

Defending the Statue of Liberty: Understanding militant responses to terrorism

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The traditional Southern belief that men must defend their honor is alive and well but not just among men. A new study finds that both men and women in the Southern United States believe in responding aggressively - and sometimes in the extreme - to attacks on the nation.

In two studies, researchers sought to measure both individual and regional differences in honor ideology in the [United States](#). "Honor ideology encompasses beliefs about how men are supposed to behave in the face of provocations and the attributes that 'real' men should exhibit," says Collin Barnes of the University of Oklahoma, lead author of the research online this month in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. "The ideology demands that men be tough, strong, and courageous and that men respond with aggression to provocations that call those qualities into question."

Past research on honor ideology has looked mostly at regional differences, noting a traditional North-South divide, wherein people in Southern states, so-called "culture of honor states," are more likely to uphold those ideals. Little work has been done to measure such beliefs at the individual level.

Barnes' team created a scale to measure individual honor ideology. It includes eight statements about the conditions under which men should use physical aggression to defend themselves or their reputations (e.g., "A man has the right to use physical aggression against another man who insults his mother"), as well as eight statements about the defining qualities of "real men" (e.g., "A real man will never back down from a fight"). After completing this honor ideology scale, White males read about and responded to questions about a fictitious attack on the Statue of Liberty.

The researchers found that high levels of belief in honor ideology predicted hostile responses to the fictitious attack and support for the use of extreme counterterrorism measures, such as the use of severe interrogations, even when the researchers controlled for right-wing authoritarianism, conservatism, and other such factors. The researchers were surprised by the extremity of many of the reactions. "For instance, one high scorer on the honor scale suggested that the only way to deal with radical Muslims is to use nuclear force, paying no mind to collateral damage," Barnes says. Another simply said, 'Kill 'em all.'

In a second study examining regional differences, male and female college students at two schools, one considered to be in a culture of honor state (Oklahoma), the other not (Pennsylvania), completed questionnaires about their reactions to 9/11 within two weeks of the attacks. The researchers found that among both men and women, desires for lethal retaliation against the 9/11 terrorists were stronger for those attending school in an honor state versus a non-honor-state.

"The inclusion of women in the second study separates it from a lot of prior research on the U.S. culture of honor," Barnes says. "Honor values of masculine strength and toughness can be endorsed by men and women, and although men are often the ones who engage in military combat, women may give voice to their honor values by endorsing militaristic responses to national provocations just as men who hold these values do."

Barnes cautions people, however, not assume that as soon as they cross the Mason-Dixon line they will "encounter a throng of blood-thirsty men ready for a no-holds-barred fight." The paper does not want to promote this view, but rather shows, he

says, that while honor-related concerns are more prevalent in the South than in the North, "these concerns are held by individuals who need to be understood in broader terms than just where they live."

For all individuals, "people should try to be aware of how valuing masculine strength and toughness impacts their attitudes and behavior, both toward their neighbors across the street and nations halfway around the world," Barnes says. "If people find themselves brimming with murderous rage following personal slights or ready to launch nuclear war following terrorist attacks, the wisest move might be to recognize that desires for restitution can be best served when burning emotions are chilled by cool level-headedness."

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