DECENT VERSUS HUMILIATING ORGANIZATIONS ANTECEDENTS AND EFFECTS

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Abstract

Humiliating organizations are those which systematically humiliate their customers, employees, suppliers, or other groups significantly related to the organization. This paper, firstly, aims to identify characteristics of humiliating versus decent organizational actions *vis a vis* the individual. In particular, we will show where humiliation reaches beyond rational justification. Secondly, we will propose conditions and antecedents of humiliation in the relationship between the organization and individual. We build our explanatory model on theories of status, the effects of status behavior and identity threat. The paper closes with a discussion of the contributions of the paper and potential future studies.

Key words

Organizational Identity, Status, Organizational Politics, Fairness, Organizational Justice

On January the 12th, 2008, the daughter of President Bush arrived at Lima's civilian and commercial airport. As a consequence, all other flights carrying hundreds of passengers from all over the world were detoured to land in a military airport located two hundred kilometers to the south.

Organizations draw distinctions. They distinguish between jobs and roles and assign employees to these roles. They distinguish hierarchical layers, they distinguish segments of customers, and they even distinguish between more or less important suppliers. All of these distinctions always carry some assignment of status. In the case of employees and individual customers this leads to a hierarchy of social status. In the introductory example this is taken to the extreme. The carrier and the airport treat a high-status customer in an extremely privileged way, thereby obviously humiliating their other customers, who have to accept the inconvenience of traveling through a different airport.

In this paper we want to explore the question of whether and under what conditions status distinctions of and within organizations lead to humiliation of individuals, or whether and under what conditions all groups and individuals are treated in a decent way. The latter would characterize a decent organization. The theoretical paper proceeds in three basic parts. First, we define the basic concept to be explained, which is humiliation and the humiliating organization, as well as associated behaviors. Because this section concerns definitional behavior for a novel concept, we do not refer to previous literature. This changes when we describe the main theoretical basis, building on research into status, especially as it surfaces in organizations and, more generally, theories on identity threat, which is proposed as a main trigger for organizations to act in a humiliating way. Through these theories we derive propositions about antecedents and effects of the humiliating organization. The paper concludes with a discussion of the paper's further implications.

Humiliation and decency defined

"Humiliation is any sort of behavior or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured" (Margalit, 1996, p. 13). Accordingly, we define as a humiliating organization an organization which systematically humiliates its customers, employees, suppliers, or other groups which are significantly related to the organization. An organization acts only through agents or affects individuals through programs, rules, policies, and working conditions. Therefore, an organization can only humiliate through these programs, rules, policies, working conditions and by systematically leading actors into humiliating behaviors. We would like to illustrate humiliation by organizations through some examples.

Example 1: Firms in an oligopolistic market with strong price competition tend to simultaneously reduce the quality of services along with their reduction of prices. Usually, such firms offer low-cost services for price-sensitive customers and premium services at much higher prices. Further, firms frequently implicitly collude, which makes it impossible for price-sensitive customers to find a firm with better services.

Example 2: Knowledge-intensive firms treat employees like criminals as soon as they announce they are leaving the company: the employee is only allowed to go back to his or her desk to pick up private belongings, and only accompanied by a guard. This is not only humiliating for this specific person, but the prospect of such a procedure at the end of one's contract is humiliating to every employee within the firm.

Example 3: A contract is made with a supplier by a firm for a certain time period. The firm terminates the contract before the end of this period, implicitly or explicitly assuming that the contractor will not sue against this premature termination, because otherwise the contractor will never be engaged in the future.

When is self-respect injured and how is this done by others and by the organization? Essentially, self-respect is an aspect or a function of one's own perception of social status and, more generally, one's identity. However, low social status is not necessarily humiliating. In contrast, low-status groups usually take pride in their place in life or in their job, as long as they can, broadly speaking, identify with their status, with their occupation, or with their group, and as long as their identity is maintained, which is, for example, exemplified by the value of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Self-respect is threatened only if the present status is, for some reason, lowered. For example, blue-collar workers mostly take pride in being members of the "working class". However, a more or less subtle lowering of this status by, for example, labeling somebody as being "*only* working class" will be perceived as humiliating. Furthermore, even the lowering of status is not necessarily humiliating. The most significant change in social status in organizations is surely the transfer from a supervisory position to a subordinate position. However, as long as this is perceived to be justified by some reason, this will hardly have a humiliating impact.

Means of humiliation

Basically, we propose two classes of ways to humiliate which are relevant for organizations: organizational means, represented especially by certain rules and norms in the organization, and individual behaviors. For the latter we propose a certain subset of status-behaviors (Lehner, 2008).

Rules and norms. Obviously, rules and norms which are perceived to be systematically unjust will likely have a humiliating effect. We will discuss the role of justice in more detail below. Rules for distributing rewards within the organization or rules of advancement in the organization may be regarded as humiliating if they are perceived to function in an extremely unjust way. For example, a strict policy of hiring outside personnel for leadership positions might have such an effect if the candidates selected turn out to be systematically less qualified than internal personnel.

Rules and norms function like laws in organizations, thereby anchoring the perception of justice. If behavior is in accordance with explicit rules then it is more likely to be regarded as justified. However, rules always leave room for interpretation: when or under which conditions is a rule to be applied, and how is it to be applied? Further, rules and especially behavioral norms in organizations may be perceived to contradict higher-order norms, thereby being perceived to be unjustified. If these are applied in a manner which lowers the status of individuals then they will operate in a humiliating way. For example, if a supervisor ignores a certain subordinate while communicating with others, the supervisor lowers the status of the ignored subordinate. Such behavior is restricted to the leader-member-dyad and, therefore, does not describe the organization. However, the existence of either an explicit rule or a behavioral norm not to respond to all internal e-mails is an attribute of the organization which is likely to lead to humiliation, because it is likely to be applied in an unjustified manner.

Cognitive standards for evaluating outcomes (Folger & Murnighan, 1993) also include the perception of the status of others, especially if this is regarded as privilege. When individuals holding a recognition of high status are given special treatment in matters of having privileges, the privilege of some is at the same time the humiliation of many.

Low organizational justice and fairness. Probably the oldest treatment of justice and fairness which, nevertheless, still applies to modern organizations is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. He explained justness as the distribution of awards "according to merit". Such a distribution is always located at an intermediate stage between "too much" and "too little". These principles apply to material rewards as well as to social status within organizations. What is perceived to be justified in organizations has been well researched in the field of organizational justice. Nowakowski and Conlon (Nowakowski & Conlon, 2005) distinguish between four dimensions of justice: distributional, procedural, interpersonal, and informational. Only procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice is relevant here, because a change in status of itself is hardly perceived to be fair (distributional justice); rather, the procedure of status lowering, the interpersonal processes and information may have an impact on the perceived fairness of this change.

In a series of studies Wiesenfeld et al. (Wiesenfeld, Swann Jr, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007) showed that individuals with high self-esteem will react particularly negatively to a lack of procedural justice. High self-esteem is likely to be correlated with a perception of one's own relatively high status. Therefore, a threat to one's own status also threatens self-esteem. For individuals with *a priori* low self-esteem and/or low status, such a threat has little effect. People also refer to cognitive standards for judging the fairness of outcomes (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). Folger proposed that employees will react negatively to organizational outcomes to the extent that (a) the loss for employees is severe, and (b) the way it is implemented is perceived to be inappropriate. Change which negatively impacts on working conditions and is perceived to be unfair lowers commitment to change (Fedor, Caldwell, & Herold, 2006).
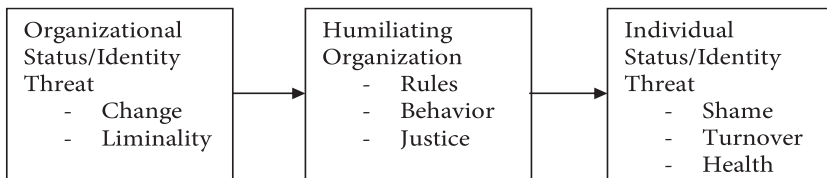
High Status (high potential for humiliation)	Low Status (low potential for humiliation)	Condition
Use of humor	task-oriented talk	Content of humor (e.g. racist)
Informal talk	formal talk	Excluding others by using only certain informal channels
Use of aggressive words	only friendly talk apologies	Directed against the person instead of task-related
Use of metaphors	Technical jargon	Using negative metaphors
Being late	Being on time	Clearly on purpose instead of tight schedule
Asking for help in irrelevant areas	Accepting help in relevant tasks	Not trying to do it alone
Claiming success, celebrating	Acknowledging own failures, showing shame	Not acknowledging the contribution of others

Tab. 1: Status-behaviors with potentially humiliating effects

Change will be perceived to be unfair if the status quo is perceived to be just. Consequently, a decent organization will be able to change in a decent way only if both the procedures of change and the prospective future state of the organization are perceived to be fair. The latter is unlikely if a substantial proportion of the organization's members face the threat of losing status through the proposed change.

Behavior. Clearly, the strongest form of humiliation through behavior is bullying, which has been found to be a consequence of status inconsistency as well (Heames, Harvey, & Treadway, 2006). However, there is a huge class of behaviors which are, on the one hand, not generally humiliating, but which, on the other hand, may have a humiliating effect, depending on the context of their application. Based on a review of status-behaviors by Lehner (2008), Table 1 provides a summary of status-behaviors which might have a humiliating effect under conditions which are represented in the third column of Table 1.

The above already suggests two necessary conditions for the humiliating organization: first, the systematic lowering of the status of individuals or groups, and, second, a lack of justification of this lowering. The opposite, the decent organization, is characterized by either raising or preserving the status of individuals, or lowering the status only in a justified way. In the following section, status, identity, and justice in organizations as cornerstones for our theory are reviewed. In the subsequent section, and based on this, we will propose antecedents and consequences of Humiliating Organizations as outlined in Figure 1.

Organizational Status/Identity Threat - Change - Liminality	→	Humiliating Organization - Rules - Behavior - Justice	→	Individual Status/Identity Threat - Shame - Turnover - Health

Fig. 1: Theoretical Frame: Antecedents and Consequences of the Humiliating Organization

Status and Identity in and of Organizations

Max Weber defined social status ("Ständische Lage") as a claim for positive or negative privilege in regard to social esteem or honor (Weber, 2004/1924). Although Weber defined status as a claim to social esteem which can be acquired not only through birth but also through merit, the concept has tended to be used for describing enduring social hierarchies, which are stable over time. This view dominates even modern thinking about organizations, which implicitly views status within organizations as overlapping with the formal organizational hierarchy, although examples of a lack of overlap can be identified easily: occupants of high leadership positions frequently lack respect from their subordinates, experts often acquire a status much higher than their hierarchical position implies, and groups without an official hierarchy form a status hierarchy among team members or within an informal network pervading the organization (Tichy, Nystrom, & Starbuck, 1981).

Referring to Lehner (2008), we define status as follows. Status is the perceived position of an individual (a group, an organization) relative (above, below, equal) to its interacting partners. Thus, unlike a formal organizational hierarchy, which is made explicit through organizational charts, job descriptions, and titles, status is defined here as a perceptual phenomenon which is a result of social interaction, but which is not necessarily made explicit. Although viewing status as a perceptual phenomenon is compatible with the sociological use of the concept, because concepts like esteem or honor are inherently of a perceptual nature, this has not been made explicit so far. The definition implies that the perceived status of an individual may vary among observers. In particular, one's own perception of status may diverge considerably from the perception of peers. Even if there is some agreement about the status hierarchy within a social situation, this may change quickly with each interaction. On the other hand, status can be transferred to some extent between different contexts, because, like social capital, it is not fully dependent on hierarchical positions (Adler & Kwon, 2002). The more that agreement is formed within the organization about the relative status of each member, the more clearly a status hierarchy emerges. Even if there is strong agreement, the status hierarchy is much more in flux than the formal organizational hierarchy, and it is much more fine-grained, because it distinguishes between higher and lower status positions within groups of official equals.

One's own perception of status creates expectations about the behavior of others and about more general treatment within the organization. If such expectations are violated, this is likely to be regarded as an attempt to lower one's status. For example, executives expect a certain amount of office space, with appropriate furniture. If an executive is assigned a significantly smaller office, with fewer windows or shabby furniture, this will be perceived as a lowering of status.

Status is a special aspect of general (individual or organizational) identity. Identity threats have been proposed to have widespread implications for organizations (Petriglieri, 2011). For the purpose of our theory, two consequences proposed by Petriglieri are particularly relevant: derogation of the source of the threat and identity-restructuring responses. The first possibility is likely to be dealt with by behaviors. The second can be managed through certain rules and norms established in the humiliating organization. Both have been described in the above section on the humiliating organization.

In the proposed model (Figure 1), status and identity threat is located in two ways. First, on the organizational level (Organizational Status and Organizational Identity) it is proposed to act as an antecedent of the Humiliating Organization, which will be explained in the next section. Second, as discussed in the subsequent section, the effects on individual status and identity will be observed on the individual level.

Antecedents of humiliation

We view the decent organization as the quasi-natural state of an organization, because it is a state of equilibrium, where every individual and every group occupies a certain social status, thereby forming a social hierarchy which largely parallels the formal organizational hierarchy, although the latter is more coarse-grained than the informal social hierarchy (Lehner, 2008). Basically, there are two possibilities for humiliating organizations. First, certain events trigger a departure from this equilibrium, strong enough and in a sufficiently unjustified way to be regarded as humiliating. The second possibility is represented by organizations which implement measures, rules, or behavioral norms which produce humiliation.

External triggers, change. The status of individuals and groups is frequently threatened as a consequence of organizational change (Kiefer, 2005), layoffs (Bennet, Martin, Bies, & Brockner, 1995), and company takeovers (Vince, 2006), and it is mostly accompanied by negative emotions toward the organization, anger, fear, and shame (Lundberg, Kristenson, & Starrin, 2009). The opposite, the decent organization, creates or maintains contexts which either do not affect the status of individuals or which even raise the status of individuals or groups of individuals.

As antecedents of humiliation, we propose the status of the organization, and a perceived threat in the environment, especially the threat of a lowered status of the organization. This is different from previous attempts to link threats in regard to status and negative emotions on the individual level (Kiefer, 2005). Instead, we refer to attempts to transfer the concept of social status to the organizational level (Podolny, 2005). Status and power usually correlate positively but are not fully overlapping. This distinction is especially important here, because we propose diverging influences of status and power on humiliation: whereas humiliation will be a consequence of the expectation of lowered status, an increase in the perceived power of the organization (e.g. market power through collusion or quasi-monopoly) will increase the likelihood of humiliation. Rather than a linear relationship between the present status of the

organization and humiliation, we expect a curvilinear relationship. The likelihood of humiliating organizations is highest at the middle layer of status.

Liminality. Gennep (1960) describes in his classic ethnographic studies on rituals how members of a society who are to advance in the social hierarchy are forced into a transient, "liminal" situation with a complete drop in status. A prospective chief of a tribe is molested, humiliated, and disgraced in a special ritual before he can assume his new position (Turner, 1989). In modern society, especially in modern organizations, such rites of passage are lacking. But liminal situations are ever present. Some trends in the modern-day economy and in organizations suggest that liminal situations are even increasing, such as the rise of the consulting business (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), the increasing significance of network organization with "borderless spaces" (Ortmann & Sydow, 1999) with "gatekeepers" permanently "outside" and "within", being on the organizational border (Ferris et al., 2007), the frequent appearance of change agents (Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, & Willmott, 2005), keeping organizations in an adaptation rather than efficiency mode (Selznick, 1948), and with an increasing proportion of the workforce in "flexible" working arrangements (Sennett, 1998). In such situations, without any backing from a formal position, possibly accompanied by a loss of social identity (Simon & Oakes, 2006), individuals increasingly regard themselves as status-less individuals, encountering others who are very unsure about their status. As a consequence, observers will be more receptive to status-behavior and even transformative leadership (Pawar & Eastman, 1997).

A liminal situation is exemplified by a new team consisting of members of different organizations who hardly know each other and who are to work together in an inter-organizational development project. Familiarity with observers has been shown to be significantly correlated with the frequency of verbal self-presentation (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). The forming of the new team is a liminal situation, starting without a clear status hierarchy, but developing relatively quickly during the first meetings of the team. In such early team situations, members' status-behavior will strongly impact on the resulting status hierarchy, which was suggested by Tuckman's (1965) much-cited model of team development. Another typical liminal space within the organization is the situation of hiring a new employee. By applying for a specific job which is located within a certain hierarchical layer of the organization, the candidate signals (Spence, 1973) a certain status. For this reason, formerly high-ranked jobless persons will favor longer periods of unemployment over jobs with low status (McCormick, 1990). When short-listed for a management position and invited for an interview, the applicant's ability to show behavior which is associated with a certain status in the organizational hierarchy will be highly predictive for the hiring decision. For example, personality characteristics and their associated behaviors which have been found to be predictive for success in assessment centers (Haaland & Christianse, 2002) essentially represent high-status behaviors. Following this type of hiring process, new employees are often placed in trainee programs, which show many similarities to the rites of passage described for less advanced societies (Turner, 1989).

All of the above examples describe situations in organizations where the status of an individual is highly ambiguous, both for observers and in terms of one's own perception, because neither formal organizational hierarchies nor behavioral records are sufficiently available to derive a status perception. The term liminality describes such situations. Under liminality present status-behavior will be strongly used to form status perceptions. Status-behavior, on the other hand, will be strongly based on the actor's interpretation of the current situation.

Consequences of humiliation

We propose three different outcomes of humiliation. Firstly, the psychological state of shame, which might be treated as an intermediary variable, and then two surface outcomes which affect the organization, which are turnover and health-related outcomes.

Shame. A significant drop in status, a loss of honor, or a threat to one's own self-respect is followed by the feeling of shame (Neckel, 1991; Poulson, 2002). Also, threats to identity or self-representation are directly followed by the "master emotion" of shame (Martens, 2005). Therefore, shame is a likely consequence of humiliation.

Turnover. High turnover will be a likely consequence of the humiliating organization. Often this will even be an intended consequence. Generally, there are many studies showing how low job satisfaction leads to high turnover (Anderson & Brown, 2010). Since humiliation will also reduce job satisfaction, a corresponding link between humiliation and turnover has to be expected.

Employee health and absence rates. Probably the most severe consequence of the humiliating organization is its negative impact on health. There is a growing body of evidence that threats to identity and status have significant impacts on health (Anderson & Brown, 2010; Christie & Barling, 2010; Lundberg et al., 2009; Scanlan & Bundy, 2009; Schnittker & Mcleod, 2005). This leads to increased rates of absence compared to the decent organization.

Recent results (Lehner, Azeem, Ul Haq, & Sharif, 2014) suggest that psychological capital, which is related to social capital and status, might mediate these effects.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper introduces a framework for describing humiliation in and by organizations together with possible antecedents and effects. As a basis we made particular use of theories of status and identity, and related research which also provides some empirical evidence. However, humiliation is a largely under-researched issue. Because of the vast importance organizations have in the life of modern-day human beings, humiliating organizations can surely pose a significant threat to the physical and psychical health of employees, suppliers, and even customers. On the other hand, the decent organization plays a potentially positive role in society beyond pure ethical concerns.

We will close this paper by discussing the relevance for different scholarly discourses and potential future studies in this area. First, there is a growing interest in status and identity in organizational research, for which the theory of this paper is proposed as a contribution. The antecedents of status and identity, as well as the consequences of identity and status threat, are, however, still little-researched phenomena. The concept of the humiliating organization may provide a cornerstone for advancing this line of research.

Further, the humiliating organization may inform more general societal discourse. The present discussion on organization is dominated by pure economic consideration of transaction costs, profitability, and their role within a market economy. Even though there is widespread agreement that organizations fulfill much wider societal and psychological functions, these are rather underrepresented in scholarly discourse. The distinction of humiliating versus decent organizations might nurture wider considerations of research questions within economics, sociology and management research.

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