

What Makes a 'Good Samaritan' Good? That Opinion Depends on the Beneficiary

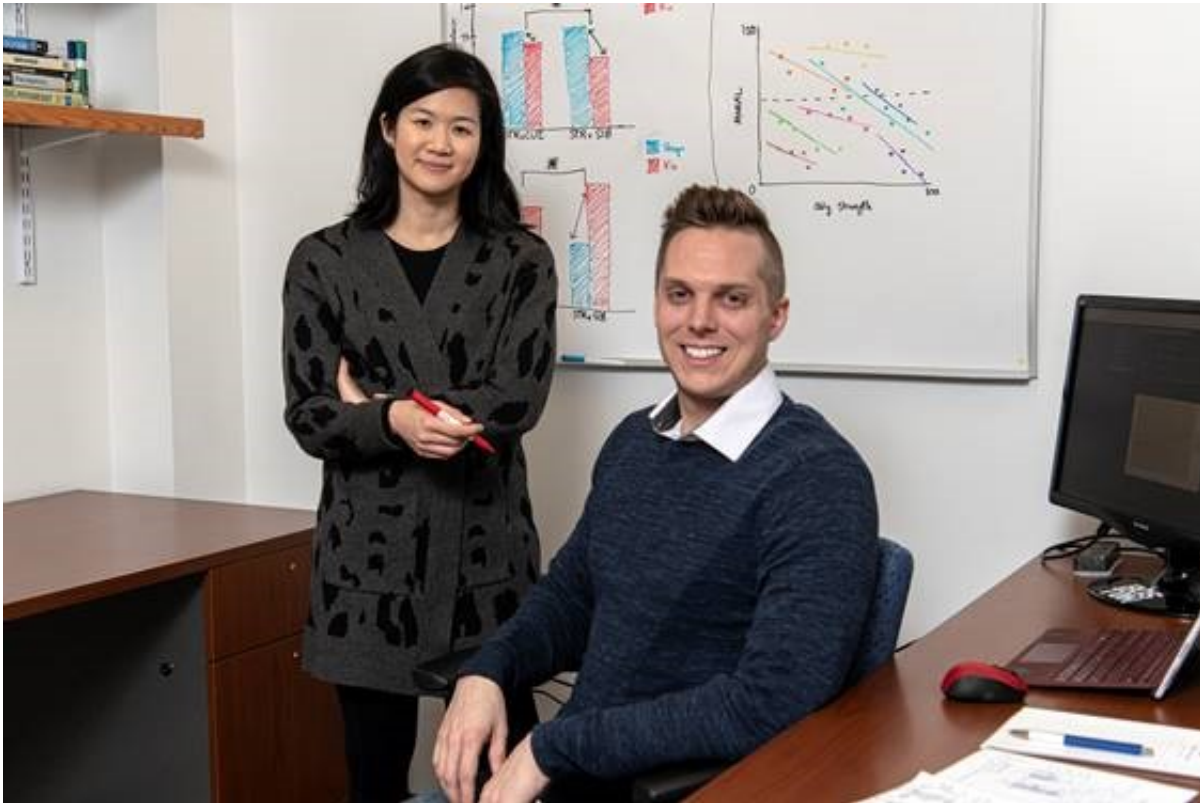
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Your good deed for the day—whether lending a hand to a stranger or giving up your seat on the subway—may prompt others to see you as a good and trustworthy person, but not always. In certain circumstances, it may do just the opposite.

New research published in [Psychological Science](#), the flagship journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that someone who helps a total stranger is generally viewed as morally better and more trustworthy than someone who helps a family member. But this is true only if the helper did not have to choose between those options.

Through a series of five online experiments, a team of psychology researchers from Boston College and Harvard University recruited more than 1,300 volunteers and asked them to evaluate several “Good Samaritan” scenarios. The goal was to determine if familial obligations factor into people’s everyday judgments of moral character, and if so, in what way.



Liane

Young (left) and Ryan McManus (right), Boston College, researched the impact of special obligations on moral judgment. Credit: Lee Pellegrini, Boston College

In each of these scenarios, the researchers manipulated one specific element: whether the person being helped was a stranger or, alternatively, was distantly related to the person lending a hand. The good deeds presented in the tests were basic courtesies, like helping someone move into a new apartment. They did not require extreme physical or financial sacrifice.

In one series of tests, participants read scenarios in which only one person—either a stranger or kin—could be helped. People who helped a stranger were judged as more morally good and more trustworthy than people who helped an equally deserving family member.

“In these cases, we found that perceptions of a helper’s moral character clearly changed based on whether their help was directed at a family member,” said Ryan McManus, a second-year PhD student at Boston College and lead author on the paper. Additional members of the research team included Liane Young, an associate professor of psychology at Boston College, and Max Kleiman-Weiner, a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard University.

“All things being equal, people who helped a stranger were judged to be more moral and more trustworthy than people who helped a family member,” said McManus.

In a second series of tests, participants were faced with similar scenarios, except for one difference: The helper had to choose between helping either a stranger or a family member. Helping one meant forgoing help to the other.

The addition of this either/or choice reversed the outcome. Participants judged that people who chose to

help a stranger over a family member were less morally good and less trustworthy than people who opted to help a family member.

“What struck us was how clearly participants’ judgments changed when they viewed these acts of kindness through the lens of choice between kin and strangers,” said McManus.

The researchers think these seemingly contradictory character judgments are actually connected by a single principle: familial obligation.

This same concept carried over into a third series of tests in which people simply chose to offer no help at all, (e.g., preferring to play videogames rather than help a neighbor move into a new apartment). In these cases, people who ignored the needs of a stranger were judged less critically than people who withheld help from a family member.

“The take-home message from this work is that, from a third-party perspective, the way that we think about others’ moral character depends on who their helpful, or unhelpful, behavior is directed at,” concluded McManus.

The team plans to continue their investigations by examining the role of obligations in judgment when comparing closely related family members to more distant relations.

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Psychological Science, the flagship journal of the Association for Psychological Science, is the leading peer-reviewed journal publishing empirical research spanning the entire spectrum of the science of psychology. For a copy of this article, “What We Owe to Family: The Impact of Special Obligations on Moral Judgment” and access to other research in Psychological Science, contact news@psychologicalscience.org.

All data for this research have been made publicly available via the Open Science Framework. All materials are given in the article itself. This article has received the badges for Preregistration, Open Data, and Open Materials.

For more information about this study, please contact Ryan McManus at mcmanurd@bc.edu.