THE NEW SCHOOL FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

The Shocking Nature of Boredom

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Background

- Boredom is a feeling of discomfort experienced when the situational environment is insufficiently stimulating[1] and has been associated with a variety of affective and behavioral issues.[2,3,4]
- Boredom can be induced in most people by exposure to under-stimulating, monotonous conditions (state boredom) but people also vary in their predisposition to experience state boredom in response to monotonous stimulation (boredom proneness).[6]
- Previous research has indicated that sitting with one's own thoughts for 15-minutes will prompt some participants to self-administer an electric shock.[7]
- The suggested the subjects found their thoughts so aversive that the physical sensation of the shock served as a preferable distractor .[7]
- However, the decision to self-shock was possibly could also be due to the desire for the momentary rush of uncertainty and anxiety rather than the shock itself. And since state and trait boredom levels of the participants were not measured in the original study, it is unclear what participants were motivated by. The current study attempts to clarify these questions.
- In the current study, conditions with varying shock probabilities were used to dissociate the goal to experience the physical sensation of the shock itself from the goal of experiencing the associated anxiety and uncertainty.
- It was hypothesized that the condition with the highest risk of a shock when pushing the button would be associated with greater feelings of anticipatory anxiety.

Purpose & Hypotheses

The goal of the current study was to decouple the desire for self-stimulation from the actual shock from the stimulation of anticipatory anxiety, and to confirm that higher levels of state boredom are associated with higher rates of decisions to self-shock.

Hypothesis 1: High probability shock condition will lead to more frequent button pressing compared to the low
Hypothesis 2: Trait and State boredom will be positively correlated with the decision to self shock

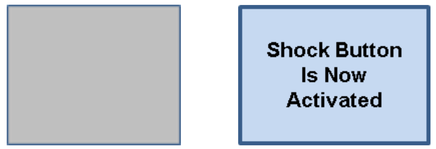
Methods

Participants

- *N* = 33

Procedure

- Three conditions: Participants are told there was either a 20% chance of shock (High), 2% chance (Low), or 0% chance (Zero).
- All participants tethered to shock electrodes.
- Unknown to the participants, the electrodes were inert in all conditions.
- Participants asked to entertain themselves with only their own thoughts while sitting in front of a computer screen for 15-minutes.
- The computer screen alternated between a grey screen and a blue screen phase.



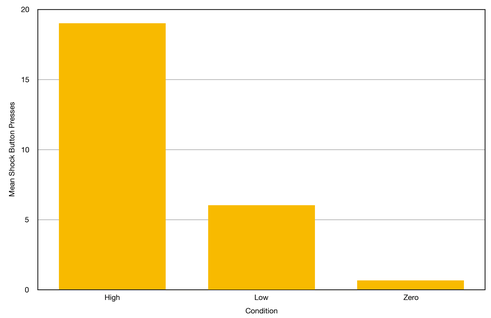
- Participants were told that the shock button was inert during the grey screen phase. However, participants were told that during the blue screen phase the shock button was activated and they had either a 20%, 2%, or 0% chance of receiving a shock should they choose to push the space bar. Each phase lasted 2–3 minutes.
- Participants were informed that pressing the shock button was entirely voluntary.

Questionnaires

- Affect Questionnaire
- Multidimensional State Boredom Questionnaire
- Demographics
- Boredom Proneness Scale
- Barrett Impulsivity Scale
- Experience Questionnaire
- State Boredom Measure

Results

Condition X Shock



- There were positive correlations between trait boredom, $r = .358$, $p = < .023$, boredom intensity, $r = .348$, $p = < .028$, and reported boredom $r = .501$, $p = < .003$ with number of button presses.
- There was a positive correlation between reported boredom and at least one button press, $r = .376$, $p = < .028$. However, there were was no significant relationship between at least one button press with other state or trait boredom measures.
- The high condition ($M = 19.000$, $SD = 26.465$) was more likely to press the shock button more frequently than the low ($M = 6.000$, $SD = 12.133$) or zero ($M = .636$, $SD = 1.027$) conditions $F(2, 24) = 871.404$, $p = .009$.
- While marginally significant, the high condition ($M = .727$, $SD = .467$) was also more likely than the low ($M = .273$, $SD = .467$) and zero conditions ($M = .364$, $SD = .505$) to press the shock button at least once $F(2,24) = 2.948$, $p = .072$.

Discussion

- Both state and trait boredom influenced the decision to self-shock. Moreover, when trait boredom and self-reported histories of recent boredom (SBM) are controlled for, the impact of state boredom is even more apparent.
- The number of button presses were found to be significantly higher in the high condition when compared to the low and zero conditions.
- A similar, albeit only marginally significant pattern was also found when only the high and the low conditions were compared and the dependent variable was at least one button press, suggesting that the probability of being shocked also influenced the decision to make the first button press, not just the number of presses.
- Unlike Wilson et al.'s (2015) study the current study varied the degree to which participants believed that they were likely *to be shocked.* The fact that participants attempted to self-shock more in the high condition (the condition with the highest risk of being shocked) suggests that bored individuals may have been attempting to counteract the feelings of sameness with feelings of anxious apprehension and uncertainty.

References

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