

### Tomkins and Sedgwick: commentary

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Charles, M. (2011). Tomkins and Sedgwick: commentary. *ETD - Educação Temática Digital*, 13(1), 246-251. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-286258>

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**TOMKINS AND SEDGWICK: COMMENTARY*****TOMKINS E SEDGWICK: COMENTÁRIO******Marilyn Charles<sup>1</sup>******Abstract***

*In contrast to trends in pedagogy and in critical theory, Alcorn & Massé bring affect to the forefront in their considerations of factors that facilitate and inhibit learning in the classroom. Using Tomkins' affect theory and Sedgwick's reading of Tomkins to focus their discussions, each highlights ways in which affect enters the classroom. They also invite us to consider some of the perils of failing to recognize ways in which affect does have an impact on ideas, learning, and even meaning itself.*

***Keywords:*** *Affect. Sylvan Tomkins. Shame.*

***Resumo***

Em contraste às tendências na pedagogia e na teoria crítica, Alcorn & Massé trazem o afeto para o centro de suas considerações sobre os fatores que facilitam e inibem a aprendizagem em sala de aula. Trazendo para suas discussões a teoria do afeto de Tomkins e a leitura de Sedgwick sobre Tomkins, cada um enfatiza maneiras através das quais o afeto entra em sala. Eles também nos convidam a considerar alguns dos sérios riscos de se falhar ao reconhecer os meios pelos quais o afeto tem impacto sobre as ideias, sobre o aprendizado, e mesmo sobre o significado em si.

***Palavras-chave:*** Afeto. Sylvan Tomkins. Vergonha.

We live in a culture that valorizes rational understanding over more implicit nonverbal ways of knowing (CHARLES, 2002) and yet, in tracing the prosodies of the interactions that Alcorn describes going through with his class, we can see how conscious intention mingles with less conscious reactions, creating tension, dissonance, and disturbance. It can be difficult for the educator to position himself in such moments in ways that bring the focus of attention back to the task at hand. If we can recognize ways in which affect informs thought, our efforts are more likely to be effective. Affect, however, has in some ways become the bastard child in contemporary critical theory (SEDGWICK; FRANK, 1995). Countering this tendency, Massé invites us to consider Sedgwick and Frank's descriptions of their experiences reading the work of affect theorist Sylvan Tomkins.

Anticipating an understanding of human behaviour, memory, and cognition that would recognize the pivotal role of affect, Tomkins' (1962; 1963) seminal work describes

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how our motivations, values, and actions are fundamentally organized and circumscribed by the affect that colours our experience of the moment and shapes our subsequent interpretations. Tomkins expands our understanding of some of the constancies of affective experience, pointing to the universality of physiological arousal patterns and the distinctive facial expressions through which affects can be recognized across cultures. He notes the primacy of affect in human interactions, detailing the experiential prosodies of the primary affects and noting how parenting patterns shape meanings across the life span.

Although Freud had developed a theory that recognizes the potency of affect and ways in which unconscious motivations can drive behaviour, Tomkins expands these conceptions by focusing on the potency of the affect itself. He details the processes through which the intensity of the affect profoundly affects our attributions of meaning. Notably, in Tomkins' work shame replaces Freud's drives as the crucial potentiating factor that can amplify or inhibit any other emotion or motivation.

Alcorn's classroom incident involved shame, from Tomkins' standpoint one of the most difficult affects to endure. Tomkins describes shame in terms of a disruption of interest or pleasure. This sudden rupture leaves the individual feeling alone and alienated. Shame breaks the interpersonal bond. In Tomkins' (1963, p. 118) words,

If distress is the affect of suffering, shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation. Though terror speaks to life and death and distress makes of the world a vale of tears, yet shame strikes deepest into the heart of man. While terror and distress hurt, they are wounds inflicted from outside which penetrate the smooth surface of the ego; but shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul. It does not matter whether the humiliated one has been shamed by derisive laughter or whether he mocks himself. In either event he feels himself naked, defeated, alienated, lacking in dignity or worth.

By definition, according to Tomkins, shame involves an expectation being violated and, with it, the social bond being broken. Eyes averted, the head goes down, and we are left alone, flooded with the sense that all eyes are and should be upon us in judgement. Reconnecting with others from that position of shame can be difficult. At the extreme, I have worked with individuals who were so shame prone that even when looking in the direction of another person's eyes, the eyes remained hooded and there was no actual eye contact, merely its appearance. It is a chilling experience to encounter such empty eyes.

Concomitant with shame is a feeling of powerlessness. Repair involves reasserting our power, often at the expense of the other, in the type of recycling shame dynamic such as occurs in bullying and scapegoating. In Alcorn's example, he used humour as a way of

attempting to ease tensions over difficult material in the classroom but failed to recognize how this intervention might be experienced as shaming to the students. His students, in reasserting their own potency, shamed him in return. Being able to recognize his own shaming as a response to a sequence he had initiated enabled Alcorn to stop this cycle. He was able to regain his own equilibrium sufficiently to be able to join the students and reach across to them as one human being to another rather than merely trying to reassert his own power and potency and thus continuing the battle he had begun. In this way, his empathic attempts at reconnection helped to bring the interaction back more firmly into the realm of reflective function.

Shame and fear are particularly difficult emotions to overcome because they so easily become entrenched and pervasive. Fear has obvious survival functions. If there is danger, attending to it must be paramount. With shame, the survival functions may be less evident but if we think of the profound dependency of human beings on social inclusion for psychic survival, then the potency of shame is evident.

Tomkins' life work focused on elucidating the primary affects and, along with Ekman (1972), the universality of these basic affects across cultures. Much as has been affirmed by the literature on attachment, our responsiveness to these recognizable facial gestures or tonal indicators is swift and automatic, encoded directly without conscious reflections. In this way, human beings learn to co-regulate (FOGEL, 1992) one another's behaviour as they 'read' and react to nonverbal signals without necessarily knowing why. The tendency, then, is to attribute reason to our behaviours even when affect may be the primary driving force.

Tomkins extends these ideas by highlighting how early experience governs our reading of affective cues in ways that appear to us to be universal because we grow up learning that this is 'the way things are.' It is only at adolescence, with the development of formal operational thought, that we are able to reflect on our ideas with sufficient perspective that we can recognize that we – just like everyone else – are inevitably constrained by the histories, world views, and ideologies of our forebears. Tomkins notes how individuals develop 'scripts' that contain the expected parameters of behaviour, based on the patterns we have learned in our families of origin. He also details ways in which fundamental values or *ideologies* govern these scripts.

Because we believe that we *should* be rational beings, we often use our thought to rationalize behaviour that is driven by primary affective reactions such as shame, fear, and

anxiety. In that sense, thought is often used to justify in retrospect an action that was determined primarily by affect. Complicating this picture are the schisms that occur when one world-view meets another; when your script does not meet mine. This is the type of collision we can see in Alcorn's example, in which his world view was so different than that of his students that he failed to anticipate some of the conceptual difficulties they might encounter. As a result, although his attempt to overcome their resistance rather than speaking to it directly was initially effective, when the resistance reasserted itself, Alcorn was effectively annihilated. He had used humour to soften their defenses but failed to anticipate that shame would be the backlash.

In *his* moment of shame, Alcorn was excised from the human community and stood alone and isolated. This is a difficult position from which to recover, and Alcorn struggled with his conflicting feelings. Ultimately, however, his responsibility in his role as teacher reasserted itself, helping him to think about how his students might have been feeling to have elicited such intense reactivity. His ability to recognize the common bond he shared with his students – in having been the victim of public shaming – enabled him to repair his own image in his mind. As he regained the role of teacher, he was able to reassert his reflective functions and once again take up his position as teacher in a classroom of individuals who might be interested in learning but also had their own entrenched prejudices and affective responses that needed to be taken into account.

Massé shifts the conversation from a consideration of shame as an interpersonal dynamic that can occur within the classroom, to a consideration of affect as a somewhat subversive element in education more generally. Massé's first story raises the question of whether there is room for affect in the classroom and, if there is, what is the position of affect in relation to the material? Amelia intrudes affect into the classroom through her tears and also in her conversation. One might question whether we could read the persistence of her affect and the paucity of words in relation to it as a statement communicating, first, that the material is affectively loaded and, second, that there may or may not be the possibility of discussing that affect. The teacher assumes that those discussions should or could only happen elsewhere. The student, in turn, insists that the classroom is the proper locus. We do not know, from the material given, whether Amelia's silence on the subject had more to do with her own preferences to consider these issues silently to herself, or to her presumptions about the appropriateness of speaking publicly. Notably, she is not invited into further speech about her feelings in the classroom.

Moving back then to Massé's commentary about Sedgwick, I would like to highlight the portion in which she calls attention to Sedgwick's description of *textured feeling*. This is an interesting term to a psychoanalyst, who locates the terminology in the teacher's bailiwick: that of texts. In this term, we see an affirmation of the 'and more than this' inherent in Sedgwick's insistence on the texture that can be discovered within the text, if one is only willing to immerse oneself sufficiently to experience it. This immersion in an experience is termed 'liminality' by Massé, in this way pointing to the potentiality always hovering at the edges of our experience.

The psychoanalyst in me locates this position in terms of Winnicott's (1971) admonition not to steal the creativity of the other by interpreting too much, prematurely or, perhaps, even at all. Massé seems to be implicitly pointing to this dilemma when she notes ways in which one person's reading can override, obscure, and occlude the reading of the other. Perhaps most tragically, too much certainty about 'the way things are' can short-circuit the kind of exploration required in order to even know what one's ideas might be. This type of short-circuiting may be at work in whatever conversation does not happen between Amelia and her classmates. It certainly happens between Hadley and her parents and, it would seem, in some ways between Hadley and herself in her failure to integrate her first and second paragraphs: her refusal to imagine that her future *might* be mysterious or even scary.

In inviting us to consider ways in which affect enters the classroom, and the impact that affective responses can have on thinking, meaning, and understanding, Alcorn and Massé invite a deeper consideration of some of the underlying dynamics at play in education. Without considering the role of affect – and of shame, in particular – in the classroom, we would have few tools through which to make sense of the interactions described by Alcorn and Massé. Learning is not accomplished through our cognitive functions alone. Furthermore, intense affective experience can inhibit our cognitive functions. Shame, as Tomkins reveals, is a particularly virulent emotion. Understanding its potency can help the educator to recognize ways in which this affect can enter the classroom and inhibit learning.

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Recebido em: 30/03/2011  
Publicado em: 13/01/2012