

# Humiliation as Experienced by Somali Refugees in Norway

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**Abstract:** What kinds of situations trigger feelings of humiliation in Somali refugees in Norway? Why are these situations experienced as humiliating? Might some of the situations be interpreted as the result of two different habituses clashing, and thus a kind of miscommunication rather than humiliation? Or are there any real lack of recognition or lack of respect behind the humiliating situations? When Somalis humiliate each other are these reactions to their life in exile, or did the same kind of humiliation occur in Somalia? How do Somali refugees living in Norway react to their feelings of being humiliated? And what might be done in order to prevent such experiences to occur? These are the questions analysed in this paper. Based on formal interviews with 25 individuals, and casual conversations (written down in retrospect) with about 20 more, as well as participation observations in families and on cultural events, participation in a casual discussion group and several meetings with a focus group, a theory of humiliating experiences in exile is developed. It shows that refugees in a totally different society than their home country might be very vulnerable to intimidations, and might maybe also be met in hurtful ways. The theory addresses some connections between this vulnerable situation as well as clash of cultural ways of being as one important arena on which humiliation might occur. The theory also encompasses the way in which humiliation that occurred in the home country might be continued in the new country, as well as how new forms of humiliating situations might develop between individuals from the home country in the new setting. The theory identifies typical reactions that the refugees have to the humiliating situations, and lastly, some suggestions for ways to prevent such humiliation to occur.

## Theoretisations of Humiliation

Humiliation is a quite new field of research, and thus there are no general agreement of what the main traditions within the field should be. It seems that most research publications on this topic are written by psychologists, with perhaps Donald C. Klein as one of the most influential writers. He addressed a special issue of his *Journal of Primary Prevention* to the issue in 1991. In addition, Evelin G. Lindner (2000, 2001, 2002, 2004) has contributed to the theoretisation of humiliation based on her field-work and interviews in Somalia, Burundi and Rwanda. Among sociologists, Thomas Scheff (1994)

is one of the few who has contributed to this topic, by his writings on anger, shame and humiliation.

As a sociologist, my focus is on the socio-cultural bases for humiliation. My starting point for being interested in this research-topic was immigration-studies, and especially my on-going post doctor study of the integration and identity navigation among Somali refugees in Norway. I learned that many Somalis felt intensely humiliated by the way they were portrayed in the media, and by the way they were met by officials. At the same time, I conducted interviews with Norwegian refugee-workers, social workers, child care workers etc. These persons tended to portray Somalis as the worst case of immigrants, proud, strong, but difficult to understand, and often not wanting to become integrated in society. I saw that negative circles tended to occur, where both Somalis and various Norwegian officials tended to misinterpret each other. Situations of humiliation occurred, without this being intended so. At the same time I heard of much humiliation going on between Somali refugees themselves. There were clan tendencies, which lead to stigmatisation of Somalis from certain areas or certain minority clans; as well as gossiping and stigmatisation, especially towards girls who did not follow the strict gender norms of Islam.

As a sociologist, employed by the University, I could see these different arenas for humiliation from the perspective of an outsider. To use Klein's words, I was sometimes *witness* to the humiliating situations, but mostly I was a second-hand witness, in the sense that I heard these stories told rather than observed them directly. As a sociologist, I can see the socio-cultural and structural bases for this humiliation to occur, and by focusing on the systemic base of such humiliation, we can also find possible ways to prevent humiliation to occur in interactions between refugees and different actors from the host-country, as well as between refugees themselves in their first 10-15 years in a new country.

The concept of humiliation is interactional and relational. According to Donald C. Klein (1991) although the *feelings* associated with humiliation are intensely personal, the *process* itself is located in the *relationship* between the person and "the emotionally relevant human environment". Further, he asserts that the prototypic humiliating experience involves a triangle that includes: 1) *humiliators* - those who inflict

disparagement; 2) *victims* - those who experience it as disparagement; 3) *witnesses* - those who observe what happens and agree that it is disparagement. If only vicariously or in their imaginations, everyone has played all three -- the humiliator, the victim, and the witness.

This paper seeks to contribute to a theory of the distinct humiliation dynamic (cf. Klein) which becomes activated for many refugees in their host society. While a theory derived from a qualitative study can only be tentative, it can nevertheless be important in stimulating similar qualitative studies in other countries. The focus is on the person who experiences humiliation, in this case, Somali refugees in Norway. Some of the experiences are centred on meetings with various public officials, others kinds of humiliation stem from interactions with reactions other Norwegians or with fellow-Somalis. In many of the cases, I am sure that neither the humiliator nor eventual witnesses would describe the acts as intended to humiliate. But since the Somali refugee interprets them as humiliating, the result is nevertheless an experience of humiliation. Here the concept of systemic humiliation might be useful. Paul Stokes (2004) uses this concept to describe situations when ‘although none was intended the insult is received, the slight acknowledged, the put-down is felt, the rejection absorbed and the body/mind mobilises its destructive and devious response in cavernous interiors’. A victim may also feel humiliated in the absence of any deliberately humiliating act, as a result of misunderstandings, or as a result of personal and cultural differences concerning norms about what respectful treatment ought to entail (cf. Lindner 2000a).

In my interviews with Somalis in Norway the issue of humiliation comes to the surface both directly - when the experiences are named as humiliation - and indirectly - when the interviewees tell about times when they felt stigmatized or discriminated either by Norwegians or by fellow Somalis. The humiliation Somalis experience in diaspora is less severe than the humiliation some Somalis experienced during the civil war. Here it might be useful to distinguish between humiliation of different degrees of severity. The idea of humiliation covers a wide range of experiences from being the object of genocide to being the victim of gossip (Lindner 2001:8). Humiliation might be defined as a push downwards along a vertical line (Lindner 2002:126, 2004:40). Even though Lindner does define humiliation in general, I will use her definition to point to severe humiliation,

because it includes the use of force. Thus severe humiliation is ‘the *enforced* lowering of a person or a group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honour or dignity’ (Lindner 2000a:29). Severe humiliation is when you are ‘placed, against your will (...) and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect’. One of the defining characteristics of severe humiliation is that ‘the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon or made helpless’ (ibid.).

More subtle, but even though hurtful, forms of humiliation are the day-to-day experiences of some form of ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others (Klein 2001). Such experiences might trigger several feelings, of which Klein (2001) lists feeling wiped out, helpless, confused, sick in the gut, paralyzed, or filled with rage. Klein’s interviewees reported that they felt made small, stabbed in the heart, or hit in the solar plexus. No matter how many years have passed, the experience remains vivid and fresh in their minds. Lazare (1987), suggests that the experience of humiliation involves 1. visual exposure, feeling blemished, exposed, or stigmatized; 2. feeling reduced in size, i.e., feeling belittled, put down, or humbled; 3. being found deficient, i.e., feeling degraded, dishonored, or devalued; 4. being attacked, i.e., experiencing ridicule, scorn, or insult; 5. an avoidant response, i.e., wanting to hide one's face or sink into the ground. Linda Hartling (1999) has developed a long list of typical humiliating experiences such as being teased, bullied, scorned, excluded, laughed at, put down, ridiculed, harassed, discounted, embarrassed, cruelly criticized, treated as invisible, discounted as a person, made to feel small or insignificant, unfairly denied access to some activity, opportunity, or service, called names or referred to in derogatory terms, or viewed by others as inadequate, or incompetent. These different forms of humiliation might serve as a kind of operationalisation of what humiliation means, and I will use them directly in my analysis in order to refer to or understand the more concrete ways in which Somali refugees feel they are humiliated in various arenas.

Somalis living in Norway experience more subtle kinds of humiliation, whereas during the war in Somalia, more severe forms of humiliation frequently occurred. Somalis have often suffered traumatic experiences (Halcón et.al. 2003). However, the refugees’ experience of subtle humiliation must be understood in relation to the more

severe humiliation many of them experienced during the dictatorship of Siad Barre in the 1980s or during the civil war from 1991 and onwards. During Barre's dictatorship some clans were persecuted. Many living in the major cities were destroyed by Barre's aerial bombings in 1988 (Griffiths 2002:100). After Barre was forced into exile in 1991, civil war started. Bitter faction fighting ensued between clans and resulted in bloodshed and endless sufferings for the civilian population, atrocities being carried out on all sides (Lindner 2000a:60). By the end of 1992, Operation Restore Hope was launched by the US in order to establish a secure environment for the delivery of humanitarian relief. However, in 1995, the last UN soldiers were forced to leave the country. After 1993, when 18 US soldiers were killed during one bloody night, chaos has enveloped Somalia. This post-collapse was having a far-reaching effect on how Somalis were being treated in a world adjusting to September 11 (cf. Farah 2004).

For many Somali refugees the severe humiliation they experienced in Somalia was an important factor in their decision to leave Somalia. Their feeling that they cannot move back to live in Somalia before the area becomes safer and more quiet, means that they are living in Norway because they feel they have little choice. They are not here because they so much want to be, but rather because they feel they must. This condition might make the subjects vulnerable even to normal exposure in the Norwegian community. This situation furnishes the context for their experiences of being humiliated in Norway, both by Norwegians and by fellow Somalis.

### **Background information about Somalia and Somalis in diaspora**

Only a few Somalis came to Norway before 1987 (cf. Lie 2004). Similar to the immigration of Somalis to Britain, many Somalis came after the bombing of Hargeisa and Burao in 1988 which, following Griffiths (2002:78) lead to "a dramatic increase in war victims, the traumatised, and large numbers of young single mothers and children". Many of those arriving from 1991 onwards were fleeing from the collapse of the Barre regime in the south, the effects of the Gulf war and the continuing militia based warfare in the southern, coastal and central regions of the country (ibid.). At the start only a few came to Norway each year, while 60% of the Somalis have come during the past five years (cf. Lie 2004). By January 2004, slightly more than 12,000 Somalis lived in Norway, or 15.586, if we include those born in Norway from Somali parents. Most of

those who have immigrated to Norway from Somali have status as refugees (ibid.). Even though so many of the Somalis living in Norway have newly arrived, Somalis represent the sixth largest immigrant group from non-western countries (ibid.). The Somali population in Norway is very young compared to other immigrant groups. Of all Somalis in Norway, 48% are under 20 years of age (ibid.). More than half of the children born in Norway of Somali parents are under five years of age.

According to most indicators of living standards, Somalis are the refugee group that have poorest ratings. They are more often unemployed than any other groups of first-generation immigrants in Norway (Statistics Norway 2002). 25,8 % of Somalis in Norway in 2001 had a job, whereas 38,3% of first generation Pakistanis had a job and 64,8% of persons without immigrant background had a job (cf. Lie 2004). 19% of the women had work, whereas 31,1% of the men were working. The total income for Somali households in Norway is very low compared to other immigrant groups (ibid.). Many Somalis have great difficulties finding accommodation (people who rent out their houses often do not want to rent their apartments to Somali families with many children). In a study of living conditions among immigrants in 1996, half of the Somalis interviewed reported that they for sure had been discriminated against when trying to rent or buy an apartment (Statistics Norway 1997). 76 % of the Somalis in Norway rent their houses, only the remaining 24 % own their own property (cf. Lie 2004).

Even on indicators of life quality, Somalis seem to have a worse position. In a study of living standard among different immigrant groups in Norway, 36% of the Somalis reported that they had experienced racism (Djuve and Kavli 2000:71). In a Finnish study, Somalis faced more negative attitudes than most other immigrant groups, and also experienced more racist crimes than any other immigrant groups (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004). In a Norwegian survey, more Somalis than most other refugee groups reported that they feel lonely, or have nervous symptoms (Djuve and Hagen 1995; Djuve and Kavli 2000). As many as 54% of Somalis in Norway report that they feel lonely (cf. Blom 1997). Of different non-western immigrant groups only Iraqis more frequently report that they feel lonely than Somalis. This is linked to the high amount, 26,5%, of Somalis in Norway who live in households of only one person (cf. Lie 2004).

Literature from other western countries, such as Australia, England, Canada and Finland, reveal very much the same picture of the situation for Somali refugees. Even though Somali settlement in England, because of the British colonisation of North-Somalia, goes back to the early 1900, very much the same picture of those lowest on the hierarchy, is used as a description by David Griffiths (2002:80-81) who has studied Somalis in London. Similar to the Somali situation in Norway, surveys show that the majority of Somalis in London are under 20 years of age, and similar to Norway (cf. Lie 2004), there is a high proportion of female headed households, at the same time as the average household is significantly larger than the mainstream population. Chronic unemployment, poor housing and literacy and consequent problems in accessing mainstream social and educational services are typical for Somalis both in England and in Norway (Engebrigtsen 2004, Griffiths 2002:81). The greatest difference in the situation of Somalis in England and in Norway, is that Somalis in England have access to long-standing Somali communities including second and third generation Somalis, and that for many Somalis Britain means home. Recently arrived refugees often have family links with Somalis settled in Britain, whereas this is often not the case with Somalis arriving Norway. A study of Somali refugees in Canada show that they encounter considerable difficulties during the initial stages of resettlement (Danso 2001). They face social exclusion and multiple forms of disadvantage including high unemployment, underemployment, and overcrowding, as well as frustrations and despair that sometimes result in suicidal behaviours, particularly among the young males. Host language incompetence and recency of immigration are some explanatory factors, but the study concludes that systems of institutional and everyday racism also have created very formidable barriers for Somalis as they integrate into their new country (ibid.).

The point with presenting these figures of Somalis living standard is not to contribute to a top-down racial hierarchy which concludes that Somalis are more disadvantaged than others (cp. Song 2004, who warns against such hierarchies). The point is more to give a context for understanding the vulnerability many Somalis feel in exile and the following over-exposure to feeling humiliated. Even though Somalis are of the least privileged, in regards of status, many had higher status in Somalia than they achieve in Norwegian society. This occurs even though their living standard increases. In

Somalia most people lived in houses without walls, and with no water or electricity. In Norway they have more space in their apartments, and many more facilities. Even though most Somali people are in a better economic position in Norway than in Somalia, they are unexpectedly placed low on the social ranking scale, and they experience many problems that they had not foreseen. Many say that they had expected to achieve a higher standard of living when coming to Norway than they actually achieved. In Norway, they are put in the position of those who receive, those who should (according to an informal rule) show gratitude or thankfulness.

Somalia before the war did not have a social welfare system similar to the Norwegian one. The responsibility for poor people or those people who needed various forms of help was the duty of the clan. The clan should provide both money and help when needed. Somalis travelled from a country in ruins to an extremely thoroughly organized society. There is no social structure, service or system that functions in Somalia. Money goes from hand to hand; appointments go from mouth to mouth (Klepp 2003:80). One has to know who one can trust and who one can count on. It is all about who is friend and who is enemy (ibid.)

Somalia is the only country in the world which has not had any centralised administration for the last 15 years (Haakonsen 2004, Griffiths 2002:45). Somalis are probably one of the peoples of the world who have least experience with a centralised state system, mostly because of the traditional nomadic governance system with its emphasis on equality, and because of dictatorship and civil war (Engebrigtsen 2004). At the same time Norway is one of the states of the world with most official institutions and the meeting between the Norwegian and the Somali thus is full of mistrust and miscommunication (ibid.). The main problem in relation to humiliation seems to be that they are met in a way they did not expect, a way that threatens their pride in being Somali.

Somalia has by several researchers been described as egalitarian, especially because of the nomadic traditions (Lewis 1961, 1983, Lindner 2000b, Griffiths 2002). This egalitarian habitus is referred to as a contrast to being polite and showing thankfulness (Lindner 2000a:276). Also Somali respondents give a description of their own cultural habitus as egalitarian, direct, not bowing or creeping or showing too much politeness,

someone who do not want to be told things, and who do not want to offer anything. Many Norwegian research reports on Somali refugees conclude that this Somali habitus might be one reason why refugee workers report of more difficult interaction with Somalis than with many other immigrant groups (Klepp 2003, Engebrigtsen 2004).

### **Majority – Minority Humiliation**

#### *Humiliation in Meetings with Various Authorities*

Many Somalis report that they feel controlled by officials, they do not like being told things and they feel intimidated because they experience that Norwegians in various public offices lecture them. There thus seems to be a clash between social workers, immigration workers etc. wish to help or guide newly arrived refugees, and the way some Somali refugees interpret these efforts. Somalis report that they burn inside when they have to bend their neck because of such lectures (Klepp 2003:83). When officials try to give information about 'how things are done in Norway', the result might be that a Somali turn his back and leave. The ways in which things are said mean a lot.

This means that even though some of the lectures from the officials probably are well-meant (as help or guidance); the result might nevertheless be that the recipient feels humiliated. Refugee-workers in the municipalities or in special Somali projects, tend to describe Somalis as 'the most difficult immigrants to integrate', but simultaneously as strong, proud and even elegant or aristocratic. Officials who work with Somali refugees often seem to view them partly with frustration and partly with admiration.

Newly arrived refugees find themselves in a position where they time and again must walk their way to different kinds of state or municipal offices, such as the police station, Directorate of Immigration, a social welfare office, employment office, national insurance office, child health centre, local refugee office and adult education school. For Somalis, all these offices resemble something completely new. To be dependent on the help of officials is as mentioned earlier a new situation for Somalis when coming to Norway (except for those who previously have lived in another western country). Public offices do not share the intimacy and warmth which other people of the same clan would have for each other. Humiliating experiences in meeting with public authorities might occur among all refugees coming to a new country, but according to several of the

immigration workers, social workers and other officials I have interviewed, Somali refugees are more prone to experience different situations as insulting than other refugees.

Somalis often view the various offices as one and the same, all resembling 'the system' or 'the state'. Thus when one person in one of these offices is rude to them or humiliates them, they think that the state humiliates them. They talk about the need to learn the system, and those who have not learnt this, are those who fail in this society. To learn to deal with the system seems to be a buffer against feeling humiliated, and also decreases the number of humiliating situations.

The first phase of settlement seems to be a critical phase regarding feelings of humiliation. A great majority of Somali refugees are illiterates (cf. Somali conference 1998). The Somali school system has not functioned since before the war. The class room education of newly-arrived refugees might trigger a sense of failure and thus also feelings of humiliation, in the sense of being made to feel small or incompetent. Sometimes Somalis also feel more directly discriminated in these situations:

I am attending a Norwegian course. In my country, we can pray whenever we want to. That is what I call the freedom of belief. But not in Norway. I think it is difficult to accept the fact that I cannot pray during the course. To pray is half of my life! I heard that there is freedom of belief in Norway, but that is not true. This is very hard for me, so I am considering quitting the course. I get 5,000 Norwegian kroner if I complete the course, but if I must choose between praying and 5,000 kroner, I will choose to pray. (Somali woman in her 30s).

It becomes evident how heartfelt this was for this woman, because a few months later she took her children with her and emigrated. She couldn't bear to live in a country where she was denied the right to live and practice in the same way she had done in Somalia.

Similar statements regarding Norway's lack of freedom of religion are related by many Somalis. Not being allowed to pray in various settings, like language courses, schools or at work, is experienced as humiliating. Seen from a majority perspective, there is perhaps little ground for feeling humiliated because you cannot break up the lecture in order to pray. There would be a lot of disturbance if Muslim participants in the language courses every now and then should leave the lecture like this. On the other hand, praying is done five times a day, which would mostly mean only once during the daily school period, and

takes only five minutes. Many Muslims know how to discretely raise up and go to a corner of the room to pray, and then sit down again without making much disturbance.

Several Somalis report that they feel humiliated by the way the politicians talk about Somalis. One respondent was angry at the way the politicians reacted to the problems in the Somali population, and felt humiliated by the authorities trust Somali resource persons who were critical to their own people:

The politics they have conducted against Somalis has had the form of ready-made solutions. Somalis have never been included in planning these solutions. Somalis feel that Somalis as a group are suppressed by the state. I am a Somali resource person, and I also feel humiliated by the fact that when Norwegian authorities seek advice from a Somali person, they choose persons who are critical to Somalis. I think these persons spread lies about the Somali people, out of an interest in being accepted by the Norwegian system. They have suffered under an undemocratic state in Somalia [the dictatorship under Siad Barre], and thus think they must be strict with Somalis. But they struggle with their identity, as they distance themselves from their own. My position is to give constructive criticism, by not using labels that stigmatise other Somalis (male Somali in his 30s).

Many of the respondents report feeling humiliated by being falsely suspected for committing criminal acts, not receiving the benefits they think they rightfully deserve or being treated in a bad way, by being looked down at by the officials:

I have experienced it very stressful to meet all the different authorities. Once I was falsely suspected by the police in a case where some Somalis fought in the street. My meeting with the social welfare office was also a disappointment. I had expected to have a much higher standard of living when coming to Norway than what I in fact had, and I felt humiliated by the strict way I was met when I was trying to increase the size of my grant [which is given only once to all refugees in Norway] for buying furniture, clothing etc. (Somali male in his 40s)

Many Somalis feel that the authorities suspect them and that they are rigid and lack understanding or empathy. On the one hand, some surely experience that they unfairly are denied access to services, on the other hand, many situations experienced as humiliating probably more has to do with unrealistic experience of what or how much they rightfully should receive. I will come back to this in the chapter on prevention.

### *Humiliation in the Labor Market*

Somali refugees experience Norwegian society as being anything but inclusive, as they are often being met by closed doors, both in the labour and in the housing market. One

respondent reflected on negative media images having an impact on exclusion of Somalis from the job market:

In Somalia, the war is the problem. Here in Norway, we are free from war, but then it is difficult to find employment. In Somalia, there are also many who are unemployed, but they can do other things instead. There no one thinks that other people hinder them from getting a job, but here they experience discrimination. Here, eighty percent of Somalis do not have a job. Then there must be factors other than competition that hinder them in having a job. The media writes that Somalis are so and so. An employer will notice this and will exclude Somalis when he is hiring new people. If refugees do not have a job they become a burden to the society. But if they have a job they become a resource. It is important to be a good example for others (male Somali in his 40s).

Many Somalis have experienced discrimination from employers. One mother says she has no belief in education, after seeing so many well-educated Somalis who cannot even get a job as a cleaner. One woman was disillusioned after being fired from her job because she refused to take off her Muslim head-cloth, the *hijab*. One Somali doctor had been working hard to get the extra formal education needed in order to work as a doctor in Norway, but did not get any jobs because he did not speak Norwegian well enough. He has more or less given up, so that instead of working hard to improve his language, or instead of trying to get jobs within the health system, he now works with refugees who have just come to Norway, and tells them about the need to remain active. By talking all day with newly-arrived refugees, he is not in the best position to improve his Norwegian language. And he has little confidence in his ability to get the type of professional job that suits his long education. For those Somalis who wish to integrate into the Norwegian society, their will to do so might be seriously impaired by such experiences. Resignation and anger become for many possible reactions to long periods where they have done everything to attain success, in the educational system and/or the labour market, without finding any open doors.

### *Humiliation at School*

Some Somali children who have not been born in Norway experience being *teased* or *bullied* at school. Because they do not yet speak fluently enough, and cannot explain what happened to the teacher afterwards, they often experience that blame is put on them, even when other children started the fight. One mother states that she feels humiliated when

her children are punched at school, and she as parent is not allowed to hit back. She cannot behave in the ways she is accustomed to in Somalia:

I wonder how you raise your kids here in Norway, alone, without relatives who help you, and when someone hassles your kids, what do you do then? At school one of the other kids hit my child. I wanted to hit this kid back, but I have learned that you do not do that here. But I wanted to take revenge. When I use all my time and effort on my children, and then somebody else hits them, what shall I do then? (Somali female in her 30s).

She knew of no other way to deal with such harassment of her children, and this resulted in a feeling of powerless. Many Somalis report that they feel humiliated by the way their children are treated in school. This is another arena where authorities' efforts in helping or guiding often are misunderstood as humiliation and insult. Several of my Norwegian respondents state that measures in order to help Somali children who do not manage well at school, are met with anger and refusal from Somali parents. Such measures might be the offer of extra study lessons with an assistant in order to manage school work, or guidance from the pedagogic-psychiatric office (*PPT*) at school in how to help their children adapt better at school. Klepp (2003:81) describes the same pattern of Somali parents who experience such offers as incomprehensible and frightening.

Somalis express that they doubt that Norwegians know best what a Somali family need. They would thus rather seek help or guidance from elder Somalis from the same clan. They experience the public officials as ambiguous; someone who says they want to help, but who nevertheless do not understand what sort of help was needed. One Somali social worker, who has a job helping Somali families to find accommodation, said about one of the families that he helped:

I try to help them understand the system. The family has heard rumours about kindergarten which are not in accordance with reality. When their little boy got sick, the parents took him to the doctor in order to get a confirmation of the child being so sick that the mother could not participate in the Norwegian course. The doctor, however, thinks the child is healthy enough to go to the kindergarten, so that the mother has no reason to stay at home. The family has a 'hidden agenda': keeping the cash-for-care benefit [a benefit for those who stay at home with the children instead of sending them to the kindergarten]. The family argues like this: The child has a good time with its mother. It is important that mother stays at home and makes food for the family. One creates unnecessary chaos when the mother is out 8 hours daily. Mother is not used to this. The system is brutal. Norwegians do not understand anything about family life etc. The family is thus in collision with Norwegian authorities, which wants the children to go to kindergarten in order to learn Norwegian etc. and

wants the women to enter the labour market, in order to achieve integration and equality between man and woman. (Somali male in his 50s)

I think this description accurately points out the way 'good' purposes of the welfare system are experienced as controlling, humiliating, uncomprehending etc. by Somali families. Not being allowed to make their own choices regarding what is best for their own family is experienced as an unwanted intimidation.

*Humiliated by being Defined by a Sense of 'Otherness'*

Many Somalis in Norway, as in many other Western countries (cf. Ali 1995, Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004:88), have a hard time handling the 'Otherness' attributed to their ethnic group by the media, by politicians and by the majority population in general. This is an experience they share with many other immigrant groups. Klepp (2002:7) has analysed presentations of Somalis in the media, and has found that from the beginning of the 1990s and till 1998, there was a change in the way Somalis were represented by the media, and there was an increasing negative focus on them as 'difficult and conflict-producing', both in Norway and in other countries (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2004:93). Headlines like "Bloody gang-riots - Somali youths involved", "child care cases over-represented by Somalis" and "Somali youths as ticking bombs", were not unusual. Klepp that out of the total amount of reports of Somalis she found in the net versions of the newspapers, 88% were negative focused.

Many Somalis feel humiliated by this public image of the dangerous, the criminal or the non-integrated Somali – they are reduced to a stereotype people, rather than being presented as a group of unique individuals. Some Somali women feel that Norwegians only relate to them as victims because they wear *hijab* and because they have been circumcised. A male college student in his 30s, told to me that he was afraid that his daughters might not have any pride in being a Somali. He says that many young Somalis refuse to say that they are Somalis. Common for almost all of the Somalis I have interviewed, is that they in some way or another feel humiliated by the negative or exotic public image that has been created. One woman who had taken a bachelor degree in Norway, and was thinking of proceeding with a master, was told by a Norwegian colleague that he would not advice her to do so, she should rather continue playing drums, because that was what she was best at. Such sayings are extremely humiliating.

This woman was indeed good at playing drums, but she had also had a very successful work life in Norway, and had a good and rewarding job. Reducing her to only the exotic African is only one example of Somalis experiencing that they are reduced to a stereotype instead of being recognised for all their individual qualities.

*Humiliation Caused by Questioning of Ethnic Belonging*

Many Somalis report that it is immensely humiliating to be a suspect ‘nobody’ at every passport control, or to be a refugee from a country that has ‘messed it up totally’ (Lindner 2000:51). Several respondents also felt humiliated when asked how they define themselves in national terms:

I do not like being asked why I do not feel that I am a Norwegian, and then after that I hear somebody else say that I am a foreigner. No matter what choice I make it is not accepted. I try to adapt, but even so, I am viewed as a foreigner, because I do not have blond hair, and my skin is not light-coloured (Somali female in her 20s).

Yes, you are reminded of this constantly. Where are you from? People always ask. My daughter was asked in the kindergarten where do you come from? She said the name of the city in Norway where she was born. But now she says “I am from Somalia, because my skin is brown” (Somali female in her 20s).

Some of the young Somali women I have interviewed feel pushed by Norwegians in the direction of acting and dressing like them on the one hand, and other hand, they sense that others will always see them as non-belonging foreigners no matter how hard they try not to be:

Last year, on the Norwegian Constitution Day, I was interviewed, and was asked why I did not wear a Norwegian national costume (*bunad*). I said I do not wear it because I am not a Norwegian. I cannot force myself to be accepted! I will always be a foreigner! (Somali female in her 20s)

A dark-skinned refugee is continuously reminded of his or her minority position in relation to the white majority, and the underlying message which they might sense in the question ‘where do you come from?’ is that ‘you do not belong here’. The question of national or ethnic identity might thus have the effect of placing the other in a context of non-belonging, even though the person who is asking perhaps only thinks of him or herself as curious and positively interested.

## **Intra-Minority Humiliation in Exile**

### *Humiliated by other Somalis because of Clan Membership*

In the previous section, we saw that Somalis often find questions about where they come from or how they define themselves as humiliating. However, in the aftermath of the Somali civil war, there are much humiliation going on between Somalis all over the globe. Griffiths (2002:99) writes that where social contact between Somalis had been unproblematic, the experience of war has created divisions and memories of violence which scar social relationships for many years to come. Both in Somalia and among Somalis living in different Western countries, knowing who you are and who the other is in clan terms, is often vitally important (ibid.). Thus, many Somalis in Norway also tend to humiliate each other on the basis of ethnic belonging. A Somali woman I interviewed had moved to live with her parents in Kenya when she was a child. 18 years ago, she travelled to Norway with her own daughters. She has taken her education in Norway and now works in helping immigrants get jobs. In Norway she experiences that even other resourceful Somalis bully her for being not really Somali, since she lived in Kenya. They call her *sijui*, meaning 'I don't know'.

Several Somalis report *bullying* because of clan occurs also in Norway. People from one clan might say things like, we are better, and there are a lot of political strategies on the basis of clan. Severe humiliation especially occurs towards members of the minority *Midgan* clan. The leader of a Somali youth organisation, had been involved in helping young Somali girls who had problems. He told about one teenaged girl who had become pregnant with a boy from the *Midgan* clan. Her relatives forced her, by means of *violence*, not to marry the boy, because of his clan background. She found shelter at the house of an elder, distant relative, a woman. This was the worst case the organisation has had so far in their aid-work with Somali girls. The worst thing in these cases is that the Somali milieu closes itself totally in order to *exclude* the norm-breaker from the community.

Another group of young Somali women, who are excluded in the Somali milieu in Norway, are those who marry Norwegian men, whereas marriage between Somali men and Norwegian women is accepted.

I have a girlfriend who is together with a Norwegian boy. This is very tough for her, all that she has to go through. Once she went together with her boyfriend to *Grønland* (an area of Oslo dominated by many Pakistani and Turkish shops, and many Somali men tend to gather in the street there). Her boyfriend held his arm around her. Then some Somali men spit on her and called her “whore”.

(Somali female in her 20s)

To be labelled in such a way are common ways of bullying reported by several Somalis. Even though Somali girls I have interviewed argue that they have much more freedom than what is usual among female Pakistani class mates, they must even so adhere to strict moral codes. According to the former leader of a Somali youth organisation, some Somali girls who violate the strict sexual norms of who they may date or how they should behave (not drinking alcohol, not go to Norwegian parties or pubs, not have sex before marriage) are sent back to Somalia in order to ‘relearn’ the culture. Some are also *forced* into marriages. Forced marriages are, however, not an extensive problem among Somalis in Norway. Perhaps a reason for this is that even when a girl is forced to marry, divorce is to a large extent accepted among Somalis if the marriage does not succeed (cf. Fangen 2002).

#### *Humiliated by being Imposed Strict Moral Norms by other Somalis*

Somali girls who attend schools and get to know girls and boys from the white majority encounter situations where they are faced with differing views on gendered assessments of behaviour (cp. Salmela, 2004). Most of the young Somali women I interviewed have adopted more modern clothing, which in several ways differs from the prescribed dress for a Somali girl. These young women wear trousers, and they do not wear a *hijab*. As a result, they are constantly exposed to humiliating comments from elder Somalis.

In a casual discussion group between five Somali women in their 20s this was intensely discussed.

‘When you go to a Somali café, you know that they talk about you’.

‘You hear so much about how you behave. But I want to be the way I am’.

‘There are many who make a standard picture of what you should be like. If you go out once a week, they say that you are a bad girl. Now I have gone without head-clothing for three years, and then I’m a bad girl?? I think they should see the positive sides of the person instead!’

‘Also those our age think like that. If you use *hijab* you are seemingly higher up. You should *not* use trousers, and *not* clothes that show your body. I think many use a *hijab* even though they do not want this themselves’

The last speaker's statement reveals the dimension of humiliation in these reactions. The young women who accept dressing in traditional Muslim women's clothes are viewed as higher up on the scale of dignity, than those women who choose to wear more modern clothing.

One of the women present wanted to present the aspect of wearing a *hijab* as something solely voluntary, something you choose out of religious conviction only.

When I go to the mosque, I read the *Qu'ran*; it is not my parents who say what I should do. And to wear a *hijab* is my own private choice; I go to the mosque and I wear a *hijab*, and I get irritated if anyone criticizes it (female Somali in her 20s).

This woman probably regards this as her own choice precisely because she does not violate her parents' or other adult Somalis' attitudes. The mechanisms of suppression are first activated when a young woman violates the rules. In order to avoid condemnation, many young women choose to play the game when seen, but drop it when on their own. One of the women commented on this.

'Many have a double moral standard. They wear the *hijab* when other people see them, but when they are together with friends they take it off'.

'I do not think this has anything to do with religion. If you do it for God, you must wear it 24 hours a day'.

Then several of the other women gave various examples of *hijab* being imposed on young Somali women, against their own will. All of them, except the woman who chose to wear a *hijab* herself, agreed that most Somali young woman wear it in order to satisfy the demands of others, or even because their own boyfriend demands it. Some women choose to start wearing it a couple of years before they marry, because they then are regarded as more worthy as a wife, than if they didn't wear it. Again the scale of worthy woman on the top of the dignity scale and the unworthy, modern woman on the bottom is seen.

Some resourceful elder Somali women underline that not all adult Somalis share this perspective. These are women who are engaged in Somali organizations in Norway in order to help other Somali women, and create social gatherings and so on for Somalis. Many of these women have daughters who do not wear *hijabs*. They do not impose that on them.

Even though the young women did experience negative reactions from other Somalis because they chose not to wear *hijabs*, they did not feel the press as unbearable.

I cannot talk for everyone. Yet there are in fact some who manage no matter what others say. I do not wear a *hijab*, and I must listen to the complaints from Somali neighbours and people I meet accidentally, they comment on the fact that I do not use it (female Somali in her 20s).

This woman found the complaints tiring, but she did not get depressed by it. It was rather felt as a constant pressure, which irritated her, but which she even so managed to cope with. The other women also experienced such comments as exhausting and limiting, and even humiliating; but even so, this sense of humiliation is not strong enough for them to choose to give up, and start using *hijab* despite their own wishes.

Another instance of rules imposed by their parents or the milieu, however, was the extent to which they could stay out with friends in the evenings or not. The young women in the discussion group felt frustrated and somewhat humiliated by parents who isolated them in order to prevent them from having a bad reputation or from experiencing things which might violate the strict moral rules.

The parents think that, well, she just has to manage herself. But if they hear that their daughter has a boyfriend, then they keep her at home. It is always our mother who rules. Girls are not allowed out, whereas boys are.

<konklusjon: dignity vs. humiliation etc. noe fra Skeggs her? + Lindner om dette>

### **Reactions to Humiliation**

In this paper, I have described several instances of humiliation as experienced by Somalis living in Norway. So how do Somalis who feel strongly humiliated in this new position react to this pain?

According to Klein (2001), the experience of humiliation and the fear of humiliation are implicated in a variety of mental illnesses and engender rage which is manifested in anti-social behavior, murder, and suicide. In a study of living conditions among refugees in Norway, Somalis was the group (out of four) with highest frequency of nervous symptoms (Djuve and Kavli 2000). In another similar study, Somalis was the one out of six immigrant groups with the highest frequency of mental problems (20%). Such mental problems might of course be the long term effect of traumatic war experiences or traumatic experiences in refugee camps and in transition. However, many Somalis I have

interviewed report that they feel more hard hit by experiences linked to their new situation in Norway.

The effects of humiliation are probably universal, whereas the means are culturally dependent (cf. Lindner 2000:374-5). Some common reactions are depression, the use of drugs, flight into religion and aggression (ibid.). When one respondent, a Somali social worker, read this (in an earlier draft of this paper), he became very enthusiastic. He said that he liked especially the juxtaposition of religion and dope. 'Religion is opium for the people', he quoted Karl Marx. He said that it is true that to become very religious is a counter-reaction to humiliation, especially when you look upon those Somalis who were not particularly religious in Somalia, and not even their first period in Norway, but who after a while become extremely rigid and religious, and use religion in order to justify a very negative view of the Norwegian culture. He gave one example: an earlier client of his was earlier very open to Norwegian culture. He even married a Norwegian woman and had a baby with her. Later on they were divorced, but he continued dating Norwegian women, and he drank alcohol etc. The Somali social worker did not see him for ten years. Then he met him accidentally when he went out with his Norwegian colleagues, and they took a taxi. The taxi driver was his former client. He had now a big beard. Later on, they met again, and the taxi driver said: 'Why do you hang out with these Norwegians? Their culture is shit! You should rather go to the mosque, you with all your knowledge, we need you there'. The Somali social worker said that he was disappointed in the change in the man. It was good that he was no longer a welfare recipient, and that he managed to work within the private business sector, driving for a Pakistani man, another Muslim. The negative thing about this, however, was that he had adopted an extreme view by joining the ideology of Bin Laden: that you will come to paradise if you fight the West. He would now marry a Muslim woman with *hijab* and so on, and talked very negatively about Norwegian women.

This story is only one example of a man who lets religion function as a shelter against the humiliation he feels Norwegian society thrust upon him. He hated his former position as welfare recipient. Nor did he succeed in his marriage with a Norwegian woman. Now he manages by being part of a Muslim milieu, driving the car of another Muslim man, and condemning the Norwegian culture that did not let him in. He gets his

very negative picture confirmed every day, when driving drunken Norwegians late at night. His picture of Norwegian culture would probably have a much better chance of being positive if he worked in another kind of job where he could meet Norwegians in a more serious context.

Also many other Somalis conclude that many Somalis are much more religious here in Norway, than they were in Somalia. More women use *hijab* than what was usual in Somalia before the war. Some tell of husbands who use religion in order to keep their wives in place, so that they do not feel humiliated by a wife who suddenly goes out, meets other people and learns to know the new society. In a study of Somali women in Australia, the same pattern was found, that Islam had become more important because of their experiences with persecution and violence during war, and the hardships of replacement. War and exile lead to increased importance of religious faith, and Islam sustains them during times of emotional distress (McMichael 2002:172-173).

Many Somali men chew more *khat* here than what was customary in Somalia. The same over-use of *khat* is seen in London, according to Griffiths (2002:81). Somalis themselves state that this is a reaction to their sense of hopelessness, depression, frustration and anger. They hang around at the street-corner, chew *khat* all the evening, and sleep all day.

The dynamics of humiliation, both that which is experienced and that which is feared, play an important part in perpetuating international tensions and violence (cf. Klein 2001). There have also been a great many instances of violence among Somalis in Norway, both domestic violence and street violence. Street violence has mostly occurred among young Somali men, who did not manage school, but who sought comfort in criminal gangs. Domestic violence and abuse has, according to Natoschia Scruggs (2004), increased because of the civil war. Women were granted many rights under the 1979 constitution, but all progress was erased by the war. Children were traditionally well protected within the family network. However, Scruggs asserts, societal disintegration has left these two groups particularly vulnerable. She describes the same pattern among Somalis in diaspora. The use of violence might be a result of the brutality which the war has caused, but might also be triggered by a feeling of frustration and anger of not coping with one's own situation in diaspora. Men might feel threatened by the many rights women have in

the new country, and by the new economic independence of their women, due to their rights to social benefits from the state. Feelings of humiliation might lead to acts of humiliation. This is seen in several relations between husband and wife among Somalis in Norway. A Somali woman who worked as a helper for Somali women with problems, reported to me many instances of Somali women who were beaten by their husbands, because the husbands felt humiliated by the wives' economical independence because of social benefits given by the state. In Somalia the men had the role as breadwinners, here they feel superfluous. These men try to retain a feeling of being in power by holding their wives down, not allowing them to go out, or even bullying them for their appearance, saying they are ugly etc.

Another, more self-centered, reaction to humiliation might be distancing oneself from everything, a kind of mental disease. A concept is used among Somalis for men who distance themselves from real life, and only think of the Somalia they have lost. They are known as *buufis*. According to Zorc and Osman (1993) the concept originally meant 'to blow or to inflate'. In refugee camps in Kenya, the concept is, according to Cindy Horst (2004) who has done fieldwork there, used for someone's hope, longing, desire or dream to go for resettlement. But the Somali refugees also gave three other meanings: resettlement itself, the people who go overseas and the madness that occurs when the dream to go overseas is shattered. According to Somalis in Norway, *buufis* is only used about a kind of mental disease, with the above-mentioned symptoms of distancing oneself from contact with others. In several severe actions of violence, including murder, committed by Somali men in Norway, the perpetrator have been diagnosed as suffering from psychiatric diseases. According to some Somali helpersons I have interviewed, who have been in contact with several of these men, these men suffer from *buufis* or report that they were commanded to commit the violence by a *djinn* (spirit).

For some, different experiences of humiliation in exile might lead to a reorientation into their own traditions and culture, and to living a life on the margins of the Norwegian society, by seeking the company of other unemployed Somalis, in organizations or cafés. For others, such negative experiences lead them away from Norway and further on to other countries, where they think that things might be easier. The implication of such

uprooting is an unstable sense of identity and a failure to find a sense of belonging anywhere.

### **What is it That Prevents Humiliation among Somalis in Norway?**

There are several ways to heal humiliation. What kind of solution is best depends upon what kind of feeling is triggered, the reaction to this feeling and what the current situation between the parties is, in the aftermath of the humiliating act. On a psychological level, to stop seeing oneself as a victim and focus so much on the humiliators, and instead try to build up one's own sense of dignity is the best way to be healed (cf. Lindner 2002:133). In some Somali, as well as some Norwegian lead organisations, voluntaries (and in some cases employed) work with self-help groups in order to increase the empowerment in Somali (and in some cases also other nationalities) refugees. Generally, recognition which will give new self-confidence and hope, is the antithesis to humiliation (cf. Lindner 2000). In order not to humiliate Somali families, the message from many Somalis is that authorities should avoid arrogance and 'I know best' attitudes, and let the Somalis themselves decide over their own lives (cf. Klepp 2003:84).

On a more structural level, increasing one's living standard might lead to less vulnerability for humiliating experiences, and even less humiliation to occur. Work, a place to live, marriage/family, after many years perhaps also wealth, are mentioned by Lindner (2000a) as humiliation-preventing factors. These factors might resemble those factors usually thought to be important for a person's sense of life-quality. According to my observations of Somalis in Norway, especially one factor seems to be important in order to make humiliating experiences less important, and that is a good and rewarding network, including both Somali and Norwegian persons.

To be generally well-integrated might have an effect. I have met many resourceful Somalis in Norway who are satisfied with life, and who manage well in Norwegian society. These Somalis have a job, where they get positive feedback, and many of them have bought their own house. The problem is that many Somalis won't buy houses because they interpret the Islam norm that you shall not pay interests in such a way that it is impossible to take up a bank loan in order to buy one's own apartment. These more well-integrated Somalis do not believe in the need to follow this rule, and so they have a much more stable living situation than those who are exposed to the uncertainty and

discrimination of the house-renting market. Those Somalis who have a stable job are also in a much better position in regard to their economic situation. In itself, being better integrated triggers more positive reactions from the Norwegian society. Many aspects of being integrated (having a good job and a nice home) also trigger positive reactions from fellow Somalis; however, being integrated in the sense that one dresses or acts (goes to pubs etc.) like Norwegians might of course trigger negative reactions.

In the casual discussion group mentioned earlier, one of the participants herself specified what would prevent feelings of humiliation, either from own parents, other Somalis, or Norwegians: 'What we all have in common is a need for safety and being loved'. She mitigated the negative reactions from others because she did not wear a *hijab* with this placating thought 'it is not wearing or not wearing a *hijab* which determines whether you go to heaven or hell when you die. I am a Muslim, and if I should die today, I think God would look more at what I have done to others'. So she felt consoled because even though she was sometimes humiliated by the reactions from other Somalis, God did not agree with these gossiping persons. He pays more attention to the way she acts than the way she dresses. A personal interpretation of religion might thus also give a certain degree of healing from humiliation.

Public officials' interaction with Somali refugees often occurs within a context where they want to give help or advice, but also other motives, such as avoiding having to pay higher benefits might be important. A mixture of motives, along with difficulties of understanding the other party caused by differences in language and culture, might determine the officials' behaviour, which in result is experienced as humiliating by the Somali refugees. On the other hand, the Somali refugee interact with various authorities based on their self-definition or identity from Somalia and how they think they ought to be treated, along with the dreams and expectations they have in advance regarding what life in Norway will be like, and what rights they may have when entering the country.

My conclusion is that Somalis are exposed to much negativity in Norway as they have been stigmatized both by media and by officials as the worst case group of refugees. A negative circle might occur, where Somalis literally turn their backs on the Norwegian society and the Norwegian society turns it backs on Somalis. Those Somalis who have

found their way into the Norwegian society by having a stable job and home, and by interacting with many Norwegians, seem to be those who least often feel humiliated.

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## Appendix

I have conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with about 27 Somalis: 6 welfare recipients (3 men and 3 women in their 20s, 30s and 40s), 5 female college or university students in their 20s, 1 male college student in his 30s, 2 male social workers in their 30s and 50s, 2 female health workers in their 40s, 3 female natural helpers in their 30s and 40s, 1 male doctor, working in the introductory program for refugees in his 40s, 1 female in her 40s also working in the introductory program, and 5 school children (2 boys, 3 girls). In addition, I have written down extracts from casual conversations with somewhat 20 more Somalis of different backgrounds. I have also conducted participant observation in two families and participated in a casual conversation group of young Somalis and repeatedly participated in a focus group for Somali women. The sample includes both deeply religious and more secular persons. After making initial contacts with Somali resource persons, I used snowball sampling to select additional respondents. The interviews were conducted in respondents homes, in cafés or in my office, depending on what the respondent preferred. The interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours. I asked about the respondents' situation in Norway today and in the period all back to their arrival. I asked following up questions on experiences with Norwegians in general and officials in special, as well as relations to other Somalis living in the country. Data were collected in 2003 and 2004. The data were analysed using the methods of coding and comparison outlined by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1988).