



University
of Exeter



HUMAN RIGHTS AND
DEMOCRACY FORUM

Dignity & Democracy

A HRDF Blog



Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network: A Worldwide Community, by Michael Britton

POSTED BY CCLD201

15 AUGUST 2024

The **Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network** grew out of a startling realisation. In 1996, **Evelin Lindner**, a medical doctor and a psychologist born in Germany, went to all university libraries she came across, expecting to find a great amount of research on the emotion of humiliation. After all, history lessons had taught her that the collective humiliation Germans were subjected to by the Treaties of Versailles after the First World War had been the powder keg Hitler used to launch a world war. From 1984 to 1991, Evelin had also worked as a psychologist in Cairo, Egypt, and there she had seen how powerfully destructive humiliation can be for families and for individuals throughout their lives. These observations connected with her father's life, who had profoundly suffered from the Second World War — in addition to losing one arm, he lost his brothers, the family farm, and his homeland — he was forcibly displaced to a faraway region.

What Evelin found in 1996 was astonishing: The emotion of humiliation was rarely studied in academia, at least not on its own. If it was being mentioned, it was conceptualised as part of a continuum with shame. Evelin, however, saw that wars could be instigated with the aim to actually 'liberate' its sufferers from shame, wars could aim at revenging humiliation. Thus, she doubted that humiliation is always associated with shame. How come, Evelin therefore asked, given that humiliation has the potential to lead to war, that libraries are not full of research on humiliation?

Evelin felt that finding out might be her life mission. Reinvigorating the connections she had with Norway, she set out on a second doctorate (after her first doctorate in medicine in 1994), this time in social psychology at the University of Oslo, using the opportunity to do in-depth research on human dignity, the nature of humiliation, and humiliation's role in violence. She received a four-year stipend from the Multilateral Development Assistance Programme of the Foreign Ministry in Norway to do her research. With Germany and World War II as one case study, the Multilateral Development Assistance Programme suggested to add two more recent ones, in a different part of the world, namely, Rwanda and Somalia. Thus, from 1997 to 2001, Evelin lived for the better part of the year in Africa and conducted in-depth interviews. What role, if any, she wanted to know, did humiliation play in war and genocide? With a detailed picture of what had happened, she returned to Oslo and made the case to her doctoral committee that humiliation, an under-researched emotion, actually poses an immense danger. The committee agreed. Collective humiliation was such a powerful dynamic that it could even launch a world war and trigger genocide. With her second doctorate in hand, Evelin began giving talks in universities to promote awareness of humiliation and how widely woven into life it is, stressing the importance, the urgency, of reducing humiliation in our world and promoting concern and respect for each other's dignity.

After one such talk at Columbia University in New York City in 2001, people told her that, to spread the word, she needed to create an organisation. And so it was that the idea for the **Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network** was born out of an emotion that had been widely overlooked. In 2003, Evelin invited everyone she had been in touch with during her doctoral research to a conference to be held in Paris. Although she was initially unsure that anyone would come, the conference was attended by leading experts in areas relating to humiliation. These included **Arne Næss**, Norway's foremost philosopher, who was radically devoted to the sense of everyone's dignity, and **Donald Klein**, an American community psychologist, who had foregrounded humiliation as a central challenge in building community. The most important person, however, was **Linda Hartling**, a relational psychologist, now the HumanDHS Network's Director. 2003 thus became the actual birth date of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network, both as an academic field and a global network of like-minded people.

HumanDHS has since produced **numerous publications**. In 2011, the HumanDHS launched the **World Dignity University Initiative**, followed by founding **Dignity Press**. Evelin herself has led the effort to build **a solid, scholarly base** for making this case, with books on humiliation and dignity in interpersonal/love relationships, economics, global relations, and in our relationship to the environment, planet Earth, on whose web of life our lives depend. In this way, the realisation of the significance of an often-overlooked emotion in academia evolved into a global network with the mission to help create a more dignified future for all living beings on planet Earth. The mission is to emphasise the power of cooperation and shared humility over humiliation and thus create spaces, both globally and locally, where dignity, mutual respect, and esteem can flourish.

At the 2003 Paris conference, a pattern was set that Evelin Lindner and Linda Hartling have followed ever since, namely, searching the world for outstanding thinkers and practitioners in the areas of dignity and humiliation-reduction, people who not only think deeply about these matters but practice them in their own lives. Over the intervening decades, Evelin has served as 'global ambassador' for the dignity community, spending many months at a time living in different parts of the planet, living with people and getting to know their cultural mindsets and the realities of dignity or humiliation being experienced, searching out people who were working in this area and **inviting them to join this network**. She has brought into the Network people working on issues as diverse as the economics of equality and dignity (such as Kamran Mofid and Howard Richards), practitioners of conflict resolution among ethnic groups and countries (Morton Deutsch), therapists (Michael Britton), lawyers and students of international justice (Michael Perlin, Janet Gerson), historians concerned with cultures of honour and the notion of dignity (Bertram Wyatt Brown), creative artists, specialists in literature.

In this way, a formidable list from around the world who are now part of HumanDHS's **Global Board of Advisors** who number more than 300. People like these are drawn to the Network so they can share their work with others who understand and value what they are doing. They join the Network's conferences to hear what others are thinking and doing, adding to their own ways of thinking and taking action. They join to be together with others who share this vision of human life and the future that needs to be brought into being, a future where humiliating is no longer a routine part of life and where the universal right to human dignity becomes a universal reality. They come to find partners in correspondence and partners in collaboration.

The Network runs **regular conferences since 2003**, and recognising that conference invitations and attendance can be a potential source of humiliation, they have taken two steps: (1) to run conferences without fees and with minimal running costs, which are covered by donations; and (2) to run conferences around the world, to make them accessible for the Global South as much as for the Global North and reduce travel expenses.

Morton Deutsch, the 'father' of the field of conflict resolution, invited Evelin to hold a Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict every December at Teachers College, Columbia University, which has become a HumanDHS tradition. Every year, mid-way between those December conferences, Evelin Lindner and Linda Hartling have in addition created another conference elsewhere on the planet. In other words, if people could not come to the conference, the conference would come to them. Not only would it come to them, but it would also make them the featured speakers, the owners of those conferences. These conferences gave Evelin and Linda the chance to foreground people working on dignity and humiliation-reduction on all continents, to highlight their work, to make others in the network aware of their work, and to give them support and encouragement.

There have by now been **twenty conferences in New York and twenty conferences around the planet since 2003** starting in Paris, France, and Berlin, Germany, then San Jose, Costa Rica; Hangzhou, China; Oslo, Norway, Honolulu, Hawai'i; Istanbul, Turkey; Dunedin, New Zealand; Stellenbosch, South Africa; Chiang Mai, Thailand; Kigali, Rwanda; Dubrovnik, Croatia; Indore, India; Cairo, Egypt; the state of Para, Brazil; and Amman, Jordan. Some of these conferences have taken place in areas of danger — after all people defending dignity are not always safe. Their membership in the HumanDHS community can protect them, giving them an additional sense of legitimacy, as HumanDHS as HumanDHS has been nominated for the **Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, 2016 and 2017**. These nominations have given many HumanDHS members courage and have at times even been lifesaving.

What at first had been a realisation of the importance of an emotion that had been given little attention in the academic realm has thus turned also into a global network on a mission, a worldwide community dedicated to opening space, globally and locally, for dignity, mutual respect and esteem to take root and grow. Its goal is to support the healing from cycles of humiliation throughout the world, an ending of systemic humiliation and humiliating practices. HumanDHS is about the power of cooperation and shared humility (we can all learn from one another) – rather than humiliation – to build a better world, a happier world, a world where we are all safe in each other’s presence, a world where we are all safer than before because all the rest of the inhabitants of this world are with us, a world of equal dignity for all. This, the members of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies network believe, is the future we are all working towards today.

HumanDHS is now coming up to its **fortieth conference**, to be held 17th to 20th September 2024, in Madrid, Spain, with the theme ‘Global Vulnerabilities: From humiliation to dignity and solidarity’. All are welcome who share its values.

Michael Britton is a Member of the the **HumanDHS Board of Directors**, the **HumanDHS Global Core Team**, and a Member of the **HumanDHS Global Coordinating Team**, as well as Co-Director and Co-Coordinator of the **HumanDHS Stop Hazing and Bullying Project**.

Search

Recent Posts

- **Transformative capacity building around a right to a healthy environment: what role for dignity as a human rights value?, by Elaine Webster and Elisa Morgera**
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948**
- **Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network: A Worldwide Community, by Michael Britton**
- **State Cooperation and the difficult Diplomacy of Human Rights Bodies: the case of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture – by Christine Bicknell**
- **The age of dignity: human rights and constitutionalism in Europe, (Hart/Bloomsbury, 2015), by Catherine Dupre**

Archives

Archives

Select Month ▼

Categories

Select Category ▼

[Back home](#)

[Back](#)

[Home](#) › [Text](#) ›

Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network: A Worldwide Community, by Michael Britton



University
of Exeter



Select Language ▼

Powered by

Google Translate

[Privacy and Terms](#)