# Reflections on 'Humiliation' in a Cultural Perspective

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## About this presentation

Humiliation and dignity must be regarded as two basic aspects of the human being. One may even say that without any dignity, there would be no human being. Humiliation, however, is its counterpart, whose absence serves as a guarantee for dignity. The two words are so obvious and so central to mankind that every culture throughout the history seems to have had clear ideas about what the two words refer to.

Nevertheless, the two words have not always been used in full agreement. Very often misunderstandings, conflicts and a lot of trouble have been intimately connected to them. Thus they have to been taken seriously in an approach to understand inter-human conflict and conflict resolutions. And in this paper I will present some reflections on the term 'humiliation' in the shade of the term 'culture'.

I will look at some problems connected to the term 'humiliation', reflect at the fact that there are several different approaches to culture in psychology, and then give some arguments for a semiotic approach to both 'culture' and 'humiliation'. Two of these arguments are empirical. I will examine closely the case of "The live broadcast of 9.11. on CNN", and a survey which was made among Norwegian youngsters on September the 13th and 14th 2001. Both of these examples show that the immediate reaction of being humiliated by the attack on Twin Tower, was not present. I try to explain this paradox by proposing that the signs connected to humiliation were not activated at that moment.

## The problem of the term 'humiliation'

There are not many empirical studies, when it comes to humiliation. We have of course some classic studies, which primarily show the willingness to obey (Adorno, Theodor W., Frenkel-Brunswik, Else, Levinson, Daniel J.; Sanford, R. Nevitt 1950/1997), even though following the order will result in another's pain (Milgram 1974). Despite the fact that both of these studies have been regarded as controversial and old-fashioned, they both form a point of departure, which must be regarded as relevant to an understanding of the term 'humiliation'. The main problem, however, is that they only say something about the encroacher and not so much about the humiliated. In this case, it seems to be much more easy to say something about the cause for humiliation instead of its effect on the victim.

Nevertheless, there are some aspects of the authoritarian personality-study, which could be of interest anyway. First, it focuses on ideology as a methodological presupposition for the investigation. This means that personality is not envisaged as a non-historic, universal entity, but on the contrary defined as "a way of thinking about man and society" (Adorno 1950/1997, p. 150). 'Ideology' is a core term in Adorno's philosophy and it refers to the falseness, which characterises the one who tries to understand the same society, which he or she is a product of. Understanding requires distance, but to obtain that distance to one's own society is almost

impossible, because everyone is so intimately interwoven into it. "Those which exist at a particular time are results both of historical processes and of contemporary social events" (ibid. p.151). Like 'authority', also 'humiliation' has to be analysed and understood in accordance with a certain time, society and culture.

A second aspect of importance in this authoritarian personality-study is the mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodology. Despite the fact that Adorno was one of the main fighters against positivism in the sixties, his dispute was not with the methods themselves, but about what the methods pretended to be. Quantitative research was criticised because researchers thought they represented an objectivity, which Adorno meant was not there. He justified quantitative methods many places. As long as the use of a method did not pretend to be objective, then it did not represent any problem either.

Although there have not been many attempts at operationalising 'humiliation', it should not be more problematic than other terms. The challenge, however, is very much connected to the theoretical understanding of 'humiliation'. Many discussions dwell with more or less ostensive definitions and understandings of the term, in the sense that one refers to a certain historical event, especially the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War, by presenting the statement: "This is humiliation". Such definitions have their values, but they do not leave any theoretical understanding of the term. A theoretical understanding is much more general and requires much more than what ostensive definitions can offer, since ostensive definitions are inseparable from the specific.
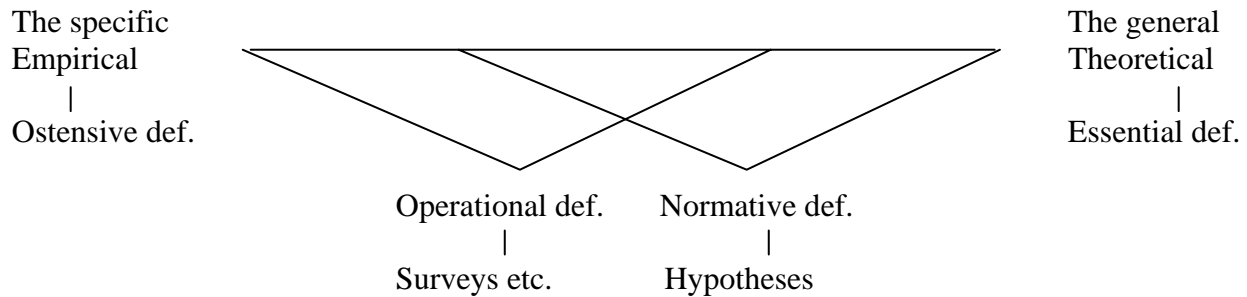
In this sense it is important to take into account what kind of definitions we have, and how to operate with them. This focus builds on the suggestion that there is a strong connection between types of definitions and scientific approaches. We have at least two very extremes in which ostensive definitions represent one extreme and essential definitions represent the other. Ostensive definitions represent the most specific. They refer to the one actual example, which counts. Essential definitions, however, are supposed to grasp the general content of the term, no matter what time and what space we are talking about.

Despite the fact that we find very many definitions, which are supposed to be essential, they do not fit very well to scientific approaches. In science it is important to create a link or a bridge between theoretical and empirical aspects of the problem, in which hypotheses represent theoretical generality, and investigations are related to the specific. Essential definitions do satisfy the theoretical requirement, but they do not open up for empirical justifications or corrections. It is the same problem with ostensive definitions, but the other way round. They do satisfy the requirement of being empirical, but they do not have any theoretical implications. They represent just a sense impression of something specific.

In between those two extremes, there are at least two types of definitions, which must be said to have both theoretical and empirical implications. These are normative and operational definitions. They are quite different in the sense that normative definitions focus on the most reasonable suggestion of what something is supposed to be, whereas the operational type refers to a procedure which ends up with a certain result, which gives us an idea of what something is supposed to be. In psychology, both are applied, but the latter type has a dominant position in main-stream psychology. Almost all studies, which include surveys and questionnaire forms imply operational definitions. Thus this kind of definition is primarily empirical, but it is not limited to the specific in a narrow sense. They are mostly combined with normative definitions in terms of hypotheses. Normative definitions, therefore, must be regarded as hypotheses in a non strict meaning of the term.

On this background we may formulate a schematic overview of these types of definitions:

Types of definitions

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The specific                                                    The general
Empirical                                                       Theoretical
   |                                                                |
Ostensive def.                                                  Essential def.

                   Operational def.    Normative def.
                         |                   |
                   Surveys etc.         Hypotheses
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'Humiliation' must be regarded as a much more universal entity. As far as 'dignity' is almost inseparable from the human being itself, its counterpart must be regarded as having the same level of universality. The fundamental paradox, however, is the fact that the form of both 'dignity' and 'humiliation' differ so much around the world, that the two terms probably represent the best argument for that there are big differences between cultures and nations. Thus one of the core challenges is to find the solution of how 'humiliation' on the one hand represents something universal and on the other hand is the best argument for non-universality in the world.

The core aim of this presentation, therefore, is to point out how culture might be understood in an attempt at making the term meaningful in itself and fruitful for empirical investigations. To understand the cultural variations in a proper way is a big challenge in itself. Very few problematise the term 'culture' and they may very often end up with an understanding that appears to be more or less unable to predict anything when it is operationalized. In this perspective problems are not only connected to the term 'humiliation' but to the term 'culture' as well.


## Main Categories in Definitions of 'Culture'

There are not many systematised discussion on different understandings of the term 'culture'. One of the few is made by the sociolinguist Ben Rampton (unpublished) in a study, which primarily dwells with different perspectives on linguistic diversity in the society. The article does not, in fact, discuss different understandings of culture directly, but ends up with an illuminating table which accounts for four different understandings, which are:

- Culture as elite canon/standard
- Cultures as sets of values, beliefs and behaviours
- Culture as reflection of socio-economic relations
- Culture as the processes and resources involved in situated, dialogical sense-making.

Each one of the four categories corresponds to a certain way of thinking and political ideologies. When culture is defined in terms of an elite canon and a certain standard, it is highly correlated with political conservatism, a tendency to define some groups' culture as not satisfying the standard, and a view of research, which requires neutrality and objectivity.

When culture is seen as sets of values, beliefs and behaviours, it is much more correlated with liberal pluralism. This means that different groups must be regarded as equal and even advocated, or at least seen as incommensurable sizes. Whereas the strategy for meeting different cultures in the first category is characterised by assimilation, it is diversity and multiculturalism, which

characterise the strategy of the liberal pluralistic perspective. The view of research is mostly the same by pointing out neutrality and objectivity,

By defining culture in terms of socio-economic relations the conflict between the different groups is still there, but they are all equal parts in a larger system. As a point of departure, the political system must be regarded as marxistic, and in that sense the conflict between the groups is depicted in terms of oppression, imperialism, racism, hegemony and resistance. Even research is seen as a part of the ideological base for scientific activity. The scientific method in itself is not so important compared to how it is ideologically based.

When culture is defined in terms of dialogical sense-making, it is primarily based on a post-modern perspective on ideology, politics and society. Certainly, there is a big problem in using the term 'post-modern', because it is difficult to say what it is all about. This discussion is difficult to run here, but in terms of psychology, it corresponds to social constructionist and discursive perspectives.

## Different approaches to culture in psychology

Despite the fact that culture is a problematic term in itself, it is very often well defined in psychology. The problem, however, is that there are so many different directions and schools, in which each one of them refers to a very certain type of definition. One may say that there are at least four different directions and types of definitions. The boundaries between these directions are not very clear, but the tendency of focusing on a certain definition of culture, must be said to be so.

Grid and group-analysis is probably not the most central theory in mainstream psychology, but it is representative for a discussion about the relation between culture and psychology in at least two ways. First, it refers to organisation of society as the main source for generating a cultural dimension (Douglas & Wildavsky 1983), and second, it does not discuss any alternative definitions. So when culture is referred to in this tradition, it is hypothesized as being generated from one of the four types of organisational patterns, which is depicted by the terms individualistic, hierarchic, egalitarian, and fatalistic. It is quite typical for mainstream thinking that organisation of the society should be the main source for predicting cultural diversity. Even in humiliation research this perspective is quite dominating (Crawford 2001).

Cross-cultural psychology, on the other hand, is much more representative for mainstream psychology, when it comes to methodology and thinking. Especially in the classic studies from the seventies and eighties, culture was very much defined in terms of values (Hofstede 1980). Despite the fact that cross-cultural psychology includes very many different sorts of paradigms, values seems to be a prevailing aspect of the definitions of culture. But the problem here is that culture is very seldom explicitly defined.

Cultural psychology is very often included as a part of cross-cultural psychology. There are reasons, however, to distinguish between the two traditions, especially when it comes to definitions of culture. Michael Cole is one of the very few who defines culture in terms of artefacts (Cole1998, p.117). This is probably the most old-fashioned way of defining 'culture', because it is very close to end up with a certain canon. That is not what Cole himself would focus on. On the contrary, he is focusing very much on the relation between consciousness and objects. By referring to Vygotsky, he is searching for the materialised consciousness, and ends up with the artefacts. In this sense artefacts must be regarded as much broader than what a canon would contain, in the sense that it is "an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the

history of its incorporation into goal-directed human action" (loc.cit.). Anyway, he ends up with a certain collection of objects which mirror the human activity, and this collection is what he would call culture.

Cultural studies, on the other hand, is originally not a part of psychology. It is a tradition, which has mainly focused on popular culture. Along with the increasing interests in popular culture in other fields, like in literature, media research, anthropology and in psychology, methods and approaches have been adopted to these areas as well. One of the main defender for combining cultural studies with psychology is the British social psychologist Michael Billig (Billig 1997). Cultural studies represents a certain mixture of neo-marxistic critical thinking and semiology, and it has been a historic development from the former to the latter. In that sense, culture has the last thirty years very much been understood in terms of exchanges of symbols. This implies that cultural studies correspond in many ways with discursive psychology, which is the main point of Billig. There are reasons to underline that a semiotic approach to psychology is not a new invention as far as the American semiotics represented a point of departure for William James, Georg Herbart Mead, Charles Morris and even John Dewey as well.

One may make connections between the four perspectives on culture in psychology and the four categories made of Rampton. There is however a miscorrespondancy between one of the categories. Despite the fact that Cole operates with culture defined in terms of artefacts and these might be said to form a certain canon, there is no room for operating with a certain standard for culture, in which some of the artefacts are regarded as being parts of it, and some are not. The tendency of defining culture in terms of a certain canon seems to be there anyway, so this is probably the closest relation one can obtain. The two categories, defined in terms of values and socio-economic relations respectively, correspond very well. The fourth category, in which Rampton defines culture in terms of dialogical sense-making, is much more problematic. In Cultural studies and discursive psychology, it is an open question whether semiotics represents an ingredient or only counts as a point of departure. There are reasons to end up with the latter, and in that perspective, it should be a lot of coincidences between these directions in psychology and the one Rampton refers to. The term post-modernism, however, is still a very disputable term.

## Two different traditions for understanding the symbol: Semiology and Semiotics

If exchange of symbols represents a fruitful point of departure in an understanding of culture, one must be aware of the fact that there are different approximations for understanding the symbol as well. There are two main directions, which may be summarised by the terms semiology and semiotics respectively. The former is connected to French structuralism, and especially the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. The latter is a part of the American pragmatism and is primarily formulated by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. It must be mentioned that 'semiotics' has become the international, general term for this field, and therefore will include both of these directions.

There are many aspects to be accounted for in the two traditions. One of the core aspects of French semiology, is the arbitrarity of the sign. This is a necessary consequence of the distinction between the signifier and the signified, the signifiant and the signifié, respectively. This arbitrarity has a lot of consequences. One is that it ends up in a nominalism, which might be characterised as an extreme version. In a lesser extreme version, which is known from the beginning of the fourteenth century and represented by William of Ockham, there is a connection

between the signifier and the signified in the sense that signifier, the name, was regarded as a substitute for the signified, the reference.

This is quite different in the Saussurian system. The point is that the signifier in principle is constituted, not by the signified, which Ockham suggested, but through the other signifiers. Every sign is regarded as being independent of anything else but the organisation of the signs themselves. This is the point of departure. Thus linguistic meaning is not a result of any certain word alone, but is generated from the sign-system as whole. A linguistic sign gets its specific meaning just because it is different from the other signs. All rich languages are developed by means of cultivating the differences in the terms.

This means that a sign-system is not limited to language, and semiology has been used on many different areas of communication and expression, like food, fashion, film, picture, music etc. Even social systems have been analysed in terms of semiology. In all these non-linguistic areas there is a challenge in defining the smallest unit, which is a necessary requirement for generating differences in a predictable way, like we have in language. Nevertheless, language is probably the most central aspect of a culture, and thus would be a sufficient means for a demarcation of a certain culture. In this perspective, there would not be any problems in defining culture in terms of semiology.

If that would be the case, there would be an opening for hypothesising the cultural role of the term 'humiliation'. Like every other terms, meaning has not to be regarded as a result of the event itself, or the term's reference. The meaning would instead be a result of the use of the term. In that sense terms have to be circulated and used to gain a certain meaning. That would be the case with the term 'humiliation', too. Thus the hypotheses would be: *Circulated humiliation related signs generate ideas of humiliation, whereas not circulated signs do not.*

This means that an event is one thing, to what extent it has to be connected to what we would call humiliation, is something else. This would also be the result if we take American pragmatism and the Peircean semiotics as a point of departure. In this tradition, the envisaged effect of a sign is the main path leading to an understanding of the sign's meaning. This is formulated in the so called pragmatic theses: "In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception" (Peirce, Charles Sanders (1878/1972): "How to Make Our Ideas Clear", in Gullvåg 1972, p.159ff). There are two points that have to be stressed in this quotation. One is the consequences of the term, and the other is the conceivability of these consequences.

In accordance with these theses one could reformulate the hypotheses quite slightly. The consequences, however are very much the same, namely that the meaning of a term is not given by the reference alone, but the process in which the event and the applied terms are only subordinated parts. In these terms, one may formulate the hypotheses in this way: *Effective humiliation related signs cause humiliation, whereas ineffective signs do not.* This means that when our ideas of humiliation are activated as a consequence of the event, one may talk about humiliation, whereas this consequence is not given by necessity.

## Immediate reactions on CNN

The world wide news television channel CNN was very early present and ready for broadcasting in New York that morning on September 11th, 2001. They were not able to catch the first crash, but a few minutes after the transmission was on, the next crash was covered in its full extent. Because of this, we are in the position of having unique documentation of what really happened

that morning, which one may say changed the human perspective on threats throughout the whole world. And the pictures from the second attack have been repeated over and over again on all the television channels quite frequently since then.

   If one, however, not only look at the pictures, but also on what was said and commented on that broadcast, we would have access to the most immediate understanding of what really happened. And the question, then of course is: Was the event understood as a humiliating attack on the American dignity as such? This question is not possible to answer by the pictures alone, because they do only show us the event and not the understanding of it.



At 9 o'clock local time, the transmission shows a burning tower with a lot of black smoke coming out of it. A witness is explaining what happened while the second flight appears at the television screen from the right. The viewer himself therefore is a witness to the second attack, whereas neither the speaker nor the interviewed comment the highly visible plane which is shown on the television screen. When the crash is completed the two persons become aware of the explosion, but the angle of the picture is such that you cannot distinguish the two towers from each other. Thus the immediate comment from the reporter represents an abruption of the interviewed while exclaiming (9.03 L.T): *"Hold up a moment, we've got an explosion inside."*

   Thus the second crash was not registered at all by the reporter when it happened, despite the fact that the he was an eyewitness on behalf of millions of television viewers throughout the world. He was, however, very soon made aware of that something more probably had happened. But they had to recapitulate what really made that second explosion, and while the television staff made some research, the reporter recapitulated the first crash (9.05 L.T.): *"This all began at about 8.48 this morning, again, what we know [...] is [...] that a small plane, not a Cessna type[...] instead perhaps a passenger flight ran into the north side of the World Trade Centre."* (Author's transcription)

   This is probably the very first understanding of what really had happened that morning. What we see is that the event is recapitulated as if it was an accident. Especially by referring to a small plane, it is the plane itself and not the building, which was victimized. At that moment, there were no reason to suggest that several passenger flights were deliberately hijacked as means for attacking and humiliating American symbols and Americanism as such. Despite the fact that the event was a humiliation act, it was not perceived as such from the beginning, and it was several minutes later, after having received the official comments from the government, that the event was understood in terms of an attack and the buildings became victimized instead of the flights. Thus humiliation must be understood in terms of a certain discourse. Not until humiliation-

related terms were used and reproduced, can one say that the event was an humiliation related act.

## The Norwegian survey 2001

The example above tells us that not all regarded the 9.11-event as an act of humiliation from the beginning. At least one person, which is this reporter on CNN did not. Thus this case may count as a counterexample to the hypothesis suggesting that the twin tower attack was perceived as an act of humiliation. If one may talk about falsification at all, one may even say that this hypothesis must be regarded as falsified because of this example.

The example also demonstrates that there is a logical possibility of making a distinction between the event itself and how it is perceived and understood. This conclusion opens up for a discussion of the event itself, in the sense that there is no necessarily given correlation between the general accepted understanding of the event and the event itself. This distinction is a necessary precondition for the semiotic approach to the field, in the sense that the event itself, the signified or signifié, has to be regarded as a consequence of the discourse around the event, the signifier or signifiant.

What is hypothesised here now, is the suggestion that people did not feel humiliated as an immediate consequence of the attack. A Norwegian survey (N=401) made on September the 13th and 14th 2001, may say something about this in more general terms. A Questionnaire with five points Likert scale and semantic differential was used  in this survey among undergraduate Norwegian students in media research (N=153) and psychology (N=248). The survey focused on immediate emotional and cognitive reactions to the 9.11-event and what kind of behavioural consequences the event had for the individual, but it also registered background, gender, age and channels used for information.

The average age was 21,5 years with highest representation of 19 and 20 years old youngsters (about 50%). This is a generation born around 1980, which grew up long time after the big war-discussions in the sixties and seventies. Their parents represent the post-war generation, so they are probably not been told much about the Second World War. They have grown up in a very peaceful corner of the world, in a country where nobody has to worry about their future because Norway is one of the richest countries in the world and has a health and social care system, which are supposed to include everyone.

Despite the fact that they are also embraced by a mass media society, very many received their information from friends and family. This means that the circulation of the symbols and signs, which is the discourse around the event, can not be underestimated when it comes to how their perspectives and understandings of the event were conceived.

## Norwegian youngsters' emotionally and cognitive reactions on 9.11.

The survey reveals great agreement when it comes to understanding and use of terms. The term 'humiliation' was not applied directly in the survey. Instead it focuses on some emotionally charged terms as well as the way the event was attributed. This shows very deeply felt emotionally reactions, in the sense that the event was described in terms of 'sinister', 'horrible', and 'disgust'.

These terms are English translation of terms that very soon became central in the Norwegian discourse around the 9.11-event. In addition to being emotionally highly charged, they are quite unclear, imprecise and difficult to define. There are also reasons to stress that the event was

perceived as very surprising, which probably explains why these emotionally charged terms were seen to cover their understanding of the event in a best way.
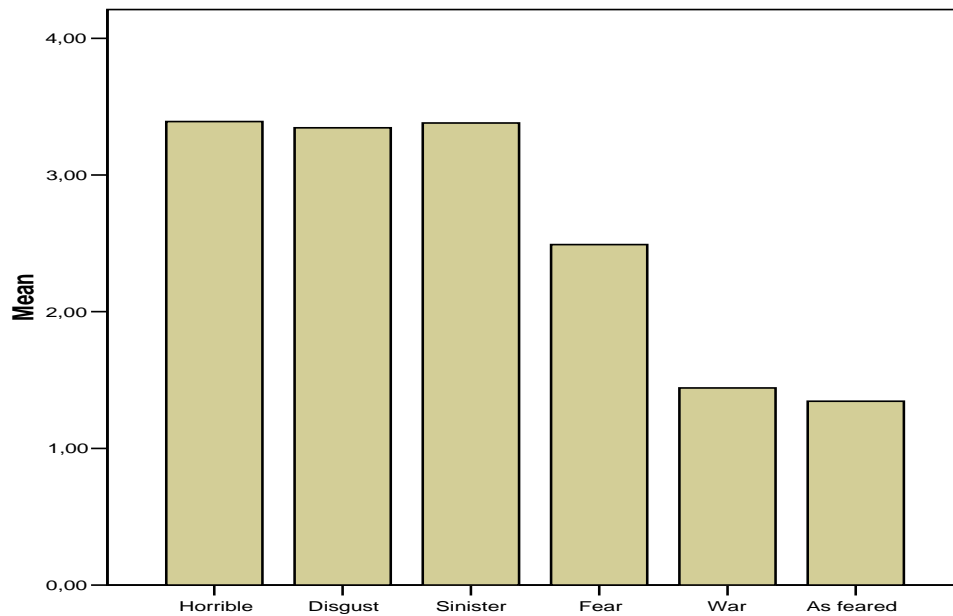


Table 1

Very few felt that the event could be related to war, and it could not be regarded as a consequence of the American political system, neither when it comes to interior nor foreign affairs. Instead it was explained in terms of 'terrorism', 'sickness' and 'evilness'. These three terms became very soon also the international terms used to explain the event. We have seen that the terms were absent from the reporters' vocabulary in the very beginning, but 'terrorists' appeared at once the government's comments were read. The term 'evil' seemed to appear in the first speech President Bush held about 45 minutes later. The term 'sick' was very soon used by the European reporters, and after that seemed to be a central part of the explanatory vocabulary.
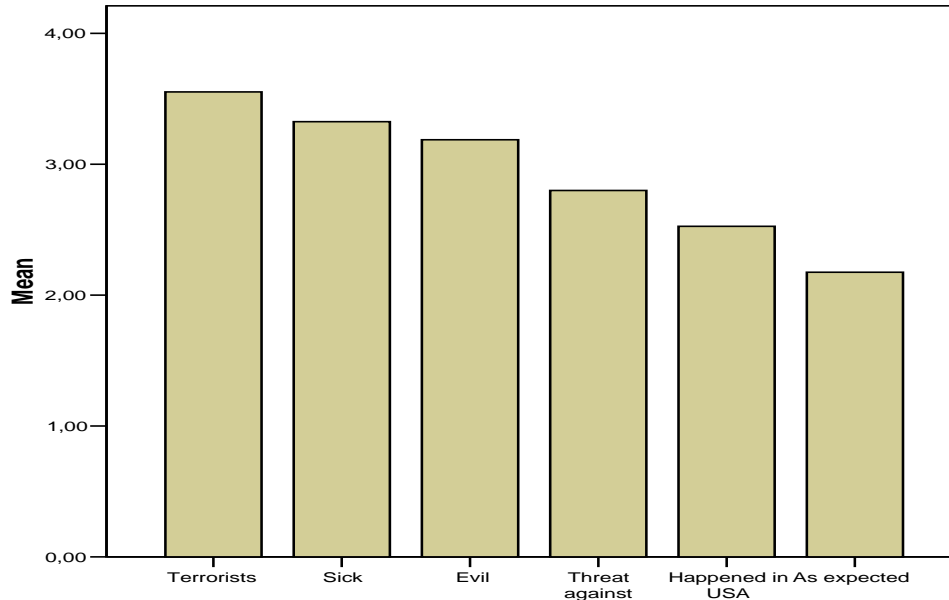
Table 2

All these aspects seem to point in one direction, which tells us that the event was perceived as accidental and almost impossible to explain. Norwegian youngsters did not feel that they themselves were threatened. The survey tells us that they were not even afraid of travelling to any tourist destination because of this event. They did not agree very much with the statement which said that the event was a threat against the western democracy. This means that they did not regard themselves as victims, and they would probably not regard themselves as humiliated.

## Tentative conclusions

The conclusions that might be drawn from this paper, concern some of the most fundamental aspects of social psychology. Culture is a very central term, which says something about how people interact. The big diversity of understanding, may cause a problem, but the fact that this diversity is not very much discussed either, must probably be regarded as an even greater problem. It must also be concluded that one understanding is not necessarily more true than the other. One may say, however, that some definitions may fit better, depending on what the task is supposed to be.

In this perspective, to define culture in terms of exchanging symbols seems to be a proper path to follow. Especially when it comes to the term 'humiliation'. The reason is quite simply, that humiliation is a term which is very much interwoven to the linguistic system. It obtains its meaning by the way it is used in the linguistic system. An operationalisation of it would therefore be most efficient by keeping the term within this frame, instead of focusing on its denotative meaning and separate it from other terms. This does not mean that the term does not refer to anything, that it should not have any denotation. It is a question about where to start in a scientific approach to the field. The examples above have demonstrated, that the meaning of an event or a term is not definitively given, but acquires its meaning through an almost never-ending process.

Another aspect which has to be emphasized here is the fact that there seem to be very many different layers operating at the same time, when it comes to terms like 'culture' and 'humiliation'. On the one hand Norwegian youngsters may sympathise with the American

people, and in that sense feel that they belong to the same cultural way of thinking, but the survey demonstrated that they did not feel the attacks as a personal threat in the same way as the Americans did. Even Americans in the mid-west could report that they were anxious to go to bed for months after 9.11.2001. Such reactions were probably intensified after a while, which again underline that certain symbols have to be activated before one can talk about a certain effect.

Thus we may summarise the conclusions of this paper in the following points:

- The experience of humiliation does not necessary result in an immediate feeling of being humiliated
- It might be that activations of humiliation related symbols is a necessary condition for having the feeling of being humiliated
- Thus theories of signs may be fruitful in further investigations of humiliation
- Theories of signs have the advantage of tolerating the paradox which implies that humiliation on the one hand represents a universal feeling, but on the other hand shows very many different appearances.

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