



M *Maleness and aggression do not have to go together. A “culture of honor” underlies some high murder rates*

Men, Honor and Murder *by Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen*

Homicide overwhelmingly involves males—as both perpetrators and victims. Evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson estimate that across a wide range of cultures a man is more than 20 times more likely to kill another man than a woman is to kill another woman, a finding they explain by arguing that men are more risk prone than women [see “Darwinism and the Roots of Machismo,” on page 8]. Moreover, men are more likely to kill women than the other way around. When a woman does commit homicide, she

usually kills a man who has repeatedly physically abused her.

These facts, together with the observation that males are the more aggressive sex in nearly all mammals, have led many people to suppose that men are unavoidably aggressive and that homicide is a natural consequence of male biology. Yet the striking variation in homicide rates among different societies makes it clear that, whatever men’s predispositions may be, cultures have a great influence on the likelihood that a man will kill. For example, Colombia’s rate is 15 times



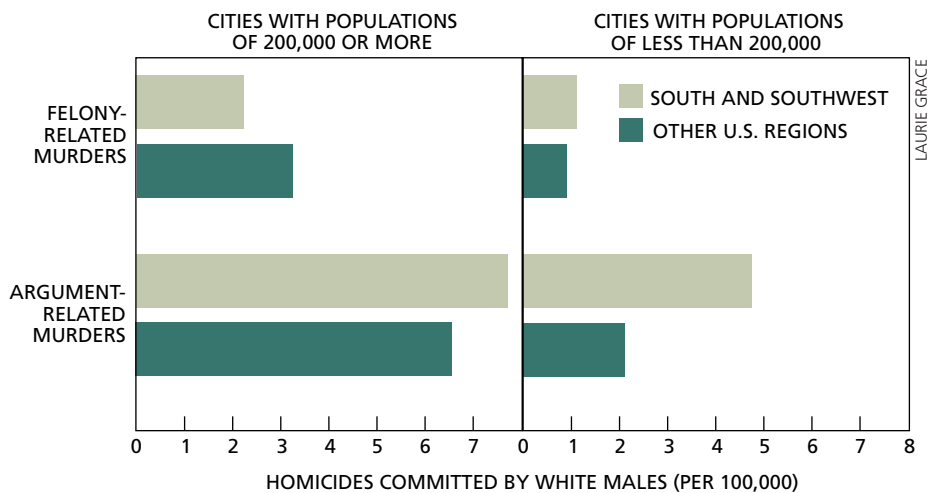
OUT OF MY WAY... *In a reenactment of a study of how southerners and northerners react to insults, an accomplice of the researchers (man in foreground, far left and above) rudely bumped into and swore at an unsuspecting participant passing him in a narrow corridor.*



I'M NOT BUDGING... *After the bump and insult, a bulky second accomplice of the experimenters (foreground) marched down the corridor, forcing unsuspecting passing subjects to step aside. A southerner who had previously been insulted waited until the last second to make way (above). A southerner who had not been insulted was far more gracious (left). Northerners showed no such difference.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL YURMAN Gamma Liaison

Rates of Homicide by White Males



LAURIE GRACE

HIGHER RATES OF HOMICIDE in the South and Southwest result from argument-related murders—not felony-related ones. The former are more common in those regions, especially in small cities and rural areas. Large cities in the South and Southwest have more argument-related but fewer felony-related murders than cities elsewhere.

that of Costa Rica, and the U.S. rate is 10 times that of Norway. Marked regional differences exist even within the U.S. We and our colleague Andrew Reaves have established that in small U.S. cities in the South and the Southwest, the homicide rate for white males is about double that in the rest of the country. We also found that a white man living in a small county in the South is four times more likely to kill than one living in a small county in the Midwest. By making detailed regional comparisons, we have been able to rule out several explanations that have previously been offered to account for similar data, such as the history of slavery in the South, the higher temperatures there and the greater incidence of poverty.

Although there are surely many reasons for regional differences, we believe that one particular set of conditions reliably elicits high rates of homicide. It occurs when men face danger from the actions of other males and the state does not provide protection. Men respond by resorting to self-protection and demonstrating that they are strong enough to deter aggression.

This type of social system is known as a culture of honor. A man establishes his honor by tolerating no challenge or disrespect, responding to insults and threats to his property with threatened or actual violence. Such a code of behavior deters theft and wanton aggression, but it also requires that violence

sometimes be employed: disputants cannot be too willing to back down, or honor will be compromised.

This type of culture dominates almost the entire Mediterranean basin and most of the New World countries influenced by Spanish culture. It is found among the Masai of East Africa, the horsemen of the central Asian steppes and the Native American horsemen of the plains. In the past, it also held sway in Ireland and Scotland, as well as in most of Scandinavia. We have found that it prevails in the U.S. South as well.

What characteristics do these disparate groups have in common? One we think is important is animal husbandry. It plays, or once played, a large role in their economies. Animals are easily stolen, so it is crucial for a man who owns livestock to establish that he is not someone to be challenged lightly. Ethnographer John K. Campbell illustrated the point when he described how critical the first quarrel is in the life of a young Greek shepherd: "Quarrels are necessarily public." To gain respect, a novice shepherd must challenge not only obvious insults but also subtly concocted slights. (The reader may recall people in high school who were gifted at constructing such insults: "You looking at my girlfriend?" "No." "What's a matter, she's not good-looking?")

The U.S. South was settled largely by herdsmen from Scotland and Ireland in

the 17th and 18th centuries, when law enforcement was virtually nonexistent. Many of the settlers' descendants relied on keeping hogs and cattle, too. The northern U.S., in contrast, was colonized mainly by tillers of the soil from England, Germany and the Netherlands. Crop growers are at much less risk of having their capital assets stolen, and they must get along with their neighbors. The bluster of the herdsman would not serve them well. We think this is why homicide rates for white males are higher in the South than in the North. (All the statistics we discuss below make reference to white males.)

Many observers have assumed that the South is simply more brutal than the rest of the country. But its lead in the murder department is entirely the result of the number of homicides that, according to data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, probably stemmed from insults, barroom brawls, lovers' triangles or neighbors' quarrels. Among cities that have a population of more than 200,000, those in the South and Southwest actually have fewer homicides that occur in the context of a felony such as a robbery or burglary than do those elsewhere. Sociologist John Shelton Reed of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has commented that you are probably safer in the South than in the North if you avoid quarrels and stay out of other people's bedrooms.

Self-Defense in the South

Southerners favor violence in general no more than other Americans. They differ from northerners mainly over the use of force to protect home and property, to respond to insults and to socialize children. Our research shows, for example, that southerners are more likely to think it justifiable to kill to protect one's house. They are more likely to take offense at an insult and to think violence is an appropriate recourse. And they are much more inclined than northerners to say they would counsel their child to fight a bully rather than reason with him.

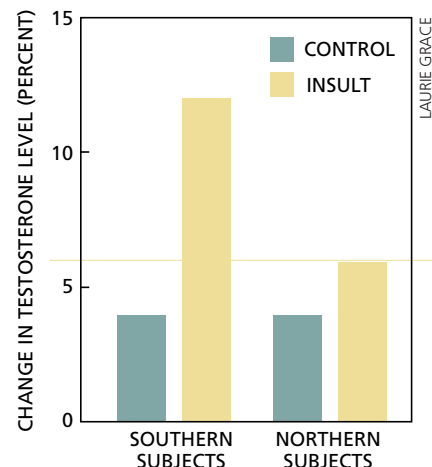
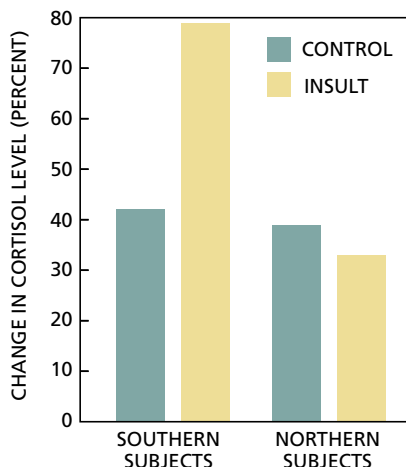
The differences go beyond attitudes. We conducted an experiment in which an accomplice insulted a college student by bumping him in a narrow hallway and swearing at him. (The students had agreed to participate in a study but were misled about its nature

and were given no clue that the corridor incident was staged.) Northerners tended to shrug off the episode. The angry faces of southerners revealed that they did not take it so lightly. Moreover, their cortisol and testosterone levels—but not those of northerners—surged after the insult, which suggests stress and preparedness for aggression.

For the clincher, we confronted some research subjects with another challenge immediately after the insult. As the subject was walking down the narrow hallway, a six-foot, three-inch, 250-pound accomplice of the experimenter walked toward him down the middle of the corridor. Southerners who had not been insulted stepped to one side when the bruiser was about nine feet away. But those who had been insulted walked to within three feet before they stood aside. Apparently the southerners who had just been offended were in no mood to be trifled with, even by someone else—a dangerous frame of mind when the new antagonist has a 100-pound weight advantage. In contrast, the northern students' decision on how close to approach before stepping aside was unaffected by whether they had been insulted.

We think we have some interesting evidence on what keeps the honor tradition alive. Southerners seem to think they will be regarded as unmanly if they do not respond to an insult, and compared with northerners they perceive more peer support for aggression.

Some of our research subjects knew that another person, whom they were just about to meet, had observed the bump-and-insult incident. After the meeting, we asked the subjects to assess what this observer thought of them. Southern participants, but not northern ones, reported that the observer probably thought they were weak because they had not responded forcefully enough. (They were most likely wrong in this. When shown videotapes of people responding to an insult, stu-



HORMONE LEVELS surged in southerners who had been insulted in an experiment but changed much less in southerners in a control group who had not been insulted. Northerners in either group were relatively little affected.

dents from the South rated aggressive responders whom they watched to be just as unattractive as did northerners.)

In another version of our experiment, done with our colleague Joseph A. Vandellos, the insult occurred in front of a group of people. Southerners judged this audience to be more encouraging of aggression than did northerners who watched the same interaction. Such a tendency to perceive support for aggression erroneously could be responsible for maintaining violence as an option.

Institutions in the South also reinforce the culture of honor. We sent retail outlets around the country a job-seeking letter purporting to be from a young man who had killed someone who had been sleeping with his fiancée. Responders from the South were more sympathetic than northerners were. In addition, we sent college newspaper editors around the country a police blotter-style account of a crime of passion that involved an insult. We asked the editors to write up the story for their paper for a fee. Northern accounts strongly condemned the insulted perpetrator; southern accounts were much more sympathetic. A version

of the story that contained no insult elicited no comparable differences.

Furthermore, laws and social policies in the South reflect the culture of honor. Southern laws are more likely to exonerate people who shoot someone escaping with their property. And many statutes in the South endorse a “true man” rule, which allows someone to stand his ground and kill rather than forcing him to beat a cowardly retreat from an attacker.

The South’s culture of honor will surely change. It has already come a long way since the era when a man would ask a prospective son-in-law if he had ever done any “sparkin’”—putting his life on the line in combat. (If the answer was no, the suit was over.) Economic and social changes, together with immigration from other regions, will eventually erode what remains of the tradition.

In the meantime, the contrast between North and South shows that violence by men is a matter of nurture as much as one of nature. Male aggression is not inevitable. Whether a man reaches for his gun or his civility when insulted is a matter of culture. SA

The Authors

RICHARD E. NISBETT and DOV COHEN study the relation between culture and thought processes. Nisbett is co-director of the Culture and Cognition Program at the University of Michigan. Most of his research focuses on differences in reasoning resulting from education and culture. He hails from Texas, and while doing the work reported here, he discovered that you can take the boy out of the South but not the South out of the boy. Cohen is assistant professor of psychology at the University of Illinois. He studies how culture affects people, and vice versa. Cohen abhors violence in all forms except heavy-metal rock music.

Further Reading

HONOR. Julian Pitt-Rivers in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 6. Edited by David Sills. Macmillan, 1968.
 HONOR AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD SOUTH. Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Oxford University Press, 1986.
 CULTURE OF HONOR: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH. Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen. Westview Press, 1996.