

Parenting Styles, and their Impact on Children: Humiliation, Abuse and Neglect

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For thousands of years, almost everywhere on the globe, humankind believed in hierarchically ranking human value. Almost everybody thought that some people were born as *higher* beings and others as *lower* beings. This was called the “order of nature” or “divine order.” The cradle of democracy, the Greek city state of about 2,000 years ago - just to give you one example out of many - was adamant that women and slaves, per definition, had no voice.

Any pain or suffering that those had to endure who had their place somewhere at the bottom of the pyramid of power was deemed to be *necessary pain* or *prosocial humbling*. Through thousands of years, underlings’ sufferings were regarded as “good” for them and “fruitful” for the health of society as a whole. Beating underlings, for example, was usually regarded not as abuse, but as legitimate means to “remind” them of their “due” place. Vaccinations or surgical operation, albeit painful, are generally accepted as “good treatment” for patients; this is a positive view of pain that everybody sympathizes with. Similarly, for millennia, underlings’ pain was seen as “good treatment” for underlings and the health of society altogether.

Strict Father Model

Parents typically were central to reproducing obedient underlings. Alice Miller (1983), spelled out how, in the period that lead up to the two World Wars, leading pedagogues of the time regarded *breaking the will of the child* as essential for childrearing. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) describe the underlying framework with what they call the *Strict Father model* (as opposed to the *Nurturant Parent model*):

The father has authority to determine the policy that will govern the family. Because of his moral authority, his commands are to be obeyed. He teaches his children right

from wrong by setting strict rules for their behavior and by setting a moral example in his own life. He enforces these moral rules by reward and punishment. The father also gains his children's cooperation by showing love and by appreciating them when they obey the rules. But children must not be coddled, lest they become spoiled. A spoiled child lacks the appropriate moral values and lacks the moral strength and discipline necessary for living independently and meeting life's challenges. The mother has day-to-day responsibility for the care of the household, raising the children; and upholding the father's authority. Children must respect and obey their parents, because of the parents' moral authority. Through their obedience they learn the discipline and self-reliance that is necessary to meet life's challenges. This self-discipline develops in them strong moral character. Love and nurturance are a vital part of family life, but they should never outweigh parental authority, which is itself an expression of love and nurturance – tough love. As children mature, the virtues of respect for moral authority, self-reliance, and self-discipline allow them to incorporate their father's moral values. In this way they incorporate their father's moral authority they become self-governing and self-legislating (Lakoff & Johnson (1999), pp. 313-314).

The result is described by Lakoff and Johnson as follows,

Evidence from three areas of psychological research – attachment theory, socialization theory, and family violence studies – shows that the Strict Father model ...tends to produce children who are dependent on the authority of others, cannot chart their own moral course very well, have less of a conscience, are less respectful of others, and have no greater ability to resist temptations (Lakoff & Johnson (1999), p. 327).

Thus, the *Strict Father model* seems to produce what Theodor Adorno called the *authoritarian personality* whose principal characteristic is obedience and preparedness to blindly following orders, irrespective of their moral contents (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford (1950)).

Nurturant Parent Model

Around 300 - 250 years ago, the Human Rights revolution began to undermine the belief that it is "nature's order" to have *lower* and *higher* beings. In 1757, a new meaning of the word *humiliation* emerged. Up to 1757 the verb *to humiliate* meant nothing worse than *to lower* or *to humble*, or *to show underlings their legitimate lowly place*, without any connotation that this may also signify an illegitimate violation. This we learn from the *Oxford English Dictionary* with regard to the English language. I quote from Miller (1993), who informs us that "the earliest recorded use of *to humiliate* meaning to mortify or to lower or to depress the dignity or self-respect of someone does not occur until 1757."

Article 1 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." This declaration represents a revolution insofar as it upsets the hierarchical ranking of human worthiness that was in place for millennia and calls for a new order, namely the order of *equal dignity for all*. In this new order it is regarded illegitimate to put down people; putting down people, beating and punishing them cruelly, is no longer labeled as "prosocial humbling" but as abusive

antisocial humiliation. As might be expected, this revolution has consequences also for parenting.

Lakoff and Johnson allude to this when they describe the *Nurturant Parent model* of rearing children. This model describes a parenting style that abides by the new Human Rights ideals. What formerly was regarded as “good” for children, turns into abuse and neglect in the new nurturant framework.

Many parents fear that being nurturant means being lenient and permissive. Yet, nurturant parenting has nothing to do with leniency. It combines firmness with respect for equal dignity. Lakoff and Johnson write, “Nurturant Parent morality is not, in itself, overly permissive. Just as letting children do whatever they want is not good for them, so helping other people to do whatever they please is likewise not proper nurturance. There are limits to what other people should be allowed to do, and genuine nurturance involves setting boundaries and expecting others to act responsibly” (Lakoff & Johnson (1999), p. 316).

The point with the Nurturing Parent model is that “lessons” are no longer taught by putting down children. “Breaking” children is no longer permissible. “Lessons” are now to be taught with firm love and humility, no longer by applying humiliation.

To summarize, we all, parents included, live in the midst of a historic transition from concepts of *ranked human worthiness* to visions of *equal dignity for all*. We all are embedded in some way or another within this transition, either by welcoming it or resisting it, and in all cases by being confused by it. It is a difficult transition even for the most fervent human rights enthusiast because it is easy to lose orientation.

We lose orientation not least because old recipes still sound so “right.” For example, is it so bad to sometimes hit a child? Have we not all survived such treatment? And was it not to our own good? And what about the treatment of women? Should not women be careful not to lose their “femininity” [= submissiveness as *lower beings*]? Many such questions confuse our minds in times of transition.

What we have not yet developed are new proverbs and new sayings that sound equally “right” as the old ones. The new world is not yet there while the old world disappears. We need to develop new language, new proverbs and sentences that highlight that “lessons” are no longer to be taught by humiliation, but with love and humility.

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