

From religion to politics: why it matters if we think someone is watching

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People express greater disapproval of moral transgressions if they feel they are being watched.

(Medical Xpress) -- People are more likely to condemn the bad behaviour of others when they sense someone else may be watching, research by a PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sydney shows.

The research, published in [Evolutionary Psychology](#), confirmed the prediction that participants who believed they were being watched, although possibly not conscious of that thought, would express greater disapproval of moral transgressions, than those did not.

The increased expression of disapproval is attributed to people's

sensitivity to perceptions of their own reputation.

The research was done by Pierrick Bourrat from the University of Sydney together with colleagues Nicolas Baumard from the University of Pennsylvania and Ryan McKay from the University of London.

To test their hypothesis the researchers presented participants with two stories of moral transgressions - keeping money found in a lost wallet and faking a resume.

Half the participants were given the stories on a piece of paper which had a picture of a pair of eyes while it was an image of flowers for the other half.

Those given stories accompanied by eyes rated the actions as less morally acceptable than those given stories showing flowers.

Pierrick Bourrat explains: "We concluded that the surveillance cues - that is the image of eyes - may have triggered people's internalised moral norms or what has been termed private [self-awareness](#)."

"Alternatively, or additionally, as the two explanations are not mutually exclusive, it may be explained by saying it activated the mental mechanisms involved when we believe our behavior is being observed."

"In this case it is our 'public self-awareness' that is involved - our awareness of the impression we are making on others and our actions to adjust it according to our understanding of accepted moral standards."

"The people who demonstrate explicit support for shared standards of behaviour may be acting to maintain their reputations. Failure to express support for prevailing moral norms may arouse suspicion in others."

Evidence that people regulate their public expression of moral judgments depending on how those judgements are being scrutinized and how it might influence their reputation suggest that such public declarations play an important role in cooperative behavior.

The relevance of these findings is broad including shedding light on both politics and religion.

"We are all familiar with the politician who is known to have expressed one view privately or to their party colleagues on a moral issue but a different or more stridently condemnatory viewpoint when it is expressed publicly," Pierrick Bourrat said.

"The research is also part of Explaining Religion, a three-year, multinational project looking at religious practice and the kinds of behavior, involving moral judgement, that religion often claims to control."

The findings do not prove belief in the existence of a judgmental god plays a role in cooperation. The reaction to the scenario with the pair of eyes does however demonstrate the existence of a mental process that aligns with being sensitive to the judgements of an all-knowing, all-seeing presence.

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Provided by University of Sydney

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