

The Different Facets of Honor Cultures and Killings

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Abstract

Arab countries are honor-oriented cultures that place a high value on personal and familial honor as well as social reputation. Hence, understanding cultures of honor and honor killings in all of their aspects is crucial to prevent these crimes from happening. Honor-based killing and the use of violence to restore honor are crimes that occur in both Western and Arab countries. As such, this literature review aims to investigate honor killings as a social, legal, and psychological phenomenon, as well as to examine possible solutions to the prevalence of honor killings. Throughout my search for articles, I noticed a gap in the psychological literature to identify the motives behind honor killings and a lack of research around honor killings happening in Western countries.

Keywords: honor cultures, honor killings, social aspect, legal aspect, psychological aspect, gender specific codes, Western/Arab countries.

The Different Facets of Honor Cultures and Killings

Psychological research has failed to thoroughly examine the concept of honor in the Middle East and North African regions (MENA) as a social, legal, and psychological phenomenon. Honor killings are common in the Arab world and other cultures that value honor, thus it is important to comprehend all facets of such crimes. The purpose of this literature review is to examine how honor killings are motivated by a combination of legal and psychological factors. In addition, this paper will define cultures of honor, how the practice of honor killing takes place with legal impunity, as well as the relationship between gender-related psychological constructs and honor cultures.

The Origins of Honor Cultures

Honor cultures are defined as groups that prioritize a person's social image or reputation in their society; it is a form of collectivism (Uskul & Cross, 2020). According to research, there are cultural differences in honor, with some cultures having a high level of honor, such as the Middle East, and others having a low level of honor, such as the United States and Northern Europe (Cihangir, 2013). In fact, cultures with a high level of honor give more importance to gender-specific codes, and as a result, any violation of these codes is punished more violently.

Gender-Specific Honor Codes

In honor cultures, there are gender-specific codes that differentiate the responsibilities and punishments of breaking the honor between sexes. According to Cihangir (2013), both male and female members of high honor cultures have responsibilities to safeguard personal and collective honor, as well as the honor of their families. However, there are numerous differences between the male and female honor codes. The masculine honor code consists of responsibility and keeping authority over one's family, as well as ensuring that female members of the family maintain their honor (Cihangir, 2013). The feminine honor code, on

the other hand, is to retain sexual purity and refrain from any sexual behavior (Cihangir, 2013). Moreover, Lowe et al. (2021) examined homosexuality in high honor cultures, a topic that is completely overlooked by researchers. Cultures of honor tend to label homosexuality as dishonorable and a disgrace to the family. As a result, we can see how homosexuality is linked to the feminine honor code, as any form of sexual behavior betrays an individual's personal and familial honor, resulting in violent reactions that is a direct consequence of the betrayal. According to Cihangir (2013), when compared to low honor cultures, high honor cultures use more violence to restore the family's damaged honor, such as physical and psychological abuse, social isolation, forced marriage, and death (via the encouragement of suicide or honor killings). Similarly, Lowe et al. (2021) found that anti-gay honor abuse is acceptable and common in high-honor cultures, demonstrating how sexuality and gender interact with honor codes. Finally, even though the previous studies were conducted in other countries, they can be applied to our society because Arab countries are known for having high honor cultures that adhere to gender-specific codes and police deviations from honor codes via honor crimes and killings. After examining the gender-specific honor codes and the violent punishment if breached, it would be important to understand the psychological factors that contribute to honor killing.

The Psychological Aspect of Honor

We mentioned previously that a possible consequence of breaking honor codes is death either by promoting suicide or by killing the victim (Cihangir, 2013). Such killings are called "honor killings". There are underlying psychological factors that contribute in the perception and the act of honor killing. Barmaki (2019) provided an adequate psychological explanation of these killings as previous research was not able to do so. The rise of the eventual-killer's anger, shame and desperation to the point of no return, may leave the killer with the sense that the only solution is to kill the violators of the honor code (Barmaki, 2019).

This act might be the result of “dissonance reduction”, which takes place when an individual’s anxiety is fueled by the inconsistency between his beliefs and behavior, which drives him to eliminate the inconsistency and harmonize the two (Barmaki, 2019). An interesting point mentioned by the author is that whether a behavior is labeled as normal or abnormal is a matter of social judgement rather than an absolute truth. For instance, a community that values honor promotes honor killings by encouraging the killer to restore that honor by killing without facing social or legal consequences. From a psychological perspective, individuals experience “honor” as their “sense of dignity”, which promotes the need for approval and respect (Barmaki, 2019). The fear of losing one’s honor, particularly among men, is a common emotion and a major source of anxiety (Barmaki, 2019). Furthermore, it is unknown whether honor killings and mental or personality disorders are linked; nonetheless, honor killing has been linked to psychopathic traits, acute stress disorders, and borderline personality disorder by previous researchers (Barmaki, 2019).

To dive deeper into the psychological factors contributing in the perception and the act of honor killing, it would be interesting to look at the Big Five personality traits. According to a study by Ne’Eman Haviv (2020) on Arabs of 1948¹, there is a relationship between the Big Five personality traits and attitudes towards honor killing. In fact, Haviv (2020) found a negative correlation between conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experiences, and attitudes towards honor killing. This means that individuals who scored higher on conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, are more likely to have a negative attitude towards honor killings. On the other hand, a study that examined attitudes towards honor killings among adolescents in Jordan found that believing in the importance of female chastity and moral neutralization of aggressive behavior were predictors of supportive attitudes towards honor killings (Eisner & Ghuneim, 2013). However, it is crucial to mention

¹ That is, Arabs who hold Israeli citizenships.

that the study by Ne'Eman Haviv (2020) might be culturally biased because the author is Israeli and is conducting a study on Palestinians. This limitation raises questions regarding the validity and reliability of this study. Next, we will examine the concept of honor in individualistic and collectivist countries and the legal standing of Western and Arab countries.

Social and Legal Standing of Honor

When discussing the notion of honor, we must examine both the legal and social aspects of the term. In fact, in most instances, both of these viewpoints are intertwined and reinforce one another. In this section, we will go over the differences observed when comparing the concept of honor from a social and legal standpoint among different cultures.

Honor in Individualistic Versus Collectivist Countries

It is interesting to compare individualistic and collectivist countries to learn more about the variations between cultures when it comes to honor. For instance, Caffaro et al. (2014) covered a very important gap in research: the influence of gender in individualistic versus collectivist countries on the perception of honor-related violence against women. Since Turkey is considered a collectivist culture and Italy is considered an individualistic one, Turkish and Italian undergraduate students were asked to fill out a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of three honor killing scenarios (Caffaro et al., 2014). In Turkey, the notion of honor is based on a collectivist social organization that fosters conformity to social norms and gender roles; however, in Italy, the concept of honor is based on personal beliefs and gender roles are more flexible (Caffaro et al., 2014). As a result, both individuals' perspectives on honor killing differed in the study. Consequently, Turkish participants blamed the victim of honor killings more than the Italian participants (Caffaro et al., 2014). We can conclude that collectivist countries generally have a more accepting view on honor-related violence against women. However, an important limitation of this study was that the

author could not differentiate religion from culture when comparing both of the countries.

This implies that religion might have played a role in the differences found in the perceptions of honor-related violence against women between Italy and Turkey. However, Barmaki (2019) stated in their article that the popular belief that Islam and honor killings are related is false; nevertheless, there is research indicating that the Sharia law in Islam can be interpreted to allow honor killings (Cheema, 2008; Palo, 2008). In sum, whether religion and honor killings are related remains a controversial topic. Given that Arab countries are considered to be collectivist cultures with a strong Islamic presence (and overall conservatism), it is reasonable to assume that people have more positive attitudes about honor-related violence against women.

Western and Arab Legal Standing on Honor Killings

When it concerns honor killings, one of the most important aspects to consider is the legal aspect. We can find similar laws regarding honor killings in all Arab countries and in some honor-oriented European countries. Honor killings, however, are certainly more prominent in countries with lenient laws and regulations against these crimes. In fact, Abu Odeh (2010) discussed the regulations and adjudications of honor killings in the Arab world. It is crucial to understand that the Arab penal codes are still quite lenient and not well-regulated. For instance, Abu Odeh (2010) stated the Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code, “Excused in Murder”, that explains the position of the Jordanian court on Honor killings. The Article 340 is based on the Ottoman and French penal codes that are quite similar to each other in that they lean towards the justification and acceptance of honor killings. In fact, Abu Odeh (2010) described the legal sources as “surprisingly harmonious” and quite lenient when it comes to honor killing. Furthermore, the main differences amongst Arab penal codes are that some limit defense to situations of adultery and grant a reduction rather than an exemption from punishment, and that others differ on who benefits from the excuse (Abu

Odeh, 2010). Nonetheless, all Arab countries must change their laws and penal codes on honor killings and take a strong stand against these crimes in order to control the occurrence of these killings.

On the other hand, Idriss (2015) criticized the non-availability of sentencing guidelines of honor killings issued by the Court of Appeal in the United Kingdom (UK). This leads to inconsistency in the prosecution of these crimes in several law courts in the UK. In regards to that, an important point mentioned by the author is that implementing such rules will also serve to ensure consistency in the punishment of honor killers, while also stating a clear and direct message that such offenses are considered repugnant by English criminal law (Idriss, 2015). Consequently, it is impossible to deny the importance of the presence of penal codes that ban and prosecute honor killers in the frequency of honor killings in the community. In fact, both Arab countries and the UK must reach laws prohibiting honor killings; however, Arab countries' legal standing on honor killings is still worse than the UKs, as there are already laws in place that are lenient and justify these crimes, making it easier for the perpetrator to carry out the crime. After examining the legal, social, and psychological aspects of honor killings, it would be interesting to explore the possible solutions to the prevalence of honor killings.

Possible Solutions to the Prevalence of Honor Killings

Uskul and Cross (2019) examined the socio-ecological factors that have been previously discussed in causing honor cultures to emerge which will help in finding solutions to prevent the crime from happening. In fact, Nowak et al. (2016) found that the evolution of honor cultures was influenced by two factors: the efficacy of the police and the harshness of the environment (as cited in Uskul & Cross, 2019). According to the researchers, a culture of honor was not functional when reputation had no effective function in the presence of institutional authority. For instance, prioritizing reputation more than one's safety in cultures

of honor appears to promote behaviors such as honor killings (Uskul & Cross, 2019). These behaviors may seem irrational at first, but understanding the socio-ecological factors that contribute to the existence of an honor logic in a culture will allow us to understand and address violence, aggression, and conflict around the world (Uskul & Cross, 2019). In sum, this cultural evolutionary approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the logic of honor in the context of a long-term strategy in order to be able to find more efficient solution to the prevalence of honor killings.

Additionally, Cihangir (2013) evaluated the influence of a five-week program that focused on identity, culture, honor, legal consequences of honor related violence, and future expectations. This program helped the participants from different ethnic background to talk about taboo topics such as honor-based violence, and it reduced the importance placed on female sexual purity (Cihangir, 2013). In sum, educational programs can help people change their cultural beliefs and attitudes about honor. Namely, governments and institutions should integrate an educational program in their system in order to reduce honor related beliefs and hence, decrease the occurrence of honor-related crimes.

Finally, Kaplanian and Gill (2019) closely examined the notable gap between the social and legal codes when it comes to the punishment of honor crimes in order to understand the lack of progress in regulating honor killings in Jordan, a context where gender inequalities are salient and at the heart of such killings. One of the most important and useful points that this study captures is that we should address gender issues before changing the regime because changing the regime does not mean solving the problems, rather putting another façade to the overarching patriarchy. Hence, even if changing the laws is quite important to penalize all forms of honor killings, social and cultural change should take place as well.

Conclusion

To conclude, in order to comprehend what honor cultures are and why honor killings occur, the social, psychological, and legal aspects must be taken into account and well-understood. For instance, high honor cultures have gender-specific codes that forbid women from displaying any sexual behavior. In fact, violence is used to restore the family's damaged honor, and a number of psychological factors stimulate this use of violence. Furthermore, collectivist cultures, such as Arab countries, are more honor-oriented and have a more favorable attitude toward honor-related violence against women. In addition, in both Western and Arab countries, strict laws related against honor killings must be developed to penalize honor killers. To summarize, after examining all aspects of honor crimes, legal and cultural changes are required to prevent these killings. For change to occur in our society, educational programs that promotes change in cultural beliefs and traditions must be implemented.

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