

Misbett & Cohen:

Culture of Honor

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*Insult, Anger, and Aggression:  
An "Experimental Ethnography"  
of the Culture of Honor*

**W**E HAVE ARGUED FROM the anecdotal and historical data in Chapter 1, the archival homicide data in Chapter 2, and the survey data in Chapter 3 that southerners, because they belong to a culture in which insults are a very serious matter, are more violent than nonsoutherners. Insults cannot be ignored, because a man's reputation for strength and toughness is compromised until he proves himself through violence, or at least through dominant or aggressive behavior signaling a capacity for violence.

We still need to show, however, that behaviors and attitudes are linked in the way our theory specifies. The relation between attitudes and behavior is often not straightforward: People sometimes merely pay lip service to attitudes without behaving in ways consistent with them, or sometimes they earnestly hold such attitudes but never manage to find ways to act them out. In any case, decades of research by social psychologists have shown that there can be large gaps between expressed attitudes and actual behavior. Measures of behavior are needed before one can take seriously hypotheses about cultural difference.

In the experiments reported here, which we conducted with Brian Bowdle and Norbert Schwarz,<sup>1</sup> we examined the sequence of reactions following an insult, in an effort to determine whether southerners become more upset by affronts and are more likely to take aggressive action to compensate for the diminishment they experience. We brought southerners and northerners into the lab, where an associate of the experimenter, who did not appear to be part of the study, rudely insulted them. We observed subjects' emotional reactions, physiological responses, and actions in response to this insult.

When we refer to northerners and southerners who participated in the experiments, we use those words as a shorthand way of referring to male students

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from the North and the South attending the University of Michigan who are white, non-Hispanic, and non-Jewish. Our sample is certainly not a representative one—even of white non-Hispanic, non-Jewish males. The students came from families that were financially well-off on average, with the median income for northerners being about \$85,000 and for southerners, \$95,000. The southerners might also be unusual in that they chose to leave the South at least temporarily and come to school in the North. We suspect both of these factors worked to mute regional differences and that regional effects would be bigger if more-representative samples of northerners and southerners were drawn. Southern and northern students differed from each other in remarkably few respects other than region of origin. Southerners were defined, as in Chapters 2, 3, and 5, as individuals from census divisions 5, 6, and 7, though the definition had to be broadened slightly in Experiments 2 and 3 to increase the number of eligible southerners. (Details about subject characteristics are found in Appendix C.)

### Experiment 1: Cognitive and Emotional Reactions to an Insult

The three experiments all took place in the laboratory of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. All three explored consequences of the same basic situation: A confederate of the experimenter bumped into the unsuspecting subject as he walked down a hallway and called him an "asshole."

#### Procedure

In Experiment 1, we examined the effect of this insult on the immediate emotional reaction of the subject and on hostility expressed at a later point in the experiment. Subsequent hostility was assessed with a word-completion task and a face-rating task. Hostility was also assessed by having the subject complete two scenarios: one neutral and one that involved affront and sexual challenge. These procedures allowed us to examine whether the subject would project his anger onto ambiguous, neutral stimuli after the insult or whether only stimuli that involved affront and challenge would bring out southerners' aggression after the insult.

Forty-two northern and forty-one southern students came to the laboratory, where they were told they would be participating in a study concerning the effect of response-time constraints on judgment. After an initial introduction to the study, subjects were asked to fill out a brief demographic questionnaire and take it to a table at the end of a long, narrow hallway.

As the subject walked down the hall, a confederate of the experimenter walked out of a door marked "Photo Lab" and began working at a file cabinet in the hall. The confederate had to push the file drawer in to allow the subject to

pass by him and drop his paper off at the table. As the subject returned seconds later and walked back down the hall toward the experimental room, the confederate (who had just reopened the file drawer) slammed it shut on seeing the subject approach, bumped into him with his shoulder, and called the subject an "asshole." The confederate then walked back into the "Photo Lab."

Two observers were stationed in the hall. They appeared to be working on homework, paying no attention to the goings-on in the hall. One observer, a male, was seated on the floor in a location where he could glance up and see the subject's face at the moment he was bumped. The other observer, a female, was sitting at the table at the end of the hall where she could glance at the subject's face if he turned around (which occurred about 86 percent of the time). Both observers could hear everything the subject said and could read his body language (though from different perspectives). Immediately after the bumping incident, the observers rated the subject's emotional reactions on seven-point scales.<sup>2</sup> Of course, observers did not know the regional origin of the subject. Subjects assigned to the control condition dropped their questionnaires off but were not bumped and no one was present in the hall.

**Neutral Stimuli.** After the subject returned to the room, the judgment tasks began. The first three tasks had relatively neutral content. They were studied in order to examine whether southerners would "project" hostility onto neutral stimuli after an affront. The first task was a word completion task, in which the subject was given a string of letters (for example, ight or gu\_) that he could complete in either a hostile way (fight or gun) or a nonhostile way (light or gum). The second task was a face-rating task, in which the subject tried to guess what emotion was being expressed in a series of photographs of faces—anger, fear, disgust, sadness, or happiness. The third task was a scenario completion task, in which the subject needed to fill in the beginning or ending of a story. In the neutral scenario, a man was rescued by an ambulance and the subject was asked to fill in the beginning of the story.

**Insult Prime Scenario.** Another scenario presented a clear affront, however. The scenario began:

It had only been about twenty minutes since they had arrived at the party when Jill pulled Steve aside, obviously bothered about something.

"What's wrong?" asked Steve.

"It's Larry. I mean, he knows that you and I are engaged, but he's already made two passes at me tonight."

Jill walked back into the crowd, and Steve decided to keep his eye on Larry. Sure enough, within five minutes Larry was reaching over and trying to kiss Jill.

Subjects were asked to complete the ending to this story.

After all tasks were completed, subjects were thoroughly debriefed and reconciled with the "bumper."<sup>3</sup>



### Results

**Emotional reactions.** Northerners and southerners differed in how angry or amused they appeared to be after the bump. Observers rated southern subjects as significantly less amused by the bump than northern subjects<sup>4</sup> and marginally more angry than northern subjects.<sup>5</sup> We subtracted the amusement rating from the anger rating for each subject to show the very different reaction patterns of northerners and southerners. As may be seen in Figure 4.1, the most common emotional reaction for northerners was to show more amusement than anger. The overwhelmingly dominant reaction for southerners was to show as much or more anger than amusement.<sup>6</sup>

**Projective Hostility for Neutral Stimuli.** We examined whether the insult would make southerners more hostile even to neutral stimuli but leave northerners unaffected. There was no such pattern for any of the word completion, face rating, or neutral scenario completion tasks. Neither northerners nor southerners were much affected by the insult, and northerners did not differ from southerners overall.

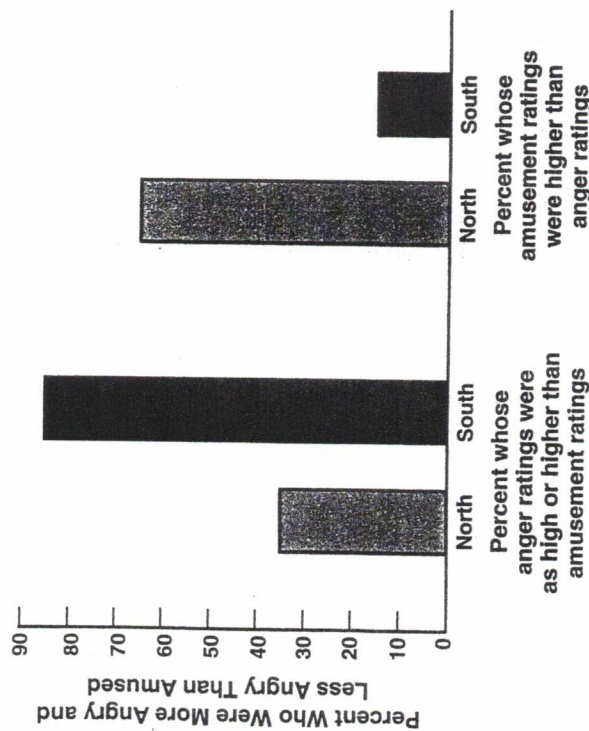


FIGURE 4.1 Pattern of emotional reactions of southern and northern subjects to insult

**Hostility in Response to Insult Prime Scenario.** For the scenario describing the attempted pass at the fiancée, the insult had very different consequences for northerners and southerners. If southerners were insulted, they were much more likely to end this scenario with violence; northerners were unaffected by the insult. Fully 75 percent of insulted southerners completed this scenario with events in which the man injured or threatened to injure his challenger, whereas only 20 percent of noninsulted southerners did so.<sup>7</sup> Northerners were unaffected by the manipulation, actually being trivially less likely to conclude this scenario with violence if they had been insulted than if they had not (41 percent versus 55 percent).<sup>8</sup>

In sum, southerners, unlike northerners, were likely to see the insult as a cause for anger rather than amusement, and they were much more likely to complete the "affront" script with violence if they had been insulted than if they had not. Interestingly, insulted southerners were no more likely to project hostility onto neutral stimuli than other subjects. These findings indicate that an insult may make a southerner angry and—although it does not produce hostility in response to innocuous stimuli—the insult does lower his threshold for angry thoughts in response to subsequent affronts.

## Experiment 2: Physiological Reactions to an Insult

In Experiment 2, we explored whether southerners' responses to the insult went beyond expressions of annoyance and mere "cognitive" priming for aggression, and examined whether they were accompanied by physiological changes of a sort that might mediate real behavioral aggression.

### Procedure

**Physiological Measure of Stress.** To measure how upset or stressed the subject became, we examined the cortisol level of the subject before and after the bump. Cortisol is a hormone associated with high levels of stress, anxiety, and arousal in humans and in animals.<sup>9</sup> If southerners are more upset by the acute stress of the insult, they should show a rise in cortisol levels compared to control subjects. If northerners are relatively unaffected by the insult, as they seemed to be in Experiment 1, they should show little or no rise in cortisol levels compared to control subjects. To measure this, we obtained saliva samples allowing for assays of cortisol levels before and after the bump.

**Physiological Measure of Preparedness for Future Aggression.** To measure how prepared for future challenges subjects became, we examined their testosterone levels. Testosterone is a hormone associated with aggression and dominance behavior in animals and humans. The causation seems to go



both ways: High levels of testosterone facilitate dominance or aggressive behaviors, and successful dominance encounters lead to increases in testosterone.<sup>10</sup> Research suggests that testosterone plays a role in preparing participants for competitions or dominance contests,<sup>11</sup> perhaps by facilitating the aggressive behaviors and display of dominance cues that make one act and even look tougher. In addition, testosterone may raise fear thresholds. In male rats, injections of testosterone act as an "anxiolytic" agent, reducing the rats' fear of novel environments.<sup>12</sup> It would obviously be useful in challenge or competition situations if this fear-reducing effect were to occur in humans. Testosterone levels were also measured by assay of saliva sample.

If southerners respond to the insult as a challenge and are preparing themselves for future aggression or dominance contests, we would expect a testosterone increase after the bump. If northerners are relatively unaffected, we would not expect their testosterone levels to rise very much.

**Sequence of Events.** The 111 northern students and 62 southern students were met in the laboratory by an experimenter who explained that the study concerned people's performance on tasks under various conditions. The experimenter said that she would be measuring the subject's blood sugar levels throughout the experiment by taking saliva samples. To get a baseline measurement, the subject was given a piece of sugarless gum to generate saliva, a test tube to fill to the 5 ml level, and a brief questionnaire to fill out as he provided the first sample.

After the saliva sample was given, the subject was sent down the hall to drop off his questionnaire and was bumped and insulted as described in Experiment 1. The subject was bumped publicly, bumped privately, or not bumped at all. In the public condition, there were two male witnesses to the insult. Both witnesses were confederates of the experimenter, but had been identified as fellow subjects by the experimenter before the subject began his walk down the hall. Both observers made eye contact with the subject so that the subject knew they had witnessed the incident. In the private condition, there were no observers in the hallway. And in the control condition, the subject was not bumped or insulted.<sup>13</sup>

After a few minutes, the subject and two confederates were called to the experimental room (in the public condition, the confederates were the same two men who had seen the subject get insulted). The experimenter explained that the subjects would be performing mechanical aptitude tasks and she asked them to give another saliva sample. On average, this second sample was given thirteen minutes after the first. The experimenter then asked the subject to fill out an "opinions test." This questionnaire had a number of scenarios that were ambiguous with respect to whether an insult had been delivered. In one scenario, for example, one character cuts another off as they are driving down the road. For each situation, the subject was asked to guess the likelihood of a

physical fight or a verbal argument occurring. After the subject finished the questionnaire, he was asked to give another saliva sample. On average, this third sample was given twenty-five minutes after the first.<sup>14</sup>

## Results

We anticipated that publicly insulted subjects would show a more extreme pattern of responses than privately insulted subjects. However, that did not happen, so we combined publicly and privately insulted subjects into one insult condition.

**Cortisol Levels.** We averaged the two post-bump measurements and then computed a change score: (average post-bump cortisol level minus pre-bump cortisol level) divided by (pre-bump cortisol level). As may be seen in Figure 4.2, cortisol levels rose 79 percent for insulted southerners and 42 percent for control southerners. The levels rose 33 percent for insulted northerners and 39 percent for control northerners. Thus, as anticipated, insulted southerners showed large increases in cortisol level, whereas control southerners and both insulted and control northerners showed much smaller changes.<sup>15</sup>

**Testosterone Levels.** As with cortisol, we averaged the two post-bump measurements and then computed a change score. As may also be seen in Figure 4.2, testosterone levels rose 12 percent for insulted southerners and 4 percent for control southerners. They rose 6 percent for insulted northerners and

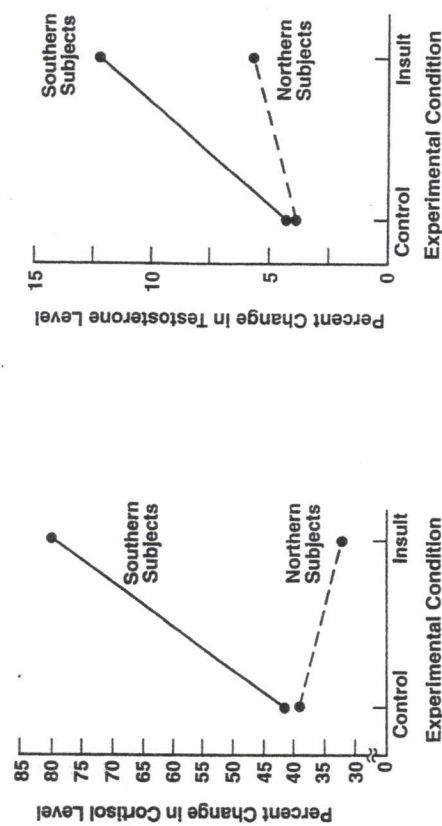


FIGURE 4.2 Change in cortisol levels and change in testosterone levels for insulted and noninsulted southerners and northerners



4 percent for control northerners. As predicted, the change was greater for insulted southerners than for subjects in all other conditions.<sup>16</sup>

**Ambiguous Insult Scenarios.** Southerners, whether insulted or not, were no more likely than northerners to expect the ambiguous scenarios to end with either physical or verbal aggression. Consistent with the results of Experiment 1, a clear insult seems to be required to prompt angry or aggressive interpretations on the part of southerners.<sup>17</sup>

Experiment 2 showed that southerners became aroused and more prepared for aggression on the physiological level. Southerners were more stressed by the insult, as shown by the rise in their cortisol levels, and more primed for future aggression, as indicated by the rise in their testosterone levels. Cortisol and testosterone levels of northerners were hardly affected by the insult. We want to emphasize the importance of these physiological findings. They show that the insult produces effects in the southerner that go far beyond mere cognitive changes. Southerners are put into a physiological state that should not merely affect interpretations of subsequently encountered affront but could also be expected to impel aggressive action. We explored in Experiment 3 whether such behavioral effects can be demonstrated.

### Experiment 3: Behavioral Reactions to an Insult

In Experiment 3, we tried to extend the results of Experiments 1 and 2 by exploring whether southerners, in accord with a culture-of-honor worldview, would perceive the insult as damaging to their status and reputation and would consequently behave in more aggressive and domineering ways.

#### Procedure

Subjects were again brought in, given a cover story, and sent down the hall to be bumped or not. After the subject was bumped publicly or privately or not bumped, he continued walking down the long hallway. Another confederate—who was 6 feet 3 inches tall (1.91 meters), weighed 250 pounds (114 kilograms), and played college football—appeared around the corner and began walking toward the subject at a good pace. The hall was lined with tables, so there was room for only one person to pass without the other person giving way. The confederate walked determinedly down the center of the hall on a collision course with the subject and did not move (except at the last second to avoid another bumping).

In essence, we set up a “chicken game” similar to that played by American teenagers who drive at each other in their cars (or Albanian shepherds who consider it a dishonor to yield to another person on a narrow mountain path). The confederate estimated the distance at which the subject decided to

“chicken out” or give way to him. We expected insulted southern subjects to respond aggressively to the challenge, that is, to go farthest toward the confederate before swerving to avoid a collision.

After playing the chicken game, the subject returned to the experimental room, where he was told that the experiment concerned “who you are” and that “one big part of who we are is who other people think we are.” The experimenter explained the importance of first impressions for this and said that sometimes people are aware of the first impressions they make and sometimes they are not. She told the subject that he would have a brief meeting with another subject (actually another confederate, whom we will refer to as the “evaluator”). And she added that the subject’s task would be to guess what this other person really thought of him. The subject and his counterpart would be allowed to shake hands, but that was all; no talking was allowed.

The experimenter then brought in the “evaluator” confederate, who shook hands with the subject. In the public bump condition, the evaluator was one of the witnesses to the bump. (In the private bump condition, the evaluator was not one of the observers, and in the control condition, there had been no bump to observe.)

After the brief handshake between the subject and evaluator, the experimenter sent the evaluator out into the hall to record his impressions. The evaluator rated the firmness of the subject’s handshake, and he made summary ratings of how domineering or submissive the subject was during the encounter, all on seven-point scales. We expected insulted southern subjects to be more domineering and less submissive after the insult; northerners should be little affected by the insult.

Back in the experimental room, the experimenter explained that the subject would now have to guess what the evaluator thought of him. On a one to five scale, the subject guessed what the other person thought of him on dimensions like “Cowardly-Courageous,” “Strong-Weak,” “Manly-Not manly” as well as filler dimensions like “Introverted-Extroverted,” “Attractive-Unattractive,” and so on. Finally, after the subject estimated what the evaluator thought of him, the experimenter asked the subject to rate himself on these dimensions as he really was.

The subject completed another demographic questionnaire and then was debriefed and reconciled with the bumper. Once again, the public versus private nature of the insult was not an important factor in subjects’ responses, and we combined the public and private data for analysis.

#### Results

**“Chicken Game.”** As may be seen in Figure 4.3 the insult produced aggressive behavior in southerners in the “chicken game.” Insulted southerners went much farther before “chickening out” and deferring to the confederate (at about three feet), compared to control southerners (at about nine feet). The insult did not much affect the behavior of northerners.<sup>18</sup>





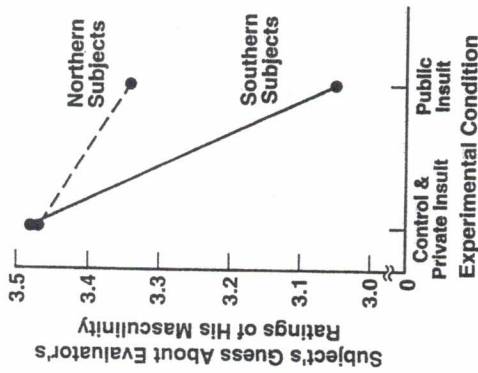


FIGURE 4.4 Perceived masculine status of insulted and noninsulted southerners and northerners

We would never have predicted differences so strong as we found with this college student population. One way to understand the results is to propose that an insult simply has a fundamentally different meaning for northerners and southerners: For the southerner, the insult has something to do with himself and his reputation; for the northerner, the insult has something to do only with the person who delivered the insult.

If the reactions of our subjects bear any similarity to the way southerners react to a real insult in their lives, it is easy to understand why violence in response to an insult is more common in the South than in the North. It is not just that southerners have attitudes that are more approving of violence to answer an insult *in the abstract*. The insulted southerner feels his reputation threatened, he becomes angry, and he is cognitively and physiologically prepared for aggression. The insult is a matter about which something must be done, and aggressive or domineering behavior toward offenders (or even bystanders) is required.

Of course, our laboratory experiments did not produce any truly violent behavior in our subjects, so it is an extrapolation to say that we have shown the process by which an insult results in actual violence for members of a culture of honor. However, we believe it takes more faith to believe that processes such as those shown here would fail to have consequences than to believe the opposite. Anger, arousal, and threat to status clearly constitute an explosive combination that instigates many acts of violence.

People in a culture of honor who respond with aggressive and dominant behaviors after an insult may be acting quite rationally if they are trying to avoid the stigma of the insult from their peers. Recall that in Chapter 3 rural residents of the South were shown to be more likely than those of the North to believe that a man who failed to fight or shoot when presented with affronts was "not much of a man." Similarly, interviews with our subjects showed that many southerners were convinced that it was sometimes necessary to resort to violence in order to show that one is not a "wimp."

We should add that one aspect of our experimental results is puzzling and requires some commentary. The manipulation of the private versus public nature of the insult had little effect. This is somewhat problematic, since the presumed reason that members of a culture of honor find an insult so upsetting is that it lowers one's reputation for being able to defend oneself. If the insult occurs in public, reputation is at stake to a much greater degree.

In retrospect, however, it is not clear that our manipulation was a very good one. The "public" manipulation occurred in front of people the subject had never seen and likely would never see again. Reputation could not be much damaged under those circumstances. A better manipulation would involve insulting subjects in front of acquaintances or friends with whom they expect to interact in the future. The point is important to clarify because it is highly relevant to the theory about the meaning of an insult and the utility of various responses to it.

Until more research is done, however, we may say that the experimental data—added to the homicide rate and attitude data—offer support for three important points: (1) The insult is a much more serious matter to the southerner than to the northerner. (2) It is more serious because an insult makes the affronted southerner feel diminished. (3) Consequently the affronted southerner may use aggressive or domineering behavior to reestablish his masculine status.

In Chapter 5 we turn from individual psychology to more public representations—asking whether laws, public policies, and institutions reflect and encourage the kind of individual attitudes and behavior we have considered to this point.

## Notes

1. Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, and Schwarz, in press.
2. The correlation for the two observers' judgments for amusement was .52,  $p < .001$  and for anger was .57,  $p < .001$ .
3. The debriefer explained why the research was important and why the deception and insult were used. Informal conversations made it clear that subjects were not unhappy with the treatment accorded them. When asked to rate how interesting the experiment was and how glad they were to have been in it, the modal answer was seven on



a seven-point scale for both questions. On every measure, insulted subjects were actually more favorable toward the experiment than controls.

4. Mean amusement ratings for northerners = 2.77, for southerners = 1.74,  $t(41) = 2.65, p < .01$ .

5. Mean anger rating for northerners = 2.34, for southerners = 3.05,  $t(41) = 1.61, .10 < p < .15$ .

6. There were no significant differences in how aroused, flustered, resigned, or way subjects seemed (all  $t$ s  $< 1.1$ , all  $p$ s  $> .25$ ).

7. Chi-square (1,  $N = 40$ ) = 12.13,  $p < .001$ .

8. To examine the statistical interaction between region and insult, we performed an analysis of variance on a three-level variable (no violence, violence suggested, actual violence). Higher numbers indicated greater violence. The means were: southern insult = 2.30, southern control = 1.40, northern insult = 1.73, northern control = 2.05 (interaction  $F(1,78) = 7.65, p < .005$ ).

9. Booth et al., 1989; Dabbs and Hooper, 1990; Kirschbaum, Bartussek, and Strassburger, 1992; Leshner, 1983; Popp and Baum, 1989; Thompson, 1988.

10. Booth et al., 1989; Dabbs, 1992; Elias, 1981; Gladue, 1991; Gladue, Boechler, and McCaul, 1989; Kemper, 1990; Mazur, 1985; Mazur and Lamb, 1980; Olweus, 1986; Popp and Baum, 1989.

11. Booth et al., 1989; Campbell, O'Rourke, and Rabow, 1988, cited in Mazur, Booth, and Dabbs, 1992; Dabbs, 1992; Mazur, 1985; Mazur, Booth, and Dabbs, 1992; see also Gladue, Boechler, and McCaul, 1989, p. 416; but see Salvador et al., 1987.

12. Osborne, Niekrasz, and Seale, 1993.

13. The subject was told to continue to chew the sugarless gum as he walked down the hall to deposit his questionnaire and was told not to talk while he had the gum in his mouth. This was to keep the subject from talking to observers after the insult in the public condition. The public observers rated the subject's emotional reaction to the bump. (No private observation could be made since there were no observers in the hall for the private bump in Experiment 2.) Emotion ratings in the public condition of Experiment 2 (and in the public and private conditions of Experiment 3, reported further on) yielded weak and inconsistent results regarding reaction to the bump. We believe this was because of the requirements to chew gum and not to talk in Experiments 2 and 3, which prohibited the free expression of emotion. But of course, this is a post-hoc explanation, and the results of Experiment 1 regarding anger and amusement must be treated with caution until subsequent research replicates the findings of Experiment 1 in ecologically natural circumstances. More complete details on the results of the emotion ratings can be found in Cohen, 1994.

14. Samples were frozen at  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-20^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), so that they could be assayed by <sup>125</sup>I radioimmuno-assay (Diagnostic Products Corporation) by technicians of the University of Michigan Reproductive Science Program.

15.  $t(165) = 2.14, p < .03$ . For the sake of consistency, the interaction contrast specified was +3 (for the insulted southerner condition) vs. -1, -1, -1 (for all other conditions) for all analyses in Experiments 2 and 3 (though it did not always capture the actual pattern of the data optimally). An overall "politeness index," adding scores on all behavioral measures in Study 3, showed control southern subjects to be somewhat more deferential than control northern subjects ( $p < .08$ ).

16.  $t(165) = 2.19, p < .03$ .

17. There was one other measure in Experiment 2. In a situation designed to elicit demonstrations of toughness, subjects were asked to volunteer to take electric shock. They chose the level of shock they wanted to take, once in front of two other subjects (actually confederates), and later when given a private opportunity to reconsider their choice after the two other subjects had left the room. Overall, southern subjects elected to take more shock in front of the two other people than they did in private, whereas that was not true for northerners. However, this effect held for *all* southerners, not just insulted southerners. (Complete details on the shock procedure can be found in Cohen et al., 1995.) In Experiment 3, we allowed subjects a more natural way to demonstrate toughness and dominance, hoping that would differentiate the insulted southerners from the noninsulted southerners and from both groups of northerners.

18.  $t(142) = 3.45, p < .001$ .

19.  $t(144) = 1.89, p < .06$ .

20.  $t(144) = 2.52, p < .01$ .

21.  $t(144) = 2.53, p < .01$ . Southern subjects regarded the damage to their reputations as being limited to character traits having to do with masculinity, such as "strong-weak" and "cowardly-courageous." The public insult did not differentially affect how northerners and southerners thought the other person saw them on *nommasculine* dimensions. Moreover, the insult had little effect on how the subject rated *himself* on all dimensions. For all groups that were insulted—including publicly insulted southerners—subjects' self-ratings (on both the macho and nonmacho items) were about the same and were not different from those of subjects who were not insulted.