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A meditation on boredom:

Re-appraising its value through introspective phenomenology

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Abstract

Boredom is almost universally regarded as a dysphoric mental state, characterised by features such as disengagement and low arousal. However, in certain quarters (e.g., Zen Buddhism), boredom is seen as potentially having great value and even importance. The current study sought to explore boredom through a case study involving introspective phenomenology. The author created conditions in which he would experience boredom for an hour, and recorded his experience in real-time using a variant of the Experiencing Sampling Method. The data were analysed using an adaptation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The results indicated that the state of boredom contained three main sources of value: (a) altered perception of time; (b) awakened curiosity about the environment; and (c) exploration of self. Consequently, the paper offers a re-appraisal of boredom, suggesting that rather than necessarily being a negative state, if engaged with, boredom has the potential to be a positive and rewarding experience.

Keywords: boredom; meditation; phenomenology; introspection; wellbeing.

The problem of boredom

Boredom is almost universally regarded as a negative mental state. This disparaging appraisal is reflected in Vogel-Walcutt et al.'s (2012, p.90) definition of it as 'temporary feelings of low-arousal and unpleasant emotions induced by environmental factors,' and in Fisherl's (1993, p.396) depiction as an 'unpleasant, transient affective state, in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest.' However, these sparse definitions do not really begin to capture the range of dysphoric feelings that have historically been associated with the term 'boredom' (Toohey, 1988). Indeed, Toohey suggests that boredom – or non-English translative equivalents, since 'boredom' did not enter the English language until 1852 with Charles Dickens' (1853) Bleak House – has been used throughout history to depict states of malaise that involve some dispiriting combination of frustration, surfeit, depression, disgust, indifference, apathy, and confinement. Moreover, each historical epoch has tended to emphasise particular elements of this dysphoric state. One of the earliest literary works, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (transcribed circa 2000 B.C.) describes the Mesopotamian King Uruk as being 'oppressed by idleness' (cited in Maier, 1997, p.314); this ennui is then the premise for Uruk embarking on a quest to discover some sense of purpose and legacy. A somewhat more frustrated state is depicted in Homer's *Iliad* (circa 850 B.C.), in which a mood akin to boredom is cited when the Achaeans are waiting restlessly to fight the Trojans, with the state taking on shades of vexation and impatience (Toohey, 1988).

Later, in classical Greek and Roman philosophy, we find states comparable to boredom taking on weighty existential overtones that verge on despair, emotional states that are arguably close to the modern psychiatric diagnosis of depression (Szasz, 2002). For instance, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 B.C. – 65 A.D.) lamented the ubiquity of *Taedium vitae* (tiredness of life), which he describes chillingly as 'the tumult of a soul fixated on nothing' (cited in Hecht, 2013, p.42); indeed, *Taedium vitae* was recognised by Roman law as one of the few morally acceptable reasons for suicide (though Seneca did not himself advocate this). In medieval times, boredom took on shades of spiritual listlessness and melancholia in the form of *acedia* (Latin); this was often referred to by Christians as the 'demon of noontide,' and was described by St. Thomas Aquinas (1273) as 'sorrow of the world,' and the 'enemy of spiritual joy' (cited in Frevert, 2011, p.31). In more recent centuries, this existential

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sense of anomie, and of the melancholia that would often accompany it, was recast and labelled in a variety of ways, including as the 'English disease' in the 17th and 18th centuries, the '*mal de siecle'* in 19th century Europe, and the 'nausea' of continental existentialists in the 20th century (Toohey, 1988).

Coming into the present day, contemporary psychological theory has sought to identify and operationalise different forms of boredom. For instance, Toohey (2011) suggests that boredom can be differentiated into: (a) existential boredom; (b) situational boredom; and (c) boredom of surfeit. The first encapsulates many of the melancholic states depicted above, such as *Taedium vitae.* However, as noted, this form of deep, existential boredom is perhaps more likely to be characterised in today's medicalised discourse as 'depression,' and in its extreme versions to be treated clinically as a psychopathology (Szasz, 2002). In contrast, situational (or 'situative') boredom – referred to by the novelist Flaubert (1856) as 'common boredom' – arises when a specific situation is judged to lack interest or value. As Svendsen (2005) notes, this context-specific state can be distinguished from existential boredom in numerous ways, not least their physiological manifestations; situational boredom is revealed by signs of restlessness and/or tiredness, from fidgeting to yawning; in contrast, existential boredom is not necessarily accompanied by any particular physical/behavioural patterns. Finally, boredom of surfeit captures the kind of decadent overabundance where one encounters a lack of constraining limits (e.g., as experienced by the very rich), but where one also lacks the ability or passion to make any value distinctions, thereby finding all options to be equally uninteresting.

Another contemporary approach to boredom, driven by psychometric personality theory, has been to differentiate between trait and state boredom, and to elucidate the differential factors comprising these. Trait boredom, i.e., general tendencies towards experiencing boredom, has most commonly been assessed using the 'boredom proneness' scale developed by Farmer and Sundberg (1986). Although initially operationalised as a single factor, subsequent analyses (e.g., Vodanovich et al., 2005) identified two main factors: lack of external stimulation (which pertains to one's need for variability and change); and lack of internal stimulation (which concerns an inability to produce stimulation for oneself). Conversely, state boredom relates more to what Toohey (2011) refers to as situational boredom, i.e., lack of interest in one's current situation. In this respect, Fahlman et al.'s (2013) Multidimensional State Boredom Scale comprises five main factors: disengagement, high

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arousal, low arousal, inattentiveness, and (altered) time perception. In turn, both trait and state forms of boredom have been associated with a host of negative outcomes. For instance, trait boredom has been identified as a risk factor for anxiety and depression (LePera, 2011), negative social orientation, such as alienation or paranoia (Leong & Schneller, 1993), impulsivity (Watt & Vodanovich, 1992), and dysfunctional behaviours, e.g., pathological gambling (Blaszczynski et al., 1990). Similarly, state boredom has been linked to multiple adverse outcomes; for example, in the context of work, boredom has unsurprisingly been connected to greater dissatisfaction with most aspects of work, from work itself, to pay and co-workers (Kass et al., 2001), as well as poorer performance as rated by managers (Watt & Hargis, 2010). More broadly, adopting a phenomenological perspective, Bargdill (2000) explored more extensive forms of boredom, analysing the experiences of six people who felt 'bored with their lives' (p.188). His analysis revealed that this type of enduring malaise arose in part from an assessment that endeavour and action were futile, leading to feelings of apathy and emptiness.

Re-evaluating boredom

So, boredom is generally considered to be a problematic or dysphoric state. While there are multiple ways of conceptualising boredom, these all point to, in Klapp's (1986, p.127) words, a 'deficit in the quality of life.' However, alongside this dominant negative perspective, it is possible to discern a subtly different strand of thought, one that is less obvious, but which actually finds some strange value in boredom. In this line of thinking, the issue is not so much with boredom per se, but with people's inability to tolerate or engage with it. Indeed, many of the issues above, such as the dysfunctional gambling behaviour associated with boredom proneness, can be viewed as the result of a desperate *fleeing from* boredom; it is this common intolerance of boredom, and the resulting troubles, that led to the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1843, p.281) arguing forcefully that 'Boredom is the root of all evil.' In a less dramatic way, the anthropologist Genevieve Bell (2011) suggests that recent technological innovations like the smartphone have created a world of constant distraction that prevents people from ever having to be bored. On the surface, according to the conventional negative appraisal of boredom outlined above, these technological developments are surely a good thing, alleviating its ubiquitous and problematic burden. However, Bell argues that actually this easy distraction is an issue, since allowing oneself to experience boredom can not only be

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valuable, but important and vital. Indeed, she points to the emergence of trends such as 'digital detoxing' (Morrison & Gomez, 2014) as indicators that people need the time and space to occasionally be bored. Why might that be? What could boredom have to offer that might be of value?

Indeed, the impetus for the current paper stems from a similarly curious and provocative question by Robert Pirsig (1974) in his classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,* in which he discusses the value of meditation. A wealth of recent research has suggested that meditation (e.g., mindfulness) can be highly beneficial for wellbeing, from alleviating mental illness (Zindel et al., 2002) to helping people function better at work (Shapiro et al., 2005). In his book though, Pirsig makes a striking point in relation to the Zen practice of *zazen* (essentially a form of mindfulness): 'Zen has something to say about boredom. Its main practice of "just sitting" has got to be the world's most boring activity… You don't do anything much: not move, not think, not care. What could be more boring? Yet in the very center of this boredom is the very thing Zen Buddhism seeks to teach. What is it? What is it at the very center of boredom that you're not seeing?' (p317). This paper, then, attempts to explore this question.

In exploring relevant literature in pursuit of possible answers, three main responses emerged: (a) altered perceptions; (b) creativity; and (c) exploration of 'the self.' Regarding altered perceptions, the most striking example is shifts in one's experience of time. Indeed, Heidegger (1938), who wrote extensively on the importance of becoming attuned to boredom, felt that it amounted to a physical experience of time (and of our existence through time). More specifically, Heidegger argued that in boredom – which he referred to as an 'existential orientation' rather than a mood (Slaby, 2010) – subjective time tends to slow down, as if to a halt. In a similar vein, the dissident Soviet author and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky (1997) argued that boredom 'represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendour.' Of course, this sense of time slowing is a familiar feature of boredom; indeed, experiments in time perception suggest that high boredom prone people do experience time as subjectively passing more slowly (although they can often still accurately judge the objective passing of chronometric time) (Watt, 1991). However, what is striking about the position of Heidegger and Brodsky is the great *value* of entering into this altered mode of time perception. For instance, Brodsky described boredom as our 'window on time's infinity,' the experience of which

could radically alter our sense of place in the cosmos. Similarly, for Heidegger, deep boredom creates a clearing space in which one gains insights into the nature of reality, including the sense that one is responsible for creating meaning in life, and moreover is free and empowered to do so (Slaby, 2010).

Such insights brings us to the second key value of boredom in the literature: creativity. One can find many testimonials from geniuses attesting to the generative power of boredom. For instance, Nietzsche (1882, p.108) wrote that great artists 'require a lot of boredom if their work is to succeed. For thinkers and all sensitive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable 'windless calm' of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effect on them.' Similarly, Kets de Vries (2014) argued that boredom played a crucial role in many great artistic and scientific breakthroughs: Decartes allegedly 'discovered' the notions of x and y while idling in bed watching a fly on the ceiling, while Einstein reportedly achieved his initial pivotal insight into the nature of relativity while abstractly daydreaming. Thus, as Stern (1988) puts it, the 'heavy-gaited time' (p.5) of monotony and boredom serves as a gestational space, and finally as a 'reluctant but nevertheless urgent passageway to creativity' (p.11). Such anecdotes have been corroborated by recent research. For instance, Gasper and Middlewood (2014) and Mann and Cadman (2014) found that participants induced into a state of boredom performed far better on creativity tests (e.g., thinking of novel uses for plastic cups) than people who were either elated, relaxed or distressed. One explanation given was that boredom allowed attention to wander, and the mind to free-associate, thus facilitating creativity. Indeed, from a neurophysiological perspective, boredom may activate the default mode network (Raichle et al., 2001), which is thought to play a key role in creativity (e.g., stimulus independent thought) (Takeuchi et al., 2012).

Finally, and perhaps most dauntingly but also most transformatively, boredom can be a means of self-exploration, of coming face-to-face with oneself. This brings us back to meditation, and to Pirsig's (1974) point that 'in the very center of this boredom is the very thing Zen Buddhism seeks to teach' (p.317). Zen is generally regarded to have begun with the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism to China in 520 A.D. (Watts, 1957). According to semi-historical legend, upon arrival in China, he failed to initially be well-received, and thereafter retreated to a cave and spent nine years meditating facing its wall. Such was his subsequent influence that wall-facing became the

dominant form of meditation in Zen (Senauke, 2006). The contemporary teacher Osho (2015) freely acknowledges that this activity is perhaps the very epitome of boredom. However, Eastern traditions have an interesting explanation for this boredom: at its core, it is the result of psychological tension that arises if people are uncomfortable being alone with themselves. As such, it is suggested that many people seek company or distraction to avoid this type of uncomfortable self-encounter (Pezeu-Massabuau, 2013). However, Buddhist theory holds that if one can tolerate and push on through this boredom and discomfort, one is able to gain vital insights into one's mind and self-identity (Biceaga, 2006). From a psychological growth perspective, such experiential insights can potentially be liberating and transformative; as Osho puts it, 'Watching the wall – slowly, slowly thoughts disappear, thinking stops, mind evaporates and what is left is your authentic reality' (p.486).

So, as can be seen, although boredom has tended to be conceptualised as a negative state, there are valid reasons to suppose that it may potentially be of some value. The current study, then, is an exploratory investigation of boredom, aimed at enquiring into its nature and understanding any positive experiential elements. To do this, the study uses the relatively unconventional method of phenomenological introspection. Introspection was a much valued methodology in the early years of psychology, pioneered by phenomenological philosophers like Edmund Husserl (1931). Indeed, William James (1890, p.185) wrote that 'Introspective Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always.' The technique fell out of favour due to numerous factors, from the dominance of Skinner's (1938) behaviourism in the first half of the 20th century, to the critique of self-knowledge and agency provided by post-constructionist theories of identity in the latter half (e.g., Gergen, 1985). However, in recent years, the value of phenomenology has once again been recognised, most prominently within consciousness studies with the emergence of Varela's (1996) neurophenomenology paradigm. As outlined in Varela and Shear's (1999) edited book *The View from Within: First-Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness*, first-person reports of subjectivity have an invaluable (and indeed irreplaceable) role in furthering our understanding of psychological processes and experience. As such, this study brings the introspective phenomenological method to bear on the experience of boredom, with the aim of enquiring whether boredom may contain value or uses that are not readily apparent in conventional (i.e., negative) appraisals of this state.

Method

Overview

Introspective phenomenology is a form of empiricism which involves observing and reporting on one's own subjectivity with as much accuracy as possible. As Sinnott-Armstrong (2008, p.85) puts it, 'The method is simple: describe the phenomena. More precisely: introspect on your own experience and then describe what it is like to have certain kinds of experience.' The method can arguably be situated within the broader emergent paradigm of auto-ethnography (Denzin, 2013), being distinguished in particular by efforts to engage with one's current subjective experience. For this study, conditions were established in which I would experience boredom for an hour, specifically, in the middle of a 13 hour airplane flight. (Given the nature of the project, the first person voice will be used from here on in.) I recorded my experiences in real time using an adaption of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1987) Experiencing Sampling Method. The recorded data were explored for thematic content, and analysed using an adaptation of Smith's (1996) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Participant

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research, since the personal background and qualities of the researcher impact upon the research at all stages of the process, including serving as the 'filter of salience through which data are sieved' (Schreiber, 2001, p.60). As such, it is worth mentioning a few salient details about myself here that are relevant to the study. (That said, I shall keep this brief, for reasons given in the discussion.) I am a 36 year old lecturer in psychology. I was born in London into to a very loving middle class family (although my parents, both teachers, have a working class background), with one brother and sister. I did well academically at school, despite it being a rough place, and spent much of my time playing music and football. Before university I taught English for six months in China, and returned the following year to visit Tibet; it was there I became interested in Buddhism, and have tried ever since (with varying success) to maintain a regular meditation practice. I moved up to Edinburgh to study psychology, and stayed there for nine years. I spent five years in a touring and recording band while also working as a psychiatric nursing assistant. I moved back to

London in 2008 to undertake a PhD, studying the impact of meditation on mental health, and took up a position as a lecturer at a university in London in 2013.

Data collection

The intention was to gather real-time data on my own subjective experience of boredom. The data collection method was an adaption of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1987) Experiencing Sampling Method (ESM). Standard ESM protocol involves participants being contacted at various intervals (e.g., via pager), at which point they are asked to self-rate current experience (e.g., in terms of affect). The variation pioneered in the current study might be termed the 'micro-experience auto-sampling method' (MEASM). It is micro because it covers a relatively short period of time (one hour in this case). It is auto in two respects: (a) it is autonomous, in that the data was elicited and recorded by myself, rather than at the prompting of an independent researcher; and (b) it is automatic, in that the prompts were regulated by a set timer (in this case, setting my phone to alert me, via a vibration, every 60 seconds).

The specific details of the data collection are as follows. A period of time was selected in which I was likely to be bored. The occasion selected was a 13 hour flight (leaving Singapore at 7am, bound for London). I selected the mid-point of the flight (i.e., after six hours) as the hour in which data collection would occur. This was chosen as an ideal situation for boredom, given, (a) flights are generally regarded as somewhat boring; (b) after six hours, I was already likely to be bored; (c) limited opportunities for movement (none in fact occurred during the hour); (d) limited opportunities for interaction (none in fact occurred during the hour); and (e) a relatively unchanging visual scene (window blinds were purposefully kept closed, and my entertainment screen turned off). Moreover, prior to the data collection hour, I specifically sought to ensure that I would already be in a state of boredom. For the first four hours of the flight, I watched two films (The Usual Suspects, and American Beauty), both of which I like but had seen at least twice before. I then spent two hours doing nothing (i.e., not entertaining myself in any way, and also not specifically trying to meditate or engage in interesting mental activities), to further foster a state of boredom. For the data collection hour itself, I sat comfortably in my chair and set my phone to vibrate every 60 seconds. At each 60-second prompting, I quickly wrote a note [a few words] on my laptop, simply recording what I was

thinking, feeling or experiencing at that particular moment. Immediately at the end of the hour, I then expanded each note into a full sentence, drawing on my still-fresh memory to provide slightly more detail and context to each note.

Data analysis

The data analysis method was a variation on Smith's (1996) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Standard IPA protocol was developed for the analysis of one-to-one interviews of a small group of participants who are 'homogenous' in some way. However, recent years have seen adaptations to suit various methodological contexts, e.g., focus groups (Palmer et al., 2010). IPA usually aims towards moving from the particular (i.e., one person's experiences) to the shared (i.e., experiences people have in common). However, in the current study, the aim was to explore the particular in some depth through a sustained exercise in introspection, thereby providing a case study of boredom. In other respects, however, the protocol of IPA was followed, i.e., moving from the descriptive to the interpretative via a process of close line-by-line coding followed by identification of emergent themes.

The data analysis occurred immediately after the data collection hour. The raw data were the 60 notes I had made during the hour (one per minute). Thus, the first stage of the analysis was the process of expanding these notes into whole sentences, as indicated above, which took about 10 minutes. I then moved into the initial coding stage, in which I sought to identify up to three themes for each of the 60 entries (with an 'entry' consisting of the original note, plus the expanded sentence). In doing so, since the experience was still fresh in my mind, I was able to move from description to interpretation by drawing on memories and reflections of the hour itself, thereby substantiating and fleshing out the recorded notes. This coding process generated 82 separate themes (some shared by more than one entry). Next, I looked for emergent patterns of commonality by grouping the themes into categories based on conceptual similarity, which generated 20 categories. The categories were themselves then grouped into five meta-categories, again based on conceptual similarity: Time; World; Subjectivity; Self/Identity; and Project.

Results

The data collection hour generated 60 separate initial notes (one per minute), as detailed below verbatim in table 1. The expanded sentences based on the notes (written immediately after the hour) are included in the third column.

Minute	Verbatim note	Expanded sentence
1	why do this, futile	Question futility of exercise
2	thinking of items! pressure	Wonder about pressure to write one item per minute
3	fast min	Surprised by speed of the previous minute
4	dirty screen	Notice computer screen needs cleaning
5	blank, fuzzy mind	No thoughts in mind – head fuzzy
6	weird screen pattern	Notice unusual pattern in background to computer screen
7	sound stream wash over	Feel like I'm in a stream of sounds, washing over me
8	suites? etym.	Wonder about etymology of word 'suites'
9	knot – me, self?	Identify my 'sense of self' with a psychological 'knot' behind my forehead
10	quiet – nice!	Pleasant moment of silence
11	lipread aisle man	Try to lipread conversation of man standing in the aisle
12	plastic - inventor?	Wonder about who invented plastic
13	sudden breath – odd	Sharp intake of breath highlights the irregularity of my breathing
14	shoulder – old emo hurt?	Wonder whether tension in shoulder is an old emotional wound
15	nice water, thanks	Gratefully accept a glass of water
16	tired, seeing nothing	Feel like I've exhausted my observational powers
17	child sound like bird	Think that child in front sounds like a bird when she talks
18	untie knot in mind	Return to psychological 'knot,' and try to untie it mentally
19	eyes dart – look for interest	Feel my eyes darting around to find something of interest in environment

20	eyes to window. free?	Head turns involuntarily towards window; wonder about free will
21	time gone – sad at time passing	A sudden sadness at 20 minutes of my life having evaporated
22	blue light trance	Hypnotically drawn to blue light on cabin ceiling up ahead
23	time waste	Condemn this whole project as a waste of time, and unusable
24	words elusive	Finding that appropriate descriptive words are increasingly elusive
25	emails! anxious, chest	A flutter of anxiety in chest about returning to work emails
26	thoughts – come from?	Wonder how thoughts are being formed, and by who
27	mind = ocean, looking for fish	Feel like I'm peering into the ocean, waiting for fish (thoughts) to pop to the surface
28	want choc van ice	Craving for chocolate and vanilla ice cream
29	blinking = weird, nice	Think that blinking is an odd bodily activity, but pleasant
30	shins tingle	Tingling sensation in my shins
31	words like centipede chasing	Think that words on screen look like little centipedes chasing each other
32	thick tongue – want to poke	Tongue feels saturated – an urge to poke it out
33	clearing, no thought	A clearing, without thoughts
34	feeling endurance, keep at it	A feeling of endurance, like I could stick at this
35	time quick, surprise	Surprised at the relative speed of the exercise
36	my bonnie	The tune 'My bonnie' darts into my mind
37	ossle ossle	Some of its lyrics morph into nonsense syllables ("ossle ossle")
38	sunshine field at home – urge to run	Sudden urge to sprint across a field (behind my parents' house) in the sunshine

39	nice fest, happy	A happy memory of being at a music festival
40	uniforms – pretty	Admire ornate uniforms of cabin staff
41	bad election, annoyed	Bitterness at recent UK elections
42	red dungarees	Recall a pair of red corduroy dungarees I wore as a child
43	old and sad	Feel old, and a bit despondent
44	knot tight	Throbbing sensation in forehead – the knot tightening?
45	eyes closing – drowsy	Eyes close involuntarily; wave of drowsiness
46	time stopped	Feel that time hasn't moved at all (despite clock changing)
47	crew at curtain – clumsy magic	Flight attendant emerges suddenly from behind curtain, like a clumsy magician
48	slow thoughts, all incomplete	Thoughts slowing down, and emerging half finished
49	knot again – Nietz recur	A recurrence of the knot – a sense of 'eternal recurrence' (Nietzsche)
50	Nietz like koan – mystery	Think Nietzsche sounds like a Zen koan, and equally mysterious
51	me a ball on hill	Feel like I'm a ball, bobbling haphazardly down a gentle, bumpy, never-ending hill
52	vertigo, not just plane	A sudden vertigo, not related to being on a plane
53	silly task – me too!	Find myself quite preposterous for doing this
54	no blame	Admitting stupidity seems to absolve me of responsibility
55	peace, happy	Feeling quite peaceful, happy even
56	I don't matter – fine	My own insignificance strikes me as a relief
57	nearly done, free	Quite liberated at the thought of nearly finishing the hour
58	full? empty? strange	A strange sensation of being both fuller and emptier than when the hour began
59	hopeful future – mix of images	A sense of hopefulness about the future (arising from relatively inconsequential images)
60	nice unusual hour	Grateful for spending the hour in this unusual way

Table 1: Results from the data collection hour.

These entries were coded thematically, and grouped into categories and meta-categories. The themes, categories and meta-categories are shown in table 2 below, together with the specific entries associated with each theme.

Meta-category	Category	Theme	Entry
Time	Perception	Shifting time perceptions	3, 35
		Time quickening	3, 35, 52
		Time slowing	46
		Strangeness of passage of time	42, 46
	Usage	Time well spent	57, 60
		Time as a resource	60
	Existential reflection	Life passing quickly	21, 39, 43, 52
		Preciousness of time	21
		Make the most of time	21, 39
		Nostalgia	39, 43
		Sadness at time passing	43
World	Attentiveness	Noticing new features	4, 6, 22
		Surprise at surroundings	4, 47
		Perception/appreciation of detail	6, 24
		Attention 'ensnared/captured'	20, 40
		Lack of attentiveness	16
		Epistemic hunger	19
	Altered relationship	Aesthetic appreciation	6, 22, 40
		Perceptual shifts	7, 31, 47, 51
		Immersion in world	7
		Transience/impermanence	7
		Curiosity about phenomena	8, 11, 12, 50
		De-familiarisation (see old as new)	8, 12, 17, 31
	Engagement	Yearning for activity	38, 59

		Yearning to explore world	38, 39, 57, 59
		Sense of possibility	39, 52, 57
		Intentions for future activities	4, 34
		Probing the world	12, 19
		Receiving goods	15
	People	Attention to people	11, 15, 17, 40, 47
		Care/regard for others	11
	Broader concerns	Reflection on events	41
		Worry/concern about life	25, 41
Subjectivity	Embodiment	Somatisation of emotions	25
		Unfamiliarity with body	13, 14, 30, 32
		Involuntary nature of bodily processes	13, 32
		Getting to know body	30
		Sensations in head	5, 9
		Vivid memory	28, 38, 39, 42
	Mental strangeness	Slipperiness of mind	37
		De-familiarisation of internal world	29, 30, 32
		Mind as sea of potentials	27
		Content emerging unbidden	26, 27, 36, 41, 58, 60
		Sudden (involuntary?) shifts in attention	13, 20, 22, 44
		Strangeness of internal world	26, 29
	Clearing	Internal space	10, 33,
		Mental quietude	5, 10, 33
		Calmness	10, 33,
		Lightness	56
	Creativity	Creative imagination	31, 37, 59
		Free-associating (creativity/play)	8, 17, 36, 37, 47, 50, 60
	Positivity	Happiness	55, 56
		Freedom	56
		Delight/pleasure	28

		Pleasant sensation	29, 30
		Gratitude	15
		Desire	28
	Negativity	Mind drowsy/sluggish	45, 48
		Mental fuzziness	5
		Bodily discomfort	14, 18, 49
		Boredom	16
		Negative cognitions	25
Self/identity	Awareness	Witnessing consciousness	27, 44, 58
		Self-consciousness	53, 55
		Insignificance of self	55, 56
	Aspects of self	Emptiness of self	58
		Plenitude of self	58
		Probing self/identity	9, 14, 18, 20, 26, 42, 44, 49
		Lack of volitional control	36, 45, 51
	Creation of identity	Linked to mental tension (knot)	9, 18, 44, 49
		Self-as-repetition	49
		Sense of personal history/journey	14, 39, 42, 51
Project	Concerns	Doubt about value of project	1, 23, 53, 54
		Doubts about own ability	2, 16, 23, 24, 53, 55
		Exercise feels contrived	2
	Difficulties	Ineffability of experience	23, 24, 48, 50
		Exercise feels unfamiliar	1
		Strangeness of activity	46
	Positives	Appreciating activity	34, 57
		Enjoying activity	34, 35, 54, 57
		Flow	54, 55

Table 2: Themes, categories and meta-categories from the data collection hour.

Analysis and Discussion

The results offer a revealing insight into the phenomenology of boredom, showing this to potentially be a rich and dynamic state, full of value and possibility. Of course, there are the obvious caveats, such as the impossibility of generalising from this one intensive observation by one person to all other people and contexts, as discussed further below. Nevertheless, as a sustained introspective exercise, the results offer a unique case study of the kaleidoscopic nuances of boredom; it can be seen, in this case at least, that boredom is not necessarily the dull, valueless state that it is commonly taken to be, but can facilitate a fascinating array of experiences and insights. The hour yielded positive or intriguing moments relating to two of the three main sources of value outlined above – altered perception of time, and exploration of self – with an additional boon not previously identified, namely, curiosity regarding the external world. There were some experiences pertaining to the third main strand above, namely creativity, such as the generation of novel mental data through free association. In general though, there did not appear to be many moments of creativity per se. However, this is not especially surprising: in the literature, boredom is often presented as a *prelude* to creativity, a germinal state in which new associations are perhaps being made below the surface of awareness, which then burst forth after the period of boredom (Mann & Cadman, 2014). Thus, the three main sources of value were: (a) altered time perception; (b) environmental curiosity; and (c) exploration of self. These shall be outlined below.

However, before discussing the phenomenology of boredom in this instance, it is worth re-iterating one key point: I truly was bored! That is, as I began to engage with the exercise (i.e., at the beginning of the hour), I was in the midst of an on-going state that I would have no hesitation in describing as 'boredom.' Or more specifically, I was experiencing what could be called 'situational' (Toohey, 2011) or 'state' boredom (Fahlman et al., 2013), characterised by lack of interest in my current environment, comprising elements like restlessness combined with tiredness, disengagement, and inattentiveness, all of which are factors of Fahlman et al.'s (2013) Multidimensional State Boredom Scale. However, following the advice of Brodsky (1997), rather than seeking to escape or distract myself from the boredom – as I and others might normally do – I tried to enter deep into it, to really probe and explore it. In doing so, the experience started to change; I might still have plausibly

and legitimately described the hour as 'boring,' yet at the same time it began to become vibrant and interesting, full of mystery and depth. Whether it then still truly 'counts' as boredom is a fascinating question, and one which highlights the limitations of language in capturing the ineffable nuances of experience (Brockmeier, 2002). Indeed, this question actually highlights the shape-shifting nature of emotional and experiential categories, showing that if an experience such as boredom is fully embraced, it may no longer be boring per se. It is this same rationale that underpins mindfulness-based interventions, which are based on the premise that if dysphoric states like anxiety are engaged with in a particular spirit (e.g., open, curious, kind, and non-judgmental), then these states become somehow transmuted into less noxious or threatening versions, and perhaps even dissipate entirely (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

The first emergent meta-theme was altered time perception. A slowing or lengthening of subjective time is one of archetypal features of boredom, identified theoretically by philosophers such as Heidegger (1938), and corroborated in empirical experiments (e.g., Watt, 1991). However, in the current study, there was a strange sense of time both slowing *and* quickening: at points (e.g., min. 46) time felt almost static, yet at other moments (e.g., mins. 3, 35, & 52) I was surprised by the swiftness of the preceding minute, with a sensation of time slipping away through my fingers. Perhaps such juxtapositions are not so unfamiliar; as Roeckelein (2008) elucidates, the elusive, paradoxical nature of time has been recognised at least as far back as the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea (circa 490-430 B.C.). It has been argued that eventful (i.e., interesting) experiences seem to pass quickly at the time, but seem lengthy in retrospect (due to the formation of substantive and varied memories), while uneventful (i.e., boring) experiences pass slowly, but seem short afterwards (due to a lack of discrete memorable components) (Hammond, 2012). However, in the current study, sensations of time quickening and slowing appeared to alternate and even co-exist; indeed, an overriding feeling was simply of the *strangeness* of time, once observed up close.

Added to this strangeness was a strong, melancholic awareness of time as a precious resource that was fast depleting, as capture in minute 21. This in turn evoked a range of emotions, from nostalgia for time gone by, to an urgent wish to 'make the most' of future time. For instance, in minute 42, I recalled a pair of red trousers I used to wear as a child (which are vivid to me still, as

there is a photo of me wearing them, in which I just look completely happy); this memory led inexorably, in the next minute, to a sense of sadness at growing old. However, this melancholy train of thought then seemed to dissipate, and by the closing of the hour (e.g., minute 59), I was feeling rather more hopeful about life, and about the time that still lies ahead of me. Arguably these varied reflections corroborate Heidegger's point about the value of boredom as an embodied experience of time itself, generating vital existential insights, such as the need to act and seize the day before it passes (Slaby, 2010).

The second meta-theme was curiosity regarding my surroundings, both proximally (i.e., the aircraft cabin) and more distally (the world 'generally'). Usually, lack of interest in one's environment is a defining feature of boredom as conventionally understood (Fisherl, 1993). Indeed, I myself felt disengaged and inattentive at the beginning of the introspective hour (having deliberately induced boredom). However, as the hour proceeded, I noticed an unusual phenomenon. I had previously judged my surroundings as devoid of interest, hence boring. Normally, this would be the cue to seek alternative surroundings, or at least to distract myself. By removing these options though, I began to find value in stimuli that I had previously judged as lacking. I found myself noticing new features of my environment I had previously overlooked, and indeed appreciating these aesthetically (mins. 4, 6, 22, 40); moreover, stimuli I had become habituated to became 'de-familiarised,' i.e., seeming new and strange. For instance, I became mesmerised at one point (minute 40) by the beautifully ornate patterns on the uniforms of the cabin crew, which is certainly not something I have ever paused to appreciate or even notice previously. These experiences reflect a passage in Pirsig (1974), in which he describes people in the prairies noticing subtle phenomena that might be overlooked by people caught up in the sensory overload of the city, quiet moments of beauty that 'can be noticed because other things are absent' (p.24). In cognitive/epistemic terms, attention is often drawn to phenomena that are novel, salient, or urgent (Posner & Petersen, 1990). Phenomena that lack these qualities are thus often judged as lacking interest. But, if attention is compelled to stay with such phenomena, it is as if the mind *finds* ways to make these novel or salient. An example of this is the 'mindfulness of breathing,' a meditation practice focusing on the breath. Usually, one might take one's breathing for granted, or see

it as lacking interest. However, practitioners report that, once engaged with, the breath can become a source of great fascination, possessing subtle depths and nuances (Kapleau, 1965).

This last point brings us to our final meta-theme, exploration of the self (comprising both subjectivity and self/identity in the results table). Here we return to the idea that boredom brings us face-to-face with ourselves. As Stern (1988, p.5) puts it, boredom is a 'void [that] becomes a vital capability, [one that] confronts the question of "Who am I?".' Indeed, in Zen, the rigours of wall sitting meditation are designed to encourage/compel practitioners to 'push through' boredom and to interrogate their identity (Watts, 1957). Essentially, the aim of Zen meditation is for people to realise that their 'ego' (their conventional identity) is an 'illusion' (an on-going project of construction), and instead to experience the liberation of not 'having' an ego per se (Kapleau, 1965). During my introspection, I cannot claim to have had any such insights. However, I did certainly journey 'into myself,' exploring unfamiliar aspects of my being, and becoming attentive to my mental dynamics. For instance, there was a recurrent observation of a sensation of a 'knot' behind my forehead (minutes 9, 18, 44 and 49). This observation occurred in conjunction with a feeling that my sense of identity was somehow bound up with this sensation, as if, were the sensation to dissipate, so might my sense of self.

Similarly, I noticed the way that thoughts appeared to emerge unbidden (i.e., without me volitionally 'thinking' them), as in minute 26. While such observations are common currency in Buddhist theory – indeed, the title of a prominent book on Buddhism and psychotherapy is *Thoughts without a Thinker* (Epstein, 2004) – it was interesting to notice this for myself. However, this does raise the question as to whether my prior reading of Buddhism influenced my interpretation of minute 26 – i.e., was I primed to feel as if thoughts were arising unbidden due to my exposure to a philosophy that explicitly conceptualises thoughts thus?. More generally, I was intrigued by how slippery, elusive and strange the mind was, a fleeting dance of vague ephemera; not for nothing did William James (1890) famously refer to consciousness as a 'stream.' Indeed, I was particularly captivated by a meta-image that occurred to me in minute 27 – i.e., an image about the nature of mind itself, and about the nature of the introspective activity I was engaged in. In particular, I felt that the process was much like peering into an ocean, and waiting for fish (i.e., thoughts) to appear. In retrospect, this image does

indeed capture my feelings about the exercise, and the mind generally, quite effectively. I also found that my sphere of subjectivity appeared to widen, encompassing more phenomenological 'terrain.' For instance, I often tend to live 'in my head,' i.e., wrapped up in discursive thoughts, and am rather inattentive to my embodied experience. However, here I enjoyed the sensation of exploring the subjectivity of my body (e.g., minutes 29, 30 and 32), corroborating studies that have linked enhanced body awareness to wellbeing (Brani et al., 2014). That said, it wasn't an unmitigated enjoyment; both minutes 29 and 32 felt 'weird,' in that I was acutely aware of the sheer fact of my physical being, which evoked subsequent parallels in my mind with the sensation of 'nausea' described by Sartre (1938).

So, in all, I encountered a range of absorbing experiences during the hour. As I will suggest below, such empirical data have the potential to facilitate a re-appraisal of boredom, showing that it is not necessarily the dysphoric state it is usually conceived as being, but has the potential to also be of some psychological value. Before making this claim, however, I must introduce the inevitable caveat regarding the generalisability of the data. Firstly, the design of the study, and in particular the decision to elicit an observation every 60 seconds, inevitably influenced the nature of the data collected. In practice, this period of time actually felt very brief, and therefore the prompts were experienced as somewhat intrusive. Indeed, two of my first three observations (minutes 2 and 3) related specifically to the pressure I felt relating to the need to note down observations so frequently. Moreover, this design structure arguably impacted on the nature of the observations, in a number of ways. Firstly, one might argue that the rapidity of the observation sequence impeded the chance for boredom to truly 'set in.' There was roughly only 50 seconds between completing my note for a given minute and being prompted for my note for the subsequent minute. Moreover, given that I knew in advance how soon my next observation would be prompted, in the seconds leading up to the prompt I often found myself already composing the notes I would write when prompted. This latter point was exacerbated by my knowledge that I would seek to report and publish my observations, which perhaps created a certain pressure to make them interesting or noteworthy. As such, it could be said that I was actually task-focused for much of the time, rather than actually allowing myself to be bored. Given these

points, I have some suggestions below for how future research in this area might remedy these limitations.

A second point regarding the generalisability of the data is the fact that this is just one person's experience of boredom on one occasion. Reflexivity demands that I acknowledge the data as necessarily particular, determined by my own history and characteristics. To this extent, I have tried to give some brief indications of how my personal history may have shaped the 'filter of salience' through which the data were sieved (Schreiber, 2001, p.60), such as my familiarity with meditation (discussed further below), and my prior familiarity with Buddhist theory (mentioned above). However, I am wary about focusing overly on my personal characteristics. This study is a phenomenology of boredom, not of me, and there is a risk that excessive reflexivity turns into a form of 'epistemological narcissism,' in which researchers are more concerned with accounting for themselves than their data (Cutcliffe, 2003). Moreover, there are limits to reflexivity: even the lengthiest autobiographies fail to capture the near-infinity of stories and experiences that constitute a person. Moreover, as psychoanalytic theory has recognised, there is so much about the person that is hidden to themselves (Luft, 1969); thus, the idea that I can ever fully 'account for' myself, let alone within the confines of a short academic paper, is something of an impossibility. In any case, the study is not about 'proving' that boredom can be a valuable experience for everybody all of the time. No doubt there are many people who experience severe boredom, such as isolated older adults (Gabriel & Bowling, 2004), and need genuine assistance to find engaging activities and relationships to alleviate its burden. Rather, this is simply a case study to suggest that boredom has the potential at least to not be an *entirely* negative and unfulfilling state of mind.

That being said, it could also be argued that my 'ability' to engage with boredom, and to find interest in it, was due to my experience as a practising meditator, as well as to the possibility that I was motivated to make the experience interesting. Indeed, it could even be suggested that, during the activity, I *was* actually meditating (i.e., trying to observe my internal world with non-judgemental curiosity), rather than being bored. However, this latter reflection is precisely the point of this paper, with its aim of 'reappraising' boredom. As Biceaga (2006) argues, perhaps meditation is boredom, and boredom is meditation? The only difference between the two then is that boredom is

conventionally appraised as negative (and hence people tend to denigrate or devalue it), whereas meditation is usually regarded as a worthwhile and beneficial mental activity (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Consequently, if people were able to regard their boredom as a meditative experience, it may no longer be appraised as negative; indeed, it may no longer even be boring – as I found during the hour, the boredom became interesting!

These kinds of reappraisals have relevance for fields such as positive psychology (PP), which are concerned with wellbeing and flourishing (Lomas et al., 2014). PP initially appeared to make a distinction between mental states that were 'positive' (e.g., optimism) and those that were 'negative' (e.g., anxiety). It furthermore often implied that the former were necessarily good, and should be sought, whereas the latter were intrinsically bad, and should be eschewed. However, in recent years, a 'second wave' of the field has been emerging (Held, 2004; Wong, 2011; Lomas & Ivtzan, 2015), in which it is recognised that: (a) ostensibly positive states can be detrimental to wellbeing in certain circumstances, e.g., 'excessive optimism' is linked to health risk behaviours (Weinstein, 1987); (b) apparently negative states can sometimes be conducive to flourishing, e.g., anxiety can alert us to potential threats, and encourage pro-active coping (Norem, 2001); and, (c) many desirable states (e.g., love) are actually 'co-valenced,' involving a complex dialectical blend of light and dark elements (Lazarus, 2003). In this context, perhaps the current paper can contribute towards a re-appraisal of boredom, challenging the conventional view that it is necessarily 'negative' and devoid of value, and suggesting that it has the potential, if engaged with, to be a positive and rewarding experience.

However, this potential needs further corroboration through future research, given the limitations of the current study, as outlined above. Based on these limitations, I would like to offer various recommendations for any such research into this topic. Firstly, in terms of generalisability, it will be helpful to recruit a broad range of participants, of varying age, gender, ethnicity, and educational level. Efforts could also be made to compare people with and without meditation experience, to explore the intriguing notion that meditators may have developed a particular ability or capacity to appreciate boredom. Secondly, in terms of the session itself, a longer time period than 1 hour would ideally be allocated to allow boredom to truly manifest; indeed, researchers might try experimenting with different durations to compare their impact (e.g., 2 hours versus 1 whole day).

Thirdly, and similarly, it would be prudent to space the observation prompts further apart than 60 seconds. As discussed above, in practice, this interval felt too short, and indeed intrusive, making the hour too 'task-oriented.' Gaps of 5 or even 10 minutes would be preferable in this regard. Moreover, researchers might give thought to spacing these intervals with a degree of randomness, e.g., giving the first prompt after 10 minutes, the second after 6 minutes, the third after 14 minutes, the fourth after 3 minutes, and so on. This would prevent participants anticipating or waiting for a prompt (e.g., trying to guess when 5 minutes had lapsed, and preparing their observation in advance), as I did here. Fourth, to alleviate task demands, it would be better for participants to be able to verbally report their observations (via audio-recorder) rather than having to write these down.

Finally, in terms of recruiting participants, it may be worth developing a protocol where the period of boredom appears to participants as merely accidental. This would help prevent participants *realising* that it was a study about boredom, a realisation which would, (a) reduce the likelihood of their participation in the first place, and (b) influence their responses. For instance, participants could ostensibly be recruited to an experiment which seems appealing and interesting, such as a flight simulation. Then, on arrival to the experiment, participants could simply be asked to sit alone in a waiting room, with no distractions. Once there, they might be warned that there might be a 'bit of a wait,' of up to two hours, say, before the experiment started. The researchers might then contrive some reason to intermittently check on the participants and enquire what they are thinking about. Obviously, this is just one suggestion, but arguably something akin to this might be needed to generate an ecologically valid situation of genuine boredom. If this is managed, then we shall get a better idea of whether boredom can indeed be a useful and valuable state, as this current paper has suggested.

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