

# The Lost Cause? Examining the Southern Culture of Honor Through Defensive Gun Use

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## Abstract

This article reconsiders the “Southern culture of honor” thesis, which has enjoyed prevalence in the social sciences since the first half of the 20th century. The bulk of researchers investigating the link among Southern residence, culture of honor, and violence have focused on attitudinal measures of violence through surveys and ethnographic experiments indicating preferences and opinions toward engaging in hypothesized violence. The current research measures respondents’ actual violent behaviors in a national survey of defensive gun use (DGU). Although the results failed to support a relationship between Southern residence and defensive gun use, respondents’ age and victimization were significant. This finding is dissonant with the historical literature that suggests that the rural Southern White male is prone to a violent defense of honor; as such, the article orients discussion around the further theoretical advancement of the culture-of-honor perspective.

## Keywords

Southern subculture honor, defensive gun use, violence

Throughout most U.S. history, the South has experienced a higher rate of violence than that of other regions, a phenomenon that has captured considerable

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academic attention (Ellison, 1991; Erlanger, 1976; Huff-Corzine, Corzine, & Moore, 1986; Messner, Baller, & Zevenbergen, 2005; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996; Nisbett, Polly, & Lang, 1995; Reed, 1971). As early as the 1930s, sociologists and criminologists noted higher rates of homicide and other violent behavior in the South than in other regions in the United States, thereby lending credibility to the description of the South as “that part of the United States lying below the Smith and Wesson line” (Brearley, 1932, p. 73; see also, Odum, 1947). The differences in rates vary with the ecological unit examined, but disproportionately high Southern violence is seldom disputed (Gastil, 1971; Hackney, 1969; Hayes & Lee, 2005; Messner, 1983; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Although numerous explanations for Southern violence have been developed, a leading contemporary explanation posits that increased propensity to violence among Southerners is attributable to a heightened sense of honor (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). This sense of honor is thought to compel Southerners to respond with force in various situations, such as to defend their honor, loved ones, and property.

The current research examines one dimension of Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen’s contention (1996) that culture drives violence; it employs a behavioral measure of violence, instead of commonly used attitudinal measures, to determine if Southern residents rely on guns to defend themselves, their families, and their property more so than residents of non-Southern states. After reviewing the subcultures-of-violence perspective in general and the relationship between culture of honor and Southern violence in particular, we employ logistic regression to analyze data from the National Self-Defense Survey (NSDS; Kleck & Gertz, 1995), the first nationwide collection of data specifically focusing on armed defense across multiple situational contexts. Findings are presented and so inform discussion regarding the theoretical viability of the culture of honor and the existence of a Southern subculture of honor.

## **Subcultures of Violence**

Culture-of-honor hypotheses such as the one examined here (specific to the South), as well as the idea of pro-violence values in general, are derived from the subculture-of-violence theory posited by Marvin Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti (1967). This explanation of violence among inner-city African Americans employed the learning and differential association contributions of Edwin Sutherland (1947) to demonstrate disproportionately high rates of violence among inner-city Blacks as a function of a distinct subculture of violence (i.e., value system). The immediate cause of crime was viewed as the norms and values taught and daily reinforced by the social interaction observed in the immediate environment. Violence is considered normal in some subcultural contexts; thus, it is the anticipated and appropriate response in various social situations (e.g., insults, arguments, public displays of disrespect). Not only is violence expected, but

failure to demonstrate this norm carries potential consequences, which makes violence a required social response and predictable outcome in subcultural contexts.

Beyond illustrating the criminogenic nature of this belief system, Wolfgang's subculture-of-violence theory produced multiple theoretical insights that have proven instrumental to the theoretical development and framing of criminological statements oriented around culture. Generalizable across subcultural settings, the foremost of these tenets include the following:

- No subculture is totally different or in complete conflict with the dominant culture;
- individuals who subscribe to violent subcultural values are not categorically violent but can be in circumstantially specific situations;
- the more individuals internalize subcultural values, the more violent they will generally be;
- violence avoidance in situations wherein violent expression is normatively proscribed per the subculture's norms will result in social ostracism toward the basic purpose of reinforcing the violence ethos; and
- the immediate community does not necessarily define violence negatively, thereby removing informal social controls of guilt and shame (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967, pp. 157-160).

Wolfgang and Ferracuti's subculture-of-violence theory is integral to the cultural-transmission theoretical lineage in general, and it has proven to be significant to virtually all subsequent culture-of-violence statements. The 1970s saw the declining popularity of the subcultural school, which was portrayed as being too conservative; this shift was fueled by a combination of social events (e.g., civil rights movement, Vietnam War, and shifts in academe and the larger society toward egalitarian ideology) and a related attack (Kornhauser, 1978) on the subculture-of-crime and delinquency theories of the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., A. K. Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Miller, 1958)—namely, that they were too limited and tautological. Although critical perspectives and then control perspectives largely replaced subculture as the leading explanation of crime during the 1970s, the subcultural perspective sustained and furthered subcultural theory, largely owing to the Wolfgang and Ferracuti contribution that extended the explanatory reach of subculture beyond gangs and delinquency to violence. The theory also originated a line of inquiry around the concept of honor within subcultural environments. Subsequently, considerable studies addressing criminal subcultures have been conducted (for a meta-analysis of this literature, see Erlanger, 1974) and so continue to influence current empirical inquiries into the link between subculture and violence (Anderson, 1999; Cao, Adams, & Jensen, 1997). Nowhere, however, has the Wolfgang tradition been more apparent than in

the literature observed below—specifically, that regarding the Southern subculture of violence and culture of honor.

## **Southern Violence and the Culture of Honor**

It is important to recognize and distinguish between Southern violence and the random senseless acts of violence that most Americans find fearsome and undesirable. Reed (1982), as well as Nisbett and Cohen (1996), contends that most Southern violence is instrumental, being intimately related to the defense of honor, integrity, and reputation. In their summary of available evidence about cultural differences regarding violent attitudes, Nisbett and Cohen conclude that Southerners are more likely to approve of violence as a form of social control, in response to perceived insults, and in defense of self and home.

Others have concurred, noting the likelihood that such values were a result of socialization from birth (Hackney, 1969; Hawley & Messner, 1989; Ellison, 1991; Lee, Hayes, & Thomas, 2008). Using data from the 1983 General Social Science Survey, Ellison (1991) demonstrated that regional differences in attitudes toward violence were attributable to Whites being more likely than non-Whites to approve of retaliatory and defensive forms of violence. Moreover, Ellison suggested that Southerners' propensity toward violence is compounded by the nature of religion in the South—particularly, the theological emphasis placed on moral judgment and punishment that serves to legitimize violence interpersonally and for society in general. Similarly, Cao et al. (1997) used data from the General Social Survey (1983-1991) to test the subculture-of-violence theory. They concluded that Whites were more likely to engage in defensive situations—a conclusion that indirectly supports the claims of Nisbett and Cohen (1996).

In seeking to refine the Southern culture of honor, psychologists Nisbett and Cohen (1996) introduced a new thesis of Southern violence, based on history, an examination of current trends in violence, ethnographic experimentation, and even topography. They provide a range of evidence across these elements and thoroughly explore the varying features of the Southern environment, including income disparity, climate, slavery and racial tension, and the genealogical roots of the Southern population to explain regional variation in violence.

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) provide a primer on the settling of the South to address the Southern subculture of honor and its seemingly intrinsic violence. They argue that the first outsiders to inhabit the southern frontier of the United States were herdsmen from the fringes of Britain who brought with them their territorialism and reputation for toughness. This sense of aggression in the defense of animals and property against the lawless country of the day perpetuates itself in what is now the modern-day South, in the form of protection of reputation, honor, and integrity, especially in the context of family, a female companion, home, or business. An affront to any of these is a threat that is liable to be met with serious if not lethal violence.

High levels of violence in the South, then, are considered a function of the exaggerated culture of honor that flourishes in the region. The focal concept of honor, as used in the Nisbett and Cohen hypothesis (1996), is not employed in “the sense of probity of character but in the sense of a reputation of status and power” (p. xvi). This characterization emphasizes a man’s honor in terms of toughness, ability, and, most important, willingness to defend his reputation and property against insults or threats of loss. Furthermore, aggression is not merely deemed the best means by which an unfavorable situation (e.g., insult or threat) may be managed; rather, it is a required action in the psyche of the Southern White male. Southern culture places such a premium on absolute defense of honor, at nearly all costs, that forceful punishment of insult or threat must be employed in an extreme and unquestionable manner, lest one lose his respect at least or his property and life at worst (Messner, 1997). Thus, the central assertion of Nisbett and Cohen is that the Southern subculture of honor has arisen from an aggressiveness and a toughness vital to one’s maintaining a successful existence derived predominantly from a herding economy.

Following traditional views on the roots of Southern honor, Nisbett and Cohen (1996) credit the arrival of the culture of honor to fierce herdsman from the Scottish highlands, Ireland, and other Celtic regions. In discounting the possible violence-producing effects of slavery, the War Between the States, the subsequent disenfranchisement during reconstruction, and the developing industrial economy, they disallow these other popular causes from influencing their theoretical treatment of the violent tendencies of rural White Southern men. Combining this population with (a) land well suited to herding and (b) the absence of a strong government able to exercise authority throughout this broad frontier-based jurisdiction yielded what many have described as a fiercely lawless and wild area (McWhiney, 1988; Reed, 1971; Wyatt-Brown, 1982). D. Cohen (1996) has abridged empirical and sociological support for the culture-of-honor thesis, as noted below.

Southerners articulate stronger support for honor-related violence than do Northerners. According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996), “though [Southerners] do not express greater approval than northerners do for violence in general, they are more likely to endorse violence for protecting oneself from injuries and threats to self, family, or property” (p. 565). This is most likely rooted in the historical foundations of Southern culture laid by the Scots-Irish who first settled the frontier South—particularly, the Southern highlands. Their sometimes-violent responses were adaptive in a time and place where adequate law enforcement was not dependable, thus necessitating self-protection and reliance on less-formal social control (Webb, 2004). According to Fischer (1989),

in the absence of any strong sense of order as unity, hierarchy, or social peace, backsettlers shared an idea of order as a system of retributive

justice. The prevailing principle was *lex talionis*, the rule of retaliation. It held that a good man must seek to do right in the world, but when wrong was done to him, he must punish the wrongdoer himself by an act of retribution that restored order and justice in the world. (p. 765)

Social policy and law in the South also lend support to the honor–violence relationship. Southern legal perspectives on capital punishment, domestic violence, corporal punishment, and national defense policy all reinforce the use of violence (Borg, 1997). Similarly, laws on marital affairs and child rearing reflect a higher value on state nonintervention and self-determination, as derived from clans’ and states’ rights legacies reinforced by local and vigilante social control during the 18th and 19th centuries. Other Southern legal codes—especially, those pertaining to violence for protective purposes and defense of honor—also support the culture-of-honor premise (D. Cohen, 1996). Gun control laws, for example, reinforce the frontier mentality of self-reliance for protection and provision (i.e., hunting), as indicated by voting patterns on gun restriction issues.

Laws pertaining to self-defense (e.g., degree of citizen entitlement to utilize force in defense of home and property, obligation to retreat by innocent persons in lieu of fighting back against an assailant) provide Southerners a right to fight that would be unlawful in most states (Sloan, 1987). The “true man” rule, for instance, conveys the moral and social value placed on standing one’s ground to the point of killing another person if attacked. In fact, the frontier mentality of the South is thought responsible for a major split in the history of American self-defense law. Mischke (1981) contends that the split is between (a) states that have adopted the retreat rule, requiring an innocent person to retreat if possible before killing an assailant, and (b) those states that have adopted the true man rule, allowing a person to stand fast in the face of an attack and to kill the assailant if necessary. Most likely owing to the frontier conditions that distinguished the South and the West, courts in those regions have been historically more likely to rebuff the retreat rule and more likely to allow the application of the true man rule (D. Cohen, 1996, p. 966).

Moreover, the social artifacts and cultural products of the South are more favorable than similar elements in the North toward the use of violence. Baron and Strauss (1989) ascertained that the South scored higher on a “legitimate violence” index, measuring violent television viewership, violent magazine subscription, hunting licenses per capita, and rates of executions. Similarly, Schwaner and Keil (2003) argue for an increased focus on the relationship between alcohol consumption and violence in a region of the South (Appalachia); specifically, alcohol use, as mixed with emotions and difficulty arising

from unemployment and other economic distress to infractions of honor, produces the violence characteristic of the South.

D. Cohen and Nisbett (1997) found that institutions such as employers and the media are more likely to perpetuate culture-of-honor norms by indirectly reinforcing violence. Their field observations showed that employers in the South were more likely than those in the North to hire job applicants who had killed someone in bar fights. Also, Southern print media reporters were more likely than their Northern counterparts to approach stories involving honor-related violence with empathy for the responsible person. Another element under this classification is religion, long hailed as being vitally important in the South. Pridemore and Freilich (2006) found that some of the underlying components of the culture of honor, including patriarchal and paramilitaristic values, are motivated by the same fundamentalist Christian beliefs that are endemic to the region. This argument is bolstered by Lee's confirmation (2006) that another, earlier study (Ellison, Burr, & McCall, 2003) was on track in expecting that "Southern violence is at least partly driven by the high concentration of conservative Protestants in the region. Hence the 'flavor' of the local religious climate carries substantial import for the prevalence of community rates of violence" (p. 320).

Ethnographic experiments lend additional support. Whereas Northerners seem to be little affected by the addition of an insult to a social situation, insulted Southerners typically respond with more emotional, cognitive, physiological, and behavioral signs of hostility and control (D. Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; D. Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; D. Cohen, Vandello, Puente, & Rantilla, 1999; D. Cohen, Vandello, & Rantilla, 1998). Evidence from experimental research portrays the culture of honor as permitting, if not demanding, Southerners to retaliate to maintain their honor.

This cultural internalization is so deeply rooted that it has even been linked to physiology (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Using undergraduate students (self-identified as Southern and non-Southern) at a Northern university, situations were orchestrated in which students' toughness, honor, or reputation was challenged or demeaned. Such situations included getting bumped in a hall, challenged to yield right-of-way in a hall (i.e., "chicken"), and being insulted in a profane manner. After exposure to these effects, the participants were evaluated on psychological and physiological levels, with strong support found for both forms. Nisbett and Cohen (1996) observed among their college student participants that Southerners were more likely than those from other regions of the country to experience higher levels of stress, anger, or aggression regarding these confrontational situations in terms of higher testosterone and cortisol levels.

Nisbett and Cohen's work is well supported, yet the culture-of-honor thesis is not immune from attack. Several tests of the thesis have produced weak to modest

support (Chu, Rivera, and Loftin, 2000). These tests, however, have typically relied on attitudinal measures of support for honor-based violence. Perhaps a better test would involve behavioral measures of defensive violence. Thus, the purpose of this study is to test the defensive violence aspect of the hypothesis regarding the Southern subculture of honor, by examining regional variation in the use of guns to defend one's self, family, and property. Whereas the majority of individual-level research on the Southern subculture of honor considers attitudes toward violence, the present test measures actual behaviors (i.e., defensive actions taken with a gun). In line with the culture-of-honor thesis, we expected Southern residents to engage in more defensive gun use (DGU) than that of non-Southern residents.

## Data and Method

Data for the present study were obtained from Kleck and Gertz's National Self-Defense Survey (1995), which was the first national survey devoted to the topic of armed self-defense, in which a large, nationally representative sample of adults (aged 18 and over) in the lower 48 states were interviewed through a stratified sampling design.<sup>1</sup> Sixty-one percent of the persons contacted completed the interview.<sup>2</sup> To obtain a larger sample of DGU incidents, two regions of the United States were oversampled where previous surveys have shown gun ownership rates to be higher—namely, the South and the West.

Males in successfully contacted households were also oversampled because they are more likely to own/carry guns and be victims of crimes in which a gun might be used defensively. Last, the investigators oversampled respondents who reported a DGU early in the interview; that is, all these respondents were given the full interview, in contrast to the respondents not reporting a DGU, among whom only a third were randomly administered the full interview. Data were weighted using a weighting variable available in the National Self-Defense Survey data set (AWT) to adjust for oversampling by region, sex, and involvement in a DGU<sup>3</sup> (for a full description of the data and methods, see Kleck & Gertz, 1995).

## *Defensive Gun Use*

Nisbett and Cohen (1996) contend that the Southern penchant for violence is most pronounced in terms of their acceptance of violence as a form of social control, in response to insults, and to defend themselves and their property. The current study focuses on the last point. Specifically, participants were asked about their use of guns to defend themselves. Each interview began with a few non-threatening questions regarding important issues facing the respondents' communities. Following these questions, the questions on DGU were phrased as



follows: "Within the past 5 years, have you yourself or another member of your household used a gun, even if it was not fired, for self-protection or for the protection of property at home, work, or elsewhere? Do not include military service, police work, or work as a security guard." Those who replied *yes* were then asked, "Was this to protect against an animal or a person?" Those reporting a DGU against a person were then asked, "How many incidents involving defensive uses of guns against persons happened to members of your household in the past 5 years?" and "Did this incident [any of these incidents] happen in the past 12 months?"

Respondents reporting a DGU were then asked a series of questions about what happened during the DGU incident, to determine whether it should be treated as a genuine DGU.<sup>4</sup> These procedures led to a total of 222 completed interviews in which a DGU incident was reported. In addition, 1,610 respondents who did not report a DGU were administered the full questionnaire (except for follow-up questions specifying the nature of the DGUs). Of the 1,832 respondents who completed the full interview, 1,626 were White, among whom 180 reported a DGU incident to interviewers (81% of all DGUs). The results reported here are based on the subsample of White respondents.

### *Southern Subculture of Honor*

Academics have employed a variety of macro-level measures to capture the existence of a Southern subculture of honor. The most commonly used measure for Southern subculture is a binary dummy variable, scored 1 for census-based South or ex-Confederate states and 0 otherwise (e.g., J. R. Blau & Blau, 1982; Hackney, 1969; Messner, 1983; Parker, 1989). This approach, however, has been the subject of much criticism because it necessarily assumes that cultural traits promoting private violence are uniform across the South and do not spill over into neighboring non-Southern states (Huff-Corzine et al., 1986; Simpson, 1985). For example, the census South dummy variable treats states such as Delaware, Maryland, and Oklahoma as being similar in Southernness to states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina. With respect to the ex-Confederate state dummy variable, there is the additional conceptual problem that the South and its attendant high levels of violence is a direct by-product of the War Between the States or its aftermath (Huff-Corzine et al., 1986; Faust, 1988). Southern scholars, however, have consistently maintained that any cultural predispositions for violence stemming from the South were likely initiated during the antebellum period (Franklin, 1956; Reed, 1972); in fact, Gastil (1971) succinctly notes, "This regional culture was already developed before 1850" (p. 412).

Given the obvious drawbacks of using a binary dummy variable to approximate Southerners' approval of private violence, some scholars have developed more nuanced measures in an attempt to capture the extent to which Southern

subculture varies across Southern states and spills over into other parts of the country owing to the migration of Southern Whites. Perhaps the most well known of these measures is Gastil's Southernness index (1971), which is based on the historical migration patterns of Southern Whites before 1960. Whereas the Southernness index measure has the benefit of being more refined, the formula used by Gastil to compute the measure has never been made publicly available to other researchers and thus cannot be updated to reflect subsequent changes in migration patterns of Southern Whites since 1960.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, we follow the lead of P. M. Blau and Golden (1986) and Huff-Corzine et al. (1986, 1991) by using the percentage of the White population born in the census South (BORNSOUTH) to measure Southern subculture.<sup>6</sup> The benefits of this measure are twofold. First, the measure can easily be updated to reflect the latest migration patterns of White Southerners, given that the U.S. Census Bureau routinely collects data on the population's state of birth (i.e., during each decennial census). Second, the measure is consistent with Gastil's contention that "Southernness" should be treated as a regional concept of violence, as opposed to a subculture of violence that emphasizes norms and values (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967), because it takes into account the intergenerational transmission of Southern culture over time and the movement of these cultural patterns to other parts of the country owing to internal migration.

We also present results using alternate measures of Southern culture, such as an ex-Confederate state dummy variable and Gastil's Southernness index, to examine the robustness of the findings with our preferred BORNSOUTH measure. For each respondent in the National Self-Defense Survey data set, we attached the value for the BORNSOUTH measure that corresponded to the state in which the respondent resided at the time of the survey. For example, all respondents residing in Alabama were assigned a value of 87.95 for the BORNSOUTH measure because this is the percentage of White state residents who reported to the census that they were born in Alabama or another census South state.

Of course, all the Southern subculture measures discussed above, albeit rarely discussed in the literature (for exceptions, see Dixon & Lizotte, 1987; Loftin & Hill, 1974), have the obvious drawback of inferring the existence of certain cultural traits among White Southerners—especially, violent values indicative of membership in a subculture of violence based solely on geographic location or migration patterns of White Southerners (Lee & Shihadeh, 2009). That is, none of the previous research attempting to link elevated levels of violence to a Southern subculture has validated its measures by showing them to be positively related to independent and direct measures of violent values associated with subcultures of violence (Dixon & Lizotte, 1987, p. 384). As a result, researchers claiming to have found support for the Southern subculture thesis based solely on a positive association between Southern region or migration patterns of Southerners and

violence (e.g., Gastil, 1971; Hackney, 1969; Reed, 1972) cannot rule out the possibility that omitted structural conditions unique to the South (e.g., extreme poverty and socioeconomic inequality between Blacks and Whites) or other omitted components of Southern subculture (e.g., rural, hunting/sport shooting culture; prejudice against Blacks) were actually responsible for observed associations between the Southern subculture measures and violence (Dixon & Lizotte, 1987; Loftin & Hill, 1974).

The National Self-Defense Survey did not include any items related to violent attitudes characteristic of membership in a subculture of violence—drawbacks that also hamper this analysis. Specifically, our models do not allow us to test whether White respondents residing in the South are more likely to possess violent attitudes and, more important, whether the possession of violent attitudes mediates the relationship between Southern culture and DGU. Consequently, any positive associations found between the Southern subculture measures and DGU should be tempered by the fact that other cultural/structural traits besides a subculture tolerant of violence are likely to be captured by such global measures and may in fact be responsible, at least partially, for any observed associations found between them. Nevertheless, we think this exploratory study provides a significant contribution to the Southern subculture literature because it is the first of its kind to examine the relationship between the Southern subculture and actual forceful defensive actions taken by prospective victims.

### *Control Variables*

Table 1 lists the control variables used in the analysis. In addition to the variable name and a brief description, the means and standard deviations are shown.<sup>7</sup> Many of the variables were binary, indicating the presence or absence of a trait, with a value of 2 indicating that the respondent possessed the trait and with 1 indicating that the respondent did not. All analyses controlled for whether the respondent carried a gun for protection in the past year (CARRY) and whether there was a gun in the respondent's household (GUNHSLD). Failing to control for these potential confounding factors could result in spurious correlations for the Southern subculture measures; that is, the findings could reflect patterns of gun ownership and carrying, rather than a Southern subculture. Similarly, we also controlled for the White homicide rate (WHTMUR) in the state in which the respondent resided, to account for the possibility that places with higher levels of criminal violence are more likely to have incidents in which White victims might use guns for defensive purposes.

### *Analytic Procedures*

Because the dependent variable is dichotomous (2 = respondent engaged in DGU, 1 = respondent did not engage in DGU), the linear probability model has several

well-known shortcomings; notably, the predicted probabilities may not lie between 0 and 1. In this case, the binary logistic regression model is used to estimate the probability that an event occurs. However, the interpretation of logit parameter estimates (i.e., the rate of change in the log odds of  $Y$  for a one unit change in  $X$ ) is not straightforward. Therefore, we converted the logit coefficients to the more intuitive odds ratios using the exponential function  $e^b$ , where  $e$  is the base of the natural log and  $b$  is the logit coefficient. The odds ratio for continuous-level variables may be interpreted as the effects of a one-unit change in the explanatory variable on the odds or likelihood that an respondent used a gun defensively. The odds ratio for a dichotomous independent variable compares (a) the odds of a person's engaging in DGU for the category of the independent variable coded 2 to (b) the odds for the category coded 1. We also follow the recommendation of Peng, Lee, and Ingersoll (2002) and report Wald's chi-square statistic (to determine the statistical significance of individual coefficients) and results of Wald tests (to assess the overall fit of the logistic regression models).<sup>8</sup>

In this case, one statistical pitfall with contextual variable analysis (i.e., hierarchical or mixed-level analysis) is the exaggerated levels of statistical significance for the state-level variables, because of clustering (Moulton, 1990). This occurs because the state-level variables do not vary across individuals within each state. For example, every respondent from Texas will have the same value for BORN SOUTH (the percentage of the state population born in the South) and WHTMUR (the homicide rate for Whites). As a result, errors in predicting DGU are likely to be correlated within clusters (i.e., states), and conventional estimates of standard errors for the state-level factors may be biased downward owing to violation of the standard assumption in regression analysis that the errors are independently and identically distributed (Moulton, 1990). To address this problem, we follow the recommendation of Primo, Jacobmeier, and Milyon (2007) by calculating clustered standard errors, which adjust the standard errors for nonindependence by allowing for any arbitrary correlation among the observations within a state, as well as for any arbitrary heteroscedasticity in the error term (Williams, 2000). The logistic regression models were estimated using the logistic command in Stata Release 9.0 (StataCorp, College Station, TX).

## Results

Table 2 provides the logistic regression results of four models estimating the impact on DGU from Southern Whites' exposure to the Southern subculture. The baseline logistic regression model (Model 1) examines the extent to which the Southern subculture (as measured by BORN SOUTH) increases the likelihood of White victims' engaging in DGU while controlling for household gun ownership (GUNHSLD) and whether the respondent carries a gun for self-protection (CARRY). This specification allows us to estimate any direct effects of

**Table 1.** Variables Used in Logistic Regression Analysis.

Variable Name	Description	M	SD
DGU	Respondent used gun defensively against human	1.04	0.19
BORNSOUTH	Percentage of White state population born in South, 2000	70.84	12.85
GASTIL	Gastil's Southernness index	18.90	7.99
SOUTH	Respondent lives in census South	0.34	0.47
GUNHSLD	Respondent lives in household with gun(s)	1.40	0.49
CARRY	Respondent carries gun for protection	1.09	0.28
WHTMUR	White homicide rate per 100,000, state, 1993	5.60	3.45
MALE	Respondent is male	1.47	0.50
AGE	Age in years	42.22	15.69
MARRIED	Respondent is presently married	1.61	0.49
INCOME	Household income (6-point scale)	3.08	1.41
BIGCITY	Respondent lives in city with more than 500,000 residents	1.21	0.41
GUNOCC	Respondent employed as police officer or security guard or in military	1.03	0.18
ROBVICT	Victim of robbery in past year	1.02	0.15
ASLVICT	Victim of assault in past year	1.22	0.42
BURGVICT	Victim of burglary in past year	1.05	0.22
KNOWVICT	Respondent knows victim of serious crime in past year	1.29	0.46
CRIMNBHD	Respondent sees crime higher/lower in neighborhood?	2.50	1.12
CRIMWORK	Respondent sees crime higher/lower in area where he works? (5-point scale)	2.14	1.02
FAVORDP	Respondent favors death penalty for murder	1.73	0.44
CRTSNHE	Respondent feels courts not harsh enough	1.82	0.39

Descriptive statistics are based on weighted data for all cases with valid data on a given variable. Except where noted, variables were coded 2 for cases with the indicated attribute, 1 for cases without.

Southern subculture on DGU by White victims.<sup>9</sup> Models 2 and 3 report results using alternate well-known measures of SSOV (i.e., GASTIL and CENSUS-SOUTH) to examine the extent to which the baseline results (Model 1) are sensitive to the measure of Southern subculture employed.

Before turning to the results of the Southern subculture measures, we briefly discuss some of the more noteworthy findings for the individual-level control variables included in Models 1 to 3. Not surprising, a White gun defender is more likely to reside in a household with a gun (GUNHSLD) and carry a gun (CARRY) for self-protection. Specifically, a White with a gun in the home or who carries a gun for self-protection has odds of engaging in DGU that are nearly 14 and 6 times higher than his counterpart, respectively. These results are consistent with bivariate and multivariate analyses on the determinants of DGUs by all persons reported by Kleck and Gertz (1995, Table 4) and Kovandzic, Kleck, and Gertz (1998, Table 2), respectively.

Another expected finding was the greater likelihood of a White defender's being a victim of a burglary (BURGVICT) or robbery (ROBVICT) in the past year. The odds ratios suggest that victims of these crimes have 3 to 4 times the odds of nonvictims of engaging in a DGU. Of course, for respondents whose DGU occurred as a result of these victimization attempts, this finding reflects nothing more than a tautology (Kleck & Gertz, 1995, p. 186). Also, for White defenders experiencing an assault victimization (ASLTVICT) since becoming an adult, the odds of experiencing a DGU are twice as large as those of nonassault victims engaging in a DGU.

White gun defenders are more likely to be younger (AGE), a finding probably due to the generally higher rates of crime victimization among younger persons. Specifically, the odds of engaging in a DGU decrease by a factor of .952, or 4.8%, for every 1-year increase in age, controlling for other variables in the model. However, White defenders do not appear to have any other well-known characteristics of crime victims, such as being male (MALE), single (MARRIED), poor (INCOME), or residing in a big city (BIGCITY). White gun defenders also do not appear to be more punitive than nondefenders. In fact, White respondents reporting a DGU actually appear to be less likely to support the death penalty (FAVORDP) or the view that the courts do not deal harshly enough with criminals (CRTSNHE), although the coefficients are never significant at conventional significance levels. Last, White defenders are, all things being equal, significantly more likely to perceive crime as being higher in or around their workplaces (CRIMWORK). The odds ratio of 1.23 indicates a one-unit increase in CRIMWORK, which increases the odds of being a gun defender by 23%. The Wald test indicates that the overall fit of each logistic regression model is quite good and is to be preferred to the intercept-only model. The most important result in Model 1 is the logit coefficient and odds ratio for BORN SOUTH. The results indicate that, controlling for household gun ownership and other individual-level characteristics, the odds of Whites engaging in DGU are not directly related to exposure to the Southern subculture. Contrary to theoretical expectations, the logit coefficient for BORN SOUTH is in the unexpected, negative direction and is far from significant. We also found no sign of a direct impact of Southern subculture on the DGU variable when substituting BORN SOUTH with other widely used measures of

Southernness, including the GASTIL index (Model 2) and the CENSUS-SOUTH dummy variable (Model 3). Again, the logit coefficients for both of these Southern subculture measures are far from significant and for CENSUS-SOUTH are in the unexpected, negative direction. Thus, the results are apparently not sensitive to the measure of Southern subculture employed. Perhaps more important, our findings indicate that White Southerners do not appear to be exposed to any cultural traits, including values supportive of violence, that directly encourage them to engage in armed resistance against criminal attackers.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This analysis tested the idea that Southerners are more likely than non-Southerners to use violence in defense of self and property—a core tenet of the culture-of-honor model proposed by Nisbett and Cohen (1996)—with a direct measure of violent defense of honor (i.e., DGU). What is presented here is a contrast to and improvement on prior research that has focused on a broadly regional (Southern) or racial (mostly Black) subculture of violence in that Nisbett and Cohen’s model seeks to integrate region, race, and gender. Specifically, Nisbett and Cohen’s model “suggests that Southern White males in particular will be more approving of violence than other demographic groups when it is used in defense of honor, family, or personal property” (Hayes & Lee, 2005, p. 613). In addition, and perhaps most important, it adds to prior research in that it measures actual defensive behaviors instead of attitudes and opinions regarding potential defensive actions. This is advantageous when considering that this behavioral measure allows us to consider what a person has done, as opposed to what a person might be willing to do given a predetermined set of hypothetical circumstances. Although past performance is no guarantee of future outcomes, it is perhaps a better indicator than hypothetical preferences. Furthermore, measures of Southern residence have been developed to engage a greater degree of the Southern milieu in which violent defense of honor will hypothetically occur. Previous studies were built on measures not as culturally contextual nor relevant in influencing one’s choice to engage in violent behavior, whereas the measures used in this project better cover the South in both a geographical sense and a contextual sense.

The results of this study indicate that Southerners do not appear to necessarily favor the use of violence through DGU more so than others. In considering the findings, there are however several limitations of the current study. Defensive behavior was operationalized solely as DGU, thereby limiting the scope of the study and failing to include other relevant defensive behaviors, such as punching; brandishing and/or using a knife, club, or other weapon; or any other of a broad range of personally defensive activities. As such, there is a large segment of

**Table 2.** Estimating the Direct Impact of Southern Subculture on Defensive Gun Use: Results From the National Self-Defense Survey for White Respondents.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coef.	z	OR	Coef.	z	OR	Coef.	z	OR
<b>Southern subculture variables</b>									
BORNSOUTH	-0.001	-0.04	0.999	—	—	—	—	—	—
GASTIL	—	—	—	0.008	0.61	1.008	—	—	—
SOUTH	—	—	—	—	—	—	-0.028	-0.12	0.973
<b>Control variables</b>									
GUNHSLD	2.621**	5.44	13.760	2.612**	5.34	13.620	2.623**	5.41	13.775
CARRY	1.709**	6.52	5.523	1.680**	6.48	5.365	1.716**	6.30	5.562
WHTMUR	0.044	1.10	1.045	0.041	0.92	1.042	0.045	1.12	1.046
MALE	-0.419	-1.43	0.657	-0.409	-1.40	0.665	-0.419	-1.48	0.657
AGE	-0.050**	-3.45	0.952	-0.049**	-3.42	0.952	-0.050**	-3.42	0.952
MARRIED	-0.152	-0.52	0.859	-0.155	-0.53	0.856	-0.151	-0.52	0.860
INCOME	-0.023	-0.30	0.978	-0.022	-0.29	0.979	-0.023	-0.31	0.977
BIGCITY	0.245	0.71	1.278	0.253	0.73	1.287	0.242	0.72	1.274
GUNOCC	-1.029	-1.57	0.357	-1.031	-1.61	0.357	-1.029	-1.60	0.358
ROBVICT	1.479**	3.24	4.388	1.484**	3.26	4.412	1.478**	3.29	4.378
ASLTVICT	0.872**	5.20	2.391	0.879**	5.18	2.408	0.872**	5.14	2.392
BURGVICT	1.165**	3.94	3.206	1.152**	3.89	3.166	1.168**	3.97	3.215
KNOWVICT	-0.211	-0.81	0.810	-0.208	-0.81	0.812	-0.209	-0.81	0.812
CRIMNBHD	-0.109	-0.79	0.897	-0.110	-0.82	0.896	-0.107	-0.79	0.898
CRIMWORK	0.207*	2.52	1.230	0.204*	2.43	1.227	0.208*	2.46	1.231
FAVORDP	-0.499	-1.88	0.607	-0.512*	-2.01	0.600	-0.494	-1.90	0.610
CRTSNHE	-0.314	-0.80	0.730	-0.315	-0.80	0.730	-0.316	-0.80	0.729
Overall model evaluation									
Valid test		236.14**			235.18**			228.44**	

N (weighted) = 1,133. Logit coefficients and odds ratios (ORs) from a maximum-likelihood model using defensive gun use as the dependent variable. All estimates are calculated using National Self-Defense Survey sampling weights. Standard errors are calculated using Huber-White standard errors, adjusted to account for the cluster sampling design of the survey.  
 \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01.



defensive actions that were not addressed here and are thus open for additional inquiry.

A second limitation of the current study is that it addressed only one dimension of Nisbett and Cohen's theory (1996), which acknowledges that violence can result from a variety of sources. Individuals can evoke violence in defense of self and property, to exert social control, or as a response to perceived insults. Here we examine only the first of these motives for violence. Thus, it is possible that Southerners engage in more of the other forms of violence than do non-Southerners. Because the current design prevents us from examining this potential, we refrain from making too strong of a statement regarding the broader viability of the theory.

A final limitation is the inability of the survey instrument to fully appraise the strength and regional specificity of the culture of honor owing to cultural transmission and cultural migration. Along these lines, it is worth noting that violence in the West, an area settled subsequent to the South by a significant number of Southerners, is only slightly lower than that in the South. History confirms that there was at one time a powerful culture of honor and violence existing in the American South; yet, at present, this study is unable to conclude whether this culture exerts the same influence, which may be a suitable explanation for why this analysis did not portray greater odds for Southern populations being involved in defensive violence.

The mixed support for the Southern subculture of honor in previous research may likely be due to the differing ways in which investigators have measured and defined what is Southern or what constitutes the South. Each study has determined what measures are salient and, from these measures, has mined its relevant data and conclusions. However, given such breadth and diversity, as well as subjectivity, of the measures, there is little uniformity across the literature. The present study adds to this variety and urges future research to craft and refine a more definitive measure, likely constructed from a combination of the demographic, socioeconomic, and various other specific personal behavioral indicators, such as alcohol use (Schwaner & Keil, 2003), as opposed to the aforementioned attitudinal measures. Forging a superior, more robust measure of the South is critical, and "redefining or revisiting how we think of the Southern region, especially in relation to the geographic boundaries of Southern culture, may buttress the theoretical argument for the existence of a Southern culture of violence" (Lee, Bankston, Hayes, & Thomas, 2007, p. 270). Toward this end, future research could ably expand the knowledge in this area by composing a more detailed picture of the persons responsible for honor-motivated violence (to pin down a more precise level of involvement by Southern White males) and by determining more explicitly the locations in which this honor-motivated violence is most prevalent (to separate out the small town or rural occurrences of interest).

The results of this study indicate that the celebrated and fabled Southern culture of honor may be just that: a fable or story from a time long past. Outcomes of this analysis tell us that Southern White males are no more likely than others to use a weapon for defense and protection of honor. As the ideal of honor among the traditional populace of the South seems to grow fainter and die away, it must be acknowledged that the South remains a mysterious place—"Where is it?" and "What is it?" asks John Reed, the sociologist of the South. As such, Southern culture remains difficult to pin down and to measure, as does culture in general. Culture-of-honor theory will advance only as we come to answer these questions with more surety and cut through the fog and mist of this enigmatic place. As the United States becomes more homogenized, seeking support for the Southern subculture of violence may be a lost cause.

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### **Notes**

1. The survey was conducted by a professional telephone polling firm, Research Network (Tallahassee, Florida), between February and April 1993.
2. One of the readers inquired whether estimates of defensive gun use (DGU) as derived from the National Self-Defense Survey were weighted to correct for differences in unit nonresponse across strata (i.e., states). In a personal communication, Gary Kleck informed us he was unable to employ nonresponse weighting adjustments because the polling firm responsible for the sampling did not provide him with any information on nonresponse rates by states. However, in fairness to Professor Kleck, applying differing weights for differing response rates of subgroups is by no means standard practice in survey research (Hahs-Vaughn, 2006). In fact, there is controversy over whether postsurvey weighting adjustment techniques for unit nonresponse in general is even good practice, given that it tacitly assumes that there are no meaningful differences between respondents and nonrespondents and that the nonrespondents are missing at random. If this is not the case, applying larger weights to respondents in states with low response rates would amount to giving greater weight to unrepresentative respondents, thereby serving to make weighted DGU estimates even less reflective of the population

than unweighted DGU estimates. In any event, we cannot rule out the possibility that the estimates presented here might suffer, at least partially, from nonresponse bias.

3. Specifically, the gender weights are 0.80 and 1.30 for males and females, respectively. With respect to region, respondents in the South and West were assigned a weight of .784, whereas those in the Northeast and Midwest were assigned weights of 1.54. Last, persons reporting a DGU were assigned a weight of .368, whereas those not reporting a DGU were assigned a weight of 1.09. The weighting variable (AWT) is the product of the gender, region, and DGU weights.
4. The following criteria had to be met for an incident to be considered a genuine DGU: First, the incident involved actual defensive contact against another human (as opposed to an animal) but not related to work as a police officer or security guard or while serving in the military; second, the defender was able to report a specific crime that he thought was being committed; third, the defender used the gun in some manner, with the minimum requirement being that it was used as part of a threat against a person (e.g., verbally referring to the gun, pointing the gun at attacker). No attempt was made by the authors to determine the lawfulness of the defenders' actions.
5. Loftin and Hill (1974) report that the score assigned to each state appears to coincide with its geographical proximity to the Confederate South.
6. We used data from the 2000 census.
7. Complete item wordings for each measure can be obtained from the National Self-Defense Survey questionnaire, which is available upon request from Gary Kleck <gkleck@fsu.edu>.
8. The Wald test is similar to the more commonly reported likelihood ratio test in that it examines whether the logistic regression model with all the predictors provides a better fit to the data than does a model without any predictors (or the intercept-only model). The benefit of the former is that it is computationally less intensive than the latter. More important, the likelihood ratio test is not appropriate when there is a clustering of individual observations and when sampling weights are used, as is the case here. In such a situation, the Wald test should be used instead of the likelihood ratio test (Sribney, 2005).
9. We realize that some might be disappointed that we did not examine for potential indirect effects of the Southern subculture on DGU as operating through gun ownership and gun carrying, given that the latter are sometimes considered core components of the former (e.g., Gastil, 1971; Hackney, 1969; Reed, 1972). The best available research on this topic, however, concludes that although those who are raised and residing in the South are more likely to own guns, this relationship is not mediated by a subculture of violence. That is, findings show no relationship between violent values indicative of membership in a subculture of violence and those raised in the South (and currently residing there) or between violent attitudes and gun ownership (Dixon & Lizotte, 1987).

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