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The Ambiguity of Everyday Experience: Between Normality and Boredom

Abstract This paper asserts that the growing expansion of the micro realm of social activity calls for the exploration of everyday experience, seen as ranging from the most extraordinary to the most ordinary. The paper focuses on two constitutive features of the ordinary type of experience, namely, normality and boredom. It conceptualizes normality as an outcome of people's potential to construct meaning of their ordinary experiences and boredom as a state signaling our inability to realize this desire. Both types of ordinary experience are in the core of everyday life and thus their consequences can be detrimental to the quality of social life. This paper's discussion of normality and boredom includes both sociological and literary works where these two phenomena find their rich expression.

Keywords Boredom; Experience; Normality; Role; Sense-Making

Everyday Experience as the Main Ground of the Sense-Making Practices

Analyzing people's experience, including everyday experience, has always been seen as the essential step in the realization of sociology's aspiration to provide account of the formation of human subjects and to offer a better explanation

for people's behavior. Yet, despite this realization and the recognition of the everyday experience's pervasiveness in our lives, this notion is still under-theorized. The main sociological approaches treat the micro-level experience "as an after-thought, an epiphenomenon, a derivative of social structure" (Davies 1997:386). The idea of immediate experience "remains one of the most trivialized and misunderstood aspects of social existence" as it is not well defined and refers to "lived" experience or "here and now" or is simply identified with the single experience (Gardiner 2012:39). Furthermore, effort to capture details of people's experiences often relies on curricular assertions as such attempts, after asserting that social reality is an experienced reality, claim that "experience" is about the experience of having experience and being "constituted" by it.

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Although it is not surprising that in the dominant sociological theories there is still "no way adequately to communicate the strange complexity and variable texture of immediate experience" (Ferguson 2009:7), there are many reasons why we should investigate human experience in the everyday context. Firstly, the sociological investigation of the "small stuff of social life" is important because "seemingly trivial interactions perform what is necessary to hold society together" (Davies 1997:376). Secondly, the growing expansion of the micro realm of social activity and the realization of potential costs of overlooking problems connected with this aspect of social existence call for the exploration of this experience (Chaney 2002). Thirdly, in the context of the growing inequalities, studying everyday experience becomes timely as this notion can shed light on consequences of such divisions. Finally, we should be interested in the micro-level experiences as "our work as social scientists depends on how human experiences can be understood, shared, and then communicated to others" (Chernilo 2014:347). Hence, the aim of this paper is to conceptualize the essence and complexity of everyday experience.

A task of bringing substantive concreteness to this notion—which is "something of an 'anti-concept': it is an 'ill-defined region' of raw, fragmentary, and essentially unmediated experience 'into which all concepts dissolve'" (Ferguson 2009:39)—is full of difficulties. To overcome problems connected with the "conceptual unruliness" of the idea of everyday experience, several approaches define this concept's ambiguity as expressing itself in the fact that this experience is at the same time triv-

ial and the main foundation upon which society is formed (Lefebvre 1984; Ferguson 2009; Gardiner 2012). In this view, everyday experience is more than its apparent banality as it is also the crucial source of all creativity and as it upholds "a depth beyond its triviality, something *extraordinary in its very ordinariness*" (Lefebvre 1984:37 [italics in the original]). It is inexplicable and yet vital, simultaneously "humble and sordid" or self-evident and rich in potential; it is both the mundane type of experience and the "space-time of voluntary programmed self-regulation" which offers the "utopian possibility" (Lefebvre 1971 as cited in Gardiner 2012:51). However, to comprehend the complexity of everyday experience stipulates more than only the knowledge of how the ambivalence of everyday experience expresses itself. To fully grasp the dual and ambiguous quality of everydayness, characterized by its both "banality, triviality, repetitiveness," as well as its profoundness (Lefebvre 2002:7), calls for the expansion of understanding how everyday experience remains "the alpha and omega of what it means to be human" (Gardiner 2012:51). Such a perspective, together with the argument that human life "simply is not possible without the quality of meaningfulness" (Barbalet 1999:631), constitutes everyday experience as the main ground of the sense-making practices. By stressing that people construct the meanings out of their ordinary experience, it focuses our attention on everyday practices as the main context and purpose to negotiations of the distinctiveness of their lives.

To highlight how meaning arises in everyday life and how its construction resonates with cultural

schemas already in place, the everyday's meaning-making practices are best viewed as a continuum of experiences; from experiences standing outside of ordinary, leaning into the unknown and disregarding the ordinary routines, through a core of sense-making activities, to experiences of meaninglessness. Such a scale of everyday experience comes close to Dewey's (1934:35) continuum of experiences which ranges from the most "unusual" or "completed" experience, like artistic or scientific innovation, to the most ordinary experience, like routine conversations. While arguing that all experiences have some transformative effect upon individuals, Dewey (1934) asserts that creative experiences (located at the one end of the spectrum) can offer potential capacities for change, the ordinary type of experience (located in the middle of the spectrum) can offer control and stability, and warns that experiences at the other end of the spectrum are without much capacities to generate meanings. In similar vein, Simmel's (1971:193) conceptualization of adventure as "a social form and experience that maximizes uncertainty while anticipating resolution" can be seen as the antidote to boredom. For Simmel, the adventure, like artists experience, but unlike ordinary life which is marked by sameness, continuity, and repetitions, is defined by change, activity, and its distance from the everyday of the flow of routine. Also Csikszentmihalyi (2000), who sees experience of adventure, creativity, or invention as "flow experience," seems to suggest that the experience of normality involves an appreciation of control and stability, while experience of boredom emerges with a lack of flow in life.

In other words, if we overlook for our purpose, what Dewey (1934) called "unusual" or creative experience, Simmel (1971) adventure, and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) flow, and hence limit our focus to the part of spectrum of experience where the ordinary daily experience is located, our interest will be restricted to the experience of normality and the experience of boredom. The focus on the ordinary everyday experience leads to viewing normality and boredom as the two constitutive features in the daily process of sense-making, with normality being conceptualized as a state of successful search of meaningfulness and boredom as a state signaling our inability to realize this desire. Such an approach can facilitate sociological accounts of the mechanisms by which the social sources of meaning come into play, as well as explanations of the dynamics of meaning creation.

By conceptualizing the idea of normality as an outcome of people's potential to construct meaning of their ordinary experiences and by looking at boredom as the state of meaninglessness, we can also gain an essential insight to collective life, as these phenomena are symptomatic of deeper social processes which consequences are detrimental to the quality of social life. The increase in our understanding of how people escape the unsatisfying experience of boredom and how they construct the meanings out of their daily experience can provide an essential perspective for phenomenology of collective life. For instance, it is important to comprehend how boredom establishes itself as people's dominant or even sole experience because such a situation, as frequent warnings about a new epidemic of nothingness remind us, can lead to

disturbing social consequences (Jervis, Spicer, and Manson 2003; Musharbash 2007; Schielke 2008; O'Neill 2014). Although boredom is a feeling experienced by an individual when "the overall meaning has disappeared" (Svendsen 2013:22), it can have negative impacts not only on individuals' well-being but also on the nature of social bonds, the type of social engagement, and the quality of social life. As some social and cultural conditions facilitate the transformation of boredom into apathy, alienation, despair, and social problems (Brissett and Snow 1993), the increase in boredom reflects "a serious fault in society or culture as a conveyor of meaning" (Svendsen 2013:22).

While arguing for the importance of studying experience of everyday's role in people's sense-making practices by investigating how people negotiate between boredom and normality, the paper aims to develop an understanding of these two phenomena and their relations to broader social and cultural issues. Because there is not many sociological works on these topics, in our discussion of normality and boredom, I shall also look up to a range of literary studies and works of fiction where these two phenomena find their rich expression.

Making Sense of Everyday Experience: Normality

Apart from a few accounts of people's quest for normality, which can be found in sociological works concerned with the constitution of everyday life (Ferguson 2009), the notion of normality has not been directly addressed within modern sociology. Yet, in the classical sociology, the idea of

normal profited from the high status and visibility to such a degree that the history of sociology can be seen as a slow process of rejection of this legacy (Canguilhem 1989; Hacking 1990; Porter 1999). The 19th century social physics' usage of this term made the idea of normal to one of the most popular ideas of that period: "Between 1759, when the word 'normal' appeared, and 1834 when the word 'normalized' appeared, a normative class had won the power to identify—a beautiful example of ideological illusion—the function of social norms, whose content it determined, with the use that that class made of them" (Canguilhem 1989:246). Following the first wave of positivism and Comte's borrowing of the word "normal" from pathology and identifying of the normal with an aspiration, harmony, and perfection, the idea of normal became "a popular doctrine in the nineteenth century" (Pickering 1994:411). Without going into details of the history of this notion, it can be said that the 19th century's concept of normal was seen as either referring to the average state or to the desirable state. With the rejection of Comte and Durkheim's notion of pathology, seen as an abnormal form in social life, the understanding of the inadequacy of the old definitions grew. Today the value of the notion defined in the two traditional ways is thought to be minimal or questionable. The concept of normal as referring to average is contested as amounting to nothing more than the statistical term, while the normative idea of normal is rejected as imposing order on variations and introducing a demarcation line between the socially acceptable and the unacceptable (Hacking 1990). Yet, despite the fact that the idea of normality has been reevaluated, the legacy of the previous usage can sometimes be

found in sociological texts. Moreover, sociological usages of the notion of normality still sometimes reflect commonsense treatment of this idea which associates the normal and natural in a value-laden generalization, as in such expressions as: “In the normal (Western) family, a man and a woman...” or “Normal people need oases of direct love from time to time” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014: 60, 48).

On the other hand, since the mid 20th century references to the notion of normality can be found in discussions of such sociological concepts as equilibrium and conformity (Parsons) or safety and predictability (Goffman). It was the functionalist sociology that replaced the old notion of pathology with studies of deviance and focused on the links between equilibrium, conformity, and normality. Claiming that social equilibrium “always implies integration of action with the system of normative patterns which are more or less institutionalized,” Parsons (1951:250) framed debates of the system’s normal functioning in terms of conformity, seen as the individual’s adequate and normal response to the equilibrium between the cultural system and the social system. The functionalists’ underlying assumption that conformity is a universal feature of the human condition, and therefore cannot be questioned, was linked to the observation that a rejection of conformity has dangerous social consequences. Merton (1976), who, like Parsons, viewed conformity to the established order of things as an individual normal mood of adaption, argued that when non-conforming behavior becomes normal, society then goes unstable. By showing how the culturally induced pressure to be successful “generates rule-breaking

behaviour as a normal response” (Orrù 1990:233), Merton (1976) asserts that when people’s non-conformity becomes normal, there are unwanted consequences.

Today there is no such threat from unwanted consequences of non-conformity as non-conformity is not perceived as deviance or problem. Already almost five decades ago, Auden (1970) observed that the concept of normal is “dated” as it ceased to have any meaning with fashion replacing tradition. This observation, that with the decline of tradition and speed of change this notion does not describe the reality, has been behind the social sciences’ rejection of the functionalists’ viewing of conformity as synonymous with normality. The discipline’s realization of the impact of the accelerated social change and cultural transformation on the nature of everyday experience has led to the recognition of a need to reevaluate the idea of normality so it could reflect the changing context. The understanding that normality cannot be viewed as being the same as conformity and the acknowledgment of the historicity of this notion have been implicitly incorporated into a couple of sociological perspectives, each trying to grasp the historical specificity of the experience of normality and integrate it with a more sociological understanding of people’s experience.

Both Elias (1994) and Foucault (1980), while synthesizing the historical specificity of the experience with its more universal understanding, indirectly addressed the dilemma of people’s experience of normality. They independently offer not only the justification of the historical conceptualization of

normality, but also allow us to address the issue of strategies and practices through which normality is ensured and seen as self-evident and meaningful. They illustrate a shift from the ahistorical perspective to the conceptualization of normality as “‘everydayness’ in a historically all-encompassing sense which affects ages and cultures” (Link 2004:36). Elias (1994) in his social history of the process of civilization, demonstrates how modern “civilized” individuals construct their sense of normality with a help of manners and self-control, while Foucault (1980), by drawing a connection between and the creation of modern forms of self-understanding, shows how people were subjected to a program of normalization. The intensiveness of the self-control at a particular given time in a given society, together with the norm of regularization, thus can be seen as an indicator of this specific society’s idea of normality and, by the same token, the “docile body” that has become “civilized” can be seen as an indicator of normal behavior patterns. However, the mere demonstration that a form of experience is historically specific does not constitute an interpretation of that experience. Moreover, the phenomenon of normality is not only a product of normalizing and civilizing processes, but also a result of the modern subject’s search for a meaningful grounding for action in the new context. Hence, a full account of the modern subject’s experience of normality requires a critical and reflective perspective on the dilemmas of modern subjectivity.

This task is undertaken by Goffman (1983) who identifies normality as a timeless aspect of the human condition, while at the same stressing the specific historicity of normality. He combines ac-

counts premised on a conception of the universal human condition with those that insist on explaining the subjective experience in its social-historical setting. Goffman’s perspective initially takes the form of a sociological generalization: normality is “constituted out of interactional materials” used by various social circles to reach “a working understanding” (Goffman 1983:9, 11). His attempts to clarify the rules governing patterns and habits of everyday life focus on how to find balance between social interactions and regulations which are predicated “on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints” (Goffman 1983:5). Yet, Goffman (1963:6) is aware of the dilemma of treating each situation as unique and at the same time as typical. Recognizing the distinctiveness of the context, he claims that in a given time and specific circumstances, the “normals” are “those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue” (Goffman 1963:5). It is the popular magazines’ identification of “normalcy” with the idea that having “a spouse and children” and living an ordinary life, attested by “spending Christmas and Thanksgiving with the family” establishes the fame for the measuring of normality (Goffman 1963:7). In order to communicate with others, people need to be capable of adjusting frames in such a way that the definition of the event becomes acceptable and does not threaten the future of their relationship.

Goffman’s viewing normality as a frame which individuals use to make sense of their circumstances is also supported by Garfinkel’s assumption that people, in constant attempt at putting meaning to the world, use self-replicating accounting

frameworks to “normalize” their view of everyday events. Garfinkel (1967:236), like Goffman, asserted that people—when confronted with potentially disruptive experiences—normalize discrepant activities by embedding them within new accounting frameworks. As a result of the new normalizing coda of ordering, what was seen as “not-normal” in the light of the old framework, will be viewed under its new alternative “as appropriate, normal or natural” (Heritage 1984:231). Similarly, Goffman suggests that the appearances of normality count for more than the actual occurrences because they provide us with a sense of safety and predictability. With normal appearances assuring people that nothing around them is out of the ordinary and life is predictable, everyday life takes on the appearance of normality. The frame of normality, adapted as a result of routinized practices which preserve the stability and predictability of the order, offers comfort by suspending the arbitrary character of reality. Like Garfinkel, Goffman assumed that the best way to reveal the scope of tensions between people’s desire for normality and their fear of its comforting power’s ability to induce passivity is by analyzing situations where people’s competencies to obey the rules come under pressure. When “normal” expectations are not met, common reactions are anomic and people demonstrate confusion (Garfinkel 1967:236). In dangerous conditions, when there is a high level of risk, people employ various creative accounts to render abnormalities as unalarming, concealing suspicions by acting “normally” (Goffman 1971:330).

Goffman and Garfinkel’s input has challenged the previously dominant use of notion of normality as

they proposed to view normality as a social construct which is negotiated out of social conventions and rules in the local context. While both Goffman and Garfinkel’s studies have developed our understanding of the importance of the predictability and the rules of the interaction order, today’s sociological theories bring to our attention the diversity of options, risks, uncertainties, and the growing level of reflexivity and individualization. Whereas Goffman (1974:49) and Garfinkel (1967) demonstrate that people’s unreflective attachment to rules leads to “constancy and patterning of behavior” as rules are the central analytic devices for reducing the contingency and arbitrariness of interaction, presently sociology is more concerned with the explanation of the transformation of subjective experience in modernity and accounts of people’s reflexive, goal-oriented use of the world. Sociological debates focus on new resources for the creation of meaning and upholding normality, with theories of the second modernity (Beck 1999), reflexive modernity (Giddens 1990), and liquid modernity (Bauman 2002)—all stressing the diversity, plurality, fluidity, and multiplicity of choices experienced by people in their daily lives. Recent sociological theories demonstrate how in the late modernity both traditional and collectivist certainties declined or disappeared and point out that the process of de-traditionalization, pluralization of the lifeworlds, and the emergence of contingent knowledge create a situation where routines lose their unquestioned moral authority. These various theories of post or radical modernity, while not directly referring to or conceptualizing “normality,” bring to our attention that one of the main feature of our times is the prevalence of multiples of normalities.

Nonetheless, sociology still lags behind changes in the status and role of the idea of normality in the contemporary societies. These new developments, however, are already well illustrated in recent works of fiction. For example, they are reflected in Smith’s (2000) novel, *White Teeth*, which offers a very complex portrait of the growing spectrum of normality, the hybridization of standards of normality, and the persistence of the desire for normality. The novel portrays the expansion of options available to contemporary Londoners to deal with the mutability, flexibility, and uncertainty. It shows how this new situation of multiple normalities results in the very conscious cultivation of hybridized standards of identity (Smith 2000:131). While illustrating the new status of the expanded normality, *White Teeth* portrays people as becoming increasingly conscious of their own reflexivity and the complexity of their contexts and cultures. It also, by showing migrants engagement “in the ‘battle’ between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be” (Smith 2000:516), presents how the ambivalence, shifting boundaries, and fluidity of diverse cultures recreate a desire for a normality. The London immigrants actively aim to discover and sustain the constancy and continuity of their daily lives in the context of the multiplicity of normality. Designing their “normality after all” in the unpredictable conditions, they try to overcome their worries and confusions as they swing between religion and secularism, between desire to belong and a fear of being “diluted” (Smith 2000:327). *White Teeth* shows how the complexities, possibilities, and difficulties brought by modern conditions lead to the growing negotiability and leniency in the ways people construct and manage normality.

Contemporary societies witness not only the expansion of the spectrum of normality but also the increase in both a very conscious way of raising the status of this idea and in new ways of employing it. These new developments, as reflected in the frequent references to “the new normal” and “normcore,” mirror the growing interest in making sense of new and confusing experiences. The term “the new normal” has recently entered various areas of public life and debates and is used widely in science, medicine, technological fields, literature, and media. Labeling the world as “the new normal” aims to grasp and discover the constancy behind new trends, from the climate change, through changes in the nature of contemporary labor market, to changes in the social life. The concept refers to situations where new norms, diversity, new notions of risk, and opportunities call for a new marker. For example, the popularity of series *The New Normal*, an American sitcom about a new type of family, or calling the Internet dating as “the new normal” both reflect on societal attempts to make sense of the new forms of interaction and new types of relationships. Similarly, the phrase “normcore” (normal and hardcore), which has been recently adapted as the main feature of a fashion style, shows people’s attempt to raise the status of normality. It promotes normal, ordinary-looking clothing as a way to find “liberation in being nothing special” because in our global world, with its expanding access to an enormous amount of information, any attempt to differentiate yourself from others is illusory. This style of “dressing in normal clothes” intends to create a sense of “normality” which does not aim to undermine “authenticity” but only to enhance a group belonging

(Duncann 2014). In other words, this new self-aware, stylized “normality” is not about embracing sameness in order to cover for “difference” (Sladen 2014). It is the fashion of those who, while accepting that they are “one in 7 billion,” do not worry that their “identity has dissolved” and that they are perceived as non-descriptive or anonymous (Duncann 2014).

The above examples of the employment of “the new normal” and the “normcore” not only reflect how these ideas help people to understand and adjust to contemporary changes, they illustrate the transfiguration of normality. In other words, they demonstrate that the status of the idea of normality is raised to the level of art form. Paraphrasing Danto’s (1981:v) statement about the transfiguration of the commonplace into a work of art by “a certain theory of art,” it can be said that today’s status of normality is possible because the representation of normality in modern society has been transfigured by “a certain theory of society.” In other words, the new status and scope of normality are connected with its role in representing the diverse, individualized, open, fluid, and changing society. The new status and wider spectrum of normality can reduce levels of frustration connected with feelings caused by the inability to manage normality and the high risk associated with breaking the existing conventions in order to gain some control and autonomy. Moreover, the transfiguration of normality, while lowering of the contradictions and tensions between people’s desire for normality and their fear of being trapped by its banality, also expands people’s effort to find ways to express their creativity and potential.

To sum up, the idea of normality, although not frequently addressed in sociology, plays an important part in our understanding of the social world as it allows us to grasp people’s construction of meaning of everyday experience. Moreover, today, after decades of the suspicion of the phenomenon of normality, we witness the increase in the status and the expansion of the scope of normality. These two trends are a result of the fact that people not only strive for the predictability and safety in the global, risky, and unforeseeable world but they also explore uncharted territories through making unusual practices into the flexible and not-restrictive set of social conventions which account for meaningfulness of everyday experience. Seeing normality as a collective achievement to which we all contribute by following the rules of interaction (Goffman 1983), grants this notion the essential role in helping us to make sense of the world around us and allowing us to trust others. The potential of the idea of normality is connected with the fact that in order to communicate with others, people need to be capable of adjusting frames in such a way that the definition of the event becomes acceptable and does not threaten the future of their relationship. In short, we can say that the normality frame, or the lens by which people interpret their circumstances and relate to others, helps people to make sense of the world by the reduction of its perceived complexity and unpredictability.

However, the framework of normality is not the only medium that has a relevance for grasping immediate experience. While normality is connected with a successful making sense of daily life, boredom, which is located on the end of the spectrum of ordinary life, can be seen as a failure of sense-mak-

ing practices. Yet, normality and boredom are not contradictory as they are, as two aspects of the same reality, the constitutive features of everyday experience. However, even though they are connected through the routines of social relations and practices, as well as through people’s desire for meaning, they differ in that normality speaks to people’s potential to construct meaning, while boredom is connected with limitations in our ability to realize this desire. Then again, their relationships are further complicated when high levels of the unsatisfying experience of boredom are normalized. Since the “normalcy” of such situations (Musharbash 2007:307) is behind many social problems, an examination of the root of boredom is of enormous social importance.

Meaninglessness of Everyday Experience: Boredom

Boredom, like normality, is a taken-for-granted part of everyday life. Being a rudimentary experience of human life, it is a very ambiguous and socially significant phenomenon. As the one of core conditions of ordinary life, boredom cannot be easily escaped even with the digital age’s promises. Despite “Google being so boredom-averse that it seems to change its logo every day,” Facebook’s offering of a “more connected world,” and Apple’s guarantees that its latest gadget could do everything “twice as fast” (Morozov 2013), the boredom’s presence and its implications for both individual and collective well-being cannot be overlooked.

The ambiguity of the concept of boredom is reflected in the convoluted evolution of the notion’s mean-

ings and the varieties of its definitions. The long history of this phenomenon can be traced back to the antiquity’s notion of *acedia*, conceived by Evagrius Ponticus (c. 345-399) as “being demonic” (Svendsen 2013:50), linked to the spiritual disintegration and viewed as having moral implications (Toohey 1990). The concept of *acedia* was later used to describe the mood of idleness and burn-out among medieval monks (Harré 1986:13). In the Renaissance, it was replaced by the term of melancholy, which was transformed by Ficino, a neo-Platonist, from the medieval idea of melancholy, understood as suffering, sin, and sadness, into the mark of genius (Perlow 1995). It found its most famous expression in Robert Burton’s 17th-century book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. The evolution of the notion of boredom continued through the 18th century, where boredom was popularized under the French name of *ennui*, to the 19th century’s historical account which paid attention to the connection between boredom and its broader cultural and social context (Dalle Pezze and Salzani 2009). By the early 20th century in humanities and social science the experience of boredom had become to be seen as an outcome of modernity’s crisis of meaning.

The ambiguity of the idea of boredom is also reflected by the diversity of conceptualizations of this notion. The definitions of boredom range from philosophical to behavioral, with the first type best illustrated by Heidegger’s phenomenological viewing of profound boredom as a mood of experience which reveals everyday’s nothingness and emptiness and raises the questions of being and authenticity (Goodstein 2005:289-297), and the second type of definitions exemplified by Otto Fenichel’s (1953:292)

conceptualization of boredom as “an unpleasurable experience of a lack of impulse” which is derived from inadequacy of “the external world” (Fenichel 1953:301). The majority of approaches, while suggesting complexity of the experience of boredom, assume “its inevitability” (Spacks 1995:5). Boredom, like normality, is viewed as a taken-for-granted condition which is “integral to the process of taking one’s time” (Phillips 1993:69). Moreover, it is commonly accepted that boredom has external sources and that many features of modern society, including the processes of individualization, technological development, consumerism, the spread of leisure time, are blamed for this unsatisfactory experience (Klapp 1986; Spacks 1995; Conrad 1997; Jarvis, Spicer, and Manson 2003). Since boredom could be a result of either overload or under-stimulation, this ubiquitous of boredom experience seems to suggest “no need for explanation as it simply exists” (Spacks 1995:272).

The phenomenon of boredom has never been a popular topic in sociological literature because of sociology classics’ faith in the optimistic trajectory of progress. Moreover, boredom still tends to be identified as subjective malaise and therefore it is viewed as a topic more relevant for psychology, medicine, psychiatry, and education. However, several classical sociological concepts, such as alienation (Marx), anomie (Durkheim), and disenchantment (Weber), can be seen as indirectly pointing out to boredom as a cultural and historical phenomenon reflecting the problem of the modern subject unable to find a meaningful grounding for action in the rationalized, bureaucratized, and modernized capitalist world. Also sociologists who iden-

tified the transformation of subjective experience in modernity as being symptomatic of the loss of meaning come very close to the topic of boredom. For example, although boredom is not at the center of Simmel’s (2002) attention, he nonetheless touches on this phenomenon when referring to a blasé attitude and reflecting on meaninglessness of the world. Simmel’s notion of blasé attitude can be seen as “an insincere boredom used to shield of fantasy of stable individuality from the destabilizing effect of too much stimuli and possibilities” (Game and Metcalfe 1996:28) and as such a part of a broader approach to boredom as an outcome of modernity’s crisis of meaning. Hence, the sociologists who contributed to a debate on the nature of modernity have at the same time, although indirectly, enhanced the recognition of the idea of boredom as one of the aspects of modern human condition, the view already popular in the literary circles (Spacks 1995). However, within this dominant in social and literary studies’ conceptualization of the link between boredom and the main feature of modernity, there are two distinctive stands.

The first approach, which sees the experience of boredom as the burden of the modern man, follows Max Weber’s “disenchantment of the world” idea and was later taken up by the Frankfurt School. This way of interpreting the boredom’s emergence in modern societies is best expressed by Benjamin’s (1968:159) view of boredom, or “the increasing atrophy of experience,” as the cost we pay for our addiction to the endless streams of information and the instant experienced. The “epidemic of boredom” reflects a distinctiveness of modern societies in which “the older narration is replaced by information and

information by sensation” (Benjamin 1999:33). With this trend’s continuous acceleration, with increases in endless and empty repetitions, boredom erodes the modernist idea of meaningful, creative, and engaged participation in the construction of everyday life. For the perspective which sees boredom as a malaise of modernity, boredom has become an “all-purpose index of dissatisfaction” (Spacks 1995:249). In other words, under the standardizing conditions of modernity, boredom has come to be seen as the “greatest source of unhappiness” (Nisbet 1982:28). The conceptualization of boredom as the modern subject’s burden underlies many of the Frankfurt School’s observations about how this negative feature of the human condition grew with modern life and their critique of the emptiness of consumption, alienation at work, and the emptiness and sameness of free time (Adorno 1991). Also Merton’s (1968:188) idea of retreatism as “a state of psychic passivity in response to some discernible extent of anomie” seems to be an approximation of what could be perceived as one of boredom’s negative consequences.

The second approach, in contrast to the first one, proclaims boredom to be the “privilege” of modern man (Svendsen 2013:21). While claiming that with the expansion of leisure time and democratization of boredom the amount of boredom has increased dramatically in modernity, this stand insists that boredom is a source of new opportunities. It is seen not only as the experience caused by the breakdown of older ways of being in the world but also a source of change and creativity. For example, Lepenies (1992), who sees democratized, modern boredom as being born out of reflection about

meaningfulness of the world, asserts that boredom is behind projects of change as people’s desire to dispel boredom leads to reflections on imperfections of the world and consequently to creative ways of thinking and acting. When Lepenies (1992) proposes that boredom is a normal response to situations of powerlessness and the failure of purposeful meaning, he also hopes that it motivates agents to act against social orders that inhibit them from acting meaningfully. This line of argument that stresses that attempts to escape from boredom can enhance creativity and imagination can also be found in Lefebvre’s (1984) assertion that intrinsic to our experience of modernity is the realization that boredom, alongside its negative potentials, is also the experience full of possibilities.

These two accounts of boredom share the conceptualization of boredom as a big problem associated with the crisis of meaning which is “deeply *assumed* in our culture” (Spacks 1995:272 [italics in the original]). Another similarity between the two discussed perspectives is that both approaches—by placing boredom within everyday experience and by viewing it in the context of the process of meaning construction—assert that boredom can be conquered “via constructing meaning of daily life” (Svendsen 2013:57). These perspectives also agree that boredom, with all its ambiguity, stands in a complex relation to social order because it is social forces that both produce and alleviate boredom. The main difference between the perspectives refers to the boredom’s impact, as according to the first stand, boredom’s function is to abandon us to “experience without quality” (Goodstein 2005), while according to the second one, boredom can

inspire creative action and promote social change and meaning construction (Lepenies 1992).

The identification of boredom as a problem of meaningfulness is only one of the approaches behind sociologists' interest in studying this notion. Particularly the emergence of empirical sociological research on boredom can be attributed to the interactionist interpretation of boredom as role quitting and communicational phenomenon. This type of study has also contributed to the expansion of debates of boredom's consequences and discussions whether we should frame boredom as deprivation or saturation. Following Mead's idea on how an individual's experience takes on meaning, Brissett and Snow (1993:237) conceptualized boredom as "an interactional phenomenon that is inextricably connected to social rhythm," while Darden and Marks (1985) defined boredom as the emotional experience of role distance or detachment of the actor from the role. While viewing boredom as connected with a lack of the sense of anticipation and the dominance of feelings that time is stretched endlessly, Brissett and Snow (1993:242) focused on the functions of communication about boredom, seen as being useful in establishing and maintaining a sense of self in interaction with others, establishing the superiority or presenting one's role distance, and in allowing "the individual to engage in potentially self-discrediting activities while at the same time saving face." Their empirical study shows that boredom is able to motivate not only troubling but also constructive actions as it "may enable a stalled self to get moving, to once again experience the flow and momentum of life. In this paradoxical sense, then boredom can be energiz-

ing; it can prod the individual into setting up lines of activity that establish some sort of future" (Brissett and Snow 1993:243).

Also Darden and Marks's (1999) study illustrates the boredom's ability to stimulate both positive and negative change. Their empirical results prompted them to view boredom as performing various functions and tied to the situation in which there is a lack of excitement, or no anticipation of future or nothing to do. While further developing their original symbolic interactionist definition of boredom by incorporating Goffman's (1967) dramaturgical analogy, Darden and Marks (1999:26) proposed a dramaturgical conceptualization of boredom as "the socially disvalued emotion we experience in a setting where the drama fails for some reasons." Their research produced a long list of reasons and situations which elicit boredom, such as too familiar scripts, undesirable roles, the quality of the role available, a lack of the possibility of negotiation roles and distance from roles, and "a lack of a role, any role at all" (Darden and Marks 1999:26). Many of their respondents, while relating boredom to "the conditions under which action and coherence may be lacking," expressed desires for more constructive actions by saying they "wanted to do something," although their situation did not always allow to do it (Darden and Marks 1999:20). However the other participants, while connecting boredom to the situation that does not have a future, emphasize that boredom is the feeling of "having no intention or purpose" (Darden and Marks 1999:26). The interactionist conceptualization of boredom emphasizes the actors' perception of the meaninglessness of activities or situations,

while suggesting that boredom could stimulate various types of action.

This recognition of the contradictory potentials of boredom and linking boredom to individual interpretations of one's situations are common features of many other empirical studies on boredom. The conceptualization of boredom as related to people's expectations, seen as influenced by culture, and the emphases on the fact that opportunities to escape boredom are shaped not only by personal dispositions but also by the quality of social roles, situations, and resources resulted in many sociological investigations of boredom's links with social forces. In such studies, boredom is seen as "a fundamentally negative subjective state where the individual experiences little interest in what is currently happening they see" (Conrad 1997:467) and which is produced by the nature of social contexts. This type of research also shows that boredom can lead to social problems and therefore it is the necessity to be tackled. For example, Jervis, Spicer, and Manson's (2003) study of boredom in the American Indian reservation led them to warn against negative consequences of boredom, viewed as a state of alienation for both individual and group life. While accepting that boredom ultimately is a problem of meaning, Jervis, Spicer, and Manson (2003) illustrated the relationship between boredom and "troubles" (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and illegal activities). Their participants' linked boredom to the perception that "there was nothing to do on the reservation due to unemployment, scarce recreational options, and lack of transportation" (Jervis, Spicer, and Manson 2003:52). The study's comparison of the accounts

of bored participants and participations who were meaningfully engaged with positive aspects of life allowed the authors to frame boredom as deprivation and stressed "the inability of trouble to serve as viable long-term antidote to boredom" as the negative impact of boredom, drinking, or other troubles only temporarily "distract people from the suffering of nothingness" (Jervis, Spicer, and Manson 2003:53).

Indeed, several empirical investigations, while connecting the increase in boredom's dehumanizing and alienating powers with a lack of resources, also proposed that boredom's caused troubles themselves are roots of further intensification of feelings of hopelessness and inactivity. Such a state of alienation and discontent, produced by misaligned expectations, emphasizes again a question of negative consequences of the experience which "springs from a lack of meaning" (Svendson 2013:154). For instance, observing boredom's connection to unfulfilled aspirations for a better and more exciting life in a context when time is the only thing that is available in excess, Schielke (2008:67), in his study on boredom and the experience of time among young men in contemporary rural Egypt, suggests that "the solution to boredom is doing something meaningful." Although boredom is a key experience in the village where life is intrinsically monotonic, the young men do not attribute it to monotony, as being bored requires the capacity to aim for more and to become aware that there is an alternative to the monotony (Schielke 2008:257). Their accounts of boredom "highlight repetition and frustration as the key causes of boredom, and a perpetual sense of pointlessness and despair as its manifestation" (Schielke

2008:256). However, even their aim or dream of escape, which leads them to “subordinate all activities to merely waiting to get out, itself becomes a factor of boredom” (Schielke 2008:260).

Also the exploration of boredom and the practice of drug use among young Scottish men shows how the context and its resources influence the nature and availability of activities for alleviating boredom (Pavis and Cunningham-Burley 1999). Similar observation can be found in Wegner’s (2011) empirical study of young school dropouts’ experience of boredom, which they identified as the lack of meaning, monotony, and repetitiveness of everyday experience. This investigation shows that leisure boredom adds to risk factors influencing adolescents’ well-being, engagement, and positive performance in all spheres of life. Pointing to the links between experience of boredom and the social deprivation, the research demonstrates that these boys “were bored in their free time because they had nothing to do” and that they “felt that boredom was part of life, although some perceived it to be ‘dangerous’ because it often led to risky behaviour” (Wegner 2011). While noticing that these youngsters’ needs were not met by their environment, Wegner (2011) also notes that some of the participants wished “for constructive meaningful free time activities” as “boredom provokes the desire to engage, and find meaning, in a constructive way.”

However, the realization of such desires, as many studies demonstrate, does not become easier in contemporary societies. In the light of the scale of problem of social inequality, with “have-nots” in-

creasingly separated from “haves” in terms of various activities, from cultural participations to sports and after school activities (Putnam 2015), the modern crisis of meaning indicates also disengagement from the mainstream of society. The emphases on boredom’s ties to the experience of exclusion from practices of consumption and on traumatizing consequences of the feeling of deprivation in a moment of heightened consumerism can be found in O’Neill’s (2014) ethnographic study of Bucharest’s homeless. O’Neill (2014) points out that boredom, seen as a persistent form of social suffering, is structured by the politics of consumption in post-communist countries and deepened by the crisis in the global economy. Chronic under-consumption and downward mobility left the homeless defenseless against boredom, viewed “as an effective state that registers within the modality of time the newly homeless” (O’Neill 2014:9). Boredom “is something to fear” as it increases people’s sense of alienation from work and home, as well as their feelings of being cast aside (O’Neill 2014:11).

Without equal opportunities to escape boredom, from motivational, through educational, to financial, those at the bottom in unequal societies are marginalized and excluded. Being in such “traumatizing social relationship born out of having been cast aside” (O’Neill 2014:24) could have a lasting and painful social consequences. Such warnings against the detrimental consequences of boredom are also well-illustrated by literary works which always play a crucial role in representing boredom. For instance, Louatah’s (2012-2014) novel, *Les Sauvages*, which focuses on the young Maghrebi immigrants’ experience of daily life in contem-

porary French council estates, grasps the nature of conditions behind boredom. The novel’s main narrative, including terrorist and criminal acts and police hunt for suspects, shows the impact of boredom and a lack of means and opportunities to escape it on the alienated young adults. Similarly, Welsh’s (1996:89) novel, *Trainspotting*, describes the group of friends who “out of boredom” turned first to drugs and later to criminal activities to support their addiction. Another work of fiction, from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, through Moravia’s novel *Boredom*, to Essbaum’s *Hausfrau*, point out that to escape boredom, one needs not only resources but also imagination and determination to reach out beyond a sense of the insufficiency and ordinariness of reality. For example, Anna, a protagonist of Essbaum’s (2015) novel, is persistently estranged from the world around her, which seems distant and irrelevant. Despite resources available to her and despite her psychotherapist’s insistence that “boredom is danger” and that “a modern woman needn’t live a life so circumstanced” (Essbaum 2015:47), Anna is “ill with inaction,” locked in her boredom, and unable to negotiate between her passivity and desire to disengage from everyday life (Essbaum 2015:17).

When the net result of such negotiations is the experience of boredom, too often “those caught under the crush of modern boredom can find little relief in work or in consumption” (Ferrell 2011:295). Moreover, despite the accessibility of new technologies, today’s boredom is apparently much greater than in the past, which prompts many institutions, from schools to hobby clubs, to engage in the fight against this problem, for example, *The Guardian* now pub-

lishes a special monthly magazine, *Do Something*, advising people how to escape boredom. What is more, today’s new type of boredom, mediated boredom, is harder to notice because of its “rhetoric of newness and newness” (Morozov 2013). In spite of promises of information, adventure, and entertainment, new technologies do not automatically reinstate the possibility of wonder and creativity, they even contribute to more boredom, for example, slow Wi-Fi has been recently ranked on the seventh position among the 50 most boring things in the world (Ridley 2015). Even more importantly, new technologies make it more difficult for us to realize that we are moving in the vicious circle of the reproduction of meaninglessness.

What began as being seen as “an epidemic” in modernity, now is viewed as a universal feature of human existence, which contributes to the modern subject’s crisis of meaning (Goodstein 2005). Thus, boredom is not only a metaphor for modernity but also a useful lens for understanding everyday experience in today’s society.

Conclusion: How to Be Normal and Not to Be Bored?

Many contemporary processes have been adding to the importance of exploring everyday experience, the concept that is so central to our understanding of social life that it is too often taken for granted and seen to be not in any need for explanation. Moreover, with the expansion of the micro realm of social life to larger parts of society, there is the increase in demands for strategies for addressing its problems and dilemmas. In order to bring some

concreteness to the notion of the ordinary experience, we focus on the everyday life's continuous efforts of sense-making, and this allows us to define the ambivalence of everyday experience as constituted by two seemingly insignificant and trivial forms of ordinary experience, normality, and boredom. Yet, as our discussion shows, these concepts are also not without their own problems and ambiguities. Both of the phenomena are either seen as timeless aspects of human condition or as products of specific conditions, while their consequences are viewed either positively or negatively. To investigate these relatively unexplored, under-theorized, and often misinterpreted rudimentary experiences of human life, it seems to be useful to expand sociological imagination with a help of literary studies.

Today's transfiguration of normality and the new form and scope of boredom, brought about by the diversity of values, choices, opportunities, and new

technologies, do not make a task of researching these two phenomena easier. Yet, such an exploration is central to grasping new dilemmas and questions posed by these contemporary developments. To paraphrase a title of Jeanette Winterson's (2011) autobiographical book, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (which refers to her mother's inability to accept her decision to seek happiness with a lesbian lover), now we are more likely than in the past to ask: *How to be normal and not to be bored?* This ambitious question does not express the acceptance of compromised standards of normality or the naturalization of boredom; it rather refers to a search for imaginative and individualized ways of combining normality with not being bored. It is more than a call for conformity because it is rooted in the endorsement of people's freedom to choose their own criteria of normality, as well as in the appreciation of people's creative ways of dealing with the experience of boredom.

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