

Toward a Globally Informed Psychology of Humiliation: Comment on McCauley (2017)

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Abstract

There has never been a more urgent time for psychologists to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the pernicious dynamics of humiliation. Congratulations to the *American Psychologist* for introducing an article on the topic of humiliation and asymmetric conflict. Based on more than 20 years of research, a global community of scholars has established humiliation studies as a field of academic inquiry and has built a solid foundation of expertise on the phenomenon of humiliation and its impact. Open violence is only the tip of the iceberg. This commentary offers substantial clarifications and updates in support of McCauley's article and invites psychologists to recognize their vital role in developing research and clinical practice to address the explosive consequences of humiliation around the globe.

Keywords: humiliation, dignity, global research, relational-cultural theory

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The publication of an article in the *American Psychologist* examining the pernicious dynamics of humiliation marks a milestone worthy of applause (McCauley, 2017). Clark McCauley focuses on asymmetric conflict; yet, this is only the tip of the iceberg. In support of McCauley's article, this commentary offers substantial clarifications and updates emphasizing the global study of humiliation as paramount to the field of psychology.

The interdisciplinary community Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) has established humiliation studies as an area of academic inquiry. Beginning in 2001, HumanDHS has evolved into today's diverse network of scholars and others who recognize the urgent need for research on humiliation that reaches across cultures, continents, and disciplines. It strives to transcend the traditional lens of Western individualism by integrating a historical-relational-cultural approach to identify and investigate cycles of humiliation that disrupt the lives of individuals, communities, nations, and entire world regions. Clark McCauley became part of this effort in 2005. It is important to note that HumanDHS does not primarily focus on "one-on-one relationships" as implied by McCauley (2017, p. 255); rather, it emphasizes a broad, systemic analysis of the micro and macro manifestations of humiliation. To date, HumanDHS is the largest affiliation of scholars in the world collaborating and freely sharing findings to advance the study of this experience. It connects investigators, educators, practitioners, creative artists, and many others, as well as distinguished professionals in the field of psychology.

To cultivate a robust global perspective, researchers and psychologists should be cognizant of at least three overlapping dimensions of humiliation (Hartling & Lindner, 2016): (1) internal experience (e.g., feelings of unworthiness, anger, shame, depression, disempowerment in the context of relationships), (2) external interactions (e.g., obvious and subtle forms of

disparaging aggression or exclusion, discrimination, racism, sexism, heterosexism, bullying, hazing, etc.), and (3) systemic conditions (e.g., intractable poverty, forced migration, displacement, lack of access to education, economic injustice, social domination, apartheid-like social arrangements in general, environmental degradation, etc.). McCauley offers a brief discussion of responses to humiliation, including anger and shame. There are also less visible consequences of this experience that call for research, such as the depressogenic effects (Collazzoni, et al., 2014), inertia effects (Leidner, Sheikh & Ginges, 2012), and the widespread consequences of systemic humiliation (Hartling & Lindner, in press). The *Humiliation Inventory* by Hartling and Luchetta (1999) has been translated into Italian, French, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Norwegian in progress, and this has been crucial in extending the global research on humiliation.

State-of-the-art research can benefit from a historical analysis recognizing humiliation as perhaps "...the strongest force that creates rifts between people and breaks down relationships" in modern times (Lindner, 2006, p. 171). When examining the English language, there is a significant change in the meaning of humiliation that begins in 1757. Prior to that time, it was widely seen as appropriate to use humiliation to humble subordinates to keep them in their place. This is what Lindner calls *honor humiliation*. Only for dominant members of society was it accepted as honorable and necessary to defend one's honor, e.g., in duels, as in the case of Alexander Hamilton vs. Aaron Burr. Today, political figures, ideological groups, corporations, militias, gangs, and others continue to engage in modernized, sometimes weaponized, forms of dueling to defend their honor.

Lindner (2009, 2017) posits that humanity is in the midst of a historic shift in the concept of humiliation, a shift informed by a vision of *equality in dignity*, as aspired to in America's

Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) and the French Revolution (August 4, 1789). In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, which begins with the statement that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity...” (UN, 2007, p. 5). In a social context that prioritizes dignity—rather than stratified systems of honor—the concept of humiliation changes. It is now defined as the enforced lowering of any person or group that damages their inherent dignity. This is *dignity humiliation*.

In contrast to honor humiliation in which elite individuals or groups compete to maintain dominant-subordinate relationships, dignity humiliation involves a degradation of one’s human worth altogether. In an honor culture only dominants are entitled to reject attempts to humiliate them, while underlings are expected to adapt to humiliation. Society’s growing appreciation of equal dignity rightfully extends the entitlement to reject humiliation to *every human being*. In the world today, colliding forces of honor humiliation and dignity humiliation appear to be escalating. As a result, it is not an exaggeration to describe humiliation as a “nuclear bomb of emotions” (Lindner, 2006, p. 32).

Finally, it is vitally important that research on humiliation begins long before it becomes of interest to homeland security, military professionals, and terrorist experts. Violence and terrorism are the tip of a titanic iceberg of unaddressed social and systemic cycles of humiliation. In the future, psychologists and researchers must go to the headwaters of these experiences to find effective ways to prevent, repair, and reduce humiliation long before its consequences become calcified in the minds of its victims, witnesses, and perpetrators.

Therefore, the study of humiliation must be an expansive, globally informed endeavor rather than defined, designed, or monopolized by the interests of a single field, funder, culture, or institution. It requires an examination of its countless manifestations, from the volatile events

emerging in world politics to the casual cruelty found on playgrounds. In particular, research is needed on systems that perpetuate and intensify humiliating practices of inequality, economic injustice, and social domination—in short, all forms of institutionalized humiliation—which even affect the field of psychology itself. Moreover, research exploring the social, cultural, and political conditions that cultivate systemic dignity may identify effective and enduring relational practices that can counter the toxic consequences of humiliation. Psychologists are vital to the study of this experience. May all of us be motivated by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Kofi Annan’s words: “All the cruel and brutal things, even genocide, starts with the humiliation of one individual” (Whack, 2013).

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