

Honor and Shame

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Abstract

Honor once defined northern Europeans, then it defined others on the margins of Europe, and now it is a problematic feature of others within Euro-American societies. This entry traces honor and shame as paired concepts in social scientific thought beginning with their introduction by anthropologists of the Mediterranean in the 1960s. Men claimed honor through acts of bravado or violence which commanded social respect. Transgressions of a man's property, including his women, caused shame and required retaliation. Honor had been a familiar idea in medieval and early modern Europe, but it disappeared with the emergence of strong centralized states, and it became a fascinating anachronism in Mediterranean societies. Eventually it disappeared from the northern Mediterranean littoral only to re-surface in the heart of modern Western societies among urban street gangs or in 'honor killings', which have been on the rise in Europe and North America since the turn of the twenty first century.

Keywords

Honor, shame, Mediterranean, Pitt-Rivers, duelling, honor crimes, violence, gender, sexuality

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Culture and Emotion; Emotions, Psychological Structure of; Emotions, Sociology of; Feud and Internal War: Legal Aspects; Guilt; Mafia; Shame and the Social Bond; Tribe; Violence, History of; Violence in Anthropology

Honor and Shame

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An historical perspective on honor and shame reveals this conceptual pair to be an othering label – a substandard ethos that Euro-American societies left behind with the advent of state judicial control. A strong whiff of what Fabian (1983) termed “allochronism” hovers and makes contemporary honor and shame societies non-coeval with the modern Western societies. The analysis of this situation in the first part of this article allows readers to understand what social scientists have understood by ‘honor and shame’ and where such social and cultural configurations could be found. This leads to a paradoxical observation. Whereas honor and shame had largely become extinct in Western societies by 1900, at the dawn of the twenty-first century they re-surfaced at the root of social panics over ‘honor killings’ in countries such as Sweden, Germany and the USA. These acts of violence are interpreted as evidence of the unassimilated character of recent migrants from the Middle East and South Asia. ‘Honor killings’ drew upon a complex of ideas so foreign (or so anachronistic) that police and judicial systems in the West took quite some time to comprehend what was happening. Far from dying the death that seemed destined for them, globalization has returned honor and shame with new force. Social scientists must now consider how to understand and respond to honor and shame in a transnational situation where distant homelands can nourish these values and incite action in diasporas around the world.

1 Honor in Anthropology

Social anthropologists working in Mediterranean societies introduced the gender-linked concepts of honor and shame in the 1960s. Men claimed honor by staking out a reputation for aggressive machismo, while women submitted to their control with quiet modesty.

Mediterraneanists treated honor and shame as a system of social values – very much in the Durkheimian tradition, as ‘collective representations’. Honor comprised both an individual's sense of self-worth and this person's reputation in the surrounding community. Shame, by contrast, arose from the failure to act according to social values and it entailed public disgrace.

Anthropologists assumed that the honor and shame configuration was distinctively Mediterranean but its features can be found in many societies, especially in the Middle and Near East; from Morocco to India. The recognition of this wide dispersion, along with the demise of area studies, caused researchers to become more interested in local vocabularies and practices. Ethnographers ceased attempting to build a generalizable analytic model of honor and shame by the late 1980s. Historians of early modern Europe and America then became the social scientists most interested in investigating honor as an important social concept underpinning the social institution of dueling, for example. The concepts of honor and shame opened new insights for social and cultural historians wishing to explore the intimate topics of gender, sexuality, aggressive pride, self-regard and public reputation.

By the middle of the twentieth century the word ‘honor’ was well on its way to obsolescence in ordinary English language usage. The practice of dueling to redress injuries to one's honor had ended and consequently honor had ceased to be a topic of public concern. The term was mainly frozen into stock expressions such as ‘word of honor’ or fixed in the aspect of formalized conventions such as the Queen's Honours List, or the school honor roll. Honor was

still a familiar word, yet people were not absolutely certain what it meant; it was rich in connotations, but poor in denotation.

The Oxford-trained anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, scion of a venerable English family whose forebears may well have participated in the culture of honor in the nineteenth century, capitalized on the evocativeness of ‘honor.’ He reintroduced the word in a wide-ranging essay that drew principally on data from early modern European history. In that period honor drifted away from its medieval sense of a monarch’s gift of fiefs in return for military services. By the seventeenth century it had come to mean a general social reputation and then in the early nineteenth century it took on a more interiorized sense of integrity or moral dignity. If publicly insulted—called a liar or cuckolded, for example—a man was within his rights to demand the satisfaction of a duel to restore his honor. Under Napoleonic law a man could kill his wife with impunity if he caught her *in flagrante delicto*.

Pitt-Rivers used an amalgamation of the historical senses of honor to interrogate his own contemporary ethnographic data from a Spanish village. His essay appeared alongside studies of other Mediterranean societies in a book entitled *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Peristiany 1965) that launched honor and shame in anthropology. The premise of the volume was that ‘[M]editerranean peoples ... are constantly called upon to use the concepts of honor and shame in order to assess their own conduct and that of their fellows’ (Peristiany 1965, p. 10).

For the most part honor and shame were conceived to be opposites and furthermore to orient different gender-linked ideals. Men were most likely to claim honor aggressively through acts of violence or cunning that earned them a fearsome reputation. This reputation was

maintained by an ongoing performance of swagger and gruffness that staked out an inviolable space around a man's property, livestock, and women. As Peristiany noted (1965, p. 9), if provoked, 'a Greek Cypriot, a Bedouin and a Berber may answer "I also have a moustache".'

For their part, women protected this honor by comporting themselves with the modesty. Among the Sarakatsani shepherds of northern Greece described by Campbell (1964, p. 287), women did not run for fear that they might fall over backwards and expose their underwear, thereby shaming themselves irretrievably. Ideally a young woman should stay at home working on her dowry, well away from the public gaze so that her name would not be on people's lips.

2 Comparative Considerations

The Mediterranean focus of the *Honour and Shame* volume spurred further ethnographic research within this 'culture area' and also attempts to theorize why such a similar set of values had been arrived at in this region. Virtually all anthropologists assumed that honor and shame were relatively consistent in form throughout the Mediterranean until Herzfeld (1980) pointed out, on the basis of research in two very different Greek communities, that honor amounted to 'socially appropriate behavior.' In a quiet, law-abiding village, macho swagger and aggressivity do not form the basis of honor.

The appreciation of the relativity of honor forced specialists into a theoretical stock taking (Gilmore 1987). Two definable tendencies emerged: (a) honor and shame vary in form in different communities, and indeed may be found in completely non-Mediterranean societies such as Japan where there is a great emphasis on the avoidance of shame; (b) although not exclusive to the Mediterranean, Mediterranean societies do, nonetheless, seem to converge on some strikingly similar cultural expressions of honor and shame. The gestural sign of the billy goat's horns made with extended index and baby finger, for example, signifies that a man has been

cuckolded in a number of Mediterranean societies. The northern European resort to the image of the cuckoo bird to represent marital betrayal (hence 'cuckold') indicates the imagery of a different cultural area. In Mediterranean societies goats furnish the relevant vocabulary. A man who has been betrayed by his wife wears horns in Greek (*keratás*) and in Italian (*cornuto*) while in Spain he is just a big goat (*cabrón*). Unlike rams, billy goats allow their females to be mounted by other males without protest.

3 Performance: Class and Gender

In early modern Europe honor was mainly an affair of the aristocracy; slights from social inferiors could be ignored without consequences. The majority of early anthropologists of the Mediterranean worked in small rural communities where everyone was putatively a social equal. All men began with an equal portion of honor that they could increase or lose. A single system of honor and shame thus permeated the whole community. In larger, stratified towns or cities, however, there could be several parallel systems of honor by class. Honor itself was not economically determined, but the circles within which it was contested, and the modes of contestation, were.

There can be few societies lacking altogether in notions of precedence and social failure. The particular expressive performance of prestige in Mediterranean societies was surely what attracted the attention of anthropologists. These performances might involve elaborate verbal displays such as the spontaneous exchange of insulting rhyming couplets, or the skilled telling of tales of sexual prowess or daring animal theft. The anthropologists recording these stories usually came from the middle classes of northern European or North American societies. Their fascination with these spectacularly different social practices precluded the recognition of their own participation in systems of honor (Pina-Cabral 1989, p. 402). If transgressed a middle class

person might conceivably report the incident to the police and perhaps bring charges. If defamed in public, this person might register an accusation of libel and fight the case through the legal system rather than by direct, violent retribution. These practices protect personal reputation and arguably involve honor and shame, but it is not *the* system of honor and shame that Mediterraneanists had in mind.

Mediterranean honor assumed its particular form as a mode of direct action in the absence of moderating state institutions. Even where the law might be present, honor ignores its offices. The place to find similar configurations of honor and shame in many Western societies is often among the working classes or in criminal subcultures. American inner-city gangs have developed an honor culture that is perhaps even more 'Mediterranean' than that of Mediterranean societies as evidenced in the following statement by a Los Angeles Chicano gang member:

Honor is important to me and every homey [gang member] because if you ain't got honor, you got nothing, man. I mean, no amount of money can buy you honor, so you do everything you can to protect it. I mean, without honor, nobody will respect you, not your friends or your family (Jankowski 1991, p. 143).

That middle class anthropologists were apparently oblivious to these alternative systems of honor in their own societies exemplifies the earlier contention that parallel, discrete codes for honorable comportment may operate in stratified societies.

Feminist studies of honor and shame have rejected the idea that honor is exclusive to men, and contended that women are not to be construed primarily as the passive defenders of male honor. Although their silence has been taken as a sign of submissiveness it might actually be a form of subversive irony through which women mock the supposed gender hierarchy.

Furthermore, women's performances of suffering (their own pain, or on behalf of family members) can be understood as claims to respect in the community of fellow women sufferers. Dubisch (1995) has observed that Greek women engage in competitive suffering as a means of gaining prestige in the community. A gender studies model, then, where performances and social constructions of masculinity and femininity are treated independently, is increasingly replacing the honor and shame model, which linked them together in a version of normal patriarchy. Abu Lughod's (1986) study of honor and poetry among Egyptian Bedouins opened another dimension by contrasting honor as public performance of strength with the intimate vulnerability expressed in songs, thus situating honor and shame in the anthropology of emotions.

4 The Migration of Honor

Just as the initial optimism in the revelatory power of honor and shame began to wear out in anthropology, scholars in other fields discovered the formulation and adopted it with excitement. Where only a few books about honor and dueling in European history had been written before 1970, by the 1990s many titles had been published analyzing these themes in several European countries. In his *Southern Honor* (1982), Wyatt-Brown acknowledged the influence of Pitt-Rivers and speculated that the similarities between the American South and the Mediterranean arose because 'primitive conditions of life often produce elemental social values sometimes roughly parallel from one society to another.'

Like *mana* (to which Pitt-Rivers compared it), taboo, or shaman, honor belongs to middle-range anthropological theory—terms discovered ethnographically in one region and then applied to guide investigation in other societies. The Azande distinction between witchcraft (innate) and sorcery (learned), for example, has been used in the identification of witchcraft in numerous other societies. Honor and shame appear to have been discovered in Mediterranean

anthropology and to have traveled out to other societies and other disciplines. Yet if we look more closely honor and shame had already traveled from early modern European history into Mediterranean anthropology via Pitt-Rivers' essay. That these concepts now seem more attractive to Europeanist historians than they do to Mediterraneanist anthropologists may well be because they actually arise directly from these historical societies. Honor and shame were indigenous concepts in early modern European society.

The future of honor and shame in Mediterranean studies is murky precisely because they do not emerge from local vocabularies. It is striking how few Mediterranean societies actually have words for 'honor' in the sense advanced by Pitt-Rivers and how infrequently equivalent terms are employed in daily life. In Greece the words *timí* 'honor' and *philótimo* 'sense of honor' are rarely heard while in Italy the operative concept is neither shame nor honor, even though the latter would seem to be readily accessible in the Italian word *onore*. Instead, exemplary moral fiber is displayed by following 'the code of silence' (*omertá*) and not disclosing details of criminal or other in-group activities to inquisitive authorities. In his early monograph describing an Andalusian village, Pitt-Rivers (1954) focused attention on 'shame' (*vergüenza*) and made no mention of 'honor.'

The conception of honor brought into anthropology by Pitt-Rivers was always polysemous and this was its theoretical attraction. Honor could involve criminal aggression or Christian virtue, its forms extended into gender relations and equally into the politics and economics of patronage and mafia protection. By the 1990s anthropologists found that the vagueness of the terms honor and shame, and their mismatch with local concepts blunted their usefulness for ethnographic research and for comparison. Honor and shame looked set to be

dissolved into the local terminologies uncovered by particularist ethnography, or absorbed into other frames of analysis altogether such as psychological anthropological concepts of self and emotion.

5 Honor, Murder and Multiculturalism

Honor did not, however, disappear. On the contrary, it acquired sharper definition than ever as the phenomenon of ‘honor killings’ began to command public attention in Western countries (Ewing 2008). By 2010 an estimated twelve honor killings per year were occurring in each Germany and Britain with comparable statistics found in other countries with immigrant populations from areas such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey. Police seminars, courtroom hearings and even the European Parliament became venues where society attempted to understand the meaning of ‘honor’ in order to avert the damage it was causing (Wikan 2008). Typically in these cases, kinsmen kill a young woman for pursuing a romantic relationship, or even just a Western lifestyle, which they oppose. Men may also be victims. The woman’s alleged lover may be targeted, and overt homosexuality might also offer a pretext for murder. The meaning of honor has thus narrowed to refer to a kin group’s protection of its reputation against taint from the sexual behavior of group members that is perceived as shameful.

In Britain, 17-year-old Shafiea Ahmed was murdered by her first generation Pakistani migrant parents, who were sentenced to 25 years in prison in 2012. The motive for the murder might have been Shafiea’s refusal of an arranged marriage during a family visit to Pakistan. In understanding them as honor murders authorities have come to grasp such crimes as corporate family decisions, condoned by a number of kin (including women). The implications for criminal charges of complicity or accessory to murder are enormous. Honor killings indicate a

fatal clash between Western modernity with its recognition of individual equality and autonomy and non-Western traditions grounded in gender inequality and patriarchy. Migration to Europe has created a rift in values between generations. First generation migrants commit the majority of honor killings against second and third-generation migrants who have become Westernized.

A Swedish woman of Kurdish descent, Pela Atroshi, was murdered in Iraqi Kurdistan and her father and uncle were sentenced to six months suspended sentences by an Iraqi court for the deed (Wikan 2008: 39ff.). Upon return to Sweden, Pela's sister presented evidence that two of her uncles (themselves Swedish citizens) had been involved in the crime and a Swedish court sentenced them to life imprisonment. This case shows the mismatch between European laws and those of societies that recognize honor as a mitigating circumstance. Wikan raises the question that now hangs over many Western countries: 'Where should a liberal state stand in dealing with illiberal immigrant groups' (2004: 197)? The matter has become a diagnostic test of the limit of cultural relativist, and anti-colonial positioning.

Throughout its development as a concept, honor has been out of time or out of place, or both, and this has fuelled its fascination for social scientists. At first it was a medieval idea surprisingly found in the contemporary Mediterranean. Then it was a Mediterranean system of values that illuminated historical European societies. Later it turned up in the inner cities of America rather than out there in the Mediterranean or Near East where it belonged. With the phenomenon of honor killings it has come to roost in the West, yet it is anomalous, perhaps symptomatic of historical transition. Honor is only unstably in place; brought into prosperous Western countries by immigrants yet many of these immigrants have become citizens. It is a temporal paradox because it has not been superseded and relegated to the European past. Honor has become, rather, a growing problem for the future of liberal plural societies, which are caught

in the dilemma of how to respect cultural difference while maintaining fundamental values of individual freedom and self-determination.

See also:

Culture and Emotion; Emotions, Psychological Structure of; Emotions, Sociology of; Feud and Internal War: Legal Aspects; Guilt; Mafia; Shame and the Social Bond; Tribe; Violence, History of; Violence in Anthropology

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Synopsis

Social anthropologists working in Mediterranean societies introduced the gender-linked concepts of honor and shame in the 1960s. Men claimed honor by staking out a reputation for aggressive machismo, while women submitted to their control with quiet modesty. Mediterraneanists treated honor and shame as a system of social values – very much in the Durkheimian tradition, as ‘collective representations’. This entry traces the development of honor and shame within anthropology, examines how these ideas flowed into other disciplines, and considers their current application.

Keywords

Honor, shame, Mediterranean, Pitt-Rivers, duelling, honor crimes, violence, gender, sexuality