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The Essence of Boredom: The Definition of Situational Boredom¹

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Abstract: Boredom frequently functions as a self-explanatory phenomenon that is taken for granted, yet it is far from being one-dimensional and obvious. The paper constitutes a critical analysis of qualities of boredom employed in various definitions of boredom in order to identify those essential for the phenomenon. The main goal of the paper is to provide a summative reflection on definitions of boredom and to propose an integrative definition of situational boredom, taking aside the problem of separate and distinctive types of it, on the assumption that they are all only dimensions of the core experience. The paper is based on an analysis of literature on boredom from several fields, including psychology, philosophy, anthropology, educational and work studies, and sociology (n=572). The paper specifies non-essential (idleness, rest, laziness, apathy, monotony, lack of interest, and slow passage of time) and essential (being an emotion/feeling, perceived as aversive, combining listlessness and restlessness, disengagement, meaninglessness, and liminality) elements in defining boredom and construct the definition of situational boredom as ‘a transient, negatively perceived, transitional emotion or feeling of listless and restless inattention to and engagement withdrawal from interacting with one’s social and/or physical environment caused distinctively by an atrophy of personally-valued meaning, the frustrated need for meaning.’

Keywords: boredom, situational boredom, definition of boredom, interactionism, interdisciplinary.

¹ The article is a re-edited and updated version of Chapter 3 (pp. 69–80) of my book *Boredom and Academic Work* (Routledge, 2021).

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide a summative reflection on definitions of boredom in an attempt to propose a ‘gist’ conceptualisation of the phenomenon (in the form of novel, inclusive definition of boredom) that I hope proves useful to researchers irrespective of discipline. Thereby, it constitutes an attempt to offer a new approach towards the conceptualization of situational boredom, which thus far has received relatively scant attention from boredom researchers (the chapter by Wolff et al. [2022] and Ros Velasco’s book [2022] are rare exceptions). The paper is based on an analysis of interdisciplinary literature, encompassing work in psychology, philosophy, anthropology, educational and work studies, and sociology (n=572). Useful for theoretical reflection presented in the paper is also the fact that I have researched boredom using qualitative methods since 2011. The first part of the title of this paper references an influential article written by William Mikulas and Stephen Vodanovich (1993), as my work is meant to both challenge and develop their reflections in a broader and more interdisciplinary direction, including both psychological and sociological approaches to boredom. The paper is organized as follows. First, I explain the nature of situational boredom. Next, I argue that boredom has been poorly conceptualized. Then, I list definitional elements that have been deemed important in the literature on boredom that, in my view, are insufficient, irrelevant, or just not essential for defining the phenomenon, and I provide a justification of my stance. Subsequently, I discuss definitional components that I consider essential and similarly justify my choice. Finally, I propose an original definition of situational boredom and a short analysis of its applicability. The main goal of the paper is to propose an integrative definition of situational boredom, taking aside the problem of separate and distinctive types of it (see Elpidorou, 2021; Goetz et al., 2014), on the assumption that they are all only dimensions of the core experience.

There seems to be a general consensus among boredom researchers that two major kinds of boredom can be differentiated. For the sake of clarity, I will loosely characterize them as ‘simple boredom’ and ‘complex boredom.’ The former is usually seen as more mundane and the latter as more severe. There are various criteria according to which authors differentiate between them, but the main line of division is usually whether boredom is induced by/anchored in/associated with an external situation/environment or the individual. The following terms have been used to describe these two types of boredom: reactive and endogenous boredom (Neu, 1998); situation-dependent and situation-independent boredom (Todman, 2003); responsive and chronic boredom (Bernstein, 1975), episodic and chronic boredom (Mael and Jex, 2015), state and trait boredom (Mikulas and Vodanovich, 1993), and situational/situative and existential boredom (Svendsen, 2005; Toohey, 2011).

The first type of boredom has been characterised as (1) transient/transitory/short-lived, (2) normal/justifiable/‘innocent’/conscious, (3) directly observable, (4) easily induced and alleviated (5) affective/emotional state being a reaction/response to (6) a concrete/real situation/task at hand/external circumstances/objects. This type of boredom is rather superficial and almost entirely dependent on external factors, and it disappears when its causes are removed (Healy, 1984; Irvine, 2001; Kuhn, 1976; Toohey, 2011).

The second type of boredom can be characterised as (1) long-lasting/chronic, (2) pathological/non-normal, (3) abstract/not directly observable, (4) highly enduring/persistent, (5)

an existential state/mood, (6) endogenous/internal to/deeply-rooted in the individual's self (Elpidorou, 2017b; Fahlman et al., 2013). This type of boredom is understood in at least three ways (depending on discipline and approach) as: (1) a personal trait (boredom proneness: differential psychology), (2) an attitude towards or perception of one's existence (existential, profound boredom: philosophical existentialism and pessimism), or (3) a pathological response to or an outcome of unconscious processes (psychodynamic approach). I present this description for informational purposes and will not discuss this type of boredom any further, as the paper is solely devoted to the analysis of situational boredom.

2. Poor Conceptualization of Boredom

Boredom seems to be commonly thought to be self-explanatory, needing no verbal definition, even among many researchers who study it. When challenged to actually specify/express the meaning of boredom, individuals struggle. Boredom is like “[m]ost things immersed in daily life [that] one understands fairly enough until asked to define them” (Bauman, 2000, p. 110). However, in this respect, boredom is much like most emotions, which are, for the main part, taken for granted. Everyone seems to know “what an emotion is until asked to give a definition. Then, it seems, no one knows” (Fehr and Russell, 1984, p. 464). In much of the existing literature on boredom, authors not always employ comprehensive definitions of the phenomenon in question. Out of 572 texts with the word ‘boredom’ in the title to which I have had access (journal articles, books, books chapters, MA/PhD theses written in English [507] and Polish [65]),² analysed in the present study, only 36 (6.29%) provide a more or less original definition of boredom, 161 (28.15%) cite definitions presented by other authors (more than 50% cite one of three definitions coined respectively by Fisher [1993], Mikulas and Vodanovich [1993], or Eastwood et al. [2012]), 117 (20.45%) use some definitional expressions, frequently delivered in metaphorical/poetic language, which I call quasi-definitions (cf. “impressionistic definitions,” Meyer Spacks, 1995, p. 14), and 258 (45.11%) employ no definition at all.

The above-mentioned analysis was based on the following principle. I consider a ‘definition’ to be an intentional/connotative definition aimed at capturing the essence of a defined object which traditionally consists of two elements: *genus* (a large category) and *differentia* (distinguishing characteristics). In my analysis, if a definition under consideration had both elements and was not cited with a reference, I coded it as ‘an original definition’; if a definition was not formally correct or was not meant to be an actual definition at all (e.g., was not introduced by ‘boredom is...’), but still aimed at describing some essential qualities of the phenomenon, I coded it as ‘a quasi-definition.’ Nevertheless, the most disturbing and shocking fact, in my view, is that almost half of all analysed texts did not employ any definitions at all. The term ‘boredom’ was employed in its common, colloquial, taken-for-granted sense (see Darden and Marks, 1999), on the premise that everybody knows what boredom is. In my opinion, such a presumption constitutes a serious methodological problem, because—as I discovered upon reviewing the literature—the conceptualisation of boredom is far from unambiguous and univocal. One may

² The body analyzed included 397 articles (25 in Polish and 372 in English), 29 books (5 in Polish and 24 in English), 90 chapters in books (33 in Polish and 57 in English), and 31 master's and doctoral dissertations (2 in Polish and 29 in English).

even say that various authors speak “about separate constructs, though each one is referred to as boredom” (Baratta, 2014, p. 2) and that they “speak not of boredom, but of boredoms” (Phillips, 1993, p. 82), as the term might be just a “grab bag of a term” (Beres, 2017), a kind of umbrella term for many various related but separate phenomena.

Having no definition is a problem, but so is having an empty/vague definition. The first issue in this regard is the self-explanatory character of some definitions, i.e. circular definitions. *Merriam-Webster’s Student Dictionary* (2004), for instance, explains ‘boredom’ as “the condition of being bored,” “to bore” as “to weary by monotony, dullness,” and ‘dull’ simply as “boring.” Given that tedium and dullness are considered synonyms of boredom, defining one by referring to another provides no extra information to those who do not already know the meaning of these words. Such circular definitions are also evident in some papers on the subject, where boredom is described, for instance, as being “a reactive state to wearingly dull or tedious stimuli” (Musharbash, 2007, p. 307) or “the reflection of objective dullness” (Adorno, 2001, p. 192).

The second issue is oversimplifying, i.e., reducing boredom to a traditionally identified limited set of characteristics/keywords. This pertains to many definitions coined in dictionaries. The most popular English dictionary conceptualises boredom as “the state of being weary and restless through lack of interest” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The same practice can be observed in dictionaries of other languages. For example, in Polish, boredom is commonly defined as “an unpleasant state or feeling caused usually by idleness, lack of interesting occupation, lack of excitement, monotony of life” (Szymczak, 1995) or in German as a “depressing feeling of having no occupation” (Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache, n.d.). All these definitions provide no information about the essence of the experience, and little information about its causes. Defining boredom by its causes instead of specifying its differentiating characteristics may constitute a more general problem of defining affective states (Daschmann et al., 2011; Eastwood et al., 2012).

One more definitional problem is the formal negativity of some definitions, i.e., describing boredom by enumerating what boredom is not. The definition of *ennui* in *The Great French Encyclopaedia* can serve as an extreme example of the case:

[Boredom is] a kind of displeasure which cannot be defined; it is neither sorrow nor sadness; it is a privation of all pleasure, caused by I do not know what in our organs or in external objects, which, instead of occupying our soul, produces a malaise or disgust, which we cannot be accustomed to (Jaucourt, 1772).

This appears to be a method to avoid defining the phenomenon rather than explaining its essence in a comprehensive way. Yet, paradoxically, perhaps the tendency to define boredom by negation lies in the very essence of boredom, insofar as it is deemed to be an ambivalent, obscure and shapeless experience: “lack, void or absence, which can only be determined by a difference” (Markowski, 1999, p. 290).

Another definitional issue is the tendency to, instead of risking a formal definition, provide a more or less general, poetic, metaphorical or just partial expression. One may argue that perhaps such explanations of boredom could be even more revealing and touch upon the kernel of the phenomenon, but I argue that they are, for the most part, one-dimensional and limited in their explanatory capacities. The bulk of such expressions provide an important insight

into the essence of boredom but cannot serve as scientific conceptualisations of the phenomenon. By way of example, boredom is described as “the growing awareness of nothingness” (Mijuskovic, 1979, p. 20, quoted in in Kirova, 2004, p. 244), “extreme aesthesia” (Aho, 2007, title), “the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 91), “a psychic anorexia” (Healy, 1984, p. 60), “the lassitude of the soul” (Sandywell, 2011, p. 177), “experience without qualities” (Goodstein, 2005, title), “the longing for a content” (Marx, 1992, p. 398), or “a form of devastating agony” (Seo, 2003, p. 3). Some of the above wordings are strictly emphatic and poetic, with no exclusive connection to boredom (e.g. ‘lassitude of the soul’ may be a proper characterization of depression as well, and ‘devastating agony’ of many other states); others are more concrete and, arguably, more closely connected with boredom (‘extreme anaesthesia’ or ‘psychic anorexia’). Nevertheless, none of these can serve as a proper scientific definition of the phenomenon.

3. Non-Essential Elements in Defining Boredom

In this section, I take a closer look at several qualities frequently mentioned in definitions of boredom which I find insufficient, irrelevant, or just not essential for the phenomenon in question. As non-essential I classify those elements that, basing on existing knowledge, seem to be rather causes or consequences of boredom and not integral qualities of the mere experience of the emotion in question. As essential I deem those elements that seem inherent and universal to all instances of actual experience of boredom. The non-essential elements in defining boredom I analyse in this section are: (1) idleness/low level of arousal; (2) rest; (3) laziness; (4) apathy; (5) repetition/monotony; (6) lack of interest; (7) slow passage of time.

3.1. Idleness/Low Level of Arousal

First of all, boredom is frequently associated with idleness, and even defined as its close synonym. Yet, I argue that it is not at all equal with boredom as it is not the same as doing nothing (see the 6th myth about boredom in Ros Velasco, 2023). In my view, inactivity is only one of many circumstances under which boredom arises. Clearly enough, if it were an essential feature of boredom, work would be the most effective remedy for it. Admittedly, such a vision of boredom proliferated in the Enlightenment (Helvétius, 1810; Krasicki, 1994; Voltaire, 2006). However, as indicated by the findings of countless studies dealing with work and employment, many people experience boredom while performing their jobs (among other, Loukidou et al., 2009; Rothlin and Werder, 2008; Van Hooft and Van Hooft, 2014). In brief, work cures merely idleness but not boredom (Kierkegaard, 1843), as it “is not the disease of being bored because there’s nothing to do, but the more serious disease of feeling that there’s nothing worth doing” (Pessoa, 2002, sec. 445). Using more ‘scientific’ language (as idleness is quite a common expression), boredom is also defined as “an affective state that can be connected to low levels of arousal” (Giakoumis et al., 2011, p. 121), “the tension created by the lack of neural nourishment” (Saunders, 1996, p. 465), “understimulation stress” (de la Peña, 2006), or “a feeling of mental weariness, listless discontent, produced by want of an occupation” (Gabriel, 1988, p. 157). Lack of stimulation, and a resulting low level of cortical arousal, in my opinion is not essential for

boredom, as there are other affective states also characterised by a low level of arousal (e.g. sadness, dejection, laziness).

3.2. Rest

In many press articles, boredom seems to be a virtual synonym for rest or relaxation, for which most people do not have enough time in current achievement society. Such a view is shared by some scholars as well; boredom is described, for instance, as “a yawning empty chasm between two meaningful moments” (Gabelman, 2010, p. 147). Along the same lines, Walter Benjamin (2007) famously claimed that “if sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation” (p. 91). Yet, what proves crucial in defining boredom is the subject’s negative perception of the feeling (Macklem, 2015). In cases where one perceives one’s idleness or low intensity activity as beneficial and purposeful (e.g. resting, meditating), boredom is not in the picture at all. The state of low arousal and satisfaction constitutes a state of relaxation and peacefulness (Mikulas and Vodanovich, 1993). Boredom does take place when one is inactive and, at the same time, does not want to stay inactive any longer. In this context, it is connected with dissatisfaction and functions as a universal signal that something needs to be changed in the current situation (Elpidorou, 2017a).

3.3. Laziness

Also frequently associated with boredom, laziness constitutes a state of generic slowness, inactivity and disinclination towards activity. To some authors, it is a synonym of boredom (e.g. Fromm, 2002; Gurycka, 1977) or a cause of it (Kabzińska, 2015; Krasicki, 1994). This can be aptly illustrated by quoting Erich Fromm: “Laziness, far from being normal, is a symptom of mental pathology. In fact, one of the worst forms of mental suffering is boredom, not knowing what to do with oneself and one’s life” (2002, p. 282). However, since boredom leaves the individual craving stimulation (see the section on restlessness below), with a host of mental and behavioural consequences, which include, in some cases, hyperactivity/restlessness/fidgetiness (e.g. Burn, 2017; Kenny, 2009; Phillips, 1993), laziness cannot be a *sine qua non* of the phenomenon. To my mind, it is, rather one of the possible outcomes of boredom (Rothlin and Werder, 2008) or of its anticipation—one usually gets lazy when they are not willing to do something that they expect to be boring, unpleasant, difficult and/or wearisome (see more in Finkielsztein, 2018).

3.4. Apathy

To some authors, boredom has direct connotations of apathy, emotional detachment, “affective deficiency,” and “affective lack” (Ngai, 2005, pp. 268, 269). In this respect, it is defined as a state of “not having any feelings, being blocked emotionally, being frozen, feeling the self to be unreal, in a word, apathy” (Bibring, 1953, p. 28, quoted in Kenny, 2009, p. 139). Some define boredom as a state of “general listlessness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 442) and “emotional flatness and resigned indifference” (Gardiner, 2014, p. 30). Nevertheless, it is evidently well-distinguishable from apathy, as apathy constitutes a total lack of emotions, lack of motivation and “a failure to seek alternatives” (Bench and Lench, 2013, p. 463), whereas boredom spurs one’s motivation to change the current activity and to pursue an alternative set of actions. As Ralph Greenson (1953) noted, in patients suffering from apathy, in contrast to those afflicted

with boredom, “there is no more longing and a far greater inhibition of the ego’s thinking and perceptive functions” (p. 12). As Wolff et al. (2022) state, both boredom and apathy are associated with a decrease in interest, but “in boredom this decrease in interest is directed at the current situation (i.e., is specific to the current experience, and increases with respect to other stimuli resulting in a shift of attention),” while in apathy we observe a decrease in interest “with respect to most stimuli” (p. 17). They also note the differences in motivation: apathy is connected to a motivation decrease to all stimuli, while boredom increases motivation for seeking alternative stimuli. Apathy is, thus, a more radical state, whose scope, to some extent, may overlap that of boredom (in its listless part) but lacks many other qualities of it (see the detailed discussion in the second part of this paper). It may also be one of possible outcomes of boredom.

3.5. Repetition/Monotony

Many researchers and theorists have claimed that one of the essential qualities of boredom is repetition and monotony (Brodsky, 1995; Davies, 1926; Drory, 1982; Hill, 1975; O’Hanlon, 1981). In industrial studies, for instance, boredom for many decades functioned as a synonym of monotony (Davies, 1926). In such conceptualisations, the causes of the phenomenon are attributed to occupational deprivation (Wilcock, 2006), “exposure to monotonous stimulation” (O’Hanlon, 1981, p. 54), “an environment which is unchanging or which changes in a repetitive and a highly predictable fashion” (Davies et al., 1983, p. 1). However, the findings of a large number of studies indicate that these features do not necessarily induce boredom. The following three examples clarify the point: (1) students can get bored in lectures which are far from being monotonous (Finkielstein, 2013), (2) some industrial workers even express a preference for routine tasks, arguing that those provide them with an opportunity to focus their thoughts elsewhere, typically on more pleasurable activities (Watt, 2002), (3) artists who, like musicians or dancers, need to regularly or repeatedly practise some basic exercises do not get bored with the routine (except among some child musicians [Wagner, 2015]). When, in the eyes of the person who has settled down into a routine, it is meaningful and purposeful, the routine does not cause boredom and may even provide them with a sense of security and belongingness (Barbalet, 1999; Klapp, 1986; Winter, 2002). Therefore, monotony is only one of the possible causes of boredom (Daschmann et al., 2011; Harris, 2000; Hill and Perkins, 1985; Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2012) and is not at all essential to the feeling.

3.6. Lack of Interest

Another common view is that boredom is principally characterised by lack of interest, and that, perforce, interest or curiosity is its ultimate antithesis (Bruss, 2012; Chapman, 2013; Meyer Spacks, 1995). Yet, boredom has a multidimensional character and significantly differs from a simple lack of interest. Lack of interest is affectively neutral, implying neither the wish to engage in the situation at hand nor the wish to escape from it (Preckel et al., 2010, p. 454), whereas boredom is clearly affectively negative. One can be not interested in classical ballet yet not bored by it, because they never go to a ballet performance (Svendsen, 2016). I can feel disinterest in many topics, and it does not provoke any affective reaction in me. I simply do not care about them. Boredom constitutes rather “a state of strong counterinterest” (Healy, 1984, p. 58) and what definitions usually mean by lack of interest is the situations in which we are exposed on something that we actively do not care—so when, for instance, someone forces us to do

something that we are not interested in doing. But then, lack of interest starts to be a cause of boredom and not the essential quality of the emotion itself. Lack of interest, therefore, is not essential to boredom, either.

3.7. Slow Passage of Time

While many theorists have eloquently argued for a close connection between boredom and the experience of time dragging (e.g. Heidegger, 1995; Safranski, 2015; Zakay, 2014), I treat it rather as a consequence of boredom, a significant concomitant thereof. This conclusion is strongly favoured by the very premises of cognitive psychological theories of time perception. According to the scalar expectancy theory (Gibbon, 1977), perception of time is a consequence of attentional processes. Each organism has an internal clock, a kind of pacemaker that emits temporal pulses. Those signals are accumulated throughout a given time interval (event/activity)—the more pulses registered, the stronger the sensation that the time interval lasts longer, in other words, that time passes more slowly. When we are engaged in something, our attention is focused on it and we do not spot all the temporal pulses; thus, time seems to move faster. In boredom, we are basically unengaged, and we perceive more temporal pulses because we more consciously experience the passage of time. Consequently, the time seems to drag on. In other words, when someone is not engaged in an activity, they allocate more attentional resources to the passage of time, which creates the impression that time is moving slowly. That this is the case has been corroborated by, among others, Laird (2007), London and Monello (1974) and Bench and Lench (2013).

4. Essential Elements in Defining Boredom

This section is devoted to identifying and explaining all those qualities of boredom that, according to my perspective, constitute the essence of boredom, i.e. are an inherent quality of experiencing the emotion in question. As such elements I classify: (1) being an emotion or feeling; (2) negativity or aversive nature of such a state; (3) the combination of listlessness and restlessness; (4) disengagement/attention withdrawal; (5) sense of meaninglessness; and (6) liminality/transitionality.

4.1. Emotion/Feeling

Many authors define boredom by using the amorphous word ‘state’ or the general term ‘affect,’ which includes all affective states (emotion, feeling and mood; Zhu and Zhou, 2012), while others characterise boredom as simply a drive (for novelty, stimuli, etc.). All the same, the most frequently used genera are ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling,’ terms whose differences in meaning seem rarely to be analysed. Upon confronting boredom with psychological definitions of emotions, one comes to the conclusion that it perfectly fits into those conceptualisations and can be successfully defined as an emotion. Accordingly, boredom is a short-lived, subjective, psycho-physiological affective state that can be described as having five components (see Macklem, 2015): (1) affective (an unpleasant, negative feeling), (2) physiological (a non-optimal level of arousal), (3) cognitive (a low level of attention, the perception of time dragging on), (4) motivational (disinclination towards the activity/situation at hand), and (5) expressive (a slumped posture, drowsiness).

However, a definitional problem begins with the term ‘feeling,’ which is frequently used interchangeably with “emotion” (Mulligan and Scherer, 2012, p. 353) and is used as an integral part of its definition (many definitions of emotion start with the phrase ‘emotion is a feeling...’). Here, I follow the strain of the theoretical reflection which interprets ‘feeling’ as a conscious experience of emotion, one of its symptoms (Damasio, 1999; Frijda, 1986; Prinz, 2005). In this conceptualisation, emotions are merely “unconscious perceptions of patterned changes in the body” (Prinz, 2005, p. 17), “a physical response to change that is hard-wired and universal” (Meyer, n.d.). Psychologists and philosophers argue that emotions (e.g., boredom) can manifest themselves in an individual’s behaviour and physiology without being revealed in a subjective experience (Prinz, 2005; Sartre, 1962). Emotions are non-reflexive phenomena, which means that people can experience them without being aware of the fact (see Raposa, 1999; Svendsen, 2005). By the same token, one “can live in boredom without feeling it” (Schielke, 2008, p. 257). Feelings, on the other hand, are “mental associations and reactions to an emotion that are personal, acquired through experience” (Meyer, n.d.). Thus, emotions are generally conceived of as being unconscious, whereas feelings are considered to be conscious. To reiterate, a feeling constitutes the conscious mode of an emotion, its extension towards the realm of awareness. In the present conceptualisation, therefore, boredom is treated as either an emotion if unconscious or a feeling if conscious.

As mentioned above, boredom, as an emotion, is a relatively transient and situation-dependent experience in most cases. Often it is more a ‘conveyor belt’ to other emotions/states of mind than a clearly recognisable/distinctive, long-term experience in its own right. Experiencing boredom signals that a particular mental/physical activity does not meet one’s expectations, does not satisfy one’s need for meaningfulness, and that another, more valuable engagement should be sought (see Barbalet, 1999; Brisset and Snow, 1993; Meyer Spacks, 1995). Because of this, boredom can disappear at the very moment it emerges, as almost immediately one begins to search for another activity. Frequently, boredom is quickly replaced by other emotions such as frustration, anxiety, anger, etc. The process is, by nature, rather swift and quasi-mechanical, for emotions flow smoothly into one another (see Strelau and Doliński, 2011).

4.2. Negativity/Aversion

Boredom is also commonly perceived as an aversive state. This conclusion was drawn by Vogel-Walcutt et al. (2012) in their review of the literature, and by Baratta (2014), with half of the definitions under her analysis including the component of negativity/aversion. My textual analysis of definitions of boredom in the literature thoroughly corroborates the findings of those studies. Boredom is frequently associated with the feeling of dissatisfaction and is reported to be positively correlated with the occurrences of other negative affective states and emotions such as loneliness, anger, sadness, worry (Chin et al., 2017) and frustration (Hill and Perkins, 1985). This is not to say that boredom is negative in the sense of being maladaptive, as it may have many positive outcomes and serve various functions (Elpidorou, 2016, 2017a), but rather that its perception is negative/aversive. I am of the opinion that boredom as such is neither positive nor negative, but it can only have positive or negative consequences. Thus, what is essential in defining boredom is the negative perception of boredom rather than the negativity of the phenomenon itself.

4.3. Listlessness/Restlessness

I argue that boredom is a distinctive state characterised simultaneously by listlessness and restlessness which, however, are motivationally opposing and each of which is indispensable and essential to the experience. Listlessness alone would constitute the state of apathy, and restlessness merely a kind of nervousness. On the one hand, there are innumerable testimonies characterising boredom as a sort of freezing, lack of energy, weariness, lethargy, stagnation, paralysis, anaesthesia, indifference, emotional flatness or lack of care (Bargdill, 2000; Beckelman, 1995; Frederiksen, 2017; Gabriel, 1988; Gardiner, 2014; Kenny, 2009; Wechter-Ashkin, 2010; Thiele, 1997). This characterisation was corroborated in my research among university students (Finkielstein, 2013), who described boredom as, among other things, ‘freezing/spacing out’, ‘hibernation,’ ‘sleep mode’ or ‘quieting the mind.’ On the other hand, boredom is connected with a high motivation for stimulation (Burn, 2017), a constant search for novelty (Mosurjohn, 2016), and agitation (Fenichel, 1951; Wechter-Ashkin, 2010). Boredom is believed to create ‘undirected motion,’ i.e. “motor or mental changes away from the state that caused boredom” (Wolff et al., 2022, p. 10). In this context, boredom implies “a longing to engage in an unspecified satisfying activity” (Baratta, 2014, p. 21), ‘a call to action’ (Danckert and Elpidorou, 2023) and is defined as the state “of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire” (Phillips, 1993, p. 68). Putting it in terms of arousal, there is some evidence that boredom is both a high and a low arousal state, as it has been found to be positively correlated with both restlessness and sleepiness (Danckert et al., 2018).

This duality is reflected in the distinction between apathetic and agitated boredom (Fenichel, 1951), or between listless and restless boredom (Sundberg and Bisno, 1983), which specifies two major possible manifestations of boredom. One can become either lethargic or overactive. In other words, one can react to the core experience of boredom by further deactivation or by attempting to re-engage. From this perspective, listlessness and restlessness are basically outcomes of the feeling rather than ingredients of its essence. However, I argue that both are always present in boredom, with one of them prevailing over the other. Accordingly, to be bored is to experience listlessness and restlessness at the same time, with the former being directed towards the situation at hand and the latter being directed towards a prospective activity, specifically, escaping from the anesthetising experience (in that sense, boredom is functional; see among others Elpidorou, 2017a). As Wendell O’Brien (2014) puts it, when speaking of his boredom: “I am weary with one thing and restless for another” (p. 239).

In this context, I endorse a position close to those of Baratta (2014), who described boredom as simultaneously lethargic/deactivated and restless, and Elpidorou (2016), who defined boredom as a state of dissatisfaction, restlessness, and weariness. This coexistence of such opposite states is also corroborated by some empirical data derived from the field of existential psychology. A patient analysed by John Maltsberger (2000, p. 84) described his boredom in a way that clarifies my point: “I feel discontented, restless, and anxious, yet at the same time lethargic, indifferent, unmotivated, unmoved, an automaton” (cf. Martin et al., 2006).

4.4. Disengagement/Attention Withdrawal

In microsociology, boredom is conceptualised, in the first place, as a social emotion that emerges when an interaction between social actors lacks qualities necessary to arouse engagement, flow and/or effective communication. The social world is a place of constant interactions and communication with others (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). Boredom is a strictly relational and relative concept, being a matter of interpretation and of relationships established between people, or between people and objects (Mansikka, 2009; Raposa, 1999). Boredom is primarily the experience of disengagement from an interaction. This is the situation where “an individual experiences being out of synch with the ongoing rhythms of social life,” “being disengaged from the ebb and flow of human interaction” (Brisset and Snow, 1993, pp. 239, 241) and “not being involved in or engaged by events or activities” (Barbalet, 1999, p. 634). Boredom “frequently ends an interaction” (Darden and Marks, 1999, p. 27), and throws the individual “in a kind of social limbo” (Kenny, 2009, p. 9).

In my conceptualisation, I apply the basic principles of such a relational/interactional perspective on boredom. In this framework, I indicate that essential for boredom is some form of lack of engagement (Brisset and Snow, 1993; Darden and Marks, 1999; Eastwood et al., 2012; Goffman, 1982), of disconnection and withdrawal of attention (Healy, 1984; Klapp, 1986), which is, to my mind, the psychological term describing substantially the same experience (disengagement is always the case of inattention). Contrarily to the Boredom Feedback Model (BFM; Tam et al., 2021), which associates the feeling of boredom to “the discrepancy between one’s actual level (i.e., objectively measurable) of attentional engagement and subjectively desired level of attentional engagement” (p. 4), my proposition implies ‘attentional disengagement’ (cf. Danckert and Elpidorou, 2023) as essential for the emotion in question. Boredom, in the presented conceptualisation, constitutes withdrawal from interaction with the social and/or physical environment (e.g. when one is alone). It is a relational state characterised by lack of involvement in any kind of social or non-social activity, neglect of or withdrawal from active and genuine participation in interaction with other people or objects. Boredom is a form of disconnection, zoning out, switching off, or inattentiveness.

4.5. Meaninglessness

The fundamental premise of my conceptualisation is that the process of sense-making is essential for human beings, that humans “are addicted to meaning” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 30; cf. Frankl, 2000). In normal, everyday conditions, people usually manage to successfully satisfy their urge for meaning, but when they fail to do so, boredom emerges as a signal of “the inability to realize this desire” (Misztal, 2016, p. 102). Thus, to my way of thinking, boredom constitutes a feeling of absence of meaning (Baratta, 2014; Barbalet, 1999), “a meaning withdrawal” (Svendsen, 2005, p. 30). Moreover, I argue that if there is one unique feature of boredom which could be broadly perceived as central to the experience, it certainly is a sense of meaninglessness. Many boredom researchers (Chan et al., 2018; Elpidorou, 2017a; Martin et al., 2006; Van Tilburg and Igou, 2012) appear to have developed views that converge, at least in part, with mine. Meaning deficit (Svendsen, 2005), the perception of an activity as meaningless (Barbalet, 1999; Van Tilburg and Igou, 2012), proves quintessential to boredom. First, out of a number of important elements of the experience, it is the one that knits all of them together and, secondly, is not shared

with any other affective state (depression is a mood). There are other unpleasant affective states (e.g. anxiety, disgust, worry, irritation), some of which can be associated with disengagement, listlessness (e.g. sadness) or restlessness (e.g. impatience, frustration). Some researchers, especially psychologists, argue that the lack of meaning is a cause of boredom (de Chenne, 1998; Fahlman et al., 2009; Hill and Perkins, 1985; MacDonald and Holland, 2002), a position with which I generally agree. However, to be more specific, I claim that an atrophy of meaning is a distinctive and essential feature/cause of boredom. What I mean by this is the subject's personally-perceived lack of meaning in a concrete situation—not general meaninglessness of some kind of activity. I claim, contrarily to the MAC model by Westgate and Wilson (2018), that there is no possibility for one to be bored and simultaneously to perceive the situation as personally meaningful. In other words, the essential for boredom is both inattention and sense of meaninglessness. If one feels bored, it means that one does not assess the particular situation as personally valuable at the moment and would prefer to do something else instead. If one truly finds meaning in one's occupation, one never gets bored by it. If one feels bored, it means that, at least at that moment and in the specific circumstances, one does not evaluate the task/activity/situation as meaningful for oneself. The task as such may remain 'objectively' meaningful to somebody who performs it, but carrying it out can be, at times, boring—under certain conditions, in particular situations. To illustrate the point, teachers who like their job and find it generally meaningful and rewarding may, in some situations, feel bored with their teaching performance, when its actual meaning becomes questionable to them due to adverse conditions (e.g., they feel exhausted, or the students are not engaged in the learning process).

4.5.1. *Meaning Frustration*

Associated with disappointment, frustration is defined as “irritable distress after a wish collided with an unyielding reality” (Jeronimus and Laceulle, 2017, p. 1), or ‘failure of expectations’ (Conrad, 1997, p. 474). It can be either a cause or a consequence of boredom (Baker et al., 2010; Wechter-Ashkin, 2010; Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2012), but boredom can be as well “only another name for a certain species of frustration” (Sontag, 1967, p. 303). I claim not that boredom is a frustration, as the correlation between the two are not sufficiently high (Struk et al., 2021), but a kind of meaning frustration, i.e., an emotional reaction to the unfulfilled need for meaning or to the unsuccessful construction of meaning. If we assume, after Viktor Frankl (2000), that humans constantly ‘search for meaning,’ which I find correct, as people never willingly perform activities they perceive to be personally meaningless (i.e., without some rationalisation or imagined functionality), boredom constitutes a reaction to a situation in which this pursuit fails and the individual is left with the frustrated need for meaning.

4.6. *Liminality/Transitionality*

The last essential feature of boredom is its liminal/transitional character. It is described as a kind of captivity, entrapment (Martin et al., 2006; O'Neill, 2014; Wechter-Ashkin, 2010), stuckness in-between, in some transitional state of suspended present, un-realisation. It involves a situation in which the past is “no more” and the future is “not yet” (Frederiksen, 2013, p. 6). Boredom is a state of suspension between engagements—one involvement has ceased but another has not yet begun. I conceive boredom as ‘a conveyor belt’ to other emotions or activities. If the individual quickly manages to transition to a new activity/mental engagement/emotion, the transitional state

can take just a moment, and, thus, go undetected—as it actually often does. This interpretation seems to be reinforced by the fact that one is frequently unaware of situational boredom. All the same, when the conveyor belt goes on and on, with no conceivable destination, the sense of being stuck in the transition can become a mood or a steady disposition (chronic/existential boredom). In this sense, boredom is characteristic of any on-going transitions that inhibit the process of becoming. It may emerge in situations of major activity changes in life—when the old pattern has expired, and a new one has not yet been established. It is, therefore, a matter of a sudden drop in the individual's activity level characterised by the feeling of indeterminacy. A few typical situations to illustrate the point are: losing one's job, graduating from school/university, a transition between the army and college (Fisher, 1987) or parents' experience of an 'empty nest' after the children have 'suddenly' left home (Rogge, 2011).

The long-term liminality under discussion, a kind of suspension, is described by Alfred de Musset (2006) in his autobiographical novel *The Confession of a Child of the Century*. Written in the Romantic era, it depicts the painful experience of striving desperately to burst through old and cramping patterns and yearning for unachievable goals. The pain pervaded the whole generation of Romantics, who spent their adolescence in the frivolous, adventurous times of the Napoleonic era and reached adulthood after the Congress of Vienna, in a time of stagnation: "That which was is no more; what will be, is not yet. Do not seek elsewhere the cause of our malady" (de Musset, 2006). That 'malady' was vastly influenced by boredom, 'the Great Ennui' (Steiner, 1971).

Yet another illustration of the indeterminacy of protracted transition is the case of young Native Americans on the Grass Creek Reservation (Jervis et al., 2003). At present, their native tradition (their cultural inheritance) is losing its significance and is in danger of extinction. At the same time, new cultural patterns (the mainstream culture) are, as of now, out of reach. Consequently, a void has opened up which breeds boredom and unease. The high likelihood of the void becoming, after a prolonged period of time, their deeply-internalized everydayness is evidenced, for example, by the homeless in post-communist Romania, who live "at the margins in limbo, between a nostalgia for a brutal past and a resignation toward a hopeless future" (O'Neill, 2014, p. 24).

Boredom, in this sense, may be metaphorically compared to the situation of a rite of passage which has got stuck in the middle—one is already deprived of the attributes of one's former position but not yet included within the realm of one's new status—a bored individual is marginalised and their status is ambivalent (Van Gennep, 1960). To sum up, a bored person is imprisoned in a kind of limbo, stuck between activities, statuses, experiences, or engagements (see Finkielsztein, 2021) and, in this sense, I define boredom as a liminal/transitional emotion that constitutes a typically brief period of suspension, 'betweenness.'

5. Definition and Its Applicability

Taking into consideration all of the above described essential components of boredom, I define situational boredom as follows:

Boredom is a transient, negatively perceived, transitional emotion or feeling of listless and restless inattention to and engagement withdrawal from interacting with one's social and/or physical environment caused distinctively by an atrophy of personally-valued meaning, the frustrated need for meaning.

Therefore, I construe boredom essentially as a state of inattention/disengagement prompted by a sense of meaninglessness, involving a suspension between two activities/engagements in which one is simultaneously listless in the current situation and restless to find relief from it. Furthermore, I interpret boredom in terms of interaction withdrawal and claim that it is relational in character, as it always emerges in the context of some interplay between one's personal attitude, perception, characteristics, etc. and something external (activity, object, one's social position, institutional ambience, one's life from which one is alienated, etc.). One's relationship or connection with other people, one's environment, the performed task, or—ultimately—with oneself, erodes. Thus, I argue that every manifestation of boredom somehow breaks or ends an interaction; each case of boredom implies its negligence. Frequently, such an emotion is just momentary, being quickly replaced by other emotions—the relation with social/physical environment is re-established and one is free from the sensation. This is why I have called it 'a conveyor belt.' A simple yet representative example of such a process is students' boredom during university classes. 'Pure' boredom (inattention and lack of engagement, manifested by idleness, sleepiness, glazed look, supporting one's head with one's elbow) appears there quite rarely, because students' disengagement from the interaction with the teacher and with the content of the course quickly becomes replaced by their engagement in alternative activities (Finkielsztein, 2013). In the case where a student perceives particular classes as personally meaningless, they disengage from them by directing their attention to something else. In this sense, the student does not feel bored. All the same, their boredom in class is dormant, latent—ready to erupt as soon as the side engagement expires. There again, in my conceptualisation, it would not be treated as boredom. To be more specific, I argue that one's cognitive appraisal that something is boring is not equivalent to feeling bored, but it constitutes only one of the factors predictive of boredom. In brief, one is bored with a boring activity only when they are actively 'exposed' to it. In this connection, a student may attend a boring lecture and yet feel even excited in class—because of them being absorbed in some non-class related, exciting preoccupation during that time (see more in Finkielsztein, 2019).

I am convinced that the above definition can have potentially universal applicability. Firstly, if one is inattentive to the situation at hand and disengaged from it, we call this 'situational boredom'. Secondly, if the state is recurrent, it can become transformed into a mood with the same qualities and, accordingly, be called 'chronic boredom.' Thirdly, if it embraced one's life in general (one is disconnected/alienated from one's life, which they regard as meaningless), it would be called 'existential boredom.' Therefore, depending on the scope of boredom occurrence in one's life—from the most limited to the broadest—different kinds of boredom may be distinguished. From this perspective, situational and existential boredoms may be defined in terms of generally analogous features (such as the sense of meaninglessness, engagement withdrawal and listlessness/restlessness), but there is a crucial difference which makes the two types of boredom clearly distinguishable. To be specific, existential boredom is not a short-lived emotion/feeling but a mood, which lasts usually for a longer period of time, is low in intensity

and is object-less/undirected (Thoits, 1989). It is rather a background sensation, or—as Heidegger (1995) stated—rather a standpoint colouring our perception of the reality. Somebody who suffers from existential boredom (1) assesses their life, or life in general, as worthless, (2) lives without much genuine involvement in it, and (3) is generally somewhat lethargic. Nevertheless, they yearn for meaning—as it remains their point of reference and something that they want to gain in life, even if not believing much in the success of the pursuit.

6. Conclusions

It is certain that much remains to be learned about boredom and that the presented analysis is not the last word in the on-going discussion about its conceptualisation. Still, the paper provides a novel approach to how to define it, which I hope proves to be useful in further empirical studies of that emotion. The proposed conceptualisation is based on interdisciplinary and thorough analysis of existing approaches and summarises them in order to offer a multi-dimensional definition which is meant to overcome disciplinary limitations of the previous ones. It primarily attempts to include a sociological perspective on boredom and challenge the domination of the domain by psychological perspectives, yet simultaneously integrates these visions in the quest to identify the essence of situational boredom. To better visualize the claims of the paper, I summarize the main arguments in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1: Non-Essential and Essential Elements in Defining Boredom

Non-Essential Elements	
1. Idleness/Low Arousal	Boredom is not the situation of having nothing to do but rather the feeling of having nothing worth doing. Mere idleness could be cured by work/occupation, but the impressive bulk of studies shows that vocational boredom is one of the major problems of modern workplaces. Lack of stimulation, and a resulting low level of cortical arousal, is not essential for boredom, as there are other affective states also characterised by a low level of arousal (e.g. sadness, dejection, laziness).
2. Rest	Contrarily to some taken-for-granted views on boredom, it is not a form ‘mental relaxation’ as what proves crucial in defining boredom is the subject’s negative perception of the feeling. The state of low arousal and satisfaction constitutes a state of relaxation and peacefulness that is qualitatively different than boredom, which take place when one is inactive and, at the same time, does not want to stay inactive any longer.
3. Laziness	Laziness is rather one of the possible outcomes of boredom or of its anticipation—one usually gets lazy when they are not willing to do something that they expect to be boring, unpleasant, difficult and/or wearisome. Laziness is not a part of boredom due to its, well-proved restless component that pushes an individual out of their laziness.
4. Apathy	Apathy entails total lack of emotion, numbness, and lack of motivation to all stimuli; boredom increases motivation for seeking alternative stimuli. Apathy is a more radical state, whose scope, to some extent, may overlap that of boredom (in its listless part) but lacks many other qualities of it.
5. Repetition/Monotony	The findings of a large number of studies indicate that repetitiveness does not necessarily induce boredom: (a) some industrial workers even express a preference for routine tasks, arguing that those provide them with an opportunity to focus their thoughts elsewhere, typically on more pleasurable activities. When, in the eyes of the person who has settled down into a routine, it is meaningful and purposeful, the routine does not cause boredom and may even provide them with a sense of security

	and belongingness. Therefore, monotony is only one of the possible causes of boredom.
6. Lack of Interest	Lack of interest is affectively neutral, implying neither the wish to engage in the situation at hand nor the wish to escape from it, whereas boredom is clearly affectively negative. One can feel disinterest in many topics, and it does not provoke any affective reaction in them; they simply do not care about them. Boredom constitutes rather a state of strong counterinterest.
7. Slow Passage of Time	In boredom, we are basically unengaged, and we perceive more temporal pulses, because we more consciously experience the passage of time. Consequently, the time seems to drag on. In other words, when someone is not engaged in an activity, they allocate more attentional resources to the passage of time, which creates the impression that time is moving slowly. Thus, slow passage of time is rather a consequence of boredom.
Essential Elements	
1. Emotion/Feeling	Boredom is almost unanimously conceptualized as an emotion fitting nicely into the most common definition of emotions. Boredom is a short-lived, subjective, psycho-physiological affective state that can be described as having five components: affective, physiological, cognitive, motivational, and expressive. Emotions are generally conceived of as being unconscious, whereas feelings constitute the conscious mode of an emotion, its extension towards the realm of awareness. Boredom would be an emotion if unconscious, and a feeling if conscious.
2. Negativity/Aversion	All existing literature reviews shows that boredom is commonly perceived and conceptualized as an aversive state. Yet, it is not negative (as it may serve various functions) but rather negatively perceived as associated with the feeling of dissatisfaction.
3. Listlessness and Restlessness	Boredom is characterised simultaneously by listlessness and restlessness. Listlessness alone would constitute the state of apathy, and restlessness merely a kind of nervousness. On the one hand, there are innumerable testimonies characterising boredom as a sort of freezing, weariness, lethargy, or lack of care. On the other hand, boredom is connected with a high motivation for stimulation, a constant search for novelty, and agitation. Boredom implies a longing to engage in an unspecified satisfying activity and a call to action. To be bored, thus, is to experience listlessness and restlessness at the same time, with the former being directed towards the situation at hand and the latter being directed towards a prospective activity, specifically, escaping from the anesthetising experience.
4. Disengagement, Attention Withdrawal	Boredom is primarily the experience of disengagement from an interaction. This is the situation where an individual experiences being disengaged from the human interaction and not being involved in or engaged by events or activities. Essential for boredom is some form of lack of engagement and withdrawal of attention (attentional disengagement). It is a relational state characterised by lack of involvement in any kind of social or non-social activity, neglect of or withdrawal from active and genuine participation in interaction with other people or objects.
5. Meaninglessness	An atrophy of meaning, sense of meaninglessness, specifically the subject's personally-perceived lack of meaning in a concrete situation—not general meaninglessness of some kind of activity, is a distinctive and essential feature/cause of boredom. Boredom constitutes a kind of meaning frustration, i.e., an emotional reaction to the unfulfilled need for meaning or to the unsuccessful construction of meaning.
6. Liminality, Transitionality	Boredom is a state of being stuck in-between, of suspension between engagements—one involvement has ceased but another has not yet begun. Boredom is characteristic of any on-going transitions that inhibit the process of becoming. A bored person is imprisoned in a kind of limbo, stuck between activities, statuses, experiences, or engagements.

Source: collated by the author.

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