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Uskul, Ayse K. and Cross, Susan E. (2019) Socio-ecological roots of cultures of honor. *Current Opinion in Psychology* . (In press)

DOI

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Socio-Ecological Roots of Cultures of Honor

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Keywords: cultures of honor, socio-ecology, herding, portability of resources, limited law enforcement

Abstract

Social psychological research on honour has been growing rapidly in the last decade and increasing our understanding of cross-cultural differences in a variety of psychological processes. This growing interest in honor has stimulated research designed to examine the origins of honor cultures which is increasingly adopting creative methodologies to tackle the difficulty associated with studying causes of cultural syndromes that are rooted macro-level structures such as politics, economics, and religion. In this review, we briefly summarize this research as inspiring examples that can be adopted to examine socio-ecological roots of other cultural dimensions commonly used to explain cultural differences in psychological processes.

Socio-Ecological Roots of Cultures of Honor

The field of cultural psychology has accumulated extensive evidence documenting important differences across cultural groups in various aspects of human psychological functioning, including motivation, cognition, emotion, and behavior (for a collection of recent reviews see [1]). Observations of unexpectedly large cultural differences have motivated researchers to investigate the origin of these differences. For example, researchers examining cognitive functioning among members of (mostly) western and east Asian cultural groups suggested that both distal (e.g., societal/structural characteristics such as language, religious values, degree of industrialization or democratization) and proximal factors (e.g., social orientation such as independence and interdependence) are likely to play a role in cultural differences in cognition [e.g., 2, 3]. Other explanations put forward to explain the origin of cultural differences in different psychological processes are discussed in the articles published as part of the current issue (e.g., subsistence systems, urbanization, population density).

1.1 Honor Cultures

Here, we focus on socio-ecological factors that have been discussed as underlying the emergence of honor cultures. Honor cultures are defined as groups that position social image or reputation in one's community as a core concern. They fall outside of the cultural groups that have been commonly examined within the comparative psychological literature (e.g., western and east Asian cultures). Regions heavily understudied by psychologists such as Latin America, the Middle Eastern and North African region, and south Asia have been identified as hosting cultures that emphasize honor, where honor plays a defining role in shaping the self and social interactions [e.g., 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. These cultures are contrasted with dignity and face cultures, with dignity cultures exemplified by Northern American, Western European societies where individuals are presumed to have inherent worth that cannot be

taken away by others [10] and with face cultures exemplified by East Asian societies marked by concerns for humility and ingroup harmony [11]. Although cultural groups that promote a cultural logic of honor vs. face have both been portrayed as relatively collectivistic (prioritizing groups and relationships over individuals) and thus highly similar to each other, they are increasingly assumed to vary considerably in the ways that reputation and social status are maintained (through retaliation vs. humility and harmony), attitudes toward conflict [12, 13], and how self is defined in relation to others [14].

Proverbs such as “Give your life; take honor in return” and “Honor before bread” highlight the importance and endurance of honor in these cultural contexts. In these cultures, individuals experience honor as “a right to respect,” which is hard to earn but easy to lose, and once lost, it is difficult to regain [10]. Consequently, members of cultures of honor tend to be vigilant for threats to their honor, both for their own sake and for the sake of close others [for reviews see 15, 16]. To an outsider, individuals’ concern for honor may seem to ignore short-term cost-benefit calculations, and therefore appear irrational or maladaptive [11].

In social psychological literature, honor has been studied as a cultural syndrome [similar to individualism and collectivism, see 17] which consists of “... shared beliefs, values, behaviors, and practices that are organized around a central theme” [11, p.2] and where positive (e.g., a favor, hospitality) and negative (e.g., an insult or threat) *reciprocity* or *payback* operates as an organizing principle. This literature originally focused on the role of honor in explaining higher levels of argument-related (rather than felony-related, such as homicide committed in the course of robbery, rape arson, or other felonies) homicide rates among White males living in rural areas and small towns of the American South compared with their counterparts in the northern regions of the U.S. [18, 19]. Cohen, Nisbett and colleagues, drawing upon previous insights from Wyatt-Brown [20, 21] and McWhiney [22] argued that the observed regional differences in violence cannot be predicted by ecological,

economic, and historical differences between the regions (e.g., temperature, poverty, economic inequality, the institution of slavery), as other social scientists have argued, but are linked to a culture of honor deriving from a herding economy brought by Scots-Irish settlers which was accompanied by an attitude that men tackle affronts aggressively [see 23]. A series of archival, experimental, and survey-based studies conducted by Cohen and colleagues found support for predicted regional differences in some forms of violence [for a review, see 16].

1.2. Socio-Ecological Origins of Honor Cultures

Anthropologists working in Africa were among the first scholars to link particular socio-ecological conditions to the development of an honor culture. Edgerton [24] and Goldschmidt [25] compared the attitudes and behaviors of members of tribal groups who engaged in herding or farming. In four East African tribal groups, the herders were more independent, aggressive, self-reliant, and tough than were farmers. They argued that caring for animals, compared to caring for crops, requires greater vigilance for possible threats to the herd, more initiative to find food and water for the herd, and the ability to withstand hardship.

In the US, historians, sociologists, and psychologists have argued that the Scots-Irish immigrants who settled many parts of the southern US brought with them an honor culture developed in the borderlands of northern England and Scotland. This region was marked by the two ecological characteristics of cultures of honor: scarcity or portability of resources and inadequate or absent law enforcement [19, 23, 26, 27]. These characteristics are found in ecologies where animal herding is common because land is not suited for farming (e.g., land is arid or mountainous) and where scarce resources can be supplemented by raiding others' herds. Moreover, where herding is common, settlements tend to be far apart due to the space needed to graze animals. As a result, law enforcement may be spread thin over large, inaccessible territory, leading to a perception that law enforcement is not available for

protection. When these environmental features come together, they shape the social psychological tools that individuals develop to tackle the threats faced in these ecologies. One such strategy is to construct a reputation for strength and a willingness to retaliate against any threat, real or potential, to the limited resources that one possesses. Families who succeeded in these environments were characterized by men with reputations for swift and sure vengeance when wronged, the willingness to use violence when necessary, and by loyal and chaste women. This attitude is reflected in the common southern saying “Every man is a sheriff on his own hearth.”

1.3. Empirical Examinations of Socio-Ecology of Honor Cultures

Many people are no longer aware of the characteristics of the early Scots-Irish settlers of the U.S. South, but the attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices they brought with them can still be seen in many socialization practices, institutions, and structures of the U.S. South [e.g., more permissive gun control legislation, more lenient laws toward domestic violence, higher rates of gun ownership, greater tolerance for corporal punishment in schools; see 28, 29]. These characteristics of honor cultures continue to account for regional differences in the U.S. in violence and aggression and poor mental health [see for reviews 16, 30].

Research linking the settlement history of the U.S. South to homicide rates in the region has shown that regions of the U.S. settled by Scots-Irish immigrants tended to have higher rates of white male perpetrated homicide than did other regions [31]. In different research, a proxy variable for settlement by the Scots-Irish (number of Presbyterian churches in a region in 1850) predicted argument-related homicide between 1983-1998 in regions of the U.S. dominated by herding-related agriculture [32].

Research on the relations between socio-ecological conditions and aggression or violent behavior include work by Reaves [33] and Messner, Baller, and Zevenbergen [34],

who found that the contemporary rates of homicides committed by white males were substantially higher in historically herding regions than in farming regions of the US South. Others, however, have failed to find support for the socio-ecological explanation for higher rates of argument-related violence in the U.S. south [e.g., 35, 36, 37]. For example, Chu et al. [35] reported that controlling for the distribution of poverty among the Whites results in no discernible contemporary relationship between white male homicide rates and herding regions in the U.S. south. It has been suggested that using more direct measures and historical indices of herding vs. farming in the region could provide a more appropriate test of the culture of honor hypothesis in the U.S. south.

In a broader approach, some researchers have examined the socio-ecological foundations of cultures of honor across multiple societies. An examination of data from 18 small-scale cultural groups available in the Human Relations Area Files [38] revealed that ingroup antagonisms (such as insults, intentional rudeness, aggressive verbal and physical exchanges, or duels) and pro-aggression parenting norms were more common among herders than among farmers; explicit sanctions against aggression were more commonly found in farmers than in herders. Likewise, Altheimer [39] compiled data on resource scarcity, strength of law enforcement, and crime rates (extracted using international homicide index) between 2001-2005 in 51 nations in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western developed nations. He found that the combination of resource scarcity and weak law enforcement measured using different country-level indicators was related to increased homicide rates and had greater explanatory power compared with all of the social-structural factors (i.e., economic inequality, modernity, sex ratio, and ethnic heterogeneity) included in the study. These studies allowed testing the culture of honor hypothesis at the macro level and provided strong support for the original theory

demonstrating that consideration of characteristics of the socio-ecological milieu is important for understanding cultural variation in and predictors of aggressive behavior.

Complementing these attempts, Nowak and colleagues [40, also see 41] recently conducted an agent-based modeling study to examine the dynamics and the evolution of honor cultures. They sought to demonstrate that honor cultures may be an adaptive response to particular types of conditions. Their findings showed that two factors, effectiveness of police and toughness of the environment, played a crucial role in the evolution of honor cultures. Their study also revealed that when reputation had no utility function in the presence of institutional authority, a culture of honor was not functional. Moreover, their modeling showed that the presence of an honor logic in a culture can control the spread of aggression and violence in contexts of weak institutions, with reputation for not yielding to pressure acting as a deterrent for behaving aggressively. This cultural evolution approach to the emergence of honor cultures stresses the need to view the logic behind honor in the context of a long-term strategy rather than focusing on its apparent short-term irrationality.

1.4. Conclusion

Social psychological research on honour has been growing rapidly in the last decade and increasing our understanding of cross-cultural differences in a variety of psychological processes. Researchers examine honor in different parts of the world (e.g., the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, South-East Europe, Latin America and with immigrant groups in Western cultural settings) focusing on its emotional, attitudinal, and behavioural consequences at the individual, interpersonal and intergroup levels [for reviews see 15, 16]. As we briefly summarized in this piece, this growing interest in honor has stimulated research designed to examine the origins of honor cultures which is increasingly adopting creative methodologies to tackle the difficulty associated with studying causes of cultural syndromes

that are rooted macro-level structures such as politics, economics, and religion. Existing research in this domain continues to provide good examples that can be adopted to examine socio-ecological roots of other cultural dimensions commonly used to explain cultural differences in psychological processes. This summary also demonstrates the need for more research on honor-related processes and outcomes in parts of the world that have been widely understudied to test existing predictions as well as to identify socio-ecological roots of cultures of honor that may not have been studied so far.

Understanding the socio-ecological conditions that give rise to honor cultures can help us put in context why cultures of honor appear to promote behaviors (e.g., prioritizing reputation above safety) that may look maladaptive or irrational in the first instance. It can help us make sense of how what seems to be irrational in the short term can be functional in the long term. These insights have important implications to understand and generate solutions for violence, aggression, and conflict around the world as well as positive outcomes such as prosociality, politeness, and hospitality.

Acknowledgments

The preparation of this piece was supported by a National Science Foundation Grant, Division of Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, #1451540 awarded to both authors and a European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant (#817577) awarded to the first author.

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