

An Exploration of the Seattle Freeze Phenomenon

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Abstract

The Seattle Freeze is a social-cultural phenomenon referring to the difficulty of making new friends in Seattle [8]. This study explored how different people think about and experience the Seattle Freeze. In this qualitative study, we found that all participants defined the Seattle Freeze similarly but had different experiences with the phenomenon. Participants' experiences were characterized by: 1) an initial coldness and flakiness when meeting new people, 2) an increased amount of time and effort to build relationships, and 3) a higher than necessary degree of planning for social gatherings. The two participants with the longest residency felt that the Seattle Freeze was a baseless complaint made by recent newcomers. Participants' explanations for the phenomenon included the gloomy weather, Seattle's Scandinavian roots, the nature of the local culture, the recent influx of people, and differences in expectations around friendship.

Introduction

The Seattle Freeze is "a widely held belief that it is especially difficult to make new friends in the city of Seattle, Washington, particularly for transplants from other cities" [8]. Lately, the debate around this infamous phenomenon has intensified. In October 2019 alone, the *Seattle Times* published ten pieces focused on the Seattle Freeze. Still, opinions vary widely on the reasons behind the phenomenon and whether it even exists. Our study aimed to: 1) define the Seattle Freeze, 2) understand what the Seattle Freeze means to individuals in their own contexts, and 3) describe and document the experiences people have or do not have with the phenomenon.

Background

Although the term Seattle Freeze first appeared in a 2005 *Seattle Times* article describing the "polite but distant" nature of the city's residents [9], the phenomenon has been documented for much longer. A 1946 *Seattle Daily Times* article noted that "newcomers do not always find us altogether perfect; that we sometimes are neglectful of the stranger in our midst; that we seem unduly preoccupied with our own local concerns" [3].

There are mentions of the Freeze from academia, but there do not appear to be any large scale studies. A 2008 *Perspectives on Psychological Science* study found that Washington residents ranked 48th in extroverted behaviors [7]. Dr. Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist from the University of Washington, believes the Freeze predates the tech industry growth Seattle has seen in recent times and can be attributed more to the city's Scandinavian roots as a timber and fishing town [6]. A California State University paper came to this same conclusion [10] and this is also echoed in opinion pieces in the *Seattle Times* [5].

Most references come from the media, and they all seem to conclude that the Seattle Freeze is a real thing. A 2018 *Thrillist* article describes the Freeze as a "municipal yin-yang" and "one of the two opposing forces that drive this promising, frustrating city" [11]. In 2017, the *Seattle Met* reported that out of fifty metropolitan areas, Seattle ranked 37th in "frequency with which neighbors do favors for one another" and 48th in "frequency with which they talk to one another" [4]. A 2019 *Seattle Times* article reported that 49% of those surveyed did not want to interact with people they do not already know [2].

Still, academic research on the Seattle Freeze phenomenon is relatively light for what is reported on in the news media as being a common experience among Seattleites. This study looks to add to the existing limited body of research to better understand how different people experience the Seattle Freeze.

What is known	What this study adds
The Seattle Freeze is “a widely held belief that it is especially difficult to make new friends in the city of Seattle, WA, particularly for transplants from other cities” [8].	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores the reasons behind why people think the Seattle Freeze does or does not exist and the context behind their opinions. • Addresses initial social interactions, specific behaviors that may perpetuate the phenomenon, issues around friendship and community building and how these have affected new relationships in Seattle.

Table 1: What is known about the Seattle Freeze vs what our study adds

Methods

Recruitment

We recruited a convenience sample by sending out an online screener survey to our networks. The screener provided information about the study and the time required to participate, and asked participants to provide their contact information, the length of time they had lived in Seattle, and their availability to meet. Six respondents were able to commit to our study date. The length of Seattle residency of each participant is captured in Table 2.

Participant	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Length of residency	33 years	10 years	45 years	41 years	5 years	2.5 years

Table 2: Participants’ length of residency in Seattle

Methodology

We decided that the best methodology for our study is phenomenology, a qualitative research method which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals or a group in the context of a specific phenomenon [1]. This was a perfect match for our purposes because ultimately we were interested in the experiences of people with the Seattle Freeze phenomenon.

Method

We used multiple methods, including selfie videos, individual and group interviews, and an interactive activity. We did our study with all six participants during a three hour session on November 10th, 2019 in a classroom at the University of Washington. One researcher served as the moderator for the study.

In the first part of the study, we split the six participants into two groups. The first group of participants was asked to find a place outside of the session room where they were most comfortable, and record their responses to two questions in a selfie video of two minutes or less (Appendix, Figure 1). They then emailed their videos to one research group member who saved them in a private team Google Drive. One participant (P1) was not comfortable recording a selfie video, so these questions were included in his one-on-one interview.

While the first group was recording their videos, each member of the second group was paired with a researcher for a short one-on-one interview. Data was collected through detailed written notes and audio recordings were captured using the researchers’ phones. The interviews took place in opposite corners of the room to keep the

interviews as private as possible in the session space. The first group and the second group then swapped places, so that selfie videos and one-on-one interviews could be captured from all participants.

Following a short break, participants were put into three groups of two based on who was sitting closest to them. The moderator then explained that the next activity would be to create a newcomer's guide to Seattle in whatever form they chose (see Appendix, Figures 2-3). Each pair worked for 30 minutes and then presented their work to the group. Questions were allowed during presentations (Figures 4-6).

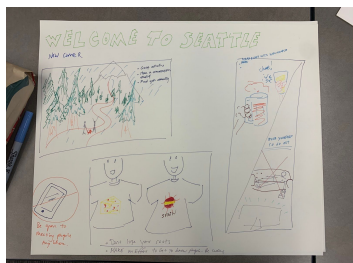


Figure 4: Pair 1 activity

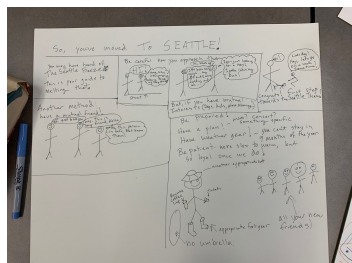


Figure 5: Pair 2 activity



Figure 6: Pair 3 activity

After presentations, participants had another break. They then came together for a group interview to reflect on their work and to discuss a few remaining questions posed by the moderator (Figure 7).

All audio and video data was saved on a private shared drive and removed from local storage on recording devices. To organize our data, we used thematic analysis and looked for common themes in participant experiences. Using a Miro board, we coded predominant themes in both emergent and in vivo style and noted outliers.



Figure 7: Group interview session

We then organized the codes into overarching themes, which were captured in a Miro board (Appendix, Figure 8) and discussed in our findings.

Findings

Experience Themes

We found that participants' experiences varied depending on the level of social interaction, but as relationships moved from casual interactions with strangers to close friendships, new themes arose contributing to the effect of the Seattle Freeze.

Coldness, Introversion, and Flakiness

The first barrier reported by participants was a general coldness from strangers in casual social interactions. A common theme emerged around what could be described as unfriendliness. While not necessarily rude, interactions were reported to lack any real warmth. This is consistent with previous reports on the Freeze by news

publications [2][3]. One participant described that when meeting people, “their first reaction is always cold” (P6). This was consistent with other participants’ experiences as well. One participant described this as a barrier to forming relationships with others: “I kept finding that I would remember people from different shifts that I was on, but they never seemed to remember me” (P4).

Participants also described a shyness when interacting with strangers, even in forced interactions with baristas or cashiers that are otherwise commonplace—“People from Seattle I think are kind of shy too, so that makes harder the interaction [sic] with them. Their personality is like really shy” (P6). Even once past the initial coldness with strangers, this shyness led to awkward social interactions—“here, I find that those interactions can be so awkward, and they don’t need to be” (P5).

Moving beyond initial interactions, the next barrier participants reported was flakiness when attempting to make plans—“‘Hey, let’s go grab a coffee,’ and then you don’t. ‘Hey, we should hang out,’ and then you don’t” (P3). This was characterized by a general noncommittal attitude, making it difficult to establish friendships—“That first interaction is way easier, but after that it’s just like they have a barrier [gestures to a wall] and you cannot [sic]” (P6).

Time & Effort

A consensus was reached that time and effort were required from both newcomers and longtime residents to build new relationships, but we did observe discrepancies in how our participants defined those concepts. Participants reflected on experiences they have had with relationships made here, and one described it as a “slow process” (P6). Other participants concurred. “When you meet a new group of people, they have to see you several times before they’re willing to interact more” (P2). Another shared a perspective regarding comfort with newcomers: “I think a lot of it is about patience and just like making yourself be seen...just being around and being seen is a huge portion of it because people become comfortable” (P1).

On the other hand, P3, a lifetime Seattle resident suggested, “I would say that it [Seattle Freeze] does exist, but I think that we’re also primarily a city of people who didn’t grow up here and don’t have a community here and are trying to find a community, and that’s really hard to find and isn’t going to happen with everybody, and it takes time and patience, and a couple of cups of coffee aren’t [sic] going to create that community for you. And, real friendship takes time and effort.”

Over-Planning

Once they got past the initial coldness and made friends, a few of the newcomers to Seattle were surprised at the level of formal planning that went into hanging out with those friends. They were accustomed to casual gatherings and spontaneity with friends in other cities, but in Seattle, hanging out with friends meant calendared events with expectations of invitations and RSVPs. One participant was surprised when he suggested getting coffee with a friend, and she sent him a google calendar invite for a 45 minute appointment. Another participant described how getting together with Seattle friends is always an event: “We’re watching this movie. You’ll bring some beer. You’ll bring some appetizers. You’ll come here. And half of you will cancel” (P2).

Explanation Themes

In addition to themes we identified in our participants’ experiences, we identified a set of themes in their explanations of why they believe the Seattle Freeze exists or does not exist.

Weather

The most common explanation offered up by participants was the gloomy weather. Raincoats and multiple layers were cited as a barrier to greeting people outdoors. Two participants specifically described keeping a heads-down posture and using low hat brims to keep their eyeglasses free of rain and fog when walking outdoors, resulting in inadvertently avoiding eye contact. Rain also led to worries about being uncomfortably “trapped” indoors with acquaintances (P2). Several participants agreed that Seattle is “a different city” (P6) in the summer, including one participant who suggested that May or June would be the best time to move in order to meet people. Some participants disagreed that bad winters were a cause, asserting instead that winters here are *not bad enough*. In harsher climates, they felt more connected to their neighbors and community due to a shared survival experience. Seattle was described as not sunny enough for casual or spontaneous outdoor socializing, yet not frozen enough to bond over—rather, it appears to be just dreary enough to isolate people and discourage social interaction.

Scandinavian Heritage

Several participants recalled comparisons between the social cultures of Seattle and Scandinavian countries that have occurred in local media and conversations in recent years. Some locals questioned the validity of this explanation, because Scandinavian immigrants do not comprise a majority of the city’s residents in the present day (P4). However, another participant who had spent time in Scandinavia insisted that the comparisons are valid—“[I’ve been in] Scandinavia and it’s exactly the same thing... exactly the same feeling” (P6).

It’s Just the Social Culture Here

Some participants described the Seattle Freeze as just part of the culture of the city. “There’s kind of just this sort of acceptance that that’s how you’re supposed to behave... [It’s almost like] a privacy you’re not supposed to pierce” (P2). They discussed social norms and values of respecting privacy, getting to know people slowly, and not forcing conversation or interaction. “At some point I realized that I was forcing a conversation that they don’t want to have... I think I was too much for them” (P6). Long-term and lifetime Seattleite participants described feeling suspicious or unsettled when their accepted norms/values weren’t recognized by newcomers.

Influx of People

Participants did not agree about which population was ultimately responsible for the Seattle Freeze. Some said it was because of the large numbers of newcomers to the area: “all these people coming in who haven’t found their community yet, and they have some walls up, too” (P3). Some people thought it was perpetuated by long term Seattleites. Others surmised that it was the result of the combination of both of those groups.

Differences in Expectations of Friendship

One theme that several participants noted was different expectations for friendship across generations. One participant, a five-year resident in his thirties, described a lack of precedent for how to make new friends compared to clearer expectations in his parents’ generation (P5). He also mentioned the influence of phones leading to more isolation and loneliness. Another participant who has lived in Seattle for more than 40 years noted that her needs might be different from those of other participants—“I don’t like to socialize, I don’t go to parties... so my needs are different... but I do have friends and I do make friends still.” (P4).

Baseless Complaint

Two participants with the longest residency felt that the Seattle Freeze was an unfair or exaggerated phenomenon—a baseless complaint made by non-Seattleites. They cited unrealistic expectations and an unreasonable sense of entitlement held by newcomers, or as one participant put it, a perceived “assumption...

that everyone's automatically going to be best friends forever" (P3). P4, a 40-year resident and self-described introvert, said she had no problems meeting people and did not understand why others found it difficult. These participants seemed to think that their standard of acceptable social interaction/warmth between strangers was universal, and questioned whether social integration struggles were actually unique to Seattle at all. They also noted that the burden of integrating into the city was the responsibility of newcomers.

Limitations

The experiences of our six participants cannot be generalized for all newcomers to Seattle or long-term and lifetime residents. One limitation is that we did not get to *observe* anyone experiencing the Seattle Freeze, though this would be difficult without a longer-term study. As such, our data was limited to the opinions and self-described experiences of our participants. Our study space posed a logistical limitation. We reserved one classroom which had sufficient space for the group interview and interactive activity, but we were unable to offer our participants completely private one-on-one interviews. Three interviews took place in opposite corners of the room, which led to a noisier environment. This could have caused some participants to hold back more than they might have in a more intimate space.

Discussion

Ultimately, our study revealed that the Seattle Freeze is a polarizing and deeply complex issue. Participants generally described their experiences as having to move past a series of barriers on the path towards meaningful friendships. Several participants described the fluidity and dissonance of finding themselves on both sides of the phenomenon. "Rarely is it personal... it's just a matter of my comfort zone. So I've perpetuated it and have experienced the other side of that" (P1). Three participants specifically described how Seattle changed them, saying that they have found themselves "trying to be cold" (P6), needing to "minimize" themselves (P5), or realizing they are now "behaving in that way, and it's not like it's bad" (P2). These participants had mixed feelings about their assimilation. They felt they needed to adapt to local social norms, but also expressed dismay about "losing" or suppressing parts of their personalities or home cultures.

The complexity of the phenomenon was highlighted by dialogue between participants of differing opinions, particularly when they asked clarifying questions about each other's experiences and noted the differences between their baseline assumptions. Interestingly, one participant's viewpoint evolved during the session after hearing others' experiences; she was initially skeptical of the phenomenon, but eventually realized she had also experienced it personally, and questioned her previous incredulity. Just like the city that spawned it, the Seattle Freeze is not black and white, but instead exists in many shades of grey.

Future Implications

Based on the depth of complexity and variety of experiences our six participants had with the Seattle Freeze, we caution against any superficial approaches to studying this phenomenon in the future. Our findings indicate that there is much more to learn about the Seattle Freeze than just whether people believe it exists or not. It is also more complex than simple differences of opinion between people from Seattle and recent transplants. We found that there are sometimes surprisingly strong opinions and a deep lack of understanding between those Seattleites who have experienced it and those who have not, and we encourage more compassion and mutual communication between those whose opinions differ on the matter. We also recommend that more research be done with people who are experiencing the phenomenon out in the field.

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Appendix

Selfie Video Questions

- “What words or phrases come to mind when you hear *Seattle Freeze*?”
- “Why do you think the Seattle Freeze exists, if it exists?”

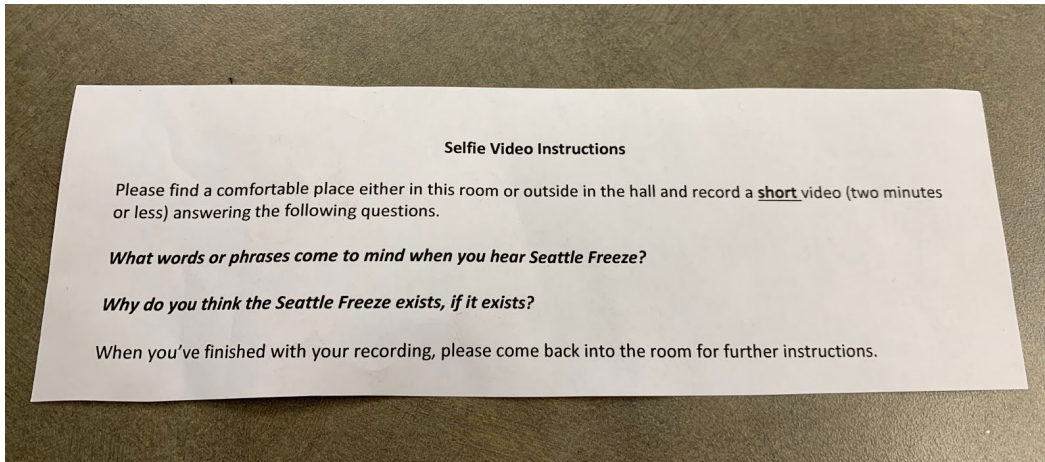


Figure 1: Self video instructions provided to each participant.

One-on-One Interview Questions

- “What does “Seattle Freeze” mean to you?”
- “Have you experienced the Seattle Freeze? If so, when and how?”

Interactive Activity

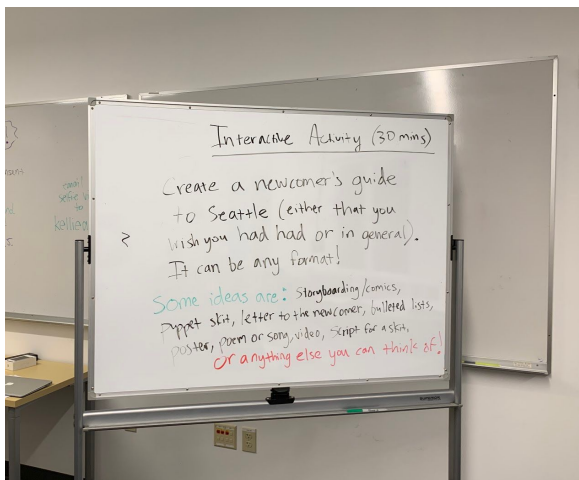


Figure 2: Direction provided to participants for interactive activity.



Figure 3: Material options for interactive activity.

Group Interview Questions

- “What does the Seattle Freeze mean to you?”
- “How many of you have experienced the Seattle Freeze? (Show of hands.) For those of you who have experienced it, can you give an example of an interaction you had that you attribute to the Seattle Freeze or how you have perpetuated it?”
- “Why do you think the Seattle Freeze exists, if you do think it exists?”



Figure 8: Coded Miro board using one color per participant and high level themes captured in blue.

Addendum: Author Contributions

This was a collaborative team project. However, each author also made unique individual contributions which are detailed below.

Jessie Biondo: For individual work, I helped by managing our shared google drive, creating files for each, with requirements, so we could contribute to assignments individually when each of us had time before coming together to finalize as a group. I reached out to potential participants during the recruitment process and was able to secure one participant. For our study session, I picked up coffee/breakfast prior to the study, and I was an interviewer/notetaker during the one-on-one and group interviews. During data analysis, using my codes, I created a Miro board for our team to collaborate on and contribute to. For our presentation, I created the initial draft with study details - question, sample, method, and findings - (we finalized as group), and I introduced our team and topic. For the paper, I wrote the methods, experience: time and effort, limitations, “what is known” and appendix sections.

Kellie Dunn: My contributions to documentation included collaborative work on the consent form, research plan, and data collection guide. For the data collection session, I recruited four of our six participants. I also took on several logistical tasks for the session: reserving the classroom; direct communication with participants about timing and directions; selecting, reserving, picking up, testing, and operating the recording equipment; and uploading all recording files to our shared drive. In the analysis phase of the project, I did some thorough coding, with timestamped transcription of relevant quotes from the recordings. Finally, my original contributions to this paper included the Discussion section, and several themes in the Findings section, particularly Over Planning, Weather, and Baseless Complaint, with close collaboration with Evelyn on three of the remaining explanation themes.

Dave Grochocki: I helped draft much of the content for our consent form and research paper outline. I also made significant contributions to the research plan, research paper, and final presentation. I had a business trip mid-quarter, and we decided it was better to optimize for running the study earlier, but I was able to review the recordings afterwards. For the paper, I was responsible for drafting content for the background section and primary experience theme around coldness, introversion, and flakiness. I edited the initial draft substantially to fit the assignment requirements and unified different writing styles and formatting to fit one voice while ensuring core meaning of each section was preserved. For the presentation, I completed the findings section, including capturing the appropriate audio recordings.

Evelyn Kalafus-Mastenbrook: My unique contributions included leading the three hour data collection session and moderating the group interview, doing two of the six one-on-one participant interviews, making the participant screener we sent out via Google Forms, recruiting one of the participants, helping to coordinate some of the group meetings, returning the video equipment after its use, writing and printing out the participant instructions for the selfie interviews, and writing and presenting the last part (impact and application) of our final presentation. For the final paper, I wrote the abstract, introduction, and future implications, and collaborated with Kellie on three of the explanation themes (Scandinavian Heritage, It’s Just the Social Culture, and Differences in Expectations of Friendship).