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Short Report

Marital Boredom Now Predicts Less Satisfaction 9 Years Later

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Close relationships are central to health and happiness. Most research has focused on eliminating problems such as conflict and tension, issues that counselors are likely to encounter. However, some cross-sectional surveys of the general public suggest that another problem faced in long-term marriages may be simple boredom, the lack of excitement; laboratory and short-term field experiments suggest a causal effect of reducing boredom (by shared participation in exciting activities) on relationship quality (e.g., Aron et al., 2000).

The experimental and other research (e.g., Graham, 2008) demonstrating this effect is based on the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986), which indicates that the excitement often experienced during relationship formation arises from rapid development of closeness, the rate of which inevitably declines over time. However, if partners experience excitement from other sources (such as novel and challenging activities) in a shared context, this shared experience can reignite relationship passion by associating the excitement with the relationship. If this model applies outside the laboratory, it has significant theoretical and practical implications.

In work presented here, we examined the role of boredom in predicting relationship quality over a time period of 9 years in a diverse, representative sample. Specifically, we examined Years 7 and 16 of the Early Years of Marriage Project (Orbuch et al., 2002), which has been following a representative sample of Black American and White American couples in the Detroit area and includes measures of the key self-expansion variables of relationship boredom/excitement and closeness, along with a standard satisfaction item.

METHOD

Participants were 123 married couples in which at least one member completed the focal items at both Years 7 and 16. In Year 1, couples applied for marriage licenses in Wayne County,

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Michigan. Both individuals in each couple had to be of the same race and entering into their first marriages, and the wife had to be younger than 35 years old. Eligible Black American couples and a random sample of White American couples were contacted; 66% of those contacted agreed to participate. At Year 1, mean ages were 23.93 years for wives and 26.38 years for husbands; the highest school grade completed was 13.9 for wives and 14.0 for husbands; the median household income was \$55,000; 40 couples were Black American, and 83 couples were White American. Face-to-face interviews were conducted separately for husbands and wives in the couples' homes by race-matched interviewers.

Participants completed three focal items, which were identical at Years 7 and 16. The first focal item was "During the past month, how often did you feel that your marriage was in a rut (or getting into a rut), that you do the same thing all the time and rarely get to do exciting things together as a couple?" (*often, sometimes, rarely, never*). The second focal item was "All in all, how satisfied are you with your marriage?" (*very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied*). The third focal item was a measure of closeness (Aron et al., 1992) in which participants were asked to select, from seven pairs of circles overlapping to different degrees, "the picture which best describes your marriage."

RESULTS

Greater boredom in Year 7 predicted significantly less satisfaction at Year 16, even after controlling for satisfaction in Year 7, $\beta = -.26$, $p = .01$ (upper panel in Fig. 1). Furthermore, the cross-lagged model supported the proposed causal direction and undermined possible third-variable alternative explanations: Whereas greater boredom in Year 7 strongly and significantly predicted less satisfaction in Year 16 ($\beta = -.26$), greater satisfaction in Year 7 did not significantly predict less boredom in Year 16 ($\beta = .12$); the difference between these two beta values was significant: $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 4.41$, $p < .05$.

Consistent with theory, the effect of boredom on later satisfaction appeared to be fully mediated by changes in closeness

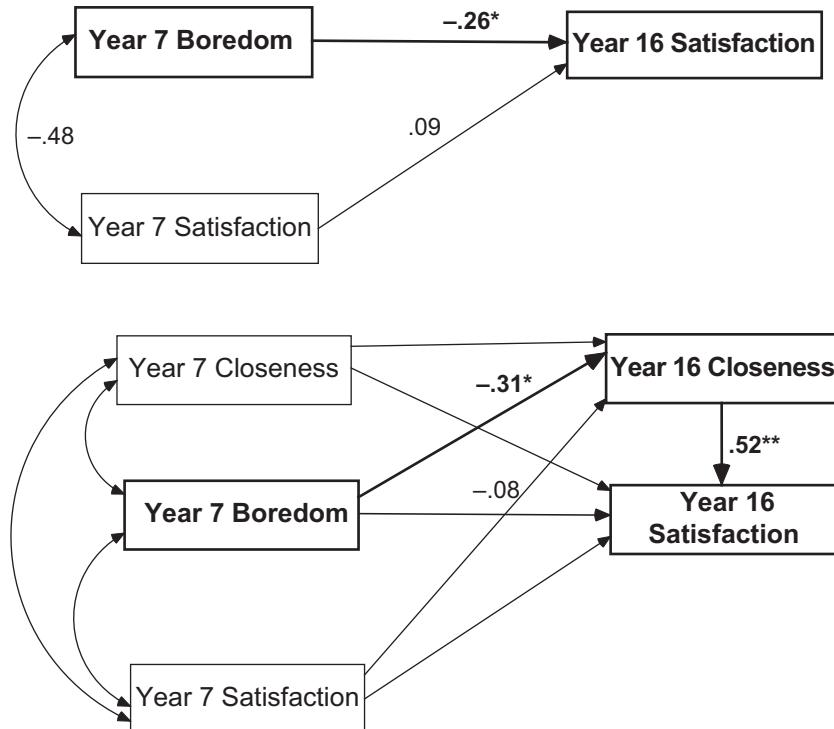


Fig. 1. Models of the basic effect of boredom on satisfaction in married couples (upper panel) and the mediation of this relationship by closeness (lower panel). Standardized path coefficients are shown. Not shown, but included in both models as exogenous variables, were household income, years of education, and race. Models shown are based on couple means (median husband-wife $r = .45$). Asterisks indicate statistical significance, $*p < .01$, $**p < .001$. Main variables are shown in bold; coefficients are given for the paths discussed in the Results section.

over the 9 years (lower panel in Fig. 1; bootstrapped indirect-effect 90% confidence interval: $-.28, -.07; p = .007$). All results remained significant with virtually identical effect sizes after controlling for measures of tension and conflicts in Year 7.

Throughout, there were no significant or nearly significant effects of race or gender, nor were there any significant or nearly significant differences between actor and partner effects. Moreover, there were no significant or marginally significant interactions involving any combination of these variables. Across analyses, there was a nonsignificant tendency for the strongest effects to be actor effects among Black American husbands.

DISCUSSION

In a representative sample of long-term married couples in the United States (see Orbuch et al., 2002, for General Social Survey data comparisons), present boredom is positively correlated with a decrease in satisfaction 9 years in the future, an effect that appears to be due to boredom undermining closeness, which in turn undermines satisfaction. The effect size ($\beta = -.26$) is quite dramatic considering that it predicted regressed change over 9 years and the sample includes only couples still together at year 16. (The 38 couples tested at year 7 who divorced by year 16

were nonsignificantly more bored at year 7 than the 123 couples who remained married.) Furthermore, all results were independent of relationship tension and conflicts. Previous cross-sectional surveys, hour-to-hour experience-sampling studies, and short-term experiments suggested such a pattern, but this is the first time it has been shown over a significant period of time and in a representative sample.

Mediation by closeness, which had not been directly tested before, integrates central aspects of the self-expansion model. Specifically, it suggests that excitement in relationships facilitates or makes salient closeness, which in turn promotes satisfaction in the long term. Indeed, closeness may promote satisfaction via other mechanisms known to be associated with promoting satisfaction over time, such as perceived partner responsiveness, transformation of motivation, commitment, communal norms, positive illusions, and trust.

Regarding application, these findings show directly, for the first time, that not only conflicts, but also simple boredom, can shape relationships over the long term. Given that short-term experiments demonstrate that couples can reduce boredom with shared exciting activities, the present findings suggest that benefits may be substantial and long lasting, for both husbands and wives and across racial groups—pointing to easy-to-implement potential additions to educational, marital preparation,

and enrichment programs, and a possible supplementary tool for marital counselors. Thus, as has been found in many other domains, increasing rewards may matter as much or more than reducing costs; or, in more contemporary terms, it may be important to focus not just on eliminating negatives, but also on enhancing positives.

Future research will benefit from replicating these findings cross-culturally, employing more elaborate measures, and testing for other potential mechanisms and moderators (e.g., perceived partner responsiveness). These data point to educational and clinical interventions that involve the promotion of shared exciting activities and other not-yet-considered possibilities for reducing boredom and enhancing excitement among couples.

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