

On Boredom

Stimulation Below Optimal Levels

by Jim Duffy, 5/13/97

Recently I gave a brief talk about the basics of Affect Theory, and a keen listener asked about stimulation below optimal levels. At that moment I recalled one of the first things I ever read about Tomkins's theory--the introduction to Affect Theory presented so clearly and succinctly in M.F. Basch's elegant book titled *Understanding Psychotherapy*. (That was really the first thing I read that helped me understand why it is important to distinguish between affect and emotion, too, and just what in the world an affect is.) I recalled that Basch proposed that another affect may exist--boredom. He thought that boredom was an affect resulting from below-optimal levels of stimulation. What opinions/comments do you, Don, Vick, or anyone have about this proposition? I frankly don't know what to think, although I have noticed that in my limited reading so far I have not seen mention of below-optimal levels of stimulation other than Basch's reference to it. And I'm wondering what boredom may be if it's not suboptimal stimulation. I hope it may be possible to explore this idea a bit.

Boredom, distress, and the clarinet

by Don Nathanson, 5/13/97

As many of you know, Mike Basch was one of my closest friends and colleagues. I had the advantage of coming into the study of affect theory after a lifetime of disrespect for the classical psychoanalytic theory of emotion. As I told Silvan the first day we spent together, I had been looking for a workable, inclusive theory of emotion all my life (truly) and when I found his, I stopped looking and devoted my time to forming the links between what each of us had discovered. But Mike was, as he loved to say, a "card carrying psychoanalyst" who was stunned by the beauty of affect theory, even though in many respects he did not really understand it until the last months of his life. Most of you know that when in the early-80s I first contacted him about these strange ideas of mine that became the theory of the empathic wall, he realized that I did not know enough about psychoanalytic theory to converse adequately with the proper audience for my ideas, and he set out a course of study for me so I might learn the language I was later to change.

But it all starts with psychoanalytic theory. Recall first that Freud postulated that the infant is protected by a stimulus barrier, and that in order for something to affect us, it had to get through that barrier. In affect theory, there is no stimulus barrier. Each and every one of the six primary affects is a matter of gradients and steady-state levels. If the ambient noise of someone's system is at level 6 out of 10, then 6 becomes that individual's baseline, and all affects are triggered when gradients and levels take flight from that baseline. You cannot hear the tinkling of a harpsichord in a typhoon because the set point of the system (its ability to sense and discriminate) is higher than that needed to appraise very soft sounds that are essentially drowned out by the loud ones. When the "noise level" drops to 2/10, then we can "pay attention" to the harpsichord; we can do so because in the absence of the overwhelming stimuli of the storm, soft sounds may be assessed on the basis of their gradients and levels.

That's why I like the analogy of a wind instrument, say, the clarinet or the piccolo. Rather than the G and D clefs we're used to on the piano, with every note exactly where we're used to seeing it, the clarinet gets a sheet of music on which the 5 lines (staves) represent places for the registration of a

certain group of notes dictated by the key of the piece. If everything is quiet in the sense of ambient noise, then the most infinitesimal tiny bit of sound will be appraised by the affect system as a trigger for affect simply on the basis of its gradient or density. There can be no such thing as a stimulus too soft to trigger affect---as long as something can be called a stimulus (because it has set off the neurological apparatus of some sensor or other), that stimulus comes in at a gradient or a level and triggers an affect.

It was Mike's good friend and colleague Doug Detrick (Ph.D., San Francisco area, self psychologist, good guy) who came up with the idea that boredom represented the condition in which a potential stimulus is too mild to trigger affect, and that the absence of affect is boredom. Mike put that idea in "Understanding Psychotherapy: The Science Behind the Art," and was prepared to continue it in his final book until he sent me the manuscript for comment. That's when he said "OK. Teach me affect theory." We talked on the phone for 2 hours, after which he understood enough to make the changes in theory he describes in "Doing Brief Psychotherapy." The funniest part of that story is when Mike, whose modesty was so deep a part of his character, ended the conversation with his dry sense of humor at its best. He said "Well, you know more about affect than anyone else in the world. And I know everything else."

What, then, is boredom? It can't be an affect because it doesn't have a specific or unique pattern of facial muscle contraction and relaxation. Most of the time when you look at the face of someone who is bored, you see the downturned lips of distress-anguish. It seems really clear to me that boredom is that special case of distress in which we have been left with our own thoughts (many of which are indeed unwanted) and have no distraction from the outside world that can spirit our concentration/consciousness/attention away. Think also of the Zen master, the guru who spends much of her time in meditation. This individual is so intently focused on the content of her thought that it is unthinkable for her to be bored. Boredom is nothing more than the name we give to the situation in which we are unable to "amuse" ourselves and are stuck with thoughts we've gone over time and again and for which we still have no answer. No optimal gradient to trigger interest-excitement; no faster than optimal gradient to trigger fear-terror; nothing going on at a steady level to trigger anger-rage. Only the steady buzz of our own thoughts humming along at a low level while we hope for something from the outside world to let the spotlight of affect distract us elsewhere.

Great Story, Great Explanation!
by Jim Duffy, 5/13/97

That is sure interesting. Great story and tremendously helpful clarification. You know, I sort of was thinking along those lines--that boredom may be more like distress-anguish inasmuch a most folks are rather easily inclined to say they find boredom rather distressing. That was one whale of a neat posting, Don. Thanks a million.