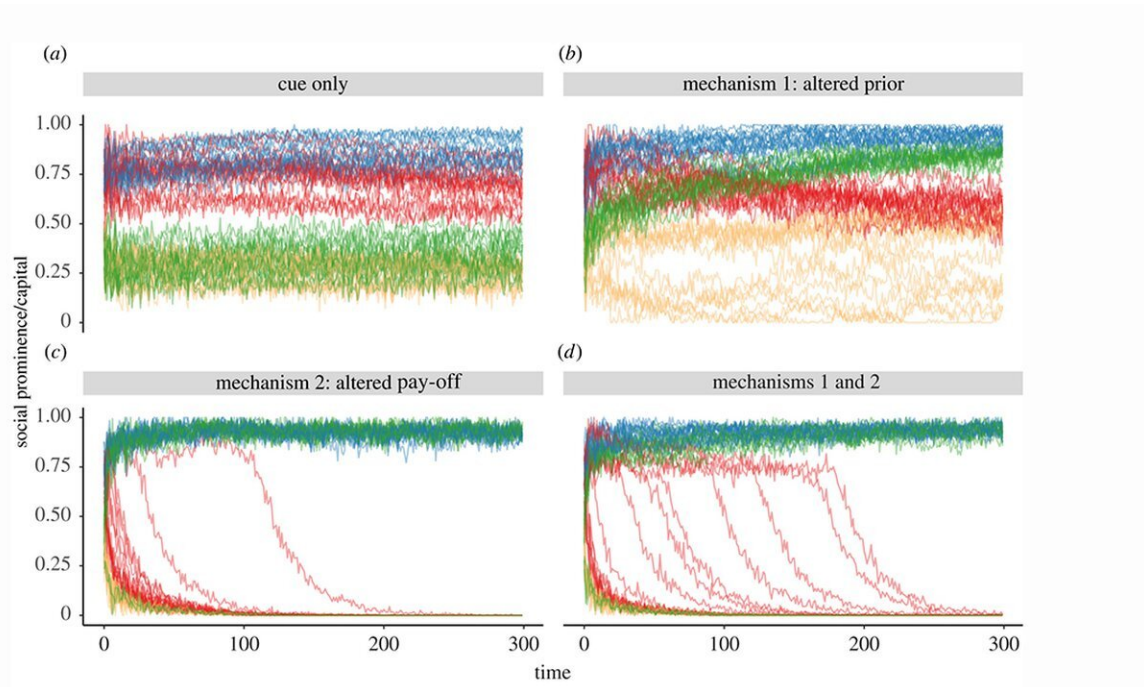


When does reputation lie?

October 27 2021



Representative individual time series of social prominence/capital for individuals of different quality and initial social prominence/capital. Credit: Santa Fe Institute

Consider two stories: the first, about a boy who gets all the attention. He's the cool kid in class who comes from a well-known family. He seems to soar through life. When he errs, few seem to care. The more popular he is, the more beloved he becomes. The second: a girl who can't thrive. She tries and tries, to no avail. She's smart and kind, but she has

few friends. The more she's shunned, the more discouraged she becomes.

Does the boy merit his standing? Or does his status ensure his success? Is the girl trapped in a system that holds her down? Or is reality somewhere in between?

These are questions explored in a new paper that grew from hallway conversations among former SFI postdocs Eleanor Power and Marion Dumas (both of the London School of Economics and Political Science), and their colleague Jessica Barker (Aarhus University and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services). The trio developed an analytical and agent-based model to assess the interplay of reputation, social prominence, and social capital. The research draws from Power's ethnographic work among South Indians who perform intense acts of religious devotion such as firewalking and body piercing in gratitude toward a Hindu goddess.

Power recognized that religious participation is tied to status and the strength of one's social support networks. The more devoutly you behave, the greater your reputation. But not all is equal: some low-status villagers—particularly women and Dalits—don't get the same benefits from their actions. And their mistakes—say, tripping over hot coals—can be seen as divine punishment.

Power had a hunch that her observations reflected the influence of status on the costs and benefits of people's religious actions. Her cohorts told her, "I think you can model that," Power says.

Their research reveals a world neither black nor white. Quality is often recognized and rewarded, as expected. But sometimes people don't merit the prominence they maintain, while others, stuck in a "reputational poverty trap," lack the social support needed to succeed. As Power says,

their work "speaks to the messiness of the world."

The paper appears in a special issue of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, co-edited by Power and dedicated to multidisciplinary research on cooperation and reputation. "What's unique about it, in a very SFI sort of way, is the diversity of approaches," she says. "These are core concepts of the behavioral sciences that are being pursued along multiple avenues."

More information: Marion Dumas et al, When does reputation lie? Dynamic feedbacks between costly signals, social capital and social prominence, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2020.0298](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0298)

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