
Affect Script Psychology

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I was recently introduced to material by Silvan S Tomkins (1962, 1963, 1991, 1992), via a contact with Thomas Ohlsson (2002). The following is my summary of Tomkins' ideas about affect, based mainly on two very useful articles by Kelly (2009) and Nathanson (2008) – these are available to download as shown in the References.

Tomkins called his work *Affect Imagery Consciousness* and explained that there were no commas in the title because there is no way to separate the concepts as we experience them. He argued that affect brings triggers into consciousness in ways that are influenced by the images we have based on life experiences. When Berne (1966) was writing about (life) scripts, Tomkins was referring to scripts as co-assemblies of current and previous affect. Nathanson provides some terminology explanations:

- ◆ *Affect* as nine highly specific unmodulated physiological reactions present from birth.
- ◆ *Feeling* to describe our awareness that an affect has been triggered.
- ◆ *Emotion* as the combination of current affect with our memories of previous affect; Tomkins later called these *scripts* and says they are shaped by culture.
- ◆ *Mood* as a state in which the current experience triggers an affect that reminds us of an analogous historical experience, rather like Erskine and Zalcman's (1979) reinforcing memories.

Tomkins proposed that our affect system evolved to deal with stimulus confusion; in other words it aids survival by enabling us to quickly identify what we should pay attention to. His idea was that we become aware of a stimulus only when affect is triggered, and that we become consciously aware of that stimulus only after we have felt something. Danger threatens and we feel and react before we think. You smell something awful and you feel sick before you identify what the object is. This fits with the current notion that the amygdala registers stimuli and we react physiologically before our neo-cortex can process in awareness.

The nine affects include two positive, one neutral and 5 negative.

The neutral affect is *surprise-startle*, which is rather like the reset button on a computer because it clears any other affect and may be followed by positive or negative affect.

The two positive affects are *interest-excitement* and *enjoyment-joy*. Interest-excitement involves increasing brain

activity and we often overlook the presence of mild interest. Enjoyment-joy goes with decreasing brain activity, as we move to contentment from a high positive level of interest-excitement or a high negative level of distress-anguish.

Of the negative affects, *fear-terror* also involves increasing brain activity, and at the very fast rate that is our survival mechanism when dangers threatens. *Anger-rage* and *distress-anguish*, however, are both steady state affects, with anger-rage involving a higher level of brain activity than distress-anguish.

Disgust and dissmell have a single label only because Tomkins did not see the need for a range; these two relate to our hunger drive and provide protection against ingesting substances that might harm us. Tomkins invented the term dissmell and linked it to racial and cultural prejudices and the markets for products to ensure we smell okay to others.

Finally, *shame-humiliation* means an affect that is not the same as the usual conceptions of shame. It may encompass emotions that we refer to as frustration, rejection, loneliness or mortification; the key is that it occurs when something interferes with ongoing positive affect. It does not require that we have transgressed against another person.

References

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