

Colby College

Time and Punishment

Do Moral Reactions to Collective Harm Fade With Time?

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Introduction

How does the passage of time affect judgments about collective harm and the need for reparations? In a series of studies, moral outrage and recommendations for compensation and punishment diminished with time. These judgments were significantly affected by taking the viewpoint of either the harm doers or the victims.

Study 1 investigated the effect of the passage of time in judgments of punishment and participants' moral outrage in response to a situation in which Zipole Manufacturing, a company, takes land away that clearly belongs to the Native People.

Study 2 examined how such responses change when the participant is asked to take the perspective of Zipole Manufacturing and/or the Native People.

Study 3 looked at how the passage of time changes the effects of compensation on judgments on damage and punitive payments.

Study 1

Researchers investigated the potential role of the passage of time in a scenario in which a company, Zipole Manufacturing, took land that rightfully belonged to a group of Native People, and sold it at subsidized prices to its workers.

METHOD

The time since the transgression had occurred was varied in a between-subjects design at 2, 4, 10, and 50 years.

Participants were asked to make judgments about compensation, punitive damages, and rate their outrage in response to the crime.

RESULTS

•**Moral outrage:** as the amount of time since the original incident increased, judgments of moral outrage declined, and were significantly lower for the 50-year case than for the 2-year case.

•**Compensation for damages:** awards declined as elapsed time increased

•**Direct punishment:** declined with the passage of time:

- 2 years: community service
- 50 year: no punishment

Study 2

Study 2 assessed the role of viewpoint in judgments of punishment and compensation in the same scenario.

METHOD

In a 2 x 2 between-subjects design, participants were or were not asked to take the perspective of those who had been harmed, and were or were not asked to take the perspective of Zipole Manufacturing.

•**Baseline condition:** take the perspective of a disinterested third party in this story (replication condition)

•**Native point of view:** imagine that you are related to the Native People; please try to see the situation from their point of view.

•**Zipole point of view:** imagine that you are related to Zipole Manufacturing; please try to see the situation from their point of view

•**Both points of view:** imagine that you are related to both of the groups in the story: the Native People and Zipole Manufacturing. Please try to see the situation from their point of view.

RESULTS

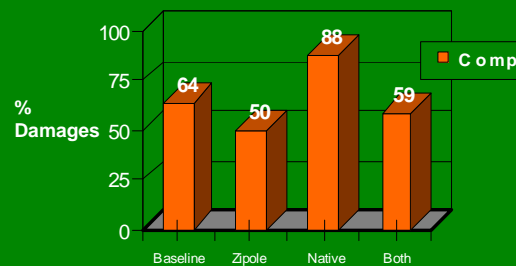
•**Manipulation of Zipole Manufacturing's point of view** had a stronger effect.

•**Compensation for damages:** main effect of Zipole's point of view, taking their point of view resulted in a lower recommendation.

Taking the Native People's point of view increased the percentage of damages to be paid

The passage of time may be counteracted by taking the point of view of one of the involved parties.

Compensation for Damages



Study 3

Study 3 investigated how time and compensation affect judgments of damage compensation and punitive payments.

METHOD

In a 2 x 2 between subjects design, Zipole either compensated the Native People or no mention was made of compensation for a crime that had occurred 2 or 50 years ago.

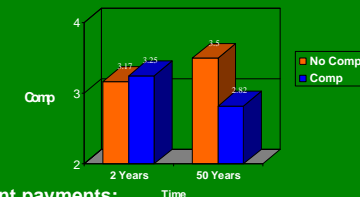
RESULTS

Compensation for damages:

•**2-year condition:** no difference was found between the compensation conditions.

•**50-year condition:** when Zipole compensated, participants thought only some percentage of the damages should be compensated. When there was no mention of compensation, participants tended to say that Zipole should pay the full cost of the damages.

Compensation for Damages



Punishment payments:

•**2-year condition:** participants tended to say that token payments should be made, and no difference was found between the compensation conditions

•**50-year condition:** participants thought that payments equal to the damage payments should be assessed when Zipole compensated, and only a token payment in the no compensation condition.

Discussion

The passage of time decreases moral outrage, damage compensation, and direct punishment.

Taking the point of view of the offending party decreases the amount of money that people think should be paid as compensation, as does compensation itself when a large amount of time has passed.

However, when Zipole compensated the Native People, participants thought that more punitive payments should be made with compensation. Participants may have thought that Zipole, having the ability to pay money, should be punished more severely.