



## The culture of honor as the best explanation for the high rates of criminal homicide in Pernambuco: A comparative study with 160 convicts and non-convicts



Monica Gomes Teixeira Campello de Souza<sup>a</sup>, Bruno Campello de Souza<sup>a,\*</sup>, Wolfgang Bilsky<sup>b</sup>, Antonio Roazzi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Brazil

<sup>b</sup> University of Muenster, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

The present work aimed to investigate the propensity towards criminal homicide using a broad approach, encompassing theories based on socioeconomic frustration, decision-making processes, emotional attachment, testosterone, moral development, moral values, and the culture of honor. A total of 160 adult Brazilian men completed a questionnaire, various psychological tests, and right-hand digit ratio measurements. The findings discarded all theories tested, except the culture of honor. It is concluded that, in the region, public policies for the reduction of the rate of homicides must be specific to that crime and address cultural issues regarding honor and moral satisfaction.

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### La cultura del honor como mejor explicación de los elevados índices de homicidios criminales en Pernambuco: estudio comparativo con 160 condenados y no condenados

#### RESUMEN

El presente trabajo tuvo como objetivo investigar la tendencia al homicidio criminal utilizando un enfoque amplio, que abarca las teorías basadas en la frustración socioeconómica, los procesos de toma de decisiones, el apego emocional, la testosterona, el desarrollo moral, los valores morales y la cultura del honor. Un total de 160 hombres brasileños adultos completaron un cuestionario, varias pruebas psicológicas, y mediciones de la relación dígitos de la mano derecha. Los resultados sugieren descartar todas las teorías evaluadas salvo la cultura del honor. Se concluye que en la región las políticas públicas para la reducción de la tasa de homicidios deben ser específicas para este tipo de delito y considerar las cuestiones relacionadas con la cultura del honor y la satisfacción moral.

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### The Culture of Honor as the Best Explanation for the High Rates of Criminal Homicide in Brazil

In the scientific studies of crime, there are many possible factors proposed as explanations for criminal behavior, including

\* Corresponding author: Rua Gervásio Campello n° 102. Prado. Recife. Pernambuco, Brazil.

E-mail address: [bcampello@uol.com.br](mailto:bcampello@uol.com.br) (B. Campello de Souza).

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psychology, biology, society, and culture. However, when it comes to homicides, there are relatively few studies that address this type of crime specifically, and most of them deal each only with a small number of the large variety of possible causal factors (Brookman, 2005; Eisner, 2013). This is a regrettable state of affairs when one considers the widespread nature of the problem and its high toll for society in general, particularly in countries like Brazil, which historically has displayed a very high rate of homicides, especially in the states of Bahia, Paraíba, and

Pernambuco (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - UNODC, 2013).

The present paper attempts to contribute to the scientific knowledge of homicides and their causes by means of an investigation encompassing a broad variety of theories, including economic frustration, moral development, moral values, decision-making processes, emotional attachment, testosterone, and the culture of honor. Given the high prevalence of that type of crime in Brazil in general and Pernambuco in particular, the study focuses on that location.

## General Theories of Crime

### *Economic Frustration*

Inspired by an analysis of the increase in suicide during periods of rapid social change, Durkheim proposed the concept of *anomie* (lawlessness) based on the view that crime is an antisocial behavior that arises not from the individual but from the dynamics of social forces themselves (Durkheim, 1978; Merton, 1968). His idea is that society's values tend to instill in its members various socio-economic goals that, given the limited structure, eventually prompt them to go outside established social norms, a state of "absence of norms". Under this kind of explanation, homicide is in part opportunities to attain them, leading to tensions of a larger set of behaviors arising from socioeconomic frustration, a form of innovation that, however lamentable, is still a force of change (Durkheim, 1978; Merton, 1968; Michener, DeLamater & Myers, 2005; Snell, 2006).

### *Moral Development*

Piaget (1994) and Kohlberg (1981, 1989, 1992) considered morality as a part of intelligence and, therefore, developed by means of a dynamic adaptive internal organization that occurs during interactions with the external world. Moral thinking, therefore, is considered by them as the result of the interplay between individuals and their social environment, with a predictable pattern of development (phases) as a consequence of his or her interactions with the world. Stams et al. (2006) did a meta-analysis of 50 well-known studies involving comparisons between juvenile delinquents and their non-delinquent peers that identified a strong tendency for the youths with criminal records to present a lower level of moral development as defined by Piaget and Kohlberg, even when one controlled for socioeconomic status, gender, age, and IQ.

### *Moral Values*

Gouveia, Milfonat, and Guerra (2013) produced a typology of basic human values that identifies three major categories: personal, central, and social. Personal values involve the search for individual advantages and interests, subdivided into experimentation and realization. Central values are a mix between individual and collective perspectives, subdivided into existence and supra-personal. Social values are directed towards others, with an interpersonal focus, subdivided into normative and interactive. Studies done with adolescents suggest that personal values are associated with a greater propensity to criminal and antisocial conduct, while social values are linked to a lower disposition towards such behavior (Formiga, 2006; Formiga & Gouveia, 2005).

## Theories of Violent Crimes

### *Forms of Decision Making*

Economist George Loewenstein proposes that human behavior as a whole, and decision-making in particular, are the result

of the interaction of at least two distinct neural systems, one being the "affective" (emotion and intuition) and the other the "deliberative" (rationality and logic). According to him, one system tends to conflict with the other, becoming stronger as a consequence of the weakening of its counterpart. This is an empirically successful model that incorporates several developments in economics, psychology, and neurosciences that occurred in the last few decades (Lobel & Loewenstein, 2005; Loewenstein, Hsee, Weber, & Welch, 2001). Using such descriptions, De Melo (2008) created a self-evaluation instrument to measure how the thinking in a decision-making situation may be more or less deliberative. The application of this score to a large sample of players in an online game produced very reliable results that were consistent with the expectations from Lobel and Loewenstein (2005). Assuming that human behavior is a consequence of decision-making systems, it follows that criminal behavior might be influenced by them. Indeed, Loewenstein and O'Donoghue (2006) found that violent crimes are associated to the workings of the affective system.

### *Attachment*

Attachment theory proposes that human beings are programmed by natural selection to identify and follow a parent or surrogate that will act as a caregiver and protector until it is capable of fending for itself, thereby producing an advantage in probability of survival (Bowlby, 1989; Golse, 1998). Relationships established with one's caregivers during childhood will influence his or her emotional and motivational structure throughout adult life (Bowlby, 1990; Cassidy, 1999; Golse, 1998), including both the ways they respond to the needs of their charges and the ways in which they fail to do so, with important implications for the personality being developed (Waters, Hamilton, & Weinfield, 2000).

Ainsworth (1978) identified patterns of attachment classified as secure (confidence in the caregiver's protection and care in stressful situation), ambivalent (lack of confidence in the caregiver and alternation between seeking help from him/her and demonstrating irritability), avoidant (feeling of being rejected by the caregiver and learning to hide one's needs). Later studies suggested a fourth type, called disorganized, usually stemming from abuse by the caregiver and characterized by lack of coherent coping strategies for situations involving stress or fear, constant impulsivity, and interactions (Main & Hesse, 1990).

Attachment theory is a perspective that has possible implications for violent crimes. Osofsky (1995) and Overstreet (2000) have associated disorganized attachment conditions in children and adolescents with aggression and anti-social behavior, while Katz (1999) found a significant link between avoidant attachment and felony charges for violent offenses.

### *Hormones*

There is evidence that biology might also play a significant role in violent crimes, especially in the case of testosterone, which has been linked to "masculine" psychological and behavioral patterns regarding risk-taking and aggressiveness (Van den Bergh & Dewitte, 2006). The amount of that hormone that an individual was subject to in the womb during pregnancy, as well as blood concentrations in the adult, are associated to the ratio between the lengths of the index and annular fingers, and so is the propensity towards violent crimes (Manning, Scutt, Wilson, & Lewis-Jones, 1998; Van den Bergh & Dewitte, 2006).

## The Culture of Honor and Homicide

According to Reed (1982), in areas where the land was unfer- tile and herding was the main means of primary production

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