DEVELOPING PERSPECTIVE – PART I
A JOURNAL OF REFLECTIONS ON HUMILIATION

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Conflict Resolution and the Psychology of Humiliation

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INTRODUCTION

Constructive conflict resolution depends, in part, on creativity.  For many, problem-solving is a linear (either/or, win/lose) task.  In situations where obvious solutions do not satisfy all parties, it is possible to invent new options that allow everyone involved to feel a "win" from the resolution.  This difficult task is made easier when parties can examine the conflict from multiple perspectives.  Perspective-taking is important for developing empathy between parties, and it can result in new solutions that better meet everyone's needs.

Perspectives are unique vantages that are vital to conflict transformation, not for their veracity, but rather for their creativity-generating potential.  In conflict situations, I am able to put myself "in others' shoes" and provide different viewpoints.  Perspectives, however, emerge from people's knowledge and experiences; thus, I never related to a situation from a humiliation perspective.  The Psychology of Humiliation class prompted me to develop a new perspective that allows me to consider humiliation, and also empowerment, in conflicts.  With this new lens, I can handle conflicts in ways that prevent others from being humiliated (or address the feeling once it has occurred), and hopefully engage people in a constructive resolution process that is also empowering.

IMPRESSIONS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

Friday, 12th November 2004

Tonight we discussed two possible outcomes of humiliation situations.  I identify with the emotions-inward group.  As I think back, I realize I have felt humiliation very few times; usually my experiences involved shame or embarrassment.  There must be a combination of individual and environmental circumstances that produces one feeling or another.  When it did happen though, I became reclusive, desiring to become invisible and escape the situation.  So what makes one react in an inward or outward direction?  Collectivism and individualism must be part of the answer.  Well, as I dwell on it, I am realizing that there are probably an array of contributing factors; I shall have to learn more about this psychology.

It seems that when emotions are turned inward, they aggregate towards a potential to explode outward if an individual is without an outlet for catharsis.  This is commonly seen in

Columbine-type incidents, where teens quietly tolerate bullying and teasing, only to carry out an outward plan of retaliation in the future. Over my four years teaching here in New York City, it seems to me that peer humiliation in high school does not happen too often, at least in the schools in which I have taught. I wonder if my perception fits with students' experiences. It is also possible that students try hard to fit in, blend in, and be accepted, for fear of being humiliated.

One comment from today's class really stood out in my mind. It is that help has the potential to humiliate. This has really got me thinking...I tend to offer help more than I receive it. Now I am wondering, have I ever offered help in such a way to make another feel humiliated? How does this happen?

Saturday, 13th November 2004

Some of the details of the video we watched today were so gut-wrenching. It turns my stomach to even imagine that people can do such things to one another; it is almost unbearable to fathom that such things are commonplace in the lives of so many. I was glad to learn about Somalia and Rwanda. I had read a little about the genocide prior to class, but the video filled in information gaps and presented the genocide within a larger historical context. It is an interesting perspective, to think that such large-scale and sickening death can result from receiving and/or avoiding humiliation. We talked about a number of examples today; mainly I realized that this emotion may play a role in people's decisions more often than we realize. Recently, I overheard two people discussing a recent movie about the Rwandan genocide. They were talking about how the United States could have stopped it but chose not to help. I wonder if they would have accepted an explanation of our country's actions from a humiliation perspective.

We discussed face-saving in the example of the Mexican who could not pay back his Belgian employer. I first became aware of this concept in the Basic Practicum class, and each time it comes up it gains importance. While this practice is inherent and intuitive in many cultures, I believe it is unknown and disregarded in mainstream American society. If people spent a little more time considering the consequences of their actions and words on others, relationships, families, and communities could be so much healthier.

During one of our class discussions, I began to wonder if domestic violence among Anglo-Saxon White males is partly a result of humiliation, which could be part of the aftermath

of the Civil Rights and Feminist Movements.  This thought struck me as I was wondering how often men feel humiliated when women offer to help them.  In Advanced Practicum I, I read an article that provided a historical perspective on the development of White Male Privilege, and so now I wonder if feelings of humiliation are involved.  Do such emotions also play a role in motivating Black men to rape White women?

Class today focused on humiliation over a global scale.  Many concepts were new to me, as I do not usually ponder human relations on a global scale.  I tend to focus from the individual up to the community level.  To think about states, countries, continents, and the world is out of my domain.  Given this, the chart on human conditions provided an interesting perspective.  Looking at human populations on a global level, a matrix of certain conditions can predict how benign or explosive a society may be.  While I agree that globalization is happening, largely unregulated, I wonder about the reality of "one village with equal dignity for all".  How many societies or nations would prefer to be self-supporting and self-governing, without dependency on others?

Another interesting perspective was that human rights groups provide patchwork for the United States' blunders.  I have always thought that activists of the former group probably oppose most of the governments worldwide actions.  Now I realize that while this may be true, individuals in other countries view all the actions as coming from the United States, and so this would indeed seem hypocritical and dichotomized, especially in places where national identity is strong.

Sunday, 14th November 2004

Today's class focused more on humiliation at an individual and societal level.  I was introduced to the classification of societies based on honor, dignity, and pride, which seems to be deeply embedded in the culture and history of peoples.  If a situation is viewed as either God's will or humiliation in honor and dignity societies, respectively, then would individuals in a pride society be immune from both perspectives?  As human rights groups from dignity societies spread their equality and justice messages around the world, I think they are disrupting existing equilibria within honor societies.  I am not sure if they are helping or hurting other cultures in the long run.

Within the educational system, I was presented with a new vantage on the old corporal punishment debate.  There has long been a divide between people who disown spanking,

slapping, and belt-whipping and those who favor it.  It seems that such a difference of opinion is strongest between schools and Black communities, where physical punishment is regarded as highly effective and necessary.  From a functional perspective, humiliation is seen as trauma within educational institutions, and as pro-social within some communities.  As an educator in NYC public schools, I often hear teens telling each other, very matter-of-factly, how they were whipped, beat, slapped, or punched by a parent.  It is disturbing to me because I grew up in a culture of shame as pro-social, not humiliation; to these youth, however, it is accepted as a normal mode of punishment.

It seem ethical and moral enough to say that globalization should not mean global domination.  Is this really possible, though, given the nature of capitalism and human nature?  I would like to think so, but I am skeptical.  For this reason, I often think it better that countries focus almost exclusively on themselves and maintain relations with other countries only to the extent that they are self-serving.  Of course, in our current times this seems impossible, especially because it has become almost impossible for one nation to exclude itself from the happenings of the world.  There are few communities around the world which exist mostly in isolation, and even they may not last very long.  For better or worse, the tendrils of globalization are quickly spreading from the United States, reaching into every inhabited corner of the world.

HUMILIATING HELP:  A FOLLOW-UP REFLECTION

Something very unusual happened to me during the second weekend of Advanced Practicum I.  The class was participating in an activity that dealt with the issue of power.  Divided into three groups, our task was to create a poster to explain "power".  This was a competition, and we were to select a winning group upon completion of the activity.  However, time and material resources were imbalanced between the groups.  I was in the group with the fewest materials, consisting only of a paper, pencil, and paper bag.

When an individual from another group approached my group and offered us access to their materials...I thanked her for the offer but became more determined to do great with what I had.  I cannot say that this offer of help induced a feeling of humiliation, however I think this feeling began to emerge as others from the two groups continued coming over and offering us materials.

At the time I became more defensive with each offer of help.  Reflecting on the activity, it is possible that my adamant refusal to accept help from others – and increased determination to be the best group even with minimal supplies – was my way of avoiding humiliation.  Of course, the other groups were not trying to humiliate me, and this whole action-reaction pattern was discussed at length in our debriefing.  For the most part, other group members said they had more materials and we could use them if we wanted to.  By stating the obvious, they seemed to be exercising power over my group.  They also minimized our strength, which was creativity.  The other two groups did not help offer help to each other, so it seemed as though we were being isolated, and helped out of pity.

Yes!  This must have something to do with my feelings...to me it seemed that others were offering one-sided help out of pity.  The other two groups realized we had only three materials, and they wanted to share theirs.  They did not think to ask how we could help them, or that we would even be capable of helping them.  For example, I think I would have reacted differently had the other groups placed materials in the middle of the room and suggested all the groups share.  What if one said, "You have so few materials, yet you seem to be working on something.  What is your idea?  Can we somehow work together?"  Help, offered in this way, also feels empowering.

Wait a minute!  Another thought just struck me.  Would it be accurate to say that help can be either empowering or humiliating?  Hmm...can it be something other than these two?  Thinking about my life experiences, I can say that people do not want to helped out of pity.  A common example of this occurs with people with disabilities.  When we help someone out of pity, we humiliate them.  Why?  I think the receiver [of help] feels degraded, as though they are losing dignity.  In other words, help given out of pity causes a person to lose face, and this results in humiliation.  These ponderings now lead me to another question.  Do persons in dignity-based societies feel humiliation more often than in other societies?  Or is help offered less or differently in order to avoid creating this feeling?

In considering the potential of help to humiliate, individual differences must be discussed as well.  Some people, for example, can easily admit that they need help, and are therefore willing and glad to accept it.  Others do not accept help because desire to be able to do things on their own.  This latter group is more likely to conclude that an offer of help emerges from pity,

and thus refuse it.  For these individuals, help has to be offered in a way that empowers them and allows them to save face; only then will they accept it openly.

Applying these musings to my own life, I immediately think about gender relationships. Being a petite female, I may unintentionally humiliate a man by offering help to him.  Tact and creativity become important as face-saving tools.  Instead of asking a man, "Can I help you carry those boxes?" I may say, "I could use the exercise.  Would you mind if I carry a few of those boxes?"  The latter question empowers the man to choose whether or not I get a workout, instead of making him feel that he cannot do the job on his own.  From this example, it becomes apparent that humiliation is closely connected to self-efficacy and identity constructs.  I will explore this statement in more detail in the second part of this paper.