Six Research Designs on Humiliation

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As first exemplified by Plato and the Socratic method, many topics in the social sciences begin as a lay concept from natural language. Typically these are topics and concepts that are obviously important in human affairs. They are then examined in an analytical way, to elaborate on what they mean, and do not mean. In this process, some questions arise that are empirical in nature. Then it is necessary to observe the world, either systematically in survey fashion, or manipulatively, in experimental fashion. The plans for these empirical observations are research designs. Typically, the results of one study lead to new problems or induce insights, which lead to further research. In this manner, knowledge arises that may eventually be of some usefulness in improving the human situation.

Clearly, "humiliation" is one of those topics. But it has some unique characteristics that should be considered before elaborating research designs to study it. First, it is probably a universal human phenomenon, though this is not certain. There may be cultures with no conception or experience of humiliation, and there may be states of human incapacity or consciousness that preclude humiliation experiences. That it is universal means that humiliation type phenomena will be found world wide, but the incidence, seriousness, meaning, function and expression may vary considerably across cultures. Second, it is unethical to induce humiliation in order to study it. Therefore, empirical studies will have to exploit naturally occurring episodes of humiliation. Thus, it is imperative to discern which social contexts, which social roles, which personality types, which kinds of human endeavors have higher incidence of humiliation and which lower incidence.

Conceptual Studies

1) Free-recall semantic space of "humiliation" in English and in other languages: Words and concepts do not exist in isolation. They maintain their meaning and function, as well as their emotional overtones in their network with other words and concepts. A free-recall study might help discover words and concepts that are linked to humiliation in people's minds. The tasks are as follows: a) Search dictionaries and thesauri to compile a list of 25 to 40 words that are related to "humiliation", or the verb "humiliate". b) Make 10 random orderings of these words, including "humiliation". c) Make audio tapes of each ordering. d) Find a sample of competent native-speakers. e) Have them listen to one of the word lists, with instructions that they are to remember as many of these words as possible. f) Have an intervening task, like answering a few demographic questions about age and education. g) Have the subjects recall as many of the words as possible, while this is being recorded. h) Identify new words that were recalled that were not part of the original set. i) Tabulate which words were immediately adjacent to

"humiliation". j) People usually recall in clusters, separate by pauses. Identify all of the words in the cluster with "humiliation". k) Tabulate the recall distance from "humiliate" for each word. l) From these data, make similarity or proximity matrices, one tabulating mutual occurrences in the "humiliation" cluster and one tabulating recall distance from "humiliation". m) Do hierarchical cluster analysis to generate a display of the semantic space of "humiliation".

2) Q-sort semantic network of "humiliation: Free-recall is drawing data from people's unconscious processing. The same kind of network can be made by overt, semantic judgements. a) After free-recall studies have been done, compile the larger collection of words related to "humiliation", consisting of the dictionary discovered words and the free-recall discovered words. b) Put each word on a note card, one word per card, perhaps 50 in total. c) Number the cards on the back side. d) Find a sample of competent native speakers, for example, students. e) Shuffle the deck of cards for each subject to make sure they each have a random ordering. f) Ask them to sort the cards into piles that have similar meanings, in their opinions. They can make as many or as few piles as they wish, and they may make adjustments and move cards during the sorting. g) Each pile constitutes a semantic cluster. Record the card numbers in each cluster. h) From these, make a proximity matrix, increasing a cell by one every time two words co-occurred in a subject's sorting. i) Use cluster analysis to make a display of the semantic network.

3) Mental experiment of robot humiliation: Human experiences, thinking, and behavior are to a very large extent unconscious. And we humans are all equally familiar with these unconscious processes, such that when we discuss such processes, we all mutually agree to the same unconscious presumptions. One way to make processes explicit is to engage in the mental experiment of trying to conceive of what would be the programming modules, input data, and decision processes for a human-like robot. Thus, if we were programming C3PO, or HAL, to be capable of humiliation, what would be the programming architecture?

Contextual Studies

4) Full text studies of newspaper data base: The purpose is to identify contexts and the kinds of human events in which humiliation takes place. Tasks: a) Identify suitable accessible newspaper archives, either because they are a newspaper of record and are historically deep (e.g. New York Times, London Times, etc.), or because they present a corpus that typifies a particular culture (e.g., Japan Times), or because they present a corpus that typifies a particular social context (e.g. Wall Street Journal). b) Keyword search for "humiliation" and its cognates (e.g. "humiliate", "humiliated", "humiliating", "humiliator") and its synonyms and antonyms if known. c) Collect all articles in which the keywords appear, or if that is too extensive, sample the articles in some definable way. d) Create a descriptive tabulation of the story that is reported, including, for example, the kind of activity (e.g., family, sports, shopping, education, etc.), the descriptive characteristics of the humiliated persons (e.g., age, gender, social role), the descriptive characteristics of the humiliator, if reported, the response of the humiliated persons to being humiliated, etc. The categories of the content analysis will

probably be an evolving process, that will change after a first set of reports are examined. This type of corpus sampling and content analysis can be repeated for several different newspapers.

5) Full-text search of novels and screen-plays: The text of newspapers is largely factual, reporting real events. Many of the contexts discovered by a search of newspapers will be macro-level about nations being humiliated, or at the meso-level about humiliation of individuals in the contexts of institutions. But humiliation is also a micro-level phenomenon, at the individual and interpersonal level. A sample of those kinds of humiliation episodes might be discovered and the characteristics compiled based on a full-text survey of novels and screenplays. Authors of these kinds of stories are also keep observers of human events and human behaviors, and probably have insights on these phenomena.

6) Survey of humiliation experiences: In order to discover what kinds of events are salient in people's minds when thinking of humiliation, and in order to determine if there are asymmetries in salience of being the humiliatee and being the humiliator, it would be useful to ask a wide variety of people, across ages and cultures two open-ended questions: 1) When was the last time you were humiliated? Please describe the event in your own words, omitting details that identify individuals or institutions. 2) When was the last time you humiliated someone? Please describe the event in your own words. From these kind of data, it will be possible to determine: a) social contexts in which humiliation events occur; b) the incidence of humiliation experiences; c) if there is an asymmetry in people being more aware of, and having more full recall of, being humiliated vs. being the humiliator.