

# Boredom and Social Deviant Behavior: An Empirical Study

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**How to cite this paper:** Malizia, N. (2018). Boredom and Social Deviant Behavior: An Empirical Study. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 8, 174-187. <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2018.82010>

**Received:** December 13, 2017

**Accepted:** February 10, 2018

**Published:** February 13, 2018

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper was the analysis of the relationship between boredom and deviance behavior; this is a field not completely explored by the sociology of deviance, despite the increase in alarm due to the increase in: deviant behavior by young people and crimes committed by groups. After a brief presentation of the most important contribution in literature, to deepen this issue, we use data collected from a survey using as principal instrument, the Boredom Proneness Scale, BPS, (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) to identify the possible forms of prevention to be adopted in family, social and institutional context, in order to not compromise, immediately or in the long term, social, physical and psychological young person well-being. To test the evidence, it was decided to implement a model, in order to describe and analyze empirical phenomena, introducing a statistical relationship, since it is not possible to know an exact relationship between variables. The model results allow to observe a direct relationship between the BPS and variables analyzed.

## Keywords

Boredom, BPS, Deviant Behavior, Deviance, Society

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between boredom and deviance is a field not completely explored by the sociology of deviance, despite the increase in alarm due to the increase in: deviant behavior by young people and crimes committed by groups. To deepen this issue is necessary to identify the possible forms of prevention to be adopted in family, social and institutional context, in order to not compromise, immediately or in the long term, social, physical and psychological young person well-being. When boredom determines the passage to the deviant act, it

is necessary to analyze the inner (personal) and external (social factors) forces that have driven and determined this behavior.

On the relationship boredom/youth deviance, the theoretical reflections of sociologists have defined, over time, the effects and social conditioning in terms of reactivity in: voluntary abandonment of institutional paths, the lack of acceptance of social configuration, the push towards social changes, the need to reach new goals or take risks, the presence of social disintegration that create discomfort, impotence, inactivity, which can also turn into boredom. For this reason, we expected that daytime activities and boredom proneness scores could be significant predictors of youth deviance. Boredom can be the result of a frustration of primary needs, responses and absence of certainties. Leisure time could turn into boredom when personal skills and real opportunities for recreation are lacking, such as to cause the deviant activities by subject. It should be noted that these behaviors are not the result of environmental and social conditioning, but, as stated by Matza, are closely linked to the will and self-determination of the subject. The aim of the research is to highlight the relationship between boredom and deviance in society, in order to understand, also, the dynamics and the different behaviors of the associates, which could be useful for future and possible interventions in social and institutional sphere.

## 2. Literature Review

Durkheim uses the term *anomie* also in reference to the morally deregulated condition, highlighting that the subjects may have little control over their behavior (Durkheim, 2008). Deviance and crime, which are expressions of subjective behavior, providing immediate gratification for needs and desires, bringing out of boredom, determined by the repetition of tasks and situations and pushing an insatiable need to look for adventures dangerous, new and electrifying, often deviant.

In this vision, crime is the set of acts of force or fraud undertaken by hobby and personal interests; from this view, it follows that the types of crime can be described, through the combination of two elements: the opportunity to engage criminal acts and low self-control (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1993). Boredom represents an emotional state that arises from the absence of meaning of a situation or activity by a subject, which tends to turn into a restless and irritating sensation that needs to be replaced (Barbalet, 1999). Boredom can also be linked to the lack of involvement in daily events; senselessness and lack of momentum may also represent factors that encourage the search for meaning, which can, however, present a risk, deviance, conflict (Brissett & Snow, 1993). If in the free time prevails boredom and lack of personal skill and opportunities for recreation, some young people can adopt deviant behavior (such as the use of drugs, alcohol, gambling) or more specifically criminal: stealing, vandalizing, violent sexual orientation, etc. (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991). Youth boredom could also be the result of the non-knowability and accessibility of activities that

constitute real leisure or entertainment (Stebbins, 2002). According to Thomas, the non-fulfillment of primary needs, such as safety, new experiences, gain recognition and have an activity that give the person a sense of contribution, or the conduct of an interest-free life, could lead young people to adopt deviant behavior (Volkart, 1951). Wilmott studied, e.g. the London working class; analyzing the relationship between young and crimes, he attempted to identify a subculture reference, but concluded that crimes were related primary to boredom (Wilmott, 1966). In young people, a proper management of free time could be a decisive factor in removing deviant interests; in this perspective, the involvement of teenagers in sports activities to dissuade them from delinquency and other deviations could be particularly important (Schafer, 1969). Some researches on sports and athletes have shown a significant reduction in the recruitment of deviant behavior than non-athletes (Segrave & Hastad, 1984). Religion, in addition to offering spiritual comfort, can also encourage respectability and conformity to social constructs (Weber, 1920).

According to Wilson and Herrnstein, individual reactivity to social inactivity could be explained starting from the biosocial theory of criminal behavior that mainly affects young people: for the authors, crime is caused by a combination of both biological and social functions; individual biological differences make some people prone to commit crimes than others. They assert that crime is a manifestation of the same human nature that produces acts of greatness. Authors emphasize the importance of familial and political associations to the development of man's capacity to act freely and independently. Similarly, they argue that primary cause of crime is low intelligence, which they also see as biologically determined (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1998). Since the first half of the 50s, some researchers claimed that low stimuli evoked "boredom", similar to hunger or thirst, that the sensory experience of variety could reduce. For this reason, curiosity and exploratory behavior are aimed to reduce boredom (Berlyne, 1950; Myers & Miller, 1954; White, 1959). In the sociological perspective, the relationship between boredom and deviance is mostly attributed to aspects and consequences of different social and dynamic factors that can affect personal sphere and reactivity of the individual: the absence of adequate political channels to express the young people deprivations (Lea & Young, 1984); in a similar way, according to the fracture theory between social and cultural structure (Merton, 1938), deviance could be considered as abandonment of institutional paths, or as a non-acceptance of the social structure, assuming the character of creativity, innovation pushing social changes. Boredom could also be the product of the tensions that derive from social disintegration and which create a discomfort common to many young people; Cohen's suggestion that members of delinquent subcultures consciously invert the norms and values of mainstream society has been criticized. Author argue that deviance is the result of individuals conforming to the values and norms of a social group to which they belong, if you belong to a social group whose norms differ from those of the main society then you

will become a deviant (Cohen, 1955). In these subcultures people commit non-utilitarian crimes, deviant behavior becomes something that reward the individual with respect and reinforce the group identity (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1972). Hence the importance of the social bond underlined in the control theory (Hirschi, 1969), according to, if the young person has a stronger connection with the “gang” than with parents or adults in general, he is more likely to becoming delinquent. Merton modifies Durkheim’s concept of anomie to establish what he describes as the theory of deformation: the hypothesis (Mason & Wilson, 1988; Mason, 1996), is that individuals remain law-abiding and united while having access to means to pursue objectives (Merton, 1938, 1967, 1968), and affirms that society achieves its unity through the possession of certain values by its members; however, when there is a discrepancy between aspirations and expectations, it produce tension and/or frustration which results in the breaking of cultural norms that may lead to deviate (Merton, 1968). Through his theory of “delinquency drift” Matza explains how he thinks young people within a subculture can break the values of society without really recognizing that they are doing. Rather than representing crime with the usual method, Matza’s aim (Clinard & Meier, 1995) was to develop a judgment on deviance, exploring it from the point of view of deviant, to understand the view of the offender and interpret the world as it appears to him. According to this theory (Trojanowicz & Morash, 1992), environmental factors do not induce an individual to become a delinquent. Matza argues that during this period of drift, the constraining bonds of society are loosened and so adolescents become more susceptible to suggestions of deviant acts by the peer group. Committing a delinquent act may then represent an attempt to demonstrate control over their lives, to exercise choice (Matza, 1964). In this context, therefore emerges the subject individuality that is permeated by forces, stimuli, apathy, intolerances culminating in the reaction. According to Matza (Gibbons & Krohn, 1991) individuals are to a considerable extent constrained or influenced by social and environmental forces, but at the same time, they are reactive subject able to exercise a certain degree of freedom or choice on their behavior; when a young falls into deviance he is still influenced by the morality of conventional society. To reduce the guilt that most people will develop before committing a crime, individuals will use a method known as neutralization (Matza, 1964). In social processes, the “meaning” is particularly important: an absence of meaning in an activity or a circumstance leads to a boredom experience and push the actor to search meaning, with the assumption of atypical social practices, including risk taking. Meaning directs and defines action; pervades core categories for sociology as “culture”, “value”, “norm”, and so on. The “meaning” typically refers to a set of symbolic objects that identify or create significant social realities. Meaning, therefore, is not an intrinsic property of objects but of the relationships of people who come into contact with such objects. Since certain meanings provide context, reference, purpose to actions, social life itself would become unrealizable without the qual-

ity of meaning (Garfinkel, 1967; Luhmann, 1984). If the meaning becomes central to social processes, it should be noted that it is never a sufficient condition and may even be absent. Social mobility, for example, is a process that does not require meaning, therefore, boredom would appear as an emotional protection and a defense against the absence of meaning. Even the alienation theory describes boredom as its central experiential component (Marx, 2004 [1844]). The senselessness and boredom of alienated labor (Seeman, 1959), as well as the absence of intrinsically rewarding activity, generate meaninglessness as self-alienation. The difference between the habitual action on one side, and the boring one, on the other, is well identified by Heller: until the repetitive action is a means to an end, involvement is minimal and without any feeling of boredom. When the repetition loses its function or its purpose, a strong and direct involvement of negative type arises, that is boredom; this negative involvement of boredom is experienced as anxiety. It would therefore be erroneous to deduce from the Heller's formulation that boredom arises only from under-stimulation. The loss of purpose can result from over-stimulation, through which social meanings are weakened (Stein & Heller, 1979). The search for novelty (Durkheim, 1962 [1893]) and the intensity of urban life (Simmel, 1996) are both examples of excessive stimuli that lead to boredom. The distinction between boredom and depression is significant, although both register an absence of interest in activities and circumstances: boredom is a restless feeling of dissatisfaction with such state and results from a loss of purpose; depression is characterized instead by anxiety, fatigue, a loss of consideration, position or status (Kemper, 1978). From this, it follows that boredom is more typically turned outside, while depression concerns the inner self, the commitments and the environment. Reactivity or not to boredom, on the other hand, is the propensity to take risks, as a set of characteristics of planning habits and lifestyle (Giddens, 1991). Further research has highlighted differences in experiences of boredom between male and female: males tend to be more competitive both in sports and occupations, more involved in adventurous and risky activities, but also more prone to boredom if they did not belong to that category of subjects; females, considering that society has moved towards equality, are crossing gender boundaries by performing activities that are usually considered masculine, starting to experience boredom too; this would explain the increase in their deviant behavior (Vodanovich & Kass, 1990a). Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Theory fully recognizes the boredom concept. Using Eysenck's theory of extroversion, which incorporates sociability and impulsivity (Cook, 1993), Zuckerman defines the sensation seeking as a kind of "non-inhibited, non-conforming, impulsive, dominant" extroversion, composed of distinct factors: thrill, search for adventure, search for experience, disinhibition and susceptibility to boredom (Ragheb & Merydith, 2001; Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978). Disinhibitors or "extroverted sensation seekers" will seek sensations through social stimulation and disinhibitory behavior (usually associated with the use of alcohol and drugs),

while individuals who are prone to boredom will avoid boring people and repetitive activities (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978). Zuckerman et al. recognize that since some extroverts and sensation seekers appear to be “chronically under-excited” (Seamon & Kenrick, 1994), the search for sensations is a general trait that depends from his expression and range of environmental possibilities (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978): therefore, most of sensation seeker are looking for variety, novelty and challenges in the environment (Iso-Ahola & Crowley, 1991; Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996). However, if the environment does not satisfy feelings seekers, “people can be driven to seek fulfillment through crime” (Gordon & Caltabiano, 1996). In this sense, Zuckerman et al. points out that people who are involved in criminal activities “are not driven by peers or compulsive neurotic needs”, but rather are motivated by the need for variety of stimuli to reach their optimal level of harmony. According to Caffray and Schneider, most of the theories implicitly or explicitly suggest that young people are motivated by their desire to improve or avoid particular emotional states. Consequently, since the need of excitement includes positive effects and lack of boredom, the research involving sensation has shown that this construct is important in predicting the behavior of young people, especially involvement in crime and minor violations (Caffray & Schneider, 2000). While sensation seeking increases from childhood to adolescence (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978; Baldwin, 1985), the search for a feeling decrease with maturity, favoring the exit of young people from crime. In the “Strain Theory” (Agnew, 1992), the central idea of deformation theory is that people who suffer tensions, stress, moral flattening, boredom, become anxious or upset and can commit anti-social acts. One of the key principles of this theory is emotion as a motivator of crime. “Consumer technology” has also contributed to the significant increase of boredom: society overloaded with stimuli and irrelevant information that have significantly contributed to a general desensitization, where boredom plays a defensive function as a barrier (Klapp, 1986; Brissett & Snow, 1993). Others authors, like Caliman, take Maslow’s “theory of human needs” as a starting point, partly because it is used in sociological research of Inglehart and other sociologists. This theory divides needs into two types: materialists (sustenance and security), post-materialists (belonging, esteem and self-realization-freedom). In fact, the different needs depending on the socio- economic-cultural condition and on the basis of them also changes the type of social hardship, especially juvenile (Caliman, 1997).

### 3. Method

Questionnaires may be used to collect regular or infrequent routine and data for specialized studies. The data analyzed in this survey was drawn from a stratified random sample. It is obtained by separating the population into mutually exclusive sets and then drawing simple random samples from each stratum. After the population has been stratified, we used simple random sampling to generate the

complete sample. Response Rate (i.e. the proportion of all people selected who complete the survey) is a key survey parameter and helps in the understanding the validity of the survey and sources of nonresponse error; in order to maximize return rates, questionnaires have designed to be as simple and clear as possible (Edwards & Cantor, 1991; Sudman et al., 2000), with targeted sections and questions. Participants in the present study were 456. They were provided with an informed consent document which they signed and were told that participation was voluntarily. Respondents completed a five-page questionnaire that was accompanied by a cover letter indicating that the questionnaire was completely anonymous and voluntary. The participants were instructed to complete a survey that included three sections: a brief demographic questionnaire, the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS, Farmer & Sundberg, 1986) and specific questions about lifestyle and possible deviant behavior.

The first section of the instrument requested demographic information. The survey contained a brief demographics questionnaire in which the participants reported: their age, gender, ethnicity, education level (years in school and Educational attainment), religious orientations, professional or employment status, household annual income and geographic location. Data collected on this aspect could be essentially to capture nonlinear effects.

The Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) was developed by Farmer & Sundberg (1986) and consists of 28 items designed originally in a true/false form. The internal consistency of the original BPS has showed by a lot of authors such as Ahmed (1990), Blunt & Pychyl (1998), Gana & Akremi (1998). However, the form used in this study was the 7-point Likert that has yielded coefficient alphas from 0.79 to 0.84 across numerous studies (Vodanovich, Wallace, & Kass, 2005; Harris, 2000; Seib & Vodanovich, 1998; Wink & Donahue, 1997); the authors have employed this modification of the instrument to increase the sensitivity of measurement. The range of BPS score was from 28 to 196, where a high or low score suggests a greater boredom proneness. According to Vodanovich & Kass (1990b) approach, the 28 items of the BPS were factored into five areas: external stimulation, internal stimulation, perception of time, constraints and affective response. Data analysis plan uses a set of independent variables to predict participants' group to provide classification rates and driver factor of boredom.

The third section asked for self-descriptions on additional items, using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The purpose of this section was the analysis of boredom on social deviant behavior. Five of the items in these sections was related to boredom, boredom proneness, or both, but were not derived from specific items on the Boredom Proneness Scale; ten questions are designed to understand the assumption of any deviant behavior by participants. The last five questions were aimed to understanding habits, routines and lifestyle. The closed-ended questions, which give a possibility to equally interpret the answers of the respondents, were used in the questionnaire, on the basis of which, the comparative analysis can be carried out. The attitude

scale was presented in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to indicate their extent of agreement with various statements described on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The selected significance level  $\alpha$  is equal to 0.05. Thus, the correlation coefficient is considered statistically significant when  $p < 0.05$ . This scale had good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

The participants were given unlimited time to complete the survey (though they generally reported that it took approximately 25 to 30 minutes to complete all three sections).

#### 4. Results

The participants' identities were anonymous and all data was stored on a password protected computer. Their ages ranged from 16 to 41 years, with a mean of 21.3 years and a median of 22 years. The majority of the respondents were European ( $n = 401$ , 87.94%), with ( $n = 45$ , 26%) Asians, 20 (4.39%) African 33 (7.24%) and 2 of other geographical origin. A majority (75%) of the participants were undergraduates; 25% were graduate students. Participants were from a European background with the exceptions of 21 people that declare a different cultural background. From the 456 participants in the sample only 373 provided a usable data, showing as random sampling appears to be associated with a higher response rate (81.73%). The final sample included 224 women (60.05%). Men were about 0.9 years older than women on average ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ). Performance was assessed in two different ways. The first one, performance (correct) was assessed as the number of items participants completed correctly. Incomplete or incorrect items did not count toward the total highlight above; second, performance (error) was assessed by subtracting the total number of items correct from the total number attempted. Performance (correct) scores ranged from 28 to 196, with an average of 72.61 (SD = 28.63). Errors ranged from 0 to 27, with an average of 1.27 (SD = 2.81). A large proportion of women and men had never been married (93%). About the 85% of the sample live constantly in Italy. Just over half the sample had a primary education and lived in city between 50,000 and 250,000 inhabitants.

The first phase of our work uses quantitative data from the BPS as part of the principal survey instrument employed, in combination with qualitative data obtained primarily from the first and third section of questionnaire, to provide insight as the characteristics of boredom proneness contribute to social deviancy behavior. Data from the surveys was entered into MathLab R2015a for statistical analysis including the calculation of Spearman's correlations coefficient, because this coefficient is more robust to outliers than other measure. The coefficient is 0.77 showing that there is strongly correlation between the BPS score and social deviancies behaviour; it is therefore show that the instrument used proves to be particularly useful for research purposes. The subjects were divided into 4 age groups by the generation of 4 age quartiles. The mean values of BPS scores were determined for each age quartile for subsequent inferential analysis (e.g. one-



way analysis of variance with Least Significant Difference, LSD, post-hoc comparisons). A LSD analysis showed significant differences in BPS scores between the 16 - 18 (the first quartile) and 25+ age groups (the fourth quartile) ( $MD = 15.73$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Regarding BPS scores, the first 3 age quartiles (up to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in age) had significantly higher BPS scores, then the oldest age quartile (above 75 ft percentile in age). It was also determined that BPS scores were the highest in the younger age groups compared with the older. People with higher Boredom Proneness scores reported that they were more often angry, frustrated, less likely to believe that could ever be fun and use the social deviancies behavior to escape from boredom. This result is partially confirmed by Harris that studied the correlates and characteristics of boredom proneness and boredom (Harris, 2000). Proneness to boredom has been reported to be strongly associated with low academic performance, substance abuse problems, delinquency and high user technologies (Amos, Wiltshire, Haw, & McNeill, 2006; Pekrun, Hall, Goetz, & Perry, 2014; Thackray, 1981).

Data from Study were used to provide initial evidence on the validity of the five BPS dimensions related to deviances. In these analyses the five dimensions were entered simultaneously with age and the other demographic data collected. Data show as young people are affected particularly by boredom. Time problems are the most frequent among the class aged 16 - 18 and 18 - 21 than the 25+. In this last group, obligations concerning work, career and family reduce the time available for boredom and deviant activities. Among youth, other problems might be relevant since studies have shown that boredom is a recurring problem among this group. The danger of becoming socially isolated exists in case of a loss of mobility (Haller, Hadler, & Kaup 2013; Sundberg et al. 1991). To test the evidence above, it was decided to implement a model, in order to describe and analyze empirical phenomena it is appropriate to introduce a statistical relationship, since it is not possible to know an exact relationship between variables. The linear model developed can be expressed as Equation (1):

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

where  $\beta_0, \beta_1, \dots, \beta_k$  are the coefficients and  $X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k$  variables that influence the responsive (Y). In detail,  $\beta_0$  represents Y (boredom) value when the variables are null, while  $\beta_j$  coefficients (with  $j = 1, 2, 3, \dots, k$ ) express corresponding Y variation to a unit increase of  $X_j$ , fixing the other variables. Verification of statistics and regressors goodness can be applied, within multiple linear regression, through  $R^2$  (correct) for the model as a whole and with p-value for model's individual predictors.

Information in **Table 1** shows a significant link between Boredom and the other covariates selected. In detail, model expresses a negative relationship between boredom and: sport player (-0.3804), education level (-0.8738), leisure activities (-0.4992); instead a strongly positive relationship emerges with deviance activities (+0.6762) and social network using (+0.4910). Not statistically significant appear the aspects linked to city sizing and religious orientation.

**Table 1.** Covariates analyzed.

<i>Covariates</i>	<i>Covariates</i>	<i>Standard Error (ε)</i>
Income	−0.0367**	0.0493
Social Network User	0.4910**	0.4235
Deviance Activities	0.6762**	0.0378
Sport Player	−0.3804*	0.0553
Education Level	−0.8738**	0.0026
Religious	−0.4612	0.8251
Town Size	−0.0358**	0.0578
Leisure Activities	−0.4992*	0.0127

\*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.01$ ; Corrected  $R^2$ : 0.769093517.

## 5. Conclusion and Limitation

Relatively little research has focused on the characteristics of boredom and deviant behavior activities. According with the purpose, this study provided primary evidence of an interaction between boredom and some of its drivers, in order to implement action at institutional level to prevent form of social deviancies. Subjects with a high level of boredom resistance show a low interest in social deviance activities, because they have higher capacity to self-entertain compared with the other one. Consistent with our expectations, expressed above, daytime activities and boredom proneness scores were found to be significant predictors of youth deviance. Our findings suggest that it may be beneficial to devote more attention to identifying (and assisting) individuals who, for whatever reasons, have a propensity for boredom that could degenerate into social isolation activities and deviance activities. Depending on the reasons for their “type of boredom”, such individuals could be helped through various interventions or by altering various aspects of the daily activities/job. The significant and positive relationships found in the present study between boredom and the variable selected, it is also congruent with various definitions of boredom describe in literature.

Nevertheless, the current study was not without limitations. Last and most importantly, behavioral researchers rarely rely on true population sampling to make the case for generalizability (Highhouse & Gillespie, 2009). Nonetheless, we urge future research to include a wide sample and triangulate our study results.

As a final limitation, we used self-report weight and height in lieu of assessing these variables objectively. These may not be very accurate because people tend to overestimate or underestimate the aspect of their inner self (Connor Gorber, Tremblay, Moher, & Gorber, 2007). In future, it would be ideal for researchers to directly measure these variables.

Considering both the benefits and limitations of our research, the current study should be considered to be a first step in demonstrating the value of

pro-active policies to reduce deviant behavior, and we believe it is a necessary first step.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to show my warm thanks to *Dr. Dinicolò Guglielmo L.M.* (PhD University of Enna “Kore”, Enna, Italy) for collaboration in collecting data and the statistical elaboration draw in this paper.

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