

In Praise of Boredom at Work

Abstract

In the context of management and organisational literature, boredom has largely been seen in individual, psychological and negative terms, both for those experiencing it and for organisational outcomes. Through selective references to a wider sociological, historical and philosophical set of perspectives, we make a case here for refiguring boredom at work as a more relational and political notion. Rather than being seen as negative or trivial, we suggest that it is central to the concerns of organisation studies (and more widely) as a ambivalent everyday condition and experience. In particular, boredom is intimately linked to the project and promises of modernity and its associated effects on time, from factory industrialisation to contemporary work platforms. Both in terms of philosophical argument and applied fields such as art, literature, architecture and design, we suggest that boredom is both emancipatory/productive *and* alienating. Such an understanding establishes opportunities for research which would be central to the experience of contemporary paid employment and wider experience.

Key words – boredom; organisation studies; power; time; emancipation; philosophy

Introduction – boredom as social, relational and important

We might like to imagine that human beings are fascinating energetic creatures, but a great deal of human life is spent doing rather little. We move around, smile and talk, but much of the time we also watch, wait and sleep. It's not that different when we are doing what we call 'work'. People stare at screens or motorways, pick things from boxes and put them somewhere else, say the same things again and again into headsets or across desks. Most people's work involves the repetition of actions in pre-arranged spaces and times, a restriction of agency in return for money. Boredom can be seen as a restriction because it is experienced as a lack of meaning or an 'experience without qualities'

(Goodstein, 2005). It might seem odd then that boredom is not regarded as *the* defining problem for those interested in organisations and the ways that people are organized within them. We might imagine lots of special issues on boredom, such that it would be an entirely conventional topic, boring even, because so ubiquitous and over-studied. The reader yawns and moves on.

But this is not the case. A decade ago, one of the editors of this special issue pitched a similar special issue on boredom to a few high-ranking organisation studies journals. The pitch had an international team of editors, and the usual justifications – a gap in the literature, interdisciplinary concept, connections to identity, culture, power and so on. The proposal was rejected rapidly by all the journals it was sent to, so it was shelved and we moved on. Several related reasons were given for the rejection. One was that it was a niche interest, a deliberately provocative piece of trivia which nudged towards cultural studies and philosophy, rather than connecting with the core themes of organisation studies. Or, and it added up to the same thing, we were rejected because this was really a *psychology* (organisational or occupational) topic, and hence better sent to a different journal. Or, and this was perhaps the most telling reason, because the editor doubted that they would get enough papers to fill the special issue. Boredom was not interesting for organisation studies. There's no 'market' in it.

The editors may well have been right. The formation of a discipline, or sub-discipline, requires that it constructs certain boundaries that define 'the field' and consequently encloses particular objects of concern, methods or concepts as being 'within' or 'without'. For an academic journal, this is usually defined in the formal descriptions of its aims and interests, with certain topics prescribed as core, central to the thought and language of the journal. Of course, such descriptions change over time, and may well involve using objects, methods and concepts that can also be found in other disciplines, though perhaps understood or connected differently in these cognate areas. That is to say, the core of a discipline is not stable, but what it contains at any particular moment and cultural context does tell us something about the assumptions and prejudices of those who practice that discipline. A similar observation is made by Svendsen (2005: 18) and the place of boredom in contemporary philosophy,

which, according to him and not unlike Organisation Studies, seems to consider that 'to busy oneself with such a subject will for some people be seen as a clear indication of intellectual immaturity'. So, what's the problem with boredom and contemporary organisation studies? What does the rejection of that special issue tell us about why the concept doesn't seem to fit our field, yet?

Let's suggest a few reasons. The first is that the largest literature on boredom is to be found within positivist occupational psychology, and that means, among other things, that the concept is very often imagined to be one that relates to *individuals* rather than groups. It is typically defined as an "unpleasant and demotivated affect", characterized by a state of apathy or a lack of motivation and enthusiasm (Loukidou et al., 2009), which some individuals might be more prone to than others (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich, 2003, Vodanovich et al., 2016). Second, that if that phenomenon is imagined to be happening largely inside someone's head, then it's quite difficult to see how contemporary *social scientific methods* might be able to provide reliable accounts of its intensity, duration, comparability and so on. Unlike culture, leadership, identity or whatever, all of which imply social relations, an individual account of boredom doesn't provide a useful launch pad for *social research*, which pushes researchers back to psychometric measures. Third, since the managerial interest in boredom is usually aimed at preventing it by redesigning jobs or workers (Fisher, 1993; Loukidou et al., 2009), then it is assumed to be a *pathology* which needs to be eradicated, and as a result it tends to be seen as something shameful. Fourth, it would be easy to think that boredom is something that tends to be concentrated in *mundane jobs*, whether mostly manual or non-manual, and hence is not of particular interest for a discipline that has become primarily focused on managerial and 'knowledge' work. Finally, it is *trivial*. Like asking about sex at work, or what people eat at their desks, or smoking at the back of the building, boredom is not central to the *real* labour of management and organisation. By implication, studying it therefore becomes a waste of time and resources at best, a pointless or even tasteless sideshow at worst.

So, if boredom is a bad yet trivial thing that happens in the heads of employees, then why would organisation studies need a special issue on it? If you haven't got bored yet, then you might be able to see what we are doing here, trying to make boredom fascinating by suggesting that the concept needs to be refigured if we are going to be able to see how productive it might be. In order to make space for boredom at work, we need to see it as social and relational, made comprehensible in particular historical circumstances and commonly found in the speech of warehouse operatives, marketing executives, entrepreneurs and professors (as well as angst ridden philosophers, writers suffering from ennui and alienated artists.) Indeed, outside of academia, in popular media, there is a persistent interest in boredom (see Ember 2021 in *The New York Times*). And though we don't rule out the debilitating affect and effect of boredom, neither should we assume that boredom feels the same for everyone, as if it were an experience which somehow escapes from the specificities of gender, ethnicity and history, particularly in viral times when the home and the workplace have, for many, become condensed or re-defined. We think that this version of boredom, the generous and open one, belongs in an organisation studies which is social, relational and attuned to the effects of power.

While studies of boredom may have largely been located within the field of psychology, there is a growing body of distinctive research referred to as "boredom studies". This takes its roots in 19th century Western literature (from Dickens and Austen to Chateaubriand or Flaubert) and draws on philosophy as well as sociology, political science, anthropology, cultural and media studies, amongst others. It has been crucial in shedding light on some of the complex, multifaceted, dynamic and ambivalent characteristics of boredom. Here, boredom is seen as having a socio-historical constitution and thereby "*incorporat(es) a spectrum of often contradictory experiences, subjective intensities and possibilities that, arguably, give us privileged insight into the vicissitudes of our modern condition.*" (Haladyn and Gardiner, 2017: 12). In line with such accounts, boredom in the context of work is also characterized by multiple tensions, which, we argue, calls for interdisciplinarity, multiple perspectives and a greater variety of research designs.

In this opening article for our special issue, we draw on diverse sources and insights in order to introduce and develop a more relational and political sense of boredom and organisation, including a short discussion of the articles themselves. It is organised as follows. First, we outline the various ways in which boredom has been understood within managerial psychology, sociology and philosophy and propose that boredom is a vital concept for thinking about the experience of modernity and the modern work organisation. As an example, we then briefly consider the importance of thinking about clock time and boredom as being mutually entangled before a section on negative and positive accounts of boredom from different intellectual traditions and disciplines. We then introduce the papers that we have collected for this special issue, showing how they reflect the agenda we have set out for refiguring and valuing boredom at work. We conclude by thinking about where the papers in the issue take us to and offer some speculative thoughts about where our interest in, and experiences of, boredom might go in the future. What lies beyond boredom?

Boredom at work as mundane and historically constituted

Despite considerable conceptual divergence across and within disciplines, there is some consensus about how widespread the experience of boredom is. Some even refer to a contemporary phenomenon of *mass* boredom or to a *boredom epidemic* (Haladyn and Gardiner, 2017). Indeed, boredom is so common, so banal, that it is tempting to conceive it as part of the general human condition, one which can be captured through a variety of measurement scales (for an overview, see Elpidorou, 2018a). However, this has proven to be an arduous task, as multiple definitions have been proposed and little agreement reached. Is it a trait or a state, and is it transitory or permanent and characterized by low or high levels of arousal (Elpidorou, 2018b)? Against such a universalist approach, which dominates much of occupational psychology and neuroscience, Goodstein (2005, 2017) supports the more relational position outlined above that boredom – even though widespread – cannot be understood outside of the specific historical and cultural contexts in which it is produced.

For Nikulin (2021: ix) for example, what is common to the work of philosophers like Simmel, Kracauer, Heidegger and Benjamin - who took an interest in the phenomenon of mass boredom - is that *“they all share an understanding of boredom as symptomatic of our situation in the social, political, and natural world as it has been historically defined by the construction of the modern subject”*.

Goodstein links the emergence of the modern discourse on boredom to the failed promise of reason in the Enlightenment and argues that it reflects what she refers to as a *“modern crisis of meaning”*. She ties boredom to the social changes that took place in modernity associated with the decline of traditional (here, religious) ways of making sense of the world, leading to a lack of meaningful engagement with the world around us through the ‘democratization of skepticism’ and the ‘disenchantment of the world through the ascendance of scientific thought’ (2005: 412-413). Indeed, the word boredom only became commonly used in the 19th century. It can, for example, be distinguished from earlier related concepts such as melancholy, *ennui* or *acedia*. Goodstein argues that boredom is generated by the rationalization of our modern world, which gives rise to democratized scepticism, and a loss of meaning.

Likewise, Gardiner (2012), drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre, connects modern boredom to the major transformations which followed industrialization. This *‘cultural modernization’* valued perpetual change, innovation and improvement while also comprising a process of the standardization and mechanization of social life, including work. Gardiner explains that while much work used to be characterized by heterogeneity and autonomy, it became increasingly standardized and routine, following a universal clock-time (see below) and subjected to variants of scientific management (Braverman, 1974). This also helps to explain occupational psychologists’ focus on repetitive tasks, work underload, low stimulation and organisational control as the main causes of boredom (Fisher, 1993; Loukidou et al., 2009), as well as personality traits and supposed boredom proneness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich, 2003; Vodanovich et al., 2016). In many ways of course, this process of standisation and measurement continues to be reinforced or even intensified with practices such

as agile working, shortening work cycles as well as the self-regulation demanded by performance targets (Annosi et al., 2016). The repetitiveness of agile routines, for instance, together with their intent to rationalize the work process, may lead individuals' tasks to become routinized and divided to the extent that it becomes difficult to perceive the broader meaning of work. Similarly, the rise of platform capitalism is encouraging the fragmentation of tasks and the development of precarious and isolated digital micro-work (Casilli & Posada, 2019), in a way which is likely to strengthen what is already considered to be a mass phenomenon of disengagement which in turn leads to 'gamification' aimed at making these routines more meaningful.

While psychology has dominated the study of boredom at work, there is also a long tradition of sociological writing on the subject, focusing especially on the experience of low skilled jobs, whether blue or white-collar ones (e.g., Roy 1959, Baldamus, 1961). While questions of class and resistance dominate this older literature, more recent sociological accounts also highlight the pervasiveness of boredom in managerial and knowledge work settings (Harju & Hakanen, 2016; Mann, 2007). Indeed, experiences of boredom in such settings, might actually be all the more salient in that individuals are perhaps more likely to have high expectations regarding how interesting and meaningful their work will, or ought to, be (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019). Conrad (1997) for example, explains that we sometimes get bored precisely because we expect stimulation and connections in situations that do not provide them. Thus, to preserve a sense of identity, individuals can be tempted to silence boredom, turning it into a taboo, or to frame it as something odd that they are not supposed to experience given their position in the world, all as part of a status claim to be 'too important' to be bored. The 'elite' consultants interviewed by Costas and Kärreman (2016), for instance, when confronted with the menial nature of some of their work, defined the tasks as 'beneath them' in order to sustain their professional identities (see also Carroll *et al* 2010). This could also be seen as a more general characteristic of modernity, which values what is new and different (Svendsen 2005). Promises of 'interesting work' and/or, in its absence, distractions from personal and organisational purpose and 'fun at work' have spread across so-called liberated companies and other 'post-bureaucratic' settings,

from call centres and industrial and hi-tech organisations to professional service firms (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Butler *et al.*, 2011).

Much remains to be explored beyond the preoccupation with routine and standardised tasks, particularly regarding the way experiences of boredom are shaped by organisational contexts. More specifically: how can differentiated experiences of boredom across and within organisations be explained? What is the relationship between boredom and different types of management control? In what ways do organisational policies and practices or everyday management techniques accentuate or alleviate experiences of boredom – engineered ‘fun’ as boring for example? Which theoretical and conceptual lenses can best help us make sense of the social and cultural processes underlying experiences of boredom at work? One crucial area in understanding boredom and organisation is the strong connection between boredom and the experience of time, to which we now briefly turn.

Boredom as the stopping and the acceleration of time

Heidegger (1995: 80) argued that boredom has “*an almost obvious relation to time, a way in which we stand with respect to time, a feeling of time*”. When we are bored, we feel like time stops, or extends itself in endless ways. In such instances, time is distorted and can appear to stand still or drag (Martin *et al.*, 2006). As mentioned above, boredom is often defined – in philosophy as well as in sociology – as a modern phenomenon which is closely linked to the industrial administration of time. This is precisely why, according to Johnsen (2016: 1407), ‘*the phenomenon of boredom and the study of organisation are closely connected*’, and why it is odd that it has not spurred more interest within organisation studies to date. From this point of view, modernity has transformed our experience towards what has become “*commodity time*” (Gardiner, 2012). According to Gardiner, pre-industrial work was repetitive and cyclical, but with constant newness within continuity: it was a process of social as well as personal creation through craft (*c.f.* Thompson, 1967). With industrialisation there was a shift towards “purely quantitative time favouring a formal, decontextualized knowledge, [...]”

which is experienced as abstract, linear, sequential, predictable and monotonous. (...) it is a time of endless 'nows'" (Gardiner, 2012: 44). The flow of collective experiences and meaning creation is reduced to a series of meaningless moments and gestures which lead towards what Benjamin described as an 'atrophy of experience' (1968: 159, cited by Gardiner, 2012: 45).

In practice, such a shift leads individuals to identify ways of coping (Game, 2007), for instance by creating their own imaginary routines that help them experience duration more positively. This is illustrated in sociological studies of work such as those mentioned above, particularly Roy's (1959) famous 'banana time' portrait of routine factory work. Here, operators structured their time around various games and rituals as a way to have fun and help the clock to appear to move more quickly. Such coping strategies might also be destructive or dysfunctional, not least in reinforcing relations of subordination (Burawoy, 1979). At the same time, 'distraction' might be imposed or engineered by management through change programmes or encouraging workers to engage in personal projects, practice hobbies and attend social events at work (Carroll et al 2010), as ways to manage boredom. This co-optation of personal life for corporate purposes may sometimes distract employees from the experience of being controlled or simply reinforce its totalising effects (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). As Johnsen argues (2016: 1405): 'boredom often merely disappears into the kind of distractions that may lead to new forms of organized productivity, or that may just be malicious and destructive'. Indeed, it has been argued that leisure more generally or 'everyday life' has been colonized by the rational and instrumental structuring of time in a logic of consumption, to the extent that it has also become a task that needs to be performed and endured (Gardiner, 2012; Hancock and Tyler, 2004), in an endless attempt to *distract* oneself from boredom (Svendsen, 2005).

This experience of time stopping or slowing to an endless succession of blank instants may paradoxically be reinforced by an apparent acceleration of time induced by technology and social change (Rosa, 2015). Indeed, this is not incompatible with the idea of the rise of boredom. Although typically associated with work 'underload' in the field of psychology (Loukidou et al., 2009), some have

argued that *overstimulation* can also lead to boredom. Harju & Hakanen (2016), for instance discuss how overload, the acceleration of the pace of work and unrealistic goals can lead individuals to experience a sense of meaninglessness in their work that is akin to boredom. For Barbalet (1999), this can be easily explained by the fact that boredom arises not from under- or over-stimulation – from nature of the activity itself - but from the lack of perceived meaning or purpose which repetition often triggers.

Again, this raises a number of unresolved questions regarding the relationship between boredom at work and time. How is boredom accentuated or alleviated through the temporal rhythms of working life? In what ways is boredom implicated in debates about different futures of work? And how might changes in the way work is organized, managed and experienced shape the temporality of practices that both intensify and mitigate against boredom?

Boredom at work as both alienating and emancipating

As we have seen, boredom is predominantly regarded as a negative or “unpleasant” state or feeling, especially in the context of the psychology of work (e.g., Loukidou et al., 2009). This renders boring work, and by implication bored workers, as a problem for a positive account of work under capitalism. Research has identified various negative outcomes for both individuals and organisations. As a state of withdrawal, for example, boredom is thought to lead to job dissatisfaction, addictive behaviours, risk-taking, accidents, stress and depression (e.g., Rupp & Vodanovich, 1997 or Ames & Cunradi, 2004). It has also been associated with other ‘negative’ emotions such as loneliness, anger, sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, worry and disillusionment (Chin et al., 2017; Ahuja et al., 2019). At the organisational level, it has been linked with absenteeism, staff turnover, and reduced productivity and service quality as well as ‘counter-productive’ behaviours such as sabotage and even violence (e.g., van Hooff & van Hooff 2014).

Such an approach is not restricted to psychology of course. As we have noted already, there is a long tradition of sociological research which identifies boredom as something to be coped with and reduced or mitigated, a physical or subjective manifestation of alienation or anomie (Baldamus, 1961). This work is largely consistent with the view that boredom is something to eradicate from organisations, whether through job enrichment, redesign or crafting (Hackman et Oldham, 1976; Harju, Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2016) or more radical approaches such as ‘alternative’ organisational forms or economic systems (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021). However, there is a small and disparate, but important body of work which points to some positive features of boredom.

In education and design, studies have highlighted how boredom can be associated with positive outcomes to the extent that it might be actively induced or engineered (e.g. Hunter et al., 2016). In particular, it is associated with curiosity which in turn gives rise to innovation (Mann & Cadman, 2014). Likewise, in the literature on art and architecture, boredom is considered a ‘very creative state’ (Richardson, 2013) and one of ‘potential richness’ (O’Doherty, 1967). In other words, boredom can precede and/or trigger creativity (Parreno and Lønningdal, 2020), constituting a force that pushes towards experimentation (Parreno, 2015). Indeed, in some architectural theory, the spaces created by the built environment become vehicles for emotions such that ‘architectural boredom’ (e.g., that a particular architectural style is perceived as dull), encourages the production and constant evolution of new designs (Göller, 1993).

An even stronger version of these positive accounts sees boredom as having (albeit incomplete) emancipatory potential. Barbalet (1999: 633), for instance, argued that rather than being a source of anxiety and depression, boredom could potentially protect individuals by creating an *‘imperative towards meaning’*. He explains that if boredom is generated by a lack of meaning, then it triggers individuals to create meaning in response. To Barbalet, *‘boredom is not a feeling of acceptance of or resignation toward a state of indifference, as ennui is. Boredom, therefore, is not a passive surrender to those conditions that provoke it.’* He goes on to explain that the restless discomfort or even distress

that boredom generates is what encourages action. This is when the bodily experience of boredom strikes us the most: we feel the need to yawn, itch, move or stretch. This is, according to Barbalet, one way to protect ourselves against the lack of meaning - it invites us to engage in action. Even if this view of the desire for stimulation might not be everyone's idea of emancipation, it does point to boredom as a more complex experience than is often thought. It resonates with popular views of parenting and encouraging resilience among children, but also chimes with some more philosophical reflections.

The idea that boredom is a complex and ambiguous experience is present in the work of writers such as Heidegger, Benjamin and Lefebvre. Heidegger (1995) for example, distinguished three progressive stages of boredom, from the mundane and superficial experience of being *bored by* or *bored with* something, to the more *profound* experience of boredom of being *bored as one*, which allows us to get access to the meaning of being. Heidegger's take on boredom has however, been criticized for being culturally elitist, turning profound boredom into the privilege of a few enlightened spirits who can appreciate the subtle joys of Weltschmerz (Goodstein, 2005). In contrast, for Benjamin (1999) or Lefebvre (2005), the emancipatory potential of boredom is accessible to all: it is a threshold through which individuals must pass and which opens the possibility of something other than itself. Nevertheless, this movement 'beyond boredom' is not a simple matter. For Lefebvre, boredom cannot merely be escaped through leisure as intensified leisure pursuits, the short-lived, mechanical and repetitive search for the 'interesting', fails to generate transformative potential. Neither can art provide an alternative to boredom, as he sees aestheticism as a privileged activity which only provides the illusion of an escape (Gardiner, 2012). Both Benjamin and Lefebvre emphasise how overcoming boredom requires, instead, collective forms of agency, which Gardiner (2012) refers to as a process of 'authentication'. For meaning and purpose to be created, the mind requires the kind of meditative state that boredom provides and which modernity so rarely allows. Boredom, acting as a 'trojan horse' (Benjamin, 1999; cited by Gardiner, 2012: 53), a 'moment' (Lefebvre, 2005), which can disturb time and show a wide range of alternative possibilities, most of which will most likely however remain unfulfilled. Thus, meaning can be derived from the banality of daily life and does not need to be

searched for in the grandiose, exotic and the extraordinary (Svendsen, 2005) – an idea which has parallels in spiritual beliefs such as Buddhism (Trungpa, 1976) and modern notions of mindfulness.

Whether as a simple source of individual or collaborative creativity or a wider route towards deeper social emancipation, it is clear that there is much scope to challenge a common-sense belief which frames boredom as a negative and negating phenomenon. This should include a call for further investigations to understand the emancipatory potential of boredom in the context of work and organisations. For example: what are the processes underlying negative perceptions and constructions of boredom at work and how can we then account for positive experiences and outcomes? How does boredom relate to social and cultural intersectionalities, and to different forms of social, cultural, physical and economic capital? Can boredom be seen as a form of resistance to objectification at work? What is the relationship between boredom and indifference, cynicism, and various forms of withdrawal from working life? Which forms of collective action can be spurred by boredom? And more grandly, how might we recognise and support a collective movement ‘beyond boredom’, as in the more emancipatory imaginings of Benjamin, Lefebvre and others? In other words, what scope is there to be in praise of boredom, and where might this take us?

The Papers

As we have begun to show, there is a rich body of work that has explored boredom (and related concepts) from diverse disciplines and which have, to date, seldom been employed by management and organisation scholars. Advancing our understanding of boredom at work requires taking into account the socially constructed and ambivalent nature of boredom at work. This calls for interdisciplinarity (drawing on philosophy and the arts for example) and for multiple methods (beyond quantitative or methodologically individualist measurements), to configure the phenomenon in different ways. Through putting together this special issue, we hope to advance a research agenda that draws together different perspectives that, taken together, offer a range of empirical, conceptual

and theoretical starting points for thinking - and working - with boredom, beyond its traditional scholarly, and managerial, confines.

The first of our six papers is Rasmus **Johnsen's** 'The Boredom Pandemic', which neatly inserts our object of concern into – for many of us – confined and viral times. Johnsen, like ourselves, argues for the value of studying boredom as a social and organisational phenomenon. He suggests that the current psychological trend in boredom research should be complemented by more studies, not only of the structures that produce boredom, but also of what it produces, both as a conceptual category and as an experienced phenomenon. Beginning with the 'discovery' of an active dimension of boredom in the current psychological literature, he illustrates how popular literature has also recently come to interpret its 'motivational component'. Foregrounding this active element can reconnect the current versions of the psychological literature to boredom's roots as a moral injunction to distinguish between activity and productivity that can itself produce a particular social reality.

Elisabeth **Mikkelsen's** paper is one example of what Johnsen solicits, an empirical study of how work that appears boring is experienced and responded to by a particular group of workers: prison officers. She draws on a qualitative case study comprising ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in two Danish prisons and her analysis engages a phenomenological approach to sensemaking aimed at capturing both workers' use of language in talk and their accounts of experience. While one would expect boredom to be an enemy of prison work, because of its potential to reduce alertness, what is remarkable in the accounts of prison officers is their tendency to take an organisational perspective on boredom, rather than a personal one, acknowledging the tedious features of work whilst emphasising their importance to the institution. Put simply, boredom means that they are doing their job well.

Turning to more literary and philosophical sources, in their article, Xavier **Philippe**, Jean-Denis **Culié** and Vincent **Meyer** explore the connection between boredom and time in the work of French novelist Michel Houellebecq. They use Heidegger's distinction between superficial and 'profound' boredom to

argue that organisations' attempts to distract employees from the experience of boredom can only reinforce profound boredom. Yet, according to them, 'listening to the call of boredom' is what can allow us to find authenticity. Instead of experiencing depression or destruction, we can refuse the rhythms imposed by organisations and search for 'true' meaning in work. Their study shows how fiction can prove fruitful to advance our understanding of contemporary experiences of boredom at work. Given how difficult boredom is to observe or even talk about, this article makes a fascinating case for the way literature can give access to the hidden and the unspoken. Academic work has often focused on the ways management and organisation practices can lead to boredom, but less often on the ways organisations attempt to 'manage' it. Yet it might be that diverting employees' attention, or presenting boredom as the outcome of an inappropriate use of time, might only lead to increased and profound boredom.

In 'Boredom and Danger at Work: The Contribution of Ernst Jünger', Peter **Watt** and Fredrik **Weibull** extend inroads that the German philosopher and author has already begun to make into work and organisation studies. In particular, they highlight his thematic and theoretical preoccupation with danger as a parallel or twin consequence of modernity's fundamental concern with progress and innovation. Noting Bloomfield et al.'s, (2017: 450) observation that 'Jünger's writing begins where Weber's ends', they show how a close reading of Jünger contributes to the critique of those psychological diagnoses and managerial prescriptions about boredom discussed above. Through Jünger, they argue, we can begin to understand boredom, not as a localised experience at work which can be overcome by targeted managerial prescriptions, distraction techniques and behavioural interventions, but as an endemic feature of modernity. In doing so, their paper opens up further avenues to explore how Jünger's conception of boredom and danger, as two defining characteristics of work in the modern (1930s) era, holds the potential for a critique and understanding of boredom in the contemporary workplace.

Katy **Lawn's** paper engages with a different form of labour - the work of Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese-American conceptual artist who uses boredom (and specifically boring labour) as a mode of production and conceptual influence in his art (see also Parker, 2013). The paper not only considers art *as* work and labour as the subject of artworks, but further, how certain forms of art can shed light on the wider relationship between boredom (discussed here as loss of meaning), art, and work, particularly boring labour. With this line of argument in mind, Lawn's analytical focus is largely on how time-based artworks - specifically performance works - foreground the labour process as art. This enables her to open up a reconsideration of the way in which work routines are often culturally coded as meaningful or essential pursuits. Through considering Hsieh's incredible artwork 'One Year Performance 1980-81' – also known as the 'Time Clock Piece' – Lawn shows how artists can performatively replicate, and in doing so critique, elements of working life shaped by temporal restrictions and patterns of repetition. Arguing that being inattentive to routines leads to a closing-down of life's textures, experiences and possibilities, Lawn shows how Hsieh's artwork provides insight into how boredom can act as a trigger for movement towards meaning-making. Hsieh's work is carefully chosen here, and Lawn encourages scope for future engagement with other artists and artworks to consider how they connect to understanding boredom and movement, loss and emancipation. She also shows us how to go about doing so, through an analysis that considers art, work and boredom as features of organisational life that 'gear' into each other.

In their paper, Erik **du Plessis** and Sine **Nørholm Just** examine the identity work undertaken by retail bankers in Denmark, considering three ways in which boredom is mobilized or re-framed in order to reconcile experiences of monotonous administrative work with bankers' self-perceptions of their professional status. Through the bankers' identity work, boredom is reframed, respectively, as (i) an unwanted and problematic aspect of their work that needs to be eliminated, or minimized by the professional banker; (ii) a duty to be performed by the 'humble and respectable' community-orientated banker, and (iii) what the authors call 'civic boredom'. By considering how these different meanings or 'rationales' for boredom interrelate, du Plessis and Nørholm Just encourage us to focus

on the rehabilitation of work tasks perceived as meaningless and/or monotonous in a way that reminds us of the literature on so-called 'tainted' or 'dirty' work. The authors show how imbuing apparent meaninglessness with meaning runs counter to perceptions of boredom as an unwanted aspect of work to be eradicated and which instead, foregrounds the value of boredom as a reference point or ethical resource that can be mobilized, tactically, in the performance of identity work.

Our final paper sees Michaela **Driver** draw on psychoanalytic frameworks, specifically the work of Jacques Lacan, to examine the transformational potential of boredom. Her empirical study explores how boredom functions at the interstice of conscious and unconscious dynamics of identity work. By focusing on how boredom is drawn on as a discursive resource to narrate identities in practice, the article extends our understandings of the constructive potential of boredom. A Lacanian view of identity suggests that the experience of boredom can be seen as a failure of the imaginary self. Driver argues that imaginary identity work is disempowering as it renders individuals more vulnerable to identity regulation. Symbolic identity work, on the other hand, is conceptualized as potentially creative and liberating as it offers an opportunity to reflect on the failure of the imaginary, thus enabling people to cope with the fluidity and indeterminacy of identity construction. A characterisation of boredom as dysfunctional is once again challenged as an oversimplification. Instead Driver asks us to understand how boredom is driven by the ways we make sense of work and constitutes our struggles with who we are and what we want, both from work and from life.

Conclusion: Beyond boredom

For different reasons and in different ways, virtually all of us will feel bored at some point during our working days, weeks, and lives. As the papers in this issue show, boredom is probably one of the most common and universal experiences that people have in work organisations, yet it is rarely discussed within management and organisation studies. When boredom does raise what is usually considered to be its 'ugly' head, it tends to be understood as a negative deviation from the 'norm' of work as a meaningful activity, whether that meaning is provided in conformity or resistance to managerial

strategies. That boredom is 'one of the typical experiences of work life' (Costas & Karreman, 2016: 62), but one which remains overshadowed by other thematic and theoretical interests was our starting premise for this special issue.

As we have discussed, psychological perspectives continue to dominate the study of boredom at work, defining it as an individual, unpleasant and demotivating condition, characterised by a state of apathy or as the result of a lack of motivation or enthusiasm. This vast body of literature, emerging largely from behavioural studies of motivation at work, has aimed to root out the causes of boredom - in personality traits such as 'boredom proneness', job characteristics and apathetic workplace cultures, or 'bad management' - in order to tackle its impact on individual well-being and organisational performance. The solution is often to prescribe an enrichment of tasks, cultures and jobs, as well as the development of individual coping mechanisms (including more and better leadership programmes and other 'challenge' initiatives), in order to alleviate or better still, eradicate boredom from organisational life.

More sociologically based literature has sometimes offered an alternative approach to understanding boredom, framing it not as an aberration, but as an endemic feature of modern organised life. This literature positions itself in direct opposition to earlier positivist or cognitive accounts by investigating boredom as a discursive or narrative phenomenon, concerning itself largely with how it is socially constructed and structured, and/or how boredom is lived and experienced. As a counter to behavioural research focusing on individual dispositions or a lack of job enrichment, such work foregrounds the diverse ways in which boredom becomes an embedded social, organisational phenomenon, situating experiences of boredom at work as reflections of broader patterns of power, culture and inequality.

Building on this 'social' turn, the papers in this issue weave together ideas and insights from art, political theory, philosophy and sociology, showing how boredom not only contributes to the maintenance of the present order but also, potentially, provides scope for challenging and resisting that order. They open up a critical appreciation of the multifaceted, situated and perhaps changing character of boredom at work, advancing our understanding of how this shapes individuals, groups and organisations. We also think that all these papers encourage us to think about how shared experiences of boredom might provide a starting point for agency, developing our empirical understanding and conceptual framing of boredom at work. In doing so, they each offer different kinds of starting points for research starting from the premise that boredom is ubiquitous but by no means universally experienced or homogenous. It seems we are all often bored, but perhaps not for the same reasons, or in the same ways, or with the same consequences.

Much remains to be explored when it comes to experiences of boredom within organisations. As pointed out by Katy Lawn, the way work routines are constructed as meaningful is culturally bound because 'meaning' (and therefore meaninglessness) is not an immanent feature of experience. Experiences of boredom vary across sectors and countries and the way it is perceived and acted on by Mikkelsen's Danish prison officers, du Plessis and Nørholm Just's retail bankers or Houellebecq's French managers seems to vary. In order to understand this more fully, we would need empirical studies across gender, class, ethnicity, countries and sectors. The experience of a Spanish supermarket warehouse worker is unlikely to be the same as that of a German architect, even though they might both complain of something like 'boredom'. It also seems important to study boredom in new contexts, particularly digitally mediated organizational settings, or spaces that blur the difference between employment and domestic life.

In their analysis of Houellebecq's novels, Philippe et al. shed light on the way organizations not only play an important role in generating and shaping experiences of boredom as they structure the times

and space of our labour, but they also attempt to 'manage' boredom itself. Watt and Weibul insist on the limitations of what they call 'distraction techniques', managerially engineered forms of banana time. The idea that the cure for boredom could itself be boring constitutes an interesting starting point for research on organisational practices aimed at either instrumentally nurturing boredom in order to stimulate creativity, mobilising boredom as a discursive resource to legitimate organisational change, or somehow taming boredom by diverting employee's attention to game playing or pizza.

In various ways and with different theoretical and disciplinary accents, all the papers in this special issue open the possibility that, under certain conditions, boredom can serve as an emancipatory resource for individuals and groups. This opens some fascinating possibilities, and serves to make boredom much more interesting, but tells us little about the conditions under which boredom may or may not be experienced as a sort of 'awakening', or whether this is a privilege for an elite who can afford to challenge organisational constraints. A collection of academics writing on boredom might be a good example of this sort of privilege. In order to explore such questions further, we think that empirical of action and experience need to be complemented with inter-disciplinary approaches. We see this in the use of philosophy by Philippe et al. and Watt and Weibul, or of psychoanalysis by Driver, as well as cultural materials coming from fiction or performance art, for instance, as in the papers by Philippe et al., Watt and Weibul, and Lawn. As our special issue shows, culture and the humanities can prove particularly fruitful in exploring the unspoken and the everyday, and allow us to see the mundane in a new light. Boredom, it seems, might actually be rather interesting.

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