AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATIVITY

Why periods of conscious boredom are worthwhile: the psychologist Henrike Moll on inactivity, impatience and the curse of constant stimulation

INTERVIEW DEIDRE RATH AND ULRICH PONTES

JAM: Our topic is boredom. As a researcher, have you yourself experienced boredom?

Henrike Moll: Not very often, I have to admit. I’m really interested in my work and it doesn’t tie me to my desk. I only get bored when I have to wait for something – if I have a meeting, for example, and the person is late but there is not enough time to start on anything worthwhile. And I am pretty impatient, which is why I try to ignore red pedestrian lights when I’m crossing the road and immediately turn my back on a post office or restaurant if I see there is a long queue. On the other hand, boredom does not play a role in my research either, so I can only speak as an “informed amateur.”

JAM: Are there different types of boredom?

Moll: There are definitely different degrees, and some of them are certainly preferable to being in a hurry or a rush. We even talk about experiencing slight boredom in positive terms, a state in which we are not doing anything in particular, so we just let the world pass by, as observers without any strong emotions. At the other end of the scale we find boredom of the type that can make us restless and angry. A tendency to experience this kind of boredom has often been linked to aggression, risk propensity and substance abuse. So-called apathetic boredom, which leaves you feeling unable to motivate yourself or snap out of it, manifests itself in depression, obesity and diabetes. However, most of the time when we do not know what to do with ourselves, we are almost by definition actually quite alright – because boredom presupposes that our basic needs have been satisfied.

JAM: Does boredom have its uses?

Moll: It is useful as a point of departure for creativity: we can think freely and hit on ideas which do not occur to us in the hustle and bustle of things. Or to put it another way: an over-structured and over-planned life – without any time to allow your thoughts free rein – is unsatisfactory. We are missing something. We feel we are being controlled or overloaded.

JAM: Why do some people get bored more quickly than others?

Moll: The standard theory is that people who need a high degree of external stimulation in order to achieve an optimum level of arousal are more prone to boredom. To feel well, these people need and seek the thrill, or else they feel bored. Other people naturally have a higher state of arousal and therefore need significantly less stimulation. They prefer a more low-stimulus environment. Neurobiologists then started to pay attention to the transmitter dopamine, which is released when we experience states of pleasurable arousal. It was suggested that the sensation-seekers had lower dopamine activity and therefore threw themselves into thrilling situations. In my opinion, there is a problem in quantifying “stimulus” – depending how frequently our attention and interest are aroused, one and the same thing may be more or less stimulating or motivating. Anyway, according to more recent findings, it tends to be the more negative temperament and personality characteristics that correlate with a proneness to boredom: weak impulse control, a lack of...
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perseverance in pursuing goals, a penchant for procrastination or a tendency to compulsive and dogmatic behaviour.

**JAM:** When it comes to children, we allow them ever fewer opportunities to get bored. We prefer to sit them down in front of the television or let them have a smartphone ...

**Moll:** Yes, that’s true. We are afraid of boring our children, so we constantly stimulate them. But television and playing around with video games can be incredibly boring! Perhaps we should not see boredom and busyness as opposites. And even if many of the things we give our children to do are supposed to be a substitute for boredom, many types of activity are not necessarily satisfying or appropriate. I am really shocked about the amount of time many young children spend watching television or playing with an iPad, whereas ambitious, educated parents with all their amazing toys, play groups and manoeuvres for keeping their children busy do not necessarily do any better.

**JAM:** Why not?

**Moll:** As I have already mentioned, I think that unplanned time not involving pre-arranged activities – that is, moments when boredom could occur – are important. This is how children learn to be independent and possibly do things together with other children, make up their own role plays, define and create situations. It is here that the child has an opportunity to experience itself as an active agent who can determine what goes on. This is extremely valuable! By the way, one of the aspects that has not received much attention so far and has not been researched at all is the cognitive preconditions for boredom. A new-born baby or even a one-year-old cannot get bored because it does not perceive time. If you only live in the present, you do not experience boredom. Only when the initial stage of language development is underway and a sense for certain periods of time emerges – coupled with certain expectations as to what should or could happen during this time –, the possibility of boredom arises.
**JAM:** Recent studies suggest that later, in puberty for example, boredom can lead to aggression, drug abuse and even dropping out of school.

**Moll:** In Western countries, youth is a moratorium during which young people are on hold, caught between childhood and adulthood. You don’t want to do the things you’re allowed to do and you’re not allowed to do the things you do want to do. So you spend your time hanging around at bus stops and parking lots or in lessons you’re not interested in. And, yes, there is a connection between habitual boredom and drug abuse, addiction, bulimia, so-called externalised behaviour like vandalism and aggression and so on. The problem at this age is that one has developed a certain cognitive and imaginative horizon that does not mesh well with being dependent on parents or guardians: you are still driven around like a child, but in your thoughts you are already miles away. Young people in villages are particularly vulnerable because they are more likely to be stranded in a cultural desert. That is why it is very important to open up cultural opportunities for young people and allow them to be independent.

**JAM:** In the world of work the counterpart of burn-out, bore-out, has become an issue in the last few years. Can underload and boredom cause stress and illness?

**Moll:** Bore-out? Really? I have never heard that term before, even though here in the US people think up neologisms for more or less ordinary problems almost every day. But it seems plausible: employees behave as if they were busy, in accordance with employers’ expectations, but they are not always very busy, and many jobs are certainly not as interesting and varied as job advertisements would lead us to believe – nor as the employees themselves would like to believe. Capitalist working conditions can, therefore, provoke a degree of alienation and this certainly means an unhealthy level of stress for those affected.

**JAM:** Last but not least: what would you recommend for people to do if boredom really does threaten to become unbearable?

**Moll:** I think it’s important to be able to occupy yourself even without the usual gadgets and tools. If I get bored sitting in a dentist’s waiting room or have to sit outside and wait for someone with no book to hand, I try to go through things systematically in my mind – at the moment it’s usually Persian vocabulary because I’m trying to learn Farsi.