



Regulating honor in the face of insults[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Previous research has examined honor-related responses prior to and after an insult but little is known about which underlying mechanisms explain this behavior. We connect honor concerns to Self-Regulation Theory and argue that honor is associated with prevention focus in an escalatory setting. In three studies, we investigated the role of prevention focus as a motivator of obliging behavior prior to conflict escalation, and aggressive behavior after conflict escalation among those high in honor. In Study 1, we found higher levels of prevention focus among high-honor participants, compared to low-honor participants, in a community sample. In two following studies we experimentally activated honor concerns and demonstrated that indeed, those high in honor were more accommodating in their initial approach to a conflict (Study 2), but showed more aggression once they engaged in an actual insulting interaction (Study 3). Additionally, both types of responses proved to be (at least partially) driven by higher levels of prevention focus. Our findings provide initial empirical support for the idea that, when honor is at stake, prevention concerns relate to obliging responses before as well as aggressive responses after conflict escalation following insults.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has focused on the influence of honor endorsement and the way people respond to insults. After being insulted, members of honor cultures tend to become angrier and show more aggression than members of low-honor cultures (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Van Osch, Breugelmans, Zeelenberg, & Bökük, 2013). Many studies report that those who adhere strongly to honor are not only more antagonistic after an insult, but they are also friendlier or more cooperative when there is no insult (Beersma, Harinck, & Gerts, 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; Cohen, Vandello, Puente, & Rantilla, 1999; Harinck, Shafa, Ellemers, & Beersma, 2013). This latter observation, however, has attracted less attention. Moreover, although the effect of insults on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses has been documented extensively, yet it is still unknown which underlying psychological mechanisms might explain these effects.

The goal of the current research is to provide a new perspective on honor-related conflict escalation after an insult by connecting it to Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997). This theory distinguishes between promotion-focused motivational inclinations, aimed at achieving gains, and prevention-focused motivational inclinations, aimed at avoiding losses. More specifically, we aim to demonstrate that both cooperative and aggressive responses in an escalatory setting are driven by

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prevention focus and the inclination to prevent a loss of honor. In this paper we present both correlational and experimental research to assess this mechanism. Moreover, by experimentally inducing salience of honor concerns in participants with a similar cultural background, we isolate the effect of honor from other cultural differences. This allows us to examine the processes of maintaining and protecting honor in the face of insults and specify the role of the underlying psychological mechanisms involved.

1.1. *Two faces of honor*

Honor has been defined as ‘the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society’ (Pitt-Rivers, 1965, p. 21). In honor cultures, people’s worth is defined in terms of their claim to honor but also the extent to which they are considered honorable by society (Gilmore, 1987; Peristiany, 1965). Hence, honor has both an internal and an external component. Honor cannot be claimed unless it is acknowledged by others – likewise it can be taken away if it is challenged by others (Miller, 1993). Therefore, members of honor cultures strive for positive social evaluations and a good reputation; positive social evaluations are an important source of their sense of worthiness. Moreover, they will go to great lengths to protect and maintain honor because loss of honor is associated with social rejection and degradation.

Previous research has shown that honor endorsement has important implications for the way people engage in social interactions, particularly when facing (potential) conflicts. For example, high-honor participants become more upset, are physiologically more primed for aggression, and respond more competitively after being offended compared to low-honor participants (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; Ijzerman, Van Dijk, & Galluci, 2007; Van Osch et al., 2013). This line of work has clearly demonstrated that honor is associated with shame, anger, and aggression, especially in response to insults.

At the same time, there is evidence that prior to or in the absence of an insult the pattern is reversed. For example, in their study Cohen and colleagues observed that, prior to being insulted, honor culture members were more polite and friendly than low-honor culture members (Cohen et al., 1996). Whereas this line of research has traditionally focused on the finding that honor culture participants respond more aggressively after being insulted, the differences obtained can also be explained by the obliging behavior of the honor culture participants who were not insulted. Moreover, Beersma et al. (2003) highlight that relative cooperativeness is observed among those high in honor. In their study, honor concerns were negatively correlated with competitive conflict intentions. Additionally, recent research by Harinck and colleagues corroborates the idea that in the absence of an insult, honor-culture members handle a conflict situation more constructively than low-honor culture members (Harinck et al., 2013).

Thus, although most researchers have emphasized that honor endorsement can elicit aggression-related outcomes, we also focus on the other side of the same coin, showing that the absence of insults is associated with more obliging and constructive behavior among honor-culture members (Harinck et al., 2013). We argue that these seemingly incompatible responses actually result from the same underlying psychological mechanism, relating to the way in which people strive to achieve or maintain their honor-related goals. Our aim is to identify these motivational inclinations that drive obliging as well as aggressive behavior and to reveal why those concerned with honor respond so differently prior to and after an insult.

1.2. *Preventing loss of honor*

As stated before, preventing loss of honor is an important concern among those who endorse honor values (Anderson, 1994; Leung & Cohen, 2011; Rodriguez Mosquera, Fischer, Manstead, & Zaalberg, 2008). Because honor is transient and relies on social affirmation, people concerned with their honor and reputation may experience that they have more to lose in tense social interactions than people who are less concerned with their honor. Operating obligingly and cautiously in interactions can help to remain in other people’s grace as a way to ensure a positive evaluation. Additionally it has been suggested that norms of friendliness in honor cultures effectively prevent unintended threat to other people’s esteem – a threat which could result in spirals of aggressive responses (Cohen & Vandello, 2004; Cohen et al., 1999).

Conversely, impugning someone’s honor is a sure way to escalate a tense situation. Doing so always involves the risk of retaliatory action, as a threat to honor requires restoration, even if this is by means of violence (Anderson, 1994; Cross, Uskul, Gerçek-Swing, Alözkan, & Ataca, 2013; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that high-honor participants tend to react vigorously to insults as a mean to restore their threatened social image after an insult (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008). These findings thus seem to suggest that honor-related aggression may be a self-defensive strategy, mainly driven by the motivation to prevent the undesired outcome of loss of honor (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Hayes & Lee, 2005).

1.3. *Regulatory Focus Theory*

If honor indeed activates concerns for the maintenance of reputation, this should be apparent in the motivational inclinations that drive people’s behavior. According to Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997), the strategies that people employ to reach their goal strongly depend on the specific characteristics of that goal. Higgins distinguishes between end states that can be characterized as ideal goals (desired outcomes associated with nurturance, growth, and gains) and ought goals (undesired outcomes associated with safety, responsibility, and losses). Each type of goal elicits a different focus, which is characterized by different strategies, resulting in different emotions when the desired goal is or is not achieved. People who

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