

Are collective punishment policies doomed to backfire? A social identity approach analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines collective punishment from the perspective of the social identity approach, demonstrating that targeting all members of a group tends to backfire by strengthening rather than weakening their shared social identity. The fundamental rationale behind collective punishment is to create pressure on innocent group members, expecting them to react internally against guilty individuals, thereby bringing about a behavioral change. However, three case analyses focusing on Western sanctions imposed on Russia, trade tariffs implemented by the Trump administration against Canada, and Israel's systematic policies in the Palestinian territories indicate that this strategy generally fails to achieve its intended outcomes. In accordance with the social identity approach, such external threats generate a shared sense of fate and victimhood within the punished group, thereby reinforcing ingroup solidarity and the collective sense of "we". Consequently, anger is directed not toward the perpetrators within the group but toward the external punisher, rendering the punishing actor's objective of dividing the ingroup ineffective. The research concludes that collective punishment is a destructive instrument that deepens polarization, erodes trust, and ultimately proven ineffective, or even counterproductive, in achieving its goals. These findings strongly emphasize that punishment, beyond its ethical and legal dimensions, should be grounded in individual responsibility and applied exclusively to actual perpetrators to ensure fairness and effectiveness.

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Introduction

Collective punishment refers to the penalization of all or some members of a group solely because they belong to that group or share the same social identity, regardless of whether they have personally committed any wrongdoing (Uysal et al., 2024, p. 2). Whether observed in small-scale settings, such as educational contexts, or within the framework of international politics, the primary purpose of such collective punishments is often to pressure the punished group members into opposing the perpetrators whose actions are presented as the cause of the punishment, thereby provoking anger toward them. In other words, collective punishment generally aims to create internal public pressure within the group and to indirectly induce behavioral change in offenders through the reactions of other in-group members (Çoksan et al., 2025, p. 4). However, recent studies (e.g., Çoksan et al.,

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2025; Uysal et al., 2024; Vasquez et al., 2015) have shown that, contrary to expectations, collective punishment may lead individuals to position themselves more strongly within their ingroup. In other words, after being subjected to collective punishment, these individuals appear to invest more deeply in their social identity rather than distancing themselves from it, contrary to the punishing actor's intentions.

In this context, this paper investigates to what extent the social identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can explain the backfire mechanisms of collective punishment. Specifically, focus is placed on the following question: What common and different socio-psychological reactions do different types of (comprehensive, financial, and genocidal) collective punishment policies lead to in the targeted groups, and how are these reactions explained by social identity theory? To answer this question, the paper has three basic objectives. The first is to theoretically frame the backfire of collective punishment through the lens of the social identity approach. The second is to comparatively analyze three different collective punishment cases (Russia, Canada, and Palestine) with an approach that treats them as a single case. Finally, it is to evaluate how strong an explanatory framework the social identity approach provides, independent of context.

Collective punishment from the perspective of the social identity approach

Collective punishment refers to the penalization of an entire group due to the wrongdoing or negative behavior of certain individuals within that group (Uysal et al., 2024, p. 2). The social identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers one of the strongest frameworks for understanding the socio-psychological dynamics created by collective punishment. This approach argues that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concepts from the groups they belong to, that is, their social identities. At the basis of the approach lie three main cognitive-motivational processes. The first is social categorization and it points to the tendency to perceive the world as *us* and *them*. The second is social identification and it is related to psychological attachment to the *us* category. Finally, social comparison is the motivation to show that the in-group is positively different from *them* in a way that increases the self-esteem of the group. This positive discrimination in favor of the ingroup is functional in terms of increasing a person's self-esteem.

In the context of collective punishment, these mechanisms may be strongly triggered. First, the punishment of the entire ingroup by an outgroup, without distinguishing between perpetrators and innocents, might be conceptualized as a social categorization act imposed by the punisher. This situation can sharply increase the salience of the *us* identity and may cause individuals to perceive themselves as *a member of the punished group*. Second, this imposed categorization can create a strong *perceived common fate* among group members. This may lead to individuals focusing on their common identities rather than their differences among themselves due to being subjected to the same treatment by the outgroup. Third, this situation can trigger motivation for positive discrimination in favor of the ingroup, that is, by increasing the intergroup distance. Group members, instead of internalizing the outgroup's negative group evaluation in the form of *all of you are bad*, might reframe the punishment and the punisher as *unjust* and *illegitimate* to protect their self-esteem. This perception of injustice may lead to resolving cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) by developing a negative attitude towards the outgroup.

Punishment extends not only to the actual perpetrators but also to individuals associated with the group in some way, even though they have not personally participated in the offense (Çoksan et al., 2025, p. 4). In other words, belonging to the same social category as the offenders is often sufficient for all group members to become the targets of punishment. Such forms of punishment have frequently appeared throughout history at both the political and social levels. Examples such as economic sanctions imposed during wartime, the punishment of an entire classroom for the misconduct of a single student, or the banning of a nation's athletes from international sporting events illustrate how this mechanism operates across various contexts and scales.

Thus, collective punishment is not merely a micro-level phenomenon observed in everyday life but also a macro-level concept that can be identified in relations between states. For example, when a teacher discovers that a few students have cheated on an exam and responds by giving the entire class a low grade, it represents a micro-level instance of collective punishment. In such a case, the intention is not to directly target specific offenders but to create social pressure among group members to prevent future instances of cheating. Similar patterns can be observed at the macro level. For instance, when a small hacker group within a country carries out a cyberattack on the critical infrastructure of a neighboring state, international academic consortia may respond by suspending long-term research funding for all researchers in that country, denying their participation in conferences, and restricting their access to shared databases rather than targeting the actual perpetrators. This represents a macro-level example of the use of collective punishment.

Collective punishment is generally understood to have two fundamental dimensions. The first involves delivering a normative message, through which the punishing party explicitly communicates its values and stances. The second concern is creating pressure within the group. By punishing members who are not responsible for wrongdoing, the punisher aims to direct their anger toward the actual offenders within the group. It is assumed that such internal social pressure will compel guilty individuals to take responsibility for their actions (Çoksan et al., 2025, p. 4). However, from the perspective of the social identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this expectation often fails to materialize and may in fact produce the opposite effect.

The social identity approach (Reicher et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals define a significant part of their self-concept through group membership. Therefore, when a group is targeted by an external actor, individuals perceive the threat not at a personal level but at an identity-based one. In the context of collective punishment, sanctions imposed by an outgroup can strengthen solidarity among in-group members (Stephen & Stephen, 2000). Instead of uniting against wrongdoers, members may experience a stronger sense of unity against external punishers. Moreover, group members may perceive the punisher's actions to be unjust. Additionally, when punished group members realize that the outgroup views them as a single undifferentiated entity, they may begin to perceive themselves as a community bound by a shared fate (Wohl & Branscombe, 2008, pp. 175-179; Wohl et al., 2010, pp. 901-905; see also Uysal et al., 2024, pp. 9-16). This perception can further enhance internal cohesion. Such a situation may generate cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), leading individuals to resolve the inconsistency by assuming that the punisher is being unjust. Altogether, these factors may trigger integration rather than fragmentation within groups. While the punishing actor expects the group to isolate the offenders, the group members instead reinforce their collective "we" identity and establish a defensive stance against the outgroup, thus becoming more consolidated within their ingroup (van Zomeren et al., 2008, pp.515-521, 2012, pp. 188-122; Çoksan et al., 2025).

Collective punishment as a multidisciplinary concept

Although collective punishment was discussed above within the framework of the social identity approach, alternative perspectives on the concept also exist. For example, behavioral economics interprets collective punishment as a strategy that undermines the sharing of public goods or behaviors that violate the principle of reciprocity (e.g., Abatayo & Lynham, 2023, pp.3-5). In contrast, sociology and political science conceptualize collective punishment within the frameworks of authority, power, and social control mechanisms (e.g., Lyall, 2009; Soss & Weaver, 2017). Furthermore, the concept is also referred to using related terms such as collective retribution (e.g., Stenstrom et al., 2008), group retribution (e.g., Smith & Warneken, 2016), or vicarious retribution (e.g., Liberman & Skitka, 2019). Although these different perspectives create some ambiguity regarding the precise meaning of the concept, the majority of the literature emphasizes the potential harm and destructive consequences of collective punishment.

The tendency for collective punishment appears to be influenced by several factors. For instance, perceived group entitativity, which refers to the extent to which a group's members are seen as forming a single cohesive entity, facilitates the punishment of the entire group (Newheiser et al., 2012, pp. 934-935). In addition, democratic groups are perceived as less legitimate targets of punishment compared to authoritarian groups (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2007, pp. 570-573). Furthermore, when an outgroup believes that all members of another group share collective responsibility for the actions of a few, the inclination to punish the entire group increases (Pereira et al., 2015, pp. 5-8).

Beyond these group-level factors, several individual-level factors have also been discussed in relation to the tendency toward collective punishment. In particular, anger has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of collective punishment (Liberman & Skitka, 2019, pp. 194-196). The more central group membership is to an individual's identity, the greater the likelihood that the individual will engage in punitive behavior toward an out-group (Stenstrom et al., 2008, pp. 1579-1581). Furthermore, men have been found to perceive collective punishment as more legitimate to the extent that they internalize traditional masculinity norms (Confino et al., 2024).

Conversely, certain factors may reduce the tendency to engage in collective punishments. For example, collective apologies (Berent et al., 2017, pp. 198-203) and humanization interventions (Landry et al., 2024, pp. 4-7) have been shown to decrease support for punitive actions. In addition, interventions that make individuals aware of inconsistencies or contradictions in their reasoning have also been found to lower the inclination toward collective punishment (Bruneau et al., 2018, pp. 433-445).

The limited number of empirical studies focusing on the consequences of collective punishment indicates its destructive long-term effects. For instance, in situations involving collective punishment, punished group members tend to perceive the outgroup as less fair and trust them less (Uysal et al., 2024, pp. 12-16). Therefore, collective punishment may deepen hostility, polarization, and perceptions of injustice in the long run.

In the context of international law, collective punishment is regarded as a phenomenon that fundamentally undermines one of the core principles of international humanitarian law, namely, the notion of individual criminal responsibility (United Nations, 1949/2020, p. 180). In other words, international law explicitly prohibits collective punishment. The legal basis for this prohibition is clearly stated in Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, as

follows: “Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited. Pillage is prohibited. Reprisals against protected persons and their property are prohibited.”

The evaluations conducted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also emphasize that the scope of this prohibition should not be narrowly confined to a judicial framework but should instead be interpreted broadly to include administrative actions, law enforcement measures, and any other forms of sanctions or practices (ICRC, 1958/2015). The primary purpose of this interpretation is to prevent actions that, in violation of the most fundamental values of humanity, target innocent civilians and hold them collectively responsible. In this context, this study analyzes how the phenomenon of collective punishment is implemented and how societies respond or may respond to it through three distinct cases: Russia, representing comprehensive collective punishment; Canada, representing collective financial punishment; and Palestine, representing collective destruction and genocide.

Analytic approach

In this study, a comparative case analysis design was used. The aim is not to make a statistical generalization but to explore and deeply understand the relevant cases in terms of collective punishment and possible backfire functions by detailing the social identity approach in different real-world contexts. By selecting these three different case types, it is aimed to evaluate the ecological validity of the assumptions of the social identity approach. These cases were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy because they represent different types of collective punishment.

The analysis was based on publicly available secondary data. Among these data are reports from international organizations (e.g., UN, EU, Human Rights Watch), think tanks, and governments (e.g., US Treasury Department, Canadian Ministry of Finance), public opinion polls (e.g., Levada-Center), and high-quality academic publications along with journalistic analyses. These sources were systematically analyzed in line with the basic constructs of the social identity approach. In each case, the cases have been deeply examined by focusing on themes such as the punisher's intention, changes in in-group solidarity in the target group, attitudes towards the out-group, perceived injustice, and emphasis on national identity.

Western countries' collective punishment policies toward Russia following the invasion of Ukraine

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, the Western bloc swiftly implemented one of the most extensive and multilayered sanction regimes in modern history. These sanctions were initially designed to isolate the Russian economy from the global system and weaken the Kremlin's capacity to wage war (European Commission, 2022a). However, subsequent decisions by institutions such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Federation International de Football Association (FIFA), and European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) expanded the scope of these measures, increasingly targeting Russian athletes, researchers, and citizens who were not involved in the conflict and, in some cases, had even expressed opposition to the Russian government's policies.

Chronologically, the initial sanctions primarily focused on measures intended to undermine Russia's financial stability. One of the most significant actions in this regard was the exclusion of major Russian banks from the international payment system (European Commission, 2022b). This decision aimed to severely disrupt the country's foreign trade payments and international money transfers by preventing Russian financial institutions from establishing direct relationships with global banks. Simultaneously, the foreign financial reserves of the Central Bank of Russia were also frozen. In addition, financial restrictions were imposed on Russia's largest banks, and the assets of oligarchs and officials closely associated with President Putin were seized by the Western bloc. The United States Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) specifically targeted institutions critical to Russia's defense industry, such as Promsvyazbank (PSB) and Vnesheconombank (VEB), which manage development funds, with the explicit objective of minimizing Russia's capacity to finance its defense expenditures (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022).

As stated above, the primary objective of these policies was to weaken Russia's capacity to wage wars. Within this framework, the export of products that could be used for both civilian and military purposes in Russia was prohibited. Furthermore, the sale, supply, or transfer of specialized technology and equipment used in strategic sectors such as oil refining, aviation, and aerospace industries was included within the scope of the sanctions (Council of the European Union, 2022).

However, when these restrictions appeared to have limited effectiveness, policies that could be interpreted within the framework of collective punishment began to emerge, primarily from civil society organizations within the Western bloc. For instance, leading governing bodies in sports, such as the IOC and FIFA, took steps to suspend Russian athletes, national teams, and clubs from international competitions (IOC, 2023). In the scientific sphere, prestigious institutions such as CERN suspended Russia's observer status (Gianotti, 2022), while numerous universities across Europe and the United States terminated their partnerships and research collaborations with academic institutions based in Russia (European University Association, 2022).

On the other hand, the policies that attracted the most public attention worldwide were those that had virtually no connection to Russian citizens' involvement in the invasion. For example, the American Kennel Club removed dog breeds of Russian origin from its breed registry system in response to Russia's invasion (Rice, 2022). At some universities, certain works of Russian literature have been banned from course syllabi (Rahman, 2022). Russian theatre and musical compositions were also censored (Weaver, 2022). As with the decisions taken by civil society organizations, the individuals affected by these measures had no involvement in or support for the invasion; in some cases, they were even openly critical of it. Nevertheless, they were collectively included among those punished (Croteau, 2022).

The international community witnessed the effectiveness of these sanctions only in their initial phase. The Moscow administration soon developed various adaptation mechanisms in response to the policies imposed by Western countries. In addition, Russia has strengthened its economic and political cooperation with countries outside the Western alliance, such as Brazil, India, China, and South Africa (Zhang & Woo, 2023). This development indicates that the expected effects of the sanctions were unlikely to materialize in the short or medium term.

The expectation directed toward Russian citizens subjected to collective punishment was that they would raise their voices against Putin. However, the socio-psychological effects of these collective punishment policies on the Russian population began to unfold in

the opposite direction of what was anticipated by the Ukrainian government. Public opinion surveys revealed that since the introduction of sanctions in March 2022, the level of concern among Russians regarding these measures has been steadily declining. As of February 2025, the proportion of those expressing concern about the sanctions had dropped by twenty percentage points, reaching twenty-six percent. A large majority of the population reported that they were not worried about Western sanctions and that these measures did not pose a serious personal problem for them or their families. Within Russian society, there is a widespread belief that the real purpose of the sanctions is not to end the war in Ukraine but rather to weaken Russia and diminish its global influence. This perception is reinforced by the increasing conviction that the sanctions target not ordinary citizens but Russia's leadership and political elite. Consequently, citizens tend to attribute the economic difficulties they experience not to their own government but directly to external powers. Ultimately, this perceptual framework may explain why more than half of the population believes that sanctions will strengthen the country in the long term and serve as an incentive for greater self-sufficiency. As a result, approximately three-quarters of Russian citizens think that the government should maintain its current policies despite the sanctions (Levada Center, 2025). These data suggest that external interventions perceived as collective punishment may not provoke opposition to the targeted regime but instead foster national unity and strengthen public support for the existing leadership, in defiance of external actors.

Trump's government's collective financial punishment policies toward Canada

In November 2023, following the confirmation of his presidency, Donald Trump and his administration unexpectedly imposed tariffs on Canada, accusing it of facilitating illegal immigration and drug trafficking. This move was unprecedented in the history of relations between these two nations (Bown, 2025). As the Canadian federal elections approached, Trump articulated his expectations regarding these tariffs, asserting that Canadians should rise up against their leaders and, if necessary, that Canada should become the fifty-first state of the United States (Taylor-Vaisey et al., 2025). From this perspective, the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on Canada can be regarded as a striking example of collective financial punishment.

The emergence of such a dispute between two allied nations that had previously maintained stable relations, attracted global attention. As mentioned above, Donald Trump justified the tariffs on two main grounds: (1) large quantities of illegal drugs were allegedly entering the United States through the Canadian border, and Canada was not taking sufficient measures to prevent it (Bown, 2025); and (2) too many refugees were crossing the border and seeking asylum in the United States, which, according to Trump, increased the crime rate (Zahn, 2025). The primary means of punishing local and federal authorities for failing to address these issues was to reduce imports from Canada, thereby financially penalizing Canadians collectively, including companies that had no connection whatsoever to the alleged problems. However, the statistical data contradicts Trump's claims. The amount of narcotics entering the United States from its northern neighbor was negligible compared to other routes and accounted for less than one percent of the overall problem. The same was true for the narrative surrounding refugee inflows (Privy Council Office, 2025; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). Interestingly, the Trump administration did not rely on standard trade legislation but instead invoked a rarely used Cold War-era law that permits import restrictions on the grounds of national security. Labeling Canada,

a close military and economic ally, as a threat to U.S. national security reinforced the criticism that the decision was a political maneuver rather than an economic measure.

The Canadian government responded swiftly to the unilateral actions of the United States. For example, it declared the new U.S. tariffs illegal and filed a formal complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO, 2025). In addition, Canada imposed retaliatory tariffs on tens of billions of dollars' worth of goods imported from the United States (Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2025). Some local governments decided to stop exporting or selling American products within their provinces (e.g., Benzie, 2025). Others took their reaction further by increasing the prices of strategic commodities, such as energy, which was sold to the United States (Department of Finance Canada, 2025). This reciprocal trade war has had tangible and negative effects on the economies of both countries.

On the other hand, this collective financial punishment, similar to the sanctions imposed on Russia, appears to have consolidated Canadians within their ingroup. These tariffs seem to have resonated deeply within Canadian public opinion, provoking a response based not only on rational economic concerns but also on strong emotional and national identity foundations. For instance, Canadians have perceived these policies not merely as an economic measure but as an attack on their national sovereignty and the integrity of the allied relationship between the two nations (Joshi, 2025). Moreover, a significant portion of the Canadian population has reported developing more negative attitudes toward the United States as a result of the Trump administration's threats and tariffs (Boynton, 2025).

This collective financial punishment policy triggered far more than an economic backlash in Canada. This laid the groundwork for a grassroots social movement that reshaped consumer behavior around national identity and patriotism. This process illustrates the emergence of consumer patriotism as a form of resistance. For example, the economic pressure resulting from this collective financial punishment led consumers to adopt more deliberate and rational behavioral changes. Nearly half of Canadians reported that during this period, they consciously chose to purchase products made in Canada or goods that were not of U.S. origin (Cavale et al., 2025). However, this response extended beyond a mere cost-benefit calculation and took on an emotional and patriotic dimension. Through initiatives such as the Buy Canadian campaign, individuals, companies, civil society organizations, and local governments have demonstrated a unified national stance (Cho, 2025; Kennedy, 2025). Furthermore, a large portion of Canadians stated that they would continue to support this position even if it imposed a personal financial cost, providing a strong example of in-group consolidation.

On the other hand, for Canadians, this sense of unity appears to have extended beyond financial solidarity. In response to the collective financial punishment, many Canadians sold their properties in the United States and redirected their financial resources back to Canada (Wilhelm, 2025). Individuals demonstrated solidarity by choosing to spend their vacations in Canada instead of traveling to the United States (Wong, 2025). Moreover, institutions emphasized their collective strength during this period by opting for Canadian-made software over American products (Cho, 2025; Kennedy, 2025). All these practices indicate that Canadians did not respond to the collective financial punishment by blaming their federal government, as might have been expected. Instead, they appeared to align more closely with the existing political authority and even strengthened their cooperation within their group.

Above all, the most striking example indicating that collective punishment backfired may be the Canadian federal election. Just before Trump officially took office, the Canadian

Prime Minister unexpectedly resigned. At that time, relevant analyses (e.g., Grenier, 2025) predicted a decisive defeat for the Prime Minister's party and a victory for the conservative opposition. However, coinciding with the implementation of these tariffs, Trump implicitly expressed support for conservatives. As the public began to feel the economic impact of the tariffs, the decision backfired, and the Liberal Party transformed a near-certain defeat into renewed victory. Academic studies (e.g., Macdonald, 2025), policy analysis reports (e.g., Fisher, 2025), and news sources (e.g., Yousif, 2025; Zurcher, 2025) have indicated that Trump's rhetoric and the collective financial punishment not only deprived conservatives of electoral success but effectively handed victory to the liberals, his intended rivals. In other words, Trump's collective financial punishment policy and his broader derogatory discourse toward Canada produced the exact opposite of what his administration had anticipated, illustrating how such measures can backfire on the US.

Genocidal collective punishment policies and aggressions of Israel in Gaza and the West Bank

Perhaps one of the most tragic examples of collective punishment is reflected in the genocidal policies and interventions carried out by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories. In response to the organized abductions and killings of Israelis by Hamas in October 2023 (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2023), Israel employed nearly all its state resources to kill, injure, or forcibly displace countless individuals of all ages without distinguishing between perpetrators and innocent civilians (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). As a result of these operations, several Israeli politicians were convicted of genocide by the International Court of Justice (International Court of Justice, 2024). However, despite this form of collective assault, Palestinians appear to have chosen not to direct their anger toward Hamas but instead to consolidate within their group, reinforcing their internal solidarity.

Israel's collective-punishment policies are not limited to its recent genocidal interventions. At the core of Israel's policies toward Palestinians lies a long-standing system of control and punishment that targets the entire population rather than individual actions. Although Israel unilaterally withdrew its soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, it continues to hold the status of an occupying power under international law (Human Rights Watch, 2008). This is because Israel maintains control over Gaza's land, air, and sea borders, regulates all entries and exits, manages population records, tax and customs revenues, and oversees the telecommunications network (United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). This system of control is reinforced through a range of policies in both Gaza and the West Bank that constitute forms of collective punishment for Palestinians.

For instance, the land, air, and sea blockade that has been in place since 2007 has turned Gaza into the world's largest, open-air prison. This blockade arbitrarily restricts the entry of essential humanitarian goods, such as food, medicine, fuel, clean water, and construction materials, reduces the fishing zones to half of what was stipulated in the Oslo Accords, and has led to the near-total collapse of Gaza's economy (Institute for Middle East Understanding, 2015). Experts from the United Nations, as well as organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have repeatedly reported that this blockade targets the entire population of Gaza under the pretext of punishing Hamas, thereby constituting an act of collective punishment in clear violation of Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (see United Nations, 1949/2020, p. 180).

In the occupied West Bank, collective punishment is implemented in different, yet equally destructive, ways. Palestinians' freedom of movement is severely restricted by hundreds of checkpoints and barriers. Israel has taken control of the majority of the region's water resources, significantly limiting the Palestinians' access to water. Consequently, Palestinians consume only approximately one-third of the amount of water used by the average Israeli, leading to a chronic water crisis (OCHA, 2025). Various organizations (e.g., B'Tselem, 2001) have documented that, in addition to these restrictions, Palestinians have faced systematic confiscation of their land and property, forced displacement, unlawful killings, and the deprivation of citizenship rights.

The cumulative impact of Israel's systematic collective punishment policies has led to a profound humanitarian crisis and sociopsychological devastation within Palestinian society. Even before the blockade, Gaza was already in a precarious state, but these policies have rendered it uninhabitable (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2022). Following the attacks that began after October 7, 2023, Israel's assaults have transformed the existing humanitarian crisis into a total catastrophe. The killing of tens of thousands of civilians, most of whom were women and children; the disappearance of over 9,000 people; the near-total destruction of civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, universities, and cultural and religious sites; the forced displacement of the majority of the population; and the intensification of the blockade, resulting in famine reaching catastrophic levels, have completely eradicated the conditions for life in Gaza (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

In addition to this physical destruction, the ongoing violence, loss of loved ones, and experiences of forced displacement from homes and lands have caused deep intergenerational trauma within Palestinian society, leading to widespread anxiety and depressive disorders. While Israel's physical and bureaucratic barriers, such as checkpoints, are designed to weaken social bonds, isolate individuals, and erode the collective capacity for resistance, this oppression and persecution have also laid the foundation for a strong Palestinian national identity shaped by a shared fate, collective suffering, and resistance (see Felty, 2019; Kocatepe, 2025).

However, these policies have not ensured Israel's long-term security as intended; instead, they have generated a profound sense of victimization and mutual resentment within Palestinian society. While collective punishment may appear to serve as a tool for penalizing the enemy in the short term, numerous experts emphasize that, in the long run, it fragments societies, weakens the prospects for peace, and even undermines the international legitimacy of the punishing party.

In conclusion, the case of Israel represents a tragic example demonstrating that the goal of dividing the ingroup through collective punishment is counterproductive. On the contrary, it fosters unity within the victimized group and intensifies hostility toward the outgroup. This outcome aligns with the predictions of the social identity approach: the punished group perceives the external actor targeting them as illegitimate and hostile, thereby reinforcing a sense of *us*. Consequently, collective punishment produces greater resistance and radicalization rather than peace and security.

The effect of collective punishment on the suppression of undesirable behaviors

Although the destructive consequences and potential backfire effects of collective punishment have been discussed thus far, it is important to acknowledge the existence of

empirical studies suggesting that collective punishment can, in some cases, lead to the suppression of undesirable behaviors. For instance, in educational settings, when the risk of collective punishment arises, students' intentions to cheat decrease (Zhao et al., 2021, pp. 738-740). Furthermore, as perceptions of collective punishment increase, individuals tend to display greater cooperation in allocation tasks (Duell et al., 2023, pp. 506-514).

In addition to these empirical findings, it is also important to discuss the effects of isolation and cultural boycotts, which can be considered forms of collective punishment. For instance, as mentioned earlier, the suspension of academic collaborations is a frequently practiced measure and can be conceptualized as a form of collective punishment within the context of this paper. The purpose, as with other collective punishments, may be twofold: to signal the moral position of the punishing actors and to pressure the targeted researchers to create public opposition against those deemed responsible for undesirable behaviors. Although such measures may occasionally appear effective in reducing undesirable actions, their potential backfire should not be overlooked. Although these boycotts do not directly target individual researchers, they may still affect individuals who have no connection to the punished behavior. Moreover, among those affected, there may be potential allies who would otherwise contribute to addressing problematic actions. Consequently, such forms of collective punishment may not only fail to achieve their intended outcomes, but may also alienate potential collaborators, ultimately leading to results contrary to the original goals.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to demonstrate that collective punishment can turn into a socio-psychological phenomenon that operates contrary to its intended logic, as seen in examples such as the comprehensive sanctions imposed on Russia, financial tariffs directed at Canada, and destructive policies targeting Palestinians. As predicted by the social identity approach, punishments that target an entire group, particularly when imposed by an outgroup, tend not to fragment the targeted group but rather strengthen its internal cohesion. The consolidation of the Russian public around the regime despite Western sanctions, Canadians' response to economic punishment through consumer patriotism and political solidarity, and Palestinians' reinforcement of their national identity in the face of systematic oppression all illustrate this dynamic at the macro level. The punishing actor's expectation that the group will exert internal pressure and isolate the perpetrators often results in the opposite outcome, where the group instead reinforces its sense of "we-ness" against a *common other* (see Çoksan et al., 2023), redirecting anger from the perpetrators toward the punisher. Although collective punishment may, in limited contexts, suppress undesirable behaviors, the case analyses presented in this paper indicate that it is, in the long run, a destructive strategy that deepens polarization, erodes trust, and undermines the prospects for conflict resolution. Therefore, beyond its ethical and legal implications, collective punishment is not merely ineffective in achieving its intended goals; as this paper demonstrates, it is fundamentally counterproductive, making it a high-risk instrument that should be reconsidered by policymakers. Based on these findings, the most fundamental conclusion is that punishment, under any circumstance, should be directed solely at perpetrators. In other words, regardless of its justification, whether moral or practical, punishment must remain individual in nature and must be applied exclusively to those responsible for the crime. Only in this way can meaningful behavioral changes be achieved.

This research focuses exclusively on three contemporary cases. For external validity, future studies should expand the analysis by examining different cases across various

contexts. Moreover, because this research was designed from a social psychological perspective, adopting alternative perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, this paper is based on the analysis of existing cases, and future research could empirically test the theoretical implications presented here.

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