

Original Article

## An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective on Cultures of Honor

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**Abstract:** A key element of cultures of honor is that men in these cultures are prepared to protect with violence the reputation for strength and toughness. Such cultures are likely to develop where (1) a man's resources can be thieved in full by other men and (2) the governing body is weak and thus cannot prevent or punish theft. Historically a herding culture operating outside of formal government, the southern United States has a rich culture of honor. In this article, I briefly review research conducted by Nisbett, Cohen, and colleagues on the southern culture of honor. I then present several important but unanswered questions about the development and maintenance of the southern culture of honor. I next argue that current models of the development and maintenance of cultures of honor and violence can be informed by an evolutionary psychological perspective. I conclude with a tentative evolutionary psychological analysis of the development and maintenance of the southern culture of honor.

**Keywords:** Evolutionary Psychology, Culture of Honor, Reputation.

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### Introduction

Respect. Walk.  
Are you talking to me?  
Run your mouth when I'm not around, it's easy to achieve.  
You cry to weak friends that sympathize.  
Can you hear the violins playing your song?  
Those same friends tell me your every word.  
Respect. Walk.  
Are you talking to me?  
No way, punk.  
Walk on home, boy.

Partial lyrics to “Walk,” recorded by Pantera, heavy metal band based in Dallas, Texas

Now a new look in my eyes.  
My spirits rise.  
Forget the past.  
Present tense works and lasts.  
Got shit on, pissed on, spit on, stepped on, fucked with,  
Pointed at by lesser men.  
New life in place of old life.  
Unscarred by trials.  
A new level of confidence and power.  
No fucking surrender.  
Can’t lose.

Partial lyrics to “A New Level,” also recorded by Pantera

The lyrics quoted above—drawn from songs recorded by a Texas-based music group—illustrate the culture of honor that characterizes the southern United States, according to Nisbett, Cohen, and their colleagues (e.g., Cohen, 1996, 1998; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwartz, 1996; Cohen, Vandello, Puente, and Rantilla, 1999; Nisbett, 1993; Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). The lyrics to the first song, “Walk,” make clear to an unnamed source that if he knows what’s best for him, he’ll respect the greater strength and power of the speaker and not issue any challenges. Better to just walk right on by, minding his own business. Furthermore, the unnamed source best not derogate the speaker, for he’ll find out. And you can bet he’ll be out to answer the affront.

The lyrics to the second song, “A New Level,” focus specifically on the importance of repairing reputational damage. The speaker’s reputation apparently has been maligned frequently in the past. More reputationally damaging still, this disrespect has been issued by “lesser men.” But beware those who think they might now challenge the speaker, for he has “a new level of confidence and power.” He “can’t lose.” One might do well to avoid insulting the speaker, for it does seem that he’s willing to inflict immediate and severe punishment on those who would challenge his strength and toughness.

The southern United States is not the only stronghold for a culture of honor. Cultures of honor have been documented throughout the world (see Daly and Wilson, 1988; Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). According to Nisbett and colleagues (e.g., Cohen, 1996; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996; Nisbett, 1993; Nisbett and Cohen, 1996), a key element of a culture of honor is that the participant in such a culture is prepared to protect with violence his reputation for strength and toughness. Such cultures are particularly likely to develop where (1) a man’s resource holdings can be thieved in full by other men and (2) the governing body is weak or nonexistent and

thus cannot prevent or punish theft. These two conditions can occur together: Herding, for example, can be the primary viable form of agriculture in remote areas, far from government enforcement mechanisms.

The southern United States was settled by herdsmen from Scotland and Ireland. The northern United States, in contrast, was settled by farmers from England, Holland, and Germany (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). Herding, more than farming, places an individual at risk for losing his entire resource base to theft. Additionally, the South was a low-population frontier region well into the 19th century. In frontier regions, the state has little power to command compliance with the law, and the residents must create and enforce their own system of order. According to Nisbett and colleagues (e.g., Nisbett and Cohen, 1996), a system of order that commonly develops under these circumstances is defined by “the rule of retaliation”: If you cross me, I will punish you.

According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996, p. xv), “to maintain credible power of deterrence, the individual must project a stance of willingness to commit mayhem and to risk wounds or death for himself.” He therefore must be unwaveringly vigilant for affronts that could be construed by others as disrespect. In a culture of honor, when someone allows himself to be insulted or disrespected, he gives the impression that he lacks the strength to protect what is his. With little or no formal government presence to punish selfish behavior—including massive theft of property that could destroy a herdsman economically—the individual must respond with violence or the threat of violence to any affront.

Most of the previous work by Nisbett and colleagues has focused exclusively on men, as men in the South (and in all cultures of honor) have been, and continue to be, the primary family breadwinners. Nisbett and colleagues have speculated that women may play a role in perpetuating the southern culture of honor. These speculations are presented later in this article. Presently, this article follows Nisbett and colleagues’ focus on men as the primary actors in a culture of honor. Furthermore, according to Nisbett and colleagues, non-white men are not expected to participate in the southern culture of honor, which demands past participation in the earlier herding economy of this region. For much of the history of the South, for example, blacks were enslaved by white landowners, and thus were not active participants in the herding economy. Nisbett and colleagues tested many of their hypotheses about the southern culture of honor for southern black men and for southern white men, independently. They found, as hypothesized, evidence of a culture of honor among southern whites but not northern whites, but no regional differences among blacks.

The remainder of this article has three goals. First, I briefly review some of the research conducted by Nisbett, Cohen, and their colleagues on the southern culture of honor. Second, I present several important but unanswered questions about the development and maintenance of the southern culture of honor. Third, I argue that current models of the development and maintenance of cultures of honor and violence can be informed by an evolutionary psychological perspective (e.g., Buss, 1995;

Goetz and Shackelford, in press; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). The article closes with a tentative and speculative evolutionary psychological analysis of the development and maintenance of the southern culture of honor.

### **Review of Some Previous Empirical Work**

*Nisbett (1993): Homicide rates.* The homicide rate is significantly higher for white male southerners than for white male northerners, but only for argument-related homicides (e.g., trivial altercations). These homicides follow insults that center on reputation, strength, toughness, and honor. An increased concern with maintaining or repairing a reputation for strength, toughness, and honor following insult accounts for the higher rate of homicide among southern white men relative to northern white men, over and above North-South differences in temperature, poverty, and the historical practice of slavery.

*Cohen and Nisbett (1994): National attitudinal surveys.* In survey studies conducted over the last three decades, white southern men do not generally endorse violence more than do white northern men. Instead, southerners' increased endorsement of violence is limited to responses to insults or threats that challenge one's strength, toughness, or honor.

*Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwartz (1996): Experiments and psychophysiological assays.* The findings of three experiments bridged the gap between the survey data showing that white southern men are more accepting of violence in response to an insult and the archival data showing that argument-related homicide rates are higher in the South than in the North, among white men. Cohen et al. (1996) conducted experiments in which the participant was insulted either in the presence of observers or in the absence of observers. The insult took the form of being physically pushed while being called an "asshole."

Cohen et al. (1996) documented that insulted white southern men, relative to non-insulted white southern men and insulted and non-insulted white northern men (1) more strongly believed that the insult damaged their appearance of strength and toughness in the eyes of an observer; (2) were made more upset by the insult, as indicated by their rise in cortisol levels and the pattern of emotional responses they displayed as rated by observers; (3) became more cognitively primed for future aggression in insult situations, as indicated by their violent completions of a vignette in which they were asked to indicate how one man should respond when another man is attempting to kiss his long-term partner at a crowded party; (4) showed physiological preparedness for dominant and aggressive behaviors, as indicated by a rise in testosterone levels; (5) behaved in more domineering ways (e.g., gave a firmer handshake) during interpersonal encounters with male observers of the insult; and (6) behaved in physically aggressive ways in subsequent challenge situations, as indicated by a greater willingness to stay put in a narrow hallway as a 6 foot, 3 inch, 250 lb. confederate barreled toward them on a certain collision course.

*Cohen (1996): Law, social policy, and violence.* A variety of laws,

institutions, and social policies requiring the participation of many people in a “shared meaning system” are consistent with the culture-of-honor characterization of the South. Relative to the non-South (especially the North), the South is characterized by (1) opposition to gun control; (2) preference for laws allowing for violence in protection of self, family, and property; (3) preference for a strong national defense; (4) preference for the institutional use of violence in socializing children; and (5) willingness to carry out capital punishment and other forms of state violence for preventing crime and maintaining social order.

*Nisbett and Cohen (1996): Women’s participation in the culture of honor.* Like their male counterparts, white female southerners, more than white female northerners, hold attitudes consistent with a culture of honor: They oppose gun control; endorse violence for the protection of self, family, and property; favor a strong national defense; and endorse parental and school spanking of children.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) provide anecdotal evidence that white southern women play an important role in socializing their sons (but not their daughters) to be vigilant and immediately responsive to insult or affront. Nisbett and Cohen report that, in the experiments conducted by Cohen et al. (1996), having a mother from the South was a good predictor of a “southern” response to insult and, in fact, was a better predictor of a “southern” response to insult than was having a father from the South.

A final piece of information presented by Nisbett and Cohen (1996) that is relevant to women’s participation in the southern culture of honor is that female members of the U.S. House of Representatives from the South are more likely to advocate a strong military and to oppose gun control than are their female counterparts from the North.

To summarize, Nisbett and Cohen (1996) speculate that women’s participation in the southern culture of honor may be primarily as socializing agents, intent on teaching their sons to respond swiftly and violently to affronts, insults, and disrespect. Nisbett and Cohen are careful to point out, however, that much research remains to be conducted before women’s participation in the southern culture of honor can be known with any certainty.

### **Lingering Questions**

Nisbett, Cohen, and colleagues have amassed a good deal of data supporting their hypotheses about the development and expression of a culture of honor among white southern men. This program of research is impressive in its use of multiple methodologies the results of which provide convergent support for the core hypotheses. Several important questions about Nisbett and colleagues’ account of the southern culture of honor remain to be answered, however. Three lingering questions are addressed below.

*What is the nature of the psychology underlying a culture of honor?*

Nisbett and colleagues provide wide-ranging empirical support for their account of the southern culture of honor and violence displayed by white southern men. What this account does not provide, however, is a clear description of the psychological mechanisms that underpin the behavioral manifestations that define the culture of honor. Key questions include: What is the nature of the psychological mechanisms that underlie the culture of honor? What are the design features of these mechanisms?

An evolutionary psychological perspective (Buss, 1995; Tooby and Cosmides, 1992; and see below) may provide a profitable framework for addressing these questions. What specific adaptive problems might the mechanisms underlying the manifest culture of honor have been selected to solve? According to Nisbett and colleagues, the southern culture of honor developed in response to the herding economy of the South, in the context of a relative absence of governmental power to prevent or punish theft of property. However, such a herding culture characterized the South for only a few hundred years and, indeed, no longer accurately describes the primary economy of the South. Even under strong selection pressures, a few hundred years is far too little time for complex psychological mechanisms to have been designed specifically in response to the problem of deterring would-be thieves from ransacking one's herd. It is more likely that the psychological mechanisms underlying the behavioral manifestations of the southern culture of honor were selected as a solution to some other, perhaps closely related, adaptive problem. This possibility is addressed below, in the section "Additional Evolutionary Psychological Speculations on Cultures of Honor."

What Nisbett and colleagues have provided is a description of some of the key inputs that are processed by the evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate actions characteristic of the southern culture of honor. Socioeconomic inputs identified by Nisbett and colleagues include, for example, participation in a herding economy in relative isolation from governmental regulation and punishment of property theft. These inputs are processed by psychological mechanisms that then produce specific outputs, several of which also have been described by Nisbett and colleagues. One set of outputs produced by the operation of these mechanisms appears to be increased vigilance for insults, affronts, or challenges to one's ability to thwart and subsequently punish those who would attempt to steal one's property. A related output is violence inflicted as a response to these perceived insults or affronts.

The psychological mechanisms underlying the culture of honor appear to be universal among men, under conditions of economic vulnerability and in the absence of a formal legal code that punishes theft of property. Nisbett and Cohen (1996; and see Daly and Wilson, 1988) document a variety of cultures around the world in which the men behave remarkably similar to white southern men in their quick, certain, and often violent response to an insult or challenge to their strength and toughness. The apparent universality of cultures of honor (under the necessary conditions) lends

support to the argument that the behavioral manifestations of cultures of honor may be underpinned by universal (albeit sex-specific) evolved psychological mechanisms.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) do not address the cross-cultural prevalence of a culture of honor among women. Nisbett and Cohen do provide some data (see above) consistent with the possibility that white southern women participate to some extent in what appears to be a male-driven culture of honor. One speculation is that to the extent that women do participate in a culture of honor—including the southern culture of honor—they may be doing so largely at the urging of, or in response to, the workings of the male mind. Thus, female psychology may not include the psychological mechanisms that underlie the male expression of a culture of honor. Instead, female psychology might include evolved psychological mechanisms for attending to the means by which male psychology regulates status, strength, toughness, and honor disputes. Nisbett and Cohen provide anecdotal evidence, for example, that southern white women play an important part in socializing sons (but not daughters) to be attentive to insults and affronts, and to respond with retributive violence when an insult or affront is detected. As Nisbett and colleagues clearly indicate, however, much research remains to be conducted on women's role in the development and maintenance of cultures of honor.

*How is the southern culture of honor maintained, given that the South is no longer based primarily on a herding economy?*

A troubling question for the account offered by Nisbett and colleagues is how and why the southern culture of honor has persisted to the present day (as it clearly has). This is troubling because the white South no longer relies primarily (or even in substantial part) on a herding economy. Why do white southern men, more than white northern men, continue to respond with violence to a perceived insult or affront when (a) they no longer risk massive economic loss due to theft, and (b) there now exist formal city, county, state and federal legislative bodies to punish theft or attempted theft of property? Nisbett and colleagues offer two general explanations for the persistence of a culture of honor among present-day, southern white men.

First, Nisbett and colleagues suggest that a culture of honor persists among white southern men because this culture has achieved a degree of “functional autonomy.” Simply stated, the culture of honor has “acquired a life of its own,” and no longer requires the herding economy or the absence of government for its persistence. This “explanation,” however, amounts to a redescription of the persistence phenomenon, and begs the question of why the culture of honor has “acquired a life of its own.” Recent work by Cohen, Nisbett, and colleagues has begun to unpack the persistence phenomenon, with a focus on identifying the social mechanisms that might help to account for the persistence of a culture of honor, including, for example, patterns of interpersonal interaction that lead to explosions of violence (Cohen et al., 1999), collective representations that condone violence, such as laws (Cohen, 1996) and media representations (Cohen and Nisbett, 1997), and

institutional non-stigmatization of violence (Cohen and Nisbett, 1997).

Nisbett and colleagues offer a second speculation for the persistence of the southern culture of honor. Perhaps the persistence of the culture of honor is attributable to “pluralistic ignorance”: everybody believes that if they do not respond to an insult with violence, then their reputation for toughness and honor will suffer. No one questions this belief, when indeed it may be false. This argument is plausible, but leaves unanswered the question of why white southern men are vulnerable to this “pluralistic ignorance.” What is the nature of the psychological mechanisms that underlie this phenomenon? Here is another area that can benefit from additional research, perhaps informed by an evolutionary psychological perspective. What adaptive problems, for example, might have selected for psychological mechanisms that motivate participation in the “pluralistic ignorance” suggested by Nisbett and colleagues?

*Why don't public insults elicit more violence than is elicited by private insults?*

Cohen et al. (1996) do not find greater endorsement of violence as a response to public insults relative to private insults, as the culture of honor hypothesis predicts. Cohen et al. suggest that this is due to poor operationalization of the public insult condition. It would have been more appropriate, they argue, to have enlisted insult observers that are acquaintances, family members, rivals, or potential mates. In their experiments, strangers with whom the participants were not likely to interact again witnessed the insult, hence we might expect less attempt at reputation maintenance by responding aggressively to an insult.

An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests, however, that this experimental paradigm may represent an evolutionarily novel situation. In the human ancestral past, observers to insults were likely to have been members of one's community and, hence, to have been potential rivals or to have communicated the observed insult to potential rivals. Thus, strangers in the experiments conducted by Cohen et al. (1996) may have been registered by the evolved psychological mechanisms of the participants as relatively unknown local group members. If the observers were perceived as local group members rather than as strangers with whom the participant would not interact again, then it is expected that the participants would have responded with increased aggressiveness to insults issued in the public conditions relative to insults issued in the private conditions.

In summary, it is not yet clear why greater aggression or readiness for aggression was not displayed in the public insult conditions relative to the private insult conditions. The strangers to the participant may or may not have been registered as strangers by the psychological mechanisms that evolved in social environments in which observers were likely to have been members of one's local community.

*Additional Evolutionary Psychological Speculations on Cultures of Honor*

Nisbett and colleagues explicitly recognize the potential utility of an evolutionary psychological perspective for understanding cultures of honor, but do not provide any systematic discussion of the relevance of evolutionary psychology. The remainder of this article presents evolutionary psychological speculations about cultures of honor, in general, and about the white southern male culture of honor, in particular.

All men may have the psychological mechanisms for responding to insult to maintain or repair a reputation for strength, toughness, and honor. These mechanisms might be called *evolved reputation maintenance mechanisms*. These mechanisms should be sensitive to context. One context to which the mechanisms underlying reputation maintenance should be sensitive is the local economy, as an index of the vulnerability of resources to mass theft.

In economies such as herding that make one vulnerable to large-scale loss of resources to theft, these reputation maintenance mechanisms might be particularly attuned to insults and affronts. Alternatively, the threshold for responding with violence to insults and affronts may be lower in the context of economies that make individuals vulnerable to large-scale loss due to theft. Vigorous and violent retribution for an affront may successfully dissuade future transgressions.

According to this account, a culture of honor might describe the collective lowering of individual men's thresholds for responding to insults with violence. Men in the South and men in the North share the evolved psychological mechanisms underlying reputation maintenance. In principle, if southern men instead grew up in the North, they would not endorse beliefs and behaviors consistent with a culture of honor. Conversely, if northern men grew up in the South, they would more vigorously endorse these beliefs and behaviors, much as southern white men do today.

A key point is that, according to this account, both northern men and southern men have the capacity to respond with violence to an insult or affront. Nisbett and colleagues' own data support this claim. Southern men are only *relatively* more likely than are northern men to (a) respond to affronts with violence, (b) support the use of using violence to redress an affront, (c) support corporal punishment, (d) support capital punishment, (e) support fewer gun control regulations, and so on.

All men—those residing in the southern or northern United States, and those residing in every other society in the world—may have the psychological mechanisms that underlie the behavioral manifestations that Nisbett and colleagues characterize as a culture of honor. What is required for the manifestation of the behavioral characteristics of a culture of honor is a certain set of input conditions that are processed by these psychological mechanisms. The psychological mechanisms then produce a set of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive outputs that are defined as the manifest indicators of a culture of honor.

The psychological mechanisms that provide output consistent with a culture

of honor are not likely to have evolved as specific solutions to adaptive problems confronted by ancestral men in economically vulnerable economies lacking a formal legislative presence. This is because herding economies and other economies in which wealth is stockpiled are evolutionarily recent phenomena.

The psychological mechanisms may have evolved, however, as solutions to a related adaptive problem that likely was recurrently confronted by ancestral men: theft of a reproductively valuable wife. Theft of a wife might have amounted not to physical theft, *per se*, but to theft of her reproductive capacity, as in the form of courting her for an extra-pair copulation or raping her. The manifest behaviors defined as indicators of a culture of honor might be the output of psychological mechanisms that evolved in response to the adaptive problem of mate retention (see, e.g., Buss, 1988; Buss and Shackelford, 1997; Flinn, 1988; Shackelford, Goetz, Buss, Euler, and Hoier, 2005).

Following this argument, it would be interesting to document, for example, whether rates of wifely infidelity are higher in the South than in the North. Why wifely infidelity rates might be higher in the South than in the North is a separate question. Nisbett and colleagues have documented that white southern men endorse violence as a means of mate retention more than do white northern men. This finding is consistent with the present speculation that the mechanisms of mate retention may be recruited in displaying behaviors consistent with a culture of honor. If manifest behavioral indicators of a culture of honor are the output of evolved psychological mate retention mechanisms, then to the extent that wifely infidelity rates remain higher in the southern United States than elsewhere in the nation, this may help to account for the persistence of a culture of honor to the present. In addition to the social mechanisms identified in recent research [e.g., collective representations that condone violence, such as laws (Cohen, 1996) and media representations (Cohen and Nisbett, 1997)], regional differences in recent wifely infidelity rates might help to account for the persistence of the southern culture of honor to the present.

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