



# Understanding the role of the perpetrator in triggering humiliation: The effects of hostility and status<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The present research addresses the question of whether two characteristics of the situation (the hostility of a perpetrator and his/her status vis-à-vis the target) are critical in triggering humiliation (versus shame and anger). In Study 1, participants described an autobiographical episode that elicited either humiliation, shame, or anger. Humiliation episodes were coded (by independent raters) as particularly unjust situations in which a hostile perpetrator (more hostile than perpetrators of the anger episodes) forced the devaluation of the target's self. In Studies 2 and 3, we manipulated the perpetrator's hostility and his/her status vis-à-vis the target. Consistent with our hypotheses, both hostility and high status contributed to elicit humiliation, albeit hostility turned out to have a much stronger effect on triggering humiliation than high status. Moreover, our results clarified the cognitive process underlying the effect that these two factors had on humiliation: hostility triggered humiliation via the appraisal of injustice, whereas high status triggered humiliation via the appraisal of internalizing a devaluation of the self.

## 1. Introduction

Humiliation has been defined as a self-conscious emotion of particularly high intensity that arises when a person is unjustly demeaned or put down (Fernández, Saguy, & Halperin, 2015; Ginges & Atran, 2008; Klein, 1991; Leidner, Sheikh, & Ginges, 2012; Otten & Jonas, 2014). Recent work has identified two core appraisals underlying the emotional experience of humiliation, namely, appraising being the target of an unjust devaluation and internalizing<sup>1</sup> such devaluation (Fernández et al., 2015). Internalizing an unjust devaluation of the self appears, however, to be a quite counterintuitive—almost paradoxical—psychological process. If we appraise that others are unjustly devaluating us, why do we not simply reject such devaluation?

We propose that the answer to this question lies, to a great extent, in the presence of external factors that trap the victims in the humiliating situation, forcing them to internalize the unjust devaluation. Among

these situational determinants is the perpetrator—the person who causes the humiliation. The main objective of the present research is to study the role that the perpetrator plays in the humiliating dynamics. Our basic premise is that, in order to compel somebody to internalize an unjust devaluation of the self, the perpetrator needs some type of power, force, or influence over the victim's self. Although there are different factors that may provide a perpetrator the capability to humiliate the victim, in the present research we focus on two of these factors, namely: hostility and status.

Understanding the role that the hostility and the status of the perpetrator play in triggering humiliation is important, not only to learn about the unique nature of humiliation, but also to better understand ordinary experiences of humiliation. Indeed, workplace mobbing or school bullying or, in general, any instance of harassment that takes place in our everyday lives, are behaviors that imply the hostility of a perpetrator against a victim and for which the status relationship

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<sup>1</sup> In the first paper we published about humiliation (Fernández et al., 2015), we referred to this appraisal as “the acceptance” of a devaluation of the self. We chose the term “acceptance” as an opposite to the term “rejection” of the devaluation, meaning that the victims of devaluation who *reject* the devaluation would more likely feel anger rather than humiliation; the emotional experience of humiliation would typically imply, we posited, the internalization or acceptance of the devaluation. However, the term acceptance has a connotation of willingness or even legitimization, which we did not mean to be part of this appraisal at all. Indeed, a central aspect of our theoretical proposal about humiliation is that a victim, in order to feel humiliated, should, not only internalize the devaluation, but also appraise it as unfair. So there is no willingness or legitimization in our understanding of humiliation. Moreover, we propose that when victims internalize a devaluation of the self that they appraise as fair, they would more likely feel shame rather than humiliation. In order to avoid this connotation of willingness or legitimization that the term acceptance has, we will use from now on the term “internalization” of a devaluation to refer to this appraisal.

between victims and perpetrators is relevant (Salmivalli, 2010; Saunders, Huynh, & Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). However, little is known about the emotional consequences that such episodes of harassment have on the victims, even though harassment is often related to humiliation (Elison & Harter, 2007).

In the present research we posit, first, that a devaluation coming from a hostile perpetrator can be particularly humiliating, because a hostile perpetrator can critically contribute to enhance the injustice appraisal that underlies the emotional experience of humiliation (Fernández et al., 2015). Indeed, humiliation has been often associated with hostile and violent interpersonal or intergroup interactions (Ginges & Atran, 2008; Jonas, Otten, & Doosje, 2014; Lindner, 2006). Moreover, Elison and Harter (2007) found that hostile intent in the form of being laughed at and mocked was, together with the presence of an audience, the key predictor of when participants believe they would feel humiliated. However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has tested in the laboratory the isolated role of hostility in triggering humiliation nor has identified the underlying cognitive process that explains why hostility may trigger humiliation.

Second, with regard to status, we posit that a high-status perpetrator can facilitate the experience of humiliation, because the target can more easily internalize a devaluation coming from a high-status perpetrator than a devaluation coming from a low-status perpetrator. Status, understood as the relative position that a person holds in the social hierarchy, has been pointed out as an emotionally relevant factor, particularly regarding emotions that are especially important to the social domain, such as pride, shame, or anger, among others (Steckler & Tracy, 2014). Research in this area has shown, for instance, that expressions of shame are perceived as communicating low status (Shariff & Tracy, 2009). Recent cross-sectional studies showed the existence of a substantial correlation between low social rank and shame (Wood & Irons, 2016), and between low economic status and shame (Bosma, Brandts, Simons, Groffen, & van den Akker, 2015). Moreover, there is evidence about low-status group members perceiving high-status out-group members to be better judges of the competencies necessary for success in society (Vorauer & Sakamoto, 2008). These perceptions could award high-status perpetrators with a significant influence over the self-concepts of low-status targets. It seems likely therefore that status can contribute to the appraisal of internalizing a devaluation of the self and, in turn, trigger humiliation.

The main hypothesis that drives the present research is therefore that the perpetrator's hostility toward the victim and his/her status vis-à-vis the target would act as situational factors triggering humiliation. In particular, we posit that each of these factors (hostility and status) would influence humiliation via a different pathway, each involving a core appraisal underlying the emotional experience of humiliation: hostility would affect humiliation via the "injustice channel," since a hostile devaluation would be appraised as particularly unjust, which in turn would elicit humiliation, whereas status would affect humiliation via the "internalization channel," as a devaluation coming from a high-status perpetrator would be more easily internalized by the victim.

A second important goal of the present research is to deepen our knowledge of how humiliation differs from shame and anger. Humiliation lies within the "family" of emotions that imply a perceived devaluation of the self. Given that shame is a dominant emotion in that category (Elison & Harter, 2007), understanding how humiliation differs from shame is important for gaining knowledge of the complex particularities of humiliation as an emotional experience. We propose that the role that a perpetrator plays in eliciting these two emotions (i.e., humiliation and shame) is a key aspect that critically differentiates them. In this regard, although humiliation and shame share the core appraisal of internalizing a devaluation of the self (Fernández et al., 2015), in humiliation the devaluation is perceived as *forced* externally by a perpetrator, whereas in shame, the person who feels the emotion considers him/herself responsible for the actions that cause his/her own devaluation (Ferguson, Brugman, White, & Eyre, 2007; Tangney &

Dearing, 2002) – we therefore posit that no perpetrator is needed to force the devaluation of the self in shame, whereas the perpetrator is consubstantial to the experience of humiliation.

With regard to the differences and similarities between humiliation and anger, we suggest that a perpetrator who acts against the target plays a similar role in these two emotional experiences. In both humiliation and anger, a hostile perpetrator would trigger the emotion via the injustice appraisal. Therefore, the key difference between humiliation and anger would not lie in the presence of a perpetrator nor in his/her hostility toward the target, but in whether the actions of this perpetrator pervade the victim's self, forcing the target to internalize a devaluation of the self. To this respect, the perpetrator's status would constitute an important difference between humiliation and anger, as for humiliation a high-status perpetrator who forces the internalization of the hostile devaluation would be particularly important, whereas for anger the perpetrator's high status would be less determining in triggering the emotion. Indeed, experiences and expressions of anger have been associated with high status of *the target* vis-à-vis the perpetrator (Steckler & Tracy, 2014), whereas we posit that humiliation would be more likely if the inverse relationship exists, that is, if the target has lower status than the perpetrator.

To test these hypotheses we carried out three studies. First, to establish the role of a perpetrator (any perpetrator) in eliciting humiliation, as well as to study the characteristics this perpetrator typically has, we analyzed autobiographical texts whose authors described situations in which they felt either humiliation, shame, or anger. Two independent raters evaluated these texts, to not only determine whether there was a perpetrator present in the episode, but also—where present—to evaluate the extent to which s/he acted with hostility toward the protagonist and had high status vis-à-vis him or her. In the second study we used the imagined-scenario method (Scherer, 1987), asking participants to imagine an academic setting in which an evaluator, who had assessed an essay they had previously written, strongly devalued their work. This evaluator varied in the hostile tone he used toward participants and in his status vis-à-vis them. We measured the key appraisals of humiliation (i.e., injustice and internalization) and the target emotions (i.e., humiliation, shame, and anger); we tested the hypothesized dual channel toward humiliation and the hypothesized differences and similarities between humiliation, shame, and anger. Finally, in the third study, we increased the ecological validity of our procedure replicating Study 2 with participants (who were all psychology students) going through an actual devaluating situation adapted from Harmon-Jones and Sigelman (2001).

## 2. Study 1

In Study 1, we asked two independent raters to assess autobiographical episodes describing situations in which their protagonists (the participants) had felt either humiliation, shame, or anger. Raters evaluated whether there was a perpetrator in the episodes. When present, raters assessed the extent to which the perpetrator acted with hostility and had a high status vis-à-vis the protagonists.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Participants were 150<sup>2</sup> undergraduate students at the National University of Distance Education, UNED, in Spain (126 females, 24 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 33.58$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.01$ ) who received course credit

<sup>2</sup> We used G\*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to conduct post-hoc power analyses for an ANOVA with 3 groups. Setting  $N = 129$  and an effect size of  $f = 0.52$ , which were the average  $N$  and effect size respectively in the tests we carried out, the resulting power was of 0.99 ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Setting  $N = 150$  and  $f = 0.35$ , which were the parameters in the weakest significant effect we got, the resulting power was 0.97. Setting  $N = 150$  (the total  $N$ ) and Cohen's (1969) medium effect size ( $f = 0.25$ ), the resulting power was 0.78.

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