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## Hypermasculinity and Violence as a Social System

Thomas J. Scheff

### Abstract

Current theories of conflict fail to develop an adequate model of the causation of violence. Greed for power is often invoked, but how greed itself develops is seldom considered. Particularly absent are models explaining the vast energy that propels violence and destruction. This essay will consider bases of greed and violence unleashed by alienation and repression of emotions. Since it appears that most men in our society are more alienated/repressed than most women, the idea of hypermasculinity is used to develop a theory of conflict. The combination of alienation with the repression of vulnerable emotions suggests a biosocial doomsday machine that leads to cascading violence and destructiveness. The way in which both men and women contribute to this system is considered.

## Hypermasculinity and Violence as a Social System

Thomas J. Scheff

Marx's early work implied two basic dimensions of the human condition: power and class, on the one hand, and, on the other, social integration: the solidarity/alienation polarity. His later work, however, was limited to the first dimension, power and class in political economies. Unfortunately, social science has followed suit, with greed for power and property usually seen as the dominant human motive.

In his early writing, however, Marx gave the two dimensions equal treatment. In 1844 he suggested that the most important human "species" need is *connection* with other human beings. He went on to discuss alienation from the mode of production, others and self. Although the state of connectedness of actual human bonds is much less visible than power and property, he noted two observable emotional responses to alienation: impotence and indignation (Tucker 1978: 133-144).

As will be suggested below, feelings of impotence can be viewed as a shame cognate, and indignation, as representing a shame-anger blend. Marx himself seemed to link these signals of alienation to violence. In a letter (to Ruge, 1843) discussing German nationalism, he wrote: "Shame is a kind of anger turned in on itself. And if a whole nation were to feel ashamed it would be like a lion recoiling in order to spring." This sentence can be seen as prophetic of the next hundred years of German history, particularly the rise of Hitler (Hitler's Appeal to the Germans, Chapter 5 in Scheff 1994).

Following the current practice in most social science, analysis of masculine behavior links it to lust for power and domination, with no mention of alienation and its relational/emotional accompaniments. A hint in the latter direction can be found in the work of the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler (1956). He argued that young children have an intense need for love and connectedness, especially from their parents. To the extent that a secure bond is not available, Adler proposed two different responses: an inferiority complex (chronic shame), or *the drive for power*. Since we now know, thanks to child development studies, that male children get less affection and intimate talk from parents than females, his idea points toward an emotional/relational basis for the hypermasculine focus on power.

### Links between Hypermasculinity (*machismo*) and Violence

An English general describes the slaughter of his brigade as they moved toward German lines in the First World War.

They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine gun fire that finally wiped them out. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back. I have never seen, indeed could never have imagined such a magnificent display of *gallantry, discipline and determination*. (Emphasis added).

The general sees the men's self control as virtuous, but it can also be seen as strict adherence to what my teacher, Erving Goffman, called the cult of masculinity (*Where the Action Is* 1967). The idea of a *cult* of masculinity turns out to be especially fortuitous, as was the case with many of Goffman's seemingly casual formulations. Since a cult points toward culture, hypermasculinity might be explained in terms of social relationships and emotions.

Goffman's chapter "Where the Action Is" (1967, pp 149-270) is by far the longest of his essays. He proposed that scenes of "action" (risk-taking) are occasions that allow the display of "character," in the sense of establishing one's degree of "courage, gameness, integrity, and composure" (p. 229). Of the four components, Goffman gave most attention to the last. By composure, he meant poise, calmness, and above all, control over one's emotions. "Character contests" are competitions in which risks are taken to determine which actor has the most character, and particularly, control over emotions.

Goffman's discussion implies that it is masculine men that have "character." A man with character who is under stress is not going to cry and blubber like a woman or child might. All occasions are seen as opportunities for one to test one's own character as compared to that of other person or persons. The hypermasculine pattern leads to *competition*, rather than *connection* between persons. Since he did not consider the link to violence to be described here, Goffman's view of hypermasculinity appears to be a gross error. Men commanded into machine gun fire, and passively accepting the command, is a vision less of courage of the leaders and the men than their stupidity.

### Emotions and Self-knowledge

A social/emotional approach to conflict runs counter to the rationalism of most current thinking. Most political analysis is "realist": human actions are usually viewed as propelled by material, calculable forces. In world literature, however, there has long been an alternative to narrow rationalism in the quest for self-knowledge: *know thyself*. Classic Greek philosophy proposed that a crucial goal for all human beings was knowledge of self, and by implication, that *human folly is a result of ignorance of self*. This thread forms a central concern in both ancient and modern literature.

The theme is epitomized in *Tasso*, an 18<sup>th</sup> century drama: "The gift of the great poet is to be able to voice his suffering, even when other men would be struck dumb in their agony." The conjunction between the suppression of emotions and dumbness may turn out to be more than just an accidental pun, as suggested by the example from WWI above.

Self-knowledge is not just a cognitive matter, but also an emotional one. Discovering one's hidden emotions may not only be the most difficult part of knowing thyself, but also the most important. Knowledge of emotions in self is also closely related to the social realm: awareness of emotions concerns not only one's own, but those of others, and therefore links individual and social matters. To the extent that we are ignorant of our own emotions and those of others, our life is a long sleep.

Boys, more than girls, learn at an early age that vulnerable feelings (love, grief, fear and shame) are seen as signs of weakness. First at home, then at school they find that acting out anger, even if faked, is seen as strength. Expressing anger verbally, rather than storming, may be seen as weakness. At first merely for self-protection, boys begin suppressing feelings that may be interpreted as signs of weakness.

In Western cultures most boys learn, as first option, to hide their vulnerable feelings in emotionless talk, withdrawal, or silence. I will call these three responses (emotional) SILENCE. In situations where these options seem unavailable, males may cover their vulnerable feelings behind a display of hostility. That is, young boys learn in their families, and later, from their peers, to suppress emotions they actually feel by acting out anger whether they feel it or not. I call this pattern "silence/violence." Vulnerable feelings are first hidden from others, and after many repetitions, even from self. In this latter stage, behavior becomes compulsive. When men

face what they construe to be threatening situations, they may be compelled to SILENCE or to rage and aggression.

Even without threat, men seem to be more likely to SILENCE or violence than women. With their partners, most men are less likely to talk freely about feelings of resentment, humiliation, embarrassment, rejection, joy, genuine pride, loss and anxiety. This may be the reason they are more likely to show anger: they seem to be backed up on a wide variety of intense feelings, but sense that only anger is allowed them. Two studies of alexithymia (emotionlessness; Krystal 1988, Taylor et al, 1997) do not mention any difference between men and women, but most of the cases discussed are men.

Numbing out fear, particularly, makes men dangerous to themselves and others. Fear is an innate biological signal of danger that helps us survive. When we see a car heading toward us on a collision course, we have an immediate, automatic fear response: WAKE UP SLEEPY-HEAD, YOUR LIFE IS IN DANGER! Much faster than thought, this reaction increases our chance of survival, and repressing it is dangerous to self and others. If the sense of fear has been repressed, it is necessary to find ways of uncovering it.

In order to avoid pain inflicted by others, we learn to repress the expressions of feeling that lead to negative reactions from others. After thousands of curtailments, repression becomes habitual and out of consciousness. But as we become backed up with avoided emotions, we have the sense that experiencing them would be unbearably painful. In this way, avoidance leads to avoidance in an ever increasing, self-perpetuating loop. The idea of social/emotional *feedback loops* may provide the model of motives that can lead toward infinite intensity.

### **Shame as the Master Emotion**

Pride and shame are not only individual feelings, but also crucial elements in social systems. Genuine pride can be seen to signal and generate solidarity in the sense of connectedness. Shame signals and generates alienation in the sense of disconnectedness. People who are on the same page in each other's presence tend to toward authentic pride states, those who are disconnected tend toward shame states.

I use the awkward phrases "pride states" and "shame states," because, as will be discussed below, most of our pride, and almost all of our shame occurs outside of awareness. Especially in English-speaking cultures, these two emotions are usually sensed to be unacceptable, even to one's self.

The emotion of shame can be directly acknowledged by referring to one's inner states of insecurity, or feelings of separateness or powerlessness. But several studies have shown that shame usually goes unacknowledged to self and others. For example, Lewis (1971) used systematic measures of emotion to analyze the recordings of over a hundred psychotherapy sessions. She found that shame was by far the most frequently occurring emotion, but that it was virtually never mentioned by client or therapist.

Acknowledging shame helps connect parties; admissions of feelings of weakness or vulnerability can build solidarity and trust. One is exposing one's deepest feelings. Denial of shame builds a wall between parties. If shame signals are disguised and/or ignored, both parties lose touch with each other. Pride and shame cues give instant indications of the "temperature" of the relationship. Pride means the parties are neither engulfed (too close), a "we" relationship, nor isolated (too far), an "I" relationship, but are emotionally and cognitively connected. Elias called an I-We relationship "interdependence" (1972). Overt shame usually signals engulfment, bypassed shame, isolation (see discussion of these two forms of shame below).

Unacknowledged shame appears to be *recursive*, feeding upon itself, and to cause recursion in other emotions, such as grief and fear. To the extent that this is the case, shame could be crucial in the causation of interminable conflict. One type of loop involves only shame. If it goes unacknowledged, it can loop back upon itself (being ashamed that one is ashamed). For example, persons prone to blushing have told me that when they are conscious of blushing, they fall into a loop of being ashamed of their blushing, and blushing more because they are ashamed, and so on.

Shame can also co-occur with other emotions, such as grief (unresolved grief), fear (fear panics), or anger (humiliated fury) causing unending recursion. Unacknowledged shame seems to foil the biological and cultural mechanisms that allow for the expression and harmless discharge of these elemental emotions. In the absence of shame, or if it is acknowledged, grief may be discharged by weeping, under culturally appropriate conditions of mourning. But if shame is evoked by grief and goes unacknowledged, unending loops of emotions (shame-grief sequences) may occur.

Individuals and groups may be unable to mourn. Volkan (2004) sees this inability as central to what he calls the intergenerational transmission of trauma. He noted that the battle cry for the Serbian attack on Bosnia was a defeat by the Turks 800 years earlier.

If shame is evoked but is unacknowledged, it can set off a sequence of shame alternating with anger. However, shame-shame sequences are probably much more prevalent than shame-anger sequences. Elias's (1978, 1982) analysis of changes in advice manuals over the last 5 centuries implies that shame-shame sequences are a central core in the development of modern civilization, to the extent that they occur in the socialization of children.

The other, less frequent direction in the dysfunctional management of shame is to mask it with anger. Shame/anger may be interminable in the form of "helpless anger," or in the more explosive form, "humiliated fury." The shame-anger loop could be central to destructive conflict. If one is in a shame state with respect to another, one route of denial is to become angered at the other, whether the other is responsible or not. That is, if one feels rejected by, insulted by, or inferior to another, denial of shame can result in a shame-anger loop of unlimited intensity and duration.

### **A Theory of Massive Violence**

One difficulty in communicating the new theory is that emotions have virtually disappeared as creditable motives in modern scholarship, as already indicated. One would hardly know they existed from reading the analyses of causes of conflict in the social sciences. When references to emotions are made, they are likely to be abstract, casual, indirect, and brief. For example, emotions are sometimes invoked under the rubric of "non-rational motives," but with little attempt to specify what this category might contain.

Unacknowledged alienation and vulnerable emotions can lead to interminable conflict. Like Watzlawick and colleagues (1967), I propose that some conflicts are unending, any particular quarrel being only a link in a continuing chain. What causes interminable conflict? There are two forms of interminable conflict, the quarrel and impasse. Both forms may grow out of isolation and unacknowledged shame and other vulnerable emotions. Shame is pervasive in conflictful interaction, but largely invisible to interactants (and to most researchers). I connect the two forms of conflict with the two forms of unacknowledged shame proposed by Lewis (1971); quarrels with the *bypassed* form, impasses with the *overt, undifferentiated* form. The two forms of shame are polar opposites in terms of thought and feeling. Overt shame involves

painful feeling with little ideation, bypassed shame, rapid thought, speech, or behavior, but little feeling. Lewis' analysis parallels Adler's (1953), but also represents an immense advance over it. Unlike Adler, she described observable markers for the theoretical constructs, and specified the causal sequence, the unending spiraling of emotion in "feeling traps."

Overt shame is marked by pain, confusion, and bodily reactions: blushing, sweating, and/or rapid heartbeat. One may be at a loss for words, with fluster or disorganization of thought or behavior, as in states of embarrassment. Many of the common terms for painful feelings appear to refer to this type of shame, or combinations with anger: feeling peculiar, shy, bashful, awkward, funny, bothered, or miserable; in adolescent vernacular, being freaked, bummed, or weirded out. The phrases "I felt like a fool," or "a perfect idiot" are prototypic.

Bypassed shame is manifested as a brief painful feeling, usually less than a second, followed by obsessive and rapid thought or speech. A common example: one feels insulted or criticized. At that moment (or later in recalling it), one might experience a jab of painful feeling (producing a groan or wince), followed immediately by imaginary but compulsive, repetitive replays of the offending scene. The replays are variations on a theme: how one might have behaved differently, avoiding the incident, or responding with better effect. One is obsessed.

Lewis (1971) referred to internal shame-rage process as a feeling trap, as "anger bound by shame," or "humiliated fury." Kohut's (1971) concept, "narcissistic rage," appears to be the same affect, since he viewed it as a compound of shame and rage. Angry that one is ashamed, or ashamed that one is angry, then one might be ashamed to be so upset over something so "trivial." The shame part, particularly, is rarely acknowledged, difficult to detect and dispel. Shame-rage spirals may be brief, a matter of minutes, but can also last for hours, days, or a lifetime, as bitter hatred or resentment.

Brief sequences of shame/rage may be quite common. Escalation is avoided through withdrawal, conciliation, or some other tactic. Wars are generated by a less common process. Watzlawick and colleagues (1967:107–108) call it "symmetrical escalation." Since such conflicts have no limits, they may have lethal outcomes. In this theory, unacknowledged shame is the cause of revenge-based cycles of conflict [this formulation was anticipated in the work of Geen (1968) and Feshback (1971)]. Shame-rage may escalate continually to the point that a person or a group can be in a more or less permanent fit of shame/rage, a kind of madness.

### **Gender Differences in Emotion Management**

In my experience, most women express vulnerable emotions more than most men. Certainly they express fear and grief more. The difference between men and women with respect to shame is probably less pronounced, however, women are more expressive of this emotion, if only obliquely. That is, women seem more likely to review the events of their day, either to themselves or with another person, than men. In doing so, they are likely to encounter one or more of the vulnerable emotions.

On the other hand, more women are inhibited as regards expressing anger, both verbally and physically. However, when it comes to expressing love, there seems to be a huge difference between most men and women. Men learn early on from fathers and schoolmates that love, like fear, grief and shame, is likely to be interpreted as a sign of weakness. It too, is seen as a vulnerable emotion. This difference is represented in a comic episode in the film *Big*. Tom Hanks, a ten-year-old boy magically inhabiting the body of the man he will become, is mystified by the flirtatiousness of a woman who is attracted to him. When he finally understands, he responds by giving her a playground shove.

My impression is that the gender difference in these four emotions is slowly decreasing, as women are being prepared at home and school for careers. This change is clearest with respect to anger; more women are expressing or acting out anger. The change toward the masculine pattern of vulnerable emotions is less clear, and may be quite slow. It seems that even career women still cry much more freely than men and are quicker to feel and acknowledge fear.

### **Killing by Men**

Men are far more likely to become mass killers than women. An earlier article (Scheff 2003), used the examples of Lt. Calley and Hitler to illustrate my theory of hypermasculine isolation, repression and violence. Newman (2004) collected information about all mass killing episodes in schools between 1974, when they were unusual, to 2002, when they had become more frequent. All told, she found twenty-seven shootings involving twenty-nine boys. (In two of the episodes, there were two shooters). No episode with a girl shooter was found. Women can be as verbally abusive as men, and commit homicides, but are much less likely to commit multiple, and especially, random killings. (The recent shooting in the Goleta Post Office by a woman is still a rare occurrence.)

As far as I can tell, none of the boys in the Newman study seemed to have a single secure bond. They were isolated from schoolmates, teachers, and family members as well. One might think at first glance that at least in two of the episodes, the pair of boys who were shooters together might have had a secure bond. There is very little direct evidence, but several comments suggest that the collaborating boys had an engulfed bond, shutting out the world of other possible relationships, and suppressing vital parts of themselves in order to be loyal to the other boy. Engulfment is often mistakenly seen as a secure bond, but is always a form of alienation from self.

A recent school shooting occurred at Red Lake Senior High School, Minnesota. This particular case is somewhat unusual in that the shooter, Jeff Weise, left a long record of writing on the Internet. On March 21, 2005, he killed seven people and himself. He was a very obese (6 feet, 250 lbs) sixteen-year-old, whose father had committed suicide ten years earlier. His mother, driving drunk, was brain damaged in an accident in 1999. According to Jeff's online postings, since her accident, she had been beating him mercilessly, and he never stood up to her.

In another posting, he stated, "I have friends, but I'm basically a loner in a group of loners. Most of my friends don't know the real me. I've never shared my past with anyone, and I've never talked about it with anyone. I'm excluded from anything and everything they do, I'm never invited, I don't even know why they consider me a friend or I them..." (Santa Barbara News-Press, March 25, 2005).

This boy was obviously without a single secure bond, rejected continually and relentlessly by everyone around him, including his mother and his so-called friends. It is little wonder that he seemed to be drowning in shame, as indicated in another of his postings: "I really must be fucking worthless..." He had attempted to slit his wrists a year earlier, was seeing a therapist, and was on anti-depressants. The news reports provide no information about the number of sessions with the therapist or what transpired in them.

However, the fact that he was on antidepressants suggests yet another rejection, this time by the medical profession. This boy's main problem was that his life was a living hell, which needed immediate intervention, change, and personal attention. Whoever put him on antidepressants was guilty of gross negligence and malpractice. Yet providing psychotropic drugs is overwhelmingly practiced in the U.S. regardless of the social surround. In this way lack of secure bonds is not only interpersonal, but also embedded in the social structure. Men, especially, because of



the isolation caused by their training for achievement, suffer more than women from lack of secure bonds.

### **Men, Women, and Massive Violence**

The difference between men and women's attitudes toward violence can be seen in the various polls that are relevant to support for the war in Iraq. No matter which poll is taken or how the questions are phrased, women always express less support for the war. Women are much less keen on violence in its collective form than men. At the family level, women are also less likely than men to commit violence, especially physical violence.

A recent literature review of responses to stress (Taylor, et al 2000) finds that women, much more than men, are likely to "tend-and-befriend" rather than fight-or-flight. The attachment/networking response seems to be more alive in women than in men. The tend/befriend can be viewed as the default variant for females, an important modification of Cannon's idea of fight or flight.

The silence/violence pattern seems to be the corresponding variant for males. The violence part obviously corresponds to fight. But the silence part is equivalent to flight, if withdrawal includes not just physical flight, but also withdrawal in its psychological sense. The Taylor et al "tend-befriend" pattern for women, when combined with the silence/violence pattern for men, suggests that the fight/flight response is crucially modified by culture-driven gender differences, hence the cult of masculinity.

The silence/violence model can be applied to the masculine mystique in general. Hyper-masculine men are silent about their feelings to the point of repressing them altogether, even anger (Acting out anger seldom resolves it). Repressing love and the vulnerable emotions (grief, fear and shame, the latter as in feelings of rejection or disconnection) leads to either silence or withdrawal, on the one hand, or acting out anger (flagrant hostility), on the other. The composure and poise of hypermasculinity seems to be a recipe for silence and violence.

This formulation might explain the enormous energy that seems to propel gratuitous violence. Isolation from others blocks the working through of repressed emotions. Isolation, when combined with the recursive nature of shame, might set up what can be seen as a doomsday machine, experienced by individuals and groups as an unbearable amount of pain and hostility.

Collins (1990; in press) also notes the vast energy that goes into wanton violence, such as the slaughter of non-combatant men, women and children in villages by U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. His explanation is in terms of what he calls a "forward panic." That is, he suggests that like the backward panic that occurs in theatre fires, the killing was set off by runaway fear. The theory outlined here proposes that it is a special kind of fear that sets off rampages, since it is unacknowledged. My theory also adds several other components to the model: social isolation of individual killers, the other two vulnerable emotions (grief and shame), and the acting out of anger.

It may be impossible to understand collective conflict, especially gratuitous wars like Vietnam and Iraq, as long as we ignore its emotional/relational components. It seems particularly applicable to the followers of hypermasculine leaders. Leaders' desire for power and property may often be one of the causes of wanton aggression. Followers, especially the working class, have much less to gain and much more to lose. In her analysis of male, working class Bush supporters, Hochschild (2004) proposed that they appreciate his hypermasculine style, since it is either like their own, or a style they would like to adopt: shoot first, question later.

## Discussion

Of the many issues that need further exploration, one in particular stands out: the extent to which some women accept/encourage hypermasculinity in men. In my various presentations of the idea of hypermasculinity, there is usually a woman who ruefully tells me, after the talk, that she is drawn to hypermasculine men. Perhaps there is a type of femininity that exactly fits, and encourages hypermasculinity, women who want a strong, silent man to protect them because they anticipate being victimized. Such women would seek hypermasculine men as husbands and encourage hypermasculinity in their male children. This pattern could help explain why modern societies continue to have high proportions of men who are hypermasculine, or at least show some of its characteristics.

So far, in my research of literature on masculinity, I have only found hints in this direction. Reardon (1985) went only so far as to suggest that the pattern of women submitting to male domination contributes to the warfare system (p. 19). Jackson's (1990) study of violent men states that they usually saw their mothers as passive victims (p.88), but the author didn't try to ascertain the accuracy of their view.

My hypothesis stresses a common emotional/relational configuration for women that would be the (partial) opposite and therefore complement of hypermasculinity. In the emotion realm, *hyperfeminine* women would suppress anger, on the one hand, and act out fear of being victims, on the other. In terms of relationships, these women would be engulfed with others, giving up crucial parts of self in order to be loyal. Norwood's (1985) study of women who tolerated abuse of self and/or their children by their husband provides an example.

Nationally syndicated columnist Michelle Malkin's idea that she is a "security mom" seems to provide an example of the "acting out of fear." She says that being afraid since 9/11 is not the same thing as living in fear (Grewal 2006). But the examples she gives from her daily life suggest that indeed she does live in fear: monitoring all the other passengers on trains and buses, and when driving, paying attention to all vehicles like large trucks and tankers that might harbor a bomb. Her columns are not perfect examples of my model of hyperfemininity, however, since she seems to be enraged at all liberals.

These two hyper-genders would be mutually reinforcing, creating a social institution of gender that would support warfare. Being only a surmise, to be taken seriously, it would have to be supported by actual studies. One direction would be to study gender differences in preferences, and responses to, certain types of films. The "action" film, revenge by men acting out anger through aggression and violence, seems to be the favorite of hypermasculine men. The corresponding favorite for hyper-feminine women, if my hypothesis is correct, would involve the acting out of fear, as in films that portray danger and threat by an intruder(s) in the home, and other threats of violence against defenseless victims.

## Conclusion

The theory of violence outlined in this essay suggests that massive violence can be understood in terms of the same kinds of cultural processes that give rise to hyper-masculinity. Furthermore, hypermasculinity may be in part produced by hyperfemininity, a reciprocal process. The vast amounts of energy involved in massive violence might be explained by model of feedback loops of alienation and emotion within and between individuals and groups. Perhaps the next step in constructing such a theory would be illustrating and testing the idea of a hyperfemininity that would complement and encourage hypermasculinity.

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