

The Psychology of Humiliation

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A four-year research project (1997-2001) was designed by the author in 1996 to explore the role of humiliation. The project is being conducted at the University of Oslo (1997-2001) and is entitled *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflicts. A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Rwanda/Burundi, Between the Warring Parties, and in Relation to Third Intervening Parties.*

216 qualitative interviews have been carried out by the author, addressing Somalia, Rwanda and Burundi and their history of genocidal killings. From 1998 to 1999 the interviews were carried out in Africa (in Hargeisa, capital of Somaliland, in Kigali and other places in Rwanda, in Bujumbura, capital of Burundi, in Nairobi in Kenya, and in Cairo in Egypt), and from 1997 to 2001 also in Europe (in Norway, Germany, Switzerland, France, and in Belgium). The interviews were often part of a network of relationships that included the researcher and the interlocutors, and in many cases interviews went over several sittings. Trust was built and authentic encounters were sought, inscribed in non-humiliating relationships that safeguarded everybody's dignity. Interlocutors were invited to become 'co-researchers' in a reflective dialogue with the researcher, involving not only the interviewee and the researcher but also various scholars – through their ideas that were introduced.

As the title of the project indicates, three groups had to be interviewed, namely both the conflict parties in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi, and representatives of third parties who intervene. These three groups stand in a set of triangular relationships (at least this is the minimum version – where there are more than two opponents, as is the case in most conflicts, the pattern, obviously, has more than three corners). Both in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi, representatives of the 'opponents' and the 'third party' were approached.

Some of the interview conversations were filmed (altogether the author produced 10 hours of film, comprising many interviews, but also images of Somaliland and Rwanda), other interviews were taped on mini discs (altogether more than 100 hours of audio tape), and in situations where this seemed inappropriate the researcher made notes. The interviews and conversations were conducted in different languages; most of them in English (Somalia) and French (Great Lakes), many in German, and in Norwegian.

This project yielded results that in many ways represent paradigm shifts since they suggest an innovative conceptualisation of reality, both diachronic and synchronic, insofar as the quality of relationships between individuals and groups – as characterised by acts and feelings of humiliation, or respect – is conceptualised as central parameter.

The project breaks new ground, among others, in its effort to be truly interdisciplinary, incorporating in its methodology aspects not only of cultural psychology, social psychology and anthropology, but also history, philosophy and even literary analysis (in its debts to deconstructionism and feminist theory). Indeed, it features an unusual specific methodology, one born in part of necessity but one that proved to have distinct advantages over more formal questionnaire or tightly controlled and impersonal interviews in which the interviewer remains aloof at a great psychological distance from those who she is interviewing. That methodology involved a kind of 'reflective' conversation in which the researcher gently confronted participants with narratives and specific questions raised by the historical records. Furthermore, she generally did so only after making an effort to win their trust and their sense that the researcher could understand their experience – in some cases by living among them and, where appropriate and strategically or ethically necessary, by sharing something of her own background and the way it allowed her to empathize with aspects of what they were telling her.

The research essentially weaves a kind of tapestry around the central theme of humiliation in its many manifestations (some obvious, but some rather subtle and non-obvious) in three different genocides involving three very different cultures. It details the role of humiliation both in inducing genocidal aggression and in the subsequent responses of victims and perpetrators who cope with the historical record and their personal recollections and the narratives of their group. In fact, the topic and the methodology seemed to dovetail very effectively. That is, the introduction of the topic proved a valuable probe to get 'informants' to reflect on their individual and collective understanding of what occurred and what its contemporary meaning or significance is for them today. The nature of their revelations obliged the researcher, both on scientific/strategic grounds (the need to get people to tell the truth or at least their truth) and on personal or ethical grounds, to interact with them as an engaged and empathetic human being rather than as a detached and totally objective scientist.

Beyond these two very general contributions, there are other contributions that relate to the specific findings and themes that emerged from the interviews, valuable largely in the way they expand our appreciation of the many forms that humiliation and responses to humiliation can take, and did take, in the context of these three 'case studies.'