

Humiliation-Revenge in Warfare: A Book Note

Thomas Scheff*

The Sociology Department at UCSB, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Thomas Scheff, The Sociology Department at UCSB, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, USA.

Received: September 01, 2017; **Published:** September 14, 2017

My book *Bloody Revenge* (1994) [1] proposed that humiliation can be felt by whole nations, and that it could lead to a war of revenge. World Wars I and II were proposed as examples. The huge role played by the desire for vengeance in France in the period 1872 - 1914 was illustrated by the way it dominated the French media and politics following their defeat by the Prussian nations in 1871. In the case of WWII, the rise of Hitler, which led to the war, was described in terms of his screaming emphasis on revenge, although the evidence was less massive.

The various reviews of my book seemed to miss the main point, even those that were sympathetic. They all appeared to be under the spell of the idea held in modern societies that emotions are not important in compared to behavior, thought, and the material world. Other works that upheld the humiliation-revenge theory, such as the series of studies by Lindner and her colleagues (see, for example, her 2006 book), were treated in the same way [2].

In the last 15 years, many references to the humiliation-vengeance cycle in warfare have finally appeared. But most of these studies also seem to hold back from directly proposing emotions as causes of war. Articles by Hall [3] and by Hall and Ross [4] illustrate this problem. Both articles discuss the possible influence of emotions, but take care not to put too much emphasis on them.

For example, in Hall's [3] study, humiliation is mentioned 8 times, but not in the summaries at the beginning and end of the article, nor in the title. There are by now many writers in this area, but only a few take a stronger stance than Hall [5,6]. Koschut [7] actually cites my work. But even these more advanced studies don't take the step of relating humiliation to the shame literature and therefore bringing it out of hiding. Such a step might help to better understand and reduce wars and other violence.

WWII

At least initially, the case for humiliation leading to WWII is also strong, but less massive. It is obvious the Germans held their own Weimar Republic (1919 - 1933) government in gross contempt. I have heard recordings of Hitler's speeches in which the loudest audience responses arose when he referred to Weimar with scathing contempt. He never called the government by its actual name, but referred to it indirectly: "*Vierzehn Jahren von Schmach und Schande!*" (Fourteen years of shame and disgrace).

It is possible that the most powerful reason for his contempt, and that of the nation, was the way of the Weimar Republic accepted the whole Treaty of Versailles at the end of WWI, without questioning any of it. The following quote from Wikipedia [8] concerns this reaction: "Germans of all political shades denounced the treaty and particularly the provision that blamed Germany for starting the war-as an insult to the nation's honor".

The Aversion to Shame in Modern Societies

It is unclear why the idea of vengeance as a cause of war is still not being given its due. One possibility that might point the way had been offered by the psychologist Gershon Kaufman [9]. He proposed that shame is usually treated as taboo, just as direct reference to

sex was forbidden in the 19th century. He wrote: "American society is a shame-based culture, but ...shame remains hidden. Since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo" (Kaufman, 1989, 46, etc.). It is relevant that I could find very few reviews of Kaufman's book.

However, one puzzle remains: neither Kaufman nor anyone else has suggested why the mention of shame would be taboo in modern societies. One possibility is that unlike other emotions, shame is strongly social: it depends on the attitude of others toward self. (Just as pride involves the belief that one is accepted by others, shame is based on the belief that one is rejected by others). But modern societies promote individualism, the freeing of the individual from others: family, friends, and community. Since shame is social, it doesn't fit with individualism, and therefore is treated as taboo.

Conclusion

If we hope to learn how to avoid wars, acknowledging and accepting the existence of shame rather than hiding it might be a helpful step. The possibly deadly conversation between Donald Trump and North Korea can be seen as both sides fending off shame by threatening to fight. Todd Hall [3] referred to similar sequences as "Are you dissing me?"

At the level of individual murderers, James Gilligan [10] found exactly the same process. As a prison psychiatrist, he asked prisoners convicted of murder why they had done it. Virtually all of them gave the same answer: "Cause he dissed me". Both Trump, N. Korea and the prisoners think they are controlling their emotions by ignoring them. Actually, however, the opposite seems to be true: by hiding their shame, they are controlled by it. Both individuals and nations need to learn to negotiate first: negotiation, no matter how lengthy and expensive, is likely to be much less devastating than war.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Todd Hall for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Bibliography

1. Scheff Thomas. "Bloody Revenge: Emotion, Nationalism and War". New York: Westview Press (Reissued by iUniverse 2000) (1994).
2. Lindner Evelin. "Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict". New York: Praeger (2006).
3. Hall Todd H. "On Provocation: Outrage, International Relations, and the Franco-Prussian War". *Security Studies* 26.1 (2017): 1-29.
4. Hall Todd and Andrew Ross. "Affective Politics after 9/11". *International Organization* 69.4 (2015): 847-879.
5. Löwenheim O and Heimann G. "Revenge in International Politics". *Security Studies* 17.4 (2008): 685-724.
6. Saurette Paul. "Humiliation and Post 9/11 Global Politics". *Review of International Studies* 32.3 (2006): 495-522.
7. Koschut S. "Emotional (security) communities: The significance of emotion norms in inter-allied conflict management". *Review of International Studies* 40.3 (2014): 533-558.
8. Wikipedia, Online Encyclopedia. The Treaty of Versailles (2006).
9. Kaufman Gershon. "The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-based Syndromes (2nd edition)". New York: Springer (1989).
10. Gilligan James. "Violence – Reflections on a National Epidemic". New York: Vintage Books (1997).

Volume 5 Issue 3 September 2017

©All rights reserved by Thomas Scheff.