

Explanatory Note: The Psychology of Humiliation:

An overview of the monograph and papers submitted

by Evelin Lindner

© Evelin Gerda Lindner

This note provides a brief account of the context and purpose of the monograph and papers, considered together. I will give first a sequential account and then an analytical overview.

Sequential account

I began with the reflection that if, as is often assumed, the humiliation of the Germans was partly responsible for the Holocaust and the Second World War, then it is important to understand the nature of humiliation and how it is related to the occurrence of genocide and mass violence. The challenge was both theoretical (what is humiliation?) and practical (how can it be prevented or healed?). The academic literature and a pilot study gave very divergent accounts of the nature and dynamics of humiliation, partly – as I have since discovered – because the broader historical and socio-cultural contexts of humiliating acts, processes and relationships were not yet analyzed in a systematic way or with proper regard for inter-societal variations.

I investigated the issue by plunging myself into the midst of Somalia, Rwanda/Burundi (and, in a different way, Hitler's Germany) - which are very different cases but have all experienced intense phases of genocide or mass killings. I took with me to Africa a long and standardized list of questions but quickly found that any attempt to administer the questions in a formal and systematic way reinforced conditions of mistrust that I was trying to overcome. In fact, there was a great danger, I felt, that the process of research, if carried out in that way, would humiliate my respondents. I shifted to a methodology of asking fewer questions, allowing the person I was talking to take the lead to a great extent, and framing the encounter between myself and the respondent as a shared search for understanding. I found that this produced a great deal of important information and insights that would otherwise have been hidden from me.

In making close contact with my interviewees - and there were a very large number of these, for I worked intensively – I drew upon my interpersonal skills as a cross-cultural

© Evelin Gerda Lindner

psychologist developed during many years in Egypt. Using this approach I began to hear very different accounts of humiliation and its aftermath in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi. Somalis asserted that their traditional culture meant being untouched by humiliation; on the other hand, people in Rwanda/Burundi confirmed that their lives had been profoundly shaped by social structures that imposed humiliation upon them.

As I discovered these profound differences in social structure and personal experience, I began to realize the importance of understanding where a society is located within a typology that distinguishes between societies according to (a) whether or not there is an established hierarchy of domination and subordination between superior and inferior groups and (b) whether or not the ideology of human rights is widely accepted within the society. I began to develop a conception of humiliation as both a feeling (or experience or state of mind) and a process that occurs between individuals and/or between groups. I also began to distinguish between what might be called a ‘universal core’ of humiliation that is present in all cases and a ‘variable perimeter’ that has to be determined by empirical investigation and theoretical analysis across several cases.

In crystallizing my conception of this universal core I have drawn, inter alia, upon the spirit of Smedslund’s ‘psycho-logic’ approach. In investigating and analyzing the variable perimeter I have drawn upon not only psychology (especially cross-cultural psychology) but also a large number of other disciplines including history, sociology, anthropology, political science, and international relations.

In the thesis I have described the process whereby I made the intellectual discovery just mentioned. The thesis is also intended to ‘speak’ to the partners in dialogue that I encountered in Africa and elsewhere in the course of carrying out the research. It is presented as a dense and rich text. At the same time as I wrote it I was also composing a number of papers which elaborate and formalize aspects of the theory of humiliation that I am developing. In the next section I will present an analytical overview of the contents of both the monograph and the accompanying papers.

Analytical overview

The thesis includes an introductory discussion of the state of the literature on humiliation and my preparation for carrying out the research. The historical background of the cases studied (Germany, Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi) is presented. The thesis then develops in three parts. In the first part, I provide an analytical description of the fieldwork as a process of

building a therapeutic relationship between the investigator and many individuals within the societies being investigated. In the second part, I present an interpretation of the cases being examined, drawing upon a wide range of evidence to construct a diagnosis and prognosis of the cases being studied. I also consider the often humiliating attempts by intervening third parties such as the UN to provide ‘treatment’ for these cases. In the third part of the thesis, I outline a methodology for creating a therapeutic dialogue between those who have suffered humiliation, those who have caused it, and third parties who are able to bring an understanding of the mechanisms and processes involved.

The thesis presents the process of research as it happened without trying to falsify this process by ‘tidying it up’ retrospectively. In this respect, it follows some aspects of the practice of, for example, Freud who treated accuracy in this respect as very important and deliberately retained in his texts thoughts and hypotheses that were subsequently bypassed or superseded.

Taken together, the thesis and the accompanying papers serve the following objects: to provide an analytical description of the process of achieving increased knowledge and understanding of humiliation within the very different societies that were included as cases; to provide an analytical description of the process of establishing a therapeutic dialogue oriented to the shared search for solutions to the challenge of humiliation within those societies; to make contributions to the development of a theory of humiliation that applies to a wide range of societies, past and present; and to make contributions to the development of a widely-applicable methodology for diagnosing the particular kinds of humiliation that are present in particular societies, as well as likely prognoses and potentially effective forms of therapy.

The thesis and the papers represent different and complementary ‘moments’ in a hermeneutic circle. The thesis captures the moment of plunging into a small number of very specific social situations, studying them very intensively and, as a consequence, moving towards a number of empirical generalizations. In organizing these generalizations, I develop a larger model that draws on political science, philosophy and cross-cultural psychology and includes variables such as (i) social identity (in its relation to humiliation or respect), (ii) the Security Dilemma (weak or strong), (iii) the nature of the pie of resources (expandable or fixed), and (iv) the time horizon (long- or short-term).

In the papers, I carry out a parallel operation of moving beyond the empirical generalizations achieved through the field research and working towards a more theoretically-developed position.

- The first two articles, ‘Humiliation and the Human Condition: Mapping a Minefield’ and ‘What Every Negotiator Ought to Know: Understanding Humiliation’ present three elements of humiliation that entered the cultural repertoire of humankind in three phases that coincided, approximately, with advances in technological and organizational capacity and shifts in the balance of power between humankind and nature and between human groups. Humiliation may be described as ‘*the illegitimate subjugation of human beings (and of nature).*’ This sentence, if carefully analyzed, encapsulates the history of humiliation, and also the history of human kind. It can be deconstructed into three parts, namely (a) the act of subjugation (or abasement, putting down, degradation), (b) the recipient of the act, namely human beings or material objects, and (c) a specific condition of the act, namely its legitimacy (or, more specifically, its violation of human dignity and/or of environmental sustainability). In the spirit of Jan Smedslund’s psycho-logic approach, the inner core meaning of humiliation is carved out. This core meaning is already indicated by the etymology of the word humiliation, namely as ‘downward push,’ or abasement. It may be defined as legitimate and even institutionalized (in traditional hierarchical honor societies) – or not (wherever human rights are the reigning paradigm). Apart from its universal core, the notion of humiliation has also a periphery that is rather diverse. This periphery is culture-dependent and, furthermore, varies from person to person;
- The article entitled ‘The Relational Anatomy of Humiliation’ shows the complicated relational nature of humiliation. A ‘humiliator’ may deliberately set out to humiliate another person, but the targeted person simply may not feel humiliated but just laugh; at the other extreme, a person may want to be helpful but her help may, quite unexpectedly, be interpreted as humiliating; or, to take a third case, somebody might observe a husband continually treating his submissive wife in such a way that the observer thinks that she must surely feel humiliated and protest - and yet she does not; finally, there are cases where people in fact actually enjoy being humiliated, engaging in so-called ‘sado-maso’ sex-practices or religious self-humiliation. These examples suggest that a perpetrator might want to commit humiliation but not succeed, that a ‘well-wisher’ might humiliate while trying to do good, that a third party might observe ‘victims’ who do not see themselves as such (or fail to see victims in cases where they do exist), and that humiliation might be sought instead of despised;
- ‘The Humiliation in the Flesh’ considers the notion of humiliation in the light of the approach taken by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Philosophy in the Flesh*. It addresses

widely-used bodily metaphors such as honor as ‘face,’ arrogance as having your ‘nose in the air’ and humiliation as being ‘put down;’

- The article ‘Humiliation - the Worst Form of Trauma’ analyzes the transition from honor to human rights that is currently occurring in many societies, meaning that degrading actions previously defined as being ‘good for you’ are being reinterpreted as violations of human rights and the source of trauma;
- The article ‘Humiliation, Rape and Love: Force and Fraud in the Erogenous Zones’ links macro and micro levels by drawing upon a case from clinical counseling that explains the humiliating (rape-like) effect of ‘false love’ within a human rights framework, contrasting this with rape used as a device to humiliate the protectors of women within an honor framework;
- ‘Recognition or Humiliation - The Psychology of Intercultural Communication’ is an article that highlights the traps of humiliation that lie in the realm of intercultural communication;
- ‘How Humiliation Creates Cultural Differences and Political Divisions’ explains how humiliation can create and deepen culture rifts between people, rifts born out of bitterness and not from any primordial cultural difference;
- The article ‘Were Ordinary Germans Hitler’s ‘Willing Executioners’? Or Were They Victims of Humiliating Seduction and Abandonment? The Case of Germany and Somalia’ examines the notion of humiliation in German and Somalian history;
- ‘Gendercide and Humiliation in Honor and Human-Rights Societies’ focuses on genocide and the fact that male victims receive less attention than female victims; and finally,
- ‘Money and Humiliation: Why the Corporate Sector Should Support Global Social Policy’ maps out the notion of humiliation within the realm of global social policy.

Building a theory of humiliation will take many more years. So will the process of refining the diagnosis-prognosis-therapy methodology for identifying and healing humiliation. The thesis and the articles are intended to make a vital contribution to completing the first passage around the hermeneutic circle. The next phase of the process will be to collect further data in the context of a sustained practical engagement, for example in the Balkans. The doctorate, if successfully achieved, will make an indispensable contribution to that process.