University of Nevada, Reno

Honor Culture in Brazil: Assessing Intra-Cultural Variation

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Sociology

by

Alvaro Bartolotti Tomas

Dr. Markus Kemmelmeier/Thesis Advisor

December, 2016

ProQuest Number: 10252481

ProQuest

ProQuest 10252481

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

Alvaro Bartolotti Tomas

entitled

Honor Culture in Brazil: Assessing Intra-Cultural Variation

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Markus Kemmemeier, Ph.D. Advisor

Johnson W. Makoba, Ph.D. Committee Member

Louis C. Forline, Ph.D. Graduate School Representative

David W. Zeh, Ph. D., Dean, Graduate School

December, 2016

Abstract

Sociologists and social psychologists often approach honor as a cultural trait belonging to specific countries and communities. An honor culture is defined as a society in which social status is defined by willingness of individuals to use force to defend one's reputation (Black, 2011; Cooney, 2014). Studies in the past have compared countries in order to establish which cultures can be considered as belonging to an honor culture (Vandello & Cohen, 2003); yet, they ignored the intra-cultural variability within countries. The purpose of this study was to systematically analyze Brazil, an honor culture, for intra-cultural variability in honor attitudes and values. To do so, we used data from the Latin American Public Opinion Survey and aggregate individual responses regarding honor concerns into regional data to create an Honor Index for the municipalities represented in the survey. Next, we compared the average responses of each municipality to demographic data and material conditions, such as the average education, violence, urbanization and trust in law enforcement of each municipality, thus analyzing variability of the presence of this type of culture across different regions.

Introduction

According to Julian Pitt-Rivers, honor is "the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society" as well as "his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his right to pride" (Pitt-Rivers, 1966). In other words, honor is one's reputation in the eyes of others, it is a measure of social worth. Honor culture has been regarded by some as a cultural adaptation to material conditions (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Others, however, have sought to understand the concept of honor with the help of the concepts of cultural capital and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2011). Scholars have compared honor culture to cultural capital due to the similarities in the process of acquiring a reputable image before their peers, which grants them a certain influence and respectability (Grzyb, 2016). However, these studies have failed to elaborate on how Bourdieu can explain the fragility of this cultural capital and how it must be constantly defended.

Previous studies have also shown that honor culture is the characteristics of an entire nation; rather, different honor cultures are present in certain locations, contingent on certain conditions, which Nisbett and Cohen (1996) and others (e.g., Henry, 2009) demonstrates to vary across the U.S. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) found that people living in southern and some western parts of the U.S. exhibited concerns that could be classified as being honor concerns. In that sense, Henry (2009), found that honor emerged as compensation for low social class, and it was more prominent precisely in southern parts of the country. Therefore, the conclusions these studies reached is that the United States is a heterogeneous, multicultural nation, and thus it cannot be referred to as having a national, homogenous culture.

Serving as an inspiration for studying honor culture in Brazil, it seemed that this very same approach could also be applied to Brazil, and allow for similar conclusions. This is so is

mostly because we suggest that the historical formation of both the U.S. and Brazil is actually quite similar. Both had a vastly heterogenic immigration pattern throughout their history, with people coming from various cultures in Europe and some in Asia. Another type of "immigration" that happened in both countries was the process that brought several thousand people from Africa to work as slaves in the American continent. After settling, these immigrants made both countries become large multicultural nations.

But their similarities are not only historical. In the socioeconomic level, both countries have massive problems with regard to poverty and inequality. Both countries stand out in the Gini Index ranking, according to data from the World Bank (2013). The U.S. is considered the most unequal country in the Western, developed world, while Brazil ranks at 16th in the world overall in terms of inequality. Both countries also have had diverse economic activities across their territory. For instance, both countries have had regions in which farming cultures were more prominent, and other regions in which herding was more prominent. This is important to the study of honor because research suggested that people in herding cultures tend to have higher honor concerns than in farming cultures due to the fact that herding is a type of economic activity in which one's property is more subject to being violated than farming (Figueiredo et al., 2004; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996).

All this variability is accentuated by the large geographical dimensions of both countries, with the U.S. being the 3rd largest country in the world and Brazil is the 5th. All these differences and inequalities being spread out in immense territories make both countries have great variance in their cultures. Therefore, if the U.S., which is not an honor culture, can have regions in which honor concerns are high amongst the population, could it not be that Brazil, an honor culture, could have locations in which honor concerns were low?

In Brazil, the existence of several frontier-type regions could explain why honor culture exists there. However, most of the research on honor culture in Brazil focuses on specific regions, mostly the North and Northeastern Brazil (Souza, Souza, Bilsky, & Roazzi, 2015), and not on any broad comparison between regions. However, historical studies have shown that Southern Brazil has had communities that valued honor as a measure of social worth (Vendrame, 2013). What are, then, the conditions for honor culture in Brazil, and where is it mostly prevalent?

The importance of the current research is, therefore, to close two main gaps in previous research regarding honor culture in Brazil. Firstly, there is the question of studies about honor culture treating Brazil as a homogenous culture, when in reality it is quite multicultural (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Secondly, we seek to challenge the notion present in novels, movies, studies and popular culture, that Brazilian honor is concentrated in the North and Northeast of Brazil. To do so, we suggested a systematic approach to measure honor across Brazilian municipalities using survey data and cross it with demographic and socioeconomic data, in order to assess the origins and condition for honor culture in Brazil. The first step to do so is to understand what honor culture is and in what conditions it emerges.

Honor

What is most important about honor is that it depends on individuals meeting cultural standards. By doing so, individuals become honorable and earn respect. In societies that value it, honor is often linked to status; how people behave and how others see them is a measure of their worth.

Individuals can only possess honor or be honorable through the recognition of others. This means that individuals think about themselves in relation to how they believe others see

them. In other words, one's sense of self is interdependent. Honor is, therefore, not something that one is born with, but something that one earns. Since the concept of honor is interdependent, it is much more easily lost than gained. It is precisely because of this that in honor societies, honor can (and must) be defended, even by silencing those who challenge one's honor. This may entail the defense of one's honor and reputation with violent means. The central problem with honor cultures is, therefore, an environment in which folk live constantly under threat of having their reputation and therefore their safety challenged. Violence seems to be the most appropriate and quick response to an insult in order to establish that one is a force to be reckoned with if provoked. This study seeks to investigate what role violence plays in social interactions within cultures and societies which emphasize honor as a high measure of social worth. We seek to understand how honor affects interpersonal relationships, status, and the manner in which those types of societies functions.

Honor Cultures

Research has shown that there are societies in which honor plays a central role (Guerra, Gouveia, Araújo, Andrade, & Gaudêncio, 2013), and individuals belonging to these types of cultures are known for holding values and attitudes that are permeated by the concept of honor (Cooney, 2014; Dória, 1994; Johnson & Lipsett-Rivera, 1998; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Thus, the code of conduct in honor cultures is based on reputation and social image of the self in the eye of others; it is the measure of the worth of the individual vis-à-vis the society in which he/she lives (Guerra, Giner-Sorolla, & Vasiljevic, 2012). Miller (1993) claims that honor cultures can only exist in a context of reciprocity, since in honor cultures "there was no self-respect independent of the respect of others" as well as "not just a matter of the individual; it necessarily involved a group" (Miller, 1993). Thus, it is not hard to see why one feature of honor societies is that they

are mainly, although not exclusively, collectivistic. Collectivistic cultures tend to value the interdependence of the self and in doing so, hold values that are only possible in reference to others (Black, 2011; Cooney, 2014; Guerra et al., 2013; Johnson & Lipsett-Rivera, 1998). In addition, both collectivistic and honor cultures are extremely family oriented, meaning that attitudes that affect the reputation of an individual reflect on all the other individuals belonging to the same family, thus affecting the reputation of the family as a whole (Guerra et al., 2013). Societies which possess an honor culture include non-Asian collectivistic communities, specifically those with a Muslim, African and Latin background (Uskul, Oyserman, & Schwarz, 2010). Also, research has identified that there are honor attitudes and values in certain sub-cultures of the United States, mainly the Southern and Western part of the country (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996).

Much like any type of culture, the system of honor culture determines to a certain extent the customs and beliefs of a community. Miller (1993) claims that honor manifests itself in these cultures as "more than just a set of rules for governing behavior. Honor permeated every aspect of consciousness: how you thought about yourself and others, how you held your body, the expectations you could reasonably have and demands you could make on others" (Miller, 1993). With that in mind, it is possible to understand why an honor culture entails a type of agency from individuals raised in it which "require a violent response or risk of loss of social standing" (Cooney, 2014). Researchers suggest that since honor is much more easily lost than gained, people whose honor is challenged must respond quickly and violently to establish themselves as someone to "be reckoned with" and regain their honor (Stevens, 1973). In that sense, people who belong to these types of cultures often engage in violent conducts that are guided by honor beliefs; namely, corporal punishment for supposedly inappropriate behavior of family members,

strong reactions towards offenses, and, in more extreme cases, honor killings (Cooney, 2014; Santos, 2012; Souza, 2015; Souza, Souza, Bilsky, & Roazzi, 2015; Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002).

Honor cultures also tend to have strict gender expectations, meaning that the dominant values and beliefs are gender specific. For men, the main value is the appearance of strength and capacity to respond strongly (even violently) to offenses by an outside party whereas for women, it lies on "the need to maintain sexual chastity and social restraint" (Guerra et al., 2013). These attitudes towards female sexuality are especially found in Latino cultures, and are often referred to "Marianismo", which literally means that women are expected to emulate virgin Mary, both in regards to their sexual chastity and their compassion and forgiveness (Stevens, 1973).

Since these cultures tend to be male dominated or patriarchal oriented societies, the expectation of conduct from women in honor cultures helps understanding how honor in these types of societies is much easier to lose than to gain. Unlike men, women are born with "honor" (sexual chastity), which they cannot earn. However, they can lose it, and losing it makes it difficult to gain it back. Individuals in honor cultures are much more likely to motivate their actions based on these values than in non-honor cultures.

Some theorists have largely explained honor culture with male domination ideology originating from patriarchal societies (Gill, 2006). Societies in which cultural beliefs of men's superiority are prevalent tend to create material conditions that render women powerless relative to men (Gill, 2006; Hansen, 2002). To understand how and why these values and attitudes emerge, it is important to analyze the similarities between these cultures in order to assess their origins, as well as the conditions in which they originate.

Material Conditions of Honor

Arguably, culture is at least in part a material form of adaptation, a collective response to specific conditions. Indeed, some researchers consider honor culture a system of social regulation that is a collective solution to a problem (Dória, 1994; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Souza, 2015). An important approach is provided by Nisbett and Cohen (1996), who argued that communities had to possess a series of material traits for an honor cultures to arise. The authors argued that these types of cultures had to have two main traits, namely, a scarcity of economic resources, and the absence of efficient law enforcement. Crucially, the authors argued that in honor cultures the benefit of resolving conflict outside the boundaries of the law (illegally) outweighed the costs (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Nisbett and Cohen (1996) proposed that in a violent environment with few economic resources and absent law enforcement people are potentially vulnerable to transgression of others, who might steal their property or who might physically harm them. They argued that this was typical of frontier-like environments with little or no presence of the state, and was typical of herding societies, which had a type of economic activity that was more susceptible to danger (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996).

In these cultures, any confrontation with others to protect one's family or property might turn violent. Even when individuals prevail in a physical altercation, they might sustain harm which weakens them for any subsequent altercation. To offset this, it is more efficient to find a way in which open violence can be minimized or even avoided. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) argued that establishing a violent reputation served such a purpose. Of course, establishing such a reputation can be costly, and bears risk. However, once an actor has established in the eyes of others, that they are strong and will act violently against any possible aggression, they minimize the risk of actually having to get involved in a fight.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) suggested that this dynamic serves as the basis for honor cultures. Individuals find means, violent or not, to signal to others that they follow a certain code, which allows them to anticipate a violent response if the individual is challenged. However, the effectiveness of this deterrence is based on their ability to establish and preserve their reputation in the eyes of others. Typically, this entails establishing oneself as "honorable." If they are unable to do so, individuals could be at the mercy of transgressors. A similar dynamic can also be observed in prisons and inner cities, in which respect and reputation play a central role in interpersonal interactions (Anderson, 2000).

Anderson describes how young people living in poverty and violent areas develop behavioral tools to survive a dangerous and threatening environment. In that sense, establishing a reputation has a very similar predicament in both inner cities and honor cultures. The difference, however, lies in what Anderson called the "dilemma of the decent kid", which entails the challenge of individuals being reputable before their peers, while simultaneously behaving as "decent" kids before their families (Anderson, 2000). In honor cultures, however, a man's honor lies not only in how he behaves, but how his family behaves. Men in honor cultures are not necessarily bound by these contradictions because having a reputation is not contradictory to being "decent". In an honor culture, a person's social worth is measured equally in the household and in the streets, and a child acting out is a challenge to the patriarch's honor more than an affirmation of the child's honor.

Both these perspectives can relate to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, that is, a set of symbolic assets that can determine one's social status (Bourdieu, 2011). When applying this notion to honor, it is possible to see that people, and especially men, living in societies that carry elements of violence and threat, as well as a general disbelief in state authorities, need to acquire

a specific form of symbolic capital in order to build a reputation. This reputation not only ascribes them social status, but it is also a tool that can shield them from external violence.

The kind of predominant economic activity of a society can also be a predictor for honor culture. Research shows that communities that originate from herding cultures, often in frontier-type areas, are more oriented toward honor more than communities that originate from farming cultures (Henry, 2009; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). In a frontier area in which a person needs to take care of animals in a semi-nomadic life, it is quite possible to find oneself in a situation in which one's main source of livelihood can be stolen or killed. However, farmers are settlers whose property is typically stationary; such populations tend to establish communities, in which neighbors cooperate, and which social rules are enforced.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) argued that early European immigration to the southern United States occurred primarily from the British Isles, and from areas that were traditional herding societies. Because these mostly Scots-Irish immigrants continued to be herders, they not only brought the seeds of an honor culture with them, but material conditions, such as the vulnerability of assault by others, and by doing so they promoted this cultural pattern. In the absence of an active and present law-enforcement in the early Americas, the solution was the development of the promise of a violent response, that is, the deterrence of transgression against one's person, one's family and one's property. Therefore, in the U.S. South reputation, strength, and symbolic proxies of being "reputable", "honorable" solved a very concrete problem. If people respected and feared one another, they might not attempt to hurt each other. It is possible to observe this cultural pattern in cowboy culture in the Wild West, as described by Courtwright (1996). These descriptions once more appear to shows parallels with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2011). The appearance of strength and