

# Past suffering can affect future praise, study says

September 28 2021

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A team of researchers from the University of Missouri has discovered that people tend to give more praise to someone for their good deeds as an adult after discovering that person has also had to overcome adversity

or suffering earlier in life, such as abuse and neglect as a child. Philip Robbins, an associate professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy in the MU College of Arts and Science, said these findings can help to narrow a knowledge gap found in both psychology and philosophy, two disciplines that study human behavior.

"Historically, psychology and philosophy have had a stronger focus on the 'dark' side of human behavior, such as moral wrongdoing, and less attention has been placed on studying the 'light' side of [human behavior](#), such as acts of altruism," said Robbins, the principal investigator of the project. "This research aims to provide a better understanding of a relatively neglected aspect of human psychology, the [human mind](#), and the human condition, which concerns how people process and react to positive behaviors, such as giving praise."

The research is based on survey results from a total of 974 participants. It builds upon the researchers' previous finding that people tend to think of an adult who has committed a crime as less culpable, and less deserving of punishment, when told that the accused had suffered serious harm in childhood.

Robbins said the team's findings are also relevant to thinking about criminal sentencing, particularly in capital trials. Defense counsel often presents evidence of clients' suffering and victimization in their early years, and the authors' previous and current studies support this practice. He added the findings point to a broader issue about how people judge others without knowing who they really are as individuals, since knowing what a person has experienced in life can alter how we assess their good and bad deeds.

"It's important that we pay attention to human beings not just as creatures that do bad things to each other, but also as creatures that do good things for each other," Robbins said. "Part of what's remarkable

about our species is our capacity to behave in prosocial ways, such as cooperating with and helping others, as well as antisocial ways, such as competing with and harming them."

The research was conducted by Robbins together with Fernando Alvear, a graduate student in the Department of Philosophy, and Paul Litton, a professor of law in the MU School of Law. Their paper "Good deeds and hard knocks: The effect of past [suffering](#) on praise for moral [behavior](#)" was published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

**More information:** Philip Robbins et al, Good deeds and hard knocks: The effect of past suffering on praise for moral behavior, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104216](#)

Provided by University of Missouri

Citation: Past suffering can affect future praise, study says (2021, September 28) retrieved 22 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-affect-future.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.