

The Transition of the Link between Humiliation and Mental Health: From Due Lowliness to Undue Humiliation

© Evelin G. Lindner

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Abstract:

We live in times of transition. Globalization and the human rights revolution push the world toward increasing global interdependence and a vision of more equal dignity for all. Mental health – how we live it, how we define it – is part of this transition.

At the current historic juncture, two new forces bring humiliation to the fore in unprecedented intensity. “Globalization” (or the coming-together of humankind), in concert with the human rights revolution, increases the significance of feelings of humiliation. As long as people live far away from each other, in isolation, relative deprivation goes undetected. But, today, Western soap operas and Western tourists walking about are teaching the less privileged of the world to recognize their own deprivation. At the same time, the human rights call for equal dignity teaches underlings around the world that their poverty, their relative deprivation, is no longer to be accepted as divinely ordained, but represents a violation of their very humanity. When a deprived person identifies the rich of the world as perpetrators of violation, when she suspects that the rich peddle empty human rights rhetoric to maintain their powerful positions, poverty turns into humiliation. Currently, the gap between the poor and the rich, locally and globally, grows wider. The underdogs in the world, and those who identify with them, listen to empty human rights rhetoric from elites and feel humiliated by the emptiness of the sermon: “to recognise humanity hypocritically and betray the promise, humiliates in the most devastating way by denying the humanity professed” (Stephan Feuchtwang, November 14, 2002, in a personal note).

However, this dynamic is not confined to the poor in their relationship to the wealthy. It plays out wherever people are in a lowly position, and do not only recognize this, but feel unduly diminished by it. Many Japanese women, for example, are “expected” to marry, leave their job, stay home, and care for their children, while their husbands are supposed to toil for the family outside of the house. In a modern world, where human rights promise equal dignity to everybody, this male/female role dichotomization might be perceived by some as an undignified and humiliating script, which, in turn, might make people reluctant to pursue it. Or, also the well-known phenomena of bullying, or young people not leaving their homes anymore, may well be related to humiliation.

In other words, the definition of mental health and happiness is in transition. In old times, the man of the house, for example, had the right of “domestic chastisement.” In many parts of the world it was enshrined in law that the husband could punish disobedient

wives and children. This was supposedly beneficial for everybody's mental health. However, this view has changed. The human rights message introduces conflict into this conceptualization. The new definition of mental health, for example in a marriage, characterizes it as the meeting of equal hearts and minds in mutual caring, a definition embedded in the human rights ideal of equal dignity for all, while the old definition was connected with female subservience and male dominance. Thus today, we speak no longer of "domestic chastisement," but of "domestic violence." Beating one's wife and children no longer is perceived as health improving, but as health impairing. The mental health of the involved parties is expected to be damaged, not healed, by the application of violence. Violence no longer humbles underlings duly, but humiliates equals unduly.

Feelings of humiliation entail an explosive potential. Lindner calls feelings of humiliation the "nuclear bomb of the emotions." Feelings of humiliation can become obsessive and almost addictive. The core of any addiction is its compelling and intense nature. Smokers, for example, know that their habit represents a health hazard to themselves and others, but they go to great lengths to "protect" their habit. Otherwise perfectly "rational" people distort facts, deny evidence, and lie to themselves and others. Feelings of humiliation may be as significant and consuming as any form of addiction or dependence. People's entire lives can be consumed with a continuous flow of incidents of humiliation and counterhumiliation. Suffering humiliation and responding with humiliation can become an all-consuming lifestyle.

There are two recent findings in neuroscience that underpin the significance of humiliation for mental health. First, the so-called mirror neurons make us identify with the humiliation we observe in others as if it were ours, and react as if we had been humiliated ourselves. Second, studies show that the pain from insults and humiliation is processed in the human brain just like physical pain, equally strong and compelling. More precisely, the human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems in a part of the brain called the insula, which understand not just the actions of others but their intentions, the social meaning of their behavior and their emotions. Mirror neurons allow human beings to grasp the minds of others by feeling, not by thinking. Social emotions like guilt, shame, pride, embarrassment, disgust and lust are based on the human mirror neuron system. And rejection hurts like physical pain. Humiliation appears to be mapped in the brain by the same mechanisms that encode real physical pain. These discoveries shift our understanding of a vast array of fields, from philosophy, linguistics, and culture, to empathy, imitation, or autism psychotherapy.