An unmentioned part of a popular study: *the sleepwalkers* – a review

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This note re-examines a book, *The Sleepwalkers* (2012), by the historian C. Clark. It is a best seller, and has been highly praised by many reviewers. Here is one example:

For a century the question of the origins of World War I has bedeviled historians… But no one who examines the question will be able to ignore *The Sleepwalkers* (David M. Shribman, *Boston Globe*, March 23, 2013.)

However, Clark’s book ends without solving the puzzle of the cause or causes of WWI. All of the involved countries are seen as more or less equally at fault. Perhaps more emphasis on emotions as causes might have helped. The part played by the emotion of shame, in the form of revenge for humiliation will be discussed here.

There is a hidden aspect of the book that neither the author nor any of the reviewers mention: the theory of *humiliation* as a way of finding a possible cause of the war. When I searched Clark’s text, there were 18 mentions of humiliation, the first on page 51, the last on page 558. A large part of this usage occurs when the author quotes the major players in World War I: they use it to explain motives. For example, Edward Gray, Prime Minister in England as World War I was approaching, is quoted as saying:

> If Britain were forced to choose between peace and the surrender of her international pre-eminence … peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable …to endure (p. 210).

He seems to be saying that avoiding *humiliation* is a motive that would cause England to go to war.

Other usages are by Clark himself. Like the quotes he describes, he also uses humiliation to explain behavior. For example, in referring to an incident in Russia just prior to the war:

> An unpopular warmongering martinet had been cut down by citizens of his own country driven to years of frenzy by years of humiliation and ill-treatment. (p. 412).

Yet neither Clark nor any of the reviews I read mention his references to the specific emotion of humiliation.

One idea is that France played the greatest part of starting World War I as revenge for their defeat by a group of a small German-speaking country in the war.
of 1870. For 41 years French politics and media were dominated by the cry for revenge (Scheff, 1994). The German states during that time formed into the single country of Germany. But the cry for revenge is largely missing during the period 1870-1914. It becomes prominent only with Hitler, beginning in 1933.

Shame as a forbidden word

The psychologist Gershen Kaufman is one of several writers (e.g. Scheff, 2014) who have argued that shame (humiliation is one of several words that refer to shame, but are somewhat less forbidden) is taboo in our society, as sexuality was earlier:

American society is a shame-based culture, but …shame remains hidden. Since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo. …The taboo on shame is so strict …that we behave as if shame does not exist (Kaufman 1989).

Kaufman’s phrase, shame about shame, turns out to have meaning beyond what he intended: just as fear can lead to more fear, causing panic, shame about shame can loop back on itself to various degrees, even to the point of having no natural limit, of being out of control. (Scheff 2011, Scheff et al 2018).

The book by D. Moisi (2009) on causes of war proposed humiliation as one of the basic causes of war, but doesn’t ever call it shame (Scheff 2018). Evelin Lindner (2006), a psychologist, has dealt extensively with shame / violence, and with her co-workers, produced a multitude of books, articles and lectures. Her naming of the international organization she established, Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, illustrates the problem of overcoming the taboo on shame. She affixed a reference in the title to the positive emotion that is the opposite of shame (dignity can be equivalent to the emotion of authentic pride), as well as using the less taboo name for shame, humiliation. However, unlike Moisi and Clark, at times she and her coauthors also use the forbidden term shame.

It should also be noted that humiliation as a cause for wars of revenge has begun to be studied by historians (Hall (2017), Hall and Ross (2015), Lacey (2009), Löwenheim & Heimann (2008), Saurette (2006). There is also a closely related literature on protecting male “honor” as a cause of war (Offer, 1995; Frevert, 2014). Frevert dared to actually use the word shame in his title. Perhaps there is movement toward the study of emotions as causes of war.

References


