

Tracking Humiliation with CMM

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Human Dignity and Humiliation Workshop

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Humiliation is viewed as an emotional experience. People who feel humiliated believe that others, by acting in certain ways, have diminished them as persons. The result is a sense of powerlessness, of having been deceived, used, degraded, or rejected. They see themselves as having been objectified, often with malice. “Typically, humiliation occurs within relationships of unequal power where the humiliator has power over the victim. While a humiliator may be emboldened by feelings of power, a victim of humiliation will feel degraded, confused, powerless, paralyzed, ostracized, violated, or assaulted.” (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999)

Humiliation comes into play when a victim “a) suffers from actions of an Other(s) intended to inflict harm; b) is forced by those actions to participate in the violation of core moral standards; and c) is forced to suffer, and violate these norms in a public space where their suffering, as well as their (forced) participation in the violation of core moral standards, is witnessed by Others. Together these three components are critical to the production of humiliation.” (Cobb)

As Cobb points out, humiliation does not occur in isolation. It is a sense of being that grows out of specific relationships. This suggests that a social constructionist approach is beneficial as we seek to better understand how the experience of humiliation is created in relationships, particularly in conversation. Social constructionism views social reality as being in process, formed through interaction (Averill, 2000; Gergen, 1991, 1999; Harre, 1984; W. B. Pearce, 1989; W. B. Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Shotter, 1993; Tomm, 1987). From this perspective the emotion of humiliation is not treated as innate, irrational, individual, or universal. Social constructionism “reclaims emotion as an inseparable dimension of human communication that is both socially constructed and socially constructionist” (Jia, 2001, p. 8) This builds on Averill’s

argument that emotions are cultural creations, cultural performances, and that we are cultural participants in them (Averill, 1982).

Approaches to the understanding of humiliation may be broad or narrow. A broad approach would be to look at the systemics of a national culture, perhaps accompanied by an effort to effect legal changes or exert pressures that would diminish humiliating actions on the part of the citizenry.

A narrow model would look at the specifics of interpersonal exchanges, or conversations, that result in humiliation. One model for exploring humiliating conversations is offered by the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (CMM) (Pearce). “The theory of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) does not try to offer a set of propositions about the events and objects of the social world. Rather, it is a set of concepts and tools focusing on the process by which those events and objects are made. It functions to discipline and enable inquiry into specific moments of that process for the purpose of understanding, acting wisely, and intervening to improve the process” (W. B. Pearce, nd, p.55).

CMM suggests several ways of looking at conversations in order to see beyond what is being said, to explore what social reality is being made and how this is accomplished. One perspective is that of considering speech acts and how they combine. A speech act may be construed as a portion, or a phase, of a conversation that accomplishes a certain social reality, e.g., challenge, introduction, acceptance, recognition, deference, or in this case, humiliation (Harre, 1984).

Humiliation can be identified cross-culturally and historically. Cross-culturally, United States troops in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq occupation humiliated prisoners of war, causing individual pain that led to criminal proceedings and an international outcry (New York

NYTimes, 2004). An historical example of humiliation is found in the biblical story of Tamar. In the Book of 2 Samuel, Tamar experiences humiliation when she is raped by her stepbrother Amnon and he sends her away in disgrace. (2 Samuel, 1995, p. 266).<sup>1</sup>

In this story, Amnon, King David's son, falls in love with his half sister Tamar, and conspires with Jonadab, the king's brother, to sleep with her. Under the pretense of being ill he persuades the king to send Tamar to him with a meal. The king does, and when Tamar arrives Amnon tells her to bring the food to his bedroom. When she enters he grabs her and tells her to come to bed with him. She tells him not to force her because it is immoral; she says she will be disgraced and he will be seen as a wicked fool. Amnon refuses to listen, overpowers her, and rapes her. Then his love turns to hatred and he insists she leave. She pleads to stay, but again he refuses to listen and has her ejected from the room. Tamar weeps, tears her clothing, and retreats to her brother Absalom's home. Absalom tries to console her, but there she "lived ..., a desolate woman" (Samuel, 1995)

In CMM terms this is an "episode" consisting of a series of speech acts that might be labeled as follows (as quoted from the Book of 2 Samuel):

1. Amnon: "Bring the food to my bedroom" – A request for nurture and fraternal healing
2. Tamar: (brings the food) (Note that speech acts do not have to be verbal, but may consist of facial expressions, actions, etc.) – An effort to comply, provide nurture
3. Amnon: (grabbing her) "Come to bed with me, my sister." – Forcefully sexualizes the meeting
4. Tamar: "Don't, my brother ... Such a thing should not be done..." - Tries to reject the advance by invoking community moral standards

5. Amnon: (Rapes her and demands she leave) – Act of violent abuse and rejection
6. Tamar: “No! Sending me away would be a greater wrong” – Request for acceptance and appeal to moral propriety
7. Amnon: (Forces her out) – Further rejection
8. Tamar: (Tears her robe and retreats weeping, lives out her life in desolation) – Expresses grief, experiences humiliation in the form of community rejection and isolation

CMM describes communication as having two inseparable but different aspects: 1) coordinating actions and 2) making/managing meaning (W. B. Pearce, nd, p. 55). Looking closely at the conversation between Tamar and Amnon, CMM would ask,

What is being made here? How? How is it remade in the ongoing process of social construction?

Initially (1-2), Tamar believes bringing food in response to Amnon’s request will result in healing, while Amnon sees it as a ploy to seduce her. In (3-6), Tamar is confronted with a new social reality, incest, while Amnon performs acts of subjugation and hatred “Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her.” Finally in (7-8), Tamar embraces the social reality of “humiliation” and a grief response by tearing her garments and retreating to her brother Absalom’s house in disgrace.

Who participated in making it? Who didn’t?

The participants in this episode are Amnon, who expresses desire for his sister and becomes the humiliator; Jonadab, his friend and co-conspirator; King David, an unwitting collaborator; Tamar, the victim; and the broader community, whose moral standards from Tamar’s perspective drive the conversation into the social reality of “humiliation”. This last participant is important: it

is the communal standard of morality that defines Tamar as “disgraced” and condemns her to a life of isolation. Absalom, Tamar’s brother, is also a participant. He attempts to console his sister after the fact, saying it is of no consequence. (But note that two years later he will extract revenge by having Amnon assassinated.)<sup>2</sup>

What was the quality of the process by which it was made?

Here there is a sense of “oughtness” from a CMM perspective. The process is driven not only by Amnon’s desire and passions, but by the “moral force” (B. Pearce, 2001) felt by Tamar that someone in a situation like hers must respond in a certain way, i.e., by resisting Amnon’s advances; and when that proves unsuccessful, by performing socially in a humiliated manner.

CMM asks how participants in a relationship coordinate their words/actions. Coordination is the way we fit our actions into those of other people to produce patterns of communication (B. Pearce, 1999). The pattern that emerges in this episode is one of dissemblance/trust/degradation. Amnon invites Tamar to feed him on the pretense of being sick, and she comes to him trusting in his integrity. The crucial point in the episode comes in (3), where Amnon reveals his true intentions. In (4) Tamar expresses shock at the turn of events, attempting to dissuade him from taking her by force.

Coordination does not necessarily mean that people in communication are “on the same page;” rather it looks for an identifiable, albeit displeasing, pattern that emerges. Here the stage is set for a repetition of hostility and rejection by Amnon and appeals for mercy by Tamar.

How can I/we act in ways that intervene in and improve already existing undesirable events and objects?

An important question posed by CMM is, “How can we make better patterns of communication by choosing different actions in the course of a given episode?” (W. B. Pearce, nd, p. 55) This is clearly a relevant question from the perspective of human dignity and humiliation. We seek to effect change in ways that diminish the impact of humiliation, if not eliminate it. If we were to ask this group of biblical conversational participants, “What might you have said/done so that things would turn out differently?” what would their responses be? Tamar might have played coy, or asked for time to change her clothes and disappeared. Amnon, had he known the grief his actions would bring in the future, might have been polite instead of rapacious.

Consider the following, more contemporary episode. Ellie and David (not their real names) had been married for three years. They had three small children and he was working, but finances were tight. Ellie visited the Red Cross shelter to find out “what kinds of programs they had” and told David about it. The following conversation (Sayler, 2003) ensued:

1. David: “You need to get the kids together.”
2. Ellie: (Knowing he means get them in the car, and does so) “What are you doing?”
3. David: “Well, I’m just taking you guys somewhere, because you can’t be here anymore.”
4. Ellie: (thinking he means a friend’s house, but arriving at Red Cross) “Why are we here?”
5. David: “This is where you all need to go.”
6. Ellie: (Takes the children into the shelter)

## 7. David: (Tells the children goodbye; leaves)

Ellie tells this story in response to the question, “Have you ever felt humiliated?” One striking thing about this episode, in common with the episode involving Amnon and Tamar, is the sense of disconnect that takes place for Ellie in (4). There is the awareness that something is amiss, but it only slowly dawns on her that she is being abandoned. There is a hint of it in (2); she suspects that all is not well, but the full impact doesn’t hit until David actually leaves the family at the shelter. The episode doesn’t have the physical brutality of Tamar’s rape, but it contains the elements of powerlessness, degradation, confusion, and paralysis (Cobb, 2004). It also raises the questions prompted by CMM:

What is being made here? How? How is it remade in the ongoing process of social construction?

From Ellie’s viewpoint this episode results in the construction of humiliation. Note that this is her story, not the story told by her husband, the children, nor the workers at the Red Cross shelter. Each of them might have told a different story, one that contained no hint of humiliation. But for Ellie this is the reality she remembers as she recounts the incident some 8 months after it takes place. The stories we hear are told from a particular point of view, one that carries its own bias and seeks to persuade us of its own claim to the truth.

Who participated in it? Who didn’t?

In determining how humiliation is “made,” we consider the participants: Ellie, David, the children, the Red Cross staff, and perhaps most important the cultural voice of the community. It is this voice perhaps more than any other that brings Ellie to the understanding that she has been “humiliated,” in that she has failed to please her husband and he has left her to the care of those who deal with persons in abject poverty.



What was the quality of the process by which it was made?

The power differential in this episode, as in many cases of humiliation, is evident in the dialogue between Ellie and David. He tells her to “get the kids (in the car),” that they “can’t be here anymore,” that “this is where you need to go.” The conversation is one-sided – no argument, no resistance on Ellie’s part. Likewise the power distribution is one-sided, as is the case in many episodes of humiliation.

How can I/we act in ways that intervene in and improve already existing undesirable events and objects?

Interestingly, it was a communal voice that intervened for Ellie, much as a communal voice had condemned her. She found her way to a center that housed struggling families, offered job training, and provided child care. Whether she might have responded differently to David in the course of him abandoning her is a mute point; she was, for a time, powerless and homeless. But intervention did occur, and it was successful in the sense that she took control of her life, cared for her children, and finalized a divorce.

Humiliation is exceedingly difficult because it often grows out of inequality and communal condemnation. CMM does not offer sound guidance on how to address these realities. It does, however, suggest points in relationships where one might act differently, or where one might step back and seek a different perspective on what is occurring to bring about a sense of humiliation and victimization.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 13:1 In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom son of David. 2 Amnon became frustrated to the point of illness on account of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible for him to do anything to her. 3 Now Amnon had a friend named Jonadab son of Shimeah, David's brother. Jonadab was a very shrewd man. 4 He asked Amnon, "Why do you, the king's son, look so haggard morning after morning? Won't you tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I'm in love with Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." 5 "Go to bed and pretend to be ill," Jonadab said. "When your father comes to see you, say to him, 'I would like my sister Tamar to come and give me something to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I may watch her and then eat it from her hand.'" 6 So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. When the king came to see him, Amnon said to him, "I would like my sister Tamar to come and make some special bread in my sight, so I may eat from her hand." 7 David sent word to Tamar at the palace: "Go to the house of your brother Amnon and prepare some food for him." 8 So Tamar went to the house of her brother Amnon, who was lying down. She took some dough, kneaded it, made the bread in his sight and baked it. 9 Then she took the pan and served him the bread, but he refused to eat. "Send everyone out of here," Amnon said. So everyone left him. 10 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food here into my bedroom so I may eat from your hand." And Tamar took the bread she had prepared and brought it to her brother Amnon in his bedroom. 11 But when she took it to him to eat, he grabbed her and said, "Come to bed with me, my sister." 12 "Don't, my brother!" she said to him. "Don't force me. Such a thing should not be done in Israel! Don't do this wicked thing. 13 What about me? Where could I get rid of my disgrace? And what about you? You would be like one of the wicked fools in Israel. Please speak to the king; he will not keep me from being married to you." 14 But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her. 15 Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, "Get up and get out!" 16 "No!" she said to him. "Sending me away would be a greater wrong than what you have already done to me." But he refused to listen to her. 17 He called his personal servant and said, "Get this woman out of here and bolt the door after her." 18 So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing a richly ornamented robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. 19 Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornamented robe she was wearing. She put her hand on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went. 20 Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman. - 2 Sam 13:1-20 *NIV*

<sup>2</sup> 21 When King David heard all this, he was furious. 22 Absalom never said a word to Amnon, either good or bad; he hated Amnon because he had disgraced his sister Tamar. 23 Two years later, when Absalom's sheepshearers were at Baal Hazor near the border of Ephraim, he invited all the king's sons to come there. 24 Absalom went to the king and said, "Your servant has had shearers come. Will the king and his officials please join me?" 25 "No, my son," the king replied. "All of us should not go; we would only be a burden to you." Although Absalom urged him, he still refused to go, but gave him his blessing. 26 Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon come with us." The king asked him, "Why should he go with you?" 27 But Absalom urged him, so he sent with him Amnon and the rest of the king's sons. 28 Absalom ordered his men, "Listen! When Amnon is in high spirits from drinking wine and I say to you, 'Strike Amnon down,' then kill him. Don't be afraid. Have not I given you this order? Be strong and brave." 29 So Absalom's men did to Amnon what Absalom had ordered. Then all the king's sons got up, mounted their mules and fled. - 2 Sam 13:21-29 *NIV*