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Abstract:

Humiliation and Aggression:

The Impact of Different Types of Humiliation on Emotional and Behavioral Reactions.

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## **Abstract**

The proposed research seeks to gain a better understanding of how intense emotions, such as humiliation, contribute to the protracted nature of conflict. By developing greater insight into this phenomenon, we can design a variety of systemic interventions (ranging from policy to education) to help prevent individuals from engaging in violent behavior that may result from experiencing certain types of humiliating events. Humiliation has been shown to be a central factor contributing to the intractability of conflict (Coleman, 2003; Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 2004; Friedman, 2003; Lindner, 2002). However, our knowledge is severely limited regarding the precise role humiliation plays in conflict (Hartling and Luchetta, 1999), especially concerning how different types of humiliation impact individuals' emotional and behavioral reactions. The purpose of this research is to determine whether different types of humiliation cause differential emotional and behavioral (i.e., aggressive) reactions in individuals, both immediately after the humiliating experience occurs, as well as in the longer term.

This research extends relative deprivation theory, which distinguishes between fraternal deprivation (people's perceived discrepancy between their group's fortunes relative to what they feel their group is entitled to) versus egoistic deprivation (people's perceived discrepancy between their personal fortunes relative to what they feel they are personally entitled to) (Runciman, 1966; Gurr, 1970). Research suggests that people who experience fraternal, or collective-level, relative deprivation show more intentions to aggress than people who experience personal-level deprivation (Koomen & Frankel, 1992; Walker & Mann, 1987). Because the constructs of humiliation and relative deprivation both involve feeling "lower than" a referent party (see Lindner, 2002), I

hypothesize that like deprivation, humiliation regarding a collective-level characteristic produces more negative and aggressive reactions than personal-level humiliation.

Thus, this research asks: 1) Do individuals who are humiliated regarding a *collective-level* identity characteristic (such as religion or nationality) react with more negative affect and aggression immediately and in the long-term than individuals who are humiliated regarding a *personal-level* identity characteristic (such as aptitude or competence)? 2) Does the centrality of the characteristic to individuals' identities make a difference in how negatively or aggressively they respond? 3) Do the above variables affect the degree to which people ruminate about a humiliating experience?

*Rumination* refers to directing attention particularly on one's own negative mood (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). A series of empirical studies suggest that rumination increases intentions to aggress (e.g., Konecni, 1975; Bushman, 2002). This project will investigate whether humiliation regarding a collective-level characteristic (such as nationality) leads individuals to ruminate about the experience more than if they were humiliated regarding a personal-level characteristic, and thus to remain or become even more aggressive over time, leading violence to become protracted.

This research uses a 2 (identity characteristic: personal-level vs. collective-level) x 2 (identity characteristic: central vs. not central to self-concept) experimental design, and will be conducted through an on-line survey that begins with a written scenario (following Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Participants (n = 100) will be men and women, ages 18 and over, who have access to the Internet. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of humiliation, protection of the psychological safety of the participants will be a top priority. Participants will be asked to imagine that the scenario, in which the main actor is humiliated by another actor, is happening to them personally, and to answer a series of

questions to assess immediate affective reactions (following Watson, et. al., 1988) and intentions to aggress. One week later, delayed affective reactions, intentions to aggress, and rumination (following Caprara, 1986) will be assessed using similar measures. Data will be statistically analyzed.

### **Policy Relevance**

This topic has considerable potential to impact policy decisions on a range of important topics, from the violent behavior that occurs in our inner cities, to the current debate regarding the treatment of international terrorism detainees (Golden & Schmitt, 2005). If we can determine the types of humiliation that tend to lead to more exaggerated and prolonged aggressive responses, we can then develop policies and educational programs designed to address and ameliorate their negative effects. For example, if the hypotheses are supported, we can present policymakers with data indicating that when individuals are humiliated regarding collective-level and central identity characteristics, they are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior. Correspondingly, such data would conversely suggest that adopting policies that do not humiliate people's nationality, race, or religion when those are important to their sense of self would significantly reduce aggressive responses. These policies could be applied in any setting in which people (including international leaders) are at risk of being publicly humiliated. The purpose of implementing such policies would be to reduce the levels of immediate and long-term aggressive responses perpetrated by those who may feel humiliated, thus reducing the perpetuation of violent activity.

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