

## Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

### Do Humans Have an Instinct to Punish Third Parties?

2010-2011

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#### Abstract

Why do we humans so often fail to take action even when we are well aware that another person is being mistreated? Why are nations often so slow to intervene in civil wars, ethnic cleansings, and massive violations of human rights in distant corners of the globe? Why do so many people shirk jury duty, even though it is a solemn duty and the foundation of our system of justice? What if these failures to take moral action result not from a lack of empathy for victims—as most ethicists assume—but from a lack of motivation to punish bad behavior if it has not affected us directly—that is, from the lack of an instinct for third-party punishment? Based on evolutionary theory and recent findings, we think people are motivated to punish wrong-doers only when at least one of three factors is present: (a) they perceive themselves to have suffered harm directly; (b) they observe (or learn of) harm imposed upon someone for whom they care (e.g., a relative or friend); or (c) they experience social pressure to punish or believe that punishing will benefit their reputation among other people. Absent these conditions, we posit that witnessing someone's mistreatment of a third party does not activate a retributive goal or punishment behavior. We will test this hypothesis in two laboratory experiments. Our results will lead to peer-reviewed journal articles, a larger grant proposal to the National Science Foundation, one or more "think pieces" targeting non-scholarly outlets (e.g., an NYT op-ed), and (we hope) better-informed public dialogue about (a) humanity's individual and collective failures to assist others who are being oppressed or mistreated, and (b) policies that might improve individuals' and groups' responsiveness in such situations.

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