

BEYOND HUMILIATION: TOWARD LEARNING THAT DIGNIFIES THE LIVES OF ALL PEOPLE

Linda M. Hartling¹, Evelin G. Lindner², Michael Britton³, and Ulrich Spalthoff⁴

Despite efforts by the brightest minds and the most prestigious institutions, we continue to struggle to identify the root causes of violence, war, genocide, and terrorism. Does poverty foment violence? Does competition for scarce resources trigger atrocities? Do religious, political, or cultural differences drive destructive acts of terrorism? Or, are human beings inherently aggressive? A growing body of research suggests that the dynamics of humiliation may be a common denominator, a missing link in our search for root causes of violence (Lindner, 2006, 2009, 2010). How is it possible that our learning institutions have largely overlooked this phenomenon until recently?

Although most people recognize that the world is becoming “a global village,” have our learning institutions kept pace with this transformation? Specifically, have they kept up with the transformation of human relationships in this new global village? Although it is clear that humankind is rapidly becoming more and more interconnected and interdependent, do we understand how these rapid changes are impacting our relationships? In an interconnected world, questions of dignity and respect become paramount (e.g., “Do you respect me and my culture?”). In addition, experiences of dignity and humiliation are magnified by social media and other forms of global communication. Yet, academia has been slow to examine the rapidly changing relational conditions that lead to feelings of humiliation, feelings that can lead to violence.

¹ **Director, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies; Cofounder, World Dignity University**

² **Founding President, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, affiliated with the University of Oslo, Norway, and Columbia University, NY, USA; Cofounder, World Dignity University**

³ **Board Member, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies; Cofounder, World Dignity University**

⁴ **Director of Projects and System Administration, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies; Cofounder, World Dignity University**

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman illustrated the lack of knowledge about the impact of humiliation when he observed: “if I’ve learned one thing covering world affairs, it’s this: the single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation” (2003, para. 1). If we are going to make progress addressing the root causes of violence, our learning institutions must keep pace with the relational transformations that are taking place in the world today. The experience of humiliation is one example of a topic that has been largely overlooked in the academy until recently. Perhaps the reason is that the experience of humiliation does not fit into the compartmentalized methods of research that have dominated the traditions of academia. The experience of humiliation is complex; it can’t be understood from the perspective of one researcher, one discipline, one institution, or one culture. It is a very personal, and at the same time, a global experience. It takes a transdisciplinary, transcultural approach to understand the pernicious historical, social, psychological, cultural, economic, and political impact of humiliation in the world today. And so we have to ask: Are existing learning institutions adequately arranged in a way to facilitate the study of complex relational experiences like humiliation, or should we develop new methods and models of learning?

This chapter will use the efforts of the Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (HumanDHS) network as an example of an innovative model of learning that taps into the knowledge of a global community. HumanDHS is a global transdisciplinary fellowship of researchers, practitioners, activists, artists, and others who collaborate in a spirit of mutual support to understand the complex dynamics of humiliation, especially as it relates to violence (Lindner, 2013). This chapter will outline the historical conditions that bring concerns about the dynamics of humiliation and human dignity to the forefront. It will suggest that learning based on *equal dignity* and realized through *right relationships* is not only a promising approach to interrupting cycles of humiliation, it may be a path to learning that will help humankind survive on this planet. Finally, it will describe the initial steps of a new global initiative to advance equal dignity through transformative higher education.

Charting the Dangerous Relational Waters of a Changing World

Human relationships are rapidly changing in the world today. Human rights ideals mark a historic relational transformation of human engagement. The previous 12,000 years of human activity were largely characterized by the relentless ranking of human worthiness in relationships or what Riane Eisler

(1988) calls the *dominator model* of society. Today, human rights ideals and global information sharing have changed the game of human relating. The dominator model combined with today's unlimited power of destruction is no longer feasible, even for the dominators.

Humankind is beginning to realize the equal worth of all people. It is moving toward *partnership models* and non-dominator models (Pettit, 1997), dismantling the systems of relentless *rankism* (Fuller, 2003). Education plays a crucial role in facilitating the transformation from the old honour-based arrangements of relationships – relationships that secured privileges of a few at the expense of many – to the new dignity-based arrangements that acknowledge the equal worth of all people. Learning institutions can help people understand that movement toward equal dignity may coincide with people becoming highly conscious of indignities – humiliations – inflicted by mistreatment, outdated practices, or social conditions. Learning institutions are in the best position to help people navigate this historic transition, especially the dangerous relational waters of humiliation. Let's take a brief look at the history of humiliation.

Prior to 1757, the verb “to humiliate” had a prosocial meaning. It meant that individuals felt entitled to show subordinates their proper place in the accepted social order, which was based on rank (W. I. Miller, 1993). This was seen to be necessary to uphold one's honour. For example, in this context male aristocrats were called upon to defend their humiliated honour in duels. After 1757, the understanding of the verb to humiliate as prosocial humbling of subordinates began its journey toward our modern understanding of humiliation as an antisocial violation of one's dignity. In this new context, the downtrodden experience feelings of humiliation as they realize and rebel against their assigned subservient status in the social order. The early struggle to move from the old honour-based arrangements of human relationships to a new vision of human dignity is evident in the American Revolutionary War resulting in the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789).

The modern definition of humiliation is informed by human rights ideals. “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” as stated in the first paragraph of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948 (United Nations, 2007, p. 5). In the context of human rights, humiliation may be interpreted as *any* form of forced denigration of *any* person or group that denies or damages their equality in dignity. Thus, humiliation can be viewed as a transgression of the rightful expectation that one's basic human rights will be respected and protected. As human rights

ideals are increasingly understood and manifested around the globe, we must come to understand that humiliation in its many forms—for example, disrespect, denigration, derision, dehumanization—becomes a much more powerful force to break down relationships than before (Lindner, 2006).

This dynamic was perhaps illustrated in the vicious attack during the Boston Marathon. It is likely that the perpetrators were fuelled by their feelings of humiliated alienation. Perhaps the perpetrators took action in reaction to the humiliation of failing to find the mythical “American Dream” after immigrating to the United States (Sontag, Herszenhorn, & Kovaleski, 2013).

Based on 20 years of global research, the authors of this chapter suggest that feelings of humiliation can lead to devastating forms of violence. As Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and former Secretary-General of the United Nations, recently observed: “All the cruel and brutal things, even genocide, starts with the humiliation of one individual” (Whack, 2013). Humiliation could be aptly understood as a *nuclear bomb of emotions* in the twenty-first century (Hartling, Lindner, Spalthoff, & Britton, 2013).

Education for Dignity Becomes a Global Necessity

Violence fuelled by feelings of humiliation cannot be solved by building bigger walls or by developing ever more sophisticated weapons. Violence is an end result of humiliation. To prevent humiliation-related violence, we must get ahead of the process. We must not only address the dynamics of humiliation that result in violence, we must also address the process that triggered the feelings of humiliation in the first place. We need to ask the challenging question posed by Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson Arun Gandhi (2013): “Where did we go wrong in our relationships?” We need to “[r]ecognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part” (Earth Charter Initiative, 2013, principle IV, item 16f). Right relationships are an antidote *and* an immunization against humiliation because they are characterized by equal dignity. If we want to live in a peaceful world, diminishing the dynamics of humiliation through right relationships becomes a global necessity.

Education is the most logical vehicle for developing research and action that cultivate right relationships. Transformative education has the power to gradually disarm dynamics of humiliation. We can see this in the lives of women who have recently gained access to education around the world

(Torregrosa, 2013). However, so far, although today's learning institutions may offer extremely valuable intellectual experiences, these institutions are not necessarily the best cultivators of right relationships. They are largely organized in rigid hierarchies that grew out of an industrial age, hierarchies in which knowledge primarily trickles from the top down. Often this knowledge is characterized by faulty generalizations and circular reasoning that leads to partial knowledge, protecting the interests of the dominant social group (Minnich, 2005). Furthermore, many learning institutions promote self-serving individual achievement and cutthroat competition over long-term sustainable collaboration and creativity (Lindner, 2008). Even more troubling than this is the growing influence of economic, corporate, and other interests (Brooks, 2011) that turn inclusivity, independent research, and academic freedom into endangered species. In other words, too many institutions, educational and otherwise, are – at their core – replete with policies and practices that induce and intensify feelings of humiliation. Yet it doesn't have to be this way.

The Development of a Global Learning Community: Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

From its inception, the HumanDHS network has dedicated itself to forging a new path to knowledge and learning. Defying pressures to conform to conventional images of a not-for-profit learning organization, HumanDHS has made the goal of cultivating right relationships – mutually dignifying relationships – its highest learning priority. For the last decade the members of HumanDHS have gradually shaped a mutually supportive learning community designed to foster the growth and development of all involved. This is a system in which equal dignity is wired into the infrastructure of learning and practice. The HumanDHS network is organized to be dignifying by design. The process is difficult; it is like *building a ship while it is at sea* (Lindner, 2003a).

Founded by social scientist Evelin Lindner, HumanDHS was born in December of 2001, with nothing but a mere idea (Lindner, Hartling, & Spalthoff, 2012). From there, the HumanDHS network developed, emerged, and flourished in an organic way, as a global network of academics and practitioners who wish to build a world of more dignity and less humiliation. It was formed to bring together people from all backgrounds and all walks of life to unite in their efforts to understand the dangerous dynamics of humiliation in human relationships.

Morton Deutsch, considered by many as the father of the field of conflict resolution, was among the first core supporters. He, together with human rights activist Betty Reardon and scholar Andrea Bartoli, invited Evelin to join the Columbia University Conflict Resolution Network (in 2009 superseded by the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity, AC4) with her newly envisaged organization. Deutsch organized the first meeting of the members at Columbia University in New York City on July 7, 2003. This brought the HumanDHS network to a new level.

The meeting at Columbia inspired Lindner to propose the first global conference of HumanDHS at the *Maison des sciences de l'homme* in Paris, September 12–13, 2003. On short notice, Lindner emailed invitations while wondering if anyone would show up. To Lindner's delighted surprise, Linda Hartling, Donald Klein, peace researcher Victoria Fontan, political scientist Eric Van Grasdorff, and others dived into this new global-social venture. There were many energizing presentations at this groundbreaking meeting, but the most profound and poignant was a conversational interview with Arne Næss, one of Norway's best-known philosophers. Næss emphasized that every person, without any exception, is first and foremost a human being. He explained how he used to invite people from prison into his classes, saying "I do not see any 'murderer' in anyone, I see that someone 'has murdered.' I see no murderers, I see people who have murdered" (HumanDHS, 2003, p. 46).

This initial meeting sparked an ongoing dialogue about how the HumanDHS network would evolve. Lindner, Hartling, Klein, and others were convinced that a traditional top-down organization would not allow the group to *walk the talk* of their efforts – it would not express the core value of HumanDHS, namely that of equal dignity for all. Therefore, a more innovative vision evolved, a vision of becoming a flexible, resilient global network that creates space for creativity and organic growth, a network that transcends national confines and builds bridges between academic disciplines and from academia to practice. Advances in technology made this emergent model possible. Eric Van Grasdorff guided Lindner to establish a website that opened the door to many new possibilities for connecting with others throughout the world.

Furthermore, this initial meeting set the foundation for creating a uniquely supportive approach to global collaboration. Integrating Hartling's work with *relational-cultural theory* (Hartling, 2003) and Lindner's study of *equality in dignity* (Lindner, 2003b), it was clear that HumanDHS had to take a radically relational approach, that is, *to put relationships first in every*

step of the work. Recognizing that humiliation can poison relationships at all levels—from the interpersonal to the international—HumanDHS became a fellowship that made cultivating mutually dignifying, growth-fostering relationships their highest learning priority. This relational frame shifted the focus from getting work done through people (the dominator model; see Eisler, 1988) to what legendary psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller (1986) describes as *growing by supporting the growth of others*. At a later date, this approach seemed to be aptly described by Dorothy Maver of the National Peace Academy as developing *right relationships* (Lindner & Hartling, 2009).

How does HumanDHS build right relationships, relationships that realize a vision of unity-in-diversity across continents, nationalistic interests, and individual identities? HumanDHS needed a methodology that allowed them to walk this challenging path. A big breakthrough came when Don Klein (2004) initiated the idea of using *appreciative inquiry* as a framework for our meetings. Appreciative inquiry is a research methodology and philosophy initially developed by Suresh Srivastva and David Cooperrider (1990). Building on Klein’s suggestion, Linda Hartling (2010) and Evelin Lindner coordinated the formation of an ever-evolving appreciative model of engagement. This model encourages contributors to develop their capacity to collaborate with curiosity and openness, to listen each other into voice (Robb, 2006), to wage good conflict (Miller, 1986), to join in co-creating conditions for mutual understanding, and, most of all, to engage in dignifying dialogue, that is, *dignilogues* (F. Gomes de Matos, personal communication, May 6, 2012). As sociologist and community organizer S. M. Miller (2012) emphasizes, “the aim is to build together rather than to block one another. We change others by changing ourselves in the course of dialogue.” The Japanese proverb “none of us is as smart as all of us” (Japanese Proverb, 2013) and Senator Paul Wellstone’s (2002) famous saying “we will all do better when we all do better” capture the spirit and intent of the appreciative frame that fosters mutual learning through dialogue.

Although HumanDHS aims to raise awareness about the destructive cycles of humiliation, it does not wish to engage in *humiliating humiliators*, which would merely turn the spiral of humiliation further. Rather, HumanDHS wishes to promote respectful approaches, emphasizing the importance of *walking the talk* of equal dignity and right relationships in all aspects of its work. Therefore, HumanDHS invites people into the network who strive to work with humility and with a cooperative spirit that enhances mutual learning and respect.

Today, HumanDHS is a global transdisciplinary community of more than 1,000 concerned researchers and practitioners (with more than 5,000 additional supporters) dedicated to stimulating systemic change – globally and locally. It is a learning community that is encouraged and inspired by a world-class Global Advisory Board of nearly 300 scholars and activists. Since 2003, it has successfully hosted two annual learning events every year, one workshop in New York City and one conference at various locations around the globe. Each event has its own distinct flavour. The New York Workshop on Transforming Humiliation and Violent Conflict takes place in December at Columbia University’s Teachers College. It is hosted with the cooperation of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution and the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity. Morton Deutsch continues to be the honorary convener of this workshop. The global conferences have taken place in Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; San José, Costa Rica; Hangzhou, China; Oslo, Norway; Honolulu, Hawai’i; Istanbul, Turkey; Dunedin, New Zealand; and most recently in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

The HumanDHS learning community believes that eliminating harmful cycles of humiliation will open up space for equality in dignity and mutual respect to take root and grow. Indeed, the sustainability of social cohesion and ecological survival requires a frame of cooperation and a spirit of shared humility – not a mind-set of humiliation. As practitioners, activists, and researchers, the HumanDHS community studies the dynamics of humiliation, the antecedents and consequences of humiliating behaviours, and interventions that can help transcend cycles of humiliation and restore human dignity. HumanDHS attempts to bring incidents of humiliation in national and international affairs to the attention of people across the globe, to create public awareness of the destructive effects of such humiliation, and to promote alternative approaches that generate human dignity and mutual respect. As Sultan Somjee, Kenyan ethnographer honoured by the UN for his efforts to preserve indigenous people’s peace traditions, has said, “humiliation does not have nationality, religion, colour or gender. Humiliation of one human being humiliates humanity and our dignity of being” (Lindner, 2004, para. 28). Everyone can help end humiliation by encouraging equal dignity for all.

Taking Dignity Education to a Higher Level: The World Dignity University Initiative

As a learning community, HumanDHS efforts have demonstrated that dignity is not something one gives to others; it is a way of participating in relationships. Thus, it needs to be cultivated through thoughtful actions that consistently communicate mutual respect across differences. Moreover, equal dignity will not be achieved through individual change; it can only be achieved through changing relationships – relationships at all levels: interpersonal, social, and international – and these changes will spread the message of dignity.

Inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s call to establish a “Global Educational Trust” (Lindner, 2010, p. viii), members of the HumanDHS community recognized an urgent need for a large-scale, independent, and inclusive education initiative organized specifically to promote equal dignity in the world. This initiative would link institutions and individuals who prioritize dignity as a central component of global learning. Moving forward with this idea, HumanDHS launched the World Dignity University (WDU) initiative in 2011. The purpose of this initiative is to advance new possibilities for ending cycles of humiliation by promoting equal dignity and right relationships through transformative higher education.

It is becoming abundantly clear that we are living in times when nothing short of global cooperation can successfully address the dire problems emerging in the world today. Cooperation across vast differences begins with building a strong and resilient “relational infrastructure,” a relational system grounded in equal dignity and mutual respect, as exemplified in the efforts of HumanDHS and other like-minded communities. Building on the knowledge gained from the HumanDHS community, the WDU initiative invites educators, academics, and practitioners from around the globe to share responsibility for leading the world toward greater cooperation by bringing dignity to learning, both locally and globally.

The WDU will not be developed as a locally based physical institution; rather, it will foster partnerships through the use of emerging technology. This approach will make the WDU a highly flexible, highly responsive integrated knowledge-generating system easily accessible to existing universities and colleges, as well as individuals and communities around the world. It will incorporate the latest developments in self-directed learning and multi-centred studies. The WDU will build cyber-bridges connecting a richly diverse global community of teachers and learners from all backgrounds and experience, opening the door to clearer understanding, broader knowledge, and innovative ideas.

In its first steps, the WDU initiative has focused on developing two key resources: (1) a video library of ideas, and (2) the capacity to publish books. Since 2011, more than 100 video interviews with global scholars and practitioners have been recorded and made available to the public. In addition, books on topics relevant to humiliation and human dignity have been edited and printed by the publishing branch of the WDU initiative, Dignity Press. These achievements are only a hint of what might be possible as the WDU initiative grows and moves forward.

Who can benefit from the realization of the WDU? Academia is a first beneficiary because the WDU will both facilitate greater understanding of the role of dignity in the lives of all people and serve as a global role model of intellectual leadership and international collaboration. Practitioners, activists, and scholars can benefit because the WDU will bridge the gap between theory and practice by including both scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds and experience, enhancing the quality of research that leads to action in the world. Communities and families – especially underserved and marginalized communities – will benefit because the WDU would actively pursue many forms of knowledge and support education as a human right. Humankind will benefit because the WDU will encourage collaboration that leads to life-saving social and environmental solutions, ensuring human survival as we face urgent global concerns (climate change, sustainable energy, economic stability, and so forth). The WDU will be a global platform for cultivating right relationships in a community of educators and learners who share a common vision of dignifying the lives of all people.

Toward New Models of Learning

This chapter began with a statement: “despite efforts by the brightest minds and the most prestigious institutions, we continue to struggle to identify the root causes of violence, war, genocide, and terrorism?” One root cause of violence has been largely overlooked in academia: the experience of humiliation. In response to this intellectual oversight, HumanDHS created an innovative global community outside of the traditional academic frame to explore how humiliation disrupts and profoundly damages interpersonal, social, and global relationships and how it is linked to violence. HumanDHS is one example of the learning and global knowledge that can be developed when mutually supportive relationships are made a priority. Taking mutual learning to a new level, HumanDHS launched a World Dignity University initiative to act as a platform for transformative higher

education. This initiative is designed to bring together the wisdom and knowledge of a globally diverse community of teachers and learners to encourage equal dignity throughout the world.

It is clear that humankind is moving through dramatic relational changes, as well as facing dire challenges to our existence. To develop the vital knowledge we need to survive, perhaps our ways of thinking about learning and higher education also need to change. For example, Carmen Hetaraka (2011), an indigenous Māori and oral historian from New Zealand, suggests that the wisdom of the Māori people may be one source of the intellectual wisdom and practical “technology” that the western world desperately needs to save this planet. He might be right. Because of this, we need to create mutually supportive, humiliation-free global systems of learning that bring teachers and learners together in equal dignity. If we are to survive as a human species, we need learning systems that encourage everyone’s best contributions of knowledge and wisdom. The world needs new models of learning that dignify the lives of all people, learning that dignifies our relationships with each other and our relationship with a fragile planet. The world needs these models today.

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QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

- 1. Think of an example from your own experience of being subjected to humiliation. How did this make you feel? How did this support your learning? How did it obstruct your learning?**
- 2. The authors speak of developing a new model of learning which aims to identify cycles of humiliation, rather than simply aiming to humiliate the humiliator. List at least three examples of ways in which humiliation is a common feature of higher education as it is normally conceived.**
- 3. Do you think addressing the issue of humiliation should be a central concern for education for the 21st century? If so, why?**
- 4. Name four strategic changes we could make if we want to make human dignity a central goal of higher education?**
- 5. The practice of dignity education is essentially relational in nature. What capacities, in your opinion, do educators need to cultivate within themselves in order to be able to successfully model the type of relationships needed for this learning to take place?**
- 6. Describe the central role of an appreciative approach in educating for human dignity.**