ARTICLE

Surprise: a micro-sociological analysis

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This article explores the social and relational aspects of surprise: a reaction to the sudden discovery of unexpected knowledge. Drawing on the micro-sociological perspectives of phenomenology, dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism, I present a five-stage trajectory of this social emotion, charting its emergence, feeling, meaning, responses and function. Surprise emerges from situated encounters when an unexpected incident causes a break in the script. This evokes a subjective experience of flustering and dual consciousness, which separates the actor from their role. The signified meanings of surprise include shifts of biographical identity, changes in power and status, and concerns about the exposure of epistemological naiveté. Actors perform expressive gestures of surprise in line with cultural feeling and display rules, using dramaturgical techniques of impression management; these include dramatic realisation and verbal response cries. Team-mates cooperatively enact reparative interaction rituals, such as apologies, token exchange and feigned non-reaction, which restore the normal appearance of a scene. Surprise therefore has the paradoxical quality of being disruptively cohesive. While its immediate expression marks a momentary disturbance, it ultimately functions to maintain interaction order.

Key words surprise • emotion • dramaturgy • performance • interaction rituals

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Introduction

Surprise can be defined as a reaction to the sudden discovery of unexpected knowledge. This is a familiar experience of everyday life, occurring when we are jolted out of immersive routines. The bus breaks down on my journey to work, I bump into a friend in an unusual setting, I receive news about winning a competition. Surprise may accompany major life events, radically transforming self-identity: a pregnancy test result, illness diagnosis, or learning of a partner’s betrayal. In popular culture, surprise works as a narrative device to twist the plotlines of film, drama and comedy. In war and combat, it is the chief weapon of attack, disarming the enemy. Paradoxically, therefore, despite its marked, unusual quality, surprise is a common state that happens all around us.
Research on surprise has been largely confined to psychology, where it is understood as an individualised emotion. However, I want to argue that surprise is also a relational phenomenon that has relevance for emotion-sociological theory. Subjectively, it is a self-conscious awareness of one’s role-based character, whose habitual attitude towards a scene has been suddenly disrupted. Interactionally, surprise serves a performative and communicative function, by managing this flustered state before a viewing audience. Drawing on the micro-sociological perspectives of phenomenology, dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism, this article explores surprise through five thematic components: emergence, feeling, meanings, responses and functions. Together, these processes reveal surprise to be an interactional accomplishment that holds a place within the interaction order.

**Locating surprise**

Psychological research on surprise follows three main theoretical approaches: cognitive, evolutionary and affective. Cognitive theories focus on the appraisal and evaluation of a novel, unexpected stimulus, which is discrepant from the mind’s existing schema (Kagan, 2002; Barto et al, 2013). This interruption of ongoing brain activity causes a refocusing of attention (Schützwohl, 1998), neurological rewiring and schema revision (Donchin, 1981; Meyer et al, 1997). Surprise is an acute and transient state, compared to uncertainty, which is prolonged and enduring (Kagan, 2002). Evolutionary theories suggest that surprise is an instinctive response that serves an adaptive function: it signals an alertness to threat or danger, motivating action and increasing the chance of survival (Turner, 2007; 2009; Burke and Stets, 2009).

Affect theories suggest that the labelling of physiological arousal corresponds with a subjective experience of feeling (Tomkins, 1962; Shott, 1979; Kemper, 1978; 1987). Surprise is considered one of the six basic universal human emotions (alongside fear, anger, happiness, sadness and disgust) with a distinct facial expression (Ekman and Friesen, 1971; Izard, 1972). When we observe this display in others, it appears to be a spontaneous, uncontrollable reaction (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006), but this does not imply a lack of self-awareness. On the contrary, Reisenzein (2009) argues that surprise has a meta-representational dimension, whereby the actor reflects on their own experience of being surprised and interprets its contextual meaning. This corresponds to phenomenological ideas of the ‘feeling subject’ (Denzin, 2009), whose emotions are grounded in subjective self-awareness and biographical identity. Thus, while surprise is hedonically neutral – that is, it may be experienced as pleasurable or unpleasurable (Reisenzein, 2001) – its valence is greater when the stimulus event is directly and personally relevant (Noordewier and Breugalmans, 2013). For example, one would react more strongly to receiving a surprise gift than to noticing a new shop on the high street.

This points to two areas of sociological theory in which surprise can be located. First, the sociology of knowledge, ignorance and uncertainty (Gross, 2010; McGloey, 2014; Mica, 2018). Surprise implies an epistemological shift, whereby one version of truth and reality gives way to another. If knowledge is relative and perspectival (Weber, 1904; Mannheim, 1936), then changing one’s horizon brings different forms into view (Husserl, 1913). The individual is confronted with a new way of seeing that challenges what they had habitually assumed. In its most benign form, this might mean a serendipitous chancing upon amusing or interesting ideas. I pick
up a paperback novel left on the train and discover a new favourite author, or I take a different route through the streets and find myself in a strange neighbourhood. **Mica (2018)** thus describes unintended consequences as an opportunity for alternate forms of action. Surprise has similarly creative purposes in cinema and theatre. **Tobin (2018)** explains the thrilling satisfaction of a ‘rug-puller’ plot twist, which inverts all the viewer has known before and overturns their entire understanding.

With more profound disturbances of knowledge, mild surprise gives way to shock. **DeGloma (2014)** describes the sense of ‘awakening’ that occurs on discovering new personal truths. The revelation of a family secret, such as adoption or infidelity, leads to a reconfiguration of one’s relational self and intimate networks (Smart, 2011). To learn that one has been the victim of deception gives a fresh perspective on the naive, trusting self, invoking moral notions of falsity, injustice and exploitation (Bok, 1978; Manning, 2000). This has implications for micro-social relations of power. Ignorance makes it difficult to belong to a group and participate in their decisions; it can be used strategically to maintain professional boundaries (McGoey, 2014). Symbolic interactionists explain how the configuration of awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss, 1964) allows some actors better access than others to the tacit definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). **Simmel’s (1908)** figure of the stranger is thus positioned on the margins, excluded from the knowledge that insiders understand.

Second, surprise deserves a place within the sociology of emotions. This field helps us to understand the interactional context from which the feeling emerges and the public settings in which it is expressed. All human emotions have a relational aspect (Kemper, 1978; Barbalet, 1998) in that they locate the self in a world of others, indexing social patterns and connections (Layder, 2004; Burkitt, 2014; Bericat, 2016). Surprise fits with symbolic interactionist theories of emotional reflexivity: the intersubjective processes through which actors interpret and negotiate the meaning of their feelings (Holmes, 2015). Emotions infuse self-reflexive thought, shaping and colouring mutual perceptions (Burkitt, 2012). For example, surprise could be classified as a self-conscious emotion (Tangney and Fisher, 1995) because it involves concerns about imagined social judgements. Equally, when surprise is delivered with hostile intention, it can reflect jostles for power and status (Kemper, 1987; Barbalet, 1998). Emotions are tied to identity, telling stories about people’s changing relationships with the symbolic objects in their world (De Rivera, 1992). For example, actors feel pride or shame when role-identity claims are affirmed or discredited (Burke and Stets, 2009), prestige is lost or gained (Kemper and Collins, 1990) or social bonds come under threat (Scheff, 2000). Surprise, then, may indicate movement between different versions of self, situational roles and relative status. Finally, emotions are defined, discursively constructed and morally managed within wider cultural regimes (Reddy, 2001) and normative logics (Minner, 2019), which socialise actors into feeling and display rules (Hochschild, 1983). This means that surprise has a dual aspect, occupying a private inner world while being scaffolded by sociocultural frameworks (Craib, 1998).

Dramaturgical theories of emotion focus on display, performance and management. As an act of situated social praxis (Layder, 2004), surprise has two main strands: the self-presentational and the ritualistic. First, in micro-social encounters, actors manage the public face of their self through the reflected appraisals of others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). This involves concerns about communicating impressions about one’s character that are contextually appropriate: to meet the audience’s expectations,
observe the local code of situational proprieties (Goffman, 1959; 1963) and align oneself with cultural display rules (Hochschild, 1983). The expression of surprise is characterised by certain embodied, symbolic gestures (Blumer, 1969), such as widened eyes, opened mouth and verbal gasps. As we shall see, these serve as a meta-communicative commentary about the actor’s usual composure, despite a momentary loss of poise (cf. Goffman, 1956; Scott, 2015). Dramatically, therefore, surprise may be strategically deployed in game-like moves to defend or save the face of self before the other (Goffman, 1967; 1969).

Second, the communication of surprise is collectively managed through ritualistic process. This links the personal experience of emotion to culturally shared beliefs, values and morality (Summers-Effler, 2006). Interaction rituals are routinised exchanges between actors that follow a ceremonial order (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004). Surprise is performed, witnessed and managed by cooperative teammates, generating ‘emotional energy’ for the whole group (Collins, 2019). Picture the scene of a surprise birthday party: the unsuspecting guest opens the door to a chorus of whoops and cheers, intended to convey celebration. However, because emotional energy can also be negative (Summers-Effler, 2002), a well-intended surprise may actually feel unpleasant. Dysphoric emotion accompanies the awareness of one’s own deviance from situational norms (Thoits, 1990). If surprised actors believe that their reactions were inappropriate, excessive or poorly contained, they may suffer dramaturgical stress (Freund, 1998). As Goffman (1971) argued, actors are wary of ‘making a scene’ and being judged as uncooperative. Nevertheless, we shall see how audience responses to surprise are often sympathetic, supporting both the actor and the interaction order (Goffman, 1983).

Having shown where surprise sits within broad theoretical debates, I now provide a more detailed analysis, drawing on three micro-sociological perspectives: phenomenology, dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism. In the remaining sections of the article, I map out a five-stage trajectory of surprise as a socially negotiated process. This begins with its emergence from strange situations, which leads to a distinctive subjective experience of feeling. The actor then interprets the meaning of surprise in relational terms, giving a response that performs dramaturgical identity work. Teammates provide ritualised support through the corrective process, which functions to repair interaction order. Surprise thus unfolds as an interactional accomplishment, which is socially shaped and managed.

**Emergence**

Let us briefly recap on two points outlined above. First, surprise is defined as a reaction to the sudden discovery of unexpected knowledge. Second, the emotional component of surprise is relational, indexing connections between self and others. From this, we can infer that surprise emerges from micro-social encounters when something sudden and unexpected happens in the course of interaction. A restaurant bill is more than I had estimated, so my friend helps me to pay. An airport delay leads stranded passengers to strike up a conversation. Surprise therefore involves a disruption of the usual proceedings and ritualised routines on which actors rely to coordinate their role-based activities. This causes a hiatus, or break in the social play, which interrupts the process of the smooth, unfolding scene. What Goffman (1969)
calls the ‘normal appearances’ of relating in public cannot be sustained, and the dance of social action grinds to a halt.

This has similarities to embarrassment, which occurs when a central assumption of interaction is unexpectedly breached and actors cannot meet their role requirements (Gross and Stone, 1964). The guiding script for the scene no longer works, and so the definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) becomes confused. As Goffman (1959) argues, team-mates try to guard against disruptive ‘incidents’ and avoid ‘causing a scene’, but often find themselves in an embarrassing predicament. However, the two conditions differ in terms of their perceived source and agent of responsibility. Whereas embarrassing moments tend to be triggered by an individual mistake, when an actor perceives that their conduct has broken a rule (Goffman, 1956), surprise arises from external circumstances and feels less morally charged. Surprising events happen to us, from sources beyond our control: we discover something about the world that surrounds us, to which we can only react.

Surprise therefore has an indexical quality, which is hermeneutically circular and self-referential (cf. Gadamer, 1989); that is, unexpected disruptions turn actors’ attention away from the substantive content of their role performances, towards the mechanical structure and composition of the situation. This resonates with phenomenological and ethnomethodological ideas about breaches of residual rules (Scheff, 1966), taken-for-granted assumptions (Garfinkel, 1967) and typified recipe knowledge (Schutz, 1972). Actors are jolted out of their natural attitude (Husserl, 1913) of habitual, pre-reflective immersion in routinised activities (Lukács, 1923) and thrown into a reflexive state of discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984). They suddenly notice the situation as a scene that is contrived, contingent and precarious, and therefore vulnerable to damage. Goffman (1959) describes how actors can slip out of role, or fall out of character, when something happens to disrupt a scene’s dramatic frame (Lyman and Scott, 1970). Just as in the theatre, where actors may ‘break the fourth wall’ by turning to address the audience, surprises force a wedge between the player and their role.

Feeling

The subjective experience of surprise is phenomenologically grounded in emotional reflexivity. Whatever is happening interpersonally and collectively, there is a more immediate, internal feeling of being surprised. It is individual actors who make sudden, unexpected discoveries, and the new knowledge directly impacts on ‘feeling subjects’ (Denzin, 2009). Phenomenology examines how objects and events appear, or manifest themselves subjectively, through processes of imagination, memory and consciousness (Husserl, 1913). We cannot know the essence of what things really are, but rather consider them from different views or angles (Husserl, 1913). Changing one’s aim, focus and orientation reconfigures the perceptual landscape, bringing new, refreshing pictures into light (Heidegger, 1927). A surprise, therefore, is not an objective discovery of empirical facts or absolute truths, but rather an experience of suddenly seeing things differently from an alternate perspective.

The emotional experience of surprise is corporeally embodied (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Holmes, 2015). Just as sociologists have explored the phenomenology of other states of mind, such as fear (Davidson, 2000), shame (Scheff, 2000; Bruni, 2019) and fun (Fincham, 2016), we should try to understand what being surprised feels like.
Key to the experience is a sense of abrupt interruption: the discovery is sudden, coming out of nowhere, and it halts us in our tracks. Phenomenologists use the pragmatist term ‘intentionality’ to describe how subjects act towards, or in relation to, the objects in their world (Husserl, 1913). We take a directional path through our aims, motivations and predictions about how things around us will be. Most of the time, this unfolds as expected, and so we can proceed in a habitual manner using the natural attitude (Schutz, 1972). Occasionally, however, progress is blocked by an obstacle, forcing the movement abruptly to stop. This creates a perceptual shift, when the individual is suddenly brought into reflexive self-awareness about their situation of frustrated intentions. Heidegger (1927) called this feeling ‘disappointment’ and Husserl (1913) a ‘retroactive crossing out’: I can no longer proceed as expected and must redesign my course.

This in turn generates a feeling of internal disruption and discombobulation, which Goffman (1956) calls ‘flustering’. The individual is thrown off balance by the unexpected change, and wavers for a moment before gathering themself together and moving on. Flustering implies a liminal stage (Turner, 1967) of hanging between two states of mind: the interrupted agent is no longer immersed and unreflexive, nor yet poised and self-composed. This contrasts with the peaceful condition of ‘pause’ that May (1981) describes, when the cessation of activity allows an opportunity for pondering and wonder before creative choice. Pausing happens idly, in an unrushed, gradual way, which may have been anticipated and does not pose a threat. Flustering is a different state of chaotic agitation, for which the actor feels unprepared and out of control. They have lost their secure ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1974) on the stage floor of the scene. Flustering also demands the rapid recovery of self-composure: the actor is at pains to restore their ‘face’ and resume their part in the show (Goffman, 1956; 1967). Everyday scenes rely on players’ capacity for ‘acting natural’ (Goffman, 1971) with a nonchalant demeanour, regardless of how anxious they might feel inside. Dramatically, therefore, surprise is a risky condition that threatens to unmask a fraud. While we may all suffer from doubts about our perceived social incompetence (Scott, 2007), nobody wants these secret faults to be exposed.

Surprise produces a self-reflexive state of split or dual consciousness. When an unexpected interruption brings the individual into awareness of their frustrated intentionality, this forces a division between two parts of the self: actor and character, subject and object. As one part reflects on the other, we consider ourselves from an external perspective, imagining how we appear. As noted above, surprise has a meta-representational aspect, by which actors are reflexively self-aware of the experience while it is happening (Reisenzein, 2009), becoming their own audience. This echoes classic theories of social selfhood: the looking-glass self of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902) and the internal dialogue between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ (Mead, 1934). Bruni (2019) explores shame in a similar way, comparing the voices involved in two forms: the critical ‘I’ and the normative ‘Me’. However, rather than this being a background, low-level hum, the inner dialogue of surprise makes an acute, cacophonous din. The abrupt, unwelcome jolt out of one state and into another crashes in like a violent intrusion.

Similar feelings have been observed in athletes and performance artists who experience disruptions of flow (Hardie-Bick and Scott, 2019). Flow is a state of total absorption in an activity that leads to a temporary loss of self-awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Time seems to pass in a dream-like fugue, allowing welcome
respite from one’s usual concerns (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). During flow, the ‘Me’ is temporarily suspended, disappearing below the threshold of consciousness while the creative ‘I’ takes over (cf. Mead, 1934). However, flow can be disrupted by surprising events, such as losing one’s nerve before a parachute jump or forgetting the lines of a song. This forces an abrupt transition out of role and the return of critical self-awareness (Hardie-Bick and Scott, 2019). Theatre actors in rehearsal experience this ‘double agency’ and ‘decoupling of the self’ (Bergman Blix, 2015) and it is a common feature of stage fright (Lyman and Scott, 1970; Scott, 2017). In everyday life, the equivalent process occurs when lay actors encounter a surprising event and find themselves standing outside their roles (Hayman, 1969). Attending to oneself in dual aspect means recognising two components of reaction: the character’s shift in knowledge and the actor’s flustered status.

**Meaning**

Surprise is not a quality inherent to the unexpected knowledge or event, but rather describes the actor’s motivated attitude towards it. As noted above, social emotions are relational, telling us how people interpret their bonds with significant others (Blumer 1969; Scheff, 1990; Collins, 2019). They involve interactive practices of negotiated meaning and communicative enactment (Holmes, 2015). Reactions of surprise can therefore be said to perform Weberian social action: behaviour that is subjectively meaningful, oriented to others, and takes their perspectival views into account (Weber, 1922). This can happen in three main ways.

First, at the level of narrative phenomenology, surprise reflects a mild or major biographical disruption (cf. Bury, 1982). The actor had until this point believed in one version of social reality, but something happens to alter their perception. This frame shift (Goffman, 1974) disturbs the individual’s understanding of themself, as a knowledgeable subject with a coherent sense of self. Realising that we have made a mistake, misinterpreted things or misread a situation can create a dawning sense of awakening (DeGloma, 2014) about our own naivety. At best, we might laugh at a minor, silly blunder (I open a door in the wrong direction, or get caught in the rain without an umbrella), but at worst, we might kick ourselves for not having seen this result coming (I discover my partner’s affair, or that I have failed an exam). Hindsight bias is a cognitive distortion that makes the emergent truth seem obvious, now that we can view it from a position of full knowledge (Tobin, 2018). This availability heuristic leads us to imagine that the outcome was predictable, or even that we ‘knew-it-all-along’ (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). This indicates the temporal significance of surprise, arcing across the lifecourse. The present self reflects on its past or future counterparts, comparing their perspectives and creating ‘emotional proximities’ (cf. Heidegger, 1927; Barnwell, 2019). For example, in the current surprising landscape of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we look back nostalgically on the routines we used to take for granted and wish we had appreciated our freedom more.

Second, surprise can occur in recognition of a change of power or status within a group. Although this is unlikely to mean stark social mobility between structural strata – perceived inequality or privilege evokes more intense, passionate emotions, such as envy or rage (Barbalet, 1998; Kemper and Collins, 1990) – mild surprise can accompany subtler changes of prestige related to one’s public image. Macrosociological theories explore how power operates through small-scale interactions,
such as strategic face games (Goffman, 1969; Lyman and Scott, 1970) and exploitative fabrications (Goffman, 1974). Thus, it is important to consider the meanings and motivations of the ‘surpriser’ as well as the ‘surprisee’. Actors may inflict surprise on each other with malign intention, such as with hoaxes, bullying or political disruption. Here, the aim is to wrong-foot the victim and expose their unpreparedness, creating an object of ridicule. Witnessing surprise may then evoke feelings of schadenfreude: taking vicarious pleasure in others’ misfortune.

The surprisee receives and interprets this meaning. Goffman (1952) described the ‘cooling out’ process, whereby actors adapt to unexpected and humiliating losses of status, such as being fooled by a practical joke, or getting turned down by a romantic date. These situations create a shift in the way that individuals perceive themselves as having missed out on a potential success. To have imagined oneself to be qualified, deserving and in with a chance, but then to find oneself rejected, snubbed or dismissed, causes a surprising dent to pride and dignity. The same process could occur in a positive direction, through an unexpected elevation of status: a lottery win, job promotion or flattering request for a date. This reminds us of the hedonic neutrality of surprise, as a feeling that may be pleasurable or unpleasurable (Reisenzein, 2001). Perhaps, then, the meaning of surprise depends less on what happens unexpectedly, and more on how it impacts on relationships, connections and social bonds (Scheff, 1990; 2000; Collins, 2019).

Third, surprise has dramaturgical meanings, concerning not the unexpected discovery itself, but rather the expression of the feeling. As we saw above, surprise has a meta-cognitive, self-reflexive aspect, whereby people are aware of their reaction while it is happening in a particular, situated setting. Actors attend to the interaction context in which their surprise takes place and imagine how the event may be regarded by a scrutinising audience. This creates dramaturgical dilemmas of self-presentation and impression management (Goffman, 1959). For example, other people may witness the moment at which the individual makes their discovery, knowing in advance about its nature. In a closed awareness context (Glaser and Strauss, 1964), certain actors in a scene are privy to a secret truth from which another is excluded and may try to guard against that person finding out. From the principal’s perspective, to realise that what they have just discovered was already known by those around them can evoke feelings of embarrassment or even betrayal (Goffman, 1961a). The surprisee may reflect on how their claims to being wise, informed and competent have been undermined by the exposure of their gullible naivety (cf. Burke and Stets, 2009).

Another dramaturgical concern is how the audience might appraise one’s embodied reaction. The flustering display often involves an involuntary facial expression and verbal exclamations that erupt before the actor can ‘catch’ and control them. Reflecting on this afterwards, the actor may feel that their surprise gestures were ungraceful, posing a threat to their poised, dignified face (Goffman, 1967). As we shall see in the next section, it is difficult to perform the surprise response in line with cultural display rules, which typically demand civilised restraint (Hochschild, 1983). The gaping mouth, panicked flash and discombobulated wobble signal that the actor has accidentally dropped their character and fallen out of role. This recognition of one’s own emotional deviance (Thoits, 1990) may lead to the actor to infer perceived social judgements. Through the looking-glass self of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902), they might imagine that others see them as a clumsy, incompetent player who does not belong on the team (Goffman, 1959).
Response

The private experience of surprise is followed by its public and performative expression. Dramaturgical theory helps us to understand the skills, techniques and strategies that actors use to accomplish this, both individually and collectively. The arts of impression management (Goffman, 1959) serve to present versions of the self that are aligned with the audience’s expectations, as well as with cultural norms, values, feeling and display rules (Hochschild, 1983). In order to ensure that their conduct appears appropriate and courteous, actors observe local ‘situational proprieties’ and general ‘enabling conventions’ (Goffman, 1963). Impression management is a paradoxical means of performing identity work: ‘the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’ (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348). That is, although the actor’s public face may not mirror their private sentiment in the immediate situation, it does reflect their deeper, ongoing concerns with how their moral character may be judged.

Surprised actors are at pains to demonstrate that, despite this momentary flustering, they are normally poised and composed. Goffman (1956; 1959) explains this as a common response to situations in which something externally disruptive happens that individuals fear might be misconstrued as their personal fault. Such attributions would pose a face threat (Goffman, 1967) to the version of self that the actor wished to project. Wanting to appear normal, competent and reliable team-mates who are deserving of dramaturgical loyalty (Goffman, 1959), they seek to demonstrate that the observed slip was out of character and should not be read as typical of their intended social self.

This response also occurs with embarrassment, when actors laugh at or chastise themselves so that the audience can hear (Miller, 1996). As a symbolic apology, one part of the self critically observes another, from an externally adopted view. Splitting off the bumbling character as an object of shared derision is an aligning act (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976) that emphasises common values and belonging to the team. Role distance (Goffman, 1961b) is a display of being someone other than what one’s character implies: ironic jokes and parody convey the message that ‘I am not (just) that’ (Scott, 2015). Such actions perform defensive facework (Goffman, 1967) by detaching and disassociating oneself from an unwanted impression. They offer a meta-communicative commentary on a situated role that guides the audience’s interpretation of it.

Curiously, however, performing surprise uses opposite techniques to achieve this impression. Instead of attempting to conceal the flustered moment, gloss over it or pretend it did not happen (as embarrassed actors do), surprised actors exaggerate their gestures and make them more conspicuous. Goffman (1959) calls this the art of dramatic realisation: performing a role in an emphatic, stylised manner that highlights distinctive moves and confirms their symbolic meaning. The actor wants to ensure that the audience observe the show as they have designed it, receive the correct message and make the intended character attributions (Scott, 2015). Dramatic realisation involves gestural overplay, whereby verbal or non-verbal moves are performed in a theatrical, flamboyant way. For example, Härmä (2018) observed the behaviour of visitors to galleries and museums housing digital interactive artworks. When an exhibit suddenly popped out, moved unpredictably or revealed a sexually suggestive meaning, visitors made dramatic gestures of surprise: staggering backwards, raising
their hands to their face, and shrieking with laughter. This conveyed that they were unfamiliar with the environment and the intentions of the artist: they did not want bystanders to presume that they endorsed those deviant, subversive ideas.

Verbally, surprised actors may emit response cries (Goffman, 1981): short exclamations and utterances that highlight their reaction to a scene. Audible glee (‘oooh!’) occurs with delighted surprise, for example when opening a present: this emphasises gratitude towards the giver, who is watching in the audience. Spill cries (‘oops!’), emitted when we drop something or make a mess, define the clumsiness as accidental, insulated from our normally controlled behaviour (Goffman, 1981: 101). Reulvulsion sounds (‘ugh!’) express disgust towards a contaminating substance, emphasising its separateness from the pure self. Threat startles (‘yikes!’) point to an imminent danger, such as a spider running out or losing one’s balance on the stairs. Intriguingly, though, Goffman (1981) notes that threat startles are not truly spontaneous – they actually occur fractionally after the emergency, once the actor has regained their poise. We ‘survey what might have been our doom, but from a position of support we have had ample time to secure’ (1981: 102). This reassures the audience that although the surprised character was temporarily taken aback, the capable actor-self is now back in command, ready to resume the show.

Interaction rituals help to manage surprise collectively. Rather than the onus being on individuals to demonstrate their conformity, actors may cooperate to present a united front, or team impression (Goffman, 1959). For example, Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2006) studied the conversational exchange of ‘surprise tokens’: single-word interjections like ‘wow!’, ‘gosh!’, ‘what?’ and ‘really?’ that people say in response to hearing surprising news. They argue that these verbalisations are an interactional resource on which participants draw to maintain the turn-taking sequential order of talk (Sacks, 1992). Surprise tokens can serve as ‘repair initiations’ that convey disbelief and incomprehension, inviting the speaker to provide an explanatory account (Selting, 1996, cited in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006). They can also be strategically elicited by the speaker performing a ‘source turn’: prefacing the telling with formulations like ‘Guess what?’, which warn and prompt the hearer that an astonished response is required. Surprise tokens can be recycled between or repeated within conversations to emphasise the hearer’s consternation (‘Really? Really? Nooo, really?!’) or delayed to create dramatic, escalating tension (staring in disbelief at the speaker).

Non-reaction to surprise can be performed deliberately, as is demonstrated by symbolic interactionist studies of emotions in the courtroom. The presentation of judicial objectivity is a collective team accomplishment by all players on the scene (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2018), and much of this relies on the performance of ‘cool dignity’ and ‘emotional restraint’ (Flower, 2018). The deliberate concealment, muting or suppression of feelings performs ‘non-emotion work’ (Scott, 2019) in observance of a ceremonial order. For example, Flower (2019) reports how Swedish defence lawyers attempted to hide their surprise when the defendant revealed some incriminating evidence that discredited their own testimony. The lawyers would make a show of not-reacting by feigning disinterest and immersion in other activities: nonchalantly doodling on a piece of paper or slowly unwrapping a sweet. Flower (2018) argues that this conspicuous display of ‘little dramatic reductions’ was directed towards the judge, jury and other lawyers in an attempt to divert their attention. The emotional energy (Collins, 2004; 2019) of surprise can thus be contained towards deviant ends by strategically ‘doing nothing’ (Scott, 2019).
Surprise

**Function**

Surprise serves a paradoxical social function. Despite arising markedly in response to a disruptive event, it ultimately helps to avert damage, smooth over cracks and restore micro-social order. The sacrifice of short-term flustering and discomforting exposure pays off through the reward of longer-term stability. For individuals, this relief comes through the restoration of poise and reassurance of continued belonging, while for situated groups, managing surprise averts a potential collapse of predictable rules and routines.

Dramaturgical theory suggests that, whatever chaos and disorder may be lurking beneath the surface, all that matters is that these ‘incidents’ do not erupt and contradict the manifest display of normal appearances (Goffman, 1969). Actors tacitly cooperate to present, uphold and restore the ostensible definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas, 1928) by presenting convincing ‘normalcy shows’ (Goffman, 1969). In his essay on facework – the techniques actors use to keep, save and maintain a respectable public image in social encounters – Goffman (1955) identified two dramaturgical repertoires. The avoidance process refers to those strategies that prevent disruptions from occurring in the first place: for example, the tactful avoidance of sensitive conversation topics (Goffman, 1959) or the prefacing of questionable statements with disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975). Meanwhile, the corrective process describes those techniques that repair some interactional damage that has already occurred. The latter mechanism serves a remedial function by restoring the veneer of a damaged situation.

While avoidance tricks may be performed by individuals, correctional repair work tends to be a team effort. It often takes a ritualised form, whereby two parties – the offender and offended – engage in a dance-like sequence of remedial interchange (Goffman, 1971). The correction of surprise may unfold through reparative forms of talk (Goffman, 1981). Apologies, for example, follows a four-step chain of challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks (Goffman, 1971; cf. Collins, 2004). Imagine that Person A makes a sudden physical movement that accidentally makes Person B jump in surprise. B’s exclamatory response cry forms the challenge, to which A responds with an expression of concern and regret; this is accepted by the soothed victim, and the two laugh together in grateful relief. Another corrective ritual is the exchange of surprise tokens, outlined earlier (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006). As we saw, utterances like ‘wow!’ and ‘really?!’ express incredulity and prompt the speaker to provide a justificatory account. This averts the mild awkwardness that could otherwise ensue from confusion or disbelief, helping to rebuild a sense of confidence and trust.

The corrective management of surprise therefore serves to boost social solidarity and cohesion between dramaturgical team-mates. This fits with Collins’ (2004; 2019) theory of how interaction rituals generate emotional energy that unites those who performatively express it. The whole cast of actors collectively appraises the unexpected event as something that surprises them all, thus defining it as external to their shared social face. By tacitly colluding with the individual’s framing of the incident as unusual, they reinforce a set of common values, beliefs and sentiments about what is normal and expected (cf. Durkheim, 1912). This in turn insulates the principal actor, who stands exposed and vulnerable in the spotlight. They are not abandoned to flail centre-stage, but rather shielded by the circle of witnesses who move in to save their face. As Goffman (1971) argued, the ‘rituals of ratification’, which occur after an individual undergoes a status change, provide ‘little strokings’
of reassurance that they are still welcome on the team. The surprised actor receives affirmation of their role-distant identity claim: they are accepted as being someone more and different from that briefly flustered self.

All of this suggests that surprise is a joint accomplishment, which serves a social function. It emerges from, is expressed through, and feeds back into the micro-social process of connected individuals – the realm of rituals, rules and routines that Goffman (1983) calls the interaction order. Surprise therefore has the paradoxical quality of being disruptively cohesive. Just as Goffman (1956) concluded of embarrassment, small individual sacrifices help to sustain wider structural elasticity. Interactional disruption ‘is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour but part of this orderly behaviour itself’ (Goffman, 1956: 271). That is, surprise does not pose a serious threat to the stability of scenes, but on the contrary, is sewn into the very fabric that ultimately supports them. While it does insert a punctuation mark of dramaturgical disturbance, this mobilises greater, cooperative efforts to absorb the ill effects. Surprise, therefore, is central to interactional direction, playing a contributory role to upholding micro-social order.

Conclusion

This article has explored the social and relational aspects of surprise: a reaction to the sudden discovery of unexpected knowledge. Although surprise has an emotional component, the ways in which it is subjectively experienced and collectively managed suggest that this is a broader phenomenon, grounded in micro-level processes of social interaction. Drawing on the perspectives of phenomenology, dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism, I argued that surprise involves a self-conscious awareness of disruptions to one’s role-based character, habitual attitude and framing of the scene. Surprise reactions are managed individually and collectively, through dramaturgical techniques and ritualised practices. When successful, this serves the function of reinforcing common values and strengthening social bonds.

I have presented a five-stage interactional trajectory of surprise, charting its emergence, feeling, meaning, responses and function. Surprise emerges from situated encounters when an inopportune incident disrupts the expected procedures. The definition of the situation becomes confused and there may be a loss of script, which causes a break in the play. For individuals, this evokes a feeling of flustering, or misplaced footing, which throws the actor off balance and out of their role. Phenomenologically, the disruption of flow causes double agency: a split between two modes of consciousness, whereby actors meta-cognitively reflect on their own presented characters. They become critically self-aware of their frustrated intentionality and enforced state of liminal suspense. Surprise can have various subjective meanings, depending on the magnitude, valence and relational context of the unexpected event. It can signal a transformation of biographical identity, a change of power, status and prestige, or dramaturgical concerns about the exposure of epistemological naivety.

Actors draw on a repertoire of dramaturgical techniques to manage the expression of surprise in line with cultural feeling and display rules. Individually, they use defensive facework to avert the threat of momentary flustering: the dramatic realisation of exaggerated gestures creates symbolic distance from a normally composed character. Collectively, meanwhile, team-mates perform interaction rituals to absorb the
situational impact of surprise. The corrective process of remedial interchange involves reparative talk, such as apologies, response cries, surprise token exchange and feigned non-reaction. This generates positive emotional energy within the group, which reinforces common sentiments and ratifies transgressive members’ continual belonging. Ultimately, therefore, surprise serves a conservative function, by strengthening the micro-social bonds that underpin the interaction order.

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Conflict of interest
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