

# Being bound to nothing: Boredom in organizational settings

Kätlin Pulk<sup>2</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In general, research on time and temporality in organizations is gaining popularity (e.g., Blagoev, Hernes, Kunisch & Schultz, 2023; de Vaujany, Holt & Grandazzi, 2023). Traditionally, time-related concerns from the organizational perspective have focused on the (in)efficient use of time, control over time and schedules, speed, and synchronization of various cycles (Pulk, 2022). From the employees' perspective, studies have focused on topics such as temporal autonomy and flexibility (Briscoe, 2007; Evans et al., 2004; Feldman et al., 2020; Ganault, 2022) and time pressure and work-life balance (Kelly, Moen, and Tranby, 2011). More recently, the acceleration of processes in organizations and societies alike, fuelled by digitalization (Wajcman, 2015), temporal (dis)continuity (Pulk, 2023), and the broader implications of these dynamics, has caught researchers' attention. In addition to these topics, another phenomenon in organizations that is directly related to time and temporality has attracted the attention of scholars in the social sciences, including work and organizational studies. This phenomenon is boredom.

Bigelow (1983: 252) declares that boredom is an "infinitely interesting" topic. Indeed, the diverse aspects of boredom are reflected in research across various fields, such as psychology, behavioural and organizational studies, work design, etc., and the multifaceted nature of boredom likely accounts for the lack of consensus on its definition in the social sciences (Finkielsztein, 2024). Elpidorou and Freeman (2019: 3) point out that "the term 'boredom' is polysemic": depending on the context, the term both denotes and connotes different things." However, despite differences in the definition of the term, its possible causes and consequences, it is generally agreed that, in one way or another, boredom is related to time.

In what follows, I will briefly introduce Heidegger's view on being boring and being bored, followed by the description of the first, the most familiar but also the most trivial and superficial, form of boredom, being bored by, and its relation to time. I will conclude with the implications of Heidegger's theorization of being bored for organizational settings and how his perspective explains contradictory findings in research on boredom.

## 2. Boredom - to be or not to be bored

A French author, Georges Bernanos, provides a vivid description of boredom in his novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* through the words of a parish priest:

"My parish is bored stiff. No other word for it. Like so many others. We can see them being eaten up by boredom, and we can't do anything about it. Someday perhaps we shall catch it ourselves – become aware of the cancerous growth within us. You can keep going a long time with that in you...Well, as I was saying, the world is eaten up by boredom. To perceive this needs a little preliminary thought: you can't see it all at once. It is like dust. You go about and never notice, you breathe it in, you eat and drink it. It is sifted so fine, it doesn't even grit on your teeth. But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this drizzle of ashes you must be for ever on the go. And so people are always 'on the go'." (1937: 9, 10-11)

This description reveals the multifaceted nature of boredom, which is also reflected in the literature. It describes boredom as a commonplace feature of societies; it is neither unusual nor unique (e.g., Svendsen, 2005). On the one hand, boredom is not limited to individual traits (e.g., Boden, 2009; Elpidorou & Freeman, 2019) or subjective human experiences (e.g., Eastwood et al., 2012; Müller-Boysen et al., 2025; Westgate & Wilson, 2018) but also characterizes societies (e.g., Gardiner, 2014; Gibbs, 2011; Kustermans, 2017; Ringmar, 2017). On the other hand, it is internal to humans and develops within individuals (e.g., Roy, 1959). People cannot avoid it, and it can be overwhelming and oppressive, gradually destroying life like a cancer. People may feel stuck in time or by time (Kustermans, 2017). That is, boredom can be harmful and lead even to fatal consequences (e.g., Elpidorou, 2018; Loukidou et al., 2009). At the same time, we may not even recognize it; although it is everywhere, it may remain imperceptible (Greene, 2014; Svendsen, 2005). Realizing boredom may require conscious reflection and analysis of the situation. Despite its imperceptibility, it is always lurking around, ready to attack as soon as one decides to stand still. Therefore, to escape its grasp, there is a tendency to immerse oneself in various activities to stay busy (Svendsen, 2005). However, the question is, should we always be forever 'on the go' and try our best to escape the boredom and its 'drizzle of ashes', or can we face it and even benefit from it?

Views differ about that. While, in general, boredom is viewed as associated with several negative consequences, such as stealing, acting violently, hurting others, and destroying property (Boden, 2009; Elpidorou, 2018; Pfattheicher et al., 2022), some scholars hold different views. For example, there are claims that boredom can lead to improved well-being, new ideas, creativity (Elpidorou, 2018; Gibbs, 2011; Johnsen, 2016; Svendsen,

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<sup>2</sup> Estonian Business School.

2005) or philosophizing (Heidegger, 1995; Ringmar, 2019). Following these studies, it can be concluded that trying to keep oneself continuously busy and avoid boredom at any cost is not the most beneficial. Heidegger, hinting at possible positive aspects of boredom and highlighting the human tendency to escape from boredom, sighs, "...if only we are not opposed to it, if we do not always immediately react to protect ourselves, if instead we make room for it. This is what we must first learn: *not to resist straightaway but to let resonate*" (1995: 82, *Italics in original*).

Heidegger (1995), in his metaphysical analysis published in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, provides an extensive account of boredom. He views boredom as one of the fundamental moods through which humans relate to the world (1995). According to Heidegger, boredom (in German, *Langeweile* – *long while*) is directly linked to our experience of time.

"Boredom, *Langeweile* – whatever its ultimate essence may be – shows, particularly in our German word, an almost obvious *relation to time*, a way in which we stand with respect to time, a feeling of time. Boredom and the question of boredom thus lead us to the problem of time. We must first let ourselves enter the problems of time, in order to determine boredom as a particular relation to it. Or is it the other way around, does boredom first lead us to time, to an understanding of *how time resonates in the ground of Da-sein* and how it is only because of this that we can 'act' and 'manoeuvre' in our customary superficial way? Or are we failing to ask correctly concerning either the first relation – that of boredom to time – or the second – that of time to boredom." (Heidegger 1995: 80, *Italics in original*)

Heidegger (1995) distinguishes three forms of boredom that encompass those revealed in Bernanos' (1937) quotation presented above. Two of them, being bored by and being bored with, are referred to as more superficial forms of boredom. The third form of boredom is existential or profound boredom, which denotes "a state of being in the world, not as self but as 'one': 'it is boring for one'" (Haladyn & Gardiner, 2017: 9). Thus, according to Heidegger (1995), we can be bored in different ways and the profoundness of the boredom may vary.

In his attempt to reveal the essence of boredom, Heidegger (1995) highlights its two structural elements – leaving empty and putting in limbo. These two structural elements are interconnected; however, their nature transforms from one form of boredom to another. Additionally, each of the three forms of boredom relates to time differently, creates a distinct experience of being left empty and held in limbo, and accordingly has a different nature and set of implications.

## 2.1. Being boring and being bored

Heidegger explains boring as something that "does not stimulate and excite," that "does not give anything, has nothing to say to us, does not concern us in any way" (1995: 84). On the one hand, boring is a characteristic that belongs to this or that something. Boring belongs to things, people, situations, books, etc.; therefore, it is external to us. On the other hand, as something is boring for somebody, it is relational by its nature: "The characteristic of 'boring' thus *belongs to the object* and is at the same time *related to the subject*" (Heidegger, 1995: 84, *Italics in original*). It follows that *things* are not necessarily objectively boring, but what is boring and how is boring depend on the subject in question as much as on object in question.

According to Heidegger (1995), when we say that something is boring, "we mean wearisome, tedious" (p. 84). Something is wearisome if "it does not rivet us; we are given over to it, yet not taken by it, but merely held in limbo [*hingehalten*] by it" (pp. 86-87), while "tedious means: it does not engross us, we are left empty" (p. 87). Based on that, Heidegger concludes that "That which bores, which is boring, is that which holds us in limbo and yet leaves us empty" (p. 87). We are *held in limbo* insofar as our interim situation prevents us from doing what we intend to do. Also, during the interim period when we are prevented from doing what we intend, we feel empty because the situation does not allow us to do what we want to be doing and therefore, does not fulfil us. Therefore, we are bored when left empty and held in limbo; that is, when our engagement with activities that are interesting and satisfying to us is, for some reason, on hold, and we need to do something else instead. This *something else* could be a required or demanded activity, or a substitute to distract our attention. It follows that something is boring to us when it leaves us empty, that is, does not satisfy us, and holds us in limbo, that is, prevents us from engaging with activities that are interesting and satisfying to us. However, if boredom is linked to time, then the question is: how does being left empty and held in limbo relate to time? In my attempt to answer this question, I will focus on Heidegger's first form of boredom, being bored by. Therefore, the analysis is far from being exhaustive. Being bored by is the most superficial and the easiest to overcome form of boredom. However, boredom is the form of boredom that is probably the most often observed and inquired about in organization studies.

## 2.2. Being bored by

In Heidegger's (1995) metaphysical analysis, the first form of boredom is *being bored by*. To explain this first form of boredom, Heidegger uses the example of a railway station. He describes the situation where he is forced to spend

four hours “in the tasteless station of some lonely minor railway” (Heidegger, 1995: 93) while waiting for his departure. He describes his inability to pay proper attention to anything because nothing in the situation really interests him. All he wants is to get away from this station and continue his journey. In other words, he wants to restore continuity to his intentional activities, which have been forcibly suspended. He wants to restore his meaningful temporality; the meaningful connection between the past and future, between what has been and what will be.

However, we can be bored by anything, by a book, an event, a person, a situation, an activity, a task, etc. Notably, in becoming bored by something, “we are still concentrating on the thing at issue, indeed precisely on this” (Heidegger, 1995: 92) - this book, this event, this person, this situation, etc. “We are precisely still held fast by that which is boring, we do not yet let it go, or we are compelled by it, bound to it for whatever reason” (Heidegger, 1995: 92). The compelling nature of being bored by something explains why this form of boredom is usual in research on work and organizations. We want to be somewhere else and do something else, but we cannot. Therefore, boredom arising from these specific situations is usually “marked by a strong desire to engage in a task other than the one with which one is currently engaged” (Elpidorou, 2018: 8), and defined as an “aversive experience of wanting, yet being unable, to engage in a satisfying activity” (Eastwood et al., 2012: 482). Therefore, boredom often arises from the desire to do something else. As Heidegger explains, “we are forced, coerced into a particular situation” (1995: 94). Being forced into a particular situation where we experience suspension of our temporality, we are forced to endure it; to get out of this situation, we need to wait for it to end. If we are forced to wait, getting fed up and wanting desperately to be done with it so we can continue with what is important to us, time starts to drag.

Time drags when it is slowing down so much that its progress is “too slow for us” (p. 97, *Italics in original*). The expression “too slow for us” indicates the subjective experience and therefore, the subjective nature of experiencing boredom, which may explain contradictory findings of boredom studies. Additionally, it underscores the idea that “the length of time plays no role ...the duration of boredom decides nothing about its extent; that we can indeed be more bored in someone’s company for five minutes than during the whole four hours we are waiting at the station. The objective span of time is not decisive for the extent and degree or, ..., for the *depth* of boredom.” (p. 97, 107, *Italics in original*). Time drags, not because the objectively measurable stretch of time too long, but we experience it as too slow. In too slow time

boredom gets hold of us; it holds *us in limbo*. “The dragging of time proved to be that which holds us in limbo. Accordingly, becoming bored is a *being held in limbo by time as it drags over an interval of time*” (Heidegger, 1995: 100, *Italics in original*). The dragging of time oppresses us and enables boredom to arise.

“The time that drags must be coerced into passing more quickly, so that its being paralysed does not paralyse us, so that the boredom disappears. ...Becoming bored is a peculiar *being affected in a paralysing way by time as it drags and by time in general*, a being affected which oppresses us in its own way.” (Heidegger, 1995: 98, *Italics in original*)

Oppressive time is an enemy to fight; it is time one would like to kill. Fighting against the oppression of dragging time, we are seeking activities to pass the time. *Fighting* indicates that passing the time is an active, decisive act to eliminate or kill time. Passing the time as killing is “an intervention into time as a *confrontation with time*” (p. 96, *Italics in original*). When confronted with time, we intervene in time by “shortening of time that drives time on, namely the time that seeks to become long [*lang*]” (p. 96). Therefore, we oppose boredom with passing the time. As time passes, we try to “make it pass by, to propel it, drive it on so” (p. 93). To pass the time, we look for ways to occupy ourselves with something. However, this something is just a filler, a substitute for a real engagement. Because:

“In boredom, we are *bound* precisely by nothing. ... We are interested neither in the object nor in the result of the activity, but in *being occupied as such* and in this alone. We are seeking to be occupied in any way. ...We seek to eliminate being left empty by being occupied with something...from the perspective of passing the time and according to its ownmost intention we can say that what is at issue in passing the time is *wanting to overcome the vacillation of time*.” (p.97, 101, 98, *Italics in original*)

Heidegger reveals the double nature of the dynamics of time by concluding that, “When we say that *passing the time is a driving away of boredom that drives time on*, this seems to be a very precise definition of *passing the time*” (1995: 95, *Italics in original*). Notably, Heidegger (1995) underscores that “Being bored is neither a waiting nor a being impatient. This having to wait and our impatience may be present and surround boredom, but they never constitute boredom itself” (1995: 94). In other words, waiting and impatience while can be present are never decisive for boredom. Instead, being unbound to anything due to suspended temporality feeds our impatience, makes time feel *too slow*, and waiting heavy, which together contribute to the emergence of boredom.

### 3. One size does not fit all - no point in killing time to avoid boredom

Although Heidegger's being bored by (something or somebody) is considered the most trivial form of boredom, his analysis helps explain some of the contradictions in the findings on the topic in organizational studies. Research on boredom in organizational studies has provided conflicting findings. On the one hand, boredom is viewed as resulting from too little arousal, the monotony of the task, and too long working days (Jonsen, 2016; Roy, 1959). On the other hand, research also shows that employees may appreciate and even prefer steady work routines with low arousal and monotonous rhythms (Finkielstein, 2024).

Notably, being boring is not an objective characteristic of some object, subject, or situation. Instead, being boring always emerges in relation to being bored. Therefore, boredom is a relational phenomenon. It depends both on the something being boring and somebody being bored. However, what is boring for one is not boring for another. That is to say, we cannot objectively evaluate the boringness of something and manipulate it based on our understanding of preferred circumstances. Put differently, in organizational settings, we cannot eliminate boredom as being bored by something by shortening or lengthening waiting or working time, by increasing or decreasing arousal, or by adding or reducing working assignments. Rather, whether something is boring to somebody depends on the temporalities of a particular something and a particular somebody, and the possible conflict between these temporalities. This implies that waiting and boredom proneness (as a personal trait) do not constitute boredom, although they may accompany it. Instead, boredom tends to arise from the feeling that we are bound to nothing; that the situation we are in has no meaningful connection to our past or future, and we need to kill time to pass it. Or do we?

Considering that passing the time by killing it is a general human tendency when faced with boredom, we can expect to see this same tendency in employees' behavior, including those in the upper echelons, within organizations. When thinking about lower-level employees, Heidegger's analysis suggests that, to have genuinely motivated employees, it is crucial to maintain their attention. To accomplish that, a match of competencies could be less crucial than aligned temporalities. If we think about managers, trying to always be on the go is probably just a cover-up for the underlying boredom, the felt emptiness, and the lack of meaning. By supporting and even rewarding continuous busyness, multitasking, and a sense of self-importance as substitutes for genuine interest and associated motivation, organizations can hardly reach their full

potential. To reach their full potential, they need creativity, which requires opportunity to emerge, some empty time, and a place. Creativity often requires a certain amount of boredom.

In conclusion, organizations should not be afraid of some idle time, nor should they fight against boredom with artificial busyness. Instead, if there are signs of boredom, organizations can reflect on their setup and ask where they have lost their employees' genuine interest, motivation, and maybe even devotion.

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