

The Psychology of Humiliation : A Journal

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I Never Thought of Humiliation. Why ?

From my reading of some of the articles and probably the first class, I was struck by my own neglect of the significance of humiliation in our lives. Although, I realize now, that there was always a hind sight about the issue of what humiliating experiences can do, I never actively read, thought or pursued the area in any form. “Why didn’t I think about this,” I asked myself ? The moment I was lead to ask this question by the readings, I remembered an experience of my childhood that I have never disclosed to anyone. Not even to myself ! Why ? I didn’t, I realize because that was perhaps the most humiliating experience of my life at an age when I did not have the vocabulary to explain it to myself or to anyone else. Furthermore, the experience left me feeling ashamed of myself and it seems that I never talked about it to anyone, because I felt that the experience would cast shame on me.

“ I was in 2nd or 3rd grade and a school teacher who was considered to be very strict and scary was taking our class one day. I don’t remember what I did wrong or what happened. All I remember is that this woman came up to me and slapped me so hard on my face that I urinated on my seat in front of everyone. I think I hated myself at that moment and felt so exposed and helpless. I am sure that from thereon, I must have been petrified of this teacher and must have tried to stay out of her way. But, I was not that lucky. Another morning, this time in the playground. All I remember is that this woman walks up to me and slaps me on my cheek so hard again, that I urinate in public.”

I think I have always hated that teacher ever since the incident above and I told my mother years later about it. Of course she was alarmed and outraged and asked me why I had not

told her ? I told her, I don't know why. And here, I am, after years, trying to analyze my own silence around this beating and humiliation. When I recounted this incident, so many things that were talked about in the reading and in the class, became so easy for me to understand and now there is a flesh and blood feeling to the insights that I have on the topic of humiliation.

For one, I realized the unique relation between the *shame* and *humiliation*. I felt so ashamed of myself for having urinated in public that it completely silenced me to my own experience of humiliation.

Secondly, it was not about what the teacher had done. From there on, it had become something about me, my shame at doing something. What stayed with me and has stayed with me since, about the experience, is not the beating by the teacher, but my losing a very basic bodily control by urinating in the classroom in front of my classmates. Humiliation therefore gets masked by the shame of the victim. Furthermore, this shame that gets injected into the victim silences the victim to his own experience of humiliation, rendering the experience isolated in the psyche and the person alienated from everyone else.

I now realize that I had never thought of humiliation as such and its pertinence in life, conflict and relationships, because the nature of experiences of humiliation is such that it makes these experiences impervious to consciousness and closed to any kind of scrutiny as a result of the painful emotions that they give rise to. Holocaust survivors are a living testimony to this fact as well.

Culture and Humiliation

For me the classes on humiliation have been invaluable for they have provided me with a perspective not only on very deep personal relations, but also on issues that are so contemporary

and of such global importance. It has been something to realize that conflict in and as of itself does not lead to ruptures in relationships and broken connections. It is when those conflicts are marked by humiliation of some kind, do they become breeding grounds for violence, war, genocide and terrorism. Simply differences in cultures and norms do not lead to conflict and turbulence. In a similar vein, mere deprivation that some countries experience in the world are not enough to provoke retaliation or revenge, it is when deprivation is perceived in the larger context of humiliation by richer and more resourceful nations, does it fuel political violence. For example, I have read that the number of check points that Palestinians go through in their everyday life is been correlated to the potential for becoming terrorists. It is necessary to realize that merely going through check points in itself does not produce terrorists. It is the humiliation that might be experienced at the hands of security personnel while going through these check-points that leads to cumulative rage and violence.

A true understanding and appreciation of cultural differences is imperative to any kind of conflict resolution and peace efforts. It is important to recognize that what might be considered as liberal and open-minded in one culture, for example, might be seen as vulgar and deeply humiliation in another culture.

For centuries now, the West has been trying to export its ideals of liberation and freedom to nations that are considered to be backward and marked by norms that are thought to be oppressive or are simply beyond imagination of the western mind. It is in such instances of assuming superiority and assuming the role of a modern liberator and teacher, that the West has initiated a culture of humiliation, knowingly or unknowingly. Such insights have an extremely valuable potential for interventions in the interpersonal domain as well as in the *global village*. One such domain is international policy.

International Policy and Humiliation

Ever since September 11 happened, the United States in particular and the West in general has been questioning as to why they are hated so much by some parts of the world. Time and again I read newspaper or academic articles trying to comprehend this intense hatred through many different lens. While some have identified the unconscious pathological mechanisms through which the West has humiliated the Middle-East, others have correctly identified this humiliation as embedded in the policies of the West towards the rest of the world. The course on humiliation also helped me in considering this aspect of the dynamic of humiliation as played out in the international arena. The instructor was very effective in bringing home the point that the global village is marked by hierarchy because of the current state of the global trade rules. The West, and America in particular practices hierarchical trade rules that serve its economic dominance while preaching horizontal ideals for trade global trade. Reforming global trade rules can help hundred more times than the humanitarian work that is done to repair the harm done by the faulty trade rules. This section of the class enabled me to understand the tangible, yet overlooked, ways in which the United States has been carrying out its long-standing humiliation of the Middle-East, the culmination of which was the attacks on the World Trade Center. Sadly, however, instead of recognizing this, the United States has launched another war on the Middle-East.

Researching Humiliation: Research can be Humiliating.

One tangible lesson that I took from the course is that I will always think twice about what I want to research and why. It is heartening to realize that there are researchers, like the instructor

who realize that research can be humiliating, especially when one is conducting it in a culture that is radically different from one's own.

Research in all its scientific glory is a product of the West. This implies that when one does research in the East, one cannot import one's ideas and methodology blindly for "empirical" reasons. An important question that the instructor raised in the class and that has stayed with me is, "How do you invite your participants to participate in a scientific endeavor when your subjects do not even believe in science?" We from the West, go to other cultures flashing our scientific instruments expecting people who don't even know us to reveal their personal reactions and responses, hoping to capture what we call "truth." Our participants have no obligation to tell us anything, leave aside, their inner realities. So where is the notion of validity when your participants can be systematically lying? These insights have been crucial for me, since they not only warn me about conducting research that can be humiliating, they also reaffirm my faith in qualitative research. Qualitative methods are shrugged off as non-scientific, unsystematic and often are thought as secondary in status to quantitative research. An area such as humiliation requires careful and in depth study that, I believe, is amenable only to qualitative research.

"Psychology" of Humiliation

In the last class we all divided ourselves into groups based on our academic backgrounds to assess what it was from the class that we can take back into our professional settings. I realized that apart from feeding the political psychologist in me, the course also offered tremendous understanding that I can apply as a clinician in the clinical psychology setting.

It has been extremely useful for me to understand that the psychology of humiliation expands the notion of trauma. Incorporating experiences of humiliation and identifying them in

the therapeutic process is must for a truly healing outcome. Therapists and clinicians must be aware that deeply traumatizing experiences sometimes gain their intensity and impact over a person's life because of the humiliation that those experiences entail. Therapists need to address these experiences and also be mindful of the fact that the therapeutic process itself can become humiliating if it not sensitive to these nuances. Hartling, Rosen, Walker and Jordan's (2000) article on the same issue was very enlightening for me. This article strengthened my belief that a very well intentioned and efficient therapist can come across as humiliating to his/her client if he/she does not recognize certain core needs of the client because of his/her own fear of doing something in therapy that might be ridiculed by the clinical community of psychotherapists. A very rigid and blind belief in the technique of therapy can lead to humiliating experiences within the client who might feel ashamed of articulating his/her needs to a non-gratifying therapist.

The effect of humiliation during childhood was also a significant area of discussion in the group. We discussed this idea particularly in relation to terrorism in terms of understanding how very humiliating experiences early in life can lead to a splitting off from an array of feelings and lend themselves to a psychological state of numbing that perpetuates a cycle of humiliating others. This idea has been on my mind since a long time given the global climate of terrorism and political violence.

Another idea that we discussed in the group was the dynamic of humiliation in the organizational sector. It is pertinent to identify that organizations have subtle dynamics of humiliation operating within their structures. For example, there is intentional and unconscious use of ranks and hierarchy that promote humiliation. This may interfere with productivity and creativity in the work space with irreducible costs to the psyche of the worker.

Finally, we talked about how we as psychologists can work to mend the wounds of humiliation. We came upon the insight that it is important to give a vocabulary and release to the experience of humiliation within a secure therapeutic relationship. Like any other traumatic experience that can be channelized towards creativity, so in the case of humiliation one must work towards creating creative spaces for the expression of humiliation in a way that can transform the experience of humiliation. Personal humiliations often lead to an attachment to particular public and social movements and this kind of a catharsis can be diverted in either direction. It could form the basis of identifying with militant ideologies or in a more positive vein it could also lead to an identification with or investment in peace movements that work on principles of humility.