Parenting Styles, and their Impact on Children: Humiliation, Abuse and Neglect


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For thousands of years, almost everywhere on the globe, humankind believed in hierarchically ranking human value. Almost everybody thought that some people were born as higher beings and others as lower beings. This was called the “order of nature” or “divine order.” The cradle of democracy, the Greek city state of about 2,000 years ago - just to give you one example out of many - was adamant that women and slaves, per definition, had no voice.

Any pain or suffering that those had to endure who had their place somewhere at the bottom of the pyramid of power was deemed to be necessary pain or prosocial humbling. Through thousands of years, underlings’ sufferings were regarded as “good” for them and “fruitful” for the health of society as a whole. Beating underlings, for example, was usually regarded not as abuse, but as legitimate means to “remind” them of their “due” place. Vaccinations or surgical operation, albeit painful, are generally accepted as “good treatment” for patients; this is a positive view of pain that everybody sympathizes with. Similarly, for millennia, underlings’ pain was seen as “good treatment” for underlings and the health of society altogether.

Strict Father Model

Parents typically were central to reproducing obedient underlings. Alice Miller (1983), spelled out how, in the period that lead up to the two World Wars, leading pedagogues of the time regarded breaking the will of the child as essential for childrearing. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) describe the underlying framework with what they call the Strict Father model (as opposed to the Nurturant Parent model):

The father has authority to determine the policy that will govern the family. Because of his moral authority, his commands are to be obeyed. He teaches his children right
from wrong by setting strict rules for their behavior and by setting a moral example in
his own life. He enforces these moral rules by reward and punishment. The father also
gains his children’s cooperation by showing love and by appreciating them when they
obey the rules. But children must not be coddled, lest they become spoiled. A spoiled
child lacks the appropriate moral values and lacks the moral strength and discipline
necessary for living independently and meeting life’s challenges. The mother has day-
to-day responsibility for the care of the household, raising the children; and upholding
the father’s authority. Children must respect and obey their parents, because of the
parents’ moral authority. Through their obedience they learn the discipline and self-
reliance that is necessary to meet life’s challenges. This self-discipline develops in
them strong moral character. Love and nurturance are a vital part of family life, but
they should never outweigh parental authority, which is itself an expression of love
and nurturance – tough love. As children mature, the virtues of respect for moral
authority, self-reliance, and self-discipline allow them to incorporate their father’s
moral values. In this way they incorporate their father’s moral authority they become

The result is described by Lakoff and Johnson as follows,

Evidence from three areas of psychological research – attachment theory, socialization
theory, and family violence studies – shows that the Strict Father model …tends to
produce children who are dependent on the authority of others, cannot chart their own
moral course very well, have less of a conscience, are less respectful of others, and
have no greater ability to resist temptations (Lakoff & Johnson (1999), p. 327).

Thus, the Strict Father model seems to produce what Theodor Adorno called the
authoritarian personality whose principal characteristic is obedience and preparedness to
blindly following orders, irrespective of their moral contents (Adorno, Frenkel-
Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford (1950)).

Nurturant Parent Model

Around 300 - 250 years ago, the Human Rights revolution began to undermine the belief
that it is “nature’s order” to have lower and higher beings. In 1757, a new meaning of the
word humiliation emerged. Up to 1757 the verb to humiliate meant nothing worse than to
lower or to humble, or to show underlings their legitimate lowly place, without any
connotation that this may also signify an illegitimate violation. This we learn from the
Oxford English Dictionary with regard to the English language. I quote from Miller
(1993), who informs us that “the earliest recorded use of to humiliate meaning to mortify
or to lower or to depress the dignity or self-respect of someone does not occur until
1757.”

Article 1 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that “all human beings
are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This declaration represents a revolution
insofar as it upsets the hierarchical ranking of human worthiness that was in place for
millennia and calls for a new order, namely the order of equal dignity for all. In this new
order it is regarded illegitimate to put down people; putting down people, beating and
punishing them cruelly, is no longer labeled as “prosocial humbling” but as abusive
antisocial humiliation. As might be expected, this revolution has consequences also for parenting.

Lakoff and Johnson allude to this when they describe the Nurturant Parent model of rearing children. This model describes a parenting style that abides by the new Human Rights ideals. What formerly was regarded as “good” for children, turns into abuse and neglect in the new nurturant framework.

Many parents fear that being nurturant means being lenient and permissive. Yet, nurturant parenting has nothing to do with leniency. It combines firmness with respect for equal dignity. Lakoff and Johnson write, “Nurturant Parent morality is not, in itself, overly permissive. Just as letting children do whatever they want is not good for them, so helping other people to do whatever they please is likewise not proper nurturance. There are limits to what other people should be allowed to do, and genuine nurturance involves setting boundaries and expecting others to act responsibly” (Lakoff & Johnson (1999), p. 316).

The point with the Nurturing Parent model is that “lessons” are no longer taught by putting down children. “Breaking” children is no longer permissible. “Lessons” are now to be taught with firm love and humility, no longer by applying humiliation.

To summarize, we all, parents included, live in the midst of a historic transition from concepts of ranked human worthiness to visions of equal dignity for all. We all are embedded in some way or another within this transition, either by welcoming it or resisting it, and in all cases by being confused by it. It is a difficult transition even for the most fervent human rights enthusiast because it is easy to lose orientation.

We lose orientation not least because old recipes still sound so “right.” For example, is it so bad to sometimes hit a child? Have we not all survived such treatment? And was it not to our own good? And what about the treatment of women? Should not women be careful not to lose their “femininity” [= submissiveness as lower beings]? Many such questions confuse our minds in times of transition.

What we have not yet developed are new proverbs and new sayings that sound equally “right” as the old ones. The new world is not yet there while the old world disappears. We need to develop new language, new proverbs and sentences that highlight that “lessons” are no longer to be taught by humiliation, but with love and humility.

Reference List

