

Humiliation

By

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Simple Definition

A leading researcher on humiliation, Dr. Evelin Lindner, defines humiliation as "the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity." [1] Further, humiliation means to be placed, against ones will, in a situation where one is made to feel inferior. "One of the defining characteristics of humiliation as a process is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless." [2] Johan Galtung, a leading practitioner, agrees with Lindner that the infliction of humiliation is a profoundly violent psychologically act that leaves the victim with a deep wound to the psyche. [3]

Humiliation and Social Order

Historically, maintaining hierarchical societies meant that elites scrupulously guarded their honor against attempts to soil or humiliate it, while some form of more or less institutionalized humiliation was part of the reality for the lower echelons of a community. As long as such a reality is accepted as the norm, and it is believed that this structure helps to achieve and maintain common societal goals, the system is considered acceptable. Though some people in lower ranks may wish to be on a higher level, they do not view the system itself as flawed. By contrast, in societies such as Somalia, with its non-hierarchical egalitarian clan structures, Lindner's research shows that attempts to humiliate people are fervently resented, at least by the males of the major clan families. The more egalitarian a society, be it pre-hierarchical or post-hierarchical, Lindner asserts, the less use there is for institutionalized humiliation, particularly as a way to maintain order, and the less acceptable it is.

Humiliation and Human Rights

Lindner's research on humiliation and the effect of humiliation on groups is related to her segmentation of human history into three phases of development and her categorization of the ideal types of human societies that can be found in these stages. Most relevant here is the connection between humiliation, conflict, and the human rights revolution. [4]

When subordinate groups become aware of human rights

(http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/human_rights_protect.jsp) values and adopt them into their value system, they reframe their formerly accepted subordination as humiliating circumstances that no longer can be deemed to be acceptable. In other words, when people redefine their situation and interpret formerly "normal" subjugation as structural violence (<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/violence.jsp>), they begin to clash with the system. This clash can translate into violence. This can occur gradually, or a sudden change in power can lead to immediate devastating violence.

Why Paying Attention to Humiliation is Important

It is widely recognized that one of the main reasons for Hitler's rise to power and the onset of World War II was the humiliation of the German people in the aftermath of World War I. Though perhaps less obvious, humiliation seems to be part of much suffering world-wide, and makes millions of peoples' lives despondent. If violence between and within groups and nations is to be reduced, understanding the role of humiliation as a cause is critically important.

Humiliation, Trauma, and Victimhood

What is the difference between humiliation, trauma, and victimhood (<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/victimhood.jsp>)? The answer is both simple and complex. One may be traumatized without being humiliated. For example, one's home may be destroyed by an earthquake, in which the victim may be devastated and traumatized but not humiliated. This differs from the situation in which soldiers kick someone out of their home in the middle of the night and bulldoze it or set the home on fire. This latter case exemplifies the use of humiliation as a weapon by some people upon other people. More still, one may even be a victim of violence without feeling humiliated. The difference between feeling humiliated or not in these cases may depend on the subjective framing (<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/framing.jsp>) of the situation by each person involved – when violence is perceived as accidental and non-intentional, similar to natural disaster, it may not be felt as humiliation. Importantly, the more a victim is aware of human rights values, the more likely they are to feel humiliated. When one is acted upon in a way that undermines one's sense of equal dignity, as it is enshrined in human rights, the psychological damage of humiliation is being inflicted. It is this damage that is particularly hard to recover and heal from. Lindner believes that humiliation is the necessary concept for defining victimhood as "victimhood" and as such has to be considered as key ingredient that makes conflict comprehensible and thus preventable and manageable. According to Lindner, "victimhood at the hands of fellow human beings must entail the notion of humiliation, otherwise it would not be seen as victimhood but as pro-social event or natural disaster." [5]

Responses to Humiliation -- Hitler vs. Mandela

It is still somewhat of a mystery why responses to humiliation can differ so much. Lindner cites Hitler and Mandela as examples. Hitler chose to respond with war and atrocious acts of violence as a means of restoring national honor. His goal was to impose a new hierarchical world system with Germany on top. Mandela, on the other hand, opted for the enlightened path of peace and human rights for all of his countrymen. Mandela chose a healing track using dialogue (<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/dialogue.jsp>), forgiveness (http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/apology_forgiveness.jsp), and reconciliation (<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/reconciliation.jsp>) while still dealing with issues of justice (http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/principles_of_justice.jsp) as well. More research needs to be done to help explain why some choose a violent response to deal with feelings of humiliation and others choose peaceful struggle. But it is important to keep in mind that the "humiliation" factor in any conflict may well be the most difficult obstacle to overcome, and strong leaders are needed to prevent escalation

(<http://www.intractableconflict.org/m/escalation.jsp>) of conflict through violence and bloodshed.

There are three possible outcomes to the effects of humiliation

Acquiescence, or depression and apathy; nothing changes.

Antagonism, anger, rage, and the violent pursuit of change; often hierarchy is not abolished but merely reversed.

Antagonism, anger, rage, and the non-violent pursuit of change, including forgiveness and reconciliation, and the dismantling of hierarchy towards a human rights based system of equal dignity for every citizen.

Rage at the situation may overflow and a violent conflict may erupt as people try to change a system of humiliation. Human rights ideals indicate that humiliation and victimization of others have to be eliminated, not simply the social hierarchy reversed. Mandela strove to abolish humiliation altogether in his society through wise social change, while Hitler used it as a core parameter of his campaign. Unfortunately, it seems easier to strike back and far more people in the world may feel the urge to resort to violence (though maybe not to the extent Hitler did) than there are those who would endure twenty seven years in prison, forgive their captors, and work with them to forge a united future. Better to avoid humiliation in the first place, lest we create more Hitlers, or, short of that thousands of suicide bombers.

[1] Lindner, Evelin G. Humiliation or Dignity: *Regional Conflicts in the Global Village. Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial work and Counseling in areas of Armed conflict*, forthcoming (2002), p.2.

[2] Lindner, Evelin G. Humiliation or Dignity: *Regional Conflicts in the Global Village. Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial work and Counseling in areas of Armed conflict*, forthcoming (2002).

[3] Paraphrasing of quotes taken from Johan Galtung as recorded in Lindner, E G *Humiliation - Trauma that has Been Overlooked. Traumatology, Vol. 7*, (March 2001).

[4] For more on Pride, Honor, and Dignity societies, see Lindner, E "What every Negotiator Should Know: Understanding Humiliation," (2000), <http://www.globalsolidarity.org/articles/what.pdf>. Lindner says that knowledge of human rights intensifies feelings of humiliation and that the humiliation factor is the hard core of any conflict. Another characteristic of humiliation is that when victims admire their humiliators they react more intensely when power changes hands. (Psychology of H.)

[5] Lindner. E-mail with the author, (2003).

Comments, corrections, suggestions? Send us an e-mail.

(http://www.crinfor.org/browse_new/ickb_comments.cfm?title=Humiliation&id=27486)

Sources of Additional, In-depth Information on this Topic

Additional Explanations of the Underlying Concepts:

Online (Web) Sources: Evelin Gerda Lindner, *Humiliation: Trauma That Has Been Overlooked: An Analysis Based on Fieldwork in Germany, Rwanda / Burundi, and Somalia*. Florida State University. , 2001-03-01.

Available at: <http://www.fsu.edu/%7Etrauma/v7/Humiliation.pdf>

This article explores what differentiates trauma from humiliation. It is argued that trauma may occur without humiliation, but that humiliation may be a core agent of trauma.

Moreover, the paper suggests that the significance of humiliation in traumatic experiences has long been overlooked by researchers and practitioners.

Evelin Gerda Lindner, *Humiliation in Armed Conflicts*. University of Oslo, 1997-01-01.

Available at: <http://folk.uio.no/evelin/> and www.humiliationstudies.org

This website outlines a project aiming to examine the new characteristics of modern day warfare and how feelings of humiliation between the parties and intervenors are a "central determinant for violence".

Evelin Gerda Lindner, *What Every Negotiator Should Know: Understanding Humiliation*. Global Solidarity.

Available at: <http://www.globalsolidarity.org/articles/what.pdf>

Abstract: This paper presents a theory of humiliation and identifies its significance as an interpretative tool for use by negotiators in many kinds of situations. Humiliation and its aftermath have an important impact upon patterns of conflict, culture and communication.

D.K. Sampath, *'Contrition': For Conciliation*. Conflict Resolution Center International, 1999-10-01.

Available at: <http://www.conflictres.org/vol172/contrition.html>

This article explores the use of shame as a tool to bring mediation parties to reconciliation. The articles conclusions are based on a project conducted in Southern India.

***Coexistence Chronicle, Fall 2002*. Coexistence Initiative, 2002-01-01.**

Available at: <http://www.coexistence.net/coexistence/library/V2Issue3.pdf>

This issue of the Coexistence Chronicle includes: A Peace Proposal for the Middle East; Land & Politics: A Recipe for Community Discord; and Human Rights and Humiliation.

Annette Simmons, *Dangerous Truths*. Government Executive, 1999-01-01.

Available at: <http://www.govexec.com/features/0499/0499s6.htm>

This article examines the negative atmosphere that can be found at a number of governmental agencies that subjects employees "to public humiliation, intimidation, isolation, and recriminations" if they verbalize the truth about what takes place at their organizations. This article also gives suggestions on what can be done to address this problem.

Offline (Print) Sources: William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

The author offers useful and precise distinctions between shame and humiliation, as well as between the various strategies used to avoid them--assuming the mantle of humility or indifference, for instance, or embracing and enduring humiliation.

Karen Heetderks Strong, Daniel W. Van Ness, *Restoring Justice*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Company, 1997.

This work provides "an overview of the restorative justice movement and includes suggestions for incorporating restorative justice into the American judicial system". The attached review is one of four at the URL listed and must be scrolled down to in order to read.

Examples Illustrating this Topic:

Online (Web) Sources: Christopher Cooper, *Teaching Young People to Save Face Through Conflict Resolution Training*. Conflict Resolution Center International, 1997-01-01.

Available at: http://www.conflictresearch.org/crinfo/crcii/teaching_young_people.htm
This brief article examines face saving skills that enable young people to leave conflict situations not just unharmed, but also allows them to depart gracefully. This type of response makes sense to many teenagers since they avoid injury, embarrassment, humiliation, and/or loss of dignity.

Offline (Print) Sources: S. Megan Berthold, Harry H. L. Kitano, Mitchell T. Maki, *Achieving the Impossible Dream : How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress (The Asian American Experience)*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

During World War II over 110,000 Japanese-American U.S. citizens and legal residents were incarcerated without charges or trial by the U.S. government's self-proclaimed beacon of liberty and justice. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, coupled with racism and wartime hysteria, generated widespread support for violating the civil rights of Japanese Americans living along the Pacific Coast of the United States. Following government orders, Japanese Americans took what belongings they could carry and were incarcerated in remote, hastily constructed concentration camps. When they emerged from the camps, they faced humiliation, prejudice, and economic ruin. This book is a account of this horrific event the aftermath dealt with by Japanese Americans.

Audiovisual Materials on this Topic:

Online (Audiovisual) Sources

Offline (Audiovisual) Sources

Teaching Materials on this Topic:

Online (Web) Sources

Offline (Print) Sources

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