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Self-focused but lacking self-insight: The relationship between boredom and self-consciousness

Boredom, the uncomfortable feeling of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity [1,2] is associated with a high level of self-consciousness. That is, when bored we are painfully stuck in ourselves, unable to connect, and unable to lose ourselves in activity. In this regard boredom can be categorized as a self-referential feeling (akin to other feelings such as guilt and shame). However, only a handful of studies have explored the links between boredom and self-consciousness and have found disparate, and potentially confusing, patterns. We propose that the confusion arises because boredom has a differential relationship with two aspects of self-consciousness that must be distinguished. Whereas boredom is positively correlated with the tendency to scrutinize and direct focus towards oneself (i.e. self-directed attention), it is negatively correlated with the ability to identify and categorize one's inner experiences (i.e. self-insight) [3,4,5,6]. We will report empirical findings that support our model. People who often feel bored tend to focus attention on themselves but also lack self-insight. Moreover, people manipulated into a state of boredom report higher levels of self-focused attention whereas manipulating levels of self-focused attention did not result in increased boredom levels suggesting a particular causal relation at the state level.

In study 1, within both the undergraduate and community sample, we found evidence of a 3-factor model, with Factors 1, 2, and 3 defined by salient loadings from measures of trait boredom, measures of self-insight, and measures of self-directed attention, respectively. Trait boredom was positively associated with the latent factor of self-directed attention and negatively associated with the latent factor of self-insight.

Studies 2 and 3 experimentally manipulated self-directed attention and boredom among undergraduate students. Manipulating self-directed attention did not yield differences in state boredom (Study 2), however those who were made to feel bored reported significantly higher self-directed attention post-manipulation than those in the non-boredom condition (Study 3). In all three studies, state boredom was positively associated with state self-directed attention.

This work explicates and refines our understanding of the self-referential experience of boredom: When someone is in the negative state of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity, they will direct attention towards themselves. However, the boredom-prone person will lack the awareness and ability to consciously access and understand their feelings. This creates an intense bind – painful self-focus coupled with a lack of self-insight, which results in reduced awareness of what one wants to do. The boredom prone person may also struggle to become absorbed in activities because their tendency to self-focus disrupts effective engagement [7]. Knowing how boredom connects to enhanced self-directed attention and poor self-insight enables us to further explore how these distinct processes make the experience of boredom aversive and how they lead people to respond in ways that are maladaptive or ineffectual at reducing boredom. In doing so, we can better understand how to support those who struggle to respond meaningfully and purposefully when faced with this aversive feeling.

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