

Preventing Inadvertent Humiliation

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Goffman's explanation of humiliation is that a person X with a certain social status or social role, has expectations and entitlements of treatment by another person Y which correspond to the social status or social role. Essentially, X's expectation of treatment imposes an obligation on Y to behave in a way to satisfy the entitlements of the social status or social role that X holds. When that expectation is violated, then X feels humiliated by Y. Inadvertent humiliation would arise if Y were unaware of X's social status, entitlements and thus unaware that there were expected behaviors Y was obligated to do. Cross-culturally, inadvertent humiliation is a risk because social roles and status are culturally specific and culturally marked and because expected responses to role and status are culturally specific, as well. Thus, Y may not be aware of X's status or role, or Y may not know what behavior is required to acknowledge that status or role. Elderly persons are high status in some cultures and are low status in others. Where they are high status, that status may require bowing in some cultures, use of honorific words in other cultures, or patient pampering in other cultures. Social class barriers are probably as impenetrable as cross-cultural barriers.

Preventing inadvertent humiliation would require culture knowledge, of course. Hence, most embassies and international corporations have protocol officers whose profession is to understand the status structure and social roles of other societies, and what expectations they impose. But it would be most difficult to teach the emotional impact of humiliation that is external to one's own culture. For example, every culture has its swear words, and it is possible to learn these, understand their meanings, and understand when they can be used and when not. But the emotional impact of foreign swear words is most difficult to comprehend, or rather, to feel. The emotional hit of humiliation is probably similar. For teaching the emotional impact of humiliation, methods such as analogy, role playing, and well-articulated first person accounts seem plausible methods of imparting both knowledge and some element of the emotions that accompany humiliation.