

## Belittlement as a Psychological Phenomenon and Form of Behavior - Causes, Risks and Fatal Consequences

Editorial

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### Abstract

Although belittling as a psychological and behavioral phenomenon is common in everyday life and especially among the younger population, there is not a single scientific work in the world that previously exclusively treated only the aforementioned phenomenon. The paper discusses the relationship between the person who belittles and the person who is belittled. Classification of the causes that determine the appearance of belittling in human behavior has been performed into five basic categories. Then the risks associated with belittling comparative human values and achievements were considered. In the example of a tragic event with a fatal outcome, it was shown how dangerous it can be when belittling is applied as a pattern of behavior. In addition to the theoretical consideration of this phenomenon, the paper provides initial practical guidelines for elements of various social structures, including the authorities and people who govern nations, how to eradicate or significantly reduce the occurrence of this harmful form of behavior, in order to create solid foundations for the unhindered future prosperity of humanity.

**Keywords:** Belittlement, Psychology, Human Behavior.

### Introduction

Adults, and especially children, are exposed to some form of belittling almost every day to a greater or lesser extent. In some situations, the person who belittles does so unconsciously, unintentionally, and sometimes consciously and intentionally. There are also mild forms of belittlement that have as their main goal a constructive role to encourage the person who is the subject of belittlement to notice a problem or to engage more in solving it. In any case, when a person is exposed to any form of belittlement, it leads to a feeling of discomfort, which can be manifested in different ways, which depends on the individual mental processing of exposure to belittlement.

Although this problem is common, so far it has not been discussed in any paper as the only topic, from the psychological and behavioral aspect. By persistently searching databases of published scientific papers such as EBSCO, ScienceDirect and others, it was not possible to find a scientific paper that dealt exclusively with this topic, but they consider this phenomenon together with other aspects of mistreatment. Also, there are several papers that have the term "belittling" in their title, but they do not deal with this topic from the aspect of psychology, but from other scien-

tific or literary disciplines. A search of the printed literature also yielded no results. By searching the internet it was possible to find one paper [1], which deals with this problem to some extent, but this paper also does not focus only on belittling as a topic. In addition, there are references on the Internet that deal with this topic, but not in the form of scientific work, but as blogs or informative support for victims of belittling with the aim of how to recognize this problem, or instructions on how to fight with this problem. Based on this analysis, it can be assumed that this is almost certainly the first paper in the world that exclusively considers the problem of belittling from a psychological and behavioral perspective.

### Subject and Object of Belittlement and Their Mutual Relationships

Belittling can be defined as "the act of thinking or speaking in a way that lowers another person's self-esteem or lessens the perceived value of a target object. From the viewpoint of the speaker or perceiver, the object of contempt is relatively small and unimportant" [2]. Aristotle mentions belittling in Rhetoric II, 2 (1378a31–33) [1]. Belittlement can be directed at anyone or anything. One's friends may be part of this, as well as one's national-

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ity, one's favorite sports team, or even one's attempt at painting a landscape [1].

It follows from the above that the subject of belittlement can be a person and some of his characteristics, a person or persons who are related to the person who is the subject of belittlement, as well as some object or abstract concept that is also related to the person who is the subject of belittlement. It is interesting to consider the relationship between the person who belittles and the person who is belittled. In relation to the adopted (chosen) criterion of belittlement, the belittling person can be objectively (realistically):

- A) superior to the person being belittled
- B) in approximately the same or exactly the same status as the person being belittled
- C) inferior to the person being belittled.

In the case of B, there is no objective and obvious advantage of the belittling person over the person being belittled. In this case, the belittling person uses belittling as a means to degrade the belittled person in relation to a certain criterion, for example, intellectual achievements. Although there may be other reasons for belittlement in case B, the most common reason, as mentioned, is to gain an alleged advantage by unfair and unethical means. The forms of belittlement, in this case, can be numerous, from stating untruths, scheming, all the way to various forms of manipulation. In this case, there may or may not be a subjective belief on the part of the belittler that he has some advantage over the person being belittled.

In case C, the person who belittles is objectively inferior to the belittled person in relation to one, or even more essential criteria. In this case, the root cause of belittling is to degrade the achievements and values of the belittled person and bring their values on an equal footing with the person who applies belittling as a form of behavior. In order to belittle, a person who belittles can relativize the importance of the values disposed of by a belittled person, pointing out that the values he disposes with are irrelevant or of little importance. However, a particular problem in the interaction between a person who belittles and a belittled person arises in the case when a person who belittles has an advantage by one criterion, and is inferior to all other criteria that reflect the value of a person. For example, some aesthetic criterion may be the advantage of a person who belittles. In this case, the person who belittles will give an unrealistic advantage to the aesthetic criterion and use it as a weapon to diminish or nullify all the values of the belittled person.

### Classification of Causes That Condition the Occurrence of the Act of Belittlement

There is a greater number of causes that can influence the appearance of belittling (Figure 1). Here, five basic groups of causes have been identified that can be the cause, that is, influence the appearance of belittlement. With that in mind, the causes of belittling can be: personal in nature (the cause is some inherent property of the person who belittles), can be related to another person, can depend on the person's environment, can originate from the use of certain technological solutions and can be conditioned by dictated or existing social processes.

The personal causes of belittling are related to the person who is belittling (who may also become the object of belittling at some point). The personal causes of belittlement are most often rooted in some feeling that is present in the belittler, such as depression, anxiousness, displeasure, jealousy, anger, envy, feeling of endangeredness by competition and the possibility of isolation, or in some of its complexes, such as which is, for example, an assumption of inferiority. Lack of communication skills, poor coping skills, vulnerability, various forms of addictions (which may reduce the power of judgment and force communication that may contain elements of belittling), desire for power or control, desire to attract attention or extort recognition, sexual superiority/inferiority or sexual orientation, low self-esteem, narcissism, perfectionism also belong to this group of causes. Poor emotional intelligence, lack of empathy, enjoyment when others suffer, black sense of humor, the need to divert attention from one's own mistakes or shortcomings can also be the causes specific to the belittler, which can act as a stimulus for belittling another person. A belittling person may use belittling as a means to suppress a negative feeling or to feel better, to draw attention to himself, to seemingly reduce some of his complexes, to divert attention from his mistakes, immoral or illegal activities, to develop a sense of power, or to raise his/her reputation within other people.

Causes of belittlement that are related to another person are those causes where the other person for any reason has become a reason for belittlement, i.e. a person who has given virtual cause for belittlement. For example, another person can be seen as a competitor, which can develop a feeling of endangeredness by competition and create the possibility for involuntary isolation of the belittler. In such and similar situations, such as those inherent in jealousy, the belittling person may use belittling as a means of inappropriate defense or attack. The reason for belittlement can also be animosity regarding certain properties of the belittled person (for example physical appearance), or disapproval of the actions (activities) or beliefs of another person. In some situations, a person can apply certain forms of belittlement to another person, in order to stimulate them to a certain form of achievement or cognition. Another person can also have the role of the belittler.

A person's environment is the next possible cause that can result in belittling as a pattern of behavior. The environment here has a broader meaning, but primarily refers to the social environment of a certain person. First of all, this includes the family. Inappropriate or unmeasured criticism of family members creates favorable conditions for a person's motivation to use belittlement in his behavior. Belonging to a lower or higher social class or a group of a certain material status can also motivate belittling as a form of a person's behavior. In addition, the younger population is especially inclined to apply belittling as a pattern of behavior, in order to fit in better within the social group to which it belongs (in which belittling others may be a more or less common way of behaving). Certain technical and technological achievements can also be the cause of the appearance of human behavior that practices belittlement. Belittlement has become increasingly visible through the use of technical media, such as the Internet and TV by sensationalizing derogatory language and behaviors. On the one hand, some kinds of media, such as social networks, can be used as a platform for belittlers to express their belittling behavior, while on the other hand, they can recruit a subject that will recognize itself as a belittled person. Social media platforms can encourage users to engage in cyberbullying, while reality TV shows often

showcase contestants insulting and belittling one another. In news and political commentary, pundits may belittle and dismiss opposing viewpoints, creating a divisive and hostile social environment. Additionally, clickbait headlines and sensationalized news stories can lead to the dehumanization of certain groups, promoting a "culture" of disrespect and devaluation of others.

Existing or dictated social processes, such as, for example, a forced system of values in society, political processes in which certain social problems are marginalized or neglected, an inadequate system of social assistance to vulnerable groups of the population or the application of an inadequate educational system, the forcing of global misconceptions (reasons for the appearance of xenophobia, etc.) not only can by themselves represent a form of discrimination and belittlement of certain social groups, but can also be the cause of the appearance of behavior in which a pattern of belittlement is applied. The essential reasons for belittling at the global level are focused in this category of causes for the appearance of belittling in behavior. For example, if children are not educated on how belittling a friend can be problematic and what negative effects it can cause, if behavior based on belittling is not adequately sanctioned at an early age, at a later age there is a high probability that adults will apply belittlement at work, in the family, in dealing with other, known and unknown people. Similarly, if the value system in society is formed in such a way that the rare abilities and achievements of individuals or groups of people are not adequately valued, there is almost no way to prevent belittlement that will spread like a swollen river into all streams of life.

### Risks Associated With Belittlement

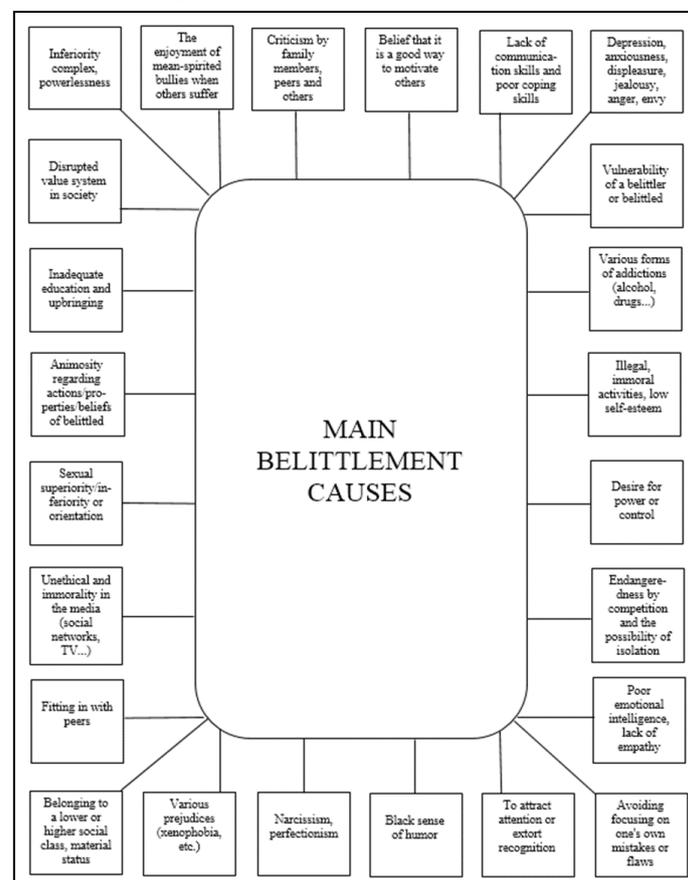
Belittlement is most often associated with the virtual reduction of

certain human values and achievements. In the following, global risks for society and the individual will be listed, which are connected to the belittlement of human, that is, personal achievements and values. They are most often present in practice. These risks will be viewed first of all through the prism of belittling the comparative values that each person possesses to a greater or lesser extent. This kind of belittlement can exist at the individual level, but it can manifest and be carried out, intentionally or unintentionally, in different ways at the level of society as a whole.

Belittling other people's achievements is a psychological phenomenon known in Australia and New Zealand as "Tall Poppy Syndrome". Expressions with similar meanings exist in many countries. This phenomenon is prevalent in societies that value equality and denounce excessive pride or ambition. It is often a way for people to feel better about themselves by diminishing others' accomplishments, which can lead to a toxic work or social environment. It is important to recognize and address this behavior, as it can have a negative impact on individual's mental health and hinder progress and growth in both personal and professional settings.

On the global scale, belittling the intellectual values of a human as a phenomenon has far-reaching negative effects on individuals and society. It leads to a lack of appreciation for knowledge, education, and critical thinking, which are essential for personal and societal growth. In today's fast-paced world, intellectual values seem to be devalued. This can have a significant impact on society, as intellectual values are crucial for progress and development. Belittling of intellectual values can lead to anti-intellectualism, which can further lead to a lack of critical thinking. The intellectual values of some groups of people, such as those characterized

Figure 1. Causes of the belittlement.



by their age, gender, or race, are sometimes belittled. It is crucial to recognize and respect the value of intellect and promote a culture that values education and learning to benefit everyone.

The spiritual values of a human being include beliefs, principles, and practices that foster a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something greater than oneself. These values often center around notions of love, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, and service to others. Belittling and underestimating spiritual and humanistic values ignores the significance and depth of the human experience. Belittling spiritual values undermines the importance of beliefs and faith in shaping individual and social identities. This reductionist approach neglects the transcendent and transformative potential of spirituality. True understanding and appreciation of spiritual values require a holistic perspective that acknowledges their multidimensional nature and their impact on human flourishing. Belittling humanistic values devalues the importance of concepts such as compassion, empathy, and respect for human dignity. Underestimating these values can lead to a society that is more concerned with profit and power than with the well-being of all people.

Belittling people based on their material status (value derived on the basis of the financial situation of an individual) can be considered as a form of classism. It perpetuates the idea that one's worth as an individual is based mainly on their wealth and material status, which is of course untrue and harmful. This negative attitude towards these members of society with low income can cause feelings of inferiority, shame, and worthlessness in those individuals. Such belittlement reinforces further social, economic, and cultural inequalities that perpetuate poverty and marginalization. This form of belittlement is often a result of a lack of empathy and understanding of the challenges faced by people living in poverty.

Belittling one's physical characteristics and abilities can have negative impacts on an individual's mental and emotional well-being, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. It could also create a vicious cycle of learned helplessness, causing individuals to feel incapable of improving their physical abilities, leading to a lack of motivation to pursue physical activity. In addition, such a form of belittling can lead to diminishing social contacts or even to social isolation, which could further exacerbate the negative repercussions on an individual's overall health and wellness. It is crucial to recognize and celebrate individual differences and abilities, promoting inclusivity and positivity for all. Belittling the aesthetic characteristics of a human can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. It can also contribute to societal beauty standards and objectification of individuals based on their looks, which can lead to discrimination and prejudice. Additionally, this form of belittling can promote debatable practices such as cosmetic surgery, skin-lightening or darkening that could under certain circumstances further damage physical, as well as mental health. Overall, belittling aesthetic characteristics can have serious consequences on individuals.

Belittling sexual potential or orientation is often used in situations where it is necessary to discredit other values possessed by the person who is the subject of belittlement. In addition, it is also applied in situations where it is necessary to raise personal reputation in front of another person from the mentioned aspect. It is not uncommon for public figures to suffer such belittlement

from others who try to destroy their reputations for personal gain or for low motives. The main risk to which a belittled person is exposed in the case of unfounded attacks is the collapse of reputation, personal integrity, as well as mental pain, while the belittler risks court and other epilogues.

## Consequences of Belittlement - an Example With a Fatal Outcome

Most people, when they belittle other people, are not at all aware of the consequences that belittling can have on the belittled person. A person who belittles thinks even less about the consequences for him when he belittles another person. Unfortunately, the consequences of belittling can sometimes be fatal for the person who is belittled, but also for the person who is belittling. In the following, one example with a tragic outcome will be briefly mentioned, the reason for which was belittlement.

Serbia is a country where mass murders are extremely rare. In the past, there were only a few examples of mass murders among the population. However, in May 2023, a mass murder happened, which attracted special attention. A 21-year-old person in the same day killed 8 people and wounded 14 people with automatic weapons in three villages in the surrounding of a city that is in the proximity of Belgrade before he was arrested [3]. He knew some of the victims, some only superficially, and some he did not know. When the police and investigators asked him why he shot, he always repeated only one answer - BELITTLEMENT. At the time of his arrest, he addressed the police with the words - respect.

Citing this example has absolutely no pretensions to justify the act of the perpetrator of this tragedy, but only to point out the possibility of tragic consequences in case of belittlement. A detailed investigation of this case will perhaps reveal more precise reasons and types of belittlement to which the perpetrator was subjectively or objectively exposed.

## Conclusion

The problem of belittling is as old as humanity. However, surprisingly, this problem has been almost completely neglected in the scientific psychological literature. There have been few papers that dealt with the mistreatment of medical students (for example [4]) where the term belittlement is mentioned. However, these papers do not consider only belittling as a phenomenon, but the focus of these papers is on the global mistreatment of medical students, including aspects such as harassment, discrimination, threats, assaults and discouragement. Due to such an approach, the term belittlement, for example in [4], was mentioned only six times in the text. Considering that in journals, conference proceedings and other scientific literature after a thorough search it was not possible to find any paper that exclusively dealt with this topic, it can be concluded that this is the first paper in the world that has only belittlement as a phenomenon in its focus. For this reason, the list of used references could not be more extensive.

In this paper, the relationship between the belittler and the belittled is discussed, and then the causes that lead to the appearance of belittlement as a form of behavior. In this paper, the causes of belittling are classified into five basic categories: personal, causes originating from other persons with whom the belittling person

interacts, the environment of the belittling person, technical and technological solutions (in the form of media that are applied on a global level for the presentation and transfer of behavioral models based on belittlement), as well as causes originating from existing and dictated social processes. After that, the risks that may arise as a result of belittling comparative human values were discussed. Also, it was pointed out the tragic consequences that can be the result of objective or subjectively experienced belittlement.

The problem of belittling is extremely large and represents one of the fundamental problems of humanity and civilization. It is present every day, locally as well as globally. This problem induces a virtually unlimited number of other problems facing humanity. For this reason, it is extremely important that the highest possible level of attention is given to solving and eradicating this problem. Solving this problem requires, above all, the engagement of scientists and experts, whose main task is to point out the importance of solving this problem in society. It is extremely important that the national and political leaders of the states, as well as experts from the relevant international institutions, are involved in solving this problem. Without their sincere and dedicated engagement in solving this problem, it cannot be solved in any way, and humanity cannot reach the necessary level of consciousness for the necessary prosperity.

The behavior based on respect represents the first postulate of civilized human communication. Of particular importance is its application in everyday life, at the individual level. For this reason, the construction and improvement of the educational system that will focus special attention on education about this phenomenon is of particular importance for the development of children. It is necessary to start with this education as early as possible, starting from preschool age, and then intensify it in elementary school age. In an appropriate form and scope, this education should be continued throughout the entire education system, until adulthood. Control of the implementation of such an education system is also of great importance.

The family is certainly a factor where perhaps the greatest influence can be exerted on the development of human behavior based on mutual respect and appreciation. For this reason, the education of adults (who should continue to educate their children) also has special significance in this respect. Political leaders and the media can play a very positive role in establishing this kind of behavior among the adult population. When an improved pattern of behavior is established among the adult population that completely rejects belittlement and favors respect, it can be transmitted much more easily at the level of the family from adult members to children.

Certainly, this is not a problem that can be solved in a day. Moreover, it is impossible to predict how long it will take to eradicate demeanor based on belittlement. However, it should be crystal clear to all that a solution to this problem is possible, even if it requires persistent and daily effort. One may think that the solution to this problem is impossible, because every human being has something negative in itself. However, it should be borne in mind that a stimulus is necessary for the practical realization of negative behavior, and when such a likely most significant stimulus in the form of belittlement is absent, then there will be no other induced, negative forms of behavior (or will be at a marginal level). It should

also be realized that complete and comprehensive realization of this endeavor requires adequate education on a global scale, in all countries of the world. Such an approach can prevent a pattern of belittling behavior from "spreading" from one country to another, especially if international interactions are frequent (as is certainly the case at the current stage of global communication).

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that involving national, regional, and world leaders in solving this problem is of universal importance. In parallel, however, they need to work to solve the problem of establishing an objective and just value system in society. Without establishing an objective value system and rewarding achievement in accordance with such an objective value system, it is very difficult or almost impossible in practice to implement a global education based on respect (because there will always be a large number of opponents who may consider such a system utopian). It is difficult to expect others to be able to respect in an objective way a person whose values have not been adequately rewarded by the global (or local) system. A reward is essentially a form of honor given to a person for his values and accomplishments. Material rewards have now been adopted informally by most of the human population as a universal benchmark of value, and thus of respect. The truth is certainly different, yet along with other forms of rewarding human values, material reward certainly is a factor that should not be overlooked on the way of establishing a model of behavior based on respect.

The establishment of a global system based on respect is very realistic and possible from the practical side. About the reality of the application of this system speaks a very simple example from marketing. When advertising a particular product, especially of high quality (such as a luxury car), usually only its advantages are highlighted, whereby the disadvantages of competing products are not mentioned, or if even mentioned, there is no mention of manufacturers of inferior products. This simple model of emphasizing advantages, in case when it is needed, can also be applied to human behavior, where an individual can emphasize his or her values and advantages, without mentioning the shortcomings of other people, or the names of inferior people (from the aspect of the observed criterion). This prevents the belittlement of other people and their achievements.

Finally, it is necessary to point out how belittlement hinders the global prosperity of humanity. The belittlement of advanced ideas and initiatives is one of the basic forms of belittlement that has a direct effect on steering the course of civilizational progress in the wrong direction. In a situation where advanced ideas are not properly accepted or they are rejected, there can be no proper and desired progress. Another form of global belittlement is, as already mentioned, inadequate rewarding of true values. The third global type of belittling is the belittling of the needs and warnings of individuals or social groups that face a certain problem. This type of belittlement can be particularly destructive on a global scale, because it can undermine established values, or even set humanity back and question its survival.

Human culture has many dimensions. Although this may not always be the case, belittling certainly has to do with the culture of the behavior. Although all national cultures teach children the culture of good behavior, we are witnessing that unfortunately there are still children and adults who misbehave. One of the reasons for the failure in the development of a culture of behavior is that

the problem of behavior is not adequately approached from the aspect of belittling. This aspect is most likely a crucial element for the fundamental improvement of the culture of behavior. In the future, national ministries of culture should be more involved in shaping the behavior of the population that does not practice belittlement. Bearing in mind all the above, this work should be globally understood as an initial step towards the local and global abolition of belittling as a common form of behavior, and as an important step towards the formation of a fundamental and complete global model of behavior based on respect, which should contribute to the further prosperity of humanity and human civilization.

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