Gender, Humiliation, and Global Security: Dignifying Relationships from Love, Sex, and Parenthood to World Affairs

Reviewed by Pandora Hopkins


I have reason to believe that in so far as the industrial applications of physics are concerned the forecast of the writers may prove to be more accurate than the forecast of the scientists. (Le- Szilárd 1933; quoted in Canaday 2000: 4)

These words, penned by the Hungarian nuclear physicist Le- Szilárd in 1933, accompanied The World Set Me Free, a book written by H. G. Wells 20 years earlier. The package was addressed to Sir Hugo Hirst, founder of the British General Electric Company. Only a few months before, Szilárd had picked up the novel that was to prove, not only pivotal to his own career, but tragically so to the world at large. In his novel Wells described artificial radioactivity and dated its future discovery: the year 1933. Despite the initial skepticism of fellow scientists, Szilárd was inspired by Wells’s imagination to begin working in the area of nuclear physics and, eventually, to become a leading player in the U.S. atomic weapons program (Canaday 2000: 3f).

The foregoing exchange of thoughts between a fiction writer and a physical scientist—members of “two cultures” usually considered to be impenetrable to one another (Snow 1956: 413f)—is particularly dramatic. However, the episode should also be understood as part of a growing desire to question the legitimacy of other boundaries between genres—e.g. anthropology/sociology, folklore/literature, mathematics/music, ethnography/writing. Ever-widening experiences with other cultures and their diverse modes of thought have led to critical reflection on accepted Western research practices, especially, the Procrustean bed of dualism and the contextlessness of non-holistic strategies. The newer perceptions are both enriching and humbling—enriching because of their potential for increased wisdom, humbling because of the implied willingness to cede a measure of professional authority. Sometimes they involve recognizing limits on what the human mind can in fact accomplish—as in the uncertainty principle (Ungenaugigkeit) of the physicist Werner Heisenberg; the “fuzzy logic” of physicists (sometimes called “fuzzy thinking”) derived from the “fuzzy set theory” of mathematicians; or the on-going controversy by social scientists about how much of an outsider an ethnographer is able to be. In short, there has been a growing realization that accuracy in scholarly research must include the willingness to incorporate what might be inconvenient—including, the unpredictable, the contradictory, and the partially true.

Evelin Lindner, the Founding President of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, has recently written an important book: Gender, Humiliation, and Global Security. It is a sequel to her two earlier volumes (Lindner 2006 & 2009) on the grave consequences of humiliation and the urgent need to work toward both
personal and interstate equality and respect—or dignity, as she prefers to call it. This is the subject Lindner calls her life’s project, and she has coined the term egalization “to complement the term globalization in ways that can help build a decent global community” (151).

Humiliation is a complicated emotion that comes in a number of forms; it can cause international cycles of violence; it can be addictive; and (one of the main themes of this book) it can even, in the sense of humility, be essential for survival. In line with the trend toward nuanced scholarship noted above, Lindner openly disavows dualism and uses qualitative methods to promote dignity through a respect for cultural diversity. In today’s world, it might seem difficult to shock through boundary-blurring. However, Lindner may have risen more than a few eyebrows by stretching the parameters of scientific inquiry into a realm usually associated with plastic lace, virtual Valentines and FTD.com. It is a subject area she calls by a variety of names, such as “big love” or “firm love,” as well as “tough universal love” and “ambitious love” (167).

Why does Lindner use the L-word? “Love has force. This is why I write about love, even though the word and the concept are so mangled that its force has almost been obliterated.” Clearly, it is partly for its very shock value that she decided to use the word. Just as clearly, the cumbersome term with its modifiers (“big,” “firm,” etc.) reflects the inadequacy of the English language to express this concept. In line with her cross-cultural ideals, Lindner lists a number of non-English terms, including satya, pilia, agape, and Desmond Tutu, in his Foreword to her book, writes that she is advocating the African concept of ubuntu which he describes as the “traditional African philosophy for living together and solving conflicts in an atmosphere of shared humility.

Lindner knows she is taking a courageous step onto uncharted—or should we say uncool?—Fortunately, she is well-armed with impeccable academic qualifications: a doctorate in medicine and another in psychology. As to her lifelong concern for human dignity, she points to being born into a displaced family from Silesia in Central Europe, part of a group of people who were deeply traumatized by being punished for a war they had not caused: “the need to develop Geschichtsbewusstsein (awareness of history) and to stand up for ‘never again’ became central for my life” (xx). Lindner has chosen to match her interdisciplinary research with a similar freedom of movement in her personal life. Constantly on a global lecture circuit, she possesses affiliations, among others, with the Columbia University Network of Conflict Resolution, the University of Oslo’s department of psychology, and the Maison des Sciences de L’Homme in Paris.

This is not an easy book to understand because, while the focus is on domestic relationships, the points are being made both for their literal meaning and for their metaphoric value in relation to international dealings—a subtle but important relationship for which Lindner ingeniously chooses a spiral type of organization.

This book is, therefore, not merely about gender and humiliation or love and dignity. It is also about cultural and institutional change, locally and globally (xvii).

In order to show these correspondences, Dr. Lindner uses vignettes. For example, to bring out the importance of understanding the cultural frame before trying to solve a societal problem, she describes a situation in which both husband and wife play the roles assigned to them within the honor-society framework; the wife believes her husband’s beatings to be evidence of his love; the husband believes he would be humiliated if deprived of his dominant (and therefore, disciplinary) function—which he associates with honor. To permanently stop the husband from beating his wife, it is necessary to do more than enforce a law against domestic violence. The first step must be to change both husband’s and wife’s conception of marriage structure—and gender—to an egalitarian one. Another vignette concerns a ski trip in the mountains of Norway. The British leaders of the expedition tragically cause fatalities, including the death of one of their sons, through their unwillingness to accept the humiliation of retreating from perilous weather conditions. In this case, acceptance of humiliation would have been constructive, in contrast to
other types of humiliation situations that invite retaliation and often instigate cycles of vengeance.

It is easy to make the international inferences: Lindner is pointing out that something similar to the patriarchal code of honor is widely accepted internationally (and can therefore be used for propaganda purposes). Invasions of weak nations by the strong are commonly explained as a disciplinary action and withdrawal or defeat considered humiliating. Keying in humiliation and Iraq on my computer this morning, I received almost 40,000 hits this morning; for humiliation and Afghanistan, I got 155,000 responses. To some of us, it is reminiscent of Secretary of Defense John McNaughton’s explanation forty years ago: “The present objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation” (quoted in Schell 1976: 10). The second vignette (the skiing tragedy) refers to the main theme of the book: there are times (internationally, as well as domestically) that call for a beneficial, non-demeaning, type of humiliation; and that kind of willingness to give in, to humble oneself without feeling violated, is only possible outside the honor culture. Lindner sometimes refers to this as humility; I would suggest that exclusive usage of this term would be more suitable and less confusing.

Thus, Lindner finds that the honor society is not confined to the Middle East, but is a societal system “predicated upon the anticipation of war.” Lindner is disgusted and angry—about bailouts to crooked millionaires, about the environment, about a permanent war economy, about “endangering the future of our children.” She refers to the philosopher Otto Neurath who used a ship metaphor:

—a wealthy play with love and sex on their luxury top decks, trying to protect their riches from the poor who attempt to climb up to them from their miserable lower decks—and all overlook or deny the fact that the entire ship is at risk of sinking (xvii).

Lindner opens up—and invites—new avenues for collaboration: “I do not have all the solutions. Most probably, there is no one final remedy. Saving the ship will always be an ongoing process” (xvii).

This book is partially a blueprint, partially a call to action; however, it is as an authority on humiliation that the author is most powerful. She is able to contribute an important psychological component to a cutting edge issue: the linkage between a patriarchal family, an authoritarian state, and war (see Braudy 2003; Ducat 2004; Goldstein 2001; Hoffman 2001; Hopkins 2008; and Lakoff 2004). Lindner shines a spotlight on the honor culture and “the need to defend it against humiliation” (50), a structure that, she theorizes, may have originally come about through fear of others (the “security dilemma”). Anyone concerned about the path toward perpetual war recently taken by the United States should be roused to action by her strong language as she points out that, within this context, human potential is “curtailed, mutilated, and deformed.” It requires the polarization of gender roles since “men prepare to die young and women to produce new soldiers whom they have to prepare to die young.” Evolutionary biologists—and the rest of us—should take note, for “honor is inherently irrational (if interest in survival is defined as rational)” (50).

Psychology has only recently shifted its focus away from a search for universals. Dr. Lindner, as a psychologist who sees wisdom in boundary blurring, believes that: “metaemotions depend on our cultural scripts, which, in turn, are embedded into large-scale geopolitical framings” (5). Lindner categorizes the humiliation found in honor societies (honor humiliation) into four types and criticizes human rights organizations for conflating them under a single rubric (70). Some might imagine that anyone who attempts to work for a more equitable world while, at the same time, maintaining respect for diverse cultural views, confronts a daunting task. Characteristically, Lindner openly airs the difficulties while pointing to the opportunities for enrichment offered by access to the knowledge and experiences of others.

As we learned from the H.G.Wells-Léo-Szilard anecdote at the beginning of this review, the fuzzing of boundaries opens minds to new ideas, but the results can be destructive: the invention of devastating weaponry. Nevertheless, Gender, Humiliation and Global Security delivers an optimistic message—a rarity in today’s world. As noted above, Lindner looks at that bête noire for progressives, globalization, and sees in it potential for creating a new and decent world community—the erasure of national sovereignty being a
prerequisite for getting rid of the “security dilemma” and the honor culture it brings with it. While pulling no punches about the gravity of the contemporary situation, she makes positive suggestions for the systemic transformation of globalization she calls egalization.

Evelin Lindner even finds a hopeful sign in the economic meltdown: the pitiful performance of the powerful has aroused sleepers whose apathy used to be so thick, she writes, that people seemed to be victims to a “mind-set that races toward crisis by default.” The fallacy of reliance on corporate leadership is out there in plain sight, and she quotes Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan who said he was “in a state of shocked disbelief” to find that CEOs could not police themselves (xix). As Dr. Linda Hartling writes at the end of her Afterword to this book:

*If men and women are going to transform pernicious institutions, we must promote humility as an organizational necessity for bridging differences. Most of all, if men and women are going to create a sustainable future for the world’s children, we must cultivate humility as an urgent international necessity. This book calls us to forge a heroic, yet humble path forward, celebrating and enlarging men and women’s potential and capacity to work together for a better world.* (177)

Lindner has shown us that we must cross both physical and mental boundaries in order to learn how to live together on this planet. There is no language or culture that contains within it all the answers—even, as we have seen, words for all types of love. Like fuzzy logic, Lindner’s recommendations are both enriching and humbling. This is an important book and should be read by anyone concerned about the future of life beyond his or her lifetime.

About the Author

Pandora Hopkins, Ph.D., taught at Yale University, Rutgers University and CUNY (the City University of New York) before moving to Mexico where she is writing a book, tentatively called *House of Cards and the Subliminal Truths That Are Holding It Together,* from which this article derives. She also co-directs (with Victoria Fontan) an oral history project, “Voting With Their Feet.” A particular research focus on the political consequences of cross-cultural perception was also manifested by her book, *Aural Thinking in Norway* (Plenum, 1986); it is a study of the cognitive nature of aural transmission through an analysis of the Hardanger fiddle tradition of Norway.

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