

Evelin Lindner

Harmony as dignity and protection from humiliation

Introduction

Harmony and dignity: where is the connection? And how can harmony and dignity protect from humiliation? These questions will be discussed from three angles: (1) malleability over rigidity, (2) unity in diversity, and (3) one global family.

Malleability over rigidity

Life is a process. Reality is fluid and continuously malleable. If we try to “nail down” processes of life, if we press them into static definitions, concepts, or institutions that are inspired by the rigidity of Newtonian mechanics, we may create hardness and disharmony where softness would not only be more harmonious but also more effective—after all, water is stronger than stone. Quantum physics or biological growth processes may often be more suitable models if we wish to design social and societal structures that nurture harmony.

Philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich has written on the commoditization of language, the tendency to use nouns instead of verbs. Philosopher Agnes Heller, in her theory of the consciousness of everyday life, describes how masculinity, on an ordinary, everyday level, reproduces itself through the interplay of individual consciousness and social structures. The traditional masculinist models of consciousness objectify world order, obfuscating how processual and continuously changeable it is in reality.

Is there a better way? The concept of the *reflective equilibrium* offers a way out. Philosopher Otto Neurath’s metaphor of a ship may serve as an illustration. In former times, scientists assumed that science was only science if it found dry docks or at least pretended that dry docks existed. Today, we understand that we must be more humble and accept and live with the fear-inducing uncertainty that human understanding of the world is limited. There is no dry dock. What we may think of as certain will always be threatened by yet undiscovered insights and lessons-learned. The solution is to circle through the reflective equilibrium and create understanding and action out of this movement. This means continuously rebuilding the ship while at sea. It means creating just enough structure so that the ship can float, never too much rigidity, since this would make the ship get stuck and sink. Stability is dynamic.

Unity in diversity

Today’s approaches to consensus building are not yet harmonious enough. Traditional consensus building processes like *ho’ho pono pono*, *musyawarah*, *silaturahmi*, *asal ngumpul*, *palaver*, *shir*, *jirga* will need to be studied in more depth in the future. Today’s approaches, including contemporary concepts of democracy, are still permeated by an excess of rigidity. Asking people to vote “yes” or “no” may lead to the manifestation of dualism where nondualism would be more fitting. In an ever more interdependent world, dependence versus independence are outdated notions. Interdependence connects two entities, \circ and \circ , in a nondualistic way, ∞ . *Dualism*, in contrast, means merging them into one entity, \odot , or separating them into two isolated entities, $\circ|\circ$. Dualism means *either separation or merging; either agreement or disagreement; either one or two*. *Nondualism* means separation *and* connection; agreement *and* disagreement; one *and* two.

Muneo Yoshikawa is an expert in intercultural communication. He developed the *nondualistic double swing* model, whereby unity is created out of the realization of differences. He shows how individuals, cultures, and intercultural concepts can blend in constructive ways. This model can be graphically visualized as the infinity symbol, or Möbius strip (∞). For this model, Yoshikawa brought together Western and Eastern thought. He drew on Martin Buber's idea of "dialogical unity—the act of meeting between two different beings without eliminating the otherness or uniqueness of each"—and on *Soku*, the Buddhist nondualistic logic of "Not-One, Not-Two," described as the twofold movement between the self and the other that allows for both unity and uniqueness. Yoshikawa calls the unity that is created out of such a realization of differences *identity in unity*: the dialogical unity does not eliminate the tension between basic potential unity and apparent duality.

One global family

Throughout the past millennia, humankind lived in a fragmented world, continuously afraid of its neighbors. Neighbors could quickly turn into enemies. Adolf Hitler was set on war and killing, and simply wishing for peace was not a valid protection. What political scientists call the *security dilemma* was all-definitorial. Nobody who hoped for peace could escape the need to prepare for war: "Si vis pacem para bellum." The enemy was to be killed or captured and humiliated into subservience. Humiliating an enemy was seen as prosocial, as was humiliating inferiors so as to prevent them from rising up and becoming enemies. The enemy was not a fellow human being. The enemy had no right to equality in dignity and rights. The masculinist culture that Agnes Heller describes has its home here, a culture of uniformity that lacks diversity.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) rejects this notion of an enemy in its first sentence: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Gandhi said: "There is no path to peace. Peace is the path." In a human rights context, humiliation is antisocial, it is a violation of dignity and rights. "To humiliate" is to transgress the rightful expectations of every human being and of all humanity that basic human rights will be respected.

Are human rights ideals utopian? No. A window of opportunity opens up for their true realization the more the fact is understood and embraced that we are one single human family on a tiny planet which we inherit from our children. This window of opportunity invites the spirit of unity in diversity. It opens space for a non-utopian global dialogue about a more dignified future for all of humankind, a future without humiliating structures and institutions. Philosopher Avishai Margalit calls this a *decent* world. Leo Semashko is part of this dialogue with his sociology of harmony.

If we grasp this window of opportunity, then there is a chance for a future where "good" and "bad" neighbors can live together, where police may be needed, however, where the notion of "enemy" and "warrior" is no longer required. The capacity of people to feel humiliated will find space to translate into a Mandela-like path of building social and societal structures that no longer systemically humiliate but dignify. And this will increasingly be done not by fighting against old structures, but by working for a future of dignity. As mentioned above, working *for* something new is much more harmonious and effective than the old paradigm of fighting *against* enemies and foes.

This window of opportunity is currently left largely unused. The security dilemma is being kept alive artificially, among others to protect wealth and investment. As a result, division crowds out unity. The "Arab street" brought about a dignity revolution. The global street, the citizens of this world, must now bring about a global dignity *refolution* (refolution is a term coined by Timothy Garton Ash to connote a mix of reform and revolution). This movement places dignity before profit and capitalizes on the potential of globalization to truly transcend the old fragmentation of our world.

To sum up: We need to sit together in a global dialogue and reflect on how we, jointly, as one human family, can organize our affairs on our home planet so that our children will find a world worth living in.

Biographical note

Evelin Lindner is a transdisciplinary social scientist and humanist. She draws on a wide range of fields, from neuroscience to political science or philosophy. She holds two Ph.D.s, one in medicine and the other in psychology. She is the Founding President of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, a global network of academics and practitioners (HumanDHS, www.humiliationstudies.org). Lindner lives and teaches globally, affiliated not only with Teachers College, but also with the University of Oslo, Norway, or the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Paris. She is the author of many books and articles.

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