



# From incidental harms to moral elevation: The positive effect of experiencing unintentional, uncontrollable, and unavoidable harms on perceived moral character



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## ABSTRACT

We contend that unintentional, uncontrollable, and unavoidable (i.e., incidental) hardships boost perceptions of volunteers' moral character because observers have a reflexive positive response to people who endure personal costs while serving others. Five experiments support this prediction. Participants judged a volunteer who suffered an incidental hardship (got stung by a bee, hit by a falling shingle, or unknowingly missed a fun opportunity while volunteering) to have greater moral character than a volunteer who did not experience these incidental hardships (Studies 1–4a). Observers' feelings of empathy emerged as a driver of this positive effect of incidental hardship on volunteers' perceived moral character (Studies 3 and 4a), and the prosociality of the target's activity (volunteering vs. not volunteering) moderated the effect (Study 2). A comparison of judgments in separate and joint evaluation contexts suggested that the effect is not due to a normative belief that volunteers should be praised for enduring incidental hardships (Studies 4a–4b). We address alternative explanations for the findings such as differences in the foreseeability of the hardship, task difficulty, and volunteers' perseverance. We discuss the implications of these findings for models of moral judgment and the processes by which people form impressions of others' positive moral character.

## 1. From incidental harms to moral elevation: the positive effect of experiencing unforeseen, uncontrollable, and unavoidable harms on perceived moral character

Sacrifice, or the willingness to endure personal hardships or costs for the betterment of others, is a moral virtue because collective life depends on people being willing to set aside their self-interest for the betterment of others (Ostrom, 1990). The public honors citizens who sacrifice their own safety to save the lives of strangers; religious sects praise followers who endure harrowing pilgrimages while spreading their faith; and social movements honor activists who face brutality and imprisonments while promoting social change. Do people also praise individuals who get stung by a bee or who unknowingly miss an outing with friends while they are helping others? Although these examples of incidental hardships may seem trite in comparison to the magnitude of the hardships described above, they raise important questions about the role of intention in the relationship between hardship and judgments of moral character: Is it necessary for a hardship to be avoidable and intentionally faced for it to boost assessments of moral character, particularly if that hardship does not increase the difficulty of the task or the

perseverance required to complete it? We endeavor to answer this question. In particular, we assess whether people see those who endure unintentional, unavoidable, and uncontrollable hardships (i.e., incidental hardships) while helping others to be more moral than those who do not, even though people may recognize that such hardships are normatively irrelevant to a person's moral character.

### 1.1. Judgments of moral character

People devote much of their lives to forming and revising impressions of others' stable characteristics. Every day, people judge whether others around them will tell the truth, treat them fairly, and honor previous commitments. These judgments arise from a quick assessment of other people's moral traits such as their trustworthiness, integrity, and dependability, which, together comprise moral character (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011; Walker & Pitts, 1998). Described as the moral dimension of a person's personality, moral character represents a dispositional tendency to behave in morally or ethically appropriate ways (Cohen & Morse, 2014). When people make a judgment about a person's moral character,

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they are making an assessment of this person's internal, stable characteristics that dispose the person to do well (high moral character) or poorly (low moral character) by others. Judgments of others' moral character are central to people's global impressions of others. They carry more weight than judgments of warmth or competence because moral character traits are seen as more fundamental to a person's identity, more situationally invariant, and more uniquely human than these other traits (Goodwin et al., 2014). Moreover, being perceived as having high moral character boosts one's social standing as well as one's economic and employment outcomes (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016; Willer, 2009).

Despite the ubiquity and importance of moral character judgments, little is known about the factors that influence people's perceptions of positive moral character because the majority of research on moral responsibility has focused on moral blame rather than praise (for a review see Bartels, Bauman, Cushman, Pizarro, & McGraw, 2015, but see Pizarro, Uhlmann & Bloom, 2003 and Pizarro, Uhlmann & Salovey, 2003 for notable exceptions). Although prominent theories of moral judgment purport to describe the evaluative processes operating across the totality of the moral space, scholars' understanding of positive moral judgments has been "dwarfed by literature on the negative side of moral judgments" (Bartels et al., 2015, p. 501) and a focus on the morality of acts as opposed to the morality of actors (Pizarro & Tannenbaum, 2011).

### 1.2. Sacrifice and judgments of moral character

Despite the relative paucity of empirical work on positive moral character, observational, historical, and empirical evidence from competitive altruism and costly signaling indicate that sacrifice, or one's willingness to endure personal costs or hardships for the betterment of others, drives perceptions of positive moral character. Group members and third-party observers are more likely to trust, value, and cooperate with individuals who make large sacrifices than individuals who make small sacrifices because they deem these individuals as more committed to collective goals and less self-serving (Barclay & Willer, 2007; Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1998; De Cremer, Van Knippenberg, Van Dijke, & Bos, 2006; Flynn, 2003; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Willer, 2009). All major religions treat sacrifice as a hallmark of virtuous behavior (Cormack, 2002), and people are praised as saints and heroes for helping others in contexts where most people would succumb to self-interest or fear (Urmson, 1958). Moreover, many of the most admirable moral characteristics (e.g., being charitable, trustworthy and honest) involve accepting some personal risk for the betterment of others (Sober & Wilson, 1998; see also Baumeister & Exline, 1999).

This positive relationship between sacrifice and moral character exists because deliberately choosing to endure personal costs for the betterment of others and/or persevering on a prosocial task despite obstacles (e.g., continuing to help another person even when the task becomes more difficult) provides assurance of a person's underlying disposition and future moral behavior (cf. Kelley, 1973). Consequently, in order for a hardship to have a positive effect on perceived moral character, one might expect that a person must be seen as choosing to face the hardship, or persevering to help others despite this hardship. However, a person may endure a personal cost while helping others that doesn't satisfy either of these conditions. The world can intercede to inflict personal costs on a person that he or she does not control, does not deliberately choose to face (e.g., getting stung by a bee while leaving a community garden after a day of volunteering), and does not have knowledge of at the time of the prosocial activity (e.g., missing a fun social engagement while volunteering). When people do not intentionally sacrifice (but rather incidentally endure a personal cost) for others' benefit, are they still seen as more moral?

According to normative theories of moral judgments, the answer to this question is "no." Arising from attribution theory, normative theories of moral judgment assert that a person must intend, control, and

foresee an outcome to be held responsible for it (Darley & Shultz, 1990). Normative theories of moral judgment make the straightforward prediction that an individual is not a candidate for moral praise or blame if he or she had no control over an action and if he or she could not have behaved otherwise (Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). As Weiner notes, controllability should be a necessary antecedent for the assignment of responsibility because responsibility requires that a person had the ability to behave differently. Consistent with this notion, people judge unintentional and unforeseeable acts of harm to be less blameworthy than intentional and foreseeable acts that cause the same harm (see Alicke, 2000; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014 for reviews).

Despite the soundness of the predictions derived from normative theories, and the evidence to support the primary role of intentions in moral judgments, people often deviate from normative prescriptions—relying instead on heuristics, intuitions, or emotions to guide their judgments (see Gigerenzer, 2008; Haidt, 2001; Pizarro et al., 2003; Slovic & Västfjäll, 2010; Sunstein, 2005). For instance, Pizarro et al. (2003) concluded that moral intuitions are a central driver of moral judgments after observing that people deviate from normative prescriptions of moral judgments by reducing the moral responsibility for causally deviant acts (i.e., acts in which intentions and outcomes are linked but not in the manner intended by the perpetrator). Emotions can also lead to deviations from normative judgments of moral responsibility. For example, anger increases punitiveness toward perpetrators (Goldberg, Lerner, & Tetlock, 1999), and disgust amplifies moral condemnation (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008, see Landy & Goodwin, 2015 for exceptions).

According to affective models of moral judgments (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley, & Cohen, 2001; Haidt, 2001), emotions have primacy in moral judgments because they are aroused immediately and automatically, particularly when judging right and wrong (Monin, Pizarro, & Beer, 2007). This can result in people deviating from judgments they deem normatively appropriate such as when people are more generous to a single identifiable beneficiary than to a statistical group of unidentifiable beneficiaries because they feel more empathy for the identifiable beneficiary (Slovic & Västfjäll, 2010; Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Drawing from these intuitive and affective views of moral judgment, there are reasons to predict that the relationship between hardship and moral character may similarly diverge from normative prescriptions. First, given the tight link between sacrifice and moral character, people may have a reflexive positive response to a person who endures an incidental hardship while helping others because this situation bears initial resemblance to their schema of sacrifice (i.e., someone enduring a personal cost for the benefit of others). Relatedly, seeing someone endure a personal cost while helping others may evoke empathy for the person that leads observers to see the target more favorably (cf. Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995). To wit, Wispe (1991) speculated, "One will sympathize more with a brave sufferer, in a good cause, in which the sufferer's afflictions are beyond [his or her] control" (p. 134). In line with Wispe's speculation, the proposed research investigates whether experiencing incidental hardships while helping others boosts judgments of moral character because observers have a reflexive, empathic response to people who are harmed in the service of others—even if this harm is uncontrollable and bears no direct influence on the difficulty of the prosocial behavior.

## 2. Overview of studies

We conducted five studies to test the prediction that observers judge individuals who endure incidental hardships while helping others to be more moral than individuals who do not face these hardships.<sup>1</sup> We first

<sup>1</sup> All measures, manipulations, and exclusions in each study are disclosed. The Supplemental materials contain a list of all items included in each study as well as the data and materials for each study.

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