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ABSTRACT

Humiliation is a strong negative emotion that arises when a person is forced to internalize an unjust devaluation of the self. Based on theory positing agency as a key factor for self-esteem, we conducted three experiments to investigate whether enhancing the agentic capacity of people facing humiliating situations down-regulated the intensity of the negative emotional experience they felt. More precisely, we tested whether agency, understood as an active behavioral response given by the victims to the perpetrators in potentially humiliating situations, reduced the extent to which the victims internalized a devaluation of the self in those situations and the level of humiliation that they felt. To manipulate agency, we used both an imagined scenario and a realistic setting in which students received a negative evaluation regarding their academic performance and were then encouraged to imagine (Experiment 1) or to actually respond versus not respond to the evaluator (Experiments 2 and 3). In the last two experiments, we additionally manipulated the hostile tone used by the evaluator, resulting in an agency (high vs. low) × hostility (high vs. low) between-subjects design. In all the experiments, we measured the two key appraisals of humiliation (i.e., internalization and injustice), humiliation, shame, and anger. Across the experiments, agency significantly reduced humiliation, and this effect was mediated by the empowering effect that agency had in reducing internalization. Moreover, the results showed that agency affected humiliation in particular, more than shame or anger.

Humiliation is a particularly strong aversive self-conscious emotion that arises when a person is unfairly demeaned, degraded, or put down (Elshout, Nelissen, & van Beest, 2017; Fernández, Saguy, & Halperin, 2015; Lindner, 2006; McCauley, 2017; Otten & Jonas, 2014). The experience of humiliation has been associated with particularly negative outcomes for the psychological well-being of the victims, such as major depression, severe anxiety, or suicidal tendencies (Hartling & Lindner, 2016; Klein, 1991; Torres & Bergner, 2012). Not in vain, humiliation has been labeled the “nuclear bomb of emotions” (Lindner, 2006, p. xiii) to emphasize its extreme destructive outcomes. Identifying key factors that may attenuate the strength of this emotional experience among victims of humiliating actions is therefore a major research objective with important practical implications for potential intervention.

The goal of the current research was to investigate one specific process that we posit plays a particularly important role in protecting victims of humiliating situations from the aversive emotional experience

it entails, namely: *agency*, understood as the capacity of the victim to respond in an active form to the perpetrator. Drawing on research positing agency as a key factor for self-esteem (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke, Baryla, Parzuchowski, Szymkow, & Abele, 2011), we propose that victims' *agentic* responses to (potentially) humiliating incidents can protect them from the negative emotional experience of humiliation.

We diverge in our approach from the traditional work on humiliation, which has considered the agentic response (or the lack of it) exclusively as an *outcome* of the humiliating dynamic (see, for instance, Lindner, 2007, for a work that relates humiliation to extreme violent behavior or Ginges & Atran, 2008, for a work about inaction as a consequence of humiliation). Contrasting with this dominant perspective, we propose that the type of response that the victim displays toward the perpetrator can be understood, not only as an outcome, but also as an important factor that determines the emotional experience

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itself.

In this regard, the theoretical framework that best suits our proposal is the *process model of emotion regulation* (Gross, 2014), and the more basal model on which the former settles, namely: the *modal model of emotion* (Barrett, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007). According to this theoretical body of work, the emotional experience should be understood as a dynamic process that begins with the emotion-inducing event (i.e., the potentially humiliating situation), continues with attentional processes (i.e., whether the target focuses or not on the situation), followed by the evaluation that the target does of the situation (i.e., the cognitive appraisal processes), which, in turn, determines the target's response (i.e., the experiential, behavioral, and physiological response that characterizes emotion). Most relevant to our current proposition, according to the abovementioned frameworks, the emotional process does not necessarily end with the initial emotional response, but it may continue during seconds or even minutes in a sort of cybernetic dynamical cyclic process. This is especially true if the initial emotional response induces subsequent changes in any of the previously mentioned aspects of the process. When these changes are directed to serve a particular goal, either of the individual or of others, they can be viewed as emotion regulation processes (Gross, 2007). In this sense, for instance, the initial response given by the target, coupled with particular goals, could modify the appraisal of the self s/he made in the first place, leading to a re-appraisal process and a modified emotional experience (Gross, 2014).

Based on this theoretical perspective, we posit in the case of humiliation that, if by any means (e.g., external intervention), the victim's agentic response to the perpetrator is enhanced, this agentic response would reduce the level of humiliation initially experienced by the victim. This would be so because responding agenticly in a situation that triggers humiliation would block, in a subsequent re-appraisal phase of the emotional experience, the devaluation of the self that underlies humiliation, reducing, in turn, the intensity of the emotional experience. In this regard, our proposal could be understood as an emotion regulation process that mixes two types of strategies (see Gross, 1998, 2014): one would be *response modulation*, as we put forward that the immediate behavioral response of victims in a humiliating situation could down-regulate the emotional experience of humiliation; the other strategy would be *cognitive change*, as we suggest that the effect of the agentic response down-regulating humiliation comes indirectly via a more positive re-appraisal of the self as a result of the agentic response.

1. The cognitive–emotional experience of humiliation

Recent research on humiliation (see Fernández et al., 2015, 2018, 2021) has repeatedly found that two basic cognitive appraisals underlie this emotion, namely the internalization of the devaluation of the self, which is often hostilely imposed by a perpetrator and implies a loss of the victim's self-esteem, and the extent to which the victim assesses this devaluation as unfair. If victims only appraise the unfairness and do not internalize the devaluation, anger tends to be the dominant emotion; if they internalize the devaluation but find it somehow to be legitimate or not particularly unfair, then shame is the dominant emotion.

In this line of research, Fernández and colleagues have further identified contextual variables that moderate the extent to which victims of humiliating situations experience the emotion of humiliation, such as the status of the perpetrator vis-à-vis the victim (Fernández, Halperin, Gaviria, Agudo, & Saguy, 2018), the perpetrator's hostility (Fernández et al., 2018; Fernández, Saguy, Gaviria, Agudo, & Halperin, 2022), or the presence of third-party observers who witness the devaluation (Fernández et al., 2022). However, no previous research has contemplated that the victim's response to the humiliating situation can modify the emotional experience. In the current research, we posit that either preparing the victim to respond agenticly to the perpetrator or actually facilitating such agentic response would indirectly reduce humiliation via the extent to which the victim internalizes a devaluation of the self.

In this regard, our proposal fits well with an understanding of humiliation as a constructed mental category in which the type of response displayed by the target in the humiliating situation is a core information clue that affects the whole experience (see Barrett, 2017). This way of understanding the cognitive–emotional process may have particularly important practical implications in the case of humiliation because, for instance, it could be possible to protect potential victims of bullying from feeling humiliated if they could be trained to respond agenticly; this response, in turn, may have important benefits for their psychological well-being.

2. Agency as a key aspect of self-esteem

Previous research has found that agentic attributes, such as being active, decisive, self-confident, and efficient, are particularly important (more than communal attributes) in determining how we see ourselves, whereas communal attributes, such as being caring and nice to others, are particularly relevant to how we see others and how others see us (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke et al., 2011; Ybarra, Park, Stanik, & Lee, 2012). From an evolutionary perspective, this is because our agentic attributes have been particularly relevant to attaining our goals and to dealing individually with the challenges posed by the environment, whereas communal attributes, both ours and those of others, have been crucial for the way in which others would treat us and therefore also for whether they could help us to deal with the challenges of the environment, which was surely essential for survival in our evolutionary past.

Because of this, the agentic dimension has evolved to become particularly informative for our self-concept and self-esteem in a personal domain, whereas communal attributes are particularly important for how we perceive others in an interpersonal domain (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke et al., 2011) and for our reputation in front of others (Ybarra et al., 2012). In a series of studies, Wojciszke and colleagues found that self-ascribed agency was a stronger predictor of self-esteem than self-ascribed communion, even when the participants believed communal traits to be more important than agentic traits (Wojciszke et al., 2011) and when they belonged to collectivistic, communion-oriented cultures (Wojciszke & Bialobrzeska, 2014).

In a different but also relevant vein, Gray, Gray, and Wegner (2007) found that lay people consider *agency* (the mental capacities that enable us to decide about our own behavior) to be a set of attributes that differentiate humans from animals, as opposed to *experience* (the capacity to feel), which would be common to both. Similar findings were obtained by Formanowicz et al. (2018) in a series of experimental studies in which the participants consistently rated humanness from agency-related but not from communion-related characteristics. From this perspective, perceiving ourselves as mere passive victims of a perpetrator, incapable to respond to another's humiliating act, would make us devalue ourselves as less human, which would foster the experience of humiliation (see also Yang, Jin, He, Fan, & Zhu, 2015).

Based on these previous findings, we hypothesized that, in situations that threaten the self, such as those that are potentially humiliating, the mere fact of responding in an agentic manner to the source of the threat may down-regulate humiliation because the agentic response would protect victims' self-concept and self-esteem, thus making it less likely that they would internalize the devaluation that the perpetrator is imposing on them. Because the internalization appraisal would be impaired, the emotional experience of humiliation would be less likely to occur as well.

3. The relationship between humiliation and powerlessness

In most relevant research, the emotional experience of humiliation has been considered to be an antecedent of the behavior that humiliating acts have been assumed to evoke (e.g., Elison & Harter, 2007; Frijda, 1988; Ginges & Atran, 2008; Leidner, Sheikh, & Ginges, 2012;

Leventhal, 1982; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). In this regard, although humiliation has also been related to approach tendencies (Elison & Harter, 2007; Thomaes, Stegge, Olthof, Bushman, & Nezlek, 2011), it has most commonly been associated with powerlessness, feelings of helplessness, and inaction (Ginges & Atran, 2008; Leidner et al., 2012; Lindner, 2010). However, despite this emphasis on powerlessness as a state related to humiliation, to the best of our knowledge, no previous work has considered lack of agency as an *antecedent* of humiliation or, to put it differently, agency as a suppressor of emotion.

In this respect, Leidner et al. (2012), in one of the few empirical works in which powerlessness has been treated as a dependent variable and humiliation as an independent variable, found that, as expected, perceived powerlessness was significantly stronger in episodes that triggered humiliation and shame than in episodes that triggered anger. Their results therefore concurred with the dominant idea in the literature positing powerlessness as a key characteristic of humiliation. However, given the design of this study, it was not possible to conclude whether powerlessness was a key characteristic of humiliating situations (in which case it could be a *causal antecedent* of the emotional experience) or, on the contrary, a *consequence* of experiencing humiliation.

Similarly, Ginges and Atran (2008) found that humiliation experienced by Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza within the context of the conflict with Israel leads to what they called an *inertia effect*, understood as a tendency toward inaction in victims of humiliation, who suppressed rebellious actions against Israel but also suppressed support for inter-group compromise. Again, in this work, this tendency toward inaction could be a result of experiencing the emotion of humiliation or a key aspect of situations in which it is more likely that victims would feel humiliated. Indeed, we posit that powerlessness and helplessness can be well understood and studied as both an antecedent of the emotional experience of humiliation and a consequence of it. In the present research, we focused on the latter, considering the behavioral response to a potentially humiliating event as a factor that can down-regulate the emotional experience via the re-appraisal of the self (Gross, 2014; see Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007, for another example of this reverse approach to the study of the relationship between behavior and emotion).

4. The present research: overview

In three experiments, we tested our hypothesis that, when (or if) victims of potentially humiliating actions are able to react to their perpetrators in an agentic-proactive way, the very action of responding to or approaching the perpetrator in that episode (in contrast to not responding) would reduce the emotional experience of humiliation. We further proposed that this would be because the agentic response would reduce the devaluation of the self that underlies the emotional experience of humiliation, thus indirectly decreasing humiliation via internalization.

In the first experiment, the participants were presented with an imagined scenario representing a humiliating situation in the school context. We then varied whether the protagonist of the scenario reacted agentially toward the perpetrator and measured the two core appraisals of humiliation (i.e., internalization and injustice) and the emotional response. In the subsequent two experiments, we created a realistic humiliating situation in a controlled way in the laboratory. Then, using a different method in each experiment, we induced agency among the participants and compared this experimental condition with a control one in which no agency was induced. As in the first experiment, we measured internalization, injustice, and the emotions that the

participants felt. The UNED University Bioethics Committee approved the research and its method.

5. Experiment 1

To obtain preliminary support for our hypothesis, we used the imagined responses to the criteria-based scenario method (Scherer, 1987) to carry out an experiment in which we manipulated agency and measured the core appraisals of humiliation and the emotional response.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Transparency and openness

In the three experiments included in the present work, we report how we determined our sample size as well as all the data exclusion (if any), manipulations, and measures. The data, the analysis codes, and the research materials for the three experiments are available from [https://osf.io/nhqar/?view_only=46117db049c04291a673fea965ee1ab9]. The data were analyzed using SPSS, version 24, and R, version 4.1.0. No data was collected after the data analysis began. The experiments' design and their analyses were not pre-registered.

5.1.2. Participants

We used G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to conduct an a priori power analysis for an ANOVA with two groups and one degree of freedom. We set the significance level to 0.05, set the power to 80%, and assumed a small to medium effect size ($f = 0.20$), which resulted in a required sample size of $N = 199$. We finally recruited 225 (53% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 48.41$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.69$) volunteers following a snowball procedure started by undergraduate students of the UNED University of Spain.

5.1.3. Procedure

The participants received a link to a Qualtrics questionnaire in which they were first asked to imagine the following situation:

You are a sixteen-year-old school student. During the class break, you and your classmates get ready to make two teams to play a basketball game. The captain of one of the teams is very popular in the class; everyone likes him. However, this person tends to pick on you frequently, for no apparent reason. All your other classmates are chosen for the teams until, finally, the popular captain chooses you. As you approach the rest of the team, the captain trips you and you fall to the ground. Everyone laughs and the captain says: "Did you believe it, eh? How are we going to choose you for our team, if you are useless?! Go with the other team ... see if they want you in their team."

The participants were then randomly assigned to either an agency or a non-agency condition. In the agency condition, the description of the scenario continued as follows: "After a few seconds, you look at your classmate and tell him: 'We don't have to be friends, but I haven't done anything to you and you have no right to treat me like that. Don't do it again.' After this, you go with the teammates from the other team." In the non-agency condition, the description of the scenario continues as follows: "After a few seconds, you go with the teammates from the other team, without saying anything."

After reading the scenario, the participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire with the measures described below, imagining that they were the protagonists.

5.1.4. Measures

Unless specified otherwise, all the items in the three experiments were agree–disagree Likert-type statements with response options ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

Key Appraisals. To measure the internalization of the devaluation, the participants responded to the following six items (the last two items were reverse coded for the analyses): “If I had experienced the described situation ... (1) I would see the idea I have about myself threatened; (2) my self-esteem would decrease; (3) it would affect negatively the idea I have about myself; (4) it would make me doubt my worth as a person; (5) it would reinforce my self-confidence (reverse coded); (6) it would reinforce my self-esteem (reverse coded)”, ($\alpha = 0.91$).

To measure the unfairness appraisal, the participants indicated whether they thought the experienced situation was “unjust,” “unethical,” “inappropriate,” and “immoral” ($\alpha = 0.77$). To conceal the real objective of the experiment, we added to the list the following items, which were not used in the analyses: “deserved,” “respectful,” and “honest.”

Discrete Emotions. We asked the participants to indicate how they imagine they would have felt in the described scenario by indicating on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (extremely) the extent to which they thought they would have felt “humiliation,” “shame,” and “anger.” To avoid the participants being aware that we were particularly focusing on the study of humiliation, we added the following emotions to the list: “satisfaction,” “pride,” “guilt,” and “humility.”

Reading Checks. We used the following two items to check that our participants understood the situation described in the scenario correctly: “After the captain did what he did to me, I reacted by telling him not to treat me like that again” and “Upon receiving the captain's comment, I reacted by responding to him directly” ($r(224) = 0.65, p < .001$). Finally, to make sure that the agency manipulation did not affect the extent to which the situation was perceived as more or less humiliating, we included the following three items: “The scenario described a potentially humiliating situation,” “The described situation is a typical scenario of school humiliation,” and “The captain's comment was devaluating.” These items, though, had low internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.56, rs(224) < 0.42, ps < 0.002$), so we kept them separate for the analyses.¹

5.2. Results

To test our hypotheses, we first compared the means of all the measures across conditions and then tested for the expected indirect effects.

5.2.1. Reading checks

The participants in the agency condition ($M = 4.61, SD = 1.36$) scored significantly higher on the reading check measure than those in the non-agency condition ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.91; F(1,222) = 7.39, p = .007, \eta^2 = 0.032$), indicating that the participants had correctly understood the difference between the two conditions. As intended, there were no significant differences across conditions in the items included to check the extent to which the situation was perceived as potentially humiliating ($F(3,1222) < 0.59, ps > 0.445, \eta^2 < 0.003$). The means of the three items in the two conditions used to perform this check ranged from $M = 5.08, SD = 1.34$, for the item “The described situation is a

¹ The reason for including these three items was to ensure that whether the victim of the scenario remained passive or responded with agency did not affect the extent to which the scenario was perceived as more or less prototypically humiliating. It could be argued that, because powerlessness is a core characteristic of humiliation (Lindner, 2010), a scenario in which the victim does not react would be perceived as more typically humiliating than a scenario in which the victim responds with agency. The inclusion of these items allowed us to make sure that this was not the case in our manipulation and that the prototypicality of the humiliating scene remained constant across conditions.

typical scenario of school humiliation” in the agency condition, to $M = 5.50, SD = 1.00$, for the item “The captain's comment was devaluating” in the no-agency condition. The high value of these means indicated that, as intended, the scenario was perceived by our participants as a typical humiliating situation; the absence of significant differences across conditions indicated that this was so irrespective of the level of agency displayed by the protagonist.²

5.2.2. Effects of agency on the appraisals and emotions

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all the dependent variables across conditions, the results of the ANOVAs, and the correlations among variables. With regard to the cognitive appraisals, as predicted, the agency manipulation had a significant effect on internalization, with significantly lower levels in the agency than in the no-agency condition (see Table 1). The effect on unfairness was nonsignificant. With regard to the emotions, and.

in line with our hypothesis, agency had a significant effect on humiliation and shame; both were significantly lower in the agency than in the no-agency condition (see Table 1). The effect of agency on anger was marginal and smaller in size than the effect on humiliation and shame. Consistent with the humiliating nature of the scenario, the overall means (i.e., considering both conditions together) of humiliation ($M = 4.40, SD = 1.86$) and the emotions most strongly related to humiliation, namely shame ($M = 3.88, SD = 1.99$) and anger ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.60$), were significantly higher than the overall means of the other emotions that we measured, which ranged from $M = 1.40, SD = 1.78$ for the case of guilt to $M = 2.48, SD = 2.09$ for the case of pride ($ts(224) > 6.38, ps < 0.001$). The overall means of humiliation and anger were significantly higher than the overall means of shame ($ts(224) > 3.52, p < .001$); humiliation and anger did not differ significantly among them ($p = .772$).

5.2.3. Indirect effects

To test the hypothesized indirect effect of agency on humiliation via the internalization appraisal, we used the Lavaan package for R and fitted a saturated path model in which agency was the exogenous independent variable, internalization was set as the mediator, and humiliation, shame, and anger were the outcome variables (see Fig. 1).

As expected, the indirect effect of agency on humiliation via internalization was significant ($b = -0.210, p = .004$). The indirect effect of agency on shame via internalization was also significant ($b = -0.225, p = .004$). In line with our theorization, the indirect effect of agency on anger via internalization was smaller and nonsignificant ($b = -0.051, p = .058$).

5.3. Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 provided initial support for our hypotheses. As expected, when the participants imagined they were victims of a humiliating situation, they felt significantly less humiliated if the scenario included an agentic response by the victim to the perpetrator than if it did not include such an agentic response by the victim. Also as expected, the level of internalization of the devaluation of the

² Because the scenario we employed, related to sports performances, could stereotypically be understood as more relevant for men than for women, we carried out a Condition x Gender ANOVA on the three items included as reading checks and on the three main dependent variables (i.e., internalization, unfairness, and humiliation). Results yielded no significant main effects of gender ($F(3) < 1.01, ps > .316$) nor significant Condition x Gender interactions ($F(3) < 0.39, ps > .536$), except for the case of humiliation, in which the main effect (but not the interaction) was significant ($F = 5.07, p = .025$), with higher levels of humiliation expressed by women than by men. These results indicated that participant's gender did not affect the way participants understood the scenario as typically humiliating and that gender did not qualify the effect of our independent variable on our main dependent variables.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, results of the ANOVA on each dependent variable, and correlations among the variables, Experiment 1.

	Mean (SD)		ANOVA <i>F</i> (1,222)	η^2	Correlations <i>r</i> (225)									
	Agency	No-agency			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8		
1. Internalization	2.99 (1.66)	3.63 (1.55)	8.75**	0.038	–									
2. Unfairness	5.14 (1.11)	4.89 (1.57)	1.92	0.009	0.11 ⁺	–								
3. Humiliation	4.04 (1.88)	4.75 (1.78)	8.45**	0.037	0.60***	0.10	–							
4. Shame	3.44 (2.03)	4.32 (1.86)	11.33***	0.048	0.60***	0.08	0.70***	–						
5. Anger	4.18 (1.75)	4.54 (1.42)	2.79 ⁺	0.012	0.18**	0.13 ⁺	0.45***	0.38***	–					
6. Guilt	1.06 (1.59)	1.73 (1.89)	8.14**	0.035	0.51***	0.00	0.30***	0.41***	0.06	–				
7. Pride	2.94 (2.02)	2.04 (2.07)	10.74***	0.046	–0.29***	–0.10	–0.35***	–0.30***	–0.06	–0.19**	–			
8. Humility	2.57 (1.93)	2.32 (1.89)	0.97	0.004	–0.15*	–0.01	–0.15*	–0.04	–0.21***	0.01	0.15*	–		
9. Satisfaction	2.34 (2.23)	0.86 (1.56)	33.59***	0.131	–0.33***	–0.13 ⁺	–0.45***	–0.41***	–0.34***	–0.10	0.50***	0.28***	–	

Note: ⁺*p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001.

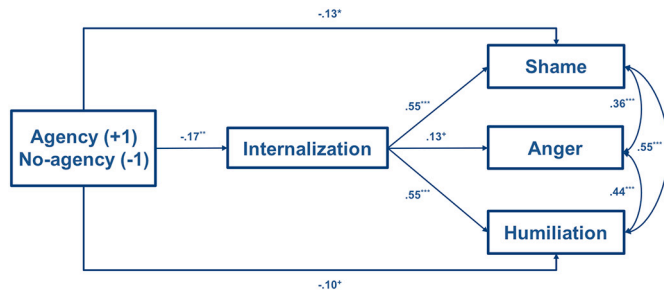


Fig. 1. Saturated path model of the indirect effects of agency on humiliation, shame, and anger via the internalization appraisal, Experiment 1.
Note. The coefficients are standardized. Only significant and marginally significant paths are drawn. *** *p* < .001; ** *p* < .01; * *p* < .05, ⁺ *p* < .10.

self was significantly lower in the agency than in the no-agency condition, and the indirect effect of agency on humiliation via internalization was significant. Importantly, the participants assessed the described situation as highly humiliating irrespective of whether the victim responded agentially; that is, the agency manipulation did not affect whether the situation was perceived as more or less humiliating, but it did affect the extent to which the participants thought the victim would feel humiliated when facing equally humiliating actions. Similarly, agency did not affect the unfairness appraisal: participants appraised the situation as highly unfair in both agency conditions (*X*s > 4.89, *DT*s < 1.57), so that the indirect effect of agency on humiliation was only significant via the internalization appraisal, but not the unfairness appraisal.

Shame was significantly affected by agency in a similar way to humiliation, including the indirect effect via internalization, whereas the effect of agency on anger was smaller and the indirect effect via internalization was nonsignificant. These results are congruent with the idea that humiliation and shame, but not anger, share the internalization appraisal through which the effect of agency on the emotions is exerted.

One limitation of this first experiment was that the participants were reporting imagined responses, so the results could also reflect how they thought they would feel more than how they would actually feel if they experienced this situation in real life. To overcome this limitation, we carried out the next two experiments with a more realistic methodology.

6. Experiment 2

In Experiments 2 and 3, we used the method successfully employed in previous research to place the participants in the laboratory in a realistic humiliating situation (see Fernández et al., 2018, 2022). We manipulated the participants' levels of agency so that we were able to compare their appraisals and emotional responses in a condition in which agency was enhanced in contrast to a condition in which agency was not enhanced. Because previous research using the same

methodology has repeatedly found that hostility is a key trigger of humiliation, we included hostility in both experiments as a second independent variable in a similar way to our past research (see Fernández et al., 2018, 2022). We therefore created a 2 agency (agentic vs. non-agentic response) × 2 hostility (hostile vs. non-hostile devaluation) design. We expected that agency would indirectly reduce humiliation via the internalization appraisal.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

An a priori power analysis for an ANOVA with four groups and one degree of freedom ($\alpha = 0.05$; $1 - \beta = 0.80$) was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). Considering the relatively subtle manipulation of agency that we were intending to conduct, we assumed a relatively small effect size ($f = 0.18$), which resulted in a required sample size of $N = 245$. We finally recruited 267 undergraduate psychology students from the UNED University (71% females, $M_{age} = 33.04$, $SD_{age} = 11.19$).³

6.1.2. Procedure

We used an adaptation of the method used by Harmon-Jones and Sigelman (2001) to evoke anger in the laboratory to induce a devaluation of the self. This method has been successfully used in previous research on humiliation (see Fernández et al., 2018, 2021). Specifically, we informed the participants that the experiment concerned the psychological aspects involved in an anonymous academic evaluation. The participants were asked to answer anonymously in writing, briefly but to the best of their ability, the following two questions about psychology: “What characterizes psychology as a scientific discipline?” “Why is psychology important for society?” Then, they submitted their answers online and were made to believe that a professor, who was allegedly connected online to the system, would evaluate their answers. In reality, no one evaluated the participants' answers and, after a few minutes of waiting time in which the participants completed a solitary distracting task, they all received a negative grade for their work (3.8 points out of 10, “fail”) accompanied by a negative feedback message from their evaluator.

To manipulate agency, the participants who were randomly assigned to the agency condition were informed in advance (i.e., before receiving their evaluation) that they would have the opportunity to respond to the professor if they wanted to do so once they had received their evaluation. Specifically, the participants in the agency condition read the following message before receiving their evaluation: “Your evaluation is

³ Participants for Experiments 2 and 3 were obtained among undergraduate students as part of their voluntary practical training during the regular semester. Because we were not able to know exactly how many students would want to participate in the different activities offered, which remained open for participation throughout the semester, the resulting final *N* obtained for Experiments 2 and 3 was only approximately what we targeted.

now available and will be shown to you on the next screen. NOTICE: Once you have received your evaluation, you will be able to send, if you wish, a comment or message to your evaluator in which you can express your opinion on the received evaluation and/or comment on any matter that you consider appropriate about the received evaluation. To maintain the confidentiality of the process, the message that you send to your evaluator will always be anonymous." In the no-agency condition, the "NOTICE" about the possibility to respond to the evaluator was not included in the message. In reality, all the participants were asked to answer the questionnaire with the measures described below directly after receiving their evaluation and, once they had completed that questionnaire, we debriefed them and thanked them. That is, we did not give the participants the opportunity to respond to the evaluator. This was therefore quite a subtle or indirect way to manipulate agency, in which we just *primed* or *activated* participants' agentic capacity beforehand by telling those in the agentic condition that they would be given the opportunity to respond afterwards if they wanted to do so.

Relying on methods used in previous work on humiliation (see Fernández et al., 2018, 2022), we used the feedback message allegedly written by the professor that accompanied the numerical grade to manipulate hostility. The participants who were randomly assigned to the hostile condition read the following feedback message: "The level of the ideas presented by the student is very poor, bordering on stupidity. Some of the ideas exposed in the work seem ridiculous when considering that they came from a university student. From an academic point of view, the given answers leave much to be desired." The participants in the non-hostile condition read the following message: "The level of the ideas presented by the student is very poor. Some of the ideas exposed in the work seem too basic when considering they came from a university student. From an academic point of view, the given answers are insufficient."

6.1.3. Measures

Key Appraisals. We used similar items to those employed in Experiment 1 to measure the internalization of the devaluation, albeit adapted to the context of the academic setting. The six items used to measure internalization were the following: "The feedback reduced my self-esteem as a student," "The feedback negatively affected the idea that I have about myself as a student," "The feedback makes me doubt about myself as a psychology student," "The feedback reinforces my confidence in my abilities as a student" (reverse coded), "The feedback reinforces my self-confidence as a psychology student" (reverse coded), and "The feedback reinforces the *psychology student* aspect of my identity" (reverse coded) ($\alpha = 0.76$).

To measure the unfairness appraisal, we used the same items as in Experiment 1 ($\alpha = 0.84$). To conceal the real objective of the experiment, we added to the list some positive items, which were not used in the analyses: "unbiased," "respectful," "educative," and "honest."

Discrete Emotions. We used the same method to measure discrete emotions as in Experiment 1, asking the participants to indicate on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (extremely) the extent to which they felt "humiliation," "shame," and "anger." To conceal the real objective of the experiment, we added "satisfaction," "pride," "joy," "guilt," and "humility."

Manipulation Checks. We used the following item to check the agency manipulation: "I had the possibility to react to the evaluation situation." To check the effectiveness of the hostility manipulation, the participants responded to the following two items: "Regardless of the grade I got, I found the evaluator's comments to be hostile," and "The evaluator used an aggressive tone in his/her feedback" ($r(267) = 0.75, p < .001$). Finally, to check that the negativity of the received evaluation did not vary across conditions, the participants answered the following item: "Academically speaking, the grade that I have received is negative."

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Manipulation checks

A 2 agency (agency versus no-agency) \times 2 hostility (hostile versus non-hostile) ANOVA on the agency manipulation check yielded a significant main effect of agency ($F(1,263) = 17.55, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.063$), a nonsignificant main effect of hostility ($p = .69$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .29$). As intended, the participants in the agency condition perceived themselves to have significantly higher agency ($M = 3.47, SD = 1.79$) than the participants in the no-agency condition ($M = 2.54, SD = 1.83$). A similar ANOVA on the hostility manipulation check yielded a significant main effect of hostility ($F(1,263) = 86.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.247$), a nonsignificant main effect of agency ($p = .42$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .27$). As intended, the participants perceived significantly more hostility in the hostile ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.40$) than in the non-hostile condition ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.66$). Finally, an ANOVA on the perceived negativity of the evaluation showed a nonsignificant main effect of agency ($p = .35$), a significant main effect of hostility ($F(1,263) = 4.49, p = .035, \eta^2 = 0.017$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .47$). The participants perceived the received evaluation to be slightly more negative in academic terms in the hostile ($M = 5.40, SD = 1.09$) than in the non-hostile condition ($M = 5.06, SD = 1.50$), which was not our intention (i.e., the hostile manipulation should not have affected the negativity of the evaluation regarding how poorly they were assessed by the professor academically speaking); however, as intended, in both conditions, the negativity of the evaluation was high. We therefore concluded that, in general, our procedure to manipulate agency and hostility was effective.

6.2.2. Effects of agency and hostility on appraisals and emotions

To test our hypothesis, we first conducted a series of agency \times hostility ANOVAs on each dependent variable, followed by *t*-tests on given paired means. Table 2 summarizes the results of these analyses, including the descriptive statistics by conditions. Table 3 shows the zero-order correlations between all the dependent measures.

6.2.3. Key appraisals

The results on internalization showed a marginally significant main effect of agency, a nonsignificant main effect of hostility, and a nonsignificant interaction (see Table 2 for the statistics). The mean of internalization was higher in the no-agency condition ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.20$) than in the agency condition ($M = 2.62, SD = 1.19$), although this difference was only marginally significant (see Table 2). The results on unfairness yielded a significant main effect of hostility, a nonsignificant main effect of agency, and a nonsignificant interaction. As expected, the participants appraised the hostile evaluation ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.28$) as significantly more unfair than the non-hostile evaluation ($M = 2.11, SD = 1.37$).

6.2.4. Emotions

The results on humiliation yielded the hypothesized significant main effect of agency, the expected significant main effect of hostility, and a nonsignificant interaction. As expected, the participants in the no-agency condition felt significantly more humiliation ($M = 2.78, SD = 2.01$) than those in the agency condition ($M = 2.26, SD = 2.03$); the participants in the hostile condition felt significantly more humiliation ($M = 2.84, SD = 2.06$) than those in the non-hostile condition ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.96$). There were no significant effects on shame. Regarding anger, only the main effect of hostility was significant, with higher levels of anger in the hostile ($M = 1.92, SD = 1.84$) than in the non-hostile condition ($M = 1.44, SD = 1.61$).

6.2.5. Indirect effects of agency and hostility on emotions via the appraisals

To test our hypothesis about the indirect effect of agency on humiliation via the internalization appraisal, we used the Lavaan package for R to fit a saturated path model in which the two manipulated factors (i.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and results of the 2 agency (agency vs. no-agency) x2 hostility (hostile vs. non-hostile) ANOVAs on each dependent variable, Experiment 2.

	Descriptive statistics: Mean (SD)				Hostility x Status ANOVA, Fs(1263)		
	Agency		Non-agency		Main effects		
	Hostile	Non-hostile	Hostile	Non-hostile	Agency	Hostility	Interaction
Internalization	2.78 (1.22)	2.45 (1.14)	2.94 (1.28)	2.83 (1.12)	$F = 3.38, p = .067, \eta_p^2 = 0.017$	$F = 2.26, p = .134, \eta_p^2 = 0.009$	$F = 0.58, p = .448, \eta_p^2 = 0.002$
Unfairness	3.43 (1.33)	2.04 (1.38)	3.45 (1.24)	2.18 (1.37)	$F = 0.24, p = .627, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$	$F = 66.72, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.202$	$F = 0.17, p = .685, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$
Humiliation	2.78 (2.12)	1.71 (1.79)	2.91(2.02)	2.66 (2.01)	$F = 4.95, p = .027, \eta_p^2 = 0.018$	$F = 7.33, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = 0.027$	$F = 2.86, p = .092, \eta_p^2 = 0.011$
Shame	2.68 (2.00)	2.40 (2.09)	2.79 (2.06)	2.99 (2.15)	$F = 1.87, p = .172, \eta_p^2 = 0.007$	$F = 0.02, p = .877, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$	$F = 0.87, p = .353, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$
Anger	1.94 (1.98)	1.22 (1.46)	1.89 (1.70)	1.65 (1.73)	$F = 0.82, p = .365, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$	$F = 5.28, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = 0.020$	$F = 1.28, p = .259, \eta_p^2 = 0.005$

Table 3

Zero-order correlations among the variables, Experiment 2.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Agency	–						
2. Hostility	0.02	–					
3. Unfairness	–0.02	0.45***	–				
4. Internalization	–0.11 ⁺	0.09	0.06	–			
5. Humiliation	–0.13*	0.16**	0.21***	0.49***	–		
6. Shame	–0.08	0.01	–0.07	0.47***	0.53***	–	
7. Anger	–0.05	0.14*	0.24***	0.25***	0.53***	0.28***	–

Note: + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

e., agency and hostility) were introduced as the independent variables, the two appraisals (i.e., internalization and unfairness) were the mediators, and the three emotions (humiliation, shame, and anger) were the outcome variables (see Fig. 2). Agency had a marginally significant indirect effect via internalization on humiliation ($b = -0.105, p = .071$), shame ($b = -0.110, p = .071$), and anger ($b = -0.046, p = .092$), with the latter indirect effect being smaller in size than the previous two. In line with our theorization, the paths of internalization for humiliation and shame were significantly stronger than that for anger ($\Delta\chi^2s(1) > 17.39, ps < 0.001$); the first two paths did not differ significantly in strength ($p = .755$). Replicating the previous results, hostility had a significant indirect effect on humiliation ($b = 0.146, p = .009$) and on anger ($b = 0.170, p = .002$) via unfairness. The paths of unfairness for anger and humiliation did not differ significantly ($p = .658$). Hostility also had a marginally significant negative indirect effect on shame via injustice ($b = -0.100, p = .082$). The rest of the indirect effects were nonsignificant ($ps > 0.212$).

6.3. Discussion

The results of Experiment 2 partially confirmed our main hypothesis. As predicted, our results showed that, when participants' agency was enhanced, they felt significantly less humiliated than when their agency was not enhanced. Agency had no significant effect on shame or anger. The participants' levels of internalization of the devaluation tended to be

lower in the agency than in the no-agency condition, although this difference did not reach statistical significance (it was marginally significant). The indirect effects of agency on humiliation and shame via internalization were also marginally significant and stronger than the indirect effect of agency on anger via internalization.

Importantly, in this experiment, we manipulated agency before the devaluation actually took place. This detail is particularly relevant to establishing our causal argument: when, in the agency condition, we informed the participants that they would be able to respond to the perpetrator, in this way activating or priming the possibility of an agentic response, the *humiliation* (i.e., the unfair devaluation actions) had not taken place yet, and therefore the differences that we were able to observe across conditions can only be attributed to the agentic mood that we were able to activate in the participants' minds.

However, one limitation of this method is that, precisely because of this subtle/indirect form of agency manipulation, we could have rendered the effects of agency particularly weak as no actual response was manipulated. To overcome this limitation, we ran a similar experiment in which we manipulated agency in a more explicit way.

7. Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, we aimed to replicate the results of Experiment 2 but with a more direct form of agency manipulation by actually inviting the participants to respond to the professor (versus not inviting them).

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

An a priori power analysis for an ANOVA with four groups and one degree of freedom ($\alpha = 0.05; 1-\beta = 0.80$) was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009). We assumed a medium effect size ($f = 0.20$), which resulted in a required sample size of 199. We finally recruited 184 participants, all of whom were undergraduate students of psychology at the UNED University (73% females; $M_{age} = 32.44, SD_{age} = 12.40$), who received a course credit for their participation.

7.1.2. Procedure

We used the same method as in Experiment 2. However, instead of manipulating agency beforehand by informing the participants of the

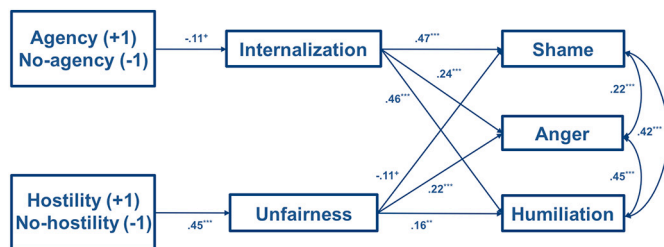


Fig. 2. Saturated path model of the indirect effects of agency and hostility on humiliation, shame, and anger via the internalization and unfairness appraisals, Experiment 2.

Note. The coefficients are standardized. Only significant and marginally significant paths are drawn. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$, + $p < .10$.

possibility to respond to the evaluator, we asked the participants actually to respond to the professor (versus not giving them the option to respond) once they had received the evaluation. To that end, in the agency condition, once the participants had received their evaluation, we provided a text box with the following instruction: "Answer now to your evaluator; that is, write a comment regarding the evaluation that you just received. You can tell him/her what you want about the evaluation, but you must write down something to continue. Remember that your response will be anonymous." This answer box was programmed so that the participants had to respond to continue with the questionnaire. If the participants tried to proceed without responding, a notice appeared indicating they had to write something in the answer box. In the no-agency condition, we did not require the participants to respond to the evaluator, and no answer box or instructions for doing so were provided. To control for the degree of cognitive elaboration of the negative evaluation across the agency and no-agency conditions, in both conditions, we asked the participants to reproduce the evaluator feedback message and the numerical grade that they received. As for the rest, the method was identical.

7.1.3. Measures

We used the same measures as in Experiment 2. The Cronbach's alphas for the items used to measure internalization and unfairness were 0.85 and 0.79, respectively. The Pearson correlation for the two items used to check the hostility manipulation was $r(184) = 0.74, p < .001$.

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Manipulation checks

A 2 agency (agency versus no-agency) \times 2 hostility (hostile versus non-hostile) ANOVA on the agency manipulation check yielded a significant main effect of agency ($F(1,180) = 4.47, p = .036, \eta^2 = 0.024$), a nonsignificant main effect of hostility ($p = .77$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .43$). As intended, the participants in the agency condition perceived themselves to have significantly higher agency ($M = 3.90, SD = 1.55$) than the participants in the no-agency condition ($M = 3.37, SD = 1.86$). A similar ANOVA on the hostility manipulation check yielded a significant main effect of hostility ($F(1,180) = 128.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.42$), a nonsignificant main effect of agency ($p = .60$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .45$). As intended, the participants perceived significantly more hostility in the hostile ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.28$) than in the non-hostile condition ($M = 2.29, SD = 1.57$). Finally, an ANOVA on the perceived negativity of the evaluation showed a nonsignificant main effect of agency ($p = .30$), a nonsignificant main effect of hostility ($p = .11$), and a nonsignificant interaction ($p = .56$).

7.2.2. Key appraisals

Table 4 shows the zero-order correlations between all the dependent measures. The results for internalization showed a significant main effect of agency, a nonsignificant main effect of hostility, and a nonsignificant interaction (see Table 5 for statistics). As predicted, the participants indicated significantly higher levels of internalization in the no-agency condition ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.36$) than in the agency condition ($M = 2.38, SD = 1.48$). The results for the unfairness appraisal yielded a significant main effect of hostility, a nonsignificant main effect of agency, and a nonsignificant interaction. As expected, the participants appraised the hostile evaluation ($M = 3.63, SD = 1.30$) as being significantly more unfair than the non-hostile evaluation ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.35$).

7.2.3. Emotions

Regarding humiliation, the results evidenced the predicted significant main effect of agency, a marginally significant main effect of hostility, and a nonsignificant interaction. As expected, the participants in the no-agency condition felt significantly more humiliation ($M = 3.65, SD = 2.17$) than those in the agency condition ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.90$).

There were no significant effects on shame or anger.

7.2.4. Indirect effects of agency and hostility on emotions via the appraisals

We used the Lavaan package for R to fit the same saturated path model that we tested in Experiment 2, that is, using agency and hostility as the exogenous predictor variables, internalization and unfairness as the mediators, and humiliation, shame, and anger as the outcome variables (see Fig. 3). As predicted, agency had a significant indirect effect on humiliation via internalization ($b = -0.163, p = .041$). Agency also had a significant indirect effect via internalization on shame ($b = -0.157, p = .042$). The indirect effect of agency on anger via internalization was marginally significant ($b = -0.087, p = .054$). In line with our theorization, the paths of internalization for humiliation and shame were significantly stronger than that for anger ($\Delta\chi^2(1) > 7.58, ps < 0.006$); the first two paths did not differ significantly in strength ($p = .744$). Replicating the previous results, hostility had a significant indirect effect on humiliation ($b = 0.235, p = .002$) and on anger ($b = 0.395, p < .001$) via unfairness. The path of unfairness for anger was marginally stronger than that for humiliation ($\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.46, p = .063$). The rest of the indirect effects were nonsignificant ($ps > 0.212$).

7.3. Discussion

The results of Experiment 3 further supported our hypotheses. As expected, when the participants were invited to respond to their evaluator directly after receiving their devaluations, the levels of internalization and humiliation were significantly lower than in a condition in which they were not invited to respond. Moreover, the indirect effect of agency on humiliation via internalization was significant. Of the three emotions, humiliation was the most sensitive to the agency manipulation; the effect of the manipulation on shame and anger resulted as nonsignificant. Similar to humiliation, the indirect effect of agency on shame via internalization was significant, whereas this indirect effect on anger was weaker and only marginally significant.

8. General discussion

In the three experiments, we found consistent evidence showing that, when participants in potentially humiliating situations reacted to the perpetrator (Experiments 1 and 3), or when their agentic response was simply primed beforehand (Experiment 2), they felt significantly less humiliated than in a condition in which they did not react to the perpetrator or their agentic response was not primed. Moreover, as expected, agency had a significant effect on buffering the internalization of the devaluation of the self that underlies humiliation and shame, so that the participants who reacted to the perpetrator (or who were primed to do so) internalized the devaluation to a lesser extent. Internalization was, in turn, positively related to humiliation. This indirect effect (i.e., agency \rightarrow less internalization \rightarrow less humiliation/shame) was significant in Experiments 1 and 3 and marginally significant in Experiment 2. All in all, our results were consistent with our main hypothesis about the effect that giving an agentic response to the perpetrator (rather than reacting passively) had on reducing the emotional experience of humiliation.

From the theoretical perspectives of the modal model of emotion (Barrett et al., 2007) and the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 2014), our results can be read as an emotion regulation process based on the agentic capacity of the victims. From this perspective, the agentic response given by the humiliated victims in Experiments 1 and 3 led them to re-appraise the devalued self during the ongoing emotional experience. Because agency is particularly informative for self-esteem (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke et al., 2011), the agentic response portrayed a more positive self-view as compared to the non-agentic response; this more positive self-view made less likely that the humiliated victims internalized the devaluation of the self that underlies humiliation and shame and, in turn, reduced the experience of these emotions. In Experiment 2, the mere activation of the agentic response

Table 4
Zero-order correlations among the variables, Experiment 3.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Agency	–						
2. Hostility	–0.08	–					
3. Unfairness	–0.12	0.50***	–				
4. Internalization	–0.16*	0.08	0.16*	–			
5. Humiliation	–0.16*	0.13 ⁺	0.30***	0.56***	–		
6. Shame	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.48***	0.63***	–	
7. Anger	–0.03	0.11	0.41***	0.35***	0.44***	0.30***	–

Note: + $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5
Descriptive statistics and results of the 2 agency (agency vs. no-agency) x2 hostility (hostile vs. non-hostile) ANOVAs on each dependent variable, Experiment 3.

	Descriptive statistics: Mean (SD)				Agency x Hostility ANOVA, $F_s(1180)$		
	Agency		No-agency		Main effects		
	Hostile	Non-hostile	Hostile	Non-hostile	Agency	Hostility	Interaction
Internalization	2.35 (1.58)	2.41 (1.42)	3.06 (1.38)	2.60 (1.30)	$F = 4.66, p = .032, \eta_p^2 = 0.025$	$F = 0.94, p = .334, \eta_p^2 = 0.005$	$F = 1.49, p = .224, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$
Unfairness	3.47 (1.31)	2.00 (1.38)	3.78 (1.29)	2.20 (1.33)	$F = 1.63, p = .203, \eta_p^2 = 0.009$	$F = 59.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.249$	$F = 0.08, p = .775, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$
Humiliation	3.38 (2.05)	2.69 (1.74)	3.81 (2.31)	3.49 (2.02)	$F = 4.18, p = .042, \eta_p^2 = 0.023$	$F = 2.77, p = .098, \eta_p^2 = 0.015$	$F = 0.36, p = .547, \eta_p^2 = 0.002$
Shame	3.43 (2.07)	3.25 (1.90)	3.28 (2.16)	3.31 (2.27)	$F = 0.02, p = .888, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$	$F = 0.05, p = .821, \eta_p^2 = 0.000$	$F = 0.11, p = .736, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$
Anger	2.58 (2.00)	2.27 (1.69)	2.74 (1.98)	2.27 (1.75)	$F = 0.09, p = .762, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$	$F = 2.04, p = .155, \eta_p^2 = 0.011$	$F = 0.10, p = .754, \eta_p^2 = 0.001$

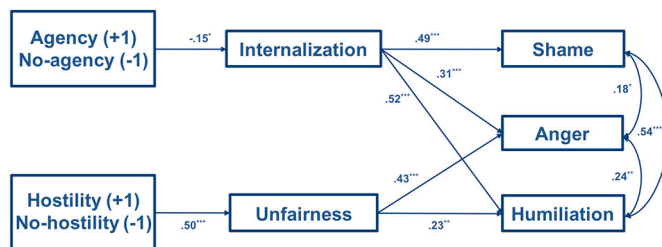


Fig. 3. Saturated path model of the indirect effects of agency and hostility on humiliation, shame, and anger via the internalization and unfairness appraisals, Experiment 3.

Note. The coefficients are standardized. Only significant and marginally significant paths are drawn. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

beforehand protected victims from internalizing the devaluation, indirectly reducing the intensity of humiliation and shame. Given that the emotional experience of humiliation is particularly aversive and negative in terms of psychological well-being (Torres & Bergner, 2012; Walker & Knauer, 2011), agency stands out as a key variable on which to focus efforts to prevent the negative consequences of humiliation.

These results are also congruent with Gray et al.'s (2007) theoretical proposal about considering agency (as contrasted with *experience*) as a key attribute of human nature. Indeed, the powerlessness and helplessness that are often associated with humiliation (see Leidner et al., 2012; Silver, Conte, Miceli, & Poggi, 1986) can contribute to undermining victims' sense of humanity (Yang et al., 2015) and dignity or, expressed in terms of the moral philosopher Avishai Margalit (1996), to undermining *self-respect*, which he defined as the intimate sense of self-value that we should all have for the mere awareness of our humanity (see also Statman, 2000). If we think we lack the capability to respond to an unfair devaluation imposed by others, we may well feel like passive beings that can only suffer the vicissitudes and threats of the environment submissively, which, in turn, can undermine our self-respect, opening the door to humiliation. In this sense, agency is closely related to the basic human motive of control, that is, the need to feel competent and effective in dealing with our social environment and ourselves (Fiske, 2010). Therefore, perceiving a lack of control and capability to reply after an act of humiliation that puts the value of the

self at stake can easily contribute to triggering the emotion of humiliation. Responding with agency, as our results show, would contribute to mitigating that emotional experience, probably because of an enhanced perception of control over the situation and over our own behavior, perhaps accompanied by certain feelings of pride or satisfaction, which would be incompatible with humiliation (although this explanation should be tested in future research).

Our results can be also connected to work on the emotional experience of regret as a consequence of action versus inaction. Research on this matter shows that, in the long term, people tend to regret more on things they have *not* done compared to things they *have* done (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). These authors identify several possible factors that explain why this is so, including the retrospective confidence that makes “failures to act inexplicable and inexcusable” (p. 386) and the so-called *Zeigarnik effect*, a phenomenon consisting of a tendency to remember unrealized goals better than those that have been accomplished. One related question, therefore, pertains to the potential role of rumination in the evolution of humiliation over time as a consequence of not having been able to respond to the unfair perpetrator. According to the findings about regret, we could expect that not having been able to respond to an unfair perpetrator would be appraised as particularly inexcusable in the long run, inducing, not only feelings of regret about our own form of behavior, but also long-lasting feelings of humiliation and shame. Indeed, recent research has related self-critical rumination with higher levels of shame (Milia, Kolubinski, & Spada, 2021). However, as far as we know, no research has studied the role of rumination in humiliation. It would be worth researching in the future whether replaying the humiliating scene in one's mind and imagining counterfactuals in which one stood up for oneself in a more self-defensive way could restore, in time, one's sense of agency, transforming in this way humiliation into anger throughout the rumination process.⁴

We consider our findings to be especially relevant in relation to possible interventions directed to preventing potential victims of humiliating actions from feeling humiliated. In this sense, training them to give an adaptive, non-aggressive, agentic response to the perpetrator could be an effective strategy to protect their psychological well-being. Targets of such training programs could be, for instance, children at

⁴ We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

schools (as part of anti-bullying programs), members of socially stigmatized minorities, who often confront indiscreet and/or offensive comments and glances in the street, to which they usually remain passive (Fernández, 2009), or women at risk of suffering gender violence. Working specifically on enhancing the capability of responding with agency is a very concrete way to protecting them from the aversive feeling of being humiliated. Importantly, it should be taken into account that not all agentic responses would be positive in all situations. As stated by Gross (2014), the responses that would best help to regulate the emotion would be those that are “adaptative,” and whether a response is considered to be adaptative would be very much contingent on the specific situation. Moreover, as several authors have already pointed out, agentic responses that seek revenge and contribute to perpetuating the cycle of violence are probably maladaptive for all parties involved (see Hartling & Lindner, 2016; Klein, 1991).

Although we have not found, nor expected, any significant effect of agency on the appraisal of unfairness, this is a question that should be further studied in future research. The situations created in Experiments 2 and 3, where participants received a negative evaluation, resemble those situations where people look for an explanation for such an unfavorable outcome and search into the procedure to see whether it was fair or not (Rutte & Messick, 1995; Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, & Dronkert, 1999). According to the literature on procedural justice, “giving voice” to people is one of the criteria for them to consider a procedure followed by a leader or an evaluator to be just, since it evokes a sense of control over the situation (Leventhal, 1980; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006)⁴. Feelings of agency can surely change the appraisal of the whole situation, and it would be worth studying under what circumstances agentic responses modify justice perceptions.

One limitation of the present research is that our studies were all conducted in the laboratory. Although Experiment 2 and 3 used a realistic paradigm in which participants experienced the devaluation as real, and that provided some ecological validity to our results, our manipulations either forced participants to respond to the perpetrator or primed them to do so in an experimental setting in which, for example, anonymity was ensured. Responding to a perpetrator in real world situations may be much more challenging for the victim than it was for our participants in the laboratory. Moreover, there are surely many contextual and individual variables that would determine whether an agentic response is more or less likely and/or effective. Identifying those variables that may make the victim's agentic response more or less likely and effective is a crucial challenge for the future.

We also want to acknowledge that humiliating situations often imply contextual factors that oppress the victims, forcing them to feel vulnerable and powerless (Leidner et al., 2012). Moreover, powerlessness and helplessness have been pointed out as defining characteristics of humiliating situations (Lindner, 2010). Previous research has studied some key contextual factors that contribute to forcing victims to internalize the devaluation of the self, such as the hostility of the perpetrators, their status vis-à-vis the victims, or the presence of an audience that amplifies the threat to the self imposed by the perpetrators (see Fernández et al., 2018, 2022). All these contextual factors, and surely many others that have yet to be studied, contribute to trapping the victims of humiliation in situations that leave them little room for agency and adaptive responses. There is therefore some degree of tautological thinking in our proposal: powerlessness is a key characteristic of humiliating dynamics (Lindner, 2010); therefore, people feel humiliated partly because they find themselves trapped in situations in which their capability to respond is undermined. However, as we have seen in the studies reported here, we can intervene to enhance victims' sense of agency, thus breaking this vicious circle, as in Experiment 2, or even directly to enable them actually to respond to the perpetrator, as in Experiment 3. That is, our work provides experimental evidence not only about the role of agency in reducing humiliation but also about the fact that victims can be motivated and primed to respond with agency; in

other words, an agentic adaptive positive response can be facilitated through external intervention (in this respect, see, e.g., Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010; Williams & Levitt, 2007). Moreover, training victims to give an agentic response may well be the only way to protect some of them, especially if we lack control over the environment (e.g., in contexts of intimate relationships).

All in all, the present investigation provides insights into both a lack of agency being an important antecedent of the emotional experience of humiliation and the possibility of protecting victims of humiliating situations from feeling humiliated by training or enhancing their capacity to respond to the perpetrator.

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The data of all the studies included in the present research, the code behind the analysis, and the materials are available from OSF and can be accessed at [https://osf.io/nhqar/?view_only=9f5e10f09a5545f9b615ec6aefc35ff5].

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