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Feminine Honor May be More Than Sexual Purity and Familiar Obligation: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract & Keywords

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Feminine Honor May be More Than Sexual Purity and Familiar Obligation: A Review of the
Literature

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Abstract

The published research appears to indicate a consensus among researchers and scholars that feminine honor has so far been defined as a woman's reputation that is created and maintained through sexual purity and familiar obedience. This essay critically examines the past literature on honor beliefs in order to evaluate the extent to which this consensus is accurate. Though some of the evidence from culture of honor and masculine honor research may support this definition, because it does not ask directly about feminine honor this conclusion may be inaccurate. Indeed, in analyzing and integrating the past literature on honor from across fields, it is seen that the current conceptualization is not completely representative of all of the ways in which women may and do become honorable.

The 2016 Oscar winner for short documentary, *A Girl in The River: The Price of Forgiveness*, tells the story of Saba an 18 year old woman who survived an attempted honor killing (NPR, 2016). After eloping with the man she loved, Saba's father and uncle beat, shot, and threw her in a river to drown. According to Saba's father and uncle, eloping with this man not only brought dishonor to Saba, but dishonored the family. They were, therefore, required by their honor code to regain the family's honor by punishing Saba.

Unfortunately, the unique aspect of this documentary is not that it happened, but that Saba survived. There are many other documented examples of honor killings (see Kulczycki & Windle, 2011 for a systematic review) and Honor Based Violence (HBV) perpetrated against women who were perceived to violate honor expectations (e.g., Asquith, 2015; Baker, Gregware, & Cassidy, 1999). The most common of these "violations" is perceived sexual impurity. This type of violation can range from flirting and rumors of sexual activity to having been raped (Baxter, 2007; Kulczycki & Windle, 2011). In general, like Saba's case, the perpetrators of HBV are male members of the women's families (Chesler, 2015; Feldman, 2010). However, showing the extent to which these "violations" are perceived to damage personal and familial honor, there are also documented incidences of elder women participating in the HBV, as well as cases in which the HBV is self-inflicted (Chesler, 2015; Feldman, 2010).

Though HBV has most often been discussed in context of Arabic culture, honor beliefs are not bound to a singular religion or region (Akpinar, 2003; Gill & Brah, 2013). Rather honor beliefs are defining features of cultures of honor more globally. Notable cultures of honor (i.e. cultures that emphasize honor beliefs) include the American South, Turkey, and Spain (e.g.,

Cross, Uskul, Gercek-Swing, Alokkan, & Ataca, 2012; Nisbett, 1993; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002a). Furthermore, researchers have defined honor beliefs as a set of gender bound expectations that define what an individual should and should not do in order to create and maintain a desirable reputation (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, 2013; Saucier et al., 2016). Specific subsets of honor beliefs include masculine honor, family honor, and feminine honor (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011). In cases of HBV, it is argued that a woman's failure to maintain her feminine honor negatively impacts her family's honor, resulting in men defending their family's honor and their own masculine honor by violently punishing her (Cihangir, 2012; Cooney, 2014). Considering the severe consequences of these gendered honor beliefs, it is imperative to evaluate and deconstruct feminine honor in order to eventually combat HBV and other aspects of the construct (e.g. sexual purity expectations, discouraging education and independence) that may work to reinforce this gender stratification. Therefore, the aim of the current work is to synthesize and critique the past literature on feminine honor. Our goal is to not only review what is known about feminine honor but also to discuss what the published research has yet to examine and report about the conceptualization, boundaries, and consequences of feminine honor.

Sexual Purity and Familiar Obedience

To date, the published research indicates that a consensus exists among researchers and scholars that feminine honor is defined as a woman's reputation that is created and maintained through sexual purity and familiar obedience (e.g. Cihanger, 2012; Guerra, Gouveia, Araujo, De Andrade, & Gaudencio, 2013; Rodriguez Mosquera, 2013; Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2000; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer,

2002a; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b; Sev'er, & Yurdakul, 1999; Vandello, & Cohen, 2003; Vandello & Cohen, 2008; Vandello, Cohen, Grandon, & Franiuk, 2009). The convergence on this definition is likely a product of the traditional expectation that women across cultures be sexually chaste. For example, there are several documented cultural representations of the requirement of sexual purity, such as the emphasis on female virginity found in many of the world's religions including Islam, Catholicism, and Hinduism (Delgado-Infante & Ofreneo, 2014; Gill & Brah, 2013). Importantly, rather than being only an antiquated notion of traditional femininity, the expectation that women remain chaste remains ubiquitous even in cultures in which women have transcended many of their traditional bounds, as represented by the virginity pledges of the young (female) constituents of the American Southern Baptist Church (Bond, 2012). Beyond its frequent basis and rationalization in religion (Bond, 2012; Delgado-Infante & Ofreneo, 2014; Gill & Brah, 2013), the importance of sexual purity to women's honor is reflected in language. For example the Arabic term "namus" refers to a woman's reputation for being sexually pure (Sev'er & Yurdakul, 1999). Further, there is a pancultural sexual double standard, such that a woman's first sexual experience is described as "a loss of purity," whereas for men it is seen as a rite of passage (Delgado-Infante & Ofreneo, 2014). Because of this double standard, women may be perceived as potentially dangerous due to their ability to bring shame to their community through their sexual behavior (Allison & Risman, 2013).

This definition of feminine honor is also demonstrated through women's internalization of the expectation of sexual purity and obedience. Sadly, women of honor cultures may commit suicide to avoid punishment and dishonor if they are perceived to be sexually impure (Bagli, &

Sev'er, 2003; Feldman, 2010). In a less severe example, researchers found that as Turkish female participants' honor belief endorsement increased, they expressed less willingness to post an improper picture of themselves on Facebook (Günsoy, Cross, Saribay, Ökten, & Kurutas, 2015).

Additional support for the sexual purity definition is drawn from research examining commonly held beliefs in several traditional honor cultures. Past evidence suggests that individuals and institutions in cultures of honor endorse violence to control women's sexuality. For instance, women's sexual histories are often brought up in cases in which they have been sexual assaulted, and if the women are perceived as sexually impure, their assaulters are less likely to be convicted (Bond, 2012). Similarly, the "reasonable man" argument has been used successfully in the defense of perpetrators of both HBV and "crimes of passion" toward women who are perceived as sexually disloyal to their male partners (Abu-Odeh, 1997). Baldry, Pagliaro, and Parcaro (2013), found that male police officers in Afghanistan (i.e., a culture of honor) expressed more lenience toward men who had committed intimate partner violence when their wives admitted to infidelity. Further, it has been found that participants from a traditional honor culture were less likely to describe a father violently punishing his daughter for dating as a crime (Caffaro, Mulas, & Schmidt, 2016).

The findings from Caffaro et al. (2016) not only demonstrate support for the sexual purity definition of feminine honor, they also speak to the familial obedience aspect. Part of why the violence by the fathers toward their daughters was perceived as justified was because the girls had disobeyed their fathers. Beyond the hypothetical, as in Caffaro, et al. (2016), there are documented cases of HBV being triggered by daughters behaving in ways that were "too

western” in opposition to their parents’ wishes, or because the daughters attempted to gain independence from the family (Cooney, 2014). In a focus group examining women’s experiences from cultures of honor, a common theme discussed was that, compared to their brothers, the women were often shamed for not doing chores, or not attending to the men in their families (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004). In addition, many of the women stated that feeling obligated to take care of the family compelled them to stay in abusive relationships (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004). In another focus group it was found that women from cultures of honor may not initially realize that IPV or shame based control were abusive because they were often associated with family honor norms (Gill, 2004). One aspect of this may be illuminated in the finding that women from a traditional honor culture expressed valuing obedience to superiors significantly more than those not from a traditional honor culture (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002a). If it is believed that it is dishonorable for a woman to question or to disobey her family, especially the men of the family, then it follows that violence in response to “disobedience” may be perceived as norm enforcement rather than abuse.

Limitations of Past Research

Androcentric Honor. Despite the apparent consensus, as evidenced above, on the definition and manifestations of feminine honor, to our knowledge, feminine honor has not yet been the central focus of any published work. Instead, it is examined in conjunction with family honor and masculine honor (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011), such as in the cases of HBV (e.g., Cihangir, 2012; Cooney, 2014). Indeed, the highest focus feminine honor receives within the literature is double billing with masculine honor (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). For instance, Vandello and Cohen (2003), found that a man’s jealous violence

toward his wife after an infidelity was perceived to be more acceptable by participants from an honor culture, than by those not from an honor culture. Though this has been taken as evidence that sexuality is an important aspect to feminine honor, it does not necessarily provide evidence for this definition. Instead, it may be that because aggressive defense of reputation is important to masculine honor (Saucier et al., 2016), this finding is about the demonstration of masculine honor rather than about the aggressive upholding of women's sexual purity.

Similarly it has been found that as adherence to masculine honor beliefs (MHBS) increase, so too does support for the severity of punishment for perpetrators of rape and rape-myth endorsement (Saucier, Strain, Hockett, & McManus, 2015). There are two possible interpretations of these results. The first is that those high in MHBS feel negative toward both women who have been raped and their perpetrators because the violation of a woman's sexual purity negatively impacts her relations' honor. The second interpretation is that the failure to protect her from such violation negatively reflects on a male's ability as a protector, causing a negative association with those involved in the situation. It follows from the second interpretation that it is not necessarily that those who abide by honor beliefs insist on the sexual purity of women, but that they insist on males being protective. Indeed, it may be that even a non-sexual violation would result in the negative feelings toward the target and the perpetrator.

Because women's behaviors have been argued to impact the honor of their male family members (Vandello & Cohen, 2003), it is logical that much of the current understanding of feminine honor comes from masculine honor research. However, as just discussed, the evidence from masculine honor research indicating that sexual purity is central to feminine honor, is not particularly strong when critically examined. This may be because these masculine honor

studies did not ask directly about feminine honor. Therefore, in order to draw solid conclusions about the importance of sexual purity to feminine honor, it would be necessary to directly examine the construct.

Gynocentric Sexual Purity. While some of the Honor Based Violence (HBV) research certainly provides support for the traditional definition of feminine honor, not all of the literature supports this narrow definition. For instance, it has been found that those both from honor and non-honor cultures perceived a woman who left her husband after an incident of intimate partner violence (IPV) as having made the better choice than a woman who stayed (Vandello, Cohen, Grandon, & Franiuk, 2009). Interestingly, it was also found that regardless of culture, the hypothetical woman described in the study was perceived as better fulfilling feminine roles when she left following the IPV. Because honor has been conceptualized as the extent to which an individual is perceived to fulfil gender stereotypes (Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011; Vandello, et al., 2009), this finding suggests that a woman who leaves after an incident of IPV is perceived as more honorable than a woman who stays. Further, within this research there is evidence that HBV is similar to the “passion crimes” of the west (Abu-Odeh, 1997). Regardless of culture, a man who committed IPV out of jealousy was perceived to have more passionate love for his wife than a man who committed IPV because of a financial argument (Vandello, et al., 2009). From this research, it appears that IPV perpetrated by men is perceived to be excusable in some situations in both honor and non-honor cultures. Therefore it may be that IPV in such situations is not only an enforcement of feminine honor, but also a form of cross-cultural gender norm enforcement (Asquith, 2015). Specifically, it may be that HBV is not about enforcing sexual purity of women, but attempting to keep women submissive to men.

Given the rates of HBV in traditional cultures of honor (Kulczycki & Windle, 2011), it may still be argued that women have reason to be particularly concerned about sexual purity in these cultures more than others. However, there is evidence that if a reputation for sexual purity is important in cultures of honor, this concern does not differ depending on gender. In Günsoy, et al. (2015)'s study on college students' willingness to post achievement or sexually improper pictures on Facebook, the Turkish participants were less willing to post an improper picture regardless of gender. Interestingly this pattern was repeated for American participants who were higher in honor beliefs. When actual rates of picture posting were coded, it was observed that honor belief endorsement was negatively associated with posting improper pictures, again with no gender interaction (Günsoy et al., 2015). HBV may result from extreme interpretations of honor beliefs, but in ordinary circumstances men and women appear to be equally concerned about how their sexual activity may impact their honor. Thus, while the sexual purity expectation of honor has primarily been gynocentric, there is evidence to suggest that males experience this expectation as well.

Because the feminine aspect of gendered honor has been traditionally conceptualized primarily as sexual purity, and men higher in honor beliefs are also concerned about their sexual purity reputation, honor may not be as gendered as previously believed. Indeed, there is evidence that honor is more of a spectrum than a dichotomy based on traditional gender roles, which may be particularly true for individualistic cultures. Rodriguez Mosquera (2011), examined honor values and attributes with a Spanish and Dutch sample. Regardless of culture, the feminine attributes (i.e. "controlling sexual desires" and "virginity before marriage") were perceived as more important for women and the masculine attributes (i.e. "physical strength,"

and “authority over one’s family”) were perceived as more important for men, but the gender-neutral attributes (i.e. “honesty” and “being respected by others”) were rated as more important for women. Further, the Dutch participants perceived the feminine attributes as more important for men than did the Spanish participants.

Thus it appears that women and men, particularly in individualistic cultures, view honor as less gendered than assumed. Further, there is research suggesting that other aspects of honor are emphasized by men and women more than the gendered aspects. Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2002b) reported that participants from both the Netherlands and Spain expressed the most concern, in regards to honor, with integrity in social relationships and the least concern with feminine honor, which was described as sexual purity. In addition, there were no significant differences between Dutch and Spanish participants in shame or anger in reaction to manipulations intended to be taken as threats to masculine or feminine honor. When asked open ended questions about what honor is, Dutch participants discussed significantly more situations having to do with personal achievement, and Spanish participants discussed significantly more situations associated with interdependence (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002b). Considering this, it appears that the biggest difference between Spanish and Dutch honor beliefs is whether honor is based on independent or interdependent behaviors. These findings suggest that even in traditional honor cultures, feminine honor is either not based entirely on sexual purity or that feminine honor is not seen as an important factor to the overall honor system.

Beyond the previously discussed evidence, it has been observed that there are no differences between Dutch and Spanish participants, of either gender, in the importance the place on one’s intimate others having a good reputation (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002a). Further,

the same study found no significant differences in regards to the rated importance of sexual propriety; both cultures rated it as only neutrally important to honor. Therefore, in contradiction to the literature on honor killings, this study suggests that sexual purity is not an important or salient factor in feminine honor for either honor and non-honor cultures.

As has been seen, the argument against the traditional manifestation of feminine honor is supported by agreement between honor and non-honor cultures on factors other than sexual purity being important for feminine honor. Interestingly, past research has also found some disagreement on this subject between the genders. Specifically, it has been found that though men in traditional honor cultures (i.e. Morocco and Turkey) perceived female sexual purity as more important for their honor, women in these cultures perceived male honor as more important (Cihangir, 2012). This appears to be in direct contradiction to the assumption that only female sexual purity is important in honor cultures. Indeed it seems that in past examinations of honor beliefs we have been assuming and concluding about feminine honor based on only the male perspective.

Feminine Honor as Achievement & Competence. Not only does it appear that sexual purity may not be central to feminine honor, but other research indicates that women value other aspects of their reputation more than their sexual purity. In examining willingness to post pictures on Facebook, a positive correlation was observed between endorsement of honor beliefs, regardless of nationality or gender, and willingness to post an achievement picture (Günsoy et al., 2015). Further, when examining actual posted pictures, an interaction was found, such that American women higher in honor beliefs were significantly more likely to have a higher ratio of posted achievement photos. It has also been observed that female participants expressed

significantly more anger and shame than male participants to a threat to their competence (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002b). There was an interaction between nationality and gender such that Spanish female participants expressed more shame in response to a threat to their competence. Thus, it would appear that competence is not only important to women's values across cultures, competence may be an important aspect of feminine honor. Offering additional support for this argument is the finding that female participants from both Spain and Netherlands expressed greater anger and shame in response to threats to their autonomy than did male participants (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002b). This is in direct contradiction to the idea that submissiveness and obedience to men is a factor of feminine honor. Contributing to this, it has been found that Dutch women value self-respect as an important aspect of honor (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a). Considering that women, even in traditional honor cultures, appear to value reputations based on autonomy, achievement, and self-respect at least as much as sexual purity, we must question the definition of feminine honor as exclusively residing in the domains of sexual purity and family obedience.

Conclusion

We feel it important to note that we are not attempting to argue that feminine honor has not been examined, or that the current empirical evidence is inadequate to explain masculine honor and cultures of honor. From what is known of masculine honor and honor cultures, (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994), it follows that sexual purity and obedience to family are important aspects of feminine honor. However, the published literature that examines feminine honor is limited, and does not fully support the narrow definition of feminine honor as only sexual purity and obedience.

Throughout the reviewed studies the evidence contradicts the assumed definition of feminine honor. The evidence pointing to the importance of female sexual purity in honor cultures may be accurate, but only from the perspective of the men in honor cultures (Cihangir, 2012). For instance, we have assumed that, because IPV committed by men in cases of their wives' infidelity is perceived as a way to reclaim masculine honor, sexual constraint is an important aspect of feminine honor (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Further, when we ask questions about the impressions of the women in these situations we see that she is not perceived to fulfill feminine norms better when she tolerates the abuse. But when participants were asked directly about honor traits, there was surprisingly little difference in what was perceived to be important for men and women (Vandello, Cohen, Grandon, & Franiuk 2009). Further, in examinations of actual behaviors research has shown that women in honor and non-honor cultures are equally likely to emphasize and show off their achievements (Günsoy et al., 2015). Indeed it would appear that there is significant crossover in gendered honor expectations, particularly in individualistic cultures (Rodriguez Mosquera, 2011). In addition, in comparison of the perceptions of women from honor and non-honor cultures, evidence suggests that competence and personal agency are more important than sexual purity and obedience to family (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b). Finally, evidence suggest that when individuals are not primed, sexual purity and obedience to family are not brought up by participants as an aspect of honor, nor is gendered honor (Rodriguez Mosquera, et al., 2002a).

Taken together, this literature review suggest that researchers have been working from an assumed, rather than an empirically supported, conceptualization of feminine honor. Because the evidence demonstrates masculine honor as a protector and defender role (Saucier et al.,

2016), researchers and scholars have assumed that feminine honor must be the other side of the dichotomy. In doing so, the past research has not only created a false understanding of the construct but has deprived the field of opportunities to examine the applied implications of an alternative conceptualization.

Research in fields other than social psychology have documented negative outcomes of the emphasis on sexual purity for feminine honor. We have already briefly discussed HBV, which ranges from emotional control to homicide (Akpınar, 2003; Aujla, & Gill, 2014; Baker, Gregware, & Cassidy, 1999; Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004). There are many documented cases of women committing suicide to avoid HBV and/or shame (Bagli, & Sev'er, 2003). Further, there is evidence that honor based shame can result in a shame and drug abuse cycle (Cottew & Oyefeso, 2005). Though clearly there are negative consequences associated with the traditional manifestation of feminine honor, we do not know if these outcomes, are also associated with the uninvestigated alternative manifestation of feminine honor. Developing an understanding of this construct could potentially aid in the development of interventions to prevent negative outcomes such as these discussed.

Given that feminine honor has thus far been viewed through the male perspective, the fact that honor is a type of property needs to be discussed. In traditional honor conceptualizations, honor is a privilege, only ownable by men (Bond, 2012). In traditional honor systems masculine honor is perceived to be threatened when a female relative is considered to be sexually impure (Baxter, 2007). In order for a man to regain his honor, he must aggress against the woman to demonstrate that he has been fulfilling his guardian duty (Saucier, Strain, Hockett, & McManus, 2015; Sev'er & Yurdakul, 1999). From this it would appear that in this traditional

manifestation a woman does not own her honor, rather it is owned by the men, but a woman's behavior can impact the men's honor status. If feminine honor is not only based on sexual purity and family obedience, it may be that women are able to claim the privilege of honor. This may explain why achievement (Günsoy et al., 2015), competence (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b), and self-respect (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002a), are valued as more important for honor by women. Therefore, research examining conceptualizations of feminine honor beyond traditional honor cultures, will be invaluable to our understanding of encouraging egalitarianism by gender.

Thus far the research on honor beliefs has been primarily androcentric. Because of this feminine honor has not been given a fair chance to be thoroughly conceptualized. In making assumptions about feminine honor based on masculine honor and limited studies, not only is the conceptualization of honor beliefs incomplete, but women have not been recognized for all the ways in which they are honorable. This should be done, not only out of the desire to thoroughly understand honor, but to recognize that Saba and other women across cultures can be, and indeed may already be, honored for more than sexual purity and familial obedience.

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