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0521443717 - Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins

Edited by E. Virginia Demos

Excerpt

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Introduction

M. BREWSTER SMITH

I am very grateful to Virginia Demos and her editorial collaborators for displaying in this book the major life work of one of the most creative psychologists of the second half of this century, and I expect many readers will come to share in my gratitude. Silvan Tomkins was and is highly esteemed by a small privileged company of psychologists who worked closely with him or found their way to and through his writings. At a step removed, he is substantially responsible through the work of Paul Ekman and Carroll Izard for the resurrection of interest in the psychology of affect and emotion during the 1970s and 1980s, and that is becoming known. But mainstream general psychology and the psychology of personality have paid insufficient heed to his contributions.

That was partly Tomkins's own fault. He was not an effective promoter of his own ideas. His magnum opus, *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*, began to appear in the two volumes of 1962 and 1963, a full decade after he had arrived at his novel central conceptions and had written extensive drafts about them. These books lacked bibliographies, which were postponed to forthcoming volumes, volumes that did not come forth until 1991 and (posthumously) 1992 – three decades later. The volumes themselves do not do full justice to the breadth and power of Tomkins's psychological thought. Major aspects of his script theory and polarity theory – important developments in the intervening years – received only summary treatment in the final volumes. And, it must be said, Tomkins was a far better thinker than communicator: It takes dedicated perseverance to penetrate the conceptual thickets of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* and his other writings. The loss to contemporary psychology has been substantial. This book goes far toward remedying the situation.

We can now appreciate how radically Tomkins departed from the paradigms current in the 1950s when he conceived *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness*. That was the heyday of neobehaviorism, of the predomi-

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nance of psychoanalytic ideas in the emerging postwar field of clinical psychology, and of Dollard and Miller's (1950) brave attempt to marry Freudian psychoanalysis and Hullian behaviorism. The so-called cognitive revolution was about to happen but could not then be anticipated. Tomkins threw down the gauntlet to both psychoanalysis and neobehaviorism in his attack on drive theory – also departing in this respect from his Harvard mentor and source of personological inspiration, Henry A. Murray. He thumbed his nose at all behaviorisms in his emphasis on imagery and consciousness, and by putting more weight on consciousness than on the unconscious, he further departed from his Freudian roots.

In its selection from Tomkins's scattered writings over four decades, including key chapters from his magnum opus, this volume puts the reader in a position to grasp the originality and importance of Tomkins's contribution. What matters more than establishing Tomkins's proper place in the historical record, however, is the treasure trove of theoretical proposals and psychological insights that it makes available at a time when psychologists, no longer so swept up by the attractions of cognition, grope to integrate affect and emotion with cognitive processes in their conceptions of the human mind. Tomkins was working on this problem long before it seemed important to anybody else, and his ideas continue to be provocative and relevant. This book with its editorial commentaries is well designed to make them accessible.

I knew Silvan Tomkins for just over half a century. With a fresh Stanford MA in psychology, I had come to Harvard in the fall of 1940 attracted by Gordon Allport and Harry Murray on the psychology faculty, and because I held the Rantoul Fellowship (set up by Murray), I had a cubbyhole at the old Harvard Psychological Clinic on Plympton Street, the rambling yellow clapboard building with "wisteria on the outside, hysteria on the inside" that had been home for Murray's enterprises since the exciting days of *Explorations in Personality* (published only a couple of years previously). Murray was on leave, appearing intermittently on occasions that were very special. While I struggled anxiously with the unreasonably demanding proseminar in general psychology up in Emerson Hall and began to get educated in the psychology of personality in readings with Robert W. White at the clinic, it was to the office lairs of Fred Wyatt (recently from Vienna) and of Silvan Tomkins that I went to relax and chat about psychology and life. If Silvan was there, he was predictably accessible. (I cannot remember whether he was then following his practice of working all night and

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sleeping daytimes.) And he was always puzzling over psychological problems, at that time focusing on Alexander Luria's treatment of conflict and on the interpretation of Murray's Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).

In the summer of 1941, Silvan took the entrepreneurial role of organizing a kind of graduate student housing collective, in which he and five graduate students in psychology rented a house on slummy Cowperthwaite Street just behind Harvard's palatial Dunster House, for the amazing sum of \$30 a month (\$5 apiece). It had neither heating nor bathing facilities, so we put in a Montgomery Ward shower and kerosene space heaters on two floors. Just before Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II, changing all of our lives, we shared an especially convivial fellowship, including some bibulous parties that may have hastened the postwar breakup of Harvard psychology. I was the only one of the six who was not undergoing psychoanalysis (a deficiency that I partly corrected after the war), but I remember feeling that I was assimilating psychoanalysis by a kind of osmosis. Silvan and I had the two claustral third-floor attic rooms. When I got drafted immediately after Pearl Harbor, I lost track of Cowperthwaite Manor, but I understood that it was succeeded by a similar communal enterprise on Mt. Auburn Street that played a major part in the lives of people who were to become junior participants in the new Department of Social Relations, to which I returned after the war.

About 30 when I first knew him, Silvan was no ordinary young psychologist. The son of Russian Jewish emigrants, he was born in Philadelphia on June 4, 1911, and raised in Camden, New Jersey, where his father was a dentist. At the University of Pennsylvania, he majored in playwriting (his later interest in the TAT was no accident) and began graduate school in psychology in 1930, focusing on psychophysics. After a year, he left psychology for philosophy, still at Pennsylvania, specializing in logic and the theory of value. Soon he found himself a very young PhD in an impractical field, unemployable in the depths of the Depression. As he told his friends (but did not say in the autobiographical statement that is the initial selection from his writings in this volume), he decided that one could make a very good living betting at the horse races *if* one studied the records of horses and jockeys systematically, as most pari-mutuel participants do not. That is what he did for a year, handicapping horse races for a racing syndicate, spending the winter at Florida racetracks and the summer at Atlantic City in a seasonal migration, usually carrying a bankroll of several thousand

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dollars with him. Not only did he make money, he loved horse racing. It remained a periodic indulgence all his life.

But the races as a way of life soon palled, and Silvan found his way back to Harvard for postdoctoral studies in philosophy, with Quine and Sheffer in logic and with Perry, Whitehead, and Prall in the theory of value. I remember his telling me an anecdote from this period that I was able to check with him for accuracy quite recently. (Its O. Henry quality required checking.) By this time, Silvan had several thousand dollars left from his racing days but had become bored with the work that had earned him the money. Contrary to his previous practice, he bought an expensive tip on what was alleged to be a “sure thing” – a horse known to the “wise” gamblers as enormously competent, which had been “pulled” by crooked jockeys in its previous races, so that the payoff odds were extremely attractive. Silvan was then living in Perkins Hall, the graduate dormitory, and being characteristically generous, he let many of his impecunious fellow graduate students in on the tip. He put the rest of his savings on the horse; the other students also invested heavily. What happened? Of course, disaster. The horse died of a ruptured blood vessel at the starting line, forfeiting all the bets but leaving untested its hypothetically marvelous competence.

Silvan must also have been in personal psychoanalysis during this period, since when I first knew him, he said that he had been in analysis for eight years. As I remember, I had the nerve to ask him what difference it had made in his life. He answered, and I took his answer to be serious: “It made me aware of my anxiety.” Psychoanalysis obviously did not solve his deeper problems, but, as obviously, it contributed to his keen awareness of much else in his repertory of affects and alerted him to the affective lives of others.

At all events, Silvan came into the orbit of Robert W. White and Harry Murray at the Harvard Psychological Clinic, engaged their interest, and had for some time enjoyed the role of research associate there by the time of our first encounter. As I noted previously, he was no ordinary young psychologist!

The Harvard clinic was then unique in American psychology as a setting for the study of human personality, “personology” as Murray preferred to call it. Inspired by Murray’s charismatic leadership, an extraordinary group of collaborators including White, who directed the clinic when Murray went on leave, had just completed the work soon to be reported in *Explorations in Personality* (1938). *Explorations* presented Murray’s comprehensive, holistic conception of personality, integrating

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psychodynamic ideas drawn from Freud, Jung, and McDougall with the holistic organicism of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead and the physiologist L. J. Henderson, and reported on studies of fifty normal men of college age conducted in that framework by multiple investigators using many different procedures, especially projective techniques like the TAT that featured evoked fantasy. Participants in the clinic had the sense, heightened when Murray was present, of living at the cutting edge of psychological discovery; their in-group morale was enhanced by the polarization all felt in relation to the hard-nosed positivism of the mainstream experimental psychologists in Emerson Hall – especially E. G. Boring, S. S. Stevens, and K. S. Lashley. Gordon Allport, also in Emerson Hall, was an ambivalent ally, since his version of personality psychology reflected his severe personal discomfort with Freudian psychodynamics.

In retrospect, it seems to me that Silvan may have been aided in preserving his intellectual independence in this heady atmosphere by the fact that his untidily unconventional life and Russian Jewish background were not in easy resonance with Murray's exuberantly patrician style or with White's restrained presence as a proper Bostonian with not so proper psychological ideas. His own contributions retained Murray's and White's goals for psychology as the study of lives in dynamic, holistic perspective and their commitment to interpretative methods (we did not talk of "hermeneutics" in those days), but the path that he soon took toward these goals came to diverge widely from theirs.

This is not the place for a formal treatment of Tomkins's academic career after he left Harvard for Princeton in 1947. After many years at Princeton, he left in 1965 to direct a research unit at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Thereafter he accepted a professorship at the Livingston campus of Rutgers University. After his retirement and relocation to Strathmere, New Jersey, he held a part-time appointment in the Social Systems Science Department of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. By usual standards, this was a good academic career, marked with more than the usual honors: a Career Scientist Award from the National Institute of Mental Health, a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford (1960–1961), the Distinguished Contribution Award from the Division of Clinical Psychology of the American Psychological Association (1971), the Bruno Klopfer Distinguished Contribution Award of the Society for Personality Assessment (1975), and the Henry A. Murray Award of the Society for Personality and Social

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Psychology (1990). Yet just as these honors do not reflect widespread understanding and appreciation of his real contributions, I do not think that Silvan was comfortably at home in academia. Certainly he was no conforming participant in the postwar publish-or-perish academic rat race. Never was there a professor whose motivation for his work in psychology was more intrinsic. Silvan cared deeply about ideas. He sought insistently for deeper and broader understanding. He also cared about individual people, friends and colleagues and students, not about institutions.

Another anecdote may help to convey Silvan's unacademic flavor. When I was at the Graduate Department of Psychology at New York University in the late 1950s, I had arranged for Silvan to talk to the Department Colloquium about his theories of affect. After I had completed my somewhat formal introduction of our visitor, Silvan stood up and shouted, "FUCK!!!" at the top of his voice. (This was in the staid 1950s.) Then he said, "You have just experienced *affect*!" Indeed we had! I imagine that most of the people who were there on the top floor of 21 Washington Place remember that scene as vividly as I do, though with the passage of time we don't remember what else Silvan had to say on that occasion.

As a psychologist, Silvan remained a philosopher – most explicitly in his book on *The Thematic Apperception Test* (1946), written during his Harvard years. That book applied John Stuart Mill's canons of inductive inference to the analysis of TAT stories – a brilliant application but too obsessive–compulsive in interpretative style to suit many clinicians. (His protégé and lifelong friend from Princeton days, Irving Alexander, captured the spirit of Silvan's inductive approach freed from the barriers posed by Silvan's compulsivity in *Personology: Method and Content in Personality Assessment and Psychobiography* [1990].)

Silvan's professional expertise in philosophy let him move with much more freedom and self-assurance in regard to metatheoretical, implicitly philosophical issues in psychology than his more narrowly trained psychological colleagues usually could. I think, for example, of his treatment of free will and determinism as complementary, not antithetical, assumptions, with the former analyzed in terms of *degrees* of freedom in the statistical/scientific sense – a way of thinking I first learned from Isidor Chein (1972), another of my admired mentor/colleagues, whose Talmudic thought processes bore some resemblance to Silvan's. A more central reflection of his philosophical background was the way in which his previous specialization in value theory underlay his commitment to

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the explicitly humanistic position that was fundamental to all of his work in psychology.

I had earlier regarded Silvan's polarity theory of ideologies as a rather minor addition only loosely tied to his general theorizing. After perusing the contents of this volume in preparation for writing my introduction, I now see it as pivotal to his avowedly value-laden psychology and as a virtually unrecognized major contribution to political and social psychology. For Silvan, the polarity of Left versus Right pervades Western ideological thought from classical to modern times. It contrasts the leftist, *humanist* position, "man as the measure of all things" – a position that promotes the value of all affects and approves of human gratifications, a positive affective balance – with the rightist, *normative* position, one that bases its evaluations on norms that transcend human interests and thus gives more play to the negative affects. Throughout his life, Silvan was firmly anchored toward the left pole of this dimension. He was surely raised as a humanist. His son, Mark, tells how, prior to his escape to America, Silvan's father had stood on the plains of Russia and defied God to strike him down. When God didn't, his father adopted atheism – an anecdote evidently relished by Silvan. His constructions of affect and script theory provide an articulate foundation in general psychology for the basic polarity and furnish cogent grounds why readers who accept his construal of psyche and world should prefer the humanistic pole. In language popularized by Jurgen Habermas (1971), Silvan promulgated an *emancipatory* psychology.

A major contribution to political and social psychology? Silvan's polarity theory substantially overlaps Bob Altemeyer's (1988) concept of right-wing authoritarianism, which Altemeyer has shown by an impressive program of research to be a psychologically important and technically satisfactory variable vastly preferable to the enticing but psychometrically faulted concept of the 1950s, the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Right-wing authoritarians as identified by Altemeyer's measures are superconventional. They tend to kowtow to what they regard as legitimate authority and are on trigger to be aggressive toward underdogs and deviants. Altemeyer provided persuasive reasons for regarding the Freudian underpinnings of *The Authoritarian Personality* as unacceptable. Although I have received Altemeyer's portrait of right-wing authoritarianism with enthusiasm, I have been less enthusiastic about the Bandura-style social learning theory to which he turns for explanation. I believe that Tomkins's script-theoretical account can accommodate Altemeyer's results

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in an explanatory framework that is more satisfactory. And polarity theory is the more general formulation.

I began my substantive discussion of Tomkins's contributions with his polarity theory so as to make explicit the affective-ideological basis of his agenda in psychological theorizing – an angle of approach much in the spirit of Silvan's own endeavors. Of course, the core of his theory is his treatment of the primary affects, and it is this aspect that has had the greatest impact on general psychology thus far. Before Tomkins, affect and emotion were a disaster area of psychology. Experimental psychology had done little with the emotions, and accepted doctrine had backed away from Darwin's classic work on emotional expression to regard expression as a matter of arbitrary cultural conventions. Social psychology eagerly accepted the weak evidence from Schachter and Singer (1962) to arrive at a dogmatic view of emotion as a purely cognitive matter, the contextual interpretation of undifferentiated arousal – still the prevalent, though unwarranted, view in the subdiscipline.

In contrast with academic psychology, psychoanalysis emphasized affect and the emotional life. But Freudian drive theory turned out to be a blind alley, and there was no coherent conception of affect to be salvaged from Freudian, neo-Freudian, or self and object-relations theories. The literature on libido, narcissism, aggression, and anxiety provided rich and controversial raw materials but no coherent general framework for the incorporation of affect and emotion in general human psychology.

Tomkins's affect theory proposed just such a framework, with biologically differentiated positive and negative affects rather than drives providing the basis of human motivation and with feedback from their distinctive facial expression being crucially involved. Ekman's (e.g., 1971) and Izard's (e.g., 1977) work on emotional expression, which revived conceptions similar to Darwin's on the basis of solid evidence, stemmed directly from Tomkins's ideas and led to the resurrection of emotion as a primary and productive research area in contemporary psychology. All the same, many aspects of the affect theory remain to be worked through, especially Tomkins's conception of the relation of affect to drive, so crucial to the theory of human motivation (another disaster area!). His metaphorical concepts of amplification and magnification seem to me vastly preferable to the previous dominant metaphor of psychic energy (with its misleading implication that the first law of thermodynamics applies, with conservation of energy balancing input and output accounts), but I confess my own inability to grasp the

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full implications that Tomkins packs into these terms. As for his attempt to base the distinctions among the affects on different patterns of neural firing, these speculations look harder to test. I admire them as testifying to Tomkins's aspirations for psychology as a biopsychosocial science, but I do not believe that they matter much for the problems of human psychology that presently concern us.

Script theory does matter. For the personologist, it is central. When the era of the classic personality psychologists – Gordon Allport, Henry Murray, Gardner Murphy, and George Kelly – was followed by Walter Mischel's (1968) situationist nihilism, the psychology of personality fell on evil days, as Rae Carlson (1971) pointed out in a definitive critique. In recent years, the field has partially revived. There have been two consensually admired changes. On the one hand, an interactional or transactional view of the interplay between person and situation has largely replaced Mischel's doctrinaire situationism (except in the precincts of experimental social psychology, where references to personality dispositions continue to be regarded as instances of Lee Ross's [1977] "fundamental attribution error.") On the other, longitudinal studies of personality development over the life course by Jack Block (1971), Ravenna Helson (e.g., Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984), and others have given new reality to the "study of lives," hitherto an aspiration more than a reality in research in the Murray tradition. A third development, the convergence of psychometric studies of personality on a Big Five set of factor-traits (Goldberg, 1993), is cheered by some, but not by personologists, who find these surface descriptors essentially irrelevant to the task to which they would give priority: characterizing individuality and its motivational wellsprings.

Script theory seems to me to provide the coherent framework for the dynamic (motivational) characterization of personality that the field badly needs. Carlson's introduction to Part IV should help the reader new to Tomkins's thought to grasp the key ideas and appreciate their power. At this point, such a newcomer must take on faith my assertion that as a developmental conception regarding the conditional linkage of "scenes" and affects in a person's life, it affords an extremely flexible language for analyzing personality structure and processes. It is based on human universals – the affects and the scripting process – but readily accommodates cultural and individual specificity of scenes and sequences. It therefore immediately escapes the culture-boundedness and history-boundedness of all standard personality theories of the kind treated in Hall and Lindzey's (1957) classic and oft-revised text and

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provides a language for the idiographic treatment of personal uniqueness, as called for by Gordon Allport (1937). It is committed neither to unity nor to fragmentation in personality organization, neither to inner-directed nor to other-directed role-playing versions of personality. It is truly general in its applications and claims.

As a motivational theory, script theory flatly rejects the energy metaphors of drive theory and avoids their pernicious consequences. In spite of its freedom from history- and culture-boundedness, it is saved from dehumanizing ethical relativism by its linkage to Tomkins's polarity theory and his doctrines concerning the socialization of positive and negative affects. There are better and worse ways of being a person, and Tomkins's theory can be articulate about them.

In terms of a metatheoretical concern with which I have been much preoccupied, script theory avoids the dichotomy of interpretative–hermeneutic (humanistic) *versus* causal–explanatory (scientific) approaches that has plagued psychology and the social sciences throughout this century. It is unapologetically both hermeneutic *and* scientific, as I think any satisfactory psychology of selfhood has to be, since the reflexivity of human self-awareness makes people's interpretations of themselves and of others causally relevant. Scripts link affect and cognition in structures of meaning. The reconstruction of a person's predominant scripts is a matter for interpretation, but the view of personality processes and development is causal–explanatory. Here is another case in which Tomkins's philosophical credentials freed him to get on with the psychological job without being hampered by supposed philosophical proscriptions.

With all these virtues, why has script theory not caught on? As I suggested earlier, the fault was Tomkins's. The little that he published on it before Volume 3 of *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* was complex, abstract, and obscure. The research that Rae Carlson (e.g., 1981, 1982; Carlson & Brincka, 1987) carried out in its terms gave the clearest presentation and exemplification of its potentialities but could not by itself compensate for the difficulties in Tomkins's exposition. In this volume, editorial commentary will help the reader. Even so, the novice will need to draw on considerable patience to digest, for example, the long catalog of scripts that Tomkins provides. With patience, the reader may come to see that his taxonomy codifies an extraordinary amount of natural-historical knowledge about people. Such natural history has been rare indeed in the literature of academic psychology.