Why childhood adversity impacts how a person's behavior is judged

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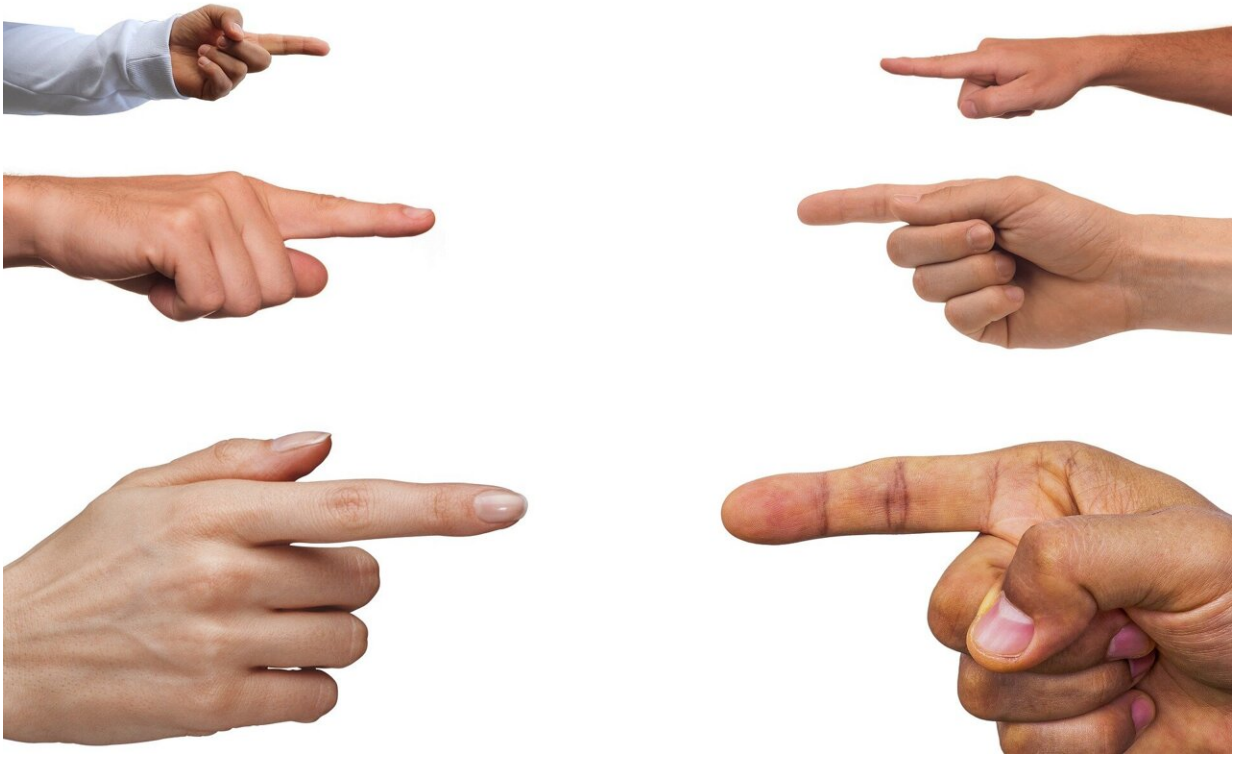

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It's human nature to be judgmental. But why do we place less blame on someone, or give more praise, if we find out that person had a history of suffering in childhood? In a recent study, University of Missouri researchers discovered why someone's childhood adversity influences

how others judge their behavior. The paper is forthcoming in the journal *Social Cognition*.

The finding contributes to a growing body of evidence that suggests judgments of praise and blame are "asymmetrically sensitive" to certain types of information about someone's life history, said Philip Robbins, associate professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy.

"In the case of negative or anti-social behavior, we see the actions of people with adverse childhood experiences as less of a reflection of their fundamental moral character, and more as a reflection of the environment they were raised in, so we blame them less for those actions," Robbins said. "On the other hand, when someone has experienced adversity in childhood and does something good, we tend to think of that behavior as more reflective or expressive of who the person is deep down, so we praise them more for it."

The research, based on statistical analysis of survey results from 248 participants, suggests that struggling with adversity in early life can be a "deformative experience," reshaping an individual's moral development.

"Experiences deform people's behavior in the sense that adverse experiences can pull people away from who they really are on a deeper level by pushing them onto an 'alternative' track of anti-sociality that they otherwise wouldn't be on," Robbins said.

The research conducted by Robbins and Fernando Alvear, a doctoral candidate in philosophy at MU, builds upon earlier work by Robbins and other colleagues, including Paul Litton, dean of the MU School of Law. Previously, Robbins and his colleagues found that people tend to think of a violent criminal as less culpable and less deserving of punishment when told that the accused had suffered serious harm in childhood. They also found that people tend to give more praise to someone for their good

deeds as an adult after discovering that person had to overcome adversity or suffering earlier in life, such as abuse and neglect as a child.

The current study by Robbins and Alvear aimed to address a largely unanswered question from the earlier work about why this kind of information has this effect on people's judgments.

"This has all sorts of implications for people's social interactions," Robbins said. "Moral judgment is tremendously important for how we relate to others as people because they form an essential part of social judgment. The current research is part of a larger project aimed at understanding how moral judgment works. This understanding could potentially reorient people's thinking in ways that could have positive effects on the everyday practice of blaming and praising."

Robbins believes there is a natural "track" for a person's development, and people who haven't experienced challenging life events, including loss, trauma or other social disadvantages, do not typically develop strong anti-social tendencies later in life.

"People generally learn to behave in morally appropriate ways toward other people, such as not hurting, harming or speaking ill of them," Robbins said. "When people don't learn these lessons, they are pulled off-track from the natural path of development. People may not be saints or heroes, but most of us aren't villains either."

In future work, Robbins plans to explore the role that gender stereotyping may play in determining how judgments of blame and praise are affected by information about a person's life history.

More information: Philip Robbins et al, Deformative Experience: Explaining the Effects of Adversity on Moral Evaluation, *Social Cognition* (2023). papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cf …

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