

# Commentary: Till We Have Faces— On Humiliation

Gwen Adshead, MB, BS

My commentary takes up two points raised by Drs. Torres and Bergner: first, the social context in which humiliation takes place and the way such behavior is normalized; and second, the question of face, and in this context, the loss of face and its impact on identity. For me, the key concern in relation to humiliation is not so much loss of entitlement status, but a loss of identity. Humiliation is a fundamental attack on narrative identity, but I will make the (perhaps uncomfortable) suggestion that not everyone is humiliate-able and that, to some extent, one may be able to choose the extent of one's injuries through loss of face.

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How shall we see the gods face to face, till we have faces?—  
C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>

I am grateful to the editor for asking me to offer a commentary on this thoughtful paper by Walter Torres and Raymond Bergner.<sup>2</sup> One of the great intellectual pleasures of forensic psychiatry (in my view) is its interface with other disciplines: literature, law, sociology, criminology, and philosophy. We need these interfaces because many of the human concepts with which we deal professionally look superficially simple, but are in fact immensely complex; and it is a strength of our profession that we give ourselves the proper time and space to take complex concepts (like humiliation) seriously.

## Primate Groups and Dominance Hierarchies

It is important to consider the context in which humiliation takes place. Humiliation, like guilt, pride, and shame, is a social emotion<sup>3</sup> that regulates the self in social relationships in human groups and communities. It entails being regarded by others in a particular way that generates feelings of shame in the one humiliated, so that the person thinks, "I don't want others to see me like this." There is something about being caught (or the fantasy of being caught)

in the social gaze that generates these social emotions. It is therefore crucial, I suggest, to see humiliation not as an individual experience, but as a group phenomenon.

If humiliation involves a loss of social status, or entitlement to status, then it suggests that we accept that it is natural and inevitable for humans to organize themselves into status hierarchies, and that humiliation and shaming behaviors are normal (albeit undesirable) within and between competitive human groups. Such an argument rests on evidence from evolutionary behavioral psychology and evidence from studies of animal groups. It is true that in most nonhuman primate groups, strict dominance hierarchies are the norm and are strictly maintained.<sup>4</sup> Authority and status are vertically constructed. The authority of a superior may be challenged by an inferior, but the loser will lose his place in the pecking order and move to a lower ranking. Challenges and competitions take place in a group setting and are witnessed and recognized by the rest of the group. Females usually have status only by association with superior males.

Loss of rank in nonhuman primates results in stress and in males, decreased testosterone. It is the status that drives the hormones and not the other way around.<sup>4</sup> Animals that lose status lose access to better food, mates, and grooming. They are treated badly by other animals and may be driven out of the group, which generally increases the risk of death.

This account of dominance hierarchies in our nonhuman cousins sounds familiar and even natural.

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Dr. Adshead is a Consultant in Forensic Psychotherapy, West London Mental Health Trust, Broadmoor Hospital, Crowthorne, Berkshire, UK. Address correspondence to: Gwen Adshead, MB, BS, London Directorate Psychotherapy Service, Administration Building, Broadmoor Hospital, Crowthorne, Berks, RG45 7EG UK. E-mail: gwen.adshead@wlmht.nhs.uk.

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Many human stories are built around such themes. We may consider how many Hollywood movies involve the return and revenge of the underdog (note the topographical language that emphasizes the ranking). But I want to argue that these stories represent our anxieties about what goes wrong in human groups and situations, precisely because it is not the norm for human groups to be organized as strict vertical hierarchies. Group size and complexity of function are directly related to the volume of the neocortex, which allows language to replace grooming as the primary modus of communication.<sup>5</sup> Language in groups and the use of time for conversation are techniques that allow for complex social functions and horizontal dynamics. These dynamics operate to flatten vertical hierarchies, so that groups become forums for information sharing, peer bonding between kinship groups, conflict resolution, and pro-social rule formations. Vertical dominance hierarchies need only operate when groups are anxious and threatened at times of real danger (few wars are won by committees).

However, human groups may experience a threat from the inside. If a human group is insecure or poorly organized, then the threat may actually be anxiety within the group. When an insecure group is overwhelmed by anxiety, complex thinking stops; or put another way, the executive neocortex fails to inhibit the limbic brain that we share with other mammals. The vertical hierarchies operate as crude default settings when groups are highly stressed or anxious, and bullying and humiliation are part of the repertoire of behaviors that an anxious hierarchy may use to restore psychological comfort for the group.

### The Public Gaze

My point here is that organizations in which bullying and humiliation are allowed to flourish are anxious organizations (as nicely set out in the first example presented by Torres and Bergner), and we may want to focus more on those who bully, not their victims. It is not natural for people to bully and humiliate other people. Those who claim it is both oversimplify human social interaction and its rules and ignore refuting evidence from sociology, behavioral psychology, and anthropology. Such claims may represent an attempt to alleviate public anxiety, either by justifying humiliating and bullying behavior, or indirectly blaming the victim for being sensitive and weak. In such situations, the person bullied is often a

scapegoat for the wider group or organization.<sup>6</sup> The scapegoat traditionally carries the penalty for a community and is not only excluded but is seen to be excluded. It is the public aspect of the naming and excluding aspect of humiliation that is essential to the psychological distress.

Right wing and authoritarian organizations often praise bullying and deride those who are humiliated as people who are too weak to protect themselves and therefore deserve to be excluded from the group.<sup>7,8</sup> I therefore found myself wondering to what extent both the organizations described by Torres and Bergner in the first and second examples were anxious organizations, which at least overlooked, and at worst promoted, bullying. I also wondered to what extent both Joe and Jane made others feel uncomfortable because they both acted as human reminders of how people may be injured or exploited at work.

I would also like to suggest that some types of personal injury cases, like those involving family conflict or violence, are not dealt with well within the traditionally adversarial approach to employment law. By focusing on the harm done to the victim, bullying individuals and organizations who cannot tolerate dissent or difference are let off the hook. Although the adversarial process may be an obvious way to look at compensation, it cannot address the systemic problems in the workplace, nor does it offer any way to expose the actions of the humiliator, or bully, to the same gaze as the victim's injuries. In this context, it is noteworthy that there is apparently (according to my spell checker) no such word as humiliator, which seems to be an interesting absence.

### Losing Face: Identity and Humiliation

Newspaper discussions of recent disputes between the United Kingdom and China contrast the Western approach of outspoken criticism with the Eastern approach that emphasizes the saving of face. Torres and Bergner made me think about face and its construction.

It is our face that gives us our identity, at many levels. In infancy, we first make attachments through gazing on our attachment figures, who gaze back, and in that mirroring process, the first structures of the self appear. We cannot psychologically survive without attachments to other people who provide mirroring, feedback, and support at times of distress and loss, and so it is imperative in evolutionary terms that we develop and maintain identities that endure

over time. It is our expanded neocortices and their thick connections to the hippocampal memory system that allow us to make and maintain complex relationships over time in ways that nonhuman primates do not need to do (they do not live so long) and arguably cannot do.

In childhood and young adulthood, it is our physical faces that give us our identity and most important, allow us to be recognized by others. A person's physical face is crucial to the social process: Narcissus' problem was not that he was grandiose, but that he didn't recognize himself. But in older adulthood, our psychological face is equally crucial, perhaps because we know that our physical faces will change and alter. One's psychological face is not a physical structure but the narrative of one's life, the story that makes up our social identity.<sup>9</sup> Events that disrupt our narrative identity cause us to lose face in front of others, and it is this disruption that is the cause of shame and humiliation. Goffman<sup>10</sup> describes the spoiling of identity as a key step in the process of stigmatizing and excluding unpopular people in a social group.

I thought the second example of Torres and Bergner neatly demonstrated how our faces (identities) are socially constructed. Jane constructed her narrative of herself at work in the relationship with Henry, and when that relationship was spoiled, her face was spoiled as well. Jane's case is a reminder of how women's faces can still be inextricably entwined with their relationships with men, even in the professional sphere, and how women still define themselves in terms of romantic relationships. Whether this represents a real difference between men and women, or another social construction, is a discussion that could well take up an entire issue of *The Journal*. There is, however, much more to be said about the influence of gender role on professional relationships, not least because so many personal injury and employment cases seem to involve women in the role of injured party.

### Changing Faces

The third case was much more familiar to me from my clinical work in a long-stay, high-security psychiatric hospital. Suicide is common in cases like Tom's, because a social face has been fatally lost when the secret, other face is exposed for all to see. This type of loss of face is analogous to bereavement, and what follows is like a pathological bereavement reaction, so

that feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and despair are commonplace. We can be thankful that few of us will ever know real despair. From what our patients say, despair is a malignant combination of shame and hopelessness that looks into the future and sees nothing but the loss of the normal face.

I suspect that this despair is the reason that suicide rates are high in prisons and secure psychiatric hospitals. The offenses of our patients are notorious and remain in the public gaze for years, meaning that the offender face is constantly seen and observed in the public eye. There is a hopelessness about how they are to change that face, and where there is hopelessness, there may be violence.<sup>11</sup> I also suspect that the sense of permanent and desperate loss of face may play a large part in what are sometimes called honor killings in Islamic culture and those particularly tragic homicides in which an estranged partner kills all his children, then himself.

So, shaming and humiliating others is a dangerous thing to do and may have fatal consequences. I want to end my commentary by taking up the point made by Torres and Bergner that some people may be more shame-prone or sensitive to humiliation than others. It is a peculiar aspect of personal injury law that the vulnerable may get more recompense than the resilient, and so plaintiffs naturally talk up their hurts and distress or at least are encouraged to be mindful of them by their lawyers. This sort of encouragement may conflict with the psychotherapeutic agenda, which nearly always asks, "Is there another way to think about this?"

From a psychotherapeutic point of view, the psychological vulnerabilities that increase people's compensation are usually what we attempt to change in therapy. If Joe (from the first case) came for therapy after his experience at work, we might wonder if there is another way to look at what happened to him and whether there are other ways for him to deal with his loss of face. We might explore with Joe the extent to which he had given the power to hurt him to his boss and might discuss with him whether he can choose not to be humiliated. For example, what if Joe had decided to make a game of his menial work and had invited others to play with him? What if Joe tells you that actually he has repeatedly been in this sort of situation at work before, but this time it was worse because his rather authoritarian father had died six months before? As therapists, we may be reluctant to accept that there is an obvious way that anyone

would feel humiliated or ashamed that may conflict with the psycholegal story of precedent, judgment, and compensation.

As Torres and Bergner suggest, there are many groups of people who may be particularly susceptible to feeling humiliated. The attachment literature suggests that those individuals who have a preoccupied attachment style may be much more prone to feeling exposed to others' gazes than are those with a dismissive style who emphasize their strength, invulnerability, and normalcy.<sup>12</sup> The literature on coping and cognitive appraisal suggests that the way we evaluate situations has a profound effect on how we then respond emotionally. Therefore, I think that it is possible that a more resilient person (one who had not suffered a physical injury) might have laughed off the menial job that Joe found so hurtful or at least might not have appraised it as humiliation. We might want to ask whether Joe could have chosen not to take offense: it might not have been easy, but if he had refused to accept that his face was damaged by this indignity, then he might have felt less distressed and recovered more quickly. I also found myself wondering about the traditional virtue of humility and whether the humble are less vulnerable to humiliation.

I am hinting here at a much more complex discussion about the role of psychological thinking in the civil courts and personal injury cases. The civil courts want to know the quantum of the human tragedy, whereas we, as psychologically minded psychiatrists want to look at the complexities of lives like those of Joe, Jane, and Tom. My chief concerns are that personal injury law generally focuses attention away

from the agency of harm doers and explores in great detail the experience of victim, whereby immature defenses (like somatization and passive aggression) are rewarded and mature defenses (humor, sublimation, and hope) are not. We also have a duty as forensic psychiatrists to challenge folk myths and stereotypes about human experience and try to convey the mysteries of human emotion in an articulate and nuanced form, in the way that Torres and Bergner have done in their article.

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