
Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies: a global network advancing dignity through dialogue

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Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies^[1]

ABSTRACT Human rights are universally based on the concept of human dignity. Various international organizations are developing the theoretical, legal, and political framework for human rights. The underlying concept of human dignity is less disputed, but also receives less attention. This shortcoming is addressed by a worldwide group of scholars and practitioners dedicated to examining and understanding the many aspects of human dignity, as well as its violation – humiliation. This article describes the efforts of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network. The network is a global transdisciplinary fellowship of individuals dedicated to advancing research, education, and interventions to end humiliating practices and promote human dignity around the world. The HumanDHS community strives to stimulate systemic change, globally and locally, opening space for mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow, thus ending humiliating practices and breaking cycles of humiliation. This article describes the efforts of HumanDHS to encourage practices that lead to *equality in dignity* through dignifying dialogue and collaborative action.

Introduction

What are the roots of violence, war, genocide, or terrorism? Is it scarcity of resources and the struggle for survival that leads to atrocities? Does poverty create violence? Or, is human nature inherently aggressive? New research suggests that the dynamics of humiliation may be the ‘missing link’ in the search for root causes (Lindner, 2006, 2009, 2010). The phenomenon of humiliation gains significance as the world’s population increasingly becomes interdependent and global resources dwindle. Today, humankind is moving closer to what has been called ‘a global village’. As this inevitable transformation takes place, individuals at all levels of all societies ask a crucial question: ‘Do you respect me and my cultural background, or do you look down on me and treat me in humiliating ways?’ The consequences of a negative evaluation of the outcome of this question can be tremendous (Lindner, 2006).

Human rights ideals mark a historical normative u-turn away from about 10,000 years of relentlessly ranking human worthiness, or what Riane Eisler (1989) calls the ‘dominator model’ of society. As the world shifts into an age of global information sharing, societies are moving towards ideals of equal worth for all people, towards ‘partnership models’ (Eisler, 1989) and non-domination models (Pettit, 1997), while rejecting rankism (Fuller, 2003).

The Council of Europe’s (2008) *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: ‘living together as equals in dignity’* addresses the crucial question of how to safeguard human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and how to promote human understanding. In alignment with this article, the research and intercultural efforts of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network suggest that equal dignity is a fundamental value and common denominator of all productive approaches to achieve these goals. In particular, the practice of dignifying dialogue – dialogue that is free of humiliation, i.e. free of derision, degradation, dehumanization, stigmatization, etc. – is essential.

HumanDHS stands as an example of innovative efforts to advance dignifying intercultural dialogue. It shares the Council of Europe's conviction that 'spaces for intercultural competences should be created and widened; and intercultural dialogue should be taken to the international level' (Council of Europe, 2008, p. 3). This article summarizes the ideas that inform the efforts of HumanDHS, ideas that resonate with the goals described in the Council of Europe's White Paper.

Understanding the Destructive Impact of Humiliation

Until 1757, the verb 'to humiliate' had no negative connotations, as it simply indicated that someone showed underlings their correct place within an accepted social order, based on honour and rank (W.I. Miller, 1993). The year 1757 marked the transition of the meaning of the verb 'to humiliate' in the English language from prosocial humbling to the antisocial violation of dignity (Lindner, 2009). The old meaning of the verb 'to humiliate' was replaced by a new, much more negative meaning. Interestingly, this occurred just prior to the American Declaration of Independence (4 July 1776), the French Revolution (4 August 1789), the emergence of the individuated self, and the birth of a growing awareness that the planet Earth is the home of one humankind. These were also the times when the canonization of human rights ideals began.

As noted by many – for example, by social anthropologist and co-founder of Harvard University's Program on Negotiation, William Ury (1999) – we are slowly moving towards 'a global knowledge society'. One reverberation of this transition is the change from traditional honour codes in hierarchical collectivist settings to new human rights codes based on equal dignity for all, linked with more individualistic cultural ideals (Lindner, 2006, 2009, 2010). As the transformation of the verb 'to humiliate' indicates, humiliation's role changes within this larger transition. The notion of humiliation is salient in both honour and dignity contexts, however, it is salient in profoundly different ways. In honour environments, humiliation is usually evoked by elites. For example, male aristocrats in the past were called upon to defend humiliated honour in duels. In dignity contexts, in contrast, feelings of humiliation are triggered in the downtrodden, those who formerly were expected to quietly bow in subservience.

With the advent of human rights ideals, the concept of humiliation changes in terms of its social meaning and the people who experience it. Within a context of human rights, humiliation may be interpreted as a violation of an individual's rights and a violation of his or her dignity. Furthermore, as science continues to emphasize the vital importance of supportive relationships throughout people's lives (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010), humiliation can be understood as a profound and enduring relational violation that threatens engagement in relationships at all levels, from the interpersonal, to the social, to the international (J.B. Miller, 1987; Hartling, 1996; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Lindner, 2006, 2009, 2010). The HumanDHS network seeks to foster 'right relationships' through dignifying dialogue. These are relationships that uphold human rights ideals, relationships that recognize that each human being is born with equal dignity and ought not be humiliated.

Understanding the complex social, historical, geopolitical, and relational nature of humiliation and human dignity inspires the HumanDHS network to work for the transformation of humiliating practices in *all* settings, locally and globally. Humiliating dynamics can be found, for instance, in traditional academic discussion styles or may arise as a result of maligned economic paradigms. The members of HumanDHS strive to root out all forms of humiliation that undermine people's ability to engage in mutually dignifying relationships.

The Mission and Vision of HumanDHS

The Council of Europe's recommendations perfectly align with the mission and vision of HumanDHS. Its organization and way of collaboration provide a role model for how intercultural dialogue may be achieved. The goals of the HumanDHS network are presented on its website:

We wish to help discontinue humiliating practices wherever they occur, globally and locally. In order to do this, we aim at building bridges between research and practice. We wish to raise awareness of the workings of humiliation through research and education, and 'change the world' more directly through interventions. In other words, we wish to focus on the interplay of both, subjective and institutional aspects of humiliation.

The vision of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) is to contribute to reducing – and ultimately eliminating – destructive disrespect and humiliation around the world. Our efforts focus on generating research, disseminating information, applying creative educational methods, and devising pilot projects and policy strategies. With these initiatives we wish to promote a new level of consciousness that is characterized by caring, mutual respect and sensitivity to dignity, thereby fertilizing new and constructive community action.[2]

In order to promote a community culture of equal dignity, HumanDHS has developed an approach based on three key tenets: (1) acknowledging the *equality in dignity* of all humans; (2) using *appreciative enquiry* as a method for cultivating dignifying dialogue; and (3) adhering to an ethic of *walking the talk*, which encourages all members of HumanDHS to develop dignifying relationships in *all* of their work.

The Concept of Equality in Dignity

As Evelin G. Lindner (2007) points out, the whole world, the East as much as the West, is currently in the process of leaving behind the code of ranked honour and entering a new normative universe, that of *equality in dignity*. This transition is not smooth. It is haphazard, fragmented, and it is often moving two steps forward and one step back – yet, it is happening in all parts of the world today.

The idea of equal dignity has existed in some form throughout history. It is not a new idea that emerged in 1757. Many founders of religions (for example, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, etc.) had at the core of their message the revolutionary question (‘revolutionary’ during the past 10,000 years): ‘Are not all people equally worthy in the eyes of God?’ Founders of these religions had followers often precisely because they proposed the revolutionary message of equality in dignity. However, this message did not receive sufficient space to flourish during the past 10,000 years. Power- and control-oriented hierarchical institutions ‘swallowed up’ this message very swiftly.

What is new today is not the idea, the ideal, or the vision of equal dignity, it is the context that gives this idea historically unprecedented space to finally gain significance and *not* be swallowed up. HumanDHS is organized to exemplify how working and living in equal dignity can lead to beneficial outcomes for individuals and communities throughout the world.

Appreciative Enquiry: cultivating dignifying dialogue

The HumanDHS network has adopted, and continues to develop, a unique approach to cultivating dignifying intercultural dialogue. This approach is known as the ‘frame of appreciative enquiry (AE)’. AE has allowed HumanDHS to realize a vision of *unity in diversity* as one of its richest organizational assets. The HumanDHS version of AE builds on Suresh Srivastva & David Cooperrider’s (1990) ‘appreciative inquiry’ research methodology and adds to it. This approach was introduced to HumanDHS by Donald C. Klein, a founding board member of HumanDHS and a groundbreaking pioneer in the field of community psychology. He described AE as an interactive stance of mutual openness, mutual empathy, mutual respect, and sincere curiosity. Klein observed that all of us have the capacity to approach our experience from this unique stance:

Everyone is born with an inherent capacity to experience the world through the lens of wonderment and awe. We have the potential to view events in our lives with simple clarity, to maintain a sense of humor and joyful perspective, and, above all, to avoid wasting energy on distracting thoughts, including the fear of humiliation. (Klein, 2004, p. 4)

Furthermore, Klein emphasized that appreciation can be a powerful and highly effective ‘antidote’ to feelings of humiliation. Research on social exclusion supports this line of thinking (Twenge et al, 2001). The frame of AE creates a social-emotional-relational holding space that sustains the dignity of people as they engage in difficult, but constructive, dialogue (Hartling, 2010).

Occasionally, individuals express concern that AE might suppress conflict. Indeed, constructive conversations depend on one’s ability to be authentic in a relationship, especially when bringing conflicting differences to the table. Over the years, we have found that creating a conference climate of appreciative curiosity sets the stage for *more – rather than less* – authentic engagement.

The cold, hypercompetitive, distant professionalism practised by many organizations can result in an enormous squandering of energy, impeding efficient outcomes as group members get caught up in defensive or aggressive debates, rather than jointly exploring and building on diverse ideas together (S.M. Miller, 2010).

Indeed, AE enhances our capacity to ‘wage good conflict’ (J.B. Miller, [1976] 1986, 1983). Typically, images of conflict portrayed in the media are not merely conflict, but conflict presented in the extreme, conflict as aggression, conflict as war. Renowned psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller challenged this myopic view of conflict. She emphasized that people can conduct conflict in ways that strengthen relationships, leading to many positive outcomes, including greater clarity, deeper connection, and mutual growth. Jean Baker Miller (1983) asserted that conflict is not only necessary for growth, but that good conflict is a pathway to better human connection. One of the most important benefits of AE is that it helps members of HumanDHS build their capacity to wage good conflict within a caring community.

Living an Ethic of ‘Walking the Talk’

As a global community of academicians, practitioners, activists, students, and other professionals from diverse backgrounds, the efforts of the HumanDHS network go beyond the goal of conducting research or implementing projects. HumanDHS members are also committed to transforming humiliating practices and cultivating dignity in all aspects of their lives – in their personal lives, in their professional lives, and in their communities. This is what HumanDHS identifies as *walking the talk*.

Experience has shown us that not everyone working for human rights and human dignity exemplifies the capacity to walk the talk of equal dignity. Consequently, HumanDHS actively looks for members who model this capacity through their words *and* their deeds. Becoming a member of HumanDHS is a *relationship-building process* of engaging in dignifying dialogue over time. This process begins by connecting with interested individuals through personal meetings, at conferences, or via the Internet. This allows the HumanDHS Leadership Team to explore whether or not potential members walk the talk of equal dignity, which is crucial to our work.

The Founding and Early Development of HumanDHS

Humiliation – the violation of human dignity – was almost completely absent from the literature until the 1990s (Torres & Bergner, 2010). Linda M. Hartling (1996) and Evelin G. Lindner (2000) wrote the first doctoral dissertations about the experience of humiliation. When Evelin G. Lindner presented her research findings in New York in 2001, she was encouraged by philanthropist Alan Slifka to establish an organization that is independent of any religious or political agenda to advance the study of humiliation. Subsequently, Morton Deutsch, one of the world’s most respected scholars of conflict resolution and author of the *Handbook on Conflict Resolution* (Deutsch et al, 2006), organized, together with Evelin G. Lindner, the first workshop in July 2003 of what then became the series of ‘Workshops on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict’, through Columbia University’s Conflict Resolution Network. This meeting was followed by the first international conference of the newly formed HumanDHS network convened at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme in Paris in September 2003.

Evelin G. Lindner, as Founding President of HumanDHS, invited a distinguished group of scholars to be on the Board of Directors. From the beginning, this leadership group realized that HumanDHS could not be built solely on a vision of individual members walking the talk, rather the *entire* structure of the organization needed to exemplify this principle. In other words, HumanDHS needed to unfold as a humiliation-free fellowship. Thus, every aspect of the organization had to be designed and arranged in a way that would recognize and support the dignity of all who worked in, or worked with, the HumanDHS community.

HumanDHS prides itself in being an innovative and sustainable organization. This is particularly evident when it comes to understanding how the leadership group has mobilized and maximized economic and human resources to move forward with goals and projects. From the start, the leadership group recognized that searching for funding can be a humiliating process. Non-

profit organizations can become caught up in an ongoing search for economic resources to the extent that the point of their work becomes secondary. With this in mind, the leaders of HumanDHS approach financing from the deeply held conviction that 'money should serve, not lead' the work. As a result, HumanDHS is supported in a variety of modest methods, including careful stewardship of resources, small economic contributions and grants, and an enormous wealth of 'action gifts' from members who generously contribute their time and energy. This *extreme-lean-green* approach to funding allows HumanDHS to preserve and sustain the focus and integrity of its work without compromise.

HumanDHS Membership and Leadership Profile

Membership in the HumanDHS community is a relationship-building process that culminates in an invitation to join the group. More than 1000 members have been invited into the network and more than 2000 others support the work. Among the 1000 members, there is a 120-person-strong Core Team of active members, helping with specific activities on a continuous or intermittent basis. The Core Team members primarily work in academic settings, but the team also includes artists, journalists, government officials, leaders of non-governmental organizations, and a diverse set of other professionals.

The Global Advisory Board (GAB) brings together more than 260 esteemed scholars and practitioners in professions of relevance to the work of HumanDHS. The large number of advisors reflects the wide range of topics related to human dignity and humiliation. Members of the GAB come from 48 countries across all continents.

The HumanDHS Board of Directors consists of five men and five women from various disciplines: four psychologists, four social and political scientists, one historian, and one physicist. Linda M. Hartling serves as the Director and Evelin G. Lindner as the Founding President. Unlike most organizations, the term 'Director' is not meant to indicate a hierarchical relationship to other members. HumanDHS prides itself in having a system of dignifying leadership, rather than a rigid hierarchy. This means the fellowship cultivates a community dynamic that promotes collaboration, fluid expertise, and shared responsibility. HumanDHS programmes and projects are essentially *co-created* by network members who attend the programmes or who participate in a project. Furthermore, the HumanDHS Leadership Team, which includes the Board of Directors, does not receive any salary and does not issue directives to members. Instead, they serve as trusted guardians and nurturers of the network.

HumanDHS does not put an emphasis on nationalities or national interests; it invites members to take a global view of human dignity and humiliation. Experience shows that there is no safe haven for humanity in any region of the world as long as equal dignity and human rights remain an unrealized dream in other regions. Therefore, the HumanDHS website acts as a *virtual library of resources*, serving the needs of up to 40,000 people from roughly 180 countries each year. Providing relevant information is only possible with the help of HumanDHS members who live and work in many regions of the world.

Activities and Achievements

With AE and dignifying dialogue at the core of its work, HumanDHS has successfully developed numerous international programmes and activities over the last 10 years. For example, HumanDHS convenes two meetings annually: the Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict at Columbia University in New York City and the Annual Conference of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies. Each year, the HumanDHS conference takes place in a different global location. This gives HumanDHS the opportunity to connect with individuals working in distant and remote locations. To date, this conference has taken place in Paris, Berlin, Costa Rica, Norway, China, and, most recently, in Istanbul.[3]

Beyond conferences and workshops, the AE framework nurtures intercultural dialogue in a multitude of other ways. AE sets the tone for HumanDHS teams to collaborate in fluid groups to advance research on human dignity and humiliation. Other teams focus on activities such as youth education. One team, for example, is developing a peace camp in Turkey and peace education

activities in the City Montessori School in Lucknow, India. In addition, Uli Spalthoff, HumanDHS Director of Media Development, is leading a project that aims to provide human rights- and human dignity-related educational content for the laptops distributed by the One Laptop per Child initiative, an initiative that provides laptops to schools in developing countries.

AE is also the frame that informs the discussions and development of other intervention activities. Typically, projects are driven by a small group of HumanDHS members. For example, HumanDHS members have initiated an effort to create 'HumanDHS Dialogue Homes' that allow people to meet and discuss issues of equal dignity in different locations around the world. These Dialogue Homes are the existing homes of HumanDHS members, who see the benefit of sharing their living space to increase opportunities for people to engage in dignifying dialogue. The first Dialogue Home opened in Portland, Oregon in 2009.

As a growing global community, HumanDHS relies heavily on Internet and email communication. In order to make this communication effective, it is always grounded in an appreciative approach. This warm, humanizing way of engaging in electronic communication cultivates connection and sustains collaboration. In addition, the HumanDHS website features a blog and news area, where information of interest to HumanDHS members is provided on a daily basis.

Although HumanDHS is primarily grounded in academic scholarship, it is *dedicated to turning dignifying ideas into practical action*. Shibley Telhami, the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and a member of the GAB, advocates for building bridges between academia and the world by influencing public policy:

I have always believed that good scholarship can be relevant and consequential for public policy. It is possible to affect public policy without being an advocate; to be passionate about peace without losing analytical rigor; to be moved by what is just while conceding that no one has a monopoly on justice.[4]

Good scholarship strengthens all aspects of HumanDHS work, including research, education, peace building, interventions, and innovation, as well as the development of public policy. In essence, analytical rigour allows HumanDHS to be a global-social incubator of promising ideas and practical efforts to foster equal dignity and constructive dialogue in the world.

Conclusion

A decade of steady growth (through connection) provides the strongest evidence that the HumanDHS network has established a uniquely successful and sustainable method of engaging in dignifying intercultural dialogue. HumanDHS's *extreme-lean-green-appreciative* approach not only supports the growth of its efforts, but it supports the growth of all involved. This is HumanDHS's humanizing vision, mission, and way of working in the world. HumanDHS is a unique fellowship that lives and works together as equals in dignity!

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] <http://www.humiliationstudies.org>

[2] See 'Welcome to Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS)'.
<http://www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/index1.php>

[3] <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/annualmeeting15.php>

[4] http://www.sadat.umd.edu/people/shibley_telhami.htm

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