

# *The phenomenon of boredom*

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Boredom remains a poorly understood phenomenon despite its evident association with dysfunctional behavior and mental health problems. However, little research has been devoted to the topic, and the bulk of studies have almost exclusively been quantitative in design. For this reason, a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study was carried out, during which ten participants were asked for their accounts of the experience of boredom. These people were sampled from the general population. The aims of the study were to find out more about the antecedents to boredom, the experience itself, any stages in its development, and methods used to deal with it.

Findings indicated that boredom is an extremely unpleasant and distressing experience. Situations giving rise to the sensation varied between specific external factors, to a general propensity to boredom proneness, although, according to the participants of the study, these could change throughout their lifetime. Feelings comprising the experience of boredom were almost consistently those of restlessness combined with lethargy. No stages in the development of the experience were identified. Strategies used to overcome the problem varied greatly, but generally involved trying to find interesting things to do. These strategies tended to be unsuccessful.

Traditional methods of dealing with boredom have focused on increasing stimulation and choice in the environment. The authors propose that a more effective strategy might be to focus more on internal causes of boredom, such as an inability to sustain attention, although further research is required to support this interpretation of the data. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2006; 3: 193–211

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## The phenomenon of boredom

It is a disturbing aspect of our western culture that, whilst we are presented with an unprecedented range of opportunities to satisfy our desires, people now appear to be more susceptible to boredom than ever before (Svendsen, 2005). The phenomenon of boredom is not well understood, in spite of a growing body of literature on the subject (Fisher, 1993; Harris, 2000; Smith, 1981; Vodanovich, 2003). A history of boredom, however, reveals that it may not be as new as is generally supposed, since ideas relating to the topic go back at least as far as the ancient Greeks. Throughout the ages, philosophers, novelists and poets have expounded on the subject, and more recently, scientists have tried to analyse it.

Examination of research undertaken reveals that the vast majority of studies have been either of experimental or correlational design, using psychometric measures, such as the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), to establish the links between a tendency to experience boredom and other measurable factors. This research suggests that boredom is associated with a diverse range of undesirable personality traits and dysfunctional behaviour, and is therefore worthy of serious consideration (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Fisher, 1993; Vodanovich, 2003). There is, however, still no accepted definition of boredom, no consensus on the antecedents of boredom, nor any convincing strategy suggested to deal with the problem (Martin, 2002).

## A history of boredom in literature

It is impossible to know how much people have been affected by boredom throughout time, as measurements of the experience

have only been attempted fairly recently, and many of these are of dubious validity, since there is still no consensus on the definition of boredom (Vodanovich, 2003). However, the following is a brief overview of the phenomenon as presented in literature from the arts rather than from science.

Boredom was a subject which concerned the ancient Greeks, indeed, Socrates suffered the indignity of being criticized by some for repetition and monotony (Kuhn, 1976). The word 'acedia' was used at this time, which is closer to what we would describe as tedium. Plato defended his protagonist by asserting the need for consistency. He compared the constancy of the stars with man's own erratic and disorderly thoughts, and believed that people should aspire to the regularity of the heavenly bodies (Healy, 1984). The early Christians also aspired to this same ideal, with St Thomas Aquinas writing of the soul entering a state of uniformity (Kuhn, 1976).

With the advent of Christianity, what we would describe as boredom rapidly rose in status to becoming possibly the most important capital sin. Many different words were used to represent conditions similar to boredom, such as 'dryness of the soul', 'inexplicable sorrow', 'complete paralysis of the will', and 'sloth'. However, the word that easily dominated the others was acedia, derived from the Greek word for tedium. The reason for this elevation of acedia to primary sin was that, once vanquished, the virtue which would replace it was joy, and when in this state, the individual would be immune to all other sins (Kuhn, 1976). Thus, boredom appears to have had a very high profile in the early middle ages in Europe.

For some reason, the word acedie was dropped from usage in the English language from the fourteenth century onwards,

although it was still used in renaissance Italy (Healy, 1984). In all the works of Shakespeare, there is not one use of the word *acedie*, 'ennui', or boredom itself, which did not appear until the eighteenth century. However, it is difficult to imagine that boredom was not experienced in the UK between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, although no single word seems to have been found to express the condition. Certainly in France, *ennui* derived from the Latin 'enodiare', or, hatred of life itself, was used liberally from the twelfth century onwards, and even infiltrated England towards the end of the seventeenth century (Spacks, 1995).

From the seventeenth century onwards, European poets and commentators devoted some of their most anguished lines to the subject of boredom. John Donne wrote of 'the heavy clouds of melancholy' to describe what he termed 'the lethargies'. At the same time in France, Pascal described *ennui* as 'the state that defines man's structure' (Healy, 1984). From this time on, *ennui* was to be a major theme in French literature, emerging from what was a sin in the middle ages, to being what was virtually a signal of sophistication in the elite of society. La Rouchfoucauld described himself as a 'connoisseur of boredom', spending most of his time at the court of Versailles in a state of *ennui*. Boredom as a literary theme continued throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Voltaire in 1764 claiming that *ennui* was 'the worst of all conditions' (Kuhn, 1976: 151).

The English word 'boredom' first appeared in print in 1766. It is not known how this word came into usage with its current meaning, although there are several possibilities, one being that it is derived from the past tense of the verb 'to bear' (Healy, 1984).

The century when boredom possibly reached its zenith as a focus for literary contemplation was the nineteenth. The list of writers who grappled with the subject is impressive; the following is only a sample: Baudelaire, Byron, Durkheim, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chateaubriand, Flaubert, and Verlaine. A taste of their opinions on boredom can be sampled from Kierkegaard, who wrote 'Boredom is the root of all evil' (Kierkegaard, *Either/or*, 281, cited in Healy, 1984: 25).

As Europe entered the next century, boredom was to capture the imagination of the existentialists who had rejected God, and now found that life had become meaningless. Albert Camus and Franz Kafka illustrated their utter indifference to life through their characters who walked through a world which was empty of meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre spoke of the 'nausea of *ennui*', describing it as a 'leprosy of the soul' (Kuhn, 1976).

In recent times, it has been suggested that boredom may arise more from an overload of stimulation rather than from monotony as it did in ancient times. Modern philosophers view boredom as inevitable in a world where we are surrounded by trivia. According to Svendsen (2005), boredom is growing and there is no cure. This pessimistic analysis of boredom is shared by Klapp (1986), who blames the apparent rise in boredom on life in the 'information society'.

## Research literature

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have brought a new type of literature to attend to the subject of boredom, that of science. Many writers comment on the surprising paucity of research into the sub-

ject of boredom, considering the impact it seems to have both on individuals and on the wellbeing of our society (Barbalet, 1999; Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Fisher, 1993; Persaud, 2001; Smith, 1981; Svendsen, 2005; Vodanovich, 2003). Whereas references to boredom seem to appear frequently in the popular press, studies of boredom are relatively few, although there has been a gradual increase in the past few decades (Vodanovich, 2003).

Research literature relating to boredom appears to be both limited and diverse. There does not appear to be an accepted definition of boredom or a consensus on the causes, and hardly any attention is given to ways of overcoming the problem. Areas covered by this literature are wide-ranging, and no particular aspect has received sustained attention. The main consensus seems to be that boredom is a complex phenomenon (Caldwell *et al.*, 1999). Aspects of boredom included in research literature include studies relating to the nature of the phenomenon, and its antecedents, but by far the greatest number of studies associate boredom proneness with a wide range of dysfunctional personality traits and behavior. A noticeable gap in research literature is any evidence of ways to overcome boredom.

Definitions of boredom are somewhat conflicting (Vodanovich, 2003). Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993: 3) have defined boredom as 'a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction, which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating situation', whereas for Barbalet (1999) boredom is a state of high arousal: 'Boredom, in its irritability and restlessness... is not a feeling of acceptance of or resignation towards a state of indifference'. Other sources propose that there is an optimal level of arousal, above or below which boredom may be experienced,

and that this occurs when the individual is fully attending to a stimulus (Leary *et al.*, 1986).

Neither has it been established if boredom is an emotion, a state, or a trait. If emotions are perceived as bodily responses and actions (Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989), then boredom could be labeled as such with its accompanying yawns and fidgeting. Many studies have found boredom proneness associated with certain personality types, such as neuroticism and extraversion (Vodanovich, 2003). Most authors describe boredom as a state, and boredom proneness as a trait (Sundberg *et al.*, 1991; Vodanovich and Kass, 1990; Vodanovich and Rupp, 1999).

It is also unclear what processes lead to boredom. Early studies indicated that boredom was caused by low external stimulation, such as monotonous work (O'Hanlon, 1981). A number of studies have examined the high levels of boredom experienced by people who have jobs that require sustained vigilance, such as air traffic controllers. They have found that this type of work is perceived as being excruciatingly dull, and requires a high cognitive workload (Charlton and Hertz, 1989; Hitchcock *et al.*, 1999). There is also some evidence that when people are compelled or coerced to do something that they do not enjoy, they are more likely to experience boredom (Caldwell *et al.*, 1999; Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Shaw *et al.*, 1996; Troutwine and O'Neal, 1981).

There is more evidence which suggests that subjective factors lead to the experience of boredom. These include the perception of monotony (Perkins and Hill, 1985; Watt, 1994), the perceived level of skill and challenge in relation to the task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), the self-perception of attention (Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989) and

spirituality (MacDonald and Holland, 2002). Other studies have suggested that boredom may be associated with cognitive processes, such as inattention (Ahmed, 1990; Hamilton *et al.*, 1984), homogenous construing (Polly *et al.*, 1993), and self-awareness (Seib and Vodanovich, 1998).

The majority of studies relating to the condition have found correlations between the scores on boredom rating scales and low motivation, negative emotions, mental illness, certain personality types, styles of cognitive function and patterns of behaviour. Boredom proneness correlates strongly with depression (Ahmed, 1990; Cosgrave *et al.*, 2000; Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich, 2003), and also with negative affect, including hostility and aggression (Gordon, 1997; Sommers and Vodanovich, 2000). Boredom susceptibility has also been related to a range of dysfunctional behaviours, including sleep disorder, procrastination, drug abuse, cigarette smoking, gambling, drunk driving, high frequencies of sexual activity, deviant behaviour in school, and criminality (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991; Kass, 2003; Tolor, 1989; Vodanovich, 2003; Vodanovich and Rupp, 1999).

There are some major limitations with the existing body of quantitative research into boredom. The first is that these studies rely on tools that have not been developed from any coherent theory, and this could be seen to compromise their validity (Vodanovich, 2003). Second, the bulk of research into boredom has relied on student samples rather than the general population. Third, experimental designs lack ecological validity, and cannot replicate the richness of situations that people encounter as they go through life.

Only a very small minority of studies were qualitative in design (Bargdill, 2000;

Gabriel, 1988), and these were only described very briefly. The outcome of these studies seems to have been compromised by the preconceived standpoints from which the authors analysed their data. The present study used interpretive phenomenology to investigate how a range of people experienced boredom. The aims were to:

- 1) Identify any antecedents to boredom;
- 2) Investigate the subjective experience of boredom;
- 3) Identify any stages of boredom;
- 4) Identify any coping strategies used to combat boredom.

### **Interpretive phenomenology as a method to study boredom**

It has been argued that, due to its holistic perspective, phenomenology is the most appropriate method of enquiry for those who wish to investigate aspects of the lived experience (Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). There are, however, different branches of phenomenology, which depend upon the researcher's ontological perspective. Edmund Husserl is usually acknowledged as the initiator of phenomenology, although he developed his ideas from his mentor Brentano. It was Brentano who first identified the concept of intentionality, which acknowledges that humans are in possession of a conscious mind which attributes meanings to the world around them. This was in contrast to logical positivism, which holds that all knowledge is derived from the senses, and supports the methods of observation and experiment in scientific enquiry (Leonard, 1994).

Husserl's contribution was in his concepts of phenomenological intuiting and reduction (Morse, 1994). Phenomenological

reduction, or epoché, is the process of bracketing out the researcher's own attitudes, beliefs and prejudices by first becoming aware of them, and then removing their influence from the description of the phenomenon. It was Martin Heidegger, one of Husserl's students, who shifted attention from the epistemological argument between objectivism and relativism to the ontological problem of what it is to be human (Leonard, 1994). This has had a profound impact on current debates about methodology, as it can be argued that epistemological and ontological issues are inextricably linked in studies of humans.

Heidegger criticized empirical phenomenologists for ignoring the issue of intentionality, which posits that all humans, including researchers, construct their own personal perspectives (Leonard, 1994). Constructivists study the multiple realities which people hold, and the notion of an objective 'fact' has no meaning (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). In addition, the concept of life world, or 'dasein', developed by Heidegger, and used by social scientists, such as VanMaanen, includes consideration of the culture and time into which the individual is born (VanMaanen, 1990). This is another departure from the empirical phenomenologists.

Interpretive phenomenologists acknowledge that the researcher will bring his/her own constructs to the research process, despite attempts to limit this. The process of reduction, unfortunately, cannot produce a clean, objective account of the data, as the process of reduction in itself will inevitably be a construct. Some interpretive phenomenologists not only acknowledge this revelation, but embrace it, as it brings a fresh openness and honesty to the research process (Anderson, 1991; Morse, 1994).

The task for the qualitative researcher is not easy. Reality is 'contradictory, illogical and incoherent, therefore the task is to somehow 'smooth out' these contradictions' (Anderson, 1991; Morse, 1994: 1). Obviously, this process is open to misinterpretation as assumptions are made about the lived experiences of other people. Holliday (2002) recommends that, for the researcher, even the most familiar of scenarios should be seen as strange, and the people in it mysterious. However, in order for the outcomes of qualitative research to be valued, the strategies used must be transparent and open to scrutiny.

## Rigor

Qualitative research has been criticized by the scientific community for lacking rigor, as it cannot use the positivist criteria of validity and reliability. Some qualitative researchers share this concern (Morse, 1994; Sparkes, 2001). Validity is the extent to which the findings represent a true representation of the data, whereas the interpretivist-constructivist position holds that an objective reality of human experience does not exist. It openly admits that the final interpretation of the data is one reality which was perceived by the author in a particular time and place. It is, therefore, impossible to be certain of the reliability of the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

A tension exists for constructivist researchers between the freedom to interpret, and the need to avoid 'methodological anarchy', which could compromise the value of the findings (Silverman, 2000). For this reason, Guba (1989) proposed that although the positivist criteria of validity and reliability cannot be applied to constructivist research, it is necessary to

develop and use mechanisms which will strive to ensure the 'truth value' of the study. Guba (1989) proposes alternative means of ensuring the rigor, or trustworthiness of qualitative research, namely through the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These standards are based on the positivist criteria of validity and reliability, and have been criticized in some quarters for this (Sparkes, 2001). However, earlier phenomenological studies of boredom found by the author did not appear to strive for accountability in terms of rigor, and this was considered to compromise their value.

The present study attempted to incorporate some of the Guba (1989) measures of trustworthiness. Bias and subjectivity are important issues, and several methods were used to minimize their impact on the interpretation. Regarding credibility, a field journal was kept by the primary researcher from the inception of the project through to the present time. In particular, she recorded her own experiences of the interviews, and her reactions to the people she was interviewing.

All participants were interviewed twice, the purpose of the second encounter was to check that ongoing interpretations were shared between researcher and interviewee as far as was possible. Prolonged engagement in the field with persistent observation is recommended for the credibility of the findings, however, this did not occur. Another method that was not used was triangulation of methods of data collection.

This study does not make a claim that the outcome can be transferred to other populations, as the sample group is so small. Rather, the purpose of the research is to shed some light onto how a few people in western culture experience boredom. Further research will be required to test

any interpretations that are made following examination of the data.

## **Procedure**

Previous research into boredom was not read in depth until after the study, as the authors did not want to contaminate their analysis of the findings with preconceptions. It is important that the researcher is not 'blinded' by assumptions, but is open to unexpected discoveries, which might become the most illuminating aspects of the study (Morse, 1994).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit the ten participants who took part in the study (Silverman, 2000). They comprised five people of each gender, with ages ranging from 18 to 81, selected to represent a range of educational and economic backgrounds. Recruitment was through advertisements in a local paper, a job center, a residential home, and work places.

Two in-depth interviews were carried out with each person, the second used to check that the understanding of the interviewer reflected the intended meanings of each participant, and thereby enhance the rigor of the study (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The style of interviewing was consistent with that used for the constructivist approach, where the relationship is interactive, both parties in the process engaged in a struggle to find meaning (Davies, 1999; Fontana, 2000).

## **Analysis of data**

The accounts of boredom were analysed using a system based on that of Moustakas (1994), which, in turn, is based on procedures derived from empirical phenomeno-

logy. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the participant's consent, then transcribed and coded using Nvivo software version 1.0 (QSR International, Australia). For example, the following passage was coded under the theme of 'the experience' as the sub-theme of 'restless':

and I'll start fidgeting, and I'll get up, go to the toilet, go and have a glass of orange juice. I'll go and have something to munch, I'll go and put my washing on, or whatever, I'll come back five minutes later, carry on being bored. I'm just going to get up and do something for the sake of doing it

Over 100 themes and sub-themes were identified in this way from the 20 interviews of the 10 participants, and these were used to structure individual descriptions of each participant, incorporating extensive quotations. A mind map for each person was developed, linking the themes for that individual. On completion of the final interview, the author returned to the original tapes and scripts to check and revise the themes.

Commonalities were found between some of the participants, which made it possible to group them into four categories. For example, one group of people appeared to become bored mostly at work, and under the theme of 'antecedents', they mostly shared common sub-themes, such as 'obligation', 'repetition', and 'level of challenge'. Descriptions were then written for each of these categories (see Findings section for extracts). A mind map linking themes from these four categories was then produced (Figure 1) and a final analysis was written. The findings and interpretations were then compared with earlier studies.

## **Ethical considerations**

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the university where the study was based. Written consent was given by everyone who took part and confidentiality was ensured through anonymity. All materials relating to the participants, including tapes and transcripts, were kept in a locked cabinet, and any material which could identify the individuals concerned was destroyed as soon as it had been analysed. Participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the study, indeed, their understanding of the aims helped them to provide relevant information. The interviewer tried to be sensitive to any discomfort manifested during the interview process, and was able to discuss any unease about the proceedings with her supervisors, both of whom were experienced healthcare professionals.

## **Findings of the study**

A diagram illustrating how the themes were linked can be seen in Figure 1. Participants were grouped into four categories depending on the antecedents: at work, at home, always bored, or not bored. Those who did experience boredom tended to share common experiences and strategies for overcoming boredom. However, some of the strategies used by participants, such as 'diversions', did not appear to work very well, as their boredom would return eventually. Another group of strategies, such as 'physical exercise', however, seemed to alleviate boredom more effectively.

### ***Antecedents to boredom***

The participants fell into four categories according to the antecedents, or situations in which they became bored: those who



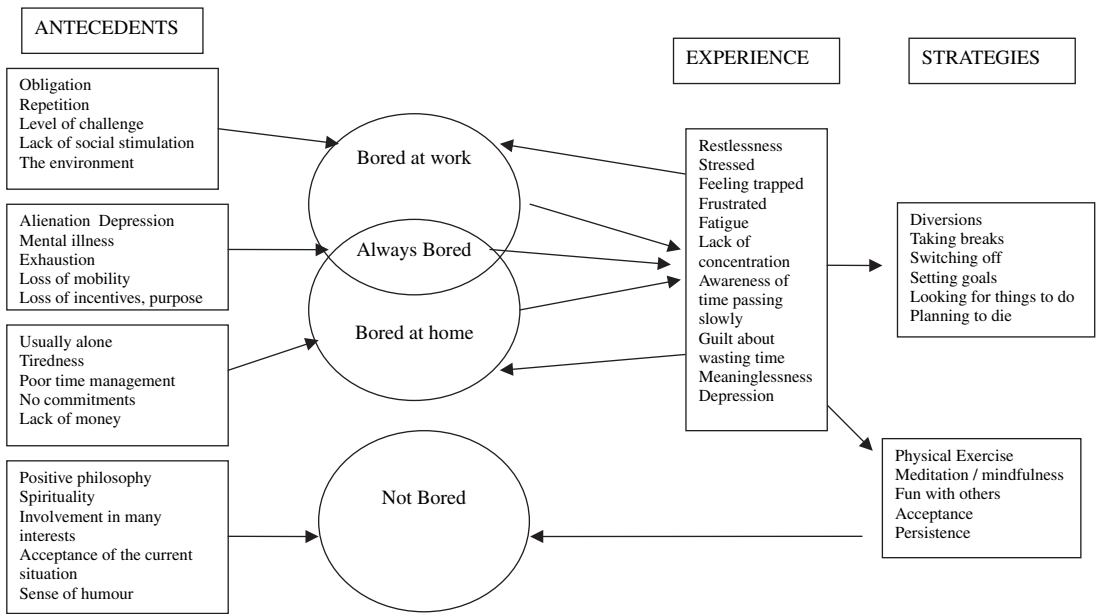


Figure 1 Overview of the findings

primarily became bored at work; those who tended to become bored at home; those who were almost always bored; those who were almost never bored. The people in this study felt that the extent to which they had been troubled by boredom had changed during the course of their lives. For example, one man in his thirties said that he was bored and alienated most of the time when he was younger, but was now married with children and had a job he enjoyed. Another man in the study described how he had been very active until middle-age, involved in a high-powered occupation, but, now that he was in his sixties, could find little with which to motivate himself.

*Work.*

Some people only became bored at work, or when engaged in some other activity that, out of a sense of duty, they had committed themselves to, such as child-

care, or a course of study. For the rest of the time they were involved with what they were doing, and gained enjoyment from their lives. For example, one man in the study had a partner and a child, and many interests including composing and playing music. However, he found his office job extremely boring. Features that made work so dull for the people in this study were the sense of obligation they felt in having to earn a living, the repetition of the work itself, the lack of challenge in the tasks they were given to do, a lack of social stimulation, and finally, the uninspiring environment:

I dunno, to me that is a problem, you know, it's bloody terrifying, stuck in a grey office, day in day out, doing a job that you don't enjoy, and you're looking out the window, you're seeing blue skies, puffy clouds, and you know the beach is just around the corner, and, well, is it any wonder you get bored?

*Home.*

In contrast to people who experienced boredom at work, some people only complained of boredom during unstructured time, and this was usually in the home environment. For example, one woman worked all day in a manual unskilled job, but was not troubled with boredom as she enjoyed being so active. It was only in the evenings, when she was alone and her husband was out working that she could not find anything to do. Some of the older people in the study had a lot of free time because they were now retired, and became bored for the first time in their lives.

Several factors were identified by these participants to suggest why this unstructured time, when they had the possibility of doing whatever they pleased, was difficult to fill. First, they were usually alone, so they did not have company to distract them.

Second, people often said that they felt more bored when they were tired. One young woman had several part-time jobs, and in addition, was studying for a degree. She was aware that at the end of a long day, she would be too tired to get anything else done. Sometimes, she could accept this, and would be quite happy to sit and watch television all evening, but at other times, she felt that she should be getting on with her studies, so would just sit there thinking 'God, I'm so bored'. She described an evening she spent with a friend in this way:

I had a very long day. I was up from six o'clock in the morning, and I was very busy ... so I had an eleven to twelve hour day ... and I went to stay at my friend's house ... we had dinner and watched television and I could see myself being sort of, or feel it even, agitated by it all because I know that there was so much at home that I'd left, and it should have been done, but it wasn't. And, because I was tired as well, I knew that there was nothing I could do about it ... so I just felt that I was wasting my time ... and I was ever so

bored because I didn't want to watch television and sit there and talk to her.

*Almost always bored.*

A few people said that they were virtually always bored, or had been continually bored at some earlier stage of their lives. They would only find respite when they could engage for a brief period in some activity that would distract them. This would not last long, however, and the relentless boredom would inevitably return soon enough.

One man in his sixties only became bored in middle age, after a very exciting young adulthood with a high-powered job and family. He felt that boredom 'just sort of descended' on him:

It's as if I'm having to make a decision all the time about what to do. Nothing happens of its own accord. Em, it's as if I'm constantly having to think up small things to do. I smoke a bit, and think that smoking is one way of combating this. It's just another little event to just fill up this terrible gap of no activity

*Never bored.*

Only one person in this study was never bored, and this was an elderly woman living in residential accommodation since she had a mild stroke. Following an active life spent bringing up four children, she was now content to spend her days in a small room, occasionally spending time with other residents in the communal areas. She appeared to possess several features which could have helped to protect her from boredom, these being a positive outlook on life, involvement in many interests, an ability to adapt to the current situation, and a well-developed sense of humor.

This lady has many interests which keep her occupied. She is quite organized about

how she spends her time, deciding in advance what she will watch on television, and fitting other activities around this. Her interests encompass a wide range of programs including serials, quiz shows, and sport, especially rugby. She manages to continue the hobbies she had earlier in life, albeit in a different form, for example, she used to enjoy baking cakes, but now that she can no longer do this, she gains pleasure from watching the cooking programs on television. As well as having a lot of interests to keep her occupied, when there was nothing else to do she is also content to simply sit by her window, watching children making their way to and from school.

### ***The experience of boredom***

Whatever the antecedents to boredom, people expressed their experiences in strikingly similar ways. The dominant feelings expressed were of being trapped and restless, yet lethargic, with associated guilt and, in some cases, depression. The people who became bored at work described this feeling of being trapped. At home, they had choice, which gave them a sense of freedom, whereas at work they felt that they had less control over their lives. One participant expressed this as follows:

Just not being in control of my life . . . I mean, you were asking what it feels like to be bored. I mean, I know what it feels like *not* to be bored, to then be in an environment where I don't seem to have any control at all, um, and a problem of boredom that just seems to completely take control, um to the point where I can't even well, type a letter for example.

However, people who were bored at home also felt they were trapped. One man who felt bored almost all the time compared his experience to that of animals in cages:

You see animals in cages, lions and things, where they pace backwards and forwards. The absolute epitome, embodiment of boredom, and they're obviously, particularly lions, I think they're in a very stressed situation and er, I think it's the same with us . . . it's a feeling you need to escape.

People who became bored at home also described this feeling of restlessness. They could not settle to any particular activity, and they could not rest, so they cast around trying to find something to do. One young woman described this as a 'fidgety' feeling:

And I'll just start fidgeting, and I'll get up, go to the toilet, go and have a glass of orange juice, I'll go and have something to munch, I'll go and put my washing on or whatever, I'll come back five minutes later, carry on being bored . . . I'm just going to get up and do something for the sake of doing it.

People who were bored all the time felt extremely restless. They had a desperate need to do something but did not know what it was. One elderly person said that when she was younger, she could go for walks, but because she was now physically limited, this was no longer possible:

I think it (boredom) involves a sort of restlessness. It's the only description I can say. And yet you don't know what you're restless for, 'cause you can't find any ease from it . . . 'Cause as you get older you're physically unable to do things that used to loose you. When I was young and got like this I used to play tennis for instance . . . it's a sort of restlessness of the mind rather than the body.

At the same time as feeling restless, people also felt tired and lethargic when they were bored. A young woman who had just finished college felt a need to go out and do something, but found that the temptation was to stay at home and watch television:

you feel sluggish, because you're not, you know, you're not going to work, and you're not going to

college, and you're not going out as much, if you don't have any money... so you do end up slobbering in front of the TV and, you know, sitting around with your friends, and that does make you feel physically, you are quite inactive.

People felt guilty because although they had the possibility to do whatever they wanted, they did not use their time productively. One of the women in the study wondered if she was subconsciously aware that she was getting older and time was running out:

I suppose you appreciate it more (time) as you get older. You know, you've had the prime of life. It's gone and now you think, you don't know how many years you've got left! (laughs) Maybe that's what it is. Subconsciously you're thinking about your life, trying to cram as much as you can.

As well as feeling trapped, the people who became bored at work also felt frustrated, stressed and tired, with a lack of concentration and an awareness of time passing slowly. They would also feel sorry for themselves and would wish that they could have a more fulfilling job. Those in temporary employment could cope with this better than others who were permanent, and could see nothing better for themselves in the future. One person in this situation became quite depressed from time to time.

Depression seems to be a feature of people who are almost always bored. One of the participants who was bored most of the time during his early years said that he was caught up in a downward spiral of frustration, apathy and depression:

You know, you can give up, almost, and that leads to exhaustion and also depression. So I'd say boredom is quite, you know, connected to depression... because you lose the will to act, to take control, and so you become very passi-

ve... Yes, that's what boredom is. It's like being unstimulated, you know. And sick and tired.

### ***The stages of boredom***

No participant was able to identify any stages in the development of boredom. They seemed to be aware only of consistent sensations throughout the experience.

### ***Strategies for dealing with boredom***

The main strategy for dealing with boredom during unstructured time was finding alternative things to do. At home, people would watch television, but this soon became boring itself, so they would search for something else, such as computer games, or make snacks for themselves. This, in turn, would make them feel guilty about wasting time, although if the activity involved physical exercise, such as going for a walk, they would feel less guilty, as this was seen to offer some health benefits.

To cope with boredom, people used all kinds of tactics. Most commonly, they chose diversionary activities that tended to be idiosyncratic depending on individual preferences. At work, this might include doodling, making changes in a diary, playing with a mobile phone, looking out of the window, chatting with colleagues, making drinks, e-mailing and using the internet. When the work was mentally undemanding, people liked to have background music playing. Taking breaks was another strategy used to deal with boredom, when people could switch off from their work. They would either do something completely different or daydream, thinking about enjoyable things they could do in the future.

Other, more successful, approaches to the onset of boredom included taking more control over the situation by making plans for the future, so that an end to the suffering was in sight. However, one elderly person

was so distressed that at times she planned to die. Others simply accepted that when there was no way out of a situation, they had to persist with the task in hand. A solution suggested by one participant and put into practice by another was to learn how to meditate, focusing on the present moment:

If I was a more involved person I wouldn't be bored if I had nothing to do. I'd just be living in the here and now. Whatever it was I'd be OK. But . . . I have to find a way of escaping from the here and now. The here and now is unbearable. I have to fill it with cigarettes and cups of tea, or computers . . . So I think boredom may be a, it's drawing our attention to the fact that we're not living in the here and now.

## Discussion

The findings of the study will be discussed in relation to the aims, namely, the antecedents of boredom, the experience of being bored, and strategies used to overcome the feeling.

### *Antecedents*

Research indicates that the causes of boredom can be either external (the state of boredom) or internal (boredom as a trait, or boredom proneness) (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Fisher, 1993; O'Hanlon, 1981). Some of the participants in this study described their boredom as a reaction to a certain situation, for example, being at work, which corresponds to the 'state' of boredom. Other participants' narratives indicated that they had a tendency to find most situations boring, reflecting a tendency to boredom proneness.

People interviewed for this study suffered from boredom in different situations, which I categorized rather crudely into the two groups, 'boredom at work' and 'boredom at

home', as these were the most usual contexts in which they became bored. Factors in the workplace that contributed to boredom were repetitive, undemanding jobs, and a feeling of coercion since they had made a commitment to their employers. These findings correspond to literature which identifies external factors contributing to a state of boredom (Caldwell *et al.*, 1999; Fisher, 1993; Shaw *et al.*, 1996; Troutwine and O'Neal, 1981).

There were, however, several participants who said that they had been prone to boredom at an earlier stage of their lives, but now only experienced transitional states of the feeling. In contrast, there were others whose accounts indicated that boredom had never manifested itself whilst they were younger, but who complained that, later in life, they were almost constantly bored. The concept of boredom proneness suggests a personality trait which cannot be changed, and, indeed, studies have linked boredom proneness to impulsivity, Type A behavior, neuroticism, and extraversion (Ahmed, 1990; Gordon, 1997; Watt and Vodanovich, 1999). This phenomenological study, however, seems to indicate that people can fluctuate in their proneness to boredom during the course of their lives, indicating that it is not necessarily a personality trait.

Rather, boredom proneness may be more of a transient pre-disposition, since people appear to pass through stages in their lives where they have more of a susceptibility to boredom, possibly due to other factors in their lives, such as an illness. Some participants in this study attributed the chronic boredom which they had experienced during an earlier period to alienation or depression. If boredom proneness is not a personality trait, this gives some hope to the possibility of finding

some 'treatment' for people who suffer from the condition.

### ***The experience of boredom***

The participants in this small study who had experienced boredom confirmed that it was an extremely unpleasant feeling, possibly worse than any other. This opinion of boredom has been shared by literary writers and philosophers throughout the ages, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kirdegaard, and Martin Heidegger (Kuhn, 1976; Svendsen, 2005). For them, boredom was the manifestation of existential angst, where life loses all meaning and purpose. This is in contrast to the way in which boredom is today treated as a source of amusement and is trivialized (Macintyre, 2005). Tools to measure boredom are not used clinically (Vodanovich, 2003), and there are almost no clinical studies of boredom. Yet, this study seems to show that it can be a deeply troubling experience, leading to suicidal thoughts in extreme cases.

People had difficulty when asked to describe the experience of being bored, and no participant could identify 'stages' of boredom, which was one of the aims of the study. However, what was striking about their descriptions of the experience was their similarity, with different participants often using the same words. Although they varied a great deal in both the degree to which they suffered from boredom, and the situations in which boredom arose, people were very consistent in the feelings that they experienced. Predominantly, they talked about stress, restlessness and entrapment, combined with lethargy. There was a desperate desire to find something interesting to do, but a dispiriting lack of energy or motivation to become engaged.

Earlier studies suggested that boredom was a state of either high or low arousal (Leary *et al.*, 1986; Mikulas and Vodano-

vich, 1993), and this piece of qualitative research seems to suggest that individuals fluctuate between the two, without experiencing the 'optimal level' that is required to obtain satisfaction from an activity. They would feel an urgent need to do something, and yet, at the same time, lack the ability to actually satisfy this need. One interpretation of this process could be that boredom is simply an inability to attend, despite efforts to do so. Earlier studies have associated boredom with inattention (Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Hamilton, 1981; Hamilton *et al.*, 1984; Leary *et al.*, 1986; Seib and Vodanovich, 1998; Thackray, 1977). This would also account for the high levels of boredom experienced by those whose work involves sustained vigilance (Charlton and Hertz, 1989; Fisher, 1993; Hitchcock *et al.*, 1999).

If it is the case that boredom is 'an affective consequence of effortful maintenance of attention to a particular stimulus' (Leary *et al.*, 1986: 968), then it will be experienced when, for any reason, the individual cannot concentrate. Thus, the antecedents of boredom would be wide-ranging, as indicated in this study. People became bored because of the nature of the task itself, and also when they were feeling tired or sick. Strategies to overcome boredom were also wide-ranging.

### ***Strategies used to overcome boredom***

The most common method of trying to overcome boredom reported by the study participants was by trying to find alternative things to do. For example, if at work, they would chat to colleagues, make jokes, look out of the window, make endless cups of tea and coffee, and go to the toilet. They also played with mobile phones, doodled, sent e-mails, and surfed the internet. Alternatively, they might just daydream, take breaks, or, as a longer term tactic, 'throw a

sickie'. Efforts to find things to do at home during leisure time included watching television, playing computer games, smoking cigarettes, making snacks, and having the ubiquitous cups of tea and coffee.

Some of the activities used as a way of combating boredom were more effective than others. For example, physical exercise seemed to have a more lasting effect, and made the participants feel better about themselves. Most activities attempted, however, only brought temporary relief. Eventually, the boredom would resurface soon enough, and the individual would feel guilty about wasting time, leaving them to feel even more frustrated than before.

One of the participants, however, had managed to overcome a state of almost constant boredom in his youth through learning how to meditate, and giving up drugs and alcohol. The one individual in the study who never experienced boredom, despite a life confined to residential accommodation, was easily satisfied with simple pleasures, and was content to just sit and look out of the window. If boredom is, in fact, an inability to attend, effective ways of overcoming the problem might be better directed towards internal mechanisms, such as learning mindfulness meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Martin, 2005b). This intervention has been found effective with a range of physical and mental symptoms (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

### Limitations of the study

It is acknowledged that ten is a very small sample of participants, although similar sample sizes are recommended for qualitative research (Patton, 2002). In addition, all of the participants came from the same geographical area, which places further

limitations on the transferability of the study. It is recommended that further qualitative research into the experience of boredom is carried out to make comparisons with these findings.

### Conclusion

The findings of this small qualitative study have provided some possible insights into the phenomenon of boredom for the authors, pointing the way to further investigations which could develop an understanding of this poorly understood subject. Accounts of boredom provided by the participants, however, reflected many of the findings of earlier, quantitative studies. There was confirmation that boredom is an extremely unpleasant and distressing experience. This is reflected in literature from the arts (Healy, 1984; Kuhn, 1976), as well as research, which has found links between boredom and mental illness, such as depression (Farmer and Sundberg, 1986; Kass, 2003).

Participants reported that situations leading to the condition were both external and internal, corresponding to studies which have found that the state of boredom can be brought about by a lack of stimulation, but that some individuals are more prone than others (Leary *et al.*, 1986; Mikulas and Vodanovich, 1993). This study did indicate, however, that although some people suffer from boredom proneness, this propensity may change throughout the lifetime, giving hope that there might be some way of overcoming the problem.

The main finding was the surprising consistency with which people described their experiences of boredom, regardless of the source. All those who reported feeling bored, described feeling stressed and

agitated, yet at the same time, lethargic. These symptoms echo the conflicting definitions of boredom in earlier studies, which have tried to determine if boredom is associated with either high or low arousal. An interpretation of this paradox offered by the authors of this study is that boredom may simply be a lack of attention, and that the effort to sustain the high cognitive workload required for sustained attention may be leading to the fluctuations between both high and low arousal.

To date, no studies have indicated a convincing solution to the problem of boredom. Traditional methods used to avoid boredom have been to make the stimulus more interesting (Fisher, 1993; Martin, 2005a). Strategies used by the participants in the study to overcome boredom were many, but predominantly consisted of searching for alternative activities to occupy the mind. It is proposed that mindfulness meditation could help people to refocus their attention to what is happening in the present moment, thereby decreasing their boredom. It is suggested that future quantitative studies should investigate the proposed negative relationship between mindful attention and boredom.

People seem to believe that they can avoid boredom and dissatisfaction by filling their time with exciting experiences. Paradoxically, this drive for more and more may be leading to less personal fulfillment, and at the same time, be endangering our planet: 'One may ask if the constant spur of desire for novelty and challenge might not have turned from an asset into a liability for the human species' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992: 91). If we could learn to pay more attention both to ourselves and to our environment, learning to accept and appreciate the present moment, we might have richer lives.

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