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Elements

Histories of Emotions and
the Senses

Boredom

Elena Carrera

Cambridge Elements

Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses

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BOREDOM

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Boredom

Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses

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Abstract: This Element challenges prevailing views of boredom as a modern phenomenon and as an experience occurring inside our minds. It discusses the changing perspectives on boredom within psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis on both sides of the Atlantic in the last 100 years. It also analyzes visual and textual material from France, Germany, Britain, Argentina and Spain, which illustrates the kinds of social situations, people and interactions that have been considered tedious or boring in the past five centuries. Examining the multidirectional ways in which words like *ennuyeux*, 'tedious', *langweilig*, *aburrido* and 'boring' have been transferred between different cultural contexts (to denote a range of interrelated feelings that include displeasure, unease and annoyance), it demonstrates how the terms, concepts and categories through which individuals have experienced their states of mind are not simply culture-bound. They have also travelled across geographical and linguistic barriers, through translation, imitation and adaptation. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Keywords: boredom, intersubjectivity, psychology, visual, cross-cultural history

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Introduction

‘I’m a little bit worried about my safety’, she said. ‘Mostly, I’m just bored’
(Shih, 2020)

The ‘she’ in the quotation above is not a female character from a novel written between 1850 and 1930. It is Coco Zhao, a twenty-one-year old student, who was queuing behind hundreds of shoppers at a supermarket in Wuhan at 8.30 am on 27 January 2020. She had spent a few days confined in her hall of residence at Hubei University, playing games on her smartphone, improving her English and ‘video-chatting with her parents, who live 60 miles away in another locked-down city in Hubei province’ (Shih, 2020). This was less than a week into a quarantine which was predicted to be ‘of unprecedented scale’, involving fifty-four million people trapped in Wuhan and the densely populated plains around the Yangtze River. As the *Washington Post* China correspondent Gerry Shih pointed out, the people he interviewed in Wuhan were ‘beginning to adjust to a surreal reality that could last weeks’ (2020). None of us imagined that, less than a month later, Northern Italians would also be living a similarly surreal reality, and so would the rest of us before the end of March. This is the biggest ‘us’ in the history of civilization. We are too used to understanding ourselves through ‘us’ and ‘them’, West and East, women and men, self and other, . . . and now, as I read the word ‘bored’, an English term that seeks to render to Westerners the feelings of a young Chinese woman, I believe that I understand how she must feel. I believe that Shih, a journalist educated at Columbia University in New York (the son of two academic parents who migrated from Kuming, in southwest China, to the United States before he was born) can convey Zhao’s feelings to people with no direct knowledge of Chinese culture. It has been argued that words of emotion are ‘actions within relationships’ that ‘gain their meaning through social cooperation’ (Gergen, 2015, p. 98). We are warned that ‘researching boredom cross-culturally is fraught with methodological dangers: How can we know what exactly people are experiencing when they say, or we think we see, that they are bored?’ (Musharbash, 2007, p. 308). How do we reconcile such caveats with our experience of reading texts in which words evoke feelings, and make us imagine and even feel what we think others must feel?

How many of us think that we know, understand or have a sense of how Zhao must have felt? How many of us glimpse at the photograph in [Figure 1](#) and conclude that the daughter looks bored but the father does not because he seems engaged in whatever he is looking at? The girl might not be bored at all, but simply fed up. Is there an overlap between these feelings? Can we use the term ‘boredom’ to describe the feelings of people who have never heard that word?



Figure 1 A family looks out from their home on the outskirts of Wuhan on 27 January. Hector Retamal/AFP/Getty Images

Even if we believe that ‘boredom’ is a broadly translatable concept, there are significant cultural differences (see, e.g., [Ng et al., 2015](#)), which are best understood from a historical perspective.

In the spring of 2020, it was not only boredom that hovered over the heads of millions of school children forced to stay home for months. It was also the frustration of not being able to move as much or go as far. In Italy and Spain, for instance, children were not allowed to leave their flats for the best part of eight weeks, and adults needed a good reason to go out, and could only do so on their own. According to a March 2020 survey of 3,452 Italians living under national quarantine, ‘boredom’ was the second most common complaint, after ‘lack of freedom’. ‘Boredom’ was ticked more often than ‘loneliness’, ‘lack of social activities’ and the ‘loss of job/income source’ in the questionnaires ([Figure 2](#)). But one should bear in mind that these were answers to the question ‘what are the main negative sides of complying with the stay home requirement (check all that apply)?’ and that most participants ticked two answers ([Barari et al., 2020](#)). Some respondents might have ticked ‘boredom’ because doing so produces less shame than revealing anxieties about job losses or the loss of income. The point here is that researchers relying on questionnaires need to take into account that the answers they collect are not simply expressions of feelings, but social acts of communication, which are shaped by the circumstances in which the answers

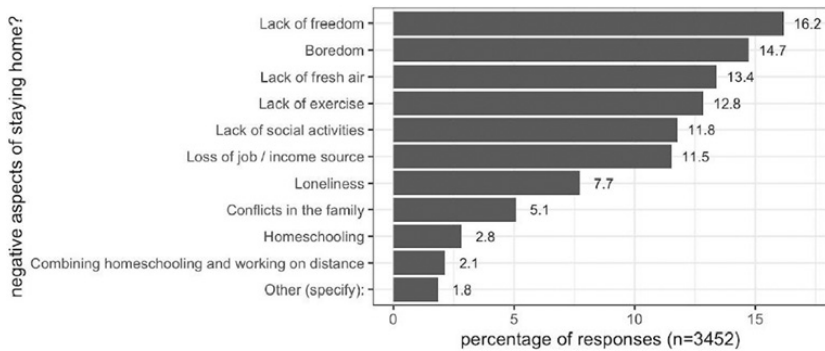


Figure 2 Negative aspects cited by all respondents about staying at home

Source: [Barari et al. \(2020, p. 8\)](#)

are collected, and by the values, expectations and practices that prevail in the respondents' sociocultural milieus.

Of all the survey options, the most difficult to interpret is 'boredom'. Can we assume that the term used in the questionnaire, *noia*, simply means 'boredom'? Like the French *ennui*, the word denotes a broader concept, which encompasses feelings of annoyance, worry, frustration and even impotence, in a situation, perceived as unbearable, from which there seems to be no escape. In this Element, I seek to capture the historical and cross-cultural connotations of the broad concept of boredom in French-, Spanish- and English-speaking contexts since the sixteenth century.

As we will see, the meaning of boredom as an object of study has changed over time, though in the last seventy years it has been shaped (and narrowed down, to a great extent) by the research methods of mainstream psychologists. While in the 1950s psychologists saw boredom as 'a state in which the level of stimulation is perceived as unsatisfactorily low', since the 1980s, boredom has been studied in connection with two extreme situations: deprivation and excess. In a postmodern capitalist culture like ours, in which distractions are commercialized as readily available choices, boredom can be a consequence of sensory and information overload, as the sociologist Georg Simmel warned in 1903. Then came the idea that boredom is an adaptive mechanism, which allows us to switch from less to more relevant stimuli ([Klapp, 1986](#); [Blumenberg, 2006](#); [Toohey, 2011](#); [Elpidorou, 2015](#); [Mann, 2016](#); [Danckert and Eastwood, 2020](#)).

Nonetheless, conceptualizing boredom as an adaptive mechanism involves a gross oversimplification of what boredom has meant and the ways it has been experienced in different cultural contexts at different points in history. As Elizabeth Goodstein points out:

Coming to terms with the complexity borne of the historical and cultural shifts in languages of reflection embedded in the experience of boredom calls for more thoughtfully contextualized strategies of definition than an operationalized paradigm can capture. . . . we must proceed very carefully and critically in developing universalist claims about experience as such that depend on bracketing historical and cultural context. (2020, p. 49)

The universalizing claims of the natural and social sciences, based on the use of single, generic keywords, continue to prevail today despite earlier warnings, like that of the historian of early Europe Edward Peters in 1975, about the need to pay closer attention to the nuanced ways in which language has been used to name, describe and conceptualize experience at different points in history:

Is *boredom* and its roughly cognate terms a useful label for an eternal human emotional state, or should not the question rather be: How did people in the past describe, conceptualize, and perhaps feel what we generically call boredom but must, for historical purposes, study in all its verbal variations and permutations? Surely the under- or overemployed peasant, the seventeenth-century nobleman, aristocratic women, stage-Danish princes, customs-house keepers, and monks did not have identical mental and emotional lives. To retain the generic term *boredom* in studying historical figures and periods is to blur the sometimes fine, sometimes obvious distinctions within societies as well as between historical periods. For the historian, the monk's *acedia*, Hamlet's *melancholia*, Baudelaire's *spleen*, or Oblomov's *lethargy* are not identical emotions, but they are elements of an emotional and social history that is most useful when its particularisms are set off against the generalizing tendencies of the social sciences or the natural sciences. And the key to that differentiation remains, for the time being, in the study of language, semantics, rhetoric, and the visual arts. (1975, pp. 510–11)

Since then, historical approaches to boredom have tended to focus on the 1850s–1920s (Spacks, 1995; Goodstein, 2005; Dalle Pezze and Salzani, 2009; Pease, 2012). There now seems to be a general consensus that ‘for a long time in the history of humankind boredom was absent or conceptualized somehow differently as *acedia*, *melancholia*, *ennui* or *spleen*, which can be interpreted as specific historical modalities of boredom’ (Ohlmeier, Finkielstein and Pfaff, 2020, p. 2012). This view, promoted by a number of non-historians in the last five decades (e.g., Kuhn, 1976; Huguet, 1984; Spacks, 1995; Toohey, 2011; Elpidorou, 2021c; Ros Velasco, 2021, 2022), is clearly reductive as regards pre-modernity, since it only relates to longer-term conditions (like *melancholia* or *ennui*), and ignores transient states of mind akin to boredom.

Boredom has been described as ‘one of the most socially disvalued, noxious, frequently expressed, and frequently experienced of human emotions’,