

Victims want to change, not just punish, offenders

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Revenge is a dish best served with a side of change. A series of experiments conducted by researchers affiliated with Princeton University has found that punishment is only satisfying to victims if the offenders change their attitude as a result of the punishment.

"Revenge is only 'sweet' if the person reacts with a change in attitude, if the person understands that what they did was wrong. It is not the act itself that makes punishment satisfying," said Friederike Funk, a Princeton graduate student in psychology and one of the researchers.

The findings offer insights into a wide range of situations—from casual encounters to the sentencing of a criminal. And the research advances efforts in psychology and philosophy to understand the social motives of punishment and the communicative aspects of punishment.

The research was highlighted in an article titled "Get the Message: Punishment Is Satisfying if the Transgressor Responds to Its Communicative Intent," which was published online this month by the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. The authors are Funk; Victoria McGeer, a research scholar at Princeton's University Center for Human Values and a fellow in philosophy at Australian National University; and Mario Gollwitzer, a professor of methodology and social psychology at Philipps-University Marburg in Germany who was a visiting professor at Princeton in 2012.

In one of the experiments, participants recruited from among Princeton

undergraduates were matched with what they were told was a human partner to solve a series of anagrams. The participants were asked to individually solve as many anagrams as they could in two minutes. For each, they would be paid 10 cents.

The participant's partner—actually a computer programmed to complete the exercise—always solved one fewer anagram than the participant. But when asked how the pair should split their earnings, the computer partner always wanted to keep the entire payment for itself. The human participants generally recommended roughly an even split. The final averaged payment was therefore always unfair.

Most participants were then given the chance to punish their partner for their selfish act by reducing the partner's earnings. The participants who decided to do so then received one of three reactions:

- no feedback;
- a message from their computer partner acknowledging the punishment, reading "Hey, you reduced my bonus! OK—I was greedy ... but I don't see what was wrong with that ... In situations like this I always try to get as much as I can"; or
- a message both acknowledging the punishment and a change in moral attitude, reading "Hey you reduced my bonus! OK—I was greedy ... and now see what's wrong with that ... I shouldn't be such a jerk in situations like this!"

"We found that punishment was only satisfying if the transgressor changed his attitude as a result of punishment. In addition, only if such a change occurred, participants would agree that everybody got what they deserve," Funk said. "It doesn't make a difference if you punish and there is no feedback or if you punish and the transgressor clearly recognizes he is punished but doesn't change. Both are equally as unsatisfying as if people didn't have the possibility to punish in the first

place."

The research represents the first part of Funk's work for her dissertation, which focuses on why people have the desire to punish and what they hope to achieve through punishment. Among the questions still to be answered: When is change perceived to be authentic?

While the research focused on a minor social transgression—unfairly splitting a nominal sum of money—it has implications for more serious situations.

The research highlights the need for changes in the criminal-justice system, because punishment often doesn't bring about the moral change victims seek in offenders, said Tyler Okimoto, a senior lecturer in management in the business school at the University of Queensland in Australia whose research topics include conflict management and justice restoration.

"Reconciling the discrepancies in what people seek to achieve through [punishment](#) and what our sanctioning practices actually achieve is critical to improving the legitimacy of our justice system," said Okimoto, who wasn't involved in the research. "This research should raise red flags for legal policymakers. These findings suggest our sanctioning practices might be adapted to better suit the concerns of the public."

More information: [psp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ...
67214533130.abstract](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67214533130.abstract)

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