Appreciative Psychology: An Antidote to Humiliation

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The Union Institute and University

Humiliation as a Collective Phenomenon

Humiliation is a social dynamic that is inextricably related to the idea of self, which, although experienced in individual terms, is itself inherently social, both in its origin and essential nature.   So long as human beings take their individual and collective ideas of self seriously, so long will they be tragically vulnerable to attempts to humiliate them and so long will their behavior be shaped by the fear of humiliation and the strong, sometimes overwhelming need, to avoid mortification at whatever cost to self and society.

In a previous article on the subject (Klein, 1991) I coined the term "humiliation dynamic" in order to connect the personal experience of being the "victim" of humiliation to the fact that two other roles are involved: there must also be an "humiliator", some one (or ones) whose attitude or behavior inflicts the humiliating experience; there must also be one or more "bystanders" (real or imagined) who witness the fact that someone is being ridiculed, made to feel small, rendered powerless, or otherwise demeaned.

Societal Differences

Societies differ in terms of what they define and experience as humiliating. Although the experience of personal and collective humiliation is assumed to be universal, the values and beliefs of each society contribute significantly to how humiliation is defined and, therefore, what is experienced as humiliating or demeaning by members of that society. It is also apparent from events in human history, such as the recent American conquest of Iraq, that members and leaders of one culture often are unaware of what constitutes humiliation to those in another.

Denial of Humiliation in the United States

Based on years of experience in the community mental health field and in-depth discussions of the humiliation dynamic with men and women from a variety of backgrounds in the United States, I believe that humiliation or the fear of humiliation is at the root of much of the most destructive interpersonal and intergroup behavior in this society. Furthermore, my inquiries led me to conclude that the potency of the humiliation dynamic is associated with a pervasive denial of the phenomenon itself. Although no cross-cultural studies have been done on the subject, it is assumed that societies differ from one another in the extent to which assaults on personal and collective dignity are acknowledged and discussed. My studies of the humiliation dynamic in the United States indicate that there is a pervasive failure, especially among males, to acknowledge humiliation when it occurs. In America, to be or feel humiliated is bad enough; to acknowledge to another person that what they did or said to one was humiliating is well nigh unthinkable (Klein, 1992.)

That denial must be removed and the deleterious effects of the humiliation dynamic brought to the forefront of attention in American society. We must be able to recognize, acknowledge, and talk about this dynamic in order to reach the point of being unwilling to participate in it, either as humiliator, victim, or bystander. If we are to achieve community-building connections between individuals and groups who differ markedly from one another in values and social orientations, the objective must be to connect people and their experience in ways that include both the experience of difference and feeling put down and demeaned by one another by virtue of those differences (Klein, 1991; 1992)

Neglect of Humiliation by Western Psychology

Consistent with the pervasive denial of humiliation as a powerful factor in human affairs is the striking fact that modern psychology, which is largely European and American in its cultural origins, has until recently almost entirely ignored the humiliation dynamic. This despite the fact that a persuasive case can be made that humiliation and the fear of humiliation as motivators are more powerfully destructive of loving, collaborative human relationships than those other "psychic furies" that have been studied and written about extensively in psychological literature: guilt, anxiety, and shame. Those few who have written about humiliation have been psychoanalytically oriented theorists, who have lumped the experience of humiliation with shame because both are clearly related to individuals' perceptions and feelings about their interpersonal relationships (see, for example, Lewis, 1971.)

Shame and Humiliation

Despite certain similarities and the apparent ease with which they can be confused with one another, it is useful both for psychological practice and social policy to make a clear distinction between shame and humiliation. According to Miller (1988), a key difference is that "humiliation involves being put into a lowly, debased, and powerless position by someone who has, at that moment, greater power than oneself," whereas "shame involves primarily a reflection upon the self by the self" (p. 46.) I have found the following analogy helpful as a way to fix in my mind the vast difference between them:

> If I cheat on my wife and she discovers my infidelity, I feel ashamed. If, on the other hand, my wife cheats on me and I discover her infidelity, I feel humiliated.

Countering the Fear of Humiliation

It can be postulated that every human being is born with an inherent capacity to

experience the world through the lens of awe and wonderment. With few exceptions, human beings 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 (Klein, 1988 & 2001.)

Appreciative Being

Everyone is born with this wonder-filled capacity, which I have termed "appreciative being." In more than a decade of inquiry, I have not found anyone who has not experienced the sense of awe and wonderment many times in his/her life. My respondents and I had two things in common: (1) We had such experiences only under special circumstances. For some (including myself) it was a beautiful sunset. For others the circumstances cover an amazingly wide range, e.g., listening to beautiful music, having good sex, feeling "close to nature" in a variety of settings, dancing, water-skiing, and achieving the so-called "runner's high." (2) Our experiences of awe and wonderment were fleeting. Once the sunset or other special circumstance ended, we typically returned quickly to ordinary reality, marked by the usual tensions, hesitancies, conflicts, and anxieties, including the fear of humiliation.

Readers are invited to consider what to me became a fundamental question: Why are such experiences of awe and wonderment so fleeting. Why, I wondered, do I return so quickly to ordinary reality once the sun goes down? Where did those good feelings go? In my case, simple logic convinced me that appreciative being did not, in fact, disappear with the sun. The feelings were mine. They were in me, not in the sun. Logically at least, since I allowed myself to gain access to those feelings during a beautiful sunset, I should be able to experience them at any time, regardless of circumstance. Logic aside, however, the fact was that simply knowing what *should* be true, didn't automatically make it so. It was clear that something was blocking me. Although I had what – judging from m own experience

and what my respondents had to say – was an inherent capacity to experience appreciative being something was keeping me and my co-researchers from that birthright.

Fear of Humiliation: Personal Discoveries

The answer to the puzzle came from a series of personal experiences. One evening, during one of the many Summers I have spent in Bethel, Maine as a staff member of NTL Insstitute for Applied Behavioral Science conducting"Training Laboratories" on interpersonal relations and group dynamics, staff and participants were listening and dancing to the music of a rock band imported for the occasion. This was new music for me and I was drawn to it. I tried to dance to the music but felt uncomfortable and awkward doing so. So I sat for awhile, thinking about what it had been like being raised as a Jew in New England. Rather than being emotionally expressive, using my body, and waving my arms to reinforce what I had to say, I had early on developed a buttoned-down, Yankee manner. To raise an eyebrow was enough to express strong passion. Moreover, being a skinny, awkward teen-ager, I had also done my best to appear suave and sophisticated in order to avoid being ridiculed. There was an "aha moment." By holding myself stiffly in order not to appear awkward I had, in fact, made it difficult for me to be anything but awkward.

The solution seemed obvious. Here was a possible opportunity to break out of my self-imprisonment. All that was needed was to move onto the dance floor, let myself respond to the music, and give myself permission to act ridiculous, feel ridiculous, and, very likely, appear ridiculous to others. To use a vernacular expression, in effect I let myself go. Twenty minutes later, happy and covered with sweat, I realized that I had discovered another setting where I felt the kind of special sense of appreciative being that I had heretofore allowed myself to experience only while watching a beautiful sunset.

Creating Reality In Our Minds

My experience that Summer in Bethel opened up an awareness of how the fear of humiliation is part of a developmental process that makes it so difficult for individuals to gain everyday access to their inherent ability to experience appreciative knowing. Soon after returning home from Bethel in 1972 I had an opportunity as a mental health professional to experience LSD Therapy as part of a project carried out by the Maryland Psychiatric Research Institute. During a single day on a heavy dose of pure acid I had repeated experiences of feeling intense fear, allowing myself to experience that fear without any attempt to block or escape from it, then moving into an almost prototypic, intensely unpleasant experience, and finally emerging in the calm, quiet, beautiful space of appreciative being. Two of the prototypic experiences were crying out hysterically for help and knowing that no one was there to help me and begging desperately for forgiveness and realizing that no one was going to forgive me.

I call such experiences prototypic because I believe that all of us have had such experiences as small children. The fear of abandonment and losing the love of significant others is, so to speak, in our bones even if such experiences lasted only minutes or even seconds. I make the assumption that such prototypic fears are at the heart of our susceptibility to the humiliation dynamic. That is, because of those early terrifying experiences – however fleeting they may have been – we know, so to speak, in our bones that we are terribly and helplessly vulnerable to abandonment and loss of significance in the eyes of others on whom our very lives depend.

The Idea of Self

Though it cannot be proven scientifically, it seemed reasonable to conclude that those early

experiences also are part and parcel of every human being's need to strive to create an idea of self. Within psychology, much research and clinical observations have been carried out on the importance of the concept of self in both personality formation and how individuals relate to the social environment around them (See, for example, Andrews, 1991; Kelly,) Although it is possible and sometimes useful to conceive of self as contained within the individual psycho-biological organism, the self is essentially socially derived and socially oriented. That is, it is inextricably tied to and influenced by one's interactions with others. The metaphor of the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), emerged early among sociologists who conceived of self as essentially a social entity. According to Cooley,

> In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self--that is any idea he appropriates-- appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking glass self:
>
> > "Each to each a looking-glass
> > Reflects the other that doth pass."
>
> As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it." (Cooley, 1902, P. 184)

Mead built on Cooley's seminal work to develop his theory of the emergence of mind and self out of the social process of significant communication. In *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), he postulates that we create what we refer to as our minds and our individual selves out of social process, which comes before individual experience.

Self and Humiliation

Cooley's reasoning provides a useful basis for understanding the ioexorable connection between the idea of self and the experience of humiliation. He pointed out that any "self-idea" has three elements. (1) how one imagines that one appears to another person; (2) one's imagination of the other person's judgment of that appearance; and (3) emotional

reactions related to one's sense of self. Among the self-feelings to which he referred were pride and mortification, the latter being, in my view, a synonym for intense or extreme humiliation. What moves us to prideful or mortified feelings, he wrote, is "the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind." (P. 185)

"the character and freight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind. A man will boast to one person of an action--say some sharp transaction in trade--which he would be ashamed to own to another." (Cooley, 1902, p. 185)

It is apparent from the work of Cooley, Mead, and the later symbolic interactionists who built on their work that one's created self includes both an individual and a collective identity. It is shaped by one's interpretations of how other react to one and what reactions, both favorable and unfavorable, they might have under various circumstances.   The self provides a fighting chance of never having to be on the receiving end of the humiliation dynamic or, if the worst happens and one is faced with inescapable degradation, to be able to right the balance, even if that means venting one's humiliated rage by torturing and killing others.

The New Yorker published on January 5, 2004 an article by journalist Lawrence Wright about journalism and the culture of Saudi Arabia. In the article Wright reports on interviews he conducted with relatives of the young pilots who flew airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. He says, "There was a sameness to the stories of the hijacker pilots. They had become Muslim extremists in Europe and America – presumably as a way of holding onto their sense of who they were in the engulfing West. *Their own cultures offered them no way to be powerful in the world*. (Italics added). ... Unemployment and idleness became central facts of life for young Saudi men ... Bin Laden gave young men with no control over their lives an identity and a wanton chance to make history. "Death is better than life in humiliation!: bin Laden said." (P. 63)

Several Western psychologists have provided in-depth documentation of adaptive and maladaptive forms of this created self. Erich Berne, creator of Transactional Analysis, is the only one, so far as I know, who has paid attention to the fact that every human being has what I refer to as a "creative self" that, from birth on, begins a process of designing a

"self" and of maintaining or even modifying that design throughout one's lifetime. Berne spoke of the "little professors" within all of us who does his/her best to sort out and make sense of ourselves and the world in which we live. (Berne, 1964; 1972)

The Metaphor of the Scrim

I liken this process of self-creation to the use of the scrim in the theater. The scrim is a transparent curtain on which theater people paint scenery. When illuminated by footlights and spotlights from the auditorium to the stage, the scenery appears opaque. That scenery and the actors playing their parts on the stage in front of the curtain constitute "reality" for audience members. The curtain no longer is perceived as transparent. If, however, the scrim is lit from behind, the scenery fades or even disappears. The curtain now appears transparent and the audience can see through the curtain to a whole new vista of objects and people, that is, a new reality.

It is as if each of us has a mental scrim on which, from earliest childhood, we have been painting the scenery of our lives, literally millions of thoughts about ourselves and the world around us. When we are an ordinary state of being, we take these ideas very seriously and treat them as the only reality that is available to us. Under ordinary circumstances, this is the only reality of which we are aware. It is also virtually the only reality that has been studied and described elegantly and in-depth by Western psychologists. It is a reality of projected thoughts. It is, in effect, a Psychology of Projection (Klein, 1991.)

Appreciative Psychology as the Antidote to Humiliation

Under special circumstances, however – as, in my case, when I witnessed a beautiful sunset and experienced the awe and wonderment - our mental scrims become transparent. The clutter of thoughts about ourselves and the world fade or even disappear. We see through and beyond our mental scrims and are once again in touch with our inherent capacity for "appreciative being." Within that state of being one experiences a psychology that is beyond the realm of thoughts, of distinctions of good and bad, right and wrong. Although they have not used the term, Appreciative Psychology, the writings of Buddhist and other Eastern philosopher/psychologists (e.g., Krishnamurti, 1972; Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, 1968; Suzuki, S. (1997) ; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2001) are clearly within the framework of consciousness to which it refers.

Appreciative Psychology involves experiencing every event in one's life – regardless of how

one thinks about it in one's mind – through the lens of that special feeling state referred to above as appreciative being. It is not a matter of liking what we see; we don't even have to find virtue, pleasure, or goodness in it. Appreciative being is simply the state of experiencing every situation with a sense of awe and wonderment. By doing so, we wipe our perceptual windows clean of the clutter of ideas that in the ordinary state of Projective Psychology we attach to whatever situation in which we find ourselves. It is also not a matter of reframing, which is a term used for rearranging our thought patterns, such as when we redefine a "problem" situation as a "possibility." Nor is it an approach that seeks to salvage something good and useful out of disaster (e.g., making lemonade out of lemons.)

Based on my own experience and the reports of others who have embraced Appreciative Psychology, it is clear that as we see beyond the mental scrim, we no longer take seriously the cluttered scenery of ideas inscribed on it. This means that, in effect, we can no longer take the part of "victim" in the humiliation dynamic. By not taking ourselves seriously, we no longer suffer from the fear of humiliation and are no longer vulnerable to others' efforts to ridicule or otherwise degrade us. Therefore, one no longer feels the need to defend oneself against threats of mortification and abandonment. One's energies are not distracted by thoughts of getting even. Also part and parcel of the state of appreciative being is a deep sense of compassion and forgiveness. The dignity of others becomes no less and no more important in the scheme of things than is one's own. One is prepared to embrace those whose beliefs and behavior appear to be dysfunctional, both for themselves and for human betterment in general, while doing one's best to find ways to make it impossible for them to achieve their objectives.

A challenge that keeps many people from making the personal shift from everyday Projective Psychology to an everyday state of appreciative being, is that in order to render one's inner mental scrim transparent one must take the revolutionary step of no longer taking one's created self seriously. For most people this involves a leap into a fearsome void. Until now they have enacted their lives in front of the familiar scenery of their mental scrims. What lies beyond? ... How will they cope? ... What strange and possibly threatening experiences must they confront? ... Indeed, will they even survive? These are questions that can be answered only after they enter the state of appreciative being.

From my own experience and observations of others who have taken the leap into the void, I know that they will survive; I know they will cope with far less wear and tear than ever before; I know they will thrive; and I know that they will deal with the situations in which they find themselves with far greater clarity, energy, and delight than before.   Such reassurance, however, has little meaning. The best I can do is invite them to act with faith and launch themselves into the unknown. When they do, they will discover that they are no longer vulnerable participants in the humiliation dynamic. Perhaps more importantly, they will often find ways to assist others to avoid becoming helpless victims of humiliation

or inflicting humiliation on others. It is, as the title of this article suggests, a powerful antidote to humiliation.

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