

Social status helped and hindered by the same behaviors and traits worldwide

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Beyond fame and fortune, certain traits and behaviors may have pervasive influence in climbing the social ladder, according to a study by evolutionary psychologists at The University of Texas at Austin.

The study of 2,751 individuals in 14 nations identified universally valued qualities, such as intelligence and honesty, that can heighten a person's [social status](#). It also identified universal double-standards that socially reward men for certain sexual behaviors but punish women. The findings

were published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and fill an important gap in understanding the psychology behind who rises and falls within [human societies](#).

"Humans live in a social world in which relative rank matters for nearly everything—your access to resources, your ability to attract mates, and even how long you live," said UT Austin evolutionary psychologist David Buss, one of the study's lead authors. "From an [evolutionary perspective](#), reproductively relevant resources flow to those high in status and trickle slowly, if at all, to those lower on the social totem pole."

The researchers compared people's impressions of 240 factors—including acts, characteristics and events—to determine what increased and impaired a person's esteem in the eyes of others. They found that certain qualities such as being honest, hard-working, kind, intelligent, having a wide range of knowledge, making sacrifices for others, and having a good sense of humor increased a person's social value.

"From the Gypsies in Romania to the native islanders of Guam, people displaying intelligence, bravery and leadership rise in rank in the eyes of their peers," said UT Austin psychology graduate student Patrick Durkee, who led the study with Buss. "But possessing qualities that inflict costs on others will cause your status to plummet, whether you live in Russia or Eritrea."

Being known as a thief, as dirty or unclean, as mean or nasty, acquiring a sexually transmitted disease, and bringing shame on one's family decreased a person's social status or value. These status-harming actions can also lead to a person being ostracized from the group—"an action that would have meant near-certain death in ancestral environments," the researchers said.

"Although this study was conducted prior to the current pandemic, it's interesting that being a disease vector is universally detrimental to a person's status," Buss said. "Socially transmitted diseases are evolutionarily ancient challenges to human survival, so humans have psychological adaptations to avoid them. Lowering a person's social status is an evolutionarily ancient method of social distancing from disease vectors."

In considering universal gender differences in status criteria, the study supported that the ability and willingness to protect others—demonstrating bravery and physical formidability and taking risks to protect allies—was more status-enhancing for men than women. On the other hand, women were more valued socially for qualities relating to domestic skills and attractiveness.

Sexual strategies and mating practices also influenced status and showed strong gender differences. Being sexually promiscuous decreased the status of both genders, but hurt women's status considerably more even in the most sexually egalitarian cultures in the study, the researchers said. Conversely, attaining a committed long-term mate increased the status of both genders, but somewhat more so for women. And fidelity increased the status of both women and men substantially and equally.

The study also identified cultural differences in qualities influencing social status. For example, practicing witchcraft damaged a person's status in Zimbabwe and Eritrea, but has virtually no impact on status in Estonia, Russia or the United States. And although valued universally, a good sense of humor contributes to a large boost in [status](#) in Poland; a moderate boost in China, South Korea and Japan; but only a slight boost in Eritrea.

More information: David M. Buss et al, Human status criteria: Sex differences and similarities across 14 nations., *Journal of Personality*

and Social Psychology (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000206](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000206)

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