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Tony Blauer's Premise For His SPEAR System Is Wrong And Misleading

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In what follows, I will admittedly here reduce Blauer's multi-layered discursive position to only that area I criticized elsewhere: namely, his gross misunderstanding and misapplication of the scientific research related to "flinch" or, to what is more appropriately called, the "startle response." Let it be clear, however, that while I am dealing with a reduction of Blauer's position and work, this remains nevertheless the central premise of his thought and practice, and it is upon this that the entirety of his SPEAR program rests.

I will begin by providing a summary of the scientific understanding of the startle response. I will not be supporting my summarization of the scientific research with citations and/or video support. However, everything in what follows can easily be confirmed by the reader via a search for related keywords in Google, on YouTube, and/or by reading any selected survey of the scientific literature and research on the topic. Nothing in the following summary will be esoteric, radical, or outlandish. Everything said below is well known by scientists and doctors studying the phenomena.

Additionally, I do not want to and will not be commenting in any detail upon the martial validity or the lack thereof of Blauer's tactical architectures. However, I will be open and upfront in the spirit of full disclosure and say here that I find Blauer's demonstration-driven and go-to tactical architecture of moving forward while remaining on the centerline extremely limited in its martial viability, only working when the defender's mass is near-equal to the attacker's, or when the

defender's mass is greater than the attacker's mass, when no weapons are present on either side, and when time and the action/reaction cycle are not determined by the attacker. This is a very limited work environment and one not very likely to manifest within the arenas of true assaults and/or Law Enforcement – the chief marketing targets of the SPEAR system – where attackers are usually with greater mass and weapons are present or best assumed present.

Describing how Blauer uses the startle response in his discourse will explain how he understands the term. Blauer's reasoning goes as follows:

1. Failure at defending oneself is most often derived from being on the reactive side of the action/reaction cycle.
2. The former proves true regardless of the martial art or style one seeks to employ.
3. Commonly and/or traditionally taught martial arts do not address this chief reason for defeat. They all instruct from a reactionary perspective.
4. The only way to address the negative impact (i.e. martial defeat) of being on the reaction side of the action/reaction cycle is by using primitive reflex action (i.e. the startle response). A primitive reflex action does not suffer the same negative chronological repercussions as a reactive response because it begins its start time earlier in the combative engagement.
5. SPEAR, unlike other martial arts or styles, uses a primitive reflex action.
6. SPEAR is therefore a more martially viable system or program than other martial arts or styles.

In prose, Blauer's theory can be described as follows:

Traditional and modern martial arts are not successful in defending oneself in street encounters because they all rely on conscious complex motor skills. However, what marks "real life" or "street encounters," at least for good guys, is that there is no time to do or to match conscious complex motor skills to a given assault. This is because the defender is by default on the reaction side (i.e. the slower side) of the action/reaction cycle. (Think: Action is always faster than reaction.) The solution then is to not do a conscious complex motor skill but to use instead a primitive motor reflex as a response. This primitive reflex is the "flinch reflex" or the startle response. The SPEAR system then goes on to identify the startle response as or to suggest that the startle response can be coupled with a stepping forward movement wherein one reaches out with symmetrical arms at parallel 45 degree angles that are positioned at a height that would shield the head and upper torso. As a result, one's defense should recognize and commence from this posture. Blauer then goes on to suggest that the nature of this position, and thus his system, is supported by scientific research.

What does the scientific literature say about the startle response?

The startle response is the physiological involuntary reflex all healthy human infants are supposed to have. It is often noted as a “primitive reflex.” In fact, it is one of the many checks doctors use to determine the normalcy of an infant’s neurological system at birth. The official name of the response in infants is the Moro Reflex. To generate the Moro Reflex, the doctor holds or supports the baby and then momentarily feigns a loss of support. The baby’s neurological system will then initiate the Moro Reflex or startle response. Abducting and adducting muscle flexion and then crying designate this reflex, and thus then reflect the health of the baby’s neurological system.

The Moro Reflex is supposed to decrease as human beings age and may even disappear altogether in adults. This is one of the reasons it is considered a primitive reflex, being more universal to newborns. A prominent startle response in adults is actually considered a neurological disorder. It is then named in regards to its severity, with the nomenclature designations ranging from its mere presence, to a strong startle response, to one being severe and debilitating. The disorder associated with a strong startle response is called an “Exaggerated Startle Response,” and the severe startle response disorder is called “Hyperkplexia.” Additionally, as a neurological disorder, its presence in young adults is now actually being used as a marker for suicidal tendencies. Scientists are drawing correlations between the startle response, environmental over-sensitivity, depression, anxiety, and suicide. It is also a part of the symptomology of other mental health disorders, such as PTSD, etc.

While not being universally present in non-infant humans (e.g. adults), the startle response is not always present in adults that may be prone to it. Because it is not predictable or repeatable in adults, or even in the same adults, the startle response in adults is often not considered a reflex, let alone a primitive motor reflex. In fact, a startle response in adults may be contrasted with the phrase “Moro Reflex” itself inside of scientific research. Hence, the more commonly used phrase in the literature when referring to adults is “startle response” and not “startle reflex.” (Note: The word “flinch” is only a colloquial term, not a scientific one.)

How and when does science say the startle response functions?

Outside of the response consisting of a general and involuntary muscle flexion, most people that have a startle response, but not all, demonstrate the involuntary flexion at the eyes, at the neck, the shoulders, the diaphragm, the arms, and the knees. This involuntary flexion causes eyelids to close, the shoulders to rise, an inability to breathe, and the knees to lock up. This involuntary flexion is adducting in orientation (i.e. moving in toward the midline of the body at the torso) and not abducting in orientation (i.e. moving away from the midline of the body at the torso).

Scientists theorizing on the evolutionary reasons behind such involuntary flexion hypothesize that the body is trying to shield and/or protect itself, noting that the eyelids shutting protect the eyes, the shoulders rising protect the neck, the arms adducting shield the primary organs, and the knees locking cause the body to fall (i.e. move from the place at which the threat was perceived without conscious thought to do so).

In adults, the startle response still appears to be associated with an external stimulus that a given adult subjectively experiences as a threat. Research has shown that subjects who have a startle response tendency and/or who have a strong or exaggerated startle response can have it dishabituated by repeated exposure and/or preparation for exposure to the stimulus. In the tactical community and the martial arts, this kind of dishabituating training is often colloquially referred to as “stress inoculation” and/or anti-flinch training. Said training has a long history in the martial arts and in the combat sports. Meaning, dishabituation has a long historical and empirical success rate that is well-known.

What then are the elements of the startle response in adults according to the scientific literature?

1. Only the Moro Reflex, present in infants only, is a primitive action reflex.
2. The startle response in adults is uncommon, often unrepeatably, and subject to dishabituation.
3. Strong or debilitating startle responses in adults are considered to be a neurological disorder.
4. Startle response in adults require both an awareness of the stimulus and the perception that the stimulus is a threat.
5. Startle responses in adults primarily manifest via an involuntary adducting flexion that closes the eyes, holds the breath, raises the shoulders, stiffens the arms, and locks the knees.

All that said, the following should be acknowledged:

- Blauer’s understanding of the startle response is not scientifically accurate. Being inaccurate, the SPEAR system cannot more than any other art or system claim to be “scientific” and/or based upon scientific principle and findings. In fact, due to said inaccuracy, one could say that the SPEAR system is less scientific than other arts or styles.

- Since the startle response in adults involves an involuntary adducting flexion, one that most commonly closes the eyes, raises the shoulders, inhibits the breathing cycle, positions the arms to cover the torso, and locks the knees so as to cause imbalance, one cannot use it and/or give it shape. There is no agency and thus no design by the agent in or with involuntary flexion.

Therefore, Blauer's go-to move of stepping forward with the arms up so as to cover the upper torso and head region is NOT a reflex movement. It is as complex and as conscious a movement as the majority of other similar moves found throughout the martial arts. Moreover, Blauer's go-to move is equally reactive and equally behind in the action/reaction cycle as any other movement he criticizes.

- Since the startle response predominantly manifests itself via an adducting flexion that closes the eyes, stops the breathing cycle, brings the arms inward to cover the torso, and locks the knees so as to cause a loss of balance, the startle response in the majority of people who are subject to them actually adopts a martially inferior body organization. From sports to combat, and including all other forms of human performance and movement, practitioners are contrarily trained to keep their eyes open, to keep their breathing cycle functioning, to lower their shoulders, and to relax their knees. This is because the adducting flexion in the startle response works to impeded overall human performance on many levels. Hence, different from Blauer, martial arts for centuries, including the combat sports, have both known about the startle response but have included dishabituating practices in their training to reduce its effects and/or to negate it entirely.

- Since involuntary flexion does not function under our own agency, it is actually governed and determined by the the attacker. This makes involuntary flexion not martially sound, because it allows the attacker to generate an involuntary flexion that may not be strategically advantageous or tactically viable. This is what precisely takes place when an attacker makes use of fakes, feints, and/or deceptive angle of attacks in their assault. This is also the reason why martial arts, including the combat sports, and/or any sport that make use of elements and/or equipment that aim at or approach the eyes, also employs dishabituation efforts in their training.

- Were the startle response's adducting flexion conducive to human performance, the response itself is not universally present in human adults. This would mean that the SPEAR program is also not universally applicable or effective. Additionally, should a person continue to train in the SPEAR program, and should said practitioner be subject to a startle response at the commencement of that training, he or she would eventually dishabituate that response. Meaning: the longer one would train and the more regularly one would train in the SPEAR system, the more said practitioner would negate and subvert its foundation principle – making him/her less likely to respond to an assault with a “primitive motor reflex,” making him/her more likely to respond with denounced conscious/complex motor movements.

In short, and in truth, Blauer's system uses movements no less complex and no less conscious than any other martial system, art, or style.