



They Did the Crime, You Choose the Time

The Role of Guilt and Shame on Sentencing Severity for Psychopathic and Non-Psychopathic Criminal Offenders

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Purpose and Question

- Guilt has often been associated with reparative, prosocial behaviors while shame relates to a desire to withdraw socially and could potentially lead to more punitive behaviors (Tangney et al., 2007).
- Research has suggested that criminal offenders who are diagnosed as psychopaths are more likely to be considered an ‘institutional risk’ and therefore have a higher likelihood of receiving capital punishment over life imprisonment (DeMatteo et al., 2020).
- **Hypotheses:**
- Based on the current research, we hypothesize that guilt- and shame-proneness will impact how severely a participant will punish a criminal defendant. Within that we hypothesize that:
 - Guilt-prone participants will tend to choose the *less severe* punishment.
 - Shame-prone participants will tend to choose the *more severe* punishment.
 - The criminal offender’s status as a psychopath will impact how severely a participant will punish them, with psychopathic offenders tending to receive *more severe* punishment and non-psychopathic offenders tending to receive *less severe* punishment.
- We predict that the participant’s personality and the offender’s status as a psychopath will interact to predict the total amount of severe punishments given. We think that the relationship between personality effects and the amount of severe punishments will be broken in the psychopathic condition.

Method

Participants: Participants were 21 undergraduate psychology students ($n_{female} = 19$) from Seattle Pacific University. Students were offered course credit for their participation in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 21 years ($M = 19.24$ years).

Procedure: Participants were asked to read five vignettes in which a fictional offender has been found guilty of one of five crimes (murder, assault, arson, embezzlement, and theft). They were asked to choose one of two sentences that they would recommend the offender serve. One of the choices is the most severe punishment someone could receive for that crime and the other choice is the least severe punishment someone could receive for that crime (sentences were based on criteria from the US Sentencing Commission). Following this “sentencing task,” participants were asked to fill out several personality measures, followed by a short demographic questionnaire.

Preliminary Findings:

- Current data suggests that guilt-prone participants may be choosing to punish criminal offenders less severely, however this result is not currently considered significant.
- There is not currently a significant relationship suggesting that psychopathic offenders may be punished more severely than non-psychopathic offenders, but the current data is trending in the predicted direction.

Method Cont.

Measures:

- The Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA-3; Tangney et al., 2000)
- Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP; Cohen et al., 2011)
- The Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI2; Soto & John, 2017)
- The Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014)
- The Religious Life Inventory (RLI; Batson et al., 1993)
- The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson & Snyder, 2003).

Results

- For analysis purposes, we determined how many times participants chose the more severe punishment out of the five vignettes and called this variable a “Punish Count.” These are rated on a scale of 0-5, with 0 meaning the participant never chose the more severe punishment, and a 5 meaning they chose the more severe punishment every time.
- Guilt scores showed a negative nonsignificant correlation with punish counts ($r = -0.38, p = .087$), suggesting that guilt-prone people may be choosing the less severe punishment more often than the severe punishment.
- Punish counts were higher for those in the psychopathic offender condition ($M = 2.09, SD = 1.14$), than those in the non-psychopathic offender condition ($M = 1.70, SD = 0.95$). These results were nonsignificant ($p = 0.40$) but are currently trending in the predicted direction.

This study is still in the process of data collection. For full citations, analyses, and resources, please contact principal investigator Soby Haarman at haarmans@spu.edu

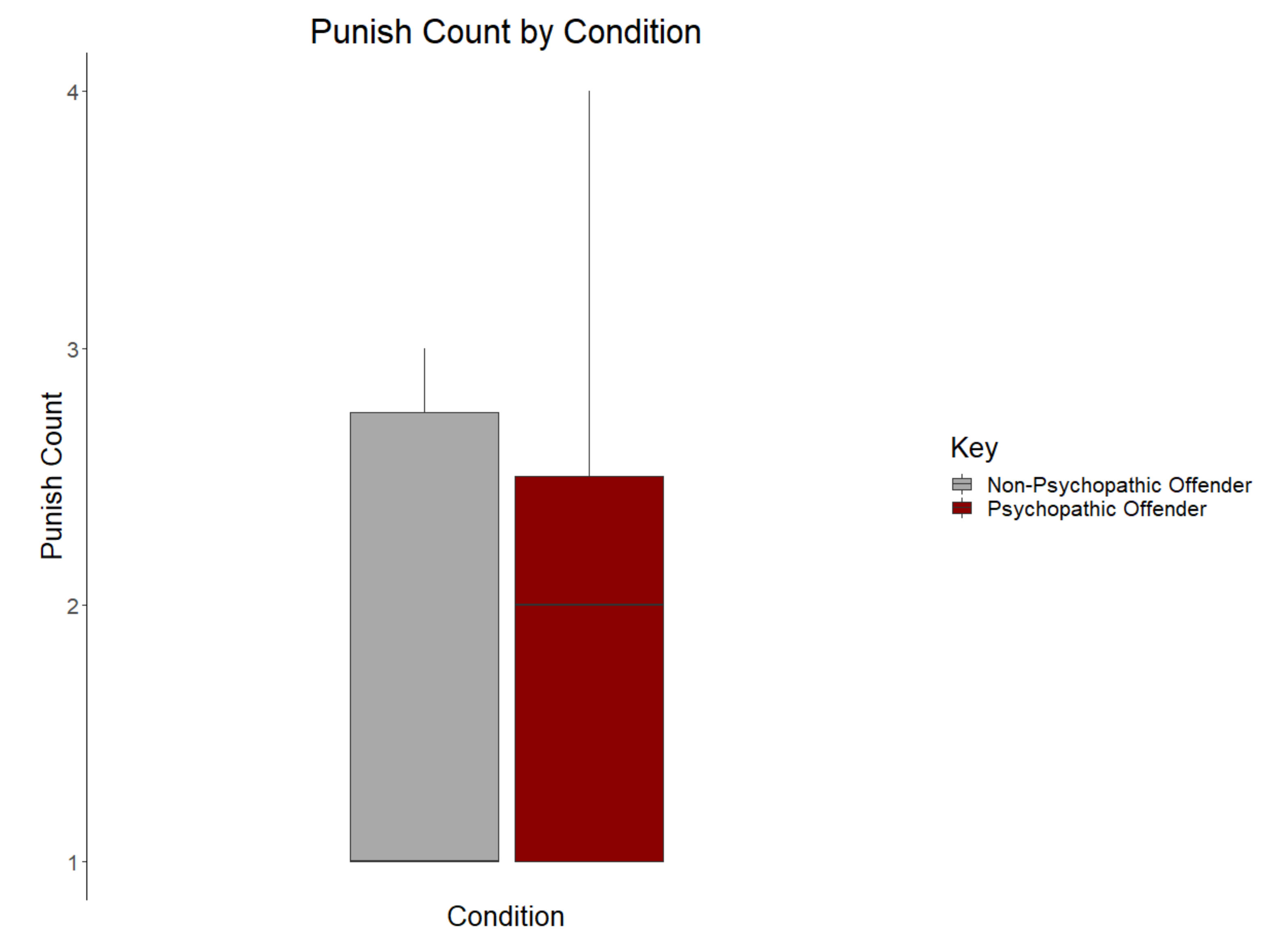


Figure 1. Difference in punish count between the psychopathic offender and non-psychopathic offender conditions.

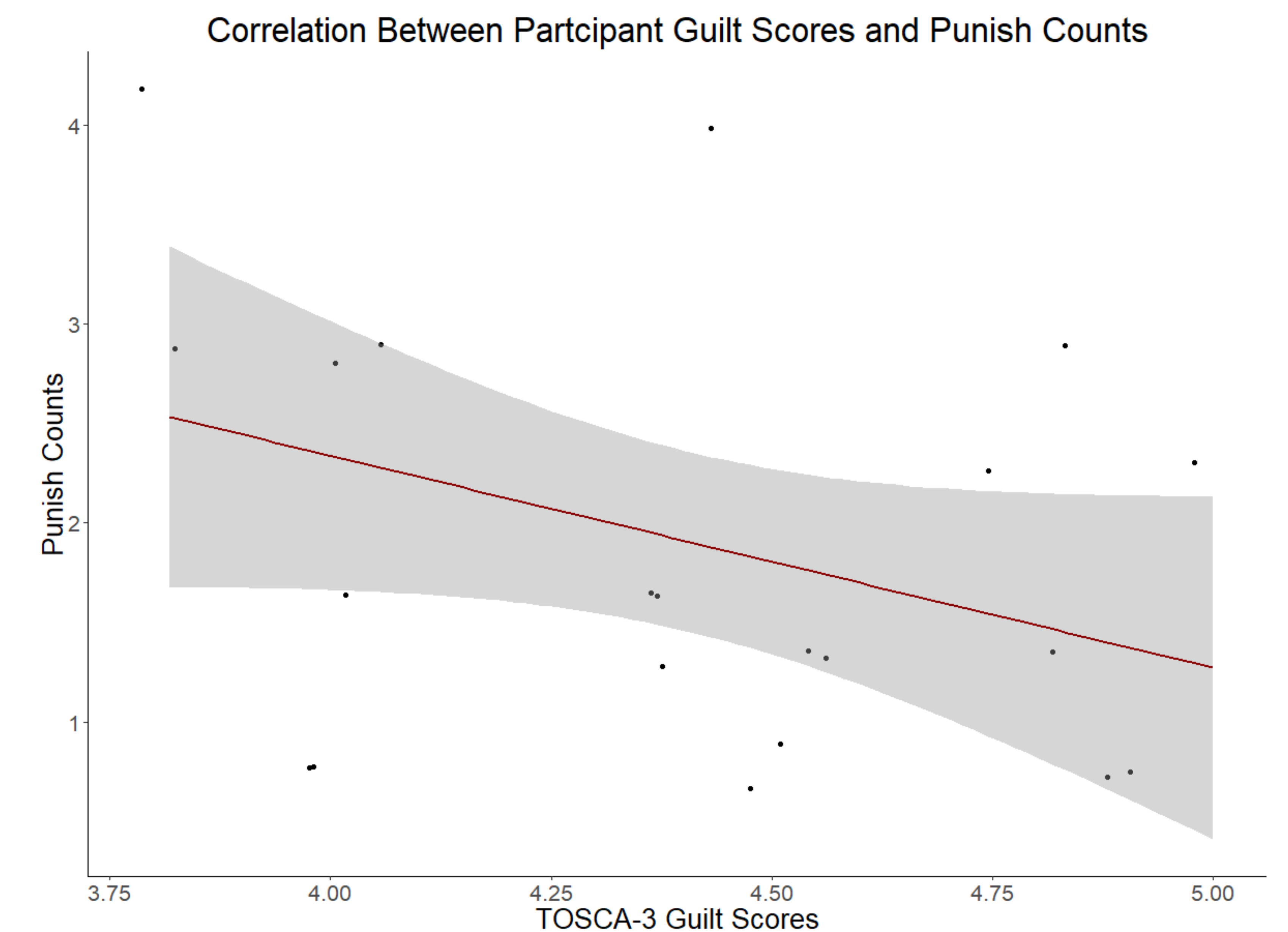


Figure 2. The correlation between TOSCA-3 guilt scores and punish counts across both conditions.

Conclusions and Future Analyses

- While none of the data is currently significant, we hope that with more data and power we will begin to see these trends become significant.
- Future analyses intend to look at correlations between punish counts and other facets of personality, including one’s intrinsic religiosity or levels on the dark triad.