Gender and Regional Differences within the Southern Subculture of Violence

Caitlin OConnor

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Gender and Regional Differences within the Southern Subculture of Violence

By

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis Under the Direction of

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Abstract

The Southern subculture of violence theory attempts to explain the higher rates of violence that can be found in Southern states or regions with high concentrations of Southern born residents. The theory proposes that the existence of a culture of honor has perpetuated attitudes that condone violence in certain scenarios. Much of the previous literature explains why male perpetuated violence is higher in the South than the non-South, and fewer studies attempt to explain how the Southern subculture of violence impacts Southern women. This pilot study attempts to expand upon existing literature about the Southern subculture of violence by examining survey respondents for gender and regional differences in their responses towards invitations of violence. The findings suggest that Southern women are more likely to take offense if their male friends do not defend them from offensive comments than non-Southern women, and, in support of previous literature, that Southern men are more likely to defend their companions or respond to invitations of violence than non-Southern men.

Introduction

Sociological studies have been attempted to explain the differences in crime in the South. Studies indicate that the South has higher rates of homicides and other violent crimes than the North, especially when it comes to interpersonal argument-based homicides (Ellison 1991, Nisbett and Cohen 1999, Lee and Shihadeh 2009). Urbanization, poverty, race, age, and education have all been linked to attitudes towards violence in the South, yet none of these factors seemed to have a significant impact on violence in the South (Gastil 1971, Messner 1982, Hackney 1969). Instead, it appears that cultural factors seem to have the biggest impact on Southern values and attitudes about violence.
Culture includes the knowledge, belief systems, morals, values, and laws or customs of a given group that shape human behavior and interactions (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Subcultures can emerge within dominant culture that may put more emphasis on certain values held by dominant society, or may reshape the value system within a subgroup entirely (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Subcultures may emerge for a variety of reasons, whether it be through group isolation from mainstream society or solidarity within a particular subgroup (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967).

Like many sociological theories, initial studies about the existence of a subculture of violence were predominantly focused on urban centers and males, which is understandable due to the disproportionate involvement of males in crime. Researchers began identifying areas with high homicide rates and examining the root of high rates of violence. Results of a study in Philadelphia reveal a class difference in the reaction of males towards violence; lower class males were more likely to feel an expectation to defend themselves and protect the ones around them. (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). If anyone challenged them, whether it be by verbally or physically assaulting them, lower class Philadelphia men were more prone to use violence to defend themselves and their honor (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967). Nisbett and Cohen theorize that men are particularly inclined to use violence when they felt threatened by another male, deeming it “honor culture”. If a man felt as though his pride was at stake, he could not avoid a confrontation since that would make him appear to be weak (Nisbett and Cohen 1999). Understandably, when honor culture is ingrained in a society, there are likely to be higher rates of violence.

The subculture of violence has particularly strong roots in the South. The culture of honor has thrived in the Southern United States for several reasons, one of which is the influence of
Celtic and Spanish immigrants. Celtic immigrants began settling in the South as early as the 1700s, and their traditions came with them (McWhiney 1988). The Southern lifestyle was more laissez-faire than in the North because of the Celtic traditions, and many Celts faced ridicule and discrimination from Northerners due to the large English population that settled in the North (McWhiney 1988). The English saw the Scots-Irish as violent drunks, and indeed Southern Celts tended to consume more liquor and tobacco rather than doing what the English deemed “useful work” (McWhiney 1988). Celtic farming and herding traditions also carried over to the South. In Ireland or Scotland, it was less common to enclose livestock in pens, instead they let animals roam the property freely (McWhiney 1988). There was also more reliance on livestock as a source of income, which meant that when someone wronged you it was sometimes deemed acceptable to steal their livestock in retaliation (McWhiney 1988). In fact, the Celts believed that it was acceptable, even honorable, to use violence in certain scenarios. The influences of these migrants accounted for a higher rate of interpersonal violence in the South. McWhiney notes that murders were as common as “quarrels followed by fistfights” in Louisiana (McWhiney 1988).

The culture of honor has been studied among men and has been traced back to the Mediterranean as well as areas with Celtic and Spanish influences (McWhiney 1988, Nisbett and Cohen 1999). Louisiana presents an ideal environment in which to further the study of the Southern subculture of violence. Louisiana has Spanish, French, Creole, and Celtic influences. Due to the melting pot nature of Louisiana’s citizens, there is a particularly strong Southern culture that can be found in Louisiana. Understandably, honor culture has also been found within the deep South and Louisiana itself. The research that exists on the culture of honor is largely focused on males. Societal standards for men, such as being tough and strong, have contributed
to the expression of violence in men, which has directed research towards studying male expressions of violence.

Largely absent in prior research is whether the subculture of violence is applicable to females. Interestingly, as the honor culture became ingrained in Southern culture, so did patriarchal gender norms. Previous literature has focused on gender norms in rural areas and has found that males in rural areas are more likely to believe women are submissive to males and that these men are surrounded by people within their community that reinforce these beliefs (Gagne 1992). This notion of a “gentle Southern belle” suggests that Southern women may be less inclined than non-Southern women to resort to violence when challenged.

However, existing research on how women are impacted by Southern attitudes towards violence found that where the subculture of violence exists the rate of female perpetrated homicides are higher (Doucet et al. 2014). Doucet et al. concluded that Southern born women and protestants had higher rates of violence and homicide than their non-Southern Counterparts. Differential association theory proposes that individuals learn deviant behavior through prolonged interactions with others, and those values, beliefs, and behaviors are reinforced by a person’s social network (Doucet et al. 2014, Vinney 2019). Doucet argues that women in the South learn the subculture of violence through interactions with the Southern men around them (Doucet et al. 2014). While Southern culture also contains a deeply rooted patriarchal system that bolsters gender roles for men and women, women are nevertheless exposed to the honor culture that seemingly targets males. Furthermore, family structure may also be a factor in how women view the use of violence. When Doucet et al. conducted their research on female-perpetrated homicides in the 1970s, there was a rise in female headed households (Doucet et al. 2014). This may cause women to assume the position of both the female and male of a household, leading
them to rely on aspects of the Southern subculture of violence for the sake of protecting their families. Doucet et al.’s research on women’s role in the Southern subculture of violence offers a foundation upon which this research is focused.

In either case, the applicability of the Southern subculture of violence’s impact on women remains an open and empirical question. This research attempts to expand upon the knowledge about women’s roles within the South by incorporating previous literature about gender norms, and how Southern women may view violence differently from their Southern male counterparts and their non-Southern counterparts. There is reason to suspect that the combination of gender roles and honor culture that exists in the South creates an environment in which women are more likely to be exposed to violence and be more likely to engage in violence themselves. Consequently, I hypothesize that Southern women will be more likely to respond to offensive comments made about them than non-Southern women, and that Southern men will also be more likely to respond to offensive comments themselves than non-Southern men.

Methods

The present study is intended as a pilot study to prepare for larger, more comprehensive research in the future. Data for this study was collected from individual responses to a survey. The survey was sent to respondents who were from the state of Louisiana and residents in the Northeast region. The data from non-Southern respondents serves as a means of comparison for Southern views of violence. One limitation Doucet et al. noted in their research was they were unable to constrain the definition of the South to one specific region (Doucet et al. 2014). By limiting Southern respondents to the state of Louisiana, I hope to focus specifically on
Louisiana’s culture and how it may foster the Southern subculture of violence in comparison to non-Southern attitudes towards violence.

The survey focuses on how respondents would react to verbal challenges of their honor and verbal invitations for violence. Questions were designed as hypothetical scenarios for respondents to imagine when choosing whether to avoid the confrontation or engage in a confrontation based on a scale of 1 to 10. Respondents were asked for their birth year, where they were born, where they currently resided, and how long they have lived in that state. These questions were to help group respondents as “Southerners” or “non-Southerners” based on their place of birth and current residence. Respondents who had lived in a region for longer than five years were classified as non-Southern or Southern, accordingly. Respondents were also asked for their ethnicity, religious affiliation, and household income. Because previous studies have focused on ethnicity, religion, and income as a potential cause for increased attitudes towards violence, these variables had to be taken into consideration in order to isolate region as a contributing factor towards violence.

The survey included questions such as “If you are walking alone when another male makes an inappropriate comment, how likely are you to physically respond to the comment? Please rank your response, with 1 being least likely to respond and 10 being the most certain to physically respond”. These questions were designed to see whether challenges to someone’s honor may impact their decision to engage in physical violence. Other questions examined whether respondents’ reactions were influenced by the race of the challenger. For example, respondents were asked: “If you are walking alone at night and see a black male on the sidewalk coming towards you, how likely are you to cross the street? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most certain”. The full list of the survey questions are
included in the addendum. These responses were coded and analyzed by gender and region for any observable differences.

An important note for this preliminary study is that all 38 respondents were white, making the current findings only applicable to whites. This helped eliminate the respondent’s race as a potential factor in their responses, but future research would benefit from expanding the racial composition of the focus group.

Results

Gender and regional differences were calculated using the means for the hypothetical scenarios respondents were asked about in the survey. The differences in those means between each subgroup were used to determine how likely that group would be to engage in an invitation for confrontation (verbally or physically), how offended they would be if their male friend did not stand up for them, and how likely they would be to avoid a stranger on the sidewalk. Table one represents the total means for each group.
Table 1: Total means for each respondent group. Table Key: Southern men (S.M), non-Southern men (N.M), Southern females (S.F), non-Southern women (N.F). Survey questions correspond alphabetically with survey questions found in the addendum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Q</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.86</td>
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<td>(N=38)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Men</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>1.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>(N=11)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>All Women</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>(N=27)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.M</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.88</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N.M (N=3)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.F (N=16)</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>2.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>N.F (N=11)</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to separate how respondents would respond to the various scenarios asked of them, the data represented in table one was broken down further by question type. Questions represented by datasets P, Q, R and S were of key interest since these questions asked respondents whether they would be likely to respond to a verbal offense or if they would be offended if their male friend failed to respond to the offensive remark. These responses are represented in table two.
Table 2: Degree of offense and likelihood of response by gender and region. Table Key: Southern men (S.M), non-Southern men (N.M), Southern females (S.F), non-Southern women (N.F). Survey questions correspond alphabetically with survey questions found in the addendum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>R</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All men</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All women</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.M</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.M</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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<td>2.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>N.F</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the findings in table two, there are regional and gender differences in how offended people would be if their male friend did not respond to an offensive comment, represented by dataset P. While all women were more likely to be offended if their male friend did not respond to the comment than men were, Southern women were more likely to be offended than their non-Southern counterparts if their male friend did not defend them against an offensive remark. There is a 0.97 difference in the mean responses for Southern and non-Southern women, which could indicate a regional difference. This finding indicates that the hypothesis that Southern women have different perceptions of violence and gender norms could be validated. While it demands further study, this difference could indicate that Southern women are more accustomed to men being the defenders, and would therefore expect a male to defend
them against violence. This is also backed up by the responses to question Q, in which Southern men indicated that they were slightly more likely to respond to an offensive comment made by another male themselves than Southern women were. Furthermore, Southern women were more likely to respond to the offensive comment when walking alone than non-Southern women were. This finding could support Doucet et al.’s previous research about Southern women being influenced by the Southern subculture of violence.

Another interesting finding is that non-Southern men were more likely to be offended if their male friend did not respond to an offensive comment about them than Southern men were. Additionally, Southern men were more likely to respond to the comment themselves than non-Southern men were, which could be a result of the male honor culture that has been embedded in the South. Southern men could feel it is their duty to defend themselves against any perceived offense, while non-Southern culture is less likely to emphasize the honor culture. Thus, the findings indicate that there are regional differences in the response to invitations for confrontation within male respondents.

There were other subsidiary findings that applied to both regions and genders. All women were also more likely than men to cross the street when a male approached them, whether the male was white or black. However, there was a racial difference to the responses for questions M, N, and O. All respondents were more likely to cross the street if a black person, whether it was a male or female, was crossing the street compared to if a white male was approaching them. These findings are presented in table three.
Table 3: Degree of likelihood to cross the street by gender and region. Table Key: Southern men (S.M), non-Southern men (N.M), Southern females (S.F), non-Southern women (N.F). Survey questions correspond alphabetically with survey questions found in the addendum.

<table>
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<td>6.15</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.M (N=8)</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.M (N=3)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>S.F (N=16)</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>2.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>N.F (N=11)</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
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</table>

While it can be observed that non-Southern females were more likely to cross the street for a black female than Southern women, this could have been influenced by the age of the respondents. The majority of non-Southern female respondents were over the age of 40, while the majority of Southern female respondents were under the age of 30. This is an interesting finding that could indicate generational differences in the perception of race and violence, and it warrants further study by other researchers.
Conclusion

This study attempted to expand knowledge about the Southern subculture of violence by examining survey respondents’ reactions towards invitations for violence. This research was an attempt to further supplement the research about women’s role in the Southern subculture of violence. The findings presented in this study indicate that there are gender and regional differences in attitudes towards violence. The hypothesis that Southern women would be more likely to respond to invitations of violence than non-Southern women was supported by the data, but due to the limited sample size, it warrants more exploration. However, the finding that Southern women are more likely to be offended if their male friend does not defend them against offensive comments is an indication that women are influenced by the honor culture in the South, as they may expect men to be more protective of them than non-Southern women. Southern men were also more likely to respond to offensive comments than non-Southern men and be less offended when someone did not defend them, indicating they may be more embedded in the Southern subculture of violence and take it upon themselves to defend their own honor. Additionally, it should be noted that the effects of the culture of honor may weaken overtime due to generational divides, the influence of social media, and the migration of people from the South. Ethnic influences in the South may also weaken as people move in and out of the South. While Southern culture, and therefore the culture of honor, and other ethnic influences on the subculture of violence may weaken, we still find differences in the responses of Southerners and non-Southerners when it comes to the subculture of violence. These findings prove that while ethnic flattening may occur, the Southern subculture of violence is still found in the region.

The findings here were limited by a small sample size and a homogenous sample group, and further research could expand upon the foundation of this research by narrowing in on
certain hypothetical scenarios and expanding the sample size. However, the homogenous sample was beneficial because it was easier to eliminate other variables like income or race as potential causes of the findings. This allowed us to focus on region and gender as the most influential variables in the findings we presented without having to do any official controls for confounding variables. There is still a gap in sociological literature regarding the Southern subculture of violence and how it impacts women, specifically. This survey was an attempt to expand the field, and it indicates there could be a plethora of future research dedicated to the subject.

Addendum

Southern Subculture of Violence Survey Questions

Please answer the survey questions based on how you truly feel, not based on what you should feel. Please know all answers will be anonymous. Responses will only be used for data collection.

A. In what year were you born?
B. In what city/town were you born? Please include the state.
C. In what city/town do you currently live? Please include the state.
D. How long have you lived in your current state?
E. What is your gender affiliation?
F. What is your ethnic identity?

G. What is your religious affiliation?

H. How often do you attend religious services?
   a. Once a week
   b. More than once a week
   c. Once or twice a month
   d. Once or twice a year
   e. On major holidays
   f. I do not attend religious services

I. What is your highest level of education? (ex: 11th grade, high school diploma, 2/4 year college degree, professional degree, etc.)

J. What is your current occupation status?
   a. Student
   b. Employed (part-time or full-time)
   c. Unemployed
   d. Not in the labor force
   e. Retired

K. If you are employed, what is your current occupation?

L. What is your current household income?
   a. Below $20,000
   b. Between $20,000 and $35,000
   c. Between $35,000 and $50,000
   d. Between $50,000 and $75,000
e. Between $75,000 and $100,000

f. Above $100,000

M. If you are walking ALONE at night and see a WHITE MALE on the sidewalk coming towards you, how likely are you to cross the street? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most certain.

N. If you are walking ALONE at night and see a BLACK MALE on the sidewalk coming towards you, how likely are you to cross the street? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most certain.

O. If you are walking ALONE at night and see a BLACK FEMALE on the sidewalk coming towards you, how likely are you to cross the street? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most certain.

P. If you are walking WITH A MALE FRIEND when another male makes an inappropriate comment to you, how offended will you be if your MALE FRIEND does not say or do anything? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least offended and 10 being very offended.

Q. If you are walking WITH A MALE FRIEND when another male makes an inappropriate comment to you, how likely are YOU to physically respond to the comment? Please rank your response with 1 being the least likely, and 10 being the most likely.

R. If you are walking ALONE when another male makes an inappropriate comment, how likely are you to physically respond to the comment? Please rank your response with 1 being the least likely, and 10 being the most likely.

S. If you are walking with a FAMILY MEMBER (i.e a brother, sister, parent, or grandparent) and a male makes an inappropriate comment to your family member, how
likely are YOU to physically confront the male? Please rank your response with 1 being the least likely, and 10 being the most likely.

T. If you are in a parking lot and a person physically threatens you FROM A DISTANCE, how likely are you to physically confront the person? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being very likely to confront the person.

U. If you are at a bar with a group of friends, and a woman at another table with her friends calls you something offensive and offers to fight you, how likely are you to physically confront her? Please rank your response, with 1 being the least likely and 10 being the most likely to confront her.

V. Do you own a weapon? If so, what kind? You may select more than one answer.

W. Have you ever taken a self-defense class (such as Rape Aggression Defense, RAD)?

X. As an adult, have you ever been victimized by a violent crime?

Y. If the answer to the previous question is yes, did you report it?

References


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