Fight or flight: Perceptions of men who confront versus ignore threats to themselves and others

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Masculine Honor (MH) describes a set of cultural beliefs by which men are expected to defend against threats, even if this defense requires the use of physical violence (e.g., Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Previous research has identified what constitutes a threat and how MH moderates perceptions of these threats. However, little research has examined perceptions of men who confront versus fail to confront a threat to their masculinity. In two studies (N = 267) we examined whether MH moderated the relationship between whether a man confronted or walked away from a threat directed at himself (Study 1) and a threat directed at his significant other (Study 2) and perceptions of the man as manly (e.g., strong) and non-manly (e.g., weak). MH was associated with manly perceptions of men who choose to fight and non-manly perceptions of men who choose to walk away from threats. These results are consistent with previous research on MH which predicts that men should respond to threats or insults that are directed at them. And to do so, violence is sometimes necessary. Thus, individuals' adherence to MH predicts how they perceive violence as a tool for defending against threats and building and maintaining masculine reputations.

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"I have to win this now, and for all time, or I'll fight it every day and it will get worse and worse."

[–Ender Wiggin (*Ender's Game*, p. 7)]

The above quote is from a popular novel by Orson Scott Card written in 1985. In the first chapter of this book, a six year old boy named Ender Wiggin is confronted by a group of bullies led by a boy named Stilson. Ender defends himself by striking Stilson in the chest and then continues to beat Stilson to end not only the current fight, but to deter all future confrontations as well. It is in this way that Ender gains a social reputation as someone who is willing to fight until the threat is annihilated and is then recruited to save the Earth from "Buggers". This line of thinking is evident in cultures of honor (e.g., Barnes, Brown, & Osterman, 2012; Nisbett, 1993, 1998; Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2000).

Much research has been conducted on masculine honor beliefs and perceptions of what is deemed as honorable behavior for men (e.g., Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver & Wasti, 2009; Saucier & McManus, 2014; Vandello, Ransom, Hettinger, & Askew, 2009). However, little research has been conducted on how

endorsement of these cultural values moderates perceptions of men who confront versus fail to confront a threat to their masculinity. Extending previous research, we examined whether Masculine Honor Beliefs (MHBS; Saucier et al., 2016) would affect perceptions of men who fought versus walked away from a threat to either themselves (Study 1) or their significant others (Study 2). Consistent with previous literature, we hypothesized that MHBS would be associated with more manly perceptions of men who choose to fight and more non-manly perceptions of men who choose to walk away from a threat.

1. Culture of honor

Cultures of honor (and in particular, the Southern culture of honor in the United States) are centered on the requirement of men responding to threat by any means necessary (e.g., Barnes et al., 2012; Nisbett, 1993, 1998; Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2000). In doing so, men build their reputation as someone who is not to be *messed with* and are able to enhance their status as a "manly man". As has been discussed in the literature, this manly reputation is a social construct in which status must be earned and demonstrated repeatedly to avoid losing honor and being repeatedly victimized (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Netchaeva, Kouchaki, & Sheppard, 2015; Saucier et al., 2016; Shafa, Harinck, Ellemers, & Beersma, 2015; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). There are many ways that men may demonstrate honor such as confronting threats to self, property, family, or significant other (Cohen &

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Nisbett, 1994, 1996), responding when insulted (Cohen and Nisbett, 1996; Saucier, Till, Miller, O'Dea, & Andres, 2015b), and even be demonstrated (Ijzerman & Cohen, 2011) and reliably evaluated (AUTHORS, in preparation) by the way that a man carries himself (e.g., posture), grooms himself (e.g., beard), and looks (e.g., muscular build).

One important way that masculine honor is demonstrated is through violence in response to threats or insults (Barnes, Brown, Lenes, Bosson, & Carvallo, 2014; Barnes et al., 2012; Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Cohen and Nisbett, 1996; Weaver et al., 2010). For example, Southerners are more accepting of physical violence than Northerners in the United States (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). However, as Cohen and Nisbett (1994) noted, there is a caveat to this difference in the acceptability of violence. Specifically, Southerners are not more accepting of violence generally. Instead, Southerners are more accepting of violence used to defend oneself, family, significant other, or property from harm or insult (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Harinck, Shafa, Ellemers, & Beersma, 2013; Hayes & Lee, 2005; Lopez & Emmer, 2002). Thus, the Southern culture of honor is built around the acceptability of instrumental violence with the intention of deterring threat. It is in this way that violence is seen as necessary, and even socially attractive (Hochstetler, Copes, & Forsyth, 2014; Vandello, Ransom, Hettinger, & Askew, 2009).

2. What constitutes a threat to masculine honor?

Much research has examined factors that should incite a response; typically beginning with a verbal confrontation, leading to a physical altercation if the threat is not diminished (e.g., Cohen & Nisbett, 1996; Harinck et al., 2013; IJzerman, van Dijk, & Gallucci, 2007; Saucier et al., 2015b). This literature highlights the importance of responding to threats toward one's family, significant other, property, and reputation (Harinck et al., 2013; IJzerman et al., 2007; Saucier and McManus, 2014) which may be as extreme of an offense as someone killing or raping a family member (Saucier, Strain, Hockett, & McManus, 2015a). However, the majority of the empirical literature focuses on lower level threats to masculine honor, such as insults, in examining what constitutes enough of a threat to honor for men to fight (Saucier et al., 2015b). For example, Nisbett (1993) describes the U.S. south as being more prone to violence in response to insult and demonstrated empirically that Southern men are willing to fight after being called an "asshole" (Cohen and Nisbett, 1996). Extending this research, Saucier et al. (2015b) examined insults that may increase the likelihood that a man will choose to fight after being targeted by them. In doing so, Saucier et al. (2015b) created a taxonomy of slurs, including "slurs against masculinity" (e.g., "bitch", "pussy"). Masculine honor beliefs significantly predicted participants' self-reported likelihood of fighting in response to being targeted by these slurs. Thus, this literature highlights an internal socialized obligation for men to respond physically when confronted with threats against their masculinity to maintain their reputation. However, previous literature has failed to directly examine whether endorsement of these cultural beliefs actually affects perceptions, by others, of men who confront versus fail to confront threats to their masculinity.

3. Overview of current studies

In the current studies we sought to extend previous research on masculine honor. Masculine honor consists of social expectations that govern men's behavior. Among these expectations is that men are to respond to threats against their family, significant other, property, or reputation. While much of the extant literature has examined the socialization of masculine honor and what is deemed a *threat* to masculine honor, little research has examined how men are actually perceived when they confront versus fail to confront a threat. In the current studies, we presented participants with a vignette in which men confront

versus walk away from a threat directed at themselves (Study 1) or their significant other (Study 2). We then examined whether masculine honor (as measured by the MHBS; Saucier et al., 2016) moderated perceptions of these men. Building on previous research, we hypothesized that participants' levels of masculine honor would be positively associated with manly perceptions of men who confronted the threat and positively associated with non-manly perceptions of men who walked away from the threat.

4. Study 1

Study 1 was conducted using a vignette in which a stranger at a bar walks up to a man, pours a drink on the man's head, and then laughs in his face. We manipulated whether the man punched the stranger or walked away. In doing so, we manipulated whether the individual confronted versus failed to confront a threat to his masculinity. We measured participants' perceptions of the man as manly versus non-manly and examined whether participants' levels of MHBS moderated perceptions of these men. Further, we examined whether participants' levels of MHBS predicted the extent to which participants perceived confrontation, non-confrontation, and the act of getting help from an outside source (e.g., police, bouncer) to be appropriate responses.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

One hundred forty-eight participants were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk software (MTurk) and completed the study online. Even though this is a study on masculine honor, we did not limit participation to men because we are interested in examining whether participants' endorsement of these beliefs as appropriate for men affects their perception of men. As such, men are not the only ones who evaluate men in society. Behavior is evaluated and socialized by men and women. Of our one hundred forty-eight participants, fourteen failed to complete the MHBS scale. Therefore, their responses were removed from data analysis. Three additional participants did not complete the demographics section. However, their data were retained due to their completing all other parts of the survey. Of the remaining 131 participants, there were 45 men and 83 women. Three participants identified their gender as "other". The majority of participants were White (59.1%), with the remaining participants being Black (10.1%), Hispanic (4.7%), Asian (8.7%), and Native American (2.0%). Three participants self-identified their race as "Other" (3.4%). Participants were compensated monetarily for their participation in the study. The average age of the participants was 33.86 (SD = 10.39).

5.2. Vignettes

The vignette used in the current study described an interaction between a man named Brian and a stranger outside of a sports bar. After Brian leaves the bar, the stranger pours a drink on Brian's head. The last sentence of the vignette was manipulated according to condition. Specifically, in one condition, Brian reacts by punching the stranger in the face, while in the other condition, Brian walks away to avoid an altercation. The complete vignette is below (The portion in brackets denotes the other condition).

It's gameday. Brian is watching the game and eating dinner with his friends at a local sports bar. It's a close game. Brian's team is down by 4, but with 10 seconds left on the clock they score the winning touchdown. Everyone at the bar cheers and Brian high-fives his friends. After the game ends, Brian's friends get up to leave so he pays his tab and leaves too. He is standing outside alone minding his own business when a man comes up, pours his drink on Brian's