# BOREDOM AND POWER:
# HOW POWER RELATIONS INFLUENCE FEELING BOREDOM

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### Abstract

The paper advocates the claim that boredom is not only a psychological state or existential mood but a social emotion produced and reproduced in the process of interactions between people as individuals, people displaying specific social roles, or social groups. Moreover, as argued in the article, the feeling of boredom is particularly characteristic of power relations. Therefore, boredom is hypothesized to be a matter of interactional/social position – its experiencing is influenced by one's social status. The power to produce boredom in others usually reflects a higher social position, and in some situations, causing others to be bored can constitute a deliberate or unintentional method of keeping others in a submissive position by limiting their sense of agency – thus a tool for gaining/maintaining power and social control.

Keywords: *Boredom, Power, Power relations, Relational power, Interactionism, Social Control*

## Introduction

Boredom researchers usually explain the aetiology of boredom in terms of internal or environmental contributory factors. Boredom is believed to be caused by a personality trait – boredom proneness (Farmer, Sundberg 1986; Sommers, Vodanovich 2000) or personal attitudes and values (Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, Perry 2010) – or by the monotonous, unchallenging, inhibitory context of action, i.e., limited stimuli input (Davies, Shackleton, Parasuraman 1983; O'Hanlon 1981). At times, they combine these factors, claiming that boredom is a result of high need for arousal and insufficient provision of stimuli from the environment that would satisfy it (non-optimal arousal hypothesis, Berlyne 1960; Mikulas, Vodanovich 1993). Others claim that problems with focusing or even an inability to focus and/or maintain attention are the main or ultimate cause of the feeling (Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, Smilek 2012). Another group of theories pinpoints meaninglessness and problems with finding meaning in one's activities, tasks or even life as factors responsible for experiencing boredom (Barbalet 1999; van Tilburg, Igou 2012). Those explanations are predominantly derived from psychological or (less frequently) philosophical perspectives, which dominate the field. The missing ingredient seems to be the social dimension of the phenomenon.

The above-listed explanations for feeling boredom, I believe though, miss at least one vital dimension – that boredom, as an emotion, may be an outcome of an interaction between people and, as I hypothesize, may be particularly characteristic of interactions in relationships where there is a power imbalance. For the sake of the article, I take a relational perspective on power (Emirbayer 1997) as dependant on 'the structure of relations or ties between actors', 'positionality in a structure of social relations' (Reed 2020: 203). I define power in a broad Weberian sense as likelihood that A "can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957: 202–203).

Herein, I would like to make three intertwined points:

(1)  boredom is an interactional phenomenon, a feeling produced by and within social interactions;

(2)  it is influenced by one's social position—the power to induce boredom in others usually resides in those with a higher social position; and

(3)  boredom can serve as a tool for controlling people; in other words, boredom forced upon subordinates can constitute a deliberate or unintentional method of keeping them in that position by limiting their sense of agency.

To support such a stance I will explain shortly my theoretical position (interactionist approach) and provide some examples and arguments corroborating that such a mechanism is of vital significance in the aetiology of boredom. I will do it on three levels: micro (direct person to person interactions), mezzo (power relations between various social roles), and macro (power relations between groups), then I will present some evidence on the (obsolete) function of boredom, i.e. gaining or maintaining control/power.

## Boredom: The Interactionist Approach

The starting point of this work is the premise that emotions are social phenomena – they are not merely an innate physiological processes or individual psychological states, but are also socially constructed. The interactionist approach, which I advocate here, conceptualizes boredom first and foremost as a social emotion (see: Stets, Turner (Eds.) 2006) that emerges when an interaction between social actors fails to arouse their genuine engagement (for more detailed definitional reflection see Finkielsztein 2021). Boredom is strictly relational and is constructed in the process of interaction between social actors. It occurs when there is no meaning in the interaction (Barbalet 1999) or when

the meaning is unanimously agreed upon (it leaves no room for ambiguity or conflicting points of view), which makes the situation entirely predictable (Darden, Marks 1999). Boredom is characterized by a person 'being disengaged from the ebb and flow of human interaction' (Brisset, Snow 1993: 239) and 'not being involved in or engaged by events or activities' (Barbalet 1999: 634). The feeling of boredom epitomizes failure in connecting and interacting with one's social environment and usually means the end of active participation in ongoing interactions with others, throwing the individual 'in a kind of social limbo' (Kenny 2009: 9).

Boredom, thus, may be interpreted as 'role distance' (Darden, Marks 1999). Usually, people are expected to perform a role in every social situation, be it that of a careful observer, a good listener, an active interlocutor etc. According to Goffman's (1956) self-presentation theory/dramaturgical approach, social life can be described as a constant presentation of self to other people. From this perspective, boredom can be interpreted as a fracture in one's role performance. When bored, one feels distant from one's role and finds no other role to replace it with, for either there is no other role to play instead or none of the available roles 'measure[s] up to our standards' (Darden, Marks 1999: 24). Displaying boredom, therefore, would be a visible sign of one's discontent with the situation at hand, usually eventuating in 'leaving the scene, either physically or through fantasy' (*Ibidem*: 18). Formally, one still participates in the interaction but, mentally, one is elsewhere. From this perspective, boredom constitutes 'not quite concealing tactfully concealed misinvolvement' (Goffman 1982: 127).

To sum up, according to the interactionist approach, boredom is produced and reproduced in the process of social interaction between individuals as such, between individuals playing specific social roles, and between social groups (see: Lepenies 1992).

## Power Relations and Boredom

### Micro Level (Direct Interactions)

Boredom in the above-presented conceptualization is a possible (by)product of social interaction and is constructed during a kind of 'counter-interactional' work (interactional work entails all actions taken to ensure 'smooth' and 'efficient' course of interaction, see: Collins 2004). Thus, people may 'cultivate' boredom in the process of interacting with one another, and the feeling may gradually grow in them during various social encounters. As Giacomo Leopardi (1893) indicates, a conversation (the most basic form of social interaction, see: Berger, Luckmann 1991) is a zero-sum game because individuals usually find it pleasurable only when they can talk about themselves, which frequently renders their interlocutors bored. One's pleasure, therefore, entails others' boredom, which is a price that one has to pay for gaining social acceptance. This observation of Leopardi has been corroborated for example by Leary et al. (1986), who found that one of the main reasons for finding interactional partners boring was negative egocentrism and self-preoccupation. There are other reasons for conversational boredom, yet what I want to emphasize is that boring interactions seem to always be zero-sum ones. It is probably not a coincidence that the English word 'to bore' means also to drill, perforate, or pierce, and in the context of interaction may indicate the process of perforating the interlocutors (Pease 2012) and as a result rendering them hollow (Heidegger 1995).

In a sense, a bore wields power over his/her interlocutors by draining their energy and, consequently, decreasing their active 'resistance'. Frequently, one is bored inside but feels powerless to end their formal participation in an ongoing interaction being petrified both mentally and physically. I would argue that the relationship between a bore and

their 'prey' is a power relationship. Energy vampirism may be also involved – as depicted in the TV series *What We Do in the Shadows* (2019). The series tells the story of a group of vampires living together in a house on Staten Island, New York. One of the characters is Collin Robinson, an energy vampire (the metaphoric expression is treated literally here) who bores everyone to sleep with his monotonous voice and an overabundance of irrelevant details whenever he is speaking. He dominates each interaction in which he actively participates—others cannot help but sleep or become lethargic and, as a result, abandon an active role in the interaction. Therefore, the position of a bore is a dominating position in an interaction, so boredom may be an effect of interactional power.

Another issue worth mentioning is that the rules of propriety/social tact frequently dictate continuation of even extremely boring interactions with another person, especially if she/he occupies a higher position in a social hierarchy. Here, the feeling of boredom may be mediated by power relation/position differences and may be influenced not only by fear of violating social mores but even more so by fear of direct or indirect consequences for terminating the interaction. When one is interacting with someone of lower position, they can cease the interaction more easily without the threat of serious consequences when bored. The opposite is highly inadvisable. When someone is talking with his/her boss or direct/indirect supervisor and finds the interaction boring, it is often impossible to just walk away with a lame excuse. One should be reverential or at least pretend to be attentive and preferably nod with a smile. At a minimum, one must engage in phatic communication, sustaining the conversation with occasional inputs ('hm', 'ok', 'yes', 'you're right', 'oh, that's interesting', etc.). Acting otherwise would be not only tactless but also possibly harmful to one's career. However, the cost of withdrawal from active participation when bored with a conversation is significantly lower for those occupying the higher position. This is not to say that bosses/supervisors are more boring than their subordinates,

but only that people with a higher position have more possibilities for avoiding, escaping or coping with boring social interactions. A professor can usually leave the conference room or end a conversation when bored more easily and with fewer negative consequences than a PhD student or young PhD. When a person of lower position in a vocational/social hierarchy displays boredom in a social interaction with someone in a higher position, it may affect his/her future advancement, future position in the social milieu, future shares in reward distribution etc. The same is not so probable for someone with an established position. Thus, the likelihood of being stuck in a boring interaction often depends on power relationships between people.

The feeling of boredom may be also highly influenced by one's position within a given interaction, be a matter of 'situational stratification' (Collins 2000). Irrespectively of social status and position, in some micro-situations those occupying 'objectively' lower positions might yield situation dominance. A middle-aged manager on a student's party would be perceived as a ridicule and in consequence occupy low interactional position – socially isolated and disrespected due to being an 'old punk', out of one's place, such manager would probably feel extremely bored as well. The same can be true in case of romantic relationship. In many ways, there can be an imbalance of power (domination relationship) between parties involved in such a liaison. As Ovid famously claimed, in love relationships, one person loves and the other allows him/herself to be loved. In Peter Blau's (1964: 118) terms we might say that one romantic partner usually holds power in relation because he/she supplies services in demand that cannot be readily obtained elsewhere by a partner. The higher the value of exchange services, the more power one yields over a partner. Thus, the less balanced the exchange in a romantic relationship, the more power one holds. One of possible cost of such a situation is enduring boredom in order to still receive demanded services. Moreover, in many ways, people in various

moments have various levels of concern about the course of the inter-action/relationship – the higher its level, the less powerful position one has. When a person wants to gain favour, she is willing to agree to do things she may find boring. This can be illustrated by the example of choosing a film to watch together, whether it is at the cinema or home. A couple may agree to watch a film they both like, but in a situation of conflict of interest, the 'losing' party will probably pay in boredom for gaining credit or simply making the other content (or avoiding anger/discontent). The same may be true for parent-child relations when a parent, to please a child, repeats some action numerous times, getting a bit bored in the process.

### Mezzo Level (Interactions of Social Roles)

The examples of boss-subordinate relations and romantic relationships illustrate that the relationship between boredom and power involves not only power relations between people as mere individuals but between social roles that those individuals play. I claim that being in a higher-ranking role gives people power over others, including the power to force boredom on others. Furthermore, I argue that the power to force boredom on others epitomises being in a higher social position, constituting its symbolic manifestation. In other words, experiencing boredom in the relationship/interaction usually provide information about who possess power over whom. The more boredom one feels in a given interaction/relation, the more submissive role one is playing, and the less power one yields.

The role one plays may be associated with one's vocation, social origins or the specific situation one finds oneself in. This is characteristic, for instance, of traditionally-defined power-imbalanced relations, when one person visibly wields power over others: the relation between boss/supervisor and subordinate (employer-employee, slave master-slave, officer-private, parent-child – see various kinds of limitations

and constraints on freedom of action, e.g. grounding), or teacher-student (see the rich literature on students' boredom during class: Mann, Robinson 2009; Sharp, Hemmings, Kay, Murphy, Elliott 2016). The boredom experienced in such relationships may be elicited by limited agency – little control over one's actions and the usage of one's time. An extreme example of such a mechanism is boredom during a totalitarian dictator's meetings. For instance, Hitler was known for being a bore and organizing deadly boring evening meals during which he talked without breaks for hours without noticing or even bothering that everyone was utterly bored. Due to power relations at the meeting, guests could not appear to lose interest, fearing consequences (even deadly ones such as deployment to the Eastern Front as a soldier) but Hitler usually fell asleep, bored and tired from his own speech (Speer 1970). A similar case is known from the Soviet Union, when Stalin organized boring and long dinners during which he bored participants out of their minds, but no one could let on that they were bored, as they could be sentenced to death for expressing disinterest (Fitzpatrick 2000). A similar case is provided by Suetonius in his treatise on Nero. Supposedly, when the Roman emperor

> "(…) was singing, it was not permitted to leave the theatre even for the most pressing of reasons. Thus, it is alleged that women gave birth during his shows and many who were tired (*taedio*) of listening and applauding, when the entrance gates were all closed, either jumped furtively off the wall or else pretended to be dead and were carried out for burial" (Suetonius 2008: 206).

Once again, one who holds power forces boredom on others (Suetonius used a form of the word *taedio* being the closest synonym to boredom in Latin) under threat of serious, even deadly, consequences.

A proper examination of power may also be to test who waits for whom. A person who waits, which often is associated with boredom (Bengtsson, 2012; Benjamin 2002; Tymkiw 2017), occupies a lower position in a social situation and wields less power (not coincidentally, criminal offenders are sentenced to boredom and waiting).

Other examples of such situations may be relationships between doctor and patient (waiting for an appointment), police or administration and a citizen (all those who have ever been at the police station or random state administration office are familiar with their 'waiting protocol'), producer/shopper and client (waiting in line, see especially the communist economy of deficit), someone of high social position (aristocrat or important political figure) and visitors (see the numerous memories of waiting for an audience), or maidens and suitors in, among others, Jane Austen's novels. Similarly, in a romantic relationship, especially at the very beginning, being late for a date and forcing someone to wait may be a manifestation of being in a more powerful position (or checking one's position by examining boundaries of allowed behaviour) and/or self-confidence. Those who have the power to force people to wait (and probably to get bored) implicitly suggest that their time is more precious than the time of others, which is a sign of higher situational/social position. Thus, a method to test who holds more power in a given relationship is to specify who controls whose time.

Those who occupy higher social positions usually yield power over those whose status is lower – and this includes the power to 'sentence' others to boredom. Differences in social position result in different patterns of and opportunities for boredom prevention and coping. For instance, those in lower position more frequently have to wait (Schweizer 2008: 6) – money functions as a way of shortening or eliminating waiting, which usually is associated with boredom. As Elina Tochilnikova noted,

> "Many shortcuts exist for the affluent: personal assistant services, shoppers, drivers, banking, chefs, concierge, and private physicians, pilots on privately charted airplanes, VIP membership with priority entrance, amongst other shortcuts and time savers, while being poor is associated with waiting in long-lines and on waiting lists for financial assistance, housing, medical care, transport, and for discounts" (Tochilnikova 2021: 8).

As a result, although boredom is a highly democratic affliction, the privileged can do more to prevent and cope with the feeling, as many potential remedies cost money or are time-consuming. As Zygmunt Bauman points out,

> "[M]oney is the entry permit to places where remedies for boredom are peddled (such as shopping malls, amusement parks or health and fitness centres); the places the presence in which is by itself the most effective of prophylactic potions to ward off the onset of the disease; the places whose principal destination is to keep desires seething, unquenched and unquenchable, yet deeply pleasurable thanks to anticipated satisfaction" (Bauman 2005: 39).

A good example is homeless people who cannot enter or have difficulties in entering shopping malls or fast-food restaurants even if they can afford eating a meal at a restaurant (O'Neill 2017).

This is a clear pattern that experiencing some kinds of boredom is mitigated by power relations and that those holding power also have a significant influence on the occurrence of boredom in others. Another example of such a tendency is supervisors delegating menial tasks to subordinates. Such tasks are usually monotonous, routine, cognitively unchallenging, and frequently perceived as meaningless and boring (Finkielsztein 2019). A case in point may be so-called dirty work. Initially, the concept was primarily associated with occupations and roles that deal with actual dirt and were perceived as degrading (e.g., domestic cleaners, waste collectors, care workers, nurses, prison guards, or mental hospital attendants), but as Everett Hughes emphasised, 'dirty work of some kind is found in all occupations' (1958: 50), and it may be just something that has to be done but hardly anyone is willing to do it because it would not fit their 'more heroic' self-conception.

For instance, a kind of dirty work among scientists may be perceived administrative duties that are forced upon them by the neoliberal system (thus, by politicians). Those bureaucratic tasks, if possible, are usually delegated to people of lower rank in the academic hierarchy who usually are not in a position to refuse (Hughes 1958; Kowzan, Zielińska,

Kleina-Gwizdała, Prusinowska 2015; Wagner 2011) as 'the last in the food chain' (Zawadzki 2017: 76). Wherever there is a hierarchy, which in the case of the academic milieu usually has a more or less feudal character (see the case of Poland [Kwiek 2015], France [Bourdieu 1984b], or Italy, from which the expression 'Baroni Universitari' comes [Ricucci 2019]), boredom seems to be concentrated in the lower strata of such a social structure. There, by the same token, we observe boredom in working class jobs (e.g., factory workers or shop assistants) caused by the delegation of menial tasks by those holding power.

Another instance of sentencing employees to boredom by delegating them to do menial tasks is Japanese banishment rooms (called also exile/boredom rooms). In essence, such rooms are 'departments where companies transfer surplus employees and give them menial or useless tasks or even nothing to do until they become depressed or disheartened enough to quit on their own, thus not getting full benefits, unlike if they were actually let go' (Torres 2013). Such practices have been documented for the biggest Japanese companies, such as Panasonic, Toshiba, Sony, to name a few, and are hidden under 'nice' names like 'Business & Human Resource Development Center' or 'career development team'. Such power-related boredom, here, is used directly as a control instrument aimed at forcing people into quitting and shows how boredom is manufactured to serve the goals of employers.

Another case, somewhat overlapping with the previous one, where boredom and power are intertwined, is a so-called 'bullshit job', which is

> "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (Graeber 2018: 9–10).

This kind of employment is not equivalent to merely bad jobs (low-paid, physically hard, sometimes dirty but ultimately necessary and/or socially beneficial). The essence of the bullshit job is its pointlessness, which may be an endless source of deeply habituated boredom. Of

course, 'not all bullshit jobs are boring jobs, but their capacity for inducing boredom is very high, simply because the meaninglessness of such work is so obvious' (Kingwell 2019: 40). The connection between bullshit jobs, boredom and power is most visible in one kind of such employment, which Graeber called 'flunky jobs'. Those jobs only exist or primarily exist 'to make someone else look or feel important' (Graeber 2018: 35). Examples of such jobs are servants, sycophants, minions of any sort: receptionists, concierges, uniformed elevator operators or porters. Their only job is to be around, look impressive and/or be a visible sign/display of an employer's position. Sometimes people are employed only to feed an employer's ego even if they have little or nothing substantial to do—it is better to have five subordinates than just two, because the impression is that this is a bigger business, more prestigious and successful if they can afford to pay five employees. In a way, such employees are the victims of employers' need for external manifestations of their power. One of the outcomes may be boredom.

*Macrolevel (Relation Between Power Holders and Social Groups)*

On the macrosocial level, boredom constitutes an outcome of the relationship between social groups – usually groups in positions of power (government/politicians and groups serving them such as administrative personnel or police) and disempowered groups such as the unemployed, the homeless, or refugees, but also the whole social strata/classes marginalized in terms of actual participation in power. Thus, we can say that there is a relationship between experiencing habituated/systemic boredom and social position. As Allison Pease succinctly summarizes Wolf Lepenies' argument (1992), 'boredom is a structural response on the part of social groups whose lack of public significance inhibits their action, leaving them bored' (Pease 2012: 8). In this sense, boredom is not solely individual anguish but it can also refer to a group's condition derived from a shared social position. According to Lepenies, boredom is a collective

mood that is an outcome of reflection on the significant systemic constraints associated with a particular social position. The members of a given group experience inhibition of action, which elicits a sense of powerlessness and lack of agency. The group that encounters numerous systemic constraints to executing their agency can either rebel or become lethargic in response to such systemic boredom. Yet, to be able to rebel, as Marx famously claimed, a group needs consciousness of its shared social situation and systemic limitations of their social status, as well as to be able to identify the source of their frustration and direct it towards that specific group (government, banks, big corporations, king's council, owners of factories, church, Jews, to name just a few historical examples). Unless individuals sharing a social position gain a group consciousness (in Marx's terms, a transition from class in itself to class for itself), revolt is impossible and boredom will be a semi-automatic response to systemic inhibition of action. Lepenies gives the example of the French nobility during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV, which had limited agency despite possessing titles and economic capital. The highest-ranking French nobles were 'imprisoned' at Versailles and did not exercise the privilege of sharing the responsibility of ruling. The conditions of court life that were imposed on that social group made it perforce idle, bored, and rebellious (see: the Fronde – a series of civil wars between 1648 and 1653).

To some extent, an analogous situation was experienced by the Russian nobility, when it was exempted from service for the Tzar in the 19th century. The phenomenon of morbid boredom among Russian landed gentry was epitomized by the concepts of Oblomovism (Goncharov 2006) and Superfluous Man (Turgenev 1894; 1904). The group that thought of itself as an active power in the country and responsible for its development was consumed with idle lethargy due to a lack of agency and the forced boredom of rural/provincial life without major roles to play.

Another example of a disempowered group is women for the majority of known history which is probably best epitomised by main characters

of such novels as *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert or The *Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Female characters in these novels, as probably many women at that time, had no active role to play (Pease 2012). Due to numerous systemic, social constraints, they felt deep inhibition of action and deprivation of a sense of agency. All of the above-mentioned groups suffered habituated boredom caused by being subjected to the external power of others, having/feeling little power on their own.

Another instance of the power-related aetiology of boredom is the situation of the unemployed and homeless. Those categories/groups of people share a similar set of constraints and emotional states, living anomic, marginal and excluded lives on the perimeter of society. They are left not only without money but also without all benefits that work provides, such as a structured and meaningful life. In the situation of systemic, long-term unemployment, many people feel bored, alienated and/or apathetic and they often get the impression that life has become anomic, empty and without direction. They try to slip through the day by spending more time sleeping than on doing anything (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, Zeisel 2009) because they lack meaningful alternatives. The excluded cannot participate in consumer society on equal terms with those who are, with few recreational options and low economic, symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984a). Exclusion makes people feel useless, emptied of a legitimate purpose, meaning in their life and, above all, a sense of belongingness. As Bruce O'Neill concludes from the case of the homeless from Bucharest, Romania:

> "Boredom is a traumatizing social relationship born out of having been cast aside' from 'consumer-based activities and spaces" (O'Neill 2014: 24).

Boredom may be, therefore, caused by limited access to activities enabling coping with boredom or even active deprivation of such access by the authorities. The case in point may be the homeless, who are unable to mitigate their boredom by consumption but also are frequently deprived of those limited opportunities to cope with boredom they have,

which are substance use, sleep and wandering in search of eventfulness and social occupations (Marshall et al. 2019). They are the object of victimization by police, who prevent them from taking drugs or take them away, do not let them sleep in and cast them out of public or semi-public places (park benches, train stations, bus stops, staircases etc.).

Another example of depriving a certain group of boredom coping opportunities may be quite paradoxical. In clinical psychology, researchers have unexpectedly discovered the phenomenon of 'the thrill of psychosis' (Branković 2015). Some schizophrenia patients have a positive attitude towards some psychotic symptoms, such as delusional feelings of importance and power, hearing voices, and the experience of being another person, and do not want to take their drugs. Those psychotic symptoms provide them with substantial stimulation that is absent in a drug-induced reality. In extreme cases, though, inhabitants of mental institutions are forced by those holding power over them (for their own good allegedly, see: Goffman 1961) into boredom, which they do not always find beneficial. By impelling psychotic patients to take sedatives, paradoxically, those in control may deprive their subordinates of a significant method of coping with boredom caused by staying in mental institution.

Inequality in power may put some categories of the population into a position of enforced boredom, such as individuals living in poverty, or refugees, a highly vulnerable and marginalized group with a significantly limited sense of agency that is forced by power holders into waiting and inactivity, which frequently eventuate in a prolonged feeling of boredom (Wagner, Finkielsztein 2021). In a way, this group is forced to be bored by those holding power (government/politicians, state administrations processing their applications for residence permits, etc.). Living away from what used to be home, in a makeshift accommodation that is not home yet, they belong to nowhere – stuck in the quintessentially transitory situation of 'double absence' (Sayad 2004). They get bored situationally (there is nothing constructive to do daily) and existentially (it

is very difficult to get comfortably included in the host society). 'Waiting in the camp is characterised by boredom, uncertainty, and induced passivity, and, the refugees feel that they have "lost track of where they are, why they are there, and who they are"' (Chan, Loveridge 1987: 746).

The ultimate case of power-boredom relations is the example of government restrictions over citizens' actions. Examples include imposing a curfew, martial law restrictions or quarantine regulations, all of which limit citizens' opportunities for leisure activities and social interactions, which may eventuate in boredom (see the case of older people in the time of the COVID-19 pandemics: Velasco 2020). Once again, boredom is enforced by power holders, and therefore, at least partially, is a matter of power relations in the society.

## Boredom as a Tool of Control

Boredom, to a certain degree, can not only be forced on people but can also be a tool for controlling them. Boredom impelled upon subordinates can constitute a deliberate or unintentional method of keeping them in that position by limiting their sense of agency – in the sense of the principle that 'boredom is counterrevolutionary' (Debord, Kotányi, Lausen, Vaneigem 2006: 112). Several examples can illustrate that mechanism: middle-class housewives, refugees in camps or people living in totalitarian, especially communist, states. By all means, boredom is also one of the most powerful incentives to action (Elpidorou 2017; Russell 1932), yet in the right dosage and circumstances may result in apathy and listlessness.

Women for ages were inhibited in their life prospects and everyday activities. The kind of boredom they experienced was a sign of their subordinate position in relation to men but also constituted a way of controlling them. Some bored women can try to escape the feeling in various ways, yet the majority slowly accommodate to the situation of limited meaningful activity opportunities and they develop an attitude

of servitude, passivity and resignation. The same is true for asylum seekers who are held in refugee camps. As Izabela Wagner's (Wagner, Finkielsztein 2021) research shows, administrators of such detention centres actively limit the refugees' freedom of action and meaningful opportunities for activity to keep them in a state of disempowerment and lack of agency. Such 'strategic boredom' is thus a social control tool administered with the purpose of gaining and/or maintaining power over others.

The more general case can be provided by the experience of living under communist regimes. The state actively deprives citizens of many meaningful ways of self-actualization and manage to make passivity and inactivity (at least in some areas of social life) a part of a communist ethos that makes it easier to control people (Tyrmand 1971). This is also seen in many utopian or dystopian novels that deal with totalitarian power systems, where the 'salvation' of humanity usually is inevitably associated with extreme boredom (Finkielsztein 2016). Boredom, thus, can be a facilitator for rulers as long as they manage to keep their society isolated from external influences – as boredom deprives people of agency only if they cannot conceive alternatives that can be realistically implemented in their lives.

## Conclusion

The paper presents several ideas concerning the relationship between boredom and power. Boredom herein is conceptualized not only as psychological pain or an existential mood, but also as an emotion produced in the process of interactions/relations between people as individuals, people playing some social roles, and social groups. The cause of such relational boredom, as I claim in this paper, may be specifically power relations. Those who hold power over others also have the power to force boredom on them by creating a boring social situation, assigning them to boring tasks and/or depriving them of opportunities to cope

with feelings of boredom. Inflicting boredom may also be a sign of a higher social position, as those holding power are frequently, in one way or another, 'responsible' for others' boredom. Creating boring circumstances and forcing people to stay in a state of chronic boredom may also be a deliberate or unintentional method of social control – as bored people usually are also apathetic and do not rebel, devolving into a position of passivity, indifference and resignation. Boredom, therefore, is strictly associated with power and is an outcome of the process of interacting, rather than only an effect of given external circumstances – thus, it is interactional and relational in nature.

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