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A desire for desires: Boredom and its relation to alexithymia

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Abstract

Participants completed self-report scales of boredom, emotional awareness and external orientation. Structural equation modeling indicated that boredom, emotional awareness and external orientation are distinctly measurable but correlated – the bored individual is unaware of emotions and externally-oriented. Furthermore, although the bored person typically complains that the external world fails to engage them, the present findings suggest the underlying problem may be in the person's inability to consciously access and understand their emotions. The present findings and accompanying literature review challenge the simplistic notion that boredom is never more than a trivial annoyance resulting from an under-stimulating environment.

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1. Introduction

Boredom is typically thought of as a common, perhaps even trivial annoyance that can easily be remedied by plunging into interesting activities. Indeed, we often react with disdain upon hearing

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complaints of boredom – there are so many interesting things to do! How could anyone possibly be bored? This conception of boredom, however, is overly simplistic. As Barthes (1975) has succinctly stated: “It can’t be helped: boredom is not simple” (p. 25). The question itself, of how anyone can be bored despite innumerable available activities, points to the possibility that boredom is rooted in something more than an impoverished environment.

Empirical evidence suggests that boredom is prevalent. References from the 1960s to the 1980s suggest that anywhere from 18% to 50% of the population is bored (Klapp, 1986). A recent survey indicated that 51% of teens aged 12–19 report “getting bored easily” (GPC Research & Health Canada, 2003). Furthermore, a survey of consumer attitudes conducted by Yankelovich Partners (2000, as cited in Kuntz, 2000) found that 71% of respondents said they yearned for more novelty in life; the authors concluded that “we are bored despite living in remarkable times” (p. WK7).

Although a common human experience, boredom is anything but trivial; in fact, it is associated with significant emotional distress. A number of studies have found correlations between chronic boredom and a range of psycho-social problems. Most notably, correlations between boredom and various types of negative affect have been well documented – especially in studies that have correlated boredom proneness with depression and anxiety (Gordon, Wilkinson, McGown, & Jovanoska, 1997; Vodanovich & Verner, 1991). The tendency to become bored has also been positively linked with measures of hopelessness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), loneliness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), hostility and anger (Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997), amotivational orientation (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986), and somatization complaints (Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000). Furthermore, addictive behaviours such as overeating (Wilson, 1986), gambling (Blaszczynski, McConaghy, & Frankova, 1990), and alcohol or drug use (Paulson, Coombs, & Richardson, 1990) have also been linked with boredom. These associations with negative affect and maladaptive behaviours are particularly disconcerting given that boredom is common and often not taken seriously in psychological research or in society more generally.

In contrast to the prevailing view, the ‘classical’ psychodynamic approach to *defining* and *understanding* boredom has suggested that boredom is a complex and significant experience resulting from inner psychological dynamics. Lipps (1904, as cited in Lewinsky, 1943) provided one of the earliest psychodynamic *descriptions* of boredom. He states that boredom can be described “as a feeling of displeasure due to the conflict between the urge for intense psychic occupation and the lack of stimulation or the incapacity to allow oneself to be stimulated” (p. 148). Fenichel (1953) expanded upon this definition, adding that the urge for psychic occupation is accompanied by an inhibition of activity and that the bored individual “does not know how one ought or wants to be active” (p. 292). Essentially, Fenichel claims that the bored individual does not lack something to do; rather, he or she is unable to designate the type of activity required to satisfy the need for stimulation, which, in turn, results in intense conflict and displeasure. Greenson (1953) summarizes boredom as:

A state of dissatisfaction and disinclination to action; a state of longing and an inability to designate what is longed for; a sense of emptiness; a passive, expectant attitude with the hope that the external world will supply the satisfaction; a distorted sense of time in which time seems to stand still (p. 7).

Classical psychodynamic *explanations* of boredom emphasize that boredom is the result of a stalemate between opposing forces in the mind; that is, while the ideational content of an instinc-

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