

# research snapshot

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## Retribution Drives Our Decisions to Punish, but Punishment Is Not the Only Moral Choice

### What is this research about?

Research suggests that people generally want to see justice served. For example, in a now-classic study, a healthy percentage of people were willing to give up a small amount of money so that they could punish someone who had been 'greedy.' They were given two choices:

1. Divide \$12 between yourself and another person who, in a previous task, kept all the money for himself.
2. Keep only \$5 and give the 'greedy' person nothing.

About 30% of people took less money than they could have had – \$5 instead of \$6 – to ensure that the 'greedy' person got nothing. Many have interpreted this to mean that those who punish are basically moral whereas those who don't are less so and are likely driven by self interest. But the study's results could be interpreted another way. After all, those who give the 'greedy' person nothing are, in a sense, hurting him. Therefore, the decision not to punish can be viewed as a moral choice as well.

### What you need to know:

When people decide to punish others, their choice is driven almost entirely by retribution. However, the decision not to punish, although often interpreted as self-interested or morally disinterested, may in fact be based on powerful moral self-reflection and considerations.

### What did the researchers do?

Researchers from York University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign set out to determine what drives people's decisions to punish or not punish others.

### What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that when people decided to punish others, what drove them, almost entirely, was retribution – the desire to see justice served and the 'greedy' person get what he or she deserved. These people didn't hesitate to punish and didn't worry too much about how

their choice to punish reflected on themselves as moral persons. On the other hand, those who struggled with the decision to punish for the most part didn't wind up choosing to punish. These people were much more concerned with the moral implications of their decision and their personal responsibility in making it. As a result, they did what they viewed as the fair thing by not punishing the 'greedy' person.

### How can you use this research?

This research is useful to anyone – a manager, a supervisor – who is in a position to reward or punish others. These findings can also help us to understand why a manager or supervisor may choose not to punish. The study contributes to our knowledge of organizational behaviour.

### About the Researchers

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### Keywords

Behavioural psychology, Social psychology, Punishment, Retribution, Personality

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### Knowledge Mobilization at York

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