

Interview with Adam J. Frank and
Elizabeth A. Wilson, authors of *A Silvan
Tomkins Handbook: Foundations for
Affect Theory* (2020)

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MR. A SILVAN TOMKINS HANDBOOK IS AN EXCITING CONTRIBUTION TO ‘AFFECT Theory’, which has had many proponents and significant scholarly impact since first taking flight in the early 1990s. Your book clarifies, but also departs from, certain tenets of affect theory that have in many ways become routinised, particularly the tendency to differentiate affect from emotion. How does the *Handbook* elucidate Tomkins’s body of work in a way that potentially transforms the way affect has so far been received and debated?

AF/EW. Tomkins’s works holds a peculiar place in the emergence of ‘affect theory’ or ‘affect studies’. *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (1995) is often cited as an early, influential text for scholars wanting to think about affects or emotion, particularly in the humanities. It might be more accurate, however, to say that the introductory essay to that volume (‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold’) was the primary influence on those scholars. Arguably more influential than Tomkins’s own work, that essay (written by Adam and by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) makes a strong argument that ‘theory’ in the 1990s had become stuck in an oppositional relation to the sciences. Sedgwick and Frank suggest that Tomkins’s theory of innate, neurologically calibrated affects could be the dynamite that would break apart that conceptual log jam. But it seems (to jump to a different metaphor) that Tomkins’s work has been more of a catalyst for the development

of interdisciplinary affect studies: it ignited and accelerated scholarly interest in affect, but it remains largely untouched by the reaction it instigated and it has been more-or-less ignored (except for the occasional citational listing) by the subfield of affect studies that subsequently materialised. Our ambition with *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook* is to make his work available to our colleagues and students who would like to think and write about the affects, but who want to read in ways that are different from the analytic modes that very quickly became routinised in affect studies. Our hope is that a return to Tomkins's affect theory will help diversify the intellectual goals and methods of affect studies. We argue in the *Handbook* that Tomkins offers a specific reading of how affects work that remains very powerful for different kinds of audiences: if you are looking for a framework to understand certain events in the clinical session, or to read text or cultural production, or to gather qualitative data about individuals or groups, or to track art practice, Tomkins's affect theory likely has something powerful to contribute.

The *Handbook* is dedicated to 'EKS' and the Acknowledgements thanks Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for introducing you both to Tomkins. What role has Sedgwick played in bringing Tomkins to a wider readership? Has Sedgwick's mediation of Tomkins produced a certain kind of Tomkins within affect theory?

There's no doubt that Eve Sedgwick's writing and editing projects have brought Tomkins's ideas into focus for the theoretical humanities. We're less confident that this has 'produced a certain kind of Tomkins', for example, a queer Tomkins. Actually, queer in one of the senses that Sedgwick has made available does describe Tomkins's thinking, queer less by way of affiliation with homosexuality than an insistence on gaps and differences in the creation of overlapping, disparate meanings. Recall Sedgwick's section on 'Christmas effects' from her essay 'Queer and Now' (in *Tendencies*) in which she contrasts the discouraging way that the Christmas holiday makes the many meanings of family line up monolithically with 'a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other[.] What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where *everything means the same thing*?' Sedgwick was drawn to Tomkins's commitments to multiplicity and fractionality (but not necessarily infinity), to complexity with coherence, his willingness to think through the necessary roles for gaps and play within and between systems, really a kind of structuralism-on-the-move that Sedgwick's own writing and thinking also aims to realise. Perhaps one of the difficulties in the uptake of Tomkins has had to do with the unusual combination here: an intellectual temperament oriented at once toward structure and play, stability and temporal change, transformation and recalcitrance. This is the Tomkins that our *Handbook* wants to make more available to affect theory.

I am interested in what the *Handbook* offers when it comes to thinking about Tomkins, affect and subjectivity. What does Tomkins's particular understanding of affect contribute to understanding of subjectivity in the present moment?

Tomkins contributes in a few different ways to thinking about subjectivity now. First, it strikes us that in social and political theory subjectivity has often been cast in terms of positionality: the positioning of a (sexed, classed, raced) subject in an ideological, discursive, or sociological field of some (more or less) determining kind. As crucial as this has been for beginning to understand the politics of personal experience, approaching subjectivity only by way of positionality can abstract or disconnect lived bodily experience from social or political context (that is, it can have the opposite of its desired effect). A vocabulary of affect offers one way to give lively, qualitative descriptions to a more abstract sense of subject position. (This vocabulary of affect and perception is one way to think about the project of, for example, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*.)

Second, and more generally, Tomkins's model of affect lets us think deconstructively about the subject-structure binary. Structure does not simply operate from the outside, from some external sociological space that imposes differentiation and hierarchy onto otherwise undifferentiated biological matter. The affect systems we inherit are already differentiated, particular, and specific, shaped by species, group, and individual development and experiences and realised by way of what Tomkins calls scripts. Some of these scripts are dynamic, changeable or over-writeable, some are surprisingly durable, and the most recalcitrant or unchanging are the nuclear scripts. Tomkins's affect script theory lets us think more flexibly than classical psychoanalytic models about how psyches and social forces intersect one another in the present of experience, and to recognise that underdetermination may be as important as overdetermination for thinking about subjectivity.

One of many things I learned from this book is how uniquely Tomkins's work is positioned as thought that crosses historical divides between the sciences (biology, physiology, mathematics, neuroscience) and the humanities (Continental philosophy, aesthetics), particularly through its combining clinical experimentation with core humanities-style analysis. What does Tomkins bring to the Humanities or the New Humanities, in particular?

Yes, Tomkins's work provides a uniquely productive template for reading research in the humanities and research in the sciences together. With the rise of feminist science studies and the so-called 'new materialisms' in recent decades

there have been many excellent models of how a humanities-sciences collaboration could work. This work has often drawn on theories of affect (for example, Bennett, Braidotti, Chen, Massumi). We would say that Tomkins's affect theory across allows readers to address the ongoing conundrums of the 'Two Cultures' and we can also see potential for his work in these new subfields (for example, the digital humanities, environmental humanities, medical humanities, legal humanities, and public humanities). What might be most salient here is that his work provides clear conceptual definitions of what affects are (the affects remain notoriously under-specified in a lot of affect studies) while giving the reader freedom to invent and combine and disaggregate as needed. To put this in a word, his theory is *useful*. At the same time, attention to Tomkins's work shows that much of what might be lauded as 'new' in the humanities has a rich intellectual history (casting doubt on the rhetoric and politics of the 'new'). For example, in the 1960s Tomkins was deeply interested in how to use early computational devices for addressing what we would normally think of as humanities questions.

I was also intrigued to read about the relation of Tomkins's affect to sexual drives. Can you speak further about the role of psychoanalysis in Tomkins's work?

In addition to noting a tendency to divide 'affect theory' into two rival camps (the Deleuzians vs. the Darwinians, for example), we have also observed a tendency in current critical work to position affect theory as distinct from, and perhaps in opposition to, psychoanalytic theory. This critical work often takes issue with the linguistic and signifiatory criticism that has been drawing on psychoanalytic theory since at least the 1960s. We feel that this way of thinking about the relationship between affect theory and psychoanalysis isn't very helpful when it comes to reading and using Tomkins's work. It is clear that Tomkins's relationship to psychoanalysis (and to the Freudian orthodoxy that was exemplary of mid-century American psychology) is complex, deeply informed, ambivalent, and intensely felt and argued. He doesn't offer a theory of affects to *replace* a theory of drives. Rather he wants to argue that the motivating effects of affects have been consistently undervalued in psychological and psychoanalytic theory. For example, a drive like hunger only motivates me, or you, or a social group to action when it is amplified by an affect like anger or fear. Without the amplificatory work of an affective state, a drive has only weak power to get us to move. For Tomkins, much of what Freud attributed to the drives more rightly belongs to the affects. This powerful critique of the psychoanalytic *primacy* of the drives is, to our minds, an intense engagement with drive theory, rather than a rejection of it. For all his life (from his own personal analysis in Cambridge MA and the heady, psychoanalytically-inflected work at the Harvard Psychological Clinic under Henry Murray in the 1940s to his later work with cybernetics and script theory)

Tomkins remain attached to the broad epistemological project that we could call 'psychoanalytic'. We see no reason, then, to make a sharp division between psychoanalytic and affect theories (even though they have different kinds of epistemological ambitions), and indeed we take one of the most important methodological lessons from Tomkins to be that there are rich readings to be had when we are less piously attached to just one way of engaging the world. One ambition that we have for the *Handbook* is to diversify the study of affect in the critical humanities so that it doesn't become doctrinaire and intellectually sequestered in the ways that psychoanalysis did in many mid-century American contexts.

Tomkins was an early thinker of cybernetics and systems theory. How do you situate his ideas about assemblages, systems, feedback networks and 'organised complexity' in relation to his better-known work on affect?

Tomkins's encounter with the ideas of cybernetics and systems theory is so crucial for his thinking about affect, imagery, and consciousness that it can be difficult to situate. In fact, if you check out the entry for *cybernetics* in our *Handbook's* index (excellently compiled by Cameron Duder), you'll notice that it shows up in at least a third of the chapters. That different biological systems can operate independently and, at the same time, in close interdependence (as do, say, respiration and blood circulation, or the affects and the drives), that feedback structures the causal relations among these different systems, that relatively simple operations of amplification and attenuation serve to govern complex information systems, or that what we consider fundamental to biological entities can be emergent properties of nested systems, all of these factor into Tomkins's thinking and writing at every step of his theory-building. We think of Tomkins's evolutionary commitment to the human as a good-enough assemblage and his powerful analysis of freedom as a function of automaticity as yet other aspects of his encounter with cybernetics. Indeed, if Freud's thinking about libido and cathexis was indebted to thermodynamics, Tomkins's theories of affect and imagery are thoroughly indebted to mid-century cybernetics and systems theory.

The *Handbook* provides a fascinating glimpse of the possible influence of Spinoza on Tomkins. At what point did you first discern this influence and how does reading Tomkins in terms of Spinoza's *Ethics* alter previous readings of his work?

AF. Well, I read Tomkins before I read Spinoza so when I finally got around to reading the *Ethics* (in a graduate seminar I ran on modern philosophies or theories of affect and emotion that included Descartes on the passions, Smith on moral

sentiments, Darwin on expressions, and so on), it was through a Tomkinsian lens. Spinoza's analysis of feelings into their component parts struck me as similar to Tomkins's analysis of complex emotions in terms of their constituent primary affects. Unusually and crucially, both thinkers relativise value to affect: underlying our more elaborated ethical or aesthetic judgments are the affects scripted by habit and experience. And for both, the question of freedom is fundamentally connected to how we are governed by the affects. Added to this was the odd anachronism that Spinoza seems to have been thinking along the lines of biological systems theory (Marjorie Levinson has written about this). Taken together, these various intellectual filiations seemed, in part, to lead to what I think of as an American Spinoza, that is, the not-so-underground presence of the *Ethics* in the late 19th-century philosophical and psychological contexts that Tomkins inherited. Placing Tomkins and Spinoza side-by-side, then, orients readers of Spinoza toward the historical role this philosopher's work may have played in North American psychology at the start of the twentieth-century and, at the same time, should reorient us toward the seemingly common-sense opposition between Deleuzian affect theories (based in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza) and Tomkins-style ones.

The book is beautifully written. Early on you articulate your vision of it as a 'makeshift handrail that guides the reader gently' into 'strong waters'. One particular delight for this reader is the way the book combines lucid, accessible definitions of Tomkins's terminology with illustrations from contemporary culture, ranging from film to Trump's America. How would you like to see your book, and indeed Tomkins's body of work more generally, read? Can you see his work reaching beyond academia, for example?

We are delighted to hear that the *Handbook* reads in a lucid and accessible way. We feel much of this has to do with our long-term engagement with Tomkins's work, both in scholarly and pedagogical contexts. One of us (AF) worked with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as an undergraduate in the 1990s, on *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* and the other (EW) probably first heard of Tomkins in her undergraduate and graduate psychology training but she had forgotten that when she read Tomkins in the wake of the Sedgwick and Frank *Reader* in Sydney in the late 1990s (with Maria Angel, Susan Best, Anna Gibbs, Melissa Hardie, Doris McIlwain, and Gillian Straker). So, for both of us there has been a lot of time to think with and alongside Tomkins, and to use his work in the classroom. The many different kinds of cultural examples in the book (TV and Broadway shows, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Canadian politeness, Harry Harlow's monkey experiments, biographies of Karl Marx and Eugene O'Neill and Oliver North and Anton Chekov, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and, regrettably, Donald Trump) reflect our own

interests but more importantly they reflect how Tomkins himself thinks and writes. The four volumes of *Affect Imagery Consciousness* are full of cultural examples, personal stories, and fabricated narratives, which make the volumes extremely pleasurable to read. As we say in the introduction, our ambition with the *Handbook* is to help people to find their way into those four volumes, which are capacious and contradictory and challenging and also very enjoyable. There is so much wonderful scholarly work in the humanities that reads and re-reads and re-invents major critical figures like Freud and Weber and Nietzsche and Darwin and Lacan and Saussure and James and Klein and Spinoza, and we argue that Tomkins could be added to this stable of authors who are helping us to think critically about our worlds.

Speaking of Trump and the current political context, do you see Tomkins as a guide for navigating the choppy currents or crises of the present. You mention, for instance, Tomkins’s ‘untapped critical utility’? What might Tomkins’s thought offer us in this time of both COVID-19 and the aftermath of the Trump Presidency?

As Tomkins’s ideological polarity scale tells us, affect has always governed politics. The difference now is the means or mediums by which political figures, ideas, and discourses are made available. It’s clear that social media have transformed the political field and have done this, in part, through the transformation of affect regulation. If, in face-to-face interactions, we modulate (up- or down-regulate) our affects with regard to what we perceive to be the affects of our interlocutors (as given to us by subtle facial and vocal gestures and movements), this nuanced information is absent from messages posted to online platforms. What we get instead of modulated affect regulation is road rage on the internet superhighway, a hyper-amplification of anger, indignation, panic. It’s exciting and exhausting because, unlike previous broadcasting media (television and radio) that are essentially one-way transmission technologies (we are mostly spectators), networked digital media platforms are transactional, requiring us to be involved (this is pretty much what McLuhan predicted). Maybe Tomkins’s thought offers the possibility of understanding the particularity of these media encounters, for example, the role unregulated resentment and fear in contemporary elections or responses to the pandemic. Whether such an understanding would help to modulate these affects or not—that’s another question.

Finally, the *Handbook* notes Tomkins’s situation at the threshold of Continental and Anglo-American philosophical traditions. Do you have any thoughts on Tomkins in the context of the twentieth century as the ‘American Century’, which was accompanied by the rise of ‘Theory’? Is

Tomkins a thinker for the twenty-first century? If so, how might Tomkins speak to non-American readers and thinkers?

This is a challenging question, in part because the distinction between the centuries and between the American and non-American worlds is often hard to parse. We see, for example, that the seventeenth century work of Spinoza resonates strongly with twenty-first century scholarly and political concerns; that while Freud is often thought of as a nineteenth century thinker, his major work and influence is in the twentieth century, beginning with the publication of the *Interpretation of Dreams* (which he postdated from 1899 to 1900); and that Vinay Dharwadker has been able to show extensive cultural resonance between Tomkins's American psychology and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (a Sanskrit text dated somewhere between 200BCE and 200CE). So, what we think of as 'American' and 'twentieth century' cannot be definitively located geographically or chronologically. Indeed, neither of us is 'properly' American even though we are both deeply indebted to the scholarly institutions and traditions that emerged in the US academy from the 1960s onwards. One of us (EW) has been strongly formed by the late-twentieth century scholarly communities in Sydney that drew expansively on French feminisms, semiotics, LGBT politics, indigenous politics, and an antipodean ambivalence about American cultural production (and surely much of this could be traced through how she reads Tomkins). We would like Tomkins's preference for a 'combinatorial' style of reading to show us the array of dependencies, inter-dependencies, and independencies between American and non-American readers, between chronological periods, and between modes of knowledge (interpersonal, scientific, literary, affective) that already structure our scholarly worlds.

The [Digital Publishing in the Humanities Initiative](#) at Emory University has made *A Silvan Tomkins Handbook* available at [Open Access](#).

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