

Affects and Dance Movement Therapy

Affects are a key structure of the Self. The point of therapy is to help an individual regulate, tolerate, and integrate affects and thus build a stronger sense of Self. However, what are affects? And as Dance Therapists how do we best work with them in order to strengthen our client's sense of self?

Affect and feeling are different things. Affect is basically a "reaction of the subcortical brain to sensory stimulation" (Lee, 1991, p. 264), whereas feeling is the awareness of the affect. This paper will discuss affect as it is the most basic piece of information that the nervous system of us human beings senses.

There appear to be two types of Affects noted in the literature.

1. Vitality Affects – as identified and described by Daniel Stern (1985)
2. Categorical Affects – as noted originally by Darwin (1872) and researched more extensively by Silvan Tomkins (1962-63)

Vitality affects are sensations that seem to be captured by words that are 'adverbial' in character. Stern describes them as "qualities better captured by dynamic kinetic terms, such as surging, fading away, fleeting, explosive, crescendo, decrescendo, bursting, drawn out, and so on" (p. 54). He feels that we can experience these qualities from within but also that these are perceivable from the outside by others. He feels they are related to the "HOW" of what we do and that we are "never without their presence, whether or not we are conscious of them" (p. 54). In my paper on Attunement (S.K. Lauffenburger) I note that the Vitality affects are very strongly related to the Tension flow rhythms and attributes of the Kestenberg Movement Profile. I refer the reader to that paper for a more comprehensive discussion.

Categorical affects are the primary topic of this paper. This type was, as noted, first discussed by Darwin, who felt that affects were "expressive forms of emotion in both humans and animals" (Lee, p. 267). Darwin suggested that emotions existed for the evolutionary reason of survival because they prepared humans/animals for action. Interestingly, whether it was human or animal, this expressiveness seemed to be centred primarily on the face, though body posture supported the expression.

Tomkins picked up on Darwin's ideas almost a century later and moved them further using methodologies not available to Darwin. Tomkins was motivated to explore affect because he felt the need "to rescue psychology from an overly imperialistic cognitive theory" (Demos, 1995, p. 18). Tomkins felt that affects not only prepared us for action, but were actually our motivational system, arguing that affects were "amplifiers that create within the organism experiences of urgency" (p. 19) I believe that the characteristic of MOTIVATION for ACTION is what makes affect such an important concept to us as Dance Therapists.

Basically Tomkins saw affects as "biologically inherited programs controlling facial muscles, the autonomic nervous system, bloodflow, respiration, and vocal responses" (Lee, p. 265). Thus regardless of gender, race, or culture, we were all pre-programmed to have particular affects available. Tomkins identified nine primary affects on the basis of a detailed study of fascial muscles. These nine affects are: **surprise, interest, enjoyment, distress, contempt, disgust, anger, fear, and shame.**

Another key point made by Tomkins about affect is that even though affect motivates the organism to act, "there are NO innate responses to affect; there are, instead, an infinite

variety of learned behavioural patterns" (Lee, p. 266). As Dance Therapists, the good news is that there are really only nine basic motivators for us to recognize and use; the bad news is that responses are not predictable between individuals. Each individual learns to respond (or not respond) to each affect signal based on their personal history. However, by being able to identify an affect and the responses organized around it*, we can become more empathic and understanding to our clients.

In order that we are more fluent in affect recognition and use, I would like to discuss briefly each of the nine primary affects. Ron Lee (in press) has broken the nine affects into three groups which he correlates to the Triune Brain (MacLean, 1990) and I will use that organization for this paper.

A. The Reptilian Affects – Interest, Startle, and Distress

The reptilian brain includes the brainstem and cerebellum. This area controls the biological regulation of the body using fixed behavioural patterns that assist survival.

1. Interest – Excitement Affect

The neural circuits of the interest affect begin functioning almost immediately after birth, thus it is obviously key to human survival. Initially a mother's interest in her infant is communicated primarily through touch – patting, soothing, playing with limbs, etc. Later interest can be activated by slight to moderate levels of novelty in touching, smelling, looking or listening, or in sexual behaviour, reverie, or reflective problem solving (Lee, in press, p. 98). Tomkins felt that "without the interest affect, perception would be impossible". This is because to form a perception we require a composite of information and 'interest' keeps us observing or data-gathering (Lee, in press, p. 99).

Therapeutically, interest is seen as holding a pivotal role "as the nucleus of the affective system" (Lee, in press, p. 106). This is because of the growing recognition that 'optimal responsiveness' is what promotes human growth and development, NOT neutrality. We need to invest interest in a client, then understand and help manage the client's response to such interest (Lee, in press, p. 106).

2. Startle – Surprise Affect

Startle, like interest, is activated by novelty, but this is a much more sudden and astonishing sense of novelty. This affect temporarily disassembles or disorganizes the mind. Tomkins would call the startle affect "attention override" that interrupts normal activity, just as a special news bulletin might interrupt a television program. In another analogy, it is like rebooting the computer. Others have described this affect as a "rupture of expectation". In other words, startle gets our attention and our interest, particularly for survival.

Repeated activation causes this affect to "habituate" or re-adjust. This allows us to return to the 'regular broadcast' after we have assessed the situation. Habituation is also an early form of self-regulation. Startle plays an interesting role in trauma.

* The thought that behaviours become organized around affect is quite reminiscent of the Jungian concept of archetypal constellations or complexes.

traumatize people are chronically over-aroused and unable to habituate (Lee, in press, p. 112). This leaves them in a very high alert state that makes self-regulation difficult. Recognizing this chronic startle response is critical in the therapeutic situation. It has even been suggested that chronic startle response creates a very disturbed attachment style.

3. Distress – Anguish Affect

Distress is essentially seen by a crying or similar state. Whereas startle is a sudden motivator, distress can be a “ubiquitous, long-term motivator”. It permits a person to mobilize their resources, and take time to solve the problems that have motivated the distress (Lee, in press, p. 122). An interesting motoric element of distress was noted by Tomkins. He found that “continuous skeletal muscular contractions can produce distress” (in Lee, p. 125). Pain can also activate the distress affect through these muscular contractions. This affect is a key component of the Chronic Pain (with psychological disorders) population.

Crying is a signal for distress, but we humans have other crying substitutes, such as head banging, nose picking, ear pulling, hair pulling, face rubbing, tongue rolling, lip biting and fingernail biting (Lee, in press, p. 129). Interestingly, thumb sucking reduces distress because it reduces muscle tension (Lee, in press, p. 128). Distress becomes attenuated as we get older, provided that we have the capacity to understand. As children our distress is high because this capacity has yet to be developed. Therapeutically we are working with our clients to assist understanding and thus reduce distress.

B. Old Mammalian Affects

The Old mammalian brain is considered to include the limbic system. This is quite important because this contains the neural circuitry of the autonomic nervous system where these affects basically lie. Developmentally it is important to note that the Sympathetic division of the ANS comes on line at about 12 months, while the Parasympathetic division does not develop until about 18 months. Arousal capacities thus mature before inhibitive ones, and regulation becomes a key issue with these affects.

1. Joy – Enjoyment Affect

This affect is considered the regulating affect. Daniel Stern (199) sees it as a interactive, intersubjective affect where “joy is the product of a mutual regulation of social exchange by both partners”. Joy is important in assisting the development of the mother-infant bond. And Tomkins (1962) feels that joy is crucial in the development of social responsiveness. Thus therapeutically, joy and enjoyment are important affects for the development of the therapeutic alliance.

2. Fear – Terror Affect

Fear is an emergency affect – the flight part of the “Fight-flight” system. It is not anxiety, which is actually “stress”. Fear’s primary function is to amplify and activate. It is a very “compelling persuader designed for emergency motivation of life and death significance” (Tomkins in Lee, in press, p. 160). Terror has a toxicity that activates our physiological reserves and can exhaust, and possibly fragment us, if it is not tenuated or regulated.

3. Anger – Rage Affect

Anger is the most urgently demanding of our affects. As an amplifier it tends to make bad things seem worse, which in turn motivates our action (Lee, in press, p. 167). It is far more intense than distress and tends to tell us that the “experience is too much, too dense, too punishing”. Anger tends also toward summation, meaning it can increase as a result of successive experiences or even contagion.

Therapeutically, exploring the meanings of anger can actually cause it to summate, or at least not assist reduction or regulation. Anger is better dealt with by focussing on concrete aspects of the experience and the specific triggering mechanisms.

C. The New Mammalian Affects

This part of the brain is the neocortex, where cognitive thought is generated. There appears to be two major complementary cognitive systems. A primary one which is built around sensory impressions, and a secondary one which is built around the rules of combination and sequencing of syntax and word order (Lee, in press, p. 187).

Humiliation Affects – Shame, Disgust, Dismissal

The humiliation affects are actually quite complex because they involve a cognitive as well as sensory component. They also tend to utilize the activation of the Parasympathetic component to alter bonding (Lee, in press, p. 194). Shame is the most common one, related to a sense of indignity and defeat. Tomkins sees it as a sense of feeling incomplete. Kohut would suggest it comes from “not having one’s experience mirrored by a significant other”. This inefficacy experience is often associated with lying and secrecy which seem to be its cognitive component. Shame is often invoked to reinforce cultural or familiar taboos.

Disgust and dismissal seem to be associated with behaviours that are designed to distance the self from an offending object (via a reaction of nausea or revulsion). Evolutionarily, they helped us avoid or reject potentially harmful objects. Cognitively they create an experience of rejection and alienation and significantly alter the sense of belonging.

Therapeutically, these affects must be worked with relatively cognitively. In the infant-mother relationship, mutual gazing can help alleviate the shame. In a young child, the shame affect can be avoided by not requiring the child to hide a shame response, as well as by avoiding humiliation. In the adult acceptance and positive regard can help alleviate the response and permanent attenuation involves an exploration of the ideal beliefs that create the response.

Summary

The advantage of thorough study of the Affect theory of Tomkins and others is that it gives us therapeutic insight. It allows us to have greater empathy as well as knowledge about effective therapeutic interventions. It is obvious from the above that each affect requires different responses, whether in movement or verbally.

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