

Examining children's and adults' reasoning about the nature of villains

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Whether it's on television or in a movie, we love the villain.

No matter how egotistical, power hungry or greedy the person is, many

of us are still attracted to their dark side—in part because we suspect some may have a redeeming quality. In fact, according to a new University of Michigan study, both adults and children more often reported that villains were inwardly good than that heroes were inwardly bad.

"In other words, people believe there is a mismatch between a villain's outward behaviors and their inner, true self, and this is a bigger gap for villains than for heroes," said Valerie Umscheid, U-M psychology doctoral student and the study's lead author.

Inside, villains are a little less evil than they outwardly seem while heroes are fully good guys inside and out.

Umscheid and colleagues conducted three studies with 434 children (ages 4-12) and 277 adults to determine how individuals make sense of antisocial acts committed by evil-doers. They focused on participants' judgments of both familiar and novel fictional villains and heroes, such as Disney's Ursula from "The Little Mermaid" and Pixar's Woody from "Toy Story."

Study 1 established that children viewed villains' actions and emotions as overwhelmingly negative. This suggests that children's well-documented tendency to judge people as good does not prevent their appreciation of extreme forms of villainy.

Studies 2 and 3 assessed children's and adults' beliefs regarding heroes' and villains' moral character and true selves, using an array of converging evidence, including how a character felt inside, whether a character's actions reflected their true self and whether a character's true self could change over time.

Across these measures, the research indicated that both children and

adults consistently evaluated villains' true selves to be overwhelmingly evil and much more negative than heroes'. At the same time, researchers also detected an asymmetry in the judgments, wherein villains were more likely than heroes to have a true self that differed from their outward behavior.

Both [children](#) and [adults](#) believed characters like Ursula had some inner goodness, despite the bad/immoral actions they regularly engage in, Umscheid said.

The research, published in *Cognition*, was co-authored by Craig Smith, senior associate librarian, University Library; Felix Warneken and Susan Gelman, both U-M professors of psychology; and Henry Wellman, U-M professor emeritus of psychology.

More information: Valerie A. Umscheid et al, What makes Voldemort tick? Children's and adults' reasoning about the nature of villains, *Cognition* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cognition.2022.105357](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2022.105357)

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