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The Different Impacts on Mental Health from Burnout and Boredom in Undergraduate Pre-health and Nursing Students

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Introduction

A significant body of research has shown that medical students have high rates of depression and burnout, and that this trend already begins in pre-medical students during undergraduate and persisting throughout their careers (Fang et al. 2010). Research shows that poor mental health is associated with both increased burnout and boredom, but not within the same studies. One previous study further showed that burnout is linked to an increased likelihood of suicidal ideation in medical students (Dyrbye et al. 2008). Another study had shown the most prevalent symptom of those experiencing mental health was boredom (Ndeti et al. 2023). While Harju et. al (2022) explored the reciprocal effects of burnout and boredom at work showing that stressors at work have unique and non-coterminous relationships with burnout and boredom. Research up to this point has not shown how mental health, boredom, and burnout all relate to one another within a single population. Further, there is currently no research with an undergraduate pre-health and nursing student population showing the relationships between mental health, boredom, and burnout.

The aims of this study are:

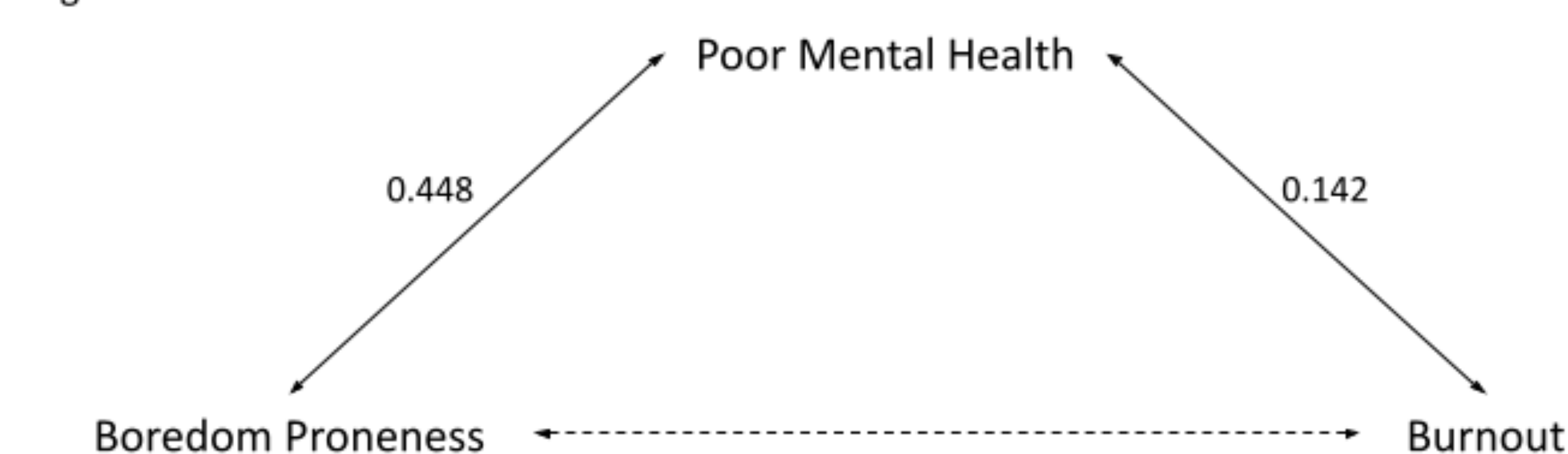
1. To test the hypothesis that mental health, burnout, and boredom are correlated to one another in pre-health/nursing college students.
2. To explore how boredom, mental health, and burnout relate to one another.

Methods

- The data comes from a longitudinal panel survey sent to three consecutive cohorts of undergraduate freshman students initially intending to pursue pre-health or nursing.
- A total number of 530 nursing or pre-health professions students were surveyed from three separate cohorts, but the analytic sample is lower due to attrition rates over time.
- Wave 1 includes all three cohorts' baseline data, and Waves 2 and 3 added a few additional questions.
- Variables included (no exogenous/endogenous structure specified):
 - Burnout: additive scale indicating how frequently they feel burned out from work
 - Boredom: additive scale indicating the respondents overall level of discomfort with unstructured time
 - Mental health: how many days in the past month respondents felt stressed, depressed, and/or have problems with emotions—indicating how many days in a month having bad mental health
 - Control measures: Gender, average hours spent studying, and first generation student status
- Data was analyzed using partial correlation in SPSS.

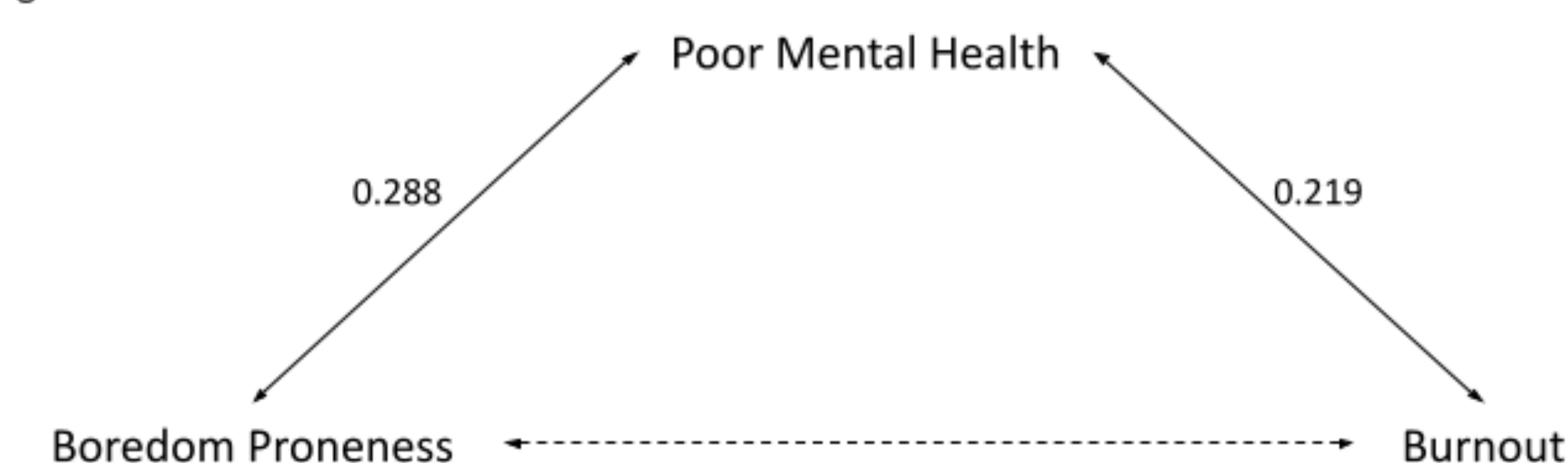
Tables

Figure 1: Partial Correlations Wave 2



Note: Partial correlations shown control from gender, first generation student, and hours studied

Figure 2: Partial Correlations Wave 3



Note: Partial correlations shown control from gender, first generation student, and hours studied

Results

- Burnout is related to the amount of hours studied only at Wave 2.
- Boredom is related to the amount of hours studied only at Wave 3.
- Burnout and boredom are both correlated with mental health, but notably boredom and burnout are not correlated with one another.
- Both boredom (0.448/0.288) and burnout (0.142/0.219) are uniquely correlated with poor mental health.

Discussion

- Boredom and burnout are opposite conditions:
 - Boredom is a result of low stressors; an unpleasant state of passiveness.
 - Burnout is a result of high stressors, a chronic stress syndrome and generally develops over a long period of time (Harju et al. 2022).
- Boredom and burnout both relate to mental health as both attributes are symptoms of poor mental health or lead to poor mental health. Burnout is mental exhaustion, correlated to mental health (Papathanasiou 2015). On the other hand, boredom impacts mental health as a psychological phenomenon linked to anxiety and impulsivity (Ndeti et al. 2023). Although burnout and boredom are both facets of mental health, they affect a person's life independently.
- Consistent with previous studies, results here show that burnout and boredom both affect negative mental health. The conceptual distinctions between burnout and boredom, however, are manifested in different ways. One possible pathways is that a student who is not academically challenged enough in pre-health and nursing would be more prone to becoming bored, whereas a student unable to sustain the various challenges of academic courses or other expectations would be more prone to becoming burned out. As both burnout and boredom relate to and can lead to a decline in mental health, they are often grouped together and thought to be similar. However, the lack of a direct correlation between burnout and boredom within this study and previous literature discussing the differences between the two show that this is not the case.

Conclusions

There is a correlation between poor mental health and both boredom and burnout within pre-health and nursing students. There was no indication of a correlation between gender or first generation students being burned out, bored, or having poor mental health. Mental health, burnout, and boredom did not significantly increase or decrease between Wave 2 and Wave 3. There was a significant correlation between mental health and burnout, as well as mental health and boredom. However, burnout was not correlated to boredom in pre-health and nursing students.

Future research should focus on whether one is more prone to be burned out or to become bored in Pre-health and nursing based on aspects such as race and morals. Previous research has shown there not to be an indication of a type of student to be more prone to either burnout or boredom.

Limitations

- The burnout and boredom variables were only included in the survey at Waves 2 and 3, so trend could not be analyzed from baseline at Wave 1.
- The survey contains missing data due to some participants not completing all questions and survey attrition rates.

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