

People stay true to moral colors, studies find

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U.S. presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have been criticized for their seeming willingness to cut corners on core principles when they consider it necessary to make some progress toward a laudable goal.

While philosophers and voters can debate the pros and cons of situational ethics, new research from Washington University in St. Louis suggests that most people stay true to their intrinsic moral colors—good or bad—when dealing with day-to-day choices, regardless of extenuating circumstances or well-intended reform efforts.

"Our studies provide new and important evidence for the stability of moral character," said Kathryn Bollich, lead author of two recent studies exploring how evolving personality traits and competing ethical quandaries influence moral behavior.

"Using naturally observed, everyday behaviors and self-reports of moral decision-making, we demonstrate that one's morality is stable," Bollich said. "These findings suggest that efforts to modify moral character may not be so simple. For example, efforts to make a roommate or romantic partner more helpful and sympathetic, or less condescending and critical of others, may be met with slow and minimal success."

Bollich, a graduate student in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences in Arts & Sciences, conducted her research as a member of the Personality Measurement and Development Lab at Washington University. Joshua Jackson, assistant professor of psychology and lab director, is a joint co-author on both studies.

While most morality research looks at situations that influence moral decisions and behaviors, these studies examines whether individual differences in morality persist across time and across situations.

Both studies demonstrate that a person's moral fiber can be gauged based on actions that demonstrate their outlook on moral issues, and that these core levels of morality remain fairly consistent across a range of morally challenging situations and surroundings.

The first, "Eavesdropping on Character: Assessing Everyday Moral Behaviors," has been accepted for publication in a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Research in Personality.

This study analyzes naturally occurring moral behaviors that were unobtrusively captured by a small digital audio-recorder that the study's

186 participants carried continuously for a weekend or two. The devices intermittently recorded snippets of conversations and ambient sounds from the participant's everyday environments; these audio snippets were then rated based on how much they exemplified moral or immoral behavior.

The study found substantial individual differences in how often participants engaged in positive moral behaviors, such as showing affection, gratitude, sympathy, hope or optimism, as well as negative moral behaviors, such as being sarcastic, condescending, arrogant, critical, blaming or boastful.

For example, one person expressed gratitude during 17.5 percent of her conversations, and 16 people never expressed gratitude in any of their recordings. In addition, 10 people never criticized others in any of their recordings, whereas one person criticized others in 22.2 percent of his or her conversations.

While these patterns of moral behavior varied widely from person to person, individuals pattern of [moral behavior](#) remained surprisingly stable over time—that is, how helpful or grateful someone is one weekend is similar to how helpful or grateful that person is on a following weekend, the study found.

Bollich's second study, "When Friends' and Society's Expectations Collide: A Longitudinal Study of Moral Decision-Making and Personality across College," was published Jan. 11 in the multidisciplinary open-access journal *PLOS ONE*. Findings are based on longitudinal survey data collected from hundreds of college students across four years during their freshman and senior years.

This second study found that the students' approach to moral decision-making across the four years of their college experience also remained

stable over time, with one important change: As students move from freshman year to senior year, they grow more likely to help a friend even when doing so requires them to ignore other ethical obligations, such as following the law or adhering to accepted social norms.

Since young adulthood and college years are an important time for personality development and maturation, Bollich and colleagues examined the data to determine if these factors might be driving changes in moral decision-making and behavior.

Surprisingly, their analysis found that increased maturity and developing personality traits had little or no connection to changes in moral decision-making.

"Future research should continue to extend our understanding of moral character by examining how the combination of large life experiences—like graduating from college or starting a family—and smaller situational influences—like the personality or moral character of interaction partners—may or may not play a role in one's morality and development. Together, these approaches will help us capture a more complete picture of morality as it is manifested in everyday life and across the lifespan," Bollich said.

Everyday morality: Positive or negative?

Here's a sample of everyday positive and negative [moral](#) behaviors as captured in audio recordings during the eavesdropping study:

Positive behaviors

- Showing affection: I love you, I really do.
- Showing gratitude: Thank so much! I really appreciate it. You

helped me a lot!

- Offering praise, making compliments: You're learning a lot. You're doing great!

Negative behaviors

- Being sarcastic: You want my lemonade? Sure, after you drank the whole thing
- Bragging: My dad's car collection is so large he had to build a new garage.
- Being condescending or arrogant: How did you get so retarded? Oh yes, I know what it means.

More information: Kathryn L. Bollich et al. When Friends' and Society's Expectations Collide: A Longitudinal Study of Moral Decision-Making and Personality across College, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0146716](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0146716)

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