

THE FEELING OF BEING HUMILIATED: A CENTRAL THEME IN ARMED CONFLICTS

A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Burundi/Rwanda, Between the Warring Parties, and in Relation to Third Intervening Parties

© Dr. med. Evelin Gerda Lindner
Psychologist and Medical doctor
University of Oslo, Institute of Psychology, Norway
<http://folk.uio.no/evelin/>

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We currently observe a changing nature of conflicts world-wide: Imperial warfare is disappearing in favour of internal civil wars (see WALLENSTEEN & AXELL, 1994), where the international community tries to step in from outside as third party. This project is based on the observation that psychological determinants in such violent conflicts have long been neglected, that conflict resolution strategies as described in rational choice theory are not sufficient. The central hypothesis of the project is that especially **feelings of humiliation** between warring parties and towards third intervening parties are a central determinant for violence, and central to hampering rational solutions leading to compromise and co-operation.

Third parties (mediators, peace keeping forces, humanitarian aid organisations, etc.) which go into conflict areas face a difficult situation: They have to operate in an unknown environment, in which they are confronted with a complicated political, military, and logistic situation, which in addition demands urgent action. Third parties are especially unfamiliar with the psychology of warring parties; they know little about what is going on in the minds of the people they have to pacify; the fact that different cultural backgrounds are involved aggravates the situation even further; third parties themselves might evoke strong psychological reactions they are not aware of. All this is not just a small problem, but a major obstacle, since the success of peace making and keeping depends very much on the acceptance by the people. It can lead to gross failure of peace making and peace keeping efforts, if only the political, military and logistic circumstances are mapped out and psychological factors in their socio-cultural context are neglected. At this point it would be beneficial to do more research and to develop strategies. The aim of this project is to contribute to this task.

In approaching this task the first question which one could pose is the following: Could it be that there are fundamental psychological mechanisms which play an important role in armed conflicts, not only in one cultural domain, but in more than one cultural domain? If yes, then it would be beneficial to know more about these mechanisms, in order to develop appropriate measures to cope with them.

Coming myself from a refugee family who's history mirrors central European history, having studied and worked during the past 20 years in different cultures (e.g. 7 years in Egypt), and currently being affiliated to a non-governmental organisation active in preventive diplomacy (*International Alert*, founded by the former head of *Amnesty International*, MARTIN ENNALS), I hypothesise that **humiliation**, better **the subjective feeling of being humiliated**, plays a central role in armed conflicts in most cultures. This is not to claim that objective factors as e.g. competition for scarce resources do not play a role in violent conflicts, it is also not to claim that conflict in itself is negative, since e.g. power imbalances might need conflict to be adjusted. But it is to claim that struggles around objective factors or power imbalances do not generate violent responses alone; conflicts around objective factors and power imbalances can also lead to non-violent confrontations, or even to compromise and co-operation. It is to claim that it might often even be the other way round, namely that feelings of humiliation feed on objective factors and then create a violent conflict (Hitler Germany being a horrible example: economic hardship and unemployment combined with feelings of humiliation after

the First World War made the German population accessible to Hitler's demagogy). I hypothesise that the significance of feelings of humiliation is universal or culture-independent, and that these feelings carry the potential to hamper conflict solutions described by rational choice theory. What is rather culture-dependent is according to my experience the way how humiliation is perceived and responded to. If this double-layer hypothesis is correct then third parties intervening in a violent conflict could develop and use a two-module strategy which contains one basic module which deals with universally present fundamental questions of humiliation, and one rather culture-dependent module which addresses the specific ways of dealing with humiliation in the cultural domain in which the third party is operating at present (note: culture or cultural domain is here not understood as closed, self-contained entity). I hypothesise that it could be in many cases more effective to address and attend to feelings of humiliation, than neglecting these feelings and facing their violent effects. This requires a widening of the time perspective, placing an acute conflict into a discourse before and also after the acute conflict phase. I take that the new notions of Common Security, and also Human Security, are open to this view, as are programmes as UNESCO's Culture of Peace Programme.

Hypothesis Ia:

In most cultures feelings of humiliation are a central determinant in violent conflicts, hampering conflict solutions described by rational choice theory.

Hypothesis Ib:

What is perceived as humiliation and how it is responded to, varies across cultures.

Hypothesis II:

Feelings of humiliation can be attended to, its violent effects can be defused.

In order to test these hypotheses the following questions have to be asked:

What is experienced as humiliation? What happens when people feel humiliated? When is humiliation established as a feeling? What does humiliation lead to? Which experiences of justice, honour, dignity, respect and self-respect are connected with the feeling of being humiliated? How is humiliation perceived and responded to in different cultures? What role does humiliation play for aggression? What can be done to overcome violent effects of humiliation?

Current state-of-the-art

There is surprisingly little which has been done on the feeling of humiliation, neither on the level of the individual, nor on the level of the collective. In the psychoanalytic literature we find different definitions of humiliation. Relevant are terms as self-respect and self-esteem; the notion self-respect provides a bridge to the notion of dignity in the field of philosophy, theology, ethics, and human rights. Honour and shame are relevant notions, too. They are covered in ethnology, anthropology, sociology and psychology. The notion of degradation belongs here, too. Theories of political psychology have to be looked at which address the psycho-dynamics of international relations. There is a larger body of literature which focuses generally on the reasons for violence. The quite young field of conflict resolution has to be looked at, and related to it rational choice theory. Furthermore we have to consider identity theory. Identity is an interdisciplinary term which stretches from personal over cultural, ethnic, political to national identity and thereby connects micro and macro level from psychology over sociology to political science. National identity theory in recent years reflected the increasing prominence of ethnic and regional movements. The fact that surprisingly little has been done on humiliation in violent conflicts, but that people get increasingly aware of psychological factors in such conflicts, reflects a paradigm shift within the security discussion. Security has long been a field of research which concentrated primarily on analysing military options and strategies. New approaches are widely seen as necessary, reorientation is under way. Common Security (Palme Commission) is a new key word. At last the literature about ethics and war is relevant, especially the literature about just war. It is relevant on two levels: There are on one side the warring parties which feel utterly justified in retaliating with violence for humiliations they feel they have suffered; and on

the other side there is the peace keeping force, the third party, which has to decide which intervention is ethical. At last intercultural communication theory has to be drawn into the project, at the point where possible strategies to address humiliation in different cultures are looked at.

Methods

The aim of this project is to contribute to finding ways to minimise warfare by attending to the feelings of humiliation which the warring parties harbour towards each other and towards third peace making and peace keeping parties.

As soon as we focus on humiliation and conflict we realise that it is a complicated concept with different layers: On one side there is the humiliating act being done to somebody, on the other side there are the feelings of being humiliated; these feelings can in turn lead to retaliation with humiliating acts, thus starting a cycle of humiliation; then there is the role of a third party stepping into a conflict where warring parties humiliate each other; the third party has to decide how to deal with the feelings of mutual humiliation existing between the warring parties; and the third party itself might induce feelings of humiliation without even being aware of it. This is because the whole situation is complicated by the fact that the feeling to be humiliated can base itself on misunderstanding, something which is especially critical between different cultural domains: A person from one cultural domain might not be aware that she is actually humiliating a person from another cultural domain; the person from another cultural domain might be doing humiliating things, which people from the same cultural domain would simply abstain from doing, because they would know that they are perceived as humiliation. This is especially destructive in situations where mainstream Western goal-oriented behaviour clashes with rather value-oriented behaviour in non-western regions (see MAX WEBER's notions of goal-rational, value-rational, traditional and affective behaviour).

We conclude that the subjective side of the notion humiliation is crucial. And this is why psychology is the suitable discipline to step in (BENJAMIN J. BROOME 1991). The preliminary working definition for humiliation at the start of the project will be the following: The feeling of being humiliated can occur, when a person or group perceives the attitude of another person or another group as degrading.

The empirical part of the project will include several methodological strategies

1. Existing literature and statistics will be used as basis.
2. Qualitative data will be collected in interviews with (a) the involved population in the conflict region, (b) with key opinion leaders in the region (see ARILD SCHOU, PRIO, Oslo 1995, for selection criteria) and (c) with international bodies involved as third parties.
3. The interviews will include an innovative application of a method based on "sculpturing" (HANS KOWERK, Hamburg 1993, see also GUDRUN ECKBLAD, Department of Psychology at Oslo University). This is a way to show the complex relationships (distance/closeness, hierarchy, degree of orientation towards a person) between parties. The complex relations among actors are made visible in a synchronic, geometrical way. The multifaceted relations a person feels towards other countries, regions, or ethnic groups can be shown and analysed. A computer programme has been developed for the analysis of the results.
4. Quantitative data will be collected via CANTRIL's well established Self-Anchoring Scale (1965), which will be adapted to the notion of humiliation.
5. The Self-Anchoring Scale will also be part of a questionnaire which will be administered to larger groups (e.g. classes of students) in the involved regions (see MALVERN LUMSDEN, psychologist at PRIO, Oslo).
6. The questionnaire will also be administered via Internet to relevant discussion groups (see e.g. fora used by non-Western participants).
7. In cooperation with multimedia director TORGEIR AUNE an **innovative interactive multimedia compact disc** will be produced which presents the results of the project to relevant target groups (foreign policy makers, peace mediators, peace keeping forces. etc.); relevant video material will be collected during the whole project.

The languages employed will be mainly English and French. In interviews with local populations translators will be used.

There are several regions in the world today which could be targeted as case studies. In Africa several conflict regions could be studied (e.g. Somalia, Burundi/Rwanda, Sudan, South Africa, Namibia, etc.), in the Far East we see conflict areas as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, North/South Korea, Taiwan/China, the Middle East is another example, or Central America (Guatemala), and, even closer to Europe, the Balkan region. Certainly there are several relevant conflict regions within Europe (e.g. Ireland). On a higher macro-political level HUNTINGTON's thesis of the West versus China and the Muslim World could be examined, too.

Co-operation Partners for the Project

The project has been promised active support from internationally reputed institutes active in conflict management: International Alert (IA) in London, and the Berghof Research Centre for Conflict Management in Berlin. Furthermore there exist contacts with numerous other institutions.

In Norway the project is anchored and gets institutional and academic support from the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo, further discussion partners come from the Departments of Anthropology in Oslo and Trondheim, from the Institute for Culture Studies at the University of Oslo, from political scientists and a psychologist at the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo (PRIO), and the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI). All these institutions also have a large international network of academic contacts. In addition the applicant herself has an international support network. One of the most reputed international HUSSERL scholars, DAGFINN FØLLESDAL, professor of philosophy at the University of Oslo, is willing to be a discussion partner for the project.

Innovative aspects

- Inclusion of psychological notions (as e.g. the feeling of being humiliated) into the discourse of peace making and keeping.
- Linkage of micro- and macro-level on all levels of conceptualisation: use of social psychology as link between psychology, sociology, and political science.

Work programme

Phase 1. Final formulation of hypotheses; at the same time analysis of available statistical data and scientific literature concerning the included conflict regions; preparation of in depth interviews; identification and contacting of relevant interview partners (duration of phase 1: 12 months)

Phase 2. In depth interviews and subsequently more structured interviews with interview partners in the conflict regions; continuing work on the conceptual part of the project (duration of phase 2: 12 months)

Phase 3. Analysis and evaluation of the results of the empirical part of the study; integration of the findings into theoretical frameworks; writing of articles and a book, and organising seminars and other ways of disseminating the results to relevant decision makers (duration of phase 3: 12 months)

Results expected

The aim of the study is to provide military and political practitioners and scientists with conceptual support for future decision-making in peace keeping situations. A strategy handbook will be aimed at which contains two modules: One basic module which deals with universally present fundamental questions of humiliation, and a second culture-dependent module which addresses the specific way of dealing with humiliation in the cultural domain in which the peace making and keeping efforts in question are carried out. Publications are expected in the form of this handbook, and scholarly articles (in English, German, French, and Norwegian); a seminar will be organised; relevant decision makers will be supplied with the results.