

Towards a Theory of Humiliation

Description of Habilitation Dissertation for Publishers

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The terrorist outrages of New York and Washington mean that urgent research is needed on the causes of such violent and destructive behaviour. This means not just looking at the acts themselves but also at the web of relationships from which they spring. We need greater understanding of the processes of humiliation that often occur within such relationships and how the victims of humiliation respond to this experience.

Towards a Theory of Humiliation is a monograph based on four years of research by cross-cultural psychologist Dr., Dr. Evelin Lindner on humiliation. It puts the notion of humiliation firmly and decisively on the academic, policy and political agendas. The phenomenon of humiliation is ubiquitous, in real life as much as in academic work. It is usually not studied explicitly but subsumed within other notions, such as shame and violence. The time is ripe for a study focused on humiliation, the powerful hidden factor that makes sense of many aspects of the wider field of emotion that has become so popular in academic and popular discourse.

Dr. med. Dr. psychol. Evelin Gerda Lindner is a cross-cultural social psychologist and a physician with broad international experience. She combines academic research with consultancy work for the corporate sector with the focus on globalisation and intercultural communication. Since 1997 she is a researcher at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Oslo in the field of conflict theory, where she looks at psychological aspects which play a role in escalating conflict to war (she grew up in a refugee family herself). Please see her academic work on <http://www.uio.no/~evelin/>.

Evelin Lindner's doctoral thesis in medicine addressed quality of life in an intercultural context (Egypt and Germany). She stood as candidate for the European Parliament in 1994. In 1993 she founded the NGO "Better Global Understanding" in Hamburg, Germany, and organised a festival with 20 000 participants under the motto "Global Responsibility." Earlier on she worked as a psychological counsellor in Cairo, Egypt, where she had her private practice, 1987-1991 and from 1984-1987 at the American University in Cairo. From 1974-1984 she studied and worked in New Zealand, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Israel, West Africa, USA, Germany, Norway. She handles around 12 languages.

It is widely believed that one of the main causes of the Holocaust and World War II was the humiliation Germany suffered after World War II, for example through the Treaties of Versailles. If humiliation can indeed lead to war and genocide, this must be vitally relevant for our present and future as a global society?

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What is humiliation? Is it not of the utmost importance to study this phenomenon more thoroughly? Why has it received so little attention till now? Should not humiliation be examined cross-culturally? Which cases should be examined? If we do this, will we find that humiliation is understood in the same way in all cultures or not? These were some of the author's questions.

After carrying out a pilot study in Norway, the author went to Africa, more specifically to Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi, to examine empirical occurrences of the phenomenon of humiliation, to ask how it is understood and used in different cultures, and to investigate whether the dynamics of humiliation were implicated in recent African genocides.

It very soon became very clear that classical western approaches to research, using questionnaires and an impersonal approach by the researcher, was – ironically – imposing humiliating effects upon interviewees. It was deeply uncomfortable to be imposing further humiliation upon people who had experienced extreme humiliation in the past and who were now being asked to discuss these experiences. Evelin Lindner's book insists in a dramatic way, relevant to many researchers in several fields, that humiliating research methods will almost certainly not yield valid results. The author's mode of addressing her readers also gives a high priority to the challenge of avoiding humiliation: she adopts an innovative narrative technique for describing her research findings and developing a number of important theoretical insights.

The book's findings show that understanding humiliation is inherently a multidisciplinary task. Studies of humiliation must draw upon not just cultural psychology, social psychology, sociology and anthropology, but also history, philosophy, and political science. This important requirement – the need to be multidisciplinary – helps to explain why humiliation has hardly been studied on its own account before now.

The results of Lindner's research suggest that humiliation is to be found at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of society, is present within personal relationships as much as in social mechanisms and societal structures, and exists both at the national and international level. Furthermore, the notion of humiliation has fundamentally changed its meaning during human history. Once it was regarded as a legitimate means of keeping order. Now it has become a synonym for the violation of human rights.

This manuscript defines a new field of multidisciplinary research, one that focuses upon the concept of humiliation, which has a universal core and culture-dependent periphery. Evelin Lindner also presents her fieldwork in a highly engaging way, and comes to innovative conclusions about genocide, Holocaust and the way third parties have to address conflicts. Her book, furthermore, places the concept of humiliation within a larger framework of 'logics' that operate within the socio-political environment within which human beings operate.

This manuscript will be of great benefit to academics in a wide range of disciplines, including cultural psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and political science. It is especially interesting for – and accessible – to students since it introduces them to an engaging piece of research 'in the real world.' It is also valuable for professionals, who deal with conflict, officials working in international and national organisations, politicians and, more generally, the interested layperson.

When the author gives public lectures on humiliation, people usually approach her afterwards and say: ‘When I first heard the word “humiliation,” I thought that it is quite irrelevant and marginal for me and my life. However, now, after having listened to you, I understand that humiliation permeates our lives and that everybody should learn more about it in order to avoid its potentially destructive effects!’

The Psychology of Humiliation follows a model that has a pattern of three elements, namely diagnosis – prognosis – therapy/prevention, as has the empirical part of the study that features the triad of Germany, Somalia, and Rwanda / Burundi. To reflect these triadic patterns the book is organised in three main chapters that are preceded by a short presentation of the state-of-the-art of research on humiliation, and a presentation of the historical background of the three cases.

The manuscript is designated to constitute part of a therapeutic dialogue with my interlocutors in Germany, Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi, as well as an academic dialogue with the network of researchers that study related fields. It focuses on the three cases of the research project, namely Somalia, Rwanda/Burundi, and Hitler’s Germany and it builds up the sequence of diagnosis – prognosis – therapy/prevention in a stepwise manner. After the introduction ‘biographical data’ of the three cases are being presented, with Hitler’s Germany as background, followed by Somalia and Rwanda / Burundi. In other words, the architecture of this book represents not only a three-layered paradigm applied on three cases, but also a three-fold ‘hermeneutic circle’ that mirrors the many hermeneutic circles that the researcher, ‘travelled through’ every day during her fieldwork: often she began in the morning by co-authoring ‘data’ together with her interlocutors, analysing them together with her interviewees, and building theory in the evening, only to be back, next morning, to co-authoring new data, and – through this shared experience – constructing new social realities in co-operation with her conversation partners; even more, not only the course of a day, every minute entailed numerous journeys from ‘data’ to ‘theory.’ In this way, she followed her own version of the famous hermeneutic circle whereby the analyst journeys back and forward between the particular and the general, producing generalisations in which the subtleties of particular cases are embodied.

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