

# Humiliation and Human Rights in Diverse Societies: Forgiveness and Other Solutions from Cross-Cultural Research<sup>1</sup>

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*Living in a multicultural society like the United States leads to sampling a range of experiences that vary from being extremely delightful to excessively stressful, with many types of experiences in between. I present cases of positive experiences of immigrants that provide positive feelings of freedom, equality, fairness and due process. I also discuss negative experiences of minorities that vary from having their names mispronounced and their accent criticized to outright racial discrimination and hate crimes. How should the individuals navigate through this minefield of humiliating experiences? I present four theoretically meaningful strategies – Learning to Make Isomorphic Attributions, Learning to Extract Help from the System, Developing a Shared Network, and Using the Acculturating Strategy of Integration – that are derived from cross-cultural research that may help a society's minority members to maintain human dignity in a multicultural society without feeling excessively cynical. I conclude the paper with a suggestion that, perhaps, we need to use our spiritual strength in dealing with humiliating situations and that forgiveness is the ultimate ointment, which allows us to heal from the wounds of humiliation.*

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Researchers have consistently identified the three domains of cognition, affect and behavior (Triandis, 1977; Brislin, 1989; Landis & Bhawuk, 2004; Bhawuk, Landis & Lo, 2006; Bhawuk, 2009) that need to be addressed in intercultural training programs to prepare people to be

effective in intercultural interactions. However, not much exists in the literature that addresses the affective issues faced by sojourners. In the acculturation literature there is more research on acculturative stress that captures the affective issues faced by immigrants (Berry, 2004) and refugees (Fangen, 2006); however, they are often presented as the plight of people facing marginalization, and others are assumed to be following the cultural learning paradigm of acculturation (Berry, 2004). An attempt is made to fill this lacuna in the literature by presenting positive and negative experiences of a successful immigrant and sojourner.

Another critical topic that is neglected in both intercultural training and acculturation literature pertains to the notion of humiliation (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999;

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Lindner, 2006; Rutan, 2000; Statman, 2000). In race relations literature there are some indirect references to humiliation (Bergman, Palmieri, Drasgow & Ormerod, 2007; Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999), but it is also not at the forefront of the field. Despite the preponderance of evidence supporting the presence of humiliation as a common feeling experienced by immigrants and members of minority communities (hate crimes, see Jacobs & Potter, 1998; racial slurs, see Leader, Mullen & Rice, 2009; and so forth) and women (sexual behavior in the workplace, see Berdahl & Aquino, 2009, glass ceiling, and so forth) in multicultural societies, the field of intercultural training has not addressed this common experience. This paper attempts to fill this gap in the literature by presenting a critical incident capturing the humiliating experience of a successful immigrant instead of the experience of marginalized people who are more often the target of such research. It also presents some qualitative data that captures the reflections on the incident of two minority members of a multicultural society.

In this paper, I take an experiential approach to the study of social psychology and share some of my positive experiences – the good – in a multicultural society, and how that leads to positive feelings, a sense of dignity, and extreme satisfaction with life in general. I also share an extremely devastating and humiliating experience – the bad – that ate at the core of my being for a long time. This is what ethnographers call evocative autoethnography (Ellis, 1997). I present the comments of two independent people on the negative experience to be able to reflect on my own experience with some objectivity. In so doing I combine autoethnography (Ellis, 2004) with interview, and used written response from the participants instead of orally interviewing them and transcribing their response.

Following the discussion of the good and the bad experiences, I present four strategies to navigate the multicultural minefield. These strategies are theoretically meaningful as they are derived from the cross-cultural literature, and have been found to be useful in many other domains like preparing people to live abroad, deal with issues of racism, and so forth. Thus, I synthesize autoethnography and reflections from other observers with the existing literature to derive some theoretically meaningful practical solutions to the field of intercultural interactions. It is hoped that these cross-cultural ideas and methodology will be examined in future research for their usefulness and validity in dealing with humiliation, and in creating a multicultural society where human right, dignity and self-respect are valued. Finally, using autoethnography again, I conclude the paper with my personal experience of forgiveness, and its usefulness in dealing with humiliation.

## The Good

When I completed my Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at the East-West Center (EWC) and the University of Hawai‘i in 1990, my mentor at the EWC asked me, “What will you miss most about the United States?” I answered spontaneously, “Freedom.” Over the years I have reflected deeply upon my response, as objectively as I can. I find that my experience can be organized into three areas where I experienced an enhanced sense of freedom – experience in the academic world, social experience in the real world, and the experienced shift in the basic value of fatalism. These are the three areas in which I felt that I would miss freedom upon returning to Nepal.

### Experience in the Academic World

Freedom came to me in many ways, and most of them were unexpected and liberating. I was born and socialized in a Brahmin family in Nepal and went to Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, in India where I received my first degree in mechanical engineering. I was an MBA student at the University of Hawai‘i but I was able to specialize in cross-cultural training, even though there was nobody at the College of Business Administration (CBA) who was an expert on the topic. The flexibility allowed by the University of Hawai‘i to its graduate students, which is a strength of the American graduate studies, made it possible for me to take a summer workshop and do a directed reading in conjunction with it to learn the literature on cross-cultural training. I could take a course on cross-cultural research methods, which further allowed me to delve more deeply into the cross-cultural training literature. Finally, I was able to do my master’s thesis on intercultural sensitivity, and the committee worked with such an open mind and allowed me to work with my EWC mentor, though he was not a faculty in the CBA at that time. This experience gave me an uplifting feeling of freedom, a taste of the “can do” attitude, and a flavor of what it means to have an internal locus of control and to do what one wants to do. I was rewarded positively with the publication of a chapter on cross-cultural orientation programs (Bhawuk, 1990) and a paper-based on my master’s thesis on intercultural sensitivity using the theory of individualism and collectivism (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). This early success provided the foundation of my research career.

This is not to argue that there is no bureaucracy in the university. There is, and I had to fill out forms that had strict deadlines, follow procedures, and so forth. However, the academic freedom to do what I wanted to do, and to carry it out when I wanted to do it, was extremely satisfying. For

example, I took my electives before my core MBA courses were done. I actually did my statistics and microeconomics courses in the last semester, which people usually do in their first semester. The ability to choose courses and to do projects in those courses that enhanced my learning objectives led to this feeling of freedom beyond learning the prescribed material in the way the teacher imposes, which is the standard way of teaching in Nepal and India.

### Social Experience in the Real World

Another area where I experienced a sense of freedom was in the social interactions in the EWC community in Hawai'i. The EWC is a federally-funded international research and education organization in Hawai'i, and it was the source of my grant to study in the United States. When I was a student there, there would be upwards of 300 students and scholars from the United States, Asia and Pacific Island Nations pursuing degree studies and research projects. I felt that I was accepted for my achievements, rather than what family or country I came from. My wife and I invited many professors, graduate students who studied with me, and other people we came to know in the community to our place for dinner, and they were all very warm, friendly and accepting. Even the professors treated us like equals, and many reciprocated by inviting us back. We became a family to our host family, and they even visited us in Nepal when we returned to Nepal. Thus, we felt that we could move around in the society freely, despite being foreigners and new to the society, and there were no hierarchical or other barriers in our way despite being a poor graduate student with no status in the community. The acceptance ameliorated the feeling of being a peon, dhobi (washerman), janitor and driver, since I did these chores in the United States, which I did not have to do in Nepal (Bhawuk, Munusamy & Sakuda, 2009).

### Moving Beyond a Fatalistic Attitude

The biggest freedom came from the liberation from the deterministic grip of fate, which I realized only toward the end of the 2 year program. In Nepal and India, people always talk about their destiny and fate, and often think that effort only counts so much, and in the end it is fate that takes us where we are going. From day one in the USA, I took charge of my learning and started by requesting a change in my assigned advisor, which was immediately accepted with warmth. I took 2 years of French language, and was encouraged to do so, though it was not a part of my graduate

studies. Of course, I had to take it over and above my 12 credit of graduate studies, but I was happy to make that extra effort, if the system allowed me to do what I wanted to do.

I worked hard and earned an "A" in all courses, attended all cross-cultural seminars organized at the EWC, worked as president of the Nepalese student chapter at the EWC, joined the International Toastmaster's club and became a competent toastmaster. I also won the district level speech contest, and came second in the state-level contest, served as a faculty member on the summer workshop on intercultural coursework development at the EWC, wrote a chapter for an edited volume on *Applied Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Bhawuk, 1990), wrote a chapter for a microeconomics text book at the invitation of the professor, danced with the Nepalese group during the International Fair at the EWC, and did many other activities.

I was driven and kept myself busy. I did not realize that I had not heard or talked about fate or destiny for 2 years since nobody discussed it. I did well in my quizzes and tests despite black cats crossing the street in front of me, almost everyday while I walked to campus. The saying in Sanskrit, which my uncle had said many years ago to assuage my concerns originating from a fellow student's negative astrological forecast, that a man or woman makes his or her own destiny, came to be true to the letter in my 2 year experience in the USA during 1987-1989. I was able to do what I wanted to do, with effort and hard work, and with the blissful support of my wife, who took complete care of the newborn baby and a 5-year-old son. During these 2 years I experienced the true meaning of what I now call the theory of *karma* – once we are born in a certain family, we are free to do what we like to do, and we become what we want to become. All relationships are our own creation. All achievements are our own doing. We are who we have made ourselves. We are free to act or (do *karma*) and we reap the harvest of the seeds we sow and nurture. This experiential move away from fatalistic attitude to believing in my own theory of *karma*<sup>2</sup> was the crown jewel of the freedom that I experienced in my first 2 years in the USA.

The above case study clearly speaks of a multitude of positive experiences; experiences that capture extreme productivity, were enabling and empowering to the core of being human. This is an example of what a multicultural society can offer to people of different ethnic backgrounds who come to make such a society their new home. Such experiences reflect the high standards of human rights practiced in these societies. However, without being cynical,

<sup>2</sup>My understanding of the theory of karma has transformed since the first draft of the paper was written in 2004. I have no doubt whatsoever in my mind that I have no control over my life, and I am happy to accept life as a gift of God. Whatever happens and whatever I do is a gift of God. And I am grateful to God.

one could also argue that I was using self-deception, the tendency to use one's hopes, needs and desires to construct the way we see the world (Triandis, 2009). After all, there is another side of these societies where minorities and women are treated poorly on a daily basis and I might have been spared such an experience simply by chance. Even one such experience of humiliation can overwhelm us and wash out all the positive experiences in almost no time. Indeed, such experiences often happen when we expect it the least.

### **The Bad: Experiencing Humiliation and some Analyses**

The following incident happened in 1999 at the University of Hawai'i where I returned as an Assistant Professor of Management, in 1995. Unfortunately I was a victim, and the incident remained unresolved for many years. I present below the incident as it happened, and also the response of two managers with whom I discussed it in some detail.

#### **The Incident**

I was proctoring the examination for a course as a substitute for an Indian colleague for his class. Three of the students received questions that were blank on page two. So, I needed to make three copies of the examination questions. I came out of the room and wanted to ask someone where the department office was. I saw a room nearby open, and so I knocked on the door to ask for directions. The following dialogue took place between the two of us (B for Bhawuk; DF for Don Fox<sup>3</sup>).

- B: Excuse me. Where is the department office?  
 DF: Why?  
 B: I need to make some copies.  
 DF: Who are you?  
 B: I am giving an exam.  
 DF: You son of a bitch.  
 B: Excuse me?  
 DF: You are the son of a bitch who is giving an exam today.  
 B: I am not the teacher.  
 DF: Yes, you cannot be a teacher. You are a son of a bitch. You don't know what our students are going through.  
 B: I am proctoring the exam. You are barking up the wrong tree, sir.

DF: I don't know.

At this point he turned his back to me and did not even tell me where the department office was. I looked for another person in the corridor, who directed me to the third floor of the building where the department office was. I asked the secretary to make three copies for me. She did. I asked her who was in Room 205. She told me that it was the office of Professor Don Fox.

As I returned, I approached Professor Fox again, and the following dialogue took place:

- B: Professor Fox, is that how you talk to a stranger?  
 DF: You are the one who came to my room.  
 B: Yes sir. I knocked on your door and said, "Excuse me."  
 DF: Who are you?  
 B: I am a professor of management.  
 (Pause)  
 B: I am going to complain to the Dean.  
 DF: You go complain to Chris Lee. He shrugged off as if he did not care.  
 B: I will.

After the examination, I walked back to my office. I went to see Dean Lee, but learned from, his secretary, that he was not in office. I consulted with two colleagues and a friend. I called Campus Security to find out if I had been subjected to a verbal assault. Officer Smith consulted with someone and told me that it would be considered verbal harassment. He asked me if I would like to press charge. I said I would. Officers Smith and Jones came to my office and talked to me. I told them what had happened. They went to get papers for me to file the complaint. They came back and gave me the paper to write my statement, and went to take Professor Fox's statement. When Officer Jones returned, he informed me that he had talked to the Associate Dean, but could not take the statement from Professor Fox since he had already left for the day. Officer Jones took my written statement and said, "I will forward the report to the Dean tomorrow."

On a Saturday shortly thereafter, I saw Professor Fox at a major social event of that department to which we were both invited. He did not say anything to me. The Associate Dean took time to speak to me and reassured me that he did not expect any trouble at the social event, since Professor Fox was not aware that I had filed a complaint with the Campus Security.

<sup>3</sup>I found out from the Dean's Secretary, after the incident, that I was talking to Professor Don Fox (not his real name). Chris Lee is not the Dean's real name.

I talked to Dean Lee on March 24, 1999. He advised me to write to the Associate Dean about this incident, and I wrote to him giving all the details of the incident as reported above. I also learned from the Campus Security that the Associate Dean would have to write to them to obtain the report that I had filed with them, and that it would not be sent to him as a routine procedure. The report, I was told, was confidential, and stayed with the Campus Security.

I found the behavior of Mr. Don Fox offensive. I actually did not feel comfortable going to the department library, as I was not sure how Mr. Fox would behave toward me. In my letter to the Associate Dean, I demanded an apology from Mr. Fox. I said, “Please note that I am a very peaceful person, but civility should not be taken as weakness. Mr. Fox needs to understand that abusing someone’s mother is a very serious offense, and I expect a written apology from him. He should be given a written reprimand so that if he behaves like this in the future, more stringent action can be taken against him. He should also be required to take professional counseling to demonstrate that he is capable of handling his personal problems effectively without directing his anger to innocent people who may seek his help at the university, and should submit evidence of such help received.”

The Associate Dean and the Dean took no action for 2 years, and never tried to resolve the problem. The Dean retired, and the Associate Dean stepped down from the position after completing his term. I saw Don Fox from time-to-time in the parking lot since our offices are in adjacent buildings, and it always made me feel humiliated. I simply did not feel comfortable in his presence or going to the building in which his office was located.

I wondered if Don Fox was racist, and why the Dean and the Associate Dean did not take any action. I wondered what I should have done to get justice. I wondered if in such situations it is even possible for someone like me to get justice. I wondered what organizations should do to prevent such incidents from occurring again. I decided to find out what others thought of my experience and requested two South Asian managers to share their perspective on the incident by answering some questions after reading it.

### **Analysis of the Case by a Male Manager**

“There is not enough information in the case to determine whether Don Fox is a racist. He was VERY RUDE, but I’m not sure if that qualifies as being racist.”

“Why did the Dean and the Associate Dean not take any action?” “Your guess is as good as mine. It could have been any number of reasons. May be they knew that it would come

down to being your word against his, and since he had been there a lot longer (assumption), it wouldn’t actually solve any problem. However, it would get the school a whole lot of unwanted publicity. It could also be that they knew that Don Fox was an accomplished professor (assumption), and losing him would be a huge blow to the school. Like I said, your guess is as good as mine.”

“What should I have done to get justice? What would you do?” “I would have written to the Dean and Associate Dean every week, and paid them a visit every week, and left them phone messages every week, basically be a pain in their butts, until they finally give up and are forced to deal with the issue. I might have even done a column in the *Honolulu Advertiser* to that effect. I’m sure the campus security must have given you a copy of their signed report (as proof that the incident was indeed reported). When you cannot get something done in a simple way, you have to try crooked ways.”

“In such situations, is it even possible for someone like me to get justice?” “Of course it is! You just have to be willing to get down to your opponent’s level and fight the battle. A squeaky wheel gets oiled. Of course, you must make sure you are not making too much noise, because if that was the case, then a REALLY squeaky wheel WILL get REPLACED!”

“What should organizations do to prevent such incidents from occurring again?” “To start-off, organizations must have a policy on harassment (all kinds, even yelling). Once the policy is in place, there must be procedures put in place, in the event this policy is violated. It is not enough to merely set the policy and procedure in place. The organization must drill it into their employees’ heads that any type of harassment will not be tolerated. Furthermore, the organization should also make it known that it HIGHLY encourages all of its employees to file a complaint, if he/she feels that he/she has been a victim of any such harassment. After all, the employee must feel confident in the policy and procedures that are put in place. He/she must believe that if they file a complaint, it will not be filed away somewhere, but will be given the due diligence that it deserves, something that the school apparently lacked.”

### **Analysis of the Case by a Female Manager**

“First of all, I am sorry that you ever went through such a nasty experience; academia is the last place you expect these things to happen.”

“Is Don Fox a racist?” “Based on his comments it is easy to assume DF is a racist. At the very least he does not seem to like foreigners. However, the case does not mention DF’s

nationality and race. Is he an African-American? If yes, then it would be hard to say he is a racist guy; he might be just an extremely rude person. Assuming DF is Anglo-Saxon, why did he behave in this manner? A highly educated academic person usually does not conduct himself in this manner. Is he suffering from some kind of illness? Could he be phobic of foreigners?"

"Why did the Dean and the Associate Dean not take any action?" "This is the part that confounds me. My elementary school going kids know that they deserve respect from everyone – family members, classmates, teachers and other school staff. They also know that their parents and/or teachers will take appropriate action if someone is being offensive to them (there have been examples of this in the past). So, how come we as adults have no similar support system at work? The Dean and his associate took the easy way out. They chose to ignore the incident and avoided any conflict. The case incident happened in 1999, not 1969, so I am sure the university officials (even in Hawai'i) were aware of racism and its repercussions. There could be three rationales for their behavior:

- a. The dean and associate dean are also racists and are condoning that kind of behavior on campus.
- b. The dean and associate dean are aware of DF being foreigner-phobic or having another psychological disorder. Knowing that they do not want to take any action against DF. Even then they could have at least mentioned that fact to you.
- c. The dean and associate dean are passive personalities. They might have seen similar incidents in the past, and noticed that the issue somehow got resolved. They might be afraid of opening the Pandora's Box, i.e. getting into a potentially expensive lawsuit (expensive in terms of university reputation as well as staff time and money). So far all the discrimination/racism cases that have been covered by media seem to involve a lot of bureaucracy – long lawsuits and bad publicity for all parties involved. They just want to serve their term peacefully and leave this battle for someone else. They are setting a very bad example, but unfortunately a lot of upper management folks do this."

"What should I have done to get justice?" "Initially you did everything right. You tried to talk to the offender and make him aware that he was being offensive (many people never realize how churlish they are). You consulted with campus security and filed the complaint; went to the Dean, etc.

If I were in your shoes, I would have waited for a few weeks; then I would have sent a letter to the Dean and gone to the next higher official at the university. If no one at the university showed willingness to address this issue, I would again have given a written notice to everyone I had met with, and then I would consult a lawyer. I realize this is taking a great risk; these things are in general hard to prove and you might have lost your job; but getting justice is never easy anyway."

"In such situations is it even possible for someone like me to get justice?" "At the risk of sounding dramatic, do you think Rosa Parks<sup>4</sup> ever doubted her right to justice? Thankfully we live in modern times and justice is possible for everyone. It is a question of what price you are willing to pay for it. Are you willing to go against your department and university? Can you handle a potential loss of job/income/career?"

"What should organizations do to prevent such incidents from occurring again?" "Organizations should have a clear policy against explicit or implicit racism and discrimination. This policy should be clearly communicated to all staff members periodically. There should be a clear step-by-step process and a small team to handle any such incidents. For example, your complaint was stopped at the Dean's level. Most likely a copy was never sent to his boss, and there was no team to deal with it. One person might be passive or timid, but a team of three or four people will not behave in the same manner, especially if they have clear guidelines as to how an offense should be defined and dealt with."

### Analyses

From the comments of the two managers who could empathize with me as a South Asian, it is unclear if the offender was a racist or not. This is not unusual since these issues are always confounded by multiple variables. It is also clear that humiliation (i.e. disgrace, shame, mortification, embarrassment, dishonor or degradation, as the dictionary defines the term) can happen even in the most unexpected place, the academic institution, and even to professors, supposedly the highest in the food chain in the university system. Statman (2000) defines humiliation as an injury to self-respect of the victim by the offender who intentionally degrades the victim by sending the message of subordination, rejection, or exclusion. It is clear that in this case the offender sent a message of degradation and subordination by using foul language, ignoring the authority of university administrators, and refusing to apologize. Organizations often ignore such incidents and let the victims suffer

<sup>4</sup>Rosa Louise McCauley Parks (February 4, 1913 – October 24, 2005) was an African American civil rights activist whom the U. S. Congress later called the "Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights movement." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa\\_Parks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Parks)

without any resolution though it is plausible that they may be able to develop enabling procedures, which could avoid such events to recur. And this incident is mild compared to physical assaults, sexual harassment, repeated racial insult, and other such behaviors, which are still not uncommon in the USA or other liberal democracies. Humiliation clearly is associated with disconfirmed expectation (Bhawuk, 2009) and much emotional stress. Though it is impossible to turn it around into a positive experience, it nevertheless needs to be addressed for the sojourner or immigrant to be functional and without stress. Next, I attempt to develop strategies to deal with these minefields to be able to build on the positive experiences discussed earlier.

### Navigating the Minefield

Living in a multicultural society like the USA leads to sampling of experiences that are as extreme as the two cases presented above. On the one hand, there are experiences that provide positive feelings of freedom, equality, fairness and due process. However, on the other hand, minorities and women also have to deal with a host of negative experiences from getting their names mispronounced, their accent criticized, to outright racial discrimination and hate crimes. How should the individuals navigate through this minefield of humiliating experiences and maintain dignity? I present here four theoretically meaningful strategies from the perspective of cross-cultural research that may help the minority members to maintain human dignity in a multicultural society without feeling excessively cynical.

### Learning to Make Isomorphic Attributions

Isomorphic attribution refers to making a correct attribution of the behavior of a person from another culture in an intercultural context (Triandis, 1975). In a homogenous culture, and to a great extent even in a multicultural society, it is often not so difficult to make the correct attribution about why people act in a certain way, especially if people share the same cultural mores. If students stand up when the teacher enters the class, the teacher makes the correct attribution in India that the students are showing respect to him or her. In the USA, if the students do not stand up when a teacher enters a classroom, continue to eat their lunch, or sit however they feel comfortable (e.g. putting their feet on the table), the teacher would make a correct attribution that this is a normal situation, and the students are not being disrespectful. However, an Indian professor is likely to make an incorrect attribution in the USA by thinking that

the students are rude, and an American professor is likely to make an incorrect attribution by thinking that the students are being inauthentic by standing up. When we make the correct attribution about a behavior, it is referred to as isomorphic attribution (Triandis, 1975). To navigate in a multicultural society, we all need to learn to make isomorphic attributions, especially while dealing with people who do not share our cultural values, beliefs and norms.

Making isomorphic attribution is particularly challenging when there is a history of conflict between two communities or ethnic groups. *History of Conflict* usually refers to a long tradition of fighting between two or more ethnic groups (Triandis, Kurowski & Gelfand, 1994). In the context of the US, European Americans have had a long history of conflict with both the African Americans and the Native Americans (Bhawuk, 2007). Similar conflicts exist within the boundary of many nations. For example, the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, the Hindus and the Muslims in India, and the British colonizers and the Aborigines in Australia, have all had a long history of conflict. To be able to make isomorphic attribution in such situations one often has to rationalize the history of conflict.

It is not easy to rationalize a long-standing conflict between two ethnic groups. It is frequently the case that people of different ethnic groups would talk about how they have suffered, especially because of the powerful group, when they are in the presence of their own people. To be able to bridge this gap, one needs to look at the individuals as individuals, as professionals, as tax payers, and so forth, so that they can focus on the similarities between them, and discount the history of conflict as the only explanation of their behaviors. Thus, by rationalizing the history of conflict between groups one is able to make isomorphic attribution about the behavior of people who are ethnically different from themselves. This also applies to gender differences in a similar way.

*Cultural distance* is another source of difficulty in making isomorphic attributions. This refers to similarity (small distance) or differences (large distance) found among cultures when comparing their objective (like social structures, religion, political systems and economics) and subjective (like attitudes, norms, beliefs, values and so forth) elements. For example, the cultural distance between the US and Western Europe is small and there is evidence that it is easier for American managers to adjust to Europe than to other parts of the world like Asia, Africa, the Middle East and so forth. Clearly, cultural distance has a direct relation to the perception of dissimilarity; the larger the distance, the more dissimilar people perceive others to be (Triandis, Kurowski & Gelfand, 1994), and the harder it is

to make isomorphic attribution across such large cultural distances.

To be able to make isomorphic attribution one has to learn to deal with cultural distance. One approach is to suspend judgment about the other person's behavior, analyze the situation from one's own cultural perspective, analyze the behavior from the other person's cultural perspective, and then to try to come up with a way to communicate the cultural difference without offending the other person (Bhawuk & Brislin, 2000). Another approach that is relevant here, especially with rationalizing history of conflict, pertains to what is referred to as rationalizing insult in the interpersonal work context (Bhawuk, 1997). There always is an occasion when a peer is rewarded a trip, training, or promotion that one strongly feels he or she deserved. In a worse situation, one may receive a derogatory or insulting remark by the superior. In such situations the subordinate is better off accepting the situation and working at the relationship with the superior with a positive attitude rather than with frustration. One has to take any such situation as a bitter pill or a tacit suggestion for improvement. This is what rationalizing insult means, and it can also be used effectively to make isomorphic attribution in trying situations.

It should be noted that it requires more than making an isomorphic attribution in situations such as the one described in the case above. The perpetrator may be racist, sexist and so forth, and the victim has to come up with a way to deal with the humiliation. Perhaps accepting the person and not accepting the behavior is the way out<sup>5</sup> (Gandhi, 1953), which clearly leads to the notion of compassion (Thurman, 1997), self-compassion (Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen & Hancock, 2007) and forgiveness (McCullough, Bono & Root, 2007; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). I will return to this at the end of the paper.

### Learning to Extract Help from the System

When a humiliating event occurs, it is important to know what formal course of action is available to the person. For example, if a woman suffers a sexual harassment episode, she should know what avenues are available in the organization for her to proceed with the complaint. Often large organizations have an ombudsperson who is specially designated to deal with cases of dispute. Some organizations have a specially designated person to deal with sexual harassment cases, others have a designated person in the

human resource management department to deal with such cases (Bhawuk et al., 2002). It is important for all of us to know what our rights are, and also what avenues of adjudicating complaints are available to us. Knowing this prevents us from becoming cynical about humiliating events, using these avenues to pursue justice allows us to stand up for ourselves, and it also helps in having a dignified experience in the workplace and the society. However, help from the system may not necessarily be forthcoming (especially if you do not have any clout in the organization) as managing humiliation cases often requires a huge investment of time and energy on part of the organizational leadership, and shortsighted leadership may not view this as a necessary investment for the organization. Hence, when institutions do not come to help us, as was evident in the above case, we have to go beyond them and delve into our spiritual strength calling on compassion and forgiveness to make ourselves pono, a Hawaiian construct that means becoming right again after the wrong is undone within oneself through *ho'oponopono* (Vitale & Len, 2007).

### Developing a Shared Network

When we meet people from different cultural or ethnic groups in different social settings, we learn to appreciate the humanness in all of us (Bhawuk et al., 2002). An Asian engineer may realize that a Caucasian engineer thinks much like him or her, and male and female engineers may realize that they are closer to each other than accountants or human resource specialists because of the similarity in their training. Such overlap of networks between different groups of people leads to the broadening of *category width* (Detweiler, 1980), and people develop tolerance toward differences of all types (Triandis, Kurowski & Gelfand, 1994). This in the end helps to deal with humiliation at the individual level, instead of the group level. For example, if I think that Don Fox is a unique person, then I do not feel the same humiliation, as I do when I think that Don Fox is a representative of white males and his behavior generally represents people of his ethnicity.

### Using the Acculturating Strategy of Integration

Integration, which refers to people choosing elements from both their native cultural values as well as the values of the host or dominant culture, is the strategy recommended in acculturation literature as the most sensible approach

<sup>5</sup>"Man and his deed are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be. 'Hate the sin and not the sinner' is a precept which, though easy enough to understand, is rarely practiced, and that is why the poison of hatred spreads in the world." Gandhi 1953, pp. 276.



to adapt in a foreign culture (Berry, 1990). When people assimilate, rather than integrate, they sacrifice their own cultural values. When they separate from the mainstream culture, they are not taking advantage of the good values of the dominant culture, and they also miss out on many of the support systems available in the society. When people are not able to accept the dominant culture, and are also not able to stay with their own cultural values, they are not able to function in the new culture effectively, and become marginalized, often requiring therapeutic help (Bhawuk, Landis & Lo, 2006). Thus, compared to all these approaches, integration seems to be the most productive when adapting to a multicultural society. The concept of integration, which suggests that minority group members maintain aspects of their cultural heritage while participating in the larger social network, is similar to positive multiculturalism (Triandis, 1976), whereas assimilation, in which ethnic group members completely adopt aspects of the dominant culture, is similar to negative multiculturalism (Triandis, 1976).

Positive multiculturalism is proposed as the psychological consequence of intergroup interaction if those interactions are rewarded. Triandis (1976) defined positive multiculturalism as the condition in which individuals acquire additional skills and perspectives that improve their chances of relating effectively to other ethnic groups. Unlike negative multiculturalism in which an ethnic group must lose some of its essential self-defining attributes in order to relate to other groups, positive multiculturalism is additive, in the sense that one maintains the essential self-defining attributes and adds skills that facilitate relationships with other groups. As evidenced in the case cited above, humiliation can shock even those of us who are using an integration strategy of acculturation, and the literature is quite silent about how one should proceed in such situations. As noted above, compassion and forgiveness seem to be the way out of such situations.

## Summary and a Coda

This paper makes a number of contributions. First, it fills the lacuna in the intercultural literature by providing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of situations that lead to positive and negative affects on immigrants and sojourners, which has been hitherto neglected in the literature. Second, the paper introduces the concept of humiliation in intercultural training literature, which can be useful in studying that negative affect. Third, it shifted focus to the experience of interculturally successful sojourners from whom there is much to learn, which again has been missing in the literature.

And finally, the paper presents autoethnographic story of the author's subjective experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004) to highlight both positive and negative affect, opening the door for inclusion of the personal journey as a research tool in intercultural training research. Reflecting on positive and negative experiences helps us avoid self-deception since we learn to live with moderation and develop a moderate worldview without leaning toward either the positive or the negative extreme (Triandis, 2009). Thus, the paper presents a strong case for using analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) in intercultural training research.

Living in a multicultural society is both a joy for the diversity that it offers, and a pain for the humiliating encounters or dreadful expectation of such encounters that life offers on a daily basis. Diversity offers to humankind a new social environment where we can learn to live with differences, unlike the past 5000 years during which people got away with viewing the world from an "us versus them" perspective. Humiliating experiences will continue to plague us, much like the minefields we have created in many parts of the world, and we will have to be prepared to deal with them as they happen. It would not be worthwhile to go back to the disconnected world of yesteryears, since the benefits of diversity outweigh its costs. We hope that the cross-cultural research literature will provide us meaningful ways to deal with the difficulties of diversity. I presented four such strategies in this paper. But now I would like to share how I dealt with the experience with Don Fox, which is more spiritual in its nature than cross-cultural and may offer another valuable mechanism to us.

One day I saw Don in the parking lot and, with his stomach protruding excessively; he looked very sick. I had also learned from some others that he was having serious health problems. I wondered if I was sending negative energy to him because he had never apologized to me. I asked myself whether my bad feelings toward him might be a "supernatural" cause of his poor health. It was clear to me that I did not wish him any harm, despite how he had treated me, and would feel badly if something injurious happened to him. It was not a minor incident for me, and it had remained unresolved for many years, but still I knew in my heart that I did not wish him misfortune. In Nepal and India they say that a *Brahmin* should not harbor evil thoughts about anybody. And, I decided to forgive him.

To my surprise, the event stopped bothering me once I consciously and categorically forgave him in my heart with an open mind. I talked about it with a good friend, and he thought that it was a decent thing to do. About 2 years after the event, I wondered if I should have walked to his office and told him that I had forgiven him and whether he would

have appreciated it. It became clear to me then that it was not important for him to know, as much as it was for me to know that I had forgiven him. Almost a decade later, today I do not even think about it and I am at complete peace with Don and the institution. If anything, I have come out stronger from this experience,<sup>6</sup> and I am grateful to Don for what he did. He gave me the opportunity to learn experientially the Native American wisdom: I have no friends; I have no enemies; I have only teachers. Or, in my own tradition, I had an opportunity to practice the wisdom presented in Manusmriti (2.162): A Brahmin should get agitated when receiving honor as if he has been given poison, and he should always seek insult like nectar (Buhler, 1969).<sup>7</sup> When I reflect on this today, I still feel good about forgiving Don, and moving on.

Thus, perhaps we need to practice forgiveness to resolve such humiliating events, for it brings the spirituality within us out to play and, conceivably there is nothing material – good or evil – that can survive the bliss of spirituality. Perhaps the wisdom of compassion and forgiveness has always been known to the saints and the messiahs, and that is why they are ever forgiving, even when they are crucified. Forgiveness is possibly the ultimate cure for a victim who has suffered humiliation.

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<sup>6</sup>Rutan (2000) proposed that it is possible to pursue growth through shame and humiliation, especially in the context of group therapy. It is plausible that a self-reflective person can also grow by dealing with humiliation in his or her own unique way, much like I was able to do.

<sup>7</sup>sammAnAdbrAmhaNonityamudvijet viSAdiva; amritasyeva cAkAGchedavamAnasya sarvadA. While receiving an honor a Brahmin should always get agitated as if he is served poison; and he should always desire insult like amrita or immortality potion.

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