

Humiliation in context: Interactional, emotional, and self-related processes



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Abstract

To examine how people perceive and experience humiliation, we analysed 2635 narratives from 1048 participants, capturing definitions of humiliation and accounts of humiliating situations. The findings reveal that humiliation is perceived as both an interactive event and an emotional resolution process, that the impact on the self (whether individual or collective) depends on whether humiliation is experienced personally or vicariously; and that agency-related devaluations were more prevalent than communion-related devaluations in both defining humiliation and recalling personally humiliating situations. In an attempt to capture the variety of definitions of humiliation and recollections of humiliating situations as interactive experiences involving emotional and behavioural resolution processes, we propose (drawing on self-discrepancy theory) that humiliation can be conceptualised as the experience of a discrepancy between a person's actual/other self-concept (i.e. how they believe significant others perceive them) and their actual/own self-concept (i.e. how they perceive themselves). We argue that this conceptualisation holds significant potential not only to capture the diverse nature of humiliation experiences but also to contribute to ongoing efforts to deepen our understanding of the underlying psychological processes.

Plain language summary

This study explored how people understand and experience humiliation. We collected and analysed 2,635 personal stories from 1,048 participants, asking them to define humiliation and describe situations where they felt humiliated. The findings show that humiliation is both a social interaction and an emotional process. Its impact depends on whether the humiliation is experienced directly (personally) or indirectly (through others). People most often described humiliation as involving threats to their sense of competence, value, or agency, rather than to their sense of belonging or relationships. To make sense of these varied experiences, we suggest that humiliation can be understood as a mismatch between how people think others see them and how they see themselves. This new way of thinking about humiliation may help researchers and practitioners better capture the complexity of these experiences and deepen understanding of the psychological processes behind them.

Keywords

humiliation, self-concept, social judgement, agency and communion, vicarious humiliation

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If bestselling books reflect the zeitgeist, then our current era is distinctly marked by anger (Mishra, 2017), rage (Burrough, 2015), and shame, heralding a New Age of Humiliation (O'Neil, 2022). Humiliation has been cited as a cause or catalyst for various forms of harm, ranging from suicide and health problems to right-wing populism, xenophobia, terrorism, and even war. Humiliation, it seems, has a great theoretical potential as an explanatory concept. At the same time, it is intuitively accessible as it captures a concrete and intensive human experience that people are familiar with across cultures. Attributions to humiliation are often plausible and convenient. Yet, humiliation involves psychological processes that are still far from being fully understood.

Since the seminal works by Hartling and Luchetta (1999) and Klein (1991), substantial theoretical efforts have been made to conceptualise and explore humiliation as a psychological experience. Building on these theoretical advancements and existing research on humiliation, the

present paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to better understand humiliation as a psychological experience. We present a study that examines how the nature of the humiliating event and the emotional resolution process contribute differently to individuals' perceptions and experiences of humiliation. Additionally, we explore how humiliation is experienced across the different components

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of the self, depending on whether the devaluation is directed to achievements and abilities or social relationships and status.

People humiliate each other – sometimes, but not always, intentionally. Whether humiliation is real or imagined, it is widely considered a painful or traumatic experience (Elison & Harter, 2007; Hartling et al., 2013; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Jackson, 1999; Klein, 1991; Mann, 2017) resulting in anxiety (Klein, 1991), depression (Farmer & McGuffin, 2003), and suicidal states (Klein, 1991). The experience of humiliation is also often cited as a motivating factor for events that shake societies, such as domestic violence (Farmer & McGuffin, 2003), school shootings (Elison & Harter, 2007), and terror attacks (Prosser, 2016). Furthermore, leaders frequently use acts of humiliation as a political tool to discredit and weaken their opponents, such as in the presidential campaigns in the United States (Izzah & Sembodo, 2022; McCarthy-Jones, 2019), and governments use it to suppress defiance, such as in humiliating torture to silence activists in Myanmar (Jefferson & Martin, 2023), or to demonstrate dominance, such as forcing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison to pose in humiliating positions for photographs and later shared by US military personnel with the world at large (Saurette, 2006; Vorbrüggen & Baer, 2007). Moreover, the claim of having been humiliated is instrumentally used by leaders to (de)mobilise resistance (Jogdand et al., 2020). Given that humiliation can trigger a desire for retaliation (Gasano, 2006; Gerodimos, 2022; Hartling et al., 2013; Hartling & Lindner, 2016; Lacey, 2011; Muenster & Lotto, 2010; Walker & Knauer, 2011), it is not surprising that groups' experiences of humiliation are often followed by violent acts (Atran & Stern, 2005; Gasano, 2006; Lindner, 2006a, 2006b; Strozier & Mart, 2017), including honour killings (Lindner, 2002a), genocide (e.g. Rwandan genocide; see Gasano, 2006), terrorism (e.g. Unrest in Northern Ireland; see Stokes, 2006), or war (e.g. Second World War; see Lindner, 2001).

Given such severe implications, one should expect humiliation to attract widespread attention. Indeed, researchers from multiple fields, including social sciences (e.g. Elison & Harter, 2007; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991; Lindner, 2016; Neuhauser, 2011), medical psychology (e.g. Brown et al., 1995; Gilbert, 1997), political studies (e.g. Lacey, 2011; Palshikar, 2005), psychiatry (e.g. Farmer & McGuffin, 2003; Torres & Bergner, 2010; Walker & Knauer, 2011), media studies (e.g. Marie, 2020), and social psychology (e.g. Fernández et al., 2015, 2018, 2022, 2023; Jogdand et al., 2020; Leidner et al., 2012; Mann et al., 2017; Veldhuis et al., 2014; Vorster et al., 2021), have been investigating humiliation over the past decades. In this rich literature, an impressive collection of concepts has been amassed, defining humiliation as an interactive and emotional experience (e.g. Fernández et al., 2015, 2018; Hartling & Lindner, 2016; Lindner, 2006b).

As an interactive experience, humiliation is commonly described as a situation in which a more powerful person or entity strips another person or entity (against their will) of their status (Torres & Bergner, 2010), limits their options, denies their privileges, constrains their rights, and exposes their vulnerabilities (Lindner, 2016), damages their self-

esteem and self-efficacy (Adshead, 2010; Klein, 1991; Silver et al., 1986; Veldhuis et al., 2014), attacks their character, identity (Otten et al., 2017), or dignity (Hartling et al., 2013; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2012; Statman, 2000), or socially excludes them (Veldhuis et al., 2014). Thus, humiliation as a social interaction involves self-relevant treatment by another person that leads to a perceived devaluation of the self (Coleman et al., 2007; Elison & Harter, 2007; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991; Lindner, 2002b).

As an emotional experience, humiliation is commonly defined as a negative, self-conscious, intensive feeling (e.g. 'I feel humiliated'), which often is accompanied by a variety of related negative emotional responses, such as shame, embarrassment, guilt, fear, anger, or sadness, as these emotions share some appraisals with humiliation (Fernández et al., 2015; Vorster et al., 2021), and which results in paradoxical behavioural responses that range from avoidance (e.g. withdraw, suppression) to approach (e.g. retaliation, violent or vengeful actions) (Fernández et al., 2015; see also Jogdand et al., 2020). These important emotional processes capture the emotional resolution process during which the experienced self-devaluation is appraised by the humiliated individual (e.g. as unjust), and these appraisals, in turn, evoke emotions (e.g. anger) and behavioural responses (e.g. retaliation) (Fernández et al., 2015; Vorster et al., 2021). For example, when someone with expertise in the relevant scientific field fails to acknowledge one's academic merits because one is only at the beginning of an academic career, the experienced devaluation can be resolved by appraising this lack of acknowledgement as unjust, which may result in feelings of anger and behavioural approach such as confronting the source of the humiliation or gossip behind their back, potentially gaining recognition and thereby restoring one's sense of worth. Alternatively, depending on interindividual differences and social norms, the same experienced devaluation may be resolved by appraising it as deserved, resulting in the feeling of shame and the behavioural response of avoidance. Avoidance can serve as protection, allowing the individual to avoid further devaluation and rebuild their self-esteem.

An interesting question is, however, whether humiliation is a unique feeling that should be distinguished from the other emotions, such as anger, shame, or embarrassment, that are often evoked during the emotional resolution process. To advance the understanding of psychological humiliation, Fernández et al. (2015, 2018, 2022, 2023) have convincingly proposed that people undergo the specific feeling of humiliation if they internalise the devaluation and, at the same time, appraise the humiliating act as unjust. However, appraising an event as unjust and internalising it as a personal devaluation, which is considered necessary for *feeling* humiliated (e.g. as compared to feeling angry), is not a necessary ingredient of the *experience* of humiliation. Instead, such internalisation captures just one of many ways in which a humiliating experience can be resolved (e.g. the claim of being humiliated, see Jogdand et al., 2020).

Researchers also generally agree that an audience plays a role in the experience of humiliation, though they differ on the extent of its influence. Some scholars, such as Klein

(1991), argue that an audience is essential, proposing a triangular humiliation model involving the humiliator, the humiliated individual(s), and the witnessing audience. In contrast, others contend that while an audience is not a necessary component, it significantly intensifies the experience. These researchers maintain a dyadic view – focussing on the interaction between the humiliator and the humiliated – while viewing the audience as a conditional factor that aggravates, rather than constitutes, the experience of humiliation (Fernández et al., 2023; Mann et al., 2017; Otten et al., 2017).

Distinguishing between humiliation as devaluation of the self and as an emotional resolution process, which may or may not be reinforced by an audience, serves conceptual and scientific purposes (Elshout et al., 2017). It is, however, crucial to acknowledge that perceptions and experiences of humiliation have existed across cultures for centuries, long before the advent of modern scientific inquiry. To ensure that the conceptualisation of humiliation – encompassing both self-devaluation and emotional resolution – resonates with people's lived realities, the present research aims to explore how individuals define and recall experiences of humiliation.

Rather than evaluating whether individuals can identify the conceptual features of existing models of humiliation, this study seeks to examine whether they prioritise self-devaluation (i.e. antecedents), emotional resolution processes (i.e. appraisals, emotions, and behavioural tendencies), or contextual factors (e.g. the presence of an audience) in their definitions and recollections. Building on prior work that has started to explore the lay understanding of humiliation (Elshout et al., 2017), this study further acknowledges that humiliation involves not only multiple components of the self but also a wide range of humiliating experiences.

Humiliation involves different components of the self

The experience of humiliation is not limited to involvement in direct interactions. As previous research demonstrated, humiliation can be experienced either *personally* or *vicariously* (Veldhuis et al., 2014; Vorster et al., 2021). Personal humiliation occurs when an individual is directly targeted. In contrast, vicarious humiliation occurs when an individual witnesses (or hears about) the humiliation of someone else who is the direct target. Despite not being directly humiliated, the observer empathically experiences humiliation.

Another reason why one can experience humiliation without being personally targeted is due to a shared social identity (Vorster, 2020). As people self-categorise on different levels (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Turner et al., 1987), we assume that both personal and vicarious humiliation can occur on an *individual* or a *collective* level, depending on the affected self. Specifically, when the devaluation refers to one's *individual* self, the experience is considered individual humiliation. When it refers to one's *collective* self, the experience is considered collective humiliation. For example, when a superior directs a derogatory comment toward an employee (e.g. 'you are so stupid'), the employee might experience personal humiliation. However, if the superior is male and he is directing the derogation towards a

female employee by stating, 'You women are so stupid', then the female employee might experience *personal collective* humiliation. Meanwhile, another employee overhearing this exchange might experience *vicarious individual* humiliation (due to empathising with the humiliated person), or *vicarious collective* humiliation (due to sharing a social identity with the humiliated person or empathising with the targeted group). While the distinction between personal and vicarious humiliation is established (Veldhuis et al., 2014; Vorster, 2020) and can be analytically distinguished from the difference between individual and collective humiliation, it remains unclear whether the level of the affected self-aspect (i.e. individual vs. collective) varies empirically depending on whether the humiliation is experienced personally or vicariously. The present study aims to provide answers to this question as well.

The variety of humiliating experiences

Lastly, various endeavours have also been made to identify core features (Elison & Harter, 2007; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991) and patterns of features (Elshout et al., 2017; Vorster et al., 2021) that capture the experience of humiliation. For instance, there is evidence suggesting that humiliation is likely to be experienced in interactions that devalue somebody's social standing, such as belittling, badmouthing, bullying, and social exclusion, which are summarised as antecedents of humiliation (Elison & Harter, 2007; Elshout et al., 2017). Previous research has demonstrated that these antecedents are neither critical nor essential features of humiliation on a conceptual level but rather features that 'differ in their relatedness to the concept' (Elshout et al., 2017, p. 1582). In line with this argument, it is commonly accepted that the mere experience of devaluation does not necessarily lead to the experience of humiliation. For example, being caught lying may be embarrassing, but if it can be reconciled with the belief that one is still an honest person by blaming exceptional circumstances, it might not lead to the experience of humiliation. Similarly, being judged weak in a particular domain, such as sports, may not be flattering. However, if that domain is peripheral to one's social self-concept, such as compared to other domains like musicality, moral integrity, or intellectual capacity, it might still be compatible with one's sense of competency and not lead to the experience of humiliation. Thus, for humiliation to be experienced, the antecedents must be evaluated or judged as an irreconcilable devaluation of the self (see also Fernández et al., 2015, 2018, 2022).

Building on previous research that addressed the variety of antecedents of humiliation (e.g. Adshead, 2010; Elison & Harter, 2007; Elshout et al., 2017; Hartling et al., 2013; Klein, 1991; Lindner, 2006; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2012; Silver et al., 1986; Statman, 2000; Torres & Bergner, 2010), and that suggested that antecedents of humiliation are neither critical nor essential features (Elshout et al., 2017), we propose that the myriads of possible humiliating experiences are likely to converge on the basic modalities of the human experience identified in social judgement, attitude, and self-esteem research (see Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Despite ongoing

debates over naming these human concerns, there is consensus in the literature on social judgement to distinguish between the two fundamental dimensions of agency and communion in pursuing goals and maintaining benevolent relationships with others, respectively. The *agency* dimension is related to the interests of the *self*, such as individuating and expanding the self by attaining one's goals. The *communion* dimension, on the other hand, is related to the interests of *others*, that is, to integrate the self in a social context by caring for others (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014). We propose that humiliation as devaluation of the self can be understood within these two fundamental content dimensions, because the humiliating act (or antecedents of humiliation) either targets one's *agency motive* and, thus, experience of autonomy and competency (i.e. the capacities as a source of social action, such as autonomy, power, influence, control, knowledge, or actual competency), or it targets one's pursuit of *communion motive* and, thus, experience of acceptance, belongingness and social worth (i.e. through status, prestige, fair treatment and respect, morality, positive distinctiveness, perceived competency, integrity or dignity). Or it targets both.

Previous research and the dual perspective model of agency and communion suggest that the relevance of these two fundamental content dimensions varies (e.g. Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, 2014). In general, communion is more prevalent than agency in social judgement. This is because communal traits, such as morality, warmth, and the ability to form social bonds, are more crucial in the perception and evaluation of others. Communion tends to be the primary dimension in social cognition, meaning people recognise and prioritise communal content more quickly than agentic content (Abele, 2022, p. 4). However, the relevance of agency and communion is also contingent upon whether the perspective is *self-focused* or *other-focused* in social interactions. More specifically, the model predicts that communion-related content is more relevant from the other-perception perspective (i.e. how we perceive others), whereas agency-related content is more relevant from the self-perception perspective (i.e. how we perceive ourselves) (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014, p. 214). Therefore, the present research further explored whether there are overall more references to communion-related than to agency-related antecedents when individuals define humiliation and whether the proportion of agency-related as compared to communion-related antecedents of humiliation is larger when humiliation is experienced personally (i.e. perspective is from the point of view of the fully affected *acting self*), in which case self-profitable traits should be of particular and unequivocal concern, rather than vicariously (i.e. perspective is from the point view of someone observing others) when one should be more concerned with other-profitable traits (Peeters, 1992; Peeters et al., 2006). According to Abele and Wojciszke (2014), this distinction between self-profitability and other profitability can be mapped to agentic versus communal traits, respectively.

The present study

To investigate people's experiences of humiliation, we conducted a cross-sectional survey in which participants

were asked to provide their own *definition* of humiliation and *recall* humiliating situations. Content-analysing their responses, we explored whether participants tended to define humiliation as the devaluation of the self (i.e. antecedents of humiliation) or as appraisals (e.g. injustice), feelings (e.g. shame), or behavioural responses (e.g. withdrawal). Thus, we examined whether the focus is more on the characteristics of the humiliating situation (i.e. what humiliates?) or on the emotional resolution process (i.e. how is it to be humiliated?) when people define and experience humiliation.

To investigate the different self-aspects affected by humiliation, we also explored whether people experience humiliation because of a devaluation of the *individual* or the *collective* self, and how these variations manifest themselves in personal and vicarious humiliation. To achieve this, we asked participants to recall a situation where *they felt* humiliated and a situation where they *witnessed someone else* being humiliated (i.e. vicarious humiliation). We then classified the narratives according to whether they referred to participants' individual or collective identities. Additionally, we sought to examine whether the level of the affected self-aspect (i.e. individual vs. collective) varied depending on whether the humiliation was experienced personally or vicariously.

The third set of explorative questions focused on the antecedents of humiliation. We suggested that the antecedents should centre around the fundamental content dimensions of *communion* and/or *agency*. First, we studied the definitions of humiliation and explored whether communion-related antecedents were primary when defining humiliation. To explore this further, we analysed whether the narratives of the personal and witnessed humiliating situations referred to the antecedents of humiliation, that are relevant for acceptance, belongingness, and social worth (communion) and/or to autonomy and competency (agency). The aim was to explore whether agency-related antecedents are more prevalent in personal than in vicarious humiliation.

Methods

Participants

Our sample consisted of undergraduate and mostly part-time students registered with an open distance and e-learning South African university. As a distance university, it enables individuals to study while working, with a higher proportion of female (66%) and mature students (57% fall within the 25 to 39 age range). The student population of more than 380,000 students reflects both the socioeconomics and demographics of South Africa, with the majority of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and with most African students (77 %), followed by White (12 %), Coloured (6%) and Indian (5%) students (Unisa, 2025).

To generate a rather large sample, we conveniently approached approximately 35,000 potential participants. A total of 2913 participants opened the survey, of which 1048 participants started the survey, and 758 completed all questions. Of those, 465 participants identified as being

female (291 as male), and two selected 'other' to describe their gender. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 66 years ($M = 29.57$, $SD = 9.54$).

Procedure and data analysis

The study was conducted with ethical approval from a South African university (REC-240816-052; 2018-CHS-004) and administered through the online platform *Qualtrics*. The data have been made publicly available at the Open Science Framework (OSF) and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/ndhp5/>

Participants were invited via email and provided with a link to the survey. Prior to starting the study, participants were informed that the study aimed to understand emotions experienced in daily life and were asked to consent to provide written responses to several questions presented in the following order. First, participants ($n = 1048$) were asked to provide their definition of humiliation in a text box. The instruction stated: 'In this part of our survey, we will ask you about your experience with the term *humiliation*. We have all experienced and felt it. If asked by somebody, how would you define *humiliation*?'. Next, participants were asked to describe an event that made them feel humiliated ($n = 824$). As we also explored the commonness of vicarious humiliation, we did not specify the target of humiliation (e.g. personal or vicarious). The instruction stated: 'In this part, we will ask you some questions about situations that might have made you feel humiliated. Please describe in detail a situation that made you feel *humiliated*?'. Again, participants responded in writing to this question.¹ As we suspected that not all participants would spontaneously produce examples of vicarious humiliation, we subsequently asked participants ($n = 765$) explicitly to describe a situation where they had experienced vicarious humiliation. The instruction stated: 'Sometimes we can also experience humiliation because we witness or hear about a situation where somebody humiliates a person with whom we have something in common (gender, age, nationality, etc.). Please describe such a situation which you might have witnessed yourself or heard about'. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate their age and gender.

The study used the participants' responses to each of the three instructions as the unit of analysis. These responses were systematically analysed using content analysis. As codes served existing categories that describe the central features of humiliation previously proposed by Elshout et al. (2017), and additional categories that were derived from the work of Hartling and Luchetta (1999), Vorster (2020), and Vorster et al. (2021). While we primarily relied on these existing categories, we remained open to the possibility that the peripheral features identified by Elshout et al. (2017) might be found in the narratives or that new codes might emerge during the analysis. The codes, which were developed mainly deductively, were applied relatively objectively rather than interpretatively, which means that participants' statements needed to match the code descriptors closely to be recorded.

The list of codes, including their origin and descriptors, is reported in Table 1. The coding of the narratives was conducted by the first and second authors of the paper. We

started by coding the definitions of humiliation using a three-step coding process. First, the two raters coded 100 definitions together, refining the descriptors of the existing categories and considering emerging codes. This first step served to ensure sensitivity towards the codes, to discuss any ambiguous examples (e.g. deciding whether a definition such as 'publish your dirt on social media', should be coded as *badmouthing* rather than as *criticising*, as both of these codes refer to a negative aspect of oneself being exposed),² and to identify and define additional codes (e.g. *body shaming*). It was decided to code words or phrases with similar meanings (e.g. betrayal and backstabbing), semantically related words (e.g. *anger* and *angry*), and words that appeared as semantic opposites (e.g. *power* and *powerless*) under the same code. When a narrative contained a word or phrase that could plausibly match more than one code (e.g. *backstabbing* could relate to *betrayal*, *badmouthing*, or *criticising*), we discussed the context to determine the most fitting synonym and the most prototypical example of the antecedent. These discussions served to improve and clarify the applications of the descriptors of the codes. The final list of codes, including descriptors and examples, is also reported in Table 1.

In the second step, the two raters independently coded another 100 definitions (Cohen's Kappa ranging from .49 to 1.00). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. In the third step, the raters independently coded the remaining 848 definitions of humiliation (Cohen's Kappa ranging from .57 to 1.00), and discrepancies were again resolved through discussion. Contextual information of each definition was considered before assigning a code. The same procedures were followed to code the narratives of the humiliating situations (answers to the second question: .67 < Cohen's Kappa < 1.00; answers to the third question: .64 < Cohen's Kappa < 1.00). The Supplementary Material provides a detailed report on interrater reliabilities (see Table S1).

To investigate how personal and vicarious humiliation can be experienced *individually* or *collectively*, we further classified the narratives of humiliating situations accordingly. If a response described an incident in which the participant was the *target* of the humiliation and the experienced devaluation referred to their individual self, it was coded as *personal individual humiliation* (e.g. *being in front of the class, blushing, and someone continuously mentioning how red I am*). If a response described an incident in which the participant was the *target* of the humiliation and the experienced devaluation referred to their collective self, it was coded as *personal collective humiliation* (e.g. *when asked should I be promoted based on my skin colour or if I truly deserve a promotion*). If a response described an incident in which the participant *witnessed* the humiliation of someone else, it was either coded as *vicarious individual humiliation* or *vicarious collective humiliation* depending on whether the devaluation referred to the participant's individual self (e.g. *a friend was accused of stealing sweets in a supermarket when we were still young boys*) or collective self (e.g. *when a man refers to a woman in a prerogative way*), respectively. The first and second authors independently classified the responses of 200 participants (Cohen's Kappa > .80). The few disagreements could easily

Table 1. List of categories used in the content analysis of the narratives of the definition of humiliation and the personally and vicariously experienced humiliating situations.

Codes	Descriptors	Example responses
Antecedents	Characteristics of the humiliating situation (i.e. what humiliates?)	
Agentic-related	Perceived devaluation that one is no longer autonomous, competent, or self-efficacy is perceived as being violated	
Aggression	Aggression, violence, molesting, name-calling, harassment*	'[...]and being called by names'
Belittling	Belittling, patronising, being belittled, belittlement	'Humiliation is the act of belittling someone'
Bringing down	Bringing down, offending, slating, degrading*, demeaning*, downgrade*, defeat*, status loss*, devaluing, disgraced*, humbled by someone*, discrediting someone*, undermined*	'Disgraceful event'
Correcting ^a	Correcting, reprimanding, adjusting, scolding*	'Being reprimanded [...]'
Looking like a fool	Looking like a fool/failure, silly, social blunder, stupid*, inadequate*, being made a fool*	'Feeling [...] or stupid, because of something that you have done'
Communal-related	Perceived devaluation that one is not accepted, does not belong, or social worth is jeopardised	
Badmouthing	Badmouthing, gossip, others who talk badly about you	'[...] where someone says bad things about you'
Being put in second place	Disadvantaged, discrimination	'Humiliation is when a person is wrongfully acted against by another in a discriminating way, in a society'
Betrayal	Deceit, deception, trust	'Backstabbing'
Body shaming ^c	Body shape, body odour	'Often my mother would comment, in front of people, on the size of my nose'
Criticising ^a	Criticism, pointing out a negative or hidden* aspect of someone	'Being criticised unconstructively, your character being attacked'
False accusation ^c	Being falsely accused	'Once a colleague was accused of theft and all of us had to be searched'
Losing honour	Losing honour, losing face, reputational damage, integrity*	'Any act done with intention to harm one's integrity'
Negative	Situation/Event is described as negative*, unkind*, mean*, treating bad*	'[...] it's filled with negative actions'
Social exclusion	Ignoring, being thrown out of the group, not belonging, rejection, dehumanisation, disregard, isolation	'When humiliated, you feel like you're not human enough or good enough'
Structural humiliation ^b	Being poor, belonging to a low-status group, economic reference	'When someone from a different background makes a comment or remark about my education and that I come from a poor and bad neighbourhood, I feel humiliated'
Agentic + communion-related	Antecedents are characterised by both agentive and communal references	
Abuse	Abuse, abusing a situation	'[...] being emotional abused'
Bullying	Bullying, being bullied	'[...] which can be a form of bullying [...]'
Extreme events	Intense experience, trauma, rape	'Being assaulted and raped'
Inappropriate	Inappropriate, unseemly, disrespectful, insulting*	'When I'm undermined, disrespected [...]'
Ridiculing	Ridiculing, laughing at someone, mocking	'Jokes made at my expense'
Stereotyping ^b	Stereotyping or generalising	'[...] because of a stereotype based on gender'
Violation of dignity ^b	Violation of human dignity	'Humiliation is when you feel that your human dignity has been violated'
Emotional resolution	Emotional response and resolution process (i.e., how is it to be humiliated?)	
Appraisals	How the antecedents of humiliation are appraised or evaluated	
Cruel	Perpetrator is described as ruthless, sadistic, severe	—
Deliberate	A deliberate act of someone else, on purpose, consciously, intentionally	'To be purposely embarrassed'
Discomfort	Uncomfortable, discomfort	'[...] by making you feel uncomfortable and unsure about yourself or situation'
Feeling small	Feeling small/little/less	'a feeling of being less than or not enough'
Power/powerless	Power, dominance, submissive, powerless, not in control of the situation, perceiving yourself as powerless*	'[...]to make them feel powerful over yourself'

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Codes	Descriptors	Example responses
Roles	There is a perpetrator who is to blame and a victim who is not to blame*, perpetrator, bullies, victim	<i>'I would define it as victimisation [...]</i>
Self-confidence/self-esteem	Feeling inferior, insecure, decreased confidence and/or self-esteem, feeling superior, worthlessness*, losing pride*, vulnerable*, losing self-respect*, self-loathing*, feeling useless*	<i>'Humiliation is when one's self esteem/dignity is being lowed or tarnished [...]</i>
Strength/Weakness	Strong, weak, difference in strength	<i>'When your weakness has been exposed [...]</i>
Unfair	Unfair, not fair, injustice	<i>'Being treated unfairly and exposed in a bad way'</i>
Feelings	Humiliation is described as an emotion, either unique emotion or another emotion	
Anger ^a	Described as anger, furious, fury, outrage, annoyed	<i>'[...] feeling annoyed at same time'</i>
Embarrassment	Described as embarrassing, embarrassed	<i>'Publication of embarrassing information'</i>
Feelings	Humiliation is described as a feeling, emotion, or negative feeling	<i>'[...] a feeling of being less than or not enough'</i>
Losing trust	Losing trust in yourself, fear of trusting others	
Pain	Pain, painful feeling, causing pain, hurting	<i>'Depending on the circumstances this could translate into physical pain'</i>
Sadness ^a	Sad, crying, sorrowful, feeling sad	<i>'You feel angry and sad'</i>
Shame	Described as shame, shameful, mortification	<i>'[...] feelings of shame'</i>
Behavioural tendencies	The narratives describe a behavioural or physiological response	
Avoiding eye contact	Head down, looking away, looking down	<i>'[...] unable to look at another person'</i>
Wanting to leave	Wanting to crawl away, wanting to sink through the floor, wanting to disappear	<i>'[...] where you just want the world to swallow you whole'</i>
Contextual factor	Factors that have an influence on the self-discrepancy evoking messages	
Audience	In other people's presence, group-related, audience, on social media*	<i>'[...] in front of many'</i>

*Subcodes added to the definitions by the authors or derived from [Hartling and Luchetta \(1999\)](#), [Vorster \(2020\)](#), and [Vorster et al. \(2021\)](#).

^aPeripheral codes according to [Elshout et al. \(2017\)](#).

^bCodes derived from other previous research ([Hartling & Luchetta, 1999](#); [Vorster, 2020](#); [Vorster et al., 2021](#)).

^cCodes that emerged from the data. Codes in *italic* appeared less than five times in all three responses and were excluded from further data analyses. Definitions of the codes were taken from [Elshout et al. \(2017\)](#).

be resolved. Therefore, it was decided that the first author would complete the coding of the remaining participants (see [Table 1S](#), Supplementary Material).

To differentiate between the antecedents and the emotional resolution process of humiliation, we classified the codes ([Table 1](#)) into those that capture antecedents and those that capture the emotional resolution process of humiliation. We identified 23 codes as antecedents as they communicate a violation in terms of how people want to be treated, how they define their position or statuses, how they outline their social contexts, and how they describe their knowledge and competencies ([Vorster, 2020](#)). Codes that capture appraisals of humiliation (e.g. unjust), feelings (e.g. anger), and behavioural tendencies (e.g. to approach) were classified as featuring the emotional resolution process. In addition, the audience was coded as a contextual factor. The classification of the codes is also reported in [Table 1](#).

To clarify our understanding of how humiliating situations relate to fundamental content dimensions ([Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#)), we classified the codes capturing the antecedents of humiliation as either referring to agency or communion, or both. Codes that indicate devaluation of the humiliated person's autonomy, competence, or self-efficacy were classified as *agency-related* antecedents. Conversely, codes that indicate devaluation of their sense of belonging,

acceptance or social worth were classified as *communion-related* antecedents. The three authors of this paper independently coded the 23 codes capturing antecedents. The Fleiss' Kappa demonstrated good overall agreement for antecedents capturing *agency* (Kappa = .65) and moderate agreement for antecedents capturing *communion* (Kappa = .55). Through discussion, we also agreed that some antecedents capture both dimensions. For instance, 'bullying' or 'abuse' refer to a simultaneous devaluation of both autonomy/competence and social acceptance/belonging. In contrast, 'aggression' was categorised as agency-related, as it primarily conveys a threat to the target's autonomy or competence, without necessarily implying a lack of acceptance or belonging. The final classification of antecedents capturing agency- or communion-related, or both agency- and communion-related antecedents, is also reported in [Table 1](#).

Results

In total, 2635 responses were analysed. Of those 350 responses were not coded at all as they were either copied from textbook sources (e.g. definitions of humiliation), fell outside the coding frame, or presented statements that were nonsensical (e.g. 'time consuming'), and were

Table 2. Frequencies of codes for the definitions of humiliation, as well as personally and vicariously humiliating situations.

	Definition of humiliation	Personally humiliating situations	Vicariously humiliating situations
Number of responses	1048	824	765
Number of allocated codes	2054	1320	955
Average number of codes per response	2	1.6	1.24

	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Responses containing antecedents	556	53	712	86	549	72
Responses containing emotional resolutions	772	74	89	11	119	16
Responses <i>only</i> containing antecedents (no emotional resolution)	222	21	637	77	451	59
Responses <i>only</i> containing emotional resolution(s) (no antecedents)	438 ³	42	14	2	21	3
Responses containing <i>both</i> antecedents and emotional resolution(s)	334	32	75	9	98	13
Responses not coded	47	4	91	11	174	23

	Definition of humiliation		Personally humiliating situations		Vicariously humiliating situations		Total of personally and vicariously humiliating situations	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Agency only	344	50.4	434	50	270	39	704	45
Communal only	131	19.2	281	32	265	38	546	35
Agency and communal	208	30.4	157	18	176	23	333	20
Total antecedents	683	100	872	100	711	100	1583	100
<i>Contextual factor</i>								
Audience	247	12	342	26	95	10	437	19

consequently not included in subsequent analyses (see Table 2). Codes were allocated 4353 times. On average, the number of codes assigned per response was 2.0 for the definition of humiliation, 1.6 for the recalls of humiliating situations (answers to the second question), and 1.2 for the recalls of vicariously humiliating situations (answers to the third question). The results of the content analysis are reported in Table 2.

Definitions of humiliation

First, we examined whether participants defined humiliation as an event by referring to the antecedents of humiliation (i.e. *what* humiliates?) or instead as an emotional resolution process guided by how the antecedent is appraised and felt and which behavioural tendencies are evoked (Table 2). The results based on the definition and the code levels suggest that participants referred to both the devaluation of the self (i.e. antecedents) and the emotional resolution process when defining humiliation. For instance, out of a total of 1001 coded definitions, more than half of these definitions (53%) referred to the antecedents, while about three-quarters (74%) referred to humiliation as an emotional resolution process. Of all coded definitions, 334 (32%) contained both antecedents and emotional resolutions. Interestingly, definitions that *only* contained antecedents (21%) were outnumbered by definitions that *only* contained emotional resolutions (42%), $\chi^2 = 112.8$, $p < .001$.

Whereas the previous analysis focused on the definition level (i.e. how often each definition was coded with a certain code), we also analysed the results on the code level (i.e. how often each code was used). The results revealed

that out of all the allocated codes for the definition of humiliation ($n = 2054$), 33% referred to antecedents, whereas a greater proportion (55%) referred to emotional resolutions (see Table 2S, Supplementary Material). Of the categories describing antecedents, 50.4% captured *agency-related* antecedents, such as looking like a fool or being brought down, followed by *agency and communion-related* antecedents, such as inappropriate and violation of dignity, and *communion-related* antecedents, such as social exclusion and criticism (see Table 2). Participants did not attribute any primacy to communion-related compared to agency-related content when defining humiliation. In fact, agency-related antecedents were mentioned more frequently.

More than half of the codes describing emotional resolutions (68%) captured feelings (e.g. embarrassment and shame), followed by appraisals (e.g. self-esteem), while behavioural responses did not play a significant role in defining humiliation (see Table 2). The presence of an audience was also considered part of the humiliating situation ($n = 247$, 12%), confirming that some – but not all – indeed perceive humiliation as a three-way interaction between a humiliator, the target and an audience (Klein, 1991). Overall, these findings suggest that when people are asked to define humiliation, they consider both the characteristics of the humiliating situation (i.e. the antecedents) and emotional resolutions, along with contextual factors such as the presence of an *audience*.

Experiences of humiliation

To explore the effects of experienced humiliation on the different aspects of the self, we examined whether the

Table 3. Frequencies of agency- or communion-related antecedents in personally and vicariously humiliating situations.

	Personally humiliating situations				Vicariously humiliating situations			
	Individual level personal humiliation		Collective level personal humiliation		Individual level vicarious humiliation		Collective level vicarious humiliation	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Number of responses	679		41		249		336	
Antecedents	862 ⁶				691 ⁷			
<i>Total antecedents</i>	812	66	50	76	304	85	387	82
Agency only	422	52	7	14	137	45	116	30
Communal only	244	30	33	66	107	35	156	40
Agency and communal	146	18	10	20	60	20	115	30
<i>Total antecedents</i>	812	100	50	100	304	100	387	100
<i>Total emotional resolutions</i>	100	8	2	3	56	15	87	18
Appraisals	32	32	1	50	20	36	26	30
Emotions	63	63	—	—	34	60	57	65
Behavioural tendencies	5	5	1	50	2	4	4	5
<i>Total emotional resolutions</i>	100	100	2	100	56	100	87	100
<i>Contextual factor</i>								
Audience	325	26	14	21	72	17	2	1

devaluations referred to the *individual* self or *collective* self and whether that varied between personally or vicariously humiliating situations. To explore these questions, we studied participants' narratives describing a situation that made *them feel* humiliated ($n = 824$) and participants' narratives describing a situation where *they witnessed* the humiliation of another person(s) ($n = 765$). Only 11 participants described a situation where they witnessed the humiliation of another person when they described a situation that made *them feel* humiliated (second question). Therefore, we regarded the rest of the responses to this question as personal humiliation.⁴ The results are outlined in Table 3.⁵ The results show that responses capturing personal humiliation (i.e. where the participant described a situation in which they were directly targeted) referred much more often (*McNemar* $\chi^2 = 563.57$, $p < .001$) to a devaluation of the individual self ($n = 679$; 96%) than to a devaluation of the collective self ($n = 41$; 4%). In contrast, responses capturing vicarious humiliation (i.e. where the participant described a situation in which someone else was targeted) referred slightly more often (*McNemar* $\chi^2 = 9.63$, $p = .002$) to a devaluation of the collective self ($n = 330$, 57%) than to a devaluation of the individual self ($n = 249$, 43%).

We further explored whether the antecedents of the personally and vicariously humiliating experiences cluster on the fundamental content dimension of communion and/or agency. The results, as presented in Table 2, indicate that overall, participants mentioned agency-related antecedents more frequently than communion-related antecedents (45% vs. 35%), while 20% referred to antecedents that capture both the agency and communion dimensions. When recalling personal humiliating events, participants referred significantly more often to agency-related antecedents (50%) than to communion-related antecedents (32%) ($Z_{\text{Wilcoxon}} = 5.77$, $p < .001$). In contrast, when recalling

vicariously humiliating situations, participants reported communion-related antecedents (38%) and agency-related antecedents (39%) equally often ($Z_{\text{Wilcoxon}} = 0.25$, $p = .81$). To sum up, no evidence was found that communion-related antecedents were overall more relevant than agency-related antecedents. The proportion of agency- versus communion-related antecedents did, however, depend on whether participants recalled humiliating situations from the perspective of the *acting self* (personal humiliation) or the perspective of some *observing others* (vicarious humiliation).

In addition to the main results of our study, we discovered some noteworthy findings. First, *features of humiliation* considered central in previous research (such as losing trust, cruel, discomfort, and roles; see Elshout et al., 2017) were not found at all or were only mentioned a few times in participants' narratives (see Table 2S, Supplementary Material). On the other hand, features previously deemed *peripheral* (such as correcting and criticising) appeared more frequently and were regarded as relatively central in the present study. Additionally, our research revealed features of humiliation that were not identified by Elshout et al. (2017), such as body shaming, false accusations, structural humiliation, and stereotyping. These results imply that the importance of certain content-related humiliation features may vary depending on the context and may not have universal centrality and peripherality (see Table 2S, Supplementary Material).

Secondly, our analysis of the *definition* of humiliation revealed that the agency-related antecedents of losing status (i.e. *bringing down*, $n = 196$, 28.7%), appraising the antecedent as lowering of one's *self-esteem/self-confidence* ($n = 197$, 58.8%), and the feelings of *embarrassment* ($n = 431$, 55.3%), and *shame* ($n = 212$, 27.2%) were most prevalent (detailed in Table 2S, see Supplementary Material). When participants *recalled* a humiliating situation, the

agency-related antecedent of being made inadequate (i.e. *looking like a fool*) played an important role in both types of responses, with greater frequency in personally humiliating recollections ($n = 283$; 32.5%) compared to vicarious humiliation ($n = 84$, 11.8%). Interestingly, acts of *aggression* were more frequent in recollections of vicariously humiliating situations ($n = 91$; 12.8%) than in recollections of personally humiliating situations ($n = 35$; 4%).

When defining humiliation, the contextual factor of the *audience* was most frequently associated with either an antecedent ($n = 146$ narratives) or an emotional resolution code ($n = 176$). Only four definitions were coded with audience alone (e.g. 'It is when someone humiliates you in front of others'). Thus, the presence of an audience is not perceived as the only defining feature of humiliation but rather as a contextual ingredient in the process of humiliation. Personal humiliation situations were characterised by the presence of an audience far more often ($n = 342$; 26%) than vicarious humiliation situations ($n = 95$; 10%), which is not surprising as people recalling the humiliation of others somehow constitute an audience themselves during a vicariously humiliating interaction so that references to an audience are less informative and may not be considered necessary.

Discussion

Extensive research on humiliation conducted across various disciplines has yielded diverse conceptualisations of humiliation, significantly advancing our understanding of this phenomenon. The present paper sought to contribute to these efforts and to deepen our understanding of humiliation by asking a large sample of South African students to provide a definition of humiliation and to report personally and vicariously humiliating situations they have experienced. We content analysed their responses using categories taken from the existing literature as well as new categories generated bottom-up when necessary. In the more abstract secondary analyses, we focussed on the distinctions of *humiliating situations* vs. *emotional resolution process*, *personal* vs. *vicarious* experiences, *individual* vs. *collective* self-concepts, and *agentive* vs. *communal* self-aspects, that is, whether the devaluation is directed to achievements and abilities or social relationships and status.

Our study's findings support the notion of humiliation as a *complex* phenomenon (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991; Leidner et al., 2012) by showing that participants indeed define humiliation as encompassing both an interactive event and an emotional resolution process, with a slight preference for perceiving it as an emotional response. The study also revealed that devaluations impacted different parts of the self, depending on perspective. Specifically, in personally humiliating situations, the devaluations primarily affected the *individual* self, whereas in vicariously humiliating situations, they tended to affect both the *individual self* and the *collective self* more or less equally often. One explanation for this result could be that the variability of observed humiliating situations is larger than that of personally experienced humiliating situations, and, thus, various aspects of identity can be activated and subsequently affected. Another explanation could be based

on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), namely that collective self-aspects are shared with other ingroup members and, therefore, are privileged sources of vicarious experiences.

Moreover, the study's findings align with the dual perspective model of agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014), although not entirely. In contrast to findings in other domains (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, Study 1), references to agency-related antecedents outnumbered those to communion-related antecedents, both in defining humiliation and recalling personally humiliating situations. However, when recalling vicariously humiliating situations, communion-related and agency-related antecedents held equal relevance. This difference between humiliation from the self-perspective and observer perspective aligns more closely with the predictions of the dual model of communion and agency, which suggests that communion-related features are relatively more pertinent when the focus is on others rather than oneself (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014).

The present study also contributes to previous research by providing further evidence regarding the significance of the presence of an audience in the experience of humiliation (e.g. Klein, 1991; Mann et al., 2017; Otten et al., 2017). However, the results support the notion that an audience is not always necessary for the experience of humiliation and that it is best regarded as a contextual factor that may or may not validate and, thus, intensify the experience of humiliation.

Probably one of the most important findings of this study is also the most obvious: Even in our relatively homogeneous sample of South African students, we encountered a vast variety of definitions, as well as reported humiliating situations and emotional responses. For instance, while it is true that agency-related antecedents were prevalent in both the definition and experience of humiliation, the concretely reported antecedents varied in their context-specific foci. Definitions of humiliation mainly referred to status loss, whereas the recollections of personally and vicariously humiliating situations were dominated by antecedents of being inadequate and the target of aggression, respectively. Moreover, some antecedents of humiliation that were identified in this study were previously not considered in the literature, while some previously identified central antecedents were less important, and some previously identified peripheral antecedents were more important than in prior studies (Elshout et al., 2017; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). These results suggest that the meaning and the experiences of humiliation also vary depending on the societal and cultural context in which they occur. This variety corresponds to the already mentioned diversity of conceptualisations of humiliation that can be found in the literature.

Concluding proposal: Humiliation as self-discrepancy

How can such a variety be conceptually captured without considering humiliation as a mere umbrella term for different phenomena? So far, we have demonstrated in our analyses that understanding humiliation as an experience

that (a) comprises a humiliating situation and an emotional resolution process, (b) can be experienced personally or vicariously, and (c) depends on the affected self-aspect, offers a promising framework for understanding this complex psychological phenomenon. To go a step further towards a conceptualisation that is versatile enough to allow for context dependency, as it was present in previous research, we propose an additional theoretical perspective on humiliation that is based on self-discrepancy theory. From that perspective, humiliation signals a discrepancy between an individual's *own* self-concept (i.e. how one sees oneself) and the *meta*-self-concept that is conveyed by the way one is treated or characterised by significant other(s). Conceptualising humiliation as self-concept discrepancy acknowledges that self-representations consist of distinct forms of the self, such as actual versus ideal/ought (Higgins, 1987), actual versus possible (Oyserman & James, 2011), or personal versus social (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Previous theoretical approaches in social psychology examined specific discrepancies between self-domains that elicit specific and predictable emotional responses. For instance, self-discrepancy theory predicts that discrepancies between the actual and the ideal *self* elicit dejected-related emotional responses such as disappointment, sadness, shame, or embarrassment, whereas discrepancies between the actual and ought *self* elicit agitation-related emotional responses such as fear or guilt (Higgins, 1987, p. 322). Furthermore, self-discrepancy theory proposes that one's *actual* self-concept (i.e. the attributes that a person believes to *possess*) is not only shaped by how people view themselves but also how they perceive others as viewing them (Higgins, 1987). Thus, the actual self is profoundly shaped by others' reactions (Higgins, 1987, p. 321). Although not explored by self-discrepancy theory so far, a discrepancy between a person's *actual/own* self-concept (i.e. how a person views themselves) and a person's *actual/other* (meta)self-concept (i.e. what a person believes how others view them) is perfectly possible and is precisely what encompasses the experience of humiliation.

Conceptualising humiliation as the experience and emotional processing of the mentioned self-discrepancy, which requires the (imagined or actual) presence of significant others, allows to capture both the situation and the emotional resolution process. Unlike previous approaches focussing on specific dimensions (e.g. status, power, worth), humiliation as self-discrepancy is compatible with various contexts while remaining concrete enough to generate testable hypotheses. While our proposal has not been directly tested in the current research, we propose that future studies investigate this conceptualisation and the hypotheses that can be derived from it to enhance our understanding of psychological humiliation in its complex and multifaceted nature.

One such hypothesis concerns the role of an audience. An audience can create a situational context where humiliation is experienced not because of the humiliator's significance, but because of the audience's significance. The audience's (in)action can socially validate the humiliating experience. For example, a speaker lacking expertise may fail to recognise one's academic merits. This devaluation may not lead to humiliation without social validation (the

humiliator does not qualify as a significant self-relevant other). However, it could become humiliating if a knowledgeable audience witnesses the non-recognition and does not correct it. Thus, we propose that the audience can be a manifestation of the significance of the other(s) who hold self-discrepant views of the self. Future studies might explore whether the number of devaluing sources, the characteristics of the relation with the humiliator (such as status relations and/or trust between the humiliator and humiliated), or the ingroup/outgroup relations and relative power of an audience impact the experience of humiliation.

Other hypotheses might focus on the emotional resolution process. Self-discrepancy is aversive, and various resolution processes may be employed to alleviate it. Humiliation as self-discrepancy implies distinctions between the actual self as perceived by oneself, the actual self as perceived by others, and the judgement or message that creates discrepancy. The humiliator serves as a source of this judgement. Future studies might explore whether different emotional and behavioural responses are elicited depending on where attention is focused. For instance, attention focused on social judgement might trigger emotions such as anger or contempt toward the humiliator, while attention focused on the source of social validation (the significant other) might trigger emotions such as fear of exclusion, for instance, towards the audience. Attention focused on the affected self-concept, for instance, if the devaluation is internalised (Fernández et al., 2015, 2018, 2022, 2023), might trigger self-awareness and/or self-directed emotions such as shame or guilt, whereas attention focused on the devaluation itself, might trigger epistemic emotions such as surprise, disgust or abhorrence. These emotional and behavioural responses may motivate changes in one's social relations, self-concept, or personal view of the social world. However, in our approach, they can all be understood as aiming to eliminate or attenuate the experienced self-discrepancy.

The proposed conceptualisation of humiliation as self-concept discrepancy might also offer the potential for predicting factors contributing to an individual's susceptibility to humiliation, which can be tested in future research. For example, individuals with an inflated self-concept, either on a personal or group level (e.g. collective narcissism; see Golec de Zavala & Lantos, 2020), are more likely to experience humiliation. Furthermore, investigating individuals' inclination toward humiliation based on the significance of the domains in which self-discrepancy occurs can be explored in future studies. For instance, previous research has emphasised the moderating role of domain centrality in the relationship between actual-ideal and actual-ought discrepancies and emotions (e.g. Boldero & Francis, 2000). By conceptualising humiliation as a psychological self-discrepancy between the actual/own and actual/other self-concepts, we provide a framework for exploring how social identity constructions and norms contribute to the occurrence of incompatibilities. For instance, future research could investigate how variations in how much people's self-worth depends on their social roles affect emotional resolution processes aimed at alleviating the experienced incompatibility (Aslani et al., 2016). It is possible to hypothesise that people experience and resolve

psychological humiliation differently depending on whether their self-worth is embedded in dignity cultures, where self-worth is not bestowed by others but rather intrinsic, or in face and honour cultures, where self-worth is heavily reliant on others and encompasses personal and familial reputation.

Moreover, conceptualising humiliation as a self-concept discrepancy allows us to consider it not only as a *devaluing* experience (i.e. a negative self-discrepancy) but also as an experience of *overvaluation*, where one perceives oneself as being judged as more competent or worthy than one actually is (i.e. a positive self-discrepancy). While including ‘positive’ incompatibilities in the concept of humiliation might seem counterintuitive and premature, it raises an intriguing empirical question: Can such positive self-discrepancies also be experienced as aversive, and if so, are their emotional consequences similar to the negative self-discrepancies? Artistic representations offer some hints. For instance, in Orson Welles’ film *Citizen Kane*, the character of Susan exemplifies this notion. Subjected to her husband’s grandiose illusions about her potential as an opera singer, Susan, who is acutely aware of her vocal limitations, experiences increasing psychological distress. The pressure to perform before audiences despite her lack of talent culminates in a suicide attempt, from which she survives, though she never forgives her husband for his refusal to acknowledge her true self. This narrative captures the humiliation inherent in being held to an idealised standard that one knows they cannot meet. Psychological research also provides insights. For instance, research on the impostor phenomenon supports the idea that positive self-discrepancies can be experienced as deeply aversive. Early conceptualisations of the impostor phenomenon, such as that of Clance (1985), suggest that individuals who are perceived as highly competent but internalise a fear of exposure are vulnerable to intense feelings of shame and humiliation. Future research should systematically study humiliation experienced not only from being seen as ‘less than’ but also from being perceived as ‘more than’ one believes oneself to be.

Finally, conceptualising humiliation as a self-concept discrepancy may also advance research into the motives behind, and crucially, the strategies employed by, both the humiliator and the audience – a topic of increasing relevance in the context of social and public shaming (e.g. Frye, 2022; Malanowski et al., 2024), particularly on social media platforms. Such insights into the motives and strategies used to fabricate discrepancies in people’s self-concepts, with the aim of publicly shaming them, could provide important information for developing interventions to prevent the harmful consequences of humiliation in both online and offline environments.

Overall, we believe our research indicates that psychological science is on a promising path, as it shows that recently suggested conceptual developments capture, to a large extent, people’s lived experiences. However, it also invites debate, such as whether internalisation, as suggested by Fernández and colleagues (2015, 2018, 2022, 2023) or self-discrepancy (as suggested by us) should be considered as essential constituents or rather special cases of the humiliation experience. More research is necessary in

different cultural contexts to determine what is context-dependent and what is universal when talking about humiliation.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Although the instruction did not specify the target of humiliation (personal or vicarious), all participants (except for eleven) described a humiliating situation in which they were personally targeted.
2. The narrative used in this example was coded as *badmouthing* as the two coders decided that being talked about on social media without the person’s consent is similar to talking about someone ‘behind their backs’. Responses were coded with *criticising* when a negative aspect is exposed in the presence of the humiliated and others.
3. The ‘Total antecedents’ refer to the code level – the total number of times antecedent codes appear across all responses. For example, in the case of agency, the instances in which agency-related antecedent codes were assigned were summed, regardless of how many appeared in a single response.
4. The responses of these 11 participants were not included in the subsequent analysis related to personal humiliation.
5. Because we asked participants to recall *situations*, responses capturing the antecedents were unsurprisingly more frequent than responses containing emotional resolutions in the recalls of personally and vicariously humiliating situations when compared to the definitions of humiliation.
6. There were 13 responses that could not be classified as either individual or collective vicarious humiliation as either the level of humiliation could not be identified, or the responses described a vicariously humiliating situation and not a personally humiliating situation – yet each of these 13 responses was coded with antecedent codes and/or emotional resolution codes (e.g. ‘failure’ – coded with *looking like a fool*).
7. There were six responses that could not be classified as either individual or collective vicarious humiliation as the level of humiliation could not be identified, yet each of these responses

was coded with antecedent codes and/or emotional resolution codes (e.g. 'being overweight' – coded with *body shaming*).

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