Community MetaFunctions and the Humiliation Dynamic

(Draft)

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The purpose of this paper is to stimulate thought about ways in which an understanding of basic meta-functions of geographic communities might contribute to ideas about how to reduce, if not eliminate, the effects of the Humiliation Dynamic on both personal and collective human interactions, up to and including intercommunal and international levels.[1] The paper took on new meaning when, in the midst of preparing it, I came upon an article by Adam Gopnik in The New Yorker magazine in which he reviews three recent books about World War I (Gopnik, 2004.) He concludes that, unlike many other major conflicts, there was no single protagonist – no Lincoln, Napoleon, or Hitler – who made the decision to take Europe "from a long peace to mutual massacre." (P. 79) Rather, he goes on, "As happens in car wrecks, every actor reacts, and even those who are most at fault seem to be bystanders at the general catastrophe." (P. 79) "Above all," he concludes, "the tragedy was that their goal was not to look weak." (P. 79)

Referring to historian Hew Strachan's comprehensive account of the origins of the war, (Strachan, 2004), he comments: "Even in Strachan's dry and unemotional narrative, one wet and emotive word rings out again and again, and that word is humiliation." (Italics added)

"The game was not to prevail – for all the players, save perhaps some of the Germans, knew that none of them could – but to avoid being seen as the loser. There are, in the recorded words, few references to rational war aims, even of the debased acquisitive kind; instead, you find a relentless emphasis on shame and face, position and credibility, perception of weakness and fear of ridicule." (P. 81-82) Gopnik's telling critique gave new poignancy both to the work of preparing the paper and of the conference itself.

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[1] The term Humiliation Dynamic is used to refer both to the experience and fear of humiliation. It is a relational concept that involves, in reality or phantasy, three parties.
 "The prototypic humiliating experience involves a triangle that includes:
 1. humiliator - those who inflict disparagement;
 2. victim - those who experience it as disparagement;
 3. witness - those who observe what happens and agree that it is disparagement. (Klein, 1991, p. 101).

I begin by presenting some ideas about the nature of the geographic community, which I consider to be one of the most remarkable of all human inventions. Years of experience working within geographic communities (villages, towns, cities, and metropolitan centers) led me four decades ago to begin a search for essential characteristics that differentiate the geographic community from other human collectives, such as face-to-face groups and organizations. Although a community is comprised, among other things, of groups and organizations, it is something other than an aggregate of such systems. Many years ago, a pioneering community sociologist (Moe, 1959) called the community "a system of systems." True. About the same time a leading political scientist referred to it as "an ecology of games." (Long, 1958) Also true. Yet to me the geographic community has always seemed far more than what either image describes or implies.

Five years ago I wrote:

> Most of us take them for granted. Yet the geographic communities in which we live and work are fascinating places, filled with mystery and magic. Compared with groups and organizations, which have been studied in far more depth, they are the least understood of all human creations.
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> ..... the community represents one of human kind's most fundamental and remarkable inventions. Consider the fact that, although they provide absolutely essential services that touch virtually every aspect of our lives, including the very ability to remain alive, they do so in most cases (certainly in the United States) with only a semblance of overall management and coordination. This is equally true whether one lives in a small village, a mid-sized city, or a vast metropolitan area. What a contrast to even the most complex organizations, which are managed by CEOs who are expected to see to it that their organizations remain solvent, function efficiently, and achieve their objectives!
>
> The unmanaged magic of a community is beautifully illustrated by the remarkably complex way in which food is distributed daily to its residents. No one is in charge of that process. Yet day after day there is an impressive chain of distribution and removal. Food comes in; is distributed to markets, stores, restaurants, food co-ops, soup kitchens, residential institutions, and other outlets. It is consumed by thousands of people, most of whom get enough to eat. And it is removed via a complicated set of trash and garbage disposal arrangements. No single person or group has designed these arrangements. No-one has the authority to preside over or manage them. No public official or agency can be held responsible. Yet somehow, however imperfectly or tenuously, (consider what could happen in a few short days if a teamsters' strike or major disaster reduces the inflow of food supplies to any major city) the system works and manages to satisfy a startling range of food preferences. It does so via the mechanism of the market place, comprising literally millions of individual decisions each day.[2] (Klein, 1999, p. 2)

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[2] I'm indebted to friend and colleague Dr. John Glidewell, who first called to my attention the remarkable unmanaged nature of food distribution in geographic communities.

The idea of community is largely in the eye of the beholder. That is, how we view community depends to a great extent on our discipline, role, and purpose. I noted in an earlier paper that Dr. Leonard Duhl, co-founder of the Healthy Cities movement, remarked that, "to economists the community is a place where people satisfy many of their daily economic wants in the local market, whereas to political scientists it is a legal and political entity with clear boundaries and governmental jurisdictions whose powers are defined and limited by higher levels of government." (Klein, 1999, p. 5) Himself a physician and psychiatrist, Duhl views the geographic community as:

> .... an organic, living system, partly organism, partly ecosystem. As an organism it is composed of a number of subsystems - arteries to transport materials and nutrition, nerves to carry messages, an excretory system, a respiratory system - and like an organism it must learn from its mistakes, adapt to and cope with change, repair itself and communicate and exchange with its fellows. (Duhl, 1990, p. 93-4)

My own working definition is far more prosaic:

> The community (in the United States and other complex societies) is a geographic locality that has a public identity established by a larger legal jurisdiction, is a place of residence for multiple households, is governed by elected officials or members of an established civic association, and contains within its borders groups, organizations, business concerns, and other entities providing various goods and services for its inhabitants. (Klein, 1999, p. 5)

Within that geographic entity, regardless of your role or position, or the functions you perform:

> You're touching and being touched by manifestations of membership, socialization, communication, role-allocation, exchange of goods and services social norms and control, prestige and power, movement within a hierarchy, and the maintenance of community cohesion- (Klein, 1999, p. 23)

To use an analogy from the study of earthquakes, major socio-economic "fault lines" exist in modern communities in the United States. Peoples' views of community issues are, to a large extent, shaped by social class, caste, and other societal positions they occupy. So-called "downtown people" – who occupy positions of political and economic power – and leaders of local neighborhood groups often become locked in heated confrontations. Widely differing stances on issues of taxation and resource allocation are endemic, depending, for example, on whether citizens are also home owners or tenants; investors or economically marginal workers; and providers or users of publically funded professional services. In the 1960s and 70s in the United States these differences reached a crescendo of recrimination, miscommunication, name-calling, and expressions of mutual contempt. So much so that in when I taught a graduate seminar on community dynamics at the University of Maryland, I chose to focus the class on what I referred to as "Community Paranoia."

From decades of experience with localities of various sizes and complexity came the recognition that, given rapid socio-technical changes and increasing mobility of large numbers of people, a growing challenge is to work deliberately and unendingly to create a foundation of meaningful connections between major subgroups in many modern communities. Such social connective tissue is essential to community well-being. It makes it possible to deal effectively with differences in basic values, to resolve disagreements, and to arrive at decisions about priorities, allocation of scarce resources, and other important matters. For short-hand purposes I refer to the "social glue" of community that enables those in conflict, even enemies, to grant the legitimacy of their adversaries as a meaningful part of the community life they share.

The geographic community, of course, is by no means comparable to the so-called world community of which we are all a part. In the true sense of the term community as I have defined it, a world community does not yet exist. We live in a world of distinct nation states and geographically separate enclaves of peoples with cultures that differ vastly from one another. It is not established by a larger legal jurisdiction and it is not governed by a single set of officials, elected or otherwise constituted. Nevertheless, if we are cautious in the leaps we make, we probably can draw some useful lessons for the creation of world community from our analyses of local community dynamics. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that we are moving in a direction towards the emergence, for better or worse, of world community, given accelerating technological developments in information exchange, data analysis, virtual systems, and population mobility, which contribute to ever-growing reliance on multi-national business for the exchange of goods and services.

The very developments that threaten to erode the social glue needed for local communities to thrive are also the ones that appear to be creating increasing amounts of the solid integrative connections that must be in place for a viable world community to emerge. An indicator that such connections have been established will be when a critical mass of the people of the world perceive themselves as citizens of a world community. And, indeed, it does appear that growing numbers of people- including many of the participants in this conference – consider themselves to be, first and foremost, citizens of the world.

An upsurge in world citizenship is essential to the creation of a world community. Just as employee and member are roles that are essential to organizations, the role of citizen is equally essential for community to exist. We are neither employed as citizens nor admitted to citizenship. We automatically become citizens when we choose to move into the community and establish our home place there, temporarily or permanently.

Rosabeth Kanter (1995) suggests that there are at least three types of citizens: locals, cosmopolitans, and "world class." Locals are those whose horizons are pretty much limited to the localities in which they live. Cosmopolitans are those whose interests, work, and relationships transcend their immediate place of residence. She uses the term "world class" to suggest the growth of a social class defined by its ability to command resources and operate beyond borders and across wide territories." Although

a growing number of cosmopolitans are linked to professional communities and communities of interest outside their community of residence, they're not necessarily world class in their scope of business, personal, or professional contacts.

Locals, cosmopolitans, and world class citizens occupy different niches in their American communities. From where each of them sits, the community feels like a very different place. Locals are usually more involved in the day-to-day life of the community than are the other two. Born in the same community where they live their lives, they're apt to be lukewarm about ideas and proposals originating from outside the community. Cosmopolitans, even those who put down permanent roots in a single locality, are usually from outside or, if born in the community, have returned to it after having been shaped by college, careers, or other experiences elsewhere. They are far more apt than locals to inject new ideas into the community, to welcome programs and projects initiated by outside agencies, and generally to be receptive to change.

The world class citizens whom I have known – and it's a limited sample – present an amalgam of local and cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviors. Initially I expected them to be far more interested in and able to relate to others like themselves than to either locals or cosmopolitans. Having learned to put down roots in many different cultures, however, they appear to be equally comfortable with the other two groups. Perhaps world class citizens have learned to value and connect with locals and cosmopolitans in other cultures around the world. Perhaps, too, they also have a need for one or more localities where they can retreat from the world and find refuge.

As they grow in numbers, world class citizens may be in the unique position of helping to create meaningful connections between locals and cosmopolitans in those communities they choose as their intimate home places. There are those who fear that the integrity and viability of communities will suffer as more and more of their citizens become world class in orientation. We may find, however, that – as Rosabeth Kanter intimates – world class citizens will provide a valuable amalgam of the best that both locals and cosmopolitans provide their communities.

As a way to focus thinking about ways to create social glue in local communities, I've identified several underlying community "meta-functions," based on why humans created geographic communities in the first place and why we insist on maintaining them despite increasing rates of change and population mobility. In the 1999 article I described the meta-functions as:

> ... fundamental gut-level considerations of survival and well-being that
> impelled the human animal to form communities in the first place. Every
> major community issue with which w e grapple today - having to do with
> housing, crime, intergroup paranoia, economic development, and the like -
> has roots in one or more of these gut-level areas... (P. 23)

The fundamental urges that impel us to gather in community with others of our species are: (1) to create a physically safe environment, (2) to have the support of others in order

to gain access to the goods and services we need to survive and maintain an acceptable standard of living; (3) to find personal significance and meaning in relationships with others outside one's immediate family; and (4) to celebrate life. I will examine each of these meta-functions in turn, addressing first their importance to local geographic communities, then speculating on how an understanding of that function might contribute to furthering creation of a world community in which the Humiliation Dynamic would no longer be a potentially disabling factor.

Safety and Security

Noted urbanist Jane Jacobs put the matter of community safety and security in the following declaration:

> The bedrock attribute of a successful city district is that a person must feel personally safe and secure on the street among all these strangers. He [sic] must not feel automatically menaced by them. A city district that fails in this respect also does badly in other ways and lays up for itself and for its city a large mountain on mountain of trouble." (Jacobs, 1992 p. 30)

Safety is, of course, more than a matter of physical security. There is also the question of psychological safety, that is, the extent to which individuals and groups feel they are or might become victims of ridicule, derision, scorn, or other humiliating social rejection.

Although many world leaders pay lip service to creating freedom from fear as an essential right in a peaceful world, their actions often are – some would say must be – at variance with their expressed beliefs. For all but confirmed pacifists, there is, of course, a delicate, vaguely defined balance between ill-advised surrender to overwhelming force (as was done in early attempts to placate Hitler) and equally ill-advised use of force to achieve goals when reasoned discussion and negotiation of differing interests would be preferable and, far less destructive (an approach that, if used, some historians believe might have prevented the massive, unexpected destructiveness of World War I.)

The hovering presence of the Humiliation Dynamic in real life makes it even harder to discern how to deal with these conflicting considerations. The experience of humiliation typically engenders rage and the desire for revenge at all costs, including – as we see in the actions of today's religiously dedicated, patriotic suicidal bombers – self-destruction and harm to one's own community. Equally powerful is the fear of humiliation that makes it virtually unthinkable to decline to meet force with force, even when the use of discussion and other means of persuasion might be the safer and far more preferable way.

And so the paradox. On the one hand, we reject physical safety and avoidance of conflict if it means incurring insufferable humiliation. On the other hand, we reject dialogue, reason, and negotiation if, by so doing, we are labeled, by ourselves or those whose approval we value, as appeasers who choose humiliation over the valiant pursuit of a lost cause.

So, physical and psychological safety appear to be inescapably intertwined. It would be counterproductive to try to establish physical safety in the world community at the expense of humiliating members of that community and those who speak on their behalf. It would be equally counterproductive to attempt to create a world community free of disabling humiliation without, at the same time, ensuring the physical as well as the psychological well-being of all concerned.

Support

This term covers a wide range of tangible and intangible goods and services having to do with our dependence on others – and others' dependence on us – for survival and well-being. We live in community because we find there many, if not most, of what we need in order to deal with life's challenges from birth to death.

> We are social creatures who must depend on others if we are to meet our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs and wants. The community is essential to this process because it's the setting where we exchange the goods and resources needed to cope with the challenges we face throughout the life cycle. In contemporary American communities there are an almost endless array of public and private agencies, institutions, associations, merchants, business firms, religious organizations, individual professional practitioners and partnerships, informal caretakers, mutual support groups, places of employment and others. They are there to provide the supports and resources we need and want. Without the geographic community as the container, they could not exist; it is equally true that without them, there would be no community as we know it." (Klein, 199, p. 25)

Actual or potential victims of rejection or other forms of humiliation must rely on individuals and groups in their communities to provide social support, serve as advocates, and in various other ways affirm their value as members of the society. When sufficient support is not forthcoming, those who feel humiliated exist in a state of chronic, enraged alienation that, as many commentators have noted, injects poisons into the life of the community.

Thus, it seems apparent that we should do our best to ensure that the rise of an economic system of multi-national firms, trade agreements, and other world-wide mechanisms is guided by policies and practices that enhance human dignity for all. I applaud the fact that debate and passionate protests against multi-national free trade policies are fueled by the twin goals of avoiding humiliating exploitation of workers who must accept marginal wages in order to avoid starvation and of protecting workers in the United States and other industrialized nations from the equally humiliating fate of being unemployable.

It is absolutely essential to engage public officials, policy makers, and senior executives of major multi-national corporations in discussion of how to structure the supportive exchange of goods and services in ways that promote a world community and avoid humiliating exploitation of one set of groups by others. It is equally essential to support the development of international unions and other efforts to provide a strong

countervailing force to the overwhelming economic and political power of major corporations.

Significance

The term significance refers to the meaning that one has, both in his or her own eyes and as viewed by others. It extends the concept of the personal self into the social realm. That is, significance involves both self-esteem and the meaning of one's life in one or more social milieus. The community is the stage beyond the family and other intimate connections on which is played our relationships to the political process as well as to work, school, religious groups, organizations dealing with social concerns, and other venues.

> It is on this stage that we express our values -including our commitments to our family's future -and develop distinct human capacities that can only be cultivated in public life. It is on this stage that we express our need to "make a difference. (Lappe, 1991, p. xxxiii)

To be without significance is to be irrelevant, expendable, and devoid of meaning within the community. Saul Alinsky, prominent, post-World War II, American community activist/organizer used the term "social dust" for those without significance in the community. (Alinsky, 1946)

Here the link to humiliation is obvious. To become social dust is to realize what I believe is a bed-rock anxiety that most, if not all, of us carry around from early childhood. In their early formative years children, even those who are most cherished, face a variety of hurtful experiences that make them feel unappreciated, unloved, put down, rejected, and, above all, powerless and without ways to manage their hurt, terror, and grief. Whether such episodes are a matter of hours, minutes, or even seconds, the experience is intense; as anyone knows who has watched a child respond to such hurtful experiences. The response is total. The child's entire organism is involved and the reaction, however brief or sustained, involves mind, emotions, body, and spirit. For almost everyone, the results have lifelong implications:

> Embedded within our sense of Self ... are early childhood experiences, the unconscious memory of which can be triggered by any adult experience that threatens ridicule, scorn, contempt, or rejection. All of us, even the most outwardly powerful, effective, and healthy, carry within ourselves a hidden person – a weak, powerless, and frightened "Humiliated Self" that began taking form when the helpless child we once were realized that it was dependent on others and vulnerable to their approval and power. This internalized "humiliated child" is universally present in all human beings, at the very core f the human personality, complete with intense (and easily activated) feelings of fear, frustration, and impotent rage. (Klein, 2001, p. 62)

I assume that for both individuals and groups of people who share a common identity and place in society, the drama of achieving and maintaining significance is, with few

exceptions, carried out against a backdrop that includes an ever-present humiliated self that is acutely attuned to any and all implications that the Humiliation Dynamic has been activated. I believe this to be true for both those who inflict and those who are the victims of scorn, derision, and rejection of various kinds. For those who take their concepts of themselves seriously and who have not transcended their dependence on self-esteem (which includes the vast majority of human beings), the search for significance is never-ending. Although often unacknowledged or even denied, in my view it permeates inter-cultural, diplomatic, and other international affairs as much as it does the most basic two-person relationships.

The quest for human dignity is inescapably important. It is here that Carl Rogers' (1980) call for the discipline of unconditional positive regard in how psychotherapists relate to clients becomes critical to interpersonal relationships of all kinds, applying equally to intimate partners, bosses and subordinates, leaders and followers, citizens and policy makers. As Rogers emphasized, unconditional positive regard applies to a deep, abiding acceptance of the humanity of others, regardless of their beliefs and behaviors. I confess that it's not easy to draw on my unconditional positive regard (which I call forth from my inherent reservoir of appreciative being, about which I have written elsewhere). (Klein, 2001) My strongly held disapproval of child molestation, genocide, and other forms of behavior that I consider to be despicable make it difficult for me to hold Hitler, Sudanese government officials, and Catholic priests who violate juvenile members of their religious community in the embrace of unconditional positive regard. And yet, it is essential that we humans make a radical shift from a moralistic, self-righteous, judgment oriented psychology to one in which we view ourselves and the world in which we live through our inherent capacity for feeling awe and wonderment. We cannot bring unconditional positive regard to bear on our relationships if we continue to filter our view ourselves and others through a screen of thought about who is good and who is bad, who is right and who is wrong, who is moral and who is immoral. The challenge is to make a fundamental shift and support others in doing so. That shift truly embraces unconditional positive regard and no longer takes seriously the projective images with which our minds are cluttered.

What I call the Psychology of Projection involves ways of perceiving, judging, and responding that Western psychologists, from Freud to the present day, have described so well. They have documented at various levels of relationships (from the interpersonal to the international) the all-too-frequent dysfunctional nature of everyday ways of viewing ourselves and the world.

> At each of these levels, the parties involved are convinced that their antagonists are behaving in an altogether reprehensible manner toward them because they are incompetent, inconsiderate, indecent, or otherwise incapable of behaving acceptably toward them. The result of these mutual projections of characteristics is that differences become disagreements, which in turn escalate into mutually destructive conflicts. Each side is convinced of the rightness of its position. Each side blames the other for the situation in which it finds itself. And all too often, each side is prepared to sacrifice vast amounts of time, energy, money, property, and even lives in order to

support the accuracy of its beliefs and its projections of insecurity, depravity, and malevolence onto its antagonists. Out of such everyday clashing projections comes such conflagrations as divorce, fragmented communities, riots, industrial strife, business failure, international tension, murderous violence, and armed conflict." (Klein, 2001, p. 3)

In the realm of Projective Psychology humiliation inevitably flourishes. To achieve the ideal of Significance for all parties in community, local or global, is not possible so long as we function within a projective framework of judgmental thoughts about ourselves and others.

Celebration

Some years ago historian Johan Huizinga (1971) caught the attention of avant-garde peaceniks, hippies, and others who rejected the intense work ethic of industrialized society by maintaining that humans are at heart playful, creative beings. If we include more serious, theatrical, and sometimes even grim manifestations of what Huizinga describes, it can be argued that one of the most important meta-functions of community is to provide a setting for that basic human quality, the playful heart. In all societies of which I am aware when human beings came together in community they created a vast array of rituals, ceremonies, games, and other ways to celebrate major life events, revel in a spirit of comradeship, worship and communicate with spirits, and otherwise engage in symbolically meaningful community-wide activities.

Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) maintain that community celebrations and rituals perform the function of refreshing and restoring a shared sense of community among participants.

> "When members of a group intentionally step outside the flow of ordinary business and gather to acknowledge a passage or a milestone, however, simply, they perceive each other with fresh eyes. They see their community or organization as a living, organic whole rather than a fragmented collection of separate parts. As members, they reaffirm their connection with one another and their identity and purpose as a group. In the truest of celebrations, they remember, as well, the larger web of relationships in which they live and the cycles of birth, growth, death, and rebirth that link them to people everywhere and to the natural world of plants, animals, and ecosystems." (1993, p. 306)

Being a community resident means both dealing with strangers and being part of public life. Unlike most organizations, communities involve a public life and contacts with strangers in ways that organizations do not. According to Palmer, (1988) it is public life that is the essence of community. To engage in public life typically means to go beyond one's family and friends. As I put it in an earlier paper, ".... once we leave the private space of home, public life is virtually omnipresent in our communities." (Klein, 1999 p. 13)

In addition to organized public games, celebrations, and rituals, public life embraces a wide variety of possibilities, including: rallies, hearings, demonstrations and other issue-oriented occasions as well as carnivals, fairs, and other festive events.

It seems reasonable to suggest that a key factor in moving us towards a world community that promotes human dignity will be the extent to which the public life of that community becomes visible and available to the citizens of the world. The most recent example of a major celebratory event that involved participants and spectators from around the world, both on scene and via television, was the Olympic Games in Greece. We need many more such world-wide celebratory occasions. It may not be totally absurd to propose that the United Nations and/or a coalition of international NGOs sponsor global fairs, ritual events, and public discussions of issues and civic concerns aimed at developing a far greater sense of world community than now exists.

Ensuring the safety of the world's citizens, support in assuring the exchange of needed goods and services, establishing the basis for personal and collective significance via meaningful participation in the affairs of the world, and creating occasions for global celebration – using these four meta-functions as guidelines for creating a world community committed to human dignity in the relationships between world citizens. That is the heart-felt vision that has stimulated and guided the creation of this paper. It is – as all such initial sketches must be – incomplete, lacking in detail, altogether too general for implementation, and no doubt in need of considerable further development and suggestions for practical implementation. It will have served its purpose if it stimulates thought, leads to serious discussion, and provides the basis for further creativity.

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