

October 7, 2008

Citizen Enforcers Take Aim

By BENEDICT CAREY

Last month a Georgia woman named DeShan Fishel was driving near a school and saw a Jeep rush past a stop signal on a school bus, clipping a 5-year-old boy. The other driver sped away.

Ms. Fishel whipped a U-turn and gave chase. She stayed with the Jeep on surface streets and caught the driver on a highway in Dawson County, Ga., making him pull over. She watched the driver until police officers arrived.

“All I could think about was that little kid, getting hit, and this person getting away with it,” Ms. Fishel said at a news conference. “It just really upset me.”

The public urge for punishment that helped delay the passage of Washington’s economic rescue plan is more than a simple case of Wall Street loathing, according to scientists who study the psychology of forgiveness and retaliation. The fury is based in instincts that have had a protective and often stabilizing effect on communities throughout human history. Small, integrated groups in particular often contain members who will stand up and — often at significant risk to themselves — punish cheaters, liars and freeloaders.

Scientists debate how common these citizen enforcers are, and whether an urge to punish infractions amounts to an overall gain or loss, given that it is costly for both parties. But recent research suggests that in individuals, the fairness instinct is a highly variable psychological impulse, rising and falling in response to what is happening in the world. And there is strong evidence that it hardens in times of crisis and uncertainty, like the current one.

The catch in this highly sensitive system, most researchers agree, is that it most likely evolved to inoculate small groups against invasive rogues, and not to set right the excesses of a vast and wildly diverse

community like the American economy. Some experts believe that Japan's disastrous delay in bailing out its banks in the early 1990s was caused in part by a collective urge to punish corrupt bankers, and they fear a similar outcome today.

"The urge to take revenge or punish cheaters," said Michael McCullough, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami and author of the book "Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct," "is not a disease or toxin or sign that something has gone wrong. From the point of view of evolution, it's not a problem but a solution."

The downside of these instincts, Dr. McCullough added, "is that they often promote behavior that turns out to be spiteful in the long run."

The urge to punish is not restricted to humans. Researchers have found evidence of self-protective retaliation, or revenge, and third-party, or "moralistic," punishment in many of nature's diverse niches. When a predatory fish is near, shoals of guppies typically send out scouting parties of several members to see whether the bigger fish is hungry — to assess the threat. The members of the scouting team take turns approaching the big fish, sharing the risk.

Biologists have found that if one member of the scouting party lags in taking its turn, the fish in front of it will loop behind and not budge from its position, forcing the reluctant member to contribute.

Examples of Good Samaritan justice are abundant in traditional, remote societies where state institutions are absent. In some Inuit villages, said Edie Turner, a professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia, tribe members will shout disapproval at someone who is stealing or cheating, sometimes casting a public curse on the person that can be removed only in a ceremony conducted by tribal elders. "And this shout, this utterance — well, it's more like a blast," she said. "The one time I witnessed an Inuit woman do this to someone, the blast practically ricocheted off of me."

Given the choice, most people prefer that others do the hard work of enforcement, recent research has found. Scientists often study cooperation and punishment by having participants play one-on-one investment games in which each player chooses how much money to pony up in a joint investment, without knowing up front how much

the other person will contribute. If both contribute a lot, they maximize their profits. If one snubs the other's contribution, or "defects," he or she is guaranteed a good profit and the other gets nothing.

Researchers adjust the costs and benefits of this game, as well as the number of times people play each other. And often another feature is added: an option to punish the other person, say, by spending a dollar to dock his or her earnings by two dollars.

In a series of such experiments, Jeffrey P. Carpenter and Peter Hans Matthews, economists at Middlebury College in Vermont, have found that depending on the costs of imposing penalties and the circumstances, 10 to 40 percent of people will act on their referee instincts.

"The urge to punish seems very strong," Dr. Carpenter said. "Some people will spend money to punish even if it has no effect on them — if they're watching players in another game and can penalize people. They're inequality averse, it seems." The researchers have found similar results across several cultures, including in Japan and Southeast Asia.

The conscious psychological motive for this behavior, regardless of its effect, is typically not deterrence but what some psychologists call just-deserts retribution. In a landmark 2002 study, psychologists at Princeton University had more than 1,000 participants evaluate vignettes describing various crimes and misdemeanors, and give sentencing recommendations. The psychologists found that people very carefully tailored their recommended sentences to the details of the infraction, its brutality and the record of the perpetrator. That is, people valued punishment for its own sake, as a measured consequence for behavior, not as a deterrent.

In a study published last year, University of Pennsylvania psychologists demonstrated how easy it was to influence how often, or how intensely, people acted on such urges to punish. The researchers had students participate in several variations of the investment game. Afterward, another group of students entered the laboratory, examined the results of earlier games and had the option to punish players who they thought deserved it.

A striking pattern emerged among these judges. When allowed to mete out their punishments anonymously, they docked players' earnings very little — about one dollar on average, or 10 percent of the allowed maximum. But when being watched by the researchers and other participants, the judges' fines tripled in value. “This suggests that when given the opportunity to punish third parties, people don't do it much,” said Robert Kurzban, who conducted the study with Peter DeScioli and Erin O'Brien. “They may be happy to see others do it, but they don't like to do it themselves.”

The sense of betrayal Americans feel toward Wall Street, and the financial tumult's effects on 401(k) accounts and small businesses, has certainly made many people less laissez-faire in their attitudes toward punishment, Dr. Kurzban said. And there is nothing anonymous about the debates over the economic rescue plan, whether in Congress or at the water cooler: people are stating their views to an audience, and the collective fairness instinct is stoked to high heat.

Fortunately for the economy, researchers say, a strong countervailing psychological force is also at work: the instinct to forgive, and to cooperate. Punishments are balanced by peace offerings, and in fact researchers have come close to calculating the rough ratio most people employ.

Running thousands of computer variations of the investment game, scientists have found that the strategies that pay off the most are tipped toward cooperation.

One of the most successful strategies is the simplest one: tit for tat. With this strategy the player, or computer program, cooperates up front, and continues to do so, as long as its partner does the same. If the partner defects, so does tit for tat. Another strategy, called generous tit for tat, also thrives in some conditions, by offering unconditional forgiveness about a third of the time.

Yet another, called firm but fair, does well using a strategy that cooperates up front, retaliates against defectors, but returns quickly to cooperation with the same partner, a pattern Dr. McCullough describes as “nice, vindictive, willing to let bygones be bygones.”

The upshot of all this, researchers say, is that human beings prefer

cooperation, both in their individual makeup and in the makeup of their social groups. In a recent study, Dr. McCullough found that the urge for revenge against personal betrayals erodes in the same way some kinds of memory do: sharply in the first few weeks, slowly thereafter.

“The forgiveness instinct is every bit as wired in as the revenge instinct,” he said. “It seems that our minds work very hard to get away from resentment, if we can.”

Not that people are ready to give Bear Stearns a bear hug. But with time, they might be ready to let all the bears and bulls extract their feet from the traps they set. And then to watch, as Ms. Fishel did, until the authorities arrive to impose some discipline.