

SIETAR Japan Newsletter. Fall 2006. (p. 26-27)

The Spring Issue of the newsletter featured an interview with Gyo Furuta by Holly Siebert Kawakami, as part of the 2005 conference of "mapping" the Intercultural Communication (IC) field in Japan (see also *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 2006). Here we are pleased to feature an interview with another interculturalist, Evelin Gerda Linder. Tim Newfields' interview links themes and needs in Japan's IC development with what Linder argues is a global imperative – that of dealing with issues of humiliation and dignity.

Towards Human Dignity: An Interview with Dr. Evelin Lindner

A guest professor at universities in Norway, France, the United States, Japan, Israel, Australia, and Costa Rica, Lindner holds dual doctorates in social medicine and social psychology. She has traveled to flashpoints such as Rwanda, Somalia, Israel, and Palestine to learn more about conflict and reconciliation. This interview was conducted by telephone about a month after her program for SIETAR.

Q: *How would you actually define 'humiliation' and can you mention ways that many Japanese feel humiliated?*

A: Japan is embedded into larger cycles of humiliation and counter-humiliation with its neighbors. Floyd Rudmin (personal communication, April 11, 2005) commented, "It is the humiliation of history. Japan's neighbors are now furious because Japan has again tried to gloss over its history of humiliating its neighbors, but Japan in turn finds it humiliating that it alone is required to continually account for and atone for its past." A contemporary definition of humiliation is based on the human rights ideal of equal dignity for all. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the U.N. in 1948, states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." In this context, humiliation is the enforced lowering of any person or group by a subjugation process damaging their dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed in a situation where your expectations to be respected as equal in dignity are thwarted. . . . Ranking people into higher and lesser beings is obsolete and represents humiliation. In Japan – as elsewhere – this idea represents a new moral framework. Until recently (and in many regions still today) it was regarded as natural or divinely ordained that some people were born as lesser beings. Women, for example, were often defined this way. Today, women who are treated as lesser beings feel humiliated. Ethnic minorities, like the Ainu in Japan, are often humiliated. Today we find the old order lingering and often colliding with the new order.

Ohta Kyoji, Chief Curator of the Osaka Human Rights Museum in Japan, highlighted how the idea of impurity and pollution is often linked to discrimination (personal communication, 7th February 2005). In many parts of the world, people doing "cleaning" work (even so-called "spiritual cleaning"), are perceived as being "polluted" by the "dirt" they handle and are thus excluded from society. In old times this was accepted. However, from a human rights perspective such practices are unacceptable.

The human rights movement has given people a chance to express feelings of humiliation that weren't present before and redefines all relationships, both macro and micro, as part of a large, transformational process. Switching from normative frameworks that condone ranking to a new framework which makes ranking illegitimate is like switching from right-hand driving to left-hand driving. The two strategies cannot coexist without lots of accidents and confusion. However, this is precisely the current situation in the world: we aren't managing the human rights transition well. . . . Only by understanding the nature of the transformation better, carrying it out more efficiently, and organizing ourselves in ways that actualize human rights more can we ameliorate this.

Q: *What inspired you to found Human Dignity & Humiliation Studies?*

A: The field of humiliation studies hasn't been researched much until very recently, perhaps because it is so interdisciplinary. . . . Soon after finishing my doctorate in 2001 I visited a friend in New York who said, "You've got to found something and start an organization." Without his encouragement, I wouldn't have launched this organization . . . he set in motion something which has grown from there.

Q: *How is Human Dignity & Humiliation Studies promoting peace?*

A: There are many peace movements around the world. Also, there are a lot of angry people in those movements. I think our group is special in that we emphasize 'walking the talk' - not just talking or theoretically subscribing to human rights and peace - but actually living it and building a community of people who live it. It's not 'new age'; we don't preach love or try to convert others by charisma or something like that. We believe significant change requires some sort of down-to-earth self-reflection. . . . Many people in peace movements believe social engineering is needed. To some degree that's true: we need more global institutions promoting peace and justice. However, I feel that many in the peace movement are counter-productive in that they don't practice their beliefs.

Q: *Concretely speaking, what programs are offered by Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies?*

A: We have two meetings per year as well as a research program, education program, and intervention program. The organization is now incorporated as a NGO in NY State, U.S.A., and details are on our website.

Q: *When explaining the concept of humiliation, what points are frequently misunderstood?*

A: Most persons, especially in the United States, think that studying humiliation means basically defending or justifying terror. They believe that trying to understand why people use violence means condoning it. Many are unable to differentiate between 'understanding' and 'condoning'. These are not the same.

Basically, there are two ways out of feelings of humiliation. One way is the Hitler way out of it. Another way is the Mandela way out of it. There is no automaticity that humiliation leads to violence or extremism.

Q: *Could you explain the concept of 'culture-counseling'?*

A: . . . Superficial 'how-to-act in X-land' types of cross-cultural trainings often are counterproductive in that they introduce a false sense of security because people think that they know about a culture when actually there's a lot they don't know. It's better, I think, if you want to function globally, to learn to 'swim' and not to 'cling' - to learn uncertainty and study how to ask questions, to respect and connect to people rather than thinking that some superficial information suffices, such as, for example, what to buy as gifts for your foreign hosts. Besides, there are so many 'how-to-do' lists that it's impossible to learn them all. Nothing is wrong with any given list, but there's a danger of acquiring a false sense of security or somehow becoming arrogantly closed. This doesn't lead to any good connection with people of any culture. Rather than seeking to know everything about a given culture, it's better to learn how to live with uncertainty and question marks, and to learn about questioning as a way of connecting with others.

Q: *You've called for a 'moratorium' on humiliation. Do you feel your voice is being heard?*

A: Yes, but one never knows whether it will be enough. I often compare our work around the planet with the situation of a cancer patient. When you have a cancer patient who's terminally ill what should you do? The only way to give a patient any chance of survival is to be aware of the crisis and focus on life-supporting strategies to increase the chances of survival. Without optimistic determination, there's hardly any chance of survival. And you only know at the end whether your efforts have been successful. So we need to keep up courage and determination in the face of uncertainty. We also need to become independent of immediate success and simply do what needs to be done regardless of whether it bears immediate fruit. . . . I think our message is being heard, but I'm not sure whether it's enough.

Q: *What trends do you see in the world that are encouraging?*

A: One is globalization or the ingathering of humankind. The world is shrinking and more people are coming to realize that we're one family who must jointly take care of this planet. . . . Just the picture of the planet Earth as astronauts see it is profound. This is something people several generations back couldn't see. Another positive trend is that more and more people are grasping that humanity is interconnected, as Ray and Anderson in *The Cultural Creatives* have noted. There are already something like 20 million in the US and 30 million in Europe who have realized this. It's a growing number, and many

people in our network are part of this larger movement.

Q: *What future projects are you working on?*

A: Most of my energy is devoted to work with this group and educating people at large about humiliation and its connection with human rights and the notion of equal dignity for all. Hopefully, this will be a seed for a new form of community which is far-sighted and sustainable, both ecologically and socially.

Works Cited

Human Dignity & Humiliation Studies. (n.d.). Available online: www.humiliationstudies.org.

Lindner, E. (2006). *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press and Praeger Publishers.

Ray, P. H., & Anderson, S. R. (2001). *The cultural creatives: How 50 million people are changing the world*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

THE TIM NEWFIELDS HOMEPAGE

[Categorical Index](#)

[Subject Index](#)

[Title Index](#)

www.tnewfields.info/Articles/intLinder.htm