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Authors

Sarin, Arunima

Ho, Mark

Martin, Justin

et al.

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Punishment: Incentive or Communication?

Arunima Sarin

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Mark Ho

Princeton University, New Jersey, New Jersey, United States

Justin Martin

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, United States

Fiery Cushman

Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, United States

Abstract

Humans are adept at using punishments to influence and modify the behavior of others. Current approaches model punishment as a direct, immediate imposition of cost. In contrast, our research suggests that people interpret punishment as a communicative act. We show that people expect costless, yet communicative, punishments to be as effective as cost imposing punishment (Experiment 1). Under some situations, people display a systematic preference for costless punishments over more canonical, cost imposing punishments (Experiment 2). People readily seek out and infer the communicative message inherent in a punishment (Experiment 3). And, people expect that learning from punishment depends on the ease with which its communicative intent can be inferred (Experiment 4). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that people expect punishment to be generated and interpreted as a communicative act.