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Lessons from the Bored Room: Applying Concepts of Boredom to Animals

When we keep animals – as companions, sports partners, entertainers, and resources – we place them in environments that we have designed for them. For a range of reasons including cost, ease of management, and safety, we often design these environments to be as stable or unchanging as possible. We make them boring. But what is boredom to a dog? Or to a cow or chicken? It is often assumed that animals in environments that seem boring to humans must be having a negative experience, but is this valid? Should we be concerned for the welfare of animals that we think may be bored? I am exploring different conceptions of boredom and how the many facets of this complex emotional state may apply to animals. Many ideas about boredom in humans (e.g., life meaning) do not translate well to the animal world. However, some aspects may be readily applicable such as environmental factors and behavioural responses. In particular, we often worry about boredom in animals that live in highly monotonous or unchanging environments. However, little is known about how animals of different species and life stages perceive monotony in its many forms. There are many questions left to ask about animals and monotony, but what they all have in common is that we need a way to ask them. I am therefore developing a behavioural paradigm that will allow us to ask questions about how animals perceive and respond to monotony – by training rats to use an iPad.