

UNDERSTANDING THE MACHO STUDENT:

Implications for interventions and behaviour management in schools

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The following article was written in an attempt to understand the nature and personality of our typical “macho” kid that we find so often involved in situations in our schools and other settings. If we understand what is happening for them at a biological and psychological level we might be able to structure our interventions (one to one, class and whole of system) in a way that may actually make a difference! I will not attempt to suggest what interventions might work, but draw a picture of this type of student in the hope that our collective creativity may produce the goods!

Those school personnel who have been trained in Community Accountability Conferencing (also known as Community Conferencing, Diversionary Conferencing and Family Group Conferencing) will know that much of what informs our practice is Silvan Tomkins’ Affect and Script Theory (1962-1992). Tomkins asserts that our biology is the basis for our emotional reactions to the events and people in our lives. For those of you not familiar with his work, which has been extended by Nathanson (1992 and 1996), Tomkins describes the innate mechanisms within our limbic system which respond to changes in the rate and density of neural stimulation (what’s going on around us). Once these mechanisms are “fired” by these changes, we experience a range of “affects” which once they filter in to our awareness, become “feelings”. The first and most obvious site (and there are many) in the body where affects are registered is the musculature of the face. So, for example, by the time we might have registered that we *feel* angry our faces will have experienced a range of changes which we associate with the look of anger - red face, eyes narrowed, tense facial muscles (a clenched jaw). Tomkins identified nine basic affects from which an enormous number of combinations and permutations of emotional experiences are possible. Our “personality” or life script is built up over time as layers of affective experience are related to particular scenes which tend to recur in the family or social setting. The nine affects are interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, shame-humiliation, distress-anguish, disgust, dissmell(contempt), anger-rage and fear-terror. I will not attempt to describe these affects in depth in this article but familiarisation with the recommended readings should help those interested in pursuing such information.

The community conference process recognises the motivations attached to our basic biology and emotional lives and is structured in such a way to increase the likelihood of bonds being repaired between people in the wake of an incident which has harmed them. In our research to find explanations for why conferencing was so deeply satisfying and successful, we began to read in greater depth the work of Tomkins, Nathanson and

others. In doing so, we discovered patterns (or scripts) which described a significant proportion of our male school population (and perhaps an increasing number of females) which we describe as “macho”. The following explanation defines machismo in affect and script theory language and provides us with signposts for the most effective points at which to intervene and what principles ought to guide those interventions.

The macho script is best understood as a “warrior” script, with the dominance of the victor over the vanquished. Tomkins and Mosher (1988) define the warrior as a “real man” with an entitlement to casual sex, who sees violence as a manly attribute and perceives danger as exciting. They propose that the macho script is developed in an environment of caregiving which is more negative than positive, and in which the young infant and child experiences deep distress. This distress is viewed as a sign of weakness and is prevented from being relieved by the usual comforting responses or being allowed to be expressed. As a result, the distress backs up as anger.

The caregiver also inhibits any expression of fear in the infant/child by dominating them and treating them with contempt. The young learn that fear is shameful and learn to avoid attending to the feelings of fear. Eventually the fear is habituated and the stimuli which produced fear now produce excitement. They have also learnt by this time that showing distress in their family setting or culture is also shameful. They defend against those feelings of shame by using angry aggression and the excitement of risk taking. Their pride in their anger and excitement is matched by disgust and contempt for those who do display distress and fear (their shameful inferiors).

Domination over the weak now generates further excitement (how many bullies and thugs do we know fit this pattern?). Surprise becomes an additional tool for achieving dominance over the weak. Excitement becomes magnified to the point that the only relaxation (enjoyment) available to these young people is when they are celebrating victory over the weak who have been vanquished.

In the dynamics which describe a typical exchange between a “warrior” and his/her “enemy”, he will use the element of surprise to elevate fear in the other. The other’s distress, shame and humiliation become a source of anger, disgust and contempt. The excitement of the risk-taking associated with all these behaviours becomes more important than the enjoyment of relaxation.

So in the socialisation that occurs in the early years of personality (script) formation, we see a trend for macho youth where anger, disgust, contempt, surprise and excitement are seen as admirable masculine traits. The more “softer, weaker” affects of fear, distress, shame and enjoyment are seen to be feminine. Thus *power over* others is linked to angry violence which has been firstly elevated, then idealised and then made sacred. (Moore, 1997)

Are you thinking (as I am) of young people and families and situations you know where machismo operates? Where, when and how do we attempt to change the scripts of our young people who are so bound by these early influences? It would seem to me that we

need to educate our young people about the emotional world that drives our behaviours at the earliest opportunity if there is to be any hope of resocialising them. We need to be teaching them about the need to be emotionally intelligent and the biological nature of their experiences and that affects (as defined by Tomkins and others) are neither good nor bad. If we know where the “deficits” are in the scripts of our “victors” and “vanquished”, we can teach them other ways of making sense of what is happening to them - in therapy, in our classrooms or in the way we do business with them in managing their behaviour.

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