

How much is it going to cost me?

Bidirectional relations between adolescents' moral personality and prosocial behavior.

THE GIST: We examined the association between students' moral personality and their low and high cost prosocial behavior towards strangers (basically, how much effort were they willing to freely give to helping others?). Personality seems to predict a person's engagement with low-cost prosocial behavior. Also, high-cost prosocial behavior was less common among children and young adults. We wished to find whether high and low-cost prosocial behavior were differentially associated with moral personality over time. To do so, we studied 682 families in the Flourishing Families Project and measured their values, self-regulation, sympathy, and prosocial behavior through self-report. This study found that values were associated with both kinds of prosocial behavior, self-regulation predicted high-cost prosocial behavior, and sympathy predicted low-cost prosocial behavior. There were some reciprocal influences as well, for example, high-cost prosocial behavior influenced the development of prosocial values and low-cost prosocial behavior seemed to have reciprocal influence with sympathy.

THE TAKEAWAY: Behaviors influence our moral identity, and vice versa. Even a small act of prosocial behavior can go a long way. We should do our best to demonstrate and encourage those forms of selflessness. And when those acts come at a greater personal cost, it can do wonders for our personal moral development, and even self-regulation.