

# **THE HUMILIATION DYNAMIC**

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## Introduction

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There it is: it doesn't make any difference who we are or what we are, there's always *somebody* to look down on. - Mark Twain, *3,000 Years among the Microbes*<sup>1</sup>

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The Humiliation Dynamic is a powerful factor in human affairs that has, for a variety of reasons, been overlooked by students of individual and collective behavior. It is a pervasive and all too often destructive influence in the behavior of individuals, groups, organizations, and nations.

The Humiliation Dynamic is used to socialize children and engineer conformity among adults. It poisons relationships between individuals and groups and, as other authors in this issue describe, is a major weapon in the oppression of women, people of color, and other stigmatized groups. The experience of humiliation and the fear of humiliation are implicated in a variety of mental illnesses and engender rage which is manifested in anti-social behavior, murder, and suicide. Moreover, the dynamics of humiliation, both that which is experienced and that which is feared, play an important part in perpetuating international tensions and violence.

As it is defined for this paper, humiliation involves the experience of some form of ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others. Without exception, all those with whom I've spoken individually and in group interviews recall one or more such times in their lives that were intensely painful.

To explore the subject during the past three years I've combined several methods. First, I've remained attentive to memories of humiliations that I've suffered, observed, and inflicted. These memories have provided a rich lode from which to mine insights and hunches. I've also extracted a variety of insights from noting those feared humiliations I've managed to avoid.

Second, I've interviewed five people in depth about their experiences and conducted four intimate group discussions in which group members have been asked to describe situations in their lives in which they've been humiliated, inflicted it on someone else, or witnessed it happening to others.

Third, I've combed the psychological literature to determine what personality theorists and clinicians have written on the topic.

Fourth, I've delved into autobiographies and novels to note what celebrities and writers of fiction have had to say on the subject. The latter material especially has provided a rich vein of insights.

A report of work in progress, this paper shares information and ideas gathered from the above sources and sketches out what I believe are certain basic ingredients of the Humiliation Dynamic. It discusses the part humiliation and the fear of humiliation play in the development of

our ideas of who we are and why I think the Dynamic colors virtually all aspects of life in our society.

Before reading what I have to say about the experience of humiliation, I invite you to imagine yourself being involved in each of the following three situations. Ask yourself in each instance what that situation or situations has meant or might mean to you.

**Situation #1:** *"You are at an informal gathering. A group of people whom you admire are discussing a topic that is unfamiliar to you... you nod amiably and listen intently, hoping that someone will drop a clue that will clear things up and make it possible for you to participate in the conversation. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. This time, no such luck." (Klein, 1988, pp. 321-322.) The conversation ends and you leave the group as ignorant and uninformed as you were when you joined it.*

Has this ever happened to you? If so, think about how you felt. What kept you from revealing that you didn't know what those people were talking about? How might they have reacted to your confession of ignorance?

**Situation #2:** *You're sitting in your living room watching coverage of the disastrous attempt by the Carter administration to use a helicopter strike force to free American hostages in Iran. As you sit there, you remember the live coverage of the take-over of the American embassy in Teheran a few months before. Before your eyes American embassy staff members were marched through crowds of laughing, jeering Iranian demonstrators. Now because of the failure to free the hostages, despite our size and strength, we remain helpless and frustrated in the face of a small, technologically backward country.*

What were your reactions to these events? Recall what friends, relatives, and colleagues had to say about America's inability to deal successfully with the situation in Iran. What effect did the so-called Iranian hostage crisis have on President Carter's bid for re-election?

**Situation #3:** *You're a youngster, somewhere between age 10 and 15. On the back of a comic book you see a cartoon advertising a body-building course offered by a muscular he-man named Charles Atlas. The ad features a 90-pound weakling on the beach with his beautiful girl friend. Along comes a powerful 200-pound bully who mocks the hero, kicks sand in his face, and leaves the weakling an object of scorn in the eyes of the girl friend.*

Do you remember this cartoon? If yes, how did you feel when you looked at it? With whom did you identify -- the 90-pound weakling, the girl friend, or the 200-pound bully? What effect, if any, did the cartoon have on you? In what ways did it speak to concerns you had about yourself?

I share these images with you because they've illuminated certain facets of the humiliation dynamic for me. That is, each in its own fashion has revealed ways in which humiliation and the fear of humiliation have played themselves out - before my eyes and in my own psyche - during my lifetime. Similarly, I hope that these images help you to engage yourself with the subject matter of the paper more fully and with greater personal meaning.

## The Experience of Humiliation

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There is no character, howsoever good and fine, but it can be destroyed by ridicule, howsoever poor and witless. Observe the ass, for instance: his character is about perfect, he is the choicest spirit among all the humbler animals, yet see what ridicule has brought him to. Instead of feeling complimented when we are called an ass, we are left in doubt. - Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

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Asked what it's like to be humiliated, my informants say:

- They felt wiped out, helpless, confused, sick in the gut, paralyzed, or filled with rage.
- It was as if they were made small, stabbed in the heart, or hit in the solar plexus.
- Usually they felt themselves flushing and wished they could disappear.
- No matter how many years have passed, the experience remains vivid and fresh in their minds.

Their descriptions are consistent with those provided by the handful of authors who have written on the subject, most notably Lazare (1987), who suggests that the experience involves five characteristics:

1. visual exposure, i.e., feeling blemished, exposed, or stigmatized;
2. feeling reduced in size, i.e., feeling belittled, put down, or humbled;
3. being found deficient, i.e., feeling degraded, dishonored, or devalued;
4. being attacked, i.e., experiencing ridicule, scorn, or insult;
5. an avoidant response, i.e., wanting to hide one's face or sink into the ground.

### The Fear of Humiliation

At least as important as the experience of humiliation itself is the *fear* of humiliation that pervades so much of human behavior. Without exception, everyone who has contributed to this study reports feeling vulnerable to such degradation at the hands of others. It should be pointed out that one doesn't have to be an actual victim of humiliation to develop the desire to avoid it. Merely participating in or observing someone else's humiliation is enough. Whatever their own experience with it in the past, my informants say they do whatever they can to avoid it.

The fear of humiliation appears to be one of the most powerful motivators of individual and collective human behavior. So powerful, indeed, that people kill themselves to escape humiliation and others, even against their deeply held principles, go to war to kill other human beings rather than run the risk of being publicly humiliated by being labelled "coward" or

"traitor."

## Humiliation as a Dynamic Interplay

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It takes your enemy and your friend, working together, to hurt you to the heart; the one to slander you and the other to get the news to you. - Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*

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Clearly, humiliation involves a certain kind of interplay with others. Let's look more closely at what's involved:

### Being Put Down

To be humiliated is to be put down. The root word for humiliation is the same as that for "humous," referring to earth. The image is one of having your face forced to the ground. To use a common expression, when you are humiliated, you are made to "eat dirt." And if one is helpless to do anything about it and must placate one's oppressors, one must "eat shit" and may, to use an expression that enlisted men were fond of when I was in the Army many years ago, wear "a shit-eating grin."

### Being Excluded or Made Less

To be humiliated is to be excluded and made less. It involves a threat to your personal integrity and wholeness, a dirtying of your countenance in the eyes of others. When you're humiliated, you become less than those who exclude you, often as if in their eyes you do not exist at all. This is what women and people of color in our society feel when their ideas and potential contributions go unacknowledged and unrecognized. To be excluded or made less involves being put out of the circle of inclusion, control, and intimacy enjoyed by those who are the perpetrators of one's humiliation.

### Loss of Face

To be humiliated is to lose face, that is, to suffer damage to your identity and sense of self. There is the myth in our society that preoccupation with loss of face is more characteristic of Asians than it is of Americans. I call it a myth because I believe that this concern is no less powerful in the West than it is in Asia, although in our society it may be more often an individual rather than a family affair as it is in China, for example.

"Face" concerns are certainly no monopoly of Chinese people. Part of what differentiates the Chinese concept of face from that of the Westerner, however, lies in the fact that face is more a concern to the family than to the individual. Face-losing or face-gaining concerns not only the person directly involved but also the family. Such sayings as, "The children's misbehavior is the fault of the

father," or, "The ugly things [of the family] should not go out of the family gate," underscore the sense of joint responsibility and shared fate involved in family membership. One's face is a collective property. For this reason children must be taught that, "A man needs face like a tree needs bark." Believing this, children are likely to be cautious and avoid any rash behavior that may adversely reflect both on them and on their family." (King and Bond, 1985, p. 37)

It's not unreasonable to suppose that in the dynamics of Western families generally, collective loss of face and fear of humiliation play a far more significant part than heretofore realized. For example, as those working with families where a member is alcoholic point out, non-addicted members often are locked into destructive denial because they feel degraded as a family and fear further humiliation (Fossum and Mason, 1986.)

### Invasion of the Self

To be humiliated is to have your personal boundaries violated and your personal space invaded. In his best seller *The Bonfire of the Vanities* Tom Wolfe vividly portrays the excruciating experience of public humiliation in which one is totally open to invasion of the self by the outside world (Wolfe, 1987.)

Wolfe's hero is Sherman McCoy, a highly successful Wall Street bond salesman, who thinks of himself as "master of the universe." McCoy is charged with killing a young African-American man in a hit-and-run automobile accident. The case hits the newspapers as a racial *cause celebre* with strong political overtones. McCoy experiences what Wolfe describes as the very opposite of sensory deprivation. He writes:

"...one's self is not a mere cavity open to the outside world but has suddenly become an amusement park to which everybody ... comes scampering, skipping and screaming, nerves a-tingle, loins aflame, ready for anything, all you've got, laughs, tears, moans, giddy thrills, gasps, horrors, whatever, the gorier the merrier. Which is to say, ... the mind of a person at the center of a scandal in the last quarter of the twentieth century." (Wolfe, 1987, p. 512)

The terrifying violence of such public humiliation is vividly described by the author. McCoy, Wolfe writes,

"... feared each day's newspapers and news broadcasts the way a man would fear the weapons of any impersonal and unseen enemy, the way he would fear falling bombs or incoming shells. Even yesterday ... in the rain and the filth, when he saw the whites of their eyes and the yellow of their teeth and they reviled and taunted and baited him, when they did everything short of trampling and spitting upon him, they were ... the enemy out *there*. They had closed in for the kill, and they hurt him and humiliated him ..." (p. 513)

Few people, in fact, ever experience the full force of humiliating public exposure described by Wolfe. Certainly few of us have Wolfe's ability to describe it. Nevertheless, the feared humiliation is seared within our most terrifying imaginings. Whether one has experienced it or not, it's possible to know in one's bones what it was like to be McCoy or, for that matter, what it would have been like to be a Jew publicly reviled in Nazi Germany, to be a victim of China's Cultural Revolution paraded through the streets wearing ludicrous hats and insulting placards to the jeers of the Red Guards, to incur the unspeakable degradation of standing in chains in a slave market in the old South, or to experience the bitter, helpless outrage of a rape victim who is accused in open court of "asking for it."

We know from what happened during the Iran hostage crisis that nations, too, experience the humiliation dynamic. As suggested earlier, our inability to deal with a small so-called backward nation was experienced by many as an assault on our collective identity. That national humiliation and the ensuing rage resulted in major political and military reverberations, including a change in administration and, many believe, the invasion of Granada and the unseating of General Noriega in Panama as symbolic ways to restore national honor.

Even as this paper was being prepared, the Persian Gulf confrontation was building to a possible crisis stage. Iraq's President Saddam Hussein was quoted in the media as saying that "Under no circumstances will Iraq allow itself to be humiliated!" while U.S. commentators were speculating whether the United States would have the will to continue its blockade indefinitely or would end up having to choose between a humiliating backdown or a shooting war.

## **Humiliation as an Interpersonal Phenomenon**

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Each man is afraid of his neighbor's disapproval - a thing which, to the general run of the human race, is more dreaded than wolves and death. - Mark Twain, *The United States of Lyncherdom*

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My quest to understand humiliation began a few years ago when I observed how I and others dealt with experiences and circumstances that we emphatically wished to avoid (Klein, 1988.) The cocktail party situation mentioned above is a classic example. More than once I've joined a group only to find that they were discussing a topic with which I was unfamiliar. In order not to appear stupid and thus run the risk of being humiliated, I hesitated to show my ignorance by asking questions. The result was that I failed to inform myself and so ended up as uninformed and feeling just as stupidly ignorant as I was at the beginning, something which I had wanted to avoid.

I noticed that the desire to avoid disparagement at the hands of others figured in a significant way in what I did and said. I also noticed that I and other people with whom I talked often ended up not getting what we wanted in life because of our tendency to avoid humiliating ridicule and rejection.

The term Humiliation Dynamic<sup>2</sup> is used to refer to the phenomena involved because I want to emphasize that, although the *feelings* associated with humiliation are intensely personal, the *process* itself is located in the *relationship* between the person and what my mentor Erich Lindemann, a pioneer in the field of preventive psychiatry, called "the emotionally relevant human environment" (Lindemann, 1979.) Lindemann was clear that the idea of a personal self encased within a single organism is a fiction, albeit a useful one for certain purposes. It makes sense in terms of everyday life because it fits the highly personal, individualistic, and often competitive nature of our society. It is, moreover, a helpful frame of reference for psychotherapists to use in their work with individual patients.

### The Concept of Role

Lindemann realized that for community mental health purposes it's more useful to think about human behavior in ways that illuminate the *interplay between personal and environment*. Early on in his work in the field of prevention, he was fascinated by what Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons had to say about role theory. He saw that to think in terms of social roles enables one to understand that self and other are basically inseparable.

Relational concepts, such as role, are important tools for helping us design ways to promote healthy human development and forestall emotional casualties that ensue when the person-environment interplay goes awry.

### Significance not Self

Like role, significance is a concept that pushes the idea of personhood well beyond the individual skin of a single organism (May, 1967, Klein 1968, Brennecke and Amick, 1980.) Significance refers to one's sense of having value in the eyes of others. I believe that significance at some level and in some fashion is vital to the emotional well-being of every human being, possibly with the exception of certain hermits and holy people.

There probably are an almost infinite number of ways in which individuals create or discover significance for themselves. Familiar ones include belonging to a nuclear or extended family, enjoying the respect of one's colleagues, gaining recognition for one's achievements, sharing membership in a social or interest group, working with others for a common cause, and celebrating one's national, racial, ethnic, or other identity.

As used here, the term does not necessarily refer to fame or power. Even those who are of little or no importance socially, politically or economically enjoy significance with respect to certain people who are important in their lives. For example,

Elliot Liebow in his book *Talley's Corner* (1966) noted that unemployed, unattached African-American men who hung out all day outside a carry-out store in Washington, D.C. found significance in otherwise bleak lives in their associations with one another.

Significance is not achievable by means of psychotherapy alone, however helpful such intrapsychic intervention can be for one's sense of self. It is fostered by exposing people to environments in which they can realize their potentials because they know they're needed, wanted, and valued by others who are important to them.



### The Triangle of Humiliation

Like role and significance, the Humiliation Dynamic is another relational concept that focusses on the interplay between person and environment. The prototypic humiliating experience involves a triangle that includes:

- 1) *humiliator* - those who inflict disparagement;
- 2) *victim* - those who experience it as disparagement;
- 3) *witness* - those who observe what happens and agree that it is disparagement.

These are familiar roles to everyone who has participated in my study. If only vicariously or in their imaginations, everyone has played all three -- the humiliator, the victim, and the witness to ridicule, scorn, contempt, or derision.

The Charles Atlas advertising cartoon, referred to earlier, is in many respects *the* prototype of the Humiliation Dynamic. Like many other males in the United States, I came upon it as an early adolescent who was concerned about his masculinity and yearned for a satisfying sexual relationship with a pretty female who would be attracted to him. Since I was tall, skinny, and poorly coordinated - physically unattractive in my own eyes - this yearning seemed totally beyond my reach. There was no doubt in my mind that I was the 90-pound weakling in the Charles Atlas ad and came close to investing in Atlas' body-building course.

Over and above its personal meaning for me, the Atlas cartoon contains the basic triangle: the humiliating bully, the hapless 90-pound victim, and the girl friend, who not only witnesses the disparagement but finally actively participates in it. The cartoon also includes two other ingredients that are worth noting since they show up frequently in informants' accounts of humiliations they've experienced. These ingredients are sex and power. By the time the sequence has been completed, it's obvious that the girl friend has rejected the 90-pound weakling and that - short of paying Charles Atlas to help him build a new, more powerful, and, therefore, more attractive body - the latter is powerless to do anything about it. The sexual prize goes to the more powerful male.

Though comparative cross-cultural studies will be needed to confirm it, my hunch is that the humiliation dynamic in all societies is to a significant extent shaped by how each society handles differences of age and gender. Every society has developed institutionalized patterns of roles and relationships in order to handle the significance and power implications both of age differences (from birth through old age) and of gender differences, including the behaviors of those whose sexual preferences do not follow traditional patterns expected of males and females.

## Our Humiliation-Prone Society

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Life does not consist mainly - or even largely - of facts and happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one's head. - Mark Twain, Autobiography

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In our own individualistic, pluralistic, and competitive society, both men and women are prone to disabling humiliation because they enjoy few clear pathways to follow as they make the transition from child to adult (Raphael, 1988.) This was not so in more traditional societies. There physical pain and ritualized humiliation or threats of humiliation were used in a prosocial way as part of a ritualized process of collective support whereby, with few exceptions, the child was enabled to move successfully through the transition. The threat of humiliation was used to ensure that youngsters would not refuse to undergo fearsome and often physically painful experiences. Humiliation itself was used to create the sense of personal vulnerability and childish helplessness that would predispose the candidate to embrace the new adult status as well as the responsibilities that went with it.

### Prosocial Humiliation

Vestiges of such prosocial humiliation exist in our society. Hazing rituals of fraternities and sororities come to mind. Werner Erhardt used prosocial humiliation in his *est* training when participants in his program were repeatedly derided as "ass holes" and required to submit to potentially humiliating indignities such as not being able to go at will to the toilet, thereby being subjected to possible loss in public of bladder or sphincter control. As the movie *Full Metal Jacket* depicts, recruits in Marine boot camp are subjected to a series of humiliating degradations that have as their final aim making a gung-ho Leatherneck out of an undisciplined, self-centered teenager. Finally, there are studies which document the fact that medical education abounds with instances of personal put-downs and ridicule used by faculty and supervisors in the teaching of medical students and residents (Lazare, 1987; Rosenberg and Silver, 1984.)

Note that the prosocial use of humiliation typically involves a *group* of victims. One's degradation is shared by others of equivalent status. Moreover, the aim of the experience, as everyone is aware at some level or another, is to help one become an acceptable equal of those doing the humiliating. There is light at the end of the tunnel and, if the process goes as planned, everyone involved - including one's humiliators, one's fellow victims, and witnesses - conspire to enable one to survive the ordeal and emerge transformed at the other end.

Unfortunately, there are costs to the use of prosocial humiliation. Even when the humiliation dynamic works as a socializing mechanism, these costs may be unacceptable. Having undergone ritual humiliation and emerged at the other end of the process with a new group identity, the erstwhile victim has found significance, usually lifelong, in the fact of having gained

membership within the group of erstwhile humiliators. It's all too easy for survivors of such a process of prosocial humiliation to look down on those who have *not* undergone the same ordeal and to view them as lesser - often more contemptible - human beings, who deserve to be scorned and derided in turn. Thus, the erstwhile medical student may inflict humiliation, in turn, on a new generation of victims after having achieved faculty status.

Another cost of using prosocial humiliation involves the lifelong sense of vulnerability to the possibility of further humiliation instilled in those who survive such hazing. As Lazare points out, the need to protect oneself against further humiliation sometimes manifests itself in unwillingness or inability to accept and deal with criticism by patients, medical colleagues, or non-medical members of the health team (Lazare, 1987.) Karen Horney, who as a woman was more sensitive than her male psychoanalytic colleagues to the impact of humiliation on personality development, put it quite simply when she wrote: "Criticism from people of lower status is the ultimate humiliation." (Westcott, 1986, p. 75)

### Humiliation in a Competitive Context

Far from being prosocial, the humiliation dynamic in our society is, for the most part, played out within a highly competitive win-lose context. From an early age, we take it for granted that there are winners and losers in life. Even in the bosom of the family we discover that love is conditional, that we get more of it when we behave correctly and that we're subject to humiliating rebukes and punishments when we do not. According to the recollections of my informants, parents and elder siblings all too often use some form of humiliating disparagement as part of their disciplinary repertoire.

Later on in school we are marked up or down for our behavior as well as our accomplishments. We soon learn to grade ourselves and to deal with the fact that we are graded up or down for who we are and what we do. In the process, many of us develop a grading

orientation to life, which substitutes the quest for recognition in place of joyfully bearing the burdens we carry and meeting the challenges that life has to offer (Luke, 1987a.)

Even in the play yard at school - perhaps it would be more correct to say *especially* in the play yard - we discover that acceptance and recognition by others isn't something that can be taken for granted. There we learn, if we've not done so already, how deeply wounding can be the pointing finger of scorn, the ritual chant of "nyaa, nyaa, nyaa, nyaa," and other assaults on our sense of self and significance. Whether or not one is the victim of such humiliation as a child, one has innumerable opportunities to witness or participate in the humiliation of others.

As a child I found little solace in the supposedly comforting saying offered by my teachers and other adults: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." Tell that to a child who, sheltered by his or her family from racist attack, first discovers that "nigger," "kike," or "wop" are expressions of contempt on the part of others who view the victim as fair game for their verbal and physical abuse.

In an enlightening book on the "language of oppression," Bosmajian points out that "the importance, significance, and ramifications of naming and defining people cannot be overemphasized." (1974, p. 1) Slaves in Roman times were regarded as cattle who didn't need

names until purchased as servants by masters who gave them the names by which they were called. People in prison today are assigned numbers and are typically addressed by their first names as a mark of their lower status with respect to their keepers. The Nazis decreed that Jews, in addition to whatever other names they had been given prior to 1938, had to adopt the additional name of Israel for males and Sarah for females. They also defined Jews, Poles, and Russians as "two-legged lice, putrid vermin which good Aryans must squash, as a [Nazi] Party manual said, "like roaches on a dirty wall." (Bosmajian, 1974, p. 6-7)

Bosmajian emphasizes that power is inherent in the ability to assign names and derogatory labels to others: "The power which comes from names and naming is related directly to the power to define others - individuals, races, sexes, ethnic groups. Our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and words with which we are labelled. The names, labels, and phrases employed to "identify" a people may in the end determine their survival. The word "define" comes from the Latin *definire*, meaning to limit. Through definition we restrict, we set boundaries, we name." (p. 5)

From an early age, my own experiences and observations of others' reactions to the taunts of their peers taught me that names involving ridicule, scorn, derision, and contempt were, indeed, personally hurtful and also represented major threats to one's acceptance by one's peers, i.e., one's significance.

## Humiliation and Self-Creation

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Everybody's private motto: It's better to be popular  
than right. - Mark Twain, *Notebook*

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My studies suggest that from an early age the humiliation dynamic is inescapable. One way or another, we have all participated in it. It's virtually inherent in the fact that small children are powerless to withstand the superior physical force of parents and other adults who order them about, pick them up and put them where they want them, and in various other ways enforce their wills upon them. The potentially humiliating power differential between child and adult greatly influences everyone's sense of security in relation to others and is inextricably involved in the process of creating one's personal self in which everyone is engaged from birth onward.

It's generally acknowledged that our personal sense of self, self-worth, self-importance, and self-ideal are all internalized deposits of thousands upon thousands of interactions with real and imagined others. So-called symbolic interaction theorists among sociologists, Cooley (1902) among others, have long maintained that the self is social in origin and that children tend to view themselves as they believe their parents and other key figures in their lives view them. George Herbert Mead, another pioneer in that field (1934) coined the term "the looking glass self" to symbolize the way in which the sense of self is a reflection of others' reactions towards one. Some years later, Erich Berne, the founder of Transactional Analysis, recognized that there's a proactive aspect to self-development. He used the term "little Professor" to refer to the creative part of even the smallest child that monitors how people respond to its behavior, reflects on what

it experiences, forms mini-theories about what's required to survive and be safe in the world, and actively fashions a story line that both explains and guides its behavior (Berne, 1964; 1972.)

I believe that the self remains a person-in-environment entity throughout one's life and that one's active process of self-creation vis-a-vis others never ends. Whether one is aware of it or not, one is always experiencing, reflecting upon, defining, and dealing with the world of oneself-in-relation-to-others. Thus, self-creation involves a lifelong process even though most of us aren't aware that it's going on. Most important for purposes of understanding the Humiliation Dynamic is the fact that it's a process in which real or imagined ridicule, scorn, and contempt - whether at the hands of family members, friends, teachers, bosses and co-workers, even utter strangers - play an important part.

## Humiliation and Psychopathology

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Our consciences take *no* notice of pain inflicted on others until it reaches a point where it gives pain to *us*. - Mark Twain, *What is Man?*

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Some degree of support to these suppositions is provided by the fact that in the literature humiliation is implicated - directly or indirectly - in many, if not most, clinically recognized emotional and social disorders. So far in my explorations I've found it cited with respect to delinquency (Erikson, 1987; Jacobs, 1983,) depression (Lewis, 1976,) mass murders (Spores, 1988,) paranoia (Gaylin, 1979,) sado-masochism (Fromm, 1973,) generalized and social anxiety disorders (Beck and Emery, 1985,) spouse and child abuse (Gelles and Straus, 1988,) and suicide (Gernsbacher, 1985.)

### Juvenile Delinquency

More than one author has alluded to humiliation as a factor in juvenile delinquency. Erikson, for one, describes what he calls "a not uncommon type of adolescent who turns delinquent:"

"Gifted, ambitious, proud, he is at the same time possessed by wild drives, is immature in his social ideas, unsure of his ideals, and morbidly suggestible. During a period of rapid growth and strong aggressiveness *he suffers a severe humiliation*. He disavows his primitive tendencies and attempts to adjust abruptly to his neighbor's standards. This personality, however, is not ready to sustain the change; he "overadjusts." .... *Adjustment becomes self-debasement* ... The adolescent finds that he has relinquished his old self without gaining a new one in his adjustment to the conflicting demands of his environment. As he begins to mistrust them he mistrusts the values which he has just begun to share with them. At this point he meets a leader and a gang who proclaim that the adolescent is always right, that aggression is good, that conscience is an affliction, adjustment a crime." (Erikson, 1987, pp. 342-343; italics added)

Though Erikson neither dwells on nor describes the nature of the severe humiliation experienced

by the pre-delinquent, it's clear that he views the ultimate delinquent identity as the only acceptable means available to such a young man for dealing with his humiliators. In effect, the delinquent has embraced the values and behaviors for which he had been held in contempt.

Delinquency has also been related to the humiliation experienced by youngsters who suffer from some form of cognitive or perceptual-motor deficit. Reporting on a study of fifty such delinquent boys, Jacobs (1983) points out that "To maintain self-esteem while burdened with a cognitive or perceptual-motor deficit is not an easy task." He describes a series of delinquent adolescents in which humiliations associated with repeated failures over many years contributed, in his judgement, to impulsivity, feelings of vulnerability, and low self-esteem.

### Depression

Helen Lewis (1976), a pioneer in the study of shame, which she defines as a family of emotions that includes humiliation, found that her depressed patients typically felt humiliated by and unconsciously enraged at loved ones who, unlike themselves, aren't trapped in a morass of hopelessness. Such depressed individuals are, in effect, caught in what Lewis calls the "feeling trap" of humiliated fury. She writes:

"Depressed patients are in a chronic state of shame proneness, if only because they are depressed and helpless to get out of it. But although they are in a humiliated state - a state, incidentally, usually accompanied by quick fury - they are not at all *conscious* of being angry at anyone." (Lewis, 1976, p. 241)

### Paranoia

Paranoia involves the projection of unacceptable wishes or impulses onto the world around us. There is a widely held theory that paranoid projection is a defense mechanism against feelings of inferiority and humiliation (Brink, 1980; Gaylin, 1979.) According to Gaylin, a psychoanalyst, we then "claim not that we wish these things but that they are being forced on us by some other. We can then feel outrage and fear, and be relieved from feeling guilty of the feeling or ashamed of the potential exposure." (Gaylin, 1979, p. 74) Paranoia, he believes, involves the choice of humiliation instead of the shame or guilt with which the individual would otherwise have to deal.

"The actual paranoid, then, must manufacture a conspiratorial world in which everyone is plotting his personal humiliation. Better humiliation than shame: at least then he can be the noble warrior in his own defense and attack the conspirators." (Gaylin, 1979, p. 74)

Gaylin cites Freud's famous Schreber case as the first published account of the part played by humiliation in the paranoid process. Justice Schreber had paranoid delusions that people were accusing him of homosexuality and that homosexual advances were being made toward him. Gaylin concludes that the exposure of his own homosexual desires would have been humiliating to Schreber.

Therefore, Schreber handled his guilt and protected himself against humiliation by believing that God himself was trying "to homosexually reduce and humiliate him." (Gaylin, 1979, p. 154)

## Running Amok

According to Spores (1988) running amok, serial killings, killing sprees, and other forms of murderous rampages are acts of personal desperation performed by humiliated individuals, almost all of whom are men. They finally lose control after they have brooded for a long time over supposed personal insults or injuries for which they feel unable to get satisfaction in any other way.

## Sado-Masochism

Sado-masochism used to be thought of simply as a perversion of sexual instincts. It is more than that. (Horney, 1950; Fromm, 1973.) Horney described the "vindictive sadist" as someone who, out of "bitter envy arising from repressed self-contempt and discontent" shows "the repeated tendency to subjugate, dominate, disparage, deprecate, humiliate, berate, blame, defeat, and cruelly criticize others." (Widiger, et. al, 1988) Fromm defined a sadist as " ... a person with an intense desire to control, hurt, humiliate another person." (Fromm, 1973, p. 282)

Masochistic or, as they are more recently labelled, "self-defeating" personality disorders represent the other side of the sado-masochistic coin. Such people think of themselves so negatively that they expect to fail and to be rejected. Not only do they expect misfortune but also repeatedly place themselves in situations where they'll be physically or emotionally abused (Widiger, et. al., 1988.) Greif (1989) describes the life of the masochistically disordered person as "an experiential world of misery, humiliation, and anxiety." (p. 2) Another author (Montgomery, 1989) writes:

"A masochistic life is one of seemingly needless, prolonged, self-inflicted suffering and humiliation... These patients feel that they suffer from life; that they are untreatable, and yet in desperation demand our help, while simultaneously clinging to pain." (p. 75)

## Generalized and Social Anxiety

In those suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorders (GAD) a major dread "is that of being depreciated, ridiculed, or rejected." (Beck and Emery, 1985, p. 96) These patients fear to expose themselves to one or another form of public humiliation.

The person suffering from GAD:

" ... believes he is subject to painful group reprisals, such as public humiliation and ridicule and is *powerless* to ward off these attacks. The social opinion is absolute, finalistic, irrevocable. ... he must accede to the right of the members of the group to amuse themselves at his expense." (Beck and Emery, 1985, p. 157)

A subcategory of the anxiety disorders is *social phobia*, which is defined in DSM-III as:

"A persistent, irrational fear of, and compelling desire to avoid, situations in which the individual may be exposed to the scrutiny of others. There is also fear that the individual will behave in a manner that will be humiliating or

embarrassing."

The generalized anxiety associated with the fear of humiliation is itself a cause of shame and humiliation. In a kind of vicious cycle, GAD sufferers, anxious about being exposed to public scrutiny and possible ridicule, experience an inner sense of humiliation because of their very vulnerability to social anxiety, which, they believe, makes them fundamentally flawed in others' eyes. In effect, they arrange for themselves the awful humiliation that they so desperately wish to avoid.

### Abuse of Family Members

Though the part played by humiliation or the fear of humiliation in engendering child or spousal abuse has not to my knowledge been explored in depth, there's anecdotal reason to conclude that those who inflict physical or emotional abuse on family members are themselves driven by the humiliation dynamic. Some support to this conclusion is contained in a recent report of research on spouse abuse, which states :

"The typical [wife beater] is employed part-time or not at all. His total income is poverty level. He worries about economic security, and he is very dissatisfied with his standard of living. ... While he tries to dominate the family and hold down what he sees as the husband's position of power, he has few of the economic or social resources that allow for such dominance; not only does his neighbor have a better job and earn more money, but often so does his wife." (Gelles and Straus, 1988, p. 88)

The report concludes that "... status inconsistency is an important component of the profile of the battering husband." It adds, "Husbands ... can be more threatened when their wives work and have an independent source of income and prestige than when they are home and dependent." (p. 88) Though the authors don't use the term, it seems reasonable to conclude from their descriptions that such battering men - regardless of their

socioeconomic level - may well be enraged victims of the Humiliation Dynamic, fearful that they will face others' ridicule and contempt for not having performed successfully as males and providers.

According to Westkott, who provides a thoughtful feminist perspective on the work of Karen Horney, one of the earliest female neo-Freudians, "Heterosexual conquest is the means - and women are the instruments along an endless path in the creation of male identity. In this pursuit, the man needs not only conquest of desirable women but also the conviction of female inferiority." (Westkott, 1986, p. 106)

Horney challenged Freud's concept of female penis envy. She maintained that the boy "fears humiliation through rejection [which] produces a kind of compulsive masculinity."

"In effect, the fear of rejection is an extension of the fear of castration; the castrating woman is the dissatisfied, humiliating woman. Laughing at the puny penis is equivalent to removing it ... Horney argued that lurking beneath the narcissistic glorification of the penis is trembling dread of the vagina." (p. 54)



Westcott quotes Horney as saying that women, in turn, are afraid of their dependence on and need for men's admiration and love, which are based on their fear of disappointments and humiliations at the hands of men, humiliations that they have themselves already experienced as children.

In other words, the proverbial "battle of the sexes" is fuelled by a volatile mixture of past and anticipated rejections, belittlements, and other humiliations, which can gradually saturate into both partners in a relationship and, when sparked by financial or other friction, - as so often happens - explode into serious psychological and physical abuse.

Though the problem of abuse is more widely recognized today than it used to be, there's reason to believe that the situation has been grim for many decades. Long-standing negative attitudes towards women predispose men, in our culture as well as elsewhere, to treat women as inferior to themselves. As early as 1927, Alfred Adler wrote that "A serious result of this myth of the inferiority of everything female is a peculiar dichotomy of concepts:

"Masculine is simply identified with valuable, strong, and victorious, and feminine with obedient, servile, and subordinated. This manner of thinking has become so deeply rooted in our culture that everything excellent has a male tint, whereas everything that is less valuable and objectionable is represented as feminine. As is well known, for some men the worst insult is "just like a woman," whereas in girls manliness does not mean derogation. The accent is always placed so that everything that reminds one of the female is represented as inferior."  
(Adler, 1978, p. 8)

That the manner of thinking about males and females has not changed much since the 1920's is reflected in the following report of a conversation with high school students carried out in 1985:

"When I asked a small mixed-gender high school psychology class...to list the characteristics they associated with the term *feminine*, they offered the following: intuitive, understanding, caring, graceful, soft-spoken, dainty, and curvy. The characteristics they associated with *masculine*, on the other hand, were muscular, aggressive, brave, ambitious, rough, logical, handsome, daring, competitive, and strong." (Lott, 1987, p. 72)

### Suicide

More often than is generally acknowledged, suicide is an act of desperation designed to remove the victim from a state of helpless humiliation over the failure to live up to what one expects of oneself or believes is expected by others. Recall, for example, the epidemic of suicides following the Wall Street crash of 1929 when many hitherto wealthy men, who apparently could not face exposure to the world as destitute failures, jumped from New York City skyscrapers or used other means of taking their own lives. Other examples include unemployed men, who have higher suicide rates than do those who are employed, and numerous reported examples of children who take their own lives after failing exams or being taunted by their peers as queer or different. If there is a fate to be feared worse than death, it would appear, for many people it is the humiliation of public exposure as a failure.

According to Gernsbacher (1985), suicide prone individuals, though they are not aware of it, hold an inner conviction of what he calls a Fantastic Self that must be "perfect, flawless, and infinitely powerful." (p. 30) About this kind of suicide-prone individual, Gernsbacher states:

"His unconscious conviction in [the Fantastic Self] causes him virtually unlimited shame, humiliation, and despair. It underlies all his self-destructiveness. And it alone foments his impending suicide." (p. 30)

One type of suicide prone individual, according to Gernsbacher, seeks self-realization through omnipotent mastery and control of others. Such a person is more apt to inflict humiliation on others than to be the victim. Inside, however, these individuals, whom Gernsbacher calls "Antipathic," carry a heavy burden of self-hatred, which, given the proper trigger of financial failure or other disaster, stands ready to self-destruct. In our society these are more often men than women.

A second type renounces power altogether and relies on an outward manner of sweetness, innocence, and altruism. These individuals, whom Gernsbacher labels "Synpathic," easily become the victims of others' exploitation and abuse. In our society far more often women than men, they pin their hopes on unlimited love to validate their imagined innocence but ultimately suffer the humiliation of being denied it.

"To avoid the unbearable humiliation contingent with denial of her innocence, [she] ... employs Passive Withdrawal, retreating from intimate contact to forestall the humiliation. She Internalizes her Vindictiveness, turning her rage against others back against herself. And she makes Surrogate Sacrifices, sacrificing her own well-being as surrogate for the persons she unconsciously rages against." (Gernsbacher, 1985, p. 243)

A third type described by Gernsbacher glorifies and idealizes freedom. This so-called Apathic person strives for absolute self-sufficiency, seeking neither control over others nor close relationships with them. All of life is hopeless to this person; nothing is worth investing in and mundane existence is filled with folly. In a sense, the Apathic individual has already experienced humiliation because of the simple fact of being born human.

## Humiliation in Everyday Life

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Monarchies, aristocracies, and religions are all based upon that large defect in our race - the individual's distrust of his neighbor, and his desire, for safety's or comfort's sake, to stand well in his neighbor's eye.  
- Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*

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In Graham Greene's novel *Doctor Fischer of Geneva*, the theme of which is humiliation, Fischer is a sardonic, wealthy man who despises everyone, including himself. He makes a career of humiliating a circle of acquaintances, who fawn on him and put up with his torments because they are greedy for the parties, entertainments, and gifts which he provides them. Fischer scorns the ability of human beings to put up with the inevitable torments of life, such as disappointed dreams, disease, decay, and death, in return for "a few small gifts," such as true love, a promotion, or winning at cards. In a prototypically Apathic way, he asserts that God's one true ambition is to humiliate humans:

"... the believers and the sentimentalists say that [God] is greedy for our love. I prefer to think that, judging from the world he is supposed to have made, *he can only be greedy for our humiliation*, and that greed how could he ever exhaust? It's bottomless. The world grows more and more miserable while he twists the endless screw, though he gives us presents - for a universal suicide would defeat his purpose - to alleviate the humiliations we suffer. A cancer of the rectum, a streaming cold, incontinence." (Green, 1980, p. 71; italics added)

When one breaks the conspiracy of silence about the humiliation dynamic, one could almost agree with Fischer's indictment. It soon becomes clear that humiliation and the fear of humiliation encase and cling to us almost as closely as a second skin. To get confirmation of the omnipresent nature of the dynamic, listen to the conversations of people around you, pay attention to what gets under your own skin, take a fresh look at the affronted individual and collective egos that are regularly reflected in world and national news.

What does one discover? Real or imagined slights and insults are the subject of innumerable stories that people tell about their lives. Almost everyone recalls major or minor examples of having been teased, taunted, or socially ostracized by other children.

The fear of losing peer approval, which in childhood is second only to the fear of losing a parent (Collier, 1988,) extends for most of us into our adult years. Few of us lose our sensitivity to the subtle change in facial expression, the telling glance, or that certain tone of voice that signals that we have been found wanting by someone whom we'd like to impress.

Bullying and denigration by family members and bosses are experiences that almost everyone with whom I've talked, individually or in group interviews, has experienced, witnessed, or heard about. Egregious instances of individual and collective humiliations at the hands of supervisors

and peers are described by respondents in a wide variety of work settings, including business firms, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Being berated in public by one's boss for doing something wrong is reported so frequently as to be an almost prototypic or even mythic humiliation in the world of work.

The classic image of the child with dunce cap seated in the corner of the school room of yesteryear is replaced today by such painful memories as having been wrongly accused of cheating, being publicly chided for daydreaming in class, being made to read a personal note to one's classmates, being called lazy and held up as a bad example to other pupils, and being called on and made to recite even though it was obvious one wasn't prepared to answer.

As noted earlier, humiliations at the hands of faculty and preceptors are recalled by many physicians (Lazare, 1987; Rosenberg and Silver, 1984.) And if *The Paper Chase*, the once popular television series is at all accurate (as two graduates of law schools have affirmed in discussions with me,) public

humiliation is used as a sharpening tool by professors who believe, perhaps correctly, that lawyers must learn both how to withstand attempts to humiliate them and how to use humiliation as a weapon on behalf of their clients.

We live in what Jungian analyst Helen Luke describes as a society pervaded by "the gradings of money, academic prowess, I.Q.'s and A's, B's and C's in every department of life..." (Luke, 1987b, p. 105) In such a society, almost everyone at one time or another, many every day of their lives, experiences the personal humiliation of failure. I suspect that it would not be too far fetched to conclude that many of us long to live in a humiliation-free community like the one described by Garrison Keilor in the popular Public Broadcasting radio program *Prairie Home Companion*, in which "all the children are above average." Perhaps Keilor's greatest attraction was his ability to tell about everyday humiliations, similar to the ones many of us have experienced but rarely reveal, let alone discuss, in a lovingly humorous and altogether healing way.

The fact is, however, that most people's lives are far more humiliation-prone than is conducive to the development of self-assured, loving, and happy people. The fear of others' contempt due to unemployment, downward mobility, or other failure to achieve; the insecurities experienced during the uneasy and often unsupported transition from boyhood to manhood or girlhood to womanhood; having to deal, as one author put it, with the tyranny of one's peers rather than the tyranny of tradition or authority (Nouwen, 1979); the prevalence of humiliations meted out to entire categories of people because of differences of caste, class, religion, gender, age, physical abilities, sexual preference, and other status considerations; the prevalence of pornography, the myth of women's masochism, and the widespread occurrence of physical and emotional child abuse -- all these and more are part of the Humiliation Dynamic that pervades - and all too often distorts - the lives of ordinary people.

## Collective Humiliation

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Americans too often teach their children to despise those who hold unpopular opinions. We teach them to regard as traitors, and hold in aversion and contempt, such as do not shout with the crowd, and so here in our democracy we are cheering a thing which of all things is most foreign to it and out of place - the delivery of our political conscience into somebody else's keeping. This is patriotism on the Russian plan. - Mark Twain, in A. Ayres (Editor) *The Wit & Wisdom of Mark Twain*

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Add to these the part played by collective humiliation in the national, international, and world scene and it becomes evident that it would be wise to take into account the humiliation dynamic as one of the most pervasive and powerful motivators of collective behavior.

Examples abound. Hitler is commonly acknowledged to have risen to power because he embodied and expressed the humiliation and impotent fury experienced by Germans following World War I. The Chinese revolution of the twentieth century is generally believed to have been fuelled by years of humiliating exploitation incurred by the Chinese people at the hands of the United States and European powers (Fairbanks, 1987.) I have already alluded to the national sense of humiliation experienced by many Americans following our withdrawal from Viet Nam and the prolonged hostage crisis with Iran. Newspaper accounts frequently report the resignations of national leaders in response to public humiliation or in order to avoid it. The uprising of the Palestinians in territories occupied by Israel, terrorism and wars of liberation in Ireland and the middle East, vendettas and blood feuds in many parts of the world are all reflections of what happens when human beings feel that their collective identities have been besmirched.

A recent discussion of the work of the CIA in the 1980's by Bob Woodward of Watergate fame abounds with explicit descriptions of the effects on high-level government decisions of feelings of personal or collective humiliation or the desire to avoid incurring such feelings. (Woodward, 1987)

The power of the Humiliation Dynamic in international relations is suggested by the following *Time* magazine quote of ex-President Richard Nixon upon his return from a visit to China following the Tiananmen Square massacre of students and workers. Nixon is commenting on the need to resolve the crisis between China and the United States which arose when this country criticized the use of extreme force to put down the student demonstration:

"On several occasions I referred to the use of excessive force as a tragedy. They refused to accept that; they insisted on calling it an "incident." In part, this may be because the Chinese word for tragedy implies that there must be a villain. As one close Chinese friend pointed out to me, no proud Chinese leader - indeed, no national leader anywhere - can ever admit that he is a villain. One top Chinese

leader told me that any colleague who humiliated China in the world community by acting contrite did not deserve to be in office. Contrition may be an attractive characteristic in soap-opera stars, but not in leaders of great nations such as China." (Nixon, R., 1989, p. 44)

## **Humiliation, Shame, and Guilt**

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A sin takes on new and real terrors when there seems a chance that it is going to be found out. - Mark Twain,  
*The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*

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I conclude from my explorations that the humiliation dynamic deserves to be given at least equal billing with guilt and shame, the other two "psychic furies" with which until now people in the mental health field have been far more conversant. How useful is to think of these three experiences as different from one another? How does the Humiliation Dynamic resemble and differ from guilt and shame?

### Guilt and Shame

Let's begin by seeing how guilt and shame compare with one another. According to Helen Block Lewis, who has explored the relationship between shame and guilt in a series of works (e.g., Lewis, 1971, 1976,) both are involved in what is ordinarily conceived of as the superego, the two components of which are (1) an internalized value system that uses "guilt" as its signal to warn against unacceptable thoughts or deeds and (2) a self-system, including self-ideals, that uses "shame" as its signal that one has failed to live up to those ideals. Lewis makes the useful distinction that guilt involves an entirely internalized conflict in which one's good self is at war with unacceptable aspects of one's being, whereas shame involves criticism of the entire self in which others' real or imagined scorn and disapproval plays an important part.

According to Lewis:

"For shame to occur there must be an emotional relationship between the person and the "other" such that the person cares what the "other" thinks or feels about the self." (Lewis, 1976, p. 193)

### Humiliation and Shame

Is it useful to make a distinction between humiliation and shame? Lewis uses the term "shame state" to encompass experiences in which others' scorn, contempt, or ridicule are involved, including what I have been discussing as humiliation. According to her, "Feeling ridiculous, embarrassment, chagrin, mortification, humiliation, and dishonor are all variants of the shame state." (Lewis, 1976, p. 188)

Although they have certain characteristics in common (such as one's reaction to others'

disparagement) shame and humiliation involve quite different dynamics and can be dealt with differently both on an individual and collective level. A key difference is that "humiliation involves being put into a lowly, debased, and powerless position by someone who has, at that moment, greater power than oneself," whereas "shame involves primarily a reflection upon the self by the self" (Miller, 1988.)

Shame is what one feels when one has failed to live up to one's ideals for what constitutes suitable behavior in one's own eyes as well as the eyes of others. Humiliation is what one feels when one is ridiculed, scorned, held in contempt, or otherwise disparaged for what one *is* rather than what one *does*. *People believe they deserve their shame; they do not believe they deserve their humiliation.*

To consider them the same is to commit the classic fallacy of the undistributed middle to which many college students are introduced in introductory philosophy courses. If all fishes have tails and all dogs have tails also, it does not mean that, therefore, all dogs are fishes. If shame involves the feeling that one has failed to live up to one's ideals and, therefore, that others look down upon one and humiliation also involves the feeling that others look down on one for failing to conform to their ideals of what is acceptable, it does not, therefore, follow that humiliation is shame. Although humiliation sometimes involves the feeling of shame, it's not useful to consider the two of them the same at least for purposes of preventive mental health and working towards a social order that fosters optimal physical and emotional growth.

Having made such a categorical distinction, I confess that the differences easily become blurred. The fact is that, despite the efforts of enlightened parents and other adults to make a clear distinction between *who* the child is and *what* the child does, most of are convinced unconsciously that we are what we do and will be judged accordingly, both by ourselves and others. Therefore, if one is humiliated by others for being different, one may easily believe that the humiliation is deserved and thus respond with shame.

For example, it was possible for me growing up as a Jewish child in Yankee New England to feel both humiliated for being a Jew, who was considered inferior and unacceptable to some non-Jews, and ashamed if others found me pushy, loud, or physically too demonstrative - being, that is, like a "New York Jew" or a kike, which was as unacceptable to me as it was for an anti-semitic non-Jew.

Similarly, members of other stigmatized groups are prone to identify with those who deride them and feel shame because of their skin color, gender, or other stigmatizing characteristic. Nevertheless, humiliation can exist without shame and typically does so. One does not have to be ashamed of who one is in order to experience humiliation at the hands of others. To equate the two is to predispose oneself to what Ryan years ago characterized as "blaming the victim." (Ryan, 1971)

Whenever the difference between shame and humiliation becomes blurred in my own mind, which it sometimes does, the following distinction helps me to get back into focus:

Shame is what I would experience if I committed  
adultery and my wife or someone else whom I loved

and respected confronted me with my behavior.

Humiliation is what I would experience if my wife committed adultery and someone else let me know I was a cuckold.

### **Maladaptive Reactions to Humiliation**

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Each boy has one or two sensitive spots and if you can find out where they are located you have only to touch them and you can scorch him as with fire. - Mark Twain, *Autobiography*

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For the purposes of this paper, a maladaptive pattern is one which is considered to be physically or emotionally destructive to oneself or to others. It either maintains the individual in a state of impotent powerlessness with respect to those who inflict the humiliation, consumes the individual's energies in attempts to get revenge or avoid further humiliations, or leads to self-destructive behavior.

Certain of these maladaptive patterns have already been referred to in this paper. They include identifying with the perpetrator of the humiliation and feeling ashamed of who one is; viewing life from a cynical perspective as a humiliating chamber of horrors devised by God to satisfy his greed for human suffering; becoming depressed; getting vicarious revenge for past and present humiliations by inflicting physical and emotional abuse on others; becoming paranoid; being immobilized by generalized social anxiety; and killing oneself.

#### Humiliated Fury

Whatever their specific characteristics, maladaptive patterns appear to have in common what has been called "humiliated fury" (Scheff, 1987.) Such fury is closely akin to the world-consuming rage of a frustrated infant who is prepared to devour the universe but is helpless to do so. Regardless of whether the rage is turned inward in the form of depression and despair or outward in the form of vengeful phantasies, paranoia, or sadistic behavior, those who are driven by such fury almost literally consume themselves - and often others - with rage. They deplete their emotional, intellectual, and physical energies either in attempts to exact revenge or in vengeful fantasies of somehow undoing the wrong.

When it is outwardly directed, humiliated fury unfortunately creates additional victims, often including innocent bystanders as is so often the case in war, civil strife, personal and family vendettas, and terrorist attacks. When it is inwardly directed, the resulting self-hate renders victims incapable of meeting their own needs, let alone having energy available to love and care for others. In either case, those who are consumed by humiliated fury are absorbed in themselves or their cause, wrapped in wounded pride and individual or collective righteousness, the very epitome of egoistic self-importance.



In our work with professional and lay people in the community, it is not unusual to come upon individuals and even entire groups who are obviously the victims of deeply wounding humiliations, either because of the general circumstances of their lives or because of arrogant or indifferent treatment at the hands of people in power over them. Sometimes we ourselves become the targets of their humiliated fury. They may vent their rage and on us because we are at hand, whereas those responsible for their plight are not. Sometimes the fury is exacerbated by the fact that no one person or group can be held accountable for their situation.

As anyone knows who has faced such rage, there is no single prescription or set of techniques to guide one's response. I have found, however, that recognizing and acknowledging the hitherto unexpressed feeling of humiliation can be the key that opens the door to constructive dialogue. It is often humiliating to acknowledge to someone else that one is feeling humiliated and powerless to do anything about it. It is often equally liberating to find that someone else understands without being told that behind one's fury is a deep sense of humiliating hurt and betrayal.

If nothing else, I hope that by understanding the nature of the Humiliation Dynamic and the part it plays in the creation and maintenance of individual and social pathology, those engaged in preventive work will bring a new and clarifying perspective to their encounters with people at risk.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This and other quotations from Mark Twain are taken from The Wit & Wisdom of Mark Twain edited by Alex Ayres (1987)

<sup>2</sup> I coined the term "humiliation dynamic" in order to emphasize that I was studying an interpersonal *process* not simply the *feeling* or *experience* of humiliation. Later I discovered that Robert Stoller had independently devised the same term for much the same reason (Stoller, 1987.)

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Dr. Robert Marshak for this insight.

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