Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

HumanDHS

A Frame of Appreciative Enquiry:
Beginning a Dialogue on Human Dignity and Humiliation

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How do we begin a dialogue about the impact of humiliation on human dignity? Until recently, the consequences of humiliation were largely overlooked by researchers, neglected by scholars, denied by political leaders, and discounted by individuals and groups at all levels of society. Yet, because of the collective efforts of individuals like those attending this *15th Annual Conference of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies* (HumanDHS) network, more and more people are beginning to understand that humiliation is a fundamental mechanism in human relations, a mechanism that disrupts and damages interpersonal, social, and international relationships around the world.

Indeed, daily media images of degrading armed conflict and dehumanizing cruelty has led many of us to agree with HumanDHS Founding President Evelin Lindner's assessment of humiliation as "the nuclear bomb of emotions," an experience that poisons individuals, families, communities, and whole societies for untold generations (2001, 2006, 2009, 2010). In 2003, Dr. Lindner invited a small group of people to join her remarkable efforts to "map the [ever-changing] minefield" (2001) of this experience at the first international meeting of the HumanDHS network in Paris. Since then, HumanDHS has hosted meetings in wide-ranging locations around the world, including Germany, Costa Rica, China, Norway, multiple locations in the U.S., and now in beautiful Istanbul, Turkey, the crossroad of cultures. Our meetings bring together scholars, practitioners, and activists who hold the belief that promoting dignity in the lives and work of *all* people requires moving beyond practices that threaten or inflict humiliation.

But how does one begin a conversation about the profoundly painful experience of humiliation and the complex dynamics of human dignity? This is a fundamental question we must address, not only in our HumanDHS meetings, but also in every step of our work in the world. Specifically, we ask ourselves how do we create the optimal conditions that will allow us to tap into the diversity of knowledge and experience that each person brings to the conversation? How do we, as explorers of the experience of humiliation, "walk the talk" of equal dignity in our words and

deeds? How do we ensure that our energy goes into the work we do together, rather than into defensive or aggressive debates?

This paper describes our approach to constructive and productive dialogue about experiences of human dignity and humiliation. Though I am the writer of the words, the ideas expressed in this paper are the culmination and synthesis of insights developed in our HumanDHS community of more than 1,000 distinguished members. I hope you hear their voices in every word of this paper.

Developing a Frame of Appreciative Enquiry

From the very first meeting of the HumanDHS network we knew we needed an innovative starting point for efficiently and effectively growing ideas as a community. Donald Klein, a pioneer in the field of community psychology and the author of groundbreaking papers on the humiliation dynamic (Klein, 1991a, 1991b, 1992), introduced our community to a "framework" that became a cornerstone for all of our conversations. We came to call this approach the "frame of appreciative enquiry." Initially derived from the research methodology known as "appreciative inquiry" (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990), Don Klein's guidance helped us develop a model of appreciative practice that is not only tailored to the collaborative needs of the HumanDHS community, but also designed to support each of us as we take our work into the world.

A frame of appreciative enquiry (AE)—a frame that values the equal dignity of all people—is characterized by mutual openness, mutual empathy, and mutual curiosity. Don Klein (2004) observed that all of us have the capacity to approach our experience from this unique stance:

> Everyone is born with an inherent capacity to experience the world through the lens of wonderment and awe. We have the potential to view events in our lives with simple clarity, to maintain a sense of humor and joyful perspective, and, above all, to avoid wasting energy on distracting thoughts, including the fear of humiliation. (p. 4)

Don Klein emphasized that appreciation can be a powerful "antidote" to feelings of humiliation. Research on social exclusion supports this line of thinking (Twenge, Cantanese, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). The frame of AE sets a social-emotional tone with our group that allows people to engage in humble appreciation of the enormous challenge and complexities of ending humiliating practices and promoting dignity in the world. AE allows people to engage in our work with an appreciation of the different perspectives each individual brings to the table. Moreover, AE encourages people to work together to create a *humiliation-free* working/learning environment, a relational environment that facilitates the growth of all involved.

Five Guiding Ideas: Ideals for Working in a Collaborative Community

Over the years, we have sought to find the most effective ways to proactively address the ever-present risk of humiliation while upholding the dignity of all members of our community. This effort has given birth to five guiding ideas that inform our practice of AE. These ideas have grown into ideals that shape our meetings and our steps forward.

First: Relationships come first! The HumanDHS network is radically relational! We have seen beyond the myth of "rugged individualism" that led 20th Century psychologists to believe that the outcome of healthy development is self-sufficiency and separation from relationships (Cushman, 1995). We have also seen beyond the cold, distant, traditional images of professional organizations. Rather than an organization, we think of ourselves as a *fellowship* of human beings cultivating

mutually empathic, mutual empowering, and growth-fostering relationships to encourage constructive global change. Connection (a.k.a., growth-fostering relating) is the glue of our creative collaboration. To advance the dignity of all people we have incorporated what studies have shown: healthy connections are essential and central to our lives (Banks & Jordan, 2007; Hartling, Ly, Nassery, & Califa, 2003; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Putnam, 2000; Resnick, 1997). Our radically-appreciative relational approach is a living experiment in transcending the conventional arrangements of organizations that all-to-often make human beings feel like they are merely tools in the operation of a large machine. Building healthy relationships is our first thought, not an afterthought.

Second: None of us is as smart as all of us. This Japanese proverb summarizes our transdisciplinary philosophy and methodology for conducting a global study of human dignity and humiliation. Our areas of investigation—dignity and humiliation—are vast and complex. Consequently, we welcome and celebrate a wide array of experiential and intellectual contributions to our shared efforts. We rely on what has been described as *fluid expertise*, rather than fixed expertise, which means we conceptualize expertise as something that can flow from one party to another over time and during interactions (Fletcher, 1997). Furthermore, inspired by Morton Deutsch's groundbreaking research, we believe collaboration will outperform competition in the long run. We appreciate the Turkish proverbs, "*Baş başa vermeyince taş yerinden kalkmaz"* and *"Bir elin nesi var, iki elin sesi var,"* which mean difficult tasks can be accomplished through collaboration (Köksal, personal communication, April 22, 2010). Our work is a difficult task, and we work best when we work together, allowing our actions to be informed by our collective and connected wisdom.

Third: It is not just the work we do together, it is *how* we work together that is important. Many organizations—including governments and religious groups—obstruct their own efforts by their inability to "practice what they preach," not only in the world, but also within their organization! Sadly, internal conflicts can easily devastate the relational landscape of organizations that have the most honorable intentions (Yamada, 2008). We have found that many toxic conflicts can be traced to forms of humiliation that develop when groups fail to live by their own words. In response to this risk, we pay close attention to how we work together and commit ourselves to "walking the talk" of our work in words and deeds. Every interaction—inside and outside of the HumanDHS fellowship—is an opportunity to walk the talk of humiliation-free equal dignity!

Fourth: We are human beings among human beings. In a world in which people are bombarded by slick, hyper-edited, sensationalized, media-enhanced images of human behavior the HumanDHS fellowship seeks to be an island of authenticity and humility. Recognizing the truth of our shared humanity, that we are "human beings among human beings," frees us to be real in our connections with others. This notion is harmonious with the African concept of *Ubuntu*, described by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Lindner, 2010). Ubuntu involves "living together and resolving conflicts in an atmosphere of shared humility," in other words, recognizing that everyone's "humanity is caught, is inextricably bound up, in" the humanity of others (p. vi). We are an intentional community of "perfectly imperfect human beings." As such, we allow ourselves and others room to grow, allowing room for error. We celebrate progress rather than perfection.

Fifth: We all do better when we all do better. These words were the definition of community for the late Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone (2001). As the son of struggling immigrants, he dedicated his life to dignifying the lives of others through grassroots organizing combined with political action that regularly defied powerful money politics. Paul Wellstone

believed that everyone benefits when we work for a world in which all people can live dignified lives. His aphorism succinctly describes our ultimate goal as well as the process of our collective efforts. The concept connotes a higher standard of ethical practice than "do no harm." Rather, we envision a world in which people work together for mutual benefit, moving toward mutuality in the moment and in the outcome (Jordan, 1986; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This requires an ethic of "action informed by empathy" for others *and* ourselves.

What the Frame of Appreciative Enquiry Is and Is Not

What do we mean by appreciation? Appreciation—valuing others and their experience—should not be confused with behaviors that might be described as "just being nice," or confused with contriving ways to "be more agreeable" in a group. It is *especially not* about praise or forcing oneself to be positive, to think optimistically, or even to reframe the messages that others present. Most of all, the *appreciative approach is absolutely not about avoiding conflict*.

The HumanDHS frame of AE is fundamentally *about being present and engaged in a way that values and encourages the contributions of all members of the group*. It is about practicing deep mutual respect, being empathically curious, and working together to accurately understand the experience of others. Further, it is about approaching new information, new ideas, and new insights from an energized sense of "awe and wonder," as Don Klein would say (2004).

Occasionally individuals express concern that AE might inhibit open dialogue or suppress conflict in a group. This is an enormously important concern! A substantive discussion of humiliation and human dignity depends on our ability to bring differences to the table. Over the years we have learned that creating a conference climate of appreciative curiosity sets the stage for more—rather than less—authentic engagement. It may or may not surprise people to know that the cold, hypercompetitive, distant professionalism practiced at most conferences can result in enormous wasted energy as participants get caught in defensive or aggressive debates, rather than in productive and constructive dialogue.

The frame of AE increases and enhances our capacity to "wage good conflict" (Miller, 1976/1986, 1983). Morton Deutsch, the 2009 recipient of the *HumanDHS Lifetime Achievement Award*, described the crucial conditions that influence the course of conflict leading to either constructive or destructive conflict (1994). Similar to concept of constructive conflict, legendary psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller used the phrase "waging good conflict" to connote conflict that leads to positive outcomes, including greater clarity, deeper connection, and mutual growth (1976/1986, 1983). Indeed, she considered conflict a necessary path to growth. Unfortunately, images of conflict portrayed in the media are not merely conflict, but *conflict in the extreme*, conflict as aggression, conflict as war. Jean Baker Miller challenged the myopic view of conflict. She emphasized that conflict doesn't have to be this way. Rather than employing maneuvers of dominance and aggression, people can conduct conflict in ways that strengthen relationships and uphold the dignity of all people. She proposed that conflict is not only necessary for growth, but good conflict is also a pathway to better human connection (1983). Waging good conflict encourages authentic engagement while valuing differences among people and perspectives. Effective parents, teachers, and caretakers can be seen as models of this type of conflict, conflict that facilitates growth. One of the most important benefits of AE is that it helps us build our capacity to wage good conflict within a caring community.

What Does an Appreciative Approach Look Like in Action?

Convening HumanDHS meetings in locations around the world affords us the opportunity to "harvest" and build on the dignifying ideas of many cultures, ideas that expand our capacity to work effectively (Lindner, 2008). Because we, as a community, value the wisdom of "connected intelligence" (Hartling, 2007), it is important to note that the practice of AE is not fixed or static; it is a "work in progress." Our model of AE is constantly growing, evolving, and unfolding as more and more people from diverse backgrounds and experience contribute to the dialogue.

Although our practice of AE is continually developing, we have identified a number of practical suggestions that guide us through our meetings.

1. Practice Relational-Cultural Awareness:

- Meet others in mutual respect from the very first moment of engagement, rather than making people earn respect. This involves recognizing that all people are worthy of dignity. The Norwegian notion of *likeverd* (equality in dignity) may be another way to describe the community climate of deep respect we strive to achieve (Lindner, 2008).

- Be mindful of one's intended and unintended impact on others (Jordan, 1995). This is the relational practice of staying attuned to others in a way that adds to, rather than subtracts from, collaborative efforts.

- Appreciate that each member of the group is connecting across differences. Connecting across differences in language, culture, disciplines, interests, experiences, and many other differences can be challenging, but it is a deeply enriching and rewarding part of our work.

- Be aware of time and timing. All of us differ in our consciousness of time and timing. One way we can practice relational-cultural awareness is by checking and confirming agreements about the use of time throughout our meetings.

2. Listening Each Other into Voice:

- The process of listening and speaking is *bidirectional*; we can literally listen each other into voice. That is, all participants can respectfully help others find ways to clearly express their ideas. Rather than organizing a meeting around a series of monologues or organizing a meeting around a win/lose debate, AE is a more participatory approach involving a type of deep listening that leads to deeper dialogue.

- Listen with your whole heart. Inspired by the work of others (Isay, 2007), network members Libby and Len Traubman remind us "listening is an act of love." Therefore, much is lost when we practice half-hearted attention, when we listen only long enough to formulate our next response. Listening with your heart dignifies the speaker as well as the listener.

- Listening is not only an act of love, it is a mutually-energizing action! Mike Miller's paper on "How to Dialogue and Why" identifies the ways we can follow up on listening by asking questions that respectfully draw out the other person's best ideas and deepen the discussion (Miller, 2010). This adds energy that generates new insights.

3. Waging Good Conflict, Conducting Constructive Conflict:

- Use AE to reframe and reclaim conflict. As noted earlier, we can practice conflict in constructive ways to increase our understanding of others, to clarify our ideas, and ideally to facilitate the growth of all involved.

- Use AE to disagree without being disagreeable. Demeaning and devaluing another person's ideas or perspective not only deadens the discussion for the speaker, but for everyone in the room. This dynamic illustrates the radioactive effects of humiliation. AE is particular useful as an approach for disagreeing while preserving the dignity of others who express opposing views.

- Use AE to engage in conflict and risk being wrong. What is so terrible about being wrong? Sometimes being wrong can open the door to new possibilities and new solutions. Some say that more problems occur when we get stuck on being right! AE allows us to risk being wrong and respond with dignity when we discover we are wrong.

- We can use AE to recognize and repair the inevitable relational blunders we make because we are "all human beings among human beings." Dr. Aaron Lazare, a distinguished member of the HumanDHS Global Advisory Board, offers us many practical ideas about repairing relationships through the healing power of apology (2004).

4. Creating Better Connection through Reflection

- Use AE to reflect on what work has been collectively accomplished, on how this work has been accomplished, and how we can improve our work in a way that exemplifies the spirit of equal dignity for all.

- We can also use AE when acknowledging and honoring individual and collective efforts to foster an appreciative, humiliation-free learning environment.

5. Taking our work seriously, but taking ourselves lightly.

- Members of the HumanDHS community are engaged in addressing some of the most serious issues of our time, such as human trafficking, forced migration, poverty, illness, violence, war, and genocide—forms of brutality beyond imagination. AE helps us to take our work seriously, while finding comfort and encouragement by taking ourselves lightly. We celebrate the moments when we can find ways to laugh together, laugh even while are hearts may be aching. Humor, as HumanDHS Business Director Richard Slaven demonstrates at every meeting, is a powerful antidote to humiliation.

Though the items above illustrate how we have translated AE into specific actions, this is not a comprehensive or a complete list. Franz Kafka once said, "Wege entstehen dadurch, dass man sie geht," which means, "Paths come into being by walking them" (HumanDHS, 2010). The HumanDHS practice of AE is still coming into being as our fellowship walks a path of equal dignity for all.

The Outcomes of an Appreciative Approach

Ultimately, what are the individual and organizational benefits of taking an appreciative approach? Our experience has shown us that AE allows members of our group to bring more of themselves—as well as more of their experience—into our meetings. It strengthens our group's capacity to engage in courageous, but difficult conversations about the complex dynamics of humiliation. AE generates the conditions for deeply dignifying dialogue. Moreover, the practice of AE is a path to what the late Jean Baker Miller, MD, identified as "The Five Good Things" of growth-fostering relationships (1986):

1. A greater sense of zest or energy,

2. Feeling empowered to action on behalf of oneself, the other, and the relationship,

3. An increased sense of knowledge or clarity in the relationship,

4. This energy, empowerment, and clarity lead to a greater sense of worth for all people participating in the relationship, and

5. These first four outcomes lead people toward a desire for more connection.

If we are going to effectively counteract humiliation and promote equal dignity in our time, we need everyone's help. We need all hands on deck. AE creates a uniquely energizing and supportive relational space for turning ideas into action. It gives us a greater capacity to be "relational-cultural bridge builders" in our work and in every aspect of our lives. When we take an appreciative approach we are simultaneously working against the deadly dynamics of humiliation and advancing the dignity of all people! We are walking our talk!

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