

Study suggests people would go to extremes to protect their honor

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(Medical Xpress)—A team of researchers from Florida State University, the University of North Carolina and the University of Queensland has found that many people will go to extraordinary lengths to protect their

reputation and honor. In their paper published in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, the group describes collecting and combining data from several previous studies to learn more about how strenuously people will protect their reputation. To confirm their findings, the team then conducted several experiments of their own.

History is filled, the researchers note, with examples of people defending their honor, sometimes to [death](#). Ship captains, for example, were long expected to go down with their ships. But does that intense desire to maintain one's image prevail in modern times? This is what the researchers sought to learn.

To start, they looked for examples in four prior studies on pride and honor. They found many examples that showed people do still very strongly value their pride, honor and [reputation](#). When asked if they had to choose between having a swastika tattooed on their forehead or having their hand cut off, for example, many volunteers actually chose the latter. Others were presented with the choice of living a long life as a known pedophile or being put to death right away. Many people reported preferring death.

Having found such examples, the team then carried out their own experiments that involved giving volunteers fake tests designed to uncover hidden racism with the results to be made public. The second part of their experiments involved offering alternatives to publicizing the results, such as submersion of a hand in a bucket of worms—nearly a third chose to go with the worms or other equally gruesome options.

The researchers suggest their findings show that people very strongly value their reputations and many are likely to go to extremes to protect their [honor](#) if it should be placed at risk—a finding that offers some explanation, perhaps, for why so many young [people](#) have taken their own lives after being subjected to online smearing and bullying.

More information: Andrew J. Vonasch et al. Death Before Dishonor, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550617720271](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617720271)

Abstract

Predicated on the notion that people's survival depends greatly on participation in cooperative society, and that reputation damage may preclude such participation, four studies with diverse methods tested the hypothesis that people would make substantial sacrifices to protect their reputations. A "big data" study found that maintaining a moral reputation is one of people's most important values. In making hypothetical choices, high percentages of "normal" people reported preferring jail time, amputation of limbs, and death to various forms of reputation damage (i.e., becoming known as a criminal, Nazi, or child molester). Two lab studies found that 30% of people fully submerged their hands in a pile of disgusting live worms, and 63% endured physical pain to prevent dissemination of information suggesting that they were racist. We discuss the implications of reputation protection for theories about altruism and motivation.

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