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When Did Boredom Become an Emotion?

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In the Fall 2008 issue of *QRCA Views*, we argued that examining ethnography's roots in anthropology helps illuminate both ethnography's promise as well as vulnerabilities when applied in market research.

We pointed to anthropology's analytic focus on social life, suggesting that anthropology's enduring contribution to market research was not ethnography-as-field-method, but rather "cultural analysis," the endeavor to illuminate understanding of the intertwined symbolic and practical dimensions of social (not individual) life and practices. In this essay, our aim is to further demonstrate the possibilities and value of cultural analysis by viewing emotion — that most psychological of constructs — through an anthropological lens.

The genesis of the case we describe, an exploration of the social constitution and expression of emotions among young adults in the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand, came from the request of New Zealand advertising planners. Their impetus was the need to distinguish their agency's approach in the wake of the 2004 book *Lovemarks* by Kevin Roberts, Worldwide Saatchi & Saatchi CEO. As the New Zealand planners also maintained, while they were "always" asked by clients to "build on the emotional aspects" of brands and to "create emotional connections," it also seemed to them that only "happy clappy" ads were deemed acceptable and that emotional appeals were not linked to specific New Zealand cultural meanings, concerns or target audiences. Rather, in much of New Zealand advertising, emotional depictions tended to the stereotypic, the obvious and the un-deconstructed, and they wanted to differentiate their approach through a nuanced understanding of the social context and texture of emotion in New Zealand.

Boredom as the Muse

From our own side, we saw the potential to explore boredom as an emotion. For a few years, we had been toying with the question of "When did boredom become an emotion?" This question had captured our imaginations in the course of a project on teens and chocolate.

As part of this study, we had asked varied teens to keep the wrappers of all the candy they ate for a ten-day period preceding the time of our ethnographic visits. We asked them to make notes on each wrapper telling us where they were, the time of day, what they were doing, with whom and what their mood was at the time.

What surprised us, even given an ongoing expectation of teen expression of restlessness or anomie, was the number of times that teens — quite independently of one another — wrote "bored" as their mood. We could not help but wonder if there were connections with ubiquitous technologically

mediated stimulation. Was it the presence of the internet, email, IM-ing, cell phones, video, digital games and television in the lives of teens that produced this sentiment? Working on this project promised us the frame and fodder to think further about it.

The Framework of the Study

Thus, the goal among us all was to examine the sociocultural expression of emotion among young people in New York, London and Auckland, to better appreciate the ways that expressed emotions in advertising were grounded and linked to larger cultural outlooks, values, symbols, metaphors, practices and processes evidenced in everyday life. Arguably, studying in three Anglophone locations meant we were conducting the research in sociocultural contexts that would be relatively similar vis-à-vis each other versus some other locations we could have picked, and it also made English

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the resource language. No question. However, we also thought the benefits of (relatively) shared Anglophone-influenced traditions might also aid us by highlighting the ways that emotions were socially constituted, if we found nuanced differences.

In each city, we recruited young adults ages 18 to 24 as our primary ethnographic interlocutors. Prior to meeting with us, we asked them to create a diary of the actual day-to-day realities of some of their emotions or emotional states. We suggested that they create the diary around three emotions or emotional states that were part of their life at the time, but we did not ask that they focus on boredom — we wanted to see if and how it would emerge, not "force" it. But we did urge them to take photographs, to jot down notes and to do whatever they needed to show us what the emotions they selected looked like, felt like and were like in their lives. We also asked them to gather together

examples of these same three emotions from ads, websites or magazines, examples that they felt *really* captured the sense of those emotions from their perspective.

To further focus and ground the study in advertising, we also gathered, from each of the countries, fairly comprehensive collections of public service, telecom and beer advertising targeting young adults. We then jointly conducted a semiotic analysis of these collected ads with the N.Z. planners and later showed some of the most telling or discussion-provoking examples to the young people in the ethnographic encounters.

Stress and the Self in the United States: the Genesis of Boredom

In our overall analysis, we discussed key emotions for each location, detailing what was valued in their expression, framed within the context of the enveloping cultural matrix and life goals of the young adults. What we want to present here, compared and illuminated with U.K. tidbits, are the main aspects of the U.S. analysis that led us

to a more nuanced appreciation of boredom as an emotional state expressed by U.S. young people.

Among the U.S. respondents, “stress” was frequently chosen as one of the emotions of focus in their diaries. Discussions of stress were also central in many of our ethnographic encounters. If, at the outset, stress seemed to us a slightly strange choice — we wondered even whether stress could be considered an emotion rather than a set of circumstances — the discussions with the young adults convinced us of both its existence as an emotional state and its merits for elucidating the sociocultural terrain of emotion for the U.S. young adults, including boredom.

Stress was generally described by the U.S. young people as the feeling of being overwhelmed or having a burden. As one of the young women detailed stress as an emotion in her diary, “Stress feels like nothing can go right. I have no time to do anything that needs to be done. I have so much to do and so little time to do it.”

As a young man put it at the very beginning of his diary, “Having to deal with a girlfriend, a job and college, stress unfortunately plays a huge role



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in my life. Whether it's having the occasional argument with my girlfriend, waking up late for work or having a test, stress always seems to occur." As he then continued in his diary, and as he recounted in the encounter, he tended to "get stressed" from the very beginning of the day, which then affected his mood for the rest of the day. The stress was often from waking up late and subsequently rushing to get to his morning class. But, as he noted, "On the rare occasion I wake up on time with no problem, something else usually causes my tardiness."

Another respondent created a PowerPoint report, with photographs and headlines. The headlines for stress included: "School stresses me out;" "Stressful = my messy room;" "Stressful = work and getting there on time;" "Stressful = seeing others stressed out." Managing and coping with stress was a preoccupation among our U.S. respondents.

If stress was a greedy cultural discourse for our U.S. respondents, the stress that our respondents discussed was also somewhat self-induced, and importantly, that at some level stress is a self-induced emotional state was precisely the most telling

facet of it in terms of the larger sociocultural terrain in which it resides and operates. For the U.S. cultural context, the idea that you make the circumstances of your life, that you create your life and your world, was the point. Stress was about making the most of oneself, not about making the most of the moment, the day or the event.

If, for our U.K. respondents, the social milieu was imagined as metaphorically populated with a distinct number of separate ladders (and so you strive to climb the one you need or want to be on), the comparable cultural imaginary for U.S. respondents was one of space for a limitless number of ladders, all of which were built by the users themselves, in the shapes and sizes of their own choosing. Personal goals, strivings and accomplishments were recurrent frames for our respondents in their diaries and in our ethnographic discussions. If the United Kingdom has been caricatured by self and other for an emphasis on nuances and distinctions of class and status, the United States has certainly gained a reputation for its emphasis on the individual, including a certain degree of egomania. Celebrities such as Madonna

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While accepting the egocentric self-creation as in part caricature, the truth of this discourse for individuals in their daily lives and the difficulties and challenges it implies can also not be overlooked or downplayed. The young U.S. adults we spoke to were constantly working on themselves, working on their lives, working on getting ahead, working to create a ladder. If, in the United Kingdom, a culturally available option to explain one's current lot or lack of success can be to assert one's place in an immutable hierarchy or to note the lack of available spots for competent individuals, in the United States a readily available cultural option is that one is stuck or one does not get ahead because of one's own doing. As a consequence or corollary, our young respondents were constantly hard on themselves, berating themselves for unproductive moments and monitoring their behavior for slip-ups, deeply concerned about the future they were going to create.

Jon, who discussed the stress he felt because he tended to always wake up late and then hurry to the bus to catch the subway to school, wrote about this berating of self in a direct and self-conscious manner: "When I finally get on the train, I begin punishing myself mentally. In my head, I start disciplining and complaining to myself. I say things along the lines of, 'Damn, Jon! You have to wake up earlier than this, or you're not going to be successful.' To be a successful person is a goal that I strive for. To achieve this goal, I am particularly hard on myself, so I tend to stress over minor things." This working on getting ahead and working on the self made even small pleasures somewhat fraught.

Another respondent depicted her watching and enjoyment of the popular television show *American*



Idol as escapism and a guilty pleasure (note: not a pleasure, a *guilty* pleasure). An excerpt from Abraham's diary shows his self-flagellation as well as his intertwined views of productivity and the future. As he wrote, "I wake up at 1 p.m., and I am frustrated that I could not wake up at a decent hour. Instead of doing something productive such as reading the newspaper or even eating, I slouch in front of the TV and watch garbage. I watch silly shows such as VH1's *The Life of the Rich and Famous*. This show creates a deep longing for the lifestyles of celebrities. This longing leads to an inspiration in which I hope to one day become a wealthy person with many financial options. Later in the day, I write short news pieces for my hip-hop website, so I feel somewhat accomplished and therefore inspired."

If stress was described by the young people as the feeling of being overwhelmed or having a burden, one could easily argue that the social metaphor of creating oneself, and of the freedom to create one's own ladder, also created the burden. It is not easy to carry and create the ladder by oneself, whatever the circumstances. As Jon described in a basketball image in his journal, when the team came from behind to win the game, getting twenty-one points in the final six minutes, it "inspired me that despite any given situation seeming bleak or hopeless, there is always time to reverse my fortunes."

A genre of ads that had a lot of appeal among U.S. respondents resonated strongly with notions of working on the self and self-achievement. These ads were ones in which young people were depicted as talking with or viewing a problematic double of themselves. U.S. ads from the Montana Meth Project, an anti-methamphetamine campaign, used this technique (see montanameth.org). One of these, "Bath tub," showed a young woman in a bathrobe, looking into a bathroom mirror and talking on a cell phone. She says into the mirror and to the other person on the phone that her parents think she is sleeping at their house and that she is just jumping into the shower. She is then shown in the shower, first looking relatively relaxed as the water runs through her hair. We then see her look down and get an exceedingly frightened look, making repeated open-mouthed sounds of terror as she gazes into the water at the bottom of the tub that is becoming tinged with the red flow of blood. She turns toward the back of the tub where she screams loudly as she sees her other self crouched in the corner, face scabbed, scarred and discolored, and shaking her head while saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it."

Interestingly, we had examples of this doubled-self genre from the United Kingdom and New Zealand as well, in these cases addressing

alcohol abuse. With the exception of an ad depicting a woman embarrassing herself at a party, this genre of ads did not seem to resonate well in the United Kingdom. Sometimes the genre was not even understood; for instance, the ad of a N.Z. man talking to his double was dismissed as off the mark because it was not the way friends would talk to one another. It was not understood that he was talking to himself, that he was having an internal dialogue.

In the End: Back to Boredom


In the end, appreciating the way that the focus on self-creation was central in the constitution of emotion led us to see that the boredom expressed by young people in the United States was not nearly as importantly related to a technologically mediated environment as we had first contemplated. Rather, in the U.S. social milieu in which one is seen as responsible for one's own success and one's own experience, to be bored was to be not working on the self — it was a missed opportunity for self-betterment. It was to have failed to take advantage of a potentially productive moment (for which only oneself was deemed rightly to blame). The power of boredom as an emotion was that it involved a failure to be constantly productive in the ongoing creation and re-creation of self. It was related to television perhaps, but not because of TV's stimulation but rather more so for the ways that our U.S. respondents berated themselves for actually watching *American Idol* or other "stupid" shows.

Through this research we also gained an appreciation for the way in which emphasis on emotions as at the heart and definition of personhood. Dramatic exaggeration in the expression of emotion and the idealization of euphoric moments made the experience of boredom akin to an existential death. To be bored was not to be feeling. Boredom was emptiness, an emptiness of personhood.

Notably, the ways in which boredom was thought about, as well as its embedded social corollaries, were different for the young people in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In New Zealand, boredom was not the "existential mini-crisis" (as one of our U.S. young people put it); rather it was a neutral zone, where one was safe from the impact and risks borne by too much "intensity" of feeling. Boredom did not risk undermining the ideal life of

engaged interaction with the situation and land as (too much) anger, sadness or depression might do. Rather, it was a holding station for being ready and able to grab life's next moment. If, for our young New Zealanders, boredom was seen as both a waste of time and potential productivity, it was not a threat to personhood, as it was in the United States. For the young adults in the United Kingdom, in line with an emphasis on the external generation of emotion and life possibilities, boredom was described as a catalyst to try new things and as occurring when one was stuck without anything fun to do or when involved in mundane tasks; self-berating, however, was not a central corollary or consequence.

For us, an understanding of boredom among young people in the United States as integrally tied to the culturally specific emphasis on self-creation, re-creation and self-improvement was much fuller — and, thus, much more generative for clients — than one that viewed the technologically mediated social milieu as the causative agent of boredom. For our New Zealand research partners, the overall analysis also provided them with the means to create more nuanced creative briefs that could take their agency's advertising beyond the "happy and clappy" New Zealand constraints.

Overall, the research also reminded us all that while it might be tempting to think of emotions as universals, rooted in a shared physiology, this would be unfortunate, as such a perspective denies the power of emotional experiences to shape and be shaped by worldviews, values or ideas such as personhood, in an ongoing and dynamic way. Nothing is static. Understanding the cultural matrix benefits designers and R&D by grounding "emotional appeal" in lived practices (versus what might be misleading abstractions). In advertising, thinking about cultural context in the expression of emotions allows for the possibility to no longer be pinned down by the overly simplistic or the overly conventional. 

*(Editor's note: A more complete version of this essay, "Contextualizing Emotion: When Do Boredom, Paranoia and 'Being Strong' Become Emotions?" can be found in *Sunderland and Denny's 2007 book, Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, Left Coast Press, <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=116>.)*

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