

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS

## A new study linking profanity to honesty shows people who curse are more authentic

Ephrat Livni | 2 hours ago



Speaking her mind. (Reuters/Lucas Jackson)

The next time someone tells you to watch your language, feel free to tell them to fuck off.

Sure, swearing is considered poor form in certain settings—like courts, classrooms, and most offices. But people who do it may be [more trustworthy](#), according to a new three-part study analyzing swearing and straightforwardness in [individuals and society](#).

“The consistent findings across the studies suggest that the positive relation between profanity and honesty is robust, and that the relationship found at the individual level indeed translates to the society level,” [concludes the final paper, set to be published in the journal of Psychological and Personality Science this year](#).

Gilad Feldman of the Department of Work and Psychology in Maastricht University in the Netherlands led an international research team whose goal was to resolve a conflict in social science, which is split on the matter

of [swearing and straightforwardness](#). On the one hand, using profanity is taboo and people who do so may be more inclined to break other social norms, including committing crimes of dishonesty—and so swearing has been associated with moral turpitude, the paper explains. On the other hand, [blurting curses](#) is positively associated with authenticity in certain situations—for example, people accused of crimes who are actually innocent are more [inclined to swear](#) during interrogations than those who are guilty and denying their crime, [other studies have found](#).

In an effort to settle the debate, the researchers first studied individual profanity by asking 276 individuals to report how commonly they curse, list their favorite swear words, and explain what emotions they associate with swearing (like anger, embarrassment, or anxiety). Then, these individuals were asked about their honesty in a rather roundabout way—they were surveyed about their reliability, among other things, using a version of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, a standard psychological model developed in 1985. Those who made certain claims—for example that they always do whatever they said they would—were deemed liars based on this particular scale

Next, they analyzed about 70,000 social media interactions between international participants, assessing the presence of profanity in status updates against other measurements of honesty online, such as frequency of use of words like “I ” or “me” which have been [associated in previous studies](#) with lack of forthrightness. “Profanity and honesty were found to be significantly and positively correlated, indicating that those who used more profanity were more honest in their Facebook status updates,” the researchers write.

Finally, the team analyzed profanity on a societal level. To do this, they looked at the 2012 [Integrity Analyses](#) of 48 US states (a measure of transparency and accountability in state governments conducted by the Center for Public

Integrity). They took the state data and compared it to individual swearing scores of state residents in their Facebook study (29,701 participants), finding a correlation between frequent cursing in residents and the state's integrity score. For example, in Connecticut and New Jersey, individuals swore frequently but their states also scored highest on the integrity analysis. Meanwhile, in South Carolina individuals politely avoided profanity, but the state also scored low in governmental integrity and openness.

“We set out to provide an empirical answer to competing views regarding the relationship between profanity and honesty,” the researchers write. “In three studies, at both the individual and society level, we found that a higher rate of profanity use was associated with more honesty.”

That said, they caution against now assuming that the potty-mouthed are all-round angels. Dishonesty in the study was limited to “conscious creation of a false sense of reality” but didn't address true ethics. So, people who curse like sailors may still commit serious ethical crimes—but they won't pretend all's well online.