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## Honor in International Relations

by  
Shashank Joshi

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## **Abstract**

The concept of honor has an extensive and distinguished lineage in the study of international relations, although contemporary theory has lost sight of its importance. This study begins to remedy that situation. It does so by first setting out the place of honor in relation to a number of other related concepts, like prestige and status. It then outlines a theory of “negative honor,” and situates this in relation to existing theoretical and empirical accounts of honor-related variables. This theory draws on extant work in social psychology, anthropology, economics, political science, and other fields, to set out hypotheses on why, how, and when political leaders of states might respond to certain kinds of challenges in a way that constitutes honor-seeking behavior. The second part of the paper tentatively sets out one way to empirically evaluate these hypotheses. While unsuccessful, this provides a blueprint for further research and a number of soon-to-be-implemented refinements.

## **Acknowledgments**

My thanks to Steve Rosen, Dominic Johnson, Richard Nielsen, Serene Hung, and participants at the Princeton Graduate Student Conference on Psychology and Policymaking (October 2008), and Hammad Sheikh and Joshua Walker in particular.

Keywords: honor, honour, prestige, reputation, status, political psychology, international relations, culture of honor, rationalism, escalation.

\* Paper presented at the Princeton Graduate Conference on Psychology and Policymaking, October 2008.

“Political units have their amour-propre, as people do”  
Raymond Aron<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of honor<sup>2</sup> has an extensive and distinguished lineage in the study of international relations (IR) and its older disciplinary counterparts. Since this is not a historical study, I will state only that it stretches from Thucydides,<sup>3</sup> to Wendt,<sup>4</sup> and beyond.<sup>5</sup> However, much contemporary IR theory has lost sight of its importance. Security has become the dominant organizing concept around which theories are built, and honor is said to possess causal force only to the extent that it furthers the former. This line of thought has its apogee in traditional deterrence theory, in which the pursuit of honor is strictly instrumental—and pursued consciously and strategically as an instrument—to optimizing some security metric.<sup>6</sup> Rationalist theories are by no means intrinsically unable to ascribe ideational purposes to actors,<sup>7</sup> but they have generally been uninterested in describing cross-cultural variation in those purposes.<sup>8</sup> Theories of a social constructivist sensibility, have hinted that they

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Aron, *Peace and war: a theory of international relations* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1973), chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term honor interchangeably with prestige, glory, status and the suchlike. I think it is possible to disentangle their meanings from one another, but that is not my purpose here. The term reputation will mean something slightly different, however.

<sup>3</sup> His famous trichotomy suggests that Athens expanded “chiefly for fear, next for honor and lastly for profit”, Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley, 1st ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), sec. 1.175.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, Cambridge studies in international relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Wendt argues that “self-esteem”, including a need for “honor, glory, achievement [and] recognition”, is part of “human nature”, 131-2; that “collective self-esteem” is a “universal national interest”, 233-6; that power politics can be “an end in itself”, 274; and, finally, that “there also seem to be forms of prestige that are unrelated to material success”, 325.

<sup>5</sup> A useful survey of the centrality of the honor, or prestige, motive in IR is Daniel Seth Markey, “The prestige motive in international relations” (PhD, Princeton University, 2000). I draw on Markey at length later.

<sup>6</sup> I think this comes out most clearly in Thomas C. Schelling, *The strategy of conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 6.

<sup>7</sup> James Fearon and Alexander Wendt, “Rationalism v. Constructivism: A Skeptical View,” in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse-Kappen, and Beth A. Simmons (London: SAGE Publications, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For a rationalist attempt at modeling the dynamics of honor, see the wide-ranging Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). To introduce a theme I

recognize the importance of honor.<sup>9</sup> But they also have been unable to explain either its constitution as a motivation (how it comes to be valued) or its behavioral effects (how its being valued then alters behavior).<sup>10</sup>

But there is empirical evidence to suggest that neither ignoring the concept altogether nor rendering it in purely instrumental terms is adequate to explain certain aspects of the behavior of states. Consider three such pieces of evidence.

First, leaders often appear to value and pursue the status of their state (or polity) relative to others, often in ways that directly and indirectly reduce their security and material prosperity, whether status is construed as one's general position, as one's status as an entity worthy of being treated in some respectful and gracious manner, as fulfilling some respected or admired role—and so on. Kagan, in a study of honor as an explicit purpose of foreign policy, concludes that “nations ... uphold other conceptions of honor ... that are the product not of calculation but of feeling”, offering a litany of examples: the tensions between Corinth and Corcyra discussed by Thucydides, the Second Balkan War of 1913, the second Moroccan crisis in 1911, Philip II's imperial expansion, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Second, such patterns of behavior are very widely observed, even occurring across primates. Anthropologist Richard Wrangham has argued that “[p]atterns of

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will return to, I think that many conceptions of honor can be ‘rationalized’, which is to say that they can be shown to be rational in some sense of that word. But most senses are either blatantly *post hoc* (we simply posit that such and such an action was maximizing honor under certain constraints) or incomplete (that action ‘led’ to an increase in the ‘core’ preference, such as security). O'Neill's analysis is more sophisticated than this.

<sup>9</sup> For an example, Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics*, New directions in world politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 14-5, 58, 91, 188, 193, 195, 315, 330.

<sup>10</sup> For a preliminary effort, see Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). Other theories grasp the basic point: that seeking a positional good for its own sake will be at odds with ends more often attributed to states, like wealth and security e.g. “Agents remember slights and they are quick to take offense. They are always ready to commit societal resources on a massive scale for vindication [including] as an edifying spectacle. Rules matter, for these agents live by an unwritten code of honor, some version of which is to be found in every small world that is let to itself”, Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of our making: rules and rule in social theory and international relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Kagan, “Our Interest and Our Honor,” *Commentary*, 1997.

collective violence found among humans [and] chimpanzees ... include ... intense personal and group concern with status”<sup>12</sup> which induces group formation and subsequent inter-group conflict, even when that conflict does not reap security or prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Both the nature of the dynamic and its prevalence across primates suggests that the proximate cause of such behavior is unlikely to be, or to closely mimic, rational calculation.

Third, Third, Jonathan Mercer persuasively demonstrated over a decade ago that “[i]t is wrong to believe that a state’s reputation for resolve is worth fighting for” since such behavior does not empirically produce credibility in future interaction.<sup>14</sup> His findings far from disprove that honor is sought got its security-related benefits,<sup>15</sup> but they cast doubt over naïve attempts to instrumentally and simply link the two.

This paper is in two parts. In the first theoretical part, I hope to establish two points. First, I will develop a working definition of honor, set out its relationship to extant conceptions of honor and related concepts, and suggest some reasons why it probably cannot be framed in purely rationalist terms. The concepts and mechanisms I discuss are not necessarily intended to ‘solve’ the puzzles mentioned above, but they should render these and similar phenomena more intelligible. Second, I will suggest some evolutionary, psychological, biological and social mechanisms that produce ‘honor-seeking’ as a purpose. I will suggest that these pertain to multiple levels of

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<sup>12</sup> Richard W. Wrangham and Michael L. Wilson, “Collective Violence: Comparisons between Youths and Chimpanzees,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1036, no. 1 (2004): 233-56.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Wrangham, “Personal correspondence to author,” 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and international politics*, Cornell studies in security affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, my later argument suggests that disentangling honor and security is unlikely to be productive at a deeper level, because the mechanisms that bring about honor-seeking (or shame-aversion) may represent evolutionary or socio-cultural adaptations that produce security *qua* survival or, more simply, serve *some* useful security function (in the way that most actions do). Additionally, one could counter Mercer’s findings with the point that states may incorrectly *believe* that reputation matters, which seems to be at least partly true. See Robert Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Michael Tomz, *Reputation and International Cooperation: Sovereign Debt Across Three Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

analysis, some of which may be redundant for social scientific purposes. In the second empirical section I suggest some preliminary means by which we can test for the effects of one type of honor, if indeed it matters at all.

## THEORIES OF HONOR

### Extant literature

Daniel Markey's decade old *The Prestige Motive in International Relations*, a PhD thesis, is one of the most recent in-depth studies of honor.<sup>16</sup> His thesis is reflective of a wider dissatisfaction with prevailing theories of international relations or their foreign policy entailments. That dissatisfaction is directed both at the largely material purposes that these theories ascribe to international actors, and the calculative and strategic manner in which these actors pursue their ends.<sup>17</sup> Foreign policy analysis can respond in two ways. First, it can counterpose neo-utilitarian<sup>18</sup>—to use John Ruggie's felicitous term—with sociologically influenced theories.<sup>19</sup> Second, it can employ cognitive<sup>20</sup> and psychological<sup>21</sup> theories that aim to identify the precise micro-foundations of conscious and unconscious decision-making. Neither of these alternatives altogether denies that actors are purposive, that they can act instrumentally, that their conscious adjustment of means to ends can take into account

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<sup>16</sup> Markey, "The prestige motive in international relations."

<sup>17</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism and International Relations," in *Handbook of international relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse-Kappen, and Beth A. Simmons (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 95-118; Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism," in *Theories of international relations*, ed. Scott Burchill, vol. 3 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 310; Fearon and Wendt, "Rationalism v. Constructivism: A Skeptical View."

<sup>18</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, "What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998): 855-885.

<sup>19</sup> John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity: essays on international institutionalization*, The new international relations (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> *Integrating Cognitive and Rational Theories of Foreign Policy Decision Making*, 1st ed., Advances in foreign policy analysis (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Philip E. Tetlock, "Social psychology and world politics," in *The handbook of social psychology*, vol. 4 (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations*, Analytical Perspectives on Politics (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).



the purposes and expected behavior of other actors, or that ends are often material. But they refine these details in significant ways.

Markey himself defines the concept of honor as “individual or collective desire for public recognition of eminence as an end in itself”.<sup>22</sup> Markey deduces from this thin description a set of broader implications: honor is “irrational, social, perpetual, and relative”.<sup>23</sup> Elaborating on this in an article he argues that it is relative insofar as “men are more concerned with relative gains than absolute ones”.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘relative’ aspect of honor was recognized and rationalized in a seminal article by Robert Powell in 1991, in which he argued that states compete over their relative position when it brings them incremental material benefits that can then be used to generate subsequent material benefits.<sup>25</sup> Markey’s second point is then that honor is not only relative, but also perpetual. We can interpret this as an implicit rejoinder to the notion that states seek relative gains only up to the point where these gains provide a marginal, material benefit. Rather, Markey claims that “the thirst for prestige is never entirely quenched”. Markey goes on to label prestige “irrational” on the basis that “it does not always yield optimal material outcomes” and that it does not always accord with an obvious means-end calculus”.<sup>26</sup>

With respect to materialism, Markey is correct to point out that neither neo-realism nor neo-liberalism incorporates ideational purposes.<sup>27</sup> On means and ends,

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<sup>22</sup> Markey, “The prestige motive in international relations,” 1,15-25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Seth Markey, “Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism’s roots,” *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (1999): 126-172.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Powell, “Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory,” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991): 1303-1320.

<sup>26</sup> Markey, “Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism’s roots,” 159-60.

<sup>27</sup> That does not mean that they *deny* the possibility of ideational ends or that ideas about attuning means to ends are irrelevant. Both families of theories self-consciously abstract from the detail of international politics. Those abstractions are methodological, not necessarily ontological—see Fearon and Wendt, “Rationalism v. Constructivism: A Skeptical View.” On the point of means and ends, both families of theories require their actors to have certain beliefs or ideas about their interests and how those interests are best pursued. See Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*.

Markey suggests he has a conception of something like lexicographic preferences, whereby one good is infinitely preferred to another, regardless of the relative quantities offered.<sup>28</sup> Put another way, there exists “logic of appropriateness” in which rules, not calculations of costs and benefits, orient decisions.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, honor for Markey is social because the object of competition, which is to say the particular marker of status at any given time, is intelligible and desirable only within a social setting. Different things are prestigious to different societies at different times.

Markey then shifts from the first to the third image by claiming “I may assume that states pursue prestige analogously to individuals in the state of war as long as the assumption is analytically useful”<sup>30</sup> and that their doing so sharpens the classical security dilemma and produces patterns of behavior that would otherwise be inexplicable.

The set of arguments advanced by Markey is a great advance on previous theoretical work that could not conceptualize a motivation that is potentially “irrational, social, perpetual, and relative”. Markey successfully distinguishes honor from a litany of other ideational variables such as justice, moral outrage, role, identity, ideology, worldview, operational code, schemata and so on.<sup>31</sup> But there remain a number of deficiencies in his account.

Consider his definition: “individual or collective desire for public recognition of eminence as an end in itself”. There are five questions that we should ask of this.

First, is the actor the individual or the collectivity? Second, is prestige a conscious or unconscious desire? Third, who must recognize the eminence: the

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<sup>28</sup> Peter C. Fishburn, “Axioms for Lexicographic Preferences,” *The Review of Economic Studies* 42, no. 3 (1975): 415-419.

<sup>29</sup> James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Markey, “Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism's roots,” 163.

<sup>31</sup> Some of these are not alternatives to honor, but higher-order variables. A state's self-defined role may include the pursuit of honor and response to injustices committed against third parties.

population of generically like units, or a subjectively defined peer group? Fourth, what is eminence? In particular, along what precise dimensions does it call for superiority? Fifth, must honor be entirely disassociated from other purposes, such as the accumulation of wealth? I raise these questions to demonstrate that Markey's conception of honor is a typology in which there are a number of sub-categories. Different configurations will produce different forms of behavior. For example, a leader who seeks honor for him/herself may pursue superiority along criteria that others within the state do not consider to be status markers. Membership of NATO might be a desirable status marker for a national leader even as the general populace believes that it would be inappropriate, harmful, or demeaning.<sup>32</sup> Examining the status markers of the populace would not, therefore, be useful for predictive purposes if the locus of agency lies elsewhere.

Put simply, Markey's definition requires a narrower specification whose empirical referents would be clearer. In particular, I will choose a particular cell in the typology of honor whose framework he outlines. The most serious problem with his definition is that it is highly overdetermining: since prestige is patently not sought perpetually and relentlessly, how do we explain variations in the degree to which prestige is sought? The problem can induce a lapse into methodological tautology whereby the presence of the independent variable—the process doing the causal work—is inferred from the very behavior that then validates the theory. Status seeking individuals might be identified only by virtue of overconfident behavior or after the fact rhetoric. Their behavior is then adduced to status seeking, without an explanation of why they desire status to begin with. This may be harmless for

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<sup>32</sup> For example, one account reports that "NATO membership has proved widely unpopular and divisive" in Ukraine, Steven Lee Myers, "Politicians in Ukraine Near Accord on a Coalition," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2006

retrodictive purposes, but does not help us ‘find’ cases of the independent variable for the purposes of predicting foreign policy behavior.

### **Two concepts of honor**

I think the principal challenge of those looking at honor is moving from anecdote to theory, by outlining the expected observable implications of a state or its leaders valuing and acting on honor, and when such behavior is likely to be operative in the first place. What I propose is revising Markey’s definition in on particular way. In my account, honor consists in an individual leader’s desire to avoid insult, shame, and particularly humiliation, relative to members of their peer group.

There are three aspects to this definition that require some elaboration. First, honor is sought, and shame avoided, by individuals. However, honor or shame accruing to the states that they represent is personalized.<sup>33</sup> Remaining at the first-image also allows us to develop actually existing micro-foundations for the concept itself. Those foundations can specify the mechanism that underlies the desire, and therefore the expected behavioral referents of the concept. Second, reversing the formulation (humiliation instead of honor) takes us into the domain of losses, in which prospect theory demonstrates that individuals are risk acceptant to a greater degree.<sup>34</sup> As such, any behavioral response would be accentuated, facilitating empirical evaluation of this theory. Third, not only is shame a social concept insofar as status markers (the objects of status, such as membership of an institution or

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<sup>33</sup> Barry O’Neill argues that “national states treat each other as if they were persons, exchanging insults, issuing challenges, and retaliating against wrongs in the name of “national” honour”, Barry O Neill, “Mediating National Honour: Lessons from the Era of Dueling,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 159, no. 1 (2003): 1. I think it plausible to assume that political leaders and decision-makers can and often do ‘self-anthropomorphize’ the state. In his first book, Jervis moves back and forth between different units of analysis, seemingly on just this premise, Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*.

<sup>34</sup> Rose McDermott, “Prospect Theory in Political Science: Gains and Losses From the First Decade ,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 2 (2004): 289-312.

possession of some good) are socially defined,<sup>35</sup> but also in that the relevant measure is one's position relative to a peer group, not all other individuals or all other states.

I said earlier that this is a cell in a typology. We can see this more clearly if we bisect the concept of honor into positive and negative variants. Markey's is a positive notion. One can acquire and accumulate honor, whether in a dyadic (desiring superiority to another actor) or triadic (desiring to be perceived by others as superior to another actor) form. The markers of superiority may vary: chairmanship of an international forum, hosting of the Olympic Games, or a major contribution to peacekeeping operations. Mine is honor in a negative sense. Honor is something that individuals desire and the converse of which they seek to avoid. But by asking why they desire it in the first place, I hope to describe the behavioral response we can expect when they are denied it. And in this sense, honor is most visible at its moment of loss, because "adults start with a presumption of holding it".<sup>36</sup> In its negative instantiation, it is meaningless to talk of acquiring more honor, since it is defined in interaction. This is clearer if we think about the way in which humiliation has been defined in the field of social psychology. Unlike shame, which results from a violation of internal values and a personal sense of inadequacy, humiliation involves a demotion of one's standing in the eyes of external observers.<sup>37</sup> To pursue honor in its negative sense amounts to averting, or anticipating and precluding, such demotion. If a demotion has already occurred, pursuing honor amounts to reacting to the transgression. If the mechanism that creates this negative honor, this aversion to challenges, varies cross-culturally (or in some other way) then we might be able to

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<sup>35</sup> It may be confusing that I use 'humiliation' in my definition, and revert here to 'status'. To clarify: I intend the two to relate to each other such that humiliation would consist in losing status (and honor in gaining it). I assume that honor and humiliation consist in *movement* along a spectrum, with the nature of that movement defined by changes in one's status relative to members of a peer group. The object in which status consists is also, separately, socially determined.

<sup>36</sup> O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Hammad Sheikh for explaining this distinction to me.

test for the behavioral variation that would be expected to result. The next section discusses such a mechanism. But first, let me say a few words on how this fits in to the wider discussion of honor, status, prestige etc.

I think there is no coherent account of positive honor, and this is partly because of the proliferation of its conceptual referents. I think there are at least three different senses in which we might use the term, aside from my own definition above. First, there is status as normative convergence, or socialization into pre-existing norms. Johnston argues that Chinese cooperative behavior emerging from interaction in international institutions can be seen as a “desire to acquire status markers as a cooperator”. More generally, “actors in world political value image in status as ends in and of themselves along with wealth, relative power, and a range of other desires”.<sup>38</sup> This image entails achieving the same image as the sort of states with whom you are interacting. I think this contrasts with a second sense of honor, which requires acquiring a different image: this is status as eminence. Eminence is superiority along the dimensions of prominence. Hymans talks of the “pure prestige factor”<sup>39</sup> associated with the possession of the nuclear bomb. He also refers to status as being a certain category of state—a great power. But producing this superiority is not emulative in the same way, because states pursuing prominence are counteracting the norms of nonproliferation held by most of the states with whom they were interacting. If India was pursuing image in 1998, it was a radically different sort of image to the image being maximized by cooperative Chinese diplomats.<sup>40</sup> Third, and perhaps a subset of this sort of image, is the pursuit of status as the pursuit of a specialized and recognized role. Role theorists have not normally stressed the need for

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<sup>38</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, Princeton studies in international history and politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 38, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96.

<sup>40</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb* (University of California Press, 2002).

a role to be recognized; it is normally seen as an internal identity construct used to orient and render action meaningful.<sup>41</sup> But states might wish for their role in the international system to be recognized, and it thus becomes a status marker. In particular, they might still want superiority or prominence. But they might narrowly define the dimensions along which they wish their eminence to be measured. Some states have no way of becoming great powers. They might, however, be great peacekeepers, great mediators, great non-aligned radical system-reformers, and so on.<sup>42</sup> I think that status as valuing and displaying autonomy or independence comes under this category, although is slightly different. States might value the pursuit of an independent foreign policy even when this is ‘costly’ i.e. when alliances, or hierarchical arrangements, are more beneficial in terms of security and wealth. This is neither eminence in a conventional sense, nor a specific role (in the sense that some function is performed). Rather, it seems to be a certain way of delineating one’s identity.

I think these three types of positive honor are extremely significant. Some are well-theorized, and simply require studying in more empirical terms. But one of the greatest difficulties confronting this is that status markets differ. They differ in these three ways, but they differ greatly within these categories too. There is a plethora of potential roles to be fulfilled, and there is a danger of retrofitting roles to actions. Employing negative honor instead of positive is a more modest way of proceeding, since the notion of ‘humiliation’ is likely to be marginally easier to observe than the various subtypes of positive status tokens. Coker rights that “[i]f we take glory to mean ‘fame’ or ‘renown’, then it may indeed appear applicable only to the pre-

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<sup>41</sup> Kalevi J. Holsti, “National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy,” *International Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1970): 233-309.

<sup>42</sup> Joshua W. Busby, “Good States: Prestige and Reputational Concerns of Major Powers under Unipolarity,” in (presented at the American Political Science Association Conference, Washington DC, 2005).

modern era. If we understand it to mean ‘deference’, ‘just due’ or ‘prestige’, then it is still an important motive for going to war ... [s]tates may no longer fight to win status, but they do so to retain it”.<sup>43</sup>

### **Mechanisms and processes**

In this section, I synthesize three distinct arguments to explain how we might explain the origins of the concept of negative honor I defined above, and how we might test for its presence. The first part draws on social and evolutionary psychology, suggesting scope conditions for co-called cultures of honor. The second suggests ways in which the biochemical micro-process underpinning such cultures might be theorized. The third relates the first two points to foreign policy behavior.

First, I use an argument developed in the field of social psychology that might explain why there is cross-cultural variation in individuals’ sensitivity to insults, which I frame as threats to honor. In 1996, Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen argued that the American South was characterized by a “culture of honor”.<sup>44</sup> “To maintain credible power of deterrence, the individual must project a stance of willingness to commit mayhem and to risk wounds or death for himself” which requires that one “be on guard against affronts that could be construed by others as disrespect”. That willingness has been amplified in the South, they argue, because it was originally settled by herdsman from peripheral areas of Britain, as opposed to farmers. Two features of herding induce a greater than ordinary sense of honor.<sup>45</sup> First, their resources—and therefore livelihood—are mobile and therefore susceptible to theft. Second, the necessary ecology of herding (sparsely populated areas far from law

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Coker, “War, memes and memplexes,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2008): 908.

<sup>44</sup> Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of honor: the psychology of violence in the South*, New directions in social psychology (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> For an expanded discussion of this point, see Charlotte G. O’Kelly and Larry S. Carney, *Women and men in society: cross-cultural perspectives on gender stratification*, vol. 2 (Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1986).



enforcement) means that the state cannot prevent such theft. Since “an insult implies that the target is weak enough to be bullied”, herdsmen are more likely to react violently to such insults. Nisbett and Cohen present very considerable and compelling range of historical, ethnographic, experimental, quantitative and sociological findings to support their claim that a “culture of honor” has persisted beyond the original herding economy. Although one criticism is that “a few hundred years is far too little time for complex psychological mechanisms to have been designed specifically in response to the problem of deterring would-be thieves from ransacking one’s herd”,<sup>46</sup> it is probable that there are prior (and possibly universal) psychological mechanisms of honor that have as their inputs certain ecological and economic conditions.<sup>47</sup> A culture of honor can endure beyond those inputs for various reasons, including functional autonomy, “pluralistic ignorance”, neo-Lamarckian cultural evolution or simple routinization.<sup>48</sup>

To summarize: a culture of honor represents a social setting in which there is a greater than average sensitivity to insults and a greater likelihood of a violent response to insults to such insults (note that this applies only to males). Both the

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<sup>46</sup> Todd K. Shackelford, “An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective on Cultures of Honor,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 3 (2005): 381-291.

<sup>47</sup> This slightly convoluted point is discussed on Ibid., 386-7, where it is argued that “What Nisbett and colleagues have provided is a description of some of the key inputs that are processed by the evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate actions characteristic of the southern culture of honor”. So, one such input is participation in a herding economy without state protection. The output is increased vigilance. This formulation of the argument also guards against claims that this comprises biological determinism. It remains possible, of course, that this or other forms of honor arise for non-functional reasons, survive for non-evolutionary reasons and can become manifest in the absence of particular inputs or conditions specified here. I recount this to clarify that this argument does not ask us to believe that evolutionary pressures can induce changes in character in such a short period of time, but rather than pre-existing evolutionary features can react to the environment, and so produce different tendencies to tolerate and react to humiliation. This is, of course, a resolutely “first-image” argument.

<sup>48</sup> *Culture of Honor* discusses “collective representations” of honor, comprising intersubjective values or norms that are embodied in institutions, laws or simply discourse. These can become uncoupled from their material origins. Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics* also places great weight on collective representations as macro-structural constraints on individual state action. This raises the question of whether regional subsystems (within the larger international state system) might also have collective representations of honor that are uncoupled from material factors. Such an analysis would require a very different methodology to that outlined here, though.

threshold of what qualifies as an insult and the nature of the expected response differs under certain conditions. Recall my definition of honor as an individual leader's desire to avoid humiliation, insult and shame relative to members of their peer group. Here, humiliation itself lies in a challenge to one's position (a potential 'demotion', if left standing). The argument advanced by Nisbett and Cohen suggests that this aversion (to being challenged) originates in a particular psychological mechanism and endures in a set of social practices (and, possibly, that same mechanism; we cannot say for certain). Individual males across different cultures have different levels of desire for such aversion. They will therefore act differently in response to insults. Indeed, they will perceive challenges in different ways. In his bold attempt at reintegrating the ancient concept of thumos with IR (which does not rest on first-image arguments, though), Lebow insists "The spirit tends to express itself in a negative way when threatened". I have tried to explain variation in that expression.<sup>49</sup>

A second set of arguments suggests the more basic physiological processes underlying such cultures of honor. These are useful less because of the level of analysis than the insights they may afford as to the behavioral corollaries of honor-seeking. Allan Mazur has documented the phenomenon of "dominance behavior" where one's "apparent intent is to achieve or maintain high status ... over a conspecific".<sup>50</sup> It differs from aggressive behavior in that violence is generally a response to a challenge or provocation.<sup>51</sup> Testosterone is a cause and consequence of such behavior. Rosen has posited a process by which groups of high testosterone males would self-select into groups (perhaps because of a common propensity to engage in some activity, like political competition). Those groups, by engaging in a

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, "Fear, interest and honour: outlines of a theory of International Relations," *International Affairs* 82, no. 3 (2006): 431-448.

<sup>50</sup> Allan Mazur, *Biosociology of dominance and deference* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Stephen Peter Rosen, *War and human nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

“cycle of challenge and [successful] response”, would durably elevate their testosterone levels relative to individuals in other groups. This, in turn, would “drive up levels of dominant behavior and keep them high”.<sup>52</sup> As Rosen has observed, this provides one explanation for the durability of the culture of honor described by Nisbett and Cohen. It also enables us to ‘cut into’ the problem at a different point, by observing the process of self-selection and cycles of dominant behavior in lieu of looking for particular ecologies and economies that reproduce the evolutionary psychological process outlined by Nisbett and Cohen.<sup>53</sup> We can then ascribe to that setting a culture of honor, and deduce the probable behavior (see below).

There is, however, a third set of arguments needed to relate these first two points to actual foreign policy. Does a culture of honor—the aversion to humiliation and its behavioral implications—have implications for the foreign policy of a state? Structural and domestic arguments might object that “from attributes one cannot predict outcomes if outcomes depend on the situations of the actors as well as their attributes”.<sup>54</sup>

In this context, there are two types of relevant situational factors that may confound the effects of unit-level factors. The first is the prevailing balance of power. If war is *ex post* costly, why do states not negotiate an *ex ante*, Pareto superior settlement?<sup>55</sup> This has been one of the pivotal questions in international relations for over a decade. Two answers are suggestive. First, Fearon argues that if the probabilities with which each side thinks it will win sum to greater than one, such

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> For example, Rosen recounts: “Peter Gay ... argued that there was a general European culture that both created and promoted men with high levels of aggressiveness”.

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “Reductionist and Systemic Theories,” in *Neorealism and its critics*, New Directions in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>55</sup> James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

overconfidence can eliminate the so-called bargaining range.<sup>56</sup> Second, if dominant behavior functions as a cognitive heuristic, which is applied regardless of the specific costs and benefits involved, then actors behave according to a “logic of appropriateness” whereby leaders place greater weight on acting out behavior befitting the circumstances than on behavior attuned to some specified end. An aggressive and militarized action may take place without consideration of the probabilities of victory, the precise valuation of the ‘good’ over which ‘bargaining’ is occurring, or the likely value of the costs to be incurred (up to a certain threshold point). The point here is that unit-level variables, such as propensity to discount costs incurred by hostility, can confound higher-level variables. This is precisely what Nisbett and Cohen mean when they say that “the culture of honor was always a culture of honor and not just a culture of deterrence”.<sup>57</sup> The pursuit of honor might be seen as a form of “diffuse deterrence”<sup>58</sup> whereby leaders pursue superiority along a range of dimensions so that—or, more likely, such that—an adversary would believe them to be also superior along dimensions relating to capabilities. But any particular status object need not directly deter an adversary. A rationalist methodology that relies on the ‘as if’ principle will not capture the important deviations from calculative behavior.

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<sup>56</sup> The bargaining range is the mutually acceptable set of outcomes that exist by virtue of the loser’s ability to compensate the winner for not fighting. On overconfidence, see Dominic D. P Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Nisbett and Cohen, *Culture of honor: the psychology of violence in the South*, chap. Conclusions.

<sup>58</sup> The term is obviously borrowed from Keohane’s more obvious formulation, “diffuse reciprocity”. See Robert O. Keohane, “Reciprocity in International Relations,” *International Organization* 40, no. 1 (1986): 1-27. Avoiding humiliation is really yet another variation on this. It can be understood as a generalized pre-commitment mechanism: if an adversary is aware that initiating a humiliating challenge or imposing a humiliating outcome is likely to lead to a violent reaction out of proportion to the material costs of the challenge (*including* its reputational costs, if they actually exist at all—see my comment on Mercer above) that that adversary may rationally choose to avoid the challenge. The economist Robert Frank describes such a dynamic in his account of pride and the so-called ultimatum game. See Robert H. Frank, *Choosing the right pond: human behavior and the quest for status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Let me expand on why I think this is the case. Thomas Schelling, in his seminal account of deterrence, suggested that strategic actors “have developed the idea of making a threat credible by getting ourselves committed to its fulfillment ... by making fulfillment a matter of national honor and prestige”.<sup>59</sup> But if both parties in a bargaining situation are truly strategic, then this will not be a successful approach since professing national honor would be costless, and therefore not credible. Since honor is likely to be costly if pursued fully, it represents costly signaling (an Schelling realizes as much a dozen pages later, when he suggests the genuinely—by which he presumably means naturally—obstinate are better off in bargaining settings).<sup>60</sup> It is a physiologically grounded pre-commitment mechanism (see footnote 51 above) that might be strategically effective precisely because it cannot be strategically deployed.<sup>61</sup>

In nearly all cases, all this does not mean that political leaders will pay no heed to consequences. If a challenge requires a response, then states can still choose the manner of that response. A diplomatic snub does not necessarily require that the humiliated state retaliate militarily; they might do so verbally. “The alternative to the rational actor”, argues Jon Elster, “is not ... someone who is in the complete grip of passions and completely ignores concerns of security and self-interest”.<sup>62</sup>

The second type of situational factors consists of institutions that can either suppress dominant behavior or transmit it externally. Mazur argues “At the very top of competing organizations are individuals who recognize and regard one another as

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<sup>59</sup> Schelling, *The strategy of conflict*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> He also adds even later that a “revenge motivation” is “probably most readily available to the truly revengeful”. If so, then the paradox such a motivation is instrumentally useful at the same time as being impossible to rationally choose. This paradox is important to keep in mind when thinking about how reputation and honor-seeking bifurcate.

<sup>61</sup> In this respect, it falls under the category of “indices”—nonmanipulatable symbols of some underlying capacity or characteristic, Jervis, *The Logic of Images in International Relations*, 64 .

<sup>62</sup> Jon Elster, “Review: Rational Choice History: A Case of Excessive Ambition,” *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (September 2000): 685-695.

personal foes”.<sup>63</sup> Leaders with dominant tendencies are likely to respond to external challenges as they do to domestic ones. But whether dominant personalities rise to leadership positions, or whether their responses to challenges are likely to become foreign policy behavior, will depend on the leadership selection mechanisms and the institutional checks and balances. There is reason to suppose that selection mechanisms, even in democracies, may favor individuals who are sensitive to insults and respond vehemently. If embedded in a larger culture of honor, such behavior is socially sanctioned. If not, their behavior may be considered unsuitable for high office. But in regimes where accumulation of power depends on an ability to successfully challenge other individuals by force, dominant individuals may hold a comparative advantage and may also self-select into such governments. Rosen therefore argues, “In modern societies, we would expect that states governed by military or militarized elites would select for individuals who sought social distinction and did not avoid social conflict, and would reinforce those tendencies”.<sup>64</sup> Even so, only “low levels of political institutionalization” i.e. fewer checks and balances would be associated with higher sensitivity to insults and greater retaliation. Nonetheless, the greater the independence<sup>65</sup> and speed of foreign policy decision making, the greater the likelihood that a dominant individual will act with sensitivity and violence toward what are perceived as insults or challenges.

Two points remain to be made. First, how does this explanation differ from other accounts of foreign policy? Fearon’s self-described “rationalist” account is

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<sup>63</sup> Mazur, *Biosociology of dominance and deference*.

<sup>64</sup> Rosen, *War and human nature*.

<sup>65</sup> The part of my argument that relied on a biosocial feedback loop—the cycle of challenge and response—might suggest that too much independence would insulate the leader from precisely the sort of interactions to which Rosen attributes durably elevated testosterone levels. I agree with this point, but would offer two responses. First, although the evidence shows that merely high status (as opposed to challenges and responses) does not correlate with elevated testosterone, there are likely to be other reasons why dictators exhibit dominant behavior e.g. a climate of perpetual fear of political enemies. Second, the relevant challenges may in fact be provided from without in the form of foreign policy challenges by other leaders.

instructive. He attributes war to (1) miscalculation of one's chances of success, (2) the existence of private information about which there is an incentive to misrepresent, and/or (3) the inability to make credible commitments (because, say, any settlement would alter the balance of capabilities).<sup>66</sup>

Let me stress that this account does not preclude non-material purposes (Waltz's Theory of International Politics does, on the other hand). My theory of honor does, however, imply that behavioral dynamics and outcomes will differ from those that we would expect under rationalist premises. If a state is challenged on non-material grounds, leaders affected by a culture of honor are more likely to perceive such a challenge as an insult (whether to their person or their state; gains or losses that accrue to the latter are likely to be personalized). They are more likely to react like the Southern males depicted in *Culture of Honor*: quickly, with anger, and with an intensity not carefully or fully consciously attuned to the nature of the challenge. They are likely to do so even when their reaction adversely affects their short run material—security and pecuniary—interests (It is crucial to note once more that this does not mean they abandon security and pecuniary aims; these, however, may work at cross-purposes with the pursuit of honor or the aversion to shame). The blunting of the means-end calculus also means that their assessments of the 'objective' probability of material victory are not the only determinants of a decision to act militarily. As such, these individuals' states are more likely to fight wars that they do not go on to win. Additionally, the biochemical (and/or cognitive) effects associated with successful challenges can induce positive feedback even where there are obvious material drawbacks to further challenges. As Lebow observes, "In some situations,

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<sup>66</sup> Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War."

standing and security are diametrically opposed”.<sup>67</sup> Whether or not pursuing honor is a form of security satisficing, the occasional opposition of these two ends will surely be evident over a period of time in the observable ways described above. McDermott summarizes this point when she observes that though “in many situations political [or rational] and psychological imperatives work in the same direction”, the methodological imperative is to “look for cases and situations where [these] forces can be teased apart and predictions diverge”.<sup>68</sup>

I reiterate that this theory—unlike Markey’s—does not predict uncontrolled expansion, unbounded retaliation at any insult or perpetual war of all against all spurred on by Hobbesian vainglory. The degree to which any of these observable implications are in evidence should relate to the existence or non-existence of a culture of honor, whether that culture is identified by the historical ecology and economy of a nation or the collective representations gleaned through discourse analysis. As such, the presence or absence of certain scope conditions can be related to behavior in the ways outlined in the previous paragraph. This enables a positivist mode of evaluation. Of course, states can also self-consciously reflect on their various purposes, and override some with others, perhaps through institutional design.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, I will make one last theoretical point. The theory of honor outlined here has potential to become a powerful explanation for revisionism. Theorists recognize that “revisionist states want more ... prestige, or other objectives that are

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<sup>67</sup> Lebow, “Fear, interest and honour: outlines of a theory of International Relations.”

<sup>68</sup> McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations*.

<sup>69</sup> It has also long been recognized that while individuals want things, they sometimes want to not want things. Amartya Sen framed this idea with the notion of “meta-rankings”, Amartya K. Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1977): 317-344. With regard to the rational design of institutions, it’s entirely possible that legislators may regard a culture of honor as primitive, and seek to replace it with a system that incorporates institutional normative and material punishments for dominant behavior where that behavior is uncoupled from security (the early stage of the League of Nations?). It’s also possible that leaders may seek to accept the existence of cultures of honor and limit challenges and insults: “The first and great commandment of the Concert [of Europe] was, ‘Thou shalt not threaten or humiliate another great power’”, Paul Schroeder cited in Rosen, *War and human nature*.



not always directly related to their security”.<sup>70</sup> If an action directed at one leader from another is asymmetrically perceived (i.e. the challenging/posturing side does not consider the act to be a challenge, but the dominant side does) then revisionism can be understood as the by-product of dominant behavior, itself related to a particularly evolutionary psychology and domestic psychological dynamic (with certain enabling conditions, such as permissive institutions), or a form of once cultivated and now institutionalized diffuse deterrence (although I admit it’s hard to see how early twentieth century revisionism can be seen as an emotionally grounded response to humiliation rather than a search for more consciously formulated ‘positive’ honor). I put aside this line of thought for now.

### **EMPIRICAL EVALUATION?**

How might we empirically evaluate whether the concept of honor as defined above does indeed have the anticipated behavioral effects? Here, I suggest two methods. The first consists of identifying cultures of honor by looking for the ecological and economic conditions of their existence, as specified by Nisbett and Cohen. The second consists of cutting into the question at a different point, by asking whether the specific culture of honor described by those scholars has had an effect on the foreign policy of the US. I tentatively implement this second approach by using a small statistical study. Both approaches rely on this insight from Jervis’ *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*: “If we can find appropriate comparisons,

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<sup>70</sup> Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In,” *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001): 107-146; Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72-107.

we can try to locate systematic differences in perceptions traceable to differences in ways of processing incoming information ... or general views of the world".<sup>71</sup>

### **Regional cultures of honor**

The general conditions that produce a culture of honor are a vulnerability to loss of one's livelihood through portability of one's resources (one can steal a cow but not a barn) and a lack of protection by centralized authority (the police cannot patrol mountains).<sup>72</sup> Therefore herding is the "one type of economy ... that tends to be associated worldwide with concerns about honor".<sup>73</sup> It should be possible to identify alternative cultures of honor by examining those regions of the world that were once dominated by herding economies or were settled by herders. Or, we could identify cultures of honor by searching for those in which we see the cultural, institutional and other marks of a society sensitive to honor; do we see the use of language associated with concerns of honor? Do we see laws that sanction or tolerate aggressive responses to challenges and insults? Do we see a large number of violent incidents over matters of relatively low material significance? This latter approach—of looking at the manifestations of underlying cultures of honor—seems more amenable to empirical research. The hypothesis would be that nations falling into this category would experience a higher frequency of conflict (given that a greater number of incidents would be interpreted as challenges), would be more likely to escalate more challenges, to escalate to a higher degree, to escalate disputes or initiate conflicts against more powerful adversaries and to lose a greater number of conflicts that they

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976), 11.

<sup>72</sup> An evolutionary dynamics argument - one that examines whether social systems can artificially 'select' for traits in a manner that mimics natural selection although at a non-individual level of analysis—would stop there, and ask whether there are corollaries to this state of affairs in the international system. One example might be a multipolar regional subsystem that is not 'policed' by a hegemon.

<sup>73</sup> Nisbett and Cohen, *Culture of honor: the psychology of violence in the South*.

initiated. The relevant ‘control’ group would be non-herding societies. This results could be refined by including further scope conditions; personalist or autocratic regimes, those with fewer checks and balances on the leader’s power and those with greater speed and independence of foreign policy decision making are all likely to transmit dominant behavior into the foreign policy realm. I leave aside this line of thought at present.

### **American culture of honor**

Nisbett and Cohen demonstrate that the American South has a “culture of honor”. Do we observe its behavioral corollary in the foreign policy behavior of presidents from the South? Lebow observes “We tend to associate the goals of honor and standing with dynastic political units, but, as the Cold War indicates, they are at least as important for modern democratic, industrial and post-industrial states”.<sup>74</sup> Here, I ask whether Southern presidents have been more likely to reciprocate and then escalate militarized disputes to which they have been challenged, once we control for relative capabilities.

Following Nisbett and Cohen, I use Gastil’s “index of southernness” to classify whether a president is from the relevant part of the US.<sup>75</sup> For a state to count as southern, I included—rather stringently—only those that scored 25 or above on the index. The highest scoring states were Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. States that scored 25 exhibited “overwhelming Southern background and a white population primarily from the South”. I excluded those that scored below 25, which consisted of those “with about half of the population of Southern background and a Southern majority at time of first settlement”. Early immigration and first

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<sup>74</sup> Lebow, “Fear, interest and honour: outlines of a theory of International Relations.”

<sup>75</sup> Raymond D. Gastil, “Homicide and a Regional Culture of Violence,” *American Sociological Review* 36, no. 6 (1971): 412-427. See Appendix titled “Gastil’s index of southernness”.

settlement were heavily weighted in this index. Since a particular pattern of early settlement underpins one channel of my theoretical explanation (though we would expect that there are other routes to cultures of honor), this is a highly appropriate measure of whether a president can plausibly be said to hail from the South.

On this measure, I calculate that the South has supplied approximately sixteen American presidents, beginning with George Washington of Virginia (1798-1797) and ending, thus far, with Bill Clinton of Arkansas (1993-2001). Virginia in particular was the birthplace of seven of the country's first twelve presidents, and four of the first five. The criterion of inclusion is birthplace,<sup>76</sup> but I also consider whether a reasonable proportion of childhood was spent in a relevant state (hence my exclusion of Abraham Lincoln).

Regarding the dependent variable, there are 345 cases of so-called ' Militarized Interstate Disputes ' (MIDs) involving the US. Their starting dates range from 1816 to 2001 (this unfortunately renders many Southern presidents irrelevant). In 161 of those cases (just under half), the US was coded as being the targeted state. This means it was not the originator of the dispute.<sup>77</sup> The originator is the first state to threaten, display or use military force. Out of these 161 cases, my coding reveals that 67 involved Southern presidents. The eventual American response to ' threats ' ranged from a threat to use force alone (as in 1863), to participation in an interstate war (as in the dispute beginning 1916).

This provides a way of operationalizing the concept of dominant behavior. The 161 cases represent challenges to the US, received by the sitting American president. The greater the extent to which the evolutionary psychological mechanisms outlined above are operational, the greater the probability that the president will

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<sup>76</sup> Hence the perhaps odd exclusion of George W. Bush.

<sup>77</sup> Faten Ghosn and Glenn Palmer, "Codebook for the Militarized Interstate Dispute Data, Version 3.0," May 4, 2008, [http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/MIDs/MID\\_v3.0.codebook.pdf](http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/MIDs/MID_v3.0.codebook.pdf).

respond in some fashion, and the greater the expected intensity of the response. Put simply, I expect Southern presidents to respond with a greater degree of hostility to challenges than non-Southern presidents. At a later time, I hope to test whether their degree of hostility is no greater in the absence of a challenge, as the theory would predict. To proxy for the degree of hostility of the response, I use a variable that records the “[h]ostility level reached by [the given] state [i.e. the US] in the dispute”. It ranges from 1 to 5; 1 being “[n]o militarized action” and 5 being “war”. I acknowledge that this is an imperfect proxy since it reflects the highest level of hostility reached by the US at any point in the dispute. As such, it depends as much on the actions of the adversary as it does on the characteristics of the president. Nonetheless, we might assume that leaders exhibiting higher sensitivity and greater retaliatory behavior are likely to produce escalatory cycles that raise the highest level of hostility reached throughout the dispute (regardless, I would prefer to refine this study at a later time by coding for the initial response of the provoked state). Therefore we should still expect variation in this measure across the two types of leaders. I control for differences in capabilities by using the difference between a “Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) score” of the US and the sum total of that of its adversaries.<sup>78</sup> I am also aware of the minimal utility of this control; with nuclear powers, measures of conventional capabilities are peripheral. Additionally, only certain levels of force are deemed ‘plausible’ in most circumstances, thus comparing aggregate capabilities is not likely to yield a figure that represents the material cost of retaliation. Nonetheless, these figures give us some indication of the

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<sup>78</sup> Various, “National Material Capabilities Data Documentation, Version 3.0,” May 4, 2008, [http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/Capabilities/NMC\\_Documentation.pdf](http://www.correlatesofwar.org/COW2%20Data/Capabilities/NMC_Documentation.pdf). I integrated the data on MIDs with that on capabilities, which were presently distinct. This entailed manually looking at the level of capabilities for each party in an interaction in the year during which that dispute took place, and summing the capabilities for all the parties in an alliance.

nature of the interaction in which the president finds himself. Higher numbers should soak up some of the variation in the degree of hostility that we observe.

I used an ordered probit regression, regressing the hostility level on both southernness (a dichotomous level) and net capability. The coefficient on south is -0.08. The results therefore show that the relationship is neither in the expected direction nor significant (and for this reason, I omit details here). How might we account for this anomalous result?

In true Lakatosian—and exculpatory—fashion, let me offer five plausible explanations for this slightly anti-climactic dénouement to the paper. First, if the proximate biochemical channel for the expected behavior is indeed an elevated level of testosterone, then there is reason to suspect that the results may conceal a significant relationship once we control for age.<sup>79</sup> Second, the concept of a dispute within the MIDs data set is potentially problematic. A dispute may have begun long before its coded ‘militarization’, in which case we have no sensible way of capturing the idea of initiation. I excluded all data where the dispute was ‘begun’ by the US, but if in these dropped cases the dispute had been initiated before by the adversary, then my construct validity will obviously be flawed. Third, the final level of hostility reached may not be a good proxy for dominant behavior if its anticipation by the adversary results in a concession or resolution of the dispute (although this raises the old rationalist question of why the adversary would consider the expression of dominance a credible signal). Fourth, southernness may be collinear with a number of other characteristics that blunt the effects of dominant behavior.<sup>80</sup> One example is a different base of electoral support. Fifth, my institutional controls may simply not be

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<sup>79</sup> This is exactly what was found in Michael Horowitz, Rose McDermott, and Allan C. Stam, “Leader Age, Regime Type, and Violent International Relations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 5 (2005): 661-685.

<sup>80</sup> I am grateful to Richard Nielsen for this point.

good enough. I have not controlled at all for the degree of presidential autonomy within a given regime, even though domestic institutional characteristics are a crucial enabling condition of the theoretical mechanism outlined in the previous section. In particular, as mentioned above, there is reason to suspect that an effect may appear if we control for the effect of age; this is precisely what was discovered in the study cited in footnote 72. Taken together, these observations point to the need for further empirical study.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Let me recap my discussion, and then mention a few outstanding questions. This paper has had three parts. In the first, I opened the discussion by observing that IR had neglected the study of the pursuit by states of honor, status, prestige and similar kinds of ideational variables. I suggested that this rendered some patterns of observed state behavior puzzling. In the second section, I introduced Daniel Markey's study of honor and set out a critique. I outlined an alternative theory of shame aversion, drawing on the evolutionary and social psychological arguments presented by Nisbett and Cohen, and the biological arguments presented by Mazur. I argued that the culture of honor depicted by the former might be instantiated at a micro-level by the pattern of dominant behavior explained by Mazur. I then related these two sets of arguments to foreign policy behavior. In the third, empirical, section I attempted to test my theory of foreign policy. The results were anomalous, but the mode of evaluation remained crude. The apparent failure of southern presidents to exhibit dominant behavior notwithstanding, my theory of shame aversion is only one way of conceptualizing the notion of honor. A 'positive' conception is an alternative, but this remains totally unspecified.

That said, my theory is certainly underspecified. For example, what constitutes an insult? Bridging the gap between social and cognitive explanations is important here. It is possible to recognize that an insult may be intersubjectively constructed whilst also seeking objective (or at least observable) characteristics of insults within a given social setting, to enable empirical analysis. A theory of peer group formation will be important, but perhaps difficult if peer groups are endogenous to one's prospective position with them (i.e. do states pick and choose peer groups depending on the status that would result?). Second, what is the role of evolution in producing a culture of honor? Shackelford argued "a herding culture characterized the South for only a few hundred years and, indeed, no longer accurately describes the primary economy of the South. Even under strong selection pressures, a few hundred years is far too little time for complex psychological mechanisms to have been designed specifically in response to the problem of deterring would-be thieves from ransacking one's herd".<sup>81</sup> That is why I stressed the possibility of a prior or more general mechanism to which socio-economic conditions were an input. But if that is the case, how do cultures of honor survive beyond the presence of such inputs? If the mechanism is highly social, is there leakage of such cultures? Do cultures of honor exhibit equifinality (this would confound a neat codification of the 'independent variable')?<sup>82</sup> Are they simply washed out by certain strategic paradigms that emphasize the pre-eminence of security as a purpose and strategic calculation as a means? All these questions, and more, have not been adequately dealt with in this study.

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<sup>81</sup> SHACKELFORD An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective on Cultures of Honor.

<sup>82</sup> Alexander L George, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, BCSIA studies in international security (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).



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