

The Nature of Humiliation

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Harvard University

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Background on my work

My research focuses on the role of emotions in negotiation. I have developed a theoretical model that I call the “relational identity framework.” The basic notion is that as people interact, they try to define and enhance their “relational identity” -- their sense of self in relation to one another. I suggest that there are two basic concerns that define the essence of our relational identity: autonomy and affiliation. If disputants deal constructively with these “relational identity concerns,” positive emotions can be stimulated and cooperation is more likely. If disputants deal poorly with these concerns, negative emotions tend to arise and lead to competitive or individualistic tendencies.

Although the following thought piece only alludes briefly to the relational identity framework, the ideas are heavily influenced by it. Rather than introducing the reader to the framework, which is published elsewhere, I have decided to take a foray toward understanding the concept of humiliation. In this brief paper, I explore some fundamental questions about humiliation.

What is humiliation?

Before we can identify ways to deal constructively with humiliation, it would be helpful to gain some understanding about the essence of humiliation. What is it? I think that there are two core factors to the concept of humiliation: Nakedness and degradation.

Nakedness. The humiliated person is personally exposed, vulnerable, and essentially naked.² That nakedness can take a physical form, as when prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison were forced to strip and masturbate in front of guards. Or that nakedness can take an emotional form, as when Hilary Clinton put her ego on the line and passionately defended her husband against accusations of an affair – only to learn otherwise.

¹ Dan Shapiro is Associate Director of the Harvard Negotiation Project. A clinical psychologist, he is on the faculty at Harvard Law School and at Harvard Medical School (Department of Psychiatry).

² I asked my wife for feedback on this paper. She said she thought that the term “nakedness” was a bit provocative. I agree. And that is the point. It rings true with part of the phenomenological essence of humiliation, which is a provocative emotion.

Nakedness alone does not constitute the sole essence of humiliation. After all, lovers commonly revel in the depth of one another's physical and psychological nakedness. They open themselves to one another and risk the vulnerability of intimacy for the pleasure it can bring.

Degradation. What turns the beauty of physical and psychological nakedness into a gut-wrenching emotional asphyxiation is the experience of degradation. While in a vulnerable posture of nakedness, the victim of humiliation is debased, devalued, and dehumanized.

The degradation is multi-layered. On the surface, the humiliated party is presumably acting with autonomy: No one other than the humiliated party is forcibly moving his or her body parts to masturbate in front of prison guards, to lick urine off the floor as a fraternity hazing ritual, or to admit defeat and sign a truce.

Yet a lack of outward, willful resistance does not mean that the humiliated party *wants* to engage in the demeaning activity. A second "layer" of forces constrains the humiliated person's autonomy. In some situations, the victim senses that acting on his or her true behavioral desires will lead to an outcome *worse* than humiliation. To *not* touch oneself or lick the floors clean is likely to lead the humiliated party to be beaten, ostracized, or worse. In other cases, the victim realizes that he or she is unable to reverse his or her own prior action. Hilary Clinton learned new information about her husband's sexual behavior and probably wished she had not supported him to the extent she did.

In sum, these two layers of autonomy fuel much of the agonizing emotional "thickness" that characterizes humiliation. On one level, as the humiliated party, I am *choosing* to degrade myself. I am *choosing* to engage in activities that will reduce my sense of self-pride and dignity. Yet at another level, constraints on my situation – whether a gun at my head or a mad desire to join a fraternity no matter the cost -- make alternative behaviors extremely risky.

Nevertheless, the pain of humiliation comes in part from the fact that I am apparently choosing to degrade myself. I *could* resist – or I could have. Now, all I have is a terrible feeling of degradation and regret.

What factors mediate the intensity of felt humiliation?

The two core factors of humiliation – nakedness and degradation – offer some direction. The more severely a person feels he or she has been both exposed and degraded, the greater the intensity of his or her feeling of humiliation. Thus, it becomes apparent why forcing a person to engage in sexually deviant acts tends to be humiliating: the humiliated party is in an extreme position of nakedness and degradation.

What makes humiliation so humiliating?

Humiliation is closely linked to one's identity. As I, the victim of humiliation, perform a demeaning behavior, I question my identity:

Am I the object that the perpetrators think I am? (Over time, many slaves came to internalize their devalued identity.)

Should I resist coercion and risk personal harm? (Prisoners at Abu Ghraib may have worried that if their actions became public, they would be seen as weak and unprincipled, especially if compromising photographs of them were to leave out the gun pointed at their head.)

Because of the close link between humiliation and identity, a humiliated party may go to great lengths to reduce the pain of humiliation or its residual impact. The desire for revenge or for saving face may trump "rational" interests for safety or substantive gain.

How can one prevent or ameliorate feelings of humiliation?

Prevention of humiliation should entail protecting people from naked degradation. A host of measures can be taken to serve these ends. At the macro-level, social incentives can be institutionalized that require people to treat one another in accordance with basic human rights. Thus, responsibility for dignified treatment shifts from individual to society. For more on the beneficial links between human rights and dignity, I refer the reader to the important work of Evelin Lindner.

At the interpersonal level, a disputant can act in a dignified, humble manner to defuse attempted efforts to humiliate him or her. For example, although British soldiers treated Ghandi like an object, he did not automatically subscribe to that relational frame. He avoided humiliation by acting with dignity, morality, and principle, setting a relational frame of mutual affiliation.

If humiliation is severe, our psyche may dissociate us from the situation, protecting us from the painful reality.

At a conscious level, we can shield ourselves from severe humiliation. A party who is forced to engage in a humiliating behavior willfully can relinquish some of his or her behavioral control to the perpetrator. (e.g., "I am deciding to give the other control over my body.") Paradoxically, this allows the victim to maintain autonomy in the face of forced victimization. (Of course, a risk of such a strategy is that we may become passive victims to forced, humiliating behavior.)

Final questions

In this section, I pose a few questions for further reflection:

1. *The politics of humiliation.* Unfortunately, today's world is filled with civil conflicts, which are fraught with feelings of humiliation on each side. Should strategies to deal with humiliation differ based upon whether focusing on a dominant or disenfranchised group? Do disenfranchised groups perceive themselves to be more exposed ("naked") and vulnerable to degradation than the dominant group? Can groups be psychologically "vaccinated" against humiliation? How can disenfranchised or historically degraded groups move out of the shadow of their humiliating past? Should they?
2. *The psychology of the group.* How can humiliation be dealt with at the group level? Is it possible for a group narrative be revised, deleted, or expanded in a way that brings positive meaning to a history of humiliation?

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I argue that two factors combine to form the essence of humiliation: nakedness and degradation. Humiliation feels emotionally painful because it impinges directly upon one's relational identity. Thus, strategies to reduce and prevent humiliation are targeted at enhancing or protecting a party's relational identity.