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### Humiliation at Columbine High School

As a privileged American, the concept of humiliation may seem a notion far removed from my everyday life; but upon thorough study, deeper understanding and thoughtful introspection, it has become quite immediate and recognizable. Americans, by nature, tend to look at the world in an ethnocentric manner. Thoughts and actions are based on individuality, material wealth and getting ahead. As a society, the United States lacks a holistic vision of the world as a "global village" (Lindner, 2002i) and instead often views American culture and society as superior. In turn, the US is often blamed for much of the world's problems; in some instances this is warranted and in others the US is a scapegoat for other nations and societies. Regardless of fault, the perception exists. While seemingly responsible for others' suffering, the US is ironically seen as a society in which those same sufferings are unlikely to occur. Both mainstream American public and many members of the global community consider the US a society in which the terrible violence spurred on by deeply humiliated populations of people would not thrive, could not happen. War, genocide, terrorism, and other acts of degradation occur around the world every day, even in these modern times. As Americans, though, many of us still think that 'it can't happen to us'. This is a false perception, a naive and uninformed point of view. Many acts of violence and desecration caused by anger and fear have taken place in the US in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even before the terror attacks of Sept 11<sup>th</sup>, a day that has clearly changed history and the American psyche forever (in some ways for the better and others for the worse) horrific incidents of violence have occurred on US soil, perpetrated by Americans and upon Americans, driven by feelings of humiliation in the aggressors. One such incident is what is known as the "Tragedy at Columbine High School."

## **Columbine Tragedy Background**

On April 20, 1999, two very disturbed, very angry and alienated high school seniors, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, after months of planning, take over parts of their high school building, Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, and begin shooting at people (see Appendix A). Over the course of approximately one hour, Eric and Dylan manage to kill 12 fellow students, 1 teacher, themselves and wound 23 others. They “fired semiautomatic weapons at students and teachers and tossed explosives, with one student being hit nine times in the chest by shrapnel, the authorities said ... One bomb exploded in the library, officials said, and one in a car outside. Two more cars were rigged with bombs” as well as a number of pipe bombs in duffel bags placed in the cafeteria (Brooke, 1999, NYT online). The public was shocked but after some investigation, it seems there were signs that had been ignored and warnings that were not heeded. These boys had made detailed plans of the attack, created Web sites that spouted hatred, and built practice bombs. They bought guns and threatened other students. They wrote essays and journals for school that espoused violence and anger. And they were the victims of bullying and alienation from other kids in the “popular” cliques. These are the facts as we now know them.

I remember watching the news from my luxurious college apartment on that Tuesday afternoon. The horrific images on the screen caused so many distinct feelings on a personal and national level: a deep sense of sadness, loss of innocence, fear about the future and the safety of our schools, general disbelief and denial, anger, and a lack of understanding as to the causes of this massacre. We were all

searching for the answers to explain how such a tragedy, such a terrible act of violence could occur in the year 1999, in suburban America.

There are a lot of still-unanswered questions. What seems to be behind the facts goes to the question of why. Why did this happen? Why did so many young people with so much ahead of them have to die? Why did Eric and Dylan believe that murder was the best and only course of action – what brought them to this point? Why did no one see the warning signs and try to prevent this from happening?

While we will never truly know all of the reasons that Eric and Dylan decided to commit mass murder and suicide, we can speculate on some of the causes and motivations. There were biological reasons that may have contributed to the boys' decision. Eric was taking Luvox, a psychotropic drug for a brain chemical imbalance, often used to treat obsessive-compulsive symptoms (WebMD).<sup>1</sup> Some believe that humans can be chemically predisposed to violent behavior and therefore mentally ill.<sup>2</sup> Maybe it was simply a distorted form of teenage rebellion that was taken too far by two boys who didn't realize the consequences of their actions. Also, there has been much debate over the culpability of the parents and if it is legal and ethical to blame the parents for the actions of a 17-year-old. "Both Mr. Harris and Mr. Klebold come from middle-class, two-parent families" (Wilgoren and Johnson, 1999, NYT online) in which both families were made up of "caring, conscientious parents who structured their lives around supporting their children -- and who believed, from all accounts, that they were on the right track" (Belluck and Wilgoren, 1999, NYT

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<sup>1</sup> I do not know Eric Harris's actual diagnosis or the extent of his psychotherapy. Information pertaining to the nature of the drug Luvox was obtained on MedMD at <http://my.webmd.com/content/article/4046.1877>.

<sup>2</sup> We will never know the exact psychological make-up of the two boys, neuroanatomical, genetic, or biochemical, as they are now deceased. We will also never know the extent of their psychosocial disorders.

online). Any or all of these factors may be behind the shootings, but overall the biggest driver seems to have been the culmination of the effects of bullying, alienation, rejection, confusion, taunting and abuse - in other words, the culmination of years of humiliation at the hands of classmates and peers.

In the following paper, I will explore the Columbine incident and how it relates to E. G. Lindner's theories and research on Humiliation as a core driver of violent behavior. I will offer personal reflections on Columbine and Humiliation as a concept, and will then look towards a future that maximizes the potential for peace and coexistence in both global and American society.

### **What is Humiliation?**

Humiliation is a complex, largely unexplored concept that crosses a number of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and political science, and must be examined holistically. Avishai Margalit (1996) strives for a "Decent Society," as opposed to simply a Just Society, which is defined as a society "whose institutions do not humiliate people" (Margalit, 1996, p.1). Taking this a step further, Lindner defines humiliation in a number of her articles as: "the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed, against your will and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations. It often involves acts of force, including violent force. At its heart is the idea of pinning down, putting down or holding to the ground. Indeed, one of the defining

characteristics of humiliation as a process is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless" (Lindner, 2000b, p.4).

These two boys were routinely embarrassed, put down, made to feel less than equal to the general population of the school. We all know that high school isn't easy, isn't fun, that kids are mean and immature at that age, that people who are different get made fun of. They are described as "kids who nobody wanted to have anything to do with . . . nerds, geeks and dweebs trying to find someplace to fit in" (Brooke, 1999, NYT online). They were members of the "Trench Coat mafia" a gang-like social group of students considered "outsiders." As other members of the Trench Coat mafia have attested, these boys were bullied and taunted along with other members of the group. They wore black overcoats and dressed in a "goth" style. They were called "faggots," had rocks thrown at them, got bashed into lockers for no reason; they were ostracized by the popular kids considered "jocks" and "cheerleaders." They were routinely stripped of their dignity, put down, subjugated, hurt and humiliated.

According to Lindner's research, there are three types of societies: Pride society indicated by man's subjugation of nature, honor society indicated by man's subjugation of man, and dignity society which is based on the notion of universal human rights. It morally condemns the subjugation of humans and illegitimizes the notion of humiliation (2000b). Here, there is a high school that should be devoid of hierarchy, in a nation and community that upholds the notion of human rights. The idealized American values of freedom, justice and equal rights should be at play. What has happened, though, is the establishment of a hierarchy based on social standing. The jocks/cheerleaders who bullied Eric and Dylan used "conquest

humiliation" (Lindner, 2001g, p.61) to make the boys and other members of their social group of outcasts into inferiors. They then used "reinforcement humiliation" (2001g, p.61) such as insulting them to keep them at a lower social rank. This creates an unequal "master-slave" relationship between different "cliques" in the school, which is a very common practice in the majority of American high schools. The "slave" loathes and admires the "master," is humiliated by but wants to emulate him, hates being an outsider or feeling alienated but longs for acceptance and popularity.

With the establishment of the notion of human rights in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a gradual transition from largely hierarchical honor societies to dignity societies. This shift in global values has created an unstable environment all over the world. The biggest pitfall of this current flux in global perspective is that now the world is more dangerous than ever. There is greater potential for violence, dissatisfaction and uprising as people learn to feel humiliated by any form of subjugation or disrespect. Lindner's research shows that "the most intense feelings of humiliation may occur in victims who admire their humiliators. In cases where such victims gain access to means for counter-humiliation this will be carried out with particular brutality and may include genocidal killings" (2002i, p.99). Eric and Dylan, while intensely angry at the more popular "jocks" and "cheerleaders," also wanted to be like them. According to recent reports, "Columbine's male athletes, tall, muscular and radiating confidence and authority in their Abercrombie shirts and jeans, stood out in today's crowd. It was easy to imagine their inspiring envy among some of their less popular classmates. . . 'We'd be walking down the hall, and people would say, 'Stupid jocks,' ' said Brad Johnson, 18, a senior who played for the

football and rugby teams. 'I guess it's because they weren't jocks'" (Rimer, 1999, NYT online) (see Appendix B).

These two boys, feeling humiliation in the context of these conflicting, transitional societal structures, were deeply wounded. Their dignity and core being had been attacked and they were traumatized by the bullying and ostracism that they encountered on a daily basis. Lindner has put forth a spectrum that examines the relationship between trauma and humiliation. She asserts that while "trauma may occur without humiliation . . . humiliation may be the core agent of trauma" (2001g, p.51) and places the two at either end of that spectrum. She asserts that at one pole of the spectrum, where humiliation is the core of trauma, that "mobbing and bullying" occur, as it has at Columbine. Here, "an actor intends to humiliate me, wants to teach me my unworthiness in a context where this is not routine but illegitimate and violates my inner core of dignity." (2001g, p.67) When this violation is turned into trauma, it "happens typically in a democratic society that is built on human rights principles where citizens expect to be treated with respect as an equal among equals" (2001g, p.67). The "jocks" and "cheerleaders" destroyed the boys as people through bullying and the use of "violent" means to keep them down and maintain the hierarchical social order. In a true human rights society, this method becomes illegitimate, the deepest violation of another. This deep violation is the trauma that Eric and Dylan were contending with in Littleton, CO.

Lindner, through extensive research, has created taxonomy around this complex notion of humiliation. I will attempt to qualify the Columbine situation according to this taxonomy and possibly add to it as well. We can look at humiliation in two parts, "1. humiliation carried out as an act by an actor or humiliator, and 2.

humiliation felt as a feeling by a victim or humiliated party" (Lindner, 2002h, p.1).

Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris act as both humiliator and humiliated in this case. As humiliators, they fall under perspective 1.1, "If you humiliate me, I humiliate you!" They felt the victim of bullying and constant humiliation, and attempted to get back at those who were oppressing them. All elements measured are present, the desire to humiliate, the intention to act, and the act itself (2002i, 2002h).

When we examine the boys as the humiliated parties, the taxonomy is not as clear-cut. They may fall into perspective 2.1, "I feel humiliated without a clear humiliator" because in some cases the oppressor is a social group with vague borders and membership, not individuals - the "jock" or "cheerleader" types. Some of the intentions to humiliate may not be there, we don't really know. But some of their intentions were there, some members of the popular groups<sup>3</sup> purposely humiliated Dylan and Eric and other members of the Trench Coat mafia and thus became direct, stated targets at the massacre. This perspective does not fit neatly into the stated taxonomy and may need a new category such as "I feel humiliated with a clear humiliator" either due to the humiliator's own problems or because I'm a scapegoat, as were the Jews during the Holocaust. Also, perspective 2.6 is applicable, "I feel humiliated when others watch." The boys were bullied and made fun of in front of other kids at school. In addition, though, one can feel humiliated even if no one is there watching, can personally feel degraded and debased within one's own psyche and heart, in front of only oneself for no clear reason other than because it violates the notion of human rights and one's personal dignity (2002i, 2002h).

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<sup>3</sup> I will keep the names of the victims out of this document as they are not directly relevant.

We can view the popular kids within this structure as well. When looking at the "jocks" and "cheerleaders" as the humiliators, 1.1 may be applicable, "if you humiliate me, I humiliate you," but it may be a displacement of focus, a blaming or scapegoating because of their own prior humiliations. Maybe they had felt humiliated at the hands of someone else at some point in their lives and they were taking it out on those of lesser social status. Perspective 1.3 may be partly responsible: "I humiliate you simply because my honor requires it." It is possible that the "jocks" and "cheerleaders" were seeking to move up on the social ladder and in order to do so had to subjugate others, either because of peer pressure or because, as in honor societies, it is the expected and informally condoned response. In this case it is a question of status. According to the measurements, the desire to humiliate may or may not be there (it is not required), but the intention to act is there and the act itself does occur. Another possibility may be 1.4, "I humiliate you simply to enfeeble you" in which the humiliator does not necessarily want to humiliate, but seeks to gain something from it and therefore feels it is a necessary action. It may be that these popular kids were simply insecure and thought they needed to push others down in order to elevate themselves, in order to make themselves look and feel better. We will never know the true extent of the situation unless direct primary research is done by interviewing the parties involved. Again, this example does not fit into the current taxonomy and may require the addition of another category, such as "I humiliate you to humiliate you" because I can and want to, or "I humiliate you to strengthen myself" which is close to 1.4 but with the desire to humiliate. At first glance, what seems to be the gap in this case is the failure of the taxonomy to deal with pure malicious intent. Lindner seems to be basing her taxonomy on an overall assumption that human beings are good at heart, but I don't know that to be true. Obviously, a belief such as this is part of one's personal philosophy about life and is

not going to be explored in this paper, but the apparent gap in the taxonomy raises a question about the existence of pure evil. I will return to this topic again at the end of this paper (2002i, 2002h).

When looking at the popular kids as the humiliated victims, in conjunction with 1.1, category 2.1 seems applicable. Maybe they had been humiliated at another point in their lives. Again, though, the missing perspective mentioned above seems to fit: "I feel humiliated with a clear humiliator" because someone wanted revenge on me, whether warranted or not. It is clear that they are the victims of Dylan and Eric's murderous, vengeful rampage. It is clear that every student and teacher at Columbine High School was a victim, but at the same time I don't believe that being a victim necessarily leads to humiliation in every case. Those who did feel humiliated in this case, though, knew who was intentionally trying to humiliate them (2002i, 2002h).

#### **Possible Responses to Humiliation:**

There are four ways of reacting to painful subjugation: a.) pain that is accepted as God's will (as is found in honor societies), b.) pain that is not accepted that in turn causes depression or self-humiliation, c.) pain that is not accepted and leads to "the desire to 'pay back' with acts of humiliation: genocide, terror attacks, violent uprisings" or d.) pain that is not accepted but is dealt with by forming constructive solutions. (2002i, p.34) According to Lindner, it is likely that "if people feel humiliated, they [will] strike back when they can" (Lindner, 2001f, p.2); that "unforgivable humiliations trigger unforgiving responses" (2000b, p.13). In other words, a person or group can either take their feelings of frustration, anger and

hatred and follow the nonviolent, humanitarian example of a leader like Nelson Mandela (option d above); or they can follow the destructive, violent teachings of a leader such as Adolf Hitler (option c above). In this case, Dylan and Eric chose violence and murder, even going so far as to associate themselves with teachings and dogma of Hitler and neo-Nazism. Hitler played on the destructive strategies of action, on the vengeful, angry energy that lives inside those who feel humiliated. Part of what draws the alienated and oppressed to violence is "the desire (among other things) to immerse oneself in something large, heroic and exciting, to feel not only a sense of purpose but a sense of belonging . . . [which will in turn lead to] positive sources of gratification" (Lindner, 2000a, p.6). The boys sought such a release for their energy. One student is quoted as having reported "he just put the gun in my face and started laughing and saying it was all because people were mean to him last year" (Brooke, 1999, NYT online). They created Websites, journals, and school essays that contained and promoted extreme violence, that expressed their uncontrollable anger and identification with Hitler's legacy (see Appendix C). They chose to misdirect their energies in destructive strategies of coping instead of peaceful ones.

The result, as we know, is one of murder, suicide, woundings and a continuation of the cycle of humiliation. "Feelings of humiliation may lead to acts of humiliation perpetrated on the perceived humiliator, setting off cycles of humiliation in which everyone who is involved feels humiliated" (Lindner, 2001d, p.5). This cycle of humiliation can come back in many forms, terrorism, genocide, kidnapping, murder, etc. This varies depending on the situation and the environment as well as on if the humiliation occurs on a universal, group, or individual level. Here it is on an individual level but also on a group level, as the Columbine tragedy was perpetrated

by two students, but affected an entire nation and also stood for the experiences other teenagers were having around the country. In essence, the humiliated party, the two boys, attempted to humiliate or retaliate on those who oppressed them. They took their "resentment, frustration, fear and anger . . . [and made] these energies available to be directed at plausible targets that come within reach" (2001f, p.12). The kids used their negative feelings brought on and enhanced by humiliation, and directed them at those they perceived as the oppressors.

### **Minimizing Violence and Humiliation in the Future:**

As discussed above, there is a greater risk for violence, terrorism, genocide, bullying, etc. during this fluctuating time of transition to a "global village" of dignity societies. The move has started, though, from the hierarchical pyramids of power to an egalitarian world in which core human dignity is afforded to everyone. It is a tough road and a long journey until we reach the ideal society, if such a utopia can ever exist. Each member of the human race is taxed with embracing the Mandelas and coming up with constructive solutions to feelings of humiliation and injustice while rejecting the cycle of violence and rhetoric of the Hitlers. Humans need to acquire a greater maturity of the individual self, of the group self and of the universal self. Each parent must teach its child about global responsibility, tolerance, multiculturalism, and universal human dignity. We must each act respectfully toward all others and ourselves. There needs to be an influx of committed third parties who believe in and work towards a peaceful future in the "global village," not just critics and "innocent" bystanders who expect someone else to fix the world's problems. And hypocrisy should be rejected, a task particularly directed at the US. One of the biggest reasons why the US is blamed for many of the world's problems

and for being a frequent humiliator is that we preach human rights but do not always practice them when dealing with other nations, or even within our own borders as evidenced by the Columbine Tragedy. A twenty-to-two ratio is necessary to effect such change (2002i, p.111). It takes everyone, every human, to be involved in this cause. In the US, even after 9/11/02, Americans are still largely apathetic and uninvolved in effecting true global change. We must all engage in the "game," as we are all a part of winning or losing it.

In the end, I don't necessarily feel sympathy for these two boys, as I don't at all feel sympathy for the Nazis or any other group of people who commit atrocious murders and acts of violence, but I do see a similarity in that a core driver of the violence is their own feelings of humiliation. By looking at this complicated notion of humiliation, we come to an increased understanding of humiliators and perpetrators as human beings who have acted out of their own suffering. This leads me back to the question of pure evil – does it truly exist or is it just a lack of understanding on the world's part to assign the term "evil" to something we cannot empathize with or explain? Is it just easier to call someone evil and erase seeing them as human than it is to try to understand what could possibly motivate one to commit unspeakable acts? And if the public is willing to look closely at a situation or a people or an individual and explore their identity, experiences, feelings, circumstances, etc. to try to gain understanding, will such understanding always lead back to universal humanity and the disbelief in pure evil? Such are the questions of philosophy and life to ponder.

Daryn Morgenstein

June 29, 2002

Conflict Resolution and the Psychology of Humiliation

ORLJ 4859A - 001

Appendix A; <http://www.angelfire.com/tx2/coroner/columbin.html>

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|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>Early 1998</b>    | After petty vandalism, authorities told Harris's to watch their son. Harris begins keeping journal of his plans to kill at Columbine High. Harris threatens Brooks Brown. Web site details Harris's rage. |
| <b>May '98</b>       | After police given print out of Web site, no action is taken. Brown's calls not returned.   |
| <b>June '98</b>      | Harris and Klebold began building pipe bombs. Parents fail to notice activity.  |
| <b>July '98</b>      | Harris plays "Doom" on internet. One level of game is layout of Columbine High.   |
| <b>August '98</b>    | Harris and Klebold explode pipe bombs in "Greenball" section  |
| <b>September '98</b> | Harris and Klebold become Seniors at Columbine High.  |
| <b>October '98</b>   | Harris and Klebold's video class projects involve anger, violence and revenge   |
| <b>November '98</b>  | Klebold's girlfriend turns 16, buys 3 guns used by Klebold and Harris in murders.   |
| <b>December '98</b>  | At some point, Harris is taking Luvox, a psychotropic drug for brain chemical imbalance.  |
| <b>January '99</b>   | Bomb making continues. Harris refines murder plans in his journal.  |
| <b>February '99</b>  | Man sells TEC-DC9 assault pistol to Harris. Goes shooting 3 times.  |
| <b>March '99</b>     | Counselor talks with Klebold and father about his violent essays at school.   |
| <b>April '99</b>     | Harris and Klebold murder 12 students, 1 teacher and severely wound 23 others.  |

Appendix B

<http://surfin.spies.com/~gus/trenchcoat/>

*BASIC RULES:*

Hitler is cool.

Jocks suck

and football sucks too.

Negroes need to put down

their forties and

head back to Africa.

School sucks

and should be bombed.

Teachers are

the real death camp guards.

The holocaust never happened,

but it would have been cool if it had.

The big secret is that

cheerleaders have more problems

with gas than average Americans.

Doom is a fun game.

German industrial music is better than  
all other music.

If something explodes,

it's cooler than if it doesn't.

Appendix C

<http://www.homepagez.com/trenchcoat/rebdomindex.html>

Wie gehts.

Well all you people out there can just kiss my ass and die. From now on I don't give a fuck what almost any of you mutha fuckas have to say, unless i respect you which is highly unlikely, but for those of you who happen to know me and know that i respect you, may piece be with you and dont be in my line of fire. for the rest of you, you all better fucking hide in your houses because im comin for everyone soon, and i WILL be armed to the fuckin teeth and i WILL shoot to kill and i WILL fucking KILL EVERYTHING! No i am not crazy. crazy is just a word. to me it has no meaning. everyone is different. but most of you fuckheads out there in society, going to your everyday fucking jobs and doing your everyday routine shitty things, i say fuck you and die. if you got a problem with my thoughts, come tell me and ill kill you, because.....god damnit, DEAD PEOPLE DONT ARGUE!

God DAMNIT I AM PISSED!!

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