

# Who Are You Calling Rude? Honor-Related Differences in Morality and Competence Evaluations After an Insult

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## Abstract

In two studies, we examined honor-related differences in morality versus competence evaluations as a way to tap into social judgment formation after an insult. In Study 1, we distinguished between high-honor and low-honor cultures. Participants' evaluations of a norm transgressor were gathered. Results indicated that high-honor participants devalued the transgressor more strongly in terms of morality than competence in comparison with low-honor participants. In Study 2, we distinguished between participants with high- and low-honor values and investigated morality and competence in self-perception. Participants were asked to respond to different types of insults gathered in Study 1. High-honor participants were primarily harmed in their morality after being insulted, while this prominence was less apparent in low-honor participants. Both studies showed that those who value honor highly moralize insults to a greater extent, because they take more offense to them.

Cultural differences have been the focus of much work in social psychology (Hofstede, 1980; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 2003; Triandis, 1989). Research has revealed that there is a class of cultures that is particularly relevant to the way people interact with each other in conflict situations. These are so-called honor cultures, common in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and southern parts of the U.S.A. (Beersma, Harinck, & Gerts, 2003; Cohen & Nisbett, 1997; Henry, 2009; IJzerman, van Dijk, & Galluci, 2007; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Distinctive for members of honor cultures is their effort to maintain a positive and honorable image. Having honor not only gives entitlement to respect and precedence, but losing honor is associated with humiliation and degradation (Peristiany, 1965).

One way of damaging a person's honor is by using offensive behavior toward or insulting the person (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996). Insults can lead to anger and aggression and have been shown to play an important role in the escalation of conflicts, especially in honor cultures (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; IJzerman et al., 2007; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b). Several studies have demonstrated a relation between honor and aggressive responses to insults, but there is still little empirical work on why people with high-honor concerns respond in such way to insults (see also Rodriguez Mosquera, Fischer, Manstead, & Zaalberg, 2008). One possible explanation for why people endorsing honor culture respond more vigorously to insults might relate to the way in which they evaluate themselves and each other after having been insulted. Examining how insults affect people's social evaluations can increase understanding of why people respond differently to them. In the present

article, we therefore extend previous research on insults by investigating their impact on social judgment formation. As morality and competence are considered key components of social judgment and have important implications for the way people behave in many settings (Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Wojciszke, 2005), we examine the implications of insults for perceived morality versus competence, and we assess how honor values affect these perceptions and subsequent behavior. We do so by first investigating how people from different cultures evaluate somebody else after being insulted by them, and second, by examining how people with high and low honor evaluate themselves after being insulted. Our goal is to increase understanding *why* insults affect interactions in day-to-day life differently across different cultural contexts. Understanding these processes more clearly informs us on what the function of insult-elicited aggression is and what can be done to prevent it.

## Honor

Researchers often distinguish between cultures in terms of individualism (vs. collectivism), power distance, masculinity (vs. femininity), and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Triandis, 1972; Wagner & Moch, 1986). More recently, however, researchers have also looked at other cultural syndromes such as *honor*, *dignity*, and *face*. These cultural syndromes do not describe one specific trait but are rather “a constellation of shared beliefs, values, behaviors, practices, and so on that are organized around a central theme” (Leung & Cohen, 2011, p. 2). They are also considered ideals, in the sense that they are not absolute but rather function as guidelines that model social interaction within each cultural setting. This perspective also means that not everyone within each type of culture fully adheres to these ideals. However, these ideals can be very informative for intercultural comparison.

This article concentrates on the ideal of honor, as previous research has demonstrated that insults are particularly detrimental for people who endorse high-honor values (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; IJzerman et al., 2007; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002b). Honor revolves around “...the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society” (Pitt-Rivers, 1965, p. 21). Members of honor cultures are characterized by their adherence to the honor code—a set of rules of conduct—prescribing how people should behave and interact with others in social situations. The honor code encompasses domains such as family honor, social integrity, masculine honor, and feminine honor (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002b). The way people are perceived by their peers contributes significantly to honor-culture members’ worth, more so than in other cultures. For example, one’s honor is for a large part based on the extent to which a person or a person’s in-group (such as family) is perceived to adhere to honor-related norms. Moreover, a person can only claim honor after it has been paid by others. As a result, honor can be gained or lost depending on one’s behavior in a certain context or can even be taken away by others.

It is argued that honor cultures are more likely to develop in areas with tough competition as a result of limited resources and that are beyond the reach of law enforcement and federal authority, such as herding communities (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996; Cohen & Vandello, 2004) but also inner city ghettos (Anderson, 1994). Interpersonal interactions in these cultures are based on strict reciprocity norms, and emotions such as pride and shame are considered more crucial in regulating social behavior (Leung & Cohen, 2011) than in other cultures. For example, in honor cultures, not having a sense of shame is considered a vice (Gilmore, 1987).

In other cultures, external evaluations may play a less important role in defining people’s sense of worthiness. For example, people in some cultures endorse the ideal of *dignity*. Dignity pertains to someone’s internally defined and inalienable worth (IJzerman & Cohen, 2011; Leung & Cohen, 2011). Dignity is something that is considered innate to every human being: All people are born with dignity, and in principle, everyone has an equal amount of dignity. The value of a person is thus presumed to be located internally and cannot easily be taken away by others. In such cultures, an individual’s conduct is guided and evaluated for a large part according to his or her own internalized moral standards.

Dignity cultures are more common in Western, industrialized, individualistic regions such as northern America, Canada, and North Europe. In the Netherlands, for example, values pertaining to achievement and independence are more closely related to a sense of self-worth than in honor cultures (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002a).

Cultures of dignity are argued to develop in agricultural communities consisting of independently operating farmers (Cohen, 2001), who cooperate according to a market model. Interpersonal interactions in dignity cultures are based on short-term tit-for-tat contracts, and social conduct is generally regulated by mechanisms such as law and guilt (Leung & Cohen, 2011), more so than in honor cultures.

In other words, while in honor cultures a person's moral guidelines (honor) are relatively context dependent and alienable, in dignity cultures a person's moral guidelines (dignity) are relatively internalized and inalienable. We argue that these differences affect the way people evaluate themselves and each other, and we will explore these differences by investigating honor-related differences in responses to insults.

## Insult

An insult can be regarded as a negative comment or gesture about who we are or what we do (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008). Insults represent a powerful way of expressing aggression against other people or communicating negative views of other people but a relatively subtle way of expressing such aggression when compared with physical violence. About 0.3–0.7% of adolescent speakers' daily output consists of offensive words, which averages up to about 60–90 words per day (Jay, 2009). Most of these words are considered conversational swearing and can be triggered by concrete day-to-day events (e.g., someone jumping the line or not giving way in traffic). However, insults also carry important implicit social information about underlying views of, and attitudes about, others, depending also on the cultural context. For instance, previous research (Semin & Rubini, 1990) has shown that people in more collectivistic contexts, such as the south of Italy, use more relational insults—"I wish your father an accident"—than people in more individualistic contexts, such as the north of Italy—"I wish you an accident"—to insult someone. Another well-known phenomenon associated with the cultural specificity of insults is that whereas some insults seem to be universal—for example, reference to genitals—other types of insults are clearly culture specific. For example, the reference to an illness—for example, cancer sufferer—is considered an insult particularly in the Netherlands, while a reference to the devil or Satan is particularly insulting in Scandinavian countries (van Oudenhoven et al., 2008).

One universal function of insults is that they communicate perceived violations of important general and normative values (van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). Insults thus convey important contextual information about which norms have been transgressed and which values are at stake. This knowledge is especially relevant to multicultural societies where different cultural value systems coexist. Unfortunately, research investigating the link between verbal abuse, social evaluations, and culture is scarce or refers to very general distinctions such as individualism versus collectivism (Semin & Rubini, 1990) or ethnicity-based linguistic preferences (De Raad, van Oudenhoven, & Hofstede, 2005; van Oudenhoven et al., 2008).

We believe that knowledge about how people evaluate themselves or each other after an insult is essential in understanding why people respond differently to insults, particularly when people strongly adhere to honor. Indeed, research has shown that the concept of honor is strongly tied to social evaluations (Peristiany, 1965; Rodriguez Mosquera, Liskow, & DiBona, 2012; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a). As such, one's social esteem—the extent to which one is valued by himself or herself and by others in social settings—has considerable impact on people's sense of self-worth (honor) in honor cultures. By examining how insults affect people's evaluation, we can more clearly understand why people respond differently to them.

In our research, we will elaborate on previous findings by focusing on underlying values of morality and competence to theoretically ground our predicted differences. Our aim is to assess the effect of insults on people's self-perceptions and social perceptions as a way to gain more insight into the way insults influence day-to-day interactions.

## Morality Versus Competence

Insulting someone is one of the many forms in which people pass judgments on others. Bond and Venus conceptualized an insult as "...a blatant maneuver to establish dominance over another by impugning their *competence or morality*" (Bond & Venus, 1991, p. 85; italics added). Research has shown that morality and competence are two evaluative domains central to social judgment of individuals as well as groups (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Wojciszke, 2005). Morality refers to whether the goals that people aspire to are beneficial or harmful for others (Wojciszke, 2005). Thus, morality concerns traits that are considered other-profitable such as honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity (Peeters, 1992). Competence refers to characteristics associated with effective and efficient goal attainment; it is about how well people strive for their goals, not the goals themselves (Wojciszke, 2005). Therefore, it refers to traits that directly benefit or harm the trait possessor (Peeters, 1992). Characteristics associated with competence are might, intelligence, creativity, and skill.

Judgments of morality and competence are considered key components "basic to survival in the social world" (Brambilla et al., 2011, p. 135; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Several lines of research have demonstrated that evaluations on these two dimensions form the basis for social judgments of both individuals and groups. Moreover, many researchers have found that, in general, morality has primacy over competence with respect to judgment formation (Brambilla et al., 2011; De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999; Ellemers, Pagliaro, Barreto, & Leach, 2008; Leach et al., 2007; Pagliaro, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2011; Wojciszke, 2005). For example, it has been widely demonstrated that moral characteristics have a greater bearing on impression formation of others than competence characteristics (Brambilla et al., 2011; De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999; Wojciszke, 2005). This is because when we encounter someone we do not know, we first have to assess whether the intentions of this person are good or bad, before we assess whether the person is capable of enforcing those intentions (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998).

## Cultural Differences

Heretofore, most researchers have investigated the primacy of morality and competence compared with each other in one cultural setting. However, to what extent and in what way people value these domains in different cultural contexts has not been systematically addressed so far. Moreover, the implications of such cultural differences in judgment formation in the specific context of a transgression on emotions and behaviors are also unknown. We propose that people from different cultures differ in the value they attach to the dimensions of morality and competence. More specifically, we propose that the primacy of morality in relation to competence will be stronger in honor cultures. There are several theoretical arguments to support this statement.

First, we argue that the primacy of morality is the result of honor-culture members' concern for reputation and vigilance toward offenses. Morality is considered an indication of a person's intentions (are they good or bad?), while competence is an indication of a person's capabilities (can they impose on me or not?). Honor cultures are believed to develop under circumstances of limited resources, high competitiveness, and a lack of central law enforcement (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996). Under those circumstances, it is conceivable that people are mainly concerned with ascertaining as soon as possible whether others are of good intentions and are trustworthy or not, particularly in a confrontational setting. Also, to maintain and to protect the group from threats, transgressions of moral standards have to be addressed immediately.

Assessment of might, on the other hand, may be less crucial because harm is easily imposed anyway. In low-honor cultures, where circumstances are less competitive, people consider others more as their equal and social interaction is governed by short-term tit-for-tat contracts (Leung & Cohen, 2011); concerns for moral judgments—although still important—might be less crucial in person evaluations.

Moreover, this heightened concern for moral judgments in honor cultures is not only limited to evaluations of others but also to the way people view and present themselves. In honor cultures, one's worth is more context dependent and alienable, because it depends on one's reputation and the amount of honor one receives from other group members (Peristiany, 1965). Research has demonstrated that adherence to moral norms is more important for securing group members' respect than adhering to competence norms (Pagliaro et al., 2011). This means that members of honor cultures have a stronger incentive to adhere to moral norms, because it secures them the respect they need from their group members. In low-honor cultures on the other hand, self-esteem is a greater source of personal worth than social esteem. Wojciszke (2005) has demonstrated that evaluations of the self, as indicated by self-esteem, rely more on notions of self-competence than notions of self-morality. In other words, people's evaluations of their own competence-related attributes were better predictors of their self-esteem than their evaluations of their own morality-related attributes.

## Present Studies

We argue that insults have a stronger impact on people's morality concerns than on competence concerns when they endorse honor. As such, we hope to take a first step in more accurately classifying insult-elicited aggression as serving a moral purpose. In some previous research, it has been theorized that vigorous responses to insults among those high in honor might stem from competence concerns: Retaliation is necessary so that one does not appear weak (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994; Cohen et al., 1996). However, we argue and empirically demonstrate that insults threaten (self-)perceptions of morality more than competence among those high in honor. If insults are indeed moralized more by those high in honor, subsequent responses may serve to address moral failure and restore moral standards rather than competence.

In our studies, we assess both dimensions of morality and competence after an insult because they are crucial parts of social judgment formation and relevant to the concept of insults (Bond & Venus, 1991). For example, previous research has demonstrated that insults can address both immorality and incompetence in many cultures (e.g., stupidity and physical disabilities, see also Semin & Rubini, 1990; van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). In a similar vein, insults to both immorality and incompetence are considered offensive to some extent, irrespective of cultural background (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002b). Additionally, by contrasting the two dimensions to each other within each group, we can rule out that general evaluative differences between groups drive the reported effects.

Our main interest in this research is the interplay of honor and insults. Because honor endorsement is not necessarily tied to culture and because culture does not only influence honor endorsement (Leung & Cohen, 2011), we considered honor as an intercultural as well as an intracultural variable in our studies. In study 1, we compared native Dutch participants to participants with an honor-culture background (see also Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008). In study 2, we used an honor-concerns questionnaire to distinguish between high- and low-honor ideology endorsement within a sample of Dutch participants (see also Beersma et al., 2003; IJzerman et al., 2007).

In summary, in this article, we investigate honor-related differences in how insults impact the way people evaluate themselves or each other. We do so by extending previous findings on honor and insults to the social evaluative domains of morality and competence. We expect that when people high in honor endorsement are confronted with insulting behavior, they consider this to be more indicative of immorality rather than incompetence, compared with people low in honor endorsement. We also expect that

this effect is mediated by stronger feelings of being offended among those high in honor. In two studies, we investigate how high- and low-honor participants evaluate others (Study 1) and themselves (Study 2) after an insult.

## Study 1

In Study 1, we focused on how people with different cultural backgrounds evaluate another person's insulting behavior. We hypothesized that high-honor-culture participants would consider insulting behavior to be more severe and offensive than low-honor-culture participants. We also hypothesized that although people in general judge others more readily in terms of morality rather than competence, this difference would be amplified among those from a high-honor culture. Finally, we predicted that this difference between groups in their preference for a morality judgment could be accounted for by honor-culture participants' heightened concerns for being offended. We tested our hypotheses by having participants indicate their response to an offensive episode and judge the transgressor in terms of morality and competence.

## Method

### Participants

One hundred and eighty-three participants (103 women, 56%,  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.87$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ) took part in Study 1. They were recruited on college grounds around different large cities in the Netherlands. Participants who were born in honor cultures or whose parents (at least one) were born in honor cultures—countries in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and South America—were categorized as high-honor participants ( $n = 76$ ), while participants from Dutch parents who were born in the Netherlands themselves were categorized as low-honor participants ( $n = 107$ ). Gender and age were distributed equally among both groups. Five gift certificates of € 40 were raffled off among participants as a reward for their participation.

### Instruments and Procedure

Candidates were asked to participate in a study on norm transgressions. After consenting, they received the questionnaire in paper-and-pencil format. The questionnaire consisted of several scales and a scenario describing a norm transgression. First, honor concerns were measured using a 12-item questionnaire.

Then, participants read the following scenario:

Imagine that you are waiting in line at a bank, because your debit card is broken. It is near closing time and you have yet to buy a present for a good friend. When, after waiting for 15 minutes your turn comes up, a man/woman steps in and walks straight to the counter. When you claim that it was your turn, the man/woman ignores your account. He/she tells you not to be so rude and to wait politely for your turn.<sup>1</sup>

Participants were asked to write down insults or offenses they might think of in this situation against the transgressor. These insults were gathered to be used in Study 2. Please note that the scenario did not specify whether the transgression was an act of immorality (e.g., purposefully cheating the line) or incompetence (e.g., having overlooked the row). Next, three variables—severity and offensiveness of the

<sup>1</sup>In half the cases, the transgressor was a male; in the other half, the transgressor was a female. Preliminary analyses showed no differences on the various dependent measures in respect to the gender of the transgressor. Therefore, the data were collapsed in the final analyses.

transgression and the amount of negative affect—were measured. Participants were also asked to indicate to what extent they thought the transgressor was immoral and incompetent. Finally, demographics were gathered. Upon completion, participants were thanked for their cooperation and had the opportunity to leave their email address if they wanted to participate in the raffle. All items were measured on 7-point Likert scales, unless stated otherwise.

## Measures

### *Honor Concerns*

Because honor is considered important in all cultures, but to a different degree, we included an *honor-concerns* measure to assess the assumption that participants from a high-honor-culture background indeed endorsed honor to a higher extent than participants with a low-honor-culture background. The honor-concerns scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ) was adapted from the original scale by Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2002b). Per honor domain, three items were selected that reflected the content of that domain adequately and were also relevant for our sample of students to keep the length of the final questionnaire acceptable.

Items on this scale describe a situation, and participants are asked to indicate to what extent it would reduce their self-worth if they were in such a situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). This scale measures honor-related domains such as family honor (e.g., To what extent would it diminish your self-worth if you would personally damage your family's reputation?), social integrity (e.g., To what extent would it diminish your self-worth if you were known as someone who is not to be trusted?), masculine honor (e.g., To what extent would it diminish your self-worth if you were known as someone who is not able to defend himself/herself when insulted), and feminine honor (e.g., To what extent would it diminish your self-worth if you were known as someone who wears sexually provocative clothing?).

### *Control Variables*

Previous research has demonstrated that insults might—although not always—raise general negative assessments such as negative affect or the severity of a particular insult (Beersma et al., 2003; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008, 2002b). Hence, we included two variables to control for and to rule out general negative assessments of the transgression as an explanation for honor-related differences on morality versus competence evaluations. These control questions asked about the *severity* of the transgression (e.g., How severe do you think this transgression is?) and *negative affect* (e.g., How upset would you be?). Each variable was measured with three items with answers ranging from *not at all* to *very much* (severity:  $\alpha = .74$ ; negativity:  $\alpha = .78$ ).

### *Offensiveness*

*Offensiveness* of the transgression was also measured using three items (e.g., How offended would you be?,  $\alpha = .83$ ), with answers ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*.

### *Immorality*

Participants indicated to what extent they considered the transgressor to be *immoral* on a scale consisting of six items ( $\alpha = .78$ ), with answers ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*. Both positively-worded (e.g., To what extent do you consider this person to be honest?) and negatively-worded items were used (e.g., To what extent do you consider this person to be unfair?). Before analyses, positively-worded items were recoded such that a higher score indicated more immorality.

### *Incompetence*

Participants were also asked to indicate to what extent they considered the transgressor to be *incompetent*. Six items were used to measure this scale ( $\alpha = .75$ ), with answers ranging from 1 = *not at all* to

7 = *very much*. Items were worded positively (e.g., To what extent do you consider this person to be intelligent?) as well as negatively (e.g., To what extent do you consider this person to be incompetent?). Before analyses, positively-worded items were recoded such that a higher score indicated more incompetence.

The five latter scales were developed for the purpose of this study.

## Results

Unless otherwise stated, the data were analyzed by means of ANOVA with cultural group (high honor vs. low honor) as independent variable. Table 1 gives an overview of the correlations between the different measures.

### Honor Concerns

To test the proposition that participants in the honor group actually endorsed honor values to a greater extent than participants in the low-honor group, the mean score on the honor-concerns scale was compared between the two groups. It was confirmed that participants from a high-honor-culture background scored significantly higher on honor concerns ( $M = 5.38, SD = 0.85$ ) than participants from a low-honor-culture background ( $M = 4.87, SD = 0.88$ ),  $F(1, 182) = 14.52, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$ .<sup>2</sup>

### Control Variables

The scores on the two control variables severity and negativity of the transgression were compared between groups to determine whether participants interpreted the situation differently. None of the effects reached significance (all  $F_s < 2, p_s > .10$ ). This result means that both groups considered the transgression to be equally severe and negative.

### Offensiveness

As expected, there was a significant main effect of group on the offensiveness measure,  $F(1, 177) = 28.40, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .14$ . High-honor participants reported being more offended ( $M = 4.65, SD = 1.46$ ) by the transgression than low-honor participants ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.22$ ). Thus, although both groups considered the transgression to be equally severe and negative, high-honor participants did report being more offended by it.

Table 1  
Correlations Study 1

	Honor	Negative affect	Severity	Offensiveness
Negative affect	-.03			
Severity	.11	.74		
Offensiveness	.35*	.27*	.50*	
Immortality–incompetence	.24*	.24*	.27*	.27*

Note.  $N = 183. *p < .001$ .

<sup>2</sup>Because the honor-culture group was ethnically diverse, we also examined possible intragroup differences on the honor-concerns scale. Honor-culture countries were grouped by continent, and honor concerns were compared with ANOVA. No significant intragroup differences were found in the honor-culture group,  $F(3, 74) = 0.696, ns$ .



Table 2  
 Mediation Effect of Culture on Immorality–Incompetence Through Offensiveness

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (182)	<i>p</i>	BCa 95% CI
Total effect	0.34	0.10	3.23	.001	
Culture to offensiveness	1.03	0.20	5.09	<.001	
Offensiveness to immorality– incompetence	0.10	0.04	2.83	.005	
Indirect effect	0.11	0.04	2.49*	.01	0.02–0.23
Direct effect	0.23	0.11	2.17	.03	

Note. *N* = 183. Culture (low honor = 0, high honor = 1); bootstrap = 5,000; BCa = bias corrected and accelerated.

\*Sobel *Z*.

### Immoral Versus Incompetent

Participants evaluated to what extent they considered the transgressor to be immoral or incompetent. First, both scales were entered in a paired sample *t*-test to assess whether immorality was higher in both groups than incompetence. Results indeed showed a significant effect,  $t(182) = 3.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $r = .26$ , indicating that in general participants considered the transgressor to be more immoral ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) than incompetent ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ).

### Mediating Effect of Offensiveness on Immorality–Incompetence

To assess cultural differences in the way participants devalued the transgressor and the mediating role of offensiveness, a new variable was created by subtracting the incompetence score from the immorality score for each participant, thus creating a measure of the precedence of immorality. Positive scores indicated precedence of immorality, and negative scores indicated precedence of incompetence in the devaluation of the transgressor. We then entered this variable as a dependent measure in a mediation analysis model with culture as a predictor and offensiveness as the mediator, using a bootstrap method as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004).<sup>3</sup> Results are depicted in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, the significant regression coefficient of the direct effect of culture on the difference score indicates that high-honor-culture participants gave even more precedence to immorality evaluation versus incompetence ( $M = 0.39$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) than low-honor-culture participants ( $M = 0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ). Moreover, assessment of the mediation effect demonstrated that this difference is significantly (although not fully) accounted for by the extent to which participants felt offended by the transgression. These results thus demonstrate that, as hypothesized, the extent to which high-honor participants are concerned with reputation and being offended accounts significantly for their stronger devaluation of the transgressor in terms of morality in comparison with competence.

## Discussion

This study revealed that members from different cultural groups respond differently to the same instance of offensive behavior. Participants in general considered the transgressor to be more immoral than incompetent. As hypothesized, this difference was amplified among high-honor-culture participants

<sup>3</sup>We only used offensiveness as a mediator in a simple mediator model, because previous analyses had shown that culture only affected offensiveness and not severity and negative affect.

compared with low-honor-culture participants. We also found support for our notion that this difference is accounted for by honor-culture participants' concerns for reputation and (not) being offended, as demonstrated by the intermediating effect of offensiveness. In general, study 1 confirms our prediction that moral norms indeed have more precedence over competence norms in high-honor cultures at least with respect to the way members evaluate a transgressor after an insult.

One limitation in this study is that we used only one scenario, which makes it difficult to generalize our findings to different everyday situations. We cannot rule out that the stronger devaluation in the moral domain is a result of the particular transgression and specific type of insult. Moreover, a stronger devaluation of another person in terms of moral concerns was to be expected when judging others concerns irrespective of the level of honor, as previous literature has shown that morality is a more central domain than competence, especially when evaluating others (Brambilla et al., 2011; Ellemers et al., 2008; Wojciszke, 2005). Would a similar effect occur when people had to evaluate themselves after an insult?

Furthermore, in this study, we distinguished between members of different groups on the basis of their ethnic background. Therefore, it was not possible to control for other variables that might have explained the differences we found. For example, all our participants might have been thinking of a native Dutch transgressor in the scenario, which would have constituted an in-group member for the low-honor group and an out-group member for the high-honor group. This may also be a reason for why we only found a partial mediational effect. We conducted a second study to address these limitations.

## Study 2

In the first study, we reported differences between high-honor and low-honor participants as members of different cultural backgrounds. The findings confirmed that norms regarding what is considered offensive and inappropriate in others may be even more strongly linked to morality than to competence in high-honor cultures, in comparison with low-honor cultures. However, these findings do not necessarily reflect how people evaluate their own morality versus competence, especially when they are the target of such insults. Additionally, in view of our interest in the connection between judgment formation and conflict escalation, it is important to assess not only how people respond to these insults at an emotional level (i.e., what they consider to be offensive) but also how they respond in terms of their behavioral strategy.

To examine the effect of honor values on different responses to insults irrespective of cultural background, in the second study, we distinguished between high- and low-honor participants on the basis of their adherence to the honor code as measured by the honor-concerns questionnaire of Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2002b). This method has been used in previous studies to isolate the predictive value of honor-related concerns (Beersma et al., 2003; IJzerman et al., 2007) especially because recent research suggests that not all members of a culture necessarily adhere to prevailing cultural norms (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

To study the way people with high- and low-honor values respond to different types of insults, we used insults from Study 1. We presented a selection of these insults to participants followed by questions regarding their emotional and behavioral responses to each of these insults. We selected different types of insults, to prevent our results from being restricted to one type of insult. We hypothesized that high-honor participants would consider the insults more severe and offensive than low-honor participants. Furthermore, we hypothesized that participants would consider themselves more immoral than incompetent and that this difference would be even greater among individuals with high-honor concerns, as found in Study 1. We further hypothesized that among high-honor participants, feelings of being offended by and not so much the severity of the insults would mediate the higher sense of immorality.

In regard to the behavioral inclinations of participants after an insult, we did not specify any hypotheses, because previous research on this topic is somewhat contradictory. Most studies report aggressive responses after a clear provocation (Cohen et al., 1996; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008) as well as a more reserved and avoidant response—especially at the initial stages of a confrontation (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen, Vandello, Puente, & Rantilla, 1999; Harinck, Shafa, Ellemers, & Beersma, 2013).

## Method

### Procedure and Participants

Participants were recruited randomly in the waiting room of a medical center and were asked to participate voluntarily in a study on insults. After consenting, they received the booklet containing the questionnaires. After completion, participants were thanked and given the option to take part in a raffle. Five gift certificates of € 15 were raffled off among participants as a reward.

Sixty-one participants (37 women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.79$ ,  $SD = 14.29$ ) took part in study 2. Of all participants, 77% were from Dutch decent. Other ethnicities were predominantly European (e.g., German). Only six participants (10%) had a background associated with honor cultures (Turkish and Moroccan). Exclusion of these participants did not affect the results, so they were included in the analysis.

### Instrument

Insults collected in Study 1 were used as stimuli in Study 2. In previous work, insults have been categorized based on their content reference (van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). After inspection of the gathered insults, we selected eight insult categories that were found to be most common among our data. The insult in these eight categories formed about 63% of the totally collected insults and were good representatives of commonly used insults in Dutch (De Raad et al., 2005; van Oudenhoven et al., 2008). In cases of gender relevant insults, we printed both the male and female version of an insult.

The insults that were used were mental inability (idiot, retard), antisocial (rotter, antisocial), threats and curses (drop dead, get lost), indecency (slut or faggot, whore or anal goer), genitals (dick or cunt, prick or twat), family (your mother or whorechild), diseases (cancer sufferer, typhoid sufferer), and miscellaneous (piss head, Bozo). As can be seen, we selected two insults per insult category—for example, *cancer sufferer* and *typhoid sufferer* for diseases—to create two versions of the same questionnaire. Each version was administered to half of the participants. Preliminary analyses revealed no differences on the responses between the two versions. Therefore, the data were collapsed. Using different examples from different categories of insults allowed us to measure our participants' response regardless of the content of a specific insult.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of eight sections. In each section, a different type of insult was introduced, and the same set of questions was asked about how participants appraised that specific insult (*severity* and *offensiveness*), how they viewed themselves when insulted like that (*immoral* and *incompetent*), and how likely they would behave in a certain manner (*avoid* and *aggress*) if such an insult were uttered at them.

The final part of the questionnaire contained the same honor scale as study 1. All variables were measured using 5-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*) unless otherwise stated.

### Measures

#### *Honor Concerns*

This variable was measured on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*,  $\alpha = .86$ ) with the same questionnaire used in Study 1.

### Severity

Participants first indicated how unpleasant it would be if someone familiar and someone unfamiliar were to insult them in such a way. Preliminary analyses revealed that there were no systematic differences in how people felt depending on whether the insults came from a familiar or unfamiliar person.<sup>4</sup> Correlations between the two items ranged from  $r = .49$  to  $r = .79$ , all  $ps < .001$ . Therefore, for each category of insult, the scores on these two items were averaged, creating a single variable indicating the *severity* of that insult.

### Offensiveness

Three items were used for each insult to measure how offended participants would be if they were insulted in such a way (upset, hurt, and offended; reliability coefficients of all sets ranged from  $\alpha = .78$  to  $\alpha = .89$ ). The three measures were combined into one *offensiveness* variable for each insult category.

### Immorality–Incompetence

To investigate self-perception after the insult, participants were then asked whether this insult would make them feel like an immoral person—we used the Dutch term *slecht mens*, literally translated into *bad* or *evil human being*—or an incompetent person—we used the Dutch term *stom mens*, literally translated into *stupid human being*. To examine the primacy of morality over competence in self-perception after an insult, a new variable was created by subtracting the incompetence item from the immoral item for each insult category, thus creating a difference score. Positive scores on this item indicate that an insult made people feel more immoral than incompetent, whereas negative scores indicate that people felt more incompetent than immoral after an insult.

To investigate their action tendencies, four questions probed whether participants would ignore the insulter, insult back, walk away, or use aggression after being offended with that insult.

### Avoidance

Two items were used to measure whether participants would employ a passive and avoidant strategy (ignore, walk away). Both items correlated significantly in all insult categories, with correlations ranging from  $r = .267$  to  $r = .557$ , all  $ps < .037$ , and were combined into one *avoidance* measure.

### Aggression

There were also significant correlations between the two more active and confrontational items (insult back, aggress) in the categories miscellaneous, threats, family, and disease,  $r = .361$  to  $r = .516$ , all  $ps < .006$ . The correlation between the two confrontational items in the categories mental inability, antisocial, indecency, and genitals was nonsignificant. However, combined and separate analyses yielded the same results. For practical reasons, we will discuss the results for the combined *aggression* measure.

## Results

Table 3 gives an overview of the correlations between the different measures. Unless stated otherwise, the honor-concerns questionnaire was used as a continuous independent variable, and analyses were

<sup>4</sup>Paired *t*-tests revealed that only in the threats category it made a difference whether the insult was coming from a familiar or an unfamiliar person,  $t(57) = 3.11$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $r = .38$ . Participants considered it to be worse when a threat insult came from a familiar person,  $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ , versus from an unfamiliar person,  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ .

Table 3  
Correlations Study 2

	Honor	Severity	Offensiveness	Immortality– incompetence	Avoid
Severity	.59**				
Offensiveness	.48**	.85**			
Immortality–incompetence	.25*	.24	.35**		
Avoid	.15	.35**	.47**	.13	
Aggress	-.07	.03	-.02	-.06	-.40**

Note.  $N = 61$ . \*\* $p < .001$ . \* $p < .05$ .

carried out on the aggregated score on a variable (i.e., aggregated over the eight different insult categories).<sup>5</sup>

### Severity and Offensiveness

The severity and offensiveness measures were highly correlated (see Table 3). More central to our hypothesis, both variables were also significantly correlated with honor, as predicted. This means that people with high-honor concerns considered the insults more severe and more offending than participants with low-honor concerns.

### Immoral Versus Incompetent

There was also a significant correlation between this variable and the honor-concerns measure (see Table 3). Those with higher honor concerns thus reported being more strongly harmed in terms of morality (I am a bad human being) than competence (I am a stupid human being) compared with those with low-honor concerns after being insulted.

Interestingly, and in line with our hypothesis, this variable also correlated significantly with the offensiveness measure but not with the severity measure. To further explore the relation between honor, offensiveness and severity of the insults, and the precedence of morality versus competence devaluations, these variables were entered in a multiple mediation analysis as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The mediation analysis (see Table 4) indicated that offensiveness completely mediated the effect of honor concerns on the primacy of the morality evaluation. The results also indicated that the contrast between offensiveness and severity of the insults is significant and there is no mediational effect of the latter variable.<sup>6</sup> These findings are all in line with our hypothesis that the extent to which high-honor participants consider an insult to be more strongly damaging for their sense of morality rather than

<sup>5</sup>Similar results were found if we treated the eight insult categories as separate and performed repeated measures ANCOVAs on the dependent measures, with honor concerns as independent variable. Only in the case of the immortality versus incompetence variable were the results slightly different. The repeated measures ANCOVA on the immortality–incompetence measure yielded a significant effect of honor concerns,  $F(1, 58) = 5.58, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .09$ , indicating that higher honor concerns caused people to feel more immoral than incompetent about themselves. Moreover, the linear between-subjects effect of insult categories was also significant,  $F(1, 58) = 4.09, p = .048, \eta_p^2 = .07$ , and was qualified by a significant interactional effect of honor concerns and the insult categories,  $F(1, 58) = 6.12, p = .016, \eta_p^2 = .09$ . This means that there was also an increase in the precedence of morality over competence in self-perception as insults became more severe and that this effect was mainly present among those high in honor concerns.

<sup>6</sup>Additional analyses showed that competence and morality evaluations separately did not correlate with the proposed independent variable, honor concerns ( $rs < .18, ps > .15$ ). This means that the significant correlation between honor concerns and the morality versus incompetence measure is really due to the difference between those two domains and not due to one or the other. Also, as can be expected from the mediation analysis, only the correlation between morality and offensiveness was significant ( $r = .37, p = .003$ ). The correlation with competence was not significant ( $r = .21, p = .11$ ).

Table 4

*Mediational Effect of Honor Concerns on Immorality–Incompetence Through Offensiveness and Severity of Insults*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (60)	<i>p</i>	BCa 95% CI
Total effect	0.08	0.04	2.00	.04	
Indirect effect of offensiveness	0.08	0.04	2.07*	.03	0.02–0.23
Indirect effect of severity	–0.05	0.04	–1.26*	<i>ns</i>	–0.24–0.02
Contrast	0.13	0.08	1.73*	.08	0.01–0.47
Direct effect	0.05	0.04	1.14	<i>ns</i>	

Note. *N* = 61; bootstrap = 5,000; BCa = bias corrected and accelerated.

\*Sobel *Z*.

competence is due to the fact that they consider the insults more offensive, but not because they consider them more severe.

### Avoidance and Aggression

As can be expected, the correlation between the behavioral inclinations of avoidance and aggression was significantly negative (see Table 3). Moreover, it is clear that participants indicated a stronger preference for avoidance in response to more severe and offensive insults, while there was no relation between these two appraisal dimensions and aggression. However, we did not find a significant correlation between the measure of honor concerns and participants' behavioral inclinations. This means that honor concerns did not affect our participants' preference to either aggress or avoid after being insulted.

## Discussion

In study 2, insults collected in study 1 were used to examine the different emotional and behavioral responses participants would report in reaction to these insults. Responses were compared between participants with respect to their honor concerns. High-honor participants reported stronger negative emotions, such as being hurt and offended, after being insulted than low-honor participants. These findings highlight the notion that the maintenance of a positive social image is considered more important in honor cultures and offenses to one's image harm a person's feelings (Beersma et al., 2003).

Interestingly, we found that the behavioral responses to the insult do not necessarily align with the appraisals. Despite the fact that they were more offended, participants in the high-honor group were not more likely to indicate they would engage in aggressive behavior nor employ more avoidant strategies. It is possible that we did not find any differences on the behavioral scales because participants only rated the insults without a specific context or scenario in which they would be expected to respond to the insult. However, it might also be that those high in honor inhibited their initial behavioral tendencies as a way to prevent possible escalation (see also Cohen et al., 1999). We will return to this issue in the general discussion.

More relevant to our hypotheses, we found that honor values influence the way participants interpret the insult. After being insulted, high-honor participants reported a stronger sense of immorality than a lack of competence, compared with low-honor participants. Moreover, we demonstrated that this difference between high- and low-honor participants was due to the fact that the same insult is considered more offensive to high-honor participants. This finding supports the results of Study 1 and our notion that moral concerns have more primacy in relation to competence among high-honor people because of their heightened concern for being treated with respect and not being offended.

## General Discussion

In our research, we focused on two central domains of judgment formation, morality and competence (Wojciszke, 2005), and we elaborated on the notion that morality generally plays a more central role in social evaluations than competence (Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2007; Wojciszke et al., 1998). We hypothesized that, given their heightened concerns for the prevention of offensive behavior and the preservation of honor, respect, and social image, people with high-honor values will consider morality even more central than competence, compared with those with low-honor values. We examined this hypothesis by investigating both intercultural and interpersonal differences in honor values across two studies.

Results of both studies indicated that being confronted with a norm transgression, be it cutting in line or insolence, leads to a stronger feeling of being offended if one adheres more strongly to honor values. These findings are in line with some of the previous research in which it has been demonstrated that some insults elicit more shame in those high in honor compared with those low in honor (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2012, 2002b).

Both studies revealed that when honor plays an important role—as cultural or interpersonal variable—people tend to give precedence to norms relating to morality than to competence when judging others and themselves after being insulted. When confronted with an offensive transgression (study 1), high-honor participants considered the same transgressor to be more immoral than incompetent when compared with low-honor participants. Moreover, after receiving insults themselves (study 2), high-honor participants reported perceiving themselves as more immoral than incompetent, compared with low-honor participants. Further analyses demonstrated that the offensiveness of the insult accounts for why people with high-honor values consider the same offense to indicate immorality more than incompetence. This was found for judging both others and self.

These findings have implications for a better understanding of honor-related differences in social evaluations and responses to insults. Our results indicate that there is truly more at stake for high-honor people in the face of insults. They not only have to endure more negative emotional consequences when they are insulted, such as feeling offended, but they also are more likely to consider the matter to be a case of moral failure. A cautionary conclusion might be that aggressive responses to an insult may thus be a way of maintaining moral standards, since evaluations on this domain have important implications for emotions and behavior in many contexts (Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2007). We know from recent research that shame following moral failure results in self-defensive motivation and other-condemnation when people are concerned with their social image (Gausel & Leach, 2011). Additionally, conforming to moral group norms is an important way to secure in-group respect (Pagliaro et al., 2011), which is particularly important for those high in honor. Although our data do not clearly link moral failure to behavioral tendencies, they are a first step in more clearly understanding and classifying honor-related behaviors and motivations in response to insults.

Our results also indicate that after an insult a dispute might more readily develop into a matter of what is good or bad instead of who is right or wrong. We know from previous research that disputes that revolve around differing values and moral convictions—as opposed to conflict of interest—are more detrimental and are harder to resolve (Harinck & De Dreu, 2004; Kouzakova, Ellemers, Harinck, & Scheepers, 2012). Research on moral value conflicts may thus better inform us on how to prevent honor-related conflicts from emerging and how they can be resolved once they have arisen.

Another implication of the current findings is that interventions aimed at buffering a person's moral concerns might be effective in countering the negative consequences associated with being insulted among those high in honor. This knowledge might be particularly relevant for interventions during intense conflicts in which parties are likely to express negative or demeaning views toward each other. For example, prior to negotiations, mediators might employ such interventions to buffer moral concerns and prevent the need to aggress or retaliate when confronted with an insulting counterpart. A final implication of these studies is that the interplay of honor and insults is not only restricted to culture or

ethnicity. Even among Dutch participants, we were able to show that those who endorsed honor to a greater extent reported more negative experience and moral devaluation than those who endorsed honor to a lower extent. As a result, concerns for the maintenance and protection of one's social image, reputation, and honor are relevant for conflict development and conflict resolution across different contexts.

Interestingly, our results also indicate that mere negative experiences do not directly lead to more aggression. These findings may at first seem irreconcilable with general findings in previous research demonstrating that honor-culture members show more vigorous responses to confrontational episodes and offenses (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008). However, these earlier findings too are not completely consistent, as in some studies honor-culture members responded more vigorously to insults than non-honor-culture members, but they also seemed to demonstrate less confrontational behavior before an insult was uttered or at least in the initial stages of conflict (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1999; Harinck et al., 2013). For example, Beersma et al. (2003) found that insults lead to more aggressive behavior in high-honor participants than in low-honor participants. However, this effect was mostly driven by the observation that high-honor participants were much less likely to react aggressively than low-honor participants when they were not insulted. Interactions reported by Cohen et al. (1996) on measures of dominance and aggression—firmness of handshake, distance at which subjects give way—also show this similar pattern. They seem to be at least equally driven by less dominant and aggressive behavior of the honor-culture participants when they are not insulted. Moreover, in some previous studies, participants were asked to think back to specific situations in which their honor had undeniably been harmed (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008), while in our studies participants might have chosen to distance themselves from the situation by opting to ignore the insults or walk away before sufficient harm was done to their honor.

It is important to realize that we do not state that high-honor-culture members are more moral than low-honor-culture members. Most of the research on the relation between social identity concerns and the primacy of morality is conducted in what we consider low-honor cultures, confirming the primacy of morality in these cultures as well (De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999; Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2007; Pagliaro et al., 2011). We underline these notions, and we argued and demonstrated that the primacy of morality in relation to competence is even stronger in high-honor cultures compared with low-honor cultures following an insult. We also demonstrated that this primacy is the result of the greater vigilance toward offenses and higher concerns for treating and being treated with honor and respect.

## Strengths and Limitations

In two studies, we demonstrated that when honor concerns are high, people tend to devalue others and themselves more readily in terms of morality than competence after being insulted. Thus, we were able to take two different perspectives to disentangle the effect of insults on social judgment formation. Using insults produced in Study 1 by a culturally diverse sample, we were also able to present participants in study 2 with stimuli that were genuine and fitting in a confrontational episode. Moreover, the fact that we used a community sample in this study adds to the possibility to generalize these findings.

Another strength of this research is that, in Study 1, group membership (high vs. low honor) was confirmed by differences on the honor-concerns questionnaire, corroborating ethnic differences in honor endorsement. However, the use of different cultural samples may also limit the accuracy of the reported results, as there is less control over other variables that covary with culture, which may contribute to the differences we found. Moreover, we did not assess dignity values of our low-honor-culture sample to distinguish the two cultural groups more evidently.

Therefore, in Study 2, we used the honor scale as an individual-difference variable within one culture. Using this latter method, we can more effectively show that indeed differences in honor values drive the effect. The use of a monocultural sample by itself does not necessarily inform us on cultural differences based on ethnicity. However, endorsement of honor is not necessarily tied to cultural ethnicity but can



also develop at the mesolevel. Two examples are the culture of honor in the U.S. South (Cohen et al., 1996) and the street culture in inner cities (Anderson, 1994). In both cases, a subculture of honor has developed within a broader cultural system, but as a result of the same contextual factors (i.e., limited resources, competitiveness, lack of central law enforcement). Second, as argued in previous studies (e.g., Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a) and in the current article, honor concerns are prevalent in all cultures, but there are cultural differences in the way they are construed and in their relative importance. Thus, using one cultural sample, we can more effectively show that indeed differences in honor values drive the effect.

## Conclusion

Through the examination of social evaluative domains after an offensive episode, our studies reveal that morality and competence play different roles for different people in the same situation. People who adhere to honor judge more readily in terms of morality than people who adhere to a lesser extent to honor, as is apparent by their responses to and evaluations of norm-transgressing behavior and after verbal abuse. These findings advance our theoretical knowledge of intercultural differences and contribute to conflict prevention and intervention by demonstrating that abusive behaviors and verbalizations may be moralized less among people with low-honor values. For those who are concerned with their honor, however, these insults have a more profound and severe impact because they violate their sense of morality to a greater extent.

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