Beanballs and the psychology of revenge: Study examines 'blood feud' exception to American norms

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This week, as tens of millions of Americans awaited the baseball season's first pitches, Brown University psychologist Fiery Cushman was watching more warily for the first beanballs. As someone who studies moral judgment, Cushman recognizes that the intentional targeting of an innocent player to avenge a hit batsman could be a telling exception within American culture, even if the rest of the game is a national institution.

Cushman and collaborators A.J. Durwin of Hofstra Univeristy and Chaz Lively of Boston University put the question to scores of baseball fans mingling outside Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park last season: A pitcher on the Chicago Cubs intentionally throws at and hits a batter on the St. Louis Cardinals. An inning later, the Cardinals' pitcher retailiates by throwing at and hitting a previously uninvolved batter for the Cubs.

In their new study published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, the researchers report that 44 percent of the fans they surveyed granted moral approval for the Cardinal pitcher's beanball.

The researchers call this system of exacting revenge by targeting a teammate "vicarious punishment," and note that it has emerged in many cultures throughout human history. In such "honor cultures" it has been acceptable to kill someone's brother to avenge one's own brother — as in, for example, the American blood feud between the Hatfields and

McCoys.

"No one should conclude from this that ... vicarious punishment is considered acceptable widely in American culture," Cushman said. "Quite to the contrary, what makes this striking is that it's an exception. We're trying to explain this exception."

The new study examines what the revenge culture of baseball may reveal about the cultural practice of "blood feud" more broadly.

The beanball exception

In their survey questions, Cushman, Durwin, and Lively peeled back the layers of the fans' thinking and found data that suggest vicarious punishment is more of a social norm than a product of different moral reasoning.

In the first survey of 145 fans at both ballparks, they asked half about the revenge scenario between the Cubs and Cardinals (of which 44 percent approved), and asked the other half to judge a situation where the Cardinals exacted their revenge not on the Cubs, but an entirely different team the next night. Far fewer fans (although still 19 percent) approved of that.

In a second experiment they asked 78 fans outside Yankee Stadium to judge either the original situation or the beaning of the pitcher who himself threw the malicious pitch the inning before. In that case 39 percent of fans still approved of the original vicarious method, but 70 percent approved of beaning the offending pitcher himself.

The third experiment, played out among 79 fans at Fenway Park, put the question in the context of the hometown favorite Red Sox. In one case a Red Sox pitcher was described avenging a previously beaned teammate.

In the other case, a Sox batter was described as bearing the brunt of his teammates' pitching transgression. In these cases, 43 percent of Red Sox fans acknowledged the morality of their own player being beaned out of revenge, but 67 percent approved of their pitcher exacting revenge against the other team.

In a final experiment, conducted among 131 baseball fans in an online discussion group, Cushman, Durwin, and Lively sought to assess fans' understanding of moral responsibility, as well as their opinions about the overall morality of vengeful beaning. In this sample, 61 percent approved of beaning, such as in the Cubs and Cardinals case (the more highly they rated their affinity for baseball, the more likely they were to approve). Despite the high approval for vicarious punishment, only 18 percent of the surveyed fans held the recipient of the retaliatory beaning to be morally responsible for the original beaning. Meanwhile, 92 percent of fans held the pitcher who threw the first beanball morally responsible.

"Deserve's got nothing to do with it"

If the vast majority of fans recognize the individual responsibility of the situation as accruing to the first pitcher who beans and not the last batter to be beaned, why do as many as two-thirds (in the hometown experiment) approve of that second batter being hit? It's a similar question to ask why such systems of justice emerged in Iceland around the 10th century A.D. or in Montenegro more than a century ago, Cushman said. Vicarious punishment also characterizes some cases of gang- and mob-related violence. Previous researchers have seen a correlation between such systems and weak state oversight.

The cultural exception that Americans make for baseball, even as they acknowledge who is and is not really at fault, the researchers suggest, may indicate cultures that practice vicarious retribution can be

understood more as driven by either contextual necessity or tradition, rather than by a fundamentally different way of assigning moral responsibility. Motivations might instead be honor or deterrence.

"It's really beautifully captured by this quote from the Clint Eastwood movie Unforgiven: 'Deserve's got nothing to do with it,'" Cushman said. "The idea is we have to protect ourselves, we have to do something to respond to this act. The person we're targeting isn't morally responsible but the practical demands of the situation are such that we've got to do something and this is it."

In that sense baseball is a game of athleticism, strategy, community, and collective punishment without an underlying theory of moral responsibility.

Provided by Brown University

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