

## LEISURE AND BOREDOM

SEPPO E. ISO-AHOLA

*University of Maryland*

ELLEN WEISSINGER

*University of Nebraska*

Inspired by recent reports that boredom is becoming an increasingly greater individual and societal problem, this study sought answers to the following questions: What factors contribute to the sense of leisure as boredom? How is the sense of leisure as boredom related to leisure and life satisfaction? Based upon the data obtained from the responses of 134 community residents, the results indicated, in complete support of the theoretical predictions, that leisure attitudes, leisure repertoire, self-motivation, and awareness of the psychological value of leisure were negatively and significantly related to the boredom perception, while the contributions of work attitudes and leisure constraints to boredom in leisure were significant and positive. The boredom perception was negatively (significantly) related to leisure satisfaction, but not related at all to life satisfaction. Awareness of the psychological value of leisure was by far the best predictor of the boredom perception, with its contribution to the total multiple  $R^2$  (.60) being one-half (.30). These results have important implications for those educators and practitioners who are making people cognitively conscious of the potential of leisure to enrich their lives.

Amid unprecedented affluence, personal freedom to match, and rapidly advancing technology, boredom has become a serious obstruction to the search for and maintenance of happiness and mental health in many lives (Bernstein, 1975). Boredom is becoming a major individual and social problem, not only to the middle-aged but to the young as well (Keen, 1977). A danger with chronic boredom is that it is a form of depression that may lead to far more suicides than generally recognized (Bernstein, 1975).

Despite its threat to the mental health of citizens, the amount of

We are grateful to James Oppenheim, Renee Stubbs, and Johnette Whitaker for their help in the data collection. Requests for reprints should be sent to Seppo E. Iso-Ahola, Department of Recreation, PERH Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

research devoted to the topic of boredom is astonishingly small. This lack of empirical investigation is especially surprising in the realm of psychiatry and clinical psychology, where complaints of boredom as a symptom are common (Patrick, 1982). Smith (1981) reported that it is difficult to find more than 40 papers published since 1926 that are directly concerned with boredom. Moreover, most of the publications are essays on the topic rather than empirical studies on the phenomenon.

One area completely devoid of research is the relationship between leisure and boredom. The leisure literature is full of conjectural evidence suggesting that many people have a "leisure problem," in that they are not equipped to handle the increasing free time at their disposal (e.g., Murphy, 1975). In addition, philosophers have speculated about the relationship between leisure and boredom. For example, Brightbill (1963) stated that of all threats which free time harbors for those unprepared for it, boredom is the most devastating. All of this conjectural evidence is underscored by a recent West German study showing that the percentage of people for whom boredom is a great problem in their leisure has steadily increased, rising from 26% to 38% from 1952 to 1978 (Tokarski, 1981).

These considerations and findings emphasize the need for and significance of the study of boredom in general and of the relationship between leisure and boredom in particular. A study of leisure and boredom focuses on one aspect of, and becomes part of, a larger research that investigates the relationship between leisure and mental health.

Ideal psychological health involves the delicate balance of excitement and repose, of moving toward unrealized possibilities and resting in past certainties (Keen, 1977). This, then, suggests that leisure should be optimally arousing for it to be psychologically rewarding. What "optimal arousal" means theoretically is that too much and too little stimulation are psychologically detrimental (Berlyne, 1960). That is, when the social environment provides too many stimuli, the individual withdraws; when these environmental inputs are overly similar to the coded information and experiences, the individual becomes bored and seeks novelty, complexity, and uncertainty. This is supported by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers's (1976) large data set, which showed an inverted-U relationship between the perceived quality of life (and leisure satisfaction) on the one hand and the level of arousal in leisure participation on the other.

From the perspective of optimal arousal, "boredom" can be defined as an information overload and underload. It is this underload situation that seems more appropriate for a definition of boredom in

the context of leisure. Thus, "boredom" is defined as a negative mood or state of mind that reflects a mismatch between "optimal" experiences and the experiences that are actually available to the individual. This "low arousal, drowsy sort of boredom" (Hamilton, 1981) tends to arise when there is low perceived meaning, intensity, or variability of involvement in leisure. In one of the few studies on boredom, Geiwitz (1966) reported that feelings of boredom are correlated with feelings of unpleasantness, constraint, repetitiveness, and low "societal" arousal.

The main purpose of the present study was to test a theoretical model predicting the dependent variable "boredom in leisure." The predictors were sociological and psychological. Age, sex, race, income, education, and employment status were sociological/demographic variables, the contribution of which was compared to that of the psychological variables. Based upon the theoretical and empirical literature, six psychological factors were hypothesized to contribute to the perception of boredom in leisure.

Perhaps the most obvious predictor of leisure boredom is people's general attitudes—that is, their attitudes toward work and leisure, or the work and leisure "ethics." Based upon recent theorizing about work-leisure relationships (Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1985), it was predicted that the higher the work ethic, the higher the perception of leisure as boredom, and the higher the leisure ethic, the lower the perception of leisure as boredom.

Leisure repertoire consists of all activities or experiences a person considers usable during leisure (Iso-Ahola, 1980). It has been theorized that "a person who has acquired a large repertoire of leisure skills and competencies would not find boredom as a great problem in his leisure" (Iso-Ahola, 1982, p. 65). This, then, led to a prediction that the larger the leisure repertoire, the lower the perception of leisure as boredom.

Awareness of leisure opportunities should also be significantly related to perceptions of boredom. It has been theorized that leisure motives are aroused when individuals think of certain activities that are potentially satisfaction-producing (Iso-Ahola, 1980). Thus, "an awareness of potential satisfaction" (Deci, 1980) stemming from involvement in leisure activities is critical for a person to become motivated by leisure. It was, therefore, predicted that the higher the leisure awareness, the lower the perception of leisure as boredom.

The perception of constraints to leisure participation is a factor potentially influencing boredom perceptions (Geiwitz, 1966). Such constraints vary from a lack of sense of freedom and of competence to a lack of time and money, and they are generally expected to be major

impediments to leisure behavior and leisure satisfaction (Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 1985). It was predicted that the higher the perception of constraints to leisure, the higher the perception of leisure as boredom. In addition, self-motivation was expected to be related to boredom perceptions. This hypothesis was based upon the tentative evidence showing that intrinsic motivation is negatively related with boredom susceptibility and positively related with boredom coping (Hamilton, 1977). Thus, it was predicted that the higher the self-motivation, the lower the perception of leisure as boredom. Finally, perceived leisure boredom was expected to be negatively related to leisure and life satisfaction; that is, the higher the boredom, the lower the leisure and life satisfaction.

## METHOD

### SAMPLE

To test the hypotheses listed above, a sample of 400 community residents received a questionnaire packet. Of these, 134 completed and mailed back the survey, resulting in a 27% response rate. Subjects' average age was 44, with 44% males and 56% females; 82% were whites, 12% blacks. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents had a household income of \$25,000 or less. Of all the subjects, 58% were employed full-time, 11% were employed part-time, 16% were retired, and 5% were unemployed. There were 30% who indicated high school (or less) as their highest level of education; 57% had received at least a BS/BA degree.

### BOREDOM IN LEISURE

An instrument was recently developed and pilot-tested to measure the individual tendency to perceive leisure as boredom. Reliability of the 16-item scale for the present sample was .90 (Cronbach's alpha). In addition, the scale has been shown to have acceptable construct validity (Oppenheim, 1984).

### OTHER MEASUREMENTS

Leisure ethic was measured by Crandall and Slivken's (1980) 10-item instrument, which has satisfactory reliability and validity. Work ethic was measured by Buchholz's (1978) seven-item instrument, which

also has satisfactory psychometric qualities. Leisure repertoire was measured by one question asking respondents to estimate the number of frequent (participation more than once a week) leisure activities. Awareness was measured by three items dealing with leisure opportunities, the contribution of leisure to life, and psychological benefits of leisure (e.g., "I have never really given much thought to whether leisure could be psychologically rewarding"), with subjects indicating agreement on a scale of 1-5. Constraints were measured on eight dimensions (lack of time, money, transportation, friends, opportunities; guilt feelings; poor health; family responsibilities), with subjects indicating how frequently (on a scale of 1-5) they were constrained by each dimension. Finally, self-motivation was measured by Dishman, Ickes, and Morgan's (1980) 10-item instrument, which has established reliability and validity.

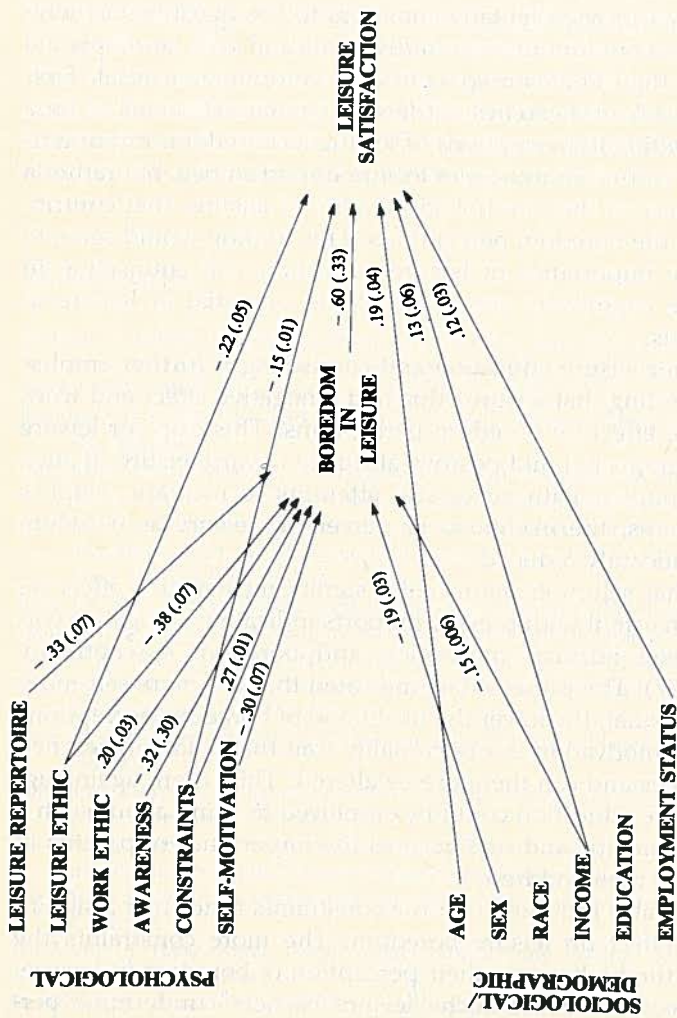
Leisure satisfaction and life satisfaction were measured by global items asking respondents to rate general levels of satisfaction. These measures have been found to be both reliable and valid indicators of the variables in question (London, Crandall, & Seals, 1977).

## RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the main findings of the study. Path coefficients are standardized regression beta weights, and the coefficients in the parentheses indicate the contribution to the multiple  $R^2$ . As can be seen, the six psychological factors, as predicted, contributed significantly to the variance of the dependent variable. The model explained an unusually large amount of the total variance (60%).

What is particularly important about the results is the very big contribution of the "awareness" variable, with its contribution to the total multiple  $R^2$  being one-half. Further analysis indicated that the two items measuring "psychological" and "life contribution" aspects of leisure awareness contributed significantly to this result. The contribution of awareness of psychological rewards in leisure to the multiple  $R^2$  was .26, and that of awareness of leisure's value to life was .05. The contribution of awareness of community leisure opportunities was not significant. Finally, the results also indicated that two of the six sociological variables (income and sex) contributed significantly to variance in boredom perceptions. Specifically, men and those with high incomes were more likely to perceive leisure as boredom than women and those with low incomes.

Figure 1 also shows the contribution of boredom and the other significant predictor variables to leisure satisfaction, with boredom



Total Model  $R^2$  for Boredom = .60 ( $p < .001$ )  
 Total Model  $R^2$  for Leisure Satisfaction = .54 ( $p < .001$ )

FIGURE 1

Psychological and sociological/demographic factors contributing to boredom in leisure and to leisure satisfaction (values are standardized regression coefficients, and those in parentheses indicate variables' contributions to  $R^2$ ).

perception being by far the strongest contributor ( $-.60$ ). Surprisingly, the effect of boredom on *life* satisfaction was nonexistent.

## DISCUSSION

The present data provide tentative answers to the questions of why leisure becomes boredom to some individuals and why some people fail to regulate their behavior so as to achieve optimal arousal. First and foremost, lack of awareness of leisure's potential seems to be a major factor leading to perceptions of leisure as boredom. Importantly, it was not a lack of awareness of leisure opportunities, but rather a lack of awareness of the psychological value of leisure, that contributed greatly to the boredom perceptions. This finding would seem to underscore the importance of leisure education and counseling in making people cognitively conscious of the potential of leisure to enrich their lives.

The need for leisure education and counseling is further emphasized by the finding that leisure ethic had a negative effect and work ethic a positive effect on boredom perceptions. This calls for leisure education programs to build positive attitudes toward leisure. If such efforts were coupled with successful attempts to increase people's leisure repertoires, the likelihood of perceiving leisure as boredom would be significantly reduced.

The fact that self-motivation had a significant negative effect on boredom is consistent with previous reports indicating a negative correlation between intrinsic motivation and boredom susceptibility (Hamilton, 1977). The present data indicated that the more self-motivated the individual, the lower the likelihood of boredom perceptions in leisure. Self-motivation is a personality trait that is largely learned from experiences and can therefore be altered. This, then, again suggests that leisure education could be employed to bring about such a change in personality, and underscores the importance of parents in helping educate their children.

The results also indicated that the constraints factor had a significant positive effect on leisure boredom. The more constraints the subjects had, the higher was their perception of boredom in leisure. This was expected because such "leisure barriers" undermine perceived freedom in leisure (Ellis & Witt, 1984), and thereby prevent one from seeking psychologically rewarding leisure experiences. A separate analysis showed that of the eight constraints, lack of friends (.16), lack of time (.08), feeling guilty (.06), and lack of money (.02) contributed significantly to the total multiple  $R^2$  (.33). The relatively strong

effect of lack of friends on boredom perceptions suggests a need for group leisure education. Such education would not only help provide information promoting awareness of and positive attitudes toward leisure, but an opportunity to meet others with the same concerns.

The unexpected finding of this study was the complete absence of the effect of boredom on life satisfaction. This is especially surprising, because the effect of leisure boredom on leisure satisfaction was highly significant. The finding suggests that the influence of leisure boredom is leisure-specific, rather than generalizable to other domains such as life satisfaction. Although leisure boredom does not appear to have a direct effect on life satisfaction, it nevertheless has an indirect effect on life satisfaction through leisure satisfaction.

## REFERENCES

- Berlyne, D. (1960). *Conflict, arousal and curiosity*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bernstein, H. (1975). Boredom and the ready-made life. *Social Research*, 42, 512-537.
- Brightbill, C. (1963). *The challenge of leisure*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Buchholz, R. (1978). The work ethic reconsidered. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 31, 450-459.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P., & Rodgers, W. (1976). *The quality of American life: Perceptions, evaluations, and satisfactions*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Crandall, R., & Slivken, K. (1980). Leisure attitudes and their measurement. In S. E. Iso-Ahola (Ed.), *Social psychological perspectives on leisure and recreation*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Deci, E. (1980). *The psychology of self-determination*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Dishman, R., Ickes, W., & Morgan, W. (1980). Self-motivation and adherence to habitual physical activity. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 10, 115-132.
- Ellis, G., & Witt, P. (1984). The measurement of perceived freedom in leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 16, 110-123.
- Geiwitz, P. J. (1966). Structure of boredom. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 592-600.
- Hamilton, J. (1977). *Preliminary report: Personality correlates of evoked response attentional styles*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hamilton, J. (1981). Attention, personality, and the self-regulation of mood: Absorbing interest and boredom. *Progress in Experimental Personality Research*, 10, 281-315.
- Iso-Ahola, S. (1980). *The social psychology of leisure and recreation*. Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Iso-Ahola, S. (1982, May). People today: Withdrawing, coping, adapting. *Parks and Recreation*, pp. 62-66.
- Iso-Ahola, S., & Mannell, R. (1985). Social and psychological constraints on leisure. In M. Wade (Ed.), *Constraints on leisure* (pp. 111-151). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Keen, S. (1977, May). Chasing the blahs away: Boredom and how to beat it. *Psychology Today*, pp. 78-84.
- London, M., Crandall, R., & Seals, G. (1977). The contribution of job and leisure satisfaction to quality of life. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 62, 328-334.



- Mannell, R., & Iso-Ahola, S. (1985). Work constraints on leisure. In M. Wade (Ed.), *Constraints on leisure* (pp. 155-185). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- Murphy, J. (1975). *Recreation and leisure service*. Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Oppenheim, J. (1984). *Perceived social competence, boredom, and capacity for self-entertainment*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Maryland.
- Patrick, G. (1982). Clinical treatment of boredom. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 16, 7-12.
- Smith, R. (1981). Boredom: A review. *Human Factors*, 23, 329-340.
- Tokarski, W. (1981, November 8). *Some social psychological notes on leisure, the meaning of leisure, and life styles*. Paper presented at the WLRA Leisure Research Conference, Twannberg, Switzerland.