

## The Relationship between Masculine Honor Beliefs and Beliefs about Confederate Symbols

 **Jessica L. McManus**

Hood College Department of Psychology 401 Rosemont Avenue Frederick, MD 21701 United States of America

Corresponding Author Information: - **Jessica L. McManus**

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Submission Date: 05 August 2025

Accepted Date: 28 August 2025

Published Date: 26 September 2025

VOLUME: Vol.05 Issue09

Page No. 35-41

DOI: -<https://doi.org/10.37547/social-fsshj-05-09-07>

### ABSTRACT

This research explored the relationships between beliefs about the Confederate flag's symbolism, masculine honor beliefs (MHB), and attitudes toward removing Confederate symbols and memorials from public areas. Participants from across the United States ( $N = 206$ ) responded to questionnaires assessing their MHB, beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance, rebellion, and racism, and reported their attitudes about Confederate symbols. Results demonstrated positive associations between beliefs that the Confederate flag stands for remembrance and rebellion, MHB, and support for the Confederate flag. Those who believe the flag symbolizes racism were most in favor of removing Confederate symbols from public spaces whereas those who believe the flag is a symbol of remembrance followed by those with higher levels of MHB most oppose their removal. Findings provide insights into how ideas about masculine honor influence perceptions of important social issues and may explain the acceptance of aggressive measures to protect the Confederate symbols.

**Keywords:** Masculine Honor, Confederate Flag Beliefs

### The Relationship between Masculine Honor Beliefs and Beliefs about Confederate Symbols

On August 12, 2017 Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency after violence erupted between protestors and counter-protestors over the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue from a public park in Charlottesville (Katz, 2017). A car later drove into a crowd, killing one person and injuring others. Charlottesville is one of the more notorious incidents of violence and aggression in response to the removal of Confederate symbols but it is not an isolated occurrence. Stone Mountain, Georgia, for example, is home to a Confederate Memorial Carving of Jefferson

Davis, Generals Robert E. Lee, and Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. In August of 2020, protestors and counter-protestors clashed (Joyner & Walker, 2020): "fights broke out, with people punching and kicking each other and throwing rocks. That's when police officers in riot gear moved in to disperse the crowds" (AP News, 2020). Likewise in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, opposing groups "traded of insults and invective" and law enforcement stepped in before the arguments became physical (The Guardian, 2016).

Threats of violence have also been reported toward city officials who have made decisions resulting in the removal of Confederate memorials. In St. Augustine,

Florida one city commissioner reported receiving profane emails following the removal of a Confederate memorial (Gardner, 2020). A final example demonstrates that these clashes also occur outside of Southern states. In Phoenix Arizona, protesters met outside of a Walmart in response to the company's decision to stop selling Confederate merchandise following the Charleston, South Carolina mass shooting; "many shouted from megaphones and taunted each other by hurling political jabs and insults. Observers outside of the fray were critical of the demonstration, with many saying they were turned off by the vitriol and banter" (Mitchell, 2015).

Many of these protests happened following the Charleston, South Carolina 2015 mass shooting and the death of George Floyd in 2020. Both of these instances brought forth conversations about racial tensions in the United States and many cities questioned the meaning of Confederate symbols in their communities. Decisions to remove Confederate memorials and flags from public spaces took place across the US and heated protests occurred in response. The current study seeks to examine how individual beliefs about Confederate symbols and beliefs about the appropriateness of male behavior predict attitudes about the removal of Confederate symbols.

### **Masculine Honor Beliefs**

Scanning media photos of these protests, one will notice that women are in the crowds but there is an overwhelmingly large male presence. The culture of honor concerns socialized, traditional beliefs about masculinity and appropriate male behavior; defending one's honor may lead to aggressive behaviors (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Nisbett, 1993). Although initially studied as differences between Northern and Southern regions of the United States (Nisbett, 1993), recent research conceptualizes honor as an individual, rather than a cultural, difference (Saucier et al., 2016; Saucier & McManus, 2014). Masculine honor beliefs (MHB) are socialized moral values for men centering on masculine pride, bravery, and protection of family and community (these beliefs about appropriate male behavior are held by men and women). When honor is threatened, those with higher levels of MHB believe it should be defended

and perceive aggression as an acceptable response to threats, provocation, and protection (Saucier et al., 2016). It is possible that the removal of Confederate symbols is perceived to be a threat to community, a removal of values, or an erasure of family history. As such, there may be connections between MHB and opposition to the removal of Confederate symbols and memorials.

### **Beliefs about Confederate Symbols**

Researchers traditionally categorize beliefs about Confederate symbols using the heritage vs. hate dichotomy. These beliefs are either associated with support for Confederate symbols as they commemorate ancestors who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War or oppose the symbols on the grounds that they are associated with slavery and racism (e.g., Cooper et al., 2021; Lippard, 2017; Strother, 2021; Wright & Esses, 2017). While the Confederacy consisted of Southern states, Confederate monuments, flags, and namesakes can be found in Northern and Western areas of the US (*Whose Heritage?* 2019) and researchers have started to examine beliefs about Confederate symbols beyond the traditional heritage vs. hate dichotomy to also include those who see it as a symbol of rebellion (McManus et al., 2025). This research found that, compared to those who believe the Confederate flag stands for racism, those who believe the flag symbolizes remembrance or rebellion were generally more supportive of the Confederate flag and were less likely to advocate for its removal from public areas (McManus et al., 2025). Each set of beliefs may be associated with different reactions to the removal of Confederate symbols. Those who believe the flag symbolizes remembrance may feel a greater need to acknowledge their family's sacrifices whereas those who perceive the flag as a symbol of rebellion may be opposing political pressures and government interference in their communities. Those who believe the flag symbolizes racism, on the other hand, may perceive the memorials as reminders of oppression and injustice and support their removal.

### **Overview and Importance**

This is an exploratory study to examine if there are relationships between MHB, beliefs about the Confederate flag's symbolism, and attitudes about Confederate symbols. Connections between these variables would provide insights into how ideas about masculine honor influence perceptions of important social issues. Importantly, such relationships may explain the acceptance of aggressive measures to protect the Confederate symbols as witnessed in the aforementioned protests in Charlottesville, Stone Mountain, and Gettysburg.

## Methods

### Participants

Two hundred and sixty participants from the United States were recruited from MTurk. Participants' data were removed from analysis if they incorrectly responded to an attention check item ( $N = 30$ ) or provided nonsensical responses to demographic items ( $N = 24$ ). The remaining 206 participants had an average age of 35.81 ( $SD = 10.91$ ), were primarily White (88.3%), male (67%), Christian or Catholic (67.8%), had Bachelor's degrees (56.8%), lived in urban communities (46.1%), and identified as middle-class (51.5%). Participants represented regions across the United States: Northeast (15.5%), Southeast (26.7%), Southwest (8.3%), Midwest (13.1%), and West (35.9%).

### Materials and Procedure

Participants responded to measures assessing their beliefs about the Confederate flag and masculine honor beliefs along with completing a social desirability scale and reporting demographic information. Unless otherwise noted, participants responded to each of the items using a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale. For scales containing multiple items, average composite variables were calculated so that higher values reflect greater representation of each construct. Study procedures followed APA ethical guidelines, including informed consent and debriefing.

**Masculine honor beliefs (MHB;** Saucier et al., 2016). Participants responded to items from the MHBScale ( $\alpha = .84$ ; *Physical violence is the most honorable way to defend yourself*).

**Confederate flag beliefs** (McManus et al., 2025). Participants responded to three separate items to assess the extent to which they believed the Confederate flag is a symbol of remembrance (*The Confederate flag is a symbol of remembrance*), rebellion (*The Confederate flag is a symbol of rebellion*), and racism (*The Confederate flag is a symbol of racism and hatred*).

**Attitudes about Confederate symbols.** Three different measures were used to assess attitudes toward Confederate symbols. First, participants were asked to "rate your feelings about the Confederate flag" using a 1 (*extremely negative*) to 9 (*extremely positive*) scale (Strother, 2021). Second, three items assessed overall support for the Confederate flag ( $\alpha = .78$ ; *People who fly the Confederate flag are exercising free speech*). Third, participants responded to five items (Murty & Vyas, 2017) regarding their support for removing Confederate symbols from public areas ( $\alpha = .91$ ; *Removing tributes to those who fought for the Confederacy from public places*) using a 1 (*very much oppose*) to 9 (*very much support*) scale.

**Demographics and social desirability.** Participants reported their age, race, sex, religious affiliation, highest level of education, community type, socioeconomic status, and state where they lived. Participants also reported their likelihood of engaging in five socially desirable behaviors (e.g., *Do you smile at people every time you meet them?*) by selecting *yes* or *no* (Haghighat, 2007).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and correlations are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

|                      | 1                  | 2                  | 3                  | 4                  | 5                  | 6                  | 7                  |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Masculine Honor   | <b>6.13 (1.72)</b> |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |
| 2. Remembrance       | .58***             | <b>5.92 (2.50)</b> |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |
| 3. Rebellion         | .37***             | .42***             | <b>5.93 (2.49)</b> |                    |                    |                    |                    |
| 4. Racism            | -.05               | -.17**             | .26***             | <b>6.36 (2.45)</b> |                    |                    |                    |
| 5. Positive Feelings | .60***             | .70***             | .44***             | -.11               | <b>5.37 (2.69)</b> |                    |                    |
| 6. Support           | .65***             | .76***             | .50***             | -.15*              | .82***             | <b>5.81 (2.12)</b> |                    |
| 7. Remove            | -.09               | -.34***            | .09                | .60***             | -.23***            | -.32***            | <b>6.46 (1.98)</b> |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**MHB, Confederate flag beliefs, and attitudes about Confederate symbols.** MHB were significantly related to beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and rebellion ( $r = 0.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not racism ( $r = -0.05$ ,  $p = .47$ ).

MHB were also associated with positive feelings about ( $r = 0.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and support for the Confederate flag ( $r = 0.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but not the removal of Confederate symbols from public areas ( $r = -0.09$ ,  $p = .22$ ).

**Confederate flag beliefs and attitudes about Confederate symbols.** Beliefs that the Confederate flag is a symbol of remembrance was positively associated with believing it is a symbol of rebellion ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and negatively associated with believing it stands for racism ( $r = -0.17$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

Beliefs that the flag stands for remembrance were associated with positive feelings about the flag ( $r = 0.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ), greater support for the flag ( $r = 0.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and less support for removing Confederate symbols ( $r = -0.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, beliefs that the flag stands for rebellion were associated with positive feelings about the flag ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ), greater support for the flag ( $r = 0.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not support for removing Confederate symbols ( $r = 0.09$ ,  $p = .20$ ).

Finally, beliefs that the flag stands for racism were not associated with feelings about the flag ( $r = -0.11$ ,  $p = .10$ ) but predicted less support for the flag ( $r = -0.15$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and greater support for removing Confederate symbols ( $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Sex differences.** Men and women did not differ on any of the measures. They had similar scores on the MHB scale ( $t(202) = -0.59$ ,  $p = .56$ ); beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance ( $t(203) = -0.39$ ,  $p = .69$ ), rebellion ( $t(204) = 0.95$ ,  $p = .34$ ), and racism ( $t(204) = 0.45$ ,  $p = .65$ ); feelings about the flag ( $t(204) = -1.71$ ,  $p = .09$ ); support for the flag ( $t(203) = -0.99$ ,  $p = .32$ ); and support for removing Confederate symbols ( $t(203) = 0.67$ ,  $p = .51$ ). Participant's sex, therefore, was not included in further analyses.

### Main Analyses

The correlations show that MHB and beliefs about the Confederate flag are significantly related to attitudes about Confederate symbols. To see which beliefs are most strongly associated with attitudes toward Confederate symbols, we next conducted linear regression analyses. Two-step hierarchical linear regressions were conducted to test the extent to which MHB and beliefs about the Confederate flag predict attitudes toward the flag and other Confederate symbols. Social desirability was entered into the first step as a control. The second step contained four standardized scores representing beliefs that the flag stands for remembrance, rebellion, and racism in addition to MHB.

**Feelings toward the Confederate flag.** After controlling for social desirability, the addition of the second step of the regression was significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Greater MHB ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .29$ ) and beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance ( $\beta = 0.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .45$ ) and

rebellion ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .22$ ) were associated with positive feelings about the Confederate flag. Beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes racism were negatively, but not significantly associated with feelings about the flag ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $p = .12$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = -.11$ ).

**Support for the Confederate flag.** After controlling for social desirability, the addition of the second step of the regression was significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Greater MHB ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .37$ ) and beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance ( $\beta = 0.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .55$ ) and rebellion ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .31$ ) were associated with support for the Confederate flag. Beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes racism were negatively associated with support for the flag ( $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = -.17$ ).

**Removing Confederate symbols.** After controlling for social desirability, the addition of the second step of the regression was significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes remembrance was associated with less support for removing Confederate symbols ( $\beta = -0.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = -.32$ ) whereas beliefs that the Confederate flag symbolizes racism were associated with greater support for removing the symbols ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .54$ ). MHB ( $\beta = 0.09$ ,  $p = .19$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .09$ ) and beliefs that the flag symbolizes rebellion ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p = .40$ ,  $r_{\text{partial}} = .06$ ) were not significantly associated with support for the removal of Confederate symbols.

## Discussion

Overall, results demonstrated positive associations between beliefs that the Confederate flag stands for remembrance and rebellion, MHB, and positive feelings and greater support for the Confederate flag. These findings provide an initial understanding of the relationships between MHB, beliefs about the Confederate flag's symbolism, and attitudes toward Confederate symbols. The protests described earlier demonstrate that there are strong feelings about the presence of Confederate symbols in the United States. When beliefs clashed- as they did in Charlottesville, Stone Mountain, and Gettysburg- emotions flared and violence ensued. Beliefs about the flag and masculine honor are connected to attitudes about the removal of the Confederate symbols. Removal of memorials may trigger feelings about the erasure of family history or

about government interference and result in protest. Likewise, those higher on masculine honor may perceive marking Confederate symbols for removal is a threat to community, family, values, way of life and act against the threat. In line with masculine honor theory, greater aggression may be deemed as an appropriate or acceptable way to react to the threat.

This is an exploratory, correlational study. As such, it only initially examines the relationships between MHB and beliefs about Confederate symbols. This limitation serves as an opportunity for additional questions and exploration. Future studies should examine the behavioral effects connected to MHB and beliefs about Confederate symbols. For example, those with stronger MHB may feel more justified acting aggressively in response to the removal of Confederate symbols and may show more support for those who have acted aggressively. Additional studies could also explore the level of perceived threat posed by removing Confederate memorials to understand how MHB and beliefs about Confederate symbols influence emotional and behavioral reactions to the removal.

Protests advocating for or against the removal of Confederate symbols and memorials have led to verbal altercations and physical violence. This study demonstrates that beliefs about Confederate symbols and masculine honor beliefs may be important in understanding the heated protests concerning Confederate symbols in the United States.

## References

1. AP News. (2020, August 15). *Police move in after fights break out during Georgia protest*. AP News. <https://apnews.com/general-news-cc42ee6ff8cb1c05278a1e2d7f045a2e>
2. Cohen, D., & Nisbett, R. E. (1994). Self-Protection and the Culture of Honor: Explaining Southern Violence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(5), 551–567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294205012>
3. Cohen, D., & Nisbett, R. E. (1997). Field Experiments Examining the Culture of Honor: The Role of Institutions in Perpetuating Norms about Violence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(11), 1188–1199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672972311006>

4. Cohen, D., Nisbett, R. E., Bowdle, B. F., & Schwarz, N. (n.d.). *Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor: An "Experimental Ethnography."*
5. Cooper, C. A., Huffmon, S. H., Knotts, H. G., & McKee, S. C. (2021). Heritage Versus Hate: Assessing Opinions in the Debate over Confederate Monuments and Memorials. *Social Science Quarterly*, 102(3), 1098–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12969>
6. Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A.-G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G\*Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/bf03193146>
7. Gardner, S. (2020, July 28). *St. Augustine commissioners face anger over Confederate memorial decision*. St. Augustine Record. <https://www.staugustine.com/story/news/2020/07/28/st-augustine-commissioners-face-anger-over-confederate-memorial-decision/42053095/>
8. Haghighat, R. (2007). The Development of the Brief Social Desirability Scale (BSDS). *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 3(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v3i4.417>
9. Joyner, C., & Walker, M. A. (2020, August 15). Protesters clash in Stone Mountain. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.
10. Katz, A. (2017). Scenes From the Deadly Unrest in Charlottesville. *TIME.Com*. <https://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>
11. Lippard, C. D. (2017). Heritage or hate?: A pedagogical guide to the Confederate flag in post-race America. *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, 10(3), 56–78.
12. McManus, J. L., White, A., Harmon, S., & Herriges, C. (2025). Remembrance, Rebellion, or Racism: Associations between Beliefs about the Confederate Flag's Symbolism and Political Affiliations, and Racist Attitudes. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences*, 8(2), 58–84. <https://doi.org/10.33422/jarss.v8i2.1382>
13. Mitchell, G. (2015, July 5). *Tense Confederate-flag rally outside Phoenix Walmart*. The Arizona Republic. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2015/07/06/phoenix-walmart-confederate-flag-rally-abrk/29751799/>
14. Murty, K. S., & Vyas, A. G. (2017). African American Students' Reactions to the Confederate Flag: A Social-psychological Approach to Integrate Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome and Microaggression Theory. *Race, Gender & Class*, 24(1–2), 133–159.
15. Nisbett, R. E. (1993). Violence and U.S. Regional Culture. *American Psychologist*.
16. Saucier, D. A., & McManus, J. L. (2014). Men of Honor: Examining Individual Differences in Masculine Honor Beliefs. In J. Gelfer (Ed.), *Masculinities in a Global Era* (pp. 85–99). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6931-5\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6931-5_5)
17. Saucier, D. A., Stanford, A. J., Miller, S. S., Martens, A. L., Miller, A. K., Jones, T. L., McManus, J. L., & Burns, M. D. (2016). Masculine honor beliefs: Measurement and correlates. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 94, 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.12.049>
18. Strother, L. (2021). Racism and pride in attitudes toward confederate symbols. *Sociology Compass*, 15(6), e12882. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12882>
19. The Guardian. (2016, March 6). Confederate flag dispute prompts verbal clashes at Gettysburg protests. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/05/confederate-flag-dispute-gettysburg-protests>
20. *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*. (2019, February 1). Southern Poverty Law Center.

<https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy-3/>

21. Wright, J. D., & Esses, V. M. (2017). Support for the Confederate Battle Flag in the Southern United States: Racism or Southern Pride? *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 5(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v5i1.687>