

## Study Group Notes



## Affect Theory Study Group, Session 2

Richmond, Virginia

**Materials Covered:** Everyone had read the assignments, and I reported on Chapter 8. Some members had listened to more of the tapes also.

**Verda Little, Ph.D., Coordinator** **Reactions, Applications, Questions:**

The consensus was that these readings were much more easily assimilated than Tomkins's Chapter 1. The need for a "primarily motivational" system to supplement the drives made sense to all. Repeated reactions alluded to Tomkins's pulling together so many threads of research and how many of his ideas seemed ahead of the time he was writing. An example is his discussion of the hunger drive and the accompanying affects, which has direct application to the eating disorders which most of us heard about in the 1970s.

**Pain:** The role of affect in the tolerability of pain was discussed in terms of trauma patients, with whom several of us work. These patients at times inflict severe physical pain on themselves to substitute for the distress of intense pain of the memories of the abuse and the experience of helplessness. At times they even explain what they are doing in these terms.

A corollary to this is my husband's recent experience following knee replacement surgery. When the physician changed the pain medication from an IV drip to a morphine pump, his distress was reduced partially because he had some sense of control. Perhaps the mechanism was reduction of the fear of uncontrollable, unbearable pain. Nevertheless, the effect was produced by a sense of control, not just the morphine.

**Distress:** In regard to the child's cry being as distressing as the pain that instigated it, several members reported having observed this in children. One member said that she had stopped caring for a friend's children along with her own because one of the children just could not be consoled. She was concerned that the mother would return and think the member had not been taking care of the child, as the child would cry for two hours with no response to efforts to comfort him.

**The Face:** In regard to the cephalo-caudal principle, one member offered personal evidence. She reported that the ultrasound picture she has on her refrigerator of her granddaughter, who is due in two weeks, seems all head and face. In regard to Tomkins's assertion that the body image is dominated by the face image, another member offered personal evidence. Her 7-year-old daughter, who has chicken pox, cries when she looks in the mirror and sees the red blotches on her face. The mother has to turn her from the mirror before she can apply the lotion. In regard to Tomkins's statement that "the hand acts as if the face is the site of feeling," one member reported that a man, when told of the death of his sister, placed his hands over his face as he moaned. In regard to the face of the mother who does not see and is not seen, some of us recalled times that must have happened with our children in our urgency to make them "good children." Regrets, alas.

One member reported that her 15-year-old daughter makes eye contact only with her best friend. The question was: "Is she avoiding seeing (perhaps disapproval, anger) or being seen?" Discussion centered around Elkind's "imaginary audience" of the adolescent, this adolescent's apparent need to be seen (e.g., coming home with blue hair), and ways she might be induced (seduced?) to find the answer to the question. Some members use the gestalt technique of taking away the voice and having couples simply look at each other. One member stated that this experience is affected by social rules about staring as well as affects, and it sometimes leads to glances and giggles. The point was that cognitions affect our behavior, not just affects. (*Editor's note: Tomkins often stated that "shared inter-ocular contact is the most intimate of human activities." The instruction to maintain eye contact must produce shame that will be handled at one or another point of its compass.*)

**Facial Styles:** We briefly considered our own facial styles. One member reported being told that she had [a] "sweet face." Another recalled working in therapy on a tight jaw, which would now feel foreign to her.

**Innate Activators of Affect:** We worked from the graph in Chapter 8 to try to understand better the affects and the concept of density as used in the theory. In regard to the affect interest-excitement, one member reported currently working with a couple whose interests have diverged so drastically within the past year-and-a-half that there is little basis for a relationship. In their last session, they spent 30 minutes figuring out how they could make dinner (the only time they could count on spending together) "quality time." They decided they could turn off the TV. This member quoted the chorus of a Robert Burns poem, sung by Jean Redpath, that seems to recognize what happens over time when interest wanes. It goes:

For love is teasin'  
And love is pleasin'  
And love is a pleasure  
When first it's new;  
But love grows old,  
And waxes cold,  
and fades away  
Like the morning dew.

Some of us remembered our ethology from graduate school. We found the mechanisms of imprinting and releasers interesting, but their application to humans remains unclear (as Tomkins notes) except for the infant's smile in response to a human face before fear comes into play.

### Session 4, 31 May 1995

Materials covered: AIC 1, Chapter 9 pp. 290-299.

**Reactions, Applications, Questions:** One member reported an intense response to listening to a tape about the face of "repressed anger" and realizing that tears accompany the full expression of rage. This was "wonderfully freeing" for her as she recalled countless arguments she lost with her father because she dissolved in tears. He would then say "We simply can't continue to discuss this because you're too upset." Her anger was coming out fully, but her tears enabled him to discount her feelings. This report led to other personal experiences of tears accompanying anger: 1) Confronting a

Master's Thesis Chairman, 100 pages into a single subject design experiment, his red marks all over the paper, tears welling up, her saying "I want to kill you but I can't." 2) A confrontation with a professor who had humiliated her, having taken a day to decide how to handle it, full of rage, wanting to kill him, telling him off, tears running down her cheeks. 3) Another person said that she assumed that the tears that came with her anger were triggered by helpless feelings. With this new knowledge that tears accompany the full experience of anger, she recalled that anger was prohibited in her family.

One member reported a therapy session this week in which a couple had been instructed just to look at each other. When the wife looked at the husband, the tears flowed. Too quickly, the therapist jumped in with "How touched you must be." The wife retorted "No, I'm pissed at him."

Hypothesis re: relations between affects: Each hypothesis was examined in terms of examples from literature, clinical work, or personal experience.

9. Startle reduction evokes a neutral state of no affect. Examples: The shock on a woman's face when her partner reported that she had spent the morning with the woman's mother, from whom she had been estranged for years following childhood sexual abuse. (And the shock on the faces of the other therapists when the member reported this event with her patient.) In Agatha Christie's *The Mirror Cracked*, people projected their own feelings on to the face of the actress, whose face was frozen with "no feelings at all." Was this a neutral state of no affect, or a mask of feelings? One member reported her observation of the startle response at one week in her granddaughter, now 6 weeks old.

10. The sudden reduction of intense, enduring fear, if complete, releases joy, but if incomplete releases excitement. Examples: Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* takes the viewer repeatedly through terror, partial relief, excitement, terror, etc. One member reported a vivid personal experience that supports this hypothesis. Her house was broken into two days before she was to leave for Russia. In her purse were her passport, \$200 in \$1 bills, and a new pair of glasses. As she was sitting in a nightgown and robe, a man kicked the door open, lunged into the room, and grabbed for her purse. Startle was followed by anger. She started after the man. Then he turned toward her. She was terrified and screamed. He left with her purse. She remembered her fear being reduced, but the excitement remained for a long time. (We then played out the scenario that would have led to complete reduction of fear, leading to joy. The police arrive and catch the man, who is a known criminal. They tell her he will never see the light of day as a free man, and they are pleased she screamed so loud. She gets her purse back and has a wonderful trip to Russia.)

11. The sudden reduction of intense, enduring distress produces joy. Example: The main character, Ayla, speaks almost exactly these words in *Plains of Passage*.

12. The complete sudden reduction of intense, enduring shame activates joy; the incomplete sudden reduction of intense, enduring shame activates excitement. Examples: One member reported a patient, a sexual abuse survivor with an extensive shame-based history, who beamed with joy when she was able to take in the therapist's joy at her presence. In many couples, the partner who is shame-based will keep hooked into the relationship with "half a loaf," never insisting on full nourishment from the other and never getting bored with him (or her). The hypothesis is demonstrated often by students who strive for A's and are successful, but who never feel it is enough for their parents. They keep trying, pushing harder and harder.

13. The instigation of maximum-density positive affect is antagonistic to the maintenance of maximum-intensity negative affect and the instigation of negative affect is similarly antagonistic to the maintenance of positive affect with regard to maximum intensity. One member agreed to conduct an experiment with her 6-week-old granddaughter to determine what level of positive stimulus is required to counter a maximum negative affect.

14. If weak or moderate instigated positive affect does not reduce the intensity of ongoing intense negative affect, the intensity and duration of the negative affect will be increased to an intensity that will reduce the antagonistic response. Example: A wife who attempts to placate a bullying husband often succeeds in inflaming him further if she does not give enough. We discussed how this hypothesis might be tested and questioned if it is a testable hypothesis.

15. All affects, with the exception of startle, are specific activators of themselves—the principle of contagion. Examples: The canned audience laughter that accompanies situation comedies is a good example of this hypothesis. Another example is the person who wants to nurse his hurt feelings and says "I'm just going to go out in the garden and eat some worms." Teenage girls will accuse others of having "a pity party" in a similar situation. A clinical example is the patient with OCD whose memories of childhood were mostly negative. When she began to recall some positive ones, her therapist asked her to make a list of her good memories. As she began to focus on the positive, she recalled even more good times and her mood improved. Another clinical example is the person with panic disorder whose fear of fear keeps her from doing things that might trigger a panic attack. (*Editor's note: an obvious exception to the assertion that surprise-startle is not an activator of itself would be the "double take," which Tomkins explains differently on p. 506 of AIC 1.*)

16. Distress which is unrelieved and intense is a specific releaser of anger. Example: Managed care.

This portion of the chapter proved so rich and interesting to the group that we decided to continue with it at our next meeting.