Cooperation under alternative punishment institutions: An experiment

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A B S T R A C T

While peer punishment has been shown to increase group cooperation, there is open debate on how cooperative norms can emerge and on what motives drive individuals to punish. In a public good experiment we compared alternative punishment institutions and found (1) higher cooperation levels under a consensual punishment institution than under autonomous individual punishment; (2) similar cooperation levels under sequential and simultaneous punishment institutions.

Cooperation in groups is more likely to arise when peers can punish each other. The first wave of experiments on informal sanctions proved this point using a special punishment rule (Ostrom et al., 1992; Fehr and Gächter, 2000). Since then scholars have been experimenting with variants in the form of punishment that reflect the variety of unstructured interactions that could characterize a social group (Andreoni et al., 2003; Decker et al., 2003; Denant-Boemont et al., 2007; Xiao and Houser, 2005; Camera and Casari, 2009; Casari, 2005; Henrich et al., 2006; Guererk et al., 2006; Carpenter, 2007; Nikiforakis, 2008).

Through a novel experimental design we tackle the issues of how a cooperative norm emerges and what motives drive individuals to punish (Camerer and Fehr, 2006; Boyd et al., 2003). We show that the emergence of norms of cooperation critically depends on the form of peer punishment available. Inside a group there may be competing individual norms of behavior and the punishment institution available have a fundamental role in composing those norms and hence generating the group outcome. For a given group, either a cooperative norm or a free-riding norm could emerge depending on the specific punishment institution. In the laboratory one can supply one punishment institution at a time and precisely isolate its effect on group cooperation. When everyone can punish without constraints (Baseline treatment), group cooperation is more easily crippled by a minority of individuals that are spiteful or obey to a free-riding norm. This has been documented by a number of studies (Gächter and Herrmann, 2006; Houser et al., 2005; Cinyabuguma et al., 2006). We report about a form of peer punishment, the Consensual institution, which endogenously censors the free-riding norm and greatly enhances group performance. Under the Consensual rule a request to punish is ignored when punishment toward a specific group member is requested by one agent only. Hence, peer punishment is carried out only when there is a coalition of two or more agents that
share the same norm. We document this "consensus dividend," i.e., an overall high group performance, whenever a coalition is needed to carry out peer punishment. This virtuous institution represents an interesting variant of informal punishment as the experimenter never imposes any norm on who can or cannot be punished; these norms emerge endogenously from the interaction within the group. Groups with a social dynamic that resemble to this punishment rule can accrue a consensual dividend.

A second result is that group members seem uninterested in coordinating their punishment actions. When information is given about how much others have already punished a group member, the subject does not adjust her punishment request accordingly. We call this surprising handling of such additional information the "coordination puzzle." This result provides insights into the motivations for punishment because it suggests that the punisher derives her utility from the act of punishing in itself and not from achieving, in conjunction with other punishers, a total amount of punishment that would discourage the free rider. If that is the case, group interaction with peer punishment will achieve aggregate efficiency only by accident.

This paper is structured into four sections. In Section 1 we describe the experimental design and the predictions. Aggregate results are presented in Section 2, while individual punishment decision results are presented in Section 3. Conclusions follow in Section 4.

1. The experimental design

Our design consists of a voluntary contribution public good with the opportunity to engage in peer-to-peer punishment. The experiment includes three treatments with distinct punishment rules, Baseline, Sequential, and Consensual. There are \( N = 20 \) participants in each session. In every period the participants are randomly partitioned into four groups of \( N = 5 \) individuals. A session comprises two parts for a total of 20 periods of a public good game. While part 1 is a simple voluntary contribution to a public good game, in part 2 there is also a punishment opportunity.

Irrespective of the treatment, in part 1 (periods 1–10) there is no punishment opportunity. For every period each subject \( i \) receives an endowment of 20 tokens and chooses to contribute \( g_i \in [0, 20] \) tokens to a group project along with other \( n-1 \) subjects in her group. All contribution decisions are made simultaneously. Period earnings for subject \( i \) in periods 1–10 are as follows:

\[
\pi_i^1 = y - g_i + a \sum_{j=1}^{n} g_j
\]

where \( a = 0.4 \) is the marginal per capita return from a contribution to the public good. At the end of each period subjects are informed about the total contribution \( \sum g_i \) to the project as well as contributions and earnings of every member in their group. In the stage game, full free-riding (\( g_i = 0 \)) is the dominant strategy. This follows from \( \frac{\partial \pi_i^1}{\partial g_i} = -1 + a < 0 \). However, the group payoff \( \sum_{i=1}^{n} \pi_i^1 \) is maximized if each group member fully cooperates (\( g_i = 20 \)) because \( \frac{\partial \sum_{i=1}^{n} \pi_i^1}{\partial g_i} = -1 + na > 0 \).

At the start of the session, we announce that the experiment has two parts but explain the rules just for the first part. No subject is ever informed about the identity of the other group members. No communication among subjects is allowed. After each period, subjects are randomly and anonymously re-matched in groups of five and the probability that an agent is re-matched with the same four people is less than two percent. For conducting the experiments we used the software "z-Tree" developed by Fischbacher (2007).

In part 2 (periods 11–20) subjects have an opportunity to punish others according to rules that differ in the three treatments. Each period includes two stages. At stage one, subjects simultaneously choose contribution levels. At stage two, subjects are informed about the individual contributions of all other group members. Moreover, a subject \( j \) can request to punish any of her group members \( i \) by assigning punishment points \( p_j^i \in \{0, 1, \ldots, 7\} \). More precisely, every subject faces four decisions of assigning punishment points, one for every other person in her group; a subject cannot punish people outside her group. Punishment rules differ by treatment.

In the Baseline treatment punishment choices are simultaneous. At a private cost of one token per punishment point, an agent can decrease the earnings of any other individual in her group by three tokens. In the case an agent receives punishment points from two or more agents, her earnings reduction is the cumulative effect of all requests. This is a common protocol in the experimental literature, adopted, for instance, by Fehr and Gächter (2002). Period earnings for subject \( i \) in periods 11–20 are as follows:

\[
\pi_i = \pi_i^1 - 3 \sum_{k \neq i} p_k^i - \sum_{k \neq i} p_j^i
\]

Session earnings were the sum of earnings in all periods. When deciding on punishment, the computer screen shows a table with each subject’s own contribution always listed in the first column and the remaining four subjects’ contributions listed

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2 The instructions for the Consensual treatment can be found in Supplementary material.

3 Each part was preceded by a trial period to familiarize the subjects with the software.

4 For conducting the experiments we used the software "z-Tree" developed by Fischbacher (2007).

5 The fine-to-free ratio is constant at 3 to 1. Period earnings of a subject can be negative, although in the experiment that event was infrequent. When ignoring the punishment given to others, the frequency was 3.3% in periods 11–20. Cumulative earnings were always positive.
in the other four columns without subject identifiers. This feature accomplishes several goals: it prevents the formation of individual reputations across periods; it makes it difficult to delay punishment to following periods; it makes it difficult to punish for revenge. At the end of a period, subjects can observe the aggregate punishments imposed on them by the other group members, and the aggregate punishment imposed on other group members but do not know who requested such punishment.6

In the Sequential treatment the only difference from the Baseline treatment is the timing of the punishment decisions. At stage one, subjects simultaneously choose contribution levels. Instead, in stage two a subject can punish each one of the other \((n - 1)\) group members in \((n - 1)\) separate steps. In step one each subject places a punishment request on a person. In step two, a subject places a punishment request on another person knowing how much punishment has been given to that person in step one by someone else. The process continues for four steps until a subject has had the opportunity to target every other member in her group. To summarize, at step \(k\) agent \(i\) can punish just agent \(j(k)\); the order of punishment decisions is random. Punishment points can be added but never subtracted.

When punishing, a subject knows at what step she is in the sequence and also the cumulative aggregate punishment imposed on each other group members up to the previous step (Varian, 1994). Hence, in the Sequential treatment a subject receives more detailed information about punishment than in the Baseline treatment because she can see both the end-of-period sum and some disaggregated statistics about the individual components of this sum. However, she is not informed about the amount of punishment she has personally received until the end of the period. This provision is meant to prevent, as much as possible, a subject from using punishment to pay back others for their requested punishments.

In the Consensual treatment both contribution and punishment decisions are simultaneous. The peculiar aspect of consensual punishment is that an agent is punished only if at least two agents requested it. In practice, only a coalition of 40 percent of group members or larger is allowed to punish a person. When there is just one request to punish agent \(i\), it has no effect. More precisely, agent \(i\) keeps her stage one earnings without reduction and will not know of the punishment request. Moreover, there is no cost for requesting punishment if it is not carried out. Period earnings for subject \(i\) in periods 11–20 are as follows:

\[
\pi_i = \pi_i^1 - 3K(i)\sum_{k \neq i} p_k^i - \sum_{k \neq i} K(k)p_k^i
\]

(3)

where \(K(i) = 1\) if \(\left(\sum_{k \neq i} I(i,k)\right) \geq 2\) and \(K(i) = 0\) otherwise. The function \(I(i,k)\) equals one when agent \(k\) requests to punish agent \(i\), \(p_k^i > 0\), and equals zero otherwise. To carry out the punishment, the consensus must be who is the target and not necessarily the exact severity of the sanction.

The canonical predictions for the experimental conditions just outlined are well known. If subjects apply the backward induction logic, the equilibrium prediction in all three treatments is that all subjects will contribute nothing to the public good and will punish nothing. In fact, choosing \(p_k^i > 0\) is a monetary cost that does not generate any monetary benefit in a one-shot interaction.

2. Aggregate results

A total of 240 subjects were recruited among the general undergraduate student population of the University of Siena via ads posted around campus asking to email or call. No subject had participated in this type of experiment before, and each subject participated in only 1 of the 12 sessions. Payment was done privately in cash at the end of each session and averaged 12.40 euros per subject.7

In this section we present results on aggregate cooperation and net payoff (Results 1–3) while in the next session those concerning individual decisions to punish (Results 4–5).

RESULT 1: The existence of punishment opportunities causes a rise in the average contribution level from 17 percent to 29 percent of the endowment. In particular, while the average contribution rises in all treatments, the rise is largest in the Consensual treatment.

RESULT 2: In the no-punishment condition average contributions converge over time close to full free riding. In contrast, in the punishment condition average contributions are stable or increasing over time. In particular there is a steady growth in contribution levels in the Consensual treatment.

Support for Results 1 and 2 comes from Table 1 and Fig. 1. Without a punishment opportunity the average individual contribution across all treatments is 3.31 tokens. When the opportunity to punish is introduced, the average individual contribution across all treatments is 5.77. A Wilcoxon-signed ranks test shows that this difference in contributions is significant at the two percent level \((N = 12)\). These average values hide a declining trend when there are no opportunities to punish—from

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6 This provision can make a difference when subjects do not know the preferences of others. When a subject can only observe the punishment points she gave or received (Fehr and Gächter, 2000), learning about these preferences may be slower than here. In our setting, a subject can see if a social norm was enforced with respect to any other subject in her group.

7 The average payment is $14.50 at the October 2003 conversion rate. This amount includes the show up fee that was 3 euros for the four sessions conducted before October and 5 euros afterwards. A “Token” was worth 0.02 euros. Each session lasted between 1 hour and 50 min and 2 h and 30 min including instructions reading.
Table 1
Individual contributions by session.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Consensual</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Sequential</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avg (sd) No</td>
<td>3.54 (5.58)</td>
<td>4.40 (6.08)</td>
<td>2.57 (4.34)</td>
<td>3.34 (5.56)</td>
<td>2.56 (4.13)</td>
<td>5.07 (6.26)</td>
<td>3.91 (5.49)</td>
<td>2.27 (4.09)</td>
<td>2.80 (4.85)</td>
<td>4.00 (5.66)</td>
<td>3.07 (4.92)</td>
<td>2.19 (3.62)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punishment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg (sd) With</td>
<td>7.74 (5.42)</td>
<td>5.14 (5.25)</td>
<td>2.62 (3.12)</td>
<td>2.36 (2.49)</td>
<td>14.11 (6.54)</td>
<td>11.26 (6.59)</td>
<td>5.89 (4.51)</td>
<td>2.57 (2.93)</td>
<td>4.18 (5.68)</td>
<td>5.53 (4.36)</td>
<td>2.42 (4.57)</td>
<td>5.41 (4.87)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punishment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sessions were conducted in 2003.
5.92 tokens in period 1 to 1.82 in period 10. With punishment opportunities there is a “jump” in period 11 when there is an average contribution of 5.21 tokens and an ascending trend to 6.50 in period 20. This jump in contribution between the last period without punishment and the first period with punishment is significant at a one percent level according to a Wilcoxon-signed ranks test ($N = 12$).

Besides these common patterns, each punishment rule shows remarkable peculiarities. Overall contributions under a Consensual rule are substantially higher than in the other two (8.46 vs. 4.46 Baseline and 4.38 Sequential). Moreover, while the time trend is increasing for the Consensual rule (periods 1–10, 6.94–9.76), it is roughly stationary for the other two (4.01–5.65 Baseline, 4.62–4.10 Sequential). Another way to capture these dynamics is to compare net earnings considering punishment expenditure and costs over time (Result 3). There exists a relative payoff loss within a treatment if the net earnings in period $t$ under the punishment condition are lower than the earnings in period $t$ under the no punishment condition.

RESULT 3: The punishment condition initially caused a relative payoff loss. In the Baseline and Sequential treatments the relative payoff losses remained throughout all periods, although they became smaller over time. Payoff losses and gains differ by treatment especially when considering the last periods. In the final period of the Baseline and Sequential treatments the relative payoff loss was roughly 20 percent. In the final period of the Consensual treatment the relative payoff gain was 13 percent.

When normalizing the earnings in the final period of the no punishment condition to 100, then earnings in the first period with punishment are equal to 57 in the Baseline treatment, 53 in the Sequential, and 85 in the Consensual. By the end of the session, all of these values have increased. While the Baseline is at 80 and the Sequential is at 78, which are still below the reference value without punishment, the Consensual treatment is above, at 113.

Interestingly, the high cooperation level of the Consensual treatment was achieved with the lowest level of punishment among all treatments. This is the key point that accounts for its superiority in terms of group net earnings. Let us define the “punishment rate” as the number of punishment points assigned to a particular contribution action. The average punishment rate is $\sum_{t=1}^{10} \sum_{j=1}^{n} \sum_{k \neq j} p_{k,t} / 10n$ for Baseline and Sequential and $\sum_{t=1}^{10} \sum_{j=1}^{n} K(j) \sum_{k \neq j} p_{k,t} / 10n$ for Consensual. The average punishment rate was 1.70 in the Consensual compared to 2.47 in the other two treatments (Table 2). For any given contribution level, lower punishment rates translate into a smaller deadweight loss. One reason for the lower punishment rate is that all punishment requests made by just one agent were ignored. Had those requests not been ignored, the punishment rate in the Consensual treatment would have been 29.4 percent higher than our reported rate.

What cries for an explanation is how a lower threat of punishment observed in the Consensual treatment could provide not weaker but stronger incentives to cooperate that in the other treatments. The reason is that the Consensual rule endogenously filtered out the anti-social norm of a minority that was targeting cooperators, thus enhancing the incentives to cooperate. While less than 1 out of every 10 requests to target full free riders was censored, more than 7 out of 10 attempts to punish strong cooperators with contributions (15,20] were blocked (Table 2). We will come back to this point in the next section. The Baseline and Sequential rule instead allowed a minority to freely harm strong cooperators and hence lower incentives for cooperation.

What stands out in the analysis of group cooperation levels across treatments is the superiority of the Consensual rule. This rule generated punishment costs 10 percent lower than the Baseline rule and realized a contribution level 90 percent higher.

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8 There is considerable variance in the effect of the consensual punishment rule. In particular the jump in contribution is driven by two sessions out of four.
Table 2

Punishment rates by contribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual contribution</th>
<th>Baseline avg. points</th>
<th>Sequential avg. points</th>
<th>Consensual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assigned (1)</td>
<td>Requested (2)</td>
<td>Difference (2) – (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0, 5]</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5, 10]</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10, 15]</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15, 20]</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: (1) Each individual contribution action is classified into one of five levels; then the average number of points of punishment received is computed (2400 obs., i.e. 800 for each treatment). (2) The minimum number of observations in each cell of the consensual columns is 113.

Table 3

Frequency of punishment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution choices not punished</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Sequential</th>
<th>Consensual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of which: One request to punish</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>66.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution choices punished</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which: One request to punish</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two requests to punish</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three requests to punish</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four requests to punish</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(No. of observations) (800) (800) (800)

Bold lines add up to 100%.

3. Individual contribution and punishment decisions

A data analysis at the individual level gives additional insights into the performance of peer punishment institutions. We first present Results 4 and 5 about the frequency of multiple punishment requests on the same target and then detailed econometric models on punishment and contribution choices.

RESULT 4: In the Baseline treatment, approximately half of the times that a subject is punished, two or more subjects have requested the punishment.

Support for Result 4 can be found in Table 3. To interpret this result, it is important to consider that in about 92 percent of the instances one group member could carry out single-handedly the whole punishment. A subject could distribute up to seven points of punishment to another subject.9 A total of eight or more points were distributed to a subject only in 8.2 percent of the cases. It follows that the multiplicity of requests to punish the same agent is not a response to the need to punish free riders more severely because almost always one agent could have done it alone.

We consider two possible explanations for this multiplicity of punishment requests for the same target in the Baseline treatment:

(a) Under the interpretation that peer punishment is a “second-order public good,” Result 4 could be evidence of a coordination failure. Assume that some agents are willing to punish the free riders if no one else does. According to the “second-order public good” view those agents derive utility from having an agent punished and hence are willing to pay a private cost to punish. An agent of the type above would happily free ride on punishment if she knows that somebody else will punish. For instance, if it is common knowledge that agent i wants to punish a given target for three points and agent k wants to punish for six points, then agent i can free ride on the punishment of agent k. Different choices may occur if there is uncertainty about agents’ punishment preferences, which can explain Result 4 as a coordination failure.10

(b) In another interpretation subjects’ decisions to punish do not depend on how much others punish the same subject. Stated differently, if a subject gains utility only from her personal punishment action then she does not care about the total amount of punishment received by the targeted subject. This preference structure could describe a strong emotional

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9 Seven points of punishment reduces earnings by 21 tokens, which implies an earning reduction between 40% and 105%.
10 Under (a) there is a parallel between consensual peer punishment and contributions to a threshold public good with refunding. While in public goods experiments the threshold is generally on the aggregate contribution level, here the threshold is in terms of number of punishers, irrespective of the level of punishment requested.
drive in the motivations for punishment. In that case no strategic element would enter into the punishment decision and
the multiplicity of punishment requests would cease to be a puzzle. It would simply reflect the plurality of subjects in
each group with a preference for punishment.

Under the “emotional” interpretation of punishment decisions (b), the procedural differences between Baseline and
Sequential would be irrelevant for punishers. As described in the next result, the data provide more support for (b) than for
(a), the “second-order public good” interpretation.

RESULT 5: In the Sequential treatment there is no improvement in coordination in punishment in comparison with the Baseline
treatment. In particular, we observe across treatments similar frequencies of multiple requests to punish the same subject and
similar distributions of total punishment received by free riders.

The similarity in the multiplicity of requests to punish is detailed in Table 3. According to coordination in punishment
decisions is easier in the Sequential than in the Baseline treatment because later movers in the sequence have additional
information on the punishment already assigned to the target. As a consequence, one may expect in the Sequential data a
lower number of group members targeting the same agent than in the Baseline. Empirically, that does not seem to be the
case (Table 3).

We cannot rule out that the information acquired throughout the steps of punishment enters into the decisional process.
Yet, the data suggest that this information is not used according to the “second-order public good” interpretation (a). Table 4
presents a detailed econometric model on why subjects punish and allows a comparison of punishment expenditure when
a subject was alone in punishing the target with the cases when everyone in the group punished the target. In step 1, there
is no significant difference in the estimated coefficients. The subject may have not cared that other would also punish in
future steps (interpretation b) or may have been unable to predict future punishment choices (interpretation a). In step 4,
if nobody punished the target before, punishment is significantly higher than if three people already punished the target.
This evidence is compatible with interpretation (a), because one may conclude that subject cared whether others punished
the target. The evidence though is weak. First of all a significant difference between the two coefficients was found also for
the other treatments. Moreover, in a modified step 4 regression (unreported) with independent variables for two, three, and
four people punishing the target, one cannot reject the hypothesis that they are all equal (p-value = 0.27).

The evidence on total punishment received by free riders provides further support in the same direction. When two
or more subjects in a group are willing to punish there could be a problem in coordinating punishment. If there is an
improvement in coordination, one would expect to see in the Sequential results less variability in the punishment received
by free riders, i.e. a reduction in the number of free riders escaping punishment or receiving extremely high punishments.
Also this conjecture about an improvement in coordination is not supported in the data. We present data relative to groups
where two or more members contributed positive amounts and where at least one complete free rode (zero contribution).
These situations are very common as they account for 68.1 percent of the groups in the Baseline and 70.6 percent in the
Sequential treatment. Typically, the complete free riders received a heavy punishment, an average of 4.83 points in the
Baseline and of 4.32 points in the Sequential. The actual punishment did vary widely in level from 0 to 19 points. Yet, the
empirical distributions of the punishment points targeting complete free riders are surprisingly similar between Baseline
and Sequential treatments. A Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for the equality of distribution functions cannot reject the equality
hypothesis (p-value of 0.34, N = 183, 219). We conclude that the additional information provided in the Sequential compared
to the Baseline treatment did not significantly change either the level or the dispersion of punishment decisions (the standard
deviation in punishment points actually grows slightly from 3.46 in the Baseline to 3.85 in the Sequential). To sum up, there
is a puzzle here for interpretation (a), as the additional information available in the Sequential treatment was not used
accordingly.

The remaining of this section further discusses the motivations of punishers, the effects of sanctions on cooperation
levels, and the peculiarity of the consensual treatment. Why do people punish? There are three main findings common to all
treatments from the regressions in Table 4. First, the contribution level of the target matters. Punishment is heavier for the
lowest contributor in the group and lighter for the highest contributor. Previous studies find a similar result while employing
as regressor the target’s contribution minus the group average contribution. Our specification avoids any hypothesis on the
functional form of the relationship. Second, when others are punished in the previous period, this encourages the subject to
punish more. This “imitation” effect in punishment is stronger than the “blind revenge” effect of punishing after having been
personally punished in the previous period. Third, the contribution level in the part without sanctions is a poor predictor
of punishment choices. In particular, we do not find subjects who are cooperating type and who will punish when the
opportunity is given. Subjects who free ride without sanction, may also be willing to engage in punishment when given a
chance. Requests to punish are context-specific and depend from the subject’s relative contribution within the period.

What is the effect of sanctions on contribution choices? From the regressions in Table 5 there are four main findings
common to all treatments. First, the immediate consequence of receiving punishment is to lower contribution levels, which
runs contrary to our intuition. This effect is highly significant and concerns punishment received both in the previous and in
the second previous periods. Second, after requesting punishing in the previous period the subject also lowers her contribu-

11 The test assumes observations are independent. If there is dependence the result of no significant differences may be even stronger.
### Table 4
Determinants of punishment expenditure (punishment given).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Sequential</th>
<th>Consensual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>All, Step 1</td>
<td>All, Step 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average subject’s contribution without sanctions (periods 1–10)</td>
<td>$-0.01 (0.07)$</td>
<td>$0.06 (0.06)$</td>
<td>$0.04 (0.05)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target was the lowest contributor in her group</td>
<td>$2.22*** (0.29)$</td>
<td>$1.53*** (0.34)$</td>
<td>$1.84*** (0.43)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target was the highest contributor in her group</td>
<td>$-1.29*** (0.24)$</td>
<td>$-0.74*** (0.22)$</td>
<td>$-1.16*** (0.38)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject’s contribution minus average group contribution</td>
<td>$0.06^* (0.04)$</td>
<td>$0.02 (0.04)$</td>
<td>$0.02 (0.05)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average contribution of subject’s other group members in previous period</td>
<td>$0.01 (0.01)$</td>
<td>$0.02^* (0.01)$</td>
<td>$0.02 (0.02)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by other group members in previous period</td>
<td>$0.06*** (0.02)$</td>
<td>$0.08*** (0.02)$</td>
<td>$0.05*** (0.02)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by subject in the previous period</td>
<td>$-0.006 (0.04)$</td>
<td>$0.02 (0.04)$</td>
<td>$0.02 (0.06)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by subject in the second previous period</td>
<td>$-0.01 (0.03)$</td>
<td>$-0.04 (0.03)$</td>
<td>$-0.11^* (0.06)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The subject was alone in punishing the target in the period—dummy (a)</td>
<td>$4.24*** (0.52)$</td>
<td>$4.24*** (0.36)$</td>
<td>$3.91*** (0.47)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyone punished the target in the period—dummy (b)</td>
<td>$3.22*** (0.44)$</td>
<td>$3.00*** (0.37)$</td>
<td>$3.00*** (0.84)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>$0.14 (0.17)$</td>
<td>$0.14 (0.17)$</td>
<td>$0.14 (0.17)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>$-3.35*** (0.66)$</td>
<td>$-4.01*** (0.75)$</td>
<td>$-3.73*** (0.82)$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
1. Tobits with individual random effects.
2. Dependent variable: request by subject \(i\) to punish subject \(k \neq i\); in every period there are four observations for each subject.
3. Session and period dummies were included in the regression but are not reported.
4. Robust standard errors in parentheses. **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
5. If everyone in a group contributed the same amount there was neither a lowest nor a highest group contributor.
Table 5
Determinants of individual contribution to the public good under the punishment condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>Sequential</th>
<th>Consensual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average subject’s contribution</td>
<td>0.47*** (0.18)</td>
<td>0.85*** (0.20)</td>
<td>0.36*** (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without sanctions (periods 1–0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average contribution of subject’s other group members in previous period</td>
<td>0.15*** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.12*** (0.03)</td>
<td>0.19*** (0.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by other group members in previous period</td>
<td>0.20*** (0.04)</td>
<td>0.23*** (0.05)</td>
<td>0.35*** (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by subject in the previous period</td>
<td>−0.44*** (0.08)</td>
<td>−0.75*** (0.17)</td>
<td>−0.65*** (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment received by subject in the second previous period</td>
<td>−0.13** (0.06)</td>
<td>−0.43** (0.17)</td>
<td>−0.26** (0.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment expenditure of the subject in the previous period</td>
<td>−0.16 (0.08)</td>
<td>−0.17 (0.10)</td>
<td>−0.28** (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the previous period the lowest contributor in her group was punished</td>
<td>0.36 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.23*** (1.38)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the previous period the highest contributor in her group was punished</td>
<td>−1.47*** (0.41)</td>
<td>−1.12** (0.55)</td>
<td>−2.64* (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−1.63 (1.12)</td>
<td>−4.52** (1.87)</td>
<td>3.64* (1.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations, no. subjects</td>
<td>640, 80</td>
<td>640, 80</td>
<td>640, 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R-squared</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>−1494</td>
<td>−1378</td>
<td>−1619</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: (1) Tobits with individual random effects. (2) Session and period dummies were included in the regression but are not reported. (3) If everyone in a group contributed the same amount there was neither a lowest nor a highest group contributor. (4) Robust standard errors in parentheses, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

The effectiveness of the consensual treatment in promoting cooperation could lie in its ability to censor perverse punishment. Most perverse punishment is requested by one person only (70 percent, all treatments) and hence was often not carried out. This contrast with punishment directed toward the lowest contributors, which was requested by one person only in 12.1 percent of the cases, hence highly likely to be carried out also in the consensual treatment. Table 4 reports estimates for requested versus actual punishment, which is in line with this interpretation. Punishment is generally lower when the target was the highest contributor in the group and this effect is stronger for actual than for requested punishment. This evidence concerns the relative contribution of the target and complements the findings on absolute contribution showed in Table 2.

4. Conclusions

We study group cooperation in the provision of a public good under three peer punishment institutions, where agents have a costly opportunity to decrease the earnings of others in the absence of any personal material benefit. While this study replicates and confirms the robustness of the qualitative results of other experiments (Ostrom et al., 1992; Fehr and Gächter, 2002; Andreoni et al., 2003; Egas and Riedl, 2005), it also points to the significant impact of the specific punishment institution. There are three major conclusions.

First, the consensual institution of peer punishment performs remarkably better than the others (consensus dividend). This study has identified a specific set of rules that promotes a strong effect on group cooperation. Under a consensual institution, other-regarding preferences dominate the social interaction (Camerer and Fehr, 2006). When punishment toward a specific group member is requested by one agent only, the request to punish is ignored. Hence, there is actual punishment only when two or more agents requested it. Under a consensual institution, contributions and earnings are higher than when everyone has full discretionality on whom to punish. Without any external interference, this punishment rule aggregates individual norms within the group in a virtuous way that favors the emergence of the cooperative norm.
Second, we gained insights into the motivations that drive agents to punish. Changes in strategic incentives and information levels have surprisingly little effect in peer punishment behavior. Under the Sequential institution a subject about to punish a “target” individual knows how much other group members have already punished the individual. One would expect a lighter punishment request if the target has already received a sanction and a heavier request otherwise. Instead, when the above information is provided the subject mostly ignores it, i.e. does not adjust her punishment request. We call this disregard for potentially useful information the coordination puzzle. More work is needed on this point but it seems that the punisher derives her utility from the act of punishing in itself and not from achieving, in conjunction with other punishers, a total amount of punishment that would discourage the free rider. This interpretation casts doubts on the view that peer punishment is intentionally provided by subjects as a second-order public good (Ostrom et al., 1992; Sober and Wilson, 1998). According to this view subjects should care about the total punishment that another agent receives, and hence have no objections to others doing the “dirty job” of punishing. They should actually prefer it because it saves them the punishment cost. That may imply that when it comes to other-regarding attitudes, emotions alter the ability of people to behave strategically.

The third conclusion concerns the efficiency consequences of peer punishment. Peer punishment is not inherently efficiency-enhancing; it could damage group net earnings or boost them depending on what specific form of peer punishment is available in the social situation. We find that in two out of three treatments the ability to punish lowers net earnings. Anthropological studies of societies without a judicial system have pointed to the danger of the spontaneous human tendency to engage in peer punishment (Lowie, 1970; Girard, 1977, pp. 16–22). Judicial systems are regulated forms of punishment that attempt to replace to some degree peer punishment in enforcing social norms. Our findings on the Consensual rule provide indirect support for the role of a legal system in the administration of punishment. Legal systems restrict sanctioning to the violation of shared rules and censor individual attempts to punish socially virtuous actions, hence channeling agents’ punishment attitudes toward beneficial ends for society (Kosfeld and Riedl, 2004; Casari and Plott, 2003). More research is needed to explore the behavioral foundations of punishment through legal systems.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jebo.2009.03.022.

References