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## Studies in Script Theory: III. Ideology and Political Imagination

Rae Carlson<sup>1</sup> and Julie Brincka

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*Two hypotheses derived from Tomkins' theory of ideological scripts were tested in a study of voters' perceptions of major candidates 1 month prior to the 1984 presidential election. College students and community adults "cast" candidates as leading characters in imaginary TV dramas representing humanistic vs normative triads of affects, and completed an abridged version of Tomkins' Polarity Scale. Specific predictions were that (1) Republican candidates Reagan and Bush would be assigned to plots dealing with normative affects of excitement, anger, and contempt, while Democratic candidates Mondale and Ferraro would be assigned to plots dealing with humanistic affects of joy, distress, and shame; (2) men would more frequently endorse a personal normative ideological posture, women a more humanistic posture. Both hypotheses were supported ( $p < 0.001$  and  $p < 0.02$ , respectively). Respondents' political party preferences showed no moderating effects.*

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**KEY WORDS:** affect; humanistic vs. normative ideology; presidential candidates; script theory.

### INTRODUCTION

We have known since ancient times that citizens' resonance to political leaders rests on affect as well as rational judgment, and that political attitudes are embedded in larger personal dispositions. Yet the literature of political psychology seems to represent two divergent paths. Classic studies in the personological mode (e.g., Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Smith *et al.*, 1956) have explored *general* political orientations and shown how these emerge from

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the complexities and idiosyncracies of individual experience. In contrast, studies of response to *specific* political leaders tend to rely on large-scale survey research and yield meticulous demographic analyses of political preference and voting behavior. While each tradition is valuable in its own right, the personological and social-sciences approaches remain somewhat isolated by different methodological conventions.

This paper reports a study from the middle ground: a theoretically motivated investigation of voters' "political imagination" in thinking about candidates for the presidency and vicepresidency of the United States in the 1984 general election. Theoretical guidance comes from Tomkins' work on affects (1962, 1963a), ideology (1963b, 1965) and scripts (1985). The aim is to encourage the study of affect-based ideological scripts as a powerful way of uniting two different approaches to understanding a major aspect of our political life.

### IDEOLOGICAL SCRIPTS

A basic premise of Tomkins' theory is that a coherent organization of thought and feeling underlies individuals' response to political leaders as well as other aspects of personal and political life. In the most controversial issues recurring through centuries of Western thought – in domains as separate as mathematics, government, philosophy of science, and child-rearing practices – Tomkins (1963b, 1965) has identified a basic polarity between *humanistic* and *normative* ideological postures.

Humanists and normatives rarely make explicit their fundamental assumptions, yet these pervade feelings about what is real and valuable in life. They deal with such questions as: Are people basically good, or must their evil propensities be guarded against? Are values that which human beings wish, or do values exist independent of human wishes? Ought people maximize their drives and affects – for hunger and sex, self and others, work and play, novelty, risk, intimacy, detachment – or should they be governed by norms that in turn modulate drives and affects? Is human weakness to be tolerated and ameliorated, or forbidden and punished? (adapted from Tomkins, 1965).

Abstract as these questions may appear, Tomkins' distinction between humanistic and normative ideological postures has proven amenable to empirical study. Humanists and normatives have been found to differ in their self-descriptions and in the value they place on such (humanistic) qualities as commitment, love, and care, as against (normative) qualities of will, purpose, and competence (Carlson and Levy, 1970). They also differ in the nature of their moral judgments (Lieberman, 1982), facial expressions of affect (Vasquez, 1975), and in quasijudicial judgments (Williams, 1984), where nor-

matives were more ready to express disgust with both wrongdoers and victims of crime.

A major new formulation of script theory (Tomkins, 1985; 1987) places ideological polarity in the broader and richer context of a comprehensive theory of personality. Ideological scripts represent an important category in a larger taxonomy of scripts.<sup>2</sup> Ideological scripts are “social inheritances” that provide an orienting vision of what life *should* be, and what it should not be. Like any script, an ideological script rests on a basic core of affect. Like many scripts, it offers a loose interpretive formula for judging what is real and valuable. However, ideological scripts are distinguished from other kinds of scripts in their “sharability” and emphasis on the “shoulds” in dealing with issues in social and political life.

From the rich array of new implications offered in Tomkins (1985, 1987) formulation of script theory, three lines of thought provide the background for the present study: (a) an account of the origins of ideological polarity in the development of social stratification; (b) the partitioning of affects into normative (anger, contempt, excitement) and humanistic (distress, shame, joy) triads; and (c) consequences for gender-specialization in the socialization of affect, and further implications of resulting ideological scripts when these become salient at decision-making points in the life of any society.

1. Origins of ideological polarity are seen in social stratification based on adversarial conquest (as nomadic warriors subjugated settled agriculturalists). Conquest and rule demand “order”: acknowledged and enforceable standards, as well as a hierarchical conception of social life. [For historical evidence and interpretation of this and the following points, see Tomkins (1987).]

2. Social stratification introduces priorities for affective life. Those who rule must be strong, decisive, and capable of imposing proper standards on the ruled. They must be ready to punish (anger), to derogate inferiors (contempt), and to pursue their visionary aims (excitement), whether for personal or social goals. By way of contrast, the “ruled”—women, children, slaves, and other lower-status persons—are pictured as loving, timid, distressed, shy, and humble in contrast to the angry, proud, contemptuous warrior-ruler. Ideological polarity thus generates a contrast based on social power: anger vs distress in the realm of punishment, contempt vs shame in the realm of humiliation, and excitement vs enjoyment in the realm of positive celebrations.

<sup>2</sup>Other script-structures, such as *commitment* scripts, and *nuclear* scripts have been studied empirically in previous work (Carlson, 1981, 1982, 1986b). For an analysis of *ideological* scripts as these bear upon issues of policy-formation, the conduct of psychological inquiry, and contemporary views of women, children, and families, see Carlson, 1986a.

3. In any highly stratified society the partitioning of affects is such that women are expected (and expect) to be specialized for joy, distress, and shame, while men are expected (and expect) to be motivated by excitement, anger, and contempt. [For evidence that such “rules” govern the socialization of affect in modern industrial societies, see Block (1973.) For evidence of gender differences in the construction of affect-based scripts, see Carlson and Carlson (1984).]

But normative ideology of the “ruler,” which places blame squarely on those who suffer and complain, generates a host of protests against the social cost of upholding such norms. Protests are by no means gender specific. They include those who wish to *modify* the norms and those who wish to *join* the rulers. Suppressed femininity and outraged masculinity were equally prominent in the protest movements of the 1960s. (“Make love, not war” and “off the pigs” – “fists and flowers” – were equally endorsed by men and women.) Granted that norms emphasize gender specialization of affects (masculine strength, feminine goodness), men and women may be equally found among the protestors or upholders of societal norms.

When such abstract conceptions are applied to the political climate of our own highly stratified society – one that has generated a host of humanistic protests while retaining a normative ideological posture – it seems obvious that ideological scripts will be most salient when such polarities emerge in national elections. Seizing the 1984 presidential election as an opportunity to test derivations from Tomkins’ theory, we focused on two major propositions: (a) a distinctive pattern of *affects* underlies normative vs. humanistic ideological postures, and (b) gender differences are such that men are more likely to espouse a normative, and women a humanistic, personal ideology.

## RATIONALE AND HYPOTHESES

Rarely has a presidential election posed so sharp a contrast between humanistic and normative ideological postures as that afforded in 1984. Long before the election party platforms, campaign oratory, and public records of the candidates established a polarization. Republican candidates Reagan and Bush emphasized a buildup of armaments, cutbacks in support for the indigent and unsuccessful, “family” policies that underscore adherence to traditional norms, and fiscal policies meant to encourage entrepreneurial adventure. Democratic candidates Mondale and Ferraro posed a contrasting national agenda: arms control vs military expenditures, social policies of concern for the indigent and unemployed, “family” policies supportive of feminist concerns (e.g., upholding the “pro-choice” Supreme Court decision), and fiscal policies aimed at long-range societal needs (e.g., concern for current trade imbalance and unemployment).

With implicit ideological issues sharply drawn in the months prior to the election, we sought to study the more subtle *affective* bases of voters' perceptions of candidates representing humanistic vs normative ideological positions, and to test the secondary hypothesis of gender differences in respondents' personal ideological posture.

1. The major hypothesis was that candidates Reagan and Bush would be perceived as representing a *normative* triad of affects (excitement, anger, contempt), while candidates Mondale and Ferraro would be perceived in terms of a *humanistic* triad (joy, distress, shame).

2. Cross-cutting this general prediction was the recognition that men and women bring to electoral decisions their distinctive experiences in the socialization of affects. Here we predicted that women would be more likely to espouse a humanistic ideology, men a normative one.

These predictions are not so obvious as they may appear. Complexities are introduced by the various ways in which humanistic or normative ideologies are constructed by individuals. A normative hero may be celebrated for moral rectitude, for qualities as an avenger, or sheer effectiveness in upholding social norms. Humanistic protagonists may be valued for such diverse qualities as sensitivity, personal embodiment of more tender affects, or effectiveness in social reform. Moreover, inversions of straightforward predictions might be dictated by respondents' wish to perceive a candidate in compensatory terms. (For example, a normative Republican might wish to temper Reagan's "hawk" image by emphasizing his more humane qualities. A humanistic Democrat might portray Mondale as a "winner" by stressing qualities of decisiveness and strength in a normative mode.) Working *against* our hypotheses would be journalistic portrayals of Reagan as a "nice guy," Bush as a "preppy," Mondale as a "strait-laced Scandinavian," or Ferraro as either "feminine ideal" or "opportunistic upstart."

## METHOD

### Overview

During the month prior to the 1984 presidential election, college students and community adults were asked to "cast" major candidates for national office as central characters in imaginary TV dramas representing normative vs humanistic affects. Respondents were also asked to complete an abridged version of Tomkins' (1964) Polarity Scale. They were guaranteed anonymity, asked to complete the forms at leisure, and to return them to the second author. From an initial pool of 150 respondents 137 returned questionnaires. This report is based on 123 responses, after discarding the 10% of returns that violated instructions by assigning unequal numbers of

“plots” to the four candidates. Nonparametric statistics (Mann-Whitney  $U$  test, Fisher’s test,  $\chi^2$ ) were used in testing hypotheses.

### Subjects

College students ( $n = 63$ ; ages 20-31) were recruited from courses in psychology, political science, and the college band in a large State University. Community adults ( $n = 73$ ; ages 20-61 +) were drawn from a high school faculty and staff, employees of an insurance company, and acquaintances of the second author. The final sample consisted of 27 college men (9 Democrats, 8 Republicans, 8 Independents, 2 Other), 32 college women (13 Democrats, 6 Republicans, 10 Independents, 3 Other), 38 community men (8 Democrats, 13 Republicans, 16 Independents, 1 Other), and 26 community women (11 Democrats, 9 Republicans, 5 Independents, 1 Other). No intrasample demographic differences were significant.

### Measures<sup>3</sup>

#### *Political Imagination Task (PIT)*

Brief plot summaries of imaginary TV dramas were constructed by the first author to represent six primary affects (Tomkins, 1962) with four replications of each. Plots were reviewed by S. S. Tomkins, the originator of the theory, for adequacy in representing specific affects. Subsequently, plots were categorized independently by relatively naive members of an undergraduate research seminar. A total of 120 judgments (24 plots  $\times$  5 judges) resulted in 96% agreement in assigning plots to humanistic/normative affect triads, and 71% agreement in coding specific affects. Note that disagreements in coding were essentially *within* humanistic/normative categories. “Errors” consisted of confusions of shame/distress (humanistic) or of anger/contempt or anger/excitement (normative).

Respondents were asked to imagine four major candidates for national office as central characters in imaginary TV dramas, and to assign six “plots” to each. Assignments were unconstrained, except that each candidate should receive six. Thus any candidate could receive 0-4 assignments to any specific affect, and no balance of positive/negative affect was imposed.

<sup>3</sup>Copies of the instruments employed in this study are available on request from the first author. Full explication of specific affects explored in this study is given in Tomkins (1962, 1963a).

Each plot centered around a leading character, ambiguous as to gender, in an essentially non-political drama. General directives, along with two examples, are given.

*Excitement* involved themes of novelty, risk, and challenge. (Example: “This play takes place during the 1988 Winter Olympics. Our central character is the coach of the U.S. ski team. During the program we see the coach encouraging both individual members and the team as a whole. There are breathtaking shots of the final contests between leading U.S. downhill skiers and their most formidable competitors from the West German team.”) Other excitement plots dealt with travel, scientific discovery, and a “takeover” in the world of high finance.

*Joy* plots dealt with themes of reunion, familiarity, preservation of sameness. (Example: “In this drama, our central character returns for a 20th reunion of his/her college class and encounters a good friend from undergraduate days. In flashbacks, they recall shared experiences during the 1960s. Warmed by these memories, they resolve to keep in touch in the future because both have so greatly enjoyed this reunion.”) Other joy themes concerned a family reunion, christening of the central character’s first god-child, and preservation of a tranquil community in the face of threats by developers.

*Anger* plots concerned themes of counteraction, punishment, retribution. Specific dramas dealt with repelling marauders in a 14th-century historical drama, counteracting fraudulent scientific work, prosecution of a ring of extortionists, and a child’s confrontation of bullies in school.

*Distress* plots dealt with loss, grief, suffering. Specific dramas concerned caring for a beloved dog in terminal illness, the plight of aged people evicted from their apartment, caring for victims of a flood disaster, and concern for a battered child in a “hospital” drama.

*Contempt* plots involved decisive rejection of the unworthy other. Specific dramas dealt with rejection of pornographic films masking as “art,” cheating by fellow students in an honor system, rejection of a friend whose values had crumbled, and corruption encountered in foreign travel.

*Shame* plots (“I want...but” in Tomkins’ theory) dealt with barriers to positive affect goals. Specific plots concerned an accident thwarting a young musician’s major recital, economic pressures blighting hopes of a college education in the 1930s depression, loss of a first love, and failure to receive a significant academic prize.

### *Polarity Scale*

A 20-item abridgement of Tomkins’ (1964) Polarity Scale was used to assess respondents’ personal ideological postures. Items were chosen to minimize “political” content and to eliminate those that had proven obsolete

over the past 2 decades. (Specific items retained were numbers 6, 8, 10, 12, 16, 20, 22, 25, 26, 35, 37, 39, 41, 42, 43, 54, 57, 58, and 59.) Our scoring disregarded “both” and “neither” choices; the number of normative choices was subtracted from the number of humanistic choices to arrive at an individual’s score. Scores ranged from  $-11$  to  $+17$ , with a median of 7. A median break, based on the entire sample, was used in categorizing respondents as humanistic or normative. Post hoc assessment of re-test reliability ( $N = 29$  over a 2-week interval) yielded  $r = 0.74$ .

## RESULTS

The major hypothesis predicted that Republican candidates Reagan and Bush would be more frequently cast as protagonists in imaginary dramas portraying normative affects of anger, contempt, and excitement, while Democratic candidates Mondale and Ferraro would be assigned to plots involving humanistic affects of distress, shame, and joy. A summary of the findings is given in Table I.

Overall, the results strongly supported the hypothesis (Mann-Whitney  $U$  test,  $p < 0.001$ ). Table I reveals that Reagan was cast in humanistic plots 34% of the time, Mondale 57%, Bush 44%, and Ferraro 65%. Data were further analyzed to consider the consistency with which subgroups of respondents confirmed our expectations. Collapsing data into a  $2 \times 2$  table (four candidates  $\times$  four subgroups) we found that of 16 possible outcomes, 15 accorded with theoretical predictions (Fisher’s test,  $p < 0.005$ ). The sole exception was a slight (nonsignificant) tendency for community women to perceive candidate Bush as more humanistic than normative.

The second hypothesis predicted a gender difference in personal ideological postures, with women expected to be more humanistic and men more normative. Responses to the Polarity Scale, based on a median-break of the

**Table I.** Humanistic and Normative Affect Profiles of Individual Candidates<sup>a</sup>

Respondents	Candidate							
	Reagan		Bush		Mondale		Ferraro	
	Hum	Norm	Hum	Norm	Hum	Norm	Hum	Norm
College men	49	113	65	97	100	62	111	52
College women	57	135	87	105	107	85	132	60
Community men	91	137	93	135	131	97	141	87
Community women	54	102	81	75	84	72	94	62

<sup>a</sup>Note. Entries represent sum of humanistic (joy, distress, shame) and normative (excitement, anger, contempt) plots assigned to each candidate by four groups of respondents.

entire sample, showed 29 of the men to be humanistic, 36 normative; frequencies for women were 40 humanistic, 18 normative ( $\chi^2 = 6.4$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.02$ ).

### Dramatic Portrayals of Individual Candidates

Because there are various ways of expressing humanistic or normative ideological postures, it is of considerable interest to know just how individual candidates were perceived by respondents. For this reason we examined the specific affect profiles attributed to each of the four candidates. The two most frequent affects assigned to each candidate are shown in Table II.

Portrayals of Reagan were consistently normative. Men assigned him to anger plots most frequently, with contempt a close second. Women agreed, but reversed the order to contempt/anger.

Portrayals of Mondale were more complex, although consistently humanistic. College students of both sexes made Mondale the hero of distress plots, with shame the next most frequent choice. Community women reversed the order (to shame/distress); community men gave a shame/joy order. An unexpected (nonsignificant) trend was for *all* women to assign more excitement than joy to Mondale, whereas men rarely did so.

Among vicepresidential candidates, Bush was most frequently cast in excitement plots by men, in contempt plots by women. However, there was a (nonsignificant) cohort difference: community adults were more likely to assign humanistic affects to Bush (shame over contempt by both sexes, joy over excitement by women) than were college students. Ferraro was the heroine of humanistic plots assigned by all four subgroups of respondents. Joy/distress was the preferred order for three groups, while community men reversed the order to distress/joy.

**Table II.** Specific Affects Most Frequently Assigned to Individual Candidates<sup>a</sup>

Affect	Candidate
Excitement	Bush
Joy	Ferraro
Anger	Reagan
Contempt	Reagan, Bush
Distress	Mondale, Ferraro
Shame	Mondale

<sup>a</sup>Note. Entries represent the two most frequent affects assigned to each candidate by entire sample.

### *On Party Preference as a Moderator Variable*

We analyzed our findings for possible effects of respondents' identification with political parties and found none. Apparently the main effect of *candidates'* implicit ideological postures swamped any partisan tendencies to assign one's preferred candidates to positive affect plots.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Insofar as we are aware, this is the first empirical test of Tomkins' theory of ideological scripts to examine linkages among affects, ideology, and resonance to political leaders. Thus our findings have broader implications than familiar "political polling," and begin to explore the affective-cognitive processes that underlie citizens' resonance to political leaders. Several facets of our findings seem worth considering more closely.

### **Affective Bases of Ideological Scripts**

Had our study merely established that Republican candidates are perceived as espousing a normative ideology and Democratic candidates a humanistic one, the results would be mildly interesting, but in no way surprising. However, our respondents were *not* asked to characterize candidates in ideological terms. Instead, they were invited to assign candidates to central roles in imaginary TV dramas on the basis of resonance to implicit affective themes embedded in conventional (nonpolitical) plots. That the results largely swamped familiar effects of cohort, gender, socio-economic status, and political party identification suggests that the *affective* basis of ideological scripts, advanced in Tomkins' theory, deserves much closer study than it has yet received.

In a more speculative vein, we note that contemporary history offers some *post hoc* support for our hypothesis. Data collected *prior* to the 1984 election (in which Reagan was portrayed as a "nice guy," and the Reagan/Bush ticket won in 49 of 50 states) signalled voters' intuitive impression of Republican candidates as fitting dramatic scenarios dealing with anger, contempt, and excitement. The "unravelling" of the Reagan administration in the Fall of 1986 is studded with relevant evidence. Consider that *anger* (symbolized by the priority given to armaments in both domestic budgets and in the conduct of foreign affairs), *contempt* (not only for "social weaklings" but also for constitutional responsibilities and Congressional oversight), and *excitement* (via encouragement of "adventurism" on the part of White House staff, National Security Council employees, and mercenaries lauded as "freedom

fighters”) lie at the heart of the many investigations and court cases that plagued the Reagan administration in 1986.

### Gender Differences in Ideological Postures

Where our first hypothesis tested a previously unnoted affective component of political ideology, the second explored previously unnoted ideological implications of “known” differences in affect-socialization of men and women (cf. Block, 1973; Lewis, 1985). Rather than asking men and women about their own affective experiences, we assessed their ideological postures. That the results supported a more humanistic orientation among women, and a normative stance among men is consistent with previous work suggesting that the sexes differ in their construction of affect-laden scenes (Carlson and Carlson, 1984).

### Implications for Future Inquiry

Beyond the particularities of the 1984 election and its aftermath, we believe that our findings have considerably broader implications. Most important is the demonstration that empirical work based on Tomkins’ script theory “connects” diverse lines of inquiry to yield an impressive array of support for a comprehensive theory of personality and persons-in society.

When our work is linked with previous evidence of ideological postures in more subtly “political” domains of moral judgment (Lieberman, 1982) or quasijudicial judgments (Williams, 1984), there emerges a coherent picture of affect-based scripts underlying a broad range of value-laden choices. When principles of script theory are applied to the lives of such activists as 19th century abolitionists, “freedom riders” in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, “rescuers” of Jews under Nazi oppression, or unheralded “helpers” (Carlson, 1982), the nature of *commitment* scripts underscores the personological bases of effective political action. When experimental inquiry reveals gender-specific modes of constructing affect-based scripts (Carlson and Carlson, 1984), we have moved beyond reencountering “known” gender differences to examine the *processes* of thought and feeling that generate familiar evidences of value-orientations in the lives of men and women. When respondents are offered semi projective measures – relatively “free response” formats unconstrained by investigator-imposed categories – we escape the hazards of “political polling” with its undue emphasis on merely demographic variables.

Dramatically clear results of the present study offer encouragement for further development of Tomkins’ theory as a framework for inquiry in political psychology. The power of the theory and the generality of its con-

structs are underscored by evidence that these can illumine problems as diverse as addictions, individual development, public policy, scientific standards, and transference in psychotherapy. When our immediate findings are taken in the context of a growing body of research exploring script theory, the implications are extremely broad. Tomkins' script theory may provide the unifying conceptualization of persons-in-society that we have long awaited.

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