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One strike and you're a lout: Perceptions of moral character are fugacious, not tenacious

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Abstract

When people who are generally loyal or fair have a momentary lapse in their moral behavior, how does that impact whether we continue to perceive them as loyal or fair people—and how is this shaped by our relative valuation of loyalty and fairness? Reasoning from an error-management perspective suggests the Moral Stringency Hypothesis: Upon witnessing a moral lapse, we should be especially prone to discount category membership for our most deeply valued moral categories, given the potential costs of affiliating with people who do not reliably adhere to our core moral values. However, another line of research on conceptions of the “true self” suggests the opposite. Specifically, the True Self Hypothesis predicts that we should reliably project our most strongly held moral values onto others, even after a lapse. Across two studies ($N = 720$), we found consistent evidence favoring the Moral Stringency Hypothesis over the True Self Hypothesis.

