

Websdale, Neil. Familicidal Hearts: The Emotional Styles of 211 Killers. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Reviewed by Thomas Scheff. Forthcoming in Psycritiques.

This is an important book for anyone interested in the roots of violence, and not just violence in the family. For one thing, it represents the largest and most systematic of the attempts to study multiple killings. Websdale gathered data on 211 cases of familicide (one spouse kills the other spouse and one or more of their children) from all over the world. There are a few earlier cases, but most are in the last 40 or so years.

The early cases are based almost entirely on press releases, but most of the later cases also involve much more data, coming from a wide variety of sources, such as police investigation reports and even interviews with persons who knew the family. Most of these sources were made available to Websdale by the domestic violence fatality review movement, a sizable group judging from the many persons acknowledged by the author. As a result, descriptions of the families and killings get quite detailed, which represented an unusual problem for this reader. I will return to this issue below.

For his basic thesis, the author draws on a theory by the psychiatrist James Gilligan:

The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence... The different forms of violence, whether toward individuals or entire populations, are motivated (caused) by shame. (Gilligan 1997, pp. 110-111. The idea of group shame will be discussed below)

Websdale finds considerable support for this thesis when there is enough detail to allow him to judge the presence of shame in the killer, that is, in a substantial majority of the 211 cases. All of the detailed cases suggested that the killer was deeply ashamed, as Gilligan's theory states.

However, Websdale's study not only supports the Gilligan theory, but also provides a surprise. Gilligan and everyone else who studied shame and violence seem to have assumed that anger also plays a major part in what Helen Lewis (1971; 1987) called feeling traps of shame-rage or humiliated fury. An image involving visible anger as well as shame is more or less implied in earlier work, including my and Retzinger's studies of violence. (Scheff and Retzinger 1991; Scheff, 1994). We wrote about shame-shame spirals, but implied that they lead to withdrawal or depression.

The shame/anger spiral predominating seems to fit a majority of Websdale's cases, but not a sizeable minority. In this minority, there is no prior history of violence, and the killings are carefully premeditated, often over a considerable length of time. Websdale calls these kinds of killers civil-reputable (CR), in contrast to those he calls livid-coercive (LC). The LC killers are virtually all men, and all of them have a history of aggression and violence. Almost all of the women killers fall into the CR category.

In a typical CR scenario, a respectable middle-class man has lost his job, but pretends that he is still working. A looming financial crisis is part of the problem, since the killer has always been proud of his ability to bring home money. Yet it appears that unbearable humiliation is the driving force.

Emotion Spirals

How could an emotion become unbearable? This is a puzzling question, because emotions are

usually brief signals that could hardly be overwhelming. One explanation would draw upon an aspect of Gilligan's shame theory not mentioned by Websdale: the kind of shame that leads to violence is secret shame, "probably the most carefully guarded secret held by violent men..." (Gilligan, 1997, p. 111). Lewis proposes a parallel idea, that it is unacknowledged shame that causes trouble (Lewis, 1971; 1987).

Shame is kept secret, Gilligan goes on to say, because one is ashamed of being ashamed. The idea of being ashamed of being ashamed suggests recursion as an answer to the puzzle. Perhaps emotions can act back on themselves indefinitely to the point that they seem unbearable.

People who blush easily provide a commonplace example of recursion. A blusher may become embarrassed that they are blushing, leading to more intense blushing, and so on. I once heard the actor Ian Holm reporting an instance. During a live performance when he forgot his lines, he became embarrassed, realized he was blushing, which embarrassed him further, ending up paralyzed in the fetal position. He had to be carried from the stage.

The idea of recursion or spiraling explains how one can become trapped within a feeling. The blusher's trap would not involve shame/anger, but shame/shame: being ashamed that you are ashamed, etc. Perhaps this is the dominant spiral for the CR killers. Even though a shame/anger spiral would also be involved, it would be hidden, especially from self, under the spiraling shame.

Websdale's finding of a type of multiple killer who shows no rage, acting carefully and with considerable planning, may also be applicable to collective violence. The ruling emotional spiral is not shame-anger, but shame-shame. A person or a nation can be so lost in a never-ending spiral of shame that it becomes the dominant force in their existence. Of the many instances, the most obvious is the case of the vengefulness (*revanchism*) of the French nation during the period 1871-1914 (Scheff 1994, Chapter 4).

The need to restore French honor (to remove the shame) after the loss of the Franco-German war in 1871 dominated the politics of the period. One of the leading politicians, a military hero, was referred to in the press as General Revenge. This theme was also blatant in popular songs, poetry and fiction. (Scheff 1994, pp. 137-139). The violence that resulted seems not enraged lost of control, but shame that submerged other emotions, interests and inhibitions that prevent killing.

Perhaps we owe Websdale more than the usual amount of gratitude for providing such an impressive study. In carrying it out, he had to sort through the details of many tragedies, each one painful in own particular way. For me, at least, reading the details was upsetting to the point that I often had to stop to take a deep breath, or at times, a full day's break. I feel the author should be congratulated not only for an excellent study, but also for being able to complete it.

References

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