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The Shamefulness of Boredom: Are good researchers allowed to be bored?

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Introduction

Being bored is an anathema for the sociological researcher. While nearly every academic is well-acquainted with boredom, boredom is shameful; it goes against the very idea of what social scientific inquiry should be. Any researcher worth her salt is supposed to have a strong inner desire for knowledge. She should be curious and interested in discovering something new.¹ And yet many researchers are compelled to do research under conditions that discourage curiosity and adventurous research. They are often obliged to investigate topics that someone else thought up and which don't particularly interest them. As many of us can attest, research funders notoriously expect answers to our questions before we have even started our research, thereby killing the drive to uncover something unexpected. The activity of theorizing has been reduced to providing boring summaries of other people's theories for an audience already more than familiar with them.² Mainstream methodologies are often required that stifle researchers' creativity and confine them to the safe middle ground of the unsurprising, the expected, what everyone already knows.

Even researchers, who are working on topics near and dear to their hearts and enjoy the freedom of doing research in the way they like, will occasionally have to struggle with boredom. In my own case, I have been fortunate enough to do research in fields that value and even demand creative approaches and yet this has not been a remedy for the experience of boredom. More often than not, I have had to struggle to find an 'angle' i.e. something surprising or unfamiliar that will make my research worth doing and, consequently, worth reading about. As I wrote in our introduction of this volume (p. xx), the absence of an angle can make even the most worthy research project boring for a researcher who longs to feel curious, to be inspired and excited. To make matters even worse, boredom is often not limited to a temporary moment of discomfort; these boring moments may stretch out into long periods during which nothing seems interesting or worth investigating. This can feel very much like existential despair ('what am I doing here?')

¹ Of course, curious people are not always welcome in universities where researchers are expected to adapt themselves to output driven research management and professionalized disciplinary structures. They may not be encouraged and may even be kept down or kept out (Ball, 2012). See, also, Phillips (2015) for an excellent overview of recent books on curiosity – a topic, which, like boredom, has been not been treated as a subject that merits serious sociological attention.

² I say that as someone who cannot read another synopsis of Foucault's work and have come to approach theoretical overviews with a big yawn. See, Davis (2014) for a critical discussion of the failure within the academy to engage with theories rather than merely replicating them.

‘What is the point?’), making the line between boredom and depression at times a very fine one.

Most academics would probably agree that the experience of boredom in research undermines our inspiration, dulls our senses, saps our motivation, and may even damage our identities as competent scholars and researchers.³ As Baghdadchi (2005) provocatively puts it, it is all well and good to decry things that are boring and to claim that being interesting is what counts, but, in fact, the ‘real business’ of academic work has little to do with ‘being interesting’. Rather it is about constructing arguments that can withstand attack in an antagonistic environment. Most contemporary scholars rightly believe that their audiences will be more critical of a lack of rigour in their work than the fact that it is boring. Indeed, boredom is something we have all come to expect. Therefore, one could say that the ubiquity of boredom in the academy should be seen – at least for those of us who still believe that research should be interesting and even exciting - as a ‘sign that our system is not functioning the way we think it is’ (Baghdadchi,2005:324).

Both its ubiquity and its negative effects on scholars should be reason enough to take the experience of boredom in research seriously. One way of doing this is to explore the moments when we become bored by asking questions like: what are the contexts and circumstances in which we describe ourselves as being bored? What kinds of perceptions and emotions accompany the experience of boredom? What kinds of objects, activities, ideas or people bore us? This kind of self-interrogation may seem like old hat for many qualitative researchers who are accustomed to think reflexively about their research. However, as Giardina and Newman (2011:525) have argued, even qualitative researchers rarely explore how they become entangled in and positioned by a whole range of emotional experiences like pain, suffering, and love. In their view, researchers need to do more than intellectually reflect on their position and the ways they are complicit with the problems they are trying to address. They need to ‘inhabit’ the research situation and explore how it impacts on their body. This means finding ways to write about research experiences that include bodily sensations, emotions, feelings of unease and excitement and making them an integral part of the analysis itself.

In this chapter, I will attempt to ‘inhabit’ the experience of being bored in the context of doing research using one of my own research experiences as a case in point. I begin by arguing why boredom should not be viewed as a non-issue or an embarrassment to be quickly forgotten, nor dismissed as a universal existential condition or inescapable artefact of modernity. Instead I suggest that becoming aware of boredom creates an uncomfortable moment which can tell us something important about ourselves as researchers, the research situation we are involved in, and the topics we are investigating. In what follows, I

³ Baghdadchi (2005) sums academic boredom up nicely as ‘the sense that the seminar is never going to end, that the speaker will never get to the point, that the articles one is reading are proceeding at a glacial pace, that one simply cannot get into a discussion, that one dreads getting into it in the first place’ (p. 319)?

will dive in and explore in the most embodied way possible what it is like to be bored in research. Before I do this, however, a few words are in order about what has been written on the subject of boredom.

Theorizing boredom

The subject of boredom has primarily been left to philosophers, historians, and psychoanalysts who have treated it, respectively, as an existential condition from which everyone suffers (Popova, 2015), an emotional state that takes on different forms and names through history (Peters, 1975; Dalle Pezze and Salzani, 2008) or an intrapsychic conflict that can be exploited by the enterprising therapist (Waugh, 1975; Phillips, 1993). Boredom is viewed as an emotional or affective experience in which 'the world, and the individuals that populate it, appear to be dull and banal, without interest, meaning or purpose '(Gardiner 2012:40).⁴ Being bored is a 'blasé attitude' (Simmel, 1997, cited in Gardiner, p. 42) where the new distractions of modern life fail to excite us. Boredom feels like a 'warm, grey cloth' of emotional flatness and an indifference that envelops and benumbs us (Benjamin, 1968, cited in Gardiner, p. 49). It insulates us from the uncertainties of the modern world, but at the cost of curiosity, commitment, and passion. Boredom is a feeling of 'emptiness' and hunger for stimuli, accompanied by the passive expectation that the outside world will somehow supply satisfaction (Greenson, 1953). It is simultaneously a state of longing and an inability to indicate the object of one's longing. Boredom alters our sense of temporality whereby time seems to stand still, becoming an endless waiting for nothing that suffuses and dominates our consciousness (Kingwell, 2019). Time turns into an endless flow of neutral, indifferent moments that seem to disappear 'in an instant that is already passed' without being embedded in a meaningful experience (Lefebvre, 1995:166). A bored person is dissatisfied and impatient, fidgety and yet too lethargic to take action to change the situation. The co-existence between the seemingly incompatible tendencies of restlessness and apathy are the crux of what being bored is all about (Bernstein, 1975:516).

For some, boredom is the cause of terrible suffering, creative paralysis, and even one of life's greatest tortures. As the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1955:181) put it, 'If I were to imagine Hell, it would be the place where you were continually bored.' For others, boredom has something 'soft and cosy' about it. This is, for example, how the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1995) recalls Sundays with the family in his childhood: as life that was 'lived in slow motion ... was *lived* there' (Lefebvre, 1995:118). With unmistakable

⁴ Some scholars make a distinction between responsive and chronic boredom. The former is a response to external circumstances (a rainy day, a tedious task, a mind-numbing lecture), while the latter resembles the malaise of a clinical depression (Bernstein, 1975:513-517). In this chapter, I will be focussing more on the former, although these areas can overlap as an academic who has gone through an existential crisis concerning her research can attest.

nostalgia, he regarded such experiences as valuable for providing moments of reverie, little 'half-dreams' that could provide a glimpse of alternative ways of living and being.

Some have attempted to find something positive in the experience of being bored. Taking up the Russian writer Leon Tolstoy's famous adage from *Anna Karenina* that boredom is the 'desire for desires', the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (1993) calls boredom 'the state of suspected anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire' (p. 71). In his memories of the 'great ennui of childhood,' he sees boredom as the child not knowing what it is waiting for or even that it is waiting. It is the 'half-hearted search for something to do that will make a difference,' transforming boredom into surprise, interest, and maybe even outright desire (p. 75). From a psychoanalytic perspective, childhood **boredom** is a preparation for as well as the search for something about which the child is presently unaware, but longs to be able to discover.

Boredom has been a neglected feeling in sociology. Sociologists seem to be more concerned with the 'big' issues like social inequality, discrimination and unemployment than with something as seemingly trivial as boredom. Those sociologists, who have turned their attention to boredom, have been primarily concerned with it as an artefact of modernity (Gardiner, 2012).⁵ Boredom is regarded as a typically modern experience in an era in which people have become addicted to hyper-stimulation and to fleeting sensations that are repetitive and empty and that, therefore, quickly become boring. The modern subject has become unable to find meaning in the endless stream of images and 'information' which have been robbed of all the metaphysical anchors formerly provided by the natural world or religiously inspired rituals and celebrations (Lefebvre, 1995; Goodstein, 2005). From a sociological perspective, boredom is a kind of alienation produced by modernity - 'an estrangement from the formerly stable moral and socio-cultural foundations of acting and thinking' (Gardiner, 2012: 42).

While much of the sociology of boredom has been devoted to exploring the link between boredom and modernity, the actual experience of boredom has received considerably less attention. A notable exception is the sociologist Jack Barbalet (1999) who examines how boredom manifests itself in everyday social life. Transposing the psychoanalytic reading of childhood boredom into an adult experience, he argues that boredom is, first and foremost, a defence against meaninglessness. Meaning is what makes something subjectively understandable and worth getting involved in. Meaning is what makes something matter to a person (p. 632). Without meaning, therefore, social life would be impossible. Thus, when a person feels that their actions or circumstances are without meaning, they will react with anxiety precisely because the situation holds no significance for them. As affective

⁵ See, for example, Lefebvre (1995; 2002; 2005); Barbalet (1999); Benjamin (2005); Goodstein (2005); Dalle Pezze and Salzani, eds. (2008), Ehn and Löfgren (2010) and, for an excellent overview of the sociology of boredom, Gardiner (2012).

experience, boredom alerts a person to meaninglessness and, therefore, provides the impetus needed to look for meaning (Barbalet, 1999: 633).⁶ Herein lies a potentially positive aspect of what, at first glance, seems to be only an uncomfortable and negative experience. Boredom produces a restless feeling which initiates a search for meaning – a process leading to ‘curiosity, invention, and associated activities in which not merely variety and novelty but meaningfulness in activity and circumstance are sought’ (Barbalet, 1999: 641).

After this brief foray into what has been written about boredom, I now turn to a concrete example of being bored taken from my own research on passion as an everyday phenomenon. As part of this research, I not only interviewed people involved in an ardent love affair (which is perhaps the most orthodox understanding of passion) but also people with a passion for anything from scuba diving, to tango dancing, to watching birds or collecting rocks, and even a passion for doing research. My assumption was that passion is part of how people try to make their lives meaningful and, therefore, worth living. Given this assumption, I did not expect to encounter boredom in my informant’s stories about their passions, nor did I anticipate feeling bored listening to them. I turned out to be wrong on both counts. I now take a look at an incident in one of my interviews in which I experienced boredom first-hand and discovered that, contrary to my previous assumption, boredom and passion are anything but antithetical.

Example: ‘Give me that pen’

The interview in question was with a person who had been referred to me by another informant as a ‘woman with a mission.’ I arrived for the interview to find a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman who, after supplying me with a cup of herbal tea, launched into a story about her fascination for a new pedagogy directed at educating infants.

During the interview, I sat across from her with my pen and notebook in hand, taking notes and making listening noises at the appropriate moments. Her story unfolded slowly with all the usual elements – her first discovery of the pedagogy, why it captivated her, how she decided to learn it herself, and, finally, her experiences promoting it in her home town. All of this was rendered in a monotone and none of it was terribly exciting. Try as I might, I couldn’t find anything of interest and my thoughts began to wander. I felt restless and began to surreptitiously glance at my watch. How much longer will this go on? Is there anything I can ask to liven things up a bit? I was clearly bored, yet as a researcher I knew that I was not supposed to be bored by my informant. I was assailed by a sinking, anxious and slightly panicky feeling that something was seriously wrong. If I was already bored with my informant’s story, how could I possibly transform it into something that other people might become enthusiastic about? Obviously, this did not bode well for my research.

⁶ It is this dynamic which differentiates boredom from alienation, for example. Alienation is also the absence of meaning, but the focus, at least in the Marxian sense of the word, is on the structural determinants, making it a much more static concept.

As if reading my thoughts, the informant suddenly changed the subject and asked me whether I had children. I jerked to attention and admitted, somewhat shame-facedly, that I did not. However, before I could don the penitential robe, she stood up and walked over to me, abruptly grabbed my pen and said: "This is how parents communicate with their babies. They say: 'Give me this pen. It's dangerous.'" She then looked me in the eye and extended her hand, saying softly: "Please give me the pen." She then began gently wiggling the end of the pen, all the time looking me in the eye and asking me to give it to her. I felt my fingers loosen automatically and I handed over the pen without further ado. She laughed delightedly. "See," she explained, "that's how to do it. You see, it works." She proceeded to explain that the problem with very young children is more that the parents want the child to become independent, but not now, than that the child is not willing to cooperate. By communicating with infants directly, their autonomy is respected and they are enabled to become compliant.

Remembering this interview still evokes embarrassment. I remember how exposed I felt. I was caught out in something that put me in a very bad light. Not only had I failed as a woman who is bored by babies, but I had also failed as a biographical researcher, who was bored by my informant's story. Worst of all, my informant was on to me. She must have sensed that I was not particularly interested in her story and it was she, the informant – not me, the researcher - who found a way to - literally – pull me, pen and all, back into her story. And, indeed, I was suddenly listening, if not with avid interest, at least without the painful sensation of being paralyzed by boredom.

As the interview progressed, my informant explained that she had considered calling off our appointment because she felt she probably wasn't the right person for an interview about passion. She went on to tell me that she had initially gotten into her work with infants because she wanted to have something she could be passionate about, something separate from her family, something that was all her own. However, she had recently come to the realization that she had lost her initial enthusiasm. She was uncertain about whether she even still wanted to be involved in it. "It all just feels like a heavy backpack now," she said.

I wish I could say that her admission of her own boredom with her former passion led to a deeper conversation about her present crisis, but it did not. After some more desultory talk, the interview ground to an uneventful close. What I had hoped would be an animated exchange about passion became its polar opposite: a monotonous narrative about something both of us apparently found uninteresting, tedious – and yes – boring. While this may not seem like a Eureka moment with flashing lights and exciting revelations, it, nevertheless, stuck in my mind and I found myself returning to it again and again, wanting to understand it and hoping to get something out of it. In short, I needed for it to have some

meaning.⁷ To this end, I decided to go back to the interview experience and see whether an exploration of how I became bored by my informant could provide something of more general interest concerning the experience of boredom in research.

Making sense of boredom

The interview experience described above niggled away at me for many months after it happened. It was not only decidedly unpleasant at the time, but even thinking about it after-the-fact evoked a kind of restless unease which was disagreeable and not something I was eager to pursue. It not only made me uncomfortable about myself as an interviewer (for example, why hadn't I facilitated the interview in a way that would have enabled my informant to explore her current life crisis?), but it also made me question the assumptions I had been making about everyday passion being an interesting sociological topic. Perhaps I was on the wrong track altogether. If people's stories about their passions could bore me, how could I possibly make a case for the importance of passion in everyday life? I felt stuck and, as a result, found myself running away from the feelings I had had during the interview. Boredom was an emotional experience that I had no desire to think about, and yet that continued to haunt me.

It was only when I decided to tackle my boredom head on, that I made several unexpected discoveries – about myself as researcher, about the relationship between interviewer and interview partner, about boredom as a process, and about the difference between things that bore us and things that we are curious about.

The bored researcher

I embarked on this interview expecting to be interested in what my interview partner would be telling me about her life. As a researcher who specializes in doing biographical interviews, listening to people's life stories is what I most like to do. Like most of my colleagues, I assume that any person's life is interesting and that it will invariably offer possibilities for sociological analysis. I have been trained to establish rapport with my interview partners and know how to express interest and do everything I can to help them tell their story. I have learned to listen carefully and I try to put myself in their shoes, imagining what the experience might feel like for my interview partner. And, finally, as a researcher I am always (meta-) listening for ways to connect my informants' stories about their lives to the sociological questions that are driving my research.

Given this background, it is not surprising that I became extremely uncomfortable when I was unable to perform properly as a qualitative researcher. Not being able to find something interesting in my interview partner's story made me feel ashamed. It did not

⁷ I had a similar experience with a failed research project in which I had invested much time and effort. After much agonizing and avoidance, I decided that my only option was to write about the failure itself. See, Davis and Gremmen (1998).

occur to me at first that her story might just be boring or that she herself was bored by having to tell it. Instead I was assailed by self-doubt. It seemed inexcusable for me as interviewer to be bored in an interview. I experienced it as a profound personal failure. The shame that the failure to connect with my interview partner raised the spectre of not being able to transform our interview into something potential readers could find interesting or worthwhile. Yet, as Elsbeth Probyn (2005:162) has pointed out in *Blush*, her insightful book on shame, it is precisely this spectre of not being interesting that is enough to send a shiver down the spine of any writer and, therefore, can provide the much needed motivation to find ways to do better.

I began looking for support from other scholars who had had similar experiences, but found that surprisingly little had been written about boredom as it occurs in research situations. The notable exception is Baghdadchi (2005) who links what he calls academic boredom to practices that are held in place by the institutions in which we work. In his view, treating boredom as a personal failure that no one wants to admit stands in the way of understanding what it is about the situation that makes us unable to find anything of interest for ourselves. There is nothing inherently boring about pedagogy for babies. My interview partner's story might have been interesting and even inspiring for someone else. It was simply that I had difficulty finding something meaningful in what she was saying, let alone imagining how it might be of value to my current research. What had made me anxious and even panicky, wanting to get away as fast as I could, had less to do with the listless sensation of boredom itself than with the shame I felt at having failed as 'good' interviewer and competent social scientist. It became clear to me that the silence in the field about the problem of boredom in research were allowing me to define boredom as my personal failure rather than an intrinsic part of most research. More importantly, this silence precluded viewing boredom as something that could teach me something valuable about my research. In other words, boredom ought to be treated as a resource and analysed rather than regarded as a source of shame to be avoided.

Boring informants

Being bored is not the individual failure of the interviewer or the informant, but rather a relational, mutually produced process. While it feels inner-directed and even self-absorbed, it is triggered by a loss of connection – in my case, with my interview partner and her story. Barbalet (1999) calls it the 'feeling of not being involved in or engaged by events or activities' (p.634). My restless and irritable discomfort and torturous inner monologue of self-doubt signaled a lack of receptivity to my interview partner. In her attempt to retrieve shame as a potentially positive emotional experience, Probyn (2005) argues that individual feelings of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior should be seen as a productive and relational process. Shame emerges through an interest in and a connection with another person. If I had not felt I should be interested in my interview partner, I could not have felt ashamed when I was bored by her story. This lack of

interest and foiled relationship results in the desire to re-evaluate oneself and re-establish a connection with the other.

In the interview, my boredom was interrupted when my interview partner took charge of the situation. She startled me out of my apathy by suddenly jumping up, coming over to me and touching me. It is so unexpected for interview partners, especially when they are strangers as we were, to physically touch. Indeed, my interview partner risked my displeasure by confronting me with my lack of relevant knowledge ('Do you have children?') and disrupted the interview situation by physically taking my pen out of my hand. Lefebvre (2005:95) argues that doing something risky is a typical way to shatter the monotony of everyday life and open up the possibility that something new, different, and maybe even exciting can happen. My interview partner's action 'shattered' the boredom I experienced, pulled me out of the 'banality of self-absorption' and re-established a connection between us. The interview could move forward on a different footing.

One of the effects of my informant's intervention was that I began to see that my boredom was not simply a matter of my individual failing, but that we were both, to some extent, embroiled in the same experience of being bored. She could tell me that she was no longer particularly interested in what had previously been her passion and that it had become a 'heavy back pack'. Since she herself was bored by her own story, it is not surprising that she did not tell it in a way that would have allowed me to vicariously enter into her experience. Nor did she reflect on what her disenchantment might mean in terms of her life and sense of self, something that would have grabbed my interest as biographical researcher. Instead she produced a narrative about her 'calling' that she had probably told many times before, a canned version recited mechanically with little enthusiasm. However, when she noticed that I was not paying attention (my glazed-over eyes probably gave me away), her own boredom was momentarily disrupted, whether by surprise or irritation at not being able to get her message across. By jumping up and grabbing my pen, she not only interrupted her own narrative that was boring her, but she disrupted the interview that was boring us both. Her eyes flashed and she spoke with excitement, making it possible for me to imagine, at least in that moment, what her passion had originally been about. While this did not 'save' the interview itself, the connection between us was reinstated and with it the possibility, at least, for a meaningful reflection about herself, her work, and her present situation was opened up.

Boredom in an interview situation like the one described above operates much the same way as it would in a psychotherapeutic encounter. Psychotherapists have described their experiences of boredom in therapy as a form of counter-transference in which client and the therapist have mutually 'checked out' of the interaction in order to avoid confronting potentially painful material (Scott, 2017)). The therapist Daniel Sonkin (2020) observes that when his patients engage in small talk rather than addressing the issues that are important for them, he finds himself becoming bored. His boredom signals that the client has become

disconnected from the real business of therapy, thereby activating his desire to drift away from what the client is saying. In counter-transference, it is not just the client who is avoiding painful subjects, however. When therapists feel trapped and unable to connect with their client, boredom provides an escape from the aggressive fantasies that emerge from feeling 'narcissistically depleted' for not being able to do the job they have been trained to do (Flannery, 1995:538). Thus, the therapist's boredom staves off tensions arising from negative feelings like irritation and frustration. If made conscious, however, it can become a helpmeet for the therapist in understanding then client's present state of mind as well as the dynamics in a specific therapeutic encounter. Thinking about boredom in an interview as a form of counter-transference makes it possible to explore it as a relational phenomenon instead of a private experience or interactional failure. I forced me to stop in my tracks and reflect about what was happening in the interview to make me feel disconnected from my informant. It marked not the end, but the beginning of a search for meaning.

The necessity of being bored

The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1930) called boredom 'fruitful monotony' - something which he believed was essential not only in everyday life, but also in scholarly endeavours. The moments when you 'do nothing with nobody all alone by yourself' force you to wait⁸, to appreciate the slow processes of nature. Boredom allows the mind to wander and provides an occasion for daydreaming. Russell believed that constant excitement - something which has become a condition of late-modernity - ultimately dulls the palate and becomes itself boring. Russell, therefore, makes a case for learning to endure monotony. It is only in this space that a person will be forced to exert some effort and imaginativeness in order to extract something interesting from her environment.

As a qualitative researcher, I know that the moments of unease in research can be valuable helpmeets, alerting me that here is something that I need to explore. Why should boredom be any different? I began to ask myself why I could not become interested in my informant's story. Was it her lacklustre presentation that was putting me to sleep? Or was the absence of any reflection on what her work meant in terms of her biography that was causing my interest to flag? Or was I picking up her own disenchantment with the subject matter of her story without being aware that I was doing so? Once I began to reflect on why I had become bored, I remembered that really hearing what informants tell you in an interview often involves more than listening to their words. It requires listening to their silences as well - the things that they are not saying. My informant was telling me less about her passion for working with babies, as it turned out, than about her own boredom with having to tell a story about something that no longer interested her. Thinking about what she was avoiding - her

⁸ See, Ehn and Löfgren (2010) for a delightful ethnography of the art of 'doing nothing', including waiting, engaging in mindless routines, and daydreaming. They resemble the 'empty time' of boredom which also belongs to the 'backyard of modernity' where such activities are treated negatively as a waste of time.

disillusionment with her former passion and her despair at not having anything in her life that really excited her – would have been potentially a much more interesting subject for her because it was relevant to her present circumstances. It also would have interested me as a researcher who has a vested interest in discovering how people make sense of their lives, negotiate difficulties, and try to find ways to make their lives meaningful. More importantly, however, thinking about why I became bored opened up a surprising new avenue for thinking about the topic of my research.

I realized that I had mistakenly assumed that any story about a person's passion, no matter how far from my own experience, would automatically be interesting. This assumption was based on the idea that passion is presumably the anti-thesis of boredom. If boredom is about lack of interest or indifference, passion must be about enthusiasm and excitement. If boredom is about restless dissatisfaction, passion has to be about the desire to pounce on what's in front of us with all our energy. Passion is what makes a person, object, event, idea or even life itself meaningful (Hall, 2005). It is experienced as what is most important to the person, essential to whom s/he is and what makes life worth living. My experience of boredom in research has made me question this dichotomy and wonder whether passion and boredom are really such polar opposites after all.

My interview experience suggests that passion and boredom may be more entangled and interdependent than we might think. A person can speak eloquently about her own passion, but if the audience does not share her enthusiasm, the narrative may incite boredom rather than excitement. Her passion does not resonate with the audience. If you cannot 'feel' it, it becomes flat, evoking a yawn rather than a vicarious thrill. A passion, just like anything else, needs to be made meaningful for the listener so that she can connect it to something that makes sense to her. In many of my other interviews with people about their passions, I could 'get' the point of a story about their passion even if it was outside my own experience. For example, when my interlocutors talked about their passions in a vivid way, I found it easy to imagine myself in the situation.⁹ Other times the 'hook' had nothing to do with the narrative itself, but with the way the person reflected on it after the fact by, for example, drawing upon a shared experience or value ('Without this, I don't know what my life means any more'; 'I'm terrified that this will be the last time I will ever be in love.'). The experience remained unfamiliar to me, yet its significance for the person was easy to understand. A passion, like any other experience, needs to be made meaningful.

My experience of being bored in an interview enabled me to interrogate my initial assumptions about passion and reframe my research question to encompass passion and boredom as mutually constitutive and, indeed, as two sides of the same coin. Passion is an escape from the everyday routines of our lives and the attempt to liven things up. A life

⁹ An example is an informant's story about her passion for scuba diving. She managed to portray the colours and soundlessness of the strange world underwater, the amazing creatures and plants, the tactile sensations of touching a squid, or the fright at a shark passing closeby.

without passion is boring. In this sense, passion can be seen as a way to overcome what Barbalet (1999) calls the 'feeling of not being involved in or engaged by events or activities' (p.634). For example, individuals who are bored with their work or don't know what to do with themselves or have no direction in their lives, are often advised to 'find their passion'. One could say that hovering at the edge of every passion is the experience of meaninglessness.

But perhaps passion is more than an antidote to boredom and a solution to lack of meaning. Being bored may be an opportunity to start looking for something that will capture our attention and make us curious. It may even be essential to the experience of passion itself. If passion is a moment of intensity – and, indeed, everyone seems to agree that passion is never a permanent state; it comes and goes – maybe being aroused from one's boredom (as I was), is crucial to getting a glimpse of something that could – at least potentially – be interesting. Boredom provides the impetus for a push toward finding something meaningful and with it, the glorious possibility of passion.

Conclusion

Research is not always exciting. As researchers, we are not always curious about what our informants have to tell us. Sometimes we fail to find something meaningful despite all of our sociological training and efforts. It simply does not interest us. Becoming bored may tell us that we are not in the right mood for the interview or that this particular informant simply fails to interest us. It might mean that the topic of our research is not as interesting as we originally thought it would be. Perhaps the project itself is too conventional or too tied to what we already know. Maybe we don't really care about the topic after all. Finding ourselves bored in and by our research can be considered as an example of what Koobak (2014) has called being caught in a 'stuck place.' Based on her insightful analysis of her own experience of getting stuck in her research, she argues that 'getting stuck' is not a bad thing. It initiates a kind of reflexivity that can become coupled with the stubborn desire to keep moving (p. 206). By reflecting on the context in which we are being bored in our research, analysing the kinds of interactions between our informants and ourselves, and deciding what makes the research object itself interesting or not, we can begin to get ourselves 'unstuck'. Getting unstuck may lead us to the conclusion that we need to let go of a topic and find a new project. It may be the sign that it is time to look elsewhere. On the other hand, it might indicate that we need to return to our original data or analysis and see whether we have overlooked something interesting and worth pursuing. In my own case, being bored allowed me to explore a 'stuck place' in my own project on passion and, in the process of getting unstuck, I came to a deeper understanding of my topic.

In conclusion, we need to come out of the closet about our experiences of boredom in research. Rather than ignoring or repressing the shame and discomfort of being bored, we should embrace it as a helpmeet for understanding our interview partners, the situations in

which we do research, the topics we are investigating, and, last but not least, ourselves as researchers.

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