SYMBOLIC PROJECTIVE TASKS

CULTURAL ANALYSIS GROUP

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Preview

- What is a "symbolic projective task"?
- Why do it?
- How does it work?
- Some examples

Introduction and Overview

- Social psychology gathers information primarily through experiment where respondents are misdirected as to the purpose of the experiment – they are told it is about X when it is really about Y in an attempt to take agency out of the data gathering process.

- Anthropology proceeds largely in the opposite direction, seeking to engage the informant to find social truth through rapport.

- But, what of information that is not consciously processed? Rational economic man may be a normatively compelling vision to some, but is hardly a realistic model of human affairs. ***How can we access what lies below the conscious?***

- Here, we explore a few simple projective tasks emanating from market research (of all places!) that offer a small but potentially interesting window on portions of a group's culture that do not derive from straightforward informant reporting.

- These tasks/techniques are NOT "Projective Tests" such as those originating in personality psychology (e.g., the Rorschach ink blot test and Thematic Apperception Test match individuals' responses to ambiguous stimuli with clinical diagnosed personality types).

- The tasks we are talking about differ from personality assessment tests in two senses:
  - Less time-consuming, less elaborate, and more subjective
  - Focus is on group culture, not the individual

- Symbolic projective techniques are more akin to free listing, representing
  - A kind of *directed* free listing of associations
  - A way of exploring not what a thing "is", but rather its emotional connections.

- In general these projective techniques are best viewed as a supplement to free listing associations rather than as alternative.

- Projective techniques are popular in market research because brand-customer relationships mirror some of the emotional dimensions of generalized exchange (e.g., Mbuti hunter-gatherers with nearby agriculturalists) versus a purely transactional relationship.

- The purpose of most advertising is actually oriented more toward generalized exchange. That is, advertising is not primarily informative, but rather seeks to alter or reinforce the way a brand connects to us.

- Symbolic projection techniques are methods for probing anything an informant has a relation with, usually a brand in market research, but it need not be. The 'target' can be *any entity* with which the informant has more than a purely utilitarian relationship.

- Projective methods fall flat if the relationship is purely functional/utilitarian – e.g., a stapler or a paint brush.

- But, as alluded to later [see POWER COMPANY example], for most of us, the repertoire of purely functional relationships is surprisingly small.

- Many other entities such as an Apple laptop, Galaxy phone, or Tesla car are likely to be freighted with emotion. Projective techniques help unpack that emotion.

- Projective techniques are compatible with anthropological methodology since they play well off of the rapport the Anthropologist frequently develops with an informant.

- That rapport underlies individuals' willingness to go off on short emotional jaunts during an interview, and for some at least, projective tasks contribute to a shared pleasure of discovery inherent in a good interview.

How It Is Done

- The general idea is for informants:
(a) to imaginatively envision a 'target' entity (X) – whether a brand, an organization, or a service – as a different kind of entity (Y), and then
(b) to elaborate that hypothetical vision in as much detail as possible.

- For example, if the specific task was:

"If __X__ were a _person_, what kind of _person_ would it be?"

then, the sort of details one hopes informants might mention include things such as:
  - Male or female
  - Young or old
  - Married or not
  - How are they dressed
  - Personality characteristics, quirks
  - Etc., etc., etc.

○ Generally, it is best to use **several** of these symbolic projective tasks. Each will involve imaginatively transforming – symbolically associating – the 'target' entity (X), but into a different domain (Y). Not only will informants find this less excruciating than pressing for more and more details from a single task, but it also gives informants more latitude to express the latent feelings they have concerning the entity in question.

○ Symbolic Projective Task template:

If   X   were a   Y , what kind of   Y   would it be?

○ Illustrative Domains (Y):
  ● animal
  ● car / vehicle
  ● restaurant / food / beverage
  ● article of clothing – shoe, shirt, a brand of jeans
  ● vacation / trip
  ● celebrity / sports figure / historical figure
  ● piece of music / a painting
  ● 3 places where   X   would fit in
  ● etc. (you are limited only by your imagination)

○ In every case, the payoff is in probing for the **why** – it's not what an association means to you, its what it means to your informants.

○ The key is to find within a specific culture or subpopulation the domains that evoke emotional relationships – not too similar to the 'target' entity itself, but not totally foreign or irrelevant.

○ Two ways to use:
   - Focus on an informant's connection to X
   - Compare or contrast connections with alternative(s), i.e., X versus Y, Z, …

Examples… Introduction

- The data in the following examples were elicited through individual interviews, but it is also possible to use projective techniques in groups.

- Groups are more difficult:
  - Counts and statistics mean very little
  - Free rider problems
  - Cascading consensus

  But, group enthusiasm allows a moderator to determine which projective responses, while not necessarily typical, seem to be socially ratified – that are "infectious" once mentioned.

- Individual interviews:
  - More time consuming and expensive
  - Cleaner – counts speak for themselves
  - Able to explore *why* a particular response in more depth

- Whatever the data collection context, we are looking for patterning in a group's culture, what feels true to most members.

Example 1 - The **SATURN** Brand (at the end of the 20th Century)

○ Saturn was created by General Motors *sui generis* in the early 80's to stave off the invasion of foreign compacts into the American market

○ The following are some results from 54 personal interviews in 3 metro areas in the US – San Francisco CA, Columbus OH, and Miami FL

○ In talking to owners and non-owners projective techniques highlight some of the emotional barriers to Saturn's success, especially with foreign car owners

○ Responses are to the questions:
  - If the Saturn brand were an animal what kind of animal would it be?
  - If the Saturn brand were jeans what kind of jeans would they be?
  - If the Saturn brand were a shoe what kind of shoe would it be?

○ Obviously we are *not* going to ask:
  - If the Saturn brand were a car what kind of car would it be?
  - If the Saturn brand were an machine what kind of machine would it be?

○ Items in **bold** are primary associations

SATURN – Animal Associations

Saturn owners

ANIMALS

dog
- Australian cattle dog (odd, small, sturdy, reliable, hard-working)
- golden retriever (loyal, dependable, trustworthy, smart)
- house pet (not exotic breed, nice)

horse
- horse (reliable, fast but sturdy)
- workhorse (that can gallop)

dolphin (smart, jplayful, free, sleek, beautiful, quick, interesting)

fox (natural, pure, genuine)

gazelle (sleek, fast, nimble)

Foreign car owners

artificial animal
- genetically engineered dog
- computer-generated animal

rabbit (small, soft, harmless)

zebra (exotic)

baboon

turtle (slow and ugly)

dinosaur

SATURN – Jeans & Shoes Associations

Saturn owners

Foreign car owners

JEANS

Wrangler ("bulletproof", sturdy, unpretentious)

Levi's
Lees
(plain, good construction, no edge)
(would never wear, all wrong, not fashion-forward)

SHOES

sneakers (comfortable, not high heels, Keds or Converse not Nike)

Adidas (high quality, popular but not too popular, emerging favorite walking shoe, not upscale)

running shoes (fast, comfortable, versatile both dressy/casual)

loafers (Dexter loafers, middle-of-the-road, not lavish, penny loafers, all-purpose, comfortable)

loafers (reliable, comfortable, never out of style)

Example 2 – Utility Companies in PA and DE

○ Deregulation created competition among what used to be locality-based monopolies, so power companies now strive for identifiable "brand" differentiation. Our study compared two competing power companies. Company 1 is larger, solid, and more established in the area; Company 2 is newer, more innovative, and energetic.

○ Directly asking electrical power customers what is important to them doesn't get very far: **price** and **reliability** are the only truly salient concerns (for gas customers, it's price and safety).

      => interviewing conclusion: just two differentiating variables to consider

○ Symbolic projective results, however, show fairly distinct perceptions of the two competing companies [NEXT SLIDE], and large sample sizes are not needed to begin to see the patterns (*only in one* person's projectives of the dozen or so informants did <u>not</u> change much from Company 1 to Company 2).

      => projective conclusion: even power companies are viewed through
        an emotional lens

○ The picture that emerges is not definitive, but it is ratified by free list associations and in-depth interviewing. Indeed, the relation between free lists and projective techniques is complementary – each informs the other.

UTILITIES – Car, Restaurant, Person Associations

Company #1	**Company #2**

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CAR

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Company #1	**Company #2**
mid-sized sedan/SUV (6)	**mid-sized sedan/SUV (5)**
(comfortable, nothing exceptional, just part of normal life)	(comfortable, nothing exceptional, just part of normal life)
old model American car (3)	**van (3)**
	- minivan (connected to family, community)
(e.g., gas-guzzler, Edsel)	- van (blue collar, hard-working professional)
luxury car (2)	**small and cute (2)**
- Cadillac	- Saturn
- Mercedes	- Neon
	sports car (2)

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RESTAURANT

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Company #1	**Company #2**
middle of road family place (5)	**upscale / trendy (4)**
(e.g., Denny's)	**middle of road family place (3)**
burger joints (2)	(local diner, fast service)
(out of step with the times, not healthy)	

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PERSON

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| **Company #1**	**Company #2**
fat-cat business type (5)	**someone who helps others (3)**
(professional, slightly overweight manager)	
	(there when you need them)
personable (4)	**efficient/gets the job done (2)**
real folk (2)	(engineer, local handyman)
	personable (2)

Example 3 – Credit Unions vs. Banks

○ Credit unions remain a relatively small part of our financial landscape even though they a popular with their customers

○ Here are the projective results from a pilot study of employees from two credit unions in NJ: N = 30

○ Projective exercises are often a productive way to illuminate the inner, subjective, emotional correlates of a symbol by relating that entity to objects in everyday life. With respondents we employed 5 such exercises:

- A. "If a CU were a restaurant, what kind of restaurant would it be?"
- B. "If a CU were a vehicle, what kind of vehicle would it be?"
- C. "If a CU were a animal, what kind of animal would it be?"
- D. "If a CU were a shoe, what kind of shoe would it be?"
- E. "If a CU were a person, what kind of person would it be?"

○ Each elicits its own set of associations, and recurrent associations when taken together, produce a composite picture of the entity

- We did these exercises for both credit unions and banks because banks are the major competitors; therefore differentiating credit unions is a necessary part of their competitive position

  - A credit unions is a financial organization and historically the default meaning of "financial organization" is a kind of bank
  - Even credit union employees often say they "bank" at their credit union
  - Originally credit unions were *created* in the 1800's as an alternative to banks - to serve customers banks ignored or often despised
  - Typically a credit union offers a very similar spectrum of services as a bank

BANKS – Projective Results

impersonal

unfriendly

powerful

formal

elite
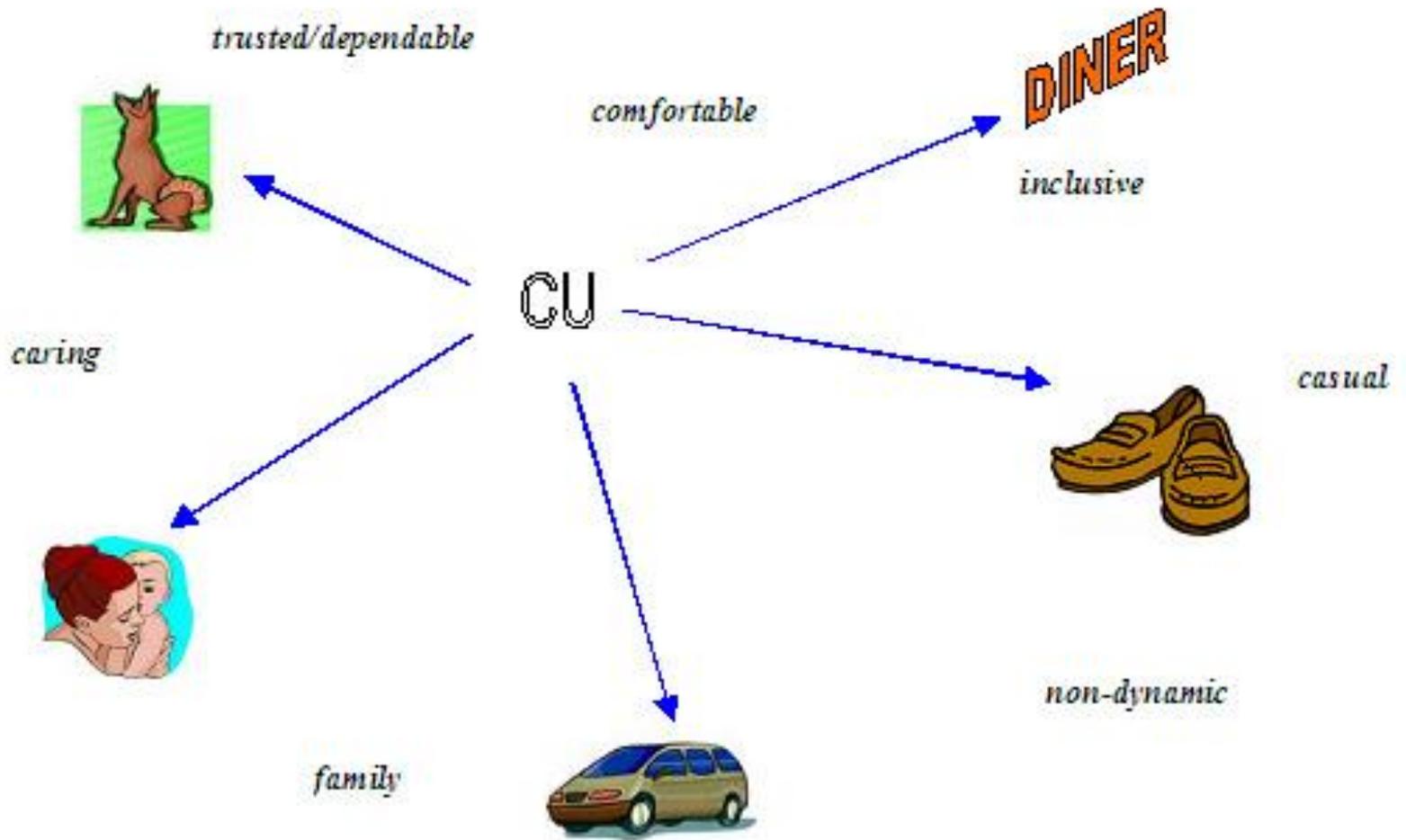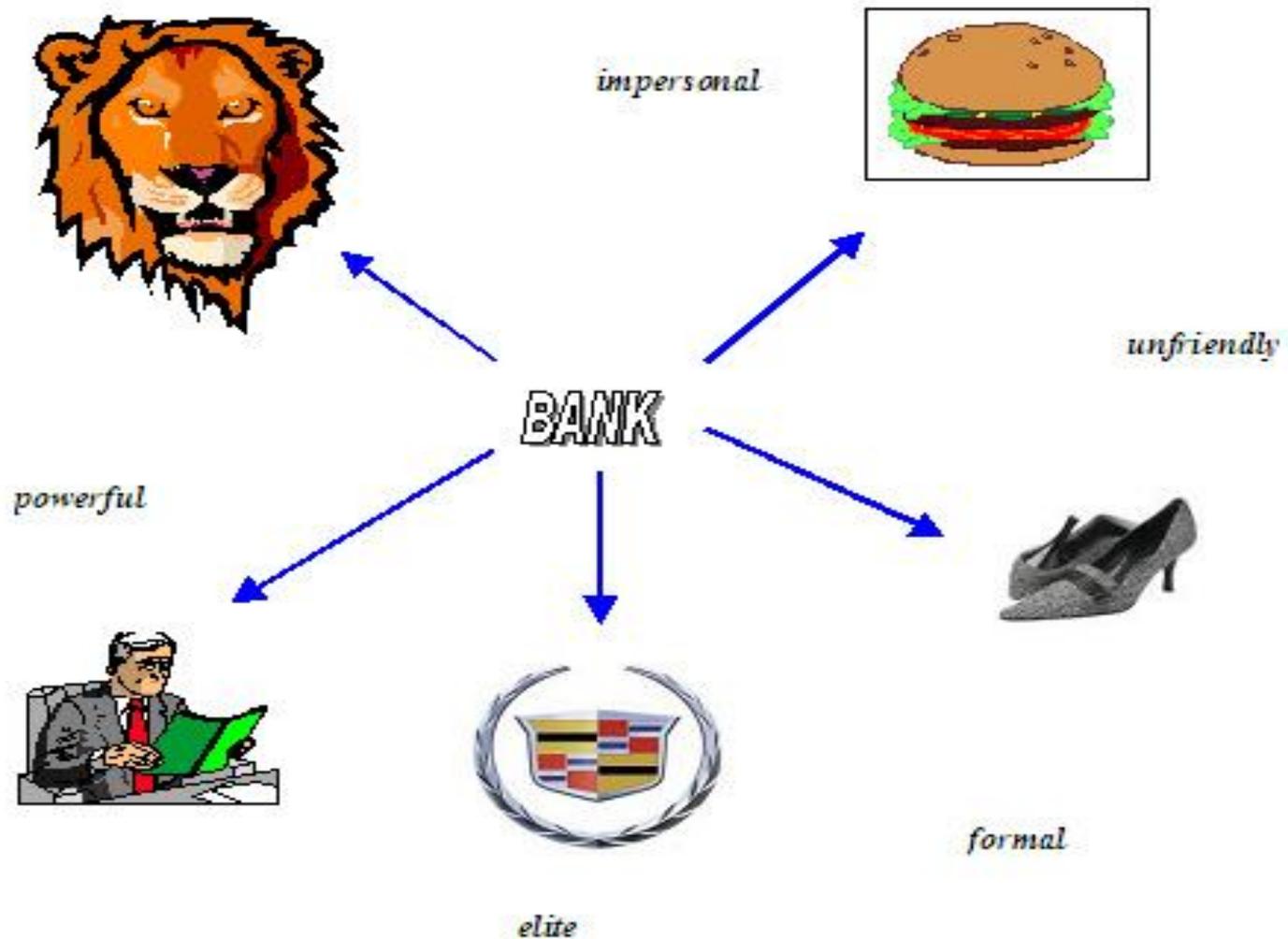
Credit Unions vs. Banks: Discussion

○ Remarkably similar themes reappear for credit unions:
- Caring, family
- Trusted, dependable, safe
- Friendly, personal, inclusive
- Comfortable + casual
- Perhaps a little non-dynamic

○ Likewise for banks, remarkably similar themes over all the exercises:
- Large, powerful, and safe
- Impersonal
- Unfriendly
- Formal
- Elite oriented

○ Very clearly credit unions connect emotionally quite differently than banks

○ In a deeper sense, credit unions are defined, even in employee's minds, in great part in terms of their relation to banks
- They are at once "banks" and "not-banks"
- Functionally similar but contrasting starkly in emotion experience

How Is This Achieved?

Note: See EXCEL file SymbolicProjectives-CU.xlsx

○ List all the responses of the group, and whenever possible include the informants' reasons for responses.

○ Look for recurrent associations. The idiosyncratic is only of interest when it points to a larger pattern.

○ Sort into related ideas/themes.

○ Focus on the responses seen again and again. Do they have many close relatives or very few? Normally it will be the former, in which case focus on the dominate or most common themes; which may include close relatives.

A Few Final Thoughts

- It is far more useful to have informants do <u>several</u> symbolic projective tasks rather than just one.
  - Different environments can reveal different nuances.
  - Perhaps more importantly, those symbolic associations that show up in multiple environments are the ones you are most interested in.

- The process is inherently qualitative.
  - Counts count: like free listing, the more instances of a response, presumably the stronger the association (or at least, the more salient).
  - BUT, like free listing, what exactly are you counting? Counting associations is not like counting marbles. Just what represents an equivalent response is a judgment call.
  - The best solutions are an intuitive best fit to the totality of the data.

Anthropological Uses

○ As more anthropology takes place in societies closer to home, the techniques described here become increasingly applicable in a simple, straightforward manner.

○ In traditional anthropological environments, the concepts remain the same but the tools need to be reshaped - creativity and a certain amount of trial and error is called for.

○ Certainly in either case symbolic projective techniques furnish a fresh look in a wide variety of situations.

○ In almost any society projective methods might be useful for exploring social tension and/or connectance between or within social groups – castes, classes, corporations, neighboring villages, government officials, NGO's, etc.