

# Toward a Theory of Habitual Boredom

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This article describes the experience of habitual boredom including: contrasting situational and habitual boredom, reviewing the humanistic-existential literature on habitual boredom as well as presenting a theory of habitual boredom. The theory suggests that habitual boredom develops from ambivalence (1) an emotional tear between one's self and others. This ambivalence leads to a passive-avoidant stance (2) toward one's life. This passivity includes a passive hope (3); the bored person believes something or someone else will change the bored person's life, but not one's own actions. Gradually, this passivity exposes identity confusion (4) but corrective action is thwarted because the person is too ashamed (5) to ask for help. Habitual boredom is conceptualized as an unresolved experience of personal meaninglessness.

Despite a growing interest in boredom as noted by the increase in number of journal articles dedicated to the topic (Watt & Vodanovich, 1999), there have been very few works dedicated to the study of chronic or habitual boredom. The boredom research largely concentrates on boredom as a state rather than a trait or disposition. Most of the early research on boredom primarily focused on boredom as a result of a monotonous situation (O'Hanlon, 1981; Smith, 1981). However, more recently several researchers have suggested that boredom can also become a trait (Bargdill, 1999; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Larson & Richards, 1991). This paper will distinguish between situational boredom and habitual boredom, review the clinical concerns that are associated with habitual boredom and put forth a theory of the major features of habitual boredom. The theory will be supported by data from a previous qualitative study and, finally, there will be a discussion about further research.

## *Literature on Boredom: Situational boredom and Habitual Boredom*

Industrial researchers who were concerned with worker productivity conducted the earliest studies that were related to boredom. Hebb (1955, 1966) and Berlyne (1960, 1967) both argued that the necessary and sufficient condition for the occurrence of boredom is the physical monotony of stimulation impinging on an individual where boredom would be the subjective perception of that monotony. Since arousal was a biological—rather than psychological—principle, therefore, boredom was attributed solely to the *situation* and not to the person.

In 1981, O'Hanlon extensively reviewed the industrial research and summarized five points of general agreement regarding situational boredom and how it may be recognized. O'Hanlon found: First, boredom occurs *as a reaction* to task situations where the pattern of stimulation is nearly constant or highly repetitious, and where a person's responses depend upon information contained within the monotonous stimulation. Second, individual reports of boredom vary when exposure is to the same monotonous working environment; not everyone is bored by the monotonous stimulation. Later, Perkins and Hill (1985) suggested it is perceived monotony, not objective monotony that causes boredom. Third, the emotional experience of boredom suggests that people dislike boredom and the situation they see as being responsible for it. They are motivated to change the environment, activity or escape the situation. If they cannot change or leave they find this stressful. Fourth, boredom can develop *moments* after the commencement of repetitive activity, particularly if that activity has been frequently experienced in the past. Finally, boredom is *highly situation-specific* and is immediately reversible when the situation changes to any large extent.

"Situational" boredom then refers to a person's negative emotional experience of repetitive or (perceived) monotonous stimuli that causes a lowering of physiological arousal. Due to situational constraints—mainly, the inability to leave the situation—the person must exert more 'effort' in paying attention to the stimuli. The person finds this exertion of effort is stressful.

### *Habitual Boredom*

This section will review some of the philosophical and psychological contributions on habitual boredom by authors from within a Humanistic-Existential-Phenomenological perspective. The philosophers, Sartre and Heidegger, both discuss how emotions relate to authentic actions. The existential psychiatrists and psychologist relate boredom to the existential issues of meaninglessness, time, world, and authenticity, and they examine how boredom might reveal something about the human condition.

Sartre's (1948) theory of emotions suggests that any emotional experience is an attempt to move from the rational to the irrational or 'magical' level of experience. Sartre sees the emotional experiences as trying to find an easy way out of a complex situation—a sign of 'bad faith'—since the emotional shift moves the conscious subject from active decision maker to passive responder. It is passivity, for Sartre, which is the hallmark

of neurosis. One of the key features of boredom is the passive attitudes that develop in the habitually bored person.

Linda Bell (1980) considers Sartre's novel *Nausea* to be a major work dedicated to the topic of boredom. She writes, "Sartre tells us 'profound boredom'...is profound not only in its intensity...but also in revealing a deep and seldom noticed aspect of things" (p.91). This profound awareness of things allows us to access sides of existence that often remain hidden to us: our own thinghood, referred to as the in-itself. Bell writes that, for Sartre, "Boredom must be connected with facticity--that aspect of ourselves most closely connected with the being of things-- and not with freedom and transcendence"(p.92). At best, boredom could act as a pre-cursor to authenticity since upon feeling this profound boredom we are, at the same time, brought back to the awareness of ourselves as the source of meaning and value in the world: the for-itself. For authenticity to occur the bored person must actively leave boredom in order to create meaning in one's life. This seems unlikely.

In contrast to Sartre who sees all emotions as inauthentic experiences, Heidegger's (1926/1962) concept of *Befindlichkeit* suggests that being in a mood is at least one of three (with understanding and speech) simultaneous pre-requisites for an authentic experience. Heidegger suggests that the human being, which he calls *Dasein*, meaning "being-there", is always in a mood, that mood implicitly reveals how *Dasein* is understanding one's being-in-the-world and communicating with others.

*Befindlichkeit* discloses *Dasein's* 'having-been' qualities such as being thrown into the world and how one is faring in the world. *Understanding* is primarily about the future since it sketches out from what has been what 'can-be'. Authentic *speech* requires that one has to be resolutely located in the present but speak from the experience of the past (having been) while communicating to the listener so that the speech will open up the future possibilities of being different. Authenticity is possible when our mood turns us toward possibilities, some of our fallen possibilities (nullities) are shaken out and *Dasein* is brought before its own being (Gendlin, 1988). Heidegger suggests that anxiety often leads to authentic experiences because anxiety emphasizes the being aspect of being-in-the-world over the world aspect as a fearful situation might do.

The question remains as to whether boredom might lead to authenticity. Heidegger (1959) suggests that boredom can lead to an opportunity for authentic questioning. For him, the question "Why is

there something rather than nothing?” is one of these authentic questions of existence. He writes, “[This] question is upon us in boredom, when we are equally removed from despair and joy, and everything about us seems so hopelessly common-place that we no longer care whether anything is or is not” (p.1). It seems from this statement that boredom could provide fertile soil from which authentic experiences can grow if the specific *Dasein* turns toward that possibility.

Boss (1969), an existential psychiatrist, understands boredom as the “inconsolable feelings of utter meaninglessness of life” (p.174). Boss names this experience “boredom neurosis” and considers it the “neurosis of the future” because, currently, there were so many patients who complain of this distress. Boss states that in boredom “there is concealed a longing which if it were not warded off with the utmost force, would cause the eruption of an insight into homelessness and all loss of sheltered security whatsoever”(p. 174). Boss believes that boredom protects us from a deep and apparently destructive anxiety that we would otherwise feel about the contemporary social world. Thus, boredom seems to be a defense mechanism that keeps people from feeling anxiety.

Viktor Frankl (1959) suggests that boredom shows itself as part of the existential vacuum that interferes with the primary motivational force of an individual, which is “his desire for a life that is meaningful as possible”(p. 154). He continues, “[T]his existential vacuum manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom...which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within vacuum becomes manifest”(p.169). Frankl attributes alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, leisure, and elderly boredom all to this existential vacuum. The only way to fill this void is for the individual to take the responsibility to make one’s own life meaningful. Frankl writes, “One of the main features of human existence is the capacity to rise above the conditions and transcend them...Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment” (p.206).

Knowles (1986) sees boredom as a mild form of depression exemplifying Heidegger’s ‘fallenness’ as an everyday, inauthentic mode. Boredom is a sickness of imaginative activity. Here, imagination is the authentic experience in which “one forms the image of the possible... [and] feels drawn to the actualization of that possibility, and...the body is already being poised for that possibility”(p.75). The fallen mode of

boredom does not open imaginative possibilities and the body feels heavy and drained of energy. Knowles points out that the authentic expression of the self can still develop out of the everyday fallen mode of boredom, but authenticity becomes more difficult for the pathological fallen mode of depression.

O'Connor (1967) suggests that boredom can become the prevailing temperament in three different ways that increase in severity. First, the boredom of the aesthete is marked by satiety. After one's needs are met, self-gratification becomes dependent on the imagination's ability to uncover new desires. The more one pursues hedonistic self-gratification the more one finds limitless longing and recognizes the impossibility of feeling complete and fulfilled. The result is disenchantment caused by trying to fill up continuous emptiness and infinite longing. Second, the boredom of the intellectual is marked by sterility. Sterility occurs when work becomes obsessive and exclusively intellectual. The result is an atrophy of the emotional powers. Emotionality returns as boredom infects the intellect and his work becomes meaningless. Third, the boredom of the spiritual man is marked by grave doubts about the meaning and purpose of life. It is a combination of disgust, disbelief, and feelings of futility. O'Connor suggests the boredom is caused by recognition of the total existential situation (arbitrary creation of meaning and value) and then turning away in disgust, lapsing into a paralyzing boredom that leads to a total indifference to questions of value.

Clive (1965) also sees three possible forms of habitual boredom resulting from increasingly intensified introspection. The first type Clive calls *the boredom of the bourgeois*, which is 'bondage to drudgery' where everything they do lacks vitality, spontaneity, and poetic qualities. Their deepest concerns are making money, gossiping, and keeping up with their neighbors. Clive says that the bored bourgeois are marked by paralysis of the imagination. The second type is *boredom of the superfluous*, which is 'bondage to the uncommitted life' and marked by paralysis of the will. This is an aristocratic type of boredom in which the bored persons become frustrated by trying to put ideas into action. It is not the lack of imagination, rather it is the lack of effort that leads to boredom. Eventually they become too apathetic to do anything because they find no reason to believe that one activity would be any more interesting than the next. The third type is *boredom of the spirit* and is marked by a paralysis of value. In the previous two types of boredom, one can expect to have some temporary

relief, some comical moments, but not in spiritual boredom. In this type, the “whole world of the individual is transformed into a ‘wasteland’ of senseless repetition and meaningless striving”(p.362). The spiritually bored are alienated from god, society, and tradition. Their reason becomes divorced from compassion and leads to a world-hatred that ultimately also reflects a self-hatred. Clive also calls this type of boredom ‘sickness of the soul’ because the disturbance reaches out to distort their whole sense of reality.

The similarities between O’Connor and Clive are at times striking; it is interesting to note that Clive does not link boredom with any authentic possibilities. The increasing severity of boredom only leads to a better focus on the bleak picture of the human condition. O’Connor’s only statement about a solution to boredom is a reference to a Nietzschean ‘transvaluation of values’ but it seems quite possible that any new value, new meaning or new society also will be faced with a new boredom.

### *From Description to Theory*

The author’s original study (Bargdill, 1999, 2000) produced a thorough phenomenological description of the experience of being bored habitually, namely, being bored with one’s life. Phenomenological descriptions are both rich in detail and do not lead to the reductionistic tendencies that plague psychology as a science. However, descriptions by themselves do not amount to empirical validation nor is clinical applicability necessarily apparent without further interpretation. To make the shift from descriptive, qualitative study to a theory that can be tested and applied, the next step must be to conceptualize the essential constituents of habitual boredom. The theory developed in this paper is the product of an additional review of the literature on boredom as well as a further analysis and consideration of the original data. A good deal of the rethinking of the concept of habitual boredom occurred as the author developed a psychometric scale of habitual boredom. The Habitual Boredom Scale is current being tested for validation.

### *Five Factors of Habitual Boredom*

In this section the five distinguishing constituents of habitual boredom will be presented as well as supported by the qualitative data

from the original study (Bargdill, 1999). The participant's response (e.g. P1) from the actual data that closest exemplifies the conceptual statement has been placed at the end of the appropriate sentences.

### *1. Ambivalence*

The pre-bored person originally did not feel ambivalent but had a personal project that was being actively worked toward (P3). After some set back toward achieving that goal, other people encouraged the pre-bored person to modify or change goals completely (P5). Ambivalent feelings developed once the pre-bored person compromised their personal goals for less desirable projects (P1). They began to work on compromised projects that they soon found their hearts were not in. By turning away from their desires the people were emotionally torn in two directions (P5).

*P3: Basically I was good up to the ninth grade in school. I was skiing and doing a lot of activities and things. I had a lot of friends and people who wanted to do things with me.*

*P5: I was originally interested in scientific work, specifically, becoming an astronomer way back in junior high school...I don't know if it was the material itself or the teacher I had trouble with but, in any case, I stumbled pretty badly in the tenth grade and became a little disillusioned with it.*

*P1: This particular project is not what I would have chosen. I kind of think that is a big part of it, of the problem...but since I already knew all of the background information, and since my advisors felt that there was further work to be done in the same area, it was mutually agreed upon that I would try to further the research that they had already done on this topic.*

*P5: So I was divided in my mind at the time...I came into some of these other world-views, and it shattered this certainty of faith that I had developed over the last couple of years.*

On one hand, those who would become bored, for the most part, would consciously feel anger and direct blame towards the world and others (P2). They would become angry at others and at the world because they came to understand that their change of goals was *forced* upon them rather than being the result of a compromise (P3). On the other hand, those who would become bored, pre-consciously, felt anger and directed blame toward themselves since they had not taken a stand and instead gave up on their

desires without putting forth the appropriate fight (P1). The people did not seem to be fully aware of these self-directed emotions, and they kept these feelings on a pre-reflective level (P6). Their attempts to deny, or ignore their own self-directed feelings led to an intensification of those feelings and contributed toward a general passivity (P5).

*P2: To this day nothing really changed. That is in my husband's relationship with me, he's still a beast. He's still cruel, and he's still heartless...I told my husband, "Thanks a lot. You've been a real winner for me all my life. You've got it to the point where even the children don't want to bring the grandchildren around."*

*P3: My mom made me quit my job and I became more frustrated and bored with my life. I felt like I was responsible. People trusted me and it challenged me. I wasn't bored with this job.*

*P1: There's a lot of self-contempt. I thought was it ridiculous that I did that. I still think I sort of wasted time, four to eight hours a day reading these stupid little comments on the computer screen. There's no meaning in that. I thought it was stupid.*

*P6: I think being bored has to do with the environment around me, there's just not much to do. It's just a lame town... The teachers aren't motivated to have fun and learn at the same time, instead they just give out the information.*

*P5: I tend to lose interest in life, and I feel like I can't take action on anything. I feel as though I have to vegetate for a while till I come out of it.*

## *2. Passive-avoidant stance*

The people who become bored relinquished active roles in their compromised project. They waited for solutions to appear and avoided asking for help (P1). A passive-avoidant stance means that the person had a diminished sense of agency (P5), and this was when the person first recognized being bored. The person's passive-avoidant stance was fueled by blaming others for events that were, at least, partly one's own responsibility (P3). Blaming others had dual consequences for the experience of boredom. First, blaming was a distraction that concentrated on who "caused" the situation, rather than concentrating on actions that would bring about a resolution. In other words, blaming was largely a defensive function since finding the "cause" of an interpersonal problem is rarely a genuine activity (Neu, 1998; Sartre, 1956). As the bored person avoided taking responsibility for his or her life, their experience of boredom deepened (Maddi, 1970).

**P1:** *So I avoided my advisors for six months. I wouldn't go to school a lot of the time. If I would go to school, I would hide out in my office so I wouldn't have to see my advisors.*

**P5:** *I felt kind of overwhelmed by the choices to the point where you have to take a step back and shut it out for a while. At that point, life temporarily loses meaning for me.*

**P3:** *After two or three months of it, I was bored and sick of it because I felt that it wasn't my fault that I got sick. I felt that other people in my family were the ones that needed the counseling that needed the help. I feel they pulled me down and I got bored.*

Second, not only did the bored persons believe that other people had created their situation (P6), they also believed that only other people were capable of changing their situation for them (P6). Interestingly, people who were bored with their lives actually had many thoughts about how to change their boredom (P3), and even had opportunities provided to them by others, which they did not take (P6).

**P6:** *Our town's boring, there's not much to do. There's a mall but you can only go there once a week, see everything in it, and know everything in it. There's a park it's pretty lame, the town's pretty much sucks...Our whole town just sucks and the people around it just suck.*

**P6:** *By the time I'm in college I'll stop being bored because I'll be away from this town and I'll be able to walk around this campus and there's always something to do there and I'll finally realize that I have to do something with my life.*

**P3:** *Too many ideas going through my mind and if I would stick to something I would get something done. But I can't stick to things very long.*

**P6:** *Like I'll sleep until twelve or twelve thirty and people who get up at nine and do stuff--like go to an early movie--they'll be gone by the time I wake up.*

### *3. Passive hope*

Hope is one emotional tone that keeps people aimed at the future (Straus, 1980). In depression, hope is lost and the future is obscured (Wyrick & Wyrick, 1977). In habitual boredom, the people retained a sense of hope that is passive. This passive hope relied on the actions of others rather than their own intentional actions (P4). The bored person waited for change that he or she would not themselves initiate. If an

individual did not set goals then the future began to close and time was experienced as dragging.

*P4: Right now, I can't make any plans. I'm frustrated with my life. I'm bored with it. I can't make any plans and I dwell on that. So the future's kind of up in the air...But it just seems like these last three years have been an eternity.*

Passive hope kept the future slightly open because the bored person believed that others or the world would correct their bored situation. The habitually bored would daydream or fantasize about solutions to their boredom. However, these solutions were not within their realm of realistic possibilities. These fantasies often required magical characters, such as a Prince Charming; magical actions, such as winning the lottery; or magical times when everything would become interesting. These fantasies centered on other people saving the passively bored (P2).

*P2: So many times my life was like a daydream. I would sit around and think about how nice it would be if I could get a job where I could travel and be the singer. I could dance. I was a real good dancer. Maybe I could get a job with Lawrence Welk. So I fantasized that somebody might discover me someday. I'd be somebody someday. It never happened though I'm still waiting.*

Active hope is associated with the imagination while passive hope is associated with fantasy (Bargdill, 2000). With active hope, people work towards transcending who they have been and becoming who they want to be. In active hope, people often anticipate long-term goals and then develop a plan for attaining those goals. Fantasy is seen as magical or unlikely possibilities that happen *to* a person rather than the person working towards the fulfillment of those possibilities (P1). In fantasy, the bored person did not need to change rather the circumstance must change (P3). In some cases, bored people imagined activities and events that were within their control that they might pursue, however, very often they decided that these activities would ultimately also be boring (P5).

*P1: The magnitude of the problem I really felt like I would never figure this out. It was going to take an act of God to put this thought into my head for it to finally click. So I thought that it would take miraculous divine intervention to get the answer, to make me see the connection between the stuff I was reading and the problem I was trying to solve.*

**P3:** *If I had money I could do things like go to amusement parks and stuff. Find somebody to go dancing with, like a girlfriend, some one to do activities. If I can't work there's no money coming in and with out money there's nothing to do. Without money or a car nobody wants you.*

**P5:** *I might think that I would become bored with whatever activity I'm looking at. I project boredom. I'm looking ahead and saying, "Oh boy, it looks like it's going to be boring after all."*

#### 4. Shame

In the experience of habitual boredom, shame was an adhesive emotion since it held all of the unproductive emotional components together. Shame involved the sense that there was some difference between one's expectations and one's actual performance. In boredom, shame occurred when the participant anticipated a successful outcome and then found that the outcome was not achieved easily or not achieved at all (P3). Sometimes the expectations were placed on them by others (Tangney, 1993). A parent may repeatedly tell their children that they are expected to go to college; however, some of these expectations are projections. For example, bored people often did not seek the help of others because they believed those others would not understand why they could not do the task on their own. The bored tried to hide their failed projects from others (P1) rather than seeking assistance.

**P3:** *I started college and every time I would go I would take on too much...One time I was going to school part time, working two part time jobs and seeing a doctor once a week. It was too much.*

**P1:** *So I avoided my advisors for six months. I wouldn't go to school a lot of the time. If I would go to school, I would hide out in my office so I wouldn't have to see my advisors.*

Most bored people did not seem to be directly aware of the sense of shame. This experience also appeared to be pre-reflective, but they frequently did speak of frustration related to the sense of shame implicitly. Frustration occurred when participant expected a task to go smoothly and it did not. Shame was produced when the person evaluated the reason for the project's failure. If the task was easy and the person could not do it, then the person felt competent. This is a fact the person wanted to hide from others and even from him or herself

For continuity sake, there are four separate quotes from one bored person (P1) that show the progression of the shameful frustration. Their frustration and anger was often directed at a person or a project rather than at the self. However, implicitly there was an understanding that the participant should be able to accomplish the task and accomplish the task without much trouble (A). The anger was projected onto others but the true damage was to the participant's self-esteem. In shame there was the sense that prior to this project, the participant saw one's self as capable. When the project stalled, the participant now found the self to be less resourceful, less original, and less capable (B), and the project changed from the obvious to the overwhelmingly complex. In particular, the frustrated participants found that they were unable to adjust or to adapt, but could merely repeat the same process over and over (C). Here there is the repetition associated with situational boredom but in this case the person was unable to imagine new possibilities addressing the problem. The person's repetitive, unsuccessful efforts now transformed their understanding of the self and the self's abilities (D).

*A) P1: In the beginning, I had a lot of enthusiasm. I had been successful in what I had done for them. So now it's time for me to work on my own thing, and I was thinking two years and I'll be done...So I hoped that I would start in whatever direction, and I guess that when I started doing research; it would be obvious to me what to do.*

*B) P1: It was like I was faced with this huge task and I felt like I had to do it all in a day. I thought I had to come up with the one big idea in a day, and I didn't know how to do that.*

*C) P1: If I went to school I would sort of pick up this same book and open it back up to the same page and look at it and still not get any new ideas. I went on like that for a while.*

*D) P1: I started having this feeling of despair, of never being able to do it; I thought I wasn't Ph.D. material or maybe I wasn't cut out to do this. I had all these doubts about whether I'd be able to do it.*

Over time the feelings associated with shame (such as doubt, frustration, being overwhelmed) began to erode the participant's self-esteem (P5). The remaining strengths of their pre-bored identities atrophied. The habitually bored were left with a sense of emptiness since their past strengths were gone and nothing had replaced them. Feelings of emptiness (P4), futility,

and apathy (P6) tended to be very self-conscious, and feelings that have been kept at a pre-reflective level often could no longer be ignored. The person's own identity began to deteriorate (P5).

*P5: I think somehow that [boredom] decreased my self-esteem. I just didn't feel very comfortable with doing that kind of work even though I knew I was green at it.*

*P4: I'll say, "Nothing. There's nothing to talk about." And she'll say, "I know you've done something." I'll say, "I have done nothing. Why should I bore you with my nothingness."*

*P6: I'll just not pay attention, and I won't know what's going on. Or they'll assign homework, and I'll do it between periods the next day right before class. Or it's supposed to be a project and I'll do good on it, but I'm not really interested in it and don't care about it.*

*P5: But my experience was that things just sort of go along and one gets a job and just becomes a drone and that's how I feel and that's boredom. That's my perception that people kind of drone along through life and I don't experience emotional peaks and valleys.*

### 5. Identity confusion

The experience of emotional ambivalence, general passivity and shamefulness combine to deteriorate the habitually bored person's identity. Identity, here, is understood in terms of person's temporal existence consisting of past, present, and future (May, 1958; Straus, 1980). Peoples' identities are made up of who they have been, how they find themselves now, and what they intend to become. The bored person's past experiences seem almost foreign to them. Who they had been in the past was experienced as a far cry from how they saw themselves at the time (P1). The people recognized a change for the worse and what had been strengths in the past were felt to be absent (P3).

*P1: In the past, I have always been energetic in every area of my life. But now, this problem I am having with my thesis work has had the reverse effect on my life. I felt like I couldn't do anything, where as before I was sort of doing everything.*

*P3: I have memories in my head about how I was before it all broke down. But I wish I could be like I was before I broke down. I can only remember it, but I can't feel how I was before.*

The present is a product not only of the past but also the future (Heidegger, 1962). The future is particularly important to a person's current identity because the future provides the direction for the person's life and requires that the person use the experiences, skills and lessons of the past, in the present, to successfully navigate toward his or her future goals. To "become" (May, 1958), people must create goals and then attempt to actualize those possible goals. In habitual boredom the active sense of becoming was blocked. A person could no longer create goals nor could they imagine what they wanted to become in their future (P5). This inability to progress towards a goal led to experience of time dragging or being wasted as well as to a general sense of stagnation (P4).

*P5: When I lose my vision, I lose any idea or projection of what I want to do in the future. I don't have any distinct plans, or even an idea of what I want to do and so I wanted to immerse myself more in the present rather than projecting myself in the future, hoping that something would work out in the near future.*

*P4: Right now, I can't make any plans. I'm frustrated with my life. I'm bored with it. I can't make any plans and I dwell on that. So the future's kind of up in the air...But it just seems like these last three years have been an eternity.*

The stagnation experienced in the present was due to the fact that there was no movement or flow toward the future (P1). The participants were simply waiting for some magical change. The bored person also recognized that becoming had not completely stopped. They passively continued to become something--only they became people whom they did not like (P4). The boredom that first began with compromised projects had spread to almost all aspects of their lives (P4).

*P1: It was just like never-ending boredom. I didn't see any end coming, and that I never experienced before. I never had a situation where I felt I couldn't get out of it.*

*P4: Presently, I am bored with my whole life. None of the old things I used to do bring enjoyment to me anymore. Nothing. There doesn't seem to be anything that makes me happy anymore. That bothers me a lot.*

*P4: [Being bored] covers a lot: It covers my social life. It covers school. It covers work. It covers going to the grocery store. I hate it; I'm bored with that.*

*I'm bored with food. If I didn't have to eat to survive, I would never ever eat because I'm bored with it. It covers a lot of things. My hair.*

Bored people gave up control of the process of inventing themselves. Therefore, habitual boredom meant living in the present being cut off from the future and estranged from the past. In the present the person felt empty, lost (P3), and apathetic. Because the future was held open only by the magical thinking of passive hope, long standing experiences of habitual boredom can ultimately turn into depressive symptoms (P5) and even suicidal ideation as the identity further disintegrates (P2).

**P3:** *I get frustrated and I don't know what to do with myself. I don't know what to do, how to take the next step. I want to accomplish things but my illness gets in the way of it.*

**P5:** *The gloom and doom is due to the fact that I didn't feel any direction or purpose and I felt that I should feel it, but I didn't feel it. So it is as if there was no future ahead of me: as if there was a curtain between me and the future.*

**P2:** *It's like you take a train, and you have a long ride, and you come to the end, and where do you go? There's nothing for you, nobody for you. It's like you're in a big empty room. What do you do? Lay down and die. That's a good answer because if it's an end, make it an end. I did, I really wanted to die. I just couldn't picture myself with no husband, no children, no duties, which my whole life was duties. So just put an end to it.*

The transition from habitual boredom to depression sometimes can occur after prolonged experiences--often years and even decades--of habitual boredom. The key element to this transition happens when the person's defensive ambivalence breaks down. This happens because the individual can no longer deny that one has wasted time and become unlikable to one's self. As a result, all the blame that has been attributed to others now falls squarely onto the bored person. Hence, a bored person's shame turns into guilt, and it is guilt that has been more closely associated with depression (Kovacs & Beck, 1979). This suggests that boredom can, at least, initially act as a defense against depression (Turner, 1984; Wanh, 1975) but also that boredom shares some common features with it.

This theory of habitual boredom suggests there are five major constituents to the phenomenon. Habitual boredom develops from the experience of emotional ambivalence that contributes toward the adoption

of a passive avoidance stance toward one's life. Passivity is kept in place by a sense of shame and limited sense of hope. The stagnation that results from passivity leads the habitually bored to identity confusion: not liking who they have become and feeling estranged from the stronger person they have been in the past.

### *Discussion*

Sartre (1948) suggests that passivity is the heart of all neurosis. If that is the case, then habitual boredom certainly has to be seen as a significant psychological disorder. One of the major features of this experience is that the person develops a passive avoidant stance. Bored people avoid others who might help because they are embarrassed about their own abilities. At the same time they find fault and blame others rather than accepting responsibility for their co-constitution of the problem.

Sartre suggests emotions, in general, transform the world through their perception. In boredom, the person sees the world--in Clive's (1965) words--as a "wasteland" where nothing the world offers as an activity can be seen as interesting. Sartre sees the emotional transformation as 'bad faith' because emotions make the world the agent and the human being the responder. Here, Sartre and Heidegger seem to be on the same page, since for Heidegger, an authentic experience must draw attention to the being aspect of being-in-the-world (e.g. *being-in-the world*).

Heidegger (1926/1962) refers to everyday emotions as "determined modes" (Gelvin, 1988, p. 57), and he suggests that any emotion (e.g. fear) that emphasizes the external, worldly aspects (e.g. *being-in-the-world*) are inauthentic experiences (Heidegger, 1926/1962, p. 395). Heidegger (1959) recognizes that boredom offers the opportunity for authenticity since it is in position of being equally distant from joy and despair and puts a person in a position to question why there is something rather than nothing. But instead of actively answering this question, the bored person turns away.

Boss sees boredom as a defense against the insight of "homelessness" and "sheltered security". O'Connor (1967) says that boredom is a recognition of the "total existential situation" in which the person realizes that there is an arbitrary creation of meaning and value. For Sartre, according to Bell, the nausea of boredom provides the person with a profound experience of thinghood--the in-itself--that provides the possibility of understanding

that the human being is free and transcendent. For Heidegger, boredom provides an authentic question, and it is possible to make the case that habitual boredom is one form of the “call of conscience”. The bored person certainly experiences *uncanniness* and is also alienated from “the they” as the bored person seems to retract one’s involvement in the world. The bored person apparently does not answer the call.

Habitual Boredom is an encounter of nihilism: the bored person’s total lack of pre-ordained meaning in human existence. It is one of *the* existential moments. A general assumption of existential thought is that the human being is born into (thrown) and follows like a herd animal the basic trends of one’s culture (fallness). For there to be authenticity, there must be a break from that inauthentic herd mentality. A near death encounter can provide the awakening, but another opportunity is the encounter with nihilism. This occurs when the person recognizes that they have been carted along with handed down values that are often portrayed as absolute truths. With some experience and a little inspection, it becomes clear that these truths do not hold up. This is the crisis call.

Once a person has the insight of the arbitrariness of meaning and value (the absurd), they must have a reaction: an existential fight, flight, or freeze. By fighting, one must create meaning for one’s self in spite of the lack of absolute value. Thus the existentialist confronts the nihilistic moment by recognizing that the anxiety of meaninglessness can be changed authentically into at least temporary and transient experience of joy and personal meaningfulness. By flight, a person can re-immense herself into ‘the they’ by attempting to avoid the anxiety of the apparent absence of meaning. Or they can become a skeptic who finds the nihilistic position disheartening and falls into despair. They largely miss the point that meaning has to be personal and wither away as they try to maintain the absolute in trite ways (e.g. “Nothing is true, not even this”).

The bored person appears to freeze. This might be closer to despair than Heidegger suggests, just as habitual boredom can eventually dovetail with depression (Bargdill, 2009). The bored person seems to sense there is no absolute truth but they don’t see how to make personal meaning that’s not ready-made for them. They go through their motions although they don’t know why. The bored person does not take up the authentic question or authentic possibilities. Yet, they do not return to an immersion into the world of “the they”. They seem unable to brush off their encounter with the meaninglessness of existence. Instead, they are both alienated from the

past and estranged from the future. They are caught in a dead present that is only nourished by tube-fed fantasies (nullities) that are not within their real possibilities. They give up the act of becoming but they continue to become--they become people who don't like themselves.

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