

The role of intent in third-party punitive action

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Humans have a predisposition to take punitive action toward unfairness, even when the target is a stranger. Experiments using the ultimatum game have revealed that the unfair intent of the proposer plays an important role in determining action toward alleviating unfairness on the part of the disadvantaged. This study utilized a similar experimental paradigm to examine whether this same result can be seen when a third party, rather than the disadvantaged him/herself, attempts to retribute fairness. Results indicated that the level of punishment was greater in the unfair-intent condition relative to no-intent. However, even in the no-intent condition, many participants preferred to punish (63%, 40 of 63 participants) in this study involving third-party punishment, compared to previous studies of second-party punishment (15 to 18%). Inequity-aversion of resources regardless of intention appears to play a much greater role in third-party punishment than in the second-party punishment, in which reciprocity plays a prominent role.

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