Humiliation: Real Pain, A Pathway to Violence
[Preliminary Draft]

Linda Hartling, Ph.D., Associate Director
Jean Baker Miller Training Institute
Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College
106 Central Street
Wellesley, MA 02481
lhartling@wellesley.edu

For the last 10 years, I have been haunted by an observation I noted in my early research on the experience of humiliation. In an exploratory study of narratives volunteered by a subset of respondents who completed my *Humiliation Inventory* (Hartling, 1996; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999), I found that those with high scores on the scale described their experiences of humiliation as if it had happened yesterday, even though the experience may have occurred many, many years in the past. Their experiences remained painfully fresh and vivid in their minds.

Since then, I have wondered what mechanisms contribute to the potency of humiliation. What keeps humiliation present in our lives? Additionally, I have wondered how the enduring nature of humiliation may contribute to, or intensify, aggressive responses to humiliation. Incorporating a relational understanding of humiliation, this paper examines recent research on the neurobiology of social pain and social exclusion to develop several new hypotheses about the enduring and violent consequences of humiliation.

Applying Relational Logic

Until recently, the experience of humiliation was largely overlooked in the literature. Perhaps research was stymied by the limitations of theories, methodologies, and systems of logic that emphasized individualistic analyses of human experience, rather than relational analyses. For example, Western psychology has tended to use the "self" as the primary unit of study, privileging the values of independence and self-sufficiency, presupposing that separation from relationships is the ultimate outcome of healthy development (Cushman, 1995; Jordan & Hartling, 2002). I confess that my scale to assess humiliation conforms to the "separate-self" scientific tradition of quantifying individual experience. Today, most of us would agree that an understanding of humiliation needs a larger lens. It is an experience that reaches far beyond the experience of the self.

For nearly thirty years, scholars at the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wellesley College, led by Jean Baker Miller,[1] Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver, have challenged the dominance of individualistic perspective and proposed a relational analysis of psychological development, which has become known as *Relational-Cultural Theory* (Jordan, 1997; Jordan & Hartling, 2002; Jordan *et al*., 1991; Jordan *et al*., 2004; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Walker & Rosen, 2004). This theory posits that relationships—specifically, growth-fostering relationships—are a

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central human necessity. In other words, people need *connection*. In recent years, a growing body of research supports a relational view of psychological development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Berscheid, 1999; Hartling *et al.*, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Reis *et al.*, 2000; Resnick *et al.*, 1997; Spencer, 2000). Indeed, new developments in brain research suggests that human beings are "hardwired to connect" (Eisenberger & Lieberman, in press; Eisenberger *et al.*, 2003; Commission on Children at Risk, 2003; Seigle, 1999). Rather than separation and independence, more and more empirical studies provide evidence that people need connection just as they need air, food, and water (Eisenberger & Lieberman, in press).

Applying relational logic, which assumes the primacy of connection, humiliation can be understood as a profound relational violation, an assault on one's essential need for relationships. Humiliation threatens one's survival by threatening one's vital connections (Miller, 1988). This view is supported by Evelin Lindner's (2000) extensive, transnational research concluding that humiliation "is the strongest force that creates rifts between people and breaks down relationships" (p. 2). The study of humiliation challenges us to move beyond a focus on the individual experience toward a larger view that takes in the relational complexities of this experience. It requires us to create multidimensional, conceptual maps of the psycho-social-emotional-political-historical geography of this phenomenon. We are gathered at this workshop to advance various aspects of our conceptual maps of humiliation.

<center>Stretching the Map: Exploring a Neurobiology of Humiliation</center>

In an effort to illuminate the factors that make humiliating experiences enduring and an impetus for violence, I propose that we stretch our conceptual maps by exploring the neurobiology of humiliation. Recent research on *social pain*—"the distressing experience arising from the perception of psychological distance from close others or from the social group" (Eisenberger & Lieberman, in press, p. 6)—may help to explain both the acuteness and the enduring nature of humiliating experiences. Most of us would agree that humiliation provokes social pain. Eisenberg and Lieberman reviewed studies of animal and human behavior and conducted neuropsychological and neuroimaging research, to formulate a theory about how the brain processes social pain—and, presumably, the pain of humiliation:

> Social Pain/Physical Pain Overlap Theory (SPOT)…proposes that social pain, the pain that we experience when social relationships are damaged or lost, and physical pain, the pain that we experience upon physical injury, share parts of the same underlying processing system. This system is responsible for detecting the presence or possibility of physical or social damage and recruiting attention once something has gone wrong in order to fix it….Based on mammalian infants' lengthy period of immaturity and their critical need for substantial maternal contact and care, it is possible that the social attachment system, the system that keeps us near close others, may have piggybacked onto the pre-existing pain system, borrowing the pain signal to signify and prevent the danger of social separation. (p. 4)

Eisenberg and Leiberman observe that social pain triggers some of the same mechanisms and responses in the brain as physical pain. Could this be one of the reasons the pain of humiliation

is so enduring? Unlike "separation distress," which dissipates through maturation (Bowlby, 1969), Eisenberg and Lieberman stipulate that social pain is a phenomenon *that can endure throughout a life span.*

Eisenberg *et al.* (2003) observe that one area of the brain is particularly active during the processing of physical and social pain:

> The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) is believed to act as a neural "alarm system" or conflict monitor, detecting when an automatic response is inappropriate or in conflict with current goals … Not surprisingly, pain, the most primitive signal that "something is wrong," activates the ACC … More specifically, dorsal ACC activity is primarily associated with the affectively distressing rather than the sensory component of pain... (p. 291)

In one study, Eisenberg *et al.* used fMRI scanning to investigate brain activity while inducing a particular form of social pain: social exclusion (also a form of humiliation). Participants in this study were scanned while they were led to believe that they were playing a virtual ball-tossing game with two other players over the Internet. In actuality, there were no other players involved. To create the illusion of an interactive game, a computer generated the actions of the other players to *include* the participant in one round and to *exclude* the participant in another round. Excluded participants showed increased activity in the dorsal ACC, which was strongly correlated with the participants' self-reports of social distress—"how rejected, excluded, meaningless they felt" (p. 17).

Interestingly, the ACC is also activated in the human brain when there is *the possibility* of physical and social pain. Comparing animal and human studies, Eisenberg and Lieberman note animal studies showed that lesioning of the ACC resulted in animals being disinterested in social connections.   In contrast, humans who had lesioning of the ACC to treat chronic pain or anxiety became less socially sensitive, less inhibited, and less shy. Based on these findings, Eisenberg and Lieberman (in press) propose that humans have more complex representations of what *might* be socially painful, perhaps involving the prefrontal cortex. This means that humans can anticipate the possibility of social pain. Thus, in the social life of animals, the presence of other animals is either good or bad; for humans:

> …the presence of others can be either good or bad depending on whether or not there is a possibility of social rejection. If the perceived possibility of social rejection is high, being in the presence of others can be distressing, even if no rejection occurs. (p. 16)

While more research is needed, these observations provide insights into how humiliation and the fear of humiliation may be processed in the brain, triggering a physical/social alarm system that has an enduring impact. In the 1991 special issue of the *Journal of Primary Prevention,* Donald Klein (1991a, 1991b) named two fundamental facets of this phenomenon: (1) humiliation and (2) fear of humiliation. My scale, the *Humiliation Inventory*, supported a two-factor analysis of humiliation: cumulative humiliation and fear of humiliation (Hartling, 1996; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). Now brain science—exploring the neuro overlap of physical and social pain

systems—seems to be providing additional empirical support for conceptualizing two central components of humiliation: perceived humiliation and fear of humiliation. In addition, based on *Social Pain/Physical Pain Overlap Theory*, we can infer that the social pain of humiliation and fear of humiliation are high priority concerns for human beings. Just as we are wired to respond to and anticipate the physical pain of touching a hot stove, we are wired to respond to and anticipate the social pain of humiliation.

<p style="text-align:center">How Does Social Pain Increase the Risk of Violent Behavior?</p>

While Eisenberg and others examine neural activity during periods of social pain induced by social exclusion, other researchers are exploring the impact of social exclusion on other behavior. In six studies, Baumeister (2005) and his colleagues found that excluded or rejected individuals experienced *decrements in self-regulation*, measured by assessing research participants' ability to make healthy choices, their ability to avoid unhealthy choices, and their tendency to "give up" when asked to perform a frustrating task. In another series of studies, Twenge, Cantanese, and Baumeister (2002) noted that people who were told that they would be facing a "future alone," versus a "future belonging" or a future of misfortune, took greater risks and were more likely to engage in *self-defeating behavior*.

In support of their findings, these researchers note a number of concrete examples. Single men—men without meaningful close relationships—are more likely to drive recklessly or be arrested for speeding (Harrington & McBride, 1970), and they are more likely to be involved with car accidents (Harano *et al*., 1975; Harano, Peck, & McBride, 1975), especially alcohol-related car accidents (Richman, 1985). Single women are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs (Williams *et al*., 1992). Individuals suffering from the social pain of grief and loss are more likely to die from risky behavior, including accidents and alcohol abuse (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987). Furthermore, excluded individuals often become aggressive, (Kirkpatrick *et al*., 2002; Leary *et al*., 2003; Twenge *et al*., 2001). Ostracized youth who become "school shooters" are one example (Leary *et al.,* 2003; O'Tool, 1999).

But how does the pain of social exclusion lead to a reduction in self-regulation and increase self-defeating behavior? Baumeister *et al*. (2005) theorized that being rejected may induce a lack of *self-awareness,* which is a necessary precondition for self-regulation. This makes sense. While people may enjoy reflecting upon themselves during periods of success, experiences of social rejection would likely motivate people to avoid self-awareness. In another series of studies assessing self-awareness after participants experienced social exclusion, Twenge, Cantanese, and Baumeister (2003) found that excluded individuals withdrew into a "deconstructed state" characterized by numbness, an altered sense of time, immersion in present rather than future or past, a relative absence of meaningful thought, lethargy, and a narrowness of focus on concrete, immediate stimuli. Stuck in an emotional state marked by these characteristics, it is easy to understand why self-regulation is difficult for these individuals. It is also easy to understand why these individuals are more likely to engage in self-defeating behavior, including aggressive behavior, without regard to the consequences.

Twenge *et al*. also suggest that suicide may be the ultimate self-defeating behavior used to avoid the pain of self-awareness. Studies show that the presuicidal state is marked by emotional

numbness, while, at the time, suicide notes contain a greater percentage of first-person pronouns compared to other documents, an established indication of self-awareness (Henken, 1976; Wegner & Guiliano, 1980). This makes me wonder: if we closely examined the developmental trajectory of suicide bombers (who frequently describe feelings of humiliation), would we find that their actions are, in part, driven by a motivation to escape painful self-awareness?

<center>The Social Pain of Humiliation: A Pathway to Violence</center>

Based on these studies of social exclusion and the brain research on social pain, we can hypothesize a pathway along which humiliation progresses toward aggression. In theory, humiliation may trigger social pain activating the alarm system of the brain leading to decreased self-awareness in the form of a deconstructed state, which includes emotional numbness. Decreasing self-awareness leads to a decrease in self-regulation, which leads to an increase in self-defeating behavior, including aggression:

Figure 1: Humiliation: A Pathway to Violence
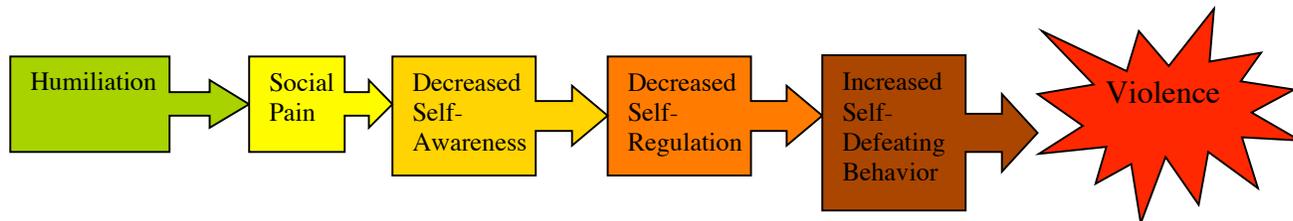
The riots that recently erupted in France offer a compelling real life example of this hypothetical chain of events. Primarily young, alienated members of the Muslim immigrant community in France lashed out in response to social exclusion in the form of racist attitudes, expressed in ways such as an unwillingness of "native" French to hire them for work.

However, this theoretical representation charting the progression of social pain (Figure 1) is too narrow! It reflects only the experience of the individual. Again, we must remember that all individual experience is embedded in a matrix of social and cultural relationships that facilitate one's sense of connection or disconnection. While profound disconnections inflicted by humiliation may trigger social pain and consequent behaviors, a context of supportive and healing connections may prevent or interrupt this progression. For example, in a study of over 12,000 adolescents, Michael Resnick and his colleagues (Resnick et al., 1997) observed that a sense of connection was the single most significant factor reducing an adolescent's risk of violence.

Furthermore, aggression and violence should not be viewed as the only detrimental outcome of the pain of humiliating social exclusion. Kendler *et al.* (2003) conducted a large-scale study of over 7,000 of male and female twins analyzing data ascertained from a population-based registry in which investigators blindly rated stressful life events using a four-dimension classification system (humiliation, entrapment, loss, and danger) to determine to what degree these stressful life experiences predict major depression (MD), generalized anxiety syndrome (GAS), and the mix of MD-GAS. This research found:

Onsets of pure MD and mixed MD-GAS were predicted by higher ratings of loss and humiliation…humiliating events that directly devalue an individual in a core role were strongly linked to risk of depressive episode. (p. 1)

Environmental experiences that involve loss of status and elicit 'psychological programmes of defeat and submission'…are more depressogenic than those involving solely loss. (p. 9)

It appears that the social pain induced by humiliation makes individuals more likely to engage in aggressive behavior or more vulnerable to depression. The difficulties experienced by populations forced to emigrate may illustrate these outcomes. These groups suffer the social pain of losing relationships and losing social value simultaneously. Clearly, extending neurobiological research on social pain and the research on social exclusion may be helpful for understanding the consequences of collective as well as individual humiliation.

Hypotheses for Future Study

This paper examines recent research on social exclusion and the neurobiology of social pain to formulate new hypotheses about the enduring and dangerous dynamics of humiliation. Grounded in a relational analysis, it proposes the following:

- Humiliation is a relational violation that profoundly damages one's sense of connection and triggers social pain.
- Social pain—including social pain inflicted by humiliation—overlaps with the physical pain processing systems of the brain.
- Unlike separation distress, social pain—including social pain inflicted by humiliation—can endure throughout the life span.
- The social pain of humiliation—as illustrated in the research on social exclusion—decreases self-awareness.
- Loss of self-awareness as a result of social pain—triggered by humiliation—may be associated with diminished self-regulation.
- Diminished self-regulation increases the risk of self-defeating behavior, including violence.

Our work together through the *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network* is gathering a portfolio of evidence that humiliation poisons interpersonal, intersocial, and international relations around the world. We should not be speaking only to one another. Based on the recent research discussed in this paper, isn't it time for more people, especially our leaders, to recognize that humiliation inflicts *real* pain, real injuries that are enduring, that all-too-often become used to justify for violence? Isn't time for more people, especially our leaders, to recognize that the *real* pain of humiliation leads people to engage in horrendous behaviors that devastate the lives of others and themselves? Isn't it time for more people—*especially our leaders*—to recognize that the *real* pain of humiliation is one of the most dangerous, most wide-spread "Weapons of Mass Destruction"?

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