

## **A CuPS (Culture X Person X Situation) Perspective on Violence and Character**

Dov Cohen

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Angela K.-y. Leung

Singapore Management University

Individual-differences and cultural approaches to the study of violence have both contributed greatly to our understanding, but both approaches face some inherent difficulties. A cultural approach that ignores individual differences can explain differences between cultures in rates of violence, but it has difficulty predicting who will be violent and what this means for the violent individuals' behavior in other contexts. Two problems with an individual-difference approach that ignores culture are that (a) it may fail to explain differences in rates of violence between societies and (b) perhaps more problematically, it may discover “truths” about violence that hold in only one cultural context but do not hold, or even reverse, in others.

In this chapter we argue for the value of combining an individual-differences approach with a cultural differences approach in a way that treats both individual differences and cultural differences seriously. Specifically, we argue for taking culture seriously by examining differences between cultural logics. Such logics structure behaviors, situations, scripts, and values in ways that makes sense to people within a culture – even if they do not make sense to people outside that culture. We also argue for taking individual differences seriously by treating people as more than cultural robots who mechanically follow cultural dictates. In the combined

approach advocated here, the key notion is that individuals are always *in* a culture, though they are not always *of* it. We outline this combined approach – called the CuPS approach (Culture X Person X Situation) – and demonstrate its value by describing experiments conducted with three different cultural groups.

Before doing so, it is important to say what the CuPS approach is *not*. CuPS is not a mediational approach. It does not assume that there is some underlying individual difference that plays itself out similarly across cultures, and it does not assume that cultural differences would simply derive from such an underlying difference. As such, it does not follow the common procedures for studying cultural and individual differences: namely, (a) show that there are cultural differences on some dependent variables, (b) measure an individual-difference variable that also predicts the dependent variable and differs in mean levels across cultures, and (c) show that the cultural difference is entirely a product of this individual difference, disappearing when the individual difference is controlled for.

We have no doubt that this mediational approach is important and that it is extremely useful for understanding various phenomena. However, our approach differs in that it treats culture seriously by considering the way cultural logics structure and give psychological meaning to behaviors and situations, and it allows for different cultures to have different cultural logics. Triandis's notion of a cultural syndrome and Mischel and colleagues' conception of personality as defined by a "behavioral signature" are both essential for the CuPS (Culture X Person X Situation) approach (Mendoza-Denton & Mischel, 2007; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Triandis, 1994).

### *Syndromes and Signatures*

A cultural syndrome is a central organizing theme of a culture (such as “Honor” or “Dignity”), structured by a cultural logic that clusters behaviors, situations, scripts, and values in a coherent, meaningful way. This coherence is internal in that it is coherent according to a distinct cultural logic for a given culture or subculture, and it may be completely incoherent for outsiders whose own cultures are structured by a different cultural logic. Thus, clusters of behavior that make perfect sense in one culture may seem puzzling to people outside that culture: “How come he would risk his life to help me out of a jam, but if I insult his mother, he’d kill me?” “How can this person be so trustworthy when he has no backbone and won’t stand up for himself?” “How can this person be so arrogant that he ignores other people’s opinions, and yet he is also so kind and dependable?”

Individual differences arise because people are not automata following the dictates of their culture. People can follow the ideals of their culture – or they can reject them. However, their behavior should not be considered random, because it is in fact patterned. People choose their behavior, but these choices are often influenced by ready-made cultural templates that structure certain sorts of behaviors as going together. Thus, within an honor culture, an individual who endorses retributive violence may be embracing the honor ideal and thus may be more honest and trustworthy – these virtues also being elements of the honor ideal. Conversely, within an honor culture, an individual who rejects retributive violence may be rejecting the honor ideals – including those related to being an honest and trustworthy person. Outside of an honor culture, the pattern is likely to be quite different. In a nonhonor culture, a person who endorses retributive violence may be rejecting his culture’s ideals – including ideals of honesty and trustworthiness as well as nonviolence. The particular cultural logics have to be understood in

greater detail, but the general point is that the person X situation “behavioral signatures” in one culture may be very different from the person X situation “behavioral signatures” in another culture.

### *Order and Value in Honor, Dignity, and Face Cultures*

Cultures are defined by how they solve certain problems. Two of the most salient of these are the problem of order and the problem of value. The first relates to how cooperation and order emerge in a society, with a central question being: Who has legitimate authority to use violence and when can they use it? The second relates to how worth is provisioned: Is personal worth something that is inherent in the individual and inalienable, or is worth something that must be socially conferred?

Our research has been mostly concerned with cultural syndromes of Honor, Dignity, and Face, and we provide brief sketches of these as “ideal types,” centering on the two issues mentioned above. In a culture of Dignity, a defining idea is that “each individual at birth possess[es] an intrinsic value at least theoretically equal to that of every other person” (Ayers, 1984, p. 19). Dignity is inalienable in that it cannot be taken away by others. Thus, a person of dignity is relatively impervious to insults or affronts by others. A person with a sense of dignity has an integrity that comes from a sturdy moral core, centered on a belief in the inherent worth of individual human beings. This sturdy moral core – rather than the threat of being shamed by others – is presumed to keep the individual behaving correctly, regardless of the whims of the situation, the temptations of expediency, or the desire to curry favor with others.

When individual conscience fails, however, an effective system of law enforcement is there to back it up. Dignity cultures tend to be found in societies such as market economies, where individuals act as relatively autonomous agents who work within a system of law that

protects property rights and punishes predation. Violations of the rules are offenses against the state, and it is the state that punishes, rather than vigilantes.

In a culture of Honor, honor is both internal and external; it must be claimed from and paid by others. Honor is “the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his claim to pride, but it is also the acknowledgement of that claim ... his right to pride” (Pitt-Rivers, 1966, p. 21). An individual must assertively strive for honor, but if that honor is not ultimately conferred by other people, this is a big problem. Thus, honor requires fortitude but is itself fragile and precarious. In Ayers’s (1984, p. 20) metaphor, unlike dignity, which resembles “an internal skeleton, ... a hard structure at the center of the self; honor, on the other hand, resembles a ... suit of armor that, once pierced, leaves the self ... no alternative except to strike back in desperation.”

The fragility of honor derives from the context in which cultures of honor typically develop. They arise in contexts where the state is weak – where there is no effective law enforcement, no mechanism to guarantee contracts, no police to prevent predation, and no justice system to punish the guilty (Miller, 1993; Pitt-Rivers, 1966). In such an environment, “every man should be sheriff on his own hearth” (as an old North Carolina proverb put it; Fischer, 1988, p. 765). A reputation for reciprocity is key here, because one must be known as someone who will pay back – who can be relied on to pay back a good turn, who will deliver on promises (and threats), and who will avenge wrongs done to him. Insults and trivial conflicts take on great importance in such cultures, because they are probes or tests of who can do what to whom. A man who will not let himself be trifled with on small matters surely will not let himself be trifled with on big matters either. In this context, it pays to have a reputation as a man of honor who will show positive reciprocity and, if wronged, a thirst for vengeance.

Cultures of Face exist within strong hierarchical structures. Face – as defined by Ho (1976) and by Heine et al. (1999) – is “the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim ... by virtue of [his or her] relative position” in a hierarchy and the proper fulfillment of his/her role. A person’s performance in his role is not for him to judge, but rather must be judged by others; thus, face has primarily an external quality. Face can be gained, but the focus is mostly on not losing it – for oneself and for others one interacts with. Indeed, unlike Honor cultures where one person can often increase his honor by taking someone else’s, in Face cultures people often work together to save each other’s face – avoiding the direct conflicts that become such important contests for status in competitive Honor cultures.

Bad behavior in a Face culture is not supposed to be punished by the victim. Doing so would only further upset the harmony that is supposed to prevail in the stable hierarchy of a Face culture. Instead, the group or someone further up the hierarchy will do the punishing. Generally, the 3 H’s that characterize Face cultures are harmony, hierarchy, and humility. The latter – humility – is quite functional, because in a system where Face must be socially conferred, it is not good to claim too much for oneself; otherwise, one may receive a painful and humiliating lesson about where one really falls in the status hierarchy.

These sketches of three kinds of cultures are “ideal types” (Weber, 1997), and ideal types do not actually exist in the world. However, the sketches are useful, because they lead us to predict very different behavioral signatures among people from Honor, Dignity, and Face cultures. It is *not* the case that individuals all follow the ideals of their culture. However, when individuals depart from the ideal, their departures tend to be systematic. Individuals who depart from the ideal are not simply people who are oblivious to cultural norms, and they are not random noise. Rather, their behavior – even when they reject their culture’s dominant ideals –

tends to fit pre-existing cultural templates, patterned by the culture's logic even as its ideals are rejected. Again, individuals are always in a culture, even if they are not always of it.

### *Two Experiments*

We attempted to demonstrate how this works with two laboratory experiments, showing the very different person X situation “behavioral signatures” that occur in different cultures. In our first study, we examined positive reciprocity and in our second we examined the virtue of trustworthiness, as shown by whether participants cheated on a memory test to earn money. In both studies, University of Illinois students were participants. Our Dignity culture group comprised northern Anglo American students; our Honor culture group comprised Latinos and southern Anglo American students; and our Face culture group comprised Asian Americans whose ancestors were from East Asia (for supporting evidence, see Ayers, 1984; Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007; Hamamura & Heine, 2008; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Ho, 1976; Ho, Fu, Wu, 2004; Triandis, 1994; Vandello & Cohen, 2003; Vandello, Cohen, Grandon, & Franiuk, 2009). Obviously, all of the participants were American, so we speak of our groups not as coming from different societies but as people whose relative familiarity with Dignity, Face, and Honor differs as a function of the dominant theme within their subculture.

In both experiments, we obtained individual-difference measures of the participant's (a) endorsement of honor-related violence and (b) belief that a person's worth is either inalienable or must be socially conferred. The measure of (a) was obtained by showing video clips in which someone responded violently to an insult, affront, or threat, and the participants needed to indicate how justified the violence was, how much the insulter deserved to be beaten, how reasonable the violent person's actions were, and so on. The measure of (b) was obtained with

simple Likert-scale items: “How others treat me is irrelevant to my worth as a person.” “How much I respect myself is far, far more important than how much others respect me.” “No one (except me) can make me feel diminished.” And “No one can take a person’s self-respect away from him or her.” Participants’ endorsements of (a) or (b) were person-level variables in the design.

In Experiment 1, participants were given a cover story, according to which we were examining people’s attitudes toward violence in the media. This was the putative reason for showing filmclips and asking about violence, followed by a questionnaire that asked about demographics and also contained the questions above concerning inalienable vs. socially conferred worth. As far as the participant knew, that was the entire experiment. However, there was, of course, more to it than this. The participant came into the study with two fellow confederates. Upon learning that the experiment involved watching movies, one of the confederates pulled out a small bag of candies and offered some to the participant and the other confederate. In half the cases, the candy offerer turned out to be the Disk confederate and in the other half, the offerer turned out to be the Distraction confederate (the reason for the names will become obvious in a moment).

After filling out their questionnaires, participants and confederates received a false debriefing and were then dismissed. After they left the lab room, the Distraction confederate buttonholed the participant and started talking to him as the Disk confederate rummaged through his own backpack at a table 15 feet down the hall. The Disk confederate pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his backpack and asked the participant and confederate, “Does either of you know where room 25 is? I’ve got to meet a study group there in 5 minutes.” One of them replied that room 25 was in the basement, and after learning this, the Disk confederate packed his bag up

and left. In doing so, however, he “inadvertently” left behind and forgot his bright, neon-colored computer disk that now lay on the desk. Having allowed the Disk confederate to make his getaway, the Distraction confederate ended his conversation with the participant. Both of them then walked down the hall, having to walk past the “lost” disk.

If the participant did not notice the disk, the confederate drew attention to it and gave the participant a few subtle opportunities to volunteer to go find the Disk confederate. If the participant did not take up the offer, the study ended. If the participant did take up the offer, he needed to find the Disk confederate – not an easy task given that (a) the directional signs in the University of Illinois psychology building are confusing, contradictory, and occasionally completely misleading (pointing to the wrong floor) and (b) room 25 is actually a locked broom closet, tucked behind a set of doors at the bottom of a ramp.

Though a few participants could not or did not find room 25, the vast majority of those who attempted to do so succeeded. (Participant progress was monitored by confederates hidden throughout the building and by the exits, communicating via Walkie-Talkies). If a participant reached room 25, however, his journey might continue, because room 25 had a sign on the door, “Meeting moved to Room 841 (8<sup>th</sup> floor).” The subject then had to decide either to walk up the 9 floors, take the elevator (if he had the time – the elevators were slow), or abandon the search altogether (the building’s exit was located tantalizingly nearby). For those who chose to go on to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor and found room 841 (a broom closet again), there was another sign on the door, “Went to get TV and VCR. Will be back soon.” A confederate hidden in the hallway watched to see if the participant waited for at least 1 minute for someone to return. The participant’s degree of helping could thus be measured – with higher scores indicating that the participant had gone further in trying to find the Disk confederate. Because we manipulated whether it was the Disk

confederate or the Distraction confederate who offered the participant candy, this Situational manipulation dictated whether finding the Disk confederate was or was not an act of reciprocity for his offer of the candy.

The key prediction involved the three-way interaction: Culture (Honor vs. Nonhonor culture) X Person (High vs. low endorsement of honor-related violence) X Situation (Helping is reciprocity vs. not reciprocity). The interaction was significant in a regression analysis. Decomposing it, we found two very different patterns for our Honor and Nonhonor respondents. Among the Honor group in the reciprocity condition, there were people who paid back and people who did not. That is, those who paid back insults and affronts (“negative gifts” as Miller (1993) called them) were those who also went the furthest to pay back a favor, traipsing all over the psychology building to help out the person who offered them a piece of candy. Thus, the people who paid back the negative were also the people who paid back the positive. On the other hand, in the nonhonor groups, the pattern was the opposite: Those who rejected retributive violence were most likely to return the favor to the Disk confederate who had offered them candy. “Good” people eschewed violence and “good” people repaid the confederate.

The moral obligation to repay the confederate was binding for Honor culture participants who embraced the ideal of honor and for Face and Dignity participants who embraced the ideals of Face and Dignity, respectively. (With regard to this latter distinction, we further found that the Dignity culture participants who were most likely to pay back a favor were also the ones who endorsed the notion that personal worth is inalienable; conversely, among nondignity participants, this relationship between paying back favors and endorsing the principle of inalienable worth did not hold). Finding the Disk confederate was a matter of fulfilling a duty to reciprocate rather than a simple act of altruism. These effects held for the situation where the

Disk confederate had offered the participant candy; they did not hold when the Disk confederate had not offered candy.

The experiment illustrates in static form the argument that (a) cultural syndromes differ in the way they cluster behaviors together, and (b) individuals position themselves toward or against the dominant syndromes of their culture or subculture. The experiment below demonstrates this dynamically, illustrating the way this process works in microcosm. That is, our bicultural Honor culture participants (Latinos and southern Anglos at the University of Illinois) may live in two worlds and may structure their behavior according to different cultural logics, depending on which one happens to be salient for them in a given situation.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is an overwhelmingly white campus in a northern part of the state. Most psychology experiments there take place in a laboratory room in the Department of Psychology. It seems reasonable for participants to presume that the salient ideal in such a context is Dignity. In the experiment we have just described, honor was “primed” in that all participants watched the film clips first – before having to go find the confederate. In the next experiment, half the participants were unprimed, whereas the other half were primed with honor, watching the film clips before engaging in the crucial behavior (again, as in the experiment already described).

In this study, we also examined a different behavior – one related to trustworthiness and integrity (an ideal embraced under the mantle of Honor in Honor cultures, the mantle of Dignity in Dignity cultures, and the mantle of Face in Face cultures). The trustworthiness ideal is a universal good, but depending on the cultural syndrome it derives from, it can be clustered with very different sorts of behaviors.

For this study, we adapted a procedure from Houston and Ziff (see Houston, 1978; Houston & Ziff, 1976), giving participants an opportunity to win money by cheating on a memory test. Briefly, the participant needed to remember words from two lists; the experimenter “accidentally” left one of these two lists exposed, and the dependent variable was (roughly) the likelihood that the participant cheated (as opposed to remembering words from the exposed list due to chance alone). Our person-level variable for the endorsement of retributive violence was measured in the same way as in the previous experiment; however, for half the participants, the honor-violence film clips were shown before the memory test was given and for the other half, the film clips came after.

Again, the key prediction concerns a three-way interaction: Culture (honor vs. nonhonor culture) X Person-level endorsement of violence (high vs. low) X Situation (honor is primed vs. honor is not primed). The prediction can be illustrated by imagining two hypothetical people. Imagine Person A from an Honor culture who endorses the notion that insults and affronts need to be paid back with violence if necessary. Imagine Person B from an Honor culture, a person who lives by the mantra “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me” and thus rejects honor-related violence. In the unprimed condition, in the context of a psychology laboratory on a northern, predominately white campus, the cultural ideal that is salient and that one reacts toward or against is Dignity. In this case, Person A, who embraces the idea of paying back insults, is a Rejecter of the ideal of Dignity, and as a Rejecter of Dignity’s ideal, should be less likely to act in an upright and trustworthy fashion. On the other hand, Person B is an Endorser of the Dignity ideal, and as such, should be more likely to act with integrity.

Now, change the salient cultural syndrome that A and B are reacting to by administering the Honor prime. When Honor is the salient ideal, Person A is an Endorser of Honor, and as

such, should follow Honor's strictures against cheating and be more honest. In contrast, Person B goes from being an Endorser of Dignity to a Rejecter of Honor, and as a Rejecter of Honor, should be more likely to cheat. This is what happened in our experiment. The honor prime made endorsers of retributive violence less likely to cheat while making rejecters of retributive violence more likely to cheat.

Interestingly, the priming effect was most pronounced among those most steeped in the culture of honor tradition. In the *unprimed* condition, for both the honor and the nonhonor groups, more endorsement of violence was correlated with more cheating. In the primed condition, among those who grew up entirely in the South, the correlation flipped dramatically: For those who grew up entirely in the South, the correlation between honor-violence endorsement and cheating was  $r = -.87$ . For these southerners, endorsing honor violence meant embracing all that honor entails, including honesty. This did not occur for people from nonhonor groups or for people who spent much less of their life in the South. For these groups, one cannot prime – or perhaps more correctly, cannot easily prime – Honor as the salient syndrome one reacts to.

A few caveats are needed and they derive from a more general point about priming. The effectiveness of a prime depends on both (a) the “strength” of the prime and (b) the participant's susceptibility to being primed by a given stimulus. Regarding susceptibility, the strong results with the life-long southerners are very suggestive but must be regarded with caution due to the small  $n$  (we had only 16 lifelong southerners in our sample). Regarding the strength of the prime, whereas we could not effectively activate honor as an ideal for our nonhonor groups, this is not to say that the ideal can never be activated. Our participants watched five film clips. Perhaps

stronger primes could induce honor as a salient ideal, but in the current studies we have no evidence for this (see also Cohen, 2007; IJzerman & Cohen, 2008).

### *Cultural Rejectionism*

As illustrated above, being an Endorser of Honor (when Honor is the salient ideal) is not the same thing as being a Rejecter of Dignity (when Dignity is the salient ideal). And conversely, being a Rejecter of Honor is not the same thing as being an Endorser of Dignity. The same inclination toward or against retributive violence positions one as either a Rejecter or Endorser of a cultural system (of Honor, Dignity, or Face); and positioning oneself with respect to this cultural system has implications for a wide variety of behaviors – including positive reciprocity, honesty, and (as illustrated in our other work not discussed here), financial as well as political actions (see Leung & Cohen, 2008).

A point that these studies reiterate is that cultural rejecters are not simply oblivious folks who just don't "get it." They are not simply undersocialized. Sometimes they understand the cultural ideals perfectly well and just choose to reject them. In our studies, cultural rejectionists behaved badly in ways that were striking. In the disk study, southerners and Latinos who rejected honor-related violence actually helped someone *less* after that person offered them candy, as compared to when the person did not offer them candy. The same was true of northern Anglos and Asian Americans who endorsed honor-related violence. And the same was true of northern Anglos who rejected the idea of inalienable worth. These participants all helped the confederate *less* after the confederate had done something nice for them. They behaved most badly when social obligations pressed heaviest upon them.

It would be worthwhile to study further this seeming desire to violate norms, to act badly when one is most obligated not to – perhaps because of a motivation to assert one's own

autonomy, perhaps because of some other motive, or perhaps simply for the sake of spite itself. There is a Yiddish word – *aftselakhis* – translated “very literally, ‘in order to provoke anger,’ [it is] the impulse to do things only because someone else doesn’t want you to” (Wex, 2005, p. 2). In the case of the experiments describe here, the word may not literally apply, because the participants in our studies were not angering the confederate by not returning his disk. However, the word perhaps captures some of the spirit of how our cultural rejectionists behaved (or misbehaved) when they faced social obligations. Again, the deeper underlying motives for their behavior, the feelings they experience when they violate social norms (glee? shame? dejection? mastery? freedom?), and the circumstances that provoke such reactions seem worth studying if we want to avoid what Dennis Wrong (1961, p. 183) famously called “the oversocialized conception of man.” There may be individual differences in the desire to act spitefully, but the results showing that participants from Honor cultures can go from Endorsers of Dignity to Rejecters of Honor (or from Rejecters of Dignity to Endorsers of Honor) by changing the salience of a cultural syndrome suggests that we should consider not just person-level effects, but also the interaction of person-level variables with situational and cultural variables as well. (For more on these effects, see Cohen, 2009; Kim & Cohen, 2009).

### *Rejecting the Logic*

We have argued that individuals are always in a cultural context, although they are not always of it. That is, people react toward or against the salient ideals of their culture – embracing them or rejecting them. Individuals are “free” to go against the ideals of their culture. Our greatest caveat is that there is another level of “freedom” beyond this. That is, individuals are free to reject not just the *ideals* of their culture but also the *cultural logic* itself that binds together and organizes sets of behaviors, values, and scripts. Thus, it is one thing to reject the

ideals of Honor as a package – to reject retributive violence, reject prosocial reciprocity, and reject honest behavior. It is another thing altogether to reject the logic that weaves together Honor – by, for example, embracing the notion that one is obligated to pay back good things but not obligated to pay back bad ones or by embracing the notion that one can show integrity without having to stand up for himself if challenged. There are obviously people who do this (though in the first experiment, there were not many). It seems worthwhile to study how, when, and why people challenge not just the ideals but the underlying logic of their culture. Again, our second study provides a clue: At least for our bicultural respondents, one might be able to replace one cultural logic (say, Honor) with that of another (Dignity), or vice versa (see also Leung & Cohen, 2009). Particularly in a rather loose social system like the United States, people can operate in not just one culture, but also in subcultures and sub-subcultures. Research exploring how people pick the niches they occupy in a culture or subculture may be particularly useful (Dach-Gruschow & Cohen, 2009; Morris, 2009).

Our caveat does not modify the claim that individuals are always in a cultural context, even if they are not always of it. However, it does make the claim more complex by noting that sometimes people can choose the salient cultural or subcultural system they are responding to.<sup>i</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In sum, all societies must solve the problem of order. How they solve it and how they conceive of individual worth helps to define whether a society resembles the prototype of an Honor, Dignity, Face, or some other sort of culture. Different cultural logics operate in different cultures, meaning that different sorts of behaviors, scripts, and values get bundled together in different ways. These bundles are coherent to people in the culture, even if they do not always seem coherent to those outside the culture.

Individuals react toward or against the salient ideals of their culture, and even when they choose to reject the culture's ideals, they are still often guided by its logic and fit their behavior to pre-existing cultural templates. The CuPS approach helps to explain the distinct patterns of within-culture, as well as between-culture, variation; and it takes both cultural logics and individual differences seriously. The acceptance or rejection of salient cultural ideals of Honor, Dignity, and Face entail consequences for patterning a range of behaviors beyond violence, including whether one is an honest, trustworthy person who can be counted on to pay back favors. Individuals are always in a cultural context even if they are not always of it. Further research – into the way people position themselves with respect to cultural ideals, their motives for doing so, and the forces and choices that influence which cultural syndrome they are responding to – seems likely to be very productive.

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#### Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> “Choice” does not apply to our experiments because participants were randomly assigned to a condition that made honor salient or not. But the point about choice applies to the larger sense in which people have some freedom to decide which subcultural systems they will be part of.