

Boredom

Uncovering feelings from beneath a psychic fog.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date:

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Abstract

The confusing nature of boredom has a history of a struggle to define and connect to the topic. This is not surprising as the behaviour of the bored individual is multifaceted and with the variety of symptoms related to chronic boredom, it has escaped being designated as a distinct pathology with no common cause.

Rather than being seen as problematic, boredom is taken for granted as part of the fabric of every day life.

By exploring boredom through a psychoanalytic frame, and by separating and joining classical psychoanalytic and object relations theory, a clearer understanding is gained of how chronic boredom can manifest as a disconnecting from self and others. The aim of this dissertation is to help therapists become more aware of the presence of boredom and its affects, in the clinical situation.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Boredom:

“Boredom-at least half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it”

Bertrand Russell (1930), *The Conquest of Happiness*.

“You dream of escape; but do not run away in order to be free.

If you fly from yourself, your prison will run with you”

Gustave Thibon .

The phenomenon of boredom has been alluded to as a 20th century epidemic . Both because of and in spite of the virtually overwhelming multitude of diversions and entertainment in today’s world, clients seem to increasingly speak of being bored.

Many writers find boredom a concept difficult to define. As Gosline reports, “boredom is not a unified concept but rather comes in many flavours” . In a similar vein Turner has described how intuitively it appears to be easily understood. However attempts to formulate a firm definition means the term is quite “subjective and elusive” . Most people have experienced boredom at some time in their life, either in a transient way or in a more chronic manner, and there are as many different descriptions of boredom as there are different personality structures. As Bernstein states, there is a “multiplicity of manifestations” that defy clarity .

From these attempts to define boredom it can be concluded that although it is a common experience, it has many faces. People are often heard to remark, ‘I’m bored to tears’ ‘I’m bored to death’ ‘I’m bored to distraction’ ‘I’m bored silly’ but these remarks fail to register that there is a problem, boredom is taken for granted. Although it may feel uncomfortable there is a general acceptance of its presence. It can feel as if it is not something to be fixed, but just a passing phase, a complaint you live with. However, as Bergler suggests, what boredom can become is an “emotional experience that tends to threaten the psychic balance of the individual.

Most people suffer boredom silently; it is by their hectic and almost futile search for ‘fun’ that they portray its presence” .

The remarks ‘bored to death, to tears, to distraction’ suggest paradoxically that there is an underlying energy and affect which is not recognized. Bergler believes there is a deeper danger where boredom may result in the feeling that all one’s endeavours, attachments and aims are senseless, and this feeling of meaninglessness merges with an intense and terrifying loneliness. I will explore how these underlying feelings are related to pathological boredom.

Girardi & Natale suggest, “The great difficulty in dealing with boredom as a clinical issue is that a client rarely presents for treatment with the complaint of ‘being bored’” . Although it is harmful and ubiquitous in society, it is usually seen as a secondary complaint from the presenting primary problem . People are less likely to seek out a psychotherapist or a doctor because of the uncomfortable, unpleasurable feelings associated with these conditions, than with depression or anxiety. However a search of the literature on boredom reveals that it is anything but a secondary complaint and as the Bertrand Russell quote above suggests, it would appear that “half the sins of mankind are caused by the fear of it.”

My initial interest and curiosity in boredom was aroused when a client spoke repetitively of feeling bored in our sessions, and her boredom with life in general. I asked her what did boredom feel like to her, she replied it felt like a dread, and she would rather feel anxious than feel bored. Another client described agitated states of hyperactivity in desperate attempts to ward off boredom. Hunger is something she alluded to quite often, and a feeling of emptiness. This part composite, part invented anecdote of clients who complain of being chronically bored gives a flavour of this feeling:

- T. When you’re bored, what does it feel like?
- C. I’ve got to escape this boredom.
- T. What do you think you are escaping?

- C. I don't know. I just need a change, something different. I get bored with food, with being on my own, if I watch more than two hours TV. Food, it's the same flavour, even if I'm hungry, I can't eat it. I get bored with sex, the same predictable repetitiveness, lack of surprise. I get excited by change; like my parent's fighting, I get excited because there is action, and drama, there's something happening. When they got divorced, the excitement gave me a rush. I love job interviews, getting the job, but then the job gets boring, I want to quit, I change jobs often.

I realised my experience differed from my clients'. I have at times experienced boredom, particularly as a child, as a feeling of deadness, nothingness, a feeling of helplessness and not knowing what to do. I often felt frustrated. I would experience a gnawing feeling, an anxiety, and I felt I was waiting for something or someone to alleviate my boredom. Reading was a way of finding excitement in a vicarious way, taking me away from the anxiety of boredom, the fear of being with myself. As Spacks argues, reading as well as writing resists boredom. "Voluntarily picking up a book, we expect, indeed demand, to have our interest engaged. Reading liberates us from routine and tedium as well as the pain life more actively inflicts".

Sitting at my computer writing this dissertation I am reminded of the above statement by Spacks. At times I feel aliveness and an interest in my topic, and also a curiosity. I realise if I am curious I cannot be bored. At other times I cannot think what to write about boredom, and I begin to feel disconnected, sleepy and bored. I have an urge to walk away and find something interesting to do, to distract me from this uncomfortable feeling. I realise these feelings are a result of my anxiety, so rather than walking away I have learnt to contain the feelings and wait for something creative to happen. I am also aware of the need to engage the reader, least they may feel bored.

Sir Edmund Hilary was someone who it seems resisted boredom throughout his very full life as an adventurer. He was asked in his final interview what he likes to do now to stave off boredom :

Lady Hilary. It's a major thing for Ed.

Sir Ed. I love sports, I watch and listen.

A little later in the interview the interviewer asked him,

Interviewer. Are you ever bored now?

Sir Ed. Yes, I'm frequently bored.

Interviewer. What do you do when you get bored?

Sir Ed. Oh I don't do very much.

Lady Hilary. You get grumpy Ed.

Sir Ed. Makes being bored even worse.

When Sir Edmund was asked why he feared boredom so much, he replied that he thought it was the desire to keep doing interesting things, to meet challenges, climb mountains and "that sort of thing it certainly motivated me."

This interview in *The Listener* raises the question as to what is normal or pathological boredom. Fenichel suggests normal boredom occurs when "we must not do what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do". By way of contrast Drob & Bernard state: "pathological boredom results from an inner-determined, chronic failure of the organism to act in relation to its goals. The result is a poverty of affect and a consequent bored or empty feeling".

In psychoanalytic terms boredom has been described as the consequence of repression and inhibition of instinctual aims. Fenichel, in his classic 1934/1953 essay, defines boredom as "a feeling of unpleasure arising out of a conflict between a need for intense mental activity and lack of incitement to it, or inability to be incited".

In contrast to the psychoanalytic conflict model of boredom, Phillips working from an object relations perspective, states, "Winnicott alerted us to the importance in childhood of states of relative quiescence". Kahn refers to Winnicott's observation of the fidgety and restless child, who is unable to use play as a way to psychologically master anxiety or excitement. Phillips would describe the capacity to be bored as a "developmental achievement" that begins as "a regular crises in the child's developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother".

Rule has described how research around the nature of boredom has focussed on how to get rid of it, and the unwanted affects that go with it. There has been very little published on the positive side of boredom or on how to accept and make the most of the experience. The empirical literature consists primarily of industrial research, the focus of which has been on discovering those characteristics that help people resist boredom on a monotonous task.

Research in psychoanalytic literature in the last 30 years has been sparse. Normal or situational boredom has created the majority of attention in the most recent studies in industrial settings. Farmer and Sundberg , developed a piece of research which resulted in a 28-question Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS), the first full psychometric scale designed to measure boredom as a trait (see Appendix I). Boredom has also been characterized as the antithesis of something called flow, a state characterized by effortless attention, focus and absorption on a task akin to being ‘in the zone’. Flow, according to the theory’s developer, psychologist Csikszentmihalyi , occurs when a person’s skills match the level of challenge presented by the environment and when a task includes clear goals and immediate feedback.

The aim of this dissertation is to give a deeper understanding of the complexities of the nature of boredom and its underlying process and dynamics, so that it can be better understood in the therapy room. Winnicott once said:

If a person comes and talks to you and, listening to him, you feel he is boring you, then he is sick, and needs psychiatric treatment. But if he sustains your interest, no matter how grave his distress or conflict, then you can help him alright .

This statement hints at what Winnicott saw as the intractable nature of chronic boredom, and the challenge it presents to therapists. In this study I would like to consider what might underlie Winnicott’s impressions by firstly examining the defensive nature of boredom from a classical psychoanalytic viewpoint. A classical view alludes to theory developed by Sigmund Freud and others, based on the idea that disorders of the mind occur where the conscious mind rejects certain elements,

but these persist in the unconscious as repressed instinctual forces. This causes conflicts which psychotherapy aims to bring into consciousness, through techniques such as free association, dream analysis, etc.

Secondly I will examine boredom from an object relations viewpoint, in particular through the work of Winnicott. Object relations is a term described by Horner as “a structural concept, referring to the inner mental structure of the self and object representations and their dynamic interplay, along with associated characteristic feelings, wishes and fears” . Following this study of boredom, I will revisit the above Winnicott quotation.

Boredom has been seen as a benign problem, and because of this belief we are not alerted to its malignancy. I argue that in fact, as Winnicott’s statement suggests, it is a significant and serious pathology, which undermines our emotional well-being. It also affects many more people than is recognized in our society today. In avoiding the unpleasant feelings of boredom, people can turn for example, to different ways of acting out, such as addictions of many kinds, or chaotic and manic fun, in a belief that the environment will alleviate for the individual feelings of emptiness and deadness. In my review and discussion of the literature, I am asking the question: “Can we better understand our client through a better understanding of the nature of boredom?”

Chapter 2 - Methodology

Interest in this research topic evolved from clinical work with a client who often spoke of feeling bored. Through the ongoing repetitiveness of this complaint, it penetrated my conscious awareness. When she talked about being bored I felt at times disconnected and at other times agitated and frustrated. This caused me to wonder about the significance of these countertransferential feelings and their possible connection to boredom.

The aim of this research is to unravel some of the complexities and characteristics that culminate in boredom. I believe that this is important to the clinical situation and I wonder if at times we are either unconscious to boredom as a pathology, or we try to treat the symptoms of boredom rather than the underlying causes.

My research question is: “Can we better understand our clients through a better understanding of boredom?”

In this chapter I give an overview of evidence-based practice. I will outline and describe the methodology employed. I will also outline the scope and limitations of the research. The systematic literature review and the methodology in the psychotherapy context are outlined below.

Method

I have employed a modified systematic literature review (SLR) to do this dissertation. This SLR has evolved from the methodology of evidence based practice (EBP) which evolved from evidence based medicine. Evidence-based medicine is described by Sackett, Rosenberg, & Gray as “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients” . This best evidence is founded on meta-analysis of thorough quantitative research and is particularly focused on randomised controlled trials (RCTs).

Evidence-based practice is a methodological approach for determining what is and what is not good treatment. The positivist, technical, rational view and the interpretive and post modernist professional artistry view are two fundamental views of knowledge within professional practice . The evidence-based practice movement is an example of the positivist approach. In this approach the systematic reviews are considered the ‘gold standard’ of best practice . The positivist approach to knowing emphasises objectivity where “The objectivity and ‘truthfulness’ of evidence are assured through the use of a scientific method” . The clinical work in the context of the psychotherapy relationship is deeply subjective, is not static, but fluid, and is also reflective and complex. To apply quantitative measures which are objective and truth seeking through scientific investigation, using RCT, leaves a wide gap between this and the fluid nature of human experience. The possibility of bridging the gap between the clinical situation and the academic research is outlined by Wallerstein as:

Research that is simultaneously faithful both to the highly subjectivistic and complex data of the psychoanalytic consulting-room and the so-called objective canons of the empirical scientific enquiry. That should be, after all, the heart of what we call psychoanalytic research .

According to Green & Britten “The value of qualitative methods lies in their ability to pursue systematically the kinds of research questions that are not easily answerable by experimental methods” . Qualitative research is seen to be more suited to psychotherapy. As Green & Britten state, “qualitative research may seem unscientific and anecdotal to many medical scientists. However, clinical experience, based on personal observation, reflection, and judgment, is also needed to translate scientific results into treatment of individual patients” . As they state, good ‘evidence’ goes further than the results of meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials.

My research is a ‘modified systematic review’ because the methodology has been modified to employ qualitative research, which is more suited to psychotherapy than quantitative research.

Search criteria

My literature review focuses on psychoanalytic theory, both from the classical psychoanalytic viewpoint and through a developmental, object relations lens. The psychoanalytic clinical literature about boredom spans 80 years, from Lipps in 1903 who first gave a psychoanalytic definition of boredom, to the late 1980's. There is only a small amount of developmental literature, most of it to be found in the 1980's.

My quest was to first find all the psychoanalytic literature available pertaining to boredom and characteristics of boredom. The Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) is the primary database used, as it holds the largest library of psychoanalytic literature. Also used were Psycharticles, Psychinfo and Proquest databases. This was extended to quotes, articles, dissertations, theses and books from reference lists and *ad hoc* sources. These sources include the Auckland University of Technology library, American web-site Abebooks.com, Google and magazines.

Whereas earlier literature about boredom uses a psychoanalytic conflict/ defence model, later writers consider the role that developmental issues might play in the pathology of boredom. This gave me the impetus to explore the developmental theme. I noticed that several later authors used Winnicott when exploring boredom and I found his developmental theories provide a useful framework to make sense of boredom in a systematic way, linking the mother infant relationship with the possible roots of boredom. Thus I use Winnicott as the main theorist in that chapter.

Inclusion exclusion criteria

There is a very large amount of literature that references boredom but very few papers for which 'boredom' is the major subject. I identified the small amount of literature that is specifically about boredom. I discovered this was a complex topic. There were numerous minor references, which proved an onerous task to collate. To attempt this I identified themes within the literature and searched the databases looking for literature using the combined keywords (see Table 1 below).

The word boredom brought up 1846 results in Psycharticles. By using the words boredom and psychoanalysis together this was reduced to 47 results. However, these turned up mainly papers with an empirical base. Many of the articles used from the different databases were the same. The total number of papers used was 80.

Because of the word limit of this dissertation and because the subject of boredom has multiple threads, the exclusion criteria are quite lengthy. Excluded in this dissertation are papers which centred on industrial research. This empirical research focuses on situational boredom and discovering characteristics that help people to resist boredom on monotonous tasks. I have also excluded existential literature, and physiological and personality research, and Cognitive Behavioural Research. One question that would be interesting to have answered is why there has been such a dearth of psychoanalytic literature published about boredom in recent years. For instance the database PEP with the keywords boredom and psychoanalysis, gave 8 hits between 1990 and 2008.

Disclaimer

To eradicate gender bias I will use the gender term 'his' when referring to the therapist and the term 'her' when speaking about a client.

The words 'pathological' or 'chronic' will be used interchangeably.

In the spirit of reviewing this literature, in creating this dissertation I have been mindful of remaining faithful to the actual words of the theorists. Wherever possible I have used the true original words and woven these into the fabric of the work.

Ethics

Ethics approval has not been sought for this dissertation as no clinical material has been formally collected. The use of two typical situations that occur in psychotherapy are offered to demonstrate what might occur within the therapeutic session. These are strictly for illustrative purposes only and are not research evidence of clinical cases, thus no approval is required.

Table 1: Results of database search

Database	Search terms	Results	Number Used
P.E.P	Boredom	1000+	-
	Boredom AND psychotherapy	11	6
	Boredom AND psychoanalysis	16	5
	Boredom AND desire	30	5
	Boredom AND narcissism	14	1
	Boredom AND aggression	30	2
	Boredom AND sense of self	15	3
	Boredom AND affect	30	4
	Boredom AND creativity	6	2
	Boredom AND waiting	13	3
	Boredom AND development	30	2
	Boredom AND depression	113	2
	Boredom AND anxiety	115	3
	Boredom AND emptiness	32	2
	Boredom AND time	20	3
	Boredom AND boring AND bored	3	0
	Boredom AND apathy	30	5
	Boredom AND holding	8	3
	Boredom AND childhood	27	2
	Boredom AND play	26	2
	Boredom AND attachment	6	0
	Boredom AND loneliness AND	49	3

	intimacy		
	Boredom AND counter-transference	7	0
PsychINFO	Boredom	1639	-
	Boredom and psychoanalysis	30	4
	Boredom AND desire	36	2
	Boredom AND depression	177	2
	Boredom AND anxiety	201	0
	Boredom AND child development	2	0
	Boredom AND waiting	8	0
Psycharticles	Boredom	1846	-
	Boredom AND psychoanalysis	47	0
	Boredom AND child development	52	0
	Boredom AND psychoanalysis AND development	63	2
	Boredom AND counter-transference	20	0
Proquest Dissertations and Thesis	Boredom	563	-
	Boredom AND psychoanalysis	47	1
	Boredom AND anxiety	44	0
	Boredom AND depression	43	0

Chapter 3 – Classical psychoanalytic concepts

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation... A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind” .

Introduction

This chapter is a review of classical psychoanalytic literature and addresses the concepts and complexities of boredom in relation to these early ideas.

Boredom as repression

In beginning a discussion of this topic from a psychoanalytic view, Freud’s concepts around repression and the “pleasure principle” are perhaps fundamental to an understanding of what is underneath boredom. Freud recognized that the natural human drive is towards pleasure and to avoid pain; this is the central motivation in all of us. Freud’s concept of the “constancy principle” suggests the existence of a “tendency to maintain intra-cerebral excitation at a constant level” . Feelings then symbolize a move away from “psychological equilibrium” that urge the “individual to action to restore equilibrium” (*ibid*).

“Freud proposed that repression, since it exists outside conscious awareness could not be directly known but could only be recognized by its failure, i.e. by parapraxes (slips of the tongue) or by the anxiety that threatened its failure” . However, Bernstein argues that where repression of feeling is successful and far reaching the result is chronic boredom.

Early concepts

One of the first psychoanalytic definitions of boredom was written by Lipps in 1903 in his “Leifaden der Psychologie”. It described boredom “as a feeling of displeasure due to the conflict between the urge for intense psychic occupation and the lack of stimulation or the incapacity to allow oneself to be stimulated” .

Fenichel in his 1934 classic study, acknowledges and builds on Lipps' 1903 work, linking his ideas to Freud's writing on instinctual gratifications, and the pleasure/unpleasure principle. In psychoanalytic terms he is describing boredom as the consequence of repression and inhibition of feelings (instinctual aims) and also that the bored individual has "a feeling of unpleasure arising out of a conflict between a need for intense mental activity and lack of incitement to it, or inability to be incited". Fenichel calls attention to the apparent paradox that one might expect 'lack of impulse' to be a pleasurable condition. Boredom however includes as a component the "need for intense mental activity", a need that in the bored person cannot find gratification by generating its own impulse but seeks "incitements" from the outside world as a means of decreasing tension. Drob & Bernard describe similar ideas from other writers who have echoed this view, theorizing how "there is a damming up of libido in which the drive derivatives are repressed to avoid anxiety". Fenichel was one of the first to define boredom and give his classic statement of boredom as a defence.

Wangh in a similar vein suggests the "chief cause and aim of boredom is to prevent intrapsychic conflict" (p547). This is accomplished through the withdrawal of interest in thoughts, fantasy and ideas. But there are uncomfortable feelings remaining, with the left over desire and yearning. Wangh also agrees with Winterstein, Bibring, Greenson, Bergler, Hartocollis and Bernstein that the most striking point of boredom is the lack of fantasy life. Wangh suggests "the bored person has no fantasies, neither self created ones nor participatory ones such as might be mobilized by a play or any other spectacle". In boredom it is the retreat from "something is in my mind" to "nothing is in my mind". Bernstein argues incisively that "the inability to experience one's own feelings directly and intensely is the root of chronic boredom".

Boredom and emptiness

Greenson has extended this concept of boredom as being "nothing on my mind" to include an understanding of boredom as "emptiness". If the individual could have

these thoughts and feelings, this would lead to satisfaction or gratification.

Greenson's famous passage succinctly describes boredom as:

A state of dissatisfaction and a disinclination to action; a state of longing and an inability to designate what is longed for; a sense of emptiness; a passive, expectant attitude with the hope that the external world will supply the satisfaction; a distorted sense of time in which time seems to stand still .

Bernstein endorses this by stating that "it is the failure to vividly experience feelings that gives rise to the sense of emptiness, and the unspecified restless longing is to fill that ache of emptiness within one's self to be full of feeling once more" .

In contrast, Levy sees emptiness as being a more complex mental state that varies from individual to individual "both in how it feels and in its particular dynamic meaning" . Levy goes on to say "Emptiness may appear as a complaint of feeling empty, as a fear of being empty, or as a belief that someone else is empty" . Those individuals, who complain of feeling empty, recount a painful sense of inner depletion of feelings associated with warmth and love, as well as destructive and hurtful feelings. "There is an absence of feelings, fantasies and wishes, as well as a lack of responsiveness, or conviction. Relating to others with warmth seems lost" .

In contrast to these writers, Wanh argues that feelings of 'emptiness' are not ordinarily part of boredom as others maintain. Wanh argues that "similar feelings of emptiness which Bergler and Greenson stress as being part of boredom, are painful intrusions into the consciousness of boredom" . They occur when boredom has not fully succeeded as a defence.

Singer has also written about emptiness, equating it with the sensation of hunger. The synonyms he alludes to include "hollowness, deadness, nothingness, an inner void, or something's missing" . More recently, object relations theory would view emptiness as "expressive of a disturbance in the sense of self as well" .

Boredom and depression

From these discussions it can be noted how boredom and depression might be confused. For instance, Fromm suggests boredom can be described as depression. There appears to be many overlapping characteristics between the two. They both have had descriptions of a feeling of emptiness ascribed to them as well as loss of interest, poor concentration, and irritability. However where boredom and depression diverge is described by Greenson . He believes that although people who are depressed also feel emptiness, “it is the world which is felt as empty” . For the depressed person, the self is sensed as heavy, weighted down or low and also “fantasy life concerning specific objects is rich, though morbid” . Wangh goes on to suggest that the bored person, because she attributes her state of mind to outside circumstances, tends to feel superior, while the basically depressed and ‘empty’ person is more likely to feel inferior. “The bored person does not clamour for pity as the depressed person does, who feels empty, sad and guilty” . Greenson asserts that “the bored individual’s feeling of emptiness is similar to the experience of the child waiting hungrily for the breast” . These ideas have been challenged by Esman who questions how Greenson knows “what the infant’s experience is” .

Turner , in making a distinction between boredom and depression, suggests that boredom “would not be expected to include guilt and self-depreciation as found in depression” . She goes on to suggest this is because the “individual’s problem is seen as in the environment for which the individual is not to blame” . In fact as Wangh explains, boredom may protect against depression “which is a response to guilt or a sense of being deserted” .

In considering whether there is a qualitative difference between boredom and depression, Bibring contended that in “depression as in boredom unconscious goals are maintained” . In boredom however, “the goals appear repressed and there appears to be no suitable substitutes. In depression, the ego is shocked into passivity, not around conflict of goals, but rather in response to narcissistic injury and the resulting helplessness” (*ibid*).

Bernstein summarizes depression as “a group of disorders sharing the common symptom of a depressive mood but otherwise manifesting a range of symptoms and having a variety of causes” . The depression of boredom he describes as “a sense of hopelessness, of despair of ever being able to experience the liveliness necessary for joy and happiness, or even peaceful comfort” . Schmale describes hopelessness as a “loss of autonomy with a feeling of despair coming from the individual’s awareness of his own inability to provide himself with gratification” .

Boredom and anxiety

Schmale suggests, “Anxiety is the first psychic awareness of discomfort and probably remains throughout life the first and immediate reaction to the perception of psychic tension in any situation” . When activity doesn’t provide gratification, affects such as anger, fear and helplessness are experienced. Encountering these affects leads to a “further differentiation of intrapsychic mechanisms for displacing, tolerating and overcoming the awareness of a need for gratification” . When all this activity succeeds in achieving gratification, “the affects of goodness, pride and hope are differentiated” (*ibid*).

For the individual suffering from boredom, instead of this differentiation, there appears to be a repetitive cycle of boredom and anxiety, with the associated discomfort at each phase. However some individuals express at least a feeling of aliveness when they are anxious in that there is “a hopeful expectation that something was happening” as opposed to a dullness and flatness, an apathy and hopelessness that nothing was happening . This repetitive cycle is observable in this composite example from my case file.

- T. It seems hard for you to stay with the simple life. Life seemed very energetic when you were with your Dad.
- C. Yeah, I felt worn out.
- T. With your father and your family and your friends?

- C. Yep, and now I'm stuck, I'm stressed and anxious, or I 'm bored. If I'm bored it's worse than anxiety, I would rather be anxious than bored, at least I feel alive. I feel I'm stuck in Limbo.
- T. When you're bored, you feel stuck.
- C. It's institutionalized. Boredom or stress, I've learnt to love my prison!

This anecdote demonstrates how, in Wangh's words, the "persistent inner stalemate which becomes manifest as a feeling of boredom may be felt as an unpleasant inability to escape".

Bernstein in writing about anxiety, states that "like fear, it is a most unpleasurable feeling and mobilizes all of our available defences". Bernstein also states that "feelings are the primary motivating force within us, they move us to action. The force of the idea lies only in the strength of the feeling". However, if the feelings cannot be expressed because of a fear of retribution then repression is the defence put in place to ward off unpleasure.

As many of us are aware, especially those working in the psychotherapeutic field, repression of feelings does not relieve the tension, and as Bernstein states, since "we do not consciously know the feeling we cannot know the direction of appropriate action". Bernstein describes what happens to the feeling-tension and the way it seeks an "aberrant pathway to discharge" (*ibid*). Anxiety arises when the feeling-tension remains unresolved, when it builds up to a point that threatens the established balance. Repression spares the individual these uncomfortable experiences of impulses and feelings, including sadness, rage, anger, frustration and anxiety; but the price of this is chronic boredom.

Differentiating types of boredom

Both Fenichel and Bernstein differentiate two kinds of boredom, normal or responsive, and chronic or pathological. Bernstein differentiates them by suggesting chronic boredom is the expression of an internal psychological dysfunction, whereas normal boredom is a transient emotional response to a real external situation. It is

the location of the cause not the duration that distinguishes between normal and chronic boredom. Bernstein further distinguishes normal from chronic boredom when he suggests that “normal or responsive boredom does not involve the internalized superego or its function of repression. Instead, responsive boredom results from the suppression of feelings when that is demanded or required by external circumstances” .

Esman disagrees with this classification, arguing that there is limited ground for such a division. In reflecting on Bernstein’s example of responsive boredom, being trapped in a summer cottage by a week of cold and rainy weather, Esman believes that Bernstein fails to consider another person feeling trapped may use his imaginative resources to cope with the rainy weather. “Boredom in such circumstances is not, then simply a response to an external situation; it is a product of interaction between the circumstances and the psychological characteristics of the individual so situated” . Esman also suggests that “classifications that distinguish between acute or situational boredom on one hand and chronic or symptomatic boredom on the other, risk blurring the common developmental features that may attend both” (*ibid*).

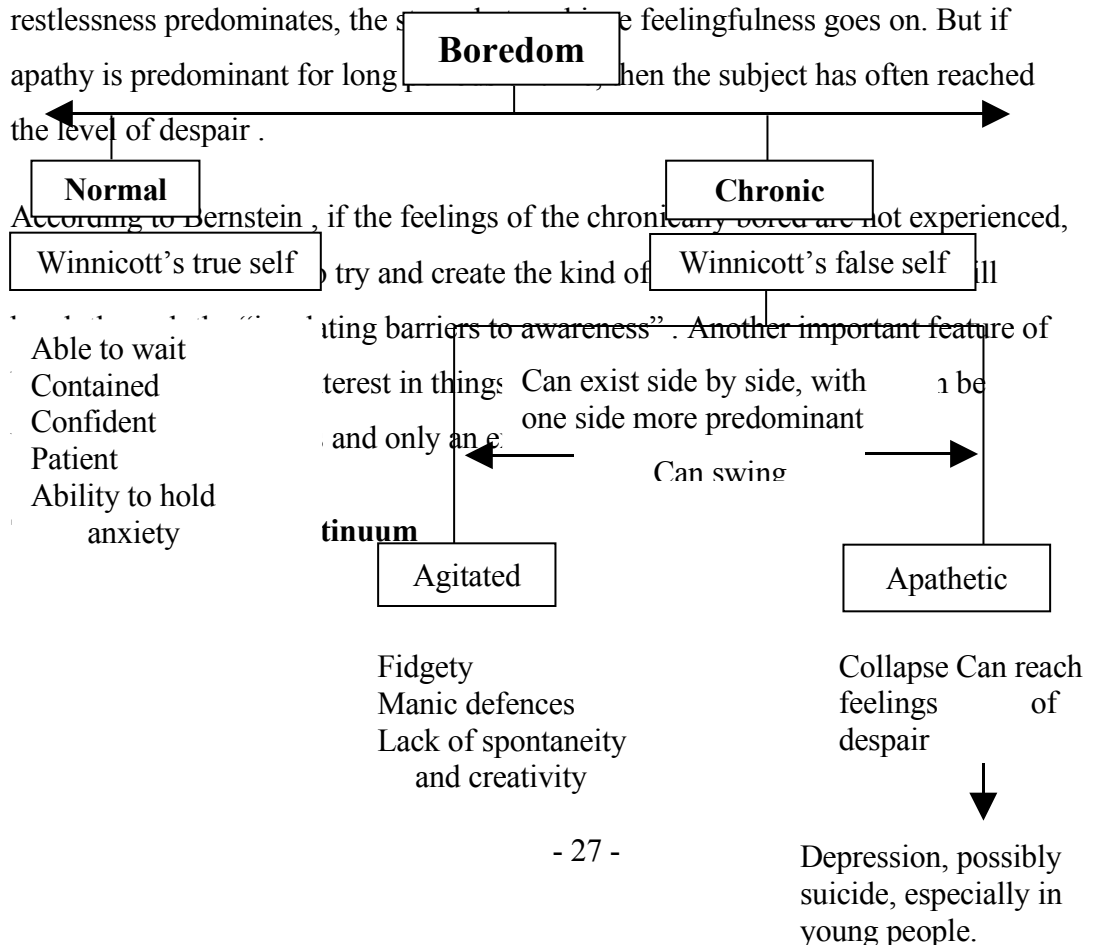
Wangh also differentiates between the internal world and external world of the bored person. He believes that the main cause of boredom is in the internal world of the individual, where there is an absence of stimulus, rather than there being monotony in the external world as others have proclaimed. He goes on to say that monotony can also be pleasant, such as the “infant falling asleep to the monotonous sound of a lullaby or a child’s insistence on a clear, undeviating repetition of a story” .

Wangh believes that clinging to boredom can be a way of protecting against graver emotional states. It may act as a defence against more serious conflicts such as protecting the individual from feelings of depression or isolation, “or it may guard against the experience of dangerous rage or terror” .

Wangh discusses boredom as an “unconscious stalemate between the fantasy, impulse and threat and is usually transitory, reaching from sleep to alertness, somnolence to thoughtfulness, emptiness to contentment, anxiety to calm, action to inertia, joy to sadness, languor to impatience” . He goes on to say that the state of boredom is fragile unless the use of defences is maximized. Wangh believes boredom should be approached as Brenner suggests, “in regard to every affective experience, like a symptom, and ask which conflicting forces bring about its formation” .

Boredom and two kinds of affect

Greenson in his classification of boredom, along with Fenichel , distinguishes between two kinds of affect in boredom, agitated and apathetic. The apathetic kind describes “the repression of the forbidden instinctual aims along with inhibition in imagination” . This alludes to the feelings of emptiness and longing, in the absence of fantasies and thought. Agitated boredom, also described by Bernstein , is experienced as a kind of restlessness reflecting the failure of available activities to provide appropriate gratifications. Bernstein also concluded that as long as restlessness predominates, the feelingfulness goes on. But if apathy is predominant for long



As discussed above, Wangh describes a 'precarious balance' by 'partial repression' between what is longed for but is at the same time feared. If the equanimity is affected, a signal of anxiety would have to occur, and have to be faced or defended against. It is possible, Wangh hypothesizes, that if the fantasy is allowed to break through the existing anxiety might be overcome and activity enjoyed. Wangh, on the other hand, suggests, "energetic unconscious rejection of the wish may this time accomplish total repression".

Boredom, waiting and time

"Always waiting for something that never came".

Hartocollis writes about how more than any other affect, boredom is experienced as a disturbance in the sense of time. Wangh describes how "time seems endless; there is no distinction between past, present and future".

Sandor Ferenczi , in a letter to Freud, perhaps captures the experience of boredom and waiting when he writes:

A basic symptom of my illness (indeed of my character) is an exaggerated quest for pleasure (as you know a reaction to deprivations of childhood). I was never able to bear suspense; loneliness was identical to boredom to me. - I was probably always waiting for some miracle or other which would bring me happiness and ecstasy .

Phillips states how:

Boredom protects the individual, makes tolerable for him the impossible experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be. So the paradox of the waiting that goes on in boredom is that the individual does not know what he was waiting for until he finds it, and often he does not know that he is waiting .

Wangh (1975), alongside Greenson (1953), agrees that to be bored there has to be a disturbance in the sense or measure of time. He writes that “it is the stand off between wish and fear and the repression of the ideational content which is registered as boredom” and creates the sensation of “stand-still of time” (p.518). Wangh (1979) believes that this, linked with the dulling of the cognitive and perceptive reactivity, is a major cause of unpleasure in boredom.

Wangh (1975) also brings in another dimension which etymologically is left out in the Greek and Latin related roots, the element of time. The German word for boredom is *Langeweile*, (in a long while). In a ‘long while’ time loses its measure. The opposite word in German, *Kurweil*, (short while) essentially stands for ‘fun’ ‘Time hangs on my hands’ and ‘to waste time’ are complaints heard often in connection with boredom. The *lang* in *langeweile* leads to the German verb *verlangen* which in English approximates ‘to long for’ ‘to yearn’ ‘to stretch the mind after’. Wangh considers this to be an intellectual idea joined to an emotional one. “This twofold aspect of boredom, the cognitive and the affective, is of particular significance in the psychoanalytic perspective on boredom” (p.540).

Fenichel connects the intolerance for tension and waiting to the organization of the infantile personality. He believes people who cannot wait are unable to judge reality,

and those who cannot endure pain or frustration are likened to ‘addicts without drugs’. Goldberg notes that “oral fixations and early trauma play a significant role as to the causes of this intolerance” . Rapaport (1960) and Hartmann (1964) echo his feelings and concentrate on the ego’s capacity for delay as an indicator of ego strength. Glover (1956) in contrast saw a psychic feeling of disruption as a typical affect that was attached to the experiences of different developmental periods. He states “Psychic feeling of disruption is thus a typical and early tension affect, which in the course of development may become fixed in different forms according to the experiences and unconscious ideations of different developmental periods” .

Some final comments on psychoanalytic concepts

As Eastwood, Cavaliere, Fahlman and Eastwood suggest, “Boredom in some form appears to be a common and perhaps unavoidable part of human experience” . A typical reaction to these unpleasant feelings is to react against the experience by seeking out frantic and intense activity. However, instead of helping us, this only serves “to strengthen the grip of boredom by further alienating us from our desire and passion, which provide compass points for satisfying engagement with life” (*ibid*).

Other classical psychoanalytic writers in discussing this topic have linked boredom to particular libidinal stages. For example Fenichel (1953) links it to conflict over oral-erotic and oral-sadistic drives. Grotjahn and Altshul relate it to anal conflicts, while Weinberger and Muller place it at the phallic stage. Taylor suggests that boredom is related to affixation or regression to the paranoid-schizoid position. Following a review of many papers on boredom, Hozier , along with Eisnitz , concludes that to link the symptom of boredom with any particular libidinal stage seems inappropriate. Instead Eisnitz proposes that boredom reflects “a disturbance in the experience of the self” . Hozier states it may be seen to “reflect a developmental ego defect as well as or instead of the commonly cited impulse-defence conflicts” . She quotes Esman (1979) as saying that although there were varying complexities including “multiple genetic and dynamic roots,” in each

situation there was a common factor to the phenomenon of boredom. All these writers, along with the view taken in this dissertation, see boredom as having a developmental structure.

Esman in fact criticizes the traditional analytic stance on boredom. He draws attention to the fact that the dynamic processes used to explain boredom apply equally well to a vast diversity of other symptoms. He also convincingly argues that there must surely be instances of boredom unrelated to unconscious conflict. He argues for example that “children who spend periods in environments that are uneventful, may experience boredom not because of psychosexual conflict but simply because of inadequate ego development, an inability to generate necessary stimulation” . Esman also notes that boredom is always “an interaction between a particular person and a particular environment” (*ibid*).

Summary

Boredom has been described in classical psychoanalytic literature as being a successful repression or inhibition of difficult feelings. However, although the defence of boredom helps prevent some intrapsychic conflict, sparing the person more uncomfortable feelings and impulses, it comes at a cost. There is a loss of thoughts, fantasy and ideas, along with an uncomfortable residue of tension left behind, where boredom can be experienced as an emptiness or depletion. These feelings may appear similar to depression, but for boredom, it is the outside world that is seen as at fault, whereas for depression, the person often experiences themselves as faulty.

Boredom has been differentiated into a normal, situational response, and chronic boredom as an expression of psychological dysfunction. Another form of differentiating is into two kinds of affect; agitated or restless, and apathetic, which contains feelings of emptiness and longing. Both can exist at the same time, but restlessness needs to predominate if boredom isn't going to lead to despair.

Although boredom has been linked by different authors to different psychosexual stages, it has also been convincingly argued that the common factors of boredom instead reflect other developmental ideas that are explored in Chapter 4.

Critique

Although there is some in-depth literature about boredom in the early psychoanalytic work, it is very sparse compared to other topics. There appears to be a gap in the literature around this topic, which is perhaps indicative of the notion that boredom is something that is considered acceptable, just a fact of life and not a serious complaint. However for my clients who complain of boredom, there seems to me to be such a profound disconnection from a sense of self and an inner life, that a more extensive examination of boredom, either as a symptom or a separate pathology, seems warranted.

A classical psychoanalytic approach to understanding boredom gives us an insightful account of the affects of boredom, and what is happening intrapsychically. However, it does not illustrate what might have happened in a person's early life that has led to an outcome of chronic boredom. To better understand our clients who might be suffering from these debilitating feelings, and to be able to differentiate boredom from other pathology, a different framework is needed.

In considering an object related self, there is a direction where an instinctual self can be integrated with a developmental perspective, to help us make sense of where boredom is linked to a developmental pathway.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered a classical psychoanalytic understanding of boredom, which, although illuminating, does not go far enough in constructing an understanding of boredom that can be helpful to therapists and their clients. The following chapter looks at boredom from an object relations view, and in particular, through a Winnicottian lens.

Chapter 4 - Boredom and developmental theories

“The two enemies of human happiness are pain and boredom”.

Arthur Schopenhauer.

Introduction

This chapter reviews literature that links boredom to developmental theory with a particular emphasis on object relations theory and Winnicott. It focuses on areas where developmental failure may be linked to adults who suffer chronic boredom.

The philosopher Kierkegaard said “to move toward the light requires a leap into the dark, and that all of life is a process of sustained becoming. But in actual living of each life there are boundary periods, times of waiting, in which we are between what was and what may be” . In Winnicott’s work around a facilitating environment, play and creativity, and in Mahler’s description of ‘low-keyedness’, there is a link with this space in all of us “between what was and what may be” and the roots of boredom.

In considering the place of anxiety in boredom, (Kierkegaard’s leap into the dark) we can examine what Mahler describes as a decrease of confident expectation and an accompanying reduction in self-esteem during the separation/individuation period that “predisposes individuals to certain emotional reactions in later life in particular depressive and anxiety spells, angry outbursts and boredom” .

Wangh (1979) was perhaps the first psychoanalytic writer to put forward a “tentative developmental perspective” of boredom when he asked, “when in human experience boredom first occurs?”(p.517). He quotes Mahler & McDevitt in calling the baby’s passiveness and lack of interest ‘low-keyedness’ (p.517). Wangh suggests Mahler’s & McDevitt’s (1968) observation of the ‘low-keyedness’ in children provides a parallel to the adult experience of boredom (p160).

Developmentally, he views boredom in terms of Mahler’s symbiotic phase. He suggests there could have been a failure within the ‘holding environment’ which

prevented a “sufficient development of longings based on images of the self in previous states of safety and protection” (p.163).

Gabriel similarly suggests a developmental explanation for boredom when she questions whether boredom in adults could be a disruption in the “capacity to image self and object representations” (p.160). She goes on to elaborate that those who are suffering severe states of boredom may not have the same supply of positive internalized self and self object images to draw on. This affects their capacity to self soothe. The bored adult, like the ‘low –keyed’ toddler, is thrust into a state of ‘straining’ to conjure up gratifying images which would provide the sought-after comfort. “This inability to remember, feel or envision a holding environment may be illustrated in states of severe boredom” (p.163). There is, as Eisnitz (1974) commented, “too little of the self to be involved” (p.589).

Adding to the argument for a developmental theory of boredom, Esman (1979) contends that the theories attributing the cause of boredom to conflict and defences, such as those derived from Fenichel’s pioneering work, (e.g. Greenson 1953, Bernstein 1975, Wangh 1975) fail to recognise “developmentally-determined structural characteristics of the personalities of those disposed to boredom” (p.432). In a similar argument Drob & Bernard (1988) believe that this psychoanalytic view which sees boredom as being a result of repression or constriction of affect, is problematic, in that it does not reflect clinical experience. They suggest boredom is more a failure of development, specifically the failure to form a consistent identity. They argue that a “workaholic lawyer or obsessed scientist”, appear not to experience either emotion or boredom, as long as they are engulfed in their work (p. 65). On the other hand, they describe the “thrill seeking adolescent” as demonstrating the opposite, how “boredom can coexist with intense affect and emotional expression” (p.65). I argue that rather than being exceptions, the above situations are typical examples of manic defences within boredom (see Table 2, p. 29).

A holding environment

A developmental view of boredom can be understood through exploring Winnicott's theories around maternal preoccupations, a holding environment and his structuring of a true or false self. Winnicott speaks of the 'inherited potential' of the infant that is realized through satisfactory parental care. This is what establishes an environment that allows for the infant to move towards 'being'. The infant goes from 'absolute dependence' to 'relative dependence' and towards 'independence'. "When the mother is away for a moment beyond the time-span of his or her capacity to believe in her survival, anxiety appears, and this is the first sign that the infant knows" (p.88).

Winnicott wrote that:

In a state of 'primary maternal preoccupation' a setting is provided for the infant's constitution to begin to make itself evident for the developmental tendencies to start to unfold, and for the infant to experience spontaneous movement and become the owner of the sensations that are appropriate to this early phase of life. If the mother provides a good enough adaptation to need, the infant's own line of life is disturbed very little by reactions to impingements. These reactions to impingements interrupt the going on being of the infant. An excess of this reacting produces not frustration but a threat of annihilation (p.303).

Winnicott's facilitating environment is what establishes for an infant a "continuity of existence", that makes it possible for the child to develop enough resilience to deal with some impingement. "The alternative to being is reacting and reacting interrupts being and annihilates; being and annihilation are the two alternatives" (p. 47).

It is possible to link Winnicott's 'not good enough' environment to what Wanh (1975) sees as failure in Mahler's symbiotic phase, and to the consequent boredom. In its soporific way, boredom appears to be the antithesis of 'going-on-being'. Perhaps the individual's experiences of agitation, restlessness and/or apathy are part of the outcome of and struggle against experiencing a fear of annihilation.

Bollas has further described this concept, seeing Winnicott's 'facilitating environment' as a place where a mother's own particular style of mothering and

responding to her infant becomes a part of the infant. In other words, it is in the sustaining of, and engaging in a reciprocal world, that allows the infant to take on the perspective of the other in order to make sense of her world.

Phillips (1993) has perhaps succinctly brought together the idea that boredom is linked to a failure in this early holding environment and this early relationship. He writes: "If the bored child cannot sufficiently hold the mood, or use the adult as an unimpinging auxiliary ego, there is a premature flight from uncertainty" (p.70). Perhaps this uncertainty is what Phillips (1993) refers to as the "curious paralysis of boredom" where he suggests there is ambiguity around "two impossible options; there is something I desire and there is nothing I desire" (p.76).

In his understanding of a facilitating environment, Epstein suggests that the parent creates a setting where the child can 'simply be'; that is they are free and safe to let down defences. In this place "a child is free to explore his or her own inner world, to try to come to terms with the paradoxical nature of separation from and connection to the parents" (p.151). Epstein goes on to describe how this facilitating environment supports the child's growth and freedom to move away from parents without too much anxiety.

True self and false self

Winnicott has described how when there is a deficiency in the holding environment, where a mother or caregiver is either unresponsive or impinging in her way of relating to the infant, that the 'true self' is hidden, and a 'false self' develops in its place. Winnicott (1960) refers to the idea of a 'true self' as the core of the personality. "It is the inherited potential of the individual, which experiences a continuity of being...If this continuous sense of going-on-being is interrupted, then a defence used is the organization of the 'false self'" . Winnicott believed that what this core self needed, was 'good enough mothering', and that it was in this way that the infant was protected from the anxiety of annihilation.

It is through the 'good enough mothering' that an infant can grasp and absorb the unpalatable fact of "The Reality Principle", that there is a world that exists outside of what the infant creates. Through the infant's impulses (met and confirmed by mother), the infant discovers the environment and what is 'not-me' while establishing the 'me'. If the environment is not safe the infant may respond with compliance. If a mother fails to recognize the infant's attempt to engage with her, or if the mother inflicts her own emotions and actions on the child, this is also responded to by the infant with compliance. Winnicott (1965) said, it is in the meeting of the omnipotence of the child that the 'true self' begins to have a life. Failure to meet the child's gestures sets up compliance in the infant.

Winnicott also believed that it is this sense of one's true self that makes life worth living. It is in living a creative life that there is aliveness. The opposite to this is a life of compliance, adapting and fitting in, which carries with it the idea "that nothing matters and that life is not worth living" (p.65). I argue that this is closely tied to the individual's experience of boredom. What can often be observed in bored individuals is the drive to feel feelings.

Eastwood, Cavaliere, Fahlman and Eastwood explain through their research that the "common antidote for boredom is getting busy or plunging into stimulating activity, fighting the experience with frenetic activity and intense varied stimulation" (p. 1043). They hypothesize that this only takes us further away from true passions and desires, which are what would make us feel engaged and alive.

Boredom and manic defence

"Winnicott sees in manic defence an attempt to deny inner reality, a flight to external reality and an attempt to maintain suspended animation". He visualized that "a whole life may be built on the pattern of reacting to stimuli. Withdraw the stimuli and the person has no life". In order to feel that one exists, the prevailing responses must be from one's true self or impulses, rather than reactions to the environment.

Bernstein (1990) writes, that in chronic boredom, there are both times of “restless dissatisfaction and longing, which predominate,” and shorter times of apathy and resignation (p.64). There is in the bored individual a growing need to “replace their missing feelings with sensation” (p.65). Individuals look to the external world to avoid looking internally, the feelings are repressed and there is a flight away to find external fun, through drugs, gambling, alcohol, shopping sprees, extramarital affairs, anything that stimulates feelings. If these are taken away the individual may be left feeling ‘empty’ or ‘dead’.

Bernstein (1975) goes on to explain how the individual who feels bored, experiences the feelings of agitation or apathy after doing something and before doing something else. There is usually frenetic energy, there is no time for just being, or a great deal of discomfort is experienced when the bored individual finds herself alone. The frenetic individual is afraid of what she may be feeling underneath the boredom. Developmentally this perhaps reflects what Winnicott observed around the fidgety child’s inability to use play to master anxiety. If the flip side, that of apathy, (see Table 2, p.29) becomes the predominant mood, the individual gives up the fight and a “level of despair” is reached (p.518). It is this particular brand of depression that Bernstein believes, can lead to suicide, especially in the young.

Winnicott describes what he calls, ‘suspended animation’ as being part of a manic defence. In this, the individual attempts to control the “internalised parents, keeping them between life and death” (p.133). This does not really work, as it prevents other good relationships that would prevent in their turn, feelings of deadness. Khan (1986) drew attention to how exhausting it is maintaining omnipotent control over inner stresses, and he linked ‘tiring’ with ‘boring’, and the individual’s “over control of language and material” (p.3).

Boredom and apathy

Bernstein (1990) states: “Apathy, literally translated, means ‘without feeling’. It is the experience of feelings that give to life its liveliness, its meaningfulness and its

zest” (p.64). Bernstein believed that the lack of motivation found in chronic boredom is what indicates the presence of apathy.

Greenson suggests that apathy is comparable to primal depression, i.e. losses during the pre-oedipal stage of development. As a defence, apathy protects against the overwhelming feelings of annihilation (p.300). He further suggests that “on the basis of clinical observations it is felt that apathy is a specific response to traumatic deprivation” (p.301).

The term low-keyedness which was referred to in the first paragraph of this chapter, is used by Mahler, Pine & Bergman to indicate a ‘toned-down’ state which Mahler suggests occurs during the practicing subphase of ‘separation-individuation’. This low-keyedness was noticeable when mother left the room, and it terminated on reunion with mother. This in Mahler’s view is reminiscent of a miniature anaclitic depression. Their studies concluded that there was an awakening awareness that the “symbiotic mothering half of self was missed” (p.75). This longing for a state of well-being and unity or closeness with mother was seen to be deficient in “children whose symbiotic relationship had been marred by the unpredictability and impulsivity of a partly engulfing and partly rejecting mother” (p.75).

Singer in a similar vein furthers these ideas when he describes anaclitic depression having as one of the primary characteristics, an urgency to fill an inner emptiness. He goes on to say that this is based on a developmental arrest in the formation of object representation and its correspondent representation at the sensorimotor level (p.46). Kernberg agrees that “due to a failure of integration of the self and object representations, there is a lack of awareness of the sense of integration” (p.467). This results in a chronic feeling of, “emptiness and meaninglessness” (p.467).

In contrast to Singer’s ‘urgency to fill inner emptiness’, in referring back to psychoanalytic theory, Greenson (1953) makes a different distinction between boredom and apathy when he states that while boredom includes emptiness and longing, that apathy is emptiness without longing. Other theorists such as Turner (1983) believe that there needs to be an object that is longed for, and it is this that is

missing in chronic boredom. “The bored person does not know what it is that is longed for, so the longing cannot be satisfied” (Fenichel, cited in Turner, 1983, p. 10). In a second overlap with psychoanalytic theory, it can be noted that Turner (1983) believed that this “longing endures and is experienced as an unyielding internal tension. It is the constant internal tension that makes the experience of chronic boredom so unbearable” (p.10). This tension, according to Hartocollis , “involves a sense of impatience with the self and the environment” (p.96).

Bernstein (1975) has suggested that it is apathy and longing, that are the cause of the feeling of restlessness, and that both coexist in boredom. Therefore it might seem reasonable to suggest that apathy occurs after longing for something and that in the ongoing journey to find what can't be found, that apathy will be the result of this deprivation. From Mahler's developmental perspective, when mother was absent for too long and too far away, rather than low-keyedness the child's behaviour becomes restless and active. Mahler (1965) states: “it would seem that the equivalent of ‘low keyedness’ at the time of the child's realization of his separateness, is the affect or emotion of sadness” (p.92).

Boredom, waiting and time

“If you knew time as well as I do”, said the Hatter,
“you wouldn't talk about wasting it”.
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

According to many writers one of the hallmarks of boredom, is the experience of a disturbance in the sense of time. For example, Hartocollis believes that when an alteration is experienced in the passage of time, it is likely to be called ‘boredom’, regardless of the possibility of other factors being present. He considers how for a child there is anxiety around waiting to find out if a need is going to be gratified, and that this affects their sense of time. This brings to mind the child waiting for Father Christmas, the excitement is unbearable, and the waiting is almost impossible, time drags, until the morning comes and the child is gratified by her

Christmas gifts. Or the child waiting for what seems an interminable time to be picked up by a parent.

Hartocollis believed that it was the individual's orientation in time that "provides an essential element in the qualification of a particular affective experience" (p.106). For example, to see one's self as having been inadequate in the past leads to depression, while perceiving one's possible future inadequacy leads to anxiety. Being unable to place one's experience of inadequacy within a "time perspective" results in "an overall experience ... of boredom" (p.106).

In Goldberg's words, "Boredom is the denial of the present moment, its possibilities and its demands; it impels the bearer to escape into past or future moments" (p.142). Goldberg also goes on to contrast the positive feelings of joy, where time goes too fast, with feelings of suffering and pain where time goes slowly, so when we are bored we try to 'kill time' (p.142).

Similarly Hartocollis describes how time can be a "timeless, mystical experience... or heavy and insufferable" (p.157). A sense of time is felt more keenly by an individual who is self absorbed; for this individual time appears to move slowly. In contrast the more selfless and spontaneous the individual becomes, the more he feels "as if he is flowing with time, or that time does not exist" (p.157). To have a perspective of a future time "depends on one's ability to resist the emotional impact of the present" (p.162). To be impulsive or have poor object constancy leads to a defective sense of the future.

In looking at a developmental aspect of boredom and waiting, Goldberg (1971) contends that there is "both an object-for-gratification aspect and a self-image aspect to the capacity to wait; impatience is both the lack of the object and the instability of the self" (p.415). Goldberg sees the development of a capacity to wait as beginning in infancy. When the young child first observes the mother preparing the food, and if this leads to gratification, he learns to have a certain amount of patience.

Consistent experiences like this give him the confidence to believe that it will happen again in the future, and that her needs will be met. She can eventually

hallucinate the picture of her needs being met, and this allows for patience. A feeling of wholeness is restored and there is no longer the anguish of waiting, creating a continuity of 'going-on-being'. Although the feeling of the 'going-on-being' has been disrupted it has been restored again when waiting has ended.

This relates to what Erikson speaks of in the formation of basic trust where the mounting tension that is inherent in delaying satisfaction finally ends in "unification with the satisfying 'object'". This makes waiting and working worthwhile.

In contrast to these developmental theories, Phillips (1993) refers to boredom as a "kind of blank condensation of psychic life" (p.78). He believes that in the "more fleeting boredom of the child, the waiting is repressed" (p.78). Phillips also believes that, "we can think of boredom as a defence against waiting, which is, at one remove an acknowledgment of the possibility of desire" (p.76). He goes on to say that waiting for something without knowing what it is that is waited for, can be more easily tolerated by the affect of boredom, which is more comfortable than e.g. anxiety or apathy. Phillips suggests that a bored child is "waiting unconsciously for an experience of anticipation" (p.69). During this rather delicate process the child needs to be held by the adult, rather than this process being sabotaged.

In Winnicott's view, this concept of anxiety being held, relates to a mother's function of keeping time going. Through this the infant gradually develops a personal sense of time. Like Goldberg (1971), Winnicott (1963) believed it was the "infant's capacity to keep alive the imago of the mother in the inner world," that is important, and that this is "partly maturational ... and partly inner defence organization".

The place of 'hesitation'

Winnicott has observed how, when a child is given a space of time, there is a period of hesitation, when the infant holds his or her body still to develop her feelings so the infant can find what she desires. Within this space, there is uncertainty, anxiety, wondering whether to make a move. "If there is no angry or disruptive response

during this hesitation from the parent; then the infant develops self confidence around actions” (p.231). As mentioned before, her continuous sense of going-on-being allows for the development of a true self.

Winnicott further extends and elaborates on this theory when he describes the play space and creativity.

Boredom and creativity

Freud said of creativity: “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own” (p.143).

Winnicott’s considerable writing around play and creativity is reflected in this Freudian quote. As has been described, Winnicott believed that creativity can only spring from the quiet confidence that is a result of a true self, and that this true self evolves when there is ‘good enough mothering’. The ability to play requires that the child can relax and be himself in the presence of the mother. That there is the space where a mother does not intrude, but the child is aware of her presence if she is needed. Winnicott believed that this capacity to play was at the root of creativity.

Casement in a similar manner has elaborated on the theme of a play space, believing it to be where “the seeds of later creativity are sown and nurtured” (p.38). He writes, “To be free to enter into imaginative and creative play a child needs there to be a space between himself and the mother, over which he has the autonomous rights of initiative” (p.38). Casement also states that on the mother’s part there must be the sensitive awareness that she must not enter the play uninvited. But the child can “use the mother’s ‘absent’ presence or her ‘present’ absence as the warp and woof of his play. He can ‘create’ or ‘uncreate’ her at will, and thereby enjoy the magic of playing God and King over his own play-realm” (p.38).

Winnicott describes the preoccupation that is a feature of play. The child in this space, “inhabits an area that cannot easily be left, nor can it easily admit

intrusions” (p.51). It is a world where external reality is invested “with dream meaning and feeling” (p.51).

For play to exist, there must, according to Winnicott (1971) be trust, so that the baby is able to take for granted that the mother will respond in an adaptive way. There is then a “direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing and from this to cultural experiences” (Winnicott, p.51). Winnicott refers to the ‘playground’ as being the ‘potential space’ where the mother and the baby are ‘joining’. Within this joining, there is what Winnicott calls the “magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is found to be reliable” (p.47).

Winnicott saw the ability to ‘use the object’ as being related to this relational capacity to play. However, he believes that this is not inborn, but is dependent on this facilitating environment that has been described. Winnicott states: “To use the object the subject must have developed the ‘capacity’ to use objects” (p.713). For Winnicott there is a maturational sequence. First there is ‘object relating’ where the object has become meaningful, where trust has developed, but before there can be ‘object use’, there is “the most difficult thing...the subject’s placing of the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control...in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right” (p.713).

Boredom, then, can likely be linked to where there are interruptions in Kierkegaard’s ‘becoming’ or Winnicott’s ‘going-on-being’. Winnicott (1971) says of play, that although it is exciting and essentially satisfying, there is always a degree of anxiety. Klein, also stressed the connection between creativity and deep, early anxieties. She states:

“creativity grows in proportion to being able to establish the good object more securely” (p.88). For Winnicott (1971), if this anxiety becomes too much, then playing is destroyed. If the child is unable to contain the experience, if, for example there are intrusions or anger from parents or others, then the result is mental confusion and physical discomfort. He believed that creativity is related to the “quality and quantity” of early life experiences (p.71). He wrote:

It is not of course that anyone will ever be able to explain the creative impulse, and it is unlikely that anyone would ever want to do so; but the link can be made, and usefully made, between creative living and living itself, and the reasons can be studied why it is that creative living can be lost and why the individual's feeling that life is real or meaningful can disappear (p. 68).

An early analyst, Hilde Lewinsky, has shown some insight into these concepts when she describes how she does not believe that filling up of free time with organized play is a major remedy for boredom. She writes:

Instead of ventilating his, the child's phantasies and conflicts in his own free play, instead of building up a capacity to bear the strain of manual inactivity, he gets organized into games and recreations which are essentially not individual. Free time is thus for many people a temptation with which they have never learned to deal. These people have never learnt to know themselves. The need is for enough insight and courage to understand one's reactions and to be able to be on good terms, not only with the environment, but with oneself (p.152).

Holm-Hadulla in bringing the idea of creativity back to its roots in a way that links these concepts, says that: "The concept of 'creativity' derives from the Latin 'creare' which means create, engender, bring into being, in biblical mythology creation arises from a void" (p.1204). He goes on to explain that "creativity is ultimately a necessity to experience oneself as a coherent and integrated being" (p.1206). In Winnicott's words, the ideal for creative living involves "not getting killed or annihilated all the time by compliance or by reacting to the world that impinges; but by seeing everything afresh all the time" (p 42). "Creativity is then, the holding on throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world" (p 41).

Boredom and the "capacity to be alone"

Winnicott believed that an important indication of maturity was "the capacity of the individual to be alone" (p.418). For the infant this begins with that requirement discussed above, of a space where a mother does not intrude, but the child is aware of her presence if she is needed. "It is only when alone (in the presence of another) that the infant can discover his own personal life; and to do the equivalent of what in

an adult is called relaxing” (p.418). Without an adequate amount of this experience, the development of the capacity to be alone cannot happen.

Winnicott has linked a capacity to concentrate on a task with this concept of “being alone in the presence of someone” (p.188). Like the preoccupation that is a feature of a child’s play, there needs to be the ability to withdraw “without loss of identification from that which has been withdrawn” (p.188).

It is this withdrawn state that Winnicott calls unintegrated. In this state,

the infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement. In the course of time there arrives a sensation or an impulse. In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be a truly personal experience (p.34).

The capacity to enjoy solitude is, then, dependent on the child having had the experience of being alone in the presence of the other. Eventually, Winnicott (1958) believes that the individual can internalize the other so they no longer need their actual presence.

In linking this to boredom Gabriel (1988) suggests that the child who is unable to conjure up the image of the absent mother may be the child at risk of becoming the bored adult.

Summary

Looking through a Winnicottian lens, as well as through the views of theorists aligned to Winnicott, what is central to healthy emotional development is the quality of the early relationship between infant and mother. Where there has been sufficient holding, there can be a facilitating environment, and the child is able to ‘go-on-being’, becoming their true creative self. Where the environment has been insufficiently holding, and/or there has been too much impingement, the child becomes reactive or compliant. It is this compliant or false self that is linked to

boredom. Similarly, Mahler's concept of 'low-keyedness' is also linked to a failed environment and boredom.

Boredom implies a disruption in a sense of time, and this has been linked developmentally to an infant's sense of helplessness, where anxiety around waiting has been too much, or too long.

Critique

A developmental view has highlighted the role of the mother/infant relationship in an individual's emotional development. Links have been made to where the beginning of chronic boredom might be on a developmental pathway. This is a useful and clarifying description of boredom, but just as a classical psychoanalytic view does not give such an in-depth understanding of where boredom comes from, this object relations view does not fully describe the internal experience. A combination of both is necessary in order to get a clearer perspective, and through this, be able to help our clients.

Conclusion

In looking at boredom through a developmental lens, it can be concluded that boredom can be both a positive, and a negative state. At a healthy level, boredom is an essential part of creativity, but when it becomes chronic, anxiety becomes overwhelming and the individual is not able to stay in this uncomfortable state and is unable to enjoy solitude.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Time travels in divers places with divers persons.
I'll tell you who time ambles withal, who time
Trots withal, who time gallops withal,
And who time stands still withal.
William Shakespeare
As You Like It

The purpose of this dissertation has been to consider boredom from a classical psychoanalytic and developmental viewpoint. Another task is to bring some clinical awareness of the different types of boredom and the affects associated with the underlying pathology of the chronically bored individual. The aim of this chapter is to reflect on these aspects of boredom, and to discuss the limitations and recommendations for further study. It is hoped that psychotherapists may gain a better understanding of their clients through a better understanding of the nature of boredom and awareness of when boredom is present in the clinical situation.

From my observations and readings about boredom, I became aware that research around boredom as a pathology was almost nonexistent within the clinical world of psychotherapy. Client's rarely come to therapy citing boredom as a major symptom, and that for therapist and client it appeared that chronic boredom was not recognized as having its own separate pathology as compared to depression or anxiety. One of the reasons for this, I believe, is the fact that boredom is so ubiquitous, it merges with the fabric of other affects. Turner gives another reason for boredom not being viewed as a serious complaint. She believes it is seen more as a lack of motivation, so the attitude is to "blame the victim" for their plight (p.9). Another reason suggested by Rinzler (1988) is that the characterologically bored person does not question their boredom; that their bored state is taken for granted. Boredom is not recognized as an "inner poverty that one might seek to remedy" (p.57).

Psychoanalytic views of boredom such as those proposed by Fenichel and Bernstein differentiate between two kinds of boredom, normal and pathological.

Looking at boredom through a developmental lens gave me a structure to build a picture of boredom as being on one hand an important normal affect, and on the other, to understand boredom as a pathology.

To express to others 'I feel bored', essentially means 'I feel nothing, nothing interests or stimulates me'. I argue that the chronically bored individual is exposing to the external world a deadened inner life, a profound disconnection from self and other. To feel alive the individual must have a feeling of existing, this means being able to live life creatively. To live life creatively we need to know we exist; to be before we can do. Often what is seen in clients who come to therapy is reaction to stimuli, rather than coming from an inner sense of true self and aliveness. Winnicott (1986) suggests, "withdraw the stimuli and the individual has no life". Lack of interest in the external world is a symptom of the bored individual, and as Bernstein (1975) suggests, "the capacity to be interested is an internal matter" (p.517). Conversely, I argue, the bored individual believes interest is generated by the external world.

I also argue that the false self is a major manifestation of boredom. As has been described, the evolution of the false self occurs within an environment that has led to compliance rather than allowing for the developing of spontaneity and autonomy. It takes place in the process of object relations, after differentiation and the establishment of the sense of 'I am'. What is often seen "is not the direct expression of boredom itself but the secondary manifestations of the frantic and desperate efforts of the chronically bored to find relief from their misery" (Bernstein, 1975, p. 515). I argue that chronic boredom is a secondary defence against anxiety or depression, which in turn is a defence against other more painful feelings, like fear of loss or abandonment, or anger and rage.

If a client suggests they are never bored, haven't time to be bored, I hypothesize that this is questionable. Boredom, as I see it, is part of our everyday existence, and is on a continuum from normal to pathological and always has an internal component (See Table 2, p.29). There is always a space between having completed something

and before doing something else. I agree with Phillips (1993), that boredom is a normal state in childhood where the child in “the irritable confusion of boredom, is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallize” (p.69). But as Phillip’s (1993) states, “to begin with, the child needs the adult to hold to the experience, to recognize it as such, rather than to sabotage it by distraction. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one’s time” (p.69). When the facilitating environment has not been able to be ‘good enough’ and the infant has not been able to ‘take his time’, through impingement of one kind or another, then the infant is unable to connect with his internal state. She cannot trust her own feelings and have the confidence to stay with the uncomfortable feelings, whilst waiting. As Phillips (1993) contends “The child’s boredom starts as a regular crisis in the child’s developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother” (p.69). The bored individual often flees from the sensation of boredom; the space is an uncomfortable space which can not be trusted and creates fear and longing.

In normal boredom the individual feels a confidence in the place of waiting, whereby the individual can act from their own internal spontaneous and creative place. When this spontaneity and patience is hindered by feelings of inadequacy and a lack of a firm sense of self, boredom can become chronic. If the individual has not been allowed to sit with the uncomfortable feelings of boredom, and to be able to remain in what Winnicott calls an unintegrated state, (where the individual can just relax), then the individual may not be able to trust that they are capable of this. It is what happens in that waiting which determines whether boredom is pathological or normal. In Phillip’s (1993) words, “the bored child is waiting, unconsciously for an experience of anticipation. In ordinary states of boredom, the child returns to the possibility of his own desire” (p.69). Rinzler states this even more strongly when she speaks of the characterologically bored individual who appears to be chronically and profoundly disconnected from all experience of his or her inner life. In Rinzler’s words, the lack of feeling or interest is because there is no self to be interested in. Along with Winnicott’s (1986) developmental description, of boredom as being unadaptive and resulting in reaction producing behaviours, a picture emerges of

boredom as a serious pathology, and one that Rinzler believes to be a hallmark of our time.

Work in the clinical setting

Clinically how do we recognize the client is bored, and secondly how do we assist the client to get in touch with their inner self?

I have found that the chronically bored individual, experiences being alone with nothing to do, with varying degrees of uncomfortable feelings. Bored clients are often manically defended against these feelings, so are on a constant futile quest, finding things to do. Winnicott (1935) noticed how the bored child may become fidgety or restless. I argue that just as these children cannot master their anxiety with play, so the chronically bored individual struggles to be able to use the 'creative play' of therapy.

Within boredom there is a belief that the external world is to blame for this feeling. As Winterstein quipped, "I am not bored, it is the others who bore me" (cited in Fenichel 1953, p.301). Another manifestation could be a bored client attempting to create dramatic external situations designed to evoke feelings. Boredom and acting out are ways of taking individuals away from painful feelings, and in that way boredom acts as a defence. With boredom there is a denial that the individual is responsible for creating their own meaning.

Clinically, a therapist may be tempted to either dismiss or to minimize a client's boredom as unimportant in terms of their work. I argue that boredom can become invisible, which is perhaps a metaphor for their inner world. There is disconnection rather than engagement. Boredom could be described as a psychic fog over a range of anxious feelings, so for the therapist there is first of all a need to bring boredom into awareness, both the client's and the therapist's. The tendency for a bored person is to either flee from the feelings or to present with a false self. In contrast to this chronic state of boredom, in its normal form, boredom is a place of quiescence and quiet, holding anxiety before doing. From this comes aliveness and spontaneity from

the depths of the individual's real self. "Boredom is the denial of the present moment" .

Rinzler (1988) believes that for our bored clients "as therapists we can point the way for them inward, to the wellspring of curiosity and resourcefulness that has been left behind" (p.60). By encouraging a bored client to trust her own judgment, we are encouraging a reconnection to creativity and to a self that has been relinquished in favour of compliance and reacting to stimuli. Rinzler believes that as part of this work, as therapists, "we must commit ourselves to our own personal work of becoming interested and resourceful, not bored; of becoming connected, not split off, from our own inner lives, our sensations" (p 60). Rinzler also believes that with this type of commitment, the therapist cannot help but "bring this attitude and commitment to patients, and thereby each of us in our own way, to the world" (p. 60).

For Winnicott (1971), psychotherapy cannot happen unless both client and therapist learn to play. He believed that creativity arises with the play, and he describes the 'joy' of allowing a patient to arrive at creative understanding, by waiting rather than attempting 'clever' interpreting. Patience is needed by the therapist to sit and wait for the client to recognize their anxiety or their compliance and to wonder with the client about the need for the manic defence, and to assist the client to find her own desires.

In a similar way Pizer (1998) in his work around negotiation in the therapeutic relationship, emphasizes how interpreting before there is a foundation of relationship, will be experienced by the client as "seductive or critical" (p.110). Pizer has clearly described how this 'too soon' intervening is mimicking the patient's early history of being 'mis-recognized', and having been so, the self was "annihilated through the blindness of the other" (p.112). When this experience of being mis-recognized is repeated in analysis, there is a "further reinforcing of the patient's defensively warding off of inner awareness" (p.112).

I argue that work with boredom is essentially about holding and waiting, or as Pizer (1998) has so eloquently synthesized it, the work is about “*containment, acceptance, and recognition*” (p.113). By *containment*, Pizer is implying the therapist’s containing of and surviving intact, a patient’s “plethora of moods, affects and manipulations over time” (p.129). By *acceptance* she is conveying to a client:

“I am willing to take your pain deep inside myself; I am willing to be confused, disconcerted, and unsettled; I am even willing, up to a point, to be hurt by you. I will struggle inside myself, and not expect the process to be easy or convenient or suited to my own self interest. I will be as patient, undemanding, non judgemental and noninvasive as I can be. I will work at our negotiations” (p.129).

The third aspect, that of *recognition*, overlaps this, and, as is mentioned above, might mean that the most authentic response may be the therapist’s silence, and his “tacit awareness that words at the moment would be coercive, intrusive, confusing corrupting or trivializing” (p.129-130).

This need for patience highlights how boredom, in a sense is a state of impatience. ‘When am I going to be gratified?’ ‘I cannot wait’. In the normal state the individual is waiting with confidence for her own creativity. Phillips (1993) talks about “not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself” (p.69). In what feels a close match with what Pizer has described, Phillips (1993) also talks about the unimpinging ‘container’ and the need to allow a client to experience the feelings of confusion and anxiety, and be given time to experience ‘being’. Containment of the client’s anxieties creates the opportunity for them to be alone in the presence of the therapist. Holding is crucial to ‘going-on-being’ .

Countertransference

In the clinical setting the therapist’s ability to use the countertransference is a useful guide in getting in touch with boredom, his own and the clients’. The client’s deadened inner world may evoke in the therapist feelings such as agitation, frustration, rage, sleepiness, lethargy, even a need to pinch one self to feel alive, or

stay awake, or there may be an experience of not existing, and wanting to talk. One response described to me by a therapist was of feeling soporific. To stop himself falling off the chair he found himself biting his tongue and pulling the hairs on the back of his hand.

Winnicott suggests that tiring and boring are related together, “as techniques of coping with inner stress” (cited in Khan, 1986, p.3). The patient’s struggles to “maintain omnipotent control over her inner reality” leads to an over-control of the commentary. “His narrative is a petrified space where nothing can happen” (Khan, 1986, p.3). For my colleague, the client’s monotone was a major contributor to his sleepiness. The therapist may be experiencing the denial by or a flight from the client’s unconscious feelings of inner deadness. Winnicott, (1935) said, “in manic defence a relationship with the external object is used in the attempt to decrease the tension in inner reality” (p.131).

Winnicott (1935) believed that it is the acceptance of destructive feelings that is being denied in the bored, depressed or manically defended individual. Pizer (1998) explores the work of Ogden (1988) in explaining how a client’s early experience of mis-recognition is re-enacted in therapy. The therapist may unwittingly react against the client’s unconscious projective identification, in various ‘mis-recognising’ and ‘impinging’ ways. For example the therapist may become certain of his analytic authority and to rationalize that the client needs a “more didactic” approach (p.112). Or he may lean on his “analytic ideology” as a defence against the anxiety of ‘not knowing’. Alternatively the analysis may come to be viewed as ‘bogged down’ and hopeless. This would account for the varying countertransferences experienced by the therapist. Of central importance is the therapist’s recognition of the real parts that are located within themselves, rather than attempting to “disavow it, to ascribe it all to transference” ...which is “to sever the patient’s emotional connection with us” (p.111). There is a need to open a “dialogical space for the potential negotiations of transference” (p.114).

This area of countertransference with a bored client is one that I believe deserves further research.

Other areas for further study

The two styles of boredom described (agitated and apathetic) can coexist side by side, but a predominance of one or the other occurs in different individuals (see Table 2, p29). I believe that there are links between these and attachment styles. The ambivalently attached individual may express a bored, neediness, seemingly dependent. “There’s nothing to do” pleading for someone or something to take the individual out of themselves. The more avoidantly attached individual, may express more of the agitated style, avoiding intimacy by ‘doing’. This may allude to the manic defence which Winnicott (1935) discussed as the bored person’s flight from boredom. This is an area beyond the scope of this dissertation, but one I believe deserves further research.

During my research I discovered a dearth of literature about ‘boredom’ as a major topic, and that most of the psychoanalytic papers were written from 1934 to 1979. In the 1980’s there was a series of papers written about boredom from a developmental view. From the 1990’s to recently there has been very little written. I question whether this is because of the subject matter, and the soporific affect it may have on researchers, and the feeling of ennui which pervades the mind when the word ‘boredom’ is mentioned. This is a possible area for research.

Some themes which could be developed at a later date and which were excluded from this dissertation are the connections between narcissism and boredom, and addiction and boredom.

Critique

Fenichel (1934/1953) and Greenson (1953) have both referred to two forms of boredom, normal and pathological. I argue that rather than there being distinct kinds of boredom, that there is a continuum (see Table 2, p.29). As Bernstein (1990) has

suggested, the “feeling of boredom is the same whether it be a transient feeling response or the manifestation of the internal dysfunction of chronic boredom” (p. 61).

In the introduction, reference was made to Winnicott’s well known quote:

If a person comes and talks to you and, listening to him, you feel he is boring you, then he is sick, and needs psychiatric treatment. But if he sustains your interest, no matter how grave his distress or conflict, then you can help him alright’ (cited in Khan, 1986, p.1).

In a different paper Winnicott has talked about how the therapist must recognize where a client is unable to ‘use objects’, and in particular to ‘use the analyst’. Because of their lack of creativity and spontaneity, the bored client is a fit with this client group. Winnicott has talked about the “joy of allowing a patient to arrive at creative understanding, by waiting” (p.711) (see Chapter 4). As Phillips (1993) suggests, boredom is a normal developmental stage, which requires a parent to be holding. For the bored client, the therapist will need to be holding so that the process of waiting does not become sabotaged.

What appears at first glance to be a further contradiction to this statement, appears in Khan’s (1986) introduction to Winnicott’s work. He quotes four case studies where Winnicott has referred to what is inauthentic and therefore boring “both for the patient and for the analyst” (p.3). Winnicott then says that “we have to learn to tolerate this counterfeit discourse in order to help the patient” (p 3). It is interesting to speculate on what further insights lead Winnicott towards what feels like a different view of ‘boring’ and to wonder if he is suggesting that psychotherapy alone cannot help these clients.

I question Winnicott’s response in believing that the client who he finds ‘boring’ needs ‘psychiatric help’. Is this a powerful countertransference to the client’s deep feelings of despair? Equally, I question, whether feeling an enlivened countertransference may be the client’s defence against anxiety and despair and an equally severe pathology.

Conclusion

Where boredom has become chronic, it leads to “inner impoverishment, passivity... and eventually self abusive and world-destructive behaviour” (Rinzler, 1988, p.55). Just as every dream is different, so every boredom is different, it has many faces. But the common thread is one of inner impoverishment that deprives the individual of a creative and true existence - there is a loss of self, there is a psychic fog covering over a fear of possibility.

In reviewing the literature around this topic, I have come to believe that beneath this fog lies the agony of early mis-recognition which has led to a need to deny what is true in the self. I also believe that the role of the therapist needs to be one of quiet holding and containing and of acceptance and recognition. In this way the client can have a different experience within the therapy space. This may be more like the ‘waiting’ that is a part of healthy boredom and from where genuine possibility can emerge. To give Winnicott (1953) the last word, this is the “transitional space,” it exists between “inner and outer worlds,” and it is this space that is the wellspring for creativity and intimacy.

Appendix I – Boredom Proneness Scale

1. It is easy for me to concentrate on my activities. (F)
2. Frequently when I am working I find myself worrying about other things. (T)
3. Time always seems to be passing slowly. (T)
4. I often find myself at "loose ends," not knowing what to do. (T)
5. I am often trapped in situations where I have to do meaningless things. (T)
6. Having to look at someone's home movies or travel slides bores me tremendously. (T)
7. I have projects in mind all the time, things to do. (F)
8. I find it easy to entertain myself. (F)
9. Many things I have to do are repetitive and monotonous. (1)
10. It takes more stimulation to get me going than most people. (T)
11. I get a kick out of most things I do. (F)
12. I am seldom excited about my work. (T)
13. In any situation I can usually find something to do or see to keep me interested. (F)
14. Much of the time I just sit around doing nothing. (T)
15. I am good at waiting patiently. (F)
16. I often find myself with nothing to do-time on my hands. (T)
17. In situations where I have to wait, such as a line or queue, I get very restless. (T)
18. I often wake up with a new idea. (F)
19. It would be very hard for me to find a job that is exciting enough. (T)
20. I would like more challenging things to do in life. (T)
21. I feel that I am working below my abilities most of the time. (T)
22. Many people would say that I am a creative or imaginative person. (F)
23. I have so many interests, I don't have time to do everything. (F)
24. Among my friends, I am the one who keeps doing something the longest. (F)
25. Unless I am doing something exciting, even dangerous, I feel half dead and dull. (T)
26. It takes lot of change and variety to keep me really happy. (T)
27. It seems that the same things are on television or the movies all the time; it's getting old. (T)
28. When I was young, I was often in monotonous and tiresome situations. (T)

References