

THE CULTURAL ECOLOGY OF GUN VIOLENCE

Culture of Honor and Code of the Street

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Abstract

Gun violence and related risk factors differ for African American and European Americans. However, there may be overlap in the psychosocial and contextual factors with respect to cultural processes related to gun violence in Black and White communities. The purpose of this article is to compare the culture of honor perspective associated with rural and suburban gun violence of European American males in the southern region to the code of the street value system ascribed to the gun violence of African American males in northern urban cities. The cultural values underlying gun violence will be reviewed in terms of cultural origins, family and community support, and ecological evidence. The central question is whether there are sufficient commonalities between the cultural ecology of the two value systems such that one has practice and policy implications for the other. The current analysis of culture-of-honor and code-of-the-street value systems vis-à-vis gun violence reveals several points of overlap in philosophy and function. Implications for policies and practices to prevent gun violence stemming from culture-of-honor and code-of-the-street value systems include (1) psychological interventions to address the perceived threats to the self; (2) neighborhood interventions to promote a sense of collective efficacy among residents; (3) addressing racial and economic inequality; (4) better gun control laws; and (5) media campaigns and interventions designed to change social and cultural norms for violence. It is important to note the pervasiveness of these value systems may vary by ethnicity and race which must be taken into consideration in violence prevention efforts.

Keywords: Code of the Street, Collective Efficacy, Culture of Honor, Ethnicity/Race, Gun-related Homicides, Self-affirmation Intervention, Violence Prevention

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of homicides and injuries resulting from gun violence in the United States is recognized as a public health concern (Bailey 2018; Prothrow-Stith and Weissman, 1991). The public health approach identifies factors that increase risk or protect individuals. Ethnic/racial differences in gun violence and related risk factors

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reveal that European American males tend to be school rampage shooters with legal guns in suburban and rural communities and that African American males tend to engage in street violence in urban communities with illegal guns (Bushman et al., 2016). The role of psychosocial and contextual factors in Black youth violence are frequently discussed and implicate the psychological need for “respect” as a contributing factor to violent behavior (Anderson 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998; Majors and Billison, 1993). In earlier work, I posited that the psychological need for respect corresponds to the value of “honor” associated with gun violence among European American males (Whaley 2020).

Despite ethnic/racial disparities in gun-related homicide rates, the cultural values underlying these lethal actions may share similar features. The purpose of this article is to compare the code of the street value system ascribed to the urban gun violence of African American males (Anderson 1999) to the culture of honor perspective associated with rural and suburban gun violence of European American counterparts (Nisbett 1993). The central question is whether there are sufficient commonalities between the cultural ecology of gun violence in the two value systems such that one can identify common practice and policy implications.

CULTURE OF HONOR

Cultural Origins

“Culture of honor” is a concept describing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors leading to gun violence in response to insults, as a means of self-defense, and as an approach to the socialization of children (Nisbett 1993). Empirical research indicates that the culture of honor value system explains high rates of gun violence among White males in the southern region of the United States (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et al., 1996; Nisbett 1993). It is a cultural manifestation of honor systems inherited from European ancestors and coping with the challenges of U.S. frontier life and the herding (versus farming) economy. Matthew R. Lee and colleagues (2010) added the Protestant ethic to the influences of Scots-Irish heritage in the production of the U.S. southern culture of violence.

The herding economy—the sale and raising of livestock (cattle, pigs, and sheep)—was a precarious source of livelihood, with property often being rustled or stolen by strangers. Herders responded to this situation with “a posture of extreme vigilance toward any act that might be perceived as threatening in any way and ... with sufficient force to frighten the offender and the community into recognizing that they are not to be trifled with” (Nisbett 1993, p. 442). Herding economies are outmoded in the modern U.S. South (and West), but the culture of honor with its violent consequences persists in this region of the United States.

Family and Community Support

Maintenance of the culture of honor occurs through values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape violent responses for self-defense or protection of honor, and by means of views about the standards of manhood (Cohen et al., 1996). Socialization of children is a primary function of cultural processes that promote the culture of honor value system. The use of spanking as a tool of socialization is condoned in the culture of honor perspective (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994). Along the same lines, Ryan P. Brown and colleagues (2009) showed the influence of the culture of honor on youth in two studies of high school students. Specifically, they found culture-of-honor states to have more

frequent gun carrying and more school shootings by students in high schools than other states (Brown et al., 2009). These findings link the culture of honor and rampage shootings in schools. I have also linked the culture of honor in the extreme to the “massacre mentality,” in other words, feelings of justification for multiple killings in mass or rampage shootings (Whaley 2020).

Moreover, social organizations in the South promote the culture of honor through the support of individuals who engage in honor-related violent acts (Cohen and Nisbett, 1997). Other scholars argue that codes of honor have been replaced by self-defense as the singular reason for gun ownership (Felson and Pare, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2017). Nicholas Buttrick (2020) extended this latter view to argue that gun ownership has become a “coping mechanism” to fulfill psychological needs for a sense of safety, self-efficacy and control, and belongingness. Consistent with my assertion about the “heritage dimension” of culture (Whaley 2003), these scholarly works indicate that intergenerational transmission of cultural values and behaviors continues in spite of the loss of their original adaptive function.

Ecological Evidence

Research on the culture of honor revealed the perpetuation of regional differences in violent outcomes including homicide rates, legal gun possession, and a predisposition for gun-related violent behaviors to address affronts to honor, self-defense, or home protection (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et al., 1996; Felson and Pare, 2010; Henry 2009; Nisbett 1993; Wolfson et al., 2017). The need for self-defense and protection is more psychological than an actual response to victimization (Buttrick 2020; Felson and Pare, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2017). Thus, the gun culture is an extension of the culture of honor (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994).

Studies of regional differences in gun culture yield mixed results. Wolfgang N. Stroebe and colleagues (2017) did not find regional differences in gun ownership. In contrast, Richard B. Felson and Paul-Philippe Pare (2010) reported more prevalent gun ownership among White respondents in southern states than northern states, but no regional differences for knives and mace as weapons of self-defense. Culture of honor perspective is still supported in that the concept is applicable to situation-specific violence including choice of weapons (see Cohen and Nisbett, 1994). Using county-level U.S. data, Lee and colleagues (2010) found southern heritage to be predictive of “argument homicides” across southern and non-southern regions.

CODE OF THE STREET

Cultural Origins

Elijah Anderson’s (1999) ethnographic study of “code of the street” is a popular account of Black youth violence that integrates personal values, cultural context, and structural factors. According to Anderson,

The code of the street is a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system...which is one reason many residents feel that they must be prepared to take extraordinary measures to defend themselves and their loved ones against those who are inclined to aggression...the person who is believed capable of ‘taking care of himself’ is accorded a certain deference and regard, which translates into a sense of physical and psychological control (1999, p. 34).

The issue at the heart of the matter is “respect,” which Anderson (1999) suggests is experienced like a precious commodity that is in short supply by urban Black youth. The assumption is that African American adolescents living in disadvantaged neighborhoods adopt the code of the street, which condones violence as means of achieving respect and social status, because conventional opportunities for success in mainstream society are unavailable.

Moreover, the code-of-street perspective explains that high rates of violence among urban Black youth is a manifestation of racial segregation and social isolation as mechanisms for convergence of multiple social disadvantages (Shihadeh and Flynn, 1996). This concentration of social disadvantage in African American communities with social and economic isolation from mainstream U.S. institutions fosters a sociocultural context and values promoting violence (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Matsueda et al., 2006; Shihadeh and Flynn, 1996; Stewart and Simons, 2006, 2010; Wilson 1987). An important consensus among scholars is that this alternative to the “culture of poverty” thesis locates the problem in the environment rather than in individual behavior (Lee et al., 2010; Shihadeh and Flynn, 1996; Wilson 1987). In other words, cultural values resulting from social disadvantage are a consequence, not a cause, of structural barriers.

Family and Community Support

Studies have found that the code of the street at the family and neighborhood levels predicts violent outcomes independent of individual-level reports (Matsueda et al., 2006; Stewart and Simons, 2006, 2010). Similarly, Susan McNeeley and Yue Yuan (2017) found independent effects for individual-level and neighborhood-level code-of-the-street effects for fear of crime. Eric A. Stewart and Ronald L. Simons (2006) found that the link between neighborhood disadvantage and violent delinquency is mediated by neighborhood-level code of the street. Charis E. Kubrin and Ronald Weitzer (2003) present ethnographic data from their mixed-method study of “retaliatory homicide,” illustrating family and community support for code-of-the-street violence.

Contrary to Anderson’s (1999) “ecology of danger” underlying the code of the street spilling over into adjacent neighborhoods, ethnographic research simply observes examples in a single inner-city neighborhood and infers that they are widespread in other urban centers and absent elsewhere (Matsueda et al., 2006). Quantitative sociological research suggests that the validity of the observation is dependent upon how a neighborhood is defined. Some researchers reported a “diffusion effect” of homicide across disadvantaged neighborhoods (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Morenoff et al., 2001). However, spillover effects of neighborhood violence in housing projects were not supported (Griffiths and Tita, 2009). Future research will determine whether diffusion of these values would differ in public housing versus other types of neighborhoods.

Anderson (1999) asserted that the code of the street was unique to impoverished African American communities involving two types of families: “decent families” and “street families”. Decent families are hardworking with mainstream values which they instill in their children, whereas street families are less invested in mainstream values and tend to be ineffective parents. Street families embrace the code of the street and socialize their children with “tough love” encouraging them to use violence to solve interpersonal conflicts (Anderson, 1999). Indeed, Stewart and Simons (2006) found Black adolescents living in street families tended to adopt the code of the street. Ross L. Matsueda and colleagues (2006) found the proportion of either Blacks or Latinos in a community was positively correlated with presence of the code of the street which challenges Anderson’s (1999) notion that the value system is unique to urban, poor African American families. The finding of code-of-the-street attitudes among college students also calls into

question its specificity to disadvantaged Black communities (Intravia et al., 2017). The code of the street beyond poor urban Black communities raises the possibility of broader cultural values.

Ecological Evidence

According to Anderson (1999), the culturally adaptive aspect of building a reputation through violence is that it protects the individual from victimization. Contrary to this hypothesis, Stewart and colleagues (2006) found longitudinally that adoption of the street code was associated with an increase in violent victimization. Moreover, epidemiological studies indicate that weapon carrying is a positive correlate of fighting behavior or fighting-related injuries (Kemal et al., 2018; Lowry et al., 1998; Rich and Grey, 2005). The fact that weapon carrying is correlated with greater exposure to violent victimization also poses a significant challenge to Anderson's (1999) hypothesis. In general, measures of the code of the street need to distinguish between generic violence and firearm-related homicides.

Jeffrey Fagan and Deanna Wilkerson (Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson and Fagan, 2000) extended the code-of-the-street perspective, theorizing that gun possession increases the reputation of toughness becoming part of the social identity of poor, urban Black male adolescents. They compared Black youth convicted of gun possession to neighborhood controls exhibiting gun-carrying behavior (Wilkinson and Fagan, 2000). Epidemiological principles suggest that the characteristics of African American adolescents who carry guns (i.e., chronic cases) may not be shared by the larger populations of Black youth (noncases or incident cases) in urban neighborhoods (see Cohen and Cohen, 1984; Delgado-Rodríguez and Llorca, 2004; Westreich 2012).

In fact, ethnographic research on noncriminal Black youth refutes code-of-the-street views on gun violence (Mahiri and Conner, 2003). Daniel W. Webster and colleagues (1993) found that Black adolescents carrying guns were more antisocial with a history of criminal arrests than those who carried knives. Consequently, the perspective of Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) is not supported by studies of (unexposed) Black adolescents with no criminal background or gun-related activities. Based on the extant empirical literature, the view of gun possession as a pervasive cultural process among poor, urban Black males is questionable. However, gun possession as a risk factor for increased Black male violence appears to be valid.

CULTURE OF HONOR AND CODE OF THE STREET

Cultural Origins

Given current advances in understanding Black youth violence in impoverished African American communities, is the code of the street a cultural variant of the culture of honor? Anderson (1999) acknowledged the culture of violence in American history, but he considered it a relic of the past. The culture of honor is still present, particularly in the Southern (and Western) regions of the United States. The research findings on the relevance of culture of honor for African Americans have been equivocal. Some empirical evidence suggests these regional effects do not apply to African Americans (Cohen and Nisbett, 1997; Nisbett 1993). Other studies suggest that they do extend to Black communities (Felton and Pare, 2010; Lee et al., 2010). Future studies should examine Black Americans' migration patterns to northern urban cities in relation to homicide rates to determine whether a single cultural source underlies culture-of-honor and code-of-the-street value systems.

Both culture of honor and code of the street are adaptations designed to achieve a reputation as “tough” and not to be messed with. Ironically, evidence suggests that protective gun ownership increases firearm-related fatalities involving family and friends (Buttrick 2020; Stroebe et al., 2017); and gun possession has been found to be associated with an increased risk of victimization among African Americans residing in violent neighborhoods (Stewart et al., 2006). Conceptual extensions of both of these cultural value systems suggest that gun possession becomes an “identity” (Buttrick 2020; Fagan and Wilkinson, 1998). These hypothesized transformations of self and identity are thus not related to crime prevention or decreased victimization in either case.

Family and Community Support

Culture of honor and code of the street both handle affronts to female significant others as matters of honor or respect requiring violent retribution (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003). Several studies suggest that owners of guns for self-defense and protection tend to believe that it is acceptable to kill someone to preserve the family (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994; Nisbett 1993; Stroebe et al., 2017). According to Kubrin and Weitzer (2003), street code justice also condones retaliatory homicide to defend family members. Punitive discipline in the socialization of children is a characteristic shared by families in the southern culture of honor and street families in code of the street (see Anderson 1999; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994). The goal in both instances is to encourage toughness in youth.

The code of the street perspective highlights the failure of police to maintain law and order as justification for street justice (Anderson 1999; Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Matsueda et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 2006). The absence of law enforcement is also implicated in the development of the culture of honor (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994, 1997; Cohen et al., 1996; Nisbett 1993). The expansion of the role of family protector to “citizen-protector” in the larger White community results from the shared belief that law enforcement do not care and have abandoned them (Buttrick 2020). From the culture of honor perspective, legal protective gun owners overestimate the risk of victimization (Buttrick 2020; Stroebe et al., 2017); whereas research on the code of the street and the fear of crime and perception of risk are related to African American youth’s experiences of actual victimization and neighborhood violence (McNeeley and Yuan, 2017; Stewart et al., 2006). Differences in exposures to actual victimization yield similar perceptions of victimization risk in the culture of honor and code of the street but differential homicide rates in Black and White communities.

Ecological Evidence

Homicide rates associated with rampage shootings are typically far less than one percent of the targeted school’s student body and even lower when the number of community residents is the base for population estimates (Brown et al., 2009; Newman and Cox, 2009). In contrast, Samaa Kemal and colleagues (2018) reported gun carrying over a seven-year period among freshmen and sophomores at urban high schools in select cities to be more frequent among African Americans (6.29%) than European Americans (3.51%). P. J. Henry (2009) applied low-status compensation theory to the relationship between culture of honor and violence. According to the theory, individuals of low status develop the culture of honor as a psychological self-defense against their feelings of low worth. Low-status compensation may also operate in the code-of-the-street philosophy of urban Black males.

Indeed, Brian P. Kennedy and colleagues (1997) found a significant relationship between an ecological measure of collective disrespect and mortality for both Black and White U. S. citizens. Interestingly, for both value systems, the cultural elements predicted homicide rates independent of social or neighborhood disadvantage (Kubrin and Weitzer, 2003; Lee et al., 2010; Matsueda et al., 2006; Nisbett 1993; Shihadeh and Flynn, 1996; Stewart and Simons, 2006, 2010). It then follows that the optimal approach to culture of honor and code of the street in relation to gun violence requires psychological and community interventions in conjunction with laws and policies addressing social disadvantage and economic inequality.

CONCLUSION

The current analysis of culture of honor and code of the street as value systems vis-à-vis gun violence reveal several points of overlap in philosophy and function. In addition, the ecological evidence revealed that culture of honor and code of the street similarly predict violence (i.e., homicide) or the risk of violence (i.e., gun possession) after social and structural disadvantages have been taken into consideration (Matsueda et al., 2006; Nisbett 1993). Social and neighborhood disadvantage are also significant positive predictors of violence. Both sets of variables should be the focus of efforts to prevent gun violence in Black and White communities.

Both value systems developed in response to perceptions of an “ecology of danger” where protection by law enforcement is expected to be lacking (Anderson 1999; Cohen and Nisbett, 1994). They are both invoked to create a “tough” individual persona as a deterrent to personal victimization. For both perspectives, some scholars argue that investment in developing such a reputation around gun possession may evolve into a new identity (Buttrick 2020; Wilkinson and Fagan, 2000). They also serve as a form of psychological compensation for low status due to inequality in society (see Henry 2009). A critical point of departure is that the culture honor in its extreme form leads to the “massacre mentality” resulting in rampage school shooting, but the code of the streets does not (Whaley 2020). Nevertheless, the various types of personal vulnerabilities share the feature of psychological threat to the self.

In-depth analysis of the psychological vulnerabilities underlying (legal) gun ownership as a coping mechanism (Buttrick 2020) may provide insights relevant to prevention of firearm-related homicides among gun carrying European American and African American youth. Individual level interventions can be informed by self-affirmation theory and research (Cohen and Sherman, 2014; Shnabel et al., 2013). The works on low-status compensation theory (Henry 2009) and social disadvantage (Shihadeh and Flynn, 1996) show how structural barriers and economic inequality contribute to firearm-related homicides. Research on collective efficacy and social capital can inform neighborhood-level interventions (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson et al., 1999; Sampson et al., 1997). In addition, laws and policies to address gun violence and underlying social and economic inequalities should be implemented.

Buttrick (2020) proposed that gun ownership is a maladaptive coping mechanism to engender feelings of safety, self-efficacy and control, and a sense of belonging. In other words, it may serve as a response to psychological threats to self-integrity. Self-integrity is the view of oneself as morally and adaptively adequate (Cohen and Sherman, 2014). How people maintain integrity of the self under threatening conditions is a core feature of self-affirmation theory (Cohen and Sherman, 2014). Self-affirmation strategies have been found to alleviate threats to the self with brief intervention but long-term effects. The most common form of this intervention is to have individuals select a personal value and write an essay about why it is important to them.

Geoffrey L. Cohen and David K. Sherman's (2014) review of the literature on self-affirmation theory and research revealed several aspects of the social-psychological interventions suitable for primary and secondary prevention of gun violence. First, it is easily administered to groups in classrooms or similar types of settings. School-based interventions are an effective method of delivering interventions to youth. Self-affirmation interventions have been used with African Americans and low-income European Americans indicating its adaptability to different cultural contexts. Middle school students and college students have been shown to benefit from the intervention, and it has also been used with adults who are patients in healthcare settings and those experiencing interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

Although participants often select their own value for the essay, research suggests that individuals can be given a preselected value for the self-affirmation process. The value of "belonging" has been shown to lead to positive outcomes when spontaneously mentioned or directed in a self-affirmation intervention (Shnabel et al., 2013). Interestingly, it can have both direct and indirect effects in terms of positive outcomes. Nurit Shnabel and colleagues (2013) found academic performance to improve after the intervention. Improvements in academic performance may foster greater school attachment. Stewart and Simons (2010) found that school attachment reduces reliance on the code of street among urban Black youth.

Direct effects on a sense of belonging could reduce the need for gun carrying among suburban White youth and potentially avert school rampage shootings (Buttrick 2020; Whaley 2020). The benefits of the value of belonging as the focus in self-affirmation may be attributable to the fact that it is a basic human need. Directed self-affirmation interventions should be applied to other personal values to test its generalizability. For example, Janet V. Ward (1995) promoted a "morality of care" as a culturally based model of violence prevention for African American youth. The personal value of caring could be the subject of self-affirmation for urban Black youth. The use of self-affirmation interventions to prevent gun violence deserves more attention in future research.

Neighborhood-level interventions should foster collective efficacy among community residents. Collective efficacy refers to a combination of mutual trust and willingness to intervene for the common good by residents in a given neighborhood (Morenoff et al., 2001; Sampson et al., 1999; Sampson et al., 1997). After adjusting for other individual-level and neighborhood-level factors, collective efficacy was a strong predictor of low levels of violence in Chicago neighborhoods (Sampson et al., 1997). It is important to note that this association was not attenuated by neighborhood disadvantage.

In a subsequent study, Robert J. Sampson and colleagues (1999) demonstrated empirically that collective efficacy is connected to the quality of life for neighborhood children. This follow-up study made several additional contributions. First, it delineated three social mechanisms—*intergenerational closure* in terms of meaningful adult-child relationships; *reciprocal exchange* of information about childrearing; and expectations for the *informal social control and mutual support of children*—by which collective efficacy is associated with child and adolescent development. Second, the researchers studied affluent neighborhoods in comparison to disadvantaged neighborhoods. Finally, the spatial location of neighborhoods was an independent study variable.

Key findings reported by Sampson and colleagues (1999) with implications for neighborhood-level interventions indicated that concentrated affluence in neighborhoods was associated positively with intergenerational closure and mutual exchange of information, whereas concentrated disadvantage negatively predicted expectations of active engagement and support of children. Even in Black neighborhoods with high expectations for collective efficacy, their spatial proximity to neighborhoods with low

social control of children was greater than affluent neighborhoods. Regular neighborhood meetings and social events where adults can meet children and adults could exchange information in their community could improve collective efficacy.

Informal and formal institutions of social order should also have a structured relationship. Policing is a particular activity that should be incorporated into efforts to increase collective efficacy. The needs for Black and White communities may differ in this regard. For Black communities where the risk of criminal victimization is relatively high, community policing would be the best way to improve relations and increase confidence in law enforcement. White communities, which tend to overestimate risk of victimization and legal gun ownership is high, may only require monthly town hall meeting with representatives of law enforcement. Those meetings should provide White residents an opportunity to share their concerns and allow actual community crime rates to be reported.

Advocates of individual-level and neighborhood-level interventions both recognize the need for the removal of structural and economic barriers as the ultimate goal (Cohen and Sherman, 2014; Sampson et al., 1997). Implications for laws and policies to prevent gun violence stemming from culture-of-honor and code-of-the-street value systems can be found. Government policies that reduce inequality, both racial and economic, is one straightforward solution which could undermine reliance on these value systems. In addition, better gun control laws and regulations for gun ownership would take away the means to act despite the value system. Buttrick (2020) cited the fact that Australia, which had a very similar gun culture to the United States, drastically reduced gun ownership with tougher legislation after a mass shooting.

Changing social and cultural norms to prevent (gun-related) violence in response to psychological threats to the integrity of selfhood by means of media campaigns and intervention strategies should be implemented (World Health Organization 2009). For example, public service announcements promoting values congruent with self-affirmation and collective efficacy could be broadcast in local television commercials and newspaper ads. Advertisements presenting data on the number of noncriminal versus self-defense fatalities would provide a more accurate picture of the consequences of gun possession. It is important to note the alteration of value systems must acknowledge differences in the social and historical context for African Americans and European Americans, as well as the nature of the inequality with which they must cope, possibly requiring unique content for ostensibly common cultural features.

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