

Study says media reports about uncommon acts of goodness can make good people even better

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People with a strong moral identity are measurably inspired to do good after being exposed to media stories about uncommon acts of human goodness, according to research at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business.

To appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the research shows a direct link between exposure to media accounts of extraordinary virtue and "moral elevation" - a suite of thoughts and emotions about being a better person that can lead to "pro-social" action.

"The news media have a tendency to celebrate bad behaviour, from Charlie Sheen's recent exploits to articles that focus the spotlight on criminal and other aberrant behaviour," says lead author Karl Aquino, a professor at the Sauder School of Business who studies issues such as social status and dominance, forgiveness and reconciliation, workplace victimization and moral behavior.

"Our study indicates that if more attention was devoted to recounting stories of uncommon acts of human virtue, the media could have a quantifiable positive effect on the moral behavior of a significant group of people."

Aquino and co-author Brent McFerran, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Michigan, investigated whether people who experience moral elevation are more readily disposed to taking positive moral action, including giving to charity.

In one of the four studies reported in their paper, the researchers conducted an experiment with 63 subjects to determine if people influenced to identify in terms of their morality were more likely

to experience moral elevation after reading a news item recounting a story of uncommon goodness.

The researchers also wanted to determine if these moral self-identifiers were more likely to display pro-social behavior after reading a news story recounting an act uncommon goodness versus a story focused merely on positive human interaction.

In the first part of the experiment, one random group of subjects was primed to see themselves in terms of their [moral identity](#) by completing a word search including morally connotative words, such as compassionate, honest and kind. A second group completed a word search comprised of morally neutral words.

The subjects were then randomly assigned to read one of two news stories. Both of the stories were about positive human interactions, but only one recounted an act of uncommon goodness. It described a 2006 shooting at an Amish schoolhouse in which parents offered forgiveness and financial assistance to the widow of the man that shot their children within days of the incident. The second story recounted a couples' experience of seeing a beautiful sunset.

Subjects then completed questionnaires asking them to divide 10 dollars between themselves and an unknown partner in another room. Participants who read the Amish story and who were influenced to think about themselves in terms of their moral identity gave 32 per cent more money on average to their partners than the subjects who were not influenced to think in terms of their moral identity.

Further, it was found that reading stories of uncommon moral goodness had a significant positive effect on the way moral self-identifiers shared funds. These subjects shared an average of

24 per cent more after reading the story of uncommon goodness over the amount they were willing to give after reading the merely positive story.

Based on his research, Aquino says the media could play a strategic role in helping the fundraising efforts for natural disasters like the recent earthquake in Japan.

"Focusing on individual examples of extraordinary goodness within the crisis may be a more effective and subtle way to encourage people to donate than inundating them with stories and pictures of need and desperation."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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