"When You Call Me That, Smile!"
How Norms for Politeness, Interaction Styles, and Aggression Work Together in Southern Culture*

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Norms for politeness may actually promote violence in the U.S. South. Whereas northerners may have behavioral rituals in which they give and receive small doses of hostility to regulate conflict, southerners seem not to. In two laboratory experiments, southerners were less clear than northerners in both sending and receiving signs of hostility. In Study 1, southerners initially showed little reaction to an annoying confederate only to end with bursts of anger far more sudden and more severe than northerners ever showed. In Study 2, as subjects watched objectively dangerous situations unfold, southerners were less sensitive to cues of hostility than were northerners. And in Study 3, consistent with southern politeness norms inhibiting effective conflict resolution, it was shown that friendly, helpful cities had different patterns of argument-related violence in the North and in the South. Results suggest a cycle in which norms for politeness and for violence can reinforce each other.

Economies, ecologies, nature, and social structure profoundly shape culture (Edgerton 1971; Triandis 1994). However, cultural patterns often persist past the material circumstances that created them. What was once a useful adaptation to the environment becomes a cultural pattern functionally autonomous from the circumstances that created it.

To understand why cultural patterns persist in ways that are not functional in current circumstances, we must look at the social mechanisms that perpetuate them. There are many such mechanisms working at the micro and macro levels, and this paper explores one such mechanism for one culture within the United States. Specifically, this paper examines how styles of interpersonal interaction and strong norms regarding politeness and conflict resolution can perpetuate violence in the U.S. South, rather than lessen it.

THE CULTURE OF HONOR IN THE U.S. SOUTH

The U.S. South (and the West) historically have been characterized by what anthropologists call a culture of honor. That is, men in these cultures held to a stance of
toughness and physical prowess and often responded to insults, threats, and serious affronts with violence. We have argued that originally this stance was a functional adaptation to the economy and ecology of the frontier South: Law enforcement was weak, and the herders who settled the region had to adopt a tough stance of "don't-mess-with-me" deterrence to protect their families and their very portable wealth—that is, their livestock (McWhiney 1988; Nisbett and Cohen 1996).

The culture of honor persists today in these regions even though the frontier has disappeared and most people no longer make their living through the economically precarious practice of herding. This persistence has been noted in attitude surveys, studies of homicide rates, and laboratory experiments, where it can be shown that southerners endorse and often act out violence when responding to affronts (Cohen and Nisbett 1994; Reaves and Nisbett 1997).

Mechanisms of Perpetuation: Micro and Macro

Independent of the forces that originally gave rise to the culture of honor, many mechanisms keep this culture in place (Cohen 1998a, 1998b). We briefly mention a few here.

Collective representations. At the macro level, there are collective representations, social policies, and institutional practices in the South and West that condone violence in response to insult or threat. These range from formal laws allowing citizens greater freedom to kill in self-defense to informal norms acted out by people and institutions, which stigmatize (or, rather, fail to stigmatize) those who kill to uphold their honor (Cohen 1996; Cohen and Nisbett 1997).

Social organization. Also at the macro level are the forces of social organization. Normally these are regarded as restraining people's violent tendencies, but tight family structures, stable communities, and strong religious institutions actually may promote certain forms of violence in the South and West. Thus, whereas cohesive family, community, and religious structures are associated with less violence in the North, they are associated with more of certain types of violence in the South and West, as shown in attitude surveys, homicide rates, and preferences for violent entertainment and pastimes (Cohen 1998a; Cohen and Vandello 1998; Ellison 1991).

Norm enforcement. At the microlevel, norms are enforced—or at least are expected to be enforced—interpersonally. That is, southern men fear that if they do not respond to an insult, others will view them as less manly (Cohen et al. 1996). How much this is actually true and how much it is a case of "pluralistic ignorance" is an open question (Miller and Prentice 1994). But either way, using violence may appear reasonable to southerners because they fear stigma from their peers if they do not do so.

Interaction patterns. Finally, at the microlevel, there are patterns of interpersonal interaction that keep the culture-of-honor pattern going. In this case, rather than lessening the potential for conflict, strong norms for politeness may create the potential for very serious aggression and may perpetuate the cycle of violence in the South.

Patterns of Politeness and Conflict Resolution

Specifically the pattern is this: Because the South possesses a culture of honor with a serious undercurrent of violence, people tread lightly and act in accordance with norms of politeness and hospitality so that they do not offend (and invite violence) from others. This politeness sometimes works in that it mutes some conflicts that will blow over. But for conflicts that are not likely to blow over and that involve repeated interaction, these norms for politeness can ironically lead situations to explode in "sudden," violent eruptions. Thus we suggest that norms for politeness can keep conflicts below the surface, masking underlying negative emotions and preventing parties from working out their differences before the situation has unfortunately gone too far.

As economist Thomas Schelling (1966) noted, many conflicts amount to coordination games. Two parties must be able to signal to each other what is acceptable conduct and what crosses the line and is an unaccept-
able act of aggression that calls for retaliation. Many cultures have very rich methods for curbing another person’s offensive behavior, such as overt declarations of anger, veiled threats, biting humor, calculated bluffs, and so on (see, for example, Colson 1975; Schelling 1966). Yet cultures with a strong emphasis on politeness and conflict avoidance often lack such tools in their behavioral repertoire. People in these cultures are unable to signal their anger in socially appropriate ways because they may not have the rituals for small hostilities and rudeness in their “cultural tool kit” for doing so (see Swidler 1986:277). Being unpracticed in the rituals for giving and receiving small hostilities during a conflict, people in such societies are unable to play the “coordination game” that might allow them to reach a mutually agreeable, face-saving solution without a full-scale blowup.

In addition, people in such cultures become unwilling to let even a little anger leak out during conflicts because they know that this will bring on violence from the other party. Thus they sensibly choose to conceal their anger and intention to aggress until they are ready to launch a full-blown attack. In either case, conflicts simmer under the surface and signs of anger are hidden until a major explosion occurs, which might have been avoided if the situation had been worked out earlier.

POLITENESS IN THE SOUTH

Anthropological research from across the world supports the notion that violent cultures are often polite, and vice versa (see work reviewed in Cohen and Vandello 1997). A classic example involves the Gebusi of New Guinea, whose culture of congeniality, “collective good will,” and “good company” also has a homicide rate of 568 per 100,000—or 50 times the U.S. average (Knauft 1985:1–2).

Politeness and violence norms often reinforce each other cyclically. On one hand, the threat of violence often leads to politeness. As Colson (1975:37) observed, “[S]ome people live in what appears to be a Rousseauian paradise because they take a Hobbesian view of their situation: they walk softly because they believe it necessary not to offend others whom they regard as dangerous.” People are often polite, genial, and friendly because they fear the enmity of others (Fiske et al. 1997; Gould 1973). This part of the cycle is captured nicely by “Robert Heinlein’s famous dictum that ‘An armed society is a polite society.’ Knowing that one’s fellow citizens are armed, greater care is naturally taken not to give offense. . . . Or as is famously said in American literature, by the hero of Owen Wister’s The Virginian, ‘When you call me that, smile!’” (quoted in Will 1993:93).

Here, however, we argue that the cycle is also self-reinforcing because politeness often helps to foment the serious violence it was supposed to prevent by making it impossible to play the “coordination game.” The South is a region known for its charm, hospitality, congeniality, and politeness. Yet there is also the potential for sudden and extreme violence that comes seemingly without warning. Thus “the southerner is proverbially gentle in manner. It has been said that until he is angered enough to kill you, he will treat you politely” (Carter 1963:59). (Similar folk wisdom about “mountain people” holds that in Appalachia, men are “slower to anger or panic, but absolutely without reason or mercy once the fat [is] in the fire” (Thompson 1966:172)).

We hypothesize here that the behavioral ritual of using anger as a warning and a check on behavior during a conflict is less familiar to southerners than to northerners; the latter often use anger, rudeness, and insults as regulating mechanisms. Thus, among southerners, as conflicts escalate, anger often is not communicated clearly and directly by one party; and further, because southerners are unpracticed in the signaling game of “small hostilities,” signs of impending anger often are not clearly perceived by the other party. Therefore, among participants who lack communication or the ability to signal and “coordinate,” conflicts often simmer under the surface and then erupt suddenly and dramatically in a violent explosion.

In Study 1 we attempt to show that norms for politeness inhibit southerners from expressing their anger during a con-
flict, until some "line in the sand" is crossed, when they respond with aggression far more unpredictable, sudden, and severe than northerners ever do. In Study 2 we suggest that in reading the anger of others, southerners are not as aware as northerners are that a situation is escalating to a dangerous, critical level. And in Study 3 we show that the processes identified in Studies 1 and 2 have consequences in the real world as we examine homicide rates in cities that are more or less friendly, helpful, or "nice" in the North and South.

A NOTE ON SUBJECTS AND THE CLASSIFICATION OF ILLINOIS

Previous research on this topic focused on white males from the North and the South. Certainly, women play a vital role, perhaps the most important role, in perpetuating a culture (Cohen and Vandello 1997; Nisbett and Cohen 1996). Yet we focus on men in these studies because men are responsible for the overwhelming majority of violent acts committed in the United States and the rest of the world (Daly and Wilson 1988). We focus on whites because empirical work has shown that these North-South cultural differences in violence hold only for whites (for possible reasons, see Nisbett and Cohen 1996). We recognize that our results do not generalize to all populations of the South and North, and we often use the term "southerner" or "northerner" merely as shorthand for southern or northern white men.

In Studies 1 and 2, North and South were defined as cultural regions whose boundaries are approximated only roughly by census categorization (Vandello and Cohen 1999; Zelinsky 1973). For these studies, we defined North and South following Cohen et al. (1996), except that students from Illinois were considered northern or southern depending on where they were from in the state. According to many historians, ethnographers, demographers, economists, political scientists, and sociologists, the south of Illinois is culturally part of the South of the United States and the north is part of the North, as a consequence of their respective settlement patterns and ecologies. The explanation is as follows:

As the country expanded westward, migration for the most part followed relatively lateral bands. Thus the lower part of Illinois was settled by rugged, clannish "Scots-Irish pioneers" from southern Appalachia. As Wirt (1989:32) wrote, "Having lost out to landowners down South and bitterly resentful of it, they doffed their coonskin hats to neither squire nor judge... The protection of rights, property, and family was often handled individually and violently." Later a distinctly different group of public-spirited and "moralistic" New Englanders settled northern Illinois (Matthews 1909). And indeed, regional identification followed these patterns: During the Civil War "there were suggestions that the state perhaps ought to be divided to permit the southern third to secede" (Sutton 1989:107).

Scholarly research has supplemented folk wisdom and has outlined how the two settlement patterns produced two distinct cultures reflecting the great North-South division in the nation at large. Today and in the past, northern Illinois has looked like the North and southern Illinois has looked like the South in features such as politics and social issues, religion, diet, family traditions, population densities, economies, agricultures, race relations, mores, regional self-identification, and, perhaps most important for the present purposes, traditions of violence (Adams 1993; Atack 1989; Barone and Ujifusa 1991, 1993; Birdsall and Florin 1992; Elazar 1970, 1972, 1994; Fenton 1966; Fischer 1989; Flynn 1996, 1997, 1998; Frank, Nardulli and Green 1989; Gastil 1975; Nardulli 1989; Nardulli and Krassa 1989; Pillsbury 1989; Powers 1953; Reed 1976, but also see Reed, Kohls, and Hanchette 1990; Weiss 1994; Whitt, Corzine, and Huff-Corzine 1995; Zelinsky 1973).

The line between the end of the South and the beginning of the North in Illinois is not obvious. We chose to draw the line at Springfield, which divides the state in half approximately, and which sits almost exactly on the same latitude as the Mason-Dixon Line. This choice is consistent with two meaningful and objective measures: (1)
political partisanship and voting patterns, which are often proxies for larger social, racial, and cultural stances (see Barone and Ujifusa 1991, 1993; Frank et al. 1989; Wirt 1989:54) and (2) migration patterns. In regard to settlement patterns, Atack (1989:70–73), using census data from 1850, showed that Springfield is an approximate dividing line in examinations of native migration. Above Springfield, the largest migrant groups to Illinois came from New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania; south of Springfield, however, there were only two counties (out of approximately 50) in which the largest migrant group did not come from either Tennessee, Kentucky, or the Carolinas (Atack 1989).

Finally, empirical evidence shows that our division of Illinois makes sense in terms of larger national divisions. On the key dependent variables in both Studies 1 and 2, our students from southern Illinois responded as did our out-of-state southerners, and our students from northern Illinois responded as did our out-of-state northerners. (Out-of-state students constituted about one-third of our sample across Studies 1 and 2.) All interactions between region and in-state/out-of-state status for our key dependent variables were nonsignificant (all ps > .20).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 27 white northern males and 22 white southern males enrolled at the University of Illinois. They were preselected on the basis of the state (or, in the case of Illinois residents, the county) in which they had attended high school. Subjects from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs (Cook, Lake, and DuPage Counties) make up a large part of the subject pool at the University of Illinois. These students were not selected for this study because we wanted the sample from northern Illinois to be as comparable as possible to the southern sample in regard to rural versus urban origin, income, and other dimensions. Demographic information was obtained from subjects after the end of the study: Subjects who had spent at least one-third of their life in the South or southern Illinois were considered southern; all others were considered northern. As in Cohen et al. (1996), the South was defined as Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Procedure

Subjects were invited to the laboratory, where a sign indicated that this was an “art therapy” study. A female experimenter greeted the subject, shook hands with him, and very earnestly explained that the session would involve “art regression therapy, which is a form of relaxed drawing that is supposed to uncover primal childhood memories. We are interested in looking at how the drawing
process relates to a state of relaxation and inner calm, and what sort of effect this has on mood and feeling." Subjects were told that in conventional “talk” therapy sessions, audiotaping takes place, but that in play or art therapy, videotape is used to monitor progress in the session; subjects were asked to sign a videotape consent form. The experimenter explained that they were waiting for another subject, but at a few minutes past the hour she decided to start the experiment and placed a “Do not disturb” sign on the door.

A short time later, the confederate walked in and asked if this was the right study. Three undergraduate students alternated playing the role of the confederate. (Along with the experimenter, the confederates were blind to the hypotheses of the experiment and to the subject’s region). All three confederates were large white men who acted very sure of themselves: They ranged from 6 feet to 6 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 170 to 215 pounds. The experimenter shook hands with the confederate and motioned for him to shake hands with the other subject before he sat down.

The experimenter explained the study again and elaborated on the concept behind art therapy. Subjects were to draw at least five pictures about themes from their childhood, using the paper and crayons that were provided. The experimenter asked the subject to select six crayons to draw with and then asked the confederate to do the same. She then told them to begin drawing and excused herself to “take care of another experiment down on the first floor,” saying she would return in about half an hour.

The subject and the confederate were seated at separate desks facing adjacent walls. Next to the far end of the subject’s desk was a large garbage can. After the experimenter left, the confederate said “What a loser” and went about drawing. After a minute or so, the confederate walked over to the subject’s desk and took two of the subject’s crayons, saying “Let me get a couple of your crayons, Slick. I’ll give them back later” (Annoyance 1).

A minute later, he announced “This really sucks. I hate drawing,” and after another minute, he crumpled his drawing and threw it in the garbage can. Beginning at this point, annoyances followed at about one-minute intervals.

Annoyance 2: The confederate crumpled his paper, shooting at the basket but missing and hitting the subject. After hitting him, he said “Watch out there, Slick.” Annoyance 3: The confederate hit the subject with another paper wad, apologizing insincerely: “Oh, sorry, Slick. Trying to hit the basket.” Annoyance 4: The confederate took two more of the subject’s crayons, saying “I need these ones now, Slick” and stared at the subject’s drawing. Annoyance 5: The confederate hit the subject with a paper wad again, saying “Slick, man, you keep getting in my way” and followed immediately with another paper wad hit, saying “He shoots, he scores...” Annoyance 6: The confederate went over to the subject and said “Great art work, Slick. I can tell you’re really in touch with your inner feelings. But you need to put your name on it.” He then wrote “Slick” on the subject’s drawing. Annoyance 7: The confederate hit the subject with a paper wad, saying “You’re sitting there like a sitting duck. Maybe I’ll call you Duck instead of Slick.” Annoyance 8: The confederate launched another paper wad and said “Sorry about that, Duck.” Annoyance 9: The confederate said “Duck, you need to duck” and hit the subject with a paper wad again. Very amused with himself, the confederate said “Get it, Duck—duck?” Annoyance 10: The confederate looked at the subject’s drawing and said “You know, Slick, your drawing is pretty weak.” Annoyance 11: The confederate hit the subject with another paper wad and said “I don’t know about your drawings, Slick, but you make a pretty good target.”

After another minute or so, the confederate got up, asked “How long is this going to go on?” and opened the door looking for the experimenter. The experimenter returned shortly thereafter and asked how everything had gone. She gave the subjects a few questionnaires to complete (including one that asked for demographic information) and then announced that subjects would be separated to talk with the experimenter individually about their drawings.

Debriefing. Process debriefings and reconciliations with the confederate were part
of the postexperimental session. Subjects were probed for suspicion. A few expressed some suspicion, but none were so suspicious that their data were eliminated. The research was explained thoroughly, and experimenters made sure that subjects were emotionally at peace with the experience and with any of their actions. Subjects in general found the experiment quite worthwhile and interesting. We also thoroughly explained the purpose of Study 2 and asked subjects for written permission to use their tapes in that follow-up study. We emphasized that giving permission was completely optional. All but one participant consented to the use of his tape.

Precautions. Confederates were instructed to stop the study if they felt that a physical confrontation was imminent, and it was believed that confederates sat far enough away from the subjects that they would have time to react if the subject did anything unexpected. The procedure, however, caused more aggression, and more sudden, unpredictable aggression, than was anticipated. In two cases, subjects—both southerners—made physical contact with our confederate. In neither case was anyone hurt, nor were the subjects (or confederates) upset after debriefing. However, it became clear that the precautions taken in the current procedure were inadequate, and we decided to stop conducting the study.

Dependent Measures

Emotional displays were rated by the experimenter, who watched on a video feed in another room, and by the confederate, who cribbed notes to himself as the study proceeded. Both the confederate and experimenter rated the amount of anger and amusement shown by the subject after each provocation. Thus, following Cohen et al. (1996), our main measure of hostility was the anger-minus-amusement score. In addition, we asked the experimenter to make an exploratory rating of the “risk of physical confrontation” and the “risk of verbal confrontation” (later averaged together) as she watched in the other room. Ratings were made on a 1 to 7 scale. (Of course, these ratings pertained to displayed rather than experienced emotion.)

Ratings were intercorrelated moderately, because experimenters and confederates had somewhat different vantage points on the action. The experimenter’s ratings of physical and verbal confrontation were correlated $r = .59, p < .001$. The experimenter’s and the confederate’s anger-minus-amusement ratings were correlated $r = .49, p < .001$.

Effect sizes for the interactions reported below are given by the $f$ statistic, where appropriate. Following convention, we consider an $f$ of .1 as small, .25 as medium, and .4 as large (Rosenthal and Rosnow 1991:444).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figures 1 and 2 reveal that the time courses for northern and southern subjects’ emotional reactions were quite different across the 11 annoyances. Significance levels for the interaction of region by time (11 levels) in the MANOVAs were $p < .001$ ($F(10,450) = 3.55$, medium effect size $f = .28$) for the anger-minus-amusement variable and $p < .02$ ($F(10,430) = 2.18$, medium effect size $f = .23$) for the risk-of-confrontation variable. More focused statistical analyses discussed below are based on the data presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Emotional Reaction

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, for the first several annoyances, northerners tended to show a somewhat greater response than southerners did, steadily increasing their hostility up to about Annoyance 5, whereas southerners stayed flat and at a relatively calm level. At approximately Annoyance 5, 5

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1 In the post-experimental sessions, subjects in both Study 1 and Study 2 gave their experiments high marks. Interestingly, subjects in Study 1 actually rated their experiment as more interesting and more worthwhile than those in Study 2, and were more likely to say that they were glad they had participated.

2 Results from both Studies 1 and 2 are extremely similar if we use only the anger variable rather than the anger-minus-amusement score.
however, a “line in the sand” seemed to be crossed for our southern subjects. At that point, southerners caught up with their northern counterparts, and after that, the patterns were reversed: Northerners leveled out in their responses and southerners showed sudden and dramatic escalations in their hostility.

*Absolute level of anger.* For this analysis, we grouped annoyances into Time 1 incidents (Annoyances 1 to 5) and Time 2 incidents (Annoyances 6 to 11). In regard to the absolute level of hostility during Times 1 and 2, for anger-minus-amusement scores, northerners were likely to be somewhat more angry and less amused than were southerners. Dividing analyses into Time 1 and Time 2 and then using the “wired-in” ANOVA contrast of +1, -1, -1, +1 is a conservative test of our hypothesis because predictions involved the trends over multiple points in time that are roughly borne out by Figures 1 and 2.
southerners at Time 1, whereas southerners were likely to be far more angry than were northerners at Time 2. The time by region interaction was significant at $p < .02$ ($F(1,45) = 5.87$, medium to large effect size $f = .36$). Means were North Time 1 = $-1.17$, sd = .72; South Time 1 = $-3.35$, sd = .83; North Time 2 = .10, sd = 1.47, South Time 2 = .91, sd = 1.77. The same pattern was found for the risk-of-confrontation measure. Means were North Time 1 = 1.20, sd = .45; South Time 1 = 1.12, sd = .29; North Time 2 = 1.44, sd = .95; South Time 2 = 1.74, sd = 1.03. The time by region interaction was marginally significant at $p < .09$ ($F(1,45) = 3.05$, medium effect size $f = .26$).

The simple main effect of region for the absolute level of hostility at Time 1 was not significant. However, the expected time by region interactions were significant or mar-
origi

sented so. Further, relevant predictions about signaling also concerned (1) rates of

cipation in expression of anger and the points

t which hostility would escalate for norther

ers and for southerners, and (2) how sud

ddenly and unpredictably hostility would

come on for the two groups.

Escalation of hostility. Averaging together

er the anger-minus-amusement and the risk

of-confrontation scores, we found that the

northerners steadily escalated their hostility

while southerners remained flat over An

noyances 1 to 4 (northern average change

score = .21, southern average change

score = -.03; t(45) = 1.92, p < .06). Begin

ning with Annoyance 5, however, the situation

was reversed with southerners showing

steady increases upward and northerners

going flat (northern average change score =

-.04, southern average change score = .43;

t(45) = 2.98, p < .005). This interaction of

region by time period for average change

score was significant at p < .002 (F(1,44) =

10.97, large effect size $f = .5$), an indication

that southerners and northerners chose to

escalate the conflict at different points.

Suddenness of hostility. For each individ

ual subject, we looked at the largest jumps

and steepest declines in hostility from one

anoynance to the next. In keeping with the

notion of politeness masking an underlying

anger, southerners' anger tended to emerge

more suddenly and unpredictably. That is,

the maximum jump in anger from one

anoynance to the next was much greater on

average for southerners than for northerners

(southern mean = 1.61, sd = .98; northern

mean = .98, sd = .71; p < .01, t(45) = 2.62,

large effect size $f = .39$). Similarly, the max

imum jump in confrontational behavior from

one annoyance to the next was greater on

average for southerners than for northerners

(southern mean = 1.30, sd = 1.24; northern

mean = 0.61, sd = .79; p < .02, t(45) = 2.35,

medium-large effect size $f = .32$. Interes

stingly, declines in anger and con

frontational behavior were not steeper, nor

were increases in amusement different for

northerners and for southerners (all ps >

.10). Thus, consistent with politeness mask

ing anger expression, southerners only

seemed to be more upwardly volatile, rather

than just unpredictable per se.

Maximum levels of hostility. For each

individual subject, we also looked at the maxi

mum level of hostility shown for any one

anoynance during the study. We predict

ed that hostility for southerners ultimately

would peak at a higher level, on average,

than it would for northerners. This predic

tion was confirmed for both anger-minus

amusement scores and confrontation-risk

scores. The means were as follows: southern

maximum anger-minus-amusement score =

2.52, sd = 2.02; northern maximum = 1.54,

sd = 1.40; p < .05, t(47) = 2.01, medium effect

size $f = .29$; southern maximum confronta

tion score = 2.86, sd = 1.95; northern maxi

mum = 1.80, sd = 1.18; p < .02, t(47) = 2.36,

medium-large effect size $f = .34$.4

4 Interestingly, northerners and southerners also

seemed to display different patterns of conflict reso

lution in regard to the inclination to forgive and for

get. Toward the end of the study, after the provoca

tions ended but before subjects were informed about

the true nature of the study, the confederate apolo

gized to the subject, saying “Sorry about hitting you

with all those paper wads” and offering to shake

the subject’s hand. For the following analyses, we divided

subjects into those who had “blown up” (defined by the
top 20 percent of the anger-minus-amusement

scores) and those who had not.

We found that northerners who had stayed calm
during the experiment were more likely to forgive

the confederate and shake his hand when he apolo

gized. Northerners who had blown up at the confede

rate, however, seemed to be genuinely angry and

were less forgiving and less likely to shake hands

with the confederate. The reverse pattern held for

southerners: Southerns who had blown up were

relatively more likely to forgive, whereas those who

had not expressed their anger seemed still to be

nursing a grudge. Means for acceptance of the apolo

gy, as rated by the confederate on a seven-point

scale, were as follows: northern blowup = 2.5; nor

thern calm = 5.33; southern blowup = 5.33, southern

calm = 4.07 (interaction $p < .005 (F(1,41) = 8.80,

large effect size $f = .46$). The following percentages of

subjects refused to shake the confederate’s hand:

northern blowup = 50; northern calm = 9; southern

blowup = 0; southern calm = 7 (interaction $p < .10

(chi-square (1,N = 45) = 3.10.)

The same patterns seemed to hold for our data on

forgetting. Approximately six months after the study,

we wrote to all subjects, mailing them pictures of

four persons and asking them to identify the one

who had been their confederate. Few subjects forgot

the confederate, but those who did were (1) nor

therners who had stayed calm and (2) southerners who

had blown up. Twenty-four percent of northerners

who had stayed calm could not pick out the confede

rate’s picture from a lineup, but all northerners who
Demographic Data

Southern and northern students were very similar on almost every demographic dimension we examined, other than the length of time their families had lived in the South \((p < .001)\). That is, southern and northern students did not differ on: school in which they were enrolled, religious preference or denomination, church attendance, present or past membership in a fraternity, whether their father or mother had been in the military, percentage of life lived in Illinois, percentage of life in rural areas, occupational categories of their father or mother, marital status of their parents now or as they grew up, number of brothers, number of sisters, age, father's or mother's education, family income, participation in a varsity sport in high school or in college, SAT verbal score, SAT mathematics score, ACT score, height, and weight \((a W p s > .10)\).

Summary

In sum, the predicted effects emerged. Southerners and northerners reacted to the had blown up could do so. In contrast, all southerners who had stayed calm remembered the confederate, whereas 14 percent of those who had blown up had forgotten him \((interaction p < .02; \chi^2 (1, N = 42) = 5.66)\).

Caution is warranted in interpreting the above data because of the small cell sizes in the “blowup” conditions: about five per cell because of the strict criteria for “blowup” that we adopted. Nevertheless, the data showed a consistent pattern. For the handshake, apology, and memory measures, it appeared that northerners who had exploded were generally more likely to forgive and forget than their counterparts who had not expressed their anger. Perhaps the southerners who exploded were following a cultural script that read something like this: “You were a jerk. I blew up at you. Let’s shake hands and put it behind us.” Such magnanimity may be part of the general culture of honor stance (Gould 1973; Pitt-Rivers 1965). These findings that styles of dispute resolution may differ for northerners and for southerners have practical implications for intervention, which are discussed elsewhere (Cohen & Vandello 1997).

STUDY 2: READING SIGNS OF ANGER

The role of the person who is affronted and wants to retaliate is only half of the conflict. The person doing the affronting also has a crucial role; and if he cannot detect subtle warnings and signals to back off, the conflict can escalate to dangerous levels.

In Study 1, it was suggested that southern culture does not have the behavioral rituals that allow persons to warn and check others through small displays of hostility. If it is true that such rituals are not part of the “cultural tool kit,” we should also see that southerners are less practiced than northerners in detecting these signals and are less sensitive to real cues of anger as dangerous situations unfold. That is, southerners should be less adept at playing the sorts of conflict “coordination games” described by Schelling (1966).

In Study 2 we showed northern and southern subjects videotapes of various experimental sessions from Study 1. In Cohen et al. (1996), it was found that southerners did not project hostility onto neutral or nonthreatening stimuli. The question here, however, was whether they would fail to see anger cues in places where the real potential for hostility existed.

METHOD

Overview

We selected eight stimulus tapes. On two of these tapes, the (southern) subject eventually tried to make contact with the confed-
erate. The other tapes consisted of two tapes with the highest northern anger-minus-amusement scores for Time 2, two tapes with the lowest northern anger-minus-amusement scores for Time 2, and two tapes with the lowest southern anger-minus-amusement scores for Time 2.

Each subject was shown four tapes, one from each of the categories named above, with order of the tapes run through all possible combinations across subjects. Subjects were shown the tapes of the sessions, but each tape ended just before the final annoyance—that is, either before the subject tried to make contact with the confederate or before the session reached the end of its course. Thus subjects in Study 2 never knew the outcomes of the sessions they were watching. Subjects assigned hostility ratings as the tapes played.

Subjects and Procedure

Subjects were 46 northern white males and 47 southern white males, defined as in Study 1. Data from five additional subjects were eliminated because they knew either a confederate or a subject on the tapes.

Subjects were invited to the laboratory and were told that they would watch videotapes and make judgments about “real people in real conflict situations.” The experimenter described the procedure for Study 1 in detail, gave subjects a list of the annoyances they would see, and familiarized them with the response booklet and their experimental tasks.

As subjects watched the tapes, they rated (on a scale of 1 to 7) the degree of anger and amusement shown by the subject on the tape after each provocation. Later we averaged across provocations. We also asked two exploratory questions after each incident: What will the subject do next? and What's the chance the session will eventually have to be stopped? (There were also a number of other questions asked of subjects after each tape, such as “How do you think most women (men) students at the University of Illinois would feel about the subject?” and “What was your feeling about the subject?” We report the findings for these questions elsewhere in a paper on norm enforcement, which is still in preparation.)

Because of time constraints, the tapes were speeded up when the subject and the confederate were merely drawing with their backs to each other. The tape was always shown in real time, however, for approximately 10 seconds before and 15 seconds after each annoyance. Sometimes the subjects were run in pairs. When this occurred, the experimenter explained the study to the subjects together and placed them in separate rooms as they watched the videotapes and made their ratings. The subjects then rejoined each other for the debriefing and were debriefed together, again because of time constraints. The experimenter thoroughly explained the purpose of the experiment and its importance. Further, the need for confidentiality and respecting the privacy of subjects in Study 1 was stressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dangerous Tapes

When shown tapes of objectively dangerous situations (that is, the two tapes in which the confederate later made physical contact with the subject), southerners saw less hostility than did northerners. As shown in Table 1, the average anger-minus-amusement rating made by northern subjects was 1.95, in contrast to an average rating of 1.61 given by southern subjects ($p < .04$, $t(91) = 2.15$, medium effect size $f = .23$.)

Nondangerous Tapes

As in Cohen et al. (1996), we found no difference between northerners and southerners in responses to more neutral stimuli.

Table 1. Anger-minus-Amusement Ratings Made by Northern and Southern Subjects Watching Objectively Dangerous (“Blowup”) Tapes and Nondangerous Tapes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dangerous Tapes</th>
<th>Nondangerous Tapes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>1.95 (.70)</td>
<td>.44 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>1.61 (.84)</td>
<td>.45 (.99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses. Interaction contrast significant at $p < .05$. 
The respective means for northern and southern anger minus amusement scores were .44 and .45 (p > .90, t(91) = −0.07). The interaction contrast predicting that southerners would see less hostility than northerners for dangerous tapes but that no difference would exist for nondangerous tapes was significant (t-statistic for the contrast = 2.37; p < .05, medium effect size $f = .25$).

It was not the case that southerners expected less hostility to occur and therefore saw less. First, there were no differences on tapes that were not dangerous. And second, when we explicitly asked subjects what they thought they would have done if they had been subjects in Study 1, there were no differences between regions (p > .50).

No differences were present when we standardized and averaged together the two questions asking subjects to predict the confederate’s behavior while the tapes played (main effect and interaction ps > .50). In retrospect, however, it was not clear that these were good questions to ask as the tape was playing. Anecdotally it seemed that subjects were merely parroting back the actions they had just seen, predicting that what had just happened would happen next time.

At the end, when we debriefed subjects, we asked them “If you had to pick one person who would have blown up, who would it have been?” In response to this question, southerners were much more likely than northerners to guess incorrectly. We examined the responses of southerners who were debriefed individually or with other southerners and compared them with those of northerners who were debriefed individually or with other northerners. (The 16 North-South dyads that were debriefed together were dropped from the analysis.) Southerners were five times more likely than northerners to guess the wrong person would blow up: Six of 29 southerners (21%) could not identify the person who blew up, in contrast to only one of 24 northerners (4%) who missed the relevant cues. The difference was marginally significant (.10 > p > .05 (chi-square(1, N = 53) = 3.13,)). Of course, 79 percent of southerners did guess correctly; however, it should be noted that 25 percent of subjects would have done so by chance alone.

### SUMMARY

When northerners and southerners viewed objectively dangerous situations, southerners perceived less hostility than did northerners. Thus, not only do southerners not send clear signals as warning signs (Study 1); they also do not clearly perceive them when others send them. If, as we have speculated, this is because southern culture does not have the behavioral ritual where small doses of hostility are let out to regulate another’s actions, then these norms for politeness are implicated in perpetuating the cycle of violence. And if this is true, we may be able to show that as norms for politeness grow stronger within the South, there is actually greater potential that conflicts will explode out of control and end in serious violence. We explore this possibility in Study 3.

### STUDY 3: POLITENESS AND HOMICIDE

We know of no data sets on the degree of politeness in various places in the United States. However, there is something close. In a series of clever studies, Robert Levine and colleagues measured the friendliness and helpfulness of people in various U.S. cities. They measured factors such as United Way contributions per capita and had confederates drop pens, ask for change for a quarter, or pretend to be blind people needing help crossing the street, among other actions (Levine et al. 1994). They found, not surprisingly, that the South was the friendliest and most helpful region of the country.

Such variables are not clear indicators of the politeness norms discussed in Studies 1 and 2. However, they may be markers for more general norms of civility and courtesy toward others. We were interested in how such norms would be related to patterns of violence, and we expected that these norms would be associated with different patterns.

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6 Informal, unscientific lists of polite cities have been compiled by etiquette experts. A recent list of the 10 most well-mannered cities by “etiquette expert Marjabelle Young Stewart” includes seven cities from the South as well as Springfield, Illinois (“Charleston, S. C., Still Most Polite” 1997).
of violence in the North and in the South because of the two ways in which politeness can function: (1) politeness can signal prosocial intentions and keep interactions going smoothly, or (2) it can mask anger and make it difficult to play the “coordination game” of establishing what is unacceptable, once a conflict starts.

In cultures with established and accepted rituals for dealing with conflicts, this second function is not so important. Thus, in the North, one would expect politeness mainly to smooth personal interactions and thus to reduce the level of violence. In cultures without such accepted rituals, however, this second function can be very important. Thus, as we have argued, strict politeness norms for southerners can sometimes smooth interaction. In addition, however, as highlighted in Studies I and 2, they can also stifle effective signaling and dispute resolution and ultimately lead to more violent eruptions. Therefore, in the South, we may expect that more polite places (as proxied by Levine's indicators) would be relatively more likely to have explosions of lethal violence.

METHOD

Data on argument-related homicides for 1976 to 1983 were collected by Fox and Pierce (1987). We limited the homicides we studied to those committed by white male offenders and then further refined our sample by including only white males age 15 to 39, because this age group is most likely to be involved in arguments, status conflicts, and games of one-upmanship that end in violence (see Cohen 1998a).

Argument and conflict-related homicides were those which the FBI classified as arising from arguments over money or property, other arguments, brawls under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, and lovers' triangles (Cohen 1998a). Using census information, we computed homicide rates for the counties corresponding to Levine's sample for white males age 15 to 39.7

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the North, consistent with the notion that in “nice” places people don’t kill people, more polite and friendly places had less argument-related homicides ($r = -0.47$, $b = -462.61$, $n = 24$, $p < 0.02$). In the South, however, this relation did not hold; in fact, it showed a slight reversal ($r = 0.14$, $b = 105.08$, $n = 11$, $p > 0.65$). When the interaction term for region and politeness was included in a multiple regression (testing for the difference in northern and southern slopes), the interaction was significant at $p < 0.05$ (interaction beta = 0.41), controlling for Levine’s size of the metropolitan area, percentage of the population non-Latino white, and a four-item index of socioeconomic variables (the Gini index of income inequality, percentage of young adult population that had dropped out of school, percentage of nonelderly population living below the poverty line, and mean family income (reverse scored)).

Thus it appears that norms for politeness and conflict resolution which we described above have consequences in the real world. The data used in Study 3 provide no direct evidence explaining why this regional difference exists, and these data are only correlational. However, we think that Studies 1 and 2 provide a very plausible causal mechanism, showing how southern norms of politeness and anger suppression can mask conflict and lead to explosions by inhibiting the clear sending and receiving of anger signals. Below we briefly discuss practical and theoretical implications of these studies, as well as the important limitations.

DISCUSSION

The studies presented here highlight a micro-level process of interpersonal interaction that sustains violence in the South. The hypothesis was that rituals for using small doses of anger, rudeness, and confrontational behavior to check another person’s actions are more part of the northern than the southern behavioral repertoire. As a consequence, when conflicts escalate, south-
erners are less able than northerners to manage conflict by sending and receiving angry "warning signals." That is, they are less able to "coordinate" and arrive at a peaceful solution, in Schelling's terms.

In Study 1 it was shown that southerners were less likely to clearly send anger signals as a conflict escalated, as indicated by their delayed but sudden, unpredictable escalation of hostility. In Study 2, it was shown that in objectively dangerous circumstances, southerners were less likely to perceive signs of anger in others. This lack of clarity in sending and receiving signals can have serious consequences. Conflicts in the South can bubble under the surface, only to erupt in a sudden, intense explosion that might have been avoided if participants had worked out their differences earlier. Study 3 demonstrated that this process seems to be reflected in real-world death rates: Friendly, helpful ("nice") places show different patterns of argument-related violence in the North than in the South.

The Issue of Representativeness

Before discussing the practical and theoretical implications and limitations of these findings, it is necessary to address the issue of representativeness. Though southern Illinois was settled by southerners, it does not represent the entire South. Further, college students do not represent the entire northern and southern population. To reach firm conclusions on this matter, it would be necessary to gather a probability sample of the population. Nevertheless, we believe that the findings presented here merit consideration for four reasons:

First, out-of-state southerners and northerners looked very similar to their in-state counterparts in Studies 1 and 2; and, to the extent that southern Illinois college students are unrepresentative of the South, our analyses might be expected to underestimate the differences that would be found in samples of the wider population (see Nisbett and Cohen 1996). Thus the analyses described above are probably a conservative test of the hypothesis. Second, one of the merits of using the populations in Studies 1 and 2 above is that they are extremely well matched on many of the demographic variables for which one would want to control. Rather than having to statistically control for these differences, we have northern and southern students who are extremely comparable, with the exception that some grew up in the South and some in the North. Third, although representativeness may be an issue in Studies 1 and 2, it is less of an issue in Study 3. The findings of Study 3 fit well with the results of Studies 1 and 2 and are based on observations and homicide rates from samples across the country. And finally, our findings fit quite well with the ethnographic work on southern politeness and conflict styles; thus it seems most parsimonious to invoke this explanation rather than some other to account for the present pattern of results (Carter 1963; Reed 1986; Wilson 1989). Conclusions from the three studies reported above are not firm; yet they seem plausible enough that it is important to examine their implications and limitations.

Practical Implications and Trade-Offs

Interventions. These studies contain several practical implications for reducing violence. First, an implication from Study 1 is that perhaps people in a conflict should be taught to communicate their intentions and emotions in a direct but nonhostile manner before the other person crosses the line and makes them blisteringly angry. Second, an implication from Study 2 is that perhaps people should also be taught how to decode the sometimes subtle warning signals from others, so that they can avoid crossing the line themselves. And third, if a conflict does develop, there needs to be some nonviolent
way to resolve the dispute that allows both parties to save face and keep their honor intact (see discussions of possible mechanisms in Cohen and Vandello 1997).

Trade-offs. In addition, we must also qualify our results by noting that discussion of changing norms for politeness and aggression may be ethnocentric. Indeed, North-South cultural differences can be interpreted in more than one way. That is,

Northern men are spineless wimps with no honor. They will not defend themselves, their women, or their culture, assuming they have a culture. . . . The South’s sense of honor is the underpinning of southern courtesy and hospitality. An iron fist in a velvet glove. (Nethaway 1996:G5)

And some people may like it that way. In the Old South, in fact, dueling was defended on the grounds that it encouraged greater civility and a “higher refinement” (McWhiney 1988:170). Traces of this reasoning are still found today (see Will 1993). Michael Hill (1997:19), a history professor and the president of the Southern League, wrote recently in praise of “this life-sustaining pugnacity,” arguing that “a reputation for toughness was, and is still, the best keeper of the peace, and this is why the South (or at least the small towns and rural areas) remains an oasis of civilization.” In the contemporary United States, where a recent U.S. News and World Report poll found that “9 out of 10 Americans consider incivility a serious national problem,” many northerners might agree that the southern way of dealing with things is better, even if there is some cost (Morris 1997:15). Those who bristle at such a suggestion need only consider how they might feel about living in places reputedly more brusque or more honest than the American North (readers can think of their own examples) and reflect that they, too, might or might not be willing to pay some cost for “superficial friendliness” in everyday life.

Although homicide rates in the South can be two to four times greater than those in the North, the chance of dying by homicide is still very small for most people (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). So perhaps for some, it may be a reasonable trade-off to exchange a slightly greater risk of violence for more politeness, civility, friendliness, and respect among people in day-to-day living. Further, possessing a sense of honor may be in itself a psychological good that justifies a slightly greater risk of violence (Cohen et al. 1998; Pitt-Rivers 1965). Thus the quality-of-life implications of the trade-off between politeness and violence are not entirely clear.

Possible Worlds

We must note one more limitation before leaving the discussion of politeness and violence. That is, we have presented the argument as if violence and “good company” inevitably go together like yin and yang, subtly reinforcing each other. Yet the fact that they do so in some societies does not necessarily mean that they do so in all societies. Multiple stable equilibria may exist for a culture that finds itself in the Hobbesian dilemma.

One equilibrium point is for a culture to settle on norms for politeness and cooperation and to respond with aggression only when provoked. That is the strategy described in the empirical studies reported above and more generally it is Axelrod’s (1984) strategy of tit for tat with players beginning by cooperating.

However, another stable equilibrium point is possible as well. In this solution, the culture settles on norms where people adopt a more belligerent stance, advertising their willingness and sometimes their desire to fight. This is the also stable strategy of all defect, in which people go on the offensive against others in an uncertain and unsafe world. And there are indeed plenty of cultures of honor that have settled on this equilibrium point—from Mediterranean herders to the Hell’s Angels to street gangs in today’s inner city, to take just a few examples (Anderson 1994; Campbell 1965; Thompson 1966).

Multiple Equilibria, Multiple Meaning Systems

As Axelrod has shown, tit for tat (“Do unto others as they have done unto you”) and all defect (“Do unto others before they
do unto you") are both stable equilibria. Why a culture settles at one solution and not another is an open question. But the larger point here is that cultures make meaning and form coherent wholes at these equilibria. *Multiple coherent meaning systems* (described by cultural anthropologists) map onto *multiple stable equilibria* (described by economists, political scientists, and game theorists).

The genius of culture is that it can make sense of many possible worlds through its power to make meaning. In the cases noted here, it makes sense of worlds in which violence and politeness go together; and it also makes sense of the *opposite* worlds, in which violence and everyday belligerence go hand-in-hand. Both possible solutions are stable and coherent in their self-contained worlds because the integrating power of culture gives many possible interaction patterns and rituals a meaning and an internal integrity for the people in that culture. This is the case even if it is not apparent to peoples outside the culture, who are working within their own systems crystallized around different equilibrium points (Cohen and Vandello 1997).

One might speculate that the cultural system and the equilibrium solution exert reciprocal influences. Culture probably plays a key role in pushing social systems toward one equilibrium point or another; further, it is probably important in perpetuating the solutions, once they are arrived at. Culture gives meaning to practices and brings a completeness and integrity to systems, thus reinforcing the stability and “stickiness” of a particular equilibrium point that a social system has reached (Cohen 1998b).

**CONCLUSION**

The above comments are an essential qualification of the results. The pattern we have identified in these studies is *one* possible, coherent, persisting pattern, but it is not the *only* such pattern.

In the present empirical studies, it seems that the lack of behavioral rituals for using small doses of anger and warnings to check another's actions has very serious consequences for southerners. Conflicts bubble under the surface, only to explode later, because people do not clearly send nor clearly receive the signals of anger. This process was illustrated in the laboratory, but Study 3 suggests that it is also found in the real world, with deadly consequences.

Of course, many other forces, ranging from the macro to the micro, maintain the southern culture of honor. Collective representations, laws and social policies, the forces of social organization, and real or expected peer enforcement of norms keep this culture strong. In addition, however, the very micro-level processes of interpersonal interaction described here also seem to play a role in the cycle sustaining norms for politeness and violence in the American South.

**REFERENCES**


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