Notes on Gibson's concept "affordance".

These notes started as an attempt at clarifying the concept "affordances" in a correspondence with Donald Nathanson. As I have worked with the concept the notes have grown, and may turn into an article. I'm thus interested in all kinds of feedback.

In these notes section 1), and 2) describe major aspects of Gibson's concept "affordance", and section 3) deals with how Gibson's framework may be applied to subgroups of persons. Section 4) then discusses some pronounced similarities between Roger Shepard's (1984) 'neo-Gibsonian' framework and Silvan Tomkins' (1962, 1991) theory of cognition, and in section 5) we point out some implications of a (revised) Gibsonian framework for further research.

It remains to add some concluding material about implications of the framework for conceptualising "the good society". It is also planned to add some comments on social constructivistic critics of neo-realistic positions. It will be argued that much of such critique builds on outmoded conceptions of 'realist' views, and fails to acknowledge the constructivistic aspects of the present framework.

1) The concept "affordances"

When discussing the background of his concept "affordances" Gibson (1979) starts with a much repeated quote from Koffka: "Each thing says what it is... a fruit says 'Eat me'; water says 'Drink me'; thunder says 'Fear me'; and women says 'Love me.'." What 'the thing says it is' was called "Aufforderungscharacter" by Kurt Lewin. This is difficult to translate into English, "invitation character", and "valence" are some early attempts, (p. 138).

Gibson preferred to make up his own term, 'affordances': "The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes for good or ill." (p. 127), and 'affordance' of an object is used synonymous with the 'meaning' of an object (p. 127, p. 134). Some of Gibson's examples: "Surfaces afford posture, locomotion, collision, manipulation... Special forms of layout afford shelter and concealment. Fires afford warming and burning. Detached objects - tools, utensils, weapons - afford special types of behavior to primates and humans." (p. 137).

2) Important aspects of "affordances"

2a) Affordances are properties of objects - independent of state of the observer - which are directly perceived.

Gibson takes issue with Koffka who at length discussed mailbox and letter mailing and claimed that it was a 'phenomenal postbox' that invited letter mailing. For Gibson, however, "the affordance of something does not change as the need of the observer changes. The observer may or may not perceive or
attend to the affordance, according to his needs, but the affordance, being invariant, is always there to be perceived. The perception of [the mailbox's] affordance should therefore not be confused with the temporary special attraction [when a letter is to be posted] it may have" (p. 138-139). The following quotation implies that 'values' may be seen as synonymous with 'affordances': "..values of things seem to be perceived directly because they are perceived directly" (p. 139-140).

2b) Affordance is a relational concept - implying 'niche' - and cutting across 'subject - object', and 'natural - cultural/artificial' dichotomies.

"In ecology a niche is a setting of environmental features that are suitable for an animal, into which it fits metaphorically. . I suggest that a niche is a set of affordances. . The niche implies a kind of animal, and the animal implies a kind of niche."

"...affordances of the environment.. are in a sense objective, real and physical unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be . .mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property, or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer." (p. 128 - 129).

Heft (1989, p.4) puts it this way: "Affordances are not 'objective' since they can't be specified independent of an individual nor 'subjective' in the sense that they reside in the mind, but 'ecological facts' in short relational."

As for the 'natural - artificial' dichotomy: "Why has man changed the shapes and substances of his environment? To change what it affords him. He has made more available what benefits him and less pressing what harms him. [Return to in GOOD SOCIETY, also wastefully, thoughtlessly]. . This is not a new environment - an artificial environment distinct from the natural environment but the same old environment modified by man. It is a mistake to separate the natural from the artificial as if there were two environments. . . It is also a mistake to separate the cultural environment from the natural." (p. 130).

2c) Affordances are species - specific

All the examples of affordances imply that they are relative to a given species, or that a given object may imply different affordances for different species. Shepard (1984, p.418) puts it this way: "the same object (e.g. a wool slipper) may primarily afford warmth of foot for a person, gum stimulation for a teething puppy, and nourishment for a larval moth. The invariants of shape so crucial for the person are there in all three cases but are less critical for the dog and wholly irrelevant for the moth."
We note here with Heft (1989, p.1) that "affordances seem most plausibly applied to features of the environment that have species-specific or transcultural significance." Since, however, a variety of applications of the Gibsonian framework deal with features that have significance only within a particular sociocultural context, or for specific subgroups of persons we outline some arguments in favor of such applications. Hopefully this will also serve to further clarify the implications of the concept 'affordance'.

3) Applying 'affordances' to subgroups of persons.

Even though critical voices have been raised about extensions to subgroups or even specific persons (see e.g. Heil, 1979, Chow, 1989, Meyering, 1997), we first note that Gibson himself apparently did not find such extensions problematic. On the contrary he saw his approach as providing the foundation for a new approach to psychology:

"Behavior affords behavior, and the whole subject matter of psychology and the social sciences can be thought of as an elaboration of this fact. Sexual behavior, nurturing behavior, economic behavior, political behavior - all depend on the perceiving of what another person or other persons afford." (p. 135) "The notion of invariants that are related at one extreme to the motives and needs of an observer and at the other extreme to the substance and surfaces of a world provides a new approach to psychology". (p. 143)

Below we discuss some aspects related to affordances which facilitate wide applications of Gibson's framework.

3a) Multiple affordances

It is probably the exceptional object which only offers one affordance: "a knife..affords cutting if manipulated in one manner, but it affords being cut if manipulated in another manner. a person.. can give caresses or blows, contact comfort or contact injury." (p. 137). Baron and Boudreau (1987, p. 1222) point out that uncritical applications of schemata concepts ignore the wide range of stimulus potential inherent in the other person. We may for instance perceive Woody Allen primarily as a nerd or as a creative intellectual simply because there is information supporting both views in the stimulus array of Woody Allen. Heft (1989, 28) has a useful distinction between "potential information in the ambient array, which is available to be picked up, and information that is picked up at a particular time, perceived affordances." This raises the question of how to conceptualise which affordances are picked up:

3b) Selectivity: (perceptual) attunements (einstellung, set)

In the ecological view "perceivers are attuned to the stimulus information that is most relevant to adaptive action". (McArthur and Baron, 1983, p. 219). "A particular stranger may afford sexual availability for perceivers of a particular age and sex but not for perceivers of a different age and sex."
Similarly a stranger may afford the threat of domineering some perceivers but not others. 'prozac' cultural values may cause American perceivers to be highly attuned to dominance and extraversion. On the other hand, Asians appear to be highly attuned to conscientiousness. (Zebrowitz and Collins, 1997, p. 218).

It will be seen that 'attunements' is invoked to describe selectivity in perceived information from the whole array of potential information. From the quotations it will be seen that 'attunement' may further be related to motivation and cultural values. Affordances are also relative to:

3c) Behavioural capacities, effectivities (which match, correspond to affordances)

"a surface of support at approximately knee height to the individual affords sitting on.. what constitutes a seat (or affords sitting on) will vary among individuals with significantly different body scaling." Heft (1989, p. 3)

This clearly points to developmental changes in which affordances are most relevant. Heft does for instance quote Werner: "The fence which, for the adult has the negative character of stopping movement, is for the child, exactly to the contrary, the very signal of movement." (p. 20).

Generally capacities co-implicate characteristics of the environment, again reminding us of the relational character of affordances.

3d) Cultural 'meaning', individual history, co-perception and affordances

Noble (1981, p. 71-72) picks up on the standard mailbox example, and imagines "an African bushman", standing beside the author, both gazing at the mailbox, and emphasizes "that it is a mailbox is an item of cultural knowledge that only I possess, and that has nothing to do with the structure of the light." Gibson (1979) points out that "positive and negative affordances are properties of things taken with reference to an observer." (p. 137) and this allows Noble to say that "the affordance of the object is directly given in the structure of the array because we, being aware members of our culture, coperceive ourselves in relation to the mailbox, and we are components of the ambient array just as the mailbox is. (Noble, 1981, p. 72)

In a similar vein Heft (1989, p. 13) notes that individual experience with an object may color the meaning it gets for a person: "the perceived meaning of the object does not reside solely with the object or the person, but it derives from the intentional relationship between the two, which includes the history of their interactions. The quality of the initial experience is 'reconstituted' through the course of their interaction."

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Baron and Byrne (1987) summarize the relation between person
and environment characteristics in a 'lock and key' metaphor. Capacities and attunements correspond to a key, and a niche—a range of settings—corresponds to a lock, waiting to be opened by the key so its affordances can be realized.

"Personality in such a view represents a reciprocal or complimentary structure to settings. Specifically, personality is a set of predispositions (e.g. traits, motives, attitudes, emotions) that attunes the animal to select and detect certain affordances rather than others and also includes 'effectivities', or capacities for actualizing the affordances of the physical and social environment." (p. 1227).

4) Direct perception and internal representation, Shepard and Tomkins

In a seminal paper, dedicated to the memory of Gibson, Shepard (1984, p. 436) wrote: "I like to caricature perception as externally guided hallucination, and dreaming and hallucination as internally simulated perception."

This is remarkably similar to Tomkins (1992, p. 239): "The world we perceive is a dream we learn to have [cf. 'hallucination'] from a script we have not written [cf. 'externally guided']. (An historical note: The passage from which this quotation is taken is repeated from a partly identical passage in Tomkins (1961, p. 15), and the latter is an expanded version of a paper delivered at the XIVth International Congress of Psychology at Montreal 1954.)

First it is clear that 'externally guided hallucination' or 'a dream from a script we have not written' are incompatible with Gibson's notion of 'direct perception'. We have as yet not discussed this aspect of Gibson's theory, but it derives from his emphasis on an active organism, moving about in space and able to pick up higher order invariants in the environment.

Gibson was deeply dissatisfied with conventional laboratory investigations of a static person, restricted to proximal stimulation, and the elaborate models of computation/representation built up on this basis in order to account for perception of depth, features of objects etc. He regarded such investigations as ecologically invalid, and forcefully demonstrated that an active organism in her natural environment will not be restricted to the shifting vagaries of proximal stimulation, but will be able to directly pick up higher order invariant features of the environment, the distal stimulation. Gibson's position was that if higher order invariants can be directly picked up, there is simply no need for concepts of 'internal representation' and/or 'inference'.

While a large body of research testifies to the fruitfulness of 'higher order invariants' (see in addition to Gibson's own work e.g. Shepard, 1984, Baron & Boudreau, 1987, Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997, for further references) both Tomkins and Shepard take issue with the conclusions Gibson drew from this. Tomkins notes (1992, p. 235) that while availability of invariant information is a necessary precondition for
perception it does not provide a sufficient theory.

Tomkins gives due credit to Gibson's ecological theory since it "revolutionized the theory of visual perception by broadening the pool of information that the perceiver is presumed to sample" [richness!], but critically notes that "he failed to generalize his great insight to include the more extended past and future as part of the context in which visual messages are necessarily embedded if they are to orient the human beings in his personal and sociocultural matrix". (p. 236). [We note in passing that Heft, cf. 3d) above, has generalized Gibsonian thinking in this respect.]

Perception as a 'dream we learn to have' is Tomkins' poetic way of stating his belief "that the afferent sensory information is not directly transformed into a conscious report. What is consciously perceived is imagery... A sensory message .. must be matched by a centrally innervated feedback mechanism." We will meet a similar notion of 'match' in Shepard's work.

Arguing for the necessity of such a feedback mechanism Tomkins first notes the overabundance of sensory information and - since channel capacity is limited - the subsequent necessity of selectivity. He then points out that even though there is overabundance, there may yet be insufficient information in specific messages.

"Insufficient information" looms large in Shepard's revision of Gibsonian theory. A major part of his argument is that conditions with reduced information, - "ecologically invalid displays" as he puts it, are ideally suited to reveal internalized invariant principles, some of which may be quite abstract. In a brilliant series of experiments on apparent movement of threedimensional objects he demonstrates that complex principles of kinematic geometry have been internalized. In a footnote (p. 436) he makes the tantalizing suggestion that "syntactic rules may be to some extent traceable, after all, to abstract properties of the external world."

So "perception cannot adequately be described as an individual act of picking up an invariant that is present in that particular stimulus. What is perceived is determined as well by much more general and abstract invariants that have instead been picked up genetically over an enormous history of evolutionary internalization." (p. 431) Among internal determinants he also includes determinants temporarily established by the current context, e.g. emotional states, and mental sets or attentional biases, as well as determinants acquired through past experiences (p. 431-432).

When thinking about internal representation Shepard finds it most conducive to insight to elaborate the metaphor 'resonance', a metaphor he notes also was used by Gibson. Shepard states: "as a result of biological evolution and individual learning the organism is, at any given moment, tuned to resonate to the incoming patterns that are significant for it.. the notion of selective tuning . . . .encompass the notion of affordances." (p. 433), cf. here 3b) above.
Shepard can then provide an interpretation of 'direct perception' as 'tight coupling': "When stimulated by a strong natural signal, as under favourable conditions of motion and illumination the system's resonant coupling with the world would be tight enough to give rise to what Gibson called direct perception. However, the coupling is tight only because an appropriate match has evolved between externally available information and the internalized constraints." (p. 433).

It is thus, we take it, not necessary to think in terms 'direct perception' versus 'internal representation', the former can more fruitfully be seen as a special case encompassed by the latter.

One of Shepard's major aims is to establish a common framework for discussing perception in relation to imagining, thinking and dreaming. He first states that there is a hierarchy, from abstract to concrete, of resonant modes. Furthermore he notes that representational processes can be externally or internally instigated. On this basis he can make the following classification: (cf. p. 435)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>MODES</th>
<th>INSTIGATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sensation</td>
<td>only concrete</td>
<td>external</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perception</td>
<td>concrete and abstract</td>
<td>external</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dreaming, hallucination</td>
<td>concrete and abstract</td>
<td>internal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imagining, remembering</td>
<td>mainly abstract</td>
<td>internal</td>
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<td>'abstract' thinking</td>
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<td>internal</td>
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Tomkins (1992, p. 239) arrived at much the same framework: "The skill of matching the constantly changing input . . . eventually supports the dream and the hallucination in which central sending produces the conscious image in the absence of afferent support."

4a) A note on depression.

One aspect of severe neurotic disorders may be an impoverished perception of reality. In a very thorough investigation of long term effects of psychoanalysis the Norwegian psychoanalyst Schjelderup (1955) discussed (among other changes) that: "in the main, the patient's world is described as being 'more real' and 'richer'". This is reflected in statements as e.g.: "a richer gamut of experience".. "I have come out of a fog".."I haven't been able to see properly before; everything has been more or less distant" (p. 117).

This, we think, can be seen as a weakening of the matching process (Tomkins) or less efficient recruitment of resonant concrete modes (Shepard).

5) Some implications

In this section we discuss some tentative implications and elaborations of the framework sketched so far. Hopefully this may help to pave the way both for further theoretical
integration and empirical work.

5a) Constructivism and realism: Complementary not incompatible! Implications for therapy

Both 'constructivism' and 'realism' are open to a variety of interpretations. In order to simplify the discussion we here follow Bohart (1995) in emphasizing that constructivistic positions emphasize that individuals impose meaning on the world (including experience of 'self') while realists emphasize that meaning is discovered or detected.

Consider now the Tomkins - Shepard perspective we have outlined above. Here 'imposing' implies emphasizing the internal feedback mechanism (cf. 'dreaming', and 'hallucinations' in quotations above). We further note that this mechanism may be more (or less) internally instigated. 'Discovery' on the other hand emphasizes externally available information, and here we further note that this may - more or less - match the internalized constraints, cf. quotation from Shepard above. So 'imposing' implies concentrating on internal mechanisms, and 'discovery' concentrating on external information in the world, but (ordinarily) both factors are operative though in different 'mixes'.

This further implies that it is by no means necessary to choose either 'constructivism' or 'realism' as an umbrella for clinical interpretations and activities. Bohart, choosing an 'unreformed' Gibsonian realist perspective, does for instance argue that an interpretation of 'resistance' should not be seen as due to a challenge of core assumptions, rather the therapist's construction simply does not fit her experience. Granting that 'resistance' is a tricky concept, we would object that some cases might well imply 'resistance' in the sense of dominance of internal (unconscious) processes, (see Westen (1991) for examples), whereas in other cases Bohart's argument may serve as a welcome antidote to misguided therapeutic interpretations.

So we take issue with the dichotomy "what is desired in therapy is a change in experience, not simply a change in conceptual understanding." (p. 322). Whether and to what extent therapy at a given moment should be guided towards 'experience' or 'conceptual understanding' would in the present view depend upon pragmatic considerations, it is not something which can be settled on the basis of a priori considerations.

In a discussion of Bohart's article (among other contributions to constructivism/realism) Bob Neimeyer (1995, p. 346-347) rhetorically asks "when . . an artisan crafts a mug from a lump of clay.. a widow 'converses' with her dead husband, or a couple in therapy engages in a heated argument, is it more useful to see these as the discovery of something that is 'out there', or to view these events as expression, dilemmas, or conflicts in a coupled human ordering process, whether viewed as personal or interpersonal?" I hope it is clear that an either/or choice is not at all necessary, it all depends on the further context whether internal processes have been dominant. or not. (But we think, as we will return to later, that our Gibsonian perspective gives a greater emphasis to the
possibility of experiences mirroring an external world than is recognized in constructivist camps.)

In fairness to Neimeyer he has recognized that Shepard's perspective blurs "any contrast between the detection of (preexisting) meanings and their impositions by a knowing subject". After reviewing Shepard's position Neimeyer does, however, conclude that there are still important areas of disagreement between a contemporary ecological view and a constructivist one: "From an ecological view, even abstract mental representations are essentially internalizations of patterns and constraints that originate in the world, whereas constructivists are likely to view these mental representations as distinctions, assertions, or conjectures posited by individuals or language communities to negotiate a social process." (p. 348).

We think, however, that Shepard has already provided (some tentative) answers to Neimeyer's final remark when he cherishes the possibility of a greater dialogue "... toward developing a more elaborated model, one that can embrace both the environmental constraints and the human ordering processes that jointly determine our functioning as individuals and communities."

A major emphasis for Shepard has been to also account for dreams and imagery, for instance creative use of dreams in scientific discoveries. Neimeyer seems to construe an opposition between 'environmental constraints' (or 'internalization of patterns') and 'human ordering processes'.

But this does not capture the great creative potential Shepard sees in his key concept resonance. He notes for instance that an eolian harp can be excited by random bursts of wind and quotes Coleridge: "And what if all animated nature/ Be but organic harps, diversely fram'd/ That tremble into thought." (p. 438)

One general implication of constructivism which on a more mundane level seems contrary to a unified view as here outlined is that within presumably the same culture, people seem to live in (partly) different worlds. How this is compatible with our Gibsonian framework will be further discussed in the next subsection.

5b) Obviousness of affordances, differentiation and creativity

On one level the lumberworker, the hiker, and the biologist will describe the same forest in quite different ways. This does not imply that they 'construct different forests'. It is more parsimonious to say that they attend to or emphasize different aspects of the forest, each of them is attuned to a specific set of affordances.

In the Gibsonian view there is a tremendous richness in the world out there, richer than what can be described in language: "The curious observer can always observe more properties of the world than he can describe" (Gibson, 1966, p. 282). Gibson & Gibson (1955) argue that perceptual learning is not a matter of "enriching" experience by associative
processes, it is instead seen as "differentiation". One of their examples is of one man who can just identify four types of wine, whereas another may have "four thousand percepts in response to the range of stimulation". The "crude fellow . . shows a low specificity of perception" whereas "the gentleman who is discriminating about his wine shows a high specificity." (p. 35).

It may be fruitful to conceive of affordances as varying in obviousness - from the point of view of a 'typical' observer. This is especially evident for human made objects since they are usually constructed for one primary use. Most such objects, can, however, be used in a variety of ways, and one standard procedure in studies of problemsolving is to arrange a situation which requires that an object be used in a nonstandard way, for instance making a tube of a newspaper so that it may afford transportation. When subjects are not able to see non-obvious affordances this is often dubbed "functional fixity".

We like to think that there is an (almost) infinite richness in affordances for most objects (human-made or not), and that some of these affordances are hard to discover. To discover non-obvious but useful or interesting affordances is an important aspect of 'creativity'. Bohart (1996) clearly expresses this view when he, partly on the basis of interviews with creative persons, "most basically think of creativity as discovery, not 'making'... In order to create I would like to fine-tune my 'seeing' (feeling/ intuition/ listening/ sensing).

A further point is that reading about or otherwise witnessing effectivities brought to bear on austere affordances may be very interesting or enjoyable. An personal example: A year ago I read with great enjoyment how Kasparov in his first set of matches with Big Blue discovered the rather scarce possibilities for victory provided by the monstrous (in human 'wetware' terms) computational powers of Big Blue. What was particularly impressive about Kasparov's feat was that his usual flamboyant style did not at all work. He had to change his strategies and managed to discover weaknesses in Big Blue's handling of complex end games with pawns. Another example of austere affordances are mountains with the highest scale of difficulty. To ordinary folks they look completely forbidding, yet the expert climber will find the minute nooks which make it 'embracable', thus affording ascent, and inspiring our awe and admiration.

5c) Compellingness of affordances

Shotter (1983, p. 28) in an attempt to improve on Gibson's theory claims that there is a hiccup in how we act in relation to affordances as the steps from perception of affordances to action are missing. Even though Heft (1989, p. 27-28) contests this interpretation, we argue that it is fruitful to conceive of some affordances as (under some circumstances) strongly inviting the 'afforded' behaviour, others as more weakly related to behaviour.

In other words affordances vary in their compellingness. How compelling an affordance is will vary with type of object,
also social norms prescribing or restricting the use of a given object, developmental level, also factors as for instance brain-damage, and personal attunements. Costall (1995) treats social norms in detail, and also quotes Vygotsky that "development may free us of the 'dictates' of the object". It is well known that many children can not resist using newly acquired tools, often in contexts irritating to caretakers. As for brain damage Damasio (1994) has a fascinating story of a brain-damaged women who, when she saw the typical paraphernalia in a doctor's office, immediately started to use the stetoscope and launched into an elaborate diagnostic procedure.

Use of affordances which to most people are neither obvious nor compelling may give rise to some surprise. In the norse sagas there is a story about a well known chieftain, Erling Skallagrimsson who, when he was twelve years old, one day used his axe to kill a slave. Since the slave had done nothing to harm or provoke Erling he was asked to explain his behavior and he answered: "His position was such that it invited chopping him down." [inadequate translation!] This specific affordance fortunately was not frequently used (otherwise it might not have aroused such widespread interest)!

An interesting sequel to this story, however, is that Erling's statement in Norway is often used to explain unjustified (mainly verbal) attacks. This points to metaphoric extensions of affordances, cf. Lakoff (1987), and Johnson (1987) for discussions of creative use of metaphors, a topic which will be further explored at another occasion.

McArthur & Baron (1983, p. 224) refer to research on prison inmates convicted of assault who were highly attuned to information in a person's gait that might reveal the persons's 'muggability'. Concerning gait the NLP trainer Charlotte Bretto (personal communication) told me that as an exercise she had walked back and forth on the 42. second street in New York City. With one gait she got lots of 'invitations', changing gait none at all.

Inspired by the Gibsonian perspective I discussed with Stewart (1996) her PTSD research on victims of (mainly) sexual assault, American women serving in the Vietnam war. She described the victims as having some 'uncertain' quality in their gait. Such observations invite using a research procedure originally devised by Johansson and often used in Gibsonian research. Attaching point lights to a moving actor filmed in near darkness allows the researcher to focus exclusively on kinematic stimulus information which may well be of crucial importance. If kinematic stimulus information relevant to sexual assaults could be explicitly described, such research might be used to train women to walk in ways which would make them less vulnerable!

The above examples hopefully illustrate that how compelling affordances are largely depend upon individual attunements, furthermore that the Gibsonian approach does not account for the steps leading from perception of affordances to action. Faced with compelling affordances inviting offensive behavior it may be a 'hard choice' to resist the temptation as discussed by Fiske (1989).
There is, however, one important area which at first blush epitomizes Gibson's capsule formulation "behavior affords behavior". Nathanson (1992), elaborating Tomkins' theory of affects, points out that emotional expressions intrinsically are highly contagious. This is particularly evident in interactions with babies who "... in the throes of an affect is a broadcaster of affect and we observers resonate with their transmission" (p. 107). Since an affect is analogous to what triggered it there is a strong tendency for us to automatically share the affect triggered in the other person, this is the prime basis for empathy.

If, however, "you were forced to resonate with every burst of affect that came your way from someone else ... imagine how difficult it would be to keep your mind on whatever interested you" (p. 110). No society can 'afford' unfettered display of all affects, and everywhere children learn to curb their affective displays lest they completely captivate the scene. Nathanson describes twin processes; not only has everyone to learn to modulate affect displays, but he has also described a complementary process: Since the "contagious quality of affect is so powerful ... the normal adult has built a shield for protection from the affective experience of the other person, a mechanism I call the emphatic wall." (p. 111).

Because affective behaviour so strongly invites resonant affective behaviour it leads to a paradoxical negation of Gibson's formulation: We can not 'afford' the resonant behavior which originally is triggered by affective behavior!

A major point in the Tomkins - Nathanson perspective is that affect is curbed to the point that we mainly experience "backed-up affect", and little 'real' affect. Furthermore 'muting of affect' is also reflected in most social science where affect has been rendered if not invisible, then largely a byproduct of cognitive and/or cultural factors. Hopefully cross-fertilization between affect theory and the Gibsonian perspective may serve to rectify this state of affairs.
References


