Boredom and Action—Experiences from Youth Confinement

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Abstract

Few studies have examined boredom as a central experience of everyday life. This article adds to the boredom-related literature by examining the role of boredom and boredom-aversion in the everyday life of young people confined in secure care for young offenders. Data are primarily drawn from an ethnographic study in a Danish secure care unit and include both participant observation and interviews with unit residents. Drawing on theories of boredom and young people's creation of action through risk-taking edgework, the article demonstrates how boredom is a key experience in daily life in secure care. Waiting is a defining aspect of the experienced boredom, and the young people spend much time "doing nothing," finding it difficult to relate to the unit's daily routines. Analyses show that the young people deal with the experience of boredom through the generation of risk-taking action.

Keywords

boredom, action, edgework, young people, confinement

Introduction

> "Damn, I'm so bored!" Rodez (a pseudonym), age 17, bangs his head hard against the wall. He looks at me. "This is so boring I could die!"

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In silence I agree, thinking of the key burning in my pocket and that I can leave and he cannot. Neither of us leaves. We stay bored for hours on end, hoping for something exciting to happen, but it never really does.

Boredom is neither static nor fixed in time or space. Rodez's banging his head momentarily broke the feeling of boredom, replacing it with a small hope that something other than boredom might redefine time and space in secure care. He was placed in police custody on the charge of assaulting and robbing a bus driver and breaking and entering the home of an elderly woman. I was at the secure care unit for a two-month field study, spending entire days studying everyday life in the unit with the aim of capturing key aspects of confinement from the perspective of the incarcerated youth. One of those key aspects is boredom. The purpose of this article is to reveal the role of boredom in the life of confined young people and their attempts to break that boredom through risk-taking action.

That boredom is an experience in the daily life of young people in a setting in many ways resembling an adult prison is not unexpected, as both share some of the same functions: confinement and rehabilitation (Harris and Timms 1993). I argue here that boredom in an institutional setting is significant, as it insinuates itself into everyday life, creating both meaninglessness and indifference (Scarce 2002). Moreover, that boredom rarely has been discussed within the social sciences is not surprising because, as Anderson (2004) suggests, in studying boredom one runs the risk of becoming enmeshed in the banality and frustration with which boredom dulls time and space. While some scholars discuss boredom theoretically (Anderson 2004; Barbalet 1999; Conrad 1997; Klapp 1986; Winter 2002) in ways that I will draw upon, none apply the theory to a particular group in a specific context—and only to a limited extent by the use of ethnographic field work. Although earlier studies on youth confinement touch upon the experience of boredom (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008; Halsey 2007; Wästerfors 2011), as do studies of prison life (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Crewe 2009; Irwin and Owen 2005; Scarce 2002), they do not cover the full significance of this experience for young people. In this article, I highlight boredom as it is experienced in the secure care setting, thus showing how ethnographic fieldwork can uncover an experience that is difficult to capture and communicate.

In the secure care unit, boredom does not merely crop up every now and then; instead, it is a key characteristic of daily life. Boredom "sits in the walls"[1] and manifests in numerous ways in the social practices of those in confinement. Understanding the role of boredom in this institutional setting

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will therefore yield a fuller picture of the meaning and influence of confinement for those young people unfortunate enough to be subjected to it. This article also adds to our understanding of the experience of incarceration in the setting of the "total institution" (Goffman [1961] 1991) as well as contributing to the sociology of everyday life through an explicit focus on boredom as an everyday practice.

Boredom is not linked only to institutional time or space. Far from being limited to specific situations, being bored is part of common experience (Anderson 2004; Conrad 1997; Klapp 1986; Winter 2002). Cultural revolts against unremitting boredom—in such acts as committing crimes or banging one's head against a wall—can be a strategy for creating moments that involve self-made dynamics of engagement and excitement (Cohen 1955; Ferrell 2004; Hayward 2002; Katz 1988; Matza and Sykes 1961). This strategy of risk-taking action appears to appeal primarily to young adult and adolescent boys; girls and women, as well as older men, often apply more subtle and less spectacular strategies (Desmond 2006; Lois 2005; Scarce 2002), especially when it comes to crime (Contreras 2009; Katz 1988; Miller 2005).

To capture how the boys' self-generated action constitutes an active strategy for escaping boredom, this article draws on Lyng's conception of risk-taking as "edgework" (see Lyng 1990, 1993). Edgework can be an active way of breaking with institutional constraints, because the spontaneity and excitement of high-risk action creates a momentary feeling of freedom and power (Lyng 2005). Focusing on the experience of boredom and the boys' attempts at breaking that boredom through risk-taking is highly relevant for understanding some of the social dynamics at play for young people in confinement. By analyzing the ethnographical data as relational constructions and by actively integrating both knowledge about young people's boredom and risk-taking and the literature on incarceration, I show how boredom becomes a key experience of youth confinement. The generation of action through risk-taking becomes the boys' way of actively breaking with boredom. I thus argue that this focus on boredom partly explains why these young people engage in edgework actions. Moreover, examining their experiences of confinement with a focus on boredom reveals how the young people handle the constraints of incarceration through taking risks.

Boredom and Action in Young People's Lives

"Life," says Stengers, "is always lurking in the interstices, in what usually escapes description" (in Anderson 2004, 752). Boredom has nearly escaped the interests of the social sciences, despite its being a common human

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experience. Boredom, which is hard to grasp, is what Heidegger calls "that which makes all things and other beings and myself fuse into a colourless indifference" (in Anderson 2004, 744)—thereby easily evading scholarly attention. Another feature relevant for understanding the lack of studies of boredom is that, given its amorphousness as a social experience, scholars find it hard to measure. That only few empirical studies of boredom have been conducted is thus not surprising. Of these, few are primarily based on ethnographic field studies of people's everyday lives (for exceptions, see Ferrell 1996; Hamper 1992; Roy 1959; Scarce 2002).

The literature dealing with boredom generally portrays it as a subjective emotional state to which a number of feelings are linked: anxiety, diffuse anger, and unpleasantness (Anderson 2004; Barbalet 1999; Conrad 1997). Nonetheless, boredom can also be a highly relevant part of a culturally or institutionally shared experience. To categorize boredom solely as an emotional state is problematic, as doing so limits boredom primarily to individual feelings and sentiments. Yet boredom is often experienced in a group or institutional setting, or is conditioned by the structures of a situation, such as time (Flaherty 2003; Scarce 2002). If we are to understand boredom in the lives of young people placed in secure care, we also need to consider boredom as a collective sociality. Scarce (2002, 309) writes of his own experience of "doing time": "The social side of doing time boiled down to respecting that others were doing their own time too and recognizing that time doing was a communal activity." This article therefore focuses on boredom as a temporal experience including both individual feelings of boredom and collective and interactional factors.

Because the experience of boredom, despite its amorphousness, is deeply connected to the role of the mundane in everyday life, it is also deeply connected to the creation of meaning. As Barbalet (1999, 633) writes, "A sociological focus on boredom thus provides an account of both the mechanisms by which the social sources of meaning come into play and the dynamics of meaning formation." Boredom as an experience becomes linked to the "action" and the "structures" creating situational meaning (or, in the case of boredom, creating meaninglessness). In creating meaninglessness, boredom opposes meaning. The experience of boredom, however, connotes more than an opposition to meaning "in that it does not merely register meaninglessness, but it is also an imperative toward meaning" (Barbalet 1999, 633). Seeking to break with boredom constitutes a back door for tackling or avoiding meaninglessness. Boredom therefore carries within it a dynamic element for creating action, as the person or group experiencing boredom will seek a way of escaping it and will create meaning in the attempt to escape (Anderson

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2004; Barbalet 1999; Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Where action is, risk-taking—or what Goffman (1969) decades ago called "chance-taking"—is sure to be found. Barbalet (1999, 642) speaks directly to this issue:

> Some phenomena . . . can be explained in terms both of the social prevalence of boredom and the role boredom-aversion plays in the formation of their sustaining meanings. In particular, key aspects of gambling and risk taking in general, and also intergroup conflict, can be explained when their meaningfulness is set in the context of boredom-aversion.

The role of boredom-aversion through risk-taking likewise appears in crime, as Cohen (1955) shows in his classic work *Delinquent Boys, Culture of the Gang*. Matza and Sykes (1961) likewise discuss in their search for "what makes delinquency attractive" (713) that "many observers have noted that delinquents are deeply immersed in a restless search for excitement, 'thrills,' or 'kicks.'" The creation of excitement is a well-known feature in relation to crime, and while crime is not essential for creating excitement (Katz 1988; Lyng 2005), it has long been recognized that the risk involved in criminal activity can generate immense excitement. As Matza and Sykes (1961, 713) write, "The fact that an activity involves breaking the law is precisely the fact that often infuses it with an air of excitement."

This line of thought is brought up to date in more recent studies, associated with "cultural criminology," that link boredom-aversion and the creation of action and excitement with elements of risk-taking (Ferrell 2004; Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2008). Lyng (1990, 2005) uses the term "edgework" to theorize a variety of risk-taking behaviors (such as skydiving) as a way of exploring the boundary between order and disorder. On the implications of "edgework," Lyng (2005, 6) writes that "groups organized around risk-taking and adventure activities provide a refuge for social actors confronting a formal institutional environment that does not fully meet their needs." As edgework creates a momentary experience of freedom and control, a form of experience absent from other areas of modern life, edgework thus creates a rare opportunity for "creative, skilful, self-determining action" (Lyng 1990, 877).

Action as a response to boredom appears particularly well suited for analyzing young people's lives, as young people generally occupy a social position defined by uncertainty and a state of becoming, with adolescence itself a period of experimenting and seeking action and waiting for adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Miles 2000). As Conrad (1997, 474) writes:

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> "Waiting" is often an occasion of potential boredom. By definition, waiting is referenced to the future until what one is waiting for arrives or one's turn comes. In waiting, there may seem to be "nothing going on" except the waiting, surely a recipe for boredom.

The notion of "hanging out doing nothing" with friends as a way of waiting and spending time is closely connected to being young and having an excess of time. While "hanging out" with friends may not disappear with adulthood, with family life and integration into the labor market it is likely to take other forms (May 2001). At the same time, "hanging out" becomes valued and no longer seen as "doing nothing." However, as a number of studies on street subculture show, breaking with life on the street is necessary for escaping the experience of "doing nothing" when "hanging out" (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Collison 1996).

In the light of young people's lack of control over their own lives, the experience of "nothing going on" and "doing nothing" is common. Corrigan (1975) describes "doing nothing" as the major activity of street youth life and as a way of fighting general boredom. For less privileged young people, the streets become their venue for experiencing free, creative, exciting, and self-directed behavior; for them, "delinquency may be a form of edgework . . . " (Miller 2005, 154; see also Bourgois 2003). We should not view young people's edgework simply as cognitive immaturity (Millstein 1993) but, as Lyng (1993) argues, also as an active response to feelings of powerlessness and a loss of personal control. Thus, crime may offer "a way of seizing control over one's destiny" (Hayward 2004, 152; see also Martin 2009).

Secure Care in Denmark

Secure care facilities for young people are a common penal institution in most Western societies, for example, Sweden (Levin 1998; Wästerfors 2011), the United States (Abrams and Hyun 2009), the United Kingdom (Harris and Timms 1993), and Australia (Halsey 2007). The specific design of such facilities differs among countries, as do the sex, age, and crime of the incarcerated and the national policies that put them there (Bengtsson and Jakobsen 2009; Muncie 2008; Pitts and Kuula 2005; Wikstrom and Svensson 2008). However, as a number of researchers have shown across countries, secure care is "ambiguous," as it simultaneously constitutes treatment, punishment, and incarceration, as well as an alternative to adult prison (ibid.).

In Denmark, secure care (*sikret institution*) also has an ambiguous function, seeking to serve the requirements of both the social services and the

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judicial system. It is at the same time a social and a legal institution, aiming at both treatment and punishment. Although the staff members are not guards but professionals educated in social work or education, they perform a number of tasks normally associated with guards: holding the keys and administering punishment. Secure care is what Goffman ([1961] 1991) in *Asylums* calls a "total institution," which he defines as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prisons serve as a clear example . . . " (Goffman [1961] 1991, 11).

Although secure care in Denmark is not a prison in the conventional sense, it has a number of prison-like characteristics (locked doors, barred windows, surveillance cameras, high walls and fences, and in-house treatment) holding mainly boys from twelve to eighteen years of age—demonstrating that the young people placed there need to be kept under high security. As in most other Western countries, Denmark's secure care facilities are designed for young people under the suspicion of real or presumed crimes or other antisocial behavior. Secure care in Denmark, therefore, is also an intervention by which the means of treatment aims at adjusting the boys' criminal behavior.

From administrative register data, I find that 96 percent of the residents are boys, of whom 53 percent are likely to be the children of non-Western immigrants or refugees. Their average stay in secure care is sixty days. The number of places in secure care has been on the rise for the past ten years, leading to more young people being placed in secure care. As the general crime rate for young people has not increased, the reasons for this increase may well be political (Balvig 2011).

Method and Data

This study of boredom in a secure care facility draws on data from a larger data set for my PhD thesis. In total, I conducted twenty-one formal interviews with youth in secure care, nineteen informal interviews with youth in secure care or jail, and approximately three months of fieldwork at two units, and additional visits to two jails and an additional secure care unit. While I do not draw directly on my experiences with the later fieldwork, those experiences confirmed my observation from the initial fieldwork that both boredom and action are relevant for understanding these young people's lives in secure care, as well as their more general life situations. When I entered the second secure care facility, one of the boys asked me about my project and what I had found. Viewing his question as a chance to check parts of my

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beginning analyses on boredom, I said, “I found that this place is boring.” He stared at me for a while, then said, “Then you have really been there.” Although I tried to say more, he quickly slipped away. I later learned that he had mentioned this exchange to the other boys, because two came up to me asking whether “boredom” was really an acceptable finding. I told them that I did not know but planned on finding out. They laughed and wished me good luck. Telling the young people about my ideas on boredom led to a faster acceptance in this second secure care facility than in the first, as the young people viewed me much earlier as someone who understood what it was like to be locked up.

For the remainder of the article, I draw specifically on the two-month fieldwork period, where I experienced the greatest boredom. The analysis of this particular period, however, will be informed by the totality and variety of the overall fieldwork experience. While through this approach I seek to understand the social and cultural meanings of boredom within the secure care setting, I do not claim to represent the experiences of all young people confined to secure care (Slavin 2004).

Both SFI, the Danish National Centre for Social Research, and the Sociology Department at the University of Copenhagen gave me permission to apply to the Danish Council for Independent Research. The council provided both the funding and final permission for the research. The director of each secure care facility allowed me access to specific units, and access to the two jails came first from the Danish Prison and Probation Services and then from the jail governors. I conducted two visits to jails because almost all the boys had spent time (from two days to three months) in jails before being transferred to a secure care unit.

I did not plan to share in the staff work in the secure care units, because I did not want the young people to associate me with staff. My presence entailed extra work for the staff, as they had to introduce me, help me with logistics, and ensure my safety. The staff was supportive throughout the study, and no conflicts arose between us. Before I entered the unit, we had agreed that if violence occurred or if I learned something that placed the staff or others at risk, I would be loyal to the staff. Fortunately no violence occurred, and the staff never questioned my loyalties.

During the two-month fieldwork in the first unit, I met with eight boys aged fifteen to nineteen; two remained throughout the entire period, with the other six either leaving or entering. I neither studied the boys’ files nor discussed the boys with the staff, so that all my information about them is based on what they told me themselves or what they revealed in conversations in the unit. Two boys were Danish; the other six were ethnic minorities, either

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immigrants or children of immigrants from Southeast Asia, Turkey, or Bosnia. Two of the boys attended secondary school, one went to business school, and one had an apprenticeship. The remaining four were not in school and had no occupation outside the secure care unit. All were under remand and police custody, accused of crimes such as breaking and entering, robbery, stealing cars, violent assault, fighting, burglary and possession, and drug dealing. When not in secure care, six of the boys lived at home with one or two parents, one had a room of his own, and one lived in a residential care institution. Pseudonyms are used for participant confidentiality.

Altogether I spent about three hundred hours in the first unit, often arriving in the morning and leaving at night for several days in a row. While I spent as much time with the boys as possible, I always asked them if I could join them when they went to each other's rooms (and they usually agreed). I did not attempt to create or promote special activities with them. This research approach positioned me primarily as an observer and an inactive participant, giving me the in-between role of being neither staff nor young person. Most of the time, once the boys realized that I was not a staff member and would not betray their secrets (such as a mobile phone smuggled in by a boy in another unit), they appeared to fully accept my presence and even share secrets with me.

The boys' acceptance of my presence surprised me. Being a young female, I had anticipated some difficulties in entering a field dominated by younger boys and, as I soon realized, a strong culture of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) praising not only physical strength and toughness but also male superiority. This culture was maintained by both the young people and, to some degree, the staff. However, my gender and non-staff position meant that I presented no threat to the boys or their masculine hierarchy. While I did not challenge their culture of hypermasculinity, neither did I support it (see also Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, and Aguilar 2008; Comack 2008; Pascoe 2007). Before entering the unit, I was initially afraid of being locked up with five teenage boys and not being able to protect myself. At first the boys challenged me, trying to flirt with or provoke me. In these situations I played ignorant, seeking the identity of "last-gendered" (Pascoe 2007, 180-83): I did not chat, giggle, or wear makeup or tight clothing. After two weeks, they more or less stopped challenging me. They even put up with my occasional "stupid and silly" questions, such as why did they not want to work in the unit's workshops or why did they watch television all night.

I recorded open-ended interviews with seven of the eight boys (one chose not to be interviewed). The interviews lasted about one hour and were later transcribed. Writing field notes while at the unit proved impossible, so I did

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them afterwards, finding it easy to recall most of each day's interactions in some detail while they were still fresh in my mind (see also Vail 2001). Not surprisingly, my note-writing attracted the boys' attention, as pen and paper were foreign objects in their daily lives. The daily world of secure care is not one of reading and writing but rather of body and impulse—such as Rodez's banging his head against the wall. Occasionally I would go to the lavatory with pen and paper, to immediately capture fresh dialogue.

The field notes act as a situational record, that is, not as a precise objective record but rather as one that helps structure episodes, experiences, conversations, and feelings. In organizing and analyzing the data, I aimed at recalling the feelings and sentiments of the fieldwork experience. Thus I used a relational approach to identify patterns of meaning structures within data by focusing on the notion that meaning derives not from the individual but rather from the individuals' *relations* to other individuals (Emirbayer 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2003). Because this position is relational, it focuses less on "true telling" (i.e., were the boys telling the truth) and more on observing and understanding relational interactions (i.e., *why* did the boys act and speak as they did) (Gubrium and Holstein 2008).

The significance of boredom in everyday life in the unit arose as a clear pattern of meaning during the field study, manifesting both physically and intellectually as a daily shared experience between the boys and me (as an observer). Drawing on Weber's concept of "Verstehen" (interpretive understanding), Ferrell (1998) argues that "experiential immersion on the part of field researcher can begin to unravel the lived meanings of both crime and criminal justice." Multiple readings of the more than two hundred pages of field notes and the interview transcripts helped me unravel the lived meaning of the boys' experience of boredom as highly relevant and directly related not only to the institutional frame of secure care but also in part to the boys' stories about their earlier life experiences.

Findings

I divide my findings into six sections. First, I focus on the role of waiting in understanding boredom in secure care. Second, I explore the distortion of temporality and how what Flaherty (2003) calls "time work" relates to the boys' experience of boredom. Third, I describe the routines of the secure care unit and how the boys experience these routines as almost meaningless time markers. Fourth, I focus on "hanging out" and "doing nothing" as central ways for the boys to pass time both within the secure care unit and on the outside. Fifth, I examine institutional edgework as a way of breaking up

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boredom. Sixth, I look at the role of edgework and crime in the boys' retelling of their lives outside secure care. The article concludes with a discussion.

Waiting

> I unlock the three locked doors and enter the secure care unit for the first time. In a small office halfway down the dark, empty corridor, I find two staff members and two boys. I enter, introduce myself, and sit down with a cup of coffee. I sit for an hour and a half. The boys move in and out of the office, sitting down and getting up, then returning to sit down again. While the boys are allowed in the office with staff permission, it is defined as staff territory. The wide corridor functions as a shared space with computers, video games, a small table with two chairs, and a table-top football game. When they are not in the office, this is where the boys spend most of their time. I sit down with my coffee in the corner of the office observing, participating in small talk, and waiting for something to happen. This position, I soon learn, is how I am to spend most of the time during the two months: observing, making small talk, and waiting.

These two months—although professionally revealing and at times exciting—were characterized by an all-encompassing feeling of boredom. In the beginning I would sit in the same chair, in the same corridor, for hours and hours, day after day, with nothing to do and seemingly very little to observe. Boredom, I soon discovered, formed the core of the experience, as it was one of the central aspects of everyday life in the institution. Thus my boredom was not merely personal, for it is the specific experience that led me to focus on the more general collective experience of institutionalized boredom.

One of my first questions was "why": "Why am I so bored, and what exactly am I waiting for? In principle, I am already experiencing what I am waiting for—observing everyday life—so there is no need for me to be waiting." Looking back, I realize that I was waiting for the boys' wild life of crime and excitement to emerge. But it never did. As several scholars suggest, boredom transpires when something expected fails to occur and the disappointment creates a feeling of being cheated and left out (Conrad 1997; Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Spacks 1995). So here I was, on the inside, with a latent expectation of something exciting about to occur—and the feeling that as long as I was waiting, I was not getting any data. The presence of boredom became the evidence that my expectations of what data was *supposed* to be

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were not being met, and the result was a clear experience of both having nothing to do and needing to do something to secure some data to save my project (see also Hastrup 1995).

After a few days, however, I realized that I was not the only one waiting. So were the boys. Their waiting situation was in many ways more concrete and real than mine, as they were waiting for their turn—their chance to get out of the institution. Yet despite my having a key, I waited with them for hours. The boys often commented on my presence. Early on, Imran, age seventeen, came up to me and asked, "Why are you here?" When I started to explain, he interrupted: "So you could just leave?" "Well," I said, "in principle I could just leave, but . . . ." Again, Imran interrupted, saying eagerly, "Go, go! Nobody who can leave would want to stay!" Before I could formulate a reply, he walked away, shaking his head.

The boys' waiting time carried some of the amorphousness of general waiting and of not knowing how long they had to wait: None of the eight boys knew when he was to be released, because police custody is an open-ended period that can be prolonged (as it was for a number of them). Therefore, their immediate future was defined by uncertainties that influenced many of their daily conversations: "I think maybe I'll be out of here by my birthday next week" or "do you think they will make me stay here longer after the trial" or "I'm calling my lawyer [again] to hear if he knows when the trial is on." Such conversations between the boys and the staff were common whenever the boys sat in the office "killing time" and waiting for something, anything—the indictment, the trial, news from the police, or even a phone call from a mother or girlfriend—ultimately waiting to get their lives back. Similarly, the TV, computers, video games, and the like functioned as little more than staff-approved time diversions, as each boy searched for a bit of excitement that would temporarily push the real purpose of waiting (to get out) into the background.

Temporality

Temporality in the secure care unit is not the same as outside. Time moves slowly "inside," and deliberate efforts to manage or control various dimensions of time are reduced by the incarceration and loss of personal freedom (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Scarce 2002). To grasp the character of temporality, Michael G. Flaherty (2003) identifies five dimensions of what he calls "time work," that is, "one's effort to promote or suppress a particular temporal experience" (Flaherty 2003, 19). These dimensions are duration, frequency, sequence, timing, and allocation.

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All five dimensions influenced both the boys' and my strategies for trying to control or customize time in the unit. Our different use of "time work" illustrated the differences in our positions. Because I was not confined to the unit, I could more freely manipulate the five dimensions of time work. I could decide how long (duration) I wanted to stay, how often I would visit (frequency), what time of day (sequence) and when during the week (timing) I would arrive, and most importantly, whether I would come at all (allocation). As I gradually changed my expectations and gave up the quest for an exciting fieldwork result, I also regained the experience of control over time through the freedom of my time work. Consequently, boredom lost much of its power over me.

By sharp contrast, the boys daily faced the challenges of dealing with temporality, as the following episode shows:

> Mark, 17 years old, is a newcomer to the unit. He sits alone for the first time with the other four boys and me in the common room, watching a popular TV show. Although we all watch the screen in silence, when the commercials come on Imran faces Mark, asking, "I hope you like the show?" "It's OK," Mark replies, without looking at Imran. Imran laughs, "Good, it's all there is to do in here . . . watch stupid TV . . . and sleep." We all laugh.

Imran's strategy for handling temporality in the unit is an attempt at active "time work" through increasing the *frequency* of activities he likes—even though he knows that he will not like them as much if he does them too often. The boys often share such ironic strategies for dealing with the *duration* of their stay, trying to help each other better cope with their lack of power over the *allocation* of their time. As Scarce (2002, 306) writes, "To some extent, inmates have lost control over time, and thus they have lost some control over themselves."

Although the boys apparently have a lot of unscheduled "free" time, they were physically confined to the unit, a situation creating a pervasive feeling of frustration (see also Cohen and Taylor 1972). This feeling is made even more overwhelming because the boys have no idea what to expect of their future, which the court will decide, and for long periods they may not even have a trial date. Uncertainty, like waiting, feeds boredom, which thus becomes a defining feature of daily life in secure care (see also Scarce 2002).

Routines

Crucial to understanding the link between the boys' experience of temporality and that of boredom is the boys' lack of control over daily routines and

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thus over both the *timing* and *sequence* of events. Experiencing the days in the unit as long and without progress is closely linked to the boys' individual experiences of "doing time." As Flaherty (2003) stresses, the very experience of temporality is shaped by one's circumstances. Likewise, my experience of temporality was influenced by my goal of understanding both the boys' interactions and experiences, and the ways that the daily routines structured them.

During the week the boys must be up by eight o'clock for breakfast and work in a metal or wood shop in the morning or afternoon for about three hours. A teacher is assigned to the unit, and most of the boys have individual voluntary tutorials once or twice a week. In the afternoons and evenings they have spare time, during which some are allowed short visits once or twice a week or limited phone calls. Others, by police order, cannot have contact with people on the outside, not even their parents. While the boys are not asked to help prepare meals, they are welcome to do so. They must be in bed by ten o'clock on weeknights and eleven o'clock on weekends.

The daily routine in the unit is both monotonous and artificial, despite the simulation of the routines of normal daily life—a simulation predetermined by others and not easily influenced by the boys' desires. These routines are far from those that the boys describe in their everyday lives on the outside, where life, they tell me, is marked by very little routine (especially for those not attending school or having jobs), with impulsivity and freedom as the main characteristics. As the following episode illustrates, the boys' lack of influence creates a monotonous environment in which they must continually negotiate room for personal control:

> It is ten o'clock and the boys are watching a movie when Susanna, a staff member, enters the common room and says that it is time for bed. The boys argue, trying to convince her that it is only fair that they see the rest of the movie, as she was the one who gave them permission to watch it. Susanna leaves the room without replying. The boys cheer at their success. Five minutes later, Lars, another staff member, comes in. Without a word, he turns off the TV. He points at the boys, who are starting to protest: "Off to bed, NOW!" The boys slowly leave the room.

An implicit aspect of this interaction is how victory is transformed into defeat. The initial success over the bedtime routine is undermined by the confirmation of the boys' lack of control—a well-described feature of everyday life in the "total institution" (Goffman [1961] 1991; Kivett and Warren 2002; Wästerfors 2011). Nonetheless, the boys constantly question the rules: "Why do I have to clean up?" "I didn't choose to be here!" "Why can't we

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stay up late?" With such questions they protest their lack of control attempting to do active time work by manipulating the forced routines of the "total institution."

With little influence on their daily routines, the boys experience a disconnection from their institutionalized lives, a disconnection that particularly appears in the illusion of normality found in the performance of work. Rodez strongly expressed the boys' view of the metal workshop when I asked him about their reluctance to go there. He explained, "They pay us next to nothing, and it's just so they know where they've got us—doing stupid metal work. Pretending it's like normal work. That's a big joke!" Rodez states the boys' typical view of working in the metal shop—an illusion of work, not real work. The boys know, and I observe, that the real value of their "work" is that of treatment, training, and being occupied (Bergmark and Oscarsson 1988). The boys do not connect to these latent values because, although work gives them *something* to do (active time work), it also clearly marks their lack of control over *what* to do.

The boys sometimes tried to create their own routines, as when Rodez and Omid, age nineteen, set up a training program for exercising twice a day. Both boys eagerly engaged in the training. After a while the other boys, even though not participating, showed an interest in when and how Rodez and Omid were training. This self-created routine managed to engage the boys' attention—because it constituted *something to do*. The training became a means of breaking the immediate boredom; thus, in contrast to the enforced institutional routines, the boys experienced their own routines as unrestricted and more meaningful. Nonetheless, their own routines never become meaningful beyond the individual situation, because they take place within the secure care unit and therefore neither signal progression nor mark the end of their waiting.

"Doing Nothing"

"We just hung around doing nothing" was often the boys' reply when, after a few days away, I asked them what they had been doing. If I tried to get more details, they would simply say "Nothing much happened, we're locked up," or they simply walked away. What had actually happened during my absence did not matter, as it was the same as what happened all the time—nothing. Everyday life in secure care was marked by this "doing nothing" (Corrigan 1975), sitting together making small talk, a form of time work that helps the boys better deal with the insecure temporality of secure care. However, no one could freely participate in the "hanging out doing nothing";

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participation had to be negotiated. Just like the boys, I had to earn the right to participate by not asking too many questions. Then I would slowly learn through the boy's interactions while "hanging out doing nothing" that something had happened in my absence, such as a new conflict, an indictment, or an upcoming trial (see also May 2001; Wästerfors 2008).

"Doing nothing" is how the boys most often characterized what they do when not in the workshop. Two or more boys may sit in the corridor, in the common room, or in their rooms. Even when watching TV or listening to music, they would answer any question about their activities by saying that they are "doing nothing." When "doing nothing" they would discuss a show on TV, the latest conflict in the unit, the other boys, their dislike of the staff, their trial, or their life on the outside. Especially on the weekends, these periods of "doing nothing" lasted for hours, with one boy leaving and a new one entering, with someone going for a drink or some food, or with some of the staff joining in. All of those activities took place at a slow pace, with none of us being able to recall what actually went on, beyond "hanging out and doing nothing" (with me as the exception, trying to retain every detail).

The experience of "hanging out, doing nothing" was not new to the boys. When talking about their lives on the outside, the boys often mentioned "just hanging out, doing nothing." When I asked Abham, age sixteen, how he spent his time outside secure care, he said, "I hang out with my friends in the local shopping mall. We smoke, talk, look at girls, you know. Most of the time it's actually quite boring but more fun than at home." Abham described a familiarity with spending time "doing nothing," and several of the boys also describe how (on the outside) they were almost always waiting for something to happen, something that would disrupt the boredom of "doing nothing." For those not attending school or going to work on the outside, "doing nothing" appeared particularly familiar, as they lacked the routines and natural time work that school or work can provide. Both during the interviews and when hanging out together in the unit, the boys described daily lives with an excess of spare time. Mark's solution was to create his own routines:

> I started to hang out with this buddy of mine every day, a bit like best friends, and we had a regular routine, you know, we did the same stuff every day. It was not that we had to, like with a job, it was just something we did. Every morning when we woke up, we went out and made break-ins until around noon. Then we had time off, or you know what I mean, then we didn't do anything, relaxed and bought clothes with the money we made, until around five or six in the evening. Then we went out to steal some cars until eight or nine in the evening. . . . [later

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> in the interview] We were bored and just cruising around . . . it's a bit ridiculous . . . now anyway, when you get convicted for all those cars and all that. Then it's a bit ridiculous.

Mark and his friend's solution to having time on their hands and "doing nothing" was to create routines that in one sense simulated normal daily life: The boys would meet, perform a "job," share some leisure time, and do something exciting in the evening. In another sense, the systemized crime in their lives made them anything but normal. Instead, their daily routines become aberrant copies of normal everyday lives. As Corrigan (1975) writes, "weird ideas are born out of boredom and the expectation of future and continuing boredom, and this affects the sort of weird ideas that they are." So Mark and his friend tried desperately, with their own daily structure, to create a meaningful daily life with meaningful time markers to fill the time. However, as Mark himself points out, in the long run their daily lives were not meaningful beyond the situation, because they constituted only a way of "killing time," of avoiding the boredom of "doing nothing."

Together with the boys' negligible interest in schooling, "doing nothing" creates a situation in which the future appears to hold no great promise (see also Comac 2008; Levin 1998). Collison (1996, 437), in his study of young "underclass" males in Britain in search of the "high life," has similar findings: "Schooling is a passport to success yet is repetitively denied to young men like these, as they deny it." Not having the skills or inclination for being successful in school or education, these boys turn to different areas for success, such as generating excitement through crime (Earle 2011; Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009). Through leading the "high life" in the street, the boys build up notions of respect and honor connected to a particular form of hypermasculinity in which friendship and loyalty is highly valued. At the same time, their hypermasculinity is also closely connected to violence and to struggles of proving themselves "real men" while remaining outside the traditional masculine domains of education and employment (Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2003; Phillips 2008). "Doing nothing" thus becomes both evidence of an almost omnipresent latent boredom and a response to the experience of this boredom in these boys' lives both inside and outside the institution.

Institutional Edgework

Not surprisingly, the boys tried similar ways of breaking up boredom in secure care. While they could not create the "high life" of the streets, they could create excitement—a strategy for boredom aversion well known in the

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literature on boredom (Barbalet 1999; Conrad 1997; Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Winter 2002). The real excitement in secure care begins at the moment when the unexpected happens, beginning with small signals between the boys: One boy looks at another in a particular way, lifting an eyebrow or nodding his head, so that the others know they are in on the fun, ready to support anyone else's attempt to break the routines. If the boys are all in on the plan, they can quickly create a situation of excitement without exchanging a word, thereby momentarily influencing the routines and speeding up their experience of time. By generating excitement, the boys could actively influence the experience of *duration, sequence*, and *timing* of the institutional routines and sometimes even gain control. Although I did not experience their gaining control over physical space (such as stealing a key and leaving the unit), I experienced their success with the routines:

> It is morning. Only substitute staff is on duty, due to illness among the regulars. At breakfast the boys have been unusually quiet, except Imran, who—to the other boys' amusement—has been asking the substitute (Karen) questions about her personal life. After breakfast, I go with five boys to Karmal's room, where they smoke and make Karen the butt of their jokes. Karen comes into the room, asking them what they are laughing at. The laughter increases, but no one answers. She leaves. I stay. The boys decide not to go to the workshop.
>
> Karen returns with Pete, the workshop manager. He tells the boys to go to the workshop. The boys look indifferent and do not move. Then two get up, but as they approach the sofa in the corridor, they begin playing a video game. Pete and Karen stare in frustration. The two boys look only at the game, not replying to Pete's angry questions. The three other boys stand in the doorway to Karmal's room, laughing. Pete angrily leaves. As soon as he has gone, all five boys run to Karmal's window and yell insults at Pete as he crosses the courtyard. Karen is left in the unit with the five boys, telling them that they have to go clean their rooms—"now!" The boys just light cigarettes and blow smoke in her direction. I leave the unit so as not to jeopardize my relationship with the boys.

The boys gained control of the situation by collectively refusing to adhere to the routines or obey the staff members' attempts to enforce them. For once the morning routine was not defined by boredom. No doubt it was unpleasant for Karen and Pete but certainly not boring. I could easily follow

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the boys' excitement as they momentarily gained the power to determine the course of events. By making a plan and sticking together, they directly influenced the daily routines over which they normally had very little influence. In this attempt at control, the boys relied on the protection that followed from their being in a group. They created a situation of "institutional edgework"—exploring the limits of the "total institution" by actively not obeying them.

There was a wild edge to the boys' actions that morning, as neither they nor I knew how the situation would develop. For the boys, staying in control of the situation demanded that they skillfully maneuver in it while running the risk of severe consequences (such as being moved to another unit or even to jail). Given that such outcomes may greatly influence their future, why then do the boys sabotage the rules and routines? The answer is that these actions reassure them that they are not completely disconnected from control (see also Wästerfors 2011).

When I later asked Omid about the episode, he said that they did it "because we could" and "it's a way of having some fun and killing time." Breaking the rules and sabotaging routines generate the feeling of being in control, a feeling from which the boys are otherwise excluded. In those few moments they experienced the joy and excitement of edgework, momentarily breaking the boredom of daily life in the unit. Through the active use of their knowledge of institutional life, the boys demonstrated skills in challenging the institution's core values of order and obedience. Their institutional edgework thus not only created an escape from boredom but also restored a little of their lost power over the present. This escape, however, was short-lived, with success only fleeting. In all such instances, regular staff quickly regained control and reestablished the institutional routines. Nevertheless, I often observed hints of rebellion in the boys' approach to institutional rules and routines, as when a boy agreed to do as told but in a saccharine voice while looking at the ceiling (see also Goffman [1961] 1991, 102).

Edgework and Crime

From hanging out with the boys, I also learned about their view of life outside secure care. When "hanging out," they would often talk about their lives on the outside, including their criminal activities. One afternoon in the kitchen, Karmal and Mark began talking about their experiences stealing cars. The following excerpt shows how the boys actively use crime in their conversation about their daily lives when discussing how to have a good time and "do something fun":

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> Karmal is sitting on the window sill, and Mark is making a sandwich. Karmal says that the police now also accuse him of stealing ten more cars. Mark's face lights up as he asks Karmal if he actually stole the cars. Karmal grins and says that he has probably stolen a hundred or more, so it's lucky that they are only charging him with ten. Mark laughs. Karmal laughs with him, saying that he even stole his neighbor's car. Mark asks what kind of car, and Karmal says it was a Toyota. Mark acknowledges that a Toyota is hard car to break into but that it goes fast—even a small one. Mark continues eagerly, saying that he once had [stolen] one and the police had chased him. It could go 180 km an hour, so they didn't catch him. Karmal excitedly jumps down from the window sill to share his own experiences of being chased by the police.
>
> Both boys clearly enjoy the conversation, excited about sharing memories of stealing cars and police chases. They continue in this vein for over half an hour before they leave the kitchen to play a car-racing video game.

By recalling and sharing the excitement of these high-risk experiences, the two boys generate new excitement (see also Ferrell, Hayward, and Young 2008). For this short time, they created a world in which they were in control, cheating the police and being smart, recreating the highs of past edgework experiences by sharing them. Whether Karmal actually stole a hundred cars is irrelevant; what matters is the shared experience of excitement, the momentary dispelling of the institutional boredom. In these moments, the boys are negotiating the border between order and disorder, both in the situation of stealing and racing the cars and in exploring each other's acceptance of it.

In their sharing, the boys create a form of active time work by influencing the experience of *duration*—thus creating a short respite from the institutional boredom. Similarly, I observe that stealing cars appears to constitute a refuge from the experience of "nothing to do" in the boys' everyday lives on the outside (see also Comack 2008; Earle 2011; Phillips 2008). Several boys explained that they often did not know what to do with themselves or expect of the future. When I asked about their plans, hopes, and dreams, the boys appeared vague and uncertain, as if the future were out of their hands. When asked directly about their future, they all said that they wished to give up crime. As Karmal explained, "I was going to start being an apprentice, becoming a painter, but then the police got me, so now I don't know. I have disappointed my parents enough, and it [crime] won't happen again." However, later in the

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interview Karmal explains in detail how he was still in control of selling drugs in his neighborhood and that he had no plans of giving up this lucrative business. This lack of coherence creates a challenge for Karmal and several of the other boys, as they struggle to combine different discourses and expectations into a coherent identity. As a result, the boys experience a lack of control over their future and a disdain for personal ambition. They thus tend to focus on the present and on immediate enjoyment, not on long-term planning involving school or employment.

This focus on immediate enjoyment also manifests in Mark and Karmal's conversation. That they have not planned these car thefts is clear: Instead, they often talk about their crimes as if they had "just happened" to find themselves in situations where crime is a possibility: walking with some friends, seeing a car, and deciding to steal it. The boys' retelling of their experiences stealing cars and joyriding appears to create a form of excitement that in turn creates a hyperreality, a reality that feels more real to them than everyday reality (see also Katz 1988; Lyng 1990; Presdee 2000). Mark and Karmal's recollection of their edgework crimes gives them a feeling of freedom and control, a feeling nearly absent in secure care. For once, the two boys (re-)experience a situation in which they are not only creative and skillful (in their criminal activities) but also momentarily in charge—and they do so intentionally, with the effect of modifying their own temporal experience. Both institutional edgework and criminal edgework thus constitute the boys' active strategies for gaining momentary feelings of control in situations where they otherwise lack it.

Discussion and Conclusion

Boredom spares no one in secure care. Although I found ways of handling the boredom during the fieldwork and even occasionally dispelled it, boredom was the feeling that underlay the entire experience. I kept waiting for *something* exciting to happen, but it never really did. So here I was, on the inside, with a clear feeling that as long as I was waiting, I was not obtaining any data. As Conrad (1997, 474) writes, "an unmet expectation, justified or not, is a sure creation of boredom." I gradually changed my expectations, realizing that what I was waiting for was already there—boredom, an inseparable part of everyday life in secure care, not only for me but also, and even more so, for the boys I observed. By focusing on what did *not* take place and specifically on how the boys related to their situation, I also found meaning in my own experience of boredom. In the ethnographic data, a parallel development appeared between my coping with boredom and the boys' coping with it (Hastrup 1995; see also Bourgois 2003).

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That the boys' stay in secure care is marked by boredom and the meaninglessness that accompanies it is not surprising. Rather than being an excuse for feeling sorry for themselves, boredom pervades their lives in secure care. Boredom in the unit springs out of the boys' continuous waiting and thus from a lack of control, not only over physical space but also over time.

As Flaherty (2003, 18) points out, we must distinguish time that is experienced internally from the time of clocks and calendars, as in some situations large differences occur. Likewise, Scarce (2002, 305) states from experience that, "[m]ore than anything else, doing time was about creating completely new meanings for time and developing strategies for fulfilling those new meanings." While the boys constantly do time work aimed at creating strategies for handling time, they were less successful in creating "completely new meanings for time" on the inside. Both time and life on the outside fill their conversations and minds, leaving them little motivation for engaging in the artificial environment of secure care.

Despite the importance of routines in organizing everyday life in the unit, the boys often find it difficult to engage in them. Consequently, everyday interaction is often marked by nonverbal, aggressive, and physical communication, all exhibiting the boys' quest for respect through hypermasculine performances. The institutional routines signified nothing significant (such as progression) to the boys, nor could they control them; they therefore did not find the routines meaningful (see also Irwin and Owen 2005; Kivett and Warren 2002). As Barbalet (1999, 637) observes, "it is not the mere absence of time markers that constitutes boredom but the absence of *meaningful* time markers" (italics mine).

The boys' focus was directed almost entirely towards their lives outside secure care. Although the daily routines and time markers were intended to giving the boys a structured life imitating "normal" social life (Goffman [1961] 1991), the consequence is often the boy's disconnection from their lives outside secure care. Furthermore, the imitation of a "normal everyday life" (focusing on regularity and the value of work) is often so far removed from the lives that most of the boys lead on the outside that this imitation in itself emphasizes their general position as "other" (Åkerström 1983). Ultimately, these institutional routines between the boys' past, present, and future become meaningless structures.

On the relationship between the past and the future on the inside, Scarce (2002, 318) writes, "We inmates raced toward a future that we attempted to control by manipulating the past." By recalling and reformulating the past, like Mark and Karmal in their stories of joyriding, the boys attempted to tie together the separate worlds of outside and inside. "These illegal forms of excitement," argues Hayward (2007, 239), "represent a break with the

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banalities of everyday life and mark an entry into a new world of possibilities and pleasures." Looking at crime as a form of edgework that generates ruptures in daily boredom makes crime meaningful in the present situation. Important here, however, is that crime becomes meaningful primarily in its immediate context; in the long run, it becomes reduced to isolated experiences of risk-taking, disconnected from the boys' daily life and their future (Hayward 2007; Presdee 2000). These edgework pockets of cheerfulness and excitement, although helping the boys keep up their spirits when "hanging out doing nothing" in the secure care unit, do not change their dominant experience of lacking control over both their present and their future.

These boys are not alone in struggling to handle the pressures of daily life and future expectations, nor are they alone in experiencing boredom. Boredom has been characterized not only as a central aspect of being young (Brannen and Ann Nilsen 2002; Conrad 1997; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Miles 2000) but also as a well-documented aspect of adult life, particularly in relation to the monotony of work (Hamper 1992; Roy 1959). However, what stands out in this fieldwork study is how wide-ranging an experience boredom is for these boys, both in the secure care unit and in their daily lives on the outside. While the boys' stories about outside life initially appear energized by excitement and edgework crimes, their stories make clear that their reality is often that of "doing nothing and just hanging out."

"Doing nothing" is the boys' way of tackling boredom—it is their active time work of trying to "do their time well" (Scarce 2002) in secure care and control temporality on the outside (Flaherty 2003). "Doing nothing" in the unit is an active strategy signaling that "I do what I want with my time," so that "doing nothing" counteracts boredom. However, "doing nothing" is not an active choice (although the boys would like to present it as such)—it is also a direct result of boredom (Corrigan 1975). As the boys see no clear alternatives to the "high life" on the streets other than creating more action through edgework, "doing nothing" becomes their lived embodiment of boredom.

In analyzing both the boys' resistance to institutional rules and their criminal edgework on the outside as responses to an almost omnipresent boredom, I find continuity across settings. Although the boys' social resources differ, they actively try to control temporality through time work on both the inside and the outside. The setting notwithstanding, I find that as soon as the excitement ends, the respite or break from the banality and boredom of daily life likewise ends, thus creating a situation of "no action" (Goffman 1969). The relationship between action and boredom therefore becomes a vicious cycle: although creating action through edgework activities constitutes a rupture with boredom in the here and now, its fleeting nature also generates future boredom.

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Bio

Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson is employed as a researcher at The Danish National Centre for Social research. She has recently defended in her Ph.D. thesis on young offenders in secure care in Denmark and is interested in young people’s risk-taking and qualitative research methods.

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