HUMILIATION
This page intentionally left blank
HUMILIATION
Mental Health and Public Shame

BY
MARIT F. SVINDSETH
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

and

PAUL CRAWFORD
University of Nottingham, UK

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China
I dedicate this book to my grandson, Fredrik. I will do my best to see you, listen to what you tell me, and show you empathy. I will help you reflect upon your emotions, interact generously with others and love mother earth. Just now, we are going to play a lot! (Marit)

For two courageous men (Paul).
# CONTENTS

*About the Authors* ix

*Acknowledgements* xi

Preface: Seeding Violence 1

1. What Is Humiliation? 3
   1.1. Some Aspects of the Word ‘Humiliation’ 8
   1.2. Degradation 9
   1.3. Confusion, Powerlessness, and Helplessness 13
   1.4. Violation/Assault 15
   1.5. Feeling of Injustice 17
   1.6. Fear of Future Humiliations and Public Exposure 19
   1.7. Exclusion 20
   1.8. Public Exposure and Individual Values 21
   1.9. Effect on Self-esteem 23
   1.10. Self-esteem, Shame and Humiliation 24
   1.11. The #MeToo Campaign 27
   1.12. Our Ability to Hurt Others 29
   1.13. Power 30
   1.14. Rank of Status 31
   1.15. Humiliation and Memory 32
   1.16. Personality 33
   1.17. Self-image, Values, and Self-esteem 34
   1.18. Defence Mechanisms 35
   1.19. Preserving a Healthy Self-esteem 38
2. Reactions to Humiliation
   2.1. Differences between Shame and Humiliation
   2.2. Ruining Self-esteem and Self-image
   2.3. Additional Psychological Understanding of Self-image and Self-esteem
   2.4. Elements in the Concept of Humiliation
   2.5. What Activates Humiliations?
   2.6. Humiliation and Narcissism
   2.7. Symptoms and Traits of Narcissism
   2.8. The Symptoms of Narcissism
   2.9. Overt versus Covert Narcissism
   2.10. Vulnerability to Humiliations
   2.11. Humiliation as Seeding Mental Illness, Violence, and Terrorism
   2.12. Vulnerability and Entitlement
   2.13. Humiliation on Behalf of Others

3. Healing, Neutralizing, and Preventing Humiliation
   3.1. Empathy
   3.2. Neutralizing Humiliations
   3.3. Human Dignity, Power Balance, Status Rank, and Compassion
   3.4. Challenging the Freedom to Humiliate Others
   3.5. Revisiting Cases of Humiliation
   3.6. Core Values and Reducing Humiliation-inspired Terrorism
   3.7. Toolbox for Neutralizing Humiliation

Bibliography

Index
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marit F. Svindseth is Professor of Mental Health at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), teaching this subject at all levels of higher education. She also has 15 years of clinical experience of working in both secure in-patient and community mental health settings. Her research has focused on mental health, especially on how patients or users of mental health facilities perceive the care and thus acknowledged the presence of humiliation in different settings.

Paul Crawford is the world’s first Professor of Health Humanities, pioneering the field and launching multiple new research, educational, and practice initiatives worldwide. He directs the Centre for Social Futures at the Institute of Mental Health, UK, and co-directs the Health Humanities Research Priority Area at The University of Nottingham. He is also an Adjunct Professor at NTNU. His recent publications include Health Humanities (Palgrave, 2015), which is being translated into Mandarin by Springer Beijing. He is also the editor of the Emerald Arts for Health Series (forthcoming, 2020) for the general reader.
This page intentionally left blank
Writing this book has been challenging and rewarding. The work would not have been possible without my co-author and colleague Paul Crawford who always chose motivating words when my brain was sleeping. My first grandson, Fredrik Karlsen Svindseth, was born in 2018. He has inspired me to finish writing this book. I want him to be part of a world that takes seriously and responds to the devastation caused by humiliation. Fredrik’s mother, my daughter, Cecilie, has provided wise advice and opinions during the writing process. Together with her partner, Christoffer Karlsen, we have grown closer together through our discussions. The same is true of my son Christian and his wife Tove. They both have the ability to turn thoughts around, find new perspectives, and ask controversial questions in order to shake things up. I thank them for testing our theories and ideas. To my husband, Torstein, who has provided me with the time and space needed to be able to write the book. Thank you for lighting the fire and brewing coffee every morning! My dear friend Åse Scott Dahl has supported me for years, especially when I lost faith in myself. She read the manuscript alongside Paul’s son Jamie Orion. Both eagerly advised finishing the book and offered sound advice. I am grateful to my long-time friend Berit Bjørnestad for our thinking walks with Borzoi Enya and Silken Windhounds Gizmo and Shiko. My dogs have done so much to restore my body
after serious health problems. They have given me unconditional love and joy every day. There is always a danger of leaving someone out when thanking colleagues. To those I fail to name, forgive me. Nevertheless, I will give a special mention to the following who have inspired me: Ingunn K. Hunstad, Janne Rita Skaar, Frøydis Vasset, Bente S. Skagøy, and Ingunn Vasset. It has been wonderful to have your energy and encouragement down the years. You deserve the best! I also thank Marie Flem Sørbo who shared my office and her mind on the topic of humiliation. I also wish to thank my professional mentors who have supported me for decades. First, Prof Alv A. Dahl has been irreplaceable; his knowledge and wisdom has given me valuable insight into the topic of personality. I hope he finds his voice within our book. Second, I owe the psychiatrist Arild Hunstad a big thank you for his views and knowledge. I observed the non-humiliating ways he treated his patients when we both worked in the same psychiatric hospital unit. I learned a lot from him about seeing the value and worth of each individual. I also thank patients, friends, and women in abusive relationships, sharing their feelings and reactions to degradation and other humiliating acts. They have provided me with their views of the devastating effects of humiliation. Finally, I started with thanking my co-author; I will end it by thanking him again. Without him, this book would not have been possible.

M.F.S
PREFACE: SEEDING VIOLENCE

There is a global appetite to humiliate others and bring them down, often in brutal ways. The public shaming of others has become a chief entertainment. Anyone can find themselves in the cross hairs of humiliation and social media has made this all the more possible and apparent. However, the worst is yet to come from this widespread phenomenon. Humiliation delivers much more than personal or individual loss and calamity. It may be human society’s greatest challenge yet. The relentless humiliation of nations, organizations, groups and individuals is placing our world in peril if we but knew it. Indeed, humiliation seeds violence and can be viewed as the world’s greatest risk to peace.

If, as some people believe, we are already in a less than visible World War III, we can suspect that humiliation is the real culprit and it will bring us all down unless we do something about it.

In this short book, we will explain humiliation and its impacts; how people react to it; and how to limit its damaging influence on individuals and society. We will refer to observed humiliations in the media and also in the lives of others with whom we have come into contact in our professional work in the field of mental health. In the final chapter, we consider better personal strategies for responding to a selection of the observed humiliations.
CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS HUMILIATION?

Most people will have a good sense of what humiliation is and how it plays a memorable part in our lives. Humiliation is one of those experiences in life that we tend to want to forget about. However, perhaps that is telling us something. In this part of the book, we introduce some of the key ideas about humiliation and begin to share brief stories from people who have been humiliated. Through the stories, we learn more about the different ways that humiliation enters the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds. The common factor is that they have all experienced being humiliated. Their witness to the impact of being humiliated or shamed is our best guide to possible solutions.

Shame springs from a personal sense of failing that can arise internally from personal reflection or externally by another person’s critical comments or behaviour. What we know is that both emotions have a strong impact on individuals. However, it is the second and more intensely embarrassing part of the shame-humiliation pairing (see Tomkins, 1963) – public shaming – that concerns us in this book, that is, humiliation. Most people will have experienced some level of public shaming and intense embarrassment in their lives.
that provokes a blushing face, but there are several, often disturbing aspects to humiliation which can bring serious consequences for individuals and society.

Although there is only sparse empirical research into humiliation or its psychopathology or effects as noted by scholars such as Elison and Harter (2007), anecdotal or narrative evidence suggests that humiliation provokes suicide; mass murders, such as school killings; and other kinds of violence, as in terrorist acts, not least the bombing of civilians. Research also identifies a link between humiliation and depression or anxiety. Clearly, humiliation can drive people into psychologically compromised states, which, in turn, may develop into self- or other-directed violence.

We have all witnessed more than enough humiliation. While humiliation can feature in lighter aspects of society, for example, in its comedy, or as a choice integral to sadomasochism, it is more often a serious, non-consensual, and highly damaging phenomenon. Even in comedy, not least satire, the distance between laughter and offence can be very short – as in the provocative Charlie Hebdo drawings of Muhammad or Shikibu Murasaki’s ancient novel *The Tale of Genji*, where people are ‘laughed to shame’. It is horrible to feel the emotion of being humiliated which involves a public loss of face and shame. Multiple films and photographs have captured the devastating effects of humiliation. Our stomachs churn when looking at the many disturbing images of humans being degraded. For example, take the stark and intense images of the orange-suited victims humiliated by Jihadi John or, conversely, those imprisoned in Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib. There are multiple humiliations like this in the histories and works of all nations and societies. Sometimes the humiliation is more subtle but palpable, as in the images of Syrian refugees who walked from Greece through the Federal Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and into Hungary.
only to be corralled and thrown food packages like feeding time at a zoo.

Beyond individuals and groups, even nations can be humiliated and disrespected. Should we expect such nations to be peaceful? If nations or peoples are humiliated, as in Germany’s economic degradation after the First World War or the Palestinian allocation to the Gaza Strip and West Bank, then we will face further conflict and tumult. As we write, Western and Middle-Eastern nations and peoples are humiliating one another in a gross game of ‘pass the parcel’. Leaders of the most powerful nations on earth are bashing each other in the media, by economic warfare, cyberattack and through deadly and symbolic put-downs such as the use by the Russian state of Novichok on UK soil. Even high-profile awards can bring humiliation, as in the case of the dissident Liu Xiabo receiving the Nobel Prize in 2010. China perceived this as direct criticism and, indeed, humiliating. They responded with a trade boycott of Norway. More recently, Donald Trump mobilized the vote for him becoming president of the United States by humiliating Muslims, blacks, Hispanics, and women. He even spoke of China ‘raping’ his beloved country. These kinds of actions and slurs escalate the idea of ‘us against them’. It seems that leaders of nations do not think twice about how their symbolic actions and words will bring further conflict or violence down the line.

Often, we become insensitive to the devaluation of others or their values. We grow hardened to the humiliation that we, perhaps non-intentionally, inflict on our fellow human beings.

In humiliation, we are talking about actions that can be subtle yet painful ‘put-downs’ or in-your-face public disapproval, denunciation or ridicule. Back in 1956, Harold Garfinkel defined such phenomena as ‘status degradation
ceremonies’ that mark ‘the irony between what the denounced appeared to be and what [they are] seen now really to be’ (p. 422). This ‘bringing down’ or what Gilbert (1997) identifies as an attack on the ‘social attractiveness’ of others is happening more and more across our shrinking world. We see powerful leaders trying to handshake their competitors into submission in front of the cameras. It is not enough these days to win the grip — it has to be witnessed by everyone on the planet. Celebrities are shamed by pictures of plastic surgery gone wrong or private sexual preferences revealed to the public. From our workplaces and homes to our hospitals and schools and onto our streets, humiliation is taking over.

In most cases, however, it is the weakest of citizens who are most likely to suffer at the bottom of the humiliation chain. As physical and psychological walls are erected that separate the worthy from the unworthy, the poorest among us are set for the equivalent of a full body slam.

Our society rewards the behaviour of coping in our work, private lives and social life. People who in one way or another fall outside of the lifestyle that society rewards, such as those with drug problems, the elderly, children, disabled or mentally ill, are prone to experience humiliations. For example, imagine for a moment, the humiliation experienced by a person with mental health problems forcibly removed in handcuffs from their home or the street by the police. Should we be surprised if they fight back? Consider an older person spoken to in front of family members as if they were a baby or cognitively impaired. Should we be surprised if they strike out or throw a plate of food at us? These are the common, daily humiliations experienced by people all over the world. Historically, we share the images of humiliation dealt out to individuals and large numbers of people, from a naked single girl, Kim Phuc, in the Vietnam War to the countless victims
of the Holocaust and other barely imaginable devastations in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Dafur. Yet humiliation is not a simple phenomenon. We will now try to shed light on different aspects of humiliation, its association to our personality traits, our reactions to it, how we can recognize it, avoid doing it to others and how to heal each other after being shamed or humiliated.

Humiliation is rooted in the Latin word *humiliare*, which means to humble or to bring down. It is a strong or intense feeling or emotion (Otten and Jonas, 2013), and the humiliated will remember the violation for years, perhaps even a lifetime. The recognition of humiliation is key to developing our empathy but also the first important step towards neutralizing it.

Several definitions of humiliation occur in literature but four should suffice here. All these definitions of humiliation seem to consider violation of human dignity as an important element. First, Statman (2000) defines humiliation as suffering an actual threat to or fall in one’s self-esteem. Second, Lindner writes that it is when people treat others as inferior against their will. Third, according to Lazare and Levy, humiliation is explained as ‘the emotional response of people to their perception that another person or group has unfairly or unjustly lowered, debased, degraded, or brought them down to an inferior position, that they are not receiving the respect and dignity they believe they deserve’. Fourth, Torres and Bergner emphasize the loss of the standing to claim status as a central element of humiliation:

*When a humiliation annuls the very standing of individuals as eligible to make status claims on their own behalf, these individuals have been nullified as participating actors in the relational domain, or community in which the humiliation has taken place.*
1.1. SOME ASPECTS OF THE WORD ‘HUMILIATION’

In the tabloid press and in social media, humiliation brings ridicule and the humiliated are told to ‘suck it up’ rather than being allowed to argue that they did not deserve this. The humiliated are represented as bringing it upon themselves by their own actions and emotions. As an intense emotion, humiliation closely relates to shame, guilt, embarrassment or a fall in pride. Often humiliation is aligned with shame. However, these are not the same. The most important difference between shame and humiliation is that shame is self-inflicted while others inflict humiliation upon us. Table 1.1 reveals the key elements of this dynamic. In this sense, shame can result from humiliation, but it is not dependent on it.

In Christiane Sanderson’s (2015) useful ‘spectrum of family of shame emotions’ (adapted in Table 1.2 below), we see how mild, moderate and severe forms play out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humiliation</th>
<th>Shame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Degradation</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>Shortcoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness/helplessness</td>
<td>Impropriety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation/assault</td>
<td>Disrepute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of unjustness</td>
<td>Feeling of justness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of future humiliations</td>
<td>Fear of future shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public exposure</td>
<td>Private experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflicted by others</td>
<td>Inflicted by oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion/withdrawal</td>
<td>Isolation/withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on self-esteem</td>
<td>Loss of self-esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>