

# Intent to harm: Willful acts seem more damaging

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How harmful we perceive an act to be depends on whether we see the act as intentional, reveals new research published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

The new research shows that people significantly overestimate the monetary cost of intentional harm, even when they are given a financial incentive to be accurate.

"The law already recognizes intentional harm as more wrong than unintentional harm," explain researchers Daniel Ames and Susan Fiske of Princeton University. "But it assumes that people can assess compensatory damages—what it would cost to make a person 'whole' again—independently of punitive damages."

According to Ames and Fiske, the new research suggests that this separation may not be psychologically plausible:

"These studies suggest that people might not only penalize intentional harm more, but actually perceive it as intrinsically more damaging."

In their first experiment, Ames and Fiske asked participants to read a vignette about a profit-sharing company in which the CEO made a poor financial investment and cost his employees part of their paycheck.

Participants who were informed that the CEO made a poor investment intentionally—so that employees would work harder for profits in the

future—perceived the paycheck cut as more damaging to employees and their families than participants who were told the CEO simply made an investment mistake, despite the fact that the employees suffered the same exact financial loss in each scenario.

Participants were motivated to "build a case" against the CEO who caused intentional harm, so they exaggerated how much harm had been done, Ames and Fiske explain.

In two additional studies, participants read about a town that was faced with a crippling [water shortage](#), and were asked to estimate the sum of [monetary damages](#) caused by the drought as they appeared in quick succession on a computer screen (e.g. \$80 to replace lost medical supplies, \$600 worth of [crop loss](#)).

Participants who thought that a drought caused the shortage estimated the amount of damages accurately—within about \$100. But those who were told that a man intentionally diverted the water estimated way over the mark—about \$2,200 dollars more. This bias persisted even when people were given a financial incentive to be accurate.

The finding may have legal implications, indicating that the notions of compensatory and punitive damages are inextricably intertwined for most people. Even when participants were explicitly required to simply add up the sum of the numbers they just saw (compensatory damages) in one space, and give a separate estimate for punitive damages in another space, they still over-estimated the sum of the compensatory damages—the amount of harm that actually occurred—when they believed that the harm was intentional.

The researchers believe that the findings also have implications for policy-related judgments, given that preventing harms almost always involves a tradeoff among limited resources:

"Every wrong that is righted leaves another wrong left unchecked," Ames and Fiske note.

"Policymakers sometimes over-allocate resources to harms that feel highly intentional—like preventing murders and terrorist attacks—even when data suggest that humanitarian interests might be better served by dedicating some of those resources to other causes, like global warming and malnutrition."

According to Ames and Fiske, the new findings suggest a potential psychological mechanism for this phenomenon:

"Intentional harms might receive more funding and attention, not just because of political imperatives and moral reactionism, but also because intent magnifies the perceived harms themselves," they explain.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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