

# Taking the moral high ground drives motivation to intervene in public situations finds new study

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In a new study, published today in the *Journal of Politeness Research*, academics from the University of Surrey and the University of Huddersfield have found that people are more likely to intervene in public conflicts, when they consider they are taking the moral high ground.

The team also discovered that a person's intervention is prompted by behaviour that violates what they consider to be socially acceptable and steps outside of what society constitutes as normal behaviour.

The researchers studied real-life situations in America where actors played out scenarios in front of members of the public and captured their responses. This included an abusive boyfriend, [lesbian parents](#) being verbally abused and a gay athlete who comes out to a group of close [friends](#).

In all scenarios (full examples in the Notes to Editors) the abuser and the victim, both of whom are in a close relationship, either start an argument, are approached by a hostile waiter or are picked on by their group of friends.

The researchers found that in these situations, the person intervenes as they perceive the morality of the situation to be more important than being polite. For example, in one of the scenarios, the lady intervening is

told to stay out of the couple's private business, but she still persists with her objection.

"The findings clearly showed that outspokenness is triggered by what the intervener sees as the impermissible violation of the victim's rights. These rights are so basic that the person intervenes despite the risk of seeming impolite in interfering in someone's private affairs or worse," said Dr Rosina Márquez-Reiter from the University of Surrey.

"The person intervening sees the alleged violation as part of the public's business despite the fact that the action taking place is essentially part of the couples' and individuals' private lives. Further research is needed to understand the relationship between morality and politeness in a wider range of communicative contexts and establish its transcultural validity," added Professor Daniel Kadar from the University of Huddersfield.

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### **Scenarios:**

A couple is arguing in the park. Bystanders overhear the argument but seem conflicted over intervention. An elderly female bystander decides to intervene.

Boyfriend: Stop crying. Shut up!

Elderly female: Hey buddy, Cool it!

Boyfriend: Ma'am, can you just let us do our own thing? It's my girlfriend. Can you just leave us alone?

Elderly female: No. That's not how you treat someone. How about I call the cops

### **Lesbian parents verbally abused**

Lesbian couple eating breakfast with their two kids at a restaurant in Texas. The server berates and humiliates the lesbian couple. Several

customers overhear the server.

Server: You're gay and you have kids? It's bad enough that you are lesbians but that they don't have a father. .... I think that is kind of bad. You don't feel uncomfortable - people watching you? Isn't it bad for the kids? I think it's terrible!

[Lesbian couple does not answer and looks very embarrassed.

Young male: Sorry, but you are just being rude. It's completely inappropriate when someone comes into a restaurant to have a breakfast with their family that you question their life choices.

Server: I just think I am entitled to my own opinion.

Young male: You are entitled to your opinion but this is not the place to voice your opinion.

Server: Is it just me that's upset? [Looks to different directions in the restaurant]

## **Gay athlete comes out to his friends**

A group of male friends are at a busy shopping centre. One of the group has started to intimate to the others that he is gay. His friends start to tease him and utter homophobic slurs. A female overhears the teasing and steps in immediately and says the friends should not tease the gay person and they should not be so hard on him. Line 1 below takes place after the "friends" of the gay athlete have already started to comprehend the situation, and the athlete makes the actual coming out.

Gay person: I have something to tell you guys.

Friend: Stop playing bro! You are gay? G-A-Y? [Starts laughing and backs away from gay athlete]

Gay person: Yes.

Friend: You really don't like females? You don't like girls? You know what we call males that like men?

Young female: Ya'll wrong. I heard the conversation. Ya'll ain't right.

That's your friend?

Friend: That was my friend.

Young female: What do you mean was? That shouldn't stop you guys from being friends

Provided by University of Surrey

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