

HUMILIATION

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HUMILIATION

Mental Health and Public Shame

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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).

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CONTENTS

<i>About the Authors</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	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	41
2.1.	Differences between Shame and Humiliation	41
2.2.	Ruining Self-esteem and Self-image	45
2.3.	Additional Psychological Understanding of Self-image and Self-esteem	47
2.4.	Elements in the Concept of Humiliation	48
2.5.	What Activates Humiliations?	48
2.6.	Humiliation and Narcissism	50
2.7.	Symptoms and Traits of Narcissism	51
2.8.	The Symptoms of Narcissism	56
2.9.	Overt versus Covert Narcissism	58
2.10.	Vulnerability to Humiliations	61
2.11.	Humiliation as Seeding Mental Illness, Violence, and Terrorism	63
2.12.	Vulnerability and Entitlement	70
2.13.	Humiliation on Behalf of Others	71
3.	Healing, Neutralizing, and Preventing Humiliation	73
3.1.	Empathy	76
3.2.	Neutralizing Humiliations	77
3.3.	Human Dignity, Power Balance, Status Rank, and Compassion	78
3.4.	Challenging the Freedom to Humiliate Others	80
3.5.	Revisiting Cases of Humiliation	82
3.6.	Core Values and Reducing Humiliation- inspired Terrorism	107
3.7.	Toolbox for Neutralizing Humiliation	108
	<i>Bibliography</i>	113
	<i>Index</i>	121

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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.

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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 Ellison 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 sado-masochism, 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 1.1. Key Elements of Humiliation and Shame.

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