Theory & Psychology

SPECIAL SECTION

Pleasure in Mind

Silvan Tomkins and Affect in Aesthetics, Personality Theory and Culture

Doris McIlwain
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT. After a brief introduction to Silvan Tomkins, the man and his work, the interdisciplinary reach of Tomkins' theory of affect is demonstrated here in a collection of articles illustrating how affective engagement intertwines inner and outer reality. Susan Best rescues the 'pleasure in looking' from renunciation, consolation or a voyeuristic, suspect visual pleasure, and revitalizes aesthetics using Tomkins' conceptualization of affects, interest and joy. These affects suspend the viewer between objectification and identification, as interest leaves the art as object, while joy renders it a source of communion. Adam Frank demonstrates how lingering unspoken affective memory—bodily memory—uncannily shapes our negotiations with the environment, via skills or taboos: skills which remain as phantom 'nervy guesses' as to where a lost limb might have been; or taboos on looking limiting our visual pleasure. Doris McIlwain rezones pleasure, renews the promise of drive theory and maps how even transient affective states (or gaps in affective experience) become enduring personality dispositions promoting cascading developmental constraints regarding what we can feel about, and do to, ourselves and others.

KEY WORDS: aesthetics, affects, drives, interest, joy, personality, phantom limbs, Tomkins, uncanny, visual pleasure

Silvan Tomkins: The Work and the Man

Silvan S. Tomkins (1911–1991) is known to psychologists as the author of an expansive and eclectic theory of affect, as the originator of script theory, and as a theoretical and empirical worker in the field of personality assessment. While working at the Harvard Psychological Clinic (1937–1947), Tomkins wrote a textbook on psychopathology and a manual for the interpretation of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Tomkins, 1947). With Dan Horn, he also devised the Picture Arrangement Test (PAT; see Tomkins & Miner, 1959).

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Tomkins' four-volume treatise on affect (*Affect Imagery Consciousness*; published over a thirty-year period, 1962–1992) has been an important contribution to personality theory.

It is Tomkins' work on affect that is the focus of this special section. The first two volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962, 1963) discuss the positive and negative affects, respectively, offering a theory of affect that differs from traditional psychoanalytic, behaviourist or cognitively influenced accounts. Tomkins draws on a multidisciplinary set of sources (clinical psychology, infant development, psychoanalysis, learning theory, anthropology, literature, biography, popular culture, cognitive science, neurology). One of the central tenets of this theory is that the nine basic affects (technically six basic affects: interest–excitement, enjoyment–joy, surprise–startle, fear–terror, distress–anguish and anger–rage; one affect-auxiliary: shame; and two drive-auxiliaries: disgust and dissmell)—not the drives—are the primary motivators of human behaviour. Contesting the dominance of drive theory in both behaviourism and psychoanalysis, Tomkins suggested that drives have motivational effect only when amplified by the affects:

> The drive system is ... secondary to the affect system. Much of the motivational power of the drive system is borrowed from the affect system, which is ordinarily activated concurrently as an amplifier for the drive signal. The affect system is, however, capable of masking or even inhibiting the drive signal and of being activated independently of the drive system by a broad spectrum of stimuli, learned and unlearned. (Tomkins, 1962, p. 22)

This startling and innovative account of psychic function was directly influential on a number of psychologists working on emotion (e.g. Paul Ekman, 1994; Carroll Izard, see Izard, Ackerman, Schoff, & Fine, 2000) and many theoretically oriented clinicians (McWilliams, 1997; Morrison, 1996; Nathanson, 1997a, 1997b). Nonetheless, the influence of Tomkins' work on affect in mainstream psychology has not been sustained. While Tomkins was a contributor to and focus of the volume edited by Ekman and Scherer (1984), which housed what became the Zajonc/Lazarus debate (Lazarus, 1984; Zajonc, 1984a, 1984b) on the primacy of cognition over affect (or vice versa), already the theoretical and empirical commitments of this mainstream research had shifted away from Tomkins' psychoanalytically inflected foundations. Many don't cite Tomkins where one would expect. Few have read him in the original. Tomkins' work is, as Nathanson (1997a) notes, 'couched in nearly impenetrable prose and based in a theory that was destined to be ignored until our present era, it has … been skimmed by every serious student of shame' (p. 107). In the current scene Tomkins is respected as an early pioneer in affect theory—his work circulates in personality theory and clinical contexts as an important precursor to contemporary theories—yet there has been little in the way of direct assessment of his theoretical framework on affect. Consequently, his work has yet to reach a wide psychological audience, and it has not received the sustained theoretical scrutiny that it deserves. This special section of *Theory & Psychology* introduces

the rich, refreshingly original character of Tomkins' work to a contemporary psychological audience.

Tomkins' work is beginning to provoke scholars across a broad range of disciplines. The revival of interest in his work has been sparked, initially at least, by two anthologies of his writings; one compiled by Demos (1995) and one by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank: *Shame and Its Sisters* (1995). In their introduction to this anthology, Sedgwick and Frank argue that Tomkins' work represents a significant challenge to what we might call current, critical, interdisciplinary scholarship, but what they call the domain of applied theory: 'theory after Foucault and Greenblatt, after Freud and Lacan, after Lévi-Strauss, after Derrida, after feminism' (p. 2). This special section responds to this challenge, considering the ways in which Tomkins' affect theory can be used to examine contemporary issues of psyche, embodiment and subjectivity. Tomkins' (1962, 1963) work has an impressive interdisciplinary reach—in *Affect Imagery Consciousness* he draws on and contributes to literatures in psychotherapy, cybernetics, Darwinism, biology, psychoanalysis, yet the focus on psychological theory and practice is never lost. One key to the importance of Tomkins' work is the way in which his theorization of affect has proved invigorating for the psychologist and non-psychologist alike.

No Longer Counter to the Tide

I would like to begin with the ending of Silvan Tomkins. In the obituary published in the *American Psychologist* (1992), Irving Alexander of Duke University sculpts the form and reach of the man: 'Tomkins wanted to know what humans really want, [formulating] a theory of human functioning … whetted by Norbert Wiener's writings in cybernetics' (p. 1674). He focused on affects when the field of psychology focused on learning, motivation and cognition. He studied affects, scripts, ideology, addictions, was known to historians, political scientists and psychiatrists—he 'exuded the values of originality and independence' (p. 1675). Alexander notes that the 'breadth and sheer brilliance of his work may have been partially muted because his interests and values seemed always to flow counter to the tide in psychology'—he wanted to understand an individual life in 'a field that heavily values empirical studies and mini-theories' (p. 1675).

No longer counter to the tide within psychology in his emphasis on affects, Tomkins is still under-acknowledged in terms of the scope and freshness of his ideas for promoting unusual linkages. It's appropriate, then, to have an interdisciplinary collection of papers in a theoretical psychology journal reworking and extending Tomkins' affect theory. The 'responsive moment in the viewer of art', the pause, in-breath of rapture or transportation, the level of self-forgetfulness that such temporary and reversible communion makes possible, is investigated by Susan Best (2007). She shows what the affect of interest 'makes possible' in a paper that's 'about a kind of psychic stretching, perhaps even a restlessness about things as they are, things known' (p. 510) living up to her own brief by

providing 'clues for rethinking the gaze, visual pleasure and affective engagement with art' (p. 509). She suggests that 'rooting aesthetic pleasure in the affective system, rather than the drives, has quite profound consequences for how we view art' (p. 510). Art becomes no longer consolation for the renunciation of more immediate pleasures, as Freud might have it, but a moment of communion, a space that is like play, where we are suspended between identification and objectification. Interest, as Best suggests, 'recognizes the otherness and novelty of the object, while joy works to bring the object into communion with the subject' (p. 512). She rescues the 'pleasure in looking' from a visual pleasure, which, post-Mulvey (1975, 1981), has become highly suspect, complicit in voyeurism and the continuation of rigid gender roles.

Adam Frank (2007) creatively makes a space for psychology in (new) media theory by bringing together Freud's dual notions of the uncanny (as repressed material resurfacing, or old surpassed beliefs and habits gaining fresh life via present occurrences which make them seem once more confirmed) with Tomkins' work on taboos on looking and phantom limb phenomena. Frank considers the habits and skills of attention, and the scripts that guide our experiences and perceptions of affect as a way of mapping the affective scripts that become bodily schemas, the 'system–environment relations that are skilled, forgotten histories' (personal communication) that may return as phantom limb phenomena—'a nervy guess as to where the body (part) is at a given moment' (p. 524–5). Phantoms, he suggests, are 'what you learn when you become skilled' (p. 525), 'vestibular and kinesthetic theories of bodies' (p. 525) that are a history of negotiations with the environment. They are histories we have never spoken, like the double we name the self. Phantoms, Frank notes, are ' "never destroyed" but are … recalled in "sudden emergencies" ' (p. 523). He links the return of skills in phantom limb phenomena with instances of the 'uncanny', 'something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud, 1919/1953, p. 241). Thriller-style, Frank unravels uncanny features of Emily Dickinson's poetry and Freud's discomfiture at meeting in a train window his 'own image unbidden and unexpected' (Freud, 1919/1953, p. 241), provoking an array of affects. The link is theoretically quite synergistic. Freud's notion of 'the uncanny' is mapped in terms of a looking at what cannot look back—be it corpse or automaton—while Tomkins' 'taboo on looking' is used to emphasize the containment or debarring of the pleasure arising from our eyes, from mutual affect awareness—being looked at, or mutual looking. This chimes well with Best's (2007) evocation of Mulvey's essay, where even looking at that which cannot look back is a pleasure both voyeuristic and suspect.

The themes of hardwiring and contingency, biology and culture, and the permeability of the organism to others, interwovenness with others, are within effortless reach for Tomkins' theory. The inclusive, precise way Tomkins gave place to drives and affects within his theory is celebrated in my paper (McIlwain, 2007). He wanted to displace the *ascendancy* of drives within

psychoanalytic theory and behavourism, not to displace drives. Yet we've lost them in psychoanalysis and largely in psychology (but see Block, 2002). Tomkins' theory of affect is better than Freud's, more consonant with contemporary discoveries. Freud (in his metapsychological statements at least) never really sets affect free from drives or from cognition. His account suffers from some of the difficulties of appraisal theories of emotion. In reply to appraisal theories, Tomkins suggests that the baby does not appraise the world as a vale of tears before it emits its first cry. Freud, in places, also treats affects as expressions of the drives, rather than as motivational states in their own right. While we might start out in life with basic affects, they don't remain that way. Not much changes in terms of the underpinning of affects across the lifespan, but they jostle with each other, becoming co-assembled. The experiential and behavioural outcome of an affect, for instance shame, largely depends on whether it has been co-assembled with fear (promoting withdrawal) or anger (promoting attack). These affective cocktails were Tomkins' speciality and they've lost none of their zing. I try to show how particular cocktails might limit a person's developmental possibilities across the lifespan in signature ways; what Izard et al. (2000) call 'cascading constraints'. Some of us resolve our helplessness, confusion and error by going for narcissistic merger rather than recognizing the other as other, by devising worldviews that cut others off at the knees; contemptuous worldviews, like that of the Machiavellian, arising in response to shame and humiliation. Others have gaps in their affective range and intensity, and fill their own affective void via the manipulation and control of others and of their emotional world. I embroider Tomkins into a contemporary array of issues to show the explanatory power and fecundity of his theory, rezoning pleasure into affects and drives.

These articles show that Tomkins isn't merely of historical interest; his affect theory is alive and kicking, and in many ways still in its infancy within psychological research, and in the vibrant disciplinary domains represented here.

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DORIS MCILWAIN teaches Personality and Philosophy of Psychoanalysis in the Department of Psychology at Macquarie University, Australia. Her research spans charisma, affective personality profiles, the costs of affective suppression and the role of affective schemas in accessing the personal past. She has published in *Meanjin* (2004), *Philosophical Psychology* (2006) and the *Journal of Neuropsychoanalysis* (2006). ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia.
[email: dmcilwai@psy.mq.edu.au]