Commentary: Is the Paradigm for Humiliation Sufficiently Complex?

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The authors Torres and Bergner present a simple, elegant paradigm for understanding the phenomenon of humiliation. They suggest it may have universal applicability and may be of heuristic value for clinicians and policy-makers involved in forensic and social arenas. They offer case examples to illustrate its utility. It is open to question, however, whether the paradigm is sufficiently complex to encompass all the variables in actual situations. In real life, the evolution of humiliation is a highly complicated, often messy process that takes place over time and often results in intense feelings of humiliation in more than one person, often affecting several persons. The authors' examples are reexamined from alternate assumptions about what may have happened in each case. An additional case example illustrates a high degree of interpersonal complexity, suggesting that actual situations may be too unwieldy to allow for simple analysis by the paradigm.

J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 38:209–11, 2010

Walter Torres and Raymond Bergner[1] have written an elegant and comprehensive essay on an important psychological phenomenon that has been underrepresented in the literature. They point out that while psychoanalytic discussions have focused on the role of humiliation in character development, they have not dealt with the nature of the phenomenon itself. Setting out to correct this deficiency, they lay out for themselves an ambitious project. They mean "to augment our understanding of the factors at work and at stake when it occurs, to enhance our comprehension of its potentially devastating effects on persons, and to assist those whose jobs include assessing damage, designing or evaluating programs, formulating appropriate punishments, and more" (Ref. 1, p 195). Thus, they hope to make contributions in the forensic, therapeutic, and social arenas.

They divide their essay into three parts. In the first, they provide an ingenious formulation of the nature of the experience of humiliation. In the second, they discuss the devastating effects of being humiliated, and in the third they review the psychopathological conditions in which people are likely to be most vulnerable to humiliation. It is the first part that I find the most original, and it is there that I focus my discussion.

Let us briefly review their formulation. They posit four ingredients. First, the person to be humiliated makes a status claim. Second, the status claim fails publicly. Third, the degrader has the necessary status to degrade. Fourth, the degraded person is denied the status to claim a status. It is within this framework that the phenomenon of humiliation is defined and explored.

I think the framework is reasonably comprehensive. It allows the authors a rich and fluent discussion of the phenomenon and, on its face, seems to provide some heuristic benefit for further discussion. I am not sure that it is an exhaustive formulation, but in this context, exhaustiveness may be too much to ask for, and for their purpose, it is not really necessary. A more relevant question, however, and one for which I have no immediate answer, is whether it is sufficiently complex. Might its very elegance and simplicity, in other words, be something of a liability? If it is being proposed to help people make important forensic, therapeutic, or sociopolitical decisions, might a more richly textured and nuanced formulation prove more valuable?

I am not claiming that the authors lack awareness of the complexities. In fact, it is quite clear that, as they develop their ideas, they begin to grapple with nuances that are not adumbrated in the initial conceptualization. But even so, as I read through some of

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Disclosures of financial or other conflicts of interest: None.

their case material, I kept wanting to say, "Yes, but what if. . . ." Let me explain by discussing their cases in turn.

Case 1

Joe, the blue-collar worker, gets workers' compensation for an injury and returns to work with mandated accommodations. His boss, furious at having to reemploy Joe at all, publicly ridicules him by giving him a sinecure.

But what had been the nature of Joe's relationship with his boss, his coworkers and his family before the injury? Might he always have been angry, litigious, somewhat paranoid? Might he have repeatedly claimed injury or mistreatment of one sort or another? Had he been a drinker at home, with alcohol on his breath in the morning? Might it not have been altogether reasonable for the boss to want to get rid of this disagreeable troublemaker? Might the boss have experienced some feelings of humiliation himself at being outflanked by Joe and his lawyer?

Such questions in no way invalidate the operating formulation, but they enrich the story. They add all sorts of details that anyone responsible for developing policy would want to know.

Case 2

What might Henry say if confronted with Jane's version of their affair? Let us imagine that he might emphasize her open seductiveness toward him at a troubled time in his marriage. His narrative might continue as follows: initially, he was quite impressed by her warmth, charm, and competence and took her under his wing. But as her presentation of herself became more sexualized, he felt blindsided by his own neediness and eventually was unable to resist her advances. As the initial excitement subsided, he had feelings of guilt and shame—guilt because he had violated his own principles and shame because, knowing that their colleagues knew of the affair, he felt he had debased himself in their eyes. Eventually, he knew he would have to return to his wife and deal constructively with the distance that had developed between them. He tried to break things off with Jane as gently as he could, but she was angry and inconsolable. He was obsessed by the knowledge that he had hurt a woman he had genuinely liked. Preoccupied with the thought that his colleagues now despised him, he began to work erratically and inefficiently. Now in a depressed state, he was convinced that he was soon to be demoted or fired.

Case 3

We are told that for years Tom had been molesting children in his care. "The evidence became both overwhelming and widely known, rendering it obvious to virtually everyone in the community that he was guilty" (Ref. 1, p 197). Virtually everyone is not everyone. I wonder who the holdouts were. Might they have been thoughtful skeptics who sensibly wished to resist the juggernaut of public opinion that was soon to crush him?

Just what was Tom's behavior? Did he fondle the children's genitals? Have intercourse with them? Or might he merely have been putting his arm around their shoulders or patting their heads, at a time of general hysteria in which such acts were being conflated with true sexual abuse? Might the community have been in the grips of the recovered-memory period, in which large groups of people became delusionally convinced that actual abuse had occurred and been repressed?

And what about Tom himself? Let us imagine that his affectionate behavior had been quite innocent, but motivated, as it often is, by entirely unconscious fantasies of a sexual nature. As the accusations begin to mount and the tide of opinion turns against him, his conceptual hold on the difference between fantasy and reality is weakened, and he begins to wonder if he really did abuse the children. He sees that all those persons whom he had once genuinely loved as children now hate him. He assumes they must have a valid reason, and accordingly he starts to hate himself. The humiliation he has been feeling vis-à-vis the community is now compounded by his loathing for himself, a tendency that had been unconscious but that now renders him completely unable to defend himself.

A curious investigator might ask other questions as well. Did Tom really believe that his conduct had not been sexual? If so, to what extent was that belief based on unconscious self-deception? If on the other hand he acknowledged that he had acted sexually, had he rationalized his activity by asserting a belief that sexual activity is not harmful to children?

Let us note again that none of these considerations invalidates the authors' formulation about the essence of humiliation. But they remain important questions that will, and ought to, pique the curiosity

of interested observers, and they will, and ought to, have bearing on whatever responses in procedure or policy are adumbrated.

Finally I should like to make explicit a conclusion that emerges from this discussion—that the interactional processes that take place within a social system in which people suffer major humiliation are highly complex and multifactorial. It is often hard to determine who among many injured people are the most humiliated. Although it has been vastly simplified for the sake of brevity, a single example will suffice.

In January, 1995, some African-American undergraduate women at a major eastern university were returning from a party to their dorm late at night. They were reportedly singing loudly. Several students were calling out to them, some angrily, to be quiet. Joining in the protest, a male freshman used an epithet that the young women decided was racist. They singled him out for complaint and lodged a formal protest with the university's disciplinary board.

In the eyes of most impartial observers the epithet was not racist. It was a term used in the freshman's native country that simply connoted carelessness and insensitivity. Initially, it was thought that meetings that allowed the principals to talk out the misunderstanding would resolve the conflict. But the women were not to be placated, and they insisted that the matter be formally adjudicated. Key members of the disciplinary board were fearful lest they be accused of racism themselves, or at least of insensitivity to the feelings of minority groups, a concern that was quite alive on the campus at that moment. The president of the university, a highly esteemed scholar and educator with a reputation for great integrity, was asked to bring his influence to bear on the matter. Privately, he thought that any decision against the freshman would be an egregious miscarriage of justice, but for complicated but highly defensible reasons of governance within the university, he decided to refrain from involvement.

The decision did in fact go against the freshman, and he was expelled (he was later reinstated). The president's silence and deference to the disciplinary board was misinterpreted as an endorsement of its position, and it instantly became a *cause célèbre*. He was pilloried in the press, particularly by nationally prominent conservative columnists, who ridiculed him for his alleged fatuous political correctness. All this took place at a particularly delicate time for him, for he had been nominated for a prominent government position and was awaiting congressional approval. He eventually was confirmed, but suffered much public ridicule on the way.

Just who was humiliated in this sorry tale? Surely, the complaining students, who had been primed to respond with outrage over racial slurs long before the incident at issue; no one questioned the sincerity or depth of their suffering. Obviously, the freshman, who had been publicly ostracized by large segments of his social system over what he justly considered a misunderstanding. Even more obviously, the president was subjected to public ridicule at a delicate point in his life. What about the head of the disciplinary board? We can only speculate.

Now let us return to the authors' formulation and ask whether it could intelligibly be applied to this highly complicated sequence of interactions. I think the authors could make a persuasive case that it could. But they would have to break down the incident into several components and subject each instance of humiliation, of each humiliated person, to their analysis. Might the process be too cumbersome to be useful? Might its heuristic value for politicians, judges, and clinicians be constrained by a formulation which, while elegant and simple in its outlines, proves too unwieldy in its practical applications?

I find it easy to admire the elegance of the authors' understanding of humiliation. But the phenomenon usually takes place in a complex, messy social context that becomes messier the more closely one looks at it. Perhaps my reservations about the utility of the formulation will recede over time and with experience. It is too early to tell.

Reference

1. Torres WJ, Bergner RM: Humiliation: its nature and consequences. J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 38:195–204, 2010