The Privilege of Humiliation:  
The Effects of Social Roles and Norms on  
Immediate and Prolonged Aggression in Conflict

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Abstract

Research on the psychology of humiliation has illustrated its central function in many intractable conflicts. Feelings of humiliation have been found to be among the strongest human emotions; they can permeate people’s lives with an all-consuming intensity and are among the most potent forces creating rifts between people and groups. However, it is not merely the type of emotions that distinguishes tractable from intractable conflict, but rather differences in the social structures and processes that imbue them with meaning. Feelings of raw emotion are often experienced, acted on, and remembered in ways that are socially determined. Thus, emotional experiences are shaped by rules and norms that define what certain emotions mean, whether they are good or bad, and how people should respond to them. Similar emotions may be constructed and acted upon differently in distinct families, communities, and cultures. Communities entrenched in ongoing conflict may unwittingly encourage emotional experiences and expressions of the most extreme nature, thereby escalating and sustaining the conflict. This paper presents an experimental study on the effects of strong roles and norms on experiences of and reactions to humiliating encounters, part of a program of research on humiliation and intractability.
The Privilege of Humiliation:  
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“What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more than 80 years of humiliation and disgrace.”
-Osama bin Laden, shortly after 9/11

“The shameful photos are evil humiliation for Muslim men and women in the Abu Ghraib prison...Where is the sense of honor, where is the rage? Where is the anger for God’s religion? Where is the sense of veneration of Muslims, and where is the sense of vengeance for the honor of Muslim men and women in the Crusader’s prisons?”
-Statement by masked terrorist on a video of the beheading of American Nicholas Berg, 2004

If we listen carefully to the words of many of those who express a desire to annihilate the Western world, the reason they give is revenge for humiliation. Feelings of humiliation are among the strongest emotions in humans (Lindner, 2002), and when used to mobilize groups to conflict, can be all-consuming and become deeply woven into the group’s basic sense of who they are (Margalit, 2002). As we look at the many violent conflicts around the globe today, it is not difficult to see the connections between severe emotions such as humiliation and rage with aggression. However, our understanding of how these emotions operate, and the conditions under which they lead to repeated cycles of humiliation and violence, is currently unclear.

This study is part of a broader research initiative seeking to identify the basic causes and dynamics of intractable conflict. Intractable conflicts are those that persist in a highly destructive state despite repeated good faith efforts toward their resolution (Kriesberg, 2005). While a comprehensive understanding of these problems is likely to be complex (see Coleman, 2003; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 2005; Kriesberg, 2005), this paper proposes that an essential step towards discerning the essence of intractability is to
examine the role that moral emotions, such as humiliation, play in perpetuating them.
Past research has shown a strong link between humiliating experiences and aggression,
but the moderating effects of social roles and norms on the perpetuation of such
hostilities has yet to be examined. This study will test these effects directly, and thus
contribute to the small but growing body of literature on the conditions under which
humiliation sustains social conflict.

This paper has four sections. The first offers definitions of intractable conflict
and humiliation, respectively. The second section provides an overview of how key
aspects of emotional experiences are socially determined, and how social roles and norms
can influence people’s experiences of and reactions to humiliating social encounters. The
hypotheses, methods, and results of our study are then presented. The paper concludes
with a discussion of next steps in this research.

Intractable Conflict

Intractable conflicts are defined in a straightforward manner as those that are persistent and destructive despite repeated attempts at resolution (Kriesberg, 2005). However, the current literature in this area presents a challenging picture of such problems (see Coleman, 2006; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, 2004; 2005; beyondintractability.org, 2007). First, they tend to be complex; with many different sources of hostilities located at multiple-levels (individual, group, communal, etc.), which often interact with each other to feed or sustain the conflict (Bar-Tal, forthcoming; Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, and Bui-Wrzosinska, forthcoming; Sandole, 1999).

Second, intractable conflicts are often situated in places where other community problems (such as poverty, unemployment, and poor housing) add to the suffering
brought on by the conflict, resulting in long-term patterns of misery, animosity, and trauma (see Wessells and Monteiro, 2001). Third, the sources of hostilities in these settings, be they the key issues, leaders, policies, popular attitudes, or the political will of the masses, are dynamic; changing continually and at any given time may be more or less determining of the conflict (Mitchell, 2005; Putnam & Peterson, 2003). And fourth, each case of intractable conflict is different; they each have their own unique set of dynamic factors responsible for their persistence, which makes generalization and learning from one case to another difficult.

Nevertheless, intractable conflicts do share some basic underlying mechanisms that can help us in our journey to identify root causes (see Bar-Tal, forthcoming; Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, and Bui-Wrzosinska, forthcoming). In particular, a variety of scholars and practitioners working in this area have identified humiliation as among the central mechanisms operating in these situations (e.g., Coleman, 2003; Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 2004; Friedman, 2003, Lindner, 2002; Margalit, 1996). Until recently however, relatively little empirical work has been conducted on the role that such emotions (especially humiliation) play in conflict situations (Barry and Oliver, 1996; Hartling and Luchetta, 1999; Lindner, 2002).

Humiliation

Humiliation has been difficult to define, and as a result the constructs of shame, embarrassment and humiliation have often been used interchangeably in the literature (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). In addition, compared with emotions such as shame and embarrassment, research on the emotion of humiliation has been conducted much less frequently (Lindner, 2002). In an effort to better specify humiliation, several scholars
have proposed definitions. Klein (1991) defined humiliation as experiencing “some form
of ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others” (p. 94).
Hartling and Luchetta (1999) define the internal experience 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). Lindner (2002) defines humiliation as the “enforced lowering of a
person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor
or dignity…the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless” (p. 126).

Klein (1991) suggests that humiliation is essentially an interaction-oriented
emotion, involving three roles: the humiliator, the victim, and the witness. This suggests
that whereas shame may be considered a private emotion (i.e., one may experience shame
on one’s own), humiliation may be considered a public emotion in the sense that the
humiliating experience either takes place in front of, or is otherwise known about by,
other witnesses. Similarly, Margalit (2002) has categorized humiliation as a “moral
emotion”, because of its tendency to predispose people to act in moral or immoral ways
towards others. Lewis (1971) and Negrao, et. al. (2004) suggest that humiliation is a
“hybrid” emotion that involves both shame and anger, including a unique combination of
self-blame and other-blame. While shame is understood to be focused on the self, and
anger is understood to be focused on the other, the hybrid view of humiliation suggests
that humiliation is both self- and other-focused.

We build on the work of these and other scholars to offer the following working
definition of humiliation: *Humiliation is an emotion, triggered by public events, which
evokes a sense of inferiority resulting from the realization that one is being, or has been,
treated in a way that departs from the normal expectations for fair and equal human treatment.

Humiliation, Conflict, and Aggression

Previous research on the psychology of humiliation has illustrated its central function in enduring conflicts. For example, Lindner (2001, 2002, 2006) conducted a four-year research project in Somalia, Rwanda, and Burundi entitled *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflict*. The study was inspired by the popular assumption that the humiliation of the Germans brought on by the Versailles Treaty after World War I was partially responsible for the atrocities committed during the Holocaust and World War II. From interviews with 216 disputants in these settings in Africa, the author found feelings of humiliation to be among the strongest emotions available to humans, that they can permeate people’s lives with an all-consuming intensity, and that they are among the most potent forces that create rifts between people. Lindner suggests that the unique force of humiliation often leads to reciprocal acts of humiliation, which if not addressed, can escalate overtime into spirals of violence and counter-violence leading to unspeakable atrocities.

While it seems true that under many circumstances, humiliation can lead to aggressive behavior and escalated conflict, this is not necessarily always the case. For example, while Lindner (2002) notes that many individuals she interviewed reacted to humiliation with violence, she also describes how some well-known individuals, such as Nelson Mandela and Somalia’s former first lady Edna Adan, refused to respond aggressively and also refused to feel humiliated at the hands of those who attempted to humiliate them. Mandela ignored taunts and did not allow himself to feel less worthy than
his humiliators (Mandela, 1995), and Adan engaged others to support her in avoiding what was meant to be a humiliating situation.

What are the factors that lead people to respond to humiliation aggressively versus non-aggressively? There are a variety of possible explanations for such differences. However, studies on emotions across cultures (Frijda, 1986; Wong & Bond, 2004) describe emotions as consistently influenced by social and cultural messages and norms (Averill, 2001; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Harre, 1986; Markus & Kitayama, 2001). More specifically, Averill (1986) contends that emotional experiences are shaped by rules and norms that define the meaning and the values placed on certain emotions, as well as how people should respond to them. Emotional rules help to establish a corresponding set of emotional roles (for instance, a grieving husband, a wronged lover, etc.; Averill, 1997).

Emotional roles can be analyzed through three broad categories: privileges, restrictions, and obligations. Privileges refers to the aspects of roles that allow a person to engage in behavior that would be discouraged under normal circumstances; behavior that people can “get away with” as a result of being in a certain emotional state. For instance, a man grieving the death of his spouse might be allowed to weep openly and display angry outbursts in public. Alternatively, restrictions refers to the limits placed on what a person can do when in an emotional state and “get away with it.” Thus the grieving husband may not be allowed to date other women for months after the loss of his spouse. In this case, the norms of the culture limit individuals’ emotional responses by restricting how mild, strong, expressive, or drawn out the behavioral response should be. In contrast,
obligations refers to the things that a person must do when in an emotional state (the husband must wear black, attend the funeral, etc.; Averill, 1997).

Thus, similar raw emotions may be constructed and acted upon differently in distinct families, communities, and cultures. Some groups may construct norms around humiliating encounters in a manner that privileges aggressive responses to the encounters, others in a more restrictive way. Previous research has shown that when people perceive the social norms surrounding humiliating situations as allowing aggression, they tend to feel angrier and respond more aggressively (Coleman, Goldman, & Kugler, 2006). This research has identified individual differences in how such privileges are perceived, which were found to be related to gender role-identities (Bem, 1974). More masculine-identified males viewed the encounter as privileging aggression (and responded more aggressively), whereas more feminine-identified males saw the identical situation as more restricting of aggression (and responded less aggressively). The current study will examine the role of situationally induced roles and norms on perceptions of privilege to aggress and aggressive intentions.

Rumination and Prolonged Reactions to Humiliation

It is not only the experience of emotions like humiliation, but also the recall of and rumination about such experiences that can motivate the perpetuation of aggressive behavior. Margalit (2002) writes, “[W]e can hardly remember insults without reliving them…The wounds of insult and humiliation keep bleeding long after the painful physical injuries have crusted over” (p.120). Social psychological research supports this assertion. Highly emotional events, and particularly negative emotional events, are relatively well retained, both with respect to the emotional

Why is remembering humiliation a reliving of it? Humiliation, I believe, is not just another experience in our life, like, say, an embarrassment. It is a formative experience. It forms the way we view ourselves as humiliated persons…[it] becomes constitutive of one sense of who we are” (2002, p. 130).

According to Singer and Blagov (2004) formative, or self-defining, memories share five characteristics. They are vivid, affectively intense, repetitively recalled, linked to other similar memories, and focused on an enduring concern or unresolved conflict. Self-defining memories have the power to affect individuals emotionally not only in the past when they first occurred, but also at the moment of recollection. Additionally, self-defining memories are thought to guide behavior as individuals strive to achieve unmet goals and act upon personal concerns. Thus, just as immediate emotional reactions influence behavior, emotional memories, especially those that are formative, or self-defining, influence behavior as well. If it is true that the memory of humiliation is something akin to reliving it, and that feelings of humiliation can motivate aggressive action under certain conditions, then the memory of humiliation can perpetuate aggressive behavior.

Emotional memories that are self-defining are likely to be recalled repetitively (Singer & Blagov, 2004); in other words, self-defining emotional memories are likely to be ruminated about. Rumination is defined as self-focused attention, and refers to
directing attention particularly on one’s own negative mood (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). A series of empirical studies suggests that rumination increases the emotional experience of anger (e.g., Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Bushman, Pedersen, Vasquez, Bonacci & Miller, 2001; Bushman, 2002) as well as (intentions to engage in) aggressive behavior (e.g., Konecni, 1974; Bushman, 2002). In contrast to the catharsis theory (which states that expressing negative emotions diffuses them), these studies suggest that the more individuals ruminate, the angrier they feel and the more aggressively they behave.

Under what circumstances might people ruminate about humiliating encounters from their past? We suggest that people are more likely to ruminate about humiliating encounters when they gain some benefit from doing so. When individuals perceive social norms to privilege aggression in response to a humiliating encounter, they ruminate about it because doing so provides them with continual motivation to retaliate, which can be pleasurable and feel morally justified and righteous (Coleman, et. al., 2006; McCullough, et. al., 2001; Lear, 2003). For example, in studies involving Israeli and Palestinian participants, individuals were found to become attached to their “victim status” because, among other reasons, such status allows them moral justification for their aggressive behavior (Nadler, 2002).

In summary, we offer the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less aggressive immediate reactions from people than situations that privilege aggression.

**Hypothesis 2**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less rumination in people about the event than situations that privilege aggression.
**Hypothesis 3**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less prolonged aggression from people than situations that privilege aggression.

**Hypothesis 4**: Individuals who, despite situational differences, perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression will report more immediate and prolonged negative affect, higher intentions to aggress, and more rumination about the encounter than individuals who do not perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression.

The Present Study

In the present study, we have sought to test whether differences in the social roles and norms surrounding a humiliating encounter make a difference in individuals’ likelihood to respond aggressively, to ruminate over the encounter, and to intend to continue to respond aggressively overtime. More specifically, we hypothesize that when the social norms of a situation communicate to people that they are privileged to respond aggressively when humiliated, they will do so, and will also tend to ruminate over and hold onto hostile feelings and intentions. On the other hand, when the social norms of a situation indicate that people are restricted from responding aggressively when humiliated, they will be less likely to do so, and will be less likely to ruminate over the situation and respond aggressively overtime.

Methods

The design of the study was experimental. Accordingly, we manipulated the social roles and norms of the situation surrounding a humiliating event. In one condition the humiliated target individual was assigned a social role which intended to inhibit aggressive responses towards the humiliator (restricting condition). In the other condition, no explicit notions about the individual’s role were specified, although given the social context of the encounter (a university party), and the nature of the encounter...
(humiliating), norms allowing aggressive responses were presumed to be present (privileging condition). As Lear (2003) notes, “Indeed, because humiliation is supposed to be so awful, some kind of retaliation is thought to be justified.” The participants responded to an on-line survey presenting the scenario and related questions at two times: Time 1 (first administration), and Time 2 (one-week later).

Sample:

The participants in this study were 56 individuals, equally divided according to the two conditions (restricting and privileging condition). Participants were over 18 years old with a mean age of 30 years. Due to the fact that the survey had to be filled out online all participants needed to have access to the Internet. They were of varied ethnic background and all speakers of English. Following Cohen & Nisbett (1994), Cohen et al., (1996), Collins & Bell (1997), Goldman & Coleman (2004), and Coleman et al. (2006) all participants were male.

Procedure:

The study was conducted through an on-line survey, which consisted of two questionnaires – one main questionnaire and one follow-up questionnaire, which was sent to the participants one week after they had filled out the initial questionnaire. If participants had not filled out the follow-up questionnaire after 3-4 days, they received a reminder e-mail. If this e-mail remained without answer as well, participants were not contacted again. The response rate to the follow-up questionnaire was 89 %.

Design of the questionnaires:

The questionnaires were identical for both conditions. The initial questionnaire started with a written scenario, which placed the participant in a humiliating encounter.
Next, a set of closed-ended questions assessed the emotional and behavioral reactions to the event as well as the participants’ perceptions of privilege to aggress. Further information about the individual’s gender role identity and demographic data was collected. In the follow-up questionnaire the participants were asked to think back to the event and indicate the emotional and behavioral reactions now after one week, as well as the degree to which they ruminated about the event. For all questions a six-point scale (1 = not at all; 6 = extremely) was used in order to determine participant’s answers.

Instrumentation:

The scenario: Both conditions began with a written scenario adapted from Cohen and Nisbett (1994). Participants were asked to place themselves “in the shoes” of the main actor in the scenario and to imagine that the scenario was happening to them personally. In the scenario, the main actor (i.e., the participant) is humiliated by another actor. The incidence took place in front of other people.

The scenario of the privileging condition was the following:

“You and your fiancée, Jill, are at a party at a friend’s apartment off campus. Just after you arrive at the party Jill pulls you aside, obviously bothered by something. “What’s wrong?” you ask.

“It’s Larry. I mean, he’s already hit on me twice tonight.”

Jill walks back into the crowd, and you decide to keep your eye on Larry. Sure enough, within five minutes, Larry reaches over and kisses Jill. It is a long kiss. This causes quite a stir in the room and someone in the back shouts “Alright, Larry!”

You look around and suddenly feel everyone staring at YOU.”

In the restricting condition, the participant was assigned a social role which was intended to restrict aggressive reactions:

“You and your fiancé Jill are at a party hosted by a student group you co-founded on campus, “Coalition for Peace”. You are the current President of the organization, which offers training in and advocacy for constructive methods of conflict
resolution. The party has been organized to recruit new students into the work of the organization. Just after you arrive you get involved in a conversation with some of the students about your personal commitment to the principles of non-violence. You are talking with a large group when Jill pulls you aside obviously bothered by something.

"What's wrong?" you ask.

"It's Larry. I mean, he's already hit on me twice tonight."

Jill walks back into the crowd, and you decide to keep your eye on Larry. Sure enough, within five minutes, Larry reaches over and kisses Jill. It is a long kiss. This causes quite a stir in the room and someone in the back shouts “Alright, Larry!”

You look around and suddenly feel everyone staring at YOU.”

*Humiliation:* The manipulation check showed that the participants felt considerably humiliated by the encounter (m= 3.75 on a 6-point scale). The different conditions had no influence on the level of humiliation reported.

*Perception of privilege to aggress:* The perception of privilege to aggress was assessed by asking the participants to what extent they thought it was appropriate to aggress against the humiliator and to what extent they felt encouraged, entitled or felt a duty to aggress. Those items form one scale (“perception of privilege to aggress”) with a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .81.

*Emotional reaction:* Immediate and prolonged emotional reactions to the experience of humiliation were assessed. The first questionnaire assessed the participants’ feelings immediately after reading the scenario and placing themselves in the role of the main character. In the follow-up questionnaire the participants were asked to remember the situation and to indicate how they felt at the time of recall. An anger-scale with a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .82 in the main questionnaire and a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .89 in the follow-up questionnaire was formed. It included the items: to what extent do you feel angry / enraged / vengeful.
Aggressive Intentions: Participants were asked to indicate their intention to respond when imagining themselves in the scenario. The intention to aggress was formed out of four items (three in the follow-up measure), which asked the participant to indicate the extent to which they would confront, threaten or fight with Larry and to what extent they would aggress. The reliability of this scale was Cronbach’s alpha = .93 in the main questionnaire and Cronbach’s alpha = .94 in the follow up. Apart from “the intention to aggress” different ways of responding to the situation were elaborated, including: talking the matter out, ignoring the situation, or making a joke. These items were included in both questionnaires in order to test the immediate and the delayed intention to aggress. In the follow-up questionnaire the participants were asked to imagine the possibility to see the humiliator again, now, after one week at a party of the Peace Coalition (i.e. being in the same role).

Rumination: In order to test the level of rumination of the participants a rumination scale following Caprara (1986) was used. The original scale of Caprara (1986) was designed to explore individual differences in rumination and dissipation related to aggressive behavior. Nine of the original items were used for the study and were arranged according to the purpose and the context of the study. Those nine items form a scale, which had a reliability of Cronbach’s alpha = .88.

Results

Statistical analysis with the computer program SPSS was used to determine whether the data supported the hypotheses. The following paragraphs summarize the results according to the hypotheses. It should be noted again, that six-point-scales were
used throughout the whole questionnaire. Therefore means or similar values refer to these scales.

**Hypothesis 1**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less aggressive immediate reactions from people than situations that privilege aggression.

The results supported this hypothesis. Participants of the restricting condition felt significantly less privileged to aggress than participants of the privileging condition ($t = 3.84; p < .01$).

Furthermore the social role of leader of the peace coalition made participants aggress less immediately after the humiliating event in comparison to participants, whose role was not specified ($t = 2.74; p < .01$). Figure 2 shows the corresponding means. In addition it was found that participants in the restricted condition were more likely to talk with the humiliator after the humiliating event ($t = -2.08, p < .05$; privileging condition $m = 3.70$, restricting condition $m = 4.64$).

![Figure 1](image-url)

*Figure 1*: Difference in the means of the two conditions regarding the perception of privilege to aggress.
**Hypothesis 2**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less rumination in people about the event than situations that privilege aggression.

This hypothesis was not supported. The means of the two conditions (privileging and restricting) did not differ significantly (restricting $m=3.47$, privileging $m=3.66$). These findings will be discussed in the next section.

**Hypothesis 3**: Situations that present social roles and norms that restrict aggressive reactions to humiliating encounters will result in less aggressive prolonged reactions from people than situations that privilege aggression.

This hypothesis was supported. The social role of being leader of the peace coalition made participants aggress less after a one-week delay. The data from the follow-up questionnaire found the prolonged intention to aggress to differ between conditions ($t = 2.48$, $p<.05$). See Figure 2.

![Figure 2: Immediate and delayed level of intention to aggress](image)

**Hypothesis 4**: Individuals who, despite situational differences, perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression will report more immediate and delayed negative affect (including feelings of humiliation and anger), higher intentions to aggress, and more rumination about the encounter than
individuals who do not perceive emotional roles to privilege aggression.

This hypothesis was confirmed, as correlations showed a significant positive relationship between the level of the perceptions of privilege to aggress and the immediate and prolonged measures of intention to aggress in both conditions. The results for the privileging condition can be seen in the Table 1, the ones for the restricting condition in Table 2.

*Table 1: Correlations in the privileging condition*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perception of privilege to aggress</th>
<th>Delayed intention to aggress</th>
<th>Delayed intention to aggress</th>
<th>Rumination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception of privilege</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.690**</td>
<td>.660**</td>
<td>.416*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to aggress</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.690**</td>
<td>.993**</td>
<td>.451*</td>
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<td>intention to</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.024</td>
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<td>aggress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delayed</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.660**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.458*</td>
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<tr>
<td>intention to</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rumination</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.416*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.039</td>
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<td>1.000</td>
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</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Table 2: Correlations in the restricting condition

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perception of privilege to aggress</th>
<th>Immediate Intention to aggress</th>
<th>Delayed intention to aggress</th>
<th>Rummation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of privilege to aggress</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.662**</td>
<td>.613**</td>
<td>.454*</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Immediate Intention to aggress</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>.662**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.987**</td>
<td>.559**</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Delayed intention to aggress</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>.613**</td>
<td>.987**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rummation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sig. (2-tailed)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pearson Correlation</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>.454*</td>
<td>.559**</td>
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** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Although there were no significant differences between the two groups concerning the level of anger at Times 1 or 2, there were interaction effects regarding the individual differences in perceptions of privilege to aggress for both immediate and prolonged negative emotions under the different conditions. In the privileging condition the perception of privilege to aggress was significantly correlated with immediate (.52, p < .01) and prolonged (.57, p < .01) anger. However, this was not the case in the restricting condition; here the perception of privilege to aggress was not significantly correlated with either immediate or prolonged anger. Thus, we see that individuals, who are predisposed to view humiliating encounters as encouraging aggressive responses, become particularly hostile when conditions are permitting of such responses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which social roles and norms that privilege or restrict aggressive reactions to humiliation affect behavioral
intentions and rumination overtime. It was hypothesized that privileging conditions would evidence more aggression and rumination than restricting conditions, both in immediate responses and after one week’s delay. Our objective was to demonstrate that, despite the toxicity of the emotion of humiliation, there are social roles and norms that keep individuals from reacting aggressively in response to such events, and that these reactions can be maintained overtime.

The results can be summarized as follows: On an emotional level, the participants reacted independent of their social role; both conditions felt humiliated and angry in response to the encounter. However, consistent with the hypotheses, the behavioral reactions of the participants differed significantly between conditions. Participants, when assigned a social role which kept them from reacting aggressively, felt less privileged to aggress and showed less intention to aggress. This was maintained over the lapse of one week. In addition, participants with a predisposition to view the situation as allowing for aggression, became significantly more angry (and maintained that anger) under conditions that privileged aggression versus conditions that restricted it. This finding, in particular, speaks to the power of situational norms to affect hostilities overtime.

No support was found for our hypothesis regarding rumination. Following Capara (1986) it was argued that an increased sense of privilege to aggress would lead to increased rumination and aggressive behavior. This difference was not found. This can be understood through Bushman’s approach to rumination. Bushman (2002) writes: “Rumination is defined as self-focused attention, of directing attention inward on the self, and particularly on one’s negative mood (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Any process that serves to exacerbate a negative mood, such as rumination, should increase
anger and aggression. If provoked individuals are induced to think about how they feel, they will maintain or exacerbate their angry mood.” (p.726). In this approach to rumination the feelings and the mood and not the behavioral response of aggression are central. The results of the present study seem to support this assertion as there were neither significant differences in the emotional responses between conditions, nor in the level of rumination between the two groups.

The issues raised in this paper are of the utmost importance today, as individuals and groups at the community, national, and international levels struggle with the effects of humiliation and aggression in protracted violence in schools, ethnopolitical conflicts, and global terrorism. The theoretical ideas posed in this paper suggest that the way individuals perceive social norms regarding aggressive responses to humiliating events affects not only peoples’ immediate behavioral reactions, but also their long-term reactions, all of which contribute to the protracted nature of some conflicts. Thus, this theory implies that one way to address protracted conflict is to influence the social norms (and/or how individuals perceive the social norms) regarding how people should respond, emotionally and behaviorally, when faced with a humiliating situations. Currently, social messages differ drastically in different countries, governments, communities, and families about what is and is not socially permitted, emotionally and behaviorally, in response to humiliation. The point of altering the existing messages in any given society or organization is to try to break the cycle of humiliation and aggression so that even when humiliating events do occur they are less likely to lead to ongoing cycles of violence.
At the societal level, altering social messages can be done through a variety of channels, including the media, the political arena, and formal and informal education initiatives. For example, in advertising campaigns and political speeches, community and national leaders can repeatedly send the message that it is best to deal with one’s own anger and humiliation in a constructive way—by talking the situation out with the other side if possible and finding other non-violent means of addressing the situation. Within formal education systems, programs similar to conflict resolution and anger management initiatives could provide training for students and teachers regarding how to handle humiliating situations constructively, and could encourage them to brainstorm non-violent ways to respond the next time it happens. Education and media initiatives at the national and community levels could provide training for leaders on how to prevent collective-level humiliating events from occurring in the first place, and how to develop and send the right social messages to diminish the effects of humiliating events when they do occur.

References


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