

Farmers, herders, and fishers The ecology of revenge

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Abstract

Culture of honor (COH) theory [Nisbett, R. E., & Cohen, D. (1996). *Culture of honor: The psychology of violence in the south*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press] predicts that the importance of upholding one's reputation is cross-culturally variable: Revenge should be more prevalent in herding societies than in farming societies, and should be entirely absent in foraging societies. This study was designed to replicate the effects that they found among herding and farming societies and to either support or refute the claim regarding foraging societies. Using a 32-item questionnaire measuring the constructs of Reciprocity and Revenge, this study cross-culturally validates Nisbett and Cohen's COH theory and extends it to fishers, a special kind of forager. Researchers sampled two herding communities (Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, and Liberia, Guanacaste, Costa Rica), two farming communities (Mexico City, Mexico, and San Jose, Costa Rica), and two fishing communities (La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico, and Puntarenas, Costa Rica.) The differences between the herding and farming samples replicated previous findings in that herders were higher on the Revenge scale than farmers. The fisher samples approximate the herder samples on the Revenge scale more than the farmer samples, but were significantly different from each other. Discrepancies between the fisher samples called for the investigation of alternative theories.

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1. Introduction

Whereas the commission of violent acts may serve a variety of functions, often perpetrators' motives are vengeful and/or based on the desire to defend their reputation. According to culture of honor (COH) theory (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), the relative importance of upholding one's reputation is cross-culturally variable, dependent on the degree of COH in any given society. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) have proposed that violence related to honor and revenge is more prevalent in herding societies than in farming societies. They also claim that hunter–gatherers will not show the characteristics of the COH ideology, but do not offer empirical support for this claim. COH (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) ideology has not yet been studied in hunter–gatherer societies. The purpose of this research is to test their theory of COH in herding versus farming societies with cross-cultural data and to include an additional form of subsistence economy to the analysis. This paper will also test Nisbett and Cohen's claim that there is an absence of the COH in hunter–gatherer societies by studying a special type of forager, the fisher.

Traditionally, anthropologists have regarded fishers as a specialized type of hunter–gatherer. Some anthropologists (Lenski, Nolan, & Lenski, 1995; Nielson, *in press*) now classify fishers as distinct from classic hunter–gatherers and have documented several substantial differences between fishers and other foragers. Nevertheless, we consider it productive to examine how Nisbett and Cohen's (1996) hypothesis might or might not apply to sedentary fishing communities. We discuss the critical differences between fishing and other modes of foraging in greater detail below.

1.1. Previous research

It has been shown that some relatively simple behavioral algorithms can successfully regulate reciprocal social exchange (Axelrod, 1984; Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). One such social algorithm has been dubbed tit-for-tat (TFT) because all that it requires is the equal payback of any benefits received. TFT requires that individuals be able to reliably recognize each other and accurately remember the value of benefits exchanged with every other individual. Furthermore, it requires that cooperating individuals be able to detect and systematically discriminate against nonreciprocating “cheaters” in repeated social interactions. Otherwise, such cheaters will socially parasitize and ultimately multiply sufficiently to undermine the system. TFT automatically discriminates against cheaters because those who confer no benefits on others eventually receive none in return. However, the only penalty imposed by TFT on cheaters is the withholding of altruistic benefits, and not the infliction of any true punishment. A tantalizing extension of this hypothesis is that the flip side of TFT is the eye-for-eye principle (EFE) immortalized in 1750 BCE by the Babylonian King Hammurabi, which entails repaying harm with harm. However, a problem with this EFE mechanism, called “spite” by Trivers (1971) was that the retaliators bear the exclusive cost of punishing the cheaters, whereas the benefits of penalizing cheating accrue equally to the nonretaliators as well as to the retaliators in the

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