

A HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL BOREDOM:  
THE UTILITY OF BOREDOM IN THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

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## Abstract

The 100-year plus history of psychologists attempting to establish boredom as a quantifiable construct provides insight into the problems associated with how psychology adopts its subject matter. By borrowing terms from the public and assuming they represent universal aspects of human nature, the discipline has spurred critical inquiry regarding the practice's hidden assumptions and theory. In particular, boredom, with its associations with both existential and trivial concerns, exposes the limitations of the practice of scientific psychology and reflects the discipline's own conflicted identity. In order to facilitate an examination of these theoretical issues, this historical examination focuses on the failed attempts by 1970s personality psychology and 1990s positive psychology to domesticate the concept. With the inclusion of the public's boredom discourse during these decades, the cultural influence on these disciplines' theorizing is excavated. These influences complicate attempts by psychologists to practice as a science and provide a reason to take pause amid repeated calls to unify the discipline.

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## Introduction

Psychology's divided identity, straddling the line between the sciences and humanities (Teo, 2017), is revealed in its investigations of boredom. Two historical examples, Hans Eysenck's personality psychology in the 1970s and the positive psychology movement in the 1990s, provide evidence of this divide as they attempted to domesticate boredom. As those investigations developed, the concept that emerged possessed little of the expected precision associated with conducting science, was inconsistent with the everyday use of the term, and was problematically utilized to help define the oppositional terms of stimulation, arousal, attention, and flow. In a backdrop of ascending neoliberalism, a comparison between how personality and positive psychologies were practiced and received by the public offers insights into the practice of psychology as embedded in a larger zeitgeist. These outcomes raise questions to the appropriateness of attempting to transform cultural concepts into quantifiable constructs and the repeated calls to unite psychology under a common scientific understanding—something both these subdisciplines explicitly called for. This paper adds to the critical scholarship opposing such attempts by highlighting the epistemological and ontological confusion caused by some psychologists' attempts to contain boredom.

There is a tradition of critical scholars highlighting problems with how psychology adopts its subject matter. Many of these critiques are related to the hidden assumptions some experimental psychologists have made about the capacity of language to represent corresponding objects found in nature adequately. More specifically, concerns have been raised over how psychologists transform "everyday psychological language" into "professional psychological language" (Richards, 2002, p. 9) during the process of isolating and operationalizing concepts of interest. The history of psychology offers many examples of everyday language (intelligence, motivation, etc., as discussed by Danziger (1997))

being utilized in psychological research with the assumption that they represent real-in-the-world unchanging aspects of human nature, akin to the correspondence between the term water and its chemical structure (Hacking, 1995; Danziger, 1997). However, Hacking (1995) argues there is a fundamental difference between the subject matter of disciplines like physics and that of psychology. He delineates the two by highlighting how the hard sciences study unresponsive objects (natural kinds) while psychology investigates reflexive human kinds. Several problems emerge when attempting to place aspects of human nature outside of their experience, starting with the supposition psychologists are able to step outside their cultural context. Additionally, psychologists must also assume that their particular professional psychological language, as performed in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, is perfectly structured to capture the essence of human nature, thus denying all alternative forms of psychology, different languages, and iterations of English this capacity (Danziger, 1997). This presentist and Western-centric approach implies that earlier boredom-like concepts (melancholy, Langeweile, acedia, etc.) can be interpreted as failed attempts to represent 'real' boredom rather than legitimate representations of a psychological experience within a particular social and historical context (Brinkmann, 2005). Danziger (1997) believes psychologists would be better served accepting that categories rely on conventions and are "embedded in a particular professional sub-culture" (p. 4), rather than the result of "undistorted observation" (p. 3). If it is accepted that human kinds (Hacking, 1995) are fundamentally different from natural kinds (some refute this, see Cooper (2004)), then much of psychology's subject matter must be culturally generated, which confounds psychologists' hopes of practicing a Kuhnian normal science (Danziger, 1997).

It is argued that in order to "excavate the hidden level of theory" that undergirds experimental psychology practices, researchers need to analyze existing discourses of which human kinds derive their "sense" (Danziger, 1997, p. 8). This approach has been pursued in the investigation of the concepts of intelligence, personality, and learning, where a looping effect, has been documented (Hacking, 1995).

Where a looping effect (Hacking, 1995) is recognized as a process where the classification of ‘types of people’ or behaviours by social scientists results in new ways of being as those classified react to these descriptions and understandings (e.g. schizophrenia, depression). Due to the reflexive nature of human kinds, success for psychological domestication projects is not found in the unmasking a concept’s hidden nature, but rather in the adoption by other psychologists and the public of their particular understanding of the term. The psychologization of intelligence after World War I provides an example of this; as the public adopted psychological understandings of the concept, and psychologists established various measurement regimes, yet 100 years later, some psychologists admit there has never been a definitive definition for the term (Gaspard, 2017; Sternberg, 2018). With these practices in mind, boredom presents an opportunity to study a partial looping effect (Hacking, 1995), as the public has yet to adopt the psychological understanding of the term. Due to the lack of public adoption, two tracks of boredom discourse are identifiable, the technical psychological language and the everyday language found in the popular discourse. When comparing the two, it is productive to consider in what ways psychologists were informed about boredom through the public, what psychological concepts were not adopted by the public, why the psychologization project for boredom has persisted, why the psychological literature regarding boredom accelerated over time (see figure 1), and whether boredom in particular offer insights into how psychology and the public inform one another. With boredom’s identity remaining unresolved and its associations with the existential and trivial, it may occupy a unique position where the tension between the two reveals a concept resistant to psychologization.

### **Literature Review**

While the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry for boredom states, “The state of being bored; tedium, ennui” with Charles Dicken’s *Bleak House* being credited as the first use in literature (1853) “[Her] chronic malady of boredom”, this attribution is contested. Dictionary.com points to the 1829 August 8<sup>th</sup> issue of *The Albion* making the first recorded use of boredom in the English language (“You



didn't", n. d). Confusion over boredom's origins aside, its identity as a "chronic malady" would persist, possibly explaining the interest from some early German psychologists and its appearance in early textbooks (Waitz, 1863; Teo, 2007). There is a long history of conceptual overlap with the similar concepts of melancholy, ennui, Langeweile, tedium vitae, horror loci, and acedia, with the last two dating back to antiquity (Goodstein, 2005; Toohey, 2011; Gardiner & Haladyn, 2017). While conclusions drawn from the data found in Google's Ngram are open to criticism, it does provide insight into how "boredom" increased as "ennui" decreased in the English language corpus in the 1910s, suggesting "boredom" had begun to establish itself as a distinct concept as WWI was raging (see figure 2; Pettit, 2016). There is some dispute among historians and psychologists about whether these are early representations of boredom, loosely associated progenitors, or entirely distinct concepts (Toohey, 2011; Gardiner & Haladyn, 2017). These disagreements reflect the difficulties psychology has had in establishing a consensus definition for boredom, a problem that persists to the present day. As acknowledged in the introduction to a collection of multidisciplinary boredom essays in *Boredom Is in Your Mind*,

Whether we pay attention to the individual or environmental causes of boredom, we all acknowledge that boredom is a reactive force whatever their consequences are, those positives or negatives. This common understanding will be decisive to learn to tolerate boredom and to deal with its products while, at the same time, we are reaching a more profound comprehension of the human phenomenon (Velasco, 2019, p. xix).

These words, echoing the person-situation debates, a disagreement over the extent to which a person or a situation was more influential in dictating behaviours (Allport, 1927; Mischel, 1968), suggests boredom will be challenging to define psychologically. In an earlier collection of more philosophically minded essays on boredom, Goldstein (2005) wrote, "boredom isolates, individuates, even as it blurs the world gray. A confrontation with nothing, then, or Nothing, or something like it. Perhaps just a name

for what cannot be named, an encounter with the limits of language. An experience without qualities.” (p. 1). The evocation of the limits of language here is telling; while psychology successfully domesticated several concepts (e.g. intelligence, personality, etc.), boredom’s nebulous nature reveals the problems inherent in the practice of reifying everyday concepts through methodology.

Various boredom scholars have begun their investigations in antiquity, using source material from the public, government officials, and philosophers (Svendsen, 1999; McDonald, 2009; Toohey, 2011). For example, McDonald (2009), a proponent of embedded boredom, which is understood as historically and culturally situated, focused on the concept of *taedium vitae* as an ancient candidate for boredom where urbanization and the artificial administration of time created the environment from which it could emerge. It is hypothesized that to address this unpleasant experience associated with meaninglessness, emperors distracted the populace with the infamous Roman spectacles (McDonald, 2009). This use of aesthetic answers by the powerful to address boredom and boredom-like phenomena is a tactic that would reoccur in the West, especially after the Industrial Revolution.

The writings of the Christian church have been a popular source for boredom scholars, with theologians establishing it as a moral concept. Interpretations included boredom as an external force and an internal experience resembling a psychological state (Pezze & Salzani, 2009; Svendsen, 1999; Toohey, 2011). Earlier discussions highlight how the concept of *acedia* was a condition of restlessness that undermined people’s resolve and made them vulnerable to sin (Svendsen, 1999; Pezze & Salzani, 2009). This ‘noon day demon’ was seen as an area of particular concern for monks during long days in seclusion (Toohey, 2011). *Acedia* would lend these concerns to future iterations of boredom with Soren Kierkegaard’s warning that boredom was the root of all evil since it undermined individual resolve and made other sins more likely (Kierkegaard, 1843/2004). Kierkegaard had himself become interested in boredom when considering how new secular freedoms came at the price of severing ties with spiritual meanings and guidance (McDonald, 2009). He believed these freedoms lead to the misuse of reflection

and self-determination for the pursuit of pleasure, and, having abandoned God, people would be incapable of finding a deeper meaning to life—only a series of fleeting distractions, again echoing the divide between the existential and the aesthetic (McDonald, 2009). While acedia and boredom would share significant definitional overlap, academics typically point to the concept of melancholy as the next step in the transition towards modern boredom. According to Svendsen (1999), the advancement of melancholy happened in the medieval period, a time of church dominance and apparent stability for boredom-associated terms. Perhaps due partly to this era of stability for boredom-like terms, the industrial revolution becomes the next period of study for many boredom scholars.

During the Industrial Revolution, several philosophers turned their attention to how the promises of the Enlightenment had given way to the dehumanizing realities of factory life (Pezze & Salzani, 2009). These developments brought new ways of regimenting people's lives, including "clock-time", whereby worker productivity could be measured with precision (Boss, 2009). This renewed focus on measurement and productivity would spur future psychological research and measurement regimes due to the implications for factories and military production (Fenichel, 1951; Svendsen, 1999; Eastwood et al., 2012; Vodanovich & Watt, 2016). Alternatively, boredom's associations with meaninglessness led other more philosophically-minded academics to conclude the construct was representative of the age (Svendsen, 1999; Goodstein, 2005; Pezze & Salzani, 2009; Leeuwen, 2009), or, according to Gardiner and Haladyn (2017), the "quintessential experience" of modernity.

Consistent with the concept of embedded boredom, Google's Ngram Viewer for English-language books reveals how melancholy had once dominated the discourse over ennui, acedia, and boredom in English-language books (see figure 3). The results depict a rapid decline in the use of melancholy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century while boredom experienced a modest increase. According to some researchers, the various terms possessed boredom's psychological and internal characteristics but were mainly missing its existential component (Svendsen, 1999; Goodstein, 2005; Gardiner & Haladyn, 2017).

Gardiner (2017) went on to suggest that Langeweile and ennui would eventually go on to adopt these existential themes after the concept of modern boredom had become popularized. In contrast, philosopher, literary critic, and language theorist Walter Benjamin thought ennui, Langeweile, and boredom manifested themselves differently in modern contexts, leaving the terms related but distinct (Pezze & Salzani, 2009).

19th-century psychological textbooks document at least a passing interest on the subject of boredom (Waitz, 1863; Teo, 2007). This curiosity into boredom appears to have accelerated after World War I (Davies, 1926; Wyatt et al., 1929; Berman, 1939; Barmack, 1939a; Barmack 1939b) and especially during the early Cold War period with psychoanalysts and psychologists examining the construct in industrial and defense settings (Fenichel, 1951; Leuba, 1955; Greenson, 1953; Heron, 1957; Geiwitz, 1966). These studies were spurred by an interest in finding operational efficiencies and the optimal conditions for human productivity, especially in monotonous work environments (e.g., assembly line work, radar surveillance). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there were disagreements over whether boredom was caused by a state of high arousal, a state of low arousal, environmental factors, or boredom susceptibility (Geiwitz, 1966). Various psychological studies attempting to address boredom were documented in James Geiwitz's literature review in his 1966 paper "Structure of Boredom", which itself was an attempt to examine the presumptions the psychological community held about boredom. Geiwitz conducted a case study to determine whether the frequently associated concepts of monotony, arousal, negative affect, and constraint were all necessary elements to elicit boredom. With his single participant, he found that while all four concepts contributed to boredom, only three of the four were necessary (Geiwitz, 1966). Monotony, arousal, negative affect, and constraint would all persist as themes associated with boredom, but the effort to turn them into constitutional aspects would not be pursued.

It was during these 1960-1980s scattershot attempts to understand boredom that personality psychology, armed with self-report, observational, and experimental methodologies, joined the inquiry in hopes of advancing understandings of how the human psyche is constituted (Tupes & Christal, 1992). Evidence for the growing interest in boredom could be found in the establishment of several subscales by Singer & Antrobus (1964), Zuckerman (1971), Grubb (1975), and Hamilton et al. (1984). While boredom was not the primary focus until the development of the Boredom Proneness Scale (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), the popularity of these psychometric approaches speaks to the confidence that they were an effective way to categorize the mind scientifically. As boredom research progressed, new subdisciplines, including positive and neurocognitive psychologies, would turn to the mystery of boredom.

Alongside the expanding psychological interest in boredom, philosophical inquiries continued. These discussions placed a new emphasis on how the acceleration of change and the transition to the digital age proliferated boredom, or the “experience without qualities,” in which isolation, alienation, and meaninglessness were common against the backdrop of neoliberalism (Goodstein, 2005). A manifestation of this modern experience can be found in Elizabeth Legge’s (2016) work discussing low-grade boredom that lacks features and is largely inaccessible to the conscious mind. Legge documents how this boredom was explored by the “young British artist movement” or “yBas” in the 80s and 90s as both a serious endeavour while still appealing to the commercial market (p. 88). Frances Colpitt was another scholar interested in the connection between art and boredom as he followed its role in contemporary art, minimalist aesthetic, and the end of modernism (2017). Colpitt argued that when entertainment’s importance in art grew, and funding shifted from public to private sources in the 1980s, the distinction between elite and mass culture became irrelevant. This shift led museums to adopt an entertainment-first strategy rather than provide a place of quiet contemplation—suggesting that many

cultural institutions, which were best suited to confront existential boredom, were now appealing to the aesthetic wants of the market.

Martin Hand furthered the idea of a leveling of culture into the 2000s by introducing the concept of digital boredom, or a shift from “clock-time” to “iTime” and how it intensified the emotional flatness of modern boredom (Hand, 2017). Hand went on to characterize contemporary life as “technologically mediated, repetitive, rushed and denying solitude, and in which multiple practices of presenting, tracking and connecting are at once efforts to alleviate boredom, contributing to experiences of boredom, and occluding the possibility of a more profound boredom” (Hand, 2017, p. 122). These considerations of time, technology, and boredom built upon the earlier work of Martin Heidegger, who explored how experiences, including boredom, were produced by “clock-time” (Boss, 2009, p. 85). While widely ignored, Heidegger believed he had revealed boredom as a metaphysical concern rather than an area for psychological research (Boss, 2009). Consistent with these themes and the tension between existential and trivial boredom was Kevin Aho’s (2017) work, which drew a parallel between people seeking distraction and the experience of online dating. In the digital dating arena, relationships are superficially constructed between heavily crafted avatars which are replaceable, undermining the ability of people to establish meaning outside of market demands. According to Aho, the act of searching provides an endless source of distraction, and since advanced algorithms filter prospective dates, there is never a need to make a “Kierkegaardian leap” with available choices being managed. This situation, where people no longer need to go beyond the available information for romantic decision-making, leads to a state of boredom where people are caught in a cycle of seeking ever more distraction. Ringmar (2017) added to this discussion, “modern boredom is a result of the way we were separated from tradition, forced to pay attention to our lives rather than to simply live them, and the way we were disciplined and made autonomous and self-directing” (p. 208). In light of this, Ringmar suggests ignoring the constant demands of news feeds and embracing boredom as a protest

against the conditions of capitalism. For him, the only way to be free in the modern world is to stop paying attention. As will be discussed below, it is of considerable interest how attention's role in boredom was mainly in the background for personality psychology, yet for the psychologies formed after the implementation of neoliberal reforms, e. g. positive psychology and neurocognitive psychology, attention was at the absolute center.

More recent psychological boredom research has been focused on understanding the construct through its associations with personality traits, pathologies, and subjective experiences. Boden (2009) documented psychological studies that found correlations between boredom and "criminal activity, violence, compulsive gambling, and sexual behaviors, as well as other maladaptive behaviors" (Boden, 2009, p. 204). Further associations were found with extraversion, neuroticism, impulse control, regulation of internal states, maladaptive behavior, stimulus perception, time estimation, and attention (Boden, 2009). Following this line of thinking, Wijnand Tilburg and Eric Igou explored the "correlates and consequences" of boredom and how it can trigger "outgroup derogation, nostalgic reverie, hero adoration, prosocial tendencies and polarization of political ideology" (2019, p. xv). The numerous dangers associated with the inability to find or create meaning, which has been repeatedly connected to boredom, include impulsiveness, unhealthy consumption, and poor mental health (McDonald, 2019). Out of these concerning associations, critiques have emerged suggesting the connections are too quickly made, perhaps providing another example of the problems which arise when psychology treats a human kind as a natural one (Ringmar, 2017).

While these investigations into the nature of boredom are extensive, in the end, they leave the concept either in a conflicted state or largely underdefined. They also largely fail to ask how or if psychology's interpretations of boredom have influenced the everyday use of the term or in what ways the everyday use has influenced psychology's investigations. Central to this paper, it is also undetermined how psychology's problematization of boredom, through associations with adverse

outcomes, was impacted by a capitalist culture and the later neoliberal reforms in the 1980s. If understood within a capitalist framework, boredom becomes a catalyst for the expansion of entertainment into all aspects of life, serving as an indicator for new opportunities for aesthetic market solutions and points of intervention for constructing neoliberal subjectivity (Teo, 2018). The problem emerging for the two subdisciplines investigated for this thesis, personality psychology and positive psychology, is how culturally-influenced shifts in boredom's identity are inconsistent with the unchanging, natural kind subject matter associated with conducting a science (Hacking, 1995) – with this discrepancy serving as the entry point for this inquiry.

### ***Frameworks***

In order to bring clarity to the forces influencing the various investigations of boredom, several frameworks are deployed. Lorraine Daston's (2000) applied metaphysical approach into the biography of psychological constructs serving as a guide, especially her use of the concept of productivity, psychological studies of boredom are contextualized given its place in Western capitalist society. Daston contends that scientific objects, like boredom, come into being as they serve the needs of investigators and the wider public. For this examination, the needs of psychology, as represented by personality psychologists of the 1970s, are dominated by a system where governments are expected to intervene to prop up failing markets and prevent labour unrest. These expectations are contrasted with the positive psychology of the 1990s, where individual responsibility largely eclipsed government obligations due to neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. Given that both subdisciplines operate in a larger capitalist framework, their understanding of boredom is impacted by how existential concerns are widely addressed through aesthetic solutions, as discussed in detail by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1947/2020). Here, boredom's identity of being both trivial and existential places it at the nexus of business practices and people's search for meaning.



Further, as discussed in the work of Kurt Danziger (1926-), Ian Hacking (1936-), Jerome Kagan (1929-2021), and John Benjafield (1941-), psychology's attempts to practice the discipline as a science led to misunderstandings of the underlying concepts and limitations of the practice as a whole. Many of these concerns are focused on how some psychologists assumed language could accurately represent natural kinds and how the appearance of particular concepts across various languages provides evidence for their transcendental existence (as assumed in the Lexical Hypothesis (Goldberg, 1981)). These works also help clarify how boredom's shifting identity for psychologists exposes how these subdisciplines are influenced by the broader culture, thus confounding their claims to be practicing a detached science. A more detailed discussion of these frameworks follows.

### *Aesthetic Capitalism and Neoliberalism*

Post-World War II and before the onset of neoliberal reforms, Western capitalist states, particularly in the United States, experienced the acceleration of a Culture Industry, as described in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2020). Following Marx's theorizing, Horkheimer and Adorno argued advancements in manufacturing technologies had led workers to become interchangeable cogs in the more extensive industrial apparatus. This redefinition of labour undermined the need for their intellectual contributions, leaving workers alienated from the products of their labour. In the place of meaningful work, mass production offered workers tangible but ultimately meaningless differences between commercial products to derive meaning and fill their hollowed-out identities. These notions were extended into the realms of media and publications, "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself, and all are unanimous together (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/2020, p. 94). Further, modern media's vast reach into the public was leveraged to sell products and enforce brand associations, as an oligarchy with control of many thousands of companies emerged to provide the illusion of choice. Horkheimer & Adorno (1947/2020) observed that "films and radio no longer need to present themselves

as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce . . . all mass culture under monopoly is identical” (p. 95). This focus on the aesthetic provided an immediate reprieve from existential worries by paving them over with an endless array of consumer goods and forms of entertainment. This understanding of trivial boredom is corroborated by its appearance in *The New York Times* articles in the 1970s and 1990s sampled for this paper, where boredom is near uniformly associated with the aesthetic, even when appearing in existential dialogues.

As Western capitalism matured, free-market solutions were promoted as the answer for government inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. These efforts would culminate in the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, facilitating the comparison between the 1970s and the 1990s by providing an inflection point on the broader culture. Neoliberalism, whether a system, ideology, or cultural practice, is essentially an application of classic economic liberalism to all aspects of social life. This new way of organizing a society flourished in Western societies in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the efforts of Friedrich Hayek (1944/2014), Milton Friedman (1962/2002), Murray Rothbard (1978), and others. Guided by the notion that expansion of free markets equated to greater personal autonomy and the strengthening of a restrictive form of democracy, these adherents promoted economic non-interventionist policies as the way to harness human potential. Oddly, while neoliberalism has unquestionably influenced all manner of private and public institutions, as well as how people understood themselves and their interpersonal relationships, the concept itself remains without a concise definition (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Rajesh, 2015; Davies, 2016; Winston, 2018; Davies, 2019). This obscurity is likely due, in part, to neoliberalism’s internal contradictions and conflicts between differing schools of thought (Winston, 2018). Similarly, Mirowski (2014) remarked that due to constant theoretical revision and collaboration since its proposed origins in 1947, neoliberalism “is still a hydra-headed Gorgon to this very day” (p. 14). Confusing this further, the very same proponents of

neoliberal reforms in public and private spheres often deny they are neoliberals while claiming the dominant system is in fact, socialism (Mirowski, 2014). Nevertheless, some progress has been made in outlining the core principles of neoliberalism. As Jackson (2014) states, “the heart of neoliberal ideology is the belief that freedom and prosperity are best advanced by expanding the role of markets and are undermined by democratic collective action, especially (but not only) by the state and trade unions” (p. 194). This promotes the “converting of society into a “marketplace” for ideas” where neoliberalism is generated not by power structures of class, but in the buying and selling of goods (Read, 2009, p. 26). As decision-making shifts from communities to the marketplace, personal autonomy is stripped in favor of the mysterious natural laws of economics, while disenchantment with politics further limits people’s ability to act outside of the marketplace (Jackson, 2014). Ultimately, as individuals enter the market as entrepreneurs, their successes and failures are understood as market functions, where exploitation becomes impossible or “invisible” (Read, 2009, p. 32).

Neoliberalism is not a purely an economic system but “in effect an epistemological machine that produces new modes of subjectivity” (Cosgrove & Karter, 2018, p. 670). As mentioned in Teo (2018), the capacity of neoliberalism to generate subjectivity can be understood through Lucien Sève’s (1978) assertions that “particular societies produce forms for the personal expression of individuality (an idea expressed in psychological anthropology; see Hsu, 1971)” (p. 583). Individuality is no longer an expression of choice but the “result of objectively existing production relations” as understood by Marx (Teo, 2018, p. 582). Neoliberalism, and its focus on feelings over reasoning, has coincided with an “affective turn” in psychology, revealing another example of how the system has impacted society (Pettit, 2016). However, psychology has not been simply passive, as its reach into the public imagination has furthered neoliberal understandings of the self by promoting ideas consistent with the development of a personal brand, adoption of self-entrepreneurship, and its proximity to self-help publications (Baron, 2012; Frese & Gielnik, 2014; Manson, 2016). The stresses placed on facilitating the development

of the entrepreneur-self could be interpreted as an answer to the alienation experienced by workers as they became interchangeable. However, as the individual enters the marketplace, it also necessitates adopting associated risks and forgoing much of the stability associated with governmental and communal services. These shifts have coincided with the “erosion of manufacturing and the dominance of the service sector, the emergence of precarious work in all domains, the decline of the welfare state, the outsourcing of public services to the private sector”, and the development of the “neoliberal form of subjectivity” (Teo, 2018, p. 584). As a new way of being, “Neoliberalism is reformulating personhood, psychological life, moral and ethical responsibility, and what it means to have selfhood and identity” (Sugarman, 2015, p. 104). In addition, Sugarman (2015) stated that psychologists were contributing to this “ideological climate” where “persons are not obliged to consider, let alone take responsibility for, the welfare of others” (p. 103). The extent of this neoliberal indoctrination within the practice of psychology is debatable, with resistance appearing in several subdisciplines, including community psychology and critical social psychology, but, as the wider public adopts market-friendly practices, psychology becomes further informed by neoliberal understandings, where “looping effects” reformulate and reinforce concepts (Hacking, 1995).

As mentioned, a key element of neoliberalism and how psychology is practiced is the concept of productivity. In *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Lorraine Daston (2000) explains why certain concepts, like boredom, become of interest to the field, “scientific objects attain their heightened ontological status by producing results, implications, surprises, connections, manipulations, explanations, applications” (p. 10). In this context, boredom provided researchers greater precision in defining its assumed oppositional concepts, e.g. arousal, stimulation (Zuckerman, 1979), anxiety, and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The progress experienced by researchers tracks Daston’s understanding of how these concepts are formed and being formed, “It takes time to forge them, time to learn how to use them, and time to learn their strengths and limitations” (Daston, 2000, p. 11). While boredom’s porous

boundaries are reflected in how it is difficult to conceptualize as a distinct whole, “scientific objects flout the boundaries between scientific disciplines” (Daston, 2000, p. 12). Given these practices, the cultural influences, and how boredom became intellectual territory researchers competed over, the scientific claims of both personality psychology and positive psychology are worthy of skepticism.

### *Psychological Categories and Vocabulary*

Another complication for the scientific claims of the psychologists who are the focus of this examination (Eysenck (1916-1997), Zuckerman (1928-2018), Seligman (1942-), and Csikszentmihalyi (1934-)) is how psychology establishes its subject matter. There have been many scholars (Daston (2000), Hacking (1995), Kagan (2001), Benjafield (2013), Danziger (1997)) to highlight the problems that arise when psychologists borrow from the public terms of everyday use (e.g., intelligence, willpower, boredom, etc.) and assume their status as natural kinds (Hacking, 1995) or indifferent kinds (Tsou, 2007) through methodology, operationalizations, and their psychological authority. This practice of borrowing from the public relies on the assumption that there is “a timeless ‘human nature’ independent of culture and history” (Hacking 1995, p. 129), that the terms offer accurate representations of concepts outside of language (Hacking, 1995; Benjafield, 2013), and that their subject matter is a universal part of ‘human nature’ (Kagan, 2001, Benjafield, 2013). These assumptions were primarily undermined by the categories’ evolving histories and the many cultural differences in their understanding and expression (Danziger, 1997; Benjafield, 2013; Kagan, 2001). Investigations like these present an explicit theoretical problem for the continued practice of scientific psychology that relies on colloquial language for its subject matter, something both personality psychology of the 1970s and positive psychology of the 1990s practiced with theoretical backing from the Lexical Hypothesis (LH). Developed by Lewis Goldberg (1981), proponents of the LH argued that because all cultures develop vocabularies for consequential aspects and objects of experience, taxonomic methods can record equivalent expressions across cultures, which establishes personality traits as a natural expression of underlying biological and

evolutionary factors rather than a cultural product (Revelle & Oehlberg, 2008). While neither of the disciplines centralized the LH in their theories or discussions, it is informative due to their reliance on cross-cultural studies and their grounding of traits/states of interest (e.g., happiness, boredom, stimulation, etc.) in biological processes. Further, the LH informed the original assumptions of Eysenck's psychometric methods, while Seligman co-authored a paper supporting the use of the theory (Schwartz et al., 2013). However, in failing to give boredom a standard definition, questions emerge regarding the assumptions of the LH and boredom's natural identity.

### **Methods**

This thesis possesses a comparative structure consisting of two chapters, each containing two subsections. The first subsection covers the technical psychological literature discussing the development of boredom, and the second subsection is dedicated to the popular discourse, with *The New York Times* (NYT) serving as a proxy. Specifically, chapter 1 covers the personality psychology of Hans Eysenck and Marvin Zuckerman and its development of boredom as a category of interest, with a particular focus on the 1970s. Chapter 1 also includes a discussion of 200 NYT articles containing the phrase "boredom" between 1970-1979. Similarly, chapter 2 covers the discussions and development of boredom by the discipline of positive psychology but focuses on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work and his concept of flow. Chapter 2 also includes a discussion of 200 NYT articles containing the phrase "boredom" between the years 1990-1990.

The over-arching strategy for the analysis is a comparison between each subsection, where the popular discourses are compared against each other and the psychological literature within its timeframe. Additionally, the two psychological bodies of literature of the 1970s and 1990s are documented for differences in methodologies and theory. This strategy was deployed to illuminate how the broader culture was influencing the discussions of boredom and whether the psychological understandings of the affective state were, in turn, influencing the popular discourse in a looping effect

(Hacking, 1995). Finally, the comparison also focuses on how the emergence of neoliberal reforms and the rapid growth of a complimentary public ideology influenced the practice of psychology, and ultimately, its understanding of boredom.

The analysis for the NYT articles was informed by a Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006 paper on conducting thematic analysis. This approach involves the researcher's immersion by reading and rereading the data in several stages as general themes and patterns emerge. Beyond building a familiarity with the underlying data, this approach is highly flexible and can be applied across a range of theoretical approaches because it is independent of theory. According to the authors, "thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The exploratory nature of this investigation into boredom allowed the themes in the corpus to speak for themselves.

#### *Source Materials*

*The New York Times* was selected for the source material due to its large readership, longevity, and ease of archive search. It is also understood here as a surrogate for middle to upper-class American culture. This approach of performing a thematic analysis of the popular press as a methodology in the history of psychology in academic papers has been utilized by Robert Kugelmann (2013), Alexandra Rutherford (2000), and Jeffery Yen et al. (2018). Alexandra Rutherford states that "Journalists, as members of psychology's popular audience . . . both mirror and interpret public attitudes. They influence these attitudes by choosing which stories, which angles and which criticisms to include in their coverage" (Rutherford, 2000, p. 374). In agreement, Yen remarked, "The news media reflect and strongly influence popular understanding of both science and prejudice" (Yen et al., 2018, p. 3). Yen also referenced earlier work by Katie Simmons and Amanda Lecouteur examining how the media shaped racist events and how that influenced how racism was understood and acted upon by the public

(Simmons & Lecouter 2008). This influencing of the readership is a well-established concept, and since psychologists also consume media, they too are influenced by the ideas in the popular press. Examples of the public influencing psychological concepts were found, yet, unexpectedly, instances of psychological ideas influencing the public discourse regarding boredom are limited, with the notable exception of editorials covering psychological findings in the 1990s, revealing its growing reach as a discipline.

### *Procedure*

The source material for this project was collected using the ProQuest database of *The New York Times* archive, where “boredom” was utilized as the search term for the 1970s and 1990s. These two decades represent periods of formation and productivity for personality and positive psychology and some scholarship on boredom. These periods also mark the periods before and after the neoliberal reforms introduced by Ronald Reagan’s administration. For each decade, the first 200 articles appearing from the search result ordered by “relevance” were added to the corpus, with some duplicates substituted for the next relevant entry.

### *Analysis and Category Construction*

As mentioned, using Braun and Clarke’s paper on thematic analysis as a guide, the data was subjected to many readings through which repeating themes associated with boredom were documented. These readings facilitated the comparison of themes and the construction of several overarching categories. These were established by identifying the primary subject matter and or context of the article. The categories for the two periods included:

1970s	1990s
Art	Art



Literature	Literature
Entertainment	Entertainment
Travel	Travel
Youth	Youth
Labour	Labour
Politics	Politics
Armed Forces	Armed Forces
Fashion	Fashion
Older Adults	Older Adults
Food	Food
	Exercise
	Trials
	Boredom

This categorization approach is imperfect as many categories possess porous boundaries; for instance, there are several examples where the Armed Forces, Youth, and Politics categories have considerable thematic overlap.

An important consideration for how the categories were constructed was the differentiation between two of the most populated categories, Art and Entertainment. While a limited number of films and theater productions contain elements of both art and entertainment, generally speaking, articles designated as Art covered pieces or productions that were not primarily intended for mass distribution, had limited or no established popular associations, and were attempting to communicate existential ideas or meaning-making rather than engaging in capitalist practices. In contrast, articles in the Entertainment category were characterized as mass-produced, attention-seeking spectacle, derivative in

nature, commercial, and readily eliciting unintentional boredom. As mentioned above, these distinctions are primarily informed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's (1947/2020) work. In a similar vein, the Literature category possesses both elements of Art and Entertainment. As such, attempts to designate examples to either category are inexact, bordering on arbitrary. It is also necessary to highlight how some theorists, such as Colpitt (2017), argue that the distinction between art and entertainment has already been eliminated, with museums and galleries adopting entertainment as a tactic to increase attendance and revenues. It is noteworthy that the concepts forwarded by Horkheimer and Adorno can be found in several other categories, including Youth, Military, and especially Labour. However imperfect, these categories allow for the comparison of the most popular themes between periods.

## Chapter 2 – Personality Psychology – Boredom as Trait

Boredom did not begin the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a phenomenon of significant interest for Western governments or psychology, but as the century unfolded, the common but little-understood experience would gain attention from the psychological disciplines. This interest is documented in the growing number of articles attempting to define the term and identify associated negative states (Davies, 1926; Wyatt et al., 1929; Barmack, 1939a; Fenichel, 1951; Geiwitz, 1966). The extent to which the leaders of the United States Military were concerned with low morale among troops and the possible psychological distress of overseas deployments is reflected in the lengths they undertook to develop entertainment programs (Tibbetts, 1986/2010). For the personality psychologists in this chapter, namely Hans Eysenck (1916-1997) and Marvin Zuckerman (1928-2018), boredom would at first be a construct of utility as it facilitated advancements in their arousal theories of personality, only later becoming of interest with the development of boredom-focused testing and assessments. While there were several academic explorations into the identity of boredom before the closure of the first world war, it was with the development of individual difference testing regimes that the modern understanding of the experience and psychological testing of it that psychologists made progress in claiming the concept.

The onset of the first world war saw several military developments that changed the nature of warfare, including the scale of battles, larger deployments of long-range artillery, and the wide use of trenches (Leese, 2002). These shifts in strategies and tactics exposed soldiers to an environment where psychological injuries were more prevalent, some of which manifested into mysterious ailments, including shell shock, battle fatigue, and war neurosis (MacCurdy, 1918; Leese, 2002; McDonald, 2016). Shell shock was singled out as a debilitating injury associated with mental disorders and behavioural abnormalities which challenged a soldier's ability to carry out their duties. While the condition baffled many physicians, the sheer number of cases, 900,000 English, 900,000 French, and 15,000 American soldiers, made it impossible to ignore (Gibby & Zickar, 2008). In time, psychologists and governments

became convinced that its expression was due to natural susceptibilities and, a growing interest emerged in findings ways to pre-emptively identify citizens who were at greater risk. This interest materialized in the development of the Robert Woodworth Personal Data Sheet, which “identify soldiers prone to nervous breakdowns during enemy bombardment in [WWI]” (Gibby & Zickar, 2008, p. 164). These growing demands for ways of identifying individual differences accelerated the ongoing research being conducted by a host of psychologists who were not only interested in intelligence but were notable eugenicists, an association that would persist in the following decades (Goddard, 1920; Terman, 1921; Cattell, 1924; Thorndike, 1924; Yerkes, 1917; 1923). While these efforts to construct new testing regimes largely came too late for screening WWI soldiers, the idea that certain people suffered from measurable mental vulnerabilities was of great interest to interwar governments and industry. Consistent with this, Woodworth’s Personal Data Sheet was revised in 1924 to test industrial personnel so that managers could identify unstable workers or applicants (Gibby & Zickar, 2008). As anxieties grew over the threat posed by communist ideologies and the rise of unions and labour unrest, capitalist leaders eagerly looked to these same psychological tests to help identify and neutralize potentially disruptive workers, facilitate efficient placement of labour, and control and manage citizenry (Gibby & Zickar, 2008; Westad, 2013). The extent to which psychological approaches, in general, grew in popularity can be partially gleaned from the founding of psychotechnical institutes in many countries, including England, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Japan (Rabinbach, 1992). It is also evidenced by the appearance of behaviourism (Schneider & Morris, 1987), articles regarding temperament measurement in “popular articles, trade magazines, and academic journals” (Lussier, 2018, p. 80), and the practice of characterology in the 1920s, which attempted to classify workers’ temperament, reliability, “devotion to duty, and other dimensions of “the working personality”” (Rabinbach, 1992, p. 281). Ultimately, during the interwar reconstruction period, there were concerns, real and fabricated, that the accelerated growth of industrial production in the USSR’s command economy and considerable

military capacity would pose a near-term threat to Western Europe and beyond if the West's economic advantage was not maintained (Ferguson & Koslowski, 2001). Attempts to advance testing methodologies persisted through the interwar period; efforts included factor analysis, the identification of various intelligences (Thurstone, 1938), and the Wechsler Adults Intelligence Scale cognitive intelligence test (Wechsler, 1939). With the introduction of complicated statistical practices, theoretical backing from notions of language which would eventually culminate into the Lexical Hypothesis, and rigorous experimental methods, the hope that psychology could be practiced as a hard science appeared to be nearing realization. Due to these developments, future boredom research could approach the experience as just another trait waiting to be revealed as the practice of psychology entered into a phase of normal science (Kuhn, 1962).

It is important to note how the public's awareness and periodic adoption of psychological concepts in the post-war period altered English Western discourses and understandings of themselves. People would come to interpret identities with tangible results of intelligence and personality testing, and for many, this spurred concern over the impact of psychological testing and the wide adoption by businesses. The reaction to this was seen in 1956 with William H. Whyte Jr.'s (2013) best-selling book, *The Organization Man*, which offered a

scathing analysis of corporate America's managerial bureaucracy. According to the Fortune magazine editor, modern enterprise abhorred individuality and creativity and fostered instead persons whose identity consisted primarily of belonging to an organization. He laid much of the blame on the science of human relations—especially psychology—for this sorry state of affairs (Pettit, 2013, p. 194).

The book also offered readers approaches to answering personality tests in acceptable ways to business interests (Pettit, 2013). However, anxieties over how to navigate systematic testing and their

implications for workers persisted as continued cooperation between business, governments, and academia accelerated into the post-war period. The discipline that found itself at ground zero for these post-war developments was personality psychology as practiced in Britain.

One center for postwar personality psychology was at the University of College London (UCL), which had benefited from a tradition of and proximity to evolutionary and statistical thinking. One of the first major influences on this institution came with Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) work discussing the evolutionary pressures on behaviours in his *Descent of Man* (1871/2008), "both animals and humans had inheritable traits that shaped their moods and temperaments" (Horowitz, 2017, pp. 2-3). This stance highlighted how temperament, a concept similar to personality, was influenced by inheritable traits, which some psychologists later interpreted as a biological basis for personality and behaviours. Building on this work, Darwin's half-cousin, Francis Galton (1822-1911), who dedicated his career to the development of the "science of eugenics", established a eugenics laboratory at UCL and the journal the *Eugenic Review*, which was "designed to promote good breeding patterns. Galton opened the imagination to the possibility of managing human resource for improving society by improving human stocks" (Buchanan, 2010, pp. 48-49). The notion that society could improve its gene pool revealed a history of colonial and racist practices, and it depended upon a systematic way of sorting the genetically superior from the genetically inferior. The task of developing these measurement methods was taken up by the same people who pioneered this fundamentally racist interpretation of human nature and who, predictably, interpreted themselves as the apex of human development. While the terminology and overtly racist practices became less blatant over the decades, perhaps partially due to the atrocities of WWII, the problematic practice of categorizing people, as informed by biological and eugenic interpretations, persisted at UCL. Advancing to the interwar period at UCL, the psychologist Cyril Burt (1883-1971) also followed this tradition by examining the evolutionary differences between peoples while establishing an intelligence testing lab at the psychology department at UCL (Buchanan,

2010). Equally crucial to the later establishment of the personality psychology of individual differences at UCL was the statistical work of Charles Spearman (1863-1945), who pioneered the approach of factor analysis. This approach allowed researchers to quantify their descriptive research in ways that had not yet been possible, and in the process, clad their work in the appearance of scientific rigor. These influences helped form a highly influential academic tradition that substantially informed personality psychology as it was constituted at UCL in the postwar era. Tellingly, the preeminent theorist of this brand of personality psychology, Hans Eysenck, named all these academics as his largest influences, with Burt being his advisor and “chief intellectual influence” (Buchanan, 2010, p. 53).

Included in this constitutive history of personality psychology is Eysenck’s work in the 1940s and 1950s, where he utilized questionnaires to measure the basic dimensions of personality by comparing neurotic with ordinary soldiers and fraternal with identical twins (Buchanan, 2010). One of the motivations for examining underlying biological causes stemmed from his experiences as a psychologist at Maudsley Psychiatric Hospital in London, England, where psychiatrists were treating the patients as if they all had the same relative potential to manifest disorders due to environmental or social causes (Zuckerman, 1979/2015). While at first practicing under these prevailing assumptions, Eysenck came to believe this approach was flawed since, for him, the primary underlying cause of mental disorders was the same as it was for different temperaments or personalities, an individual’s particular biology (Revelle & Oehlberg, 2008). This theorizing was not solely focused on discounting the role of environment, but more generally motivated by his hope to merge experimental (more commonly understood as cognitive psychology) and correlational methodologies, since “he did not believe that pure observational approaches could be anything more than mere descriptions and sources of hunches in a preparadigmatic science” (Revelle & Oehlberg, 2008, p. 1396). Further, Eysenck argued that a merger would allow individual differences to be scientifically established, paving the way for a biological basis for personalities. To this end, Eysenck and his colleagues joined other researchers by revisiting and

updating the stimulus research conducted by Austrian psychoanalyst Otto Gross (1902), Robert Yerkes, and John Dodson (1908). The main topic of interest was the Optimal Level of Stimulation (OLS) theory, which suggested that tasks were more efficiently completed at a mid-level of stimulation. As stimulation increased beyond the OLS, participants would experience overstimulation, leading to distraction and inefficiencies during task completion. The mirror of this effect was observed at lower levels of stimulation, which led to subjects becoming disengaged or falling asleep. This understanding of the OLS maps onto Yerkes and Dodson's (1908) inverted "U" concept of arousal (Eysenck & Wilson, 1976). Among the other researchers involved in this work were Daniel Berlyne (1960), Donald Fiske and Salvatore Maddi (1961), Donald Hebb (1955), Robert Malmö (1957), and Harold Schlosberg (1954). Zuckerman would later highlight how Schlosberg "suggested that the idea of an optimal level of arousal (OLA) could be substituted for OLS since the arousal construct could accommodate stimulus parameters such as novelty versus constancy, and complexity" (Zuckerman et al., 1978, p. 139). This increased flexibility also allowed researchers, including personality psychologists, to adopt the underlying theoretical mechanism to explain personality types and individual motivations as natural selection differences in the preferred level of arousal between people (Zuckerman, 1979/2014, p. 28).

With the OLA undergirding the contention that personalities can be understood in terms of biological differences, Eysenck, in his opinion, was then able to experimentally test his theories since arousal could be "manipulated, physiologically indexed, or behaviorally observed" (Eysenck, 1987, p. 30). For personality psychology, this meant that the long-existing categories of introversion and extraversion could be explained by the OLA, which would, in turn, connect his work to well-established science. Eysenck would come to believe that "extraverts are characterized by chronically lower levels of arousal in the ascending reticular activating system", while introverts' natural tendency was to be more "physiologically aroused" (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987, p. 137). As mentioned above, this effectively meant that when extraverts experienced arousal levels below their relatively high optimal level of arousal, they



would seek out increasing levels of arousal or stimulation to match their OLA, with the introverts adopting avoidance of stimulation if above their OLA. Eysenck believed these chronic lower levels of arousal motivated certain behaviours, including smoking, risky sex, and general social stimulation (Eysenck, 1963). Because Eysenck had founded his reasoning for individual differences in biology, he believed the OLA, through its connections to introversion and extraversion, was universally generalizable, “in many parts of the world, using many different instruments and methods of analysis, [researchers] have demonstrated that, descriptively, a dimension of personality closely resembling extraversion-introversion can be found universally and is of considerable help in the description of personality” (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987, p. 1). Due to this universality and his interests in genetic determinants, Eysenck, in what could be interpreted as a not-too-distant echo of Galton’s “good breeding habits”, saw the potential utility for his practices in categorizing and singling out “exceptional children” since, “We already know that E and N are implicated in school success” (Eysenck et al., 1970, p. 266).

According to biographer Roderick Buchanan (2010), Eysenck “developed a distinctive science of personality psychology that married descriptive statistics with physiological experimentation and collapsed any firm distinction between pure and applied science” (p. 3). This commitment to the assumption that the biological differences between people manifested into measurable and durable differences in personality is seen in the title of one of Eysenck’s best-known works, *The Biological Basis of Personality* (1963). While Eysenck was not dogmatic about the role of biology, he was still reasonably deterministic, arguing that “biology is not destiny but in influencing our basic appetite for stimulation it takes us down some strange byways” (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987, p. 229). According to Zuckerman, Eysenck theorized that each person had a preference for more or less arousal, and this could be explained straightforwardly, “a polygenic type of inheritance can account for much of the dimensional variance in personality. Just as we tend to inherit dispositions toward relative shortness or tallness or

certain body types, we also inherit differences in biological systems that dispose us toward various temperaments” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 45). These ideas represented one side of the broader person/situation debate in psychology, where behaviourist-inspired Walter Mischel (1968), argued that behaviours are too unpredictable from one situation to the next to conclude underlying traits influence them. In this environment, where the majority adopted correlational approaches, Eysenck differentiated his brand of personality psychology by pioneering the “factor analytic psychometric approach to personality traits” while “making extensive use of both experimental and correlational methods” (Davidson, 2017, p. 321). More specifically, Eysenck theorized that personality types were constituted from a constellation of traits, and traits were derived from a constellation of an individual’s behaviours and tendencies, ultimately meaning personality could be experimentally investigated (Eysenck, 1947/1998). With this theoretical framework and methodology in place, Eysenck furthered the idea of a biologically grounded personality, which would have implications for how boredom was understood and utilized. It is also worth noting that in the following decades, when most researchers distanced themselves from the trait approach, Eysenck held firm, stating that Mischel (1969) had misread the evidence, again claiming that “hereditary factors are important in explaining individual differences in personality” and “trait-state approach is almost the only major theory of personality that acknowledges that fact” (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985, p. 95)

The concerns stemming from these understandings of personality and arousal placed the “sensation seeker”, or extravert, as a personality type that was susceptible to the motivation to engage in risky behaviours, which could be expressed in antisocial activities and moral failings. Although, in understanding these factors, boredom, while not a central focus of Eysenck’s, did possess definitional utility for arousal as an opposed state, “the conditions of measurement have varied from “very boring” through “slightly arousing” to “very arousing” (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987, p. 8). He also noted boredom as an equivalent to a low arousal state and observed how it played a role in increasing cigarette smoking in

extraverts in situations of both over and under-stimulation (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). These findings increased the interest in utilizing boredom as a method of categorization and the labeling of people as a potential concern. One apparent conflict running through these personality studies is the depiction of arousal as easily manipulated, yet its counterpart, boredom, suffers from being hard to elicit, poorly defined, and yet bestows oppositional characteristics. For Eysenck, boredom remained in the background, but for his close colleague, Marvin Zuckerman, boredom would become of keen interest as his investigative process revealed some concerning associations. This work would catch the interest of fellow psychologists, and as boredom received more attention in the coming decades, its underdetermined identity would persist, even as it continued to provide categorizing utility and theoretical productivity.

Using Eysenck's theories and methodologies, Marvin Zuckerman identified the biological factors of personality as understood by the roles of stimulation and arousal. Similarly, he took up Eysenck's interest in transitioning away from Freud's primary drives to what he believed was a more scientifically grounded concept of the OLS and later OLA (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 17). These theories governing behaviour offered psychologists a more direct way to psychobiologically test the variations in personality by manipulating arousal levels. In acknowledging the ongoing research being conducted regarding levels of stimulation and his work on the Sensation-Seeking Scale (SSS), Zuckerman remarked, "The concept of an optimal level of stimulation, excitation, or activation has been offered by Hebb and Thompson (1954), Leuba (1955), Berlyne (1960), and Fiske and Maddi (1961) as a substitute for the unsatisfactory concept of drive reduction which assumes the common goal of all primary motivation is to reduce stimulation to a minimum" (Zuckerman et al., 1963, p. 477). Zuckerman was hopeful the SSS would provide a more complex model with the capacity to account for individual differences, as well as how different sensations can possess different optimal levels, culminating in a general factor for the OLS/OLA, "we hypothesized that a general factor would emerge from responses to diverse items"

(Zuckerman et al., 1964, p. 477). As Zuckerman pursued his interests in exploring individual differences for sensation seeking, he would come to identify boredom as a helpful concept to contextualize the sensation seeker's behaviours.

Before the SSS was fully developed, Zuckerman, much like Eysenck, found inspiration in the work of Hebb (1904-1985), Berlyne (1924-1976), Heron (1928-), and others who explored the use of sensory deprivation as a way to experimentally manipulate participants' levels of stimulation or arousal. With its apparent associations with boredom, this work provided insight and inspiration for Zuckerman as he developed the SSS, "The first form of this test was devised in 1961 as an incidental part of my experimental research in sensory deprivation" (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 1). It was also hoped that sensory deprivation research could provide clear evidence that people did indeed possess individual differences in innate preferences for arousal or stimulation, "The results made some sense in terms of an optimal level of arousal theory if we assume that the sensory variety program produced arousal only slightly above normal levels, whereas the sensory deprivation produced arousal below normal levels" (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 62). One particular observation about the problematic history of sensory deprivation studies made the connection between population management, sensory deprivation, and biological underpinnings,

The research area of sensory deprivation owes a peculiar debt to the Chinese "brainwashers" of the Korean War. The Canadian government's interest in brainwashing led to a grant to the McGill University group, directed by Hebb, to study the effects of perceptual deprivations in humans. Although susceptibility to propaganda was one of the effects studied, the interests of Hebb and his students went far beyond brainwashing. Measures of cortical activation and cognitive perceptual, and motor performance were included in order to test Hebb's evolving physiological theory of behavior (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 62).

By and large, Zuckerman interpreted much of the inconsistent results produced by the sensory deprivation studies as evidence of biological differences, expressed as individual differences in personality traits. It is also of interest how Zuckerman characterized some of the experiences of participants in these studies, “the subjects disliked sensory deprivation more, found it more boring, and reported that it made them feel more drowsy, anxious, and depressed than the sensory variety condition” (Zuckerman et al., 1978, p. 76). By describing the experience of low arousal as one marked by boredom, Zuckerman was making use of the explanatory power of the concept and its position of importance for the OLA and the SSS.

As mentioned, one of Zuckerman’s main accomplishments was in the development of his Sensation Seeking Scale, where he defined the central construct of interest as, “a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 14). He had earlier connected this concept to the OLA through personal tendencies for a need for sensations and experiences “to maintain an optimal level of arousal” (Zuckerman, 1979 et al., p. 308). Sensation seeking had previously been theorized to be an aspect of traits, including extraversion, hypomania, and field independence by Quay (1965), while Zuckerman found it was “related to an uninhibited, non-conforming, impulsive, dominant type of extraversion” (Zuckerman, 1979 et al., p. 319). Echoing Eysenck’s concerns, one of Zuckerman’s hopes for the SSS was to provide a counter to the commonly held notion that the environment was primarily responsible for personality and disorders, “Many [readers] may want to re-examine their social-environmental assumptions of causation to allow for the interactive influences of biological systems” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 2). With biological explanations being consistent with a focus on individual differences, Zuckerman believed that the SSS and other efforts could account for the majority of the between-subjects error term found in personality studies at the time by attributing it to individual differences (Zuckerman, 1979). Zuckerman further believed that these variations between people made

sense in evolutionary terms, where high and low default levels for the OLA/OLS could be advantageous in different environments. This framework also potentially identified the source of various mental disorders associated with anti-social and overactive tendencies by explaining how default levels being too high or too low could be maladaptive rather than the result of social influences (Zuckerman, 1979). Beyond the concerns of mental health diagnoses, Zuckerman believed the SSS had the potential to identify and ultimately define people in terms of how well they integrated into a managed social environment, “the low-sensation seekers will “burrow into” whatever forms of security and stability are provided by the social order. Since most social structures are built on impulse inhibition, there are usually more opportunities for low-sensation seekers to find a satisfactory way of life than there are for highs” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 374). The SSS was positioned here as a nearly all-purpose psychological categorization tool with the OLA situated at the core of understanding human motivation, which had obvious utility for government, the military, and industry.

To operationalize the construct of sensation seeking, Zuckerman relied on his own expert opinion to construct items that constituted valid self-report items. This approach included questions about risky activities like skiing, scuba diving, unprotected sex, alcohol, and drugs with the underlying assumption that people who were predisposed to engage in these activities did so because they were experiencing a deficit in stimulation or arousal (Zuckerman, 1979; Eysenck & Gudjonsson, 1989). Zuckerman earlier discussed some of the problematic associations, “found greater drug usage, alcohol drinking, and greater variety of sexual experience among high sensation seekers of both sexes than in lows” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 310). It is here that boredom surfaces as an important consideration, as a number of these items situated boredom as the opposite of arousal, “I get bored seeing the same old faces”, “I have no patience with dull or boring persons”, “Most adultery happens because of sheer boredom” (Zuckerman, 1979, pp. 398, 394, 390). While boredom was being depicted as an experience of negative valence, it is unclear if it is being recognized as a trait, a state, a motivator, or something else

entirely, but it is something to be avoided or reconciled. Beyond facilitating meaning in other constructs, Zuckerman also found utility in the concept of boredom when he deployed it in attempts to frame sensation seeking as universal, as well as a mechanism for explaining the need for variety, “Just as rats will vary the paths they take to a goal, high-sensation seekers will vary their routines to avoid boredom, in contrast to the lows who are less distressed by an unvarying routine” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 15).

As the construct of boredom became associated with high sensation seekers and recognized as an essential catalyst for problematic behaviours, Zuckerman investigated his earlier assumptions that during repetitive experiences, sensation seekers become bored more quickly than most other people (Zuckerman, 1972). In his attempts to understand the motivational aspects at work, Zuckerman revealed a problematic understanding of socioeconomic causes by essentially stating that the poor could not afford to be healthy sensation seekers (or extraverts),

Sensation seekers among lower socioeconomic groups are almost inevitably drawn into antisocial sensation seeking. Skiing and scuba diving do not provide the weekend relief from a monotonous job for them. Crime, drugs, and alcohol are often the only answers to the problem of monotony (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 251).

The conclusion that people of a lower socioeconomic status “almost inevitably” engage in antisocial behaviours categorizes them as problematic elements of society rather than fellow citizens who have limited options due to a lack of resources. It also either presents a contradiction to the argument that biology trumps environment or that those most genetically likely to be sensation seekers are also at the lower rungs of society due to genetics. Perhaps in the first case, it would simply be too expensive to address the problems of lower-income sensation seekers adequately.

Expanding on the utility of the SSS, Zuckerman also highlighted how a particular data set (Fisher, 1973) revealed

high-sensation-seeking women tend to: prefer a high frequency of intercourse, maintain interest in sex during pregnancy, believe that sexual freedom should be increased in society, frequently have multiple orgasms, have copious vaginal lubrication during intercourse, frequently sleep in the nude, and become sexually excited during a laboratory session with no explicitly erotic stimulation (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 274).

Zuckerman further singled out the problems associated with sensation seeking females by questioning the morality and decision-making skills of women so categorized, “high-sensation seeking women have a high degree of interest in clothes and are not economical in their buying of clothes. Apparently, the desire to dress attractively, whatever its motivation (and I suspect it is not primarily a sexual one), is another characteristic of sensation-seeking women” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 274). Overall, the SSS was not only positioned as a way to detect these problematized people but also to detect them early in life, “The hope was that a nonverbal sensation-seeking measure could be developed which might be useful with children” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 316). However, it is unclear if Zuckerman believed measures could be taken to correct for high-sensation seeking tendencies if detected at an early age or if society would benefit from labeling these people earlier.

In 1971, after the SSS was updated in an “attempt to develop new scales representative of hypothesized dimensions of sensation seeking, Zuckerman identified the Boredom Susceptibility (BS) factor for the first time (p. 45). This factor, which Zuckerman referred to as “The fourth factor . . . represented an aversion to repetition, routine, and dull people, and restlessness when things are unchanging”, met with some early inconsistent results (Zuckerman et al., 1978, p. 140). For example, a Temple University sample found a clearly defined factor for males but not for females, while other results showed “hard[er] to explain” racial differences (Zuckerman et al., 1978; Zuckerman, 1979, p. 141). However, the BS found a measure of validation when a United Kingdom study found Boredom Susceptibility in both males and females (Zuckerman, 1979). These mixed results, common in boredom



studies, might be explained by the lack of a widely used definition and or the inability of researchers to experimentally manipulate it, "One of the primary obstacles to research on boredom and subjective time experience is seen to be the lack of techniques which permit quick, precise boredom manipulations" (Geiwitz, 1964). Zuckerman noted the history of disagreement over boredom's identity when discussing contextual considerations of the OLA, where he adopted boredom as a low arousal state. In contrast, others, like Berlyne (1960), viewed "boredom as a high arousal state" (Zuckerman et al., 1978, p. 76). However, this lingering disagreement over boredom's nature and its continued unruliness did not prevent it from being used as a negative definitional aid to arousal. Providing theoretical support for Zuckerman's overall understanding of the stimulus seeker and boredom was how "the stimulant score also correlated significantly with the Boredom Susceptibility subscale" (Carrol & Zuckerman, 1977, p. 598). Because of this and its growing associations with adverse outcomes, Zuckerman explored the construct of boredom as a low arousal state in future research with keen interest.

Boredom's productivity for researchers continued as its undefined character made it readily amenable to the shifting understandings of the OLS and the OLA. If boredom could be measured and understood as a trait that dislikes sameness, then it could help explain the complication of how there are theorized mechanisms to not only seek out appropriate levels of stimulation but also an avoidance or displeasure in repeated stimulations, as seen in the above-mentioned rat study (Zuckerman, 1979). Another explanation for the increasing interest in boredom was how the BS corroborated earlier work that found associations between boredom with psychoticism and problematic behaviour (Hare & Thorvaldson, 1970; Zuckerman, 1979). The list of negative associations continued to grow through the 1970s, including drug abuse, eating disorders, depression, dropping out of school, low achievement, job dissatisfaction, vocational accident rates, excessive cigarette smoking, and others (Samuels & Samuels, 1974; Giambra & Traynor, 1978; Abramson & Stinson, 1977; Leon & Chamberlain, 1973; Fogelman,

1976; Robinson, 1975; Broadbent, 1979; Gardell, 1971; Drory, 1982; Ferguson, 1973; Vodanovich & Kass, 1990). These and other links between boredom and negative behaviours would continue to be investigated in the coming decades (Zuckerman, 1979; Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Mikulas, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Danckert & Allman, 2005, Eastwood et al., 2007; Raffaelli et al., 2018).

When viewed in a societal context, Eysenck's and Zuckerman's efforts to explain behavioral and personality differences between people by assuming representative differences in individuals' biology have enormous implications for the debates over the role of government and the efficacy of social programs. If people are 'stamped at birth,' then remediation efforts by governments to correct for the perceived determinants of specific biological processes become difficult to justify. With biological causation aligning with more politically conservative voices, the political fault line between the social and the biological became starker. One of the focal points of these controversies was the publishing of the former Eysenck student Arthur Jensen's 1969 article regarding efforts to boost IQ and scholastic achievement (Eysenck, 1971). Jensen openly questioned the efficacy of the United States government's universal schooling program by highlighting the causality of heredity factors in the development of intelligence, as represented by IQ tests. By citing IQ data which showed a discrepancy in performance between Whites and Blacks, Jensen was criticizing school reforms so that "schools and society must provide a range and diversity of educational methods, programs, and goals, and of occupational opportunities, just as wide as the range of human abilities" (1969, p. 117). What this amounted to was a justification for separate educational and occupational tracks according to race, which by its very definition is racist. By supporting these arguments, Eysenck was not only courting controversy but aligning himself with far-right conservatives in the United States (Buchanan, 2010). The debates over the extent to heredity's influence on performance and race would reoccur throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstien & Murray, 1994) connecting race and intelligence, serving as an example. These arguments essentially culminated into a "call for government policies to alter social

environments, based on a conviction that growing minds are plastic and capable of change, and on the other, an insistence that biological inheritance will inevitably trump most ameliorative efforts and that these efforts are in any event a waste of federal funds” (Staub, 2018, p. 6). The nature of these debates regarding the proper role of government was shaped by the fact that neoliberal policies had not been implemented in the 1970s. Meaning, rather than corrective efforts being an individual’s responsibility, government intervention was still assumed and expected, leaving conservative voices seeking a way to brand government efforts to correct for inequality as a waste of resources due to heritable determinacy.

These political concerns were also present when considering the purpose and interpretation of measurement tools like the SSS. When understood as grounded in difficult-to-change biology, psychologists could interpret vocational propensities and mental health outcomes as essentially predetermined. Eysenck himself tied extraversion to vocational preferences, noting extraverts displayed “greater 'social intelligence' than introverts” but “waste more time talking . . . seeking diversion from the routine” while the introvert was able to, “resist boredom and persist with a task for a long period of time is also valuable in other occupational contexts” and were “more reliable and conscientious, they are more punctual” (Eysenck, 1981, p. 266). These instruments place enormous power in the hands of psychologists as they systematically reveal people’s true nature and probable life outcomes. Zuckerman went further, tying political leanings themselves to biological makeup, “I would like to suggest that conservatism and liberalism may also reflect a basic personality trait, rather than merely one’s learned attitudes toward social issues” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 259). The introvert-extravert dimension could be theorized to measure all manner of traits and tendencies, with each interpretation stripping more personal agency from the general population.

### ***Qualitative Data - Boredom in the Popular Press 1970-1979***

The Western popular discourse regarding boredom in the 1970s, as represented by 200 NYT articles, covers a period of productivity and influence for personality psychology. It is also a decade of uncertainty with continued Cold War tensions, the end of American involvement in the Vietnam War (1955-1975), heightened inflation (Federal Reserve, 2021a), and the continued expansion of the American capitalist economy (Federal Reserve, 2021b). As mentioned in the methods section, the following discourses containing boredom are categorized by the overarching theme of which they take part in which they are situated, which can provide insight into how the term was being utilized, as found in the NYT.

#### *Art*

Boredom appeared in discussions of the arts, including dance, fine art, theatre, and other forms not purely dedicated to distraction and entertainment. As mentioned above, the distinction between the arts and entertainment here loosely follows Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's (1947) understandings in *The Culture Industry*. Here, Art is represented by works that have not been mass-produced, are not primarily commercial, and do not explicitly contribute to notions of false choice. Given that this is situated in a capitalist culture where commodification is ubiquitous, the borders between art and entertainment are porous, where works of art can be accused of "entertaining". Within this category, boredom was characterized in various ways, sometimes as a trivial experience, a critique, and, at times, a device to make cultural commentaries. In total, there were 26 'Art' articles out of the 200 for this period that made some mention of boredom. One example details how actors had successfully embodied the boredom gripping a decaying ruling class, "The time is 1952 and these corrupt remnants of an empty aristocracy are bored beyond relief, stewing in their own validity" (Gussow, 1976, p. 37). There were critiques about productions that centered on boring characters, as well as warnings to audiences of mixed performances, "expect boredom and excitement with "The

Hashish Club”” (Barnes, 1975, p. 12). There was a rare example of an acknowledgment, if tacit that there are individual differences in people’s reactions, varying from “enthusiasm high, criticism sharp and boredom occasionally” (“Some were”, 1972, p. 43). An exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum proved to be a “source of initiation, bafflement or boredom” (Kramer, 1971, p. D21). In contrast, some elicitations of boredom were said to be intentional on behalf of the artists, “many younger composers of the Cage and Stockhausen persuasions were writing music that aimed at raising boredom to an esthetic principle” (Henanhan, 1976, p. 59). One playwright was said to use boredom as a method to force the audience to consider an uncomfortable state, “He is a great believer in the art of boredom and the craft of reiteration” (Barnes, 1976, p. 33). Another performance adopted the same approach when it used boredom to make a commentary about the drudgery of contemporary work, “Six performers peer at the audience from behind a high counter. They wear expressions of utter boredom as they stamp papers. Call out “Next!” and crane around to stare at a large clock behind them” (Eder, 1978, p. 16). This particular use of boredom reflects some of the discourses occurring in the 1970s regarding unrest between businesses and unions. In what might be considered an “art film” with its limited release and lack of promotion, “Retour d’Afrique” was inspired by poetry the producer read as a child, was also said to be an investigation of boredom (Canby, 1973, p. 41). A film similar in its lack of wide distribution, the “English Soporific”, explored the boredom of a directionless young man, where he appears as bored as the audience is made to feel (Sayre, 1974, p. 32). The lines between entertainment and art with these films are not clear cut, but their lack of “mass production” and the risk they adopted by focusing on boredom as a central topic leaves these two offerings as decidedly non-commercial enterprises. Beyond film and productions, the arts were also depicted as an inoculation against boredom, “But if one has art one can never be bored. I don't mean art as in the artsy craftsy kinds of things, but fine art” (Snyder, 1973, 42). Furthermore, for a writer who would have perhaps scored high on the SSS, art proved a

distraction from a mundane sermon while at church, “My earliest appreciation of stained glass was as a glorious escape from boredom during church services” (Lyon, 1975, p. D41).

### *Literature*

Articles discussing literature that included the term boredom counted 14 and unsurprisingly had some commonalities with the category of Art, as some examples explore the existential aspects of the construct. The author of *The Sporting Club*, Thomas McGuane, was said to have touched on some trivial aspects and meaninglessness in upper-class life, “shown some unnerving aspects of male rivalry and affluent boredom” (Clemons, 1971, p. 33). While book reviewer Anatole Broyard remarked how *The Eye of the Beholder* made use of a particularly unwise boredom reduction strategy, “To choose an unpredictable partner is one of the antidotes to the boredom that so often seems to set in between the sexes” (1976, p. C17). A children’s book appeared to capture the growing fears of parents during this time, “Out of boredom and a sense of futility, a teen-age girl drops out of high school for no loftier purpose than to sit around the house in pink plastic curlers, stare endlessly at the tube” (Maloff, 1977, p. 29). Another book was said to have been unnecessarily pedantic, “But the dialogues go on forever. As if boredom were an essential adjunct of learning the real truth of how intelligence operations are set up” (Burgess, 1977, p. 266). There was also a discussion of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s depiction of a small boy breaking up the monotony while surrounded by the sick and dying “out of boredom he purposely blew this steam from his mouth” (“The little”, 1974, p. 27). A literary critic used the term to mock the stereotype of the bored existentialist writer as well as possibly making a connection between French writers and sensation seekers, “revulsion, boredom and distaste for the “mediocrity” of life in Paris. What would French writers do without boredom and mediocrity to inveigh against?” (Broyard, 1974, p. 29). Both here and in the previous section, boredom is expressed in a way consistent with the OLS/OLA, with people being driven to find stimulation.

## *Entertainment*

Mass consumed entertainment was repeatedly singled out as both a way to relieve boredom by distracting from the unpleasant vacancy of leisure time while also as a way of inducing it by failing to meet that expectation. Entertainment also represented the most populated category for this period, with 31 articles discussing movies, sports, television, and popular music. Common themes in this discourse present it as a curative, elicited through repetition, and as a critical evaluation. Included in this robust category was an example of a movie reviewer who utilized it for comic effect, “The Blue Bird isn’t a movie. It’s a covenant with boredom” (Canby, 1976, p. 77). Five months later, the same reviewer also observed that it is the people who seldom see movies who are the ones that complain about how boring they are, stating that they are not “a fool-proof defense against boredom” (Canby, 1976, p. 73). A music reviewer wanted to “scream from boredom” as he endured songs from Dion DiMucci’s new album, the longest of which was four minutes, which “seemed to last forever” even though the musician was known for having varied influences of rock, R&B and blues (Laterman, 1972, p. D34). Here it seems that the novelty typically associated with variation was absent; whether this is because Dion DiMucci had grown repetitive or presents a counterexample to notions of the SSS and OLA is unclear. Television was another medium that suffered from a lack of novelty, with a comedy series featuring James Stewart being at once “heavy with warm integrity” and “even heavier with banality and boredom” (O’Connor, 1973, p. 149). As some commentators experienced “utter boredom” with cable television for the unimaginative programming, with even moon landings quickly becoming a repetitive bore, “the third landing on the moon was received here yesterday with enthusiasm by a few, polite interest by many and boredom and hostility by some” (Cohen, 1972, p. D19; Montgomery, 1971, p. 13). While boredom was also present in sports articles, boredom was more often understood as a motivator to engage in sports or even create new ones. One professional tennis player credited the experience, “My habit was born-out of youthful boredom” (Stillman, 1977, p. S2). Boredom was also credited with the development of

the sport “Hot Dog” as, “People are getting bored just going up and down the mountain” (Wallace, 1973, p. 235). Intriguingly, some participants were depicted as bored with competition in general, “With a look of triumphant boredom and a gesture of good will” (Katz, 1972, p. 21). While others expressed a failure to get engaged with a sport central to their larger community, “my husband and I missed every football game the University of Texas played. Call it character. Call it boredom” (Pennebaker, 1979, p. S2). Boredom’s frequent use in these conversations could be partially attributed to the fact that people expect entertainment to address boredom, not instill it. These uses could also be interpreted as the middle brow or pretentious NYT making a cultural commentary akin to the arguments found in the Culture Industry.

### *Travel*

In the 1970s NYT sample, boredom appeared in seven discussions about the various stages of traveling long distances. Of considerable concern to these commentators were the efforts by businesses to introduce distractions, novelty and address the sense of confinement that plagued travel. Typically travel for leisure is envisioned as a way to introduce novelty, which aligns with some assumptions made by Zuckerman regarding sensation and experience seeking, but the act of traveling itself was commonly associated with its apparent opposite, boredom. In one instance, a reporter remarked how people dealt with waiting at a Tokyo airport, “Travelers passing through Tokyo’s International Airport at Haneda often experience the emotions common to passengers at most other busy airports: boredom, exasperation” (Shabecoff, 1970, p. 82). A U.S. bus terminal attempted to profit from traveler’s boredom through new coin-operated TVs (“For a price”, 1970, p. 152). In one instance, an airline attempted to introduce novelty by allowing bored customers to “eavesdrop” on conversations between ground crews and pilots during long flights (Albright, 1972, p. XX4). Another writer commented on the unpleasant state of living in motels for any length of time, “That is when boredom and the monotony of motel living sickens you” (Jacklin, 1970, p. 66). These examples are more trivial and uniformly discuss states over



traits, yet boredom was a serious enough concern that businesses devoted resources to address it while also attempting to profit from it.

### *Youth*

Relevant to this section, a version of the SSS was never established for children, even though Martin Zuckerman expressed interest in developing one (Zuckerman, 1971). The creation of such a scale would have added to the already numerous developmental theories, Sigmund Freud's Psychosexual Developmental Theory (1905), Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory (1952), Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1962), Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory (1963), and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), to name a few. These efforts reveal a long history of theoretical interest and success in capturing the public's imagination in framing youth as a time of vulnerability that required professional guidance. However, the extent to which psychologists focused on childhood brought charges of profiteering from the problematization of childhood from critics (Rosier, 2009). While Zuckerman did not author a SSS for children, it could have been fertile ground for his theories of seeking stimulation, as the articles below depict a public preoccupation with children and young adults acting in anti-social ways. Ultimately, the 29 articles from this period reveal youth as a time rife with boredom.

These discussions featured antisocial behaviours, drug use, consumerism, and stunted educational development among younger populations. One writer, who displayed a comfort with sexist assumptions perhaps not uncommon in the 1970s, highlighted the appearance of a female who had returned to school after being truant for 50 days, "her frosted hairdo, snug blouse and sloe-eyed look of boredom" (Clines, 1979, p. B2). An advertisement for a Jewish youth organization highlighted the dangers of bored youth, "Boredom gets kids to do some pretty wild things to get noticed. Like shoplifting. Joyriding. Using drugs. Destroying themselves" ("People do", 1972, p. 7). Perhaps

manifesting these concerns, one article detailed how a teen was arrested in a suspected bombing “many young people [stated] it stems from the boredom of being young and having nothing to do” (Goodman, 1975, p. 49). Another article commented on how the profession of teaching was changing since teachers now needed to be entertaining as students have learned to “change the channel” and went further to suggest that this attitude and boredom were the cause of violence and drug addiction (Kreisberg, 1977, p. 537). Related to this, the senior year of high school was an ongoing concern as a “yawning stretch of anticlimax and boredom” (Peterson, 1973, p. 43). These entries are juxtaposed with the few documenting how strong communities fostered a carefree childhood, “boredom is not one of the problems of poor city kids”, or how children “enjoyed innocence and never knew boredom” (Levenson, 1971, p. A1; Baker, 1979, p. 58). Other examples had students overcome boredom by the excitement of getting a high school class ring or going on a field trip to a recycling plant or bakery, but these more trivial uses were less common (“Time does”, 1978, p. A14; Adelman, 1978, p. NJ1). As previously mentioned, drug use in young people was repeatedly associated with boredom, with some unemployed youth in Long Island experimenting with drugs, “And boredom is the main muse” (Molotsky, 1978, p. B2). These examples of attempting to introduce stimulation or novelty, as varied as they were, are all consistent with how people would typically behave if they scored high on the SSS, but again, there is no known research exploring if children are more likely to be high sensations seekers. Boredom was also seen as playing a role in drug use transforming into drug abuse, “Earlier Dr. Arbuzzi had said that frustration and boredom . . . were responsible for the heavy use of drugs. The youths “had nothing else to do” (“Drug peril”, 1970, p. 58). In contrast, other examples pointed to de-escalation in drug use coinciding with boredom, “Youth, students, college, switching from heavier drugs to pot and alcohol (wine) out of boredom and knowing what they can safely do” (Darnton, 1971, p. 52). While the connection between drug use and boredom will be discussed in more detail in the Military section, this last example complicates understandings of motivations, the SSS, and drug use, as Zuckerman did not

discuss the idea of drug users switching drug types out of boredom, only the propensity for high and low SSS scorers to gravitate towards either amphetamines or depressants (Zuckerman, 1977). It is interesting how boredom facilitated less risky behaviours when such acts became boring, as this appears to contradict the OLS/OLA and Zuckerman's understanding of the role of stimulants (1977). The concerns of boredom and drug use were increased when violence became part of the mix, "the violence had been caused less by fear than by boredom" (Semple, 1976, p. 3). These problematic associations caught the attention of the national government, with Richard Nixon declaring, "The aim should be to make a child "immune" to the need or the lure of drugs, regardless of poverty, the persuasion of pushers, a child's curiosity, his boredom, unhappiness, his rebellion or his feelings of deprivation" (Hutschenecker, 1972, p. 47). Nixon's opinions here reveal his neoliberal understandings of individual responsibility and overcoming one's environment. In contrast, local governments endorsed a community approach to addressing the problem, "Meaningful involvement in community action projects is an effective way of combating the boredom that 'often' leads to drug abuse" ("Oyster bay", 1971, p. BQ74). These anxieties stretched beyond Western countries, at least in one instance in Moscow, "a gang of teenagers beginning with petty thefts and ending with murder, escaping boredom and getting their kicks out of violence" (Smith, 1972, p. 9). Newspapers fed into the overall fear regarding drugs as they published stories about Satanists, drugs, and death cults, with boredom playing a motivating role in finding alternative religions "If it was just the fad of a few conceived in boredom and fanned by drug-taking" (Burks, 1971, p. 35). Boredom was of obvious concern in this period, with unemployed or idle youth turning to expressions of violence and antisocial behaviours. These examples are partially consistent with how the OLS/OLA envisioned how certain behaviours would manifest as people become motivated to seek out stimulation to avoid the uncomfortable state of boredom. The alarm conveyed throughout this discourse was likely facilitated by the expansion of psychological studies focusing on the connection between disorder and boredom, as well as the historical problematization of childhood

(Rosier, 2009). The themes found here and in the next section capture Carl Roger's concerns with increased reliance on technology, specialization, having basic needs met, and overcrowding of urban areas.

### *Labour*

Boredom's role in NYT articles discussing labour concerns captured the national anxiety occurring over the state of the economy, the conflict between business and unions, and what the future held for the "average worker" at an assembly plant. This section included many articles, 31, which discussed boredom's various roles in undermining efficiencies, morale, and workplace harmony. In the context of the ongoing Cold War, some of the references to workplace violence take on a political identity and heighten existent anxieties. Some I/O psychologists attempted to address elevated concerns about the boredom and alienation associated with assembly line work, "The workers at the Topeka plant are part of an experimental attack on the boredom and alienation that in recent years have led to increasingly high turnover rates and even random acts of sabotage in American industry" (Salpukas, 1973, p. 1). While one company's approach to addressing boredom could have been directly informed by the OLA, as they increased the stimulation level of employees by doubling the capacity of the assembly line, "Yet the question remains, does doubling up lead to an equal, or even better, degree of quality because it lessens boredom?" (Kremen, 1973, p. 159). Unions also recognized the negative impact boredom was having, not on productivity, but on the well-being of workers, by promoting a 4-day work week and banking work hours ("Auto union", 1972, p. 28). The issue was of significant enough concern that governments began to study it, "Surveys have shown that good wages and benefits alone are no longer enough to motivate workers in jobs that they consider boring and in which they have little chance to move ahead" (Salpukas, 1972, p. 38). Another survey revealed that "the cross section of office employees studied were producing only 55 percent of their potential. The reasons for this included: Boredom with repetitive jobs, uneven workflow" (Stetson, 1972, p. F3). The discussion of boredom also

reached the wider public, “Worker boredom, job alienation, the blue-collar blues and the white-collar blahs have been the subjects of cover stories in national magazines. A senate sub committee is examining the problem and the ford foundation will spend half a million dollars to see what is being done about it” (Sirota, 1973, p. 208). The drudgery of assembly work left many “feeling that there is no future, that the work is boring, that the only solution is to get out of the plant or wait for retirement has become widespread among many of the hourly workers who man the nation's industrial plants” (Salpukas, 1972, p. 34). Similarly, some office and administrative work was plagued with monotony, “It can be boring, particularly for the “operations” workers on the graveyard shift, because if nothing goes wrong they have very little to do except look at a panel of dials every so often” (Flint, 1979, p. 6). The U. S. government followed these concerns by attempting to mitigate the inefficiencies associated with boredom for 18,000 social security employees by playing music “throughout the buildings with occasional interruptions for announcements on the weather, union meetings, features at the cafeteria” (Malcom, 1972, p. 53). At the same time, bridge operators were seen as having both largely consequential yet very boring responsibilities, which complicated the relationship between meaningless work and boredom (Ferretti, 1971, p. 20). Some long-haul truck drivers attempted to navigate the “loneliness, boredom and fear of jackknifing her tractor-trailer” with the citizen’s band radio or by visiting small towns along the route (Klemesrud, 1971, p. 44; Harwood, 1976, p. 200). Amid these elevated concerns, Social Psychologist Eric Fromm captured the problems with the modern workplace:

There are good reasons to assume that the increase in boredom is one of the factors responsible for the increase in aggression. The increase of boredom is brought about by the structure and functioning of contemporary industrial society. It is by now widely recognized that most manual work is boring because of its monotony and repetitiveness: much white-collar work is boring because of its bureaucratic character, which leaves little responsibility and initiative to the

individual. But leisure, meant to be the reward for boring work, has become boring too (Fromm, 1972, p. SM74)

Fromm's sentiment reflects the trends and events occurring in the United States work environments through the 1970s, which would become a significant area of interest for psychologists. In particular, personality psychologists wanted to understand the efficient placement of labour resources and which personalities were best suited for what positions, as informed by the OLA and the introversion/extraversion dichotomy. Zuckerman's interpretation of boredom is readily deployed in many examples, as the experience can be understood as a clear need to increase stimulation. However, it becomes more complicated when introducing Csikszentmihalyi's flow concept, as many of these instances appear to record a skill/challenge mismatch, speaking to the vague theorizing both subdisciplines utilized for their concepts of boredom.

### *Politics*

Another area where boredom repeatedly appeared was the discourse of political campaigns, governance, and democracy. No less than 21 political articles included boredom, with themes of sameness, lack of excitement, meaninglessness, and futility. While the language used is sometimes comical, it does not conceal the implication of a disconnect between citizens and their governments. One politician who was commonly considered boring was Jimmy Carter, but this apparently stemmed from the contrast between his subdued nature and the political turmoil of the Nixon years. This kind of comparative boredom, as highlighted above, was familiar to politics and raised the question of whether boredom would have otherwise been elicited (Safire, 1975, p. 25; Wooten, 1976, p. 19; Clymer, 1979, p. B18). Carter was, however, far from the only politician considered boring. Vice Presidential Agnew was accused of running a boring campaign, "What began as one man's prankish antidote to boredom — an occasional, impulsive toot on a police whistle—has now become one of the hallmarks of Vice President

Agnew's re-election campaign" (Wooten, 1972, p. 53). An apparent remedy for all this campaign boredom was the appearance of a contentious issue, "New Hampshire's early bird Presidential primary campaign might well have bogged down in boredom this year had not a heated side issue arisen just as the candidates were beginning their treks through the snows in search of voters" (Herbers, 1976, E1).

Boredom in politics was not restricted to North America; the Prime Minister of Spain, Adolfo Suarez, was also vulnerable, "There is no doubt that the credit of the Government has dropped a lot, and that the constitutional campaign bored a lot of people" (Markham, 1978, A8). Boredom was generally used with less alarm in this category, belying the serious implications politics can have on the citizenry. This levity can be partially attributed to the general focus on individuals or campaigns in this section rather than larger movements or political actions.

#### *Armed Forces*

Two related concerns which emerged in this sample of NYT articles were the negative influence of boredom on military readiness and its role in facilitating drug use among soldiers. It is not surprising for a country engaged in military deployments in Korea and Vietnam to be preoccupied with these worries, especially considering their overwhelming military superiority had failed to bring them to a quick end. There were instances where the contrast between the intensity of conflict and the lull of inaction and waiting was commented on, "the hours of boredom and the seconds of terror and the daily entrances by jet and nightly exits by aluminum box" and "hours of boredom, seconds of terror" one pilot described his job ("Close up", 1970, p. 216; Wallace, 1970, p. 164). Similarly, the conflict in Northern Ireland invoked some of the same imagery and anxieties; 18,000 English soldiers and police experienced "Boredom and terror" (Weinraub, 1970, p. 7). Female spies were also documented as living in this dichotomous state, "The trouble with being a woman Secret Service agent is that while there are moments of fun and glamour, there are hours and hours of boredom and drudgery, the young women have told friends" (Harkison, 1972, p. 60). Most of the articles, however, only highlighted the drudgery

of military life. For example, members of the USS Elden had to deal with “boredom as vast as the Pacific itself—day after day, same watches and drills, same food and smells, same heat and shipmates” (Leggett, 1976, p. 245). Similarly, the “declining action in Vietnam” and “isolation” of military bases lead to increases in boredom (Schmidt, 1971, p. 5). At the same time, others in Vietnam could mitigate the monotony and boredom of a jungle patrol by taking a “simple swim” (Butterfield, 1972, p. 1). These observations led to concerns about the armed forces losing effectiveness, “Peace has its own perils, and in our time, as before, peace breeds boredom” with General Emerson addressing it by introducing “Spartan Games and flavorful language” (Stern, 1977, p. A25; “General put”, 1974, p. 6). Many of these instances are consistent with how personality psychologists interpreted people’s natural preferences for a certain amount of stimulation or arousal.

For people in military service, boredom also became associated with drug use which had been widely tied to moral failings and undermining soldiers’ ability to perform their duties. It is of considerable interest that Zuckerman dedicated a study to personality, sensation seeking, and the preference for particular drugs (Carrol & Zuckerman, 1977). Questions that emerge in this section include what influence the extreme environment of being in an active warzone in a foreign country had on people’s level of stimulation and whether that influenced their OLA. Given the prevalence of boredom along with reports of “moments of terror”, Zuckerman's notions regarding drug use would seem to predict soldiers self-medicating in order to match their moods and environments. This behaviour might result in a pattern of amphetamine intake during the bulk of their days and perhaps depressants, like heroin, when they were subjected to a moment of terror. Such information is not available, but since there are negligible references to amphetamines here, the veracity of Zuckerman’s reasoning becomes suspect (Carrol & Zuckerman, 1977). Though they were provided access to alternatives, the lure of drug use was too much for some soldiers. As Emerson (1971) reported, “despite enormous amenities (pool, basketball courts, baseball, dry cleaning, good food), they are bored. Bored



enough to be disappointed when an attack on them doesn't materialize. Lack of a "frontline" discernable enemy, waiting. But the pilots worry about why kids back home take drugs, and why soldiers take heroin" (p. 11). It also did not appear to matter which theatre soldiers were stationed to, "for US troops on the West German border with the Soviet bloc the "major enemy" is boredom. It touches privates to commanding officers. It comes in dozens of variations - the "most extreme" of which is drug abuse and alcoholism. Infidelity is also an issue" (Binder, 1972, p. 7). Drug use was reported to be a way to address issues common in the armed forces, "The drug use may be the result of boredom or loneliness or peer pressure or anger at the Navy or simply a yearning for quick gratification" (Weinraud, 1978, A10). One case of insubordination revealed how boredom could undermine the chain of command, as one soldier threw "a chocolate cream pie in his company commander's face to relieve the battalion's boredom and "raise morale" went on trial here today on charges of assault and battery" ("Trial of", 1974, p. 83). Interestingly, as the level of boredom increased, the number of reported fights between servicemen declined, yet it also left bored pilots incapable of completing their work (Clarity, 1974, p. 2). Boredom was also framed as having the capacity to motivate mass murder, "a former SS doctor was convicted here in absentia today of having murdered scores of concentration camp inmates in 1941 and 1942, "sometimes out of pure boredom"" ("Ex-SS", 1979, p. A9). By observing the resources directed at the issue, it is apparent that the U. S. military was taking the problems associated with boredom seriously, even if their efforts to mitigate boredom appeared to have a limited impact on soldiers' behaviours. While positive psychology would not be founded until the 1990s, it is significant that Csikszentmihalyi's work on flow had already begun at this period, with his notions of the skill/challenge mismatch as a cause of anxiety and boredom. This work maps onto the often-mentioned juxtaposition in the military of periods of terror and boredom. Additionally, it is also an open question if the self-selection of soldiers meant that personality psychology had relevant insights into the rate of boredom among soldiers.

### *Miscellaneous – Fashion, Food, and Older Adults*

Beyond the major themes discussed, several lesser populated categories emerged in the discussion of boredom, including fashion, food, and older adults. By 1972 there were predictions that the fashion of wearing long hair had run its course, “for one thing, sheer boredom with looking the same way for years is making women restless” (Taylor, p. 31). And despite the lack of suitability of using fabric in a bathroom, it became an answer for “boredom with wallpaper” (Kron, 1977, p. 23). The expansion of food companies’ market share was met with a complaint of sterility or lack of novelty from the article titled, “If Bread Boredom Sets In”, in which the author argued, “bread has suffered more than any other food product as a result of mass-production techniques. Each year more and more loaves become blander, softer, sweeter, and more insipid to the taste” (Sheraton, 1976, p. 22). One “diet food” company attempted to address the public’s conception of mass-produced food as boring, “Watching your weight doesn’t mean you have to deprive yourself of tasty, nutritious, and interesting foods, the battle of the bulge has also become a battle against boredom” (“A dieter’s”, 1975, p. 57). These entries provide some examples of the prevalence of the culture industry, made evident by the push towards mass production, the providing of false choice, and the establishment of identity or self-brand through products (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947). Older adults and retirement were also themes associated with a period where one would be confronted with boredom. Isolated retirees looked for distractions or meaning when organizing church groups, building a greenhouse, and were urged by former President Nixon to “Never slow down” (Thomas, 1972, p. A6; Marks, 1973, p. 181; “Nixon”, 1973, p. 1).

### *Discussion – Boredom in the Popular Press 1970-1979*

While a more detailed accounting of representations of boredom is found in the comparative results section below, by in large, the boredom found in this corpus diverges with personality psychology’s understandings in several ways. The most fundamental difference was Eysenck and

Zuckerman's attempts to define boredom as a trait or propensity, while the public overwhelmingly used the term to describe a state free of individual differences. This discrepancy reveals a limitation on the discipline's ability to influence the public discourse and a failure to claim it as a psychological construct. Other discrepancies included the public possessing a near-consensus definition and how boredom was not used to define other concepts. Of note, a repeating theme appears where boredom is seemingly elicited in situations where there are periods of high arousal, as in a military setting, even though there are plenty of amenities available that would typically combat boredom. Although boredom in this sample was versatile, described as a trivial experience, a moderately depressed state, a motivator, and associated with anti-social behaviours, these differences appear to be grounded in degree rather than type. Boredom also appears in some artistic settings where existential considerations are apparent, but the boredom detailed is still overwhelmingly consistent with a fleeting state, even when present in some existential discourses. Finally, the fact that there is a disconnect between the public and academia provides an example of a partial looping effect (Hacking, 1995), where the only evident influence was that of the public to psychology in a failed attempt to domesticate the concept.

### Chapter 3 – Positive Psychology – Boredom as Motivation

Moving on from the personality psychology of the 1970s, this chapter explores the development and rapid rise of positive psychology in the 1990s. Motivated by the conviction that the discipline of psychology had failed to articulate why life was worth living, positive psychologists promoted science-based approaches to understanding and increasing happiness, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's meditation-like practice of flow being chief among them. Through flow, boredom presents itself as a major consideration in discourses of happiness, where it served as an oppositional definitional tool and an indicator that positive psychological corrective measures were required. Undeterred by criticisms of fostering individualism (Horowitz, 2017), the leaders of the new discipline enacted aggressive growth strategies which echoed broader competitive commercial practices encouraged by ascendant neoliberal policies and politics. These connections to neoliberal-consistent theorizing are compared with the biologically informed personality psychology, which was essentially free of these influences. Some of the definitional themes which reappear in this section are boredom's nebulosity, a concept of secondary interest, psychological measurement as a science, and reliance on biological underpinnings.

In 1998 Martin Seligman, head of the APA, used his inaugural address to declare the new psychological subdiscipline of positive psychology. Having first established himself as a learned helplessness scholar, Seligman branded himself a renewed man, now on a quest to promote happiness and influence broader psychology through "the growth of the new science and profession of positive psychology" (Seligman, 1999, p. 559). Seligman wanted this new science to confront the ingrained negativity within psychology, as it was practiced as a discipline of disorders. Seligman believed psychology's focus on negative emotions was promoting a "victimology" rather than promoting resilience and happiness, a situation that was only made worse by the construction and adoption of the DSM-III (Seligman, 2004). While Seligman was hardly the first to voice a complaint about the DSM-III (Nelson, 1987; Whitaker & Cosgrove, 2015; Davies, 2017), these other critics were not in the process of

developing a 'new science'. By differentiating themselves through identifying how psychology had lost its way, positive psychology's leaders were conducting important "boundary-work" (Gieryn, 1983), which included identifying a problem (psychology as a discipline of pathology), which their practice was uniquely qualified to address. As part of an ongoing process, positive psychologists established a domain of interest and identified their primary objectives. These included addressing the perception that psychology had failed to advance the "two fundamental missions of psychology: making the lives of all people better and nurturing genius" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). It is noteworthy that personality psychology also highlighted the importance of this second "mission". Seligman also contributed to these efforts by articulating the three foundational areas of focus, "First is the study of positive emotion. Second is the study of the positive traits, foremost among them the strengths and virtues, but also the "abilities" such as intelligence and athleticism. The third is the study of the positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and free inquiry, that support the virtues, which in turn support the positive emotions" (Seligman, 2004, p. 11).

Another of the explicit goals for the new discipline was an expansion by aggressively promoting working in "positive psychology ways" while transcending "traditional dichotomies and divisions within psychology and offers ways of working that are genuinely integrative and applicable across settings" (Linely & Joseph, 2004, p. 4, 6). Seligman believed that "a new science of positive psychology can be the 'Manhattan Project' for the social sciences" (Horowitz, p. 16). Facilitating the adoption of positive psychology was how it,

(1) tread a very narrow line between the requirements of scientific or expert jargon, and popular discourse; (2) position positive psychology as simultaneously rooted in ancient philosophical sensibilities and yet eminently relevant to contemporary concerns; and in a similar vein, (3) construct positive psychology as both revolutionary, and yet at the same time, moderate and scientifically conservative" (Yen, 2010, p. 10)

These conflicting characteristics were of considerable productivity in the construction of the narrative and branding efforts, as they could highlight certain aspects depending upon the intended audience and goal at the time.

Having staked their claims, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi presented themselves as semi-religious messengers whose arrival marked a turning point, where reason and authentic happiness could overcome harmful dogma, “our message is to remind our field that psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue” and it how the “time has arrived for a positive psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). The establishment of the discipline meant professional recognition and its eventual incorporation into all corners of psychology. Horowitz (2017) noted that “over time, Seligman came to seek nothing short of transforming psychology, and doing so with the ample backing from the government, foundation, and private funds” (p. 25). Outside of academia, they sought ways to apply their research to all aspects of life, “the good life is using your signature strengths every day to produce authentic happiness and abundant gratification. This is something you can learn to do in each of the main realms of your life: work, love, and raising children” (Seligman, 2004, p. 24).

While the causes for positive psychology’s rise can be debated, it is unquestionable that the expansionary goals of its founders were met. Writing in 2010, Jeffery Yen highlighted how positive psychology had “record enrollment rates in undergraduate psychology courses across North America and around the world, and attracting a considerable amount of media attention, positive psychology has become positively faddish” (p. 67). Yen (2010) also made note of at least four graduate programs on offer, while in August 2021, according to [positivepsychology.com](http://positivepsychology.com), there were over 13 programs available in the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, United Kingdom, South Africa, and with many offering online access to worldwide students. Similarly capturing this interest in the new discipline, a 2018 NYT article documented how the positive psychology-inspired course, Psychology and

the Good Life, became the most popular class in Yale's history with 1,200 enrolling, or one-quarter of all Yale students (Shimer, 2018). Curiously, the attendance for the International Positive Psychology Association World Congress, while impressively attended from the outset, experienced a static number of estimated delegates, in 2009 there were 1,500, and in 2019, 1,600 delegates, with another 1,500 expected at the 2021 congress, perhaps being a commentary on venue capacities more than anything else ("First World", 2009; Smith, 2019; "International Positive", n.d.). Positive psychology's popularity is also apparent in the inspiration for thousands of research papers, hundreds of popular books, and an industry of therapists, coaches, and mentors (Smith, 2019). Much of this growth came from the concerted efforts of Seligman and other leaders who, despite criticism of moving "too quickly from scholarship to popularization" (Horowitz, 2017, p. 21), created networks of positive psychologists, targeted young professionals, and held regular meetings to discuss growth strategies and goals for the discipline (Seligman, 1999; Seligman, 2003). These efforts appeared to have the desired effect, as "research into psychological well-being increased by a factor of 35 (from 93 publications by 1978 to 3,231 by September 2003)" (Seligman, 2004, p. 6).

Happening simultaneously with this expansion were efforts by positive psychology's leaders to seek funding for projects and scholarships. While there is likely a feedback loop between the discipline's popularity and funding, there is also an ideological overlap with business interests, as revealed in their donations. Of the various forms of funding secured by Seligman and others was a two-million-dollar investment by the Mellon Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and other private donors for postdoctoral fellowships on ethnopolitical conflict (Horowitz, 2017). Seligman was also able to secure a grant from the John Templeton Foundation, of Wall Street and religious science fame, for an annual Templeton Positive Psychology Prize, recognized as the largest award ever given in psychology. Other funding included support from numerous private donors, governments, as well as over \$1.5 million from Atlantic Philanthropies funded by Charles Feeney, who had amassed a fortune of over a billion dollars

developing duty-free shops (Horowitz, 2017). This keen interest by businesses, foundations, and private donors pointed to a synergy between the monetary goals of business leaders and positive psychologists' goal of instilling happiness. Given the Easterlin paradox (1974/2020), which states that long-term rates of happiness and income are not positively correlated, businesses could claim legitimate concerns over inevitable worker discontent regardless of the levels of compensation. While this hypothesis has been criticized (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008), it justifies corporations to find nonmonetary ways of instilling happiness in workers while fighting for lower levels of compensation. Seligman showed himself to be aware of these relationships when he quoted the U.S.'s GDP, "overall national purchasing power and average life satisfaction go strongly in the same general direction. Once the gross national product exceeds \$8,000 per person, however, the correlation disappears, and added wealth brings no further life satisfaction" (Seligman, 2004, p. 65). Related concerns are detailed in the Labour section of the 1970s NYT qualitative analysis in this paper, where worker discontent was commonly associated with boredom. While it was never a central concept of concern for positive psychology, it commonly informed their concerns and remediations.

Helping to situate the rise of positive psychology, a brief look at the political environment in the Western world during the discipline's formative years is informative. During the 1980s, an ushering in of neoliberal policies led to an erosion of labour unions, stagnation of wages for many millions, the offshoring of manufacturing, defunding of social programs, the introduction of precarious work and marriages, while the wealthy benefited from equity inflation and an increase in executive compensation (Horowitz, 2017; Satter, 2019). Some of these changes were themselves the result of policies enacted by the Reagan Administration, who, while riding a crest of optimism, implemented market-based governance which effectively upended "the earlier Fordist vision, one in which cooperation of labor unions, the federal government, and major corporations was perceived to provide social stability" (Horowitz, 2014, p. 5). These practices were embraced by subsequent American administrations into the



1990s, with George H. W. Bush (1924-2018) and William Clinton (1946-) “promoting conservative and neoliberal policies that eroded the social safety net and exposed people to market forces in a world shaped by globalization and technological change” (Horowitz, 2017, p. 94). In the aftermath of these changes, positive psychology would establish itself as a business-friendly, individualistic practice (Cabanas, 2018), that did not so much critique collective action as ignore research related to government, welfare, or protest movements (Horowitz, 2017). The early connections between business leaders and the new discipline were further revealed in a keynote address at the first International Positive Psychology Association Congress (2009), given by Professor David Cooperrider from the Weatherhead School of Management. A school where “future leaders are built for the advancement of business and society through an innovative curriculum that infuses business with analytics, technology and design thinking” (Weatherhead, n.d.). Weatherhead later strengthened these ties by being the first school to offer a Masters of Positive Organization Development. These connections to the business community were one of the defining features of the new discipline, a connection that reappears throughout their work and will be explored in more detail in the discussion of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow.

A driving force for the new practice was its establishment as a psychological science and its branding as a new way to practice the discipline. If business connections were to be maintained and strengthened, it needed to present actionable practices that appeared objective and distance itself from previous happiness studies due to accusations of pseudo-science, even though positive psychology’s theories were largely derivative of happiness research (Horowitz, 2017). Facilitating the creation of a scientific positive psychology was the construction of a legitimizing narrative, where positive psychologists claimed a long history through links to the philosophical traditions of happiness inquiry, “the Aristotelian tradition is a core root of positive psychology” (Seligman, 2004, p. 16), while at the same time branding themselves as modern experimental psychologists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As mentioned above, this “Boundary-work” (Gieryn, 1983), was useful for positive psychologists in claiming

intellectual authority and resources over previous happiness scholars, who were labeled as skeptics of the scientific method (Yen, 2010). They also distanced themselves by accusing previous scholars of facilitating the appearance of self-help movements that promoted crystal healing and aromatherapy, whose books were so plentiful they threatened the entire discipline by their sheer volume (Grogan, 2012). These perceived weaknesses of humanistic and happiness studies led Seligman and others to “distance themselves from the emphasis on self-esteem that grew out of the work of humanistic psychology” (Horowitz, 2017, p. 22), which they sanctimoniously believed “emphasized the self and encouraged a self-centeredness that played down concerns for collective well-being” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7).

Positive psychologists further marketed themselves as a radical departure from psychology’s past by leveling attacks, much like Hans Eysenck had previously done, on Freudian understandings motivations and the mechanistic theories of behaviourism. Csikszentmihalyi argued that if we accept Freud’s theories, “then life must be inherently painful because scarce resources of enjoyment lead to competition, and only a few can get more than intermittent satisfaction. For Freud, the libido is the source of all pleasure, but since the requirements of social life conflict with libidinal desires, discontent is the lot of civilized man” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. x). Seligman also criticized Freud by challenging the effect of childhood experiences in later life, while also revealing an unrepentant belief in the primacy of individual responsibility, “There is no justification in these studies for blaming your adult depression, anxiety, bad marriage, drug use, sexual problems, unemployment, aggression against your children, alcoholism, or anger on what happened to you as a child” (Seligman, 2004, p. 80). During their promotion of positive psychology as the third way, which again echoes Eysenck’s brand of personality psychology, Csikszentmihalyi also levied harsh criticism against the trend toward over-simplistic thinking that widely assumed it is of more importance to know what a person does, rather than what they think or feel. The problem for Csikszentmihalyi was, “what we need to know about others is their actions, but

what counts about ourselves is our feelings. We are all behaviorists when facing outwards but turn phenomenologists as soon as we reflect” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982/2014, p. 209). Believing these practices were still influencing psychological research, positive psychologists struck a concerned note with the direction of contemporaneous researchers, “There has been an explosion in research on psychological disorders and the negative effects of environmental stressors, such as parental divorce, the deaths of loved ones, and physical and sexual abuse” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). For them, this research was proof of the need for positive psychology, since, “No longer do the dominant theories view the individual as a passive vessel responding to stimuli; rather, individuals are now seen as decision makers, with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious, or in malignant circumstances, helpless and hopeless” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 8). They believed the way to reconcile this was through less dogmatic adherence to these outdated approaches and the embrace of science, which promoted an understanding of human nature consistent with neoliberal ideas.

To establish positive psychology as a science, its leaders highlighted their proximity to previous experimental and heredity research (again, echoing Eysenck’s brand of personality psychology). These included the work of Daniel Berlyne (1960, 1966) and Richard De Charms (1968), who attempted to understand what made particular stimuli enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014). Csikszentmihalyi (2003) also cited the twin research by David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, who “concluded that demographic factors such as religion, education, marital status, or income accounted for no more than 3 percent of people’s sense of well-being”, even though Lykken later stated that the happiness set point could be raised outside of genetic considerations (Horowitz, 2017, p 113). Unlike the humanistic psychologists, who were accused of “wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads, or hand-waving”, positive psychologists focused their energies on operationalizing virtues, values and developing a measurement regime for authentic happiness and strengths (Grogan, 2012, p. 256). Of interest to this

paper was the explicit praise Martin Seligman heaped upon personality psychology as the only area of study that kept the “flame of character and the idea of human nature flickering” in a period of Freudian and behavioural dominance (Seligman, 2004, p. 145). This reverence perhaps stemmed from their use of structurally similar and genetically informed concepts of the happiness set point, flow, and the OLS/OLA.

Confounding the intent to practice positive psychology as a science was the consistent lack of precision in their definitions of concepts under study. Beginning with the considerable inconsistencies regarding their understandings of happiness, as they theorized that happiness was both “a personal trait, or relatively permanent disposition to experience well-being regardless of external conditions” as well as “a state, or a transitory subjective experience responsive to momentary events or conditions in the environment” (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991/2014, p. 70). Straining the definition further, Csikszentmihalyi also stated that participant’s ratings of moment-to-moment happiness, which they were ultimately responsible for, could be averaged into what could be considered trait-like happiness (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991/2014). In addition, when considering neoliberal influences, Csikszentmihalyi’s notion that there are no “universal external generators” of happiness becomes individuated when integrated into the solitary flow practice. These ideas further feed into the notion that people have an individual responsibility to pursue ways to make themselves happier (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991/2014, p. 70). In agreement, Seligman articulated similar concepts in language that would not be out of place in a self-help book, “authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day in work, love, play, and parenting” (Seligman, 2004, p. 11). While the definition of happiness was still somewhat vague, positive psychologists agreed, with few notable exceptions, that people were responsible for developing their own happiness, regardless of heritable considerations.

Driven by their revolutionary rhetoric, the leaders of positive psychology adopted the “happiness set point” as an explanation for the trait or a prolonged state of happiness. This concept,

possessing some similarities to personality psychology's use of the OLA, forwarded the idea that people are born with a default level of happiness to which they naturally revert. Some positive psychologists, including Sonja Lyubomirsky, had so much confidence in this approach that a precise formula was constructed in which, "genetically determined happiness set point [was] responsible for 50 percent of positivity, external circumstances for 10 percent, and intentional activity for 40 percent" (Horowitz, 2017, p. 166). Other positive psychologists endorsed this understanding, including Csikszentmihalyi, who took the opportunity to associate their practice with genetics, "It is not unlikely that, as behavioral geneticists insist, a "set level" coded in our chromosomes accounts for perhaps as much as half of the variance in self-reported happiness" (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 185). It was the 40% that was said to be influenced by intentional activity that positive psychologists were most interested in, with Csikszentmihalyi arguing that "Hope, optimism and the ability to experience flow can be learned and thus moderate one's level of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Seligman, 2004; Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 186). Interestingly, Seligman was not as enthusiastic about the happiness set point or flow's moderating capacities to elevate a person's happiness level, "Yet the scientific evidence makes it seem unlikely that you can change your level of happiness in any sustainable way. It suggests that we each have a fixed range for happiness, just as we do for weight. And just as dieters almost always regain the weight they lose, sad people don't become lastingly happy, and happy people don't become lastingly sad." (Seligman, 2004, p. 9). It is unknown if this fundamental disagreement was ever reconciled or why Seligman would have promoted efforts to increase happiness if he believed it was largely genetically determined.

In order to facilitate the discussion of boredom's role in the discourses surrounding positive psychology and its central location in the lived experience of neoliberal subjectivities (Teo, 2018), I will now turn to an examination of Csikszentmihalyi's flow. Csikszentmihalyi's journey to becoming a pioneering positive psychologist started in the late 1960s as he began to explore why certain people

were willing to ignore material concerns to “risk their lives climbing rocks . . . devote their lives to art, who spend their energies playing chess” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 1). He questioned how such experiences were more highly valued than tangible rewards and what this meant for how people create meaning in their lives. During these inquiries, Csikszentmihalyi came to understand intrinsic motivation as an “autotelic”, or an activity whose goal is its own experience (Getzels & Csikszentmihalyi, 1969; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014). For Csikszentmihalyi, this concept addressed the old question of why people play, the answer being to enter a state of optimal experience, or flow, as it came to be known (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). After an analysis of reported experiences of various types of play from participants, Csikszentmihalyi identified what made these experiences pleasurable and codified the parameters of Flow:

(a) a person is able to concentrate on a limited stimulus field, (b) in which he or she can use his or her skills to meet clear demands, (c) thereby forgetting his or her own problems, and (d) his or her own separate identity, (e) at the same time obtaining a feeling of control over the environment, (f) which may result in a transcendence of ego-boundaries and consequent psychic integration with meta personal systems” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 41)

Csikszentmihalyi would later articulate how attention and freedom of choice were necessary elements for entering flow, as he believed “forced” attention would strip experience of its intrinsic quality. One can easily imagine how an otherwise pleasurable activity could elicit feelings of boredom or anxiety if forced to engage in them. The importance of freedom and attention to Csikszentmihalyi’s understandings can be seen in how he updated his 1975 work to include freedom, “Subjectively valued experiences depend on the voluntary focusing of attention on a limited stimulus field” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978, p. 337). This distinction between voluntary and mandatory was also explored in a study involving a group of students, where none of the teenagers identified their favorite academic subjects as belonging to the activities they enjoyed, “their spontaneous choices seem to reflect an implicit distinction between

work and leisure as contexts for enjoyment and therefore as domains in relation to which the idea of being intrinsically motivated even makes sense” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p. 90).

As much as flow was framed as an interactionist approach to increase happiness and well-being (Nakamura et al., 2002), where people’s experiences and behaviours are stripped of context, the central role of attention in the evocation of flow places much of the responsibility on the individual. When skills lag behind the level of challenge, then an increase in skills is necessary, and if skills are above the level of challenge, then a more complex challenge needs to be sought out. Csikszentmihalyi went further when describing the importance of attention “What to pay attention to, how intensely and for how long, are choices that will determine the content of consciousness, and therefore the experiential information available to the organism” (Csikszentmihalyi 1978, p. 339). The fact that boredom’s role in attention elicited by monotony is absent from the discussion is surprising, but perhaps its inclusion would unnecessarily complicate the approach. Beyond its connection with boredom, flow is seen here as an individual practice that facilitates the construction of subjectivities complementary to the broader neoliberal system. While flow was once seen as an emancipatory practice that fostered happiness regardless of material wealth, its support and adoption by the business sector raise questions about what value it was generating for investors.

Boredom enters the discussion of flow as a negatively valenced state caused by a mismatch between an individual’s level of skill and the difficulty of a task (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991/2014). As Csikszentmihalyi detailed in 1975, “If, however, skills are greater than the opportunities for using them, boredom will follow” (p. 50). Csikszentmihalyi theorized that when people engaged in a challenge of appropriate difficulty with “clear proximal goals,” they would receive immediate feedback that progress was being made and enter into the flow state (Nakamura et al., 2002, p. 93). The model received some updates when Carli (1986) and Massimini et al. (1987) found that the level of skill and challenge must be relatively high for the flow experience to materialize (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong,

1991/2014). This understanding of flow suggests a base level of resources needs to be deployed for the task to become the sole concern and awareness of the participant, which could explain why the level of challenge needs to be increased with the level of skill in order to avoid boredom (Csikszentmihalyi & Wong, 1991/2014). Csikszentmihalyi generally believed that boredom was a condition that plagued highly skilled individuals, as there tended to be a lack of challenges for them to engage with (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014). Unfortunately, this framework inadvertently allows for epistemologically violent (Teo, 2010) interpretations, as those suffering anxiety (or apathy) could be classified as less skilled, less educated, and likely of lower socioeconomic standing. At the same time, those suffering boredom could be assumed to be of more educated and affluent populations, which is problematic for treatment, education and possibly leading to discrimination.

Nevertheless, for all this theorizing of how boredom manifests due to a skill/challenge mismatch, the construct itself remained poorly defined. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) cited the earlier work of Berlyne (1960), which presented boredom as the opposite of interest and surprise and the result of redundant stimulation, where attention on the stimulus is no longer maintained. In these discussions, the well-worn state or trait problem resurfaced, “boredom should be seen as having both trait-like and state-like components. However, very little is known of boredom as a trait. Even though it is part of our tacit knowledge that some individuals are often bored and others never are” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 443). Csikszentmihalyi also slightly reformulated his concept of boredom as the result of a “specific ratio” between opportunities to act and a person’s ability to act, which echoed his notion of a mismatch between skills and challenges, “where people tend to feel dissatisfied, passive, lonely, sad, and low in self-esteem . . . as one aspect of psychic entropy, or the state of mind in which consciousness is disordered and unable to accomplish work” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 443). Boredom likely received more attention from positive psychology, as it was associated with attention problems, mental health issues, workplace inefficiencies while also providing definitional clarity to flow (Farmer & Sundberg,



1986; Martin, 2012). Much of this echoes Csikszentmihalyi's earlier theorizing about how boredom manifests in the alienation during meaningless daily tasks and their extrinsic rewards (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). In this capacity, boredom serves as an indicator regarding the quality of life and is of "central importance to parents, educators, clinicians, researchers, and laypersons interested in enhancing the quality of life" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 444). Exploring boredom further, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) looked to Ripperre's 1977 commentary regarding the experience, where he referred to it as a "general state of listlessness or apathy" during periods of disinterest, lack of control or engaged in meaningless tasks, and was "considered to be one of the least desirable conditions of daily life and is often associated with psychopathology" (p. 442). Csikszentmihalyi concluded from this that the "ability to avoid boredom is an essential component of well-being" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 443). While boredom had received increasing interest from broader psychology, positive psychology continued to explore its characteristics, as it made appearances in various studies and as an entry into *The Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* (2009),

People also differ in their willingness to take risks to obtain moments of novelty and uncertainty or to avoid the pain of boredom. This mode of curiosity, termed sensation-seeking, includes socially desirable actions such as enjoying unusual art forms, meeting new people, and trying new entrées at restaurants, as well as less socially desirable actions such as drug use, gambling, risky sexual activities, and aggression (Kashdana & Silvia, p. 271).

It is worth highlighting that the language found here is borrowed from personality psychologists' sensation-seeking literature.

Illustrating how Csikszentmihalyi's work could have emerged as liberative, where personal meaning and happiness could eclipse material wants, to becoming endorsed by wealthy companies and individuals as a way to bolster employee morale, is the parallel found in Abraham Maslow's work.

Maslow's concept of peak experiences shares enough theoretical overlap with Csikszentmihalyi's flow that he equated the two in 1978, "'peak experiences,' or flow experiences as we have called them" (Csikszentmihalyi, p. 342). Strengthening the ties between the Csikszentmihalyi and humanistic research was how numerous scholars in the humanistic tradition incorporated flow research into their work (Deci & Ryan 1985; McAdams, 1990; Renninger et al. 1992). Mirroring the transformation of Csikszentmihalyi's flow into a tool promoted by business interests (as well as self-promotion, e.g. FLIGBY Leader Simulation Game, Ted Talks, Good Business – Flow and Leadership (2004)), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943; 1954) also began as a concept which defined personal meaning and growth as unresponsive to consumer-based solutions, only to be adopted by business and management schools (Bridgman et al., 2019). Exemplifying how these concepts can be interpreted to suit the marketplace's needs, Maslow's hierarchy was transformed into a pyramid structure rather than the ladder he had personally illustrated (Bridgman et al., 2019). With each layer needing a broader base to support the one above, the pyramid structure inherently depicts a classed concept, suggesting that self-actualization is only available for upper management and justifying managerial power (Bridgman et al., 2019; Cullen, 1997). The pyramid was widely disseminated through management schools until it became one of the most recognizable products of psychology (Bridgman et al., 2019). Maslow promoted how his theories could be incorporated into companies and personnel (Maslow, 1965/1998; 2000), where workers are transformed into entrepreneurs, limiting the corporate obligations, again leading to the invisibility of exploitation (Read, 2009). While Maslow passed away in 1970, Csikszentmihalyi would live through the political transformation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s and would seemingly distance himself from humanistic psychology as "peak experience" appears only four times in his 2014 313-page chronicle of his work.

While Csikszentmihalyi's work was dedicated to understanding how people generated meaning and sought out happiness, he was also influenced by his belief in an individual's ability to overcome their

environment, a line of thinking that was primed for neoliberal reinterpretation. The tension between liberation and isolation can be found in some of his earlier work, “[a person] can be in solitary confinement or in a boring job; but as long as he knows how to respond to the few stimuli around—through fantasy, scientific analysis, or intervention—he will still be enjoying himself” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 206). Again, it is the individual’s responsibility to rise above their environment, regardless of the circumstances. Twenty-five years later, this line of thinking was applied to self-construction and self-reliance to promote mental illness prevention, “Prevention researchers have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). Referencing Hamilton (1981), Csikszentmihalyi believed these notions of the solitary person extended to how creative people apparently “rarely experience boredom” and have “no time to be bored . . . the ability to self-regulate mood and avoid boredom is one of the most important skills to learn in order to achieve a satisfying life” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 443). These materialistic approaches provide another example of how boredom and or anxiety could be utilized to categorize people in problematic ways. According to Grogan (2012), due to increasing critiques of positive psychology’s associations with promoting individualism, the discipline began promoting positive thinking as a way to encourage harmonious social action, with proponents stating, “When individualism is taken to an extreme, individual well-being can become its ironic casualty” (Myers, 2004, p. 650). However, given that the theories and remediations of positive psychology depend on individual action and their research has shown little interest in social concerns, these comments appear to be an empty acknowledgment. Historian Daniel Horowitz went further, “In the new century, positive psychologists seemed to be embracing a corporate system that others saw as exploitative selfish and a social order that others saw as increasingly insecure and unequal” (Horowitz,

2017, p. 166). Seligman also attempted to deflect some criticisms by labeling Maslow and Norman Vincent Peale as the real bootstrappers (Horowitz, 2017).

### ***Qualitative Data - Boredom in the Popular Press 1990-1999***

During the 1990s, as the positive psychology leaders were constituting the subdiscipline, the American economy was experiencing continued growth (Federal Reserve, 2021b), neoliberal reforms of the 1980s were expanded upon, and America entered into the First Gulf War (1990-1991). The popular discourse regarding boredom is again represented by 200 articles from the NYT, which contain the term. As mentioned in the methods section, the categories for this period are very similar to the 1970s, with a few exceptions, perhaps speaking to the stability of the popular usage.

#### *Art*

The Art category again included fine art, photography, stage performances, and dance. In these articles, boredom was widely used to denote a disengaged audience or highlight a piece of art's failure to convey an exciting or challenging message. However, there are also examples of boredom being intentionally elicited in audiences to consider deeper personal meaning. Associations between boredom and the arts were again well represented, with 14 entries out of the 200 included in this analysis.

One photography exhibit attempted to reveal the art present in boring everyday scenes, "The artistic value of boring scenes by stating there was, "the artistic value of boring scenes, and boredom itself" (Goldberg, 1994, p. H33). Another commentator suggested the most interesting aspect of galleries was the expressions of the patrons, "But it is more fun if time is also spent looking at the people looking at the art. Writ large on their faces is an array of emotions: amusement, perplexity, excitement, annoyance, boredom, delight, wariness" (Haberman, 1999, p. 317). Away from the gallery, stage performances were sometimes seen as boring, where one prospective audience was cautioned about attending, "Be forewarned about a play that confronts — no, entraps — an audience with "the

boredom, the boredom, the bloody' boredom" (Klein, 1994, p. WC9). Boredom could also be experienced by both the audience and the actors themselves, with an audience properly expressing it through coughing and whiles actors revealed it in their faces as they became bored with a production (Koblent, 1997, p. 159; "Not about", 1999, p. E2). However, boredom's appearance on the stage was not always considered unintentional, "Critics have found his performance noteworthy for a number of reasons, but one that stands out is how much he is able to convey through silence: anger, boredom and tenderness" (Harris, 1991, P. 5). In another example, a dance troupe purposefully explored the boundaries of the art form, "Jonathan Burrows proceeded to test the outer limits of boredom and exhaustion on Thursday night at The Kitchen" (Dunning, 1997, p. E3). These references and uses of boredom do not differ markedly from those made about the arts in the 1970s. Art also appears to be one of the few areas where boredom is not a universal negative, as long as it was deployed deliberately.

### *Literature*

Literature was once again a well-represented category, with 15 articles discussing literature and boredom in some way. The author Frederick Barthelme had made a career out of writing similar novels, "the hero is a middle-aged fellow, in the middle of a middle-age crisis; the setting is Florida or Texas or some other place along the Gulf . . . the subject is boredom or spiritual malaise, the meaninglessness of contemporary life" (Kakutani, 1993, p. C2). This was not the only case where a novelist repeatedly utilized the theme of boredom, as documented in Larry McMurtry's work, "Lonesome Dove" of 1985 "an anti-mythical, melancholy landscape where frail and truculent characters struggle with smallness, boredom and the loutishness of others" (Bernstein, 1995, p. C19). Some authors, especially new novelists, inadvertently introduced boredom into their work when utilizing vagueness for effect, "Vagueness is another specialty of the author, as of many other first novelists, who find that quality so much more evocative than specificity. Boredom often accompanies vagueness" (Disch, 1990, p. BR16). Depression and boredom also emerged as related themes in the writings of some authors, with Simon's

Corrigan's brooding hero suffering from "despairing boredom", or Iris Murdoch's protagonist similarly struggling, "I'm not mad. I suffer from depression. It's not like ordinary misery, it's like dying of boredom. It's black" (Sonenberg, 1995, p. BR20; Simon, 1995, p. BR7). Literature was another category where boredom was acceptable if evoked for a reason but suffered criticism when elicited through unimaginative repetition of the same themes and stories.

### *Entertainment*

The Entertainment category was in some ways the opposite of Art, where there were few allowances for the appearance of boredom. This likely has to do with the purpose of entertainment, that is, to distract and engage. Entertainment primarily included the same subcategories as the Entertainment category of the 1970s, with movies, music, sports, and television, all showing considerable increases. Overall, the category made up 52 of the total 200 articles sampled for a considerable representation of boredom's use in this period.

First, movies were seen as a way to address boredom, especially in children. For instance, the children's movies *Pippi*, *Aladdin* (as long as the actor Robin Williams was "on screen"), and *The Seventh Continent* were all presented as ways to relieve or pre-emptively address boredom (Gelder, 1997, p. C22; James, 1992, p. H11; James, 1990, p. C15). Other productions were said to instill boredom in their audiences, for example, Eddie Murphy's *Holy Man* would have young children "die of boredom", while *The Lay of the Land* was said to have induced "the sludge of boredom" ("Holy man", 1998, p. E12; Gelder, 1997, p. E18). Diverging from unintentionally instilling boredom in audiences, some movies, like *Clockwatchers*, purposefully utilized a "particular blend of boredom and paranoia" as a plot device (Holden, 1998, p. E23). Reflecting a larger discourse emerging in the public, the movie *The Delta* attempted to address same-sex relationships by capturing boredom and frustration experienced in these and other relationships (Holden, 1997, P. C14). A letter to the editor encouraged movie-goers to

avoid becoming quickly bored with “girl-meets-girl” movies since it took decades for lesbian romances to be realistically depicted (Mistal, 1996, p. H9).

Boredom was not often directly associated with music during this period, but due to a punk rock band’s name being The Boredoms, many references to them can be found (Ross, 1993, p. 15; Ratliff, 1999, p. E22; Ratliff, 1999, p. E1; Pareles, 1995, p. C15; Strauss, 1994, C9). According to Alternative Press Magazine, the Boredoms enjoyed a certain amount of popularity as suggested by the award of the 72nd greatest album of the 90s and playing on the main stage at Lollapalooza in 1994 (Brady, 2006). However, perhaps it is more interesting to consider what the band was communicating with their choice in name and its reception. The band renamed itself the Boredoms after a song by the 1970s punk rock band the Buzzcocks, entitled *Boredom*. The song’s first two choruses describe someone predictable, familiar, devoid of emotion, struggling with a lack of meaning, a detached entity being swept along, who does not engage in life but waits for something to happen:

Yeah - well - I say what I mean

I say what comes to my mind

Because I never get around to things

I live a straight - straight line

You know me - I'm acting dumb

You know the scene - very humdrum

Boredom, boredom, boredom

I'm living in this movie

But it doesn't move me

I'm the man that's waiting for the phone to ring

Hear it ring-a-ding-a-fucking-ding (Buzzcocks, 1977)

This song captured the imagination of the Boredoms, perhaps revealing something about the experience of boredom as a constant in capitalist societies. It also speaks to the common connection between youth and boredom in the West as the cultural threads connect the 1970s and 1990s. Further supporting the notion of youthful boredom was the band Nirvana, which according to a NYT writer, captured “the particular desperation of its day. While having a handle on the perennial teen-age obsessions with boredom, claustrophobia and sex” (Reynolds, 1991, p. H24). Otherwise, the sparse commentary regarding boredom was more related to practical concerns and how veterans of touring can become rundown over time, with Eric Clapton finding that when routine “settles in, means boredom” (Pareles, 1998, p. E5).

Surprisingly, articles discussing television were not overly populated with associations of boredom. Several instances appeared where there were complaints about how inserting “advocacy messages” into the scripts detracted from the show and made it boring (Ackerman, 1990, p. H3), while another stated, “if, as soldiers say, war consists of endless boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror, “*Martial Law*” boils down to an hour of tedium punctuated by frenzied bouts of kung fu fighting” (McDonald, 1998, p. B14). It is possible that with the growth in competition, video games, movies, news, and televised sports, that television viewership had begun to decline, “American television is already caught in a technological cross-fire that may alter not only the way programs enter our homes, but also change forever the function of our TV sets” (Millar, 1989).

There were many examples of people becoming bored with sporting events, regardless of what sport it was. Due to its long season, baseball’s spring training was singled out as a particularly challenging time, “Pitchers stretch, throw, field some grounders, run and sweat before stretching again.



Within a day or two, some veterans will openly profess their boredom” (Olney, 1998, p. C5). This boredom extended into the regular season, as sitting on the bench became a motivator for one player to start playing another professional sport, “Boredom, not ego, motivated Deion Sanders”, while a manager for a different team stated that he would keep players busy, so they will not “fall asleep from boredom” (“Sanders cites”, 1992, p. B13; Curry, 1992, p. C7). Boredom was also a partial motivator for pitchers to try new pitches, “The inspiration for pitching experimentation is varied: insecurity, injury, boredom, arrogance” (Sexton, 1993, p. S3). Boxers were also susceptible, with Roy Jones Jr. being more interested in “fighting boredom than opponents” while Mike Tyson “hung his head in boredom” (Eskenazi, 1996, p. 32; Sterngold, 1990, p. A25). With each boxer being considered the most skilled in their weight class at the time, this example maps onto Csikszentmihalyi’s understanding of boredom particularly well, as high skill and low challenge tend to elicit boredom. Football suffered not necessarily from being inherently boring, but from how modern broadcasters were monetizing the game, “explanation of the deteriorating interest of fans in TV football can be summed up in one word: Boredom . . . the networks expose us to more and more commercials, so that it now takes upward of three and a half hours to see a 60-minute game” (Kushner, 1997, p. SM14). This category may possess a relatively high number of references to boredom due to intolerance with its elicitation since sports are often understood as a cure rather than its cause.

### *Travel*

Travel was again an experience singled out for provoking a state of boredom in people. One documentary company attempted to capitalize on the perception that traveling along interstate highways was a less-than-exciting experience by producing audio tapes which documented the history and folklore “behind the scenery you’re rushing past”, and further contended that “Boredom represents our lack of understanding of what’s around us” (Hershey, 1993, p. XX24). This understanding of boredom’s mechanics reveals how activities are not often boring by nature but how they are perceived.

This subjective interpretation is consistent with positive psychology's understanding of the role of attention and skill regarding flow. Airports were also seen as boredom-inducing, evident in the retelling of being snowed-in or the introduction of shops for people with long layovers (Finder, 1996, p. 36; Verhovek, 1993, p. 353). Technology's ability to distract people's attention was leveraged on long flights as airlines began to understand the importance of introducing connectivity while in the air (Specter, 1993, p. E3).

### *Youth*

Youth boredom was again a common topic, with 31 articles discussing the connection between the two, with drugs, violence, education, and summer break commonly appearing as themes. Repeated references to lack of supervision or direction appeared alongside straightforward remedies, including engaging in simple activities, including starting a garden to occupy the downtime, "But after the snow melts, boredom tends to set in, and with it, bad tempers" (Faust, 1996, p. WC14). A museum in Denmark catered primarily to children as they are "usually bored in museums" (Russell, 1994, p. H39). While one student expressed her challenges with summertime, "I want to get back to school . . . you have fun for like two weeks and then you start getting bored" ("Eager to", 1993, p. E38). Hinting at the futility of addressing summer boredom, an article cited how development experts warned that while taking a summer job can be a solution, it too can "quickly lead to boredom" ("First-time", 1993, p. C12). Some concerns about summer boredom for students were of a far more severe nature "Seeking to head off a summer of boredom and potential violence as children are caught in gunfire and their parents face the economic pressures of a recession" (Lee, 1991, p. 27). With police also drawing a disturbing connection, "The youths . . . have lived a tenuous existence of their own, culminating what the police said was murder motivated solely by boredom" (Richardson, 1995, p. B1). Not everyone was convinced this combination was sufficient motivation for this murder, as a letter to the editor questioned, "If tedium indeed incites such violence, we can sit back confident that any proposed interventions with

aggressive juveniles are bound to be fruitless. We are effectively relieved of our responsibility” (Stein, 1995, p. A14). However, this stance is put in question in an incident where “Several members of a street gang set out to look for a party on Halloween night but instead ended up beating, raping and stabbing a woman 132 times before leaving her in a field to die. The motive, one of them told the police, was boredom” (“Boston”, 1991, p. 6). In the end, these debates over the motivational capacity of boredom for violence could be attributed to those looking for straightforward answers rather than spending the resources to investigate the social and economic factors facilitating these crimes properly. For one reader, this simplistic approach of attribution fed the concerns of parents and opened the door to enterprising psychologists:

Today parents are terrified of boredom because they are convinced it will lead to drug use, sexual experimentation and low S.A.T. scores. So children go to camps, drama camps, computer camps, gymnastic camps, sleepaway and day camps. Sweaty school substitutes. They must be stimulated. My parents’ idea of stimulation was a trip to the Dairy Queen. But today we talk about stimulating children as though we were going to hook them up to a machine and administer mild electric shocks (Quindlen, 1991, E17).

The repeated use of the word “stimulation” echoes the personality psychologists and is consistent with some of the work of positive psychologists, in that a child should spend as much time as possible engaged, or in flow, as possible.

### *Labour*

The category with the most significant decrease in uses of boredom was labour, with 31 articles in the 1970s and only 7 in the 1990s. What is striking is the almost complete lack of references to the boredom of working on assembly lines or job-related boredom in general; this is likely due to American companies moving to manufacture overseas, improvements made to lessen boredom on the job, as well

as the declining power of the labour movement. Articles did include references to service industry jobs, for instance, with blackjack dealers, “the hardest part of the job can/be boredom. Most casino workers say that blackjack dealers face the most acute problem of keeping focused on repetitive action and the changing faces of players, even with a 20-minute break for every hour worked” (Nordheimer, 1994, p. B1). While stock traders were experiencing “the boredom factor” during a down market, “The result is that many jobs whose fast pace and big dollar transactions once made them the very definition of “exciting” and “dynamic” have become increasingly dull and boring . . . “I’m bored. I’m not making money”” (Eichenwald, 1990, p. D1). Here boredom appears again in the context of a contrast, where exciting times make otherwise average experiences seem more boring than they otherwise would. Similar to this was the experience of a photographer, “The job is made of endless days of loneliness and boredom . . . the competition is rough, a dangerous game of who can push himself to the limit and take more risks” (Lorch, 1996, p. NJ10). One writer detailed the experiences of an engineer who was not given any work for long stretches, “Going out of his mind with boredom, my friend took to arriving at 9 A.M., turning on his drafting lamp and then going home for the rest of the day” (Ravo, 1997, p. F11). Psychology was still engaged with the labour issue of boredom, with the consulting company, Personnel Decisions Inc. of Minneapolis, reframing the concept of work, “By stressing the play aspects at work, he thinks, morale can be improved and boredom lessened” (Fowler, 1991, p. D17). It should be noted that these psychologists are not promoting making tangible differences in the workplace; instead, it is the workers who should ultimately integrate more fully with the work. The idea that the individual is responsible for their own experience is consistent with some neoliberal dogma and Csikszentmihalyi’s belief that we are responsible for the content of our minds.

### *Politics*

Politics were again widely considered boring but compared to the 21 articles appearing in the 1970s, only 10 instances were present in the 200 reviewed for the 1990s. While exciting politics was

associated with novelty or conflict, boredom does not necessarily reflect the opposite. Instead, it can also capture how people are separated from their representatives and or the process. If politics addressed people's concerns, it is not immediately clear why this would be considered boring unless it had been successfully doing it for an extended period. However, that level of competence and effectiveness is not something typically associated with politics. One article raised the alarm of the importance of people meeting their representatives to eliminate the distance between themselves and their democracy, which was seemingly imposed by professional political operatives, "Everyone should meet their mayor, even, or especially, in New York City. It just might save our cities from bankruptcy, terminal boredom, or a premature death inflicted by the modern drone of pollsters, consultants and "experts" (O'Conner, 1991, p. A17). To consider that boredom might cause the death of democracy certainly raises its profile above a trivial experience. This elevated impact of boredom played out in Egypt with Hosni Mubarak, who, in 1993, won a third six-year term and would remain in power until 2011, "despite growing opposition demands for political changes and mounting discontent. "There is no renewal . . . and a lot of boredom. A cloud of boredom hangs over Cairo" ("Mubarak", 1993, p. A3). A similar sentiment was conveyed when an author pointed to the notion that boredom can keep people in power and undermine democracy, "decries the public boredom and apathy in response to continuous reports of scandals in the White House" (Covington, 1996, p. E14). Another example of this political boredom discussed how since there was little excitement, the established candidate was leveraging his name recognition for victory, "Messinger, leading in polls, hopes to avoid a runoff, but boredom plagues race" (Nagourney, 1997, p. A1). Others deployed boredom as an insult; in a letter to the editor, a reader utilized language that circulates in conservative opinion, "There is no backlash, only boredom with feminism's radicals; boredom with a fringe that serves up victimology breakfast, lunch and dinner. Perhaps if feminists spent more time in the kitchens they've been so diligently remodeling on the gender-neutral floor plan, they would learn the basic rules of menu planning" (Ledeen, 1996, p. E8). This

grotesque attempt at humour also reveals an all-too-common comfort with discriminatory ideas and their use to provoke others. Boredom and citizen distance from government appear to be the dominant thread for this category, with the lack of novelty and lack of responsible government contributing to both.

### *Armed Forces*

For military conflict and training, boredom was again seen as a threat to combat readiness in dialogues that highlighted the juxtaposition of combat and downtime experienced by service people. At times boredom was characterized as a deadly adversary, “Next to the Iraqi Army, perhaps the biggest enemy facing American troops in the Persian Gulf is boredom” or “The boredom is intense, broken only by digging ditches, lugging chopped thorn bushes and listening to music on the armed forces radio network” (“Airlift”, 1990, p. B9; Lorch, 1993, p. 4). While in Iraq, apparent concerns were not only about the desert landscape inducing boredom but how some soldiers seemed less adaptable to their surroundings, “The worst thing to have is any kind of boredom . . . We try to keep them as busy as possible. But some marines say they are having a hard time adjusting. There are a couple of guys who are really stressed” (Gordon, 1990, p. A10). While personality psychologists might have seen such an observation as consistent with individual differences in coping with varying amounts of arousal, positive psychologists would likely view it as an indication that more flow is needed. For Israeli soldiers, “Boredom and terror are the stuff of life at an outpost in Yaron” where they could be strumming guitars to amuse themselves one minute and, in a firefight the next (Sontag, 1998, p. A8). In a different conflict, commanders in Somalia were concerned with the dangers of letting one’s guard down, “Boredom and low morale are the biggest challenges for commanding officers, who fear that they can make soldiers vulnerable to rock throwers and snipers. Many soldiers are also concerned that they are in Somalia for the long haul” (Lorch, 1993, p. A4). These experiences reflected those of military personnel stationed in very different roles, “Boredom and terror work inside the missile control capsules has been described as

hours of boredom that could be broken by moments of sheer terror. And for those who have been trained to unleash nuclear weapons, always vigilant for “the unspeakable”, as Lieutenant Farfour called it” (Johnson, 1991, p. A8). The need to keep soldiers busy in order to avoid boredom and the contrast between the heightened state of terror and boredom make numerous appearances. Perhaps due to the experience of the heightened state, other activities then become more likely to induce boredom, which is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of needing to increase skills to avoid the sliding scale of boredom.

### *Trials*

With the heightened public interest in the trials of O. J. Simpson and Whitewater, several references to boredom were made regarding the process followed by the courts. One article was sympathetic towards executives who were selected for jury trials while still needing to complete their work and endure “the same noisy jury room trying to fend off boredom” (Fanning, 1991, p. F23). In an article entitled “At Happy Land mass-murder trial, days of tears, humor and boredom”, the author noted how even the most heinous details could become boring through repetition, which is consistent with stimulus-based understandings of boredom (Stanley, 1991, p. 26). The Whitewater trial was considered boring enough that two separate articles mentioned how monotonous it was, with one noting that in the 10<sup>th</sup> hour, the broadcast inadvertently switched to Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, while PBS, CNN, and PBS all changed their programming (Wines, 1994, p. 26; Rich, 1994, p. C15). The O. J. Simpson trial, for all its publicity and public interest, was mocked in a NYT letter to the editor, “Next thing we know, boredom will be elevated to an official-osis. And then a legal defense; “dying of boredom” will cease to be hyperbole” (Ciraolo, 1995, p. A30). Given that these trials included people who were varying degrees of celebrity, were editorialized in popular magazines, and presented through the entertainment dominated medium of television, it is unsurprising that boredom would not be tolerated by the audience.

*Miscellaneous – Food, Exercise, Fashion, and Older Adults*

Other less frequent categories also emerged, with food, exercise, fashion, and older adults appearing, largely overlapping with the miscellaneous themes found in the 1970s. Novelty was a central theme to articles that discussed boring food or restaurants. Both Bobby Flay and Steven DePietro's menus were lauded for their food, which "explode[d] off the plate" or "reinvents" Italian cuisine, where it was "impossible to be bored" (Reed, 1997, p. WC13; Reichl, 1997, p. A25). Culinary expert William Grimes attempted to help people with their turkey stuffing, which was "synonymous with dry, volumetric bore" with some novel approaches (1992, p. F11). Exercise, which was not associated with boredom in the 1970s, appeared here as monotony was associated with exercise regimes. These feelings were said to undermine people's ability to stick with a program, "Consumers acknowledge that they spend so much on home fitness equipment mainly because they keep trying to find something that not only works but also keeps their interest. Boredom seems to be a big problem. Motivation is another" (Dignan, 1996, p. F9). However, one instructor realized the challenge was greater than the lack of novelty, "Valerie Green knows all too well the boredom that can set in with even the most varied exercise program" (Hurley, 1991, p. 44). Others still placed the blame on the slow pace of results, "The lack of visible progress (washboard abs, etc.) is fueling the boredom in exercising and its attendant equipment" (Macey, 1996, p. F34). Fashion saw its share of references to boredom with novelty again playing a prominent role. The boredom with living room furniture was addressed by introducing a mismatching sofa, in what "may have started out of sheer boredom" (Slesin, 1991, p. C8). While the larger clothing designer world was facing a crisis of boredom of sorts, with the designers themselves inspired by it to the point of a feedback loop, "Boredom was a more frequent topic of conversation at shows this season in Milan, Paris, London, and New York than the clothes, so much so that even the audience's boredom was getting boring" (Spindler, 1995, p. B7). Lastly, four articles discussed boredom in older adults and were related to themes of loss of freedom and lack of stimulation. One reporter



documented one woman's daily struggles with aging, "Ninety-seven years old and partly blind, she spends her day wandering through a dark apartment in Queens, fending off illness, boredom and depression" (Goodnough, 1994, p. 1). With the closing of a nursing home, some former residents found it difficult to adjust since they "had grown accustomed to a life peppered with daily activity, are simply bored" (Steinhauer, 1998, p. 37). Technology was seen as a possible way to address the problem of older adult boredom, "To help her avoid boredom, her older son, Marty, set her up with WebTV so she could surf the internet on her television set" (Brock, 1999, p. C20). Much of this is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's notions of how boredom can manifest in people with a skill/challenge mismatch. Here, older adults' isolation can limit chances to engage in activities that promote flow, exercisers' increasing skill levels can turn once challenging activities boring, while lack of novelty in food also promoted boredom.

### *Boredom*

One notable difference from the earlier period was the appearance of eight articles that examined published works devoted to the history and etymology of boredom itself. The books reviewed included *The vocation of a teacher: Rhetorical occasions, 1967-1988* by Wayne C. Booth (1991), *On kissing, tickling, and being bored: Psychoanalytic essays on the unexamined life* by Adam Phillips (1994), and no less than four articles covering Patricia Spacks' *Boredom: The literary history of a state of mind* (1995). Related to these works were two articles covering Csikszentmihalyi's publications, *The evolving self and flow the psychology at optimal experience*, which discussed flow and boredom,

When the mind isn't focused on a task, he observes, it veers naturally toward boredom or anxiety. The tendency may aid survival, since boredom prods us out into the world to better our lot . . . contentment comes from confronting challenges, he says, not mindless leisure . . .

the author may know the secret to a better Sunday afternoon, but the prose in this book can spoil one (Cowley, 1993, p. BR 24; Tavis, 1990, p. BR7).

With boredom appearing as a topic of central concern, it speaks to the growing interest by academics, as seen by the publications making associations with adverse mental health outcomes and psychological disorders in this period (Leong & Schneller, 1993; Wink & Donahue, 1997; Vodanovich & Rupp, 1999). However, this increase in scholarly articles discussing boredom came at a time of apparent disinterest by the public, as seen in the decreasing number of NYT articles (see figure 6).

#### *Discussion – Boredom in the Popular Press 1990-1999*

Boredom's use in the NYT during the 1990s was remarkably comparable to its use in the 1970s. In both periods, boredom was broadly depicted in ways consistent with a state, with the only references to a boredom trait found in articles covering the work of psychologists. Similarly, boredom was again not suffering from definitional confusion among the public, not used to define other concepts, and was not commonly understood in the context of individual differences. Due to positive psychology's widely applicable definition of boredom as an uncomfortable state elicited by high skill and low challenge scenarios, this understanding can be readily identified in the articles of the NYT. Most notable was how boredom captured neoliberal sentiments, with the expansion of use in Entertainment, decrease in Art, and near disappearance in Labour. Strengthening these connections is positive psychology's theorizing on attention's role in boredom and how it overlapped with individual or isolated action. Boredom was again a versatile concept, being utilized to convey frustration, confinement, disinterest, and discomfort while also understood as a motivator. It was again repeatedly depicted in juxtapositions, where scenarios with highly contrasting states of alarm and indifference elicited the emotional state, including cases where stressful jobs also had significant periods of inaction. The only categories that differed from the 1970s were exercise, jury trials, and boredom.

### **Boredoms Compared**

The attempts to domesticate boredom by personality psychology and positive psychology have mainly proven unsuccessful, as seen in recent admissions by psychologists that boredom remains elusive to the present day (Danckert et al., 2018; McDonald, 2019; Milea et al., 2021), even while such attempts continue (Yang et al., 2017; Baratta et al., 2018; Seo et al., 2019). Due to this confusion, the use of boredom to provide definitional clarity to oppositional concepts of interest is problematic. Personality psychologists attempted to ground a boredom-like trait in biology, understanding it through a lens of stimulation or arousal (OLS/OLA), and then associated it with adverse outcomes. This biological interpretation bestows enormous power to those who develop and interpret the measurement scales, and due to its assumed hereditary nature, the boredom-prone could be permanently typified as less than desirable, and within a capitalist society, unmarketable.

For positive psychologists, boredom entered the discussion through the concept of flow as a mismatch between high skill and low challenge, yet, the concept remained underdefined. At the same time, the centralizing of attention's role in boredom positioned the subdiscipline in a complementary position with neoliberal practices and subjectivities (Teo, 2018), as did their prescriptions for how to obtain happiness and well-being. Moreover, the claims to a scientific or essentialist boredom need to be reconciled with the shifts found between the two periods of NYT articles since a natural kind boredom should remain static. These changes in boredom complicate notions of biologically based boredom and frustrate claims made by these two subdisciplines to be practicing as a science. Daston's commentary on how psychologists identify their subject matter and the critical work of Danziger, Benjafield, Kagan, and others questioning the reification efforts of psychologists highlights the perhaps unresolvable problems attempting to unify psychology causes.

*Continuity in the Popular Discourse*

The fact that about half of the categories maintained a very similar number of references to boredom over the two time periods speaks to some stability in how the term was utilized, at least within the popular context. Literature increased from 14 articles to 15, with the topics ranging from the mundane to the consequential for both periods. It was not unusual for authors to deploy boredom as a motivator for certain behaviours, with fewer examples of a state that captured a character's struggle with meaninglessness in several instances, especially in the 1990s. Boredom appears to have been a constant concern for Western militaries, with 15 and 13 references made in the two samples. Boredom was primarily recognized as a danger to troop readiness, morale, and the chain of command. In both periods, great lengths were taken by governments to address it by providing extensive amenities to distract troops who were far from home. Boredom was also a constant for travel, with 7 and 6 uses, and maintained the same themes of inconvenience, the slow passage of time, and being constricted in time or place. Finally, and perhaps most consequentially, the category of Youth not only contained a similar number of references to boredom but possessed a continuity of themes across the two time periods. Many of the articles expressed concerns about youthful summer boredom and alarm over drug use, while other anti-social behaviours were common to both periods as boredom maintained its associations with poor outcomes. The only other categories that reached this heightened concern over boredom were the military and labour (specifically in the 1970s). There appears to be a mixture of concerns here, with parents and other authorities concerned about idle youth, which is also consistent with conservative viewpoints of how downtime can lead to rebellious acts and challenging the status quo.

*Differences in Depth the 1970s vs. 1990s*

While the continuity between the two periods regarding boredom use is impressively stable, several shifts merit a closer look. Perhaps unexpectedly, Entertainment was the only category that experienced a sizable increase in the number of uses of boredom. In the 1970s, there were 33 articles covering sports, movies, and music, while in the 1990s, there were 52. This frequency meant that over 25% of the uses could be attributed to some form of entertainment within this sample. While this could be a product of people spending more of their time away from work engaged in entertainment, it could also suggest an increased focus on the part of the NYT in general. It is also likely attributable to the expansion of technology where cable television was broadening its reach, and sports and other forms of entertainment became widely available 24 hours a day for the first time (Toto, 2000). Overall, the themes related to entertainment were primarily the same, most of them being of a trivial nature, where there appeared to be a low tolerance for entertainment which elicited boredom.

The first of the categories to see a noticeable decline in the use of boredom was Art – from 24 cases to 14. Interestingly, this thread is only tangentially connected to two highly related categories that also saw notable decreases, Labour, and Politics. Boredom's use in articles covering art productions was consistently varied in both periods. Some critics would use boredom to highlight unrelatable art or create confusion, while others noted the boredom of art patrons. In other articles, artists deployed boredom to establish a theme or make commentary about society, which accounted for nearly all the discourses of existential boredom. Boredom was also a motivator for some people to produce art and an escape for those in the grips of boredom. Overall, this category, more than any other, utilized boredom in all its capacity, which could reflect art itself and its ability to reimagine the world and challenge boundaries. There does not appear to be an apparent reason as to why it would have experienced a decline, except galleries were introducing more entertainment-like elements.

The next category, Politics, experienced a drop of over 50%, with 21 articles in the 1970s and 10 in the 1990s. The uses are largely consistent between periods with people experiencing trivial boredom when discussing government, especially political campaigns. Moreover, while a higher percentage of articles in the 1990s utilized a more insidious type of boredom associated with apathy and disintegration of government institutions, the sample is too small to draw conclusions. That said, the shift is consistent with the juxtaposition theme, as contrasted with the turmoil of the 1960s, the 1970s (especially the late 1970s), were relatively boring. In 1975 the commentator Russell Baker articulated the contrast in an 800+ word diatribe, of which this passage captures his present day,

The nineteen-seventies are boring. The decade is already half over and its chief legacy is an engulfing swamp of boredom. Americans are bored by Watergate. bored by Richard Nixon and bored by the endless tale of skulduggery in the C. I. A, the F. B. I. and the I. R. S. President Ford is boring, which is his chief political strength. Henry Kissinger's brilliance is boring. The President's economists are boring, but not nearly so boring as their incessant, boring predictions that prosperity is just around the corner. Playboy. Penthouse. Viva. Lui. Oui. Gent. Hustler and Screw are boring. So are Hugh Hefner and Xavicra Hollander. Unless somebody stops them soon, they will make even sex boring . . . In the nineteen-sixties. of course, Americans hungered for boredom. A sleepy Government, some peace in the streets, a release from passions and phonograph noises (Baker, 1975, p. SM2).

It is revealing that while this predominately discusses trivial boredom, in its totality, it is existential in nature. It is also worthwhile considering the blurring of the lines between politics and entertainment. While Presidents John Kennedy (1917-1963) and Richard Nixon (1913-1994) were celebrities in their own right, it was with the election of General Electric salesman Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) that it became apparent the messenger was more important than the message. In light of this, it is surprising

that boredom decreased in political discourses when considering this was a period of entertainmentization, as discussed above.

Of all the categories, it was labour that experienced the most profound shift in both numbers, from 31 to 7, and themes. The 1970s were rife with examples of labour unrest, business, and governmental interventions, workplace mundanity, isolation, and meaninglessness. The boredom associated with assembly line work was also depicted as a cause for alcohol and drug abuse and a national security issue. All manner of suggestion was considered to address the issue, from workplace enrichment of free milk, to rehearsing a company song, to go-go girls and dancing men (Farnsworth, 1973, p. 601; Shabecoff, 1973, p. 14). Contrasting this alarm with the relative tranquility emanating from the 1990s reveals the shift over this period, including the gutting of social programs, the destruction of union membership, and the rise of corporate personhood in the US. It also marks a cultural shift, where government institutions were no longer seen as sources of security or expressions of community but rather as wasteful institutions that were a fundamental threat to individual freedoms. This perception amounted to a state where people became solely responsible for their successes and failures. There was also a more tangible shift in labour, as service work outpaced assembly line work, as many manufacturers moved their productions to countries that did not possess the same worker protections. These shifts are well documented and give fairly concrete reasoning for the drastic change seen in the use of boredom.

Lastly, observing uses of boredom throughout all editions of the NYT in the 1970s and 1990s, there was a substantial drop in the number of uses. For example, in the 1970s, 2635 articles contained the term boredom, while in the 1990s, there were 1676. This 36% decrease in uses is difficult to reconcile with the expansion of entertainment and its association with easily elicited boredom, as well as the increasing interest from psychologists, as seen in the number of results for “boredom” in the PsycINFO search engine as compared with the number of entries for the NYT.

### *Juxtaposition*

A reoccurring theme throughout the popular discourse is the juxtaposition, where boredom commonly appears in the wake of a heightened state or period of excitement or anxiety. This contrasting state characteristic spurs questions if boredom would have been otherwise experienced, meaning that at either extreme, boredom or excitement are both brought into subjective existence by their opposite. There is an abundance of examples of people in the military and politics who detail experiences that possess moments of terror and hours of boredom. Further, many appearances are not temporally bound in the immediate term, as examples of more extended chaotic periods, e. g. American political turmoil in the 1960 and early 1970s contrasted with the “boring” years of the Carter administration. While boredom can pre-stage excitement, and there are examples of boredom besetting people on long drives, during work hours, and being a motivator for distraction seeking, it was far more common to find excitement first and boredom second, which is consistent with the notion of boredom as a reaction (Velasco, 2019). If boredom is typically experienced in reaction to excitement, this could explain why it appeared as a concept of secondary concern for psychologists. With a prime characteristic of language being comparative, boredom as a secondary experience might not be overly surprising, but, interestingly, this typical pattern of elicitation of boredom received little attention from researchers.

### *Popular Comparative Usage*

In addition to the categorical analysis, an attempt was made to document and compare how themes related to boredom were utilized in the NYT. This approach included boredom as a descriptor of behaviour, motivation, and situations for its likely elicitation.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>1970s</b>	<b>1990s</b>
Antisocial descriptor of behaviour	35	23



Motivation for consumeristic behaviour	28	44
Artistic manipulation of patron	14	6
As a motivator	50	38
Lack of novelty	72	47
Trait*	0	4

\*The four times boredom was utilized as a trait were all examples of articles discussing the work of psychologists.

#### *Antisocial descriptor of behaviour*

The decreasing associations between boredom and antisocial behaviours ran counter to the findings and interests of psychology as many researchers would go on to highlight the connection. This finding becomes more perplexing when considering the well-documented influence psychology has on public discourses.

#### *Motivation for consumeristic behaviour*

The sharp increase in associations between consumerism and boredom was represented by articles exploring material cures for boredom. The reliance on the marketplace for solutions is consistent with observations about the advancement of neoliberalism and the reliance on aesthetics.

#### *Artistic manipulation of patron*

The corpus essentially corroborates Colpitt's (2017) observations that galleries have moved towards an entertainment model in galleries and theatre productions. As a result, artists no longer attempted to utilize boredom's existential properties to challenge patrons to construct or explore deeper meaning within the corpus.

#### *As a motivator*

The decrease in boredom as a motivator could be partially explained by the decrease in articles discussing manufacturing work. These typically discussed concerns over worker productivity and tactics deployed to keep them motivated. However, this does run counter to the increases of interest by psychology.

#### *Lack of novelty*

Much like the previous theme, this decline can partially be attributed to the declining coverage of manufacturing work, but with novelty commonly associated with consumer goods, this decrease would not have been predicted.

#### *Trait*

Lastly, a highly informative finding from this analysis is how nearly every example from the NYT deployed boredom as a state. While some cases could be interpreted as a boredom-propensity, the language usage suggested a transitional, unstable, and fleeting experience. This common usage provides evidence that there was broad definitional agreement amongst the public. It is also of interest that only four cases of boredom being understood as a trait were found in articles referencing the work of psychologists and histories of boredom.

#### *OLS/OLA and Flow*

After a series of attempts to document if boredom was used in ways consistent with either the OLS/OLA or flow, it became apparent that the exercise was so subjective and arbitrary that it was not providing any useful information. Frustrating these efforts was the lack of descriptive information provided in the NYT and a poorly defined concept of boredom in both subdisciplines. Generally, examples in the NYT could be interpreted as an experience of low arousal and low challenge. This is consistent with notions

of nebulous boredom, the failure of these psychologies to domesticate it, and the over applicability of these concepts.

### *Total “Boredom” Appearances*

For a longer historical perspective of boredom’s use in the NYT, the total usage for the 20<sup>th</sup> century by decade below gives some insight into the growth and eventual decline of the term. As boredom reached its zenith in the 1970s, it is difficult to reconcile with both the increase in psychological studies of the topic (see figure 3) and the designation of boredom as the experience of modernity by some philosophers (though some would argue it has become invisible due to its ubiquity) (McDonough, 2017). There are a host of possible explanations for this discrepancy. It is possible psychologists had successfully created a negative stigma around boredom to the point that it became a concern for demands on self-branding at a time of precarious work where references to boredom would need to be avoided.

### *Technical Literature Comparison - OLA vs. HSP*

In comparing the two psychologies’ literature, a similarity was identified in depicting subjective states along a continuum. The theoretical mechanisms they deployed to illustrate, explain, measure, and operationalize the concepts of primary interest for personality and positive psychology (e.g., arousal, stimulation, and happiness) possessed similarities in their structure and elements. Starting with personality psychology, as biologically-grounded trait psychology, utilized the Optimal Level of Stimulation at first but eventually discarded it favoring the Optimal Level of Arousal (OLA), as it allowed for individual differences, which were central to their subdiscipline’s theories. This framework imagined a continuum where stimulation/arousal and disengagement/sleep/boredom represented the two extremes of human experience (see figure 4) (Eysenck, 1963; Strelau & Eysenck, 1987). It was theorized

that between these two poles of subjective experience sat an individual's genetically determined set point that represented their particular optimal level of stimulation or arousal, where optimal cognitive functioning took place. This framework was of enormous productivity for researchers as they deployed it to explain personality expressions of extraversion and introversion, which was determined through self-report, twin studies, observations, and cognitive experiments (Strelau & Eysenck, 1987). Essentially, trait-based personality researchers attempted to explain behaviour as motivated by a person's attempt to return to their OLS/OLA, whether through sensation seeking (e.g. risky behaviours), or avoidance (e.g. seeking quiet).

In the 1990s, proto-positive psychologists adopted the Happiness Set Point (HSP), as developed by David Lykken and Auke Tellegen, who also utilized twin studies (Tellegen et al., 1988; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Understood as a genetically influenced level of happiness whereby individuals would naturally return to after experiencing joy or sadness, the HSP was theorized to ultimately be responsible for "half of the variance in self-reported happiness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 89), while demographic influences including, religion, education, marital status, and income, were only responsible for three percent of a person's well-being (Horowitz, 2017). Complicating matters, Csikszentmihalyi believed behaviours and experiences (moderated by genetically influenced traits) made up the bulk of the remaining influence on the HSP, leaving one to question whether he was purposefully theorizing the existence of a happiness feedback loop (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). The web of influences here are impossible to pull apart in any quantifiable way, yet the potential productivity associated with establishing natural rules for happiness' expression would be too difficult for some to resist. The founder of positive psychology Martin Seligman attempted to do just that by authoring a "Happiness Equation", whereby, " $H = S + C + V$  where H is your enduring level of happiness, S is your set range, C is the circumstances of your life, and V represents factors under your voluntary control" (Seligman, 2004, p. xiii). If not taken literally, this might provide readers a helpful heuristic, but the real point of interest

here is the high degree of influence individuals were given over their HSP. This interpretation led to two important findings for positive psychology. First, the individual was loosely responsible for their level of happiness, "authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them every day", which is consistent with neoliberal interpretations of the self and is a departure from personality psychology which argued the OLS was static (Seligman, 2004, p. xiii). And second, the meditation-like technique that Csikszentmihalyi had been working on since the late 1960s could be deployed as a corrective for people who were struggling to 'cultivate their most fundamental strengths' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Csikszentmihalyi spelled out how the HSP could be influenced by "the frequency or intensity of momentary experiences of happiness would add will have more frequent and intense momentary experiences of happiness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 70). While offering a straightforward means of happiness measurement through averaging a person's moment-to-moment self-reported level of happiness, whereby a "person whose average score is higher than another's will be considered to be generally more happy" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 70). With the combination of flow (as depicted by Csikszentmihalyi) and the HSP, the theoretical similarities between the two disciplines are revealed (see figure 5). However, boredom for these two frameworks is not immediately reconcilable, as the boredom caused by low stimulation is not the same as that caused by lack of attention due to a skill/challenge mismatch. This conflict between disciplines presents further problems for establishing a natural type of boredom and practicing psychology as a science.

## **Conclusion**

This historical examination of how two subdisciplines of psychology attempted to domesticate boredom exposed the theoretical problems associated with how psychology adopts its subject matter. Some of these problems can be traced back to psychology's practice of adopting a "hidden level of theory" (Danziger, 1997, p. 8), which presumes the ahistorical nature of the categories and concepts

under study. This assumption appears particularly flawed with the rich history of culturally embedded progenitors available regarding boredom (Langeweile, melancholy, acedia, etc.). Instead, personality psychologists stripped boredom of its history and existential associations and transformed it into a more easily operationalized concept. While consistent with the larger capitalist culture and the shift towards aesthetics, personality psychologists' understanding of boredom as a trait no longer reflected how the public was using the term. This left boredom appearing in two distinct discourses, the technical psychological literature and the popular. The lack of adoption of boredom as a trait represented a partial looping effect, with psychology borrowing from the public but the public resisting psychology's interpretation. Problematically, the psychologists assumed possession of both the ability to accurately identify the nature of boredom and the language to represent it adequately while never addressing the layers of hidden theory these assumptions bring. However, by examining their use of an underdefined boredom to bring clarity to their central concepts of interest, the problems associated with their assumptions are given clarity.

While positive psychology placed less emphasis on examining the concept of boredom itself, it was still of considerable utility for Csikszentmihalyi in establishing a definition for his happiness-generating practice of flow. Positive psychology mirrored personality psychology in utilizing the common understanding of boredom to help define a concept of interest, yet also left the term underdefined. Considering the importance positive psychology leaders placed on practicing as a science, borrowing public understandings to establish objective reality is difficult to reconcile. Further complicating their goals is the influence the broader culture of neoliberalism had on the popularity of their theorizing, including the role of attention and flow as an individualistic practice. This understanding ignores associations between boredom and the struggle to find meaning, as well as boredom as a cultural artifact. Supposing positive psychology can be understood as a historically situated practice rather than

a science, then explaining why psychological interventions that stressed individual responsibility became popular reflects the popular discourse, rather than a truth whose 'time has come'.

In the years following the emergence of positive psychology, the number of psychological studies involving boredom has continued to grow over time. This interest in boredom marks a deviation from the public's usage of the term, which continued to decrease according to the number of boredom references made in NYT articles (see figure 6). Moreover, this decline in use has occurred while some philosophers identified boredom as the ubiquitous state of modern life. The reasons for this decline are too numerous to mention here, but it may have become the 'air' modern people breathe, rarely reaching the level of conscious thought while signifying a failure on the part of these psychologists to domesticate boredom. The decline might also be related to the stigmatization of boredom, as presented as a failure to control attention, seek challenges, and the host of negative associations being made in subsequent research. As this research reveals, boredom and psychology's identities are both in tension. When attempts are made to strip away cultural considerations, it is a disservice to the practice, the term, and the wider populace.

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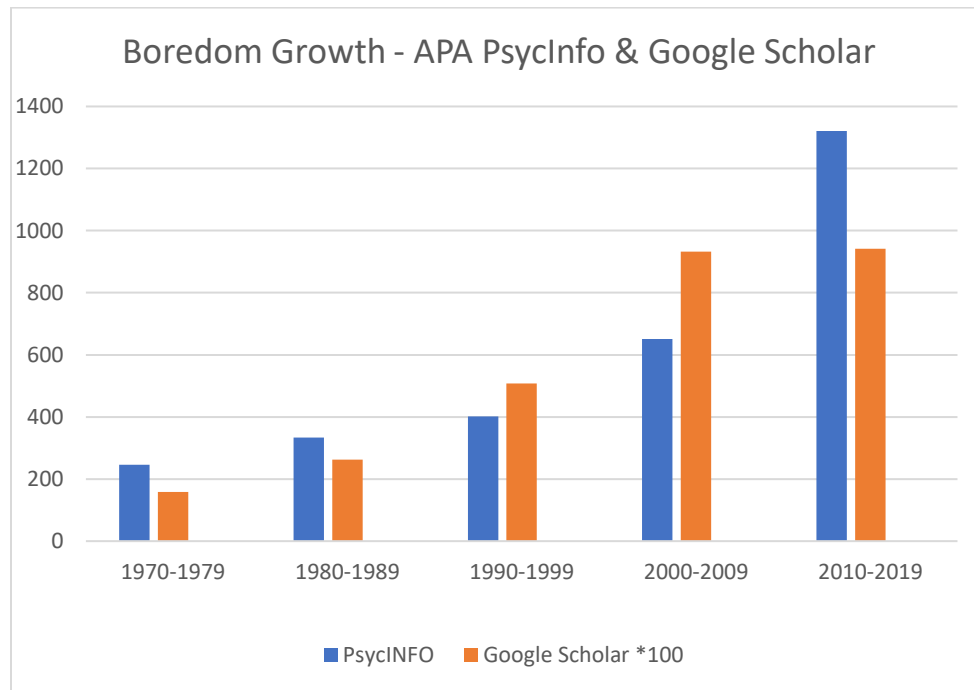
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## Appendix

**Figure 1. PsycINFO & Google Scholar search results for “boredom”**



**Figure 2. Ngram search results for “boredom, ennui, acedia”**

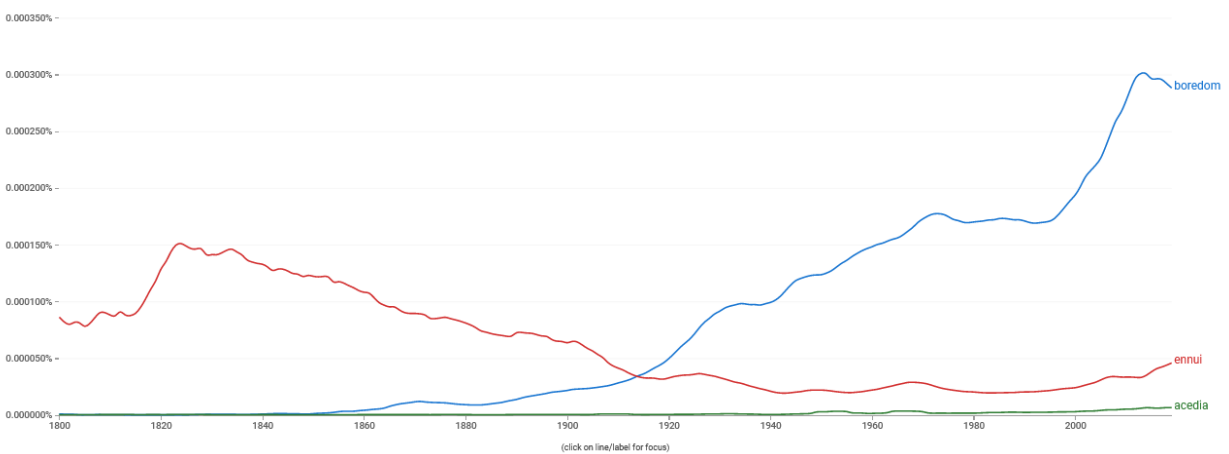


Figure 3. Ngram search results for “boredom, ennui, acedia, melancholy”

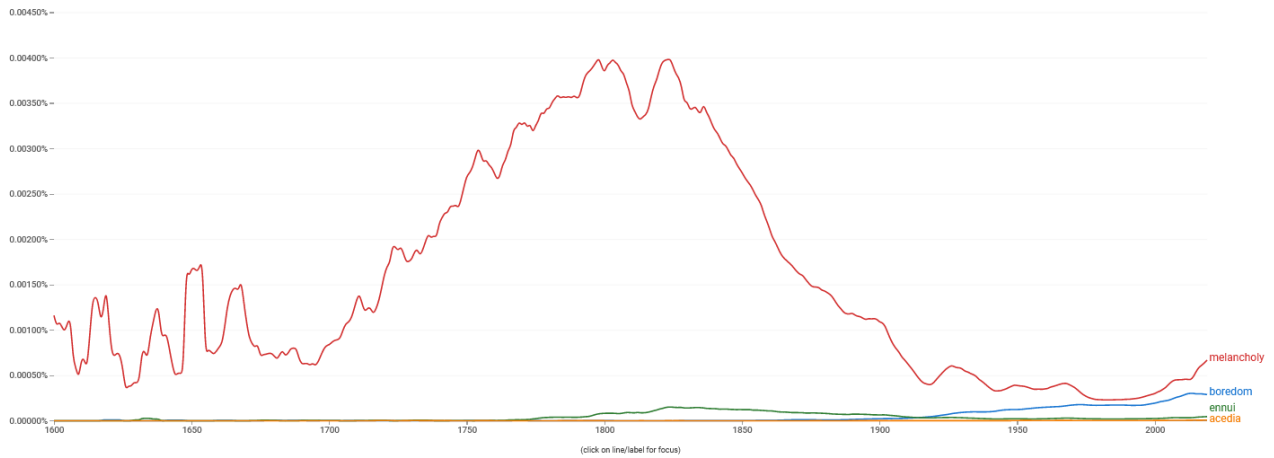


Figure 4. OLS/OLA

### Optimal Level of Stimulation/Arousal

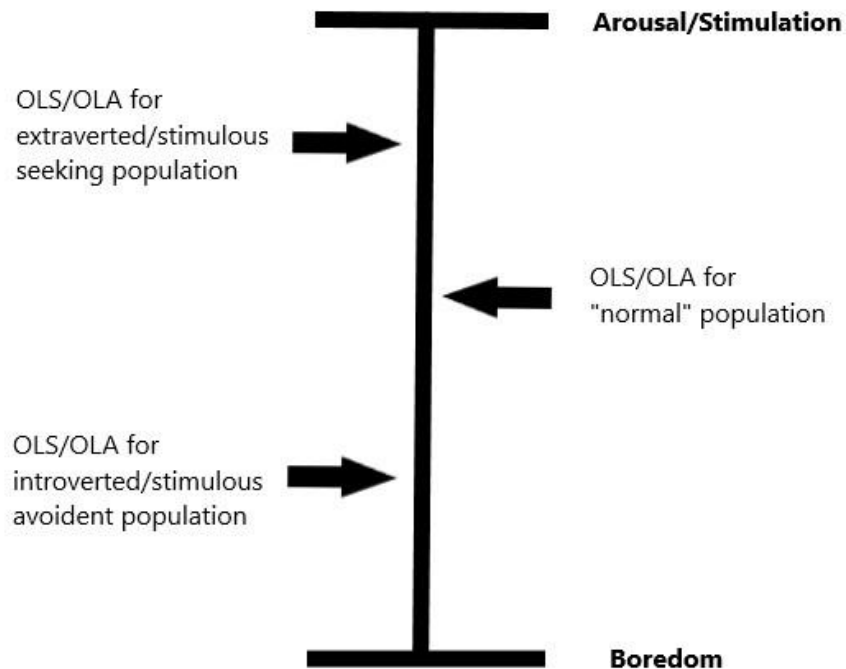


Figure 5. Flow and Optimal Experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 74)

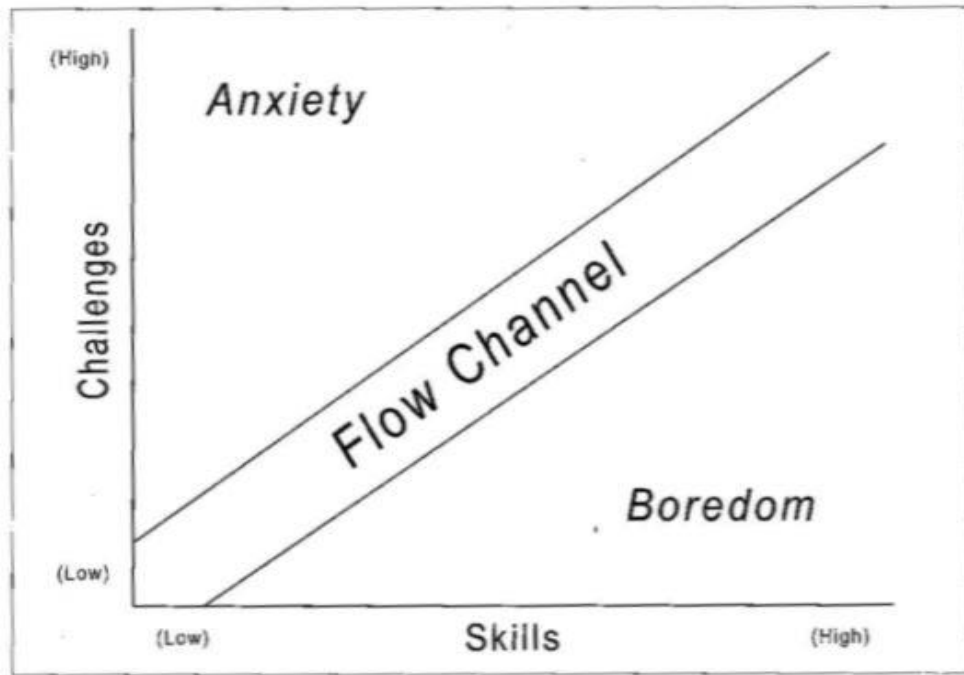


Figure 6. PsycINFO & NYT search results for “boredom”

