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# Toward a Psychology of Humiliation in Asymmetric Conflict

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**Toward a psychology of humiliation in asymmetric conflict**

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**Abstract**

Humiliation is often cited in attempts to understand the origins of asymmetric conflicts, especially conflicts involving terrorism. This paper reviews common usage, expert opinion, and experiences in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts to suggest a construct definition of humiliation as a combination of anger and shame. Following appraisal theory, this definition distinguishes between the situational appraisals associated with humiliation (insult and injury; failure to retaliate) and the emotional experience of humiliation (in which the combination of anger and shame may be more synergism than summation). Research on humiliation is barely begun and focuses on interpersonal relations; a crucial issue is whether interpersonal humiliation is the same experience as the intergroup humiliation salient in accounts of terrorism and terrorists. Better understanding of humiliation may be useful for understanding both terrorist violence and government reactions to this violence.

### **Toward a Psychology of Humiliation in Asymmetric Conflict**

In political conflict, the more extreme the violence is, the more likely the invocation of humiliation as part of the explanation. In a Google search, the combination “humiliation [terrorism or terrorist]” produces over eleven million results. Several notable analysts have implicated humiliation as a cause of terrorism. Jessica Stern (2003, p. 62) suggests that “it is the pernicious effect of repeated, small humiliations that add up to a feeling of nearly unbearable despair and frustration, and a willingness on the part of some to do anything—even commit atrocities—in the belief that attacking the oppressor will restore their sense of dignity.” Victoroff (2005, p. 29) observes that “Revenge for humiliation by an oppressor is, in fact, an ancient cultural tradition with direct links to the current violence in the Middle East.” Similarly, in an essay published in *Foreign Affairs*, Moisi (2007) theorizes that the clash of civilizations is also a clash of emotions: fear in the West, humiliation in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Atran and Ginges (2008) have polled Palestinians about experiences of humiliation and found that “People stand in line at checkpoints” led the list as most humiliating.

Psychologists have begun to study humiliation. An interdisciplinary community of those interested in humiliation is accessible at a web site ([www.humiliationstudies.org](http://www.humiliationstudies.org)), where an online journal, *Journal of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies*, was announced in November 2006. In this community, psychologists are a minority and tend to be focused on interpersonal humiliation in one-on-one relationships. Clinical and counseling psychologists, in particular, are concerned with humiliation as contributor to psychopathology, especially depression, and to interpersonal aggression (Elison & Harder, 2007; Collazzoni et al, 2014).

In other domains of social science, however, interest in humiliation tends to be more focused on intergroup relations. Historians, political scientists, and sociologists point to the

importance of humiliation in the origins of war (Kagan, 1995; Scheff, 1994; Steinberg, 1996). Anthropologists and historians point to the importance of humiliation in the origins of genocide and mass killing (Hinton, 2002; Prunier, 1995). And scholars who want to get beyond pathology and hate as explanations of terrorism often refer to the motivating power of humiliation (Stern, 2003; Lindner, 2006; Jones, 2008).

But what is humiliation as a psychological construct? How does humiliation fit into the psychology of emotions? In this paper I point the way to an empirically-based psychology of humiliation that can be of use in the analysis of asymmetric conflict in general and terrorism in particular. The first section considers different concepts of humiliation; the second section suggests a construct definition of humiliation as a combination of anger and shame; the third section discusses discriminant validity issues in relation to the proposed definition; and the last sections suggest research questions regarding the role of humiliation in intergroup conflict.

### **What Is Humiliation?**

There are three ways of thinking about an emotion (Royzman, McCauley & Rozin, 2004) that may lead to a definition of humiliation. The first is to examine ordinary language to infer the common denominator of references to the emotion. (What meaning is implied by the average person's talk about anger?) The second is to examine what experts have said about the nature and expression of this emotion. (What did Aristotle say about anger?) The third way of thinking about an emotion is to construct a definition and then judge empirically the extent to which this definition is useful. (If anger is the emotional response to disrespect, as Aristotle suggested, then what observations might be understood or predicted from this definition?)

These are all useful ways to think about humiliation, and each will be employed in turn. In particular, the first two—common usage and expert opinion--will be employed toward

developing a construct of humiliation suitable for psychological research.

**Common usage.** Dictionaries are a basic source of information on common usage. According to Merriam-Webster (2010), to humiliate means, “to reduce to a lower position in one’s own eyes or in others’ eyes” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humiliate?show=0&t=1289435381>). By this definition it is possible to *be* humiliated even if one does not *feel* humiliated because to be lowered in the eyes of others can be humiliation without being lowered in one’s own eyes.

A richer source of information on usage is provided by descriptions of experiences of humiliation. Klein (1991, p.4) reports that in five individual interviews and four group discussions, participants described the experience of humiliation in the following ways:

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.

Klein (1991) notes that these descriptions have the same characteristics that Lazare (1987, p.4) detected in descriptions of humiliation in doctor-patient interactions: 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.

Another way to learn about humiliation is to examine the etymology of the word that names the emotion. As Klein (1991, p.5) puts it, “To be humiliated is to be put down. The root word for humiliation is the same as *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’.”

**Expert opinion.** In *Humiliation: And other essays on honor, social discomfort, and violence*, William Miller analyzes examples of humiliation drawn from Icelandic sagas and his own observations to suggest the power of humiliation across time and place, especially the power of the link between humiliation and violence. This link is derived from the reciprocity norm that governs much of human life, especially in relation to ideas of honor. From Icelandic sagas Miller makes the case that honor requires maintaining reciprocity for both good and ill in relations with others: honor can be lost by failing to reciprocate a gift as well as by failing to reciprocate insult and injury.

Miller’s analysis is always at the individual level; the possibility of group humiliation does not appear. Nevertheless, his mostly literary materials lead him to connections among humiliation, honor, and violence that deserve our attention.

Taking a more psychological perspective, Harter analyzes humiliation as an extreme attack on self-esteem. Harter, Low & Whiteside (2003) investigated twelve high-profile school shooters and found “that in every case the shooters described how they had been ridiculed, taunted, teased, harassed or bullied by peers (because of their inadequate appearance, social or athletic behavior), spurned by someone in whom they were romantically interested, or put down, in front of other students, by a teacher or school administrator, all events that led to profound humiliation. All of the white middle-class males eventually sought revenge” (Elison & Harter, 2007, p.312). In two of the cases, a shooter also killed himself.

Elison and Harter review other indications that humiliation is followed by anger, violent ideation, and suicidal ideation. Notably they see anger as a correlate of humiliation, something

following humiliation rather than a component of humiliation. Their Figure 17.1, for instance, includes pathways from Peer Rejection/Humiliation to Homicidal Ideation and Suicidal Ideation, and a path from Aggressive Anger to Homicidal Ideation, but there is no path from Peer Rejection/Humiliation to Anger. In effect they identify bullying as humiliation and accept Hartling & Luchetta's (1999) definition: "The internal experience of humiliation is the deep dysphoric feeling associated with being, or perceiving oneself as being, unjustly degraded, ridiculed, or put down—in particular one's identity has been demeaned or devalued" (p264).

Hartling & Luchetta have represented their definition in a 32-item measure of humiliation that comprises two subscales: past experiences of humiliation and fear of future humiliation. Past experiences were queried thus: "Throughout your life how seriously have you felt harmed by being.." (teased, bullied, scorned..) Future fears were also queried: "In this point in your life, how much do you fear being.." (scorned, bullied, ridiculed, powerless..). These two scales were significantly correlated, suggesting that more history of humiliation led to more fear of future humiliation. It is worth noting that not all of the items (e.g. "powerless") included an explicit perpetrator, and that none included reference to an audience.

In *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*, Lindner (2006) combines historical and clinical perspectives in her analysis of humiliation and defines the experience in both contexts as a response to:

enforced lowering of a person or a group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away pride, honor, or dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed, mostly against one's will and often in a deeply hurtful way, in a situation that is greatly inferior to what one feels one should expect. Humiliation entails demeaning treatment that transgresses established expectations. The victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, and made helpless. (p. 172)



Whether the humiliation arises out of personal experience or group membership, the descriptions reviewed so far seem to include four key elements: a perpetrator, a victim, an unjust lowering, and unequal power. In Lindner's (2006) view, the feeling comes from being unjustly demeaned by a more powerful other. For Lazare (1987), it is the result of being unfairly debased or diminished by another person. According to S. Miller (1988), it “involves being placed in a lowly, debased, and powerless position by someone who has, at that moment, greater power than oneself” (p. 42).

For Stamm (1978), humiliation is experienced when others demean the individual, who is likely to “feel belittled or slandered, lowered in the eyes of others or in his own eyes” (p. 425). And for Gilbert (1997), humiliation occurs when an individual is “criticized, degraded, and abused by a bad other” (p. 134)

If humiliation requires a perpetrator, that might distinguish it from shame. As Klein (2005, p.8) notes, it is “possible to feel shame about something one has done without experiencing oneself as the humiliated victim of other’s ridicule or censure.” In other words, humiliation requires an other, but shame does not (*see also* Klein, 1991). Of course it is possible for an individual to blame his shaming on someone else, but as Gilbert (1997) suggests, shame is focused on the self while humiliation is focused on the harm done by others.

In addition to the perpetrator and victim, there may be a witness to the humiliating event. It seems clear that the presence of one or more witnesses may change the intensity of the victim’s experience, depending in part on their significance to the victim and their reaction to the event. But it seems equally clear that a witness is not required, as Lazare (1987) describes instances of humiliation during private interactions between doctor and patient.

### **Defining a Psychological Construct**

In psychology, development of new theoretical constructs is an integral part of empirical research. The researcher hypothesizes an initial definition of the construct (dissonance is awareness of two or more dissonant cognitions), places the construct in a nomological net of constructs and observations (dissonance is unpleasant, individuals will change cognitions and behaviors to reduce dissonance), and gathers new observations to test the predicted relations among constructs and observations. Often the definition of the construct will be revised to better account for the observations, that is, often construct validation includes construct revision (dissonance is awareness of inconsistency between a positive self-image and stupid or sleazy behavior—see Sabini, 1995, for the evolution of dissonance theory, and Cook & Campbell, 1979, on construct validation).

To some extent, all three ways of thinking about emotion have recourse to observations. *Common usage* refers to observations of everyday speech acts and lay opinion and *expert opinion* refers to the observations of those who have thought deeply about a concept. But the hallmark of a psychological construct is to get beyond interpretation of existing observations to predict new observations. There seems to be only one published study that took this approach to humiliation.

Negrao, Bonanno, Noll, Putnam, and Trickett (2005) conducted a study of 167 young women, ranging in age from teens to twenties with a mean age of 18. About half of the young women had suffered Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) that included genital contact or penetration perpetrated by a family member. The remaining half of participants were a comparison group without CSA who were recruited to match the CSA sample in age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family constellation.

Negrao et al began from previous research indicating that both shame and anger are commonly reported in the experience of CSA victims. For many, shame is the predominant reaction to their victimization, a shame that is internalized in feeling deeply defective and defeated. Anger too is a common reaction to abuse, as victims blame the perpetrator for demeaning them. Thus Negrao et al aimed to assess both anger and shame reactions in relation to CSA.

In addition the researchers were interested in assessing humiliation, which they saw as having often been conflated with shame. After reviewing several conceptions of humiliation (including authors cited here under *Expert opinion*) they proposed that humiliation included both shame and anger reactions.

In the present article, we propose that for humiliation to be felt, the individual must experience the self in a negative light while concurrently holding a negative attribution of blame to the other. Thus, humiliation differs from shame in that there is a significant attribution of blame to the other, and it differs from anger in that the action of the other is experienced, with or without awareness, as exposing the perceived deficiencies in the self (p. 352).

All participants were asked to describe “the most distressing event” in their lives. About half the CSA victims described their abuse, about half did not. All narratives were videotaped, divided into “narrative units,” and coded for verbal expressions of shame and anger. Narrative units with verbal expression of both shame and anger were coded as expressing humiliation. In addition, facial expressions of shame were coded from the narration videotapes. Results indicated that verbal expression of humiliation was associated with facial expression of shame, and that participants who expressed both verbal humiliation and facial shame were more likely to

show trauma symptoms.

The importance of this study is that it proposed a shame-and-anger definition of humiliation, developed a shame-and-anger measure, and showed that the new measure was associated with facial expression and trauma in a pattern not found for separate measures of anger and shame. Negrao et al thus offer an example of a construct definition of humiliation that can serve as a model for future research. For our purposes, their study has one notable limitation: it focuses on the individual level and leaves open the possibility that interpersonal humiliation and intergroup humiliation may differ in important ways. Nevertheless their anger-and-shame definition of humiliation is adopted and extended in the next section.

### **Anger, Shame, and Humiliation**

Modern appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991; Schulz & Lazarus, 2012) understands an emotion to be a syndrome of thoughts, feelings, physiological reactions, and action tendencies that is associated with perceiving a situation as having a particular importance for well-being. Different appraisals are associated with different emotions: an appraisal of threat elicits fear, appraisal of insult elicits anger, appraisal of decay elicits disgust.

If the experience of humiliation involves one or more emotions, there should be evidence of a syndrome of thoughts, feelings, and reactions associated with one or more appraisals. In the descriptions of instances of humiliation provided by Klein (1991) and Lazare (1987), the reports of the victims provide evidence of such a syndrome. They reported thoughts of their own weakness and incompetence, and of the perpetrator's strength and unfairness. They described feeling perceptually smaller, exposed and sullied, and socially dishonored, degraded, and humbled. Their physiological reactions included flushing, nausea, and paralysis. And their action tendencies suggest social avoidance and withdrawal: wishing to hide their face, sink into the

ground, or disappear.

While such reports are useful in developing an initial identification of the syndrome of humiliation, it is important to note that elements of the appraisal are often mixed in with elements of the experience. Notably, the reports cited by Lazare (1987; see *Expert opinion*) include victim feelings of being ridiculed, scorned, insulted, degraded, dishonored, or devalued by the perpetrator. These are more perceptions than feelings: elements of the situational appraisal associated with the emotional experience of humiliation rather than elements of the emotional experience itself. Discussion of emotion in this section will try to keep the appraisal separate from the associated emotion.

### **Psychology of Anger**

As described by Berkowitz and Harmon-Jones, (2004), modern research on anger points to a complex array of feelings (annoyed, hostile, and irritated as well as angry) associated with a complex array of circumstances (insult, frustration, pain, discomfort). Given the prominence of a perpetrator in accounts of humiliation, discussion here will focus on insult-anger theory.

This theory can be traced back to Aristotle, who defined anger as “a distressed desire for conspicuous vengeance in return for a conspicuous and unjustifiable contempt of one’s person or friend” (Solomon, 2000, p. 4). For Aristotle, distress and desire for vengeance are natural responses to being disrespected by another, and the responses are the same whether the disrespect is real or imagined.

Insult-anger theory, although ancient in origin, is consistent with modern appraisal theory in representing the core components of the anger syndrome—hostile thoughts, damaged feelings, heated reactions, and vengeful tendencies—as activated by an appraisal of insult. The appraisal is laden with cultural and moral judgments that determine whether or not one ought to feel

insulted, but, once anger is aroused, there is no doubt that it should be expressed. Aristotle observes that there is something slavish and ignoble in the failure to express anger in response to insult, especially when that failure is motivated by fear (Solomon, 2000, p. 4).

An insult-anger construction of humiliation makes sense of both the appraisal of unjust and enforced lowering and the intense desire for revenge that appear in accounts of humiliation. Indeed, one might be tempted to view enforced and unjust lowering of the victim as a subset of insult, and to view the resulting feeling of humiliation as a subset of anger. But there appears to be more than just anger behind the destructive power of humiliation; the next section suggests that shame is also implicated.

### **Psychology of Shame**

According to Aristotle, the desire to express anger at an insult is natural, and the decision to suppress it is ignoble. Implicit in this view is the assumption that humans always have a choice, or at least *think* they have a choice, in responding to insult and injury. Even the weakest individual or group can imagine doing something to retaliate for insult or injury. When one fails to retaliate for an insult or injury out of fear of further harm to oneself, the price of self-preservation is likely to include shame.

Shame is the emotion associated with a global indictment of the self. It is related to, but more extensive than, guilt, which is the emotion associated with a specific indictment of an act or of a failure to act. At least at the level of individual differences, those more prone to shame tend to engage in more aggressive actions, whereas those more prone to “shame-free guilt” are more likely to express their anger in communication and problem-solving (Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996).

When self-preservation is the motive for suppressing aggression against a more powerful

other, a failure to retaliate might seem to deserve at most a specific self-indictment of guilt for a specific failure to retaliate. But the reports from victims of enforced and unjust lowering suggest that it leads instead to the global self-condemnation of shame. This is particularly true of the examples in Lindner's book that are drawn from her work as a clinician in Egypt, where a strong culture of honor (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996) may have increased the tendency to feel shame at suppressing retaliation for insult. A culture of honor requires aggression in response to disrespect.

One of Lindner's cases is Alice, an educated and intelligent woman who felt that her partner, Robert, had manipulated her into sacrificing her life for him. Of her own actions, Alice said, "I feel ashamed of myself. I humiliated myself before [the] Alice who once thought highly of herself" (Lindner, 2006, pp. 80-81). It is easy to understand why Alice would feel anger at Robert's actions, but why did she feel shame for her own? The answer appears to be her long-term acceptance of his mistreatment.

In reports of humiliation, the negative judgment of the perpetrator's actions with regard to the victim (the appraisal that elicits anger) is joined by a negative judgment of the victim's actions with regard to the perpetrator (the appraisal that elicits shame). Shame may be based on the victim's failure to meet any number of expectations—personal, social, religious, political, cultural—regarding the victim's duty to act. While the norm of retaliation seems to be almost universal, the power of the norm may be greater in some individuals and cultures than others, so that shame at failing to retaliate is also greater, and susceptibility to humiliation likewise greater.

### **Anger-shame Definition of Humiliation**

The importance of anger and shame in powering aggression has been suggested in research reviewed above, but two additional lines of work are also worth mentioning.

Katz (1988) explored the subjective experience of violent criminals and found shame, anger, and humiliation at the root of their behavior. The attractions of “doing stickup,” for instance, included the glory of domination and control that reversed and retaliated for everyday experiences of shame and humiliation.

Sociologist Thomas Scheff (1994, 2007) examined problematic relationships between both individuals (psychotherapy sessions, marital quarrels) and nations (Hitler’s speeches) and found consistently a cycle of anger and shame:

The feeling trap motor turns on when we get angry at someone who rejects or insults (shames) us and acts as a substitute for feeling the pain of rejection or insult. That is, being angry about being ashamed and ashamed about being angry can become a self-perpetuating loop of intensely painful feelings, usually much more painful than the original shame being defended against. (1994, p. 32)

Scheff (2007, p. 432) describes the anger-shame loop as rage rather than humiliation: “As already indicated, rage seems to be a composite affect, a sequence of two elemental emotions, shame and anger.” For psychologists, the link Scheff sees between insult and shame (“..rejects or insults (shames) us..”) appears less likely than a link between insult and anger. But Scheff’s emphasis on the power of emotion in intergroup conflict, and his focus on anger-shame sequences, are in general accord with an anger-shame definition of humiliation (see especially Scheff & Retzinger, 1991).

From these and other considerations raised in previous sections, it seems reasonable to follow Negrao et al (2005; see **Defining a Psychological Construct**) in suggesting that the experience of humiliation is a combination of anger and shame. Feeling aroused and outraged with thoughts of revenge is part of the syndrome of anger; feeling confused, deficient, small, and



dirtyed is part of the syndrome of shame. These hallmarks of anger and shame appear throughout descriptions of humiliation cited earlier.

If, as suggested, the combination of anger and shame is experienced as humiliation, what appraisals elicit this combination? In the descriptions cited above, humiliating situations typically involve a specific appraisal of damage combined with a specific appraisal of failure. The specific damage is a perpetrator's enforced, unjust demeaning of the victim, and the specific failure is the victim's failure to resist or retaliate. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that:

- 1) the emotional experience of humiliation is a combination of anger and shame;
- 2) the anger is in response to the perpetrator's enforced, unjust lowering of the victim; and
- 3) the shame is in response to the victim's failure to resist or retaliate.

This definition of humiliation leads immediately to several questions. Is the combination of anger and shame simply a sum or blend of the two emotions? Or is there some synergism that makes the perception qualitatively different, as adding yellow and blue pigment, for instance, produces the perception of green. If a synergism, is it a self-reinforcing system? Scheff's (1994) "feeling trap" might be such a system, in which being ashamed about not retaliating for injury makes us angry about being shamed, which makes us shamed for not retaliating, and so forth in "a self-perpetuating loop of intensely painful feelings."

### **Discriminant Validation of the Humiliation Construct**

This section considers three kinds of experience often described as humiliation. Are these experiences consistent with the construct of humiliation advanced in the previous section? Empirical research will be required to make a strong case for discriminant validity, but here a conceptual examination of these three kinds of experience can show why they are outside the anger-shame definition of humiliation.

### **Initiation Humiliation**

The process of initiating new members into a high-status group typically involves rituals that are commonly described as humiliating (Klein, 1991, p. 10). Fraternity and sorority pledges are harassed with servile tasks, military recruits are belittled with insulting names, and first-year medical students are ridiculed for their ignorance. But initiation rituals do not fit our construct definition of humiliation; the abasement of hazing is neither enforced nor unjust, and there is no norm of reciprocity to produce shame for failure to retaliate.

### **Sexual Humiliation**

Googling ‘humiliation’ leads to an unsettling subculture of sexuality. Rituals referred to as humiliation are common in dominant-submissive and sadomasochistic sexual relationships, but again, the experience does not fit the anger-shame definition of humiliation. The choice to participate in these forms of sexual behavior means that the loss of control is not enforced or unjust. Nor is there an expectation that the victim could or should retaliate; the reciprocity norm has been explicitly disavowed in favor of a norm of dominance and submission.

Enforced sexual humiliation in an act of rape does fit the anger-shame definition of humiliation, however, as Negrao et al (1995) found with victims of childhood sexual abuse.

### **Self-Humiliation**

When Alice said, “I humiliated myself before [the] Alice who once thought highly of herself,” she was invoking the existence of multiple selves that are in conflict with each other. Everyone experiences this kind of conflict from time to time—the sober self who curses the drunken self for the morning-after hangover.

But the appraisal associated with anger requires a perpetrator of injury, and it is difficult to determine a perpetrator in self-humiliation —whether the bad self is enforcing the bad

behavior and the good self is not resisting, or some other factor (a drug, a gene, a demon) that is more powerful than either self is driving the behavior, in which case neither self might be to blame. Similarly the appraisal associated with shame is a failure to strike back at the perpetrator, but it seems unlikely that shame would come from failure to punish the self as perpetrator. Indeed hurting oneself is itself a source of shame in many cultures.

It seems that self-humiliation does not meet the anger-shame definition of humiliation, as the degradation is not enforced or unjust and, if there is a norm requiring retaliation against the self that does the degrading (penance, for instance), then there is still the problem of separating the perpetrator self for punishment.

In sum, although *initiation humiliation*, *sexual humiliation*, and *self-humiliation* may be popularly seen as varieties of humiliation, these are cases in which common usage departs from the construct definition advanced here. When victims are complicit in their own loss of status, whether by inviting it from others or by inflicting it on themselves, the abasement is unlikely to be appraised as enforced or unjust and there is no reciprocity norm to bring shame for failure to retaliate. These are brief speculations about the limits of the anger-shame definition of humiliation; the appraisals and feelings of individuals in these three 'humiliation' scenarios seem never to have been empirically assessed.

### **Research questions and their relation to terrorism research**

In the course of thinking about humiliation, several research questions emerged. Eight of these questions are brought together in this section for brief review, beginning with questions about the experience of humiliation. Possible connections with terrorism and terrorism research are highlighted where relevant.

1) *Is the experience of group humiliation the same as experience of personal*

*humiliation?* A pressing question for humiliation research is whether ideas drawn from interpersonal humiliation can be projected to understanding of intergroup humiliation. Is the experience when your favorite sports team is humiliated the same as when you are personally humiliated, perhaps as a member of a losing team? Is humiliation by group identification the same experience as personal humiliation?

Research by Veldhuis, Gordijn, Veenstra, & Lindenberg (2014) suggests the answer may be *yes*; they found that ratings of humiliation after rejection in a computer game were about the same when the rejection included several ingroup members as when the rejection was personal. But the issue is far from settled; Smith and Mackie (2008, p. 433) suggest that profiles of personal and intergroup emotions may be qualitatively distinct.

In terrorism research, this issue appears in the distinction between personal grievance and group grievance, which McCauley and Moskaleiko (2011) identify as two separate mechanisms that can move individuals to terrorist action. Of course these mechanisms often work together. The first paragraph of this paper cited polling research by Atran and Ginges (2008) that asked Palestinians about experiences of humiliation. Most often reported was “People stand in line at checkpoints.” No doubt many Palestinian respondents had personal experience of standing in these lines, but future research might try to distinguish reports of personal experience of humiliation from reports of humiliation via group identification.

*2) Is the experience of public humiliation the same as that of private humiliation?*

Personal humiliation can occur in private, that is, with only the perpetrator and the victim present. Rape is a particularly powerful form of humiliation: a Google search for “humiliation rape” produces over three million results. Torture is also a powerful form of humiliation. For both these humiliations, the perpetrator and the victim may be alone when the violation occurs.

But it is possible that the existence of one or more witnesses to a humiliating event affects the intensity of the victims' experience, or even its quality. This question is less pressing at the group level; it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which one group could degrade or diminish another group in a way that is known only to members of those two groups.

Indeed there is reason to believe that public humiliation can be a powerful source of public opinion supporting terrorists and terrorism. Public humiliation in an electronic world includes photographs and videos of humiliation. The images of Arab prisoners at Abu Ghraib are seared on many American eyes and viral in the Muslim world. Piles of naked men, a naked prisoner on hands and knees led like a dog by a leash in the hand of a female jailor—these images significantly undermined U.S. efforts in Iraq and raised anti-U.S. feelings throughout the Muslim world (Walker, 2014). It is worth noting that these pictures may represent a form of sexual humiliation akin to rape—naked bodies in positions suggestive of sodomy.

*3) Is the experience of chronic humiliation the same as that of episodic humiliation?*

Any prolonged emotional response is by definition a distortion of bio-behavioral adaptation, and as in the case of chronic anxiety, it may have the potential to create a disordered state of mind that affects normal judgment and function. When humiliation occurs on a group level, there may be so many events occurring over so many years that the experience becomes chronic, and that may be a factor in the special fury that is sometimes found in asymmetric group conflicts. At the interpersonal level, it seems to have been chronic humiliation that produced the school shooters studied by Harter, Low, and Whitesell (2003).

In a related study of assassins and school attackers in the U.S., McCauley and Moskalenko (2014) found four common characteristics: a grievance, social disconnection, history of mental disorder especially depression, and experience with weapons outside the

military. Most assassins and school attackers are lone perpetrators, and accumulating evidence suggests that their four common characteristics may also describe one type of lone-wolf terrorist. Given the overlap in characteristics of school attackers and lone-wolf terrorists, it seems likely that the chronic humiliation that Harter, Low, and Whitesell (2003) found for their sample of school shooters will also be found in the grievances of lone-wolf terrorists.

4) *What is the nature of the combination of anger and shame?* Is it a sum, a blend, or a synergistic feedback loop? This is a simple question but difficult to answer. It might have a different answer for personal than for intergroup humiliation, or for humiliation in conflicts involving violence than for peaceful conflict such as sports contests.

5) *Is group-level humiliation mediated by group identification?* The same appraisal of group insult and group failure to retaliate may produce very different levels of humiliation. At the level of individual differences, those who identify more with a group should feel more keenly both the anger associated with insult to the group and the shame associated with failure to retaliate (Smith, Seger & Mackie, 2007). The same prediction can be made at the level of group differences: groups with higher cohesion should feel more keenly both the anger associated with insult to the group and the shame associated with group failure to retaliate.

6) *Is humiliation mediated by the power of the reciprocity norm?* If failure to retaliate is a source of shame, then individuals and groups for whom the reciprocity norm is stronger should feel more shame and more humiliation. At the level of individual differences, those with more allegiance to a culture of honor should feel more shame and more humiliation after failure to retaliate for insult and injury (Nisbet & Cohen, 1996; Hayes, 2006). At the level of group differences, groups with a culture of honor should feel more shame and more humiliation after failure to retaliate. For instance, one might predict that countries with a stronger culture of honor

will feel more shame and more humiliation over failure to retaliate for insult and injury to their country. In this regard it is interesting to note that Arab and Muslim cultures have been described as cultures of honor (Landes, 2014).

7) *Is it possible to reduce shame and humiliation by reducing the power of the reciprocity norm?* If shame arises from acceptance of the reciprocity norm, then reduced acceptance of this norm should reduce shame and humiliation. An intervention that makes *lex talonis* look simple-minded and outdated, for instance, might reduce shame at failure to retaliate and so reduce humiliation. In the Gospel stories, Jesus is insulted and tortured but ‘turns the other cheek’ and does not show any signs of feeling shame or humiliation. Buddhist and Hindu ideas and practices may also have insights for reducing acceptance of the reciprocity norm.

8) *Is the anger-shame construction of humiliation generalizable to non-English languages and culture?* Generalizability is one of six issues of construct validation identified by Strauss & Smith (2009). The research basis of this paper is limited to English-language sources, leaving open the question of whether the anger-shame definition of humiliation can be useful in other languages and cultures. Google Translator offers some reassurance that humiliation is not just a Western idea: entering ‘humiliation’ produces six words in Chinese, five in Japanese, four in German, Hebrew and Hindi, three in Arabic and Ukrainian, two in Persian, and one in Russian and Finnish. Collaboration with native speakers of these languages would be a first step toward testing the generalizability of the humiliation construct advanced here.

Finally, there is one research issue of such potential importance that it is considered separately in the next section.

### **Can Terrorists Humiliate States?**

The logic of the reciprocity norm suggests that the strong can be humiliated if weak perpetrators

are unknown or unreachable. The powerful may be less likely to use the word humiliation in referring to their plight, but it is possible that the same combination of anger and shame will be found for both the strong and the weak who suffer an attack that is not avenged. Referring to the 9/11 attack, Lindner (2006, pp. 98-100) remarked that it was humiliating for a superpower like America to be so grievously injured and insulted by an enemy that did not even have the status of being a state.

An innovative study by Back, Kufner, and Egloff (2010) examined emotion words in millions of words of texts sent in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. Anger-related words increased throughout the day, ending six times higher than fear and sadness related words. In short, the predominant U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks was not fear but anger.

The predominance of anger in reaction to terrorist attack opens the door to seeing countries targeted by terrorists as suffering humiliation--if inability to retaliate elicits shame. Although there is yet no direct evidence of shame for governments who cannot perform retribution, the level of rejoicing in the U.S. after the execution of Osama bin Laden suggests relief from some strong negative emotion.

An insult from an inferior is difficult to resolve because retaliation that merely evens the score does not restore the victim's superior status. To the contrary, a fair fight would imply equality between the parties, which is why revenge must be fierce, unfair, and if possible, fatal. In *Cyrano de Bergerac*, the Comte de Guiche does not challenge Cyrano to meet him on a field of honor at dawn, but sends a gang of ruffians to settle the score in an alley, murderously, at night.

Similarly, when a powerful nation is attacked by terrorists, there is no easy way to exact revenge because the retaliation that would be possible against another nation is impossible



against a small group of individuals whose names are unknown, or, as with Osama bin Laden for many years after 9/11, known but unreachable. In such cases, the failure to punish the perpetrators can create the same appearance and experience of helplessness for the powerful as is usually the fate of the powerless. What can the Comte de Guiche do if hit by excrement thrown by parties unknown or otherwise unreachable?

Thus a focus on asymmetric conflict leads to the prediction of a surprising symmetry—as the weak can be humiliated by the strong, so the strong can be humiliated by the weak. This symmetry makes humiliation the prototypical emotional experience of asymmetric conflict.

### **Conclusion**

Several years ago, Tom Friedman (2003) wrote, “If I’ve learned one thing covering world affairs, it’s this: The single most underappreciated force in international relations is humiliation.” Although it receives more research attention now than it did in the past, this attention is yet small in relation to the popularity of appealing to humiliation to understand group conflict. When analysts discuss the role that humiliation plays in warfare, terrorism, and genocide, they often speak as though we know what humiliation is and what it does. But the fact is that humiliation will have to be better understood before it can help us understand intergroup violence.

In the relatively few psychological studies of humiliation available, there is an encouraging consistency among the findings. There appears always to be some action by a perpetrator that is perceived as an enforced, unjust lowering of the victim; this appraisal elicits anger. And when there is a failure to resist or retaliate that is perceived by the victim as a deep failing, this appraisal elicits shame.

A corrosive combination of anger and shame pushes and pulls its victims in opposite directions, as anger’s tendency for aggression tells them to attack, while shame’s tendency for

avoidance tells them to draw back and even to disappear. One of the many mysteries surrounding humiliation is why some victims, after years of swallowing their anger and shame, suddenly commit vicious acts of violence against the perceived perpetrators of their misery.

The most obvious limitation of the research available is that it focuses on the individual level. There is an easy assumption that the same combination of anger and shame that promises understanding at the individual level can be projected to understanding humiliation at the group level. Time and research will judge whether this assumption is justified.

Perhaps the most startling implication of the analysis advanced here, following Lindner (2006), is that it is not only the weak who can be humiliated. In asymmetric conflict, the powerful can be humiliated by the weak if, as is often the case of terrorist attacks, the government targeted is unable to retaliate directly against the perpetrators. In this situation a combination of anger and shame can lead to government over-reaction that imposes insult and injury on passive sympathizers with the terrorist cause. Terrorists aim for this kind of over-reaction in the hope that government-imposed humiliations will mobilize new supporters for terrorism (*jujitsu politics*: McCauley & Moskalenko, 2011). Better understanding of the power of humiliation may make it easier for both policy makers and citizens to resist the temptations of *jujitsu politics*.

Most generally, the imbalance of power associated with acts and experiences of humiliation links humiliation directly with asymmetric conflict. Terrorism is perhaps the most troubling form of asymmetric conflict, and we will need to learn more about humiliation if we are to learn how to prevent and respond to terrorist attacks.

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