

FROM MORALITY TO MAYHEM: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY'S INFLUENCE ON VIOLENT CRIMES

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ABSTRACT

This legal article examines the relationship between social identity theory, reputation, and criminal behaviour in the context of honour killings. It also goes through a case study that explains the relationship between reputation and social identity theory in violent crimes. It analyzes key cases involving honour killings committed to preserving the reputation of the perpetrator's social group. Through a qualitative analysis of judicial judgements, the paper explores how concepts about social identity like in-group favouritism and out-group derogation can facilitate moral disengagement and rationalisation of violent crimes. Specifically, it evaluates the Bhagwan Dass v State (NCT of Delhi) case involving the murder of a woman by her father for engaging in an incestuous relationship. The article aims to understand how honour culture and social identity dynamics can override legal and ethical considerations, motivating otherwise law-abiding individuals to commit heinous offences. The research contributes to developing prevention and intervention strategies targeting root causes enabling honour crimes rooted in social psychological mechanisms.

Keywords: Social Identity Theory, Reputation, Moral Disengagement, Honour Killings.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory is a theory that explains how individuals naturally categorize themselves into different groups of 'us' and 'them'. Some examples are gender, sex, nationality, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, occupation religion, caste, class and so on.¹ It addresses how an individual's sense of self-concept is connected to the environment that they are a part of, and they derive parts of themselves from the groups that they are tied with.² People start feeling a sense of connection with a certain group, which would here be their in-group and they will gradually start showing favouritism towards them, over groups that they do not feel like they

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¹ Campbell Leaper, 'Advances in Child Development and Behavior' (Science Direct, 2011) <[Social Identity Theory - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics](#)> accessed 29 August 2023

² *Ibid*

belong with (or simply all groups out of their in-group), here, their out-groups. They start valuing what their in-groups have to offer and might neglect other information (for instance, something from their out-groups) as inconsequential and not as important. This results in them having feelings of superiority or inferiority based on the community or group that they identify themselves with. This leads to something called in-group bias or favouritism under social identity theory.

REPUTATION AND ITS RELATIONS WITH SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

"Reputation is only a candle, of wavering and uncertain flame, and easily blown out, but it is the light by which the world looks for and finds merit." -James Russell Lowell.

If I were to define reputation, it would be as follows: Reputation is a perception-driven, subjective and dynamic concept that is a collective judgement by society over an individual's actions which is characterised by a consistent show of good character. In the context of Social Identity Theory, reputation plays a vital role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves within their in-groups and out-groups. Individuals often find themselves motivated to maintain a positive reputation within their in-groups, as it frequently showcases the values and behaviours endorsed by that particular social identity. This desire to uphold a sterling reputation for oneself can, at times, push individuals to take dire measures by resorting to violent or even criminal means. This can be seen as an attempt to protect one's reputation as a member of a certain group, even when conducting activities that violate ethical considerations and legal boundaries.

The link between Social Identity Theory and reputation becomes particularly evident here. In the pursuit of maintaining their positive reputation within their chosen social identity, individuals may prioritize the approval and acceptance of their in-group over adherence to broader ethical considerations and their conscience. This conflict of loyalties over whether one should follow their in-group or the ethical implications of their actions that disregard the perceived expectations of society creates a moral dilemma for the individual. This is where an individual's sense of identity becomes entangled with perceived expectations and norms of their in-group, potentially resulting in actions they might not have otherwise considered.

CASE STUDY: - BASED ON THE MOVIE DOCTOR G.

Abstract: This case study examines the relationship between reputation and criminal behaviour, focusing on a successful doctor, namely, 'Dr Ashok Gupta' from the movie Doctor

G (played by Indraneil Sengupta), who strives to maintain a positive public image while engaging in illicit activities. The doctor's reputation catalyses their involvement in a relationship with a minor, leading to subsequent moral and legal dilemmas. As complications arise in her abortion, the doctor resorts to extreme measures, including attempting an abortion at a clinic of questionable repute, to protect their overemphasized image. Through an analysis of the doctor's actions and motivations, the case study aims to draw attention to the link between reputation and violent crimes.

Introduction: The individual we are talking about is a doctor of high repute who has also been living a harmonious family life for many years. However, a significant flaw exists in his carefully crafted facade, as he engages in a secret relationship with a minor. This case study aims to explore how the doctor's desire to safeguard their reputation from societal backlash and the legal implications of his actions leads to a series of cascading criminal actions, actions, by the end of the movie border on violent crime.

Methods: This case study draws upon a qualitative analysis of the events and motivations depicted in a fictional movie, namely, Doctor G. It employs a thematic analysis approach to explore the connections between *reputation*, *criminal behaviour*, and the *individual's decision-making process*.

Results: The doctor's positive reputation is a powerful motivator for maintaining their public image while indulging in an inappropriate relationship. Their reputation becomes a catalyst rather than a deterrent, giving them a false sense of invulnerability. The doctor successfully upholds an aura of faithfulness and responsibility, effectively deceiving their family and others while clandestinely engaging in an intimate relationship with a minor.

When the minor girl reveals she is pregnant, the doctor's fear of damaging their reputation becomes a driving force in their decision-making process. They consider abortion; however, abortion carries fatal risks. The risks associated with undergoing the procedure in a familiar environment are too significant, potentially exposing their secret and tarnishing their reputation as a result of the same. Desperation sets in, leading the doctor to search for a discreet clinic with questionable practices to carry out the abortion and essentially, leaving her on death's door.

So, in his quest to preserve his reputation, the doctor selectively justifies engaging in dire means, overlooking ethical considerations and harmful consequences. He plans to have the

abortion at a clinic that uses substandard (potentially fatal) medications, risking the minor's safety and life.

However, the doctor's plan is thwarted when the individual they sought help from (the movie protagonist and their cousin) recognises the nature of their actions and reports them to the authorities. This action exposes the doctor's illicit activities to the world and brings him behind bars, dismantling his reputation.

Discussion: This case study highlights the intricate relationship between reputation and criminal behaviour. In his pursuit of preserving his reputation, the doctor can engage in increasingly harmful behaviours through the psychological process of moral disengagement. Moral disengagement allows individuals to violate ethical standards and engage in reprehensible acts without experiencing distress or acknowledging the wrongfulness of their actions. People generally act in line with (and refrain from conduct contrary to) internalised moral standards. Behaviors otherwise evaluated as unethical can become reevaluated as justifiable or even obligatory, or as behaviour for which the agent is not responsible.³ In the situation with the doctor, he mentally reframes his illicit relationship with the minor as a consensual one, dismissing considerations of her age and vulnerability. When faced with the pregnancy, he strategically constructs the abortion as a "medical necessity" rather than an elective termination, diminishing the perception of harm. He further distances himself from the unethical clinic by portraying it as the only viable option given the circumstances. Through such cognitive restructuring and rationalisation techniques involving moral justification, euphemistic labelling, and displacement of responsibility⁴, the doctor can disengage his moral self-sanctions and resolve the conflict between his reputation-centred goals and adherence to moral standards. This allows him to push ethical boundaries without experiencing dissonance, fueling his escalating criminal behaviour.

Conclusion: The case study of the doctor's desperate measures underscores the important association between reputation and criminal behaviour. It reveals how the fear of reputational damage and societal backlash can push individuals to engage in moral disengagement which ends with them rationalising their illegal actions. Understanding the motives and consequences behind reputation-driven crimes contributes to a deeper comprehension of human behaviour

³ Ulf Schaefer and Onno Bouwmeester, "Reconceptualizing Moral Disengagement as a Process: Transcending Overly Liberal and Overly Conservative Practice in the Field" (2020) 172 *Journal of Business Ethics* <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10551-020-04520-6#citeas>> accessed 26 September 2023

⁴ *Ibid*

and informs strategies for prevention and rehabilitation within legal and societal contexts.

HONOUR-KILLING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Many real-world cases involve the committing of violent crimes to preserve one's reputation. Honour killings are one such real example of committing heinous crimes in the real world. Honour killings refer to crimes committed to save one's reputation from the 'perceived cowardice' of one's family members or relatives. It derives authority from an excessive focus on cultural aspects where a culture surrounding honour crimes is referred to as 'honour culture'. Men in honour cultures are encouraged to seek reputations for being tough and intolerant of disrespect, whereas women are encouraged to seek reputations for being loyal to family and sexually chaste.⁵ It involves a belief that they are saving their community from facing societal shame by putting an end to the lives of the individual who has committed said shameful activity. It is a concept that opposes the idea that all families instinctively seek to protect their members from harm. It is a concept that focuses more on the values that a community fosters and the supremacy that said values hold over all other factors where upholding them becomes of primary importance, to the point that individuals go on to commit violent crimes to show their solidarity and consequentially, their refusal of the disgraceful act in question. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are among the international organisations that have made efforts to decrease honour killing incidences.⁶ When looked at in the context of social identity theory, it can be said that these individuals categorise themselves as part of a group or a community that they identify themselves with (their in-group) while showing blatant opposition and disapproval towards individuals that do not align themselves with their values, incurring their ill will and hate. Here, all values other than theirs come across as an obstacle in realising their communal objectives. This can be based on factors like religion, reputation, sex, sexual orientation and class, where non-adherence to their values directly earns their ire.

⁵ Ryan P. Brown, 'How to Understand Honor Killings' (*Psychology Today*, 11 August 2016) <[How to Understand Honor Killings | Psychology Today](#)> accessed 29th August 2023

⁶ Ali Teymoori et al., 'Honor killing as a dark side of modernity: Prevalence, common discourses, and a critical view' (2021) 60(1) *Social Science Information* <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0539018421994777>> accessed 26 September 2023

BHAGWAN DASS V STATE (NCT OF DELHI), 9TH MAY 2011⁷**FACTS OF THE CASE**

- 1) This is another gruesome case of honour killing, this time committed by the accused-appellant of his daughter.
- 2) The prosecution's case is that the appellant, Bhagwan Dass was very annoyed with his daughter, who had left her husband Raju and was in an incestuous relationship with her uncle, Shrinivas.
- 3) This infuriated the appellant as he thought of his daughter Seema's conduct as something that would bring deep shame to his family and thus strangulate her with an electric wire.
- 4) The trial court convicted the appellant and the judgement was upheld by the High Court, hence this appeal.
- 5) This case relies on circumstantial evidence but it is already established law that a person can be convicted on circumstantial evidence provided the links in the chain of circumstantial evidence connect the accused with the crime beyond reasonable doubt.
- 6) In this case, we are satisfied that the prosecution has been able to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt by establishing all the links in the chain of circumstances.
- 7) In cases of circumstantial evidence, motive is of prime importance. The motive here has been established by the prosecution as Seema was living with one Shrinivas, who was the son of the maternal aunt of the appellant because of which the appellant felt humiliated and to thus avenge his family's honour, he murdered his daughter.
- 8) The cause of death was opined by Dr. Pravindra Singh in his post-mortem report as death "due to asphyxia as a result of antemortem strangulation by ligature." This is a case of murder and not suicide. The body was not found hanging but lying on the ground.
- 9) The defence has produced that the police had no enmity against the appellant to falsely implicate him and thus the court believed that this was a clear case of murder and the entire circumstances pointed towards the guilt of the accused.
- 10) For the reasons given above, no force was found within the appeal and it was dismissed.

⁷ Bhagwan Dass v State (NCT of Delhi) (2011) 6 SCC 396

THE JUDGEMENT HELD IN THE CASE

The Supreme Court stated that 'honour' killings have become commonplace in many parts of the country, particularly in Haryana, western U.P., and Rajasthan. Often young couples who fall in love have to seek shelter in the police lines or protection homes, to avoid the wrath of people unofficially taking the law into their hands and judging someone guilty without proper evidence. It has been held in Lata Singh's case that there is nothing 'honourable' in 'honour' killings, and they are nothing but barbaric and brutal murders by bigoted persons with feudal minds.

The Supreme Court also stated that honour killings, for whatever reason, come within the category of the *rarest of rare* cases deserving of death punishment. It is time to stamp out these barbaric, feudal practices which are a slur on our nation. This is necessary as a deterrent for such outrageous, uncivilized behaviour. All persons who are planning to perpetrate 'honour' killings should know that the gallows await them.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, social identity theory provides meaningful insights into how in-group loyalty and reputation concerns shaped by honour culture can push individuals to rationalise extreme criminal behaviour. Honour killings epitomise the conflict between social identity-driven moral priorities and legal-ethical standards. By disengaging self-sanctions through cognitive tools like attribution of blame and moral justification, perpetrators can violate stringent moral and legal codes to uphold notions of 'izzat' within their reference group. Unless socio-cultural practices elevating communal reputation and norms over human dignity are challenged, such identity-based crimes will perpetuate. Strategies must target transforming honour ethnocentrism through education, legal reforms, and community mobilisation to establish individual rights and justice as supreme moral values overriding group ideologies.