

Chivalry is not dead when it comes to morality

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We're more likely to sacrifice a man than a woman when it comes to both saving the lives of others and in pursuing our self-interests, a team of psychology researchers has found.

"Our study indicates that we think women's welfare should be preserved over men's," observes Oriel FeldmanHall, a post-doctoral researcher at New York University and the study's lead author.

The research, conducted at Cambridge University's Medical Research Council's Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit and Columbia University, appears in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

In one experiment, study subjects read one of three versions of a "Trolley Dilemma"—a commonly used technique in psychology studies and akin to the "Lifeboat Question" (i.e., if you could save only three of five passengers in a lifeboat, whom would you choose?). In the trolley scenario, subjects read one of three versions of the dilemma, where each vignette described a man, woman, or gender-neutral bystander on the bridge. The participants were then asked how willing they were to "push the [man/woman/person] onto the path of the oncoming trolley" in order to save five others farther down the track.

The results showed that both female and male subjects were much more likely to push the male bystander or one of unspecified gender than they were the female bystander.

In a second experiment, a new group of subjects was given £20 and told that any money they held at the end of the experiment would be multiplied up to 10-fold, giving them as much as £200. However, there was a catch. In the experiment, the subjects interacted with other individuals—the researchers' confederates. The subjects were told that if they decided to keep the money, these individuals would be subjected to mild electric shocks. However, if they gave up the money, it would prevent the shocks from being administered.

As with the first experiment, women were less likely than men to be subjected to shocks, suggesting an aversion to harming females—even when this came at the subjects' own financial expense. However, while both female and male subjects were less likely to shock females than they were males, women in particular were less willing to shock other women.

A third experiment was a survey in which a new set of more than 350 subjects was asked a series of questions relevant to the study's focus—specifically, the researchers aimed to sort out the thought process that might explain the behaviors exhibited in the first two experiments.

The questions included the following: "On a sinking ship, whom should you save first? Men, women, or no order"; "According to [social norms](#), how morally acceptable is it to harm (men/women) for money?"; "According to social norms, how fair is it to harm (men/women)?"; and, "According to social norms, how well do (men/women) tolerate pain?"

Overall, the answers of both female and male respondents suggested that social norms account for greater harming behavior toward a male than a female target—women are less tolerant to pain, it's unacceptable to harm females for personal gain, and society endorses chivalrous behavior. Furthermore, these perspectives were not linked to emotion—[subjects](#)

found harming men and women to be equally emotionally aversive.

"There is indeed a gender bias in these matters: society perceives harming [women](#) as more morally unacceptable," explains co-author Dean Mobbs, an assistant professor of psychology at Columbia University.

Provided by New York University

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