

Reading for subsection 10 (*Classifying Scripts*):

**Subject:** *Scripts and Interventions*

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**To:** Tomkins-Talk

As usual, Eve Sedgwick has offered a challenging interpretation of the material at hand, one that should produce a significant number of interesting responses. Here is my first try:

Eve K. Sedgwick wrote (EKS):

To the best of my understanding, a distinctive, fascinating, and rather unexpected thing about the concept of “scripts,” as Tomkins used it, is that scripts are primarily interpretive, rather than performative. (This is perhaps especially unexpected given that SST himself wrote plays.) That is, a person’s scripts don’t tell you primarily what s/he DOES or could do in a particular situation, but rather how s/he INTERPRETS or reads the situation. Of course, the person’s actions will somehow reflect this interpretation, but the script itself is not like an actor’s script—more like, maybe, the scripts that would be studied by a scholar or dramaturg.

Donald L. Nathanson (DLN):

We read SST differently. I understand scripts to be systems through which recurring and similar Stimulus-Affect-Response Sequences (SARS) are grouped for the purpose of efficiency; we have evolved to be able to form scripts. Were we to respond to each and every situation as if it were novel, forced thereby to figure it out as if it bore no relation to any previous situation, precious time would be lost in computation/contemplation. Because we are advanced enough to find similarities that allow us to link several different SARS and to respond to the resulting family of scenes as if this family of scenes were a stimulus itself, we experience an affect triggered by this new stimulus, and respond to that affect by making a new kind of SARS. This new SARS, this affective reaction and then response to a family of scenes, is what we call a script in affect/script theory. It contains rules for the future management of specific clusters of experiences and thus is both interpretive and performative. A script does govern the way you will respond to a stimulus. Even more important to us as therapists, the problem with scripts is that even though scripts bring tremendous efficiency to mental function, they tend to reduce human action to its mean [mode] rather than allow its possible best. Truly novel experiences, stimuli from which the individual might learn new ways of being and new ways of doing, are misinterpreted as quite ordinary experiences that fit within the scheme governed by the script. Much of psychotherapy may be understood as attempts to identify as scripted behavior what the patient believed to be the product of free will. Classical psychoanalytic therapy offered an interesting but somewhat limited family of scripts to which it assigned neurotic behavior; cognitive/behavior therapy offers another system of describing by identifying the thoughts that “hover at the edges of consciousness” in order to remove them from what is then explained as a loop.

EKS:

This makes sense narratively in Tomkins's thought, to the extent that the new understanding of affective "scripts" in vol. 3 of AIC (1991) seems to emerge directly from, and ultimately supplant, the understanding of affective "theories" in vols. 1 and 2 (1962-3). The earlier discussion of people's affect theories, especially of the consequential differences between strong and weak theories, seems to me to be one of the really key elements of Tomkins's thought, and also one of those most directly influenced by early cybernetics and systems theory (e.g. by the emphasis on differential effects of feedback processes.) Sometimes it's harder to trace those roots in the more performative "script" language of vol.3, but they're there at least implicitly all the time.

DLN:

When he started to work on "human being theory," Tomkins recognized that he had to explain as monads the various subsystems of the mental and physical apparatus, but also to show how they related to each other, formed systems that were nested within each other, and that could both change through the history of the organism and resist change. The material contained in Volumes I, II, and IV was completed by 1962, even though publication was delayed because of SST's own nuclear script. Springer refused to reprint Volumes I and II until he finished the whole of AIC, which infuriated me because I wanted to get people working on the basic theories while he was alive and his refusal to publish the rest of the work (and the bibliography!) allowed the impasse life of its own. In essence, I told him that I would publish a pirated edition of Volume I (Springer had enough copies of Volume II at the moment—and was charging only \$8 for it) in order to start teaching the theory. I knew that his nuclear script said (among many other things) that no great scientist or philosopher ever makes more than one major contribution; the lens of his script forced him to interpret this belief as the idea that he would die were he to complete AIC. When I realized that the work he had done in the intervening 25+ years (all of script theory) would now make the final volume too thick for publication, I suggested that he break it in two, publish Volume III on script theory, and leave publication of the remainder of his work (cognition) to his literary heirs. On his death in 1991 I edited (8 months!) the manuscript of what would now be volume IV, and turned it over to Springer (after which Virginia Demos added her wisdom for the final version). I mention all this to explain that in its original form, AIC contained little or nothing about script theory, but that the long delay between completion of the original work and its eventual publication allowed Tomkins to think about his material in a new way. AIC would have been much the lesser and we much the poorer had he not been so encumbered by his nuclear script.

EKS:

The "freeze frame" technique that was discussed in a previous e-mail message comes in at a funny angle to Tomkins's script theory, because for Tomkins, too, scripts are very much about framing, but apparently in a somewhat different way.

DLN:

The “freeze frame” technique is a perfect example of one in which one particular episode of scripted behavior is removed from the control of the management system that usually operates and allowed to become a novel experience. I suspect that those who have gone through the second year of the study group process would be able to name the specific script involved (assign it to one of the groups identified by SST), identify the affect most important in its genesis, and offer a somewhat more sophisticated approach to reconstruction. But it doesn't matter what others might do—what Judy describes is a wonderful example of a well-known process through which scripts are undone, and well worth our attention.

EKS:

For him, the question of what gets included in a narrative frame in the first place seems almost coextensive with the question of what a scene “means.” For instance, if we suppose for the sake of argument that people's lives consist of roughly alternating pleasurable and unpleasurable sensations ( $p, u, p, u, p, u...$ ), then somebody with one kind of script might understand this as a succession of moments of improvement ( $u-p$  ad infinitum), while somebody else might understand it as a series of degenerations ( $p-u$  ad infinitum.) Someone else again might widen the frame from two events to three, yielding the script “things may sometimes get better, but only temporarily” ( $u-p-u$ ), or alternatively, the exact opposite ( $p-u-p$ .) A script, in Tomkins, seems to be, at least to begin with, a framing device of this sort.

DLN:

I don't think this reduction is either reasonable or adequate. It is not enough to say that life is a sequence of shifts between positive and negative affect, and to frame life as either  $p-u-p$  or  $u-p-u$ . Involved here are sequences involving nine different affects that produce nine different kinds of consciousness and nine different kinds of attention; reduction to matters of positive or negative affect makes life too close to the Freudian idea of pleasure vs. unpleasure and thus redolent of the previous system of explication. It is true that SST often said that the quality of life may be expressed as a function of the ratio between the amount of positive and the amount of negative affect experienced; but at no time (that I remember) did he suggest that it was useful to go from this reduction to a systematized analysis of life itself.

EKS:

This is obviously a way, way oversimplified account, but you can see, I think, how it both intersects with and complicates some other possible understandings of what a “script” (e.g. a script to perform a specific action) might be. As with the “attachment” thread, it'd be fascinating to hear what kind of differences this might make in therapeutic practice....

DLN:

Ah, there's the rub. We're all in pretty much the same boat, us script beginners. It is much easier to label the SARS operating in a scene than to assign the scene to the proper family for analysis of the script involved. Stay tuned to this station for further developments!