CALL FOR PAPERS: SPECIAL ISSUE OF *ORGANIZATION*
AND PAPER DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP

'BOREDOM AT WORK'

Deadline: 30th November 2020

Guest editors
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Objective and rationale for the special issue

Boredom is probably one of the most common and universal experiences of people in work organizations, yet it is rarely discussed within management and organization studies. From the repetitive and monotonous work practices of the industrial era to the conceptualizations of boredom as a 'kind of arrested identity founded on unfulfilled expectations and the sense of stagnation' in radically different contexts such as knowledge work; boredom has been reported as one of the typical experiences of work life (Costas & Kärreman 2016: 62).

Practices inspired from scientific management, such as agile working, keep spreading across industries, resulting in a continued acceleration of working times, increased performance targets, and self-regulation (Annosi *et al.*, 2016). Simultaneously, the rise of the *gig-economy* is encouraging the fragmentation of tasks and the development of precarious and isolated digital micro-work (Casilli & Posada, 2019). In other settings, injunctions to be creative, to have fun, and to have meaningful experiences at work have become particularly intensive as neo-normative and other new forms of control and technology have emerged in the workplace, from call centres to professional firms, and in our everyday lives outside of work (Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Butler *et al.*, 2011).

Such developments have, paradoxically, rendered the experience of boredom more salient than ever, as individuals increasingly perceive a discrepancy between their day-to-day work and the meaning they often expect (and are sometimes promised) to find in organisational life and work futures (Barbalet, 1999; Johnsen, 2016). This explains, in part, the popular success of books on the dangers of so-called "boreout" (see for example: Rothlin & Werder, 2008; Bourion, 2015), reiterating the idea that bureaucratic organizations prevent individuals' self-actualization, and inhibit new ways of working, entrepreneurship and creativity as means of self-fulfilment.

The dominant psychological perspective on boredom defines it as *an unpleasant and demotivated affect*, characterised by a state of apathy or a lack of motivation or enthusiasm (Loukidou *et al.*, 2009: p.383). This vast body of literature, originating from studies of motivation at work, has aimed to identify its antecedents (in personality traits as much as in job characteristics) as well as its impact on individual well-being (dissatisfaction at work, addiction, stress or depression) and organisational performance (absenteeism, turnover and reduced output quality and productivity). Others suggests that boredom at work may lead to

counterproductive work behavior (CWB) as a coping mechanism to deal with negative emotions (van Hooff & van Hooft 2014). This has led a number of authors to advocate the enrichment of tasks and jobs, as well as to prescribe the development of individual coping mechanisms, in the hope of controlling or even eradicating boredom from organisational life (Fisher, 1993).

Boredom proneness literature indicates that boredom is related to alienation (less sociable and perceived organizational support) and that boredom-prone individuals have 'broadly been viewed as reflecting an overall negative orientation' (Watt & Hargis 2010: 164). This literature relies on some relatively unquestioned assumptions, portraying boredom as an objective phenomenon generated by work underload, monotonous tasks and/or absent social relations; which would be experienced even more vividly by individuals with a certain *boredom proneness* (Vodanovich, 2003). More recent studies have taken an important step in moving away from this dominant conceptualisation of boredom as a universal emotional state and have instead been concerned with understanding the diverse ways in which boredom is *socially constructed* and *structurally embedded* (Carroll *et al*., 2010; Costas & Kärreman, 2016) suggesting that, boredom may have social origins and thus needs to be understood as a socially situated phenomenon that may take different forms across settings and is integral to a 'more holistic conception of work' (Ashforth & Humphrey 1995: 99). A closely related body of literature on the meaning of work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Bailey *et al*., 2018) has also invited us to reflect on the way individuals attach meanings to work to better understand the "norms, expectations and priorities of the particular society we live in" (Lair *et al*., 2008). In this perspective, experiences of boredom or meaninglessness are deemed to reflect broader patterns of power, culture and inequality. This literature embraces a discursive or narrative take on boredom and positions itself in direct opposition to earlier positivist or cognitive accounts by investigating meanings of boredom - including positive ones (Johnsen, 2016) – especially, but not exclusively, in elite occupations where boredom tends to be written out.

This research implicitly connects with early studies of work, which also acknowledged the role of the social and cultural context in perceptions of boredom. In the *Affluent Worker* study, for instance, Goldthorpe *et al*. (1968) argued that skilled factory workers did not necessarily perceive the monotony of work tasks as problematic in itself, as long as the job provided economic stability. Similarly, other authors noted the importance of social influence on lived experiences of boredom: the same job can be perceived as highly stimulating if others (often managers) emphasize its challenging dimensions, or as very boring if they don't (Griffin, 1983; Weiss & Shaw, 1979). More recently, Toraldo *et al*. (2018) showed that depending on how their work was framed, music festival volunteers could experience their work as boring or, instead, very meaningful and gratifying. Research has also indicated the importance of context, with sector and setting contributing to lived experiences and perceptions of boredom (Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990). In parallel, boredom is sometimes also used by managers to legitimate the adoption of certain management ideas such as total quality management, business process re-engineering or lean management (Abrahamson, 1998; Huczynski, 2006). Drawing on these threads, we posit that a deeper exploration of the meanings attached to boredom, and of the social processes underlying them, is required in order to account for the more multifaceted character of experiences of boredom at work and advance our understanding of how these shape individuals and organizations.

Aim and scope of the special issue

This special issue aims to enhance knowledge and advance theory on boredom. The topic of boredom has attracted researchers from diverse disciplines – sociology, positive psychology, organizational behavior, occupational health, management and organization studies and others. Ideas generated by these disciplines directly affect many aspects of work and employment. In this spirit, we would like to encourage contributors to explore the genealogy of the concept of boredom, to identify alternative theoretical lenses to better grasp experiences of boredom at work and to explore the phenomenon empirically and in policy terms. We welcome conceptual, methodological and empirical papers as well as contributions from practitioners and/or policy makers. We also encourage submissions adopting a comparative perspective, studying the experience of boredom across countries and industries. The special issue is open to a range of themes and multi-disciplinary approaches, including, but not restricted to, the following questions:

- What are the assumptions underlying existing empirical and conceptual representations of boredom and the management practices they have encouraged?
- Which theoretical lenses can best help us make sense of and understand the social and cultural processes underlying experiences of boredom?
- Does studying boredom in its social context raise specific methodological issues and how can these be addressed?
- Through which processes do organizational actors socially ascribe "boredom" to certain activities and tasks? What are the power dynamics underlying such processes?
- How does boredom relate to social and cultural intersectionalities, and to different forms of social, cultural, physical and economic capital?
- How do individuals experience boredom in contexts or jobs which emphasise the importance of "fun", "creativity", "interesting work" and/or "knowledge-intensiveness"? What are perceptions of boredom in performance focused environments in which time may be seen as a luxury?
- In what ways are experiences and perceptions of boredom shaped by context, sector and setting? More specifically, how can differentiated experiences of boredom across contexts be explained?
- What is the role played by identity regulation and identity work processes in the experience of boredom at work?
- What role is played by space and time in experiences of boredom? How is boredom accentuated/alleviated through spatial relations and the temporal rhythms of working life?
- What are the processes underlying negative perceptions of boredom and how can we account for positive experiences and outcomes of boredom?
- What is the relationship between boredom and different types of management control? In what ways do organizational policies and/practices or everyday management techniques accentuate or alleviate experiences of boredom?
- How is boredom at work represented in popular culture, literature and film and social media?
- Is "boredom" written out of accounts of work by researchers who are concerned about their research being labelled as "boring"?
- To what extent is boredom implicated in debates about the future of work and the discourses of those who advise on work design? How might this shape work futures?

Paper development workshop

The guest editors will hold a paper development workshop on September 1st, 2020 at Audencia Business School (Nantes, France). The guest editors will select a number of papers for the workshop. Participation in the workshop is not a guarantee of acceptance of the paper for the special issue and neither is the workshop a requirement for consideration of a paper for the special issue.

Requirements: send an abstract of 1000 words maximum (including references and appendices) before 31 May 2020 to boredomatworksi@gmail.com.

Participants will be notified of their acceptance before 30 June 2020 and will need to send in their full-paper before 15 August 2020.

Submission guidelines

Papers may be submitted electronically from 31 October 2021 until the **deadline of 30 November 2020** (final deadline) to http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/organization.

Authors may send in their ideas and queries to the SI editors at boredomatworksi@gmail.com.

Papers should be no more than 10,000 words, including references, and will be blind-reviewed following the journal's standard review process. Manuscripts should be prepared according to the guidelines published in Organization and on the journal's website:

http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal200981/manuscriptSubmission

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Biographies of guest editorial team

Lucie Noury is Assistant Professor of Management at Audencia Business School. Her research focuses on the contemporary transformations of professional work and organizations, with a specific interest in work-life balance and boredom.

Sumati Ahuja is Lecturer in Management at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Business School. Her research focuses on the changing nature of professional work and professionals' attempts to manage their identities as they make sense of the work that they actually do, in rapidly changing work environments.

Martin Parker is Professor of Organization Studies in the Department of Management at the University of Bristol, UK. He is the author or editor of twenty books on various aspects of

culture and organization, his latest being 'Shut Down the Business School' (Pluto Press 2018). He was the editor in chief of *Organization* from 2008-12, and is currently a senior editor for *Organization Studies*.

Andrew Sturdy is Professor of Management and Organisation in the Department of Management at the University of Bristol, UK. He has written widely on work, control, knowledge and organisation, most recently in *Management as Consultancy* (CUP, 2016). He has edited a number of journal special issues and is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Management Inquiry*.

Melissa Tyler is a Professor of Work and Organization Studies at the University of Essex, UK. Her research on workplace identities and social relations has been published in a range of books, journals and edited collections. She has edited a number of special issues and is a member of the editorial boards of *Organization* and *Organization Studies*, and an Associate Editor of *Gender, Work and Organization*.