

Response To Prof. Leif Nelson’s Post, “Maybe People Actually Enjoy Being Alone With Their Thoughts”

After examining the data from our studies, Professor Nelson reports that he “arrived at an inference opposite” to ours, claiming that the data show that “people typically enjoy being alone in a room with nothing to do but think.” To show this, he focused primarily on one self-report item, ignoring a preponderance of other evidence that runs contrary to his claim. For example:

(a) In Study 8, we randomly assigned people to “just think” or do common external activities such as watching television or working on puzzles. Participants enjoyed the former much less than the latter (see Table 1). In fact, across all of our studies, enjoyment of thinking was always lower than enjoyment of the external activities in Study 8. Note that this includes a total of 21 conditions in which people were asked to “just think,” including many in which we tried to get people to enjoy thinking more (see Table S1). In all 21 cases, people’s reported enjoyment was lower than that it was in the “external activities” condition of Study 8.

(b) In three studies we asked people to spend time alone with their thoughts at home, after turning off all external devices. Although the “thinking period” was only 12 minutes, many did not last that long without cheating by, for example, consulting their cell phones or doing school work. The percentage who admitted cheating ranged from 32% to 54% (which of course includes only those who admitted to cheating). Does it make sense to say that someone enjoyed a task when they disobeyed instructions to do it?

(c) The fact that 67% of men and 25% of women opted to shock themselves rather than “just think,” does not seem to describe people who “already know how to enjoy their thoughts.” Keep in mind that these people had already reported that they would *part with money* in order to avoid the shock, and yet, they preferred it to “just thinking.”

In short, researchers can always quibble over what it means when a participant checks a particular point on a Likert scale, but we believe the preponderance of the evidence does not favor Professor Nelson’s claim that most people in our studies enjoyed thinking.

In closing we note that we were continually surprised by these results, believing that people (perhaps with some instruction and time to plan their thoughts) would enjoy thinking more than they did. Exactly why thinking was not very enjoyable would be a fruitful topic for further study, as would the question of why some people enjoyed thinking more than others. We reported correlations between enjoyment and several individual difference variables (see Tables S2 and S3), and while there were some small-but-significant correlations, none accounted for much of the variance.

We again thank Prof. Nelson for his interest and for sharing an early draft of his critique with us.

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