Moratorium on Humiliation:

Cultural and "Human Factor" Dimensions Underlying Structural Violence

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Abstract

This paper spells out ten issues regarding the cultural and "human factor" dimensions underlying structural violence with particular emphasis on the notion of humiliation. It discusses the ways feelings of humiliation are involved and gives recommendations to the United Nations of how to address these dimensions.

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This paper has its place within a larger research project that the present author developed with the general objective to examine the relevance of humiliation as a factor that hampers efforts to bring about peace. It is particularly relevant at the current time when humiliation seems to be at the heart of global terrorism.[1]

The following definition of humiliation, developed in the course of the field research, informs this paper: Humiliation, according to Lindner (2000a), is 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 your will and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what you feel you should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations. It often involves 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 upon, made helpless" (2000, p. 6). Humiliation systematically connects many aspects of the human condition: it is inscribed within a societal process (and implies the existence of oppressive hierarchy); it is a process between people

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[1] In this research, the examples of genocides in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi (considered against the background of the German Holocaust) were addressed, as was the international community's handling of such conflicts. 216 qualitative interviews were carried out by the author in Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Egypt) and Europe (England, Norway, Germany, Switzerland) from 1998-2001. Both in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi representatives of opponents and third parties were interviewed. A pilot study was carried out in Norway with 52 respondents (1997-1998). The interview material comprises 100 hours of interviews on audiotape, 10 hours of digital video film, and extensive notes, see Lindner (2001a). See for a more detailed description of the research methodology Lindner (2001b). The present author, apart from being a researcher in social psychology, has a background as a clinical psychologist in intercultural settings (1980- 1984 in Hamburg, Germany, 1984-1991 in Cairo, Egypt), and as a physician.

including a "humiliator" and a "victim" (and implies an interpersonal act), and, not least, it is an emotional state (and implies the occurrence of an experience and feeling).[2]

In the following, ten issues will be listed relating to the cultural and "human factor" dimensions underlying structural violence.
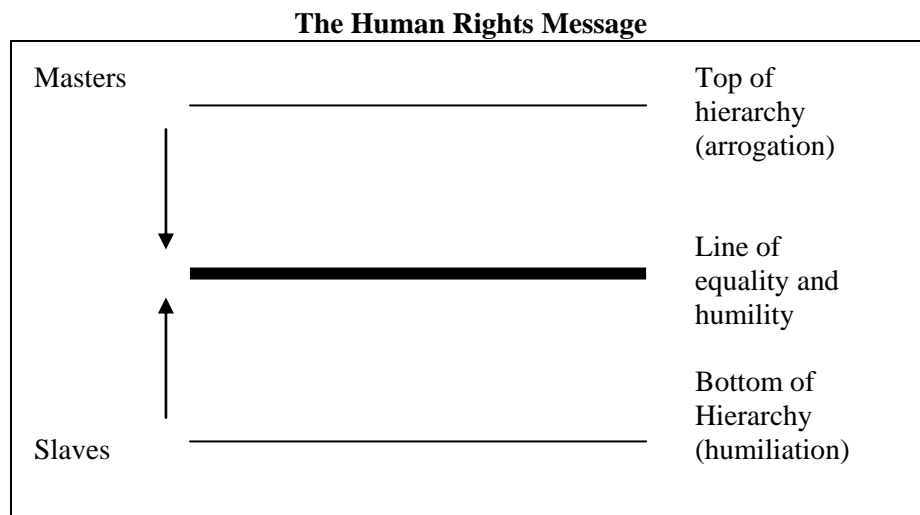
1. Yearning for recognition and respect is a universal characteristic of human cultures that overrides other interests; its violation leads to feelings of humiliation that are among the most intense feelings experienced by humans

In 1997 the journal *Social Research* devoted a special issue to the topic of humiliation, stimulated by *The Decent Society* by Margalit (1996). Margalit's work relates to the literature in philosophy on "the politics of recognition,"[3] claiming that people who are not recognized suffer humiliation and that this leads to violence.[4]

On the basis of many years of international experience involving both field research and clinical practice, the present author supports this view, namely that it is a universal human experience to feel hurt if put down and humiliated in a way that violates one's expectations. This phenomenon seems to represent a common ground for all human cultures, binding them together in the shared tendency to create divisions when recognition is lacking. Feelings of humiliation can be all-consuming in their intensity and they often lead to either depression or destructive violence. However, when dealt with in a creative way they can also drive constructive social and societal change as is shown by the example of Nelson Mandela.

2. The human rights message affects cultural norms at a global scale and initially increases feelings of humiliation

Figure 1 illustrates the message of human rights that indicates that every human being has an inner core of dignity that ought not be humiliated, and that second-class citizenship is no longer acceptable: "Masters" are asked to step down from the tops of hierarchical orders that they "arrogated," while "slaves" are encouraged to rise from humiliating levels of subjugation; both are invited to join a middle line of equality and humility that allows for creative networks and teams, but not for oppressive subjugation.

The Human Rights Message

Masters		Top of hierarchy (arrogation)
	↓ ↑	Line of equality and humility
Slaves		Bottom of Hierarchy (humiliation)

Figure 1: The human rights message

Hunters and gatherer societies are described by anthropologists as rather egalitarian societies, compared to societies based on agriculture.[5] The present author, who did research in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi on the background of Hitler's Germany, describes Somalia as a pre-hierarchical society of pristine and unbridled pride,[6] quite contrary to Rwanda and Burundi (as well as Hitler's Germany) that could be defined as profoundly hierarchical societies of honor.[7] Not just Somalia but also Afghanistan, and several other world regions that were either too mountainous, too remote, or too devoid or resources to be subjugated by major powers and included into systematic hierarchical orders, have survived till today as pre-hierarchical egalitarian societies that follow the Somali proverb of "noble warriors" that goes as follows: "A man deserves to be killed, not humiliated."[8]

In contrast, in hierarchical societies, coming into being about 10000 years ago when agriculture was adopted, masters typically carried out routine acts of humiliation – beatings, torture, bowing rules – as "necessary" means for "keeping order." During the past 10000 years, until recently, it was widely believed that it was part of divine providence or natural order that some people were lesser beings and others were chosen to lead. Humiliating subjugation was accepted – both by most underlings and masters – as necessary and unavoidable suffering for those at the bottom of the pyramid of power.

The American declaration of independence, the ideals of the French revolution (with forerunners much earlier), and today's extended recognition of human rights as not only entailing political rights, but also social, cultural, and economic rights, mean that the former acceptance of humiliation has been transformed into outright rejection. Humiliating people is no longer regarded as legitimate. Hierarchy, at least in its oppressive form, has lost its taste of legitimacy. This does neither mean that all hierarchies have in fact disappeared – social transitions often proceed slowly – nor that all forms of hierarchy are being opposed by human rights ideals. Conceptions of "teamwork" and "creative networks"[9] – modern buzzwords not least in the corporate sector – do entail hierarchical elements, however, they do not entail subjugation. They rather build on the satisfaction motivated people find in working for a common goal; people are expected to buy into such teams voluntarily and eagerly.

However, the transition is not only slow, but also painful. Human rights advocates see human rights as a platform for a better future for every human being. Yet, the effect of the advent of human rights is, at least in the short run, an increase of painful feelings of humiliation. Whatever was accepted as divinely ordained deprivation – poverty, inequality, low status – turns into bitter humiliation and subsequently into the urge to retaliate, perhaps with acts of even more severe humiliation. Underlings will resent their masters' oppression more than ever, and, as in Rwanda, even perpetrate genocide on their former masters.

Apart from increasing feelings of humiliation worldwide because of the new framing of reality brought about by human rights, human rights also heighten the sensitivity for breaches of human rights. Suffering from the West's "double standards" or "lack of even-handedness" characterizes, according to the present author, the mood of the large parts of the non-West. The West is regarded as human rights advocate, and many would like to buy into the West's standard of living. Many are even prepared to leave their homes, and pay for dangerous journeys, in order to enjoy the West's freedom and quality of life. "Double standards" is shorthand for fear that human rights rethoric may be an empty cover-up for the West's wish to dominate the world and exploit the rest, as it so often happened in history, when rising underlings promised equality only as long as they did not yet have fully secured the master's seat. Some fear that the West does nothing but bribe the masses of the world into admiring and joining them, just to dominate and humiliate them.

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[5] See, for example, Harris (1997), or Ury (1999).
[6] See, for example, Lewis (1961).
[7] See Lindner (2001c).
[8] See Lindner (2001a).
[9] See, for example, Smith (2001).

3. **Two long-standing cultural spheres are currently confronted with a vision of a third, namely the human rights vision of a global village: pre-hierarchical societies (pride) and hierarchical societies (honor) are confronted with the ideal of a post-hierarchical society (dignity, humility)**

    (1) "Pride societies" (egalitarian societal structures that have not yet experienced systematic subjugation ("noble warriors" such as in Somalia, or Afghanistan) and
    (2) "honor societies" (long-standing hierarchical societal structures entailing "masters" who "arrogate" superiority, and humiliated "underlings") are confronted with
    (3) the vision of a "global dignity society" built on human rights (knowledge society entailing egalitarian networks) that promotes the idea of egalitarian humbleness or humility. "Noble warriors" as well as "masters" are thus invited into a learning process urging them to step down, while underlings are encouraged to rise. Both, the process of rising up from humiliation, as well as the process of descending from arrogation to humility, are difficult and conflictual processes.

4. **"Cultural violence" is a concept that has its meaning only in a human rights framework**

Misunderstandings and conflicts may arise between the three players currently active on the global stage, namely

    (1) numerous "masters" around the world adhere to the old honor code and want to maintain a hierarchy where the worth of people is ranked into those "up" and others "down" (related terms are "teaching lessons," "sovereignty," "security," "law and order," "our traditional values," and Western human rights critique may be labeled as "cultural violence");
    (2) many "underlings" around the world wish to replace their "masters," or, alternatively, build a new order of egalitarian relations, ("liberation movements" accusing masters of "cultural violence," perhaps only as long as they are not yet occupying the master's seat themselves);
    (3) human rights advocates wish to dismantle hierarchy altogether and implement a global society where all human beings enjoy equal rights and are assigned equal dignity and worth (only in this context has the term "cultural violence" its initial signification).

The problem is that masters may not wish to step down, rising underlings may not want to dismantle hierarchy but become new masters, and third parties may not understand these dynamics.

5. **The significance of feelings of humiliation increase as other "logics" get more benign through the emergence of an interdependent single global village**

To summarize the theoretical evaluations that have permeated Lindner's work, we may hypothesize that a small number of "logics" are at the core of the human condition, and that they are profoundly affected by the process of globalization (here understood as the "shrinking" of the world and increasing interdependence): The question of whether and to what extent resources are expandable (Game Theory located in philosophy), whether the "Security Dilemma" is weak or strong (International Relations Theory, located in political science), to what extent long-term or short-term horizons dominate (as described in many academic disciplines, among others cross-cultural psychology), and how the human capacity to either deepen or loosen identifications and demarcation lines is calibrated (Social Identity Theory in relation to respect and humiliation, located in social psychology).

Social identity entails the problem of humiliation that, in its manifestations as both act and feeling, represents, perhaps, the most significant creator of rifts within social relationships at all levels. This is the case even in situations where the other "logics" would indicate co-operation. The interplay between these basic "logics" may have guided the way humankind has developed "cultures" of pride, honor, and dignity, and the particular manner in which each of them responds to humiliation.

The Human Condition						
		The Time Horizon		Social Identity		
		short	Long	respect	humiliation	
The Pie	fixed	1	5	9	13	
	expandable	2	6	10	14	
The Security Dilemma	strong	3	7	11	15	
	weak	4	8	12	16	

Table 1: The Human Condition: The Pie, the Security Dilemma, the Time Horizon, and Humiliation

The argument I have made in this thesis suggests that the most benign scenario is a combination of weak Security Dilemma, expandable pie, long time horizon, and an atmosphere of respect. Conversely, the worst scenario brings together a short time horizon, positioned in an environment that represents a fixed pie of resources, combined with a strong Security Dilemma, within which individuals or groups are exposed to humiliating assaults. Feelings of humiliation and their consequences may be so strong that they override and undermine otherwise "benign" scenarios, in a downward spiral.

We may hypothesize that the destructive nature of the dynamics of humiliation becomes the more visible the more the various parameters veer to the benign side. The more expandable the pie becomes (knowledge society in a globalising world), the more the Security Dilemma withers away (interconnectedness in a single global village with emergent democratic super-ordinate structures), and the longer the time horizon stretches (the advent of the term "sustainability" giving witness to the "lesson" humankind is currently being taught by its biosphere, namely that new technologies may have destructive long-term effects – ozone layer depletion being one example), the more we may expect the malign effects of humiliation to be brought to the forefront of public consciousness. This is because the extreme potential of humiliation for creating rifts between people is thrown into starker contrast as the other "logics" cease to have malign effects.

6. Feelings of humiliation can lead to the enlargement and creation of cultural, ethnic, religious and ideological differences

We are accustomed to assuming that cultural differences have a firm basis in "real" differences in the shared belief systems of the cultures we look at. "Cultures" are often seen as "containers" with more or less opaque walls, as the result of diverse environments and diverse cultural beliefs in human groups that have developed in isolation. We make a small allowance for "diffusion," meaning that cultures usually are in contact with each other and learn from each other, but this allowance does not alter the basic concept of cultures as isolated "containers."[10] Post-modern thought goes as far and turns this view into its very foundation and assumes that different cultures are fundamentally impenetrable, unknowable, and enigmatic to each other.[11]

Likewise, conflicts of interest (disputes over water, land, and other resources) are often viewed as the primary cause for violent conflicts. This paper does not dispute that cultural differences have to be respected, or that conflicts of interest must be attended to. Ethnocentrism and lack of respect for cultural diversity have to be overcome, and disputes over resources have to be taken seriously. But the picture may be more complex than that. What if "culture difference" or "conflict of interest" is secondary to relational problems entailing humiliation? What if "culture difference" or "conflict of interest" may at times even be a "device" brought forward when relations turn sour and one side wants to cash in respect? Groups formerly considering themselves as in-groups may split into several out-groups of purportedly "different" cultures or interest groups as a result of dynamics of humiliation (Somaliland, East Germany).

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[10] See for *Cultural and Social Behavior* by Triandis (1997).

[11] Adapted from Lindner (2000b), p. 12.

7. Former underlings, risen to power, are prone to becoming extremists and perpetrate particularly extreme acts of humiliation (perpetrators often are former victims)

It may be underlings, risen to power, not long-established elites, who are most prone to perpetrate atrocities such as ethnic cleansing or genocide on masters whose humiliating rule they fear in the future (Hitler, for example feared that the "Weltjudentum" [World-Jewry] was about to plan global domination).[12] Some able and ambitious leaders who suffered personal humiliation and rose from lowly backgrounds, may have acquired a "predisposition" and vulnerability to experiencing others' behavior as humiliating and degrading in very selective and larger-than-life ways (this may be identified as "inferiority complex"). They will be ready to frame even average stressful "frustrations" as humiliation and define humiliation within the cultural repertoire ("cues") available to them, namely as humiliation that must be avenged by violence, or as humiliation that must be healed by constructive dialogue. Leaders with a personal history of humiliation may tend to select, aggrandize, or even create cultural scripts that call for violent revenge. They may subsequently be called "extremists," and will intensify any cultural, ethnic, or religious difference that sets them apart from their alleged humiliators and that can support their yearnings for revenge.[13] They will fiercely oppose moderate leaders in their own camp, and will persecute those who call for alternative scripts that cultural codes usually provide for responding to frustrations and acts of humiliation, namely entering into peaceful change and dialogue with those parties who are perceived as responsible.

8. Followers can be instrumentalized by "humiliation entrepreneurship"

Extremist leaders may succeed in instrumentalizing followers, whose frustrations they canalize into the narrative of one overarching story of humiliation that must be avenged. The process of instrumentalization may include sophisticated methods that lead to the followers' moral disengagement[14] and learning of violence, a process that will be facilitated if authoritarian hierarchical structures are in place (Rwanda, Hitler's Germany[15]). This transformation of citizens into "weapons" may be achieved not only by manipulating and focusing followers' feelings on "higher" goals such as avenging humiliation, but also by bribing or coercing followers into violence. Among followers certain groups will be more vulnerable to this kind of seduction, and join the camp of extremists, others, particularly those who would be inclined to join the moderate camp, may just be frightened. The more such leaders can instigate feelings of humiliation in their followers, the easier their task will become, because their followers may even finance their participation in the war themselves (machetes were used in Rwanda). Feelings of humiliation are the key to "inexpensive" atrocities perpetrated by followers; feelings of humiliation are what I call the "nuclear bomb of emotions."

9. Psychological barriers such as "essentialism" and "fundamental attribution error" increase feelings of humiliation

The global community would benefit of becoming more aware of the fact that there are several psychological barriers to the creation of a global decent society. One important barrier is the so-called fundamental attribution error.[16] Human beings have the tendency to believe that their successes are theirs, while their failures are due to adverse circumstances. This evaluation is usually turned into its opposite when "others" are judged; others' successes are perceived as due to favorable circumstances, while only their failures are "theirs."

Following this pattern, the West is perceived as ethically wanting, as "decadent," by many in the non-West; anybody traveling in those countries that are subsumed in the category of "non-West" knows of a host of ill-feelings that are harbored with respect to the West: the West, in non-Western

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[12] See, for example, Lindner (2000c), Lindner (2000d), and Lindner (2001d).

[13] See, for example, Lindner (2000e), and Lindner (2000b).

[14] See, for example, Bandura (1999).

[15] See, for example, Adorno (1964).

[16] Reber (1995), "A general theoretical perspective in social psychology concerned with the issue of social perception. The act of attribution is one in which a person ascribes or imputes a characteristic (or trait, emotion or motive, etc.) to oneself or to another person. Thus, the term represents not so much a formal theory but a general approach to social psychology and personality theory in which behavior is analyzed in the light of this concept." See also Hewstone (1990).

eyes, does not sufficiently care for the elderly, not for children, displays a high divorce rat, has little real compassion and not enough social cohesion, and so on. The West in turn targets the non-West in similar ways: in Western eyes, women are abused in the non-West, individual freedom is choked, and self-expression is curtailed.

In reality, however, both, the West and the non-West, value social cohesion highly, and rifts such as divorce, or lack of compassion, are deeply regretted in the West as unwanted "side-effects," that is a price to be paid for the transition towards more personal freedom, authenticity and flexibility. In the same vain both camps value individual freedom, and the non-West regrets any need to curtail it as sad "side-effect," a price to be paid for social cohesion. Thus the fundamental attribution error leads to the result that "side-effects" that are regretted are perceived by the "other" side as the others' essence, as profoundly "theirs," while commonalities, such as the universality of the appreciation of social cohesion that has to be balanced with individual freedom, are underplayed.

The self-righteousness that results from this attribution error – every party feels that they in fact are entitled to teach the other party about what is right and wrong, or ethical and non-ethical – has – though unintended – humiliating effects. This humiliation is based on a misunderstanding, rooted in the common human nature to see oneself in a more forgiving light than the "other." It is compounded by the formerly mentioned problem that the West preaches human rights, while being blind to the fact that the violation of these very rights creates feelings of humiliation in those who do not enjoy them. [17]

10. Psychological barriers such as the belief in a "just world" increase feelings of humiliation

Another important psychological barrier to a decent global society is the belief in a "just world"[18] that tends to blame the victim. The more privileged in the global community are well advised to increase their awareness of the fact that they tend to be blind to the sufferings of the less privileged, and even more blind to the fact that they themselves heighten these sufferings – turning them into painful feelings of humiliation – by promoting human rights that indicate that deprivation (poverty, inequality, increasing gap between rich and poor) is a violation of the victim's basic humanity while this very violation is allowed to prevail or even increase. "Double standards" amount to a double humiliation. Reducing this blindness among the privileged will allow for the recognition of the fact that expressions of discontent are often understandable as re-actions to perceived humiliation, and not unfathomable actions of unexplainable evil.

Concluding Remarks

For the international community and the United Nations a fourfold approach is recommended in order to facilitate a Mandela-like transition to a global society that is based on human rights (as opposed to Hitler-like violent reactions to feelings of humiliation):
(1) Under no circumstances should extremism be bred, not even for "higher" causes. The UN could promote this aim in four ways: (i) the UN is the natural place for the building of inclusive non-humiliating global structures that institutionalize the perception of the world as "One World for All," a perception that is growing particularly among those who understand this vision as a promise for a more dignified life, (ii) no humiliation narratives should be forged, not even with the aim to motivate people for battle (such as the Taliban against the Soviet Union), (ii) circumstances should be avoided that humiliate losers (no other Treaties of Versailles), (iii) people should be made aware of the existence of adverse psychological barriers that deepen rifts and invite acts and feelings of humiliation.
(2) Alliances should be forged between moderate leaders, or "respect entrepreneurs" such as Mandela, across conflict lines. The UN could support and create global institutions that further moderate non-violent attendance to conflict, and convene moderates across conflict lines.
(3) Moderate leaders have to be supported in the task of marginalizing extremist humiliation entrepreneurs in their respective camps. The UN could provide arenas for personal development, arenas where urges to respond to feelings of humiliation with extremist acts of humiliation could

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[17] There are other effects that should be mentioned, such as the false polarization effect, see, for example, Ross & Ward (1996). This effect makes people systematically underestimate common ground.
[18] A general belief that assumes that those with unfortunate outcomes deserve what they receive, see, for example, Lerner (1980).

be transformed into more constructive strategies. This task is extremely important. Moderates and strong third parties are needed to prevent feelings of humiliation from accumulating, and contain them once they are instigated. Humiliation entrepreneurs and their followers will seldom discontinue cycles of humiliation if left to their own devices; moderates and third parties have to step in.

(4) Grievances have to be addressed that afflict the wider population and may be instrumentalized by humiliation entrepreneurs, grievances such as poverty, inequality, and lack of human rights. The UN has to help avoid "empty human rights rethoric," "double standards" or "uneven-handedness" that turn such grievances from divinely ordained fate into double humiliation. The UN has to help build institutions that open up channels for the peaceful and cooperative management of conflicts – a management that must be embedded in an atmosphere of mutual respect – as opposed to allow for the intensification or even creation of conflicts of interest and culture in contexts that entail humiliation. Central to this task is the furthering of global communication and dialogue, for example between the West and non-West, dialogue that addresses grievances and highlights the struggle for amelioration within a global framework of respect.

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