Finding Something for Yourself: Exploring Boredom Through the Lens of Identity Development

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Abstract: Boredom is a complex human experience understood through psychodynamic, arousal, cognitive, and existential perspectives. Despite significant contributions from these perspectives, this paper highlights two key challenges to understanding boredom: the depth of boredom – whether it is a minor or significant aspect of human experience – and the role of personal meaning in theories of boredom. I propose an initial framework for understanding boredom by integrating insights from different theoretical traditions, particularly in relation to identity development. Drawing on the work of Erik Erikson and Ruthellen Josselson, I explore how boredom connects to the experience of Holding and how identity concern and exploration contribute to this phenomenon. I illustrate this framework with examples from in-depth interviews with adolescents and young adults, analyzing their experiences of boredom through life narratives. The paper also offers new insights into the long-term tendency of individuals to experience boredom – i.e., trait boredom.

Keywords: boredom, meaning, identity development, identity exploration, youth.

First principles, Clarice. Simplicity… Of each particular thing ask: what is it in itself? What is its nature?

The Silence of the Lambs, 1991

1. Introduction

Boredom is found in many daily life contexts: work (Loukidou et al., 2009), academic settings (Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2012), leisure time (Wegner and Flisher, 2009) and romantic relationships (Harasymchuk and Fehr, 2010, 2013). It may be found at airports, workplaces, medical facilities, and so on (Chin et al., 2016). Boredom may also appear in lab settings removed from everyday life such as experiments involving signal detection (Scerbo, 1998) or simply doing nothing (Wilson et al., 2014). Young people might feel bored at school or during leisure; seniors in care centers; adults at work or in relationships; college students in lectures or experiments; academics with teaching; and even boredom researchers with boredom itself (Finkielsztein, 2021). This wide distribution of boredom across so many different contexts and populations suggests that reducing boredom to a single, uniform experience risks overlooking its complexity and the diverse meanings it may hold for different individuals.

The experience of boredom involves a mix of distorted time perception, irritability, frustration, fatigue, passivity, dissatisfaction, disinterest, wandering thoughts, detachment, attention lapses, and meaninglessness (Raffaelli et al., 2017). You might feel bored if you have nothing to do or if you're stuck doing something you don't enjoy. Indeed, even after 150 years in the English language and over 40 years of systematic research, we're still uncertain whether 'boredom' should be used in the singular or plural form. Thus, it is not surprising that we have several psychological views of boredom – psychodynamic, arousal, cognitive, and existential – each emphasizing different aspects of boredom without being mutually exclusive; indeed, this classification is only one of several possible frameworks for understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of boredom.

This paper highlights two key challenges in the study of boredom that remain despite significant contributions from various perspectives and introduces an identity development view as a potential solution. This view provides an initial framework for understanding boredom by integrating insights from different theoretical traditions, particularly in relation to identity development. In addition, it offers new insights into the long-term tendency of individuals to experience boredom – i.e., trait boredom.

2. Existing Views of Boredom

The psychodynamic view (Fenichel, 1953; Greenson, 1953; Phillips, 1993) focuses on the discomfort arising from an inhibited need for activity. This view suggests that boredom stems from an internal conflict where a drive exists but is inhibited, leading to a search for an object to satisfy the need. In contrast, the arousal view (Mikulas and Vodanovich, 1993; O'Hanlon, 1981; Thackray, 1981) emphasizes the role of task demands and attention levels in causing boredom, with under-stimulation and over-stimulation leading to feelings of boredom. The cognitive view (Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Eastwood et al., 2012; Klapp, 1986) highlights boredom as a subjective state resulting from the individual's interpretation of a situation as dull or

uninteresting, or from underutilization of cognitive resources (Eastwood and Gorelik, 2019), leading to disengagement and a need for meaningful and engaging activities. Through a functional lens (Elpidorou, 2022), boredom is seen as a regulatory emotional state that signals a perceived mismatch between desired and actual cognitive engagement, motivating us to seek more satisfactory forms of engagement to resolve this discrepancy. Lastly, the existential view of boredom (Frankl, 1959) is based on themes of desire, meaning, and purpose rather than physiological arousal or cognitive processes. Some research explores existential boredom through qualitative descriptions of experience (Bargdill, 2000; Lomas, 2017), whereas other studies use quantitative methods (Fahlman et al., 2009; Heintzelman and King, 2018).

While each view captures a unique aspect of the experience of boredom, they are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary models, such as the Meaning and Attention Components Model (Westgate and Wilson, 2018) and the Boredom Feedback Model (Tam et al., 2021), even integrate elements from multiple perspectives, highlighting the interconnected nature of cognitive, attentional, and existential factors in boredom.

Arguments could be raised against each of these views separately. For example, the psychodynamic model only makes sense within the general Freudian framework. Repetition and monotony, per se, are not necessarily boring (Game, 2007). An objectively complex and stimulating environment is not necessarily interesting or meaningful (Hill and Perkins, 1985). Furthermore, defining boredom through changes in arousal or attention is circular; that is, it defines the experience by its consequences (Loukidou et al., 2009).

Aware of these shortcomings, Eastwood et al. (2012) suggested a definition of boredom based on a shared common denominator: an aversive experience of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity. In later work, Eastwood and Gorelik (2019) refined this definition by shifting the focus from attentional failure to the underutilization of cognitive capacity. They argued that boredom arises from a desire bind (wanting to do something but being unable to engage) and an unoccupied mind (cognitive resources not being effectively used). This reconceptualization suggests that boredom is not merely an issue of attention but reflects a broader failure to find mentally engaging activity. Defining boredom in terms of disengagement is reasonable but leaves some important questions open. For example, why does someone become disengaged? Why would someone be unable to seek out satisfying activity? Why is boredom aversive in the first place?

All the arguments raised above have some merit, but for the purpose of the present paper I would like to point to key challenges in the study of boredom that remain despite contributions from various perspectives. Later, I would suggest an identity development view to try and answer them.

First, consider the depth of boredom: is it a minor or significant aspect of experience? Arousal and cognitive perspectives focus on the everyday occurrence of boredom, often describing it as a common state resulting from low stimulation or attentional disengagement (Berlyne, 1960; Damrad-Frye and Laird, 1989; Mikulas and Vodanovich, 1993). Bartone (2005) refers to this as 'small-b' boredom, which involves idle time and a lack of stimulating activities. It is still uncertain whether these approaches entirely dismiss the experience of 'capital-B'

Boredom (or ennui) – a deep sense of weariness and existential discontent. Alternatively, they might simply classify it under a different label, such as depression, rather than considering it as boredom.

Regardless, arousal and cognitive perspectives provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of everyday boredom but may lack a framework to address its deeper existential aspects. Existential theories, in contrast, examine boredom as stemming from the meaninglessness of existence, yet their emphasis on boredom as a major life crisis can overshadow its importance in everyday life. Consequently, the study of boredom is divided between these two extremes.

Second, the place of personal meaning in theories of boredom. The arousal view of boredom focuses on a person's reaction to environmental stimuli. Thus, it offers a mechanistic perspective of human nature that does not leave room for personal meaning. Overall, cognitive theories also tend to be impersonal by focusing on difficulties in cognitive mechanisms such as attention. When personal meaning is discussed, it is often operationalized and objectified in self-report measures and lab experiments (Chan et al., 2018; O'Dea et al., 2022). While quantitative studies can reveal broad trends in meaning, they do not fully capture the depth and nuance of personal experiences. Personal meaning is subjective, and while group-level analyses can highlight common sources of meaning (e.g., family, work, relationships), they may not fully represent how individuals construct and experience meaning in their own lives. For example, The Meaning Regulation Model (MRM) (Moynihan et al., 2020) and the Meaning and Attentional Components (MAC) model (Westgate and Wilson, 2018) both rely on such measurements to show that meaning regulation operates through structured automatic mechanisms through which individuals regulate meaning.

Existential views suggest that individuals are self-created through personal choices and decisions (Frankl, 2014). Consequently, meaning is seen as a personal endeavor requiring active engagement with our experiences and the world, rather than the acceptance of external values (Bargdill, 2014). To create personal meaning, we are encouraged to set goals and envision a purpose for the person we want to become in the future. However, substituting 'meaning' with 'goal' or 'purpose' still leaves the question of what personal meaning truly is unanswered. From a psychological standpoint, meaning, goals, and purpose can be seen as distinct concepts (Damon et al., 2003). As a result, in discussions of boredom, personal meaning is subjective but either represented in group-level analyses ignoring individual construction of meaning in one's own life, or remains vague about what personal meaning truly entails.

2.1. Trait vs. State Boredom

Trait boredom refers to a dispositional tendency to experience frequent and intense boredom across different contexts. It has been conceptualized as boredom proneness, boredom susceptibility, or chronic boredom. Boredom proneness reflects a stable personality trait linked to attentional difficulties, impulsivity, depression, and loneliness (Tam et al., 2021). Boredom susceptibility refers to heightened sensitivity to boredom in specific contexts, especially in monotonous or unstimulating environments, and is often associated with sensation-seeking (Zuckerman, 2007). Chronic boredom is a persistent dissatisfaction that extends over time,

affecting various aspects of life, including work and relationships (Finkielsztein, 2021). While all three involve disengagement and dissatisfaction, their key differences lie in scope and persistence: boredom proneness is conceptualized as general and stable, boredom susceptibility is context-dependent, and chronic boredom is enduring and impacts well-being and motivation.

In contrast, state boredom is a temporary emotional state marked by disengagement or lack of interest in the current activity or situation. While trait boredom reflects a stable disposition to experience boredom, state boredom arises in response to specific situational factors and typically resolves once the individual engages in a more stimulating or meaningful activity (Kass et al., 2001).

The reasons why some people are more prone to boredom remain unclear. Brain injuries (Kenah et al., 2017), ADHD (Hunter and Eastwood, 2016), certain clinical conditions (Masland et al., 2020), high neuroticism, low conscientiousness (Schwartze et al., 2020), and lack of curiosity (Hunter and Eastwood, 2016) have all been linked to increased boredom proneness. This paper extends the discussion by examining whether identity development processes might also play a role.

2.2. Philosophical and Sociological Views

From a philosophical viewpoint, boredom is understood as a deep existential experience that compels individuals to reflect on their existence and life's meaning (Svendsen, 2005). It is often seen as a condition closely tied to the modern age, where the quest for meaning and purpose becomes particularly pronounced. Boredom is considered an inherent aspect of human life, influencing self-awareness and how we interact with the world around us. It is more than just a lack of activity or stimulation; it represents a broader struggle to find meaning and coherence in a fragmented, rapidly changing society. While this view is largely the foundation of existential views of boredom in psychology, a discussion of the philosophy of boredom itself is out of scope for the present paper.

Sociological perspectives on boredom emphasize its social nature, arising from interactions lacking engagement, flow, or effective communication (Finkielsztein, 2021). Boredom is a relative concept constructed through interactions, resulting from malfunctioning engagement with the environment. It occurs when interactions lack meaning or become too predictable, leading to disengagement and a longing for connection. Additionally, boredom can be seen as 'role distance', where individuals feel disconnected from their social roles and struggle to find fulfilling alternatives. This disengagement disrupts social rituals, creating a 'backstage' space where emotions can be freely expressed without fear of reputation damage. Ultimately, boredom reflects a lack of emotional energy stemming from unsuccessful interactional rituals and a discrepancy between cultural capital and its opportunities for use. While a detailed discussion of the sociology of boredom is beyond the scope of this paper, Finkielsztein's (2021) theory remains relevant to understanding boredom from an identity development perspective and will be addressed shortly.

3. Background for an Identity Development View of Boredom

The issues mentioned above suggest both a need and a rationale for examining boredom from a fresh perspective. We know that boredom decreases with age – older people are less likely to report feeling bored, and when they do, their experience of boredom is usually less intense (Chin et al., 2016; Harris, 2000; Hill, 1975; Vodanovich and Kass, 1990). Child and adolescent literature indicates that boredom is related to the development of autonomy, changing cognitive abilities, evolving relationships with parents, and the quality of behavioral demands (Caldwell et al., 1999), as well as the development of interest through attention regulation (Hamilton, 1981).

Another line of study explored the existential consequences of compromising one's life project (Bargdill, 2000). After compromising their life-projects for less desired projects, participants gradually became bored and adopted passive and avoidant stances toward their lives. The participants' boredom led them to identity issues because they no longer were actively working toward desired personal projects and consequently felt empty and apathetic. Despite these insightful studies, we do not have a clear view of boredom seen from a developmental perspective.

In the following section I would suggest a personal identity development perspective that may answer at least some of the issues. The framework is based on the works of Erik Erikson (1968) and Ruthellen Josselson (1996). Both authors describe the psychosocial development of identity or selfhood. That is, the conscious sense of self that we form through ongoing social interactions throughout the lifespan. Since the reader may not be familiar with their work, I will first give a short outline of their ideas.

3.1 Erik Erikson's Theory of Identity Development

Erik Erikson (1968) proposed that identity development is an interactive process shaped by the ongoing tension between self and other. As we mature, we demand more from ourselves and our environment, but societal restrictions can hinder our growth. Each developmental stage involves a normative crisis that requires adjusting to these constraints and internalizing them to facilitate identity growth. Erikson identified eight stages of identity development across the lifespan. In the current paper, I will focus on the first stage, which centers around the dilemma of basic trust.

During infancy, the challenge lies in accepting what caregivers provide. Babies learn to coordinate with their caregivers' habits, while caregivers adapt to the baby's needs. By the second half of the first year, infants actively engage with pleasurable experiences rather than passively accepting them. This development is tied to the mother's distancing as the primary provider. The baby may feel abandoned and experience loss, leading to pessimism about the world's ability to meet his or her needs. To overcome this negative outlook, the child must develop a basic sense of trust – not only in the environment but also in his or her own abilities. Without sufficient trust, feelings of abandonment and emptiness may persist.

The ability to trust the caregiver-child relationship marks the child's developing identity. The basic sense of trust extends to others and the world. Throughout life, trust vs. mistrust issues persist, especially during adolescence when awareness of a unique past and future becomes part of one's identity. Adolescents must navigate this challenge to maintain continuity and unity of identity.

3.2. Ruthellen Josselson's Identity Growth Through Interpersonal Relations

Josselson (1996), like Erikson, views development as a process of connecting with others. This process emerges from complex personal needs for human interaction. In this non-individualistic perspective, becoming entails bridging the gap between oneself and others through interpersonal relationships, shaping one's identity within that context. Josselson identified eight modes of relating to others across the lifespan. In the current paper, I will focus on the first and fundamental stage: Holding.

Initially, Holding represents a sense of security and trust that our needs will be met by others. Imagine strong arms preventing a fall, grounding the person. As development unfolds, Holding evolves into a symbolic and emotional form, providing essential support.

This psychological need begins in infancy, when a baby feels secure in the embrace of the caregiver's strong arms. Only when adequately held can the baby start to feel real and develop an identity. As we mature, Holding transitions from physical support to emotional and metaphorical connections. We can be held not only by physical touch but also by abstract ideas and institutions.

Being adequately grounded is fundamental. From our earliest moments to our last, we need to be held. The absence of this anchor, experienced as falling, evokes a terrifying loss of control and a sense of helplessness. This can happen at any age but is more typical of adolescence when the cognitive ability to experience a lack of grip becomes part of the identity crisis. Teenagers encounter the shock of betrayal, realizing that their parents cannot support them completely, and they themselves are not omnipotent.

4. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative narrative approach to examine how identity development was intertwined with experiences of boredom. Narrative research was well-suited for this investigation because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences, emphasizing how individuals construct meaning through storytelling (Lieblich et al., 1998). This approach aligned with the study's theoretical framework, which posited that boredom, particularly in its chronic form, emerged as a developmental phenomenon rather than merely a transitory affective state.

4.1. Narrative Approach and Data Collection

The study relied on life-story interviews as the primary data collection method. Life-story interviews provided a means to uncover how individuals interpreted and narrated their experiences of boredom across different life stages. The interviews were semi-structured, following a guiding set of questions while allowing for spontaneous elaboration and participant-driven narratives. This approach ensured that the data captured both explicit reflections on boredom and implicit identity struggles revealed through the structure and content of participants' narratives.

A total of 20 interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with varied life experiences relevant to boredom and identity formation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be Israeli, aged 16 and 29, fluent in Hebrew, and willing to reflect on personal life experiences in an in-depth interview. The final sample included 12 females and 8 males. Given the study's emphasis on psychosocial development, the sample included individuals from different developmental stages, ensuring that the findings reflected diverse trajectories of identity formation.

Interviews were conducted in a dialogical manner, meaning that rather than treating responses as static data points, the researcher engaged in an interactive process that encouraged participants to reflect on the connections between their narratives, self-perception, and sense of meaning. This followed Josselson's (2011) recommendation for conducting life-story research with an emphasis on the relational context between the interviewer and interviewee. Interviews were typically conducted in a quiet and familiar environment chosen by the participant – usually their home or a private room at a university. Each interview lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes.

4.2. Data Analysis

The analysis followed a thematic narrative approach, drawing on both content and structural analysis (Riessman, 2008). This dual focus ensured that the study captured both what participants said (thematic content) and how they narrated their experiences (structural patterns in storytelling).

First, thematic content analysis was conducted by coding participants' narratives for recurring themes, particularly those related to boredom, identity struggles, and meaning-making. The coding process was inductive, meaning that rather than imposing pre-existing categories, themes emerged organically from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Special attention was given to how participants described their engagement or disengagement with their surroundings, as well as their reflections on what made boredom aversive or meaningful.

Second, structural narrative analysis examined narrative structure, focusing on how participants sequenced events, expressed causal relationships, and framed identity transitions within their boredom experiences. This aspect of the analysis emphasized how individuals constructed meaning through storytelling. The study also explored narrative tone, such as whether boredom was framed as an insurmountable obstacle or a transformative experience, and identity positioning, examining whether participants perceived themselves as agents or passive subjects in their experiences of boredom.

To ensure analytic rigor, several strategies were employed (Creswell and Poth, 2018). First, triangulation was used to compare findings across participants and, where possible, with existing theoretical perspectives on boredom and identity development. Second, reflexivity was incorporated by having the researcher actively reflect on their role in shaping the interviews and interpretations, documenting potential biases and influences in a research journal. Third, member checking was conducted by inviting selected participants to review preliminary interpretations to ensure that their experiences were accurately represented.

5. An Identity Development View of Boredom

This section lays down the foundations for a discussion of the meaning of boredom experiences considering personal identity development. It offers a conceptualization of the experience of boredom in terms of the Holding metaphor suggested by Josselson. For illustration, I offer examples from the life narratives of three young people: Alex (18), Shirley (24), and Guy (27).

5.1. Boredom and Holding: Finding Something There

Alex (18) is a single child to a family of emigrants, born and raised in a large town in the south of Israel. He had just recently graduated from high school, and having nothing else to do, hangs out with friends and binges at movies and social media, while waiting for military service as an escape route.

> So, this town? It's like, super quiet, you know? Boring as heck. There's nothing going on, and the options? Slim to none. Life? It's on vacation here. You can't even… There's nothing special about this place. I'm counting down the days – it's quite frustrating. How much longer, man? I'm stuck in this movie marathon loop, hoping it'll end soon. Mornings? Zero purpose. Sometimes, you just crave something different, something else. Maybe it's time to explore elsewhere. I'm feeling a bit fed up. Perhaps we could venture out, have a chat over a drink, and discuss how monotonous everything seems. And as odd as it may sound, I'm actually looking forward to enlisting in the military. It's a way to break free from this boredom, you know? (Alex)

Using Josselson's (1996) terminology, we could say that Alex feels unsupported and inadequately held. The repeated use of negation to express emptiness shows he feels as if there is nothing 'out there'. This is also evident in that he hardly says anything about what could create a sense of action or meaning in his life. Josselson (1996) refers to the term there as the fundamental mode of relatedness: knowing that someone is there means that you are not entirely on your own. This mode of relating to someone cannot be further broken down and it engrains the nature of being held.

In this view, Alex's boredom is fundamentally an awareness that there is nothing there – no relevant activity, play, thought or act of the imagination that would arouse interest, thrill, or even diversion. No form of support. In this sense boredom is closely related to loneliness (Conroy et al., 2010; Kirova, 2004; Mail, 2022).

Recall the challenge described by Erikson of accepting what a caregiver provides and then actively engaging in pleasurable experiences rather than passively accepting them. The trust vs. mistrust issue persists throughout life and is evident in Alex's feelings of abandonment and loss, leading to his pessimism about the world's ability to meet his needs. To overcome this negative outlook, he would have to develop a basic sense of trust – not only in the environment but also in his own abilities. This would mark a development of identity. Without sufficient trust, feelings of emptiness and boredom may persist.

5.2. Identity Concern: Finding Something There for You

In Erikson's view, identity is a process of becoming, through interaction between self and other, a way of relating to things and people around you. Questions regarding identity are always present in the self, even if the individual is at times indifferent to them or even unaware of their meaning. For example, Alex senses that the boredom he experiences is somehow related to the

self and to his identity, even if he does not see their meaning as a dilemma of trust vs. mistrust. In this view, questions about identity are always on our minds.

It makes sense, therefore, to talk about one's concern with questions of identity such as trust vs. mistrust. Put differently, it makes sense to claim that any individual has an identity concern. The term means a preoccupation with what is relevant to becoming at some specific time in life. An awareness of what an individual may call his: things which feel close and relevant and cause a special sensation.

When listening to young people recollecting their life stories, it is immediately apparent that not all events, experiences, decisions, wishes and so on are given equal presence by the narrator. At any given time in the life story, some are more relevant than others. Their relevancy stems from the questions of identity with which the individual is preoccupied at the time. This is what makes them meaningful. Alex, for example, talks about the military at length and views it as an escape route from boredom. The idea of enlisting in the military supports him and gives him hope while at the same time revealing mistrust in his own abilities and his abandonment and pessimism about the world's ability to meet his needs. Had I met Alex just a few years earlier or later, the relevance of military service to the life story would be very different.

We could therefore conclude that boredom is not just an awareness that there is nothing there, but more specifically an awareness that there is nothing there for you, i.e., nothing relevant to the identity questions you are preoccupied with in the present time. This is what we should read in the expression 'nothing to do', where nothing means none of the things which feel close and relevant and cause a special sensation of being your own.

5.3. Identity Exploration: How Concern and Self-knowledge Develop

Being adequately held – seeing something there for you – is basically a passive experience. Early in life, the awareness that something is there seems to be enough to bring relief from boredom. This awareness is acquired in infancy and involves accepting what the environment offers. Babies learn to synchronize with their caregivers' routines while caregivers adjust to meet the baby's requirements. However, as the first year of life progresses, infants start to actively participate in pleasurable experiences rather than merely accept them passively. The passive characteristic of being held is gradually accompanied by an active one which is practiced and improved throughout life. As we mature, we shift from passively accepting our environment to actively shaping it in ways that align with our evolving identity. Erikson (1968) describes this developmental shift, noting that "the eyes, first seemingly passive in accepting impressions as they come along, have now learned to focus on, isolate, and 'grasp' objects from the vaguer background and follow them" (p. 100). This increasing agency continues into adulthood, requiring individuals to engage with their surroundings in a more deliberate and self-directed manner.

For example, if you passively approach movies expecting entertainment, like Alex, you might find yourself stuck in an unengaging movie marathon loop. However, adopting an inquisitive stance can make even a dull film captivating. You might analyze how the sound design shapes mood or how an actor's performance conveys inner conflict (approaches that I personally find engaging). Boredom arises when you cannot 'take hold' or 'keep hold'. When asked why

something is boring, Alex would shrug or say, 'I don't know, it just is'. Most of the youth I interviewed expressed a similar sentiment.

The ability to keep being engaged over time is usually related to self-awareness and self-knowledge. These develop with age through the process of personal exploration: a deliberate action of seeking and processing information in relation to the self which enables the creation of self-relevant meaning (Flum and Kaplan, 2006; Grotevant, 1987). Early psychological research looked at exploratory behavior as a way to reduce boredom or fatigue. This exploration was driven by a basic need for physiological stimulation (Berlyne, 1960; Hebb, 1955). In contrast, identity exploration focuses on lived experiences rather than behavior and on meaning formation rather than on arousal. Put simply, we pursue experiences that reveal something about ourselves. While various factors, such as nostalgia, social identity, and religiosity can sustain engagement (Moynihan et al., 2020), self-discovery and self-validation may also play an important role. When an activity no longer serves as a meaningful avenue for self-exploration our interest wanes, increasing the likelihood of boredom.

Exploration requires a sense of basic trust. To explore, the child must develop a basic sense of trust in the environment and in his or her own abilities. As the child grows, the ability to trust the caregiver-child relationship extends to others and the world. Not just people but also concrete or abstract things such as objects, ideas, and thoughts. This pattern exceeds the realm of intersubjectivity and encompasses one's basic relations to all objects of experience.

Throughout life, we need to navigate the trust vs. mistrust challenge to maintain continuity and unity of identity. Hopefully, we become more acquainted with ourselves and learn to recognize what may be there for us. Eventually, you reach a point where you can find something for yourself in almost any situation – even during faculty meetings or while peer-reviewing a paper on boredom for publication.

Exploration is crucial for keeping us engaged and motivated in any pursuit. It fuels our curiosity and helps us discover new things. However, the flip side is that our constant need for exploration can also lead to boredom. Because we are always seeking out the next novelty, we might become easily disengaged with things that were once interesting. This can lead us to move on quickly from activities or ideas before fully exploring their potential. It is surprising how quickly something interesting may become merely interesting and then dull.

5.4. Falling and Suffocating: Boredom Extremes

It is well-documented that boredom can arise either from having nothing to do or from being required to do something one doesn't want to do (Belton and Priyadharshini, 2007; Fenichel, 1953; Loukidou et al., 2009). At first glance, these might seem like two different experiences with distinct causes. However, the Holding metaphor suggests they share a common underlying factor in identity development.

5.4.1. Falling: An Example from Shirley's Life Story

Shirley (24) was raised on a farm. When faced with expulsion from school at the age of fourteen, due to academic underperformance and behavioral challenges, she decided to quit. What followed was a period of feeling adrift and lacking clear direction.

> Seriously, it was like I was climbing the walls! Everyone else had their social lives, homework, and schedules, and there I was, waking up in the morning with nothing to do – just going back to sleep, watching endless TV, or glued to my phone. It felt like the most boring stretch of my life. And guess what? Stress started creeping in. I'd think to myself, 'What am I going to do all day?' The school I went to was supposed to be good, even great, but for me, it was a total nightmare. Studying was never my thing. I mean, at home I was always told 'be kind and honest'. But hitting the books? Less important. I just didn't fit. I didn't want that for myself. (Shirley)

According to Josselson (1996), falling is an alarming experience marked by a sense of groundlessness and helplessness. Recognizing that the fundamental human condition is one of being ungrounded can create a sensation of falling, as our sense of self and autonomy relies on feeling securely grounded. At times, especially during adolescence, boredom can provoke similar feelings of instability.

Surprised to find herself alone, without a social life or any long-term plans, Shirley is confronted with the basic groundlessness of human existence. Although quitting school was an act of self-assertion, she soon realizes that her parents cannot support her completely and she herself is not omnipotent. Nothing is holding her, so she experiences stressful falling. She would have to pick herself up, so to speak, and find something to take hold of through identity exploration. Basic trust in the world and in herself is necessary for finding something there for her. For instance, she could look for a more suitable school, dedicate herself to a project, or develop hobbies. These activities can offer opportunities for exploring her identity. The more closely they align with her sense of self, the more likely she is to remain committed to them.

5.4.2. Suffocation: An Example from Guy's Life Story

Guy (27) grew up in a divorced household. As a child, he spent a significant amount of time alone. During middle school, he frequently felt bored in class because the lessons lacked social engagement. He found himself torn between wanting to be with his friends and adhering to classroom norms.

> So, like growing up, there's this point where you stop studying at home 'cause you're out with friends, right? So, you're totally disconnected from what's happening in class. You just float there… It's like invisible handcuffs, you know? You could of course just get up and leave, but you don't dare 'cause nobody does. (Guy)

Feeling suffocated can be seen as a manifestation of boredom when viewed through the lens of Holding. While falling symbolizes a sense of groundlessness, suffocation reflects being tightly anchored without enough space. In both scenarios, we experience inadequate support, but during falling, it's due to excessive tightness (Josselson, 1996). Guy truly desires to be with his friends and find anything for himself in the classroom. But unlike Shirley who quit school, he stays and feels increasingly confined and restricted.

The concept of constraint is widely discussed in boredom literature (Fisher, 1993; Geiwitz, 1966; Martin et al., 2006; Sharp et al., 2006). It means that given more freedom, your current pursuits wouldn't be your top choice. From an identity developmental perspective, however, constraint is seen as the result of ongoing tensions between self and other. As we mature, we demand more from ourselves and our environment but face restrictions that can hinder our growth (Erikson, 1968). Boredom is our reaction to these limitations.

Guy experiences constraints due to social norms that require conformity. When we compare Shirley's life story to this perspective, we realize how delicate the concept of Holding truly is. Adequate support is essential for identity development, exploration, and escaping boredom. However, too little support can lead to a feeling of falling, while excessive support may feel suffocating.

6. Discussion

In this paper, I suggested an initial framework for understanding boredom through the lens of identity development. Drawing on the theories of Erik Erikson (1968) and Ruthellen Josselson (1996), I demonstrated how boredom can be connected to the experience of being held and how identity concern and exploration play a role in this process. In essence, as we mature, we shift from depending on external support (such as caregivers) to cultivating our own sense of identity and agency.

The shift toward proactivity is marked by a change in experience from the concrete to the symbolic. Initially, we are physically held by a caregiver, but over time, we are supported by abstract systems like relationships, careers, and values. Simultaneously, another transition occurs: we start absorbing how we relate to others. At first, we rely on a concrete other to connect with, but eventually, we begin to see ourselves as 'other'. We develop the ability to support and sustain ourselves (be held). No matter where we are – at a health clinic, in traffic, or at a faculty meeting – there's often something we can engage with. When we inevitably get bored, we feel less stressed by it and can more easily retake hold.

This perspective on boredom is distinct from other psychological views by emphasizing the interaction between the self and the 'other' – where 'other' could refer to a person, object, or even oneself – and the processes guiding identity development. However, it aligns with Finkielsztein's (2021) sociological approach, which also views boredom as an emotion characterized by withdrawal from interactions. Specifically, two key components of boredom align with the identity development perspective: first, boredom is fundamentally linked to a perceived lack of personal meaning in a situation. Second, boredom is viewed as a liminal and transitional state, marked by a sense of being stuck between activities or life stages, when past engagements have ended and future ones have yet to begin. This 'in-between' state can lead to prolonged boredom if unresolved. Both elements are central to the identity development view, as evidenced in the life stories of Alex, Shirley, and Guy.

Earlier, I pointed to two key challenges in the study of boredom that remain despite significant contributions from various perspectives. To my mind the identity development view may help address them. First, regarding the question of how deep boredom is, the idea that boredom means not finding something there for yourself suggests that even when boredom appears situational, it might actually reflect a lack of personal relevance or meaning tied to identity development. In both cases – whether the experience feels trivial ('small-b') or existential ('capital-B') – the individual may ultimately feel inadequately held. The difference may be one of degree rather than essence.

'Capital-B' (Bartone, 2005) refers to profound experiences of boredom, marked by deep weariness, existential discontent, emptiness, and a sense of meaninglessness. Psychologically, such experiences are linked to questions of identity development. For example, if a student feels pervasive boredom in her psychology studies to the extent of considering a different field, her boredom might relate to questions of personal commitment. Profound life crises may involve inadequate support, leading to sensations of falling or suffocation.

'Small-b' refers to short-lived, aversive experiences of boredom, typically involving a superficial reaction to specific circumstances. Consider another student feeling bored during a developmental psychology lecture. The boredom might initially seem situational – perhaps due to the lecturer's monotone delivery or the lack of engaging visual aids – leading to cognitive underutilization and attention disengagement. However, the developmental identity view of boredom suggests that the student's disengagement might also reflect a deeper issue of personal relevance. If the lecture's content does not align with the student's current developmental concerns or sense of identity, the experience of boredom could signal a lack of meaningful connection rather than just a poor presentation style.

Consider another scenario: a boredom researcher participating in an experiment where they are asked to sit alone in an empty room for 15 minutes with nothing to do but think. While most participants found the experience so unpleasant that they preferred administering mild electric shocks to themselves over doing nothing (Wilson et al., 2014), how might a boredom researcher respond? Given their deep intellectual investment in understanding boredom, the researcher might approach the situation with curiosity rather than discomfort (see for example Lomas, 2017).

Second, regarding the role of personal meaning in theories of boredom, the identity development perspective expands upon existing models by highlighting how boredom experiences are shaped by an evolving personal identity. It emphasizes how personal identity influences what individuals find engaging or disengaging over time. Rather than replacing views that describe boredom as a response to environmental conditions or attentional difficulties, it adds to them by exploring the connection between boredom, identity, and meaning-making across the lifespan. In essence, to understand why some things are more meaningful than others for an individual, we should examine this individual's personal identity.

6.1. Prolonged Boredom Across Contexts: An Identity Development Perspective

As mentioned above, trait boredom has been conceptualized as a dispositional tendency to experience frequent and intense boredom across different contexts and has been labeled boredom proneness, boredom susceptibility, or chronic boredom. The role of meaning in boredom distinguishes boredom susceptibility from the other two concepts. While chronic boredom and boredom proneness stem from an inability to find personal meaning in experiences, boredom susceptibility is driven by the need for external stimulation rather than meaningful engagement. Thus, an identity-based framework focused on meaning is less suited to explaining boredom susceptibility.

Since chronic boredom reflects a pervasive disengagement from life, where individuals struggle to connect activities to personal values and long-term goals (Finkielsztein, 2021), it

aligns with identity development theories, which suggest that a coherent sense of self and purpose is essential for sustained engagement (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1996). Similarly, boredom proneness, which represents a stable tendency to experience lower intrinsic motivation and life purpose across contexts (Melton and Schulenberg, 2009), may express underlying struggles with self-definition and commitment to long-term goals.

This process may unfold in several ways. A lack of basic trust early in life may lead to emotional detachment and disengagement from relationships and activities; difficulties in exploring different identities and roles may cause people to chase new experiences but quickly lose interest, contributing to chronic boredom; and weak commitments to personal values and life goals can result in an ongoing sense of meaninglessness, even when engaging in activities that should be fulfilling.

These findings resonate with Bargdill's (2000) account of the inhibition of becoming, in which boredom blocks one's ability to project toward meaningful futures and leads individuals to experience themselves more as a determined object rather than a developing self. In line with this, the current model suggests that persistent boredom may interrupt identity development by suspending the process of becoming. Rather than engaging in identity exploration, individuals may adopt a passive stance, and as Bargdill notes, may even passively continue to become – only they became people whom they did not like.

At this stage, the primary role of the identity development theory presented in this paper is descriptive, offering a fresh perspective on how boredom relates to identity formation. However, the model also holds the potential for generating novel, testable hypotheses. For example, it may suggest that individuals with more diffuse identity structures are more likely to experience boredom, that boredom intensity increases when identity coherence is challenged, and that unresolved identity struggles could heighten long-term sensitivity to boredom. These possibilities lay the groundwork for future empirical testing and further theoretical refinement.

6.2. Trait and State Boredom: An Identity-based Approach

Trait boredom reflects a persistent tendency to experience boredom across contexts. Individuals high in trait boredom should be prone to both everyday ('small-b') and existential ('Capital-B') boredom. But while boredom proneness has traditionally been viewed as a stable personality characteristic, empirical evidence challenges this view (Gana et al., 2019; Tam et al., 2021).

An identity development perspective would suggest that boredom proneness should not be viewed as a fixed psychological trait but rather as a reflection of ongoing identity struggles. Individuals who lack foundational elements such as basic trust, autonomy, or personal commitments are more likely to experience prolonged boredom. The concept of Holding (Josselson, 1996) further explains how early developmental experiences shape one's ability to engage with the world. When individuals experience insufficient Holding, they may struggle to sustain engagement across different contexts, increasing their vulnerability to prolonged boredom.

7. Conclusions

This paper has proposed an identity development perspective on boredom, integrating psychological theories by Erikson and Josselson with qualitative life-narrative data. By conceptualizing boredom as the experience of 'not finding something there for you', I offered a developmental framework that reframes state and trait boredom as expressions of unresolved identity tensions. This approach bridges situational and existential views of boredom, emphasizing the subjective construction of personal meaning through identity exploration. The metaphor of Holding adds a nuanced understanding of how inadequate support – whether through falling or suffocation – shapes our experience of boredom. In doing so, I suggest that boredom is not simply a response to one's environment but a meaningful signal within the lifelong process of becoming.

Although the identity development view seems to answer the key challenges mentioned above, it has several shortcomings of its own. First, to my mind, the main strength of the identity development perspective lies in its ability to clarify personal identity and engagement in psychological terms while highlighting the significance of everyday boredom experiences. This framework focuses on one aspect of boredom, recognizing that it is a multidimensional phenomenon. It does not attempt to explain the physiological, social, or cognitive aspects of boredom.

Second, some may argue that using personal identity to explain personal meaning is like robbing Peter to pay Paul – merely exchanging one vague concept for another without actually solving the problem. However, in my view, the identity development processes described by Erik Erikson and other identity theorists provide the most comprehensive explanations of personal meaning possible within the bounds of psychology.

Finally, this perspective encourages us to think of boredom in terms of Holding. Understanding boredom requires considering its underlying nature. This invites the question what it is in itself. While metaphors can complicate our understanding by adding layers of meaning, they also capture the richness of the experience. A balanced view that acknowledges both the complexity and the common features of boredom may offer deeper insights. To truly understand boredom, we must engage with its layered nature while remaining attentive to its core essence.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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