

Humiliation and International Conflict

Michael Masterson

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Contact Information:

Email: lmichaelmasterson@gmail.com

Website: michaelrmasterson.com

Abstract

Politicians and scholars often link humiliation to decisions to initiate and escalate international military conflict. Can emotions, like humiliation, actually affect international bargaining? If so, through what mechanisms does humiliation operate? Drawing on studies in neuroscience and experimental psychology, this paper offers two new mechanisms through which humiliation may influence conflict preferences: by decreasing sensitivity to the cost of conflict, and by increasing the salience of potential status loss. This change in preferences shrinks the bargaining range, increasing the probability of bargaining breakdown. I test this theory using both a survey and a lab experiment that exploit the carryover effects of humiliation on unrelated decisions to isolate its effects on conflict preferences. The results provide the first experimental evidence that humiliation increases individuals' preferences for conflict and that humiliation operates through the cost rather than the status mechanism.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, the Chinese government launched the Patriotic Education Campaign to spread the narrative that China had a history of greatness but was humiliated by foreign powers. Scholars have suggested this has increased the Chinese government's tendency to escalate international disputes [10]. Further, scholars point to "humiliation" as a motivation for Russia's annexation of Crimea [6]. Are public statements of humiliation merely bargaining bluster [12], or can humiliation actually increase willingness to fight? This matters because if a state's cost of war goes down, then the bargaining range shrinks, making conflict more likely [2].

Humiliation and International Conflict

Previous theories have linked humiliation to conflict [10, 1]. I build on this work by separating humiliation as an emotion from *events* that are experienced as humiliating. Distinguishing humiliation as an emotion from events that may cause it allows theorization of the mechanisms through which humiliation influences conflict preferences.

Neuroscience and experimental psychology help build the case that humiliation influences conflict preferences. First, humiliation is an intense emotion [9]. This is important because more intense emotions are more likely to influence motivations [4].

Secondly, humiliation is an approach emotion [9]. Approach emotions make individuals more likely to confront the situation they are facing rather than withdraw. In the case of international threat, approach emotions should increase the probability of a fight (intervene) rather than a flight (buck-passing) reaction.

Third, unlike similar emotions, such as shame, humiliation is associated with the perception of a hostile perpetrator [3]. Because emotions direct attention to actions that remedy the emotional concern at stake, humiliation motivates action against perceived perpetrators. Further, this hostility is not limited to perceived humiliations but can extend to other actors.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *The emotional state of humiliation increases individuals' preferences for conflict.*

Humiliation should increase individuals' preferences for conflict by making them less sensitive to the cost of conflict. Emotions have a corresponding action readiness that prepares the person experiencing them to achieve a particular aim [4]. These action tendencies are "reward insensitive", meaning that individuals attend less to the cost and benefits of emotionally driven actions [4]. Further, emotions interfere with the processing of information that is antithetical to their action tendency [4]. The especially intense cognitive demands humiliation poses make it particularly likely to interfere [9]. Because humiliation with a strong injustice appraisal leads to a hostile approach action tendency, individuals experiencing humiliation may discount the costs of taking hostile actions or simply be less able to integrate this information into their decision process.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a). *Decreased sensitivity to the costs of conflict is a mechanism through which the emotional state of humiliation increases individuals' preferences for conflict.*

The second candidate mechanism is that humiliation increases attentiveness to the possibility that status could be lost. People in humiliated states express heightened fears of future humiliations [5]. Further, status loss is one of the most frequent causes of humiliation [9], so humiliated individuals should be particularly attentive to the possibility of status loss. Because emotions motivate the resolution of the emotional concern that gave rise to them and because humiliation is an approach response that makes fight rather than flight reactions more likely, individuals are more likely to turn to conflict to prevent this status loss.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b). *The increased salience of future status loss is a mechanism through which the emotional state of humiliation increases individuals' preferences for conflict.*

Survey Experiment

An experiment is necessary to test the effect of humiliation on conflict preferences. First, observed humiliation in international relations always comes bundled with international events appraised as humiliating as well as cognitive beliefs about these events and the actors involved. It is impossible to tell whether it is the emotion of humiliation or these events and/or beliefs that are driving responses. Second, retrospective accounts of emotional decision making are unreliable [8, 4].

My survey experiment was conducted on 804 adult American respondents recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Following [7], I use autobiographical essay tasks to manipulate emotions and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X) to measure emotions [11]. Respondents read a description of a hypothetical international crisis. I manipulate the cost of US intervention and whether or not US status is at stake. The outcome is respondent support for US intervention.

Figure 1: Survey Experiment Design

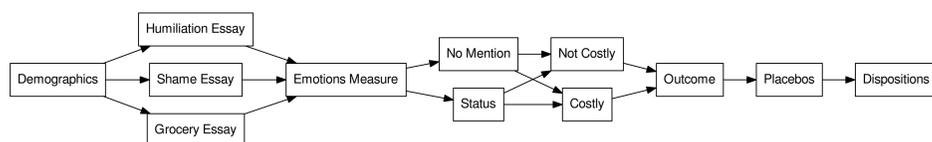


Figure 2: Effect of Essays on Emotions

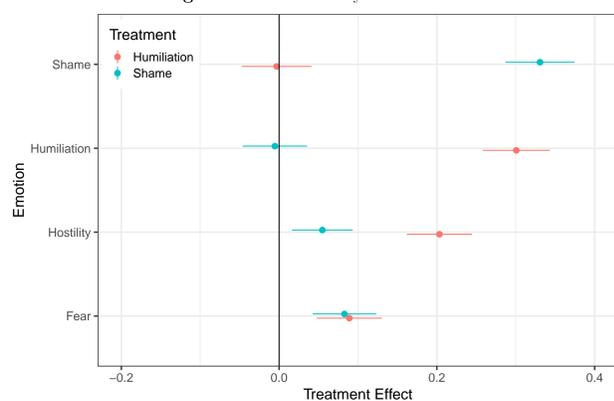


Figure 3: Effect on Intervention Support

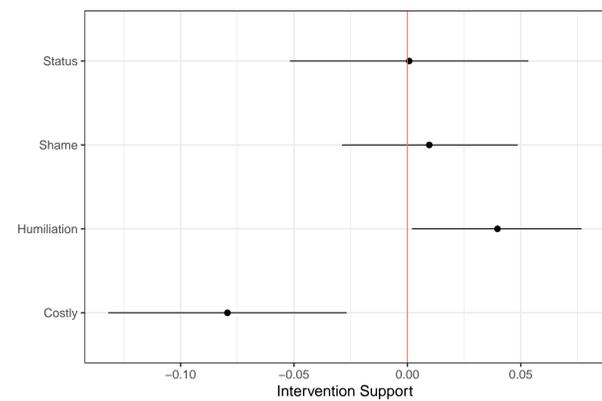


Figure 4: Effect on Intervention Support across Cost

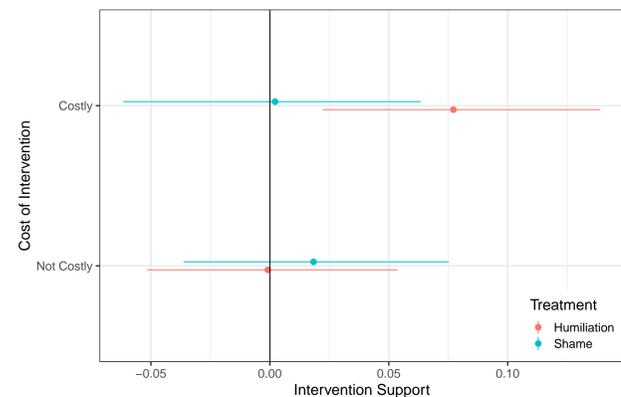
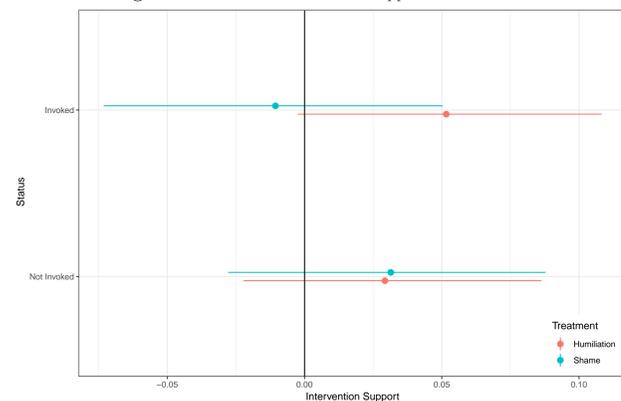


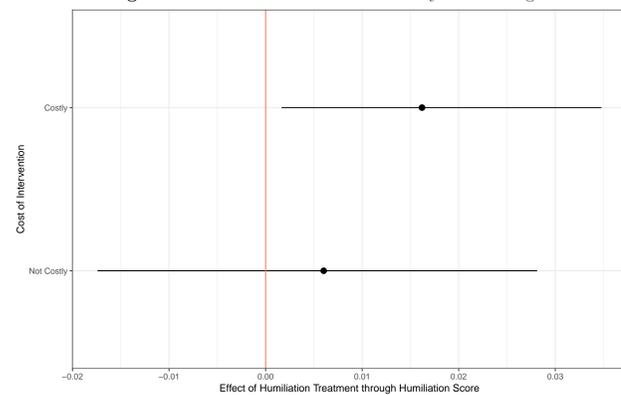
Figure 5: Effect on Intervention Support across Status



Lab Experiment

A critic could argue that if faced with actual cost, respondents would exert more effort to control their emotions and make a less costly decision. To address this, I introduce the humiliation and control essay treatments into a laboratory experiment where respondents play an incentivized game with a monetary cost to war. I recruited 196 participants from the University of Wisconsin–Madison BRITE Lab participant pool. In addition to the emotional essay conditions (humiliation and control), I assign the cost of war to be either high or low, so it is a 2×2 factorial experiment. A key property of the incentivized game is that it switches between a stag hunt and a prisoner's dilemma based on the cost of war. This allows me to assess whether players successfully adapt their behavior to the changing cost of war.

Figure 6: Effect of Humiliation Probability of Attacking



Conclusions

- The emotion of humiliation increases individual preferences for conflict.
- The mechanism through which humiliation increases individual preferences for conflict is decreasing their sensitivity to the cost of conflict.

References

- [1] Joslyn Barnhart. Humiliation and third-party aggression. *World Politics*, 69(3):532–568, 2017.
- [2] James D. Fearon. Rationalist Explanations for War. *International Organization*, 43(3):379–414, 1995.
- [3] Saulo Fernández, Eran Halperin, Elena Gaviria, Rut Agudo, and Tamar Saguy. Understanding the role of the perpetrator in triggering humiliation: The effects of hostility and status. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 76:1–11, May 2018.
- [4] Nico H. Frijda. *The laws of emotion*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, N.J., 2007. OCLC: ocm71354825.
- [5] Linda M. Hartling and Tracy Luchetta. Humiliation: Assessing the impact of derision, degradation, and debasement. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 19(4):259–278, 1999.
- [6] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko. Russia says no: Power, status, and emotions in foreign policy. *Communist and post-communist studies*, 47(3):269–279, 2014.
- [7] C Daniel Myers and Dustin Tingley. The influence of emotion on trust. *Political Analysis*, 24(4):492–500, 2016.
- [8] Richard E Nisbett and Timothy D Wilson. Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological review*, 84(3):231, 1977.
- [9] Marte Otten and Kai J. Jonas. Humiliation as an intense emotional experience: Evidence from the electro-encephalogram. *Social Neuroscience*, 9(1):23–35, January 2014.
- [10] Zheng Wang. *Never forget national humiliation: historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations*. Contemporary Asia in the world. Columbia University Press, New York, 2012.
- [11] David Watson and Lee Anna Clark. *The PANAS-X: Manual for the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule - Expanded Form*. The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository, August 1999.
- [12] Jessica Chen Weiss. *Powerful patriots: nationalist protest in China's foreign relations*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2014.