

Reading Comprehension

1. Why being bored is stimulating -- and useful, too (IELTS AT Book 13, Test 1, P 2)

This most common of emotions is turning out to be more interesting than we thought

We all know how it feels - it's impossible to keep your mind on anything, time stretches out, and all the things you could do seem equally unlikely to make you feel better. But defining boredom so that it can be studied in the lab has proved difficult. For a start, it can include a lot of other mental states, such as frustration, apathy, depression and indifference. There isn't even agreement over whether boredom is always a low-energy, flat kind of emotion or whether feeling agitated and restless counts as boredom, too. In his book, *Boredom: A Lively History*, Peter Toohey at the University of Calgary, Canada, compares it to disgust - an emotion that motivates us to stay away from certain situations. 'If disgust protects humans from infection, boredom may protect them from "infectious" social situations,' he suggests.

By asking people about their experiences of boredom, Thomas Goetz and his team at the University of Konstanz in Germany have recently identified five distinct types: indifferent, calibrating, searching, reactant and apathetic. These can be plotted on two axes - one running left to right, which measures low to high arousal, and the other from top to bottom, which measures how positive or negative the feeling is. Intriguingly, Goetz has found that while people experience all kinds of boredom, they tend to specialise in one. Of the five types, the

most damaging is 'reactant' boredom with its explosive combination of high arousal and negative emotion. The most useful is what Goetz calls 'indifferent' boredom: someone isn't engaged in anything satisfying but still feels relaxed and calm. However, it remains to be seen whether there are any character traits that predict the kind of boredom each of us might be prone to.

Psychologist Sandi Mann at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, goes further. 'All emotions are there for a reason, including boredom,' she says. Mann has found that being bored makes us more creative. 'We're all afraid of being bored but in actual fact it can lead to all kinds of amazing things,' she says. In experiments published last year, Mann found that people who had been made to feel bored by copying numbers out of the phone book for 15 minutes came up with more creative ideas about how to use a polystyrene cup than a control group. Mann concluded that a passive, boring activity is best for creativity because it allows the mind to wander in fact, she goes so far as to (suggest that we should seek out more boredom in our lives.

Psychologist John Eastwood at York University in Toronto, Canada, isn't convinced. 'If you are in a state of mind-wandering you are not bored,' he says. 'In my view, by definition boredom is an undesirable state.' That doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't adaptive, he adds. 'Pain is adaptive - if we didn't have physical pain, bad things would happen to us. Does that mean that we should actively cause pain? No. But even if boredom has evolved to help us survive, it can still be toxic if allowed to fester.' For Eastwood, the central feature of boredom is a failure to put our

'attention system' into gear. This causes an inability to focus on anything, which makes time seem to go painfully slowly. What's more, your efforts to improve the situation can end up making you feel worse. 'People try to connect with the world and if they are not successful there's that frustration and irritability,' he says. Perhaps most worryingly, says Eastwood, repeatedly failing to engage attention can lead to a state where we don't know what to do any more, and no longer care.

Eastwood's team is now trying to explore why the attention system fails. It's early days but they think that at least some of it comes down to personality. Boredom proneness has been linked with a variety of traits. People who are motivated by pleasure seem to suffer particularly badly. Other personality traits, such as curiosity, are associated with a high boredom threshold. More evidence that boredom has detrimental effects comes from studies of people who are more or less prone to boredom. It seems those who bore easily face poorer prospects in education, their career and even life in general. But of course, boredom itself cannot kill - it's the things we do to deal with it that may put us in danger. What can we do to alleviate it before it comes to that? Goetz's group has one suggestion. Working with teenagers, they found that those who 'approach' a boring situation - in other words, see that it's boring and get stuck in anyway - report less boredom than those who try to avoid it by using snacks, TV or social media for distraction.

Psychologist Francoise Wemelsfelder Speculates that our over-connected lifestyles might even be a new source of boredom. 'In modern human society there is a lot of

overstimulation but still a lot of problems finding meaning,' she says. So instead of seeking yet more mental stimulation, perhaps we should leave our phones alone, and use boredom to motivate us to engage with the world in a more meaningful way.

2. Oxytocin

The positive and negative effects of the chemical known as the 'love hormone'

Oxytocin is a chemical, a hormone produced in the pituitary gland in the brain. It was through various studies focusing on animals that scientists first became aware of the influence of oxytocin. They discovered that it helps reinforce the bonds between prairie voles, and triggers the motherly behaviour that sheep show towards their newborn lambs. It is also released by women in childbirth, strengthening the attachment between mother and baby. Few chemicals have as positive a reputation as oxytocin, which is sometimes referred to as the 'love hormone'. One sniff of it can, it is claimed, make a person more trusting, empathetic, generous and cooperative. It is time, however, to revise this wholly optimistic view. A new wave of studies has shown that its effects vary greatly depending on the person and the circumstances, and it can impact on our social interactions for worse as well as for better.

Oxytocin's role in human behaviour first emerged in 2005. In a groundbreaking experiment, Markus Heinrichs and his colleagues at the University of Freiburg, Germany, asked volunteers to do an activity in which they could invest money with an anonymous person who was not guaranteed to be honest.

The team found that participants who had sniffed oxytocin via a nasal spray beforehand invested more money than those who received a placebo instead. The study was the start of research into the effects of oxytocin on human interactions. `For eight years, it was quite a lonesome field,` Heinrichs recalls. `Now, everyone is interested.` These follow-up studies have shown that after a sniff of the hormone, people become more charitable, better at reading emotions on others` faces and at communicating constructively in arguments. Together, the results fuelled the view that oxytocin universally enhanced the positive aspects of our social nature.

Then, after a few years, contrasting findings began to emerge. Simone Shamay-Tsoory at the University of Haifa, Israel, found that when volunteers played a competitive game, those who inhaled the hormone showed more pleasure when they beat other players, and felt more envy when others won. What`s more, administering oxytocin also has sharply contrasting outcomes depending on a person`s disposition. Jennifer Bartz from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, found that it improves people`s ability to read emotions, but only if they are not very socially adept to begin with. Her research also shows that oxytocin in fact reduces cooperation in subjects who are particularly anxious or sensitive to rejection.

Another discovery is that oxytocin`s effects vary depending on who we are interacting with. Studies conducted by Carolyn DeClerck of the University of Antwerp, Belgium, revealed that people who had received a dose of oxytocin actually became less cooperative when dealing with complete strangers. Meanwhile,

Carsten De Dreu at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands discovered that volunteers given oxytocin showed favouritism: Dutch men became quicker to associate positive words with Dutch names than with foreign ones, for example. According to De Dreu, oxytocin drives people to care for those in their social circles and defend them from outside dangers. So, it appears that oxytocin strengthens biases, rather than promoting general goodwill, as was previously thought.

There were signs of these subtleties from the start. Bartz has recently shown that in almost half of the existing research results, oxytocin influenced only certain individuals or in certain circumstances. Where once researchers took no notice of such findings, now a more nuanced understanding of oxytocin's effects is propelling investigations down new lines. To Bartz, the key to understanding what the hormone does lies in pinpointing its core function rather than in cataloguing its seemingly endless effects. There are several hypotheses which are not mutually exclusive. Oxytocin could help to reduce anxiety and fear. Or it could simply motivate people to seek out social connections. She believes that oxytocin acts as a chemical spotlight that shines on social clues - a shift in posture, a flicker of the eyes, a dip in the voice - making people more attuned to their social environment. This would explain why it makes us more likely to look others in the eye and improves our ability to identify emotions. But it could also make things worse for people who are overly sensitive or prone to interpreting social cues in the worst light.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the oxytocin story has become more perplexing. The hormone is found in

everything from octopuses to sheep, and its evolutionary roots stretch back half a billion years. 'It's a very simple and ancient molecule that has been co-opted for many different functions,' says Sue Carter at the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA. 'It affects primitive parts of the brain like the amygdala, so it's going to have many effects on just about everything.' Bartz agrees. 'Oxytocin probably does some very basic things, but once you add our higher-order thinking and social situations, these basic processes could manifest in different ways depending on individual differences and context.'

3. Book Review

The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being By William Davies

'Happiness is the ultimate goal because it is self-evidently good. If we are asked why happiness matters we can give no further external reason. It just obviously does matter.' This pronouncement by Richard Layard, an economist and advocate of 'positive psychology', summarises the beliefs of many people today. For Layard and others like him, it is obvious that the purpose of government is to promote a state of collective well-being. The only question is how to achieve it, and here positive psychology - a supposed science that not only identifies what makes people happy but also allows their happiness to be measured - can show the way. Equipped with this science, they say, governments can secure happiness in society in a way they never could in the past.

It is an astonishingly crude and simple-minded way of thinking, and for that very reason increasingly popular. Those who think in this way are oblivious to the vast philosophical literature in which the meaning and value of happiness have been explored and questioned, and write as if nothing of any importance had been thought on the subject until it came to their attention. It was the philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who was more than anyone else responsible for the development of this way of thinking. For Bentham it was obvious that the human good consists of pleasure and the absence of pain. The Greek philosopher Aristotle may have identified happiness with self-realisation in the 4th century BC, and thinkers throughout the ages may have struggled to reconcile the pursuit of happiness with other human values, but for Bentham all this was mere metaphysics or fiction. Without knowing anything much of him or the school of moral theory he established - since they are by education and intellectual conviction illiterate in the history of ideas - our advocates of positive psychology follow in his tracks in rejecting as outmoded and irrelevant pretty much the entirety of ethical reflection on human happiness to date.

But as William Davies notes in his recent book *The Happiness Industry*, the view that happiness is the only self-evident good is actually a way of limiting moral inquiry. One of the virtues of this rich, lucid and arresting book is that it places the current cult of happiness in a well-defined historical framework. Rightly, Davies begins his story with Bentham, noting that he was far more than a philosopher. Davies writes, 'Bentham's activities were those which we might now associate with a public sector

management consultant'. In the 1790s, he wrote to the Home Office suggesting that the departments of government be linked together through a set of 'conversation tubes', and to the Bank of England with a design for a printing device that could produce unforgeable banknotes. He drew up plans for a 'frigidarium' to keep provisions such as meat, fish, fruit and vegetables fresh. His celebrated design for a prison to be known as a 'Panopticon', in which prisoners would be kept in solitary confinement while being visible at all times to the guards, was very nearly adopted. (Surprisingly, Davies does not discuss the fact that Bentham meant his Panopticon not just as a model prison but also as an instrument of control that could be applied to schools and factories.)

Bentham was also a pioneer of the 'science of happiness'. If happiness is to be regarded as a science, it has to be measured, and Bentham suggested two ways in which this might be done. Viewing happiness as a complex of pleasurable sensations, he suggested that it might be quantified by measuring the human pulse rate. Alternatively, money could be used as the standard for quantification: if two different goods have the same price, it can be claimed that they produce the same quantity of pleasure in the consumer. Bentham was more attracted by the latter measure. By associating money so closely to inner experience, Davies writes, Bentham 'set the stage for the entangling of psychological research and capitalism that would shape the business practices of the twentieth century'.

The Happiness Industry describes how the project of a science of happiness has become integral to capitalism. We learn

much that is interesting about how economic problems are being redefined and treated as psychological maladies. In addition, Davies shows how the belief that inner states of pleasure and displeasure can be objectively measured has informed management studies and advertising. The tendency of thinkers such as J B Watson, the founder of behaviourism*, was that human beings could be shaped, or manipulated, by policymakers and managers. Watson had no factual basis for his view of human action. When he became president of the American Psychological Association in 1915, he 'had never even studied a single human being': his research had been confined to experiments on white rats. Yet Watson's reductive model is now widely applied, with 'behaviour change' becoming the goal of governments: in Britain, a 'Behaviour Insights Team' has been established by the government to study how people can be encouraged, at minimum cost to the public purse, to live in what are considered to be socially desirable ways.

Modern industrial societies appear to need the possibility of ever-increasing happiness to motivate them in their labours. But whatever its intellectual pedigree, the idea that governments should be responsible for promoting happiness is always a threat to human freedom.