



On Feeling Humiliated. The Experience of Humiliation in Interpersonal, Intragroup, and Intergroup Contexts.

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English summary

ON FEELING HUMILIATED

The Experience of Humiliation in Interpersonal, Intragroup, and Intergroup Contexts

Humiliation is an intense emotion that seems less common than many other emotions. Yet, most people are familiar with the feeling of humiliation. This is illustrated by the fact that in many different cultures there is a word referring to humiliation (Ginges & Atran, 2008). The word humiliation not only connotes an emotion, it also refers to an act. In this dissertation we studied the *emotion* humiliation and more specifically, the subjective experience of humiliation. We followed Hartling and Luchetta (1999) in their definition of humiliation as “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” (p. 264).

Humiliation can have severe negative consequences. For example, the emotion is associated with low self-esteem, depression, anxiety disorders, suicide, homicide and violence (see e.g., Elison & Harter, 2007; Harter, 2012; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). Additionally, at the group level, humiliation is related to war, mass violence, genocide, and terrorism (e.g., Baumeister, 2002; Klein, 1991; Lindner, 2001b; Staub, 1989). Humiliation is also a complex, “mixed” emotion. On the one hand, humiliation is related to the emotions of shame and embarrassment and their associated avoidance tendencies, such as the wish to disappear or to hide. On the other hand, a relation has been found between humiliation and anger and the tendency to aggress and take revenge (e.g., Combs, Campbell, Jackson, & Smith, 2010; Fernández, Saguy, & Halperin, 2015; Leidner, Sheikh, & Ginges, 2012).

Humiliation can manifest itself in different contexts. In an *interpersonal context* humiliation occurs between individuals, for example at school or at work, between romantic partners, or in friendships. Another context in which humiliation can be

felt is the *intragroup context*, for example as part of an initiation ritual in a fraternity or during a training in the army. Finally, humiliation can be experienced in an *intergroup context*. This may concern feelings of humiliation at a national level, or between ethnic, religious, or political groups. Yet, members of smaller groups, such as a soccer team, may also feel humiliated by another group. In this dissertation we studied the determinants, strength, emotion relations, and consequences of feelings of humiliation in these three contexts.

In Chapter 2 we built on research on interpersonal humiliation and studied the influence of a specific social-contextual factor on experiences of humiliation, namely the behaviour of others who are present during a humiliating episode. Previous research showed that the presence of an audience during a potentially humiliating episode intensified reported humiliation (e.g., Combs et al., 2010; Elison & Harter, 2007; R. H. Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002). We studied the effect of two behavioural responses of such an audience, namely laughter and support. In three scenario studies we asked participants to imagine themselves in a situation in which the protagonist is insulted in the presence of an audience. This audience either laughs after the insult or it shows no response. In the first study, Study 2.1, we also included a situation in which someone from the audience supports the protagonist after the insult. As expected, participants reported stronger humiliation when the audience laughs than when it does not respond. This effect was stronger for humiliation than for shame and anger. The presence of a laughing audience thus seems to be a typical determinant of humiliation, more so than of other negative emotions. At the same time, support from the audience for the humiliated person did not lead to *less* strong reports of humiliation, which disconfirmed our predictions. Possibly, the public nature of the support increases the salience of the humiliating act which may cause a humiliated person to view him or herself as more, rather than less, victimized. This could be an interesting avenue for future research.

A laughing audience is typical for humiliation, but does this apply to every potentially humiliating situation? We expected that the effect of a laughing audience on humiliation particularly occurs when the situation is relevant for the person in question, such as when the episode concerns a threat to central and stable aspects of one's identity (i.e., the autonomous self). To study this, we explored the effect of a laughing audience on humiliation in relation to different types of self-related values, namely autonomy values and social-relational values. Autonomy values refer to independence, individualism, and self-determination and are focused on the individual. Social-relational values refer to relationships with others, for example, respect for tradition, family bonds, and care for the elderly (e.g., Schwartz, 2006). We asked participants to imagine themselves in situations in which their autonomous or their social-relational self is threatened. For example, the protagonist in a scenario is insulted by someone because he or she has no own opinion (threat to autonomous self) or has no respect for his or her father (threat to social-relational self). We also described the presence of an audience in these episodes, which either laughs or shows no response.

In Study 2.2 we found that a laughing audience intensified humiliation when the situation concerned a threat to the autonomous self, but not when it concerned a threat to the social-relational self. However, this study only included Dutch respondents. The Netherlands is a country with an individualistic culture, where autonomous values are generally considered more important than social-relational values. In collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, social-relational values are generally regarded more central to the self (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Therefore, we conducted another study (Study 2.3) with American (individualistic culture) and Indian (collectivistic culture) participants. We found that a laughing audience intensified reports of humiliation for both groups of participants when the autonomous self was threatened. Thus, for autonomous self-related values a laughing audience could be an important determinant of humiliation for both people

from an individualistic culture and people from a collectivistic culture. However, when the social-relational self was threatened there was only a marginal effect of a laughing audience on humiliation for Americans, and there was no effect for Indians. For Indians, reported humiliation in both conditions (laughing audience or no reaction) was as high as for Americans in the laughing-condition. Possibly, Indians have internalised social-relational values more strongly which could mean that a laughing audience is not “necessary” to intensify humiliation (to a similar level as for Americans). However, more cross-cultural research is needed to further test these ideas.

As indicated before, humiliation can also be felt within a group, for example as part of a ritual. In Chapter 3 we studied such a ritualised type of humiliation in an intragroup context, namely during initiation rituals in student fraternities. In these contexts, humiliation is often considered functional because it is thought to result in strong group affiliation. Within social psychology the *severity-attraction hypothesis* (Aronson & Mills, 1959) and the *severity-affiliation-attraction hypothesis* (based on Schachter, 1959) explain an alleged group-affiliation effect of severe initiations. However, humiliation is an emotion that is not associated with affiliation, but rather with withdrawal and avoidance of others (e.g., Harter, 2012). Our prediction was therefore that when initiation rituals (or comparable situations) are experienced as humiliating, they will not lead to more group affiliation, but instead to more distance between the group members.

To test this idea, we conducted three studies using very different methods. For Study 3.1 we asked (former and current) members of Dutch fraternities and sororities who had experienced an initiation ritual to report on their experiences during this initiation. The results indicated a negative relation between perceived severity of the initiation and affiliation between novices. This relation could be explained by experienced humiliation. Perceived severity of the initiation was

positively related to withdrawal from the group and this effect could also (partially) be explained by humiliation.

In Study 3.2 we simulated an initiation ritual in the lab. We asked groups of three participants to do a dance-assignment. Some participants received denigrating feedback by the experimenter on their dance performance. This feedback was either directed at the whole group of participants or at only one participant in the group. We found that participants who received the denigrating feedback as an individual in front of the group, reported stronger feelings of humiliation in this situation than participants who received this denigrating feedback together with the others in the group. In addition, participants who received the feedback as an individual in front of the group indicated a stronger tendency to withdraw from the situation. This effect could be explained by reported humiliation. We replicated these effects in a third scenario study (Study 3.3) in which we asked participants to imagine themselves in typical initiation rituals. This study showed as well that the effect of social context on humiliation—that is: stronger humiliation when a protagonist was initiated alone rather than together with others—could be explained by expected social support by those others. This could indicate that the group forms a “buffer” by enhancing the expectation of social support, by which it may, in turn, prevent strong feelings of humiliation. Together, these findings indicate that initiation rituals that evoke humiliation are less functional than initiations that are not experienced as humiliating when the aim of such a ritual is to create strong group affiliation. This is particularly true for initiations targeted at only one individual in the group.

In Chapter 2 and 3 we studied humiliation in an interpersonal and an intragroup context. These studies concerned experiences of humiliation at an individual level. However, humiliation can also be felt on the basis of one’s group membership. *Intergroup Emotions Theory* (IET; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; E. R. Smith, 1993, 1999) predicts that group-based humiliation can be experienced by an individual if his or her membership of the humiliated group is salient. Chapter 4

focused on this type of humiliation. In particular, we studied the hypothesized relation between group-based humiliation and aggression (e.g., Baumeister, 2002). We expected that the group member's perception of his or her groups' status plays an important role in this relation.

Interpersonal research (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998) shows that people with an inflated (i.e., high, but unstable) self-esteem feel more quickly insulted and react more aggressively to an insult than people with low self-esteem or people with high, but stable self-esteem. In line with this, we hypothesized that people who consider their group as superior to other groups are more prone to group-based humiliation and aggression as a response to that humiliation than people who consider their group as not or less superior to other groups.

In our studies we predicted that people (for example, Americans) confronted with a defeat of their group (for example, the withdrawal by the U.S. army from Vietnam) will experience stronger feelings of group-based humiliation when their perceived group-status is high than when their perceived group-status is low(er). In addition, we expected that when people are confronted with such a defeat they will respond more aggressively towards another group if their perceived group-status is high rather than low. In this context, we studied aggression towards another group that is not involved in the defeat.

In three scenario studies we found that humiliation caused by a defeat of one's own group (the *in-group*) was related to aggressive action tendencies towards another group (the *out-group*) that was not involved in the defeat. We did not find an effect of a manipulation of participants' group-status (high versus neutral) on aggressive tendencies. However, in line with IET (Mackie et al., 2000; E. R. Smith, 1993, 1999), participants' identification with the in-group was positively related to reported group-based humiliation and to aggressive tendencies towards the out-

group. Humiliation could partially explain this latter relation (Study 4.1). In Study 4.2 and 4.3 we used different measures of in-group identification, namely attachment to the in-group and glorification of the in-group (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). We found that only glorification of the in-group positively predicted humiliation, whereas attachment to the in-group turned out not to be predictive of humiliation. In addition, aggressive tendencies were only predicted by glorification of the in-group and not by attachment to the in-group. This relation could be partially explained by humiliation and out-group hate. It thus seems that people who strongly glorify their group are more prone to feeling humiliated about a past defeat of their group. This humiliation, in turn, causes them to feel more hate towards an out-group and to be more inclined to respond aggressively towards that out-group, even though the out-group was not involved in the humiliating defeat.

Conclusion

Humiliation is an intensely negative and complex emotion, which is experienced by many people. Although humiliation can be considered a “mixed” emotion, containing elements of both shame and anger, it is also a unique emotion that is essentially different from other (negative) emotions. In this dissertation we studied the emotion humiliation in an interpersonal, an intragroup, and an intergroup context.

We found that a number of social-contextual factors play a role in intensifying or decreasing feelings of humiliation. In an interpersonal context, we found evidence for the idea that humiliation is felt more strongly if there is an audience present which laughs after an insult. In addition, in an intragroup context, we found that humiliation is felt more strongly when someone is humiliated alone, in front of others in the group, than when they are humiliated together with other group members. With regard to consequences of this emotion we found that humiliation is related to the tendency to withdraw from the group and avoidance of others, but

also to aggressive tendencies towards the humiliator or towards an unrelated out-group. These findings indicate that humiliation is dysfunctional when it comes to the formation and maintenance of good relationships, whether this is between individuals, within a group, or between groups.

Although this dissertation offers insight in the nature and consequences of humiliation, the reported studies also invoke a number of new questions. For example, it is still unclear whether and how the strength of the relationship between humiliation and the emotions of shame and anger, and their associated action tendencies, depend on the context. We would anticipate that humiliation in an interpersonal context is more strongly related to shame and the tendency to withdraw, whereas humiliation in a group-context is more likely to evoke anger and aggression. This, however, should be investigated in future research. In addition, future studies may investigate the role of culture in the experience of and the response to humiliation, and investigate the development of humiliation over time. With the current dissertation we hope to have contributed to knowledge about and insight in humiliation and to motivate further research on this aversive, complicated, but very relevant emotion.