Humiliation and Assistance:
Telling the Truth About Power, Telling a New Story[1]

[Preliminary Draft]

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One of the most challenging aspects of studying humiliation is that it requires us, as researchers and activists, to tell the truth about the operations of power. This means we must *tell the truth about relationships*, specifically dominant-subordinate relationships in which some people hold the power to humiliate, degrade, or dehumanize others. If we hope to find effective ways to heal humiliation, this paper proposes we must uncover the disordered operations of power that sustain dominant-subordinate relationships and tell a new story about relationships that acknowledges and upholds the dignity of all people.

Power: Who's Telling the Story?

Making the operations of power visible may seem like a relatively obvious and straightforward demand of this work, but, as we all know, it is far from easy. Bestselling author and psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller (2003) observes:

> Many of us in this society (and in some others too) are mixed up about power. Yet power is very real and is operating right in front of us all the time. Quite amazingly, those who have the most power in our society almost never talk about it and even more amazingly induce many of the rest of us not to recognize it either. (p. 1)

It is difficult to map the operations of power when we have internalized knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices that divert attention away from these operations. For example, most theories of psychological development have obscured the operations of power by focusing primarily on internal traits and individual experience. Power is fundamentally relational; it requires interaction. While more and more psychological theories are exploring relational behavior, the consequences of dominant-subordinate relationships continue to be neglected (Jordan & Hartling, 2002). In another example, the American ideals of equality, equal

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opportunity, independence, and autonomy can camouflage the operations of power that protect the privileged with little regard for the most vulnerable members of society (Cushman, 1995; Lane, 2000). The recent natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, revealed America's hidden humanitarian disaster of countless people living in abject poverty in one of the riches nations in the world.

Internationally, humanitarian tragedies like Darfur are brutal reminders that politically-convenient dissociation and denial are still acceptable ways to obscure the operations of power that permit unspeakable humiliation and destruction, and the annihilation of millions of people (Lindner, 2001b, 2001g; Powers, 2002). Even if we recognize that power is operating around us all of the time, the disordered operations of power can be difficult to detect because the most powerful members of society can present these operations as normal and necessary (Walker, 2004).

Telling the truth about the operations of power is a daunting endeavor; yet, members of the *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies* network and others are forging a path:

- Don Klein (1991a, 1991b, 1992) told a truth about power when he named the "conspiracy of silence" that enables the proliferation of humiliation and the fear of humiliation, which infects the lives of millions of people.

- Evelin Lindner (2001b, 2001g; also see papers from 1999-2004) told a truth about power when she described the terrifying connection between humiliation and violent conflict.

- Victoria Firmo-Fontan (2003) told a truth about power when she documented the polarization of the occupiers and the occupied in the Iraq war, a situation that intensified feelings of humiliation on both sides.

- Paul Stokes (2004) told a truth about power when he observed that the conflict in Northern Ireland is due to profoundly damaged social bonds, bimodal alienation, and the loss of personal identity.

- Eric Van Grasdorff (2003) told a truth about power when he described how an information age, fueled by Western technology, spreads Western ideology as truth.

- Arie Nadler (2002) told a truth about power when he investigated the operations of power and social dominance underlying helping relationships.

These are some of the truths about power made visible through the study of humiliation. But how do we foster a keen awareness of the operations of power as we develop effective methods to heal humiliation? Psychologist Maureen Walker (2005) proposes that we can begin by asking ourselves two simple, but revealing questions: "Who is telling the story? Whose interest does the telling serve?" As a practitioner of Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)—a theory of development emphasizing the centrality of relationships—Walker uses this approach to unearth the operations power that shape theories of Western psychology. Walker observes:

The story of human development in Western culture has been selectively told in a manner that privileges and benefits people who have the power to tell the story. When we don't pay attention, when we don't notice who is telling the story and who is actually benefiting from the story, we might internalize the story as if it is a real truth.

Practitioners of RCT commit themselves to identifying and describing the hidden social, cultural, and political narratives that drive the operations of power. Aren't we also doing this when we study humiliation? Clearly, whether or not an interaction is perceived as humiliating depends on who is telling the story. Scores of Americans still believe that the current conflict in Iraq is about liberating (not humiliating) the Iraqi people, but many Iraqis would strongly disagree. U.S. political leaders claim that military action is helping Iraqis, but is it really helping? It seems more likely that it is an example of Arie Nadler's (2002) research finding suggesting "high status groups may give help to members of lower status groups not only out of caring and concern but also to maintain their social advantage" (p. 490). If we want to develop the most effective ways to provide assistance, we need to intensify our awareness of who is telling the story and whose interests are being served.

Legitimizing Myths: The Story Behind the Story Tellers

Once we identify who is telling the story, how do we uncover the story behind the storytellers? In RCT, this often involves investigating commonly accepted beliefs, values, or practices that mask and perpetuate existing dominant-subordinate arrangements in relationships. For instance, a primary principle of RCT is that growth-fostering relationships (i.e., humiliation-free relationships) are a central human necessity; as a result, practitioners of this theory are particularly interested in exposing the forces that undermine the formation of these essential connections. Specifically, RCT practitioners critically assess the social-cultural-political messages that breed separation, oppression, and social stratification, rather than authentic, empathic engagement. Researchers Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (1999) might call these messages "hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths," that is, self-apparent truths that maintain and enforce social stratification. Whether we are practicing RCT or studying humiliation, we can begin to tell the truth about power by investigating the story behind the storytellers, we can uncover the legitimizing myths that perpetuate unequal relationships.

Here is one example:

Western ideology (the story), supported by many theories of psychological development, suggests that the outcome of healthy development is "autonomy." According the *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* (2001), autonomy means:

1. *independence or* freedom, as of the will or one's actions: *the autonomy of the individual*.
2. the condition of being autonomous; self-government or the right of self-government; independence.

Based on over 25 years of clinical observation and research (Hartling *et al*., 2003), RCT questions whether or not autonomy is the apex of psychological development. How did the story of autonomy gain prominence and power? In the U.S., some might say the founding *fathers* (the story tellers) promoted the ideology of autonomy and independence (the story) in reaction to their feelings of humiliation they experienced under the oppression of British rule, e.g., "taxation without representation." Undoubtedly, America's drive for autonomy has generated positive developments, such as a new form of government. Ideally, self-governing independence in a democratic society encourages greater political participation, which leads to feelings of personal empowerment. Nevertheless, the notion of autonomy has its limitations. Law and Society Professor Martha Albertson Fineman (2004) observes:

> …our particular way of thinking about the desirability and attainability of autonomy for individuals and families has seriously limited the ways in which we think about equality. (p. xiii)

> …we give lip service to these ideals in a society in which policy and law protect and perpetuate existing and historic inequality, a nation where some individuals are subsidized and supported in their "independence," while others are left mired in poverty or burdened by responsibilities not equitably shared. (p. 3)

When does the ideology of autonomy become a problematic? Social domination theory (Pratto *et al*., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1994, 1999) suggests it is when it becomes a belief system that advances the superiority of one group over another, in other words, when it becomes a hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myth. At times in American history, the ideology of autonomy appears to have had the opposite effect. For instance, it was used as a "hierarchy-attenuating" story to legitimize the founding fathers' efforts to overthrow British domination. In addition, the story of autonomy provided a foundation for developing a representative system of government, a government that honored independence, in which "all men are created equal." But looking beneath patriotic rhetoric, we see that this story of autonomy never told the whole story. In reality, some men were not as equal as others, the majority of people were left out of the equation (women, people of color, indigenous peoples), some people were not considered human, and the founding fathers, in particular, were not representative nor were they autonomous. They were an elite group of men who depended on the work of women, servants, and slaves. In fact, "half of the signers of the *Declaration of Independence* were slaveowners" (Loewen, 1995, p. 146).

Could the story of autonomy be a social myth heralded to obscure the operations of power that allow privileged members of society to capitalize on the work of others? Martha Fineman (2004) asserts that the American "myth of autonomy" conceals the reality that "all of us live subsidized lives," we all rely on others—locally and globally—for necessary resources, e.g., food, water, health care, energy, education, etc. It conceals the truth that the most powerful members of society depend on extraordinary support to maintain their "independence," while others are begrudged assistance for the bare necessities of life. Moreover, it conceals the truth that it easier to represent oneself as "autonomous and independent" when one has, perhaps has always had, social, political, and economic advantages.

From a RCT perspective, the ideology of autonomy has real social and psychological consequences (Stone Center, 1981-2004). In effect, it generates a society of separation, a society that not only minimizes the value of human relationships, but also, even more importantly, grossly neglects the care of these relationships (Fineman, 2004; Lane, 2000). Autonomy implies that psychological health means "standing on one's own," without depending on others. This notion emboldens people to look down on and degrade those who must depend on others, e.g., the elderly, the disabled, the sick, the injured, etc. (Crandall, 2000). However, the landscape is changing. A growing body of research challenges the logic of autonomy, providing evidence that *we are all healthier*—socially, psychologically, and physically—*when we are connected* (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Hartling, 2003, 2004; Hartling et al., 2003; Putnam, 2000; Ornish, 1997; Resnick et al., 1997).

This discussion illustrates that even one of the most sacred assumptions of a society can be legitimizing myth that conceals the disordered operations of power. But where do we go from here?

Telling a New Story

If we are going to help heal humiliation, it seems clear that we must tell the truth about the operations of power by examining the legitimizing myths behind the stories that perpetuate dominant-subordinate relationships. These efforts will open the way for us to co-create *new* stories, new systems of thought and practice that will uphold the dignity of all people in a global community.

For example, RCT has moved beyond conceptualizing human development in terms of autonomy and independence vs. dependence. RCT is telling a new story, a new story about relating and relationships. This story notes that healthy development involves *movement toward mutuality*. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver (1997) define mutuality as *emotional and cognitive action that benefits both or all people in the relationship.* Judith Jordan (1986), co-director of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute and lecturer in psychology at Harvard Medical School, goes on to say that mutuality is the experience of:

> ...affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constantly changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other's state. There is both receptivity and active initiative toward the other. (p. 5)

In contrast, nonmutual relationships—e.g., dominant/subordinate, power-over relationships—are relationships in which emotional and cognitive actions primarily benefit the more powerful or dominant participant in the relationship. Nonmutual relationships obstruct the growth of all people, but particularly the growth and development of subordinate or marginalized groups. In nonmutual relationships, subordinate individuals or groups must exert massive amounts of energy: 1) to fend off exploitation; 2) to gain access to necessary material resources (education, housing, transportation); and 3) to protect themselves from injuries intentionally or inadvertently inflicted by the dominant group (Miller, 2004; Hartling & Miller, 2005).

Nonmutual relationships also obstruct the growth of members of the dominant group because, among other things, dominants must exert massive amounts of energy: 1) to maintain their power-over subordinates; 2) to constantly protect their access to material resources; and 3) to distance and insulate themselves from real or imagined threats from subordinates. In nonmutual relationships the dominants tend to believe that subordinates should do all the changing, *e.g.*, women should be more like men, blacks should be more like whites, non-Western-European countries should be more like Western-European countries, "underdeveloped countries" should be more like developed countries, etc. Furthermore, in nonmutual relationships dominants can easily convince subordinates that they need to do all the changing because dominants set the standards by which subordinates are evaluated.

Mutuality—cultivated in a context of mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, and mutual trust (Nadler & Saguy, in press)—creates the possibility for all people participating in the relationship to change, to move. Many scholars and researchers have noted the psychological benefits of mutuality observed in a variety of relational configurations, including close relationships (Genero, Miller, Surrey, & Baldwin, 1992), martial relationships (Fischer-Davidson, 2001; Lippes, 1998; Schneider & Schneider, 1991), women's relationships (Beyerle & Yarosh, 1997; Sperberg, 1995), men's relationships (Lizee, 1997), mother-daughter relationships (Adams, 2000; Goldberg, 1993), adolescent relationships (Cohen-Romano, 1996; Powell *et al.*, 1995), parent-child relationships (Lindsey, 1997), lesbian relationships (Murray, 1993), inter and intraracial relationships (Charlot-Swilley, 1997; Crisp, 1998; Genero, 1995), supervisor-student relationships (Thompson, 2000), learning relationships (Lambros, 2000), mentor relationships (Dixon, 2001; Spencer *et al.*, 2002) care-giving relationships (Lamendola, 1998; Stricks, 1998) work relationships (Cara, 1997; Garrett, 1999), relationships impacted by trauma (Bradway, 2001), and in relationships coping with major health concerns (Blumberg, 1996; Sormanti, 1996). Even when there are temporary inequalities in power in these relationships (*e.g.*, teacher-student, parent-child relationships) or functional hierarchies (*e.g.*, a pilot flying a plane, a conductor leading an orchestra, a president leading a country), mutuality is possible, though people will grow and change in different ways (Miller, 1986). Perhaps one way to heal humiliation is to work for mutuality in relationships, upholding human dignity while creating positive change in and for all involved—the humiliators, the victims, and the witnesses.

Some might say that movement toward mutuality is only possible on an interpersonal level. However, one can find evidence of mutuality anywhere one can find growth-fostering relationships. Here are a two of examples of encouraging mutuality to heal humiliation on an interpersonal and social level:

1. Tostan (2002, 2003), a nongovernmental organization based in Senegal, has been highly successful in eliminating what some might say is one of the most physically hurtful forms of human rights violations, the practice of *female genital cutting* (FGC). Since 1997, Tostan's efforts have led 1,271 communities, representing 600,000 people in Senegal, to abandon this practice. Tostan uses a teaching model of creative participation and respectful consultation, which begins with engaging village women in discussions of what they want for their communities. Through this process, the women developed strong, mutually-beneficial relationships, which empowered them to take collaborative

action within their communities.   Strengthened by their relationships with each other, they also formed mutually-beneficial alliances with religious and community leaders who could support and contribute to their efforts. Ultimately, this empowered these women to engage in and maintain patient, empathic conversations with the most resistant members of their communities who now support their efforts.

2. Linda Stout (1996), in her book *Bridging the Class Divide,* describes the formation of a Piedmont Peace Project (PPP), an organization that has been highly effective in engaging the participation of diverse communities of poor and marginalized Americans, people whose interests are often neglected or overlooked by the dominant society. Noting that most social justice groups were comprised of and managed by members of the middle class or a more privileged class, Stout worked to establish a grassroots organization in which low-income and working-class individuals could fully participate and develop their leadership skills. Stout's organization paid particular attention to eliminating the obstacles to creating connection, such as language and educational differentials that shame and humiliate low-income people. The PPP nurtured mutuality and mutual empowerment, which allowed members to not only change, but also inspire change in people who were in positions to implement government policies. How did they achieve this? Linda Stout emphasized, "Personal connections have made us strong—strong enough to be able to stay together and move forward even during times of internal conflict and tremendous opposition" (p. 184-185).

In these examples, mutuality provided a new story that created change in interpersonal and social relationships. Perhaps, when more government, business, and political leaders begin to tell the truth about power, the practice of mutuality would be more evident on an international level. Maybe this would ultimately reduce humiliating, degrading, and dehumanizing interactions around the world.

In conclusion, to develop effective methods to heal humiliation, this paper proposes three forms of action:

1. We must tell the truth about the disordered operations of power,
2. We must know who is telling the story and whose interests are being served, and
3. We must co-create a new story that upholds the dignity of all people.

Some of us would say that Evelin Lindner is the living embodiment of these practices. Through her universally-inclusive, mutually-empowering style, she draws together scholars, activists, journalists, business professionals, artists, government leaders, students, friends, family members, colleagues—*all of us* who are committed to telling the truth about the disordered operations of power that inflict humiliation. By her example of compassionate truth-telling and collaborative action, Evelin is telling a new story, moving us toward a global community in which mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, trust, respect, mutuality, and equal dignity can thrive.

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