



## What's a Script?

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As Dr. Kelly and I study the responses from those who are involved in the second year of the study group process, we note with some interest that many, if not most, people find it difficult to comprehend exactly what Tomkins means when he introduces the language of scripts and script theory. Since the method of psychotherapy that we have devised is based on the relation between affect and script, it seems only reasonable that we refine our definitions of these basic ideas.

If you are curious about such things, it helps to understand that the terminology of Bridge was developed in the Roaring 20's by a group of cynical card players who shifted such words as "tricks" and "rubbers" from their campy, vulgar meaning to a new sort of legitimacy. In order to understand script theory, you should know that when Silvan Tomkins began his undergraduate years at the University of Pennsylvania, he expected to be prepared for a career as a playwright. He didn't end up writing plays, but I suspect that he harbored a lingering wish to explain how the human an organism with great pride in its freedom could act as if scripted or controlled by pre-written instructions. Nevertheless, just as there is a world of difference between the tricks and rubbers of bridge and those of sexual conversation, a psychological script is not a series of instructions exactly like those in a piano roll, a computer program, or even the script for a stage play.

Whether as a dramatist or a philosopher, Tomkins was primarily interested in what made us human. Over and over, he asked questions that were meant to clarify the links between our equipment and our nature. The work on cognition introduced in the final volume of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* had actually been completed at the time Volumes I and II were published but delayed three decades for a number of reasons related to the author's personal scripts. His real goal was to produce a competent explanation of all facets of personality, something he called "human being theory," and neither affect nor cognition really satisfied these criteria. Missing was the way such structures were integrated with sexuality and the other drives, the implications of individual development, and the variables introduced by biological glitches and ingested substances. The links to neurobiology and psychopharmacology were made easy by my language of hardware, firmware, and software, which Tomkins accepted with pleasure. He welcomed my contribution of a new theory of sexuality, saying "I've been looking for an explanation of the sexual drive for 25 years, and I think you've found it." The integration of sex and personality the explication of sexual scripts is the work of Donald Mosher, another core member of the Tomkins circle, whose staggeringly important theories are summarized in his chapter for *Knowing Feeling* and will appear eventually in a long-anticipated major text. So important to Tomkins was their collaboration that the final volume of AIC was dedicated to Dr. Mosher.

It was to the matter of individual development that Tomkins devoted the last decades of his enormously productive creative career. One of the reasons his prose is often so impenetrable is that a central theme of his life was the search for truly general statements about the world, a need to produce theories and observations of explanatory power equal to those found in physics and mathematics. In order to explain script theory, it will be necessary for me to discuss some of the ideas Tomkins offered only in the epilogue of *AIC*, ideas expressed previously only in conversation with his closest colleagues and placed at the end of his life work as his own epitaph.

"Consciousness appears in animals who move about in space but not in organisms rooted in the earth. Mobility is the key, requiring ever changing information for an organism which is never twice in exactly the same world . . ." (*AIC IV* p. 353). There is no evidence that plants have consciousness, no matter how complex or enduring they may be. Into the genetic code of these sessile life forms may be encrypted solutions for every condition that kind of organism can encounter over its entire life. Cataclysmic conditions will terminate its existence, while each season presents challenges to which the organism will respond as predirected rather than as an act of conscious creativity. If mobile life forms are to manage the sheer variety of stimuli impinging on them, they must evolve not only with the ability to solve increasingly more difficult problems, but to store, link by association, and retrieve data about problems already solved, and also develop some way of ranking stimuli and problems according to their importance. It is the innate affects that provide the power to accomplish this latter task.

"Consciousness is a report about affect-driven imagery. Since affect in our view amplifies varying rates of change (its innate activities), the images within the control assembly represent only such information as is urgent that reports significant, vital, new changing information" (p. 353). The six basic innate affects (interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage) are evolved, programmed responses to stimuli with highly specific qualities. They are triggered when the flow of data rises or falls over one or another gradient, or remains steady at one or another non-optimal level. The contour in time of each type of stimulus is mimicked by the contour in time of the affect it triggers, thus drawing our attention to the specific kind of importance associated with that stimulus. Affect is vitality; affect occurs only when something is significant; affect is about changing information. "Stability is that very rare special case of a rate of change which is extremely slow compared with the totality of the environment" (p. 354). Boredom is not triggered by lack of change, but by a steady-state non-optimal stimulus; boredom is an adult form of distress rather than an innate response to understimulation (which can only exist in death.) We have evolved to "know" that some stimulus needs the highest level of neocortical cognition (accessible only through the gateway of consciousness) because an affect has told us so.

The modern city did not start out as a metropolis, but rather as an unconnected bunch of small towns that, as they grew in population, spread horizontally until their borders blurred and became unimportant. In order to understand a complex biological system one must atomize it, separate for the purpose of study what has become joined over eons. The human has evolved with a group of subsystems including sensory organs, analytic tools, drive mechanisms, the affect system, memory, motor systems, and feedback mechanisms. Although basically independent of each other, all of these subsystems must be linked so that they are interdependent (although variably so) and nested (rather than interacting like billiard balls transferring energy from one to the other.) So many subsystems "talking" at the same time would make a Tower of Babel were it not for the control afforded by the central assembly, a "location" Tomkins postulated where the data from all of these subsystems is put together, and which produces conscious thought whenever affect is blended into the mix.

It is to the way memory and affect are nested within each other that I wish to address here. It seems unlikely that any event can enter memory unless it has first triggered an affect that causes it to enter consciousness, after which we use our best tools to solve whatever problem it presented. The "billiard ball" language of Stimulus-Response Pairs (S-R Pairs) has been replaced by that of Stimulus-Affect-Response Sequences (S-A-R Sequences or "SARS.") To put this in the simplest language, although we are able to retrieve and repackage information of any sort, it is actually stored as the result of these SARS. What we know, how we know it, and the ways in which we will use what we know all depend on sequences that involve affect. In the playwright's language he used to introduce these ideas, Tomkins referred to these SARS as "scenes." Every time we "remember" an event it is altered by the scene in which some stimulus triggered an affect that powered a response.

We move around all the time, whether physically in space or metaphorically through experience. So much to learn, so little time. The evolution of the neocortex has been toward steady increase in its ability to store information, but not every aspect of experience need be stored else the mind would be a house that gave equal space to trivia and to data critical for the maintenance of life. We do not remember every telephone pole passed on every road traversed every time we drive our cars.

Tomkins saw in this casual observation a world of significance, and as explanation offered the concept of compression-expansion transformation. No matter how intense a psychotherapy session I may just have completed, I require of myself the act of synthesis through which I summarize the process that has just taken place. The resulting note may vary from a couple of words to a few sentences, but it can never be a literal recitation of every word spoken during that period of time. Rather, it captures and celebrates what changed during that session, what became different as the result of my work. As a result, even years later I am often able to reconstruct a great deal of any specific session when I "go over my notes." Stored and compressed during the process of note-creation was information about the critical differences between the already-formed set of data by which I know this person who came to me for my ability to foster change and the actual person who left my office at the end of this episode of our work together. Retrieved and expanded was information about both the persons who existed on either side of that session and the process responsible for whatever differences might be attributed to it.

What we sometimes call our "memory bank" is formed by such processes of synthesis; memory itself is not linear like the click and whirl of billiard balls but nested within interacting webs of SARS. Just as money banks have rules about deposits and withdrawals, the systems that together form the mind involve rules about the ordering of information. There is a time in our lives when a telephone pole is entirely novel and the subject of intense investigation through which differences between specific telephone poles are noted with care. Yet for all of us there comes a time when we have seen a forest of such poles, all of which are deemed adequately similar to be classified or identified by the label or symbol of "telephone pole." Remembered from this morning's drive would be only the screaming yellow pole installed by a therefore weird neighbor; it took a moment of work to identify it as a member of the set called telephone pole, after which only its unusual color would commend it to memory as a member of an entirely new set that still maintained a great deal of information from the term as it had existed yesterday.

Scripts, the structures within which we store scenes, are sets of rules for the ordering of information about SARS. There is a time in our lives when the act of answering the telephone is entirely novel and the subject of intense investigation through which differences between specific telephone conversations are noted with care. Yet for all of us there comes a time when we have answered so

many calls that the sequences of events initiated by the ringing of the communication device are all deemed adequately similar to be classified or identified by the label or symbol of "telephone call." Remembered from this morning's calls would only be the screaming of our weird neighbor whose message triggered a series of affects and responses unusual enough in our experience to be classified as a truly new event. In a few days, when neither the stimulus nor our eventual response continues to trigger dense affect, we are capable of reviewing that specific event in order to find more similarities between it and other telephone calls. This permits us to downgrade the degree of its uniqueness, after which the affect triggered by the memory of that specific call will lessen considerably and the event of the call will merge into the now slightly expanded but not very much changed label or symbol of "telephone call."

When we assemble SARS on the basis of their similarities we agree to ignore or downgrade what is different about each member of this new set. The efficiency and elegance of this storage technique makes it unnecessary to store every piece of information about every scene within the set. By saying the magic word that has become the label or handle for that set, we expand what had been compressed earlier. Yet now something new has happened, for the moment we call up the information compressed by storing the SARS as a set, the act of expansion of that information now triggers an affect dependent on the gradient or level produced during the expansion. All of a sudden, the act of remembering the set triggers an affect that now may come to color everything within the set itself. Furthermore, the nature and density of that affect is also dependent on whatever had already been going on when the magic word was uttered and the remembered set of SARS released like the genie from the bottle. As mentioned above, since the events that require the retrieval of a memory are themselves full of affect, it stands to reason that memory itself is dynamic and ever capable of change through this process of magnification by the affect of the moment.

Both intuition and experience raise questions about that last statement, for all of know how difficult it is to get someone to change the pattern of affects that we call an attitude. Once we have grouped sets of SARS on the basis of some perceived similarity, the group itself becomes a thing, an entity, a structure that is now (as a thing, an entity, a structure) capable of triggering affect and initiating a Stimulus-Affect-Response Sequence that could not have existed prior to the formation of that group. The highly cognitive act of forming the group results in an apparent reduction of the affect associated with the scenes involved, but a radical increase in the affect associated with retrieval of the set. The SARS formed when a grouped set of scenes now becomes a stimulus for further affect is itself part of a set of SARS that we can recognize as similar not on the basis of the actual events involved, but merely on the basis of the ways such groupings trigger new affect and new responses. Complex idea, I know, but worth a lot of our attention, for this is where we come in as psychotherapists.

Let's say that again through an example: All of the new theories that we find initially daunting get grouped as our response to new theory, after which we not only avoid new theory like the plague but find it difficult to read books about any new approach to anything. Another one: You meet the person who might be your ideal life partner on the anniversary of the day in 1987 that you were divorced, that also happened to be the day in 1993 that you lost a lot of money in the stock market, and that also happened to be the day in 1995 that your ambivalently loved father died. One more: You have grown up believing that we have been placed on this earth by a God who insists that you live in God's image, serving others to the best of your ability and using your God-given talents and resources to assist the greatest number of people in the most efficient way possible. You learn that a medication originally thought to treat one specific illness is capable of helping millions with illness of a completely different form and establish a not-for-profit foundation to disseminate this information.

Something similar to this last script may be involved in the story of the prominent and highly visible Chief Executive Officer of a popular investment company whose previously untreatable bursts of anger responded to treatment with the anticonvulsant Dilantin, after which he established a foundation that informed physicians all over the country about this new approach. It is my belief that the attention given his efforts had something to do with the research that has led to the acceptance of another anticonvulsant (Depakote) in the treatment of Bipolar Affective Disorder. I have no way of knowing whether this man had the preexisting set to produce the sort of commitment script outlined above, but cite his story as a possible analogue.

Strange as it may seem, then, we humans have not evolved to process every novel stimulus as a novel stimulus. Rather, the brain has evolved so that we learn to assemble perceptions into sets and SARS into scripts; in this way we conserve vital storage space but also learn to misidentify potentially new experiences as if they had been known and understood before. Mobile creatures who were fortunate enough to develop an affect system (that conferred urgency and importance on data or stimuli that represented change and required the best neocortical attention) also developed the propensity for scripts that brought both far greater efficiency of thought and an inherent susceptibility to emotional illness. Once a set of scenes has been assembled into a script, with all the rules and regulations associated with so complex a psychological organization, it is far more economical for the mind to distort a new experience to make it fit this or another of our already-existing scripts. People who say "Don't confuse me with facts – my mind is made up," are telling you the truth at a far deeper level than they might have known.

Donald Mosher says it perfectly in the last pages of his own epilogue to AIC IV:

As a relatively weak force, the amplification by affect, no matter how dense within a multidimensional scene, counts for far less in creating an individual's plotted life history than does the strong force of psychological magnification of a coherently connected set of scenes. Dense affect can be transient, but the system of personality deals with the abstract and imperious issues of a family of scenes that continue changing at their own rate through time, either becoming magnified or attenuating, dependent on both personality and the conditions (scenes that happen) faced in the world that unfolds through time. (p. 370)

If the very act of forming a script makes subsequent events more likely to be colored by the past than is perhaps good for the organism, and may reduce what might be novel and transformative to the ordinary and perhaps banal, then the art of psychotherapy requires a new attention to affect. While it is true that the family romance produces for the toddler a group of sexual scenes that form into scripts determining a significant part of our adult psychosexual attitudes, it would be foolish for any therapeutic system to favor this particular realm of scripts as the definitive area for therapeutic approach. While it is true that a biochemical glitch that makes one affect into a relatively constant experience (rather than part of the normally plastic system of affective responses) must foster the development of life scripts answering the call of that affect, and that properly designed and monitored psychopharmacological treatment can undo the glitch and remove the inappropriate affect, the newly freed patient must now build an entirely new group of scripts based on a completely new affective environment. While it is true that well-designed cognitive therapy can alter the thoughts that hover at the edges of consciousness, unless you know the both affects involved with those thoughts and the type of script through which they have been managed, your system of treatment is mechanical and less effective than otherwise possible. Couples therapy that focuses on issues rather than affects tends to be long, dreary, and unpleasant. Art therapy that focuses on relationships rather than the affects triggered in those relationships must be tame

indeed. Alternatives to all of these complaints have been offered in previous issues of this Bulletin by a number of our members.

Since it is through scripts and systems of scripts that all life is managed, no scene can be understood by either member of the therapeutic dyad until it has been recognized as a SARS and placed in the context of the specific script with which it resonates. Effective therapy must involve dense affect in a therapeutic context that guarantees safety to both participants, in scenes that may be repeated often enough or with enough intensity that the affect so triggered causes reorganization of the preexisting affect management script. Consciousness, affect, memory, skill, habit, attitude, and a host of other common terms can only be understood within this language of scene and script, and even then, only through long and difficult study. Directly opposed to the part of me that wishes life were simpler is the part that enjoys the sheer complexity of life and the wondrous variety of human experience for which we are privileged to be counselors.