

Addressing Humiliation through Listening with Respect: A Restorative Justice Model for Victims, Offenders, and Law Enforcement

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Most of us know what it is like to be humiliated from personal experience. Indeed, many of us are experts. Often we have felt humiliated at some point as children, and future experiences build on that pain and contribute to challenging feelings as adults. Can public policy address these feelings of humiliation? Can we find ways to help humanity prevent and recover from experiences of humiliation, and ways to reduce the pain such experiences cause, perpetuate, and are used to justify?

Since humiliation includes “feel[ing] hurt because you deem being put down as a violation” (from “What is Humiliation” on this website), after a humiliating experience trust typically dissipates. Respect for the other is frequently lost in response to the perception of being treated with disrespect. Thoughts, feelings, and sometimes actions can turn inwardly to loss of self-respect, as well as outwardly to retaliation or rejection.

Healing from or preventing humiliation can thus involve strengthening one’s relationship to oneself - in a sense one’s trust in oneself - through personal (including spiritual) work on one’s self-concept and self-respect. Relationally, healing may include restoration of wholeness and trust in connection with others through feeling heard, seen, valued, and recognized – in other words, through a sense of being respected.

Public policy planning, therefore, can address humiliation and its attendant consequences by addressing issues of trust and respect. The educational and criminal justice systems (perhaps surprisingly) are two avenues with high potential for fostering improved trust in relationships. Listening with respect can be used in both these arenas to shift our society through reducing humiliation.

For example, the power of listening, as well as how to express oneself effectively and safely, can be encouraged through supporting educational programs that encourage human relations and communications skills. How many of us have been teased or otherwise experienced (and/or passed on) humiliating experiences at school? Through social studies classes, mediation programs, and other classes, schools can instead become training zones for managing conflict/disagreement in ways that acknowledge differences without condemning them. In addition, free programs can be offered for parents on skills involved in practicing, modeling, and teaching ways of relating at home that are respectful and effective. Some programs might include both parents and young people together, practicing fun ways to enhance their relationships with one other.

In the legal system, restorative justice can be expanded as a model for engaging the victim in the justice system, for addressing the causes of offender behavior, and for encouraging dialogue where it can be helpful for healing the harm done. These approaches can allow both victims and offenders to move on in their lives in more satisfying ways. In my personal as well as my professional experience, the adversarial and retributive justice system works in part on the basis of discrediting (and often trying to humiliate), the other party (seen as a party, not necessarily as a person). Given the often re-victimizing impacts of the criminal justice system, distrust in others is often exacerbated by fear and distrust of the system itself. Addressing the needs of *all* parties through hearing and recognizing pain caused, and working to address the sources of harm done, can rebuild trust in healing and in the system rather than increasing humiliation in the legal process itself.

Community Impact Panels (CIPs) are a model of just such a process. Developed at the Center for Court Innovation's Midtown Community Court, CIPs were created as an adaptation of victim-offender group conferencing to address low-level crime within a community. In CIPs, a convenor brings people who have pled guilty to a Quality-of-Life offense together with area residents and police officers to discuss improving the neighborhood for the benefit of all who live, work, and pass through there – in other words, for everyone at the table.

At these facilitated dialogues, each person has the opportunity to speak about his or her experiences with the kinds of offenses committed – such as urinating in public, disorderly conduct, drinking alcohol in public, shoplifting, illegal vending or posterage, minor drug possession, or fostering prostitution. Whether they have committed such offenses, been impacted by them in the neighborhood, or addressed them as a law enforcement officer, each person is welcome to share his or her views. After everyone has had a turn, there is an opportunity for open discussion for how to improve community life for everyone in the future – including how to better prevent or address problems related to the crimes committed.

CIPs bring together participants who often would not have had an opportunity to interact directly in daily life, or to hear one another's perspectives on community life. In a typical conversation, offenders, police officers, and residents alike gain a better understanding of and respect for one another. Suggestions may be proposed ranging from changes in personal behavior to changes in legislation and public policy. Frequently, those who came with initially judgmental views leave panels with a better sense of how others may see things and why they would act as they do. Compassion can be shown across the board – for the impact of public urination on a neighborhood resident, for the shame felt by a person caught by shoplifting, for the discomfort or fear an officer might feel arresting someone for disorderly conduct.

While the goal is not universally achieved, the intention is for each person to leave with a renewed sense of respect for themselves and others – as well as feeling respected for who they are. People frequently acknowledge a renewed sense of hopefulness, belonging, and commitment, as well as a feeling of increased involvement and agency in the life of

their community. In addition, law enforcement, residents, and people who have pled guilty to offenses may shift their view of the possibilities of the criminal justice system to create respect rather than humiliation, to address harm rather than increasing it, to improve trust rather than increase distrust between different aspects of society. And it gives them an opportunity to be involved in the system itself in a new way – to have a positive involvement rather than to feel potentially (re)victimized and humiliated by the system itself.

Therefore, such a model for public policy addresses alienation from the system itself as well as alienation from other members of a community. In so doing, it counteracts humiliation by engendering increased self-respect and respect for others. In this environment for listening with respect, humiliation, conflict, anger, and frustration are reduced and people find news to speak and work together in a collaborative spirit.

Public policy can further alienate or further include members of society. The restorative group conferencing model of listening with respect is one way of reducing humiliation, increasing respect for self and others, and creating a more satisfying public environment for everyone.