

Humiliation: Its Nature and Consequences

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In this article, we present a new analysis of what is involved when individuals undergo significant public humiliation. We describe the structure of humiliation—that is, the factors that, taken collectively, render certain life events and circumstances humiliating; the most common destructive consequences of being subjected to them; and several personality factors that, when present, can serve to amplify the damaging effects of humiliating experiences. The analysis is intended to enable forensic clinicians, lawyers, judges, and other relevant parties to understand better what happens when individuals are humiliated and to identify more precisely the damage that such persons sustain. It is also intended to have heuristic value for the discussion, confrontation, and alleviation of humiliation in correctional, jurisprudential, clinical, and general societal contexts.

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I learned that to humiliate another person is to make him suffer an unnecessarily cruel fate.—Nelson Mandela¹

Humiliation is an important element in many situations that come to the attention of forensic clinicians. Its presence and effects are referred to, explicitly or implicitly, in a range of civil actions, including wrongful termination, malpractice, libel, civil rights, and workers' compensation cases.² In criminal cases, including some highly publicized ones involving mass murder followed by suicide, humiliation is often imputed to be a primary motive for the act of vengeance. Further, it can be a significant element in situations, such as military, law enforcement, correctional, and medical ones, in which institutions and individuals are invested with the authority to coerce others. Finally, humiliation and its consequences have arisen as topics in a debate regarding the legitimacy and value of employing its deliberate public use as a punishment for offenders (Perlin M, personal communication, September 2007).³

Despite its prevalence in forensic contexts, humiliation has been subjected to relatively little concep-

tual or empirical scrutiny. Psychoanalytic discussions, while helpful, have been focused primarily on the role of humiliation in character development and on character structures that render persons more vulnerable to it, but not on understanding the phenomenon itself.⁴ The formulation of humiliation presented herein is designed 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. The observations presented derived from clinical practice, both forensic and therapeutic, whereas the general concept of humiliation was formulated within the framework of descriptive psychology.^{5,6} However, the case examples represent classic scenerios of humiliation and not actual clinical cases.

Our discussion has a three-part structure. In part 1, we present an analysis of humiliation and of the ingredients that render certain life events humiliating to individuals. In part 2, we detail the specific effects on individuals of being subjected to humiliating circumstances and thus of the ways in which humiliation can be so devastating and damaging to them. In part 3, we discuss psychopathological conditions that

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may render individuals more subject to humiliation and its adverse consequences.

What Is Humiliation?

Let us begin our analysis of the nature of humiliation by considering three cases (based on real cases and altered for dramatic and conceptual value and to prevent identification) in which individuals experienced severely humiliating life events.

Case 1

Joe, a blue collar worker, was seriously injured at work. As a result, he lost the ability to function in his usual job, a physically demanding and strenuous one. His employer had workers' compensation insurance, but still had to pay some out-of-pocket expenses to cover Joe's treatment and compensation. Subsequent to treatment, Joe was sent back to work with medically mandated requirements for accommodations, as well as restrictions on what kinds of tasks he could perform. Further, to look out for his rights in this situation and to maximize his compensation award, Joe had hired an attorney. His employer was livid. He resented having to take Joe back into the workforce at all and decided to accommodate his limitations by instructing Joe's supervisor to place him in a highly trafficked public area, through which all the other laborers had to pass to get to their work sites, and to assign Joe to work at a table carrying out a menial task. Everyone, including Joe, knew that the task he was performing was completely meaningless and was intended to humiliate him in the eyes of his coworkers. As a consequence of this treatment, Joe developed intense but powerless rage, sleeplessness, and feelings of worthlessness and profound helplessness to change or escape his humiliating circumstances. He felt painfully degraded as a worker and as a man.

Case 2

Jane, a single woman in her thirties, was a middle manager in a large corporation. Henry, a senior executive, seemed to recognize her talent and took her under his wing as a mentor. He invited her to company events where leaders and rising stars of the corporation were core participants and secured roles for her that positioned her for advancement and leadership. She was delighted by this turn of events and grateful to her mentor. As events progressed, they developed a personal relationship that became amo-

rous and sexual. She knew that he was married, but her feelings for him prevailed over her judgment. However, several weeks into their personal relationship, he suddenly told her that their relationship could not continue because he felt obligated to remain with his wife. Shortly thereafter, he stopped taking her to special events and became quite distant and cold toward her. She began to harbor doubts both about the honesty of his affection for her and his initial mentoring and about the validity of her own talents and potential for advancement. She spoke of this to no one. She felt betrayed and hurt, troubled by confusion and self-doubt, and ashamed of her willingness to participate in the affair. A short time later, while using the toilet at the workplace, she saw scribbled on the stall wall, "Henry nails another one." This triggered a flood of humiliation and shame at what she believed must be a widespread condemnation of her involvement in an affair with a married executive and of her having been naïvely duped by this man into believing both that he cared for her and that she had special abilities that would lead to advancement.

Going to work became an awful ordeal for Jane. She became preoccupied with the gnawing sense that others were deriding, ridiculing, and judging her, loathed herself for "having been so stupid," and came to suspect that in truth she was "really a loser." She developed anxiety symptoms that included gastrointestinal malaise and frequent vomiting. Jane knew she could lodge a claim of sexual harassment, but feared that she might lose such a claim because she had willingly participated in the affair. She also feared that it would expose her as someone who was naïve, stupid, and self-deluded for thinking that Henry cared for her and for acting as if she had been a rising star.

Case 3

Tom, a school teacher, had for many years been a much-admired, kindly figure in his community. In addition to being well liked and respected, he enjoyed a secure job position, a nice home, an apparently secure marriage, and more than adequate financial resources. However, late in his career, it was revealed that for many years he had been molesting children in his care. Subsequent to his initial denials and much public support, more and more of his former students came forward and testified that they had been molested by him over more than a decade.

The evidence became both overwhelming and widely known, rendering it obvious to virtually everyone in the community that he was guilty. In the wake of public certitude about his guilt, he was suspended from his job pending the decision in his court case. His wife left him. He became a social pariah who could no longer present himself in public and faced an almost certain lengthy jail term.

Ingredient 1: The Status Claim

In all of our examples, we see that the individuals in question claimed, or attempted to claim, a certain status. By this we mean that they presented themselves to others as the legitimate occupants of, or bidders for, certain social positions vis-à-vis these other persons. They claimed, explicitly or implicitly, in word or in deed, “I am. . . a legitimate worker notwithstanding my injury. . . a loved and talented partner of a senior executive. . . an upright, kindly school teacher who cares about the young children in his charge.”

Ingredient 2: The Public Failure of the Status Claim

In all cases, the status claim failed. The individuals involved either failed to secure the status they aspired to or lost the status that they had formerly enjoyed or believed they enjoyed. Further, the failure was a public one, meaning that it was witnessed by at least one other person and possibly, as in one of our examples, by many people. The disabled worker was placed in a public situation that subjected him to ridicule and derision, effectively proclaiming, “How ridiculous that this man calls himself a worker.” The middle manager was sexually exploited, duped into believing that she merited star status, and humiliated by her discovery that an unknown set of fellow employees knew that she had been fooled before she did. The teacher was publicly exposed as a hypocritical molester of young children and as anything but a true subscriber to his professed values.

When a status claim fails in a completely private way, such that no one but the claimant realizes the failure, the result may be painful self-realization, but not humiliation. An excellent fictional account of such a state of affairs may be found in Camus’ *The Fall*,⁷ in which the protagonist is forced by a critical life event to recognize that he is far from being the morally upright altruist he had always taken himself to be. In the wake of this realization, he suffers deep disillusionment. How-

ever, since the critical event was unknown to anyone else, he is not humiliated.

The reasons behind failed status claims can be quite various. The individual, for example, may have been making false claims, may not have had the social skills to make good the claims, or may have encountered gratuitous derision toward the claims. Further, other persons who become apprised of the relevant facts may in some cases conclude that the humiliation is both justified and deserved and in other cases that it is neither. Such differences in situations, while they may be important in other respects, make no difference with respect to what causes a given social scenario to be humiliating.

Ingredient 3: The Status of the Degradator to Degrade

Not everyone has the status to degrade another person, to reject or invalidate a status claim and thereby “de-grade” the individual in society. For example, in the public forum of a jury trial, an expert witness may characterize a plaintiff’s claim as fraudulent, thus potentially humiliating the latter. However, it is then established by the plaintiff’s attorney that, not only is this witness a notorious hired gun with a long history of testifying in accordance with the paying party’s wishes, but also his credentials as an expert are fake. Once he is convincingly exposed as such in court, he loses his status as someone who can effectively denounce and thus humiliate the plaintiff. By way of further example, a respected professor of biology once articulated the theory of natural selection in a lecture, reviewed key research in its support, and indicated that she accepted the theory as scientifically well established. A student in the front row, however, raised his hand and responded that it was ridiculous to believe that humans could have evolved in such a fashion, that evolution was just a theory, and that anyone who believed such a thing (by implication, the professor included) must be both stupid and impious. This student, however, found himself surrounded by fellow students who made it known that they did not share his implicit religious beliefs, that they thought the professor’s presentation was compelling, and that they regarded the student as completely lacking the status to denounce the professor. Thus, the student’s attempt at humiliation failed. In these cases, neither the expert witness nor the critical student had the

standing in their respective situations to be regarded as legitimate and valid assigners or degraders of status.

Returning to our case examples, had the business owner confronted Joe's supervisor and disciplined him for his vindictive and humiliating treatment of Joe, or had Jane developed insight early on about Henry's intentions and *modus operandi*, the status (and thus ability) of these persons to degrade would have been undermined. Unfortunately, these resolutions did not happen in either case, and the persons were left in positions that enabled them to continue the degrading treatment of their victims.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, having the status to degrade another does not imply any special or exalted social standing. In everyday life, we witness a wide variety of ordinary citizens lodging degrading and humiliating claims against others. The patient accuses the doctor of sexual misconduct. The employee accuses the employer of harassment. The adolescent accuses the parent of sexual abuse. Such claims may be honest and legitimate or dishonest and illegitimate. The key point, however, lies in the fact that our ordinary presumption is that persons have the necessary status to denounce and degrade others. In a manner akin to our regarding others whom we meet as sane and rational unless our observations show otherwise, we regard others as veridical reporters—in this case, denouncers—unless we see that there are better reasons not to so regard them. A female patient accuses the doctor of sexual misconduct. We already know, or subsequently find out, that the patient is regarded by those who know her as impeccably honest, that she has never made such an allegation in the past, that she is a person of means, and so forth. In the absence of disqualifying evidence, we conclude that her allegation is probably true. In the case of another such accusation, we already know or subsequently learn that the accuser is widely viewed as dishonest, has a criminal record involving the perpetration of scams, and has an expensive drug habit. We tend to view her as disqualified and ineligible, as lacking the status to degrade the doctor as a sexual predator. The practical result is that, because of our general presumption of the status and eligibility to denounce and degrade, many people will have the misfortune to be successfully, although not legitimately, humiliated.

Ingredient 4: Rejection of the Status to Claim a Status

Consider the following two refusals of a status bid. A job applicant receives a letter of rejection that reads as follows: "Thank you for applying for a position at XYZ Corp. We received hundreds of applications, many from fully qualified applicants such as yourself. It was an extremely difficult decision. However, we regret to inform you. . . ." Second example: A woman, in turning down a date request from a young man, says to him: "I really like you, and if I had met you a year ago I would have loved to go out with you, but I'm very involved with someone else now; in fact, I'm engaged to be married."

In both of these cases, a bid for a status, that of employee and that of potential boyfriend, is rejected. However, the message conveyed in the rejection is that the bidder was a legitimate candidate and was fully eligible and entitled to make the bid in question. Consider, in contrast, a situation in which the letter of rejection reads, "Given your ridiculously inadequate qualifications, we can't believe you even applied for this job. What were you thinking?" Or suppose the woman had said to her suitor, "You think I would be remotely interested in going out with the likes of you? You've got to be kidding!" These refusals become declarations that, not only is the status claim or bid rejected, but the very status of the claimant to make such a status bid or claim is rejected. In these rejections, the individual is branded a pretender, someone who had no business making the status claim to begin with. With this added element, these messages become humiliations.

In the context of our case examples, the public message, delivered by only one person or many people, becomes: "How ridiculous that you would even think of presenting yourself as. . . a real worker. . . a talented and attractive candidate for a top executive's love and favor. . . an educator of young children who truly cares about them and their best interests!"

The critical nature of this element is hard to overstate. When humiliation annuls the status of individuals to claim status, they are in essence denied eligibility to recover the status that they have lost. They have effectively lost the voice to make claims within the relevant community and especially to make counterclaims on their own behalf to remove their humiliation. (This is evident, not only conceptually but phenomenologically. The person who is suddenly humiliated in a group is typically left feeling

stunned and speechless, unable to counterclaim.) Furthermore, the loss of standing to claim status within a community is the equivalent of being rendered a nobody within that community. Consistent with this formulation, some describe the effect of severe humiliation as an annihilation of the self,⁸ and many humiliated individuals find it necessary to move to another community to recover their status, or more broadly, to reconstruct their lives.

This fourth and final element serves to clarify the distinction between humiliation and embarrassment. In embarrassment, a person discovers such things as that his zipper is open, that there has been spinach between his teeth during a just completed conversation, or that a gossipy comment has been overheard by its target. Such persons are caught out of face, in minor violations of social decorum or conduct. However, in these and other embarrassing situations, their status to make status bids or claims is not rejected. In humiliation, it is.

Summary

In summary, then, an individual suffers humiliation when he makes a bid or claim to a certain social status, has this bid or claim fail publicly, and has it fail at the hands of another person or persons who have the status necessary to reject the claim. Finally, what is denied is not only the status claim itself, but also and more fundamentally the individual's very status to have made such a claim at all.

Damaging Consequences of Humiliation

Suffering severe humiliation has been shown empirically to plunge individuals into major depressions, suicidal states, and severe anxiety states, including ones characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder.⁹ The following analysis focuses on the most common direct consequences of experiencing humiliation, and clarifies the linkages between being humiliated on the one hand and developing such mental disorders on the other. It should be emphasized that attention to individual differences is important: not all humiliated persons experience all these consequences, and different persons experience them to different degrees. Thus, although humiliation is powerfully pathogenic, both the nature and degree of personal harm that any humiliated individual suffers varies with the specifics of the humiliating circumstance and personality and must be assessed on an individual basis.

Loss of Status and the Resultant Inability to Behave

An individual's statuses are crucial determinants of the range of behavior of which the person is capable.^{6,10} An individual's statuses are the positions that are occupied in relation to everything in his world. These statuses or positions would include, for example, social, occupational, and situational roles (e.g., husband to one's wife, employee of one's company, or speaker at a conference); disadvantageous positions vis-à-vis significant others (e.g., scapegoat in one's family of origin or victim of harassment in one's workplace); and stigmatized positions in society (e.g., criminal, sexual deviant, or mentally ill person). (These examples are provided in the hope that they will serve to avoid the frequent misinterpretation of status as prestigious social standing, as in the expression status-seeker.)

The crucial point of focusing on a person's status is that the occupation of certain relational positions expands one's range of eligibilities, opportunities, and reasons to act in valued ways—that is, one's behavior potential.^{5,10} The occupation of others constricts such behavior potential. A simple example of this general truth may be seen in military hierarchies, in which an individual might occupy the position of private or of general. The mere occupation of the latter position by an individual carries with it greatly expanded eligibilities and powers and thus a range of possible behavior, relative to the former. For example, a general, unlike a private, can give orders to virtually everyone else in the chain of command, enjoy a host of officers' privileges, and have a far greater voice in important decisions. What status dynamics emphasizes is that all relational positions convey various degrees and qualities of behavior potential.^{5,10}

From this perspective, it can be seen that what befalls an individual who is successfully subjected to severely humiliating treatment amounts to a degradation, a literal de-grading, entailing a significant loss of status that had been, up until then, successfully claimed and acted on and thus a loss of the individual's range of behavioral eligibilities in some community or communities.^{9,10} It amounts to damaging these persons' very ability to behave as members of their communities, both because they have a new and degraded status (e.g., malingering worker or sexual predator) and because they have lost status to claim status and with this have a greatly impaired ability to recover their lost status. The first and most basic

question in assessing the harm befalling an individual, then, is that of how much and what kind of degradation, or status loss has been sustained. In general, the greater the degree of such loss, the greater the degree to which the individual is rendered unable to behave in his world. Is it comparable with our school teacher, Tom, who lost his whole world? Or is it more comparable with our injured worker Joe and our middle manager Jane, who, although severely humiliated in front of coworkers, may nonetheless retain considerable standing with and support from family and friends?

Considerations in determining the severity of any given humiliation include the following:

How global, and thus broadly socially disqualifying, is this individual's status loss? Has the individual been degraded to a status such as pedophile that would render him a pariah in every community or to one such as outcast in organization X, which is far more narrow and specific?

How fundamental is the status that the individual has lost? Has the person lost the status to determine who touches him sexually or lost the status to determine where and when he may drive a car?

How core is the community in which the humiliation occurs? Did it occur in a community that is highly central to the individual's way of life (e.g., for a practicing physician, the medical community) or in a community that is more peripheral (e.g., that same physician's tennis club)?

How public is the humiliation? Is it known to only one other individual or perhaps to an entire community or even a nation?

How publicly supported is the individual's degradation? Is there universal concurrence, little concurrence, or some concurrence that the individual merits the degraded status?

Has the humiliation occurred in the context of a loss such as an arrest, divorce, workplace injury, or dismissal from a job? In such cases, the individual's status has already been marginalized and compromised, and there is less alternative standing to weather the humiliation.

To what extent was malice involved in the humiliation? In the authors' experience, and consistent with the aggravated effect of trauma that is

inflicted through malice, humiliations carried out with malicious intent to degrade another can be particularly devastating.

Finally, and very critically, to what degree has the individual lost the status to make status claims? To what degree has the person been effectively silenced and nullified and lost all credible voice and opportunity for recovering from the degradation?

Hopelessness, Helplessness, and Suicide

Individuals who have been subjected to the most severe and public of humiliations frequently experience feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Lacking the ability to make effective appeals on their own behalf, they have no discernible way back, no avenue to recover and have a better future. Furthermore, their status as a nobody in their former community can be excruciatingly painful and may sometimes become intolerable. For example, in the case of Tom, the school teacher, after he was regarded by virtually everyone in his community as an individual whose claims of model citizenship concealed his being a child molester, liar, and moral sham, he lost completely his ability to make any claims on his own behalf that could bring about recovery of his lost status. He had lost not only his whole world, but with this loss of voice, any hope of recovering his place in that world. In such situations, the grave danger arises that the individual may commit suicide.

Powerless Rage and Possible Murder

Understandably, the anger provoked by being severely publicly humiliated, particularly when the humiliation is experienced as unjust and undeserved, can be extreme. Such a response was the case for Joe, our injured worker, who was forced to spend every day engaging in meaningless work in front of his coworkers. Naturally, such humiliations evoke powerless rage, the urge to protest, and a strong desire to seek redress. However, humiliated individuals, who have now lost the status of persons who can effectively make status claims on their own behalf within their communities, no longer have any voice within these communities to make their case and have it considered. Thus, although their anger is often intense, they are powerless to act within their communities to recover their former status. In this situation, some individuals assume a new, powerful, and potentially quite dangerous status, that of an outsider

who has become an enemy of the community. Such persons come to believe that they have no other recourse but to take revenge on the community itself through some form of violence. However, in perpetrating acts of violence, they effectively end the possibility of attaining future standing in this or in any community (except perhaps prison), and they are left nowhere. Their lives in this sense are over and dispensable, and they may reasonably regard suicide as necessary, tolerable, and perhaps even convenient collateral damage. Such a scenario is often reported in the news in which a humiliated employee or student goes on a rampage, kills many innocent coworkers or fellow students, and then commits suicide.⁸

Disabling Preemptive Motivation

Many humiliated individuals find themselves preemptively motivated by their circumstances, by the need to recover from them and by the need to gain revenge on their humiliators. The motives surrounding the humiliation become so powerful and all-consuming that they largely preempt all other motivations in the person's life. Other concerns fade into the background. The individual cannot focus on these matters, cannot concentrate, and is constantly distracted by the humiliating situation and its implications. Jane, the middle manager, found herself so completely consumed by her situation that she could not concentrate at work, in social situations, or even while trying to watch a television show. Many evenings she could not sleep because of her obsessive preoccupation with her circumstances. In our experience, most severely humiliated persons, like Jane, find their ability to function to be greatly impaired in the other important spheres of their lives, such as their families, friendships, and jobs.

Loss of Status as an Appraiser of Reality

When individuals are humiliated in such a way that their fundamental capacity to read reality is successfully discounted and invalidated, the effects can be particularly devastating. We are referring to individuals whose reading of important realities is preemptorily and successfully dismissed and discounted as not to be taken seriously, or pointedly labeled as crazy, irrational, hopelessly biased, or beset by a psychosomatic problem that renders their claims and experiences of pain and impairment as all in their heads. In these circumstances, that which serves as the basis for making claims in the real world (i.e., the

capacity to read reality correctly) is invalidated, and such individuals are left with little or no voice or foundation to make any claims.

Loss of Status to Claim Basic Human Rights

The status to claim the enjoyment of basic human rights is, by its nature, a core, fundamental status. A humiliation that involves public demonstration of an individual's inability to claim such rights has a devastating effect. For example, individuals in wartime who are forced by their captors, against all of their cultural and religious beliefs, to strip naked, to be led around on all fours on a leash, or to witness the rape of their own wives and daughters, would be examples of persons humiliated in this way. These situations constitute *de facto* "degradation ceremonies"⁹ in which the message to the degraded individual is: "If there is something that you most want to resist, it is this. Yet, look at you. Look how utterly powerless you are to claim what is most essential to you." The ceremony establishes publicly the individual's utter helplessness to make the most elemental claims against violations of that which he holds most essential and cherished. If the individual does not have the status to make the most elemental of claims, what status has he left? Indeed, these kinds of degradations may be perpetrated to engender a profound sense of powerlessness to make claims of any sort. Thus, they are enacted to disempower fundamentally not only individuals, but whole ethnic and religious groups. Of course, humiliations such as these need not occur only in the context of war or political subjugation; for example, victims of rape or of sexual harassment living in ordinary society may experience precisely this kind of devastating humiliation. Finally, going back to the humiliating treatment of both Joe and Jane, one could argue that there is a basic human right not to be subjected to gratuitous public humiliation itself.

Sense of Worthlessness

Severely humiliated individuals often experience a sense of worthlessness. The reasons for this should be clear when we consider the plight of a person who has suffered many or all of the consequences delineated herein. The individual has sustained a massive loss of status in the world, has been left without an effective voice to recover, has been rendered a nobody who is helpless and hopeless, has become unable to function well in other critical spheres of life such as family and

job, has been branded and seen by others as unable even to read reality correctly, or has been forced to submit to treatment that is a gross violation of basic human rights. It is little wonder that the result would more often than not be profound feelings of worthlessness.

Psychopathological Conditions That Render Persons More Vulnerable to Humiliation

Certain pathological conditions, and in particular the kinds of personalities who are most prone to incur them, engender a greater than usual vulnerability to the detrimental effects of humiliation. These conditions and personalities can markedly aggravate or magnify the effects of humiliating experiences, generate the perception of humiliation where there was none, or even invite humiliation from others. The disorders discussed in the following sections stand out in this regard, but the list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Depressive Disorders

Long-noted characteristics of persons who are prone to depression are their low self-esteem and their proclivity to blame themselves for negative life events.¹¹ One famous and well-researched account, for example, characterizes these persons as having an insidious attributional style¹¹ in which, when bad things happen, they tend automatically to attribute them to factors that are internal (i.e., to negative personal qualities within them such as unlovability, inadequacy, or stupidity), stable (i.e., unlikely ever to change), and global (i.e., affecting not just this event but many things in their lives). Given their initial sense of unworthiness, as well as this highly self-blaming and self-destructive attributional style, these persons are all too ready to succumb to humiliating indictments, and tremendously impaired in their ability to make strong counterclaims on their own behalf. Thus, they are far more vulnerable and suffer far more seriously the adverse effects of humiliating events, and often experience profound senses of hopelessness and helplessness in the face of them.

Social Phobia and Avoidant Personality Disorder

Individuals with these disorders, who have strong senses of personal inadequacy and unacceptability, live in dread that they will say or do something (e.g., make an inappropriate comment, give a poor perfor-

mance, vomit, or faint) that will expose them to scrutiny and harsh criticism from others.¹²⁻¹⁴ Extremely sensitive to negative evaluation, they constantly scan the social environment for the possibility that their actions will be seen and exposed as those of an impostor, an incompetent, or some other kind of shameful person. They are unusually ready to interpret critical, rejecting stances or even inadvertent, accidental dismissals from others as crushing humiliations, and to suffer accordingly. Given such general sensitivities and vulnerabilities, the level of humiliation they experience from an actual severe public humiliation tends to be more extreme than that of the average individual.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Persons with narcissistic personality disorder are viewed by most theorists as individuals who, despite outward appearances, are beset with an underlying sense of personal unworthiness and unacceptability.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Unable to truly esteem themselves, they desperately pursue a compensatory life strategy of convincing themselves that they are actually special persons who are set apart from and above other people, and seeking the acclaim of others by making public claims (e.g., of special talent, brilliance, or accomplishment) of a highly self-aggrandizing nature designed to win the admiration and affection of these others. When these claims fail, narcissists, unlike persons with more solidly grounded self-esteem, are highly humiliation-sensitive, prone to overreact to minor criticisms or failures of others to value them and to react with bitter anger or vicious counterhumiliations. At times, narcissistic persons engineer their own humiliation by making grandiose claims that are simply false and that subsequently result in public exposure. Although narcissists can be adept at evading these humiliations through self-serving rationalizations that debase their would-be humiliators, their defensive maneuvers often fail, leaving them feeling deeply humiliated and enraged.

A Common Thread

It is notable that a common feature of all of these personalities is an underlying lack of self-esteem. By definition, when we speak of self-esteem, we are talking about the esteem in which persons hold themselves. In the case of low or poor self-esteem, we are talking about individuals who, as critics of themselves, have made the summary appraisal that they

are persons of little worth.¹⁸ Thus, when the humiliating allegations and mistreatments from external detractors occur, they are generally at a great disadvantage. Believing the worst of themselves, they are all too ready to concur in the degrading indictments of their humiliators and are very ill-prepared to defend themselves from them.

Uses of the Present Formulation

The practical uses of this analysis of humiliation and its consequences lie in forensic, clinical, institutional, and scientific domains. In closing, we shall briefly relate some of the more important of these.

Forensic Uses

The present analysis can assist all concerned in forensic situations—clinicians, attorneys, judges, jury members, and clients—to understand better what is involved and what is at issue in cases of humiliation and thus to make more informed judgments concerning this important matter. For example, the detailed articulation presented herein of the many consequences that can result from severe humiliation may be employed as a kind of checklist by clinicians and attorneys to identify the precise ways in which specific clients have been injured, enabling them to provide judges and juries with detailed, rationally grounded cause-effect accounts of the nature and extent of clients' injuries. Further, the analysis of the relationship between certain psychopathological conditions and humiliation may serve as an important qualifier in determinations both of the causality of humiliation and of its consequences.

Therapeutic Uses

Employing the kind of informed clinical assessments of their patients' situations and personal conditions just described, psychotherapists may use the present analysis, as well as the status dynamic framework within which it is embedded,¹⁹ to design interventions that comprehend and meet the precise needs of their clients. We intend to describe such interventions in a future publication.

Program Design and Modification

The delineation of the conditions that constitute humiliation may allow or promote better identification of its actual or potential occurrence in programmatic and other institutional settings. It may thereby better position administrators to institute processes

and procedures that serve to recognize, correct, and prevent it. Our observation has been that humiliation tends to be under-recognized, trivialized, and insufficiently confronted in many kinds of settings.

Due Process and Punishment

This application concerns those charged with the duty to construct or evaluate prosecution and punishment of offenders. Punishments by their very nature involve some element of loss of status. The incarcerated individual, the demoted soldier, the person whose driver's license is revoked, all lose the status to engage in activities for which they had been eligible before their punishment. What appears to distinguish humiliating from nonhumiliating prosecution and punishment is the formal or informal due process that acknowledges the individual as having rights as a status claimant. Consistent with the essence of this article's formulation, the due process that is the core of our system of jurisprudence appears designed to protect individuals from humiliation through the assiduous protection of their status to claim a status: no denunciation or punishment can be leveled without honoring the right of the accused, with the assistance of counsel, to lodge counterclaims and to have his claims receive due consideration. It is for this reason that we do not ordinarily regard a trial and conviction, despite its public nature, as humiliating *per se*, by virtue of its very structure. (Of course, a prosecution and conviction may constitute a humiliation for an individual because of the nature of the offense, particular personal characteristics, the contrast between preindictment status claims and the ultimate findings in the case, and more.)

On the other hand, denunciations and punishments that are delivered without the accused's having recourse to defending himself are humiliating by the very fact that the individual has been deprived of the essential status of one who is entitled to make a counterclaim. Most obviously, judicial systems in which the accused is denied counsel are for this reason highly degrading. One could argue that they are *de facto* instances of the denial, discussed earlier, of basic human rights. However, other less obvious punishments and sentences can be considered in this regard. For example, "branding" type punishments (e.g., ones in which convicted individuals are forced to wear a sandwich board that declares their offenses, or ones in which they must drive with a license plate that labels them drunken drivers) are designed to

expose the individual to the degrading judgment of peers outside of the judicial setting, without recourse to a counterclaim. Such punishments violate the traditional protection of the status to claim a status that is otherwise so firmly adhered to in our system of jurisprudence.

Research Design

The delineation of the conditions that constitute humiliation may allow researchers to identify more clearly and investigate its occurrence and its personal and societal consequences.

Conclusions

In this article, we have presented an analysis of what is involved when individuals undergo severe public humiliation. We have described the structure of humiliation, i.e., the factors that, taken collectively, render certain life events and circumstances humiliating ones for persons; the most common damaging consequences of being subjected to these; several personality factors that, when present, can serve to facilitate humiliation and amplify its damaging effects; and some applications of the present analysis in a variety of forensic, clinical, institutional, and scientific contexts.

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