

Humiliation and Dignity

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Humiliation and dignity are of crucial significance for peace, and for the field of peace psychology. Already the very definition of peace is deeply interwoven with humiliation and dignity. In a normative frame defined by human rights, peace is conceptualized as successful dialogue embedded in mutual respect for every participant's equality in dignity. In contrast, throughout history, peace often meant calm and quiet achieved through success in inflicting humiliation on one's population. Still today, the latter definition of peace reigns in large parts of the world. Both definitions are mutually exclusive, and both camps tend to feel insulted and humiliated when criticized by the other, something that, in turn, can be disruptive of peace.

The definition of humiliation that Evelin Lindner developed is as follows: Humiliation is a complex phenomenon that entails acts of humiliation responded to with feelings of humiliation. Humiliation as an act means 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 one's will (very occasionally with one's consent as in cases of religious self-humiliation or in sadomasochism) and often in deeply hurtful ways, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what one feels one should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations. It may involve 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 on,

and made helpless. People react in different ways when they feel humiliated. Some people may experience rage. When this rage is turned inward, it can cause depression and apathy. Rage turned outward can express itself in violence, even in mass violence when leaders are available to forge narratives of group humiliation. Leaders such as Nelson Mandela, in contrast, translate humiliation into constructive social change (adapted from Desmond Tutu in Lindner, 2010, p. 1; 2006, p. 172; see also www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/evelin.php).

The significance of humiliation and dignity at the present juncture in human history can only be understood by using a larger geohistorical lens. In 1757, in the English language, the connotations of the verbs to humiliate and to humble parted in opposite directions. Until that time, the verb to humiliate did not signify the violation of dignity. To humiliate meant merely to lower, to humble, or to remind underlings of their "due lowly place." Peace was defined as successful subjugation of inferiors by way of routine humiliation that was regarded as prosocial.

Medieval Christianity stressed the misery and worthlessness of *homo viator*, earthly man. Life on Earth meant suffering, which had to be accepted with dutiful and obedient humility and submissiveness. At best, happiness could be expected in afterlife. This frame of mind characterized not only medieval Christianity. History attests that in the wake of the crucial turning point around 10,000 years ago, when agriculture-based civilizations began to emerge from Mesopotamia to the Nile, otherwise widely divergent societies followed the "dominator model" rather than a "partnership model" (Riane, 1987). Hierarchies of domination, with a rigidly male-dominant "strongman"

rule, both in the family and state, characterized the Samurai of Japan as much as the Aztecs of Meso-America.

In other words, the “civilized habitus” that sociologist Norbert Elias (1994) describes could also be called the “successfully humiliated habitus.” The French court, the Indian caste system, the Chinese system of kowtowing, and the Japanese bow all express and reinforce strong hierarchies, all constructed around practices of successfully humiliated habitus of ritual humbling. This form of humiliation could be labeled “honor humiliation,” the form that was seen as legitimate during the past millennia (and is still regarded as legitimate in contemporary honor cultures).

Honor was inescapable, and it was ranked. Honorable gentlemen had the duty to defend their honor against humiliation from peers in duels or duel-like wars. In contrast, duels were not permitted to underlings. A lord and his warriors in feudal Japan, for instance, had the legal right to use their swords to kill lower persons, such as farmers, traders, or outcasts, when they deemed it necessary, without having to expect any duel-like responses. Superiors instilled dread and apprehension in underlings and threatened them with violence and terror, from torture to killing. It was regarded as a duty for superiors to routinely humiliate their subjects to show them down to their due lowly place and thus keep stability and order, peace and quiet. Over time, continuous humbling, shaming, and humiliating became sufficient to keep subalterns in subjugation, particularly when underlings had learned to feel ashamed at even contemplating failing their master’s expectations.

Inferiors (and the majority were inferiors) had to be cautious and preserve submissiveness *vis-à-vis* their superiors, at least overtly, unless they were prepared for death. It was potentially lethal to displease one’s masters, and fear reigned. Women were inferiors by definition and were usually not entitled to

defend humiliated honor in the same way as men. There was no female honor similar to male honor, except that women were expected to accept lowliness and subjugation with deference and display chastity. Women represented a “substrate” to male honor.

The term dignity has its etymological roots in the Latin words *decus* and *decorum* (Sanskrit *dac-as*, “fame”). For Cicero, dignity was a quality of masculine beauty. Even though it was discussed, the concept of dignity was not forged into an internally consistent set of ideas in Europe until the Renaissance. The Renaissance began in Florence, one of the first successful global players. Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459), son of a Florentine merchant, Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), another Florentine humanist, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) gave philosophical and theological form to the importance of this-worldly dignity.

The concept of dignity opposes both the discourses of ranked collectivism and this-worldly suffering. It embraces life on Earth as something positive and rejects collectivist hierarchy, instead emphasizing individual rights. The Age of Reason, with the Enlightenment emerging in the eighteenth century, germinated ideas such as freedom, democracy, and the establishment of a contractual basis of rights. These ideas ultimately led to the scientific method, to the ideas of religious and racial tolerance, and to the concept of states as self-governing republics through democratic means.

The linguistic shift in the meaning of humiliation in 1757 preceded the American Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776) and the French Revolution (August 4, 1789), both rallying points for the human rights movement. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Article 1 reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and

rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” In this context, humiliation is the enforced lowering of any person or group that damages their equality in dignity. To humiliate is to transgress the rightful expectation of every human being that everybody’s equality in dignity will be respected as a basic human right.

Dignity humiliation is profoundly different from honor humiliation. The linguistic shift of the meaning of the word humiliation in 1757 signals that, even though humiliation was always central to the human experience, its significance increases together with the rise of the ideals that inform human rights: the experience of humiliation becomes more intense, it affects more people, and it increases the risk for violent responses but also the chances for systemic change.

When everybody is invited as equal members into the human family, being put down hurts and humiliates more. While humiliating underlings was seen as beneficial in the context of ranked honor, this turns into a violation in a human rights context. Human rights un-rank human worthiness and are therefore not simply about dignity, but about equality in dignity or non-domination (Pettit, 1997).

Honor is a more collective feeling and institution than dignity. Honor is worn like armor, and people may defend their group’s honor against humiliators merely as a duty, without much personal emotion. Dignity humiliation, in contrast, affects the core of the individual. In a human rights context, being treated as a second-class citizen contradicts its very political, cultural, and ethical spirit. Practices and institutions that once were normal – *patria potestas*, coverture, slavery, bondage, serfdom, feudalism, lords and vassals, apartheid, anthrop supremacy, speciesism – turn into *rankism* (Fuller, 2003). Rankings by sex, race, class, imperialism,

age, or ability all acquire the label of illegitimately discriminatory inequality.

In an honor culture, humiliation is ubiquitous, with only masters being entitled to reject attempts to humiliate them, while underlings were required to subserviently succumb to humiliation. Human rights extend the entitlement to reject humiliation to every human being and make its application illegitimate in all cases. Millions of former subalterns, those who suffered in silence and would never have dared to raise their voice, begin to feel humiliated and request a say. Human rights generate millions of equal players, equally entitled, no longer a few aristocrats overseeing the majority of meek subjects. Moreover, not only is each humiliator now a violator, every member in a social environment that fails to protect victims turns into a violator. If the international community allows atrocities to be perpetrated in their midst, the entire human family turns into a potential perpetrator of humiliation. Standing idly by is no longer an option in a context of human rights. (See *BYSTANDER INTERVENTION*.)

Moral judgment depends on feelings, and feelings of humiliation are the strongest emotional driving force of the human rights movement. The ability to feel humiliated on behalf of oneself and others in the face of violations of dignity represents the emotional engine for the human rights movement. Feelings of humiliation drive *conscientization*, which, in turn, provides the motivation and energy to initiate systemic change toward a more dignified and peaceful world. Conscientization is “a psychological process in which individuals and groups are politically transformed by building a common consciousness that embraces the value of active political nonviolence” (Christie, 2006, p. 13).

Since feelings of humiliation can also be translated into acts of violence – they represent the nuclear bomb of the emotions (term coined by Lindner) – and can drive

violent cycles of humiliation, peace is lost when those feelings are elicited without being guided toward Mandela-like constructive systemic change. *Hutu* means “servant,” which signifies that the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was perpetrated by recently risen subalterns on their former ruling elite, a path that Mandela avoided.

Human rights call for large-scale systemic change, inspired by a new human awareness of global unity. In the spirit of the concept of a decent society (Margalit, 1996), a society in which institutions do not have humiliating effects, human rights entail the demand to build a decent world society. This requires the creation of new local and global practices and institutions that include every citizen into the stewardship of their world as a joint task where dignity is proactively increased, rather than conflict merely resolved. Peace is no longer the peace of underlings being forced and manipulated into quiet submission under systemic humiliation, but the institutionalization of dignified mutuality in dialogue among equals.

SEE ALSO: Bystander Intervention.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- www.humiliationstudies.org (Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies)
- www.tc.columbia.edu/ICCCR/ (International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution)
- www.upeace.org/ (University for Peace)