

## Humiliation



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#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

The field of humiliation studies emerged in the early twenty-first century. In 2001 the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network

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(<http://www.humiliationstudies.org>)) was founded as a global consortium of distinguished academics and practitioners with the aim to create a new multidisciplinary field that bridges academia with practice and incorporates scholarship from anthropology, history, philosophy, [political science \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-53\)](/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-53), social psychology, and sociology.

The phenomenon of humiliation is rapidly gaining visibility and significance. Expectations of equal dignity and opportunity rise as people come closer together, both physically and digitally, in a globalizing world. Coupled with the spread of the [human rights \(/social-sciences-and-law/law/international-law/human-rights\)](/social-sciences-and-law/law/international-law/human-rights) message, any attempt to lower the expectations of any one group becomes a humiliating offense against all groups and humanity in general. The first sentence in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Few researchers have studied humiliation explicitly. In many cases the term *humiliation* has not been differentiated from other concepts. In the work of HumanDHS, in contrast, humiliation is addressed on its own and is differentiated from other concepts: humiliation is, for example, not regarded simply as a variant of shame. Shame is often accepted as prosocial humbling—[human rights \(/social-sciences-and-law/law/international-law/human-rights\)](/social-sciences-and-law/law/international-law/human-rights) advocates, for instance, frequently use shaming techniques to make people abide by human rights—while humiliation describes a hurtful experience that typically is rejected as an illegitimate violation by the victim. (However, a special type of shame—unacknowledged and bypassed shame—as been described to be emotionally destructive )

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In today's mainstream language, the word humiliation is used threefold. First, the word humiliation signifies an act; second, a feeling; and third, a process: "I humiliate you, you feel humiliated, and the entire process is one of humiliation." This triple meaning of the word humiliation complicates its use; sometimes humiliation indicates the feeling of a victim, sometimes the act of a perpetrator, sometimes the entire process from act to feeling.

The core meaning of humiliation entails a downward push, down to the ground, to earth, as derived from the Latin word *humus*. This push can be perceived as a hurtful violation, or not, depending on the overall societal, cultural, and psychological framework. In human rights-based contexts being pushed down and held down is perceived as a violation that will lead to suffering and rage that may be turned inward or outward. Rage and fury turned inwards render feelings of depression, abandonment, anomie, and alienation. Rage and fury turned outward feed violence, including mass violence.

Yet, prior to the human rights movement, being put down was often embedded into a culture of ranking in which higher beings were expected to show lower beings their due lowly place. In that case being put down is not perceived as a violation and therefore does not elicit the same consequences as previously described. Human rights delegitimize such practices and empower the downtrodden to invoke humiliation.

In other words, the differentiations one uses today are historically recent. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest recorded use of *to humiliate*, meaning to mortify or to lower or to depress the dignity or self-respect of someone, did not occur until 1757. Up to 1757, the words *to humble* and *to humiliate* were used rather interchangeably. It is in fact with the emergence of human rights ideals of equal dignity for all that these two words move into

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Humiliation is a complicated concept. Not always does a person witness a humiliator and a humiliatee. For example, help may humiliate. In that case there is a benevolent helper on one side and no ill-intentioned perpetrator at all. Or, neither actor nor victim may define a situation as humiliating, only a third party. The social worker wants to rescue the battered wife, but she claims that the beatings are her husband's way of loving her. Then, one may expect that humiliation is always avoided, however, some people seek it, for example in sadomasochism or religious rites. Thus, humiliation is an act, an emotional state, and a social mechanism, with a broad relevance, from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, social and clinical psychology to [political science \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-53\)](/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-53).

Phenomena such as global terror may be explained as an outfall of global clashes due to humiliation rather than of clashes of civilizations. Global and local terror and violence may be linked to humiliation rather than to "unexplainable evil." Conflicts of interest over scarce resources, often identified as a source of violent conflict, may very well lead to cooperation. It may be precisely humiliation that hampers cooperation. Many people profess their love for peace, while being unaware that their fear of humiliation and their wish to resist humiliation may foreclose peace. A Somali proverb makes this point very clear, "A man deserves to be killed and not to be humiliated."

[Adolf Hitler \(/people/history/german-history-biographies/adolf-hitler\)](/people/history/german-history-biographies/adolf-hitler) imagined future world domination and humiliation from the World Jewry (Weltjudentum), and the Holocaust was his atrocious attempt to "prevent" future humiliation. Also in [Rwanda \(/places/africa/rwandan-political-geography/rwanda\)](/places/africa/rwandan-political-geography/rwanda), it was imagined humiliation in the future that was "prevented" by genocide. Nelson Mandela, in contrast, made constructive use of the energy contained in the

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in prison, he could have unleashed genocide on the white South African elite. However, he did not. He refrained from instigating cycles of humiliation and instead promoted constructive social change that included the perpetrators.

The solution is egalization, brought about in a Mandela-like fashion. *Egalization*, a word coined by Evelin Lindner in the context of HumanDHS, has been designed to match the word *globalization* and at the same time differentiate it from words such as *equality*, *equity*, or *egalitarianism*. The main point of egalization is the true implementation, beyond mere rhetoric, of equal dignity for everybody as stipulated in the Human Rights Convention. Only a world that combines globalization with egalization, and thus prevents and heals the violent outfalls from dynamics of humiliation, can be expected to be sustainable and decent.

**SEE ALSO** *Contempt; Genocide; Globalization, Social and Economic Aspects of; Holocaust, The; Peace; Rape; Recognition; Shame; Terrorism; Violence*

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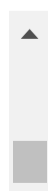
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