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# Boredom, the Life Course, and Late Modernity

Understanding Subjectivity and Sociality of 'Dead Time' Experiences

Benedikt Rogge

## **Abstract**

For empirical time and life course researchers, boredom experiences constitute a highly interesting research subject. Based on three qualitative interview studies, this article delivers a phenomenological approximation to boredom and describes two distinct types of boredom experience, namely "situational boredom" and "agentic boredom" both of which are theorised from the perspective of sociological practice theory. Focusing on the experience of "agentic boredom", the paper analyses its connections to life stages, life transitions and life-long socialisation processes. Finally, current socio-historical conditions are taken into account and it is suggested that agentic boredom is perhaps an emotion symptomatic of late modernity.

## **Langeweile, Lebenslauf, und Spätmoderne Zur Subjektivität und Sozialität des Erlebens von ‚toter Zeit‘**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Für empirische Zeit- und Lebenslaufforscher ist Langeweile ein höchst interessanter Forschungsgegenstand. Unter Rückgriff auf drei qualitative Interviewstudien liefert der Artikel eine phänomenologische Annäherung an Langeweile und beschreibt zwei grundsätzlich zu unterscheidende Typen der Erfahrung von Langeweile, nämlich „situationsbezogene Langeweile“ und „handlungsbezogene Langeweile“. Beide Typen werden aus der Perspektive der soziologischen Praxistheorie durchdrungen. Der Artikel beschränkt sich im Folgenden auf das Erleben handlungsbezogener Langeweile und analysiert ihre Zusammenhänge mit Lebensphasen, Transitionen und Sozialisationsprozessen. Abschließend wird auf die gegenwärtigen soziokulturellen Bedingungen eingegangen und die These formuliert, dass es sich bei der handlungsbezogenen Langeweile um eine für die Spätmoderne symptomatische Emotion handelt.

## **Introduction**

Much has been said on the subject of boredom. Key commentators have ranged from philosophers such as Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, psychoanalysts and psychologists such as Freud, Fromm, and Frankl, to sociologists including Marx, Simmel, Wolf Lepenies and Anton Zijderveld. Indeed, boredom has been thought of as a truly modern phenomenon and throughout modernity has largely been considered as a problem, nuisance, or even pathology.<sup>1</sup>

Today, boredom seems to be more present than ever in people's everyday lives. However, to date there appears to be no valid longitudinal study confirming this impression.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, public discourses continuously point to an increased prevalence of boredom with the growing pervasiveness of the notions of "happiness" and "well-being" in the media, politics, economics, and academia accompanying an increasing intolerance towards the experience of boredom (Rogge 2011). More often than not boredom, appears as the antagonist to the happiness and flow experiences many contemporary Western individuals strive for (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Thus, combating the presence of boredom may indeed be of primary concern to a rising number of people in late modernity.

There is a need for social scientists to thoroughly research boredom as a social phenomenon. In particular, the need is to overcome psychological reductionisms that focus on an individual's propensity to experience boredom and neglect contextual parameters (e.g. Mikulas/Vodanovich 1993) as well as sociological reductionisms that overstate the role of cultural parameters in boredom by ignoring the dimension of individual agency and interpretation (e.g. Klapp 1986). In this article, I analyse boredom within the interplay of both individual and contextual processes as unfolding throughout the life course.

Following a brief outline of the empirical studies that this article draws on, I deliver a phenomenological approximation to boredom and then go on to differentiate two distinct types, i.e. "situational boredom" and "agentic boredom", theorising them from the perspective of sociological practice theory. Subsequently, I show how the experience of agentic boredom relates to characteristics of the life course. Finally, I discuss the issue of agentic boredom in the sociocultural context of late modernity.

## **Three qualitative studies on boredom**

This article is based on the findings of three qualitative studies. All three studies used semi-structured interviews for their data collection (Witzel 2000) and classical coding techniques to analyse the fully transcribed interviews (Coffey/Atkinson 1996). The first study was conducted in 2004 with eleven, mainly undergraduate, students of a British university. The sample consisted of six women and five men, aged 19 to 25. The two central topics of the interviews were the experience of boredom and the students' everyday lives. The second study was executed in 2005. It included ten male,

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1 Boredom has been described as correlate and predictor of social deviance such as low school performance (e.g. Robinson 1975) and violent behaviour (e.g. Bartone 2005), as well as impaired psychosomatic and physical health (Sommers/Vodanovich 2000).

2 Studies contending, for instance, that the number of bored people in West-Germany had increased from 26% in 1952 to 38% in 1978 (Iso-Ahola/Weissing 1987, 357) cannot be relied upon. Only representative household panel studies can deliver appropriate evidence.

German, long-term unemployed aged 45 to 60. This study dealt with daily time structures and time experiences paying particular attention to the emergence of boredom. The third study, carried out in Germany in the years 2008 and 2009, was a longitudinal study with 25 short-term unemployed participants in mid-adulthood (13 women and 12 men, aged 30 to 45) whom I interviewed some eight months after job loss and again ca. eight months later. The focus of this study was on the interviewees' identity process and mental health. Again, a major part of the interviews included descriptions of the respondents' everyday lives, their associated perceptions and emotional reactions.<sup>3</sup>

### Approximating boredom

First of all, the three studies delivered evidence on the question: What is boredom? In fact, in the literature, there is a ubiquitous fuzziness as to the notion of boredom (Vodanovich 2003, 570). Rather than delivering a clear-cut, precise, definition of what boredom is, I will subsequently depict core aspects of how boredom is experienced.<sup>4</sup> According to the interviewees and existing research, I would like to suggest a minimal consensus of what constitutes the distinct experience of boredom. The suggestion contains four components. The experience of boredom is characterised by (1) the subject's perception of a lack of contrast, (2) the subject's slowed perception of time passage, (3) the subject's increased awareness of the situation or the self and (4) a manifest negative feeling in the subject.

The first point stresses the subjectivity of the phenomenon. In fact, the experience of boredom varies enormously from person to person. Besides, the first aspect integrates disparate accounts of boredom describing it as a "lack": that is a "lack" of "arousal", "interest", "meaning" or "motivation". This links the deficit character of boredom to the basic category of contrast experience (similarly Brissett/Snow 1993). But it is at the cognitive, emotional or physiological level: The construction and perception of contrast is a fundamental part of human life, as Zerubavel (1993) has so astutely shown and, I would like to add, a basic human need. Note that the initial perception of a lack of contrast, be it at a family occasion, at work or on a lonely Sunday, typically entails a "restless and irritable feeling" in the subject (Barbalet 1999, 635). This restlessness indicates a need for change, for a rebalancing of one's contrast experiences.

The second component of boredom includes a perception of "protracted duration" (Flaherty 1991). During interviews, respondents reported that being bored meant that "time drags", "time stretches" or that time was experienced as "empty time" or "dead time". In their perception time does not move on as they themselves do not experience movement. Accordingly, one of the most typical statements is to "feel stuck". All of these descriptions reflect a slow-motion effect in the perception of time passage that other studies (Danckert/Allman 2005; Mikulas/Vodanovich 1993) have also demonstrated to be symptomatic of boredom. Note that the slowed time perception relates

3 Details on methodology and other characteristics of these studies can be found in earlier publications (e.g. Rogge/Kuhnert/Kastner 2007) or directly be obtained from me.

4 See Martin/Sadlo/Stew (2006) for the phenomenological character of qualitative boredom research.

not to the retrospective judgment of life time (e.g. “These months have flown by”) but to the current experience of everyday time.<sup>5</sup>

The third element of the boredom experience is the subject’s increased awareness of the situation or the self. When experiencing boredom people find they “must do what [they] do not want to do” (Fenichel 1951, 359) or they feel they “do not know what to do” at all. These two very different sensations have one commonality: from the subject’s perspective, the situation does not entail “cognitive engrossment” (Flaherty 1991, 82). Rather than being fully involved in the on-going situation, subjects are distancing themselves from it either hoping that the situation will soon be over or wondering what else they could be doing. In both cases, subjects display a characteristically increased awareness of the situation or themselves. As psychological time research interestingly indicates, this awareness can be thought of as a “cognitive disfluency” in the flow of cognitions leading to the slowed perception of time passage described above (Wittmann 2009).

The fourth characteristic of boredom is a manifest negative feeling occurring in the subject. Boredom is an emotion (Barbalet 1999) and emotions do play a highly significant role in time perception.<sup>6</sup> The negative valence of this emotion is rooted in the subject’s perception of a discrepancy between a desired situation, e.g. going out with one’s friends, and the real situation, e.g. having to attend a university class (Kern 2009, 118). In contrast to some other authors (Doehlemann 1991), I do not conceive of any positive aspects of boredom as an emotion. Although some interviewees did enumerate positive aspects of boredom, these rather referred to situations framed as “relaxation”, “calmness” and the like, or to events or actions following the experience of boredom such as “inspiration” and “creativity”. However, these phenomena must be differentiated from the emotion itself.

#### **“Situational boredom” and “agentic boredom” from the perspective of sociological practice theory**

In what follows, I will differentiate two distinct types of boredom experience and theorise them from the perspective of sociological practice theory. As mentioned earlier, boredom evokes a feeling of restlessness and the need to rebalance one’s contrast experiences. Whenever this is impossible, people become, or remain, bored. However, the experience of boredom and the characteristic feeling of “being stuck” (Laura, student) can, in the subject’s eyes, occur for two highly disparate reasons: it can either be attributed to the external situation; or it can be traced back to oneself. The former case is exemplified by situations such as having to wait for the delayed bus or having to listen to some dull dialogue partner. The latter emerges, for example, when lying in bed or being stuck to a terribly boring TV programme. The interview data yielded a systematic difference between these two types which I call “situational

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5 Opposed to this, some scholars have suggested that life time during which one is bored is perceived as passing more quickly (Svendsen 2005, 52-59). Yet, this observation relates to a global evaluation of (the meaninglessness of) one’s life rather than the experience of everyday time.

6 Wittmann (2009; 1956) even speaks of a recent “emotive turn” in time research stressing that the experience of time is intricately bound up with the subject’s emotional states and reactions.

boredom”<sup>7</sup> and “agentic boredom”. I will outline their characteristics while drawing on sociological practice theory and the sociology of time.

Sociological practice theory (Reckwitz 2002) assembles a group of recent theoretical approaches; it is best known through the works of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu. There are four major reasons why sociological practice theory is useful to analyse and understand boredom experiences:

(a) At its heart lies the notion of social practices that are repetitive everyday routines which are “simply done” (Giddens 1984, 7). That is to say, from the subject’s perspective, they are conducted in the mode of a “practical consciousness” (ibid.), in a tacit, taken-for-granted manner. Besides, practices are considered as “bodily-mental routines” (Reckwitz 2002, 256) including the subject’s knowledge stocks and processes of meaning-making on the one hand and action parameters on the other. As an emotion that emerges in everyday life, boredom can adequately be addressed with the notion of practices.

(b) Practice theory seeks to overcome the structure-agency and micro-macro dichotomies that have dominated sociological theorising for so long. It thus supplies theoretical devices for looking at the interplay of agentic processes on the one hand, and structural and contextual parameters on the other. This helps to get over cultural and structural reductionisms as well as psychological reductionisms. Linking practice theory to the concerns of time sociology, this includes the analysis of the interplay of sociotemporal structures and individual interpretations as well as agentic “time work” (Flaherty 2011). The notion of “time work” stems from Flaherty and refers to attempts to “modify or customize one’s own experience of time or that of others” (Flaherty 2011, 26). It also includes, I argue, skills to fabricate contrast experiences and avoid boredom. Besides, the constraining and enabling qualities of sociotemporal structures can be analysed along the three, only analytically distinguishable, modalities of structuration as suggested by Giddens (1984). These are processes of signification (social meanings), legitimation (social norms) and domination (power relations).

(c) A further characteristic feature of practice theory is that it suggests conceiving of social structures not only as external to the subject but also as operating from within the subject: that is as rules and schemes. Giddens (1984, 17) speaks of “memory traces orienting the agent’s conduct”. Bourdieu (1977) has emphasised that subjects acquire and internalise these rules and schemes (*habitus*) throughout their socialisation and that they are unequally distributed across social groups. This idea can be connected to the assumption of time sociology that subjects’ perceptions of time as well as their time work capacities differ across social groups (e.g. Tismer 1985).

(d) Finally, practice theory, in particular Giddens’ structuration theory, proposes a connection between the exercise of social practices and psychological experience. Giddens (1984, 3) stresses that activities constitute a “continuity of practices”, an ever-on-going cycle of action. This continuity is deemed central to the individual’s identity process. In fact, the individual is thought of as “the unique crossing point of practices” (Reckwitz 2002, 256). As is well-known, Giddens (1984) emphasises that all individuals are motivated to maintain the continuous flow of practices so as to maintain the experience of “ontological security”. A rupture of the continuous exercise of practices, by contrast, is experienced as a threat to the feeling of ontological

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7 The term “situational boredom” was first suggested by Doehlemann (1991).

security. This is why everyday practices and individual self-experience and self-portrayal are closely connected. Particularly the experience of agentic boredom, as we shall see, represents a sense of “practical disfluency” that is intricately intertwined with the individual’s identity process and impairs the feeling of ontological security.

#### *Situational boredom*

For an exemplary description of situational boredom, consider Musharbash’s (2007) ethnographic account of a mourning ritual amongst Warlpiri people. The Australian aborigines referred to are bound to continue mourning due to the social norms of the community (Musharbash 2007, 311):

*The key-mourners were exhausted from wailing, it was incredibly hot, and the news was that the mourners from Alice Springs wouldn’t arrive until Saturday [to complete the ritual], meaning four more days in the hot sun with nothing to do but wailing, being exhausted, grieving.*

Albeit an external description rather than the account of subjective experience, this passage illustrates the character of situational boredom. In situational boredom subjects feel bored “with” or “by” something or somebody: that is they feel constrained by the situation. In the example of the Warlpiri mourners, boredom arises because of the nature of the very monotonous activity that cannot be abandoned because of community norms. Therefore, in situational boredom the situation itself requires me to do something I do not want to do. The respective sociotemporal constraints can, according to the subject’s perception, be contingent upon constellations of meaning, social norms or power (Giddens, 1984). For instance, somebody might feel stuck in a conversation with somebody coming from a culture in which, according to my perception, interrupting an interlocutor is considered extremely impolite (signification). Thus, they keep listening. Somebody else could also be trapped in a boring conversation because their girl-friend expects them to listen carefully to minute details of her day, otherwise she will start yelling (legitimation). Finally, it could be a conversation with one’s boss who has to decide on extending my working contract next week (power asymmetry).

As interviewees describe, situational boredom is often perceived as a prison or a “cage” (Martin/Sadlo/Stew 2006) stressing the presence of situational constraints. Note that in situational boredom the situation does not need to be meaningless to the bored subject as other authors have argued (e.g. Barbalet 1999). In fact, it might be very meaningful for me to keep babysitting my own child or listening to the monologues of my mother-in-law. It is not the meaninglessness but the lack of contrast inherent to the situation that bores me.

It is important to acknowledge that according to the subject’s perception, the situation is clearly defined. As to the subject’s conduct, when experiencing situational boredom, interviewees say they feel forced to take on a passive role (e.g. of the patient listener) while cognitively distancing themselves from it (e.g. by wondering when the situation ends). While the flow of (social) activities continues, the subject is in the position of waiting for the end of the situation thus becoming oriented towards the future. Often interviewees portray themselves as the unhappy or alienated victims of a specific situation. However, there is no essential damage to the subject’s feeling

of “ontological security” as the flow of action still continues. The identity process is deflated but not necessarily impaired.

#### *Agentic boredom*

The second type, the experience of agentic boredom, is described in the following passage on an everyday, occidental, experience (Martin/Sadlo/Stew 2006, 203):

*And I'll start fidgeting, and I'll get up, go to the toilet, go and have a glass of orange juice [...] 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.*

In this type of situation boredom arises not because of situational constraints but, quite the reverse, in the middle of situational undeterminedness. Here, the subject perceives not a maximum but a minimum of situational restrictions and a maximum of “enabling potential”. Time is not experienced within a “cage” but as “free time”. The feeling that the situation is not clearly defined is the actual problem. The subject perceives barely any normative, significative or power-related constraints in the situation. He or she does “not know what to do” and, as in the example, starts to do something “for the sake of doing it”. The sentence “You sort of don't know what to do with yourself” (Paul, student) epitomises the experience of agentic boredom. The subject cannot attribute any meaning to the current situation nor draw on any action scheme to “go on”. The feeling of “stuckness” here is not a feeling of being dominated by heteronomic forces as in situational boredom, but the sensation of a failure to live out autonomy. This is felt as a practical void and an interpretive vacuum. In terms of practice theory, people feel there are neither internal nor external structures to draw upon to ultimately balance their contrast experiences. This leads to an interruption of the continuous flow of action.

This interruption of the continuity of practices engenders the “uneasy sensation”, the “stagnant, nagging feeling” (Mary, student) that accompanies agentic boredom. This, as has been suggested, impairs the feeling of ontological security for when experiencing agentic boredom subjects cannot, as it were, locate themselves. Lacking any definition of the situation and any script of what to do, the subject, albeit only instantaneously, lacks the “basis for seeing who [she is]” (Hewitt 2003, 63).

Agentic boredom typically occurs in leisure time that is unstructured, “bulk” time in which there are relatively few external constraints and higher degrees of freedom to choose when compared to other “time regimes” such as work and family (Luckmann 1983). Thus, agentic boredom is characteristically attributed to oneself, not to external parameters. Subjects become self-conscious and consciously address their “being stuck”. This reflexivity is symptomatic of agentic boredom. If the feeling is persistent or repetitive, some people turn to portraying themselves as a “failure”, feeling they do not accomplish time work in any satisfactory way. This is what makes agentic boredom “nagging” to many people. Here also lies the potential association with the development of pathological symptoms such as depressive symptoms when boredom experiences keep reoccurring. This is because the experience of agentic boredom interferes with the self, appearing as a, albeit often bearable, hiatus of the identity process and reducing the subject's feeling of ontological security.



In these moments, subjects are not oriented towards the future as in situational boredom (“when is the situation over?”) but are absorbed by a seemingly never-ending present (“what shall I do now?”). At the level of conduct, agentic boredom does not go along with a position of waiting. Rather, the behavioural response, as seen in the example above, is erratic. Many people refer to it as “killing time”. This term stands for all attempts to disperse the perceived unpleasant “vacuum” and to overcome disfluency in the identity process. “Killing time” includes all sorts of activities from the “fidgeting” mentioned earlier and a restless enchainment of meaningless activities to apathetic lying in bed, sitting in an armchair and, mostly, “doing nothing in particular” (Emily, student). All sorts of thoughts, associations, mental fragments, action attempts etc. may emerge in this praxeological void. However, when the situation is framed in any specific way and a script for any bodily-mental routine activated, the actual experience of agentic boredom ends.

### **Agentic boredom across the life course**

So far, I have focused on characteristics of the experience of agentic boredom. I now proceed to analysing its relationship with the life course. Life course sociology and the sociology of time are united in the endeavour to transcend reductionisms in social theory and to investigate “the interplay of human lives and historical times” (Elder 1994, 5). In the following, I show how the experience of agentic boredom relates to life stages, life transitions, as well as habitus formation and life-long socialisation processes.

#### *Agentic boredom and life stages*

Agentic boredom occurs in the relative absence of temporal constraints. Temporal constraints obviously vary throughout one’s life, primarily depending on work and family commitments. Based on the institutionalisation of work biographies, Kohli (1986) suggests a tripartite character of the life course consisting of the pre-work stage, a working stage, and a retirement stage. While some psychologists have contended that boredom experiences would decrease with growing age (Mikulas/Vodanovich 1993), this linear assumption does not make sense from a life course perspective. This can be explained by the fact that in most biographies temporal constraints are most pronounced in the working stage of life. This is due to the “time regime” that work imposes but also to the temporal routines and schedules that go along with family life (Rogge 2009).

While we do not yet possess representative, large-scale data on the variation of boredom experiences across the life course (Kern 2009, 71-80), my interviews reflect how many agentic boredom experiences emerge in life stages that are characterised by weak sociotemporal constraints. Some of the students I interviewed make clear that they perceive the fact that their “time-scale is not dictated to [them] by other people” (Jason, student) and that their “days vary so much” (Sarah, student) as a challenge and a source of agentic boredom. Similar findings have been reported for people out of the labour market (Rogge/Kuhnert/Kastner 2007). However, the sociotem-

poral constraints of work are not the only determinants of boredom experiences.<sup>8</sup> Consider, for instance, the contrasting examples of two students both of whom face comparable temporal restrictions in their everyday life, including a similar financial situation:

*I am a very spontaneous person. [...] One minute I might be studying and thinking, 'Oh, let's go and do this,' or I do that or whatever. (Emily, student)*

*It was getting up, lectures, coffee, library, bar. [...] I got myself in quite a pattern really. [...] I have been pretty disciplined. (Alan, student)*

This example illustrates the differences between the students' everyday lives and their patterns of time work or their "time styles" (Cotte/Ratneshwar 2001). Alan displays a pronounced planning orientation and an analytic time style dividing his everyday time in small chunks, whereas Emily practices a holistic time style thinking of the day in larger chunks and not extensively planning it (ibid., 400). Stressing her spontaneous way of organising her everyday life, Emily reports she often experiences agentic boredom. By contrast, Alan explicitly considers boredom as a failure to anticipate the organisation of contrast experiences:

*Boredom is [...] if you don't organise your day [...] and you wake up and you've got nothing to do. And then you're trying to organise your day on the day. (Alan, student)*

Similar differences in time styles have been observed in other samples wherein individuals live under conditions of weak temporal constraints, such as freelancers. So, even in the pre-work life stage, agentic time work leads to highly disparate time and boredom experiences. Even extensive time planning cannot always prevent the feeling of boredom. In the students' accounts, particularly the absence of meaningful interaction and the experience of loneliness, e.g. during holidays when significant others are not available, external limits to the success of time work are represented.

From a life course perspective the experience of agentic boredom is likely to be most prevalent in the pre- and post-work stages of a biography: that is in youth and old age. The opposite almost certainly applies to the experience of situational boredom. Nonetheless, agentic processes that are both individual efforts to organise time and subjective differences in experiencing time interact with the effect of life stage parameters.

#### *Agentic boredom and life transitions*

Life transitions characteristically bring about a change in everyday routines. Think here of leaving home, moving in with a partner, the birth of a child, the "empty nest"

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<sup>8</sup> What Marie Jahoda (1981) proposed with regard to the results of the famous Marienthalstudie from the 1930s, is not true: the objective deprivation of the time structures of work does not necessarily and by all means lead to boredom and mental health impairments. Jahoda's assumption is an empirically falsified, sociological reductionism (Rogge 2012). It is erroneous because it blends out individual's agentic efforts to organise their time.

syndrome, the loss of a spouse etc. Life transitions typically require the individual to establish, habitualise, and internalise new routines. For a moment, at least, ontological security is in danger, as long as new routines have not been established. Consequently, as indicated in the numerous interviews I have conducted with unemployed persons, life transitions often give rise to an increased experience of agentic boredom, as unemployment frequently entails subjective disorientation concerning how to re-schedule one's time and restructure the daily flow of activities:

*I mean, who would feel like hanging around inside all day long. [...] I do not know what I should do, apart from, you know, going to work [laughs] (Mariah, short-term unemployed)*

Asked for the most important change in her life brought about by job loss, another participant answered:

*I got bored. I had to reschedule my time. [...] it was simply boring, really boring. Nothing to do. The housework was done very quickly, my husband was at work, my daughter at school, the little ones were either playing or we did something together, tinkering or some-thing. But you can't do that every day and it does get really boring at some point. And reading all day long or doing whatever else, watching TV, I'm not really that kind of type. (Martha, short-term unemployed)*

The breakdown of habitualised routines that had previously guaranteed a minimum of contrast experience leads to the experience of agentic boredom after job loss. It is the feeling that one is incapable of fabricating the experience of contrast that is so worrying. Interestingly, and again refuting the over-romantic view of work proposed by Jahoda and others, this is much less the case with people who decide to quit their jobs themselves. Having anticipated the need to actively restructure their activities they are characteristically better able to fill their time. Some, for instance, report extensive leisure activities such as attending language classes and cultural events, playing sports, socialising etc. However, to interpret this within a situational determinism would be mistaken. Martha, for instance, tells us about her agentic adaptation to the initially boring experience of unemployment:

*And then I decided as soon as the children go to the play school [...] at school, there is a cafeteria, and they are always in need of mothers to help out, make sandwiches, sell stuff, and so on. So I said, okay, as long as I do not work and am not having anything else to do, that'd be it. Go there, you will get to know some people, that will make a change. No sooner said than done. And this is what I am now doing four times a week. (Martha, short-term unemployed)*

After she has been struggling with the restructuration of her everyday life, she chooses to develop a new routine by committing herself to a voluntary engagement. This reincreases her experience of contrast and reduces her boredom experience which, as she accentuates in the interview, had become a psychological burden to her. Taking on the voluntary commitment, she says, has improved her well-being.

In contrast to this, another interview participant who quit his job voluntarily and has been enjoying his everyday life with many leisure activities, such as cycling and jogging in the preceding eight months, is aware that this state might change and boredom might creep in at some point:

*I am not bored [...] I'd say [...], it has not come that far yet, that I, how to say, sit at the kitchen table all day long and look out of the window. [laughs]. [...] I think, with some people that happens, but not yet with me. (Bernd, short-term unemployed)*

Hence, the experience of agentic boredom emerges whenever subjects cannot draw on pertinent practices to level out their experience of a lack of contrast. The necessity to restructure one's everyday routines, then, is what makes the experience of agentic boredom likely during life transitions. Of course, the restructuring of practices occurs within a dynamic process that can include both "successful" adaptation and failure.

The empirical studies I conducted only relate to job loss as one exemplary life transition. However, other life transitions, as mentioned above, entail comparable restructurings of practices. It is thus probable that they have similar effects on the experience of agentic boredom. This is visible, for instance, in the "empty nest" syndrome in which the parents, notably the mothers, need to reorganise their daily routines. This often goes along with boredom experiences and, in the long run, a sense of decreased well-being. This can be seen as a dynamic process of change of routines and potential adaptation. To many people, job loss is a major loss of ontological security and initially a breakdown of everyday routines. As the situation persists, people are more likely to adapt and rebalance their contrast experiences in everyday life as quantitative well-being studies confirm (e.g. Lucas 2007). In many cases, however, the restructuration of routines fails and boredom experiences persist and accumulate.

#### *Habitus formation and life-long socialisation processes*

While psychologists have investigated boredom as "boredom proneness", that is a stable personality trait, some sociological scholars have suggested that boredom experiences are more likely in certain social milieus than in others. For example, Schulze (2005) argued what he called the "entertainment milieu", notably teenagers and adolescents with low education demonstrated a strong need for diversion and a deep anxiety towards the experience of boredom and monotony. In this context, it is very useful to take up Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Famously, Bourdieu has delivered extensive evidence for differential habitus formation including leisure activities and techniques of coping with everyday life that differ immensely across social milieus. In this vein it is plausible, as evoked earlier, to assume an unequal distribution of skills to perform time work and of ways to perceive time including the capacity to avoid experiencing agentic boredom. These capacities and patterns are acquired from early socialisation on.

I should like to exemplify this point with one skill that is specifically relevant to the experience of boredom: the skill to deal with privacy. Not only are upper and middle class children better instructed to manage their everyday lives in general, but in particular working class children are also often less trained in performing routines of how to be on their own. Some thoughts of Randall Collins are useful here. He pro-

poses that devoid of the bodily presence of others we experience “no heightened emotional energy [...] or worse, a sense of a drag, the feeling of boredom and constraint” (Collins 2004, 51).

Yet, obviously boredom does not necessarily emerge when we are by ourselves. Collins suggests that when being alone we may perform what he calls “rituals of self-solidarity” (ibid.). These “mental routines” can consist of all sorts of activities such as playing sports, chess or an instrument, singing, reading, meditating, reflecting, praying, writing etc. Such self-solidarising practices are of great relevance in the avoidance of experiencing agentic boredom. For aloneness and agentic boredom are closely intertwined. When “rituals of self-solidarity” cannot be drawn on in situations of aloneness, then what people often experience is agentic boredom: “Some reach high degrees of solidarity with oneself; at these moments, one feels focused, directional, and most clearly conscious. At other moments [...] inner interaction rituals do not come together: thought is episodic, scattered, inarticulate.” (Collins 2004, 219 f.).

Notwithstanding Collins’s specific theoretical approach, what is crucial to my argument here is that the capacity to organise one’s time experience in a fulfilling way when alone is likely to be more extensively trained in the upper classes than in the working classes. This includes the capacity to exercise time work. Consequently, habitus, as it were, encompasses skills to prevent and deal with the experience of agentic boredom.

Habitus is formed throughout socialisation which is a life-long process. Not only are working class people at a greater risk of receiving less training in boredom-relevant skills from their parents. But they are also more likely to have unstable work and family biographies. Unstable life conditions and critical life events such as precarious employment, unemployment, divorce and the like, however, bring about the break-up of everyday routines. This further hampers the development and habitualisation of practices that are necessary to avoid agentic boredom.

While stable biographies with long-term working contracts and few job changes are perhaps formed by a greater experience of situational boredom, unstable, discontinuous work biographies, long-term unemployment and highly discontinuous family trajectories are potentially associated with the experience of agentic boredom. In many cases, agentic boredom then becomes an iterative part of people’s everyday life often going along with or leading to problems of daily identity work. The long-term unemployed persons I interviewed gave impressive examples of this. Although they have been in continuous unemployment for years, they still frequently experience agentic boredom, meaning that their attempts to adopt and establish routines that deliver them with sufficient contrast experiences continue to fail. As Fabian remarks:

*Unemployment makes life meaningless [...] you bum around all day long. (Fabian, long-term unemployed)*

Fabian’s statement reflects a meaninglessness that has become a routinised yet plaguing part of his everyday life. In fact, the pattern of “killing time” then often forms part of everyday routines as indicated in the following interview extract.

*You have nothing to do. So, then you have nothing to do and you wonder  
'What shall I do?' Do something! Do anything! What? Do some practicing.  
Some finger exercises. With the computer. (Horst, long-term unemployed)*

Here, the despair with which Horst is looking for activities to keep up the continuity of everyday practices is highly visible. My point is that rather than being born as member of a “bored class”, as implied by a rigid and reifying habitus concept, it is the habitus formation in conjunction with life-long, dynamic socialisation processes that lead to the repetitive, cumulative experience of agentic boredom, probably being most prominent in the working class. This likely makes for the social inequality of agentic boredom experiences.

### **Agentic boredom and late modernity**

Finally, a major topic in both time and life course sociology is the analysis of socio-historical change. What Simmel (1903/1997) famously referred to as the “blasé attitude” in modern metropolitans has been related to the experience of boredom by contemporary authors (Aho 2007). The blasé attitude is described as follows: “The nerves find in the refusal to react to their stimulation the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life.” (Simmel 1903/1997, 179)

Simmel (ibid.) attributes the development of a blasé attitude to the quantitative intensification of the stimulation of the nervous system in the city. In other words, the explosive growth of external stimuli and the immense acceleration of multiple social, technological and other developments leads to a “cognitive overload” (Klapp 1986) and consequently to a deadening of the nervous system. Aho (2007), as much as Klapp (1986), considers this cognitive overstimulation as a central source of boredom. Contrast experiences, we could say along these grounds, decline when the number of stimuli has risen to such a point that they can hardly be discerned any more. Cognitive time research confirms that both cognitive overload and under-stimulation are potential sources of subjective boredom (Wittmann 2009).

Other authors have emphasised the growing “cultural arrhythmia” (Brissett/Snow 1993) as leading to an increased experience of boredom. Likewise, Rosa (2009) holds the social acceleration responsible for an increase in the experience of boredom and inertia. The “desynchronized high-speed society”, he contends, leads to an increase in the subjective experience of “frantic change and temporalized time [giving] way to the perception of ‘frozen time’ without (a meaningful) past and future and consequently of depressing inertia” (Rosa 2009, 101).

While I agree that the consequences of social acceleration are paramount, I accentuate a somewhat different account of contemporary boredom. First, I would like to stress that there are still no representative empirical data that describe a longitudinal, let alone historical rise in boredom experiences. While there are good reasons to assume such an increase in agentic boredom, we should still be cautious as assessments of contemporary time and culture often fall prey to observational distortions. Second, it is indispensable to differentiate between the experience of situational boredom and the experience of agentic boredom when speculating about sociohistorical change. In a way, the two types could not differ more. When discussing the sociocultural dimension of situational boredom, we need to refer to external situations, life situations,

work and family conditions, political conditions, etc., whereas when dealing with changes in agentic boredom experiences we are concerned with transformations of individuals' skills to fabricate contrast experiences and manage their identity process. In the latter case, I hold, we must thus analyse alterations of internal, psychosocial structures.

Third, regarding this I think the observation of individualisation processes and the historical rise of reflexivity (Giddens 1991) has a strong explanatory potential. Agentic boredom is a practical disfluency and a, albeit ephemeral, hiatus of the identity process. It characteristically contains the reflexive problematisation of the self. The very phenomenon of agentic boredom goes back to our increased possibility and need to constantly choose and decide what to do, and to the decreased clarity of what we are to do. If situational boredom was perhaps characteristic of modernity as the era of self-disciplination (Foucault) and the "iron cage" (Weber) of the "institutional programme" (Kaufmann), then agentic boredom can be contextualised as symptomatic of the era of late modernity. Late modernity, which Giddens and Beck both call "reflexive modernity", is characterised by the permanent need to construct oneself and to exercise daily identity work. Not all the time, but clearly more often than previously, people are wondering "What shall I do?". It is indeed this decline of predefined routines and action patterns that plays an important part in the sociohistorical dimension of the experience of agentic boredom.

This latter idea links up with an argument made by Ehrenberg (2010). He suggests that in modernity depression was thought of as resulting from a neurotic conflict that is a deviation from disciplinary norms. In late modernity, however, depression is considered to result from a feeling of individual insufficiency that is a failure at realising individual self-determination and autonomy. Thus, the grown need to construct and enact an autonomic self-determined identity is considered as a major origin of the explosive growth in the prevalence of depressive disorders. I am not convinced that this argument applies to depression in terms of clinical pathology for "weariness of the self" and psychiatric disorders are different phenomena. However, the weariness Ehrenberg refers to and the agentic boredom described here might emerge from the same late modern challenge that is the daily fulfilment of identity work. Agentic boredom, then, is perhaps one characteristic emotion of late modernity.

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