

Ideas

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YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS



DAN ZEDEK/GLOBE STAFF PHOTOILLUSTRATION

THE ADULT HUMAN is a serious animal: a worker, a thinker, a problem solver. He or she strives for focus and efficiency, resisting frivolity in the name of being a grown-up and staying on task.

OK, so maybe that's not always true. If it were, there probably wouldn't be Ping-Pong tables popping up in America's trendiest office buildings or karaoke nights in downtown Boston. And there probably wouldn't be so many funny dog videos on Facebook or such a premium placed in social situations on making other people laugh.

The fact is, even the most responsible

adults occasionally indulge in what can only be described as playfulness: pursuing delight in all its forms, engaging in friendly, low-stakes competition, and investing precious resources in amusing themselves and others. While it's easy enough to say from personal experience that we do this stuff because it's fun, scientists who specialize in the psychology of play have only recently started getting a grip on what it is that makes otherwise self-possessed, mature adults inclined toward fooling around and being silly—and what long-term benefits they get out of it.

"Adults are playful—that's a fact," said René Proyer, a psychologist at the University of Zurich who has written more than a

dozen papers on adult playfulness over the past three years. "[But] psychologists haven't thought much about this, probably because it wasn't deemed worthy enough."

What Proyer and the other researchers who have recently moved to fill that gap are discovering is that playfulness, as a personality trait, is not only complex but consequential. People who exhibit high levels of playfulness—those who are predisposed to being spontaneous, outgoing, creative, fun-loving, and lighthearted—appear to be better at coping with stress, more likely to report leading active lifestyles, and more likely to succeed academically. According to a group of researchers

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NEW RESEARCH UNCOVERS THE REAL BENEFITS OF PLAYFULNESS IN ADULTS

BY LEON NEYFAKH

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The war we can't agree on

VIRGINIA MAYO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

What does World War I mean? A century later, the conflict continues.

By JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH

WHEN WORLD WAR I began 100 years ago, on July 28, 1914, every nation fighting thought it knew why. England, France, and Russia blamed Germany and Austria-Hungary, while the latter blamed the former. Socialists blamed imperialists, pacifists blamed warmongering leaders, and Americans blamed the Old World for succumbing to its usual barbarism.

A century later, the guns have long been silenced, but the war over the war continues. To an extent that seems amazing for a modern conflict, there is still no consensus over who was responsible for World War I, whether it was a just or unjust war, or even whether it needed to be fought at all.

Instead, the war has enjoyed a long history as

a political football, invoked by politicians, pundits, scholars, and activists to support all kinds of views, and influencing US foreign policy in different ways with each generation.

Today, as the war has faded from America's political consciousness—it's World War II, Vietnam, or Iraq that tend to be invoked more often—it remains a point of contention among academics, who continue to joust about its meaning and publish books exploring the war's origins. A quick tour of how we've seen the war through history suggests that the shifting American story of WWI may not always tell us much about the war itself, but offers an excellent window into the outlook of the nation at any given time.

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World War I

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SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEM

In 1916, Woodrow Wilson was reelected president with the slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War." Two years after shooting began, the prevailing American sentiment was that the war was an uncivilized exercise conducted by savages—"a violent eruption from the pit of corruption that was Europe," as the historian David Kennedy later put it. The United States was a paradise blessed by geography, ideology, and God; part of its mission was to stay free of such senseless carnage, which it did—until 1917.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR HEROISM

Six months after Wilson was reelected, he asked Congress to declare war against Germany to "make the world safe for democracy." Though the war policy was a U-turn, the idea behind it wasn't. Europe was still barbaric—but instead of hiding from the old continent, America needed to redeem it. The war was, for a time, immensely popular. Millions of men enlisted in the military—fitting for a nation bursting with enthusiasm and self-confidence, an emerging continental power with a new sense of its role in the world.

A MISTAKE

To say that Americans were disappointed with the aftermath of WWI would be an understatement. Immediately following the war, the Versailles Peace Treaty swiftly disintegrated, Germany collapsed, Russia warred with Poland, and Europe in general returned to its old ways. Instead of a new world made safe for democracy, Americans got back an old world still safe for traditional power politics. The 1920s also saw the beginnings of a cultural revolution: flappers, bootleggers, and jazz. There was enough change at home—maintaining large-scale commitments in Europe was too much. Instead, America returned to "normalcy," a word Warren Harding coined in his successful presidential campaign.

A WARNING

As assistant secretary of the Navy during the war, Franklin Roosevelt saw up close the Wilson administration's handling of the conflict and its aftermath. From this, he drew many lessons, among them that simply showing up and winning isn't enough: What matters is constructing a lasting postwar peace. He cultivated Republicans to ensure continued US engagement, acceded to the reality of Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe, and insisted on rehabilitating Germany. In many ways, this cautionary version has remained the dominant interpretation of the war by American leaders and pundits. That's what President Clinton meant when in 1995, making the case for intervening in the former Yugoslavia, he lamented that, "After World War I, we pulled back from the world, leaving a vacuum that was filled by the forces of hatred."

AN ACCIDENT

In 1962, historian Barbara Tuchman published "The Guns of August." A history of WWI's origins, the book argued that none of the combatants wanted a war—but by ignoring the fact it might happen, they blundered into what was then the costliest conflict in history. A Pulitzer Prize-winner and bestseller, Tuchman's book influenced how President Kennedy handled the Cuban Missile Crisis. ("I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time [called] 'The Missiles of October,'" JFK told his brother.) Tuchman's view would become the most popular one among an American public scarred by the futile-seeming war in Vietnam, but today few experts believe that Tuchman's thesis holds up. They may not agree whose fault it was, but the mounting aggression of the time made the war something considerably more than a mistake.

GERMANY'S FAULT

Today, the most widely accepted explanation among American historians is that Germany wanted a war to prevent Russian enlargement, to increase its overseas colonies, and to become the dominant European power. This wasn't initially an American idea, however: It came from a 1961 book by the German historian Fritz Fischer, whose work blaming his own country rocked the nation. West Germany had rebuilt itself as a responsible country after Hitler's death, and the last thing it wanted was to be found guilty of yet another global catastrophe. Fischer's argument found a sympathetic audience in America, reassuring doubters that US participation in the war, and its ultimate role in stopping Germany, hadn't been futile after all.

AN AFFAIR OF THE EAST

If one thing can be said to characterize the emerging modern worldview, it's the recognition of the importance of what happens beyond the actions of traditional Western powers. In 2011 Sean McMeekin, an American historian who works at a Turkish university, released a book in which he pointed to a new culprit: Russia, whose territorial ambitions in the crumbling Ottoman Empire led it to provoke Germany in the hopes of swiftly winning a war. (This theory was more counterintuitive even than Niall Ferguson's 1998 book, "The Pity of War," that—controversially—held England responsible for the war's huge toll, in taking a smaller conflict and transforming it into a catastrophic global struggle.) Framing the war as an Eastern land grab that just happened to lead to the deaths of millions of Europeans might not ever become the standard narrative, but at a time when those former Ottoman lands are again a huge preoccupation for America, it may be just the angle for our times.

Jordan Michael Smith is a contributing writer at Salon and The Christian Science Monitor.



Uncommon Knowledge

Surprising insights from the social sciences BY KEVIN LEWIS

The impulsive candy fiend

BY DEFINITION, IF you have a sweet tooth, you're tempted by sweet foods. But new research from the University of Chicago suggests you'll also be the kind of person who's tempted by any immediate gratification. Healthy young adults without substance-abuse histories were asked to rate the sweetness of various cherry Kool-Aid concentrations. Individuals who liked the sweetest concentrations also expressed a stronger preference for smaller, immediate rewards relative to larger, delayed rewards. (However, liking sweetness was not associated with the ability to exercise self-control.)

Weafer, J. et al., "Sweet Taste Liking Is Associated with Impulsive Behaviors in Humans," *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* (June 2014).

Begone, bad doctors

MALPRACTICE DAMAGES CAN soar to unbelievable heights these days, and some states have instituted caps on how high they can go. That may be a big boon—for people in neighboring states. A study by an economist at Notre Dame finds that "when a county's neighboring state passes a cap on noneconomic damages, the supply of physicians falls by 4 percent" in that county, but the statewide malpractice rate also "falls by approximately 4 percent." This doesn't seem to be explained by higher-risk specialties leaving the state. Instead, it looks like malpractice-prone doctors move their

practices over the state line. And that can mean a real improvement in outcomes for patients in the states left behind: "A back-of-the-envelope calculation suggests that if all of a state's neighbors were to pass caps on noneconomic damages, there would be 311 fewer deaths per year in that state."

Lieber, E., "Medical Malpractice Reform, the Supply of Physicians, and Adverse Selection," *Journal of Law and Economics* (May 2014).

Accidentally good for the earth!

THE PACKAGING ON products often touts the environmental spirit behind them. But maybe marketers should think twice. In several experiments,

researchers at the Yale School of Management found that when a product was described as better for the environment "as initially intended," people were less interested in buying it, compared to when it was better for the environment "as an unintended side effect." The same phenomenon occurred in the context of food: People expected it to be tastier if its healthiness was unintended versus intended. The phenomenon seems to be the result of people inferring that socially responsible motives lead to a lower investment in quality. Indeed, the effect was reversed when the socially responsible benefit was not part of the product itself, as in paying workers better wages.

Newman, G. et al., "When Going Green Backfires: How Firm

Intentions Shape the Evaluation of Socially Beneficial Product Enhancements," *Journal of Consumer Research* (forthcoming).

Are interracial couples...hotter?

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS have traditionally been frowned upon by many communities. What would make people brave possible disapproval to date outside their race? Maybe someone extremely good-looking. Researchers at the University of California Irvine found that "interracial daters exhibited more desirable attributes than intraracial daters, most consistently in the realm of physical attractiveness" as judged by independent raters.

Wu, K. et al., "The Sweetness of Forbidden Fruit: Interracial Daters Are More Attractive than Intraracial Daters," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (forthcoming).

Married CEOs play it safe

NOTE TO BOARDS OF directors: If you want to push your company, consider hiring a CEO who's single. In an analysis of the financial performance of publicly traded companies, two professors of finance found that companies run by unmarried CEOs "invest more aggressively (in capital expenditures, R&D, advertising, and acquisitions)" and have more volatile stock prices, even after controlling for other characteristics of the CEO and the company. To confirm that this relationship didn't just reflect riskier firms hiring riskier personalities, the professors compared companies headquartered in states with community-property divorce laws to companies headquartered in other states—considering that "wealthy individuals are substantially less likely to be married in community property states"—and found that the effects of CEO marital status "continue to hold (and are actually stronger)."

Roussanov, N. & Savor, P., "Marriage and Managers' Attitudes to Risk," *Management Science* (forthcoming).

Kevin Lewis is an Ideas columnist. He can be reached at kevin.lewis.ideas@gmail.com.



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