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Boredom and Creative Constraints

A growing body of work suggests a connection between boredom and creativity. There are tentative signs that boredom may – under certain circumstances – enhance creativity and support creative problem-solving (Mann and Cadman, 2014; Park, Lim and Oh, 2019). This understanding of boredom as a force for good has however been under fierce criticism by some researchers highlighting the unpleasant nature of boredom and its detrimental effects on health and wellbeing (Toohey, 2019).

This paper aims to contribute to the debate around the possible effect of boredom on creativity by considering findings from creativity research. In particular, it draws on research into the role of constraints within the creative process.

Constraints are generally understood to be an integral part of the creative process. As a form of structural aid they support and guide the decision-making process and, ultimately, enable genuine novelty (Stokes, 2006, 2007). While voluntary, internal constraints – those set by the individual themselves – are generally seen as positive, even generative; external constraints – those set by external factors or other people – appear in a far more ambiguous light (Roskes, 2015). Research suggests that certain types of external constraints are detrimental for creative work. Others, in contrast, can actually bolster creative performance. The effect of the particular type of external constraint appears to be determined by the type of motivation that drives the creative process.

This connection between creativity, constraint and motivation may help us understand boredom's relationship to creativity because boredom itself is closely associated with both concepts.

Boredom arises out of external constraints. It is generally linked to the experience of being stuck in an undesirable situation or place. Any type of creative work emerging from boredom will therefore develop under these

set constraints. If the constraints are generative and supportive of creativity, creativity will be more likely to emerge from situations of boredom. Creativity will thus appear in correlation with boredom – rather than as the effect of boredom.

At the same time, there may be a second factor that influences the successful emergence of creativity from situations of boredom. This relates to motivation. Boredom is generally understood to have significant motivational power (Bench and Lench, 2019; Elpidorou, 2018; Martin, Sadlo and Stew, 2006). Like other types of negative experiences, it creates avoidance motivation. Yet unlike pain or fear it has much less predictable action tendencies. Instead of aiming for a decrease in a stimulus which is present, it demands that we add a stimulus which is currently absent. Seen in this light, the effect of boredom would be much more closely associated with achievement motivation. The type of motivation experienced is likely to be determined by the individual's specific focus – either on the avoidance of negative experiences or their strive toward positive experiences.

By considering the complex interactions between different types of constraints and different types of motivation associated with boredom, this paper hopes to develop a preliminary account of the conditions under which boredom may indeed result in increased creativity.

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