

Reading for subsection 1 (*Nine Basic Affects: Positive Affects, Negative Affects, and Surprise-Startle*):

### ***Surprise-Startle, The Macho Script and Nothing***

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Because we have heard so little about surprise-startle, I thought a post on this important affect would be welcomed and invite interested others to add their comments or critiques. But I would like to discuss surprise-startle in the context of two other topics, namely the attack other mode of shame management and the macho script. There has been a lot of discussion on this forum about domestic violence and its relation to the attack other mode of managing shame. For a breathtakingly detailed and thrilling (mixing fear with interest-excitement) intellectual tour on which one can further understand likely origins of the mode of attacking others, the article by Donald Mosher and Silvan Tomkins titled "Scripting the Macho Man: Hypermasculine Socialization and Enculturation," *Journal of Sex Research*, 1988, 25, 60-84 is available for service.

In this post I am paraphrasing from a section of this article and adding some of my own comments on the surprise-startle reaction, especially as it applies to a very specific situation—that in which one is surprised or startled to find a nonresponsive, callous response to one's own fear or distress. The ideology of machismo, as explicated by Mosher and Tomkins, entails the use of this form of surprise-startle by the macho as one way to attack others.

I would like to add some of my own thoughts about this subject. In particular, I would like to hypothesize about possible psychological processes that I believe may be involved when non-macho persons in relationship with the macho fail to use the macho's callous nonresponsiveness as an indicator that s/he is more extensively socialized to conform to an unsympathetic machismo ideology.

To begin all of this, I first present Mosher and Tomkins's sixth dynamic for socializing a youngster for machismo. The sixth dynamic socializing the differential magnification of "superior masculine" affects is as follows: Surprise Becomes an Interpersonal Strategy to Achieve Dominance by Evoking Fear and Uncertainty in Others.

Surprise-startle is an affect whose function appears to be that of clearing away attention from anything else one may be attending to (affectively responding to.) Startle interrupts whatever is happening and makes it necessary for the person to reassess immediately priorities for further investment of one's attention.

The child-in-training for machismo learns that he can surprise others and thereby exercise control over them by interrupting whatever they are doing at the moment. He also discovers that if one surprises another repeatedly, one can thereby activate fear in another. By activating fear in others with repeated surprises, the macho also discovers another means of providing himself entertaining excitement.

The following are some of the ways a young macho-to-be activates surprise-startle in others:

- 1 Showing sudden intense anger
- 2 Performing risky acts of daring
- 3 Behaving unpredictably
- 4 Creating common place surprises of all sorts
- 5 Using displays of callous toughness in the face of others' emotions of distress and fear.

I think it worth emphasizing that Mosher and Tomkins understand callous, unempathic (non)-responsiveness when witnessing another's fear or distress to be not just shaming and distressing to the one in fear or distress. Such callousness is an activator of the affect of surprise-startle, i.e., the callousness causes a sudden reaction in which one is moved to quickly scan the environment and reassess priorities.

It is my supposition that many macho persons can probably be identified by their callous response to others' distress or fear. But I believe that often non-macho persons who first become acquainted with someone they do not yet know to be a macho disregard their surprise-startle reaction to another's callousness. They disregard it because surprise-startle can quickly dissipate and seem inconsequential if nothing further happens immediately that is surprising—and, more importantly, because many persons in this culture are habituated to this particular activator of surprise-startle in that the larger culture, in many ways and in many places, is itself often as much or more callous to distress and fear.

Moreover, many persons are unfortunately able to overlook all their affects in general and thus do not make further cognitive elaborations in consciousness about the significance of their surprise at the Macho's callousness in the face of distress or fear. Unfortunately this handy clue to another's possible macho script—one's own surprise-startle in reaction to another's callousness—thus may be ignored as an important possible indication of far more significant entrenched socialization within macho's unsympathetic ideology.

There is another reason that the surprise-startle reaction may not be used to help one recognize the possible presence of a macho script. When callousness is expressed as a blank, indifferent, nonresponsiveness, then in one sense it can be said that the nonresponsiveness consists of "doing nothing."

There exists a body of psychological research literature showing that human beings, and other species, have difficulty noticing the presence of a nonevent. When that which stimulates a reaction is the NON-occurrence of something, the absence of something, then the occurrence of this absence may be unacknowledged, unnoticed, or, that is, unknown consciously.

It is of course "known" unconsciously because one has a startle reaction to the nonresponsiveness. But in trying consciously to account for one's own startle response, one may be left with no accounting if the situation seems merely to be one in which "nothing" has happened. It takes a special type of perceptual self training to begin to notice a hole in a doughnut, a space inside a glass, a sin of omission, neglect of caring, and the nonevents that produce the startle reaction to abandonment in moments of one's fear and distress. The macho, of course, has the greatest difficulty recognizing the absence of a soothing, understanding response from another because, in addition to the reasons just explained for the non-macho's failure to recognize callous nonresponsiveness, the macho also has been trained from childhood to expect not to be comforted in times of fear or distress, a process elaborated with exquisite clarity in the Mosher and Tomkins article.

(Editor's note: This contribution stands as an excellent addition to the 1994 SSTI colloquium "The Experience and Expression of Anger," the tape album of which may be obtained through the Tomkins Institute office.)