

L'ennui, c'est les autres ? The practices of boredom in organizations : ambivalences of a diabolized, yet symbolic part of office life

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Résumé :

Cet article propose d'étudier des activités de non-travail au travail à l'aide d'une approche originale reposant principalement sur des journaux de bord, remplis par des honnêtes employés de bureau pas toujours si débordés que cela, complétés d'entretiens. A travers l'étude spécifique de récits d'ennui au travail, nous proposons d'interroger la représentation communément admise du travail comme une course folle en quête de productivité, d'efficacité, voire même d'intelligence et de sens en organisation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), nous situant ainsi dans la lignée des approches critiques en management. En cherchant à éclairer ce qui se trame dans l'intimité des individus au travail, nous souhaitons relater un récit différent sur son sens (Paulsen, 2014). Les résultats préliminaires indiquent que l'ennui est à la fois un symptôme et une pratique. Aux niveaux individuel, collectif et organisationnel, l'ennui au travail est révélateur d'une relation spécifique aux autres, à son travail, voire à son organisation, et en dernier lieu, à son moi professionnel et personnel. Mais aussi, au rebours d'une conception uniquement négative de l'ennui, celui-ci peut se lire comme une véritable pratique, à la fois diabolisée et pourtant très symbolique (parce qu'inévitable?) de la vie de bureau qui convoque, par de riches mécanismes, une dimension centrale de travail émotionnel (Hochschild, 2003). Avec un peu de pratique, l'ennui peut s'avérer le lieu où le travailleur se reconnecte à lui-même : le bureau se mue alors en endroit familier, réapproprié. Libéré du regard inquisiteur des collègues, le "bored self" (Costas & Kärreman, 2016) peut alors se lover avec délectation dans des instants salvateurs de paresse au bureau.

Mots-clés : Ennui, quotidienneté, non-travail au travail, travail émotionnel

L'ennui, c'est les autres ? The practices of boredom in organizations : ambivalences of a diabolized, yet symbolic part of office life¹

INTRODUCTION

« Je ne peux pas supporter qu'on attende quelque chose de moi. Ça me donne tout de suite envie de faire le contraire »²

Is the office life congruent with the scholar depiction we make of work? Academic literature on organizations and management is obsessed with fostering the pursuit of performance, efficiency and rationality. In this perspective, organizations are machineries dedicated at optimally allocating tasks to efficient individuals and teams in the pursuit of productivity. In such a perspective, idle time is an organizational aberration : Paulsen (2014) notes the frequency of use of the expression “time waste” in the academic literature studying what he calls “Empty labor”³, “which in itself judges what is “waste” and what is not”. The academic literature insists on the implications of such a pursuit on our relationship to time, be it in terms of “acceleration” (Rosa, 2013), or “urgency cult” (Aubert, 2003, Jauréguiberry, 1998) to name a few “Maux du Siècle”. Many a scholar insists on the impacts of NTIC on such a phenomenon (Coeugnet, 2011, Bretesché et al., 2012, Créno et Cahour, 2016) leaving little room for respiration (Sauvajol-Rialland, 2014), even once the day of work is over: work, and by extension, occupation (even pre-occupation?), has pervaded the private domain, deeply impacting individuals’ life and identity (Belleza et al., 2017, Chiapello et Boltanski, 1999). Be it at the risk of slipping from activity to hyperactivity, either your life is full, or you have no life at all.

The colonization of work into personal life has long been studied. While at work, obviously, such a tension remains, increasing the blurring of the line between professional realm and

¹ The data and theoretical framework displayed in the present paper emanate from a PhD project; parts of this work have already been publicly submitted and/or discussed in conferences (AGRH, SCOS, EGOS), but the main ideas and findings displayed in this paper has never been presented before.

² “I cannot stand that people expect something from me. It makes me want to do the opposite at once.” (Huis Clos, Sartre, translation from author)

³ Defined as follows: “Empty labor is everything you do at work that is not your work. All who work know what empty labor is. We all take breaks; we all go to the bathroom. Many of us also make private phone calls, write private emails, and surf the web for our own purposes while at work. Most of us spend a great deal of time on this type of non work-related activities.” (Paulsen, 2014, P5)

private life of workers (Fleming, 2014, D'Abate, 2005), often to point out that the former subjugates the latter. But the reverse impact has been less scrutinized (Bouvier, 1983), or in a fragmented manner (see Le Lay and Pentimalli on humor at work, 2013, Bozon and Lemel on “petits profits du travail salarié”, 1990, Montjaret on parties, 2001, Petelczyc, Claire Aislinn, et al., on play at work, 2018, Roy on “banana time”, 1953...). There can be several reasons to it. “Time waste” being useless, it must be fought. Therefore, it can be tracked and prevented (for instance, by resorting to firewalls preventing people from surfing on certain websites at work, or by asking people to write down their activity and time allocation), or proactively filled by management (rise of “afterworks”, “office parties”, seminars and so on, dedicated at providing corporate “fun” times to employees); in such a perspective, productivity (through motivation, implication, team cohesion...) is still the main goal at stakes. Indeed, in such hectic times, time emptiness, as is epitomized by boredom, is no longer an option in people's life. At work, this time waste is prone to be labelled as a professional “misbehavior” (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), defined as “anything you do at work you are not supposed to do”, as opposed, as Paulsen puts it, “to the established discipline of “organizational behavior”.” He adds : “Ackroyd and Thompson argue that the labor process is the result of a constant struggle between employees and management in which several factors or “appropriations” are at stake – the appropriation of identity, product, work, and time.” Paulsen situates his study of the phenomenon of “empty labor” in such the perspective of “time appropriation”: “Empty labor covers all their examples of time appropriation, including small time perks and more serious timewasting. Yet there is an important difference: empty labor does not necessarily imply organizational misbehavior. Whereas time appropriation requires a subject, i.e. an employee actively taking back the time that officially belongs to the employer, empty labor can emerge for other reasons.” Together with a potential professional flaw (lack of efficiency), wasting time is a moral misdemeanor, opening the door for ethical considerations about what a “good” professional behavior is, and is not. Indeed, at work, you *have to* work. However, many things happen at work that are something other than work, which are more or less tolerated by management, and for which workers cannot always be held responsible for. A deep paradox lies here.

Another possible reason for the lack of scrutiny on such instants might lie in the fact that, in order to exist, they must be performed in a hidden manner. In the critical perspective (CMS), organizations are domination tools that distort individuals' inner desires to make them match their own, leaving them with few possibilities of emancipation from work obligations *while at*

work (see Hirschman's Model of "exit, voice, loyalty"). And yet, everyone can recall moments of activities other than work at work, and even worse: total inactivity at work, having nothing to do, or no will to do it. Everyone experiences "emptiness", idleness, boredom or the mere absence of efficiency or productivity. Therefore, are those bored moments expressions of "misbehavior"? Are they means of resistance and emancipation? Their mundane character seems to deeply question their radicality. Their localization, in the interstice between individual (mis)behavior and organizational (mis)match, can deeply interrogate how work is organized, and made sense of. Costas & Kärreman (2016) define the specific state of boredom as follows: "Rather than embracing or distancing oneself from the exhorted organizational self, boredom indicates a kind of arrested identity founded on unfulfilled expectations and the sense of stagnation". It is a subtle, deeply personal feeling that can be interpreted in several manners, at best as a floating moment amidst a hectic day of work, at worst, as a recalcitrant state of mind. The trouble lies in the fact that boredom constitutes a negation of the pursuit of efficiency and productivity. Like other types of time wasting, it has therefore been diabolized and combatted, as is to be seen in Taylor's departing point for displaying his Scientific management: the hunt for "soldiering" among workers (1971). Nowadays, research and management practitioners try to foster motivation inside individuals in order to make their will converge with this pursuit of efficiency (Chiapello & Boltanski, 1999). Boredom appears as a mismatch, an *anomaly*. Therefore, what happens when people experience boredom at work, and what does it reveal on work? We believe that the study of boredom as a moment of *emotional labor* can provide a fruitful angle to such a question. More precisely, because boredom is ambiguous (both diabolized and yet a symbol of office life, both due to personal and organizational causes), it points at interrogating the way work is organized, and the way it is considered by workers. To us, since boredom questions the classic professional posture expected from the ideal professional at work, it displays an interesting type of emotional labor as Hochschild (1983:6-7) defined it concerning flight attendants: "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others (...). This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality". In this perspective, boredom is a suspended moment of "arrested identity" where the worker has no other option than exerting his/her ability of "time appropriation", to fill it with personal sense of the self, while being obliged to maintain

a certain professional posture (hence the “work” dimension of this expression of emotion), in a Goffmanian view.

This work ambitions to highlight the richness of mundane non-work-related activities that workers experience at work as a means to question the very meaning of work and to freely elaborate their professional identity, with a specific attention to the particular non-work activity of boredom. The primary findings of such a study help considering the fruitful concept of boredom as a revealing anchorage point into questioning the meaning of work at a micro-level perspective, thus encapsulating workers’ personal views on their professional identity, personal utility at work, and possible ambivalences lying in them.

The ambitioned findings of this article are plural: after displaying a synthetic review of the academic frameworks in which we wish to insert this study, methodological considerations are discussed, since this project also hopes to contribute to methodological creativity in research: it uses plural means of data collection on the sensitive topic of everydayness at work, where individuals enact, translate, deconstruct and recreate fruitful dialogue with organizational demands and expectations. The main findings of the study will be then presented before being discussed, notably on the possible contributions it can provide to the concept of emotional labor and the CMS apprehension of “appropriation”, and put into perspective and promising areas for future research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. WORK HECTICS AS A SYMBOL OF WORK ETHICS: WHEN BOREDOM IS KICKED OUT OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL KINGDOM

Management studies are obsessed with the pursuit of productivity and rationality. Taylor’s early work on scientific management (1971) originally aimed at erasing workers’ tendency to “soldiering” : those acts were not only seen as an aberration against practical efficiency but as a true moral wandering, symptomatic of workers’ ungodly bargaining power. In such a perspective, Scientific Management was a hunt for idle time. Nowadays, most recent management fads try to increase productivity at work by any means possible (naps and yoga, chief happiness officers and weekend seminars, to name a few trends convoking non-work-related, leisure-like activities, sometimes during free-time. See Petelczyc et al., 2018, Dujarier & Lelay, 2018, Monjaret, 2001). This softer appeal for workers’ motivation seems to advocate for erasing dull times, as if those moments desperately needed to be filled with

something. It seems that workers have to deal with a dissonant injunction: work hard, play hard, be always productive and efficient, and thrive on it. Is it serious?

Professional and private identities at work are more and more required to overlap. As noted by Chiapello & Boltanski (1999), the “New Spirit of Capitalism” rises and shines, notably through “autocontrol”, a pervasive mechanism integrated by individuals to partake in the productive effort. In such a perspective, non-productive time, even training time, is rejected out of the worked time; it is rendered invisible. Others refer to the foucauldian perspective of “biopower”: workers are encouraged to bring “Life itself” to work (Fleming, 2013), and are expected to bring work back home: professionalism now outlives the office doors. Together with such extension mechanisms, old manners and values (Weber, 2017), bureaucratic and control tasks (see Hibou’s analysis of the loss of meaning of work in hospitals due to inflation of bureaucratic tasks contradicting core professional identities, 2012), add up on the to-do list of working individuals and cut down on their daily schedule. It tightens the screw and shapes the daily expectations required from employees in the office, who are held accountable for the allocation of their time at work. Even “knowledge work”, reputed for fostering creativity and autonomy (Costas & Kärreman, 2016), faces this constraint. It seems that Marx’s denunciation of capitalism as an attempt at prolonging eternally the day of work now displays new attire (“Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.”, *The Capital*, Book 1, Chapter 8, 1993), especially through the diffusion of NTIC (Felio, 2016, Jauréguiberry, 1998).

This double movement of acceleration and alienation (Rosa, 2014, Aubert, 2003) creates a distorted relationship to time, now shrinking. The imaginary akin to such a hectic activity (Belleza et al., 2017) echoes a lot the characters of Cimon and Clitandre in La Bruyère’s *Les Caractères* (first published in 1688): “ qui pourrait les représenter exprimerait l’empressement, l’inquiétude, la curiosité, l’activité, saurait peindre le mouvement. On ne les a jamais vus assis, jamais fixes et arrêtés; qui même les a vus marcher? On les voit courir, parler en courant, et vous interroger sans attendre de réponse; ils ne viennent d’aucun endroit, ils ne vont nulle part, ils passent et ils repassent; ne les retardez pas dans leur course précipitée, vous démonteriez leur machine; ne leur faites pas de questions, ou donnez-leur du moins le temps de respirer et de se ressouvenir qu’ils n’ont nulle affaire (...)”⁴.

⁴ “ He who wishes to depict them would express haste, concern, curiosity, activity, would portray movement. One never saw them sitting, steady and still ; who even saw them walking ? They appear running, talking while running, and asking you questions without waiting for an answer ; they come from no place, they head nowhere,

Therefore, this intensity raises several core issues. First, that of health in terms of physical and/or mental exhaustion, but also other types of psychological sufferings, as analyzed by Clot and Dejours for instance (see also Coeugnet et al. on time pressure, 2011, or Datchary, 2004, on dispersion at work). More broadly, the diagnosis of thinkers such as Gorz (1988) or Marcuse (1968) can help apprehend the reductionist view of such a vision of time, identity and life as a whole. In *Métamorphoses du travail - quête de sens – Critique de la raison économique*, Gorz says : “ All appropriation necessitates « work » (in the sense of « ergon », energy cost) and time, including the appropriation of our own body. Work for oneself is fundamentally what we have to do to gain possession of ourselves and of this objects organization that, prolonging ourselves and reflecting us to ourselves as a corporal existence, is our niche amid the sensitive world: our private sphere.”⁵ The dispersion in never ending activities prevents such a recollection. Second, it raises the issue of the meaning of work. As stated by Graeber (2018) – and La Bruyère’s Cimon and Clitandre-, agitation might fail more and more to make up for ‘bullshit jobs’, or an activity without any true purpose, or destination. Alvesson & Spicer (2012) also carefully analyzed the epic fail of modern organizations’ attempt at erasing irrationality and stupidity from work. Those perspectives seem fruitful, as they call for integrating to the frame of analysis the organizational level, or agency, in producing the very dysfunctions it pretends to tackle. In such a perspective, individuals’ personal traits (and flaws) are completed by an encompassing perspective, paving the way for creating a meaningful dialogue between individual, collective and organizational levels. Within this framework, boredom appears as a “peau de chagrin”, a rare commodity allowing for the possibility to break free from agitation. Times of boredom are therefore apprehended as a resource for the individual, both to catch his/her breath, and perhaps, to make sense of his/her work by taking the time to extract himself/herself from the flow of things, and practice a work of “appropriation”. Before diving into any moral consideration on boredom, we can therefore apprehend boredom as a symptom of work alienation and intensification, where exhaustion and interrogation of the meaning meet to possibly fruitfully question the usual course of things.

they come and go; do not set them back in their hasty run, or you would dismantle their machinery; do not ask them questions, or at least give them some time to take a breath and remember that they have no other thing to do (...)” (author’s translation)

5 “Toute appropriation exige du « travail » (au sens d’ « ergon », de dépense d’énergie) et du temps, y compris l’appropriation de notre propre corps. Le travail pour soi est fondamentalement ce que nous avons à faire pour prendre possession de nous-mêmes et de cette organisation d’objets qui, nous prolongeant et nous réfléchissant à nous-mêmes comme existence corporelle, est notre niche au sein du monde sensible : notre sphère privée.”

1.2. FROM DIABOLIZATION TO SYMBOLIZATION: WHEN BOREDOM IS THE BATTLEFIELD OF EMOTIONAL WORK

Working people cannot reasonably be always active and productive ; but as professionals, they might be incited to act as such, to maintain the face of professionalism (in a goffmanian perspective, 1973). Therefore, the moments of inactivity, or more precisely, of activities other than work at work, tend to be performed in a hidden manner (see Bozon & Lemel, 1990), or in codified interstices often mocking work (Le Lay & Pentimalli, 2013), that an exterior observer cannot easily spot (see Roy's narrative on "banana time", 1953, after a prolonged immersion). The reason for such a concealment might lie in the moral hazard shaped by specific work ethics (Weber, op.cit.), that Marx also pinpointed: "If the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist." (Marx, op.cit.). It is therefore often apprehended as a "misbehavior" (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999), as suggested by the allusion to theft made by Marx, expressing a moral judgment on the "appropriation" mechanism that such activities represent. As Paulsen (2014) says, "'Time waste' is probably the most frequently used term, which in itself judges what is 'waste' and what is not. Otherwise, empty labor has also been referred to as: 'anti-social behaviour'(Penney et al., 2003), 'counterproductive work behaviour', 'poor quality work' (Ones and Viswesvaran, 2003), 'deviant behaviour' (Vivien and Thompson, 2005), 'shirking' (Henle and Blanchard, 2008), and 'futzing' (Mills et al., 2001)." Such qualifications point to negative apprehension of the phenomenon. Paulsen adds: "A central reason why empty labor has not been more studied by sociologists who share other partialities is that it is hard, though by no means impossible, to integrate the phenomenon of empty labor into the popular framework that speaks of work intensification." Consequently, "The study of workplace sabotage, theft, effort bargaining and other types of misbehaviours suggests longings and frustrations that seem incompatible with the concept of the absorbed worker." We call this stigma "*diabolization*". Etymologically, this word means "to throw across" (*dia-ballein*): the congruence between what is displayed and its meaning disappears and becomes an incongruence in the normal flow of things. It is therefore diabolic, for it questions the very meaning of the act of work. The process of stigmatizing such acts ("-ation") emanates from the necessity to regulate those behaviors to maintain, at least apparently, the serious character of work. The Goffmanian perspective helps apprehending this dual obligation that workers face: they can only get bored in a manner that

preserves the appearances; they can only be bored to a certain extent. Or else, they take the risk to be submitted to diabolization, judgement, and possible punishment.

Meanwhile, quite ironically, boredom can also be seen as a *symbol* (*sym-ballein*, to throw with) of the working life (see Paulsen, 2014, Graeber, 2018). Between organizational diabolization and individual symbolization, boredom appears as a dual notion.

Therefore, it boils down to studying the relationship people nurture with their professional self at work, its relationship with the activities they indulge in while not working (Costas and Kärreman, op.cit., speak of “the bored self”), and the very nature of those activities. How is boredom displayed at work, and then, how can it be interpreted? In the CMS field, non-work related activities are often envisioned as a means of resistance, planting a differing identity at work (see Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, and their analysis of “misbehavior”, or Ackroyd & Thompson, 1995, and their interpretation of “quiet” as a surface covering of resistance). As Paulsen notes (2014), one can wonder about the actual impact of such resistance since it preserves the apparent staging of productivity and professionalism. Doesn’t it rather express a fake, useless, “decaf resistance”? If people fake work at work, they might end up maintaining a smooth, strategic, unharmed professional identity. Other schools of thought see in those acts alarming reactions to professional suffering (see Clot and Dejours’s work): people no longer have the energy to work. It seems that such a perspective applies to boredom pretty well, insofar as boredom is mainly defined as a passive state : Merriam Webster dictionary defines it as “a state of being weary and restless through lack of interest”. Therefore, boredom lies at the crossroads between questioning working conditions and, potentially, the very meaning of work.

However, as Paulsen states while considering D’Abate’s study on personal activities while at work (2005), “there is no mentioning of employees expressing dissatisfaction with their jobs, their bosses, or society at large. Rather people seem to appropriate time “because the phone, computer, email, or internet is readily available”, “because time constraints in the time demands created by home life, leisure interests, a long commute, or long hours make it necessary” or because “business hours are the only times they can reach these people or accomplish their tasks” (D’Abate, 2005:1022) etc. (...) Unfortunately these studies are written from the managerial perspective that empty labor represents the cost that should be reduced and controlled, and that it is an irrational type of behavior which the employee must somehow “rationalize and construct meanings to explain” (D’Abate, 2005:1014)”. Therefore, according to Paulsen, “The only legitimate reaction, then, is against the conditions of work,

never against work itself, against the lack of meaning, or against the fact that you have to subordinate yourself to a boss and instrumentalize your creativity for a wage.” Contrary to other types of non-work activities, boredom expresses an emptiness, a void, a vacuum. Hence it points at work organization. Like Paulsen, we noted this element in D’Abate’s work: “Among scholarly studies of empty labor, only one mentions that it may result from low workload. Asking why middle management employees engage in “personal business” on the job, D’Abate (2005:1022) found that one of the most frequent answers was “to reduce boredom on the job and/or fill downtime”. Despite more than half of the participants claiming this reason, D’Abate does not pursue it.” Where other personal activities might very well act as supplements of activity dedicated in filling the day with more or less necessary tasks (what d’Abate assesses as “enabling “individuals to balance and cross the boundaries between life realms”), boredom appears as a more radical expression of non-activity. In such a perspective, boredom might be more a sign of radical criticism than other types of non-work activities.

Whether the meaning of it lies in the expression of plight (health at work approach), irreverent play (resistance), or something else, expressions of boredom at work are diabolized as much as they appear inescapable. In a Goffmanian perspective, we argue that when experiencing boredom at work, individuals’ acts are shaped by the injunction to find strategies to maintain their professional image. We argue that non-work activities at work, because they play with veiling and unveiling the mask of productivity, might constitute a new type of relational labor, whose meaning doesn’t only express pain or protest. We believe that the double pressure of professionalism and indulging in idle time and activities can complete, and be enlightened by, the literature on emotional labor as defined by Hochschild concerning flight attendants: “in the course of doing this physical and mental labor, she is also doing something more, something I define as emotional labor. This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others (...). This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (1983:6-7). Boredom, in such a perspective, is the invasive expression of an imbalance between what is emotionally felt and what is morally asked to the professional individual; the latter has to display it through constrained manners in order to preserve his/her professional self.

If this contradictory injunction (diabolization vs inescapability) can call for alienation or suffering, we argue that its inescapability advocates for a more positive qualification of such

acts. Philosophical perspectives on notions whose kinship with boredom are close, such as idleness or contemplation, advocate for a more positive vision of the activities revealing boredom (see Russell, 1932, or Lafargue, 2000). Some scholars advocate for a new story on working life (see Bouvier, 1983, and his call for studying “quotidienneté”, or “everydayness” of work in an anthropological perspective). Such a call for inserting everyday life mundane activities into the study of organizational life points at the necessity to try to interpret those moments beyond a somewhat imprisoning duality. “Rather than embracing or distancing oneself from the exhorted organizational self, boredom indicates a kind of arrested identity founded on unfulfilled expectations and the sense of stagnation”, Costas & Kärreman argue (2016): are these suspended moments professional “stagnation”, or also possible premises for creative personal ferment lying in the momentaneous redefinition of boring interactions at work?

We argue that beyond being a symptom, boredom can also be considered as a practice allowing possible other interpretations on emotional work as only signifying a painful effort. In the inspiration of such philosophical approaches mentioned above, we think that Mona Chollet’s words in her essay “Chez Soi – Une odyssée de l’espace domestique” (2016) can very well apply to some specific displays of boredom at work: « Whether we consider time as an inert thing, dedicated to being “occupied”, “filled” or “used”, partakes in explaining the incomprehension that homebirds face. Their acquaintances presume that they can only get bored to death, whereas, while extracting themselves from the crazy world rat race, they experience the vivid nature and texture of time. They are the happy few (together with children, most likely), to confidently coil up in it. They picture it as a welcoming flying carpet, enabled to take them to unforeseen destinations, through infinite variety of landscapes. They know it is not unchanging, but rather composed of a succession of singular instants. Those instants, one has to be careful enough to bring them to tell their secrets, to whisper what they have to say, which calls for courage to brace a certain dose of passivity. One has to make oneself available, instead of scorning their inner logic and looking for conjuring fear of emptiness and unknown, compulsively filling them with anything.”⁶ (P158-159, chapter «

6 Translation by the author of the following paragraph: « Que l'on considère le temps comme une chose inerte, ayant vocation à être occupée”, “remplie” ou “utilisée”, contribue à expliquer l'incompréhension à laquelle se heurtent les casaniers. Leur entourage présume qu'ils ne peuvent que s'ennuyer mortellement, alors que, en s'extrayant de la course folle du monde, ils font l'expérience de la nature et de la texture vivantes du temps. Ils sont parmi les derniers (avec les enfants, probablement) à s'y lover en toute confiance. Ils voient en lui un tapis volant accueillant, doté du pouvoir de les transporter vers des destinations imprévisibles à travers une variété infinie de paysages. Ils savent qu'il n'est pas uniforme, mais qu'il se compose d'une succession d'instant

Malades de l'efficacité »). In familiar places, boredom can reveal itself to be the occasion for reverie, time-savouring. The others's glance is then transmuted into closeness rather than judgment. So if individuals indulge into boredom at work, couldn't it mean that they managed to make it a familiar place?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES IN DATA COLLECTION: GENERAL OVERVIEW

Unveiling the everyday life of workers has a long and protracted history (Sociology of practices, Anthropology). However, the study of their activities while not doing what they should do at work, among which boredom, still raises incommensurable methodological issues. Those moments are "typically concealed from the managerial gaze" (Fleming, 2013) because they question core values associated to "honest work" (Taylor, op. cit.), as we saw in literature review.

Mostly, collections of such intimate testimonies and/or scenes are made through participant observations (see Roy, 1959), a costly enterprise for a researcher. Besides, such observations mostly occurred in factories, and less in services offices. Like Costas & Kärreman (2016), our study focuses on workers from "knowledge economy", in their vast majority possessors of a Masters degree, evolving in a complex and supposedly intellectually challenging environment: "Such work is commonly understood as giving individuals space for creativity, problem-solving and, therefore, self-fulfillment", as the authors stipulate. However, another methodological issue arises: their observed activities might be wrongfully interpreted. For instance, Paulsen notes it while mentioning the use of a computer; the researcher can have a hard time spotting the true nature of the website being consulted. One can also picture observing a worker thinking about how to solve a complex task, doing nothing obvious but yet not being *unoccupied*.

Whatsmore, in the aftermath of Goffman (1973), we must consider the possibility that at work, people fake work, especially if they feel observed. Observing the everyday work of practitioners boils down to "asking to watch them in the intimacy of their bedroom", as one manager replied when asked if he agreed to have his teams observed on such topic. Therefore, it boils down to searching for the invisible, what is masked to the eye of the beholder

singuliers. Ces instants, il faut se faire suffisamment attentif pour les amener à livrer leurs secrets, à chuchoter ce qu'ils ont à nous dire, ce qui nécessite le courage d'une certaine passivité. Il faut se rendre disponible, au lieu de bafouer leur logique propre et de chercher à conjurer la peur du vide et de l'inconnu en les remplissant compulsivement avec n'importe quoi. »

(manager, colleagues, and obviously, researcher). What seems mundane in the day-to-day working life of individuals might constitute a threat to the professional image of workers (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). It encapsulates emotions, traits and features whose meaning might escape the direct understanding of the outside beholder.

2.2. GOING BEYOND THE STAGING OF THE SELF (GOFFMAN, 1973)

In order to grasp the richness of non-work-related activities, and especially boredom-related activities in the most accurate and vivid manner, this work resorts to a plural qualitative methodology: to date, it mostly relies on self-diaries, completed with interviews. Additional data collections (not presented here) rely on reading/watching of literature, comics, movies and TV series depicting the office life, and observations of a team during several weeks in a bank.

The main source of data is, to date, self-diaries (Stewart, 1967) given to a sample of 27 people (objective: 30 participants) presenting non-work-related activities at work. Participants were asked to write down for at least 2 full days all the moments when, to them, they do not work at work. This data collection was then completed with semi directed interviews with projective questions and based on active listening, giving access to participants' professional experience, vision of work, and personal conceptualization of non-work-related activities (see section 2.4).

The choice of participants lies mostly in a snowball technique: the researcher solicited working relatives, in their 30's, in possession of a Master degree, Parisians in the vast majority (a few expatriates are solicited to enrich the data collection), operating in various spectrums of activities (see table below). Sometimes, those participants introduced the researcher to coworkers or relatives.

Table 1. Sample of respondents to the self-diary

FIELD OF ORGANIZATION	OCCUPATIONAL SECTOR
Public	Public administration (social activity)
	Public economic structure (support to firms/entrepreneurs) (3)
	Teaching (elementary school teachers) (2)
	European institution (economics-law, abroad)
	Magistrate

Private	Consulting Production company (TV) Data processing Luxury distribution Cultural products distribution Publishing house Journalism (financial) Luxury distribution (cosmetics) (2) Energy distribution Bank Telephony Corporate lawyers (2)
Hybrid	Foundation (ecology) NGO Economic development Structure
Other 1	Self-employed (web content and social media)
Other 2	Comedians (2)

The figures in parenthesis refer to the cases where several interviewees share the same type of job. Specific profiles (i.e. not “office workers”) were also studied: those are comedians and elementary teachers; their testimony enriches the analysis by constituting revealing counterpoints, but will not be presented here due to the lack of relevance that the specificities of their job bring to the specific topic of boredom *in the office*.

This variety of professions in the sample situates itself in the aftermath of Paulsen’s work on empty labor, with some noticeable variations. In his methodological section, Paulsen raises the question of observation as possibly not entirely relevant for studying such a sensitive topic. We agree with such a standpoint, but decided to triangulate our primary findings with some direct and non-participant observations in a bank (this work being in progress, unfortunately it cannot be displayed here), in the objective of not only completing and/or enriching our data collection, but also of providing relevant information about possible lacking in the original method. Plus, Paulsen resorted to interviewing people who responded to an ad that he passed, and also to a snowball technique, while we chose to interrogate

acquaintances. He chose to focus on a sample of respondents that declared spending at least half of their working day doing something else than work, hence shedding the light on a specific type of behavior that one could consider to be both telltale, and very specific. Our aim was to be able to have access to non-work activities in a large spectrum of jobs, but without only focusing on some situations that one might consider as problematic. By doing so, we believe that the possibilities for generalizations can therefore be reinforced.

This methodology triggers very interesting interrogations and limits, especially concerning the researcher's possible relational biases towards the participants. Such proximity appears to be precisely what constitutes a key component of the methodological contribution of this project: it is a fruitful opportunity to discuss reflexive elements, like for instance the link between proximity and verification of honesty of testimonies. This task of verification on the part of the researcher is facilitated because, precisely, of the latter's close relationship with the informants. This closeness encourages both the researcher and the informant in their search for honesty, establishing a trustworthy relationship, and pushing the capacity of analysis on both sides with no fear of moral judgement which is, as we saw in literature review, a key and constituent element of the topic under scrutiny. We believe that resorting to relatives is a satisfactory response to the staging of the self and the desirability bias often encountered by researchers during interviews. One could even say that it partakes of one key hypothesis of this article stating that familiarity is fruitful: when you are in a familiar place, chances are that you can act in a more natural and spontaneous manner⁷. Providing the participants with the possibility to write down what they notice on themselves at work is also, to us, an interesting way of collecting relevant data together with a good means of triangulating the information provided during the interview (and vice versa).

2.3. CODING PROCESS AND SELECTION OF RELEVANT DATA FOR THE SPECIFIC TOPIC OF BOREDOM AT WORK

Each participant was free to write their journal in the most suitable manner for their day not to be too disturbed by the exercise of noting. Most of them wrote it down in a Word document (one consultant wrote it on a PowerPoint, a banker on an Excel sheet, an informatician and a

⁷ This hypothesis proved to be right to a large extent: the researcher had access to vivid and sometimes surprisingly honest testimonies such as the reference to very personal feelings and activities during the working day. As an illustration to this, we can refer to some very vivid analyses of painful conflicts at work, or on the contrary, their strange omission (the personal relationship interviewer-interviewee could therefore fill this "blank" while preserving the interviewee's choice for not mentioning such sensitive information); another telltale example advocating for the richness of the data collected in this manner lies in the mentioning of masturbation by one of the participants, pointing at a high degree of comfort for sharing one's testimony!

kindergarten teacher on a loose sheet of paper). The guidelines were as follows: to note fairly precisely (i.e. approximately) the time spent on a non-work-related activity, the nature of the activity, the participants, any feature of interest to understand the scene (for instance the location, objects used...), and the direct meaning of it for the participant. A specific instruction was asked to the participants: that they noted the identified factors that launched the shift from a work activity to a non-work activity, and the end of this non-work activity (and return to work). In other words, participants were asked to notify their non-work activities, but also the moments of “shift” between work and non-work. When needed, some exchanges and developments were asked, to provide extra information about the scene noted. Those extra comments are duly identified as such (use of another color, mention “meta comment” added in the document collected).

Most of the time, this exercise was completed with an interview that was recorded and then transcribed.⁸ In most cases, the end of the interview dedicated some time to the journal, thus providing some extra information (for instance, the interviewer could ask the participant if (s)he had worked before or after going/leaving the office; or to elaborate on the ongoing activity when the non-work activity happened, and the reasons why it ended, or to develop on the content of the non-work activity noted) and the possibility for the participants to express their feelings about this exercise or possible surprise, in a reflexive and open perspective (see annex for the general guideline of the interviews).

The coding process was multi-thematic, in the footsteps of Ayache and Dumez’s work on qualitative coding (2011). The main themes were: work, non-work, and return on the journal exercise for structuring the interviews, and non-work for the journals per se. Therefore, this first step of the analysis mainly followed the participant’s own categorization of work and non-work. Soon, some “weird” elements appeared: as Paulsen also noticed, “Several interviewees noted the difficulty of conceptually differentiating between work and non-work” (op.cit., p173). Therefore, a third great theme was developed, that of “frontier”, together with a coding sub-theme for each of the categories of themes (“blurring” for labelling an act(ivity), that could therefore be categorized as an element partaking of the “frontier” theme, but also “other” as an emerging element inside the themes of work and non-work - therefore leading to the possibility of pointing by abduction to a new sub-theme, and “asperity” for specifically

⁸ If not, the participants had preferred to write down a document specifically dedicated at framing their experience, current job description, a typical day of work, their vision of non-work, etc. (see annex section for detailed listing of the topics developed)

labelling a vocabulary oddity). This scrupulous first reading of the data ensured that no element was left aside and provided the foundation for a possible abductive second-hand coding that respected the discourse of the participant, his/her inner coherence and apprehension of the phenomenon noted, and a possible rigorous co-construction of meaning and categorization.

This conceptual elaboration on work, non-work and frontier, made on a roundtrip basis between theoretical and empirical construction, is developed in annex. This co-constructive dimension seems quite new in the Organization Studies field, providing an interesting methodological contribution.

In this perspective, “boredom” appeared as an emerging notion that could be retrieved in the form of a sub-theme in all the themes approached by the participants. It is a label that could characterize some specific activities and expression of feeling, be it in the work, non-work or frontier realms, and most of the time, if spontaneously mentioned by the participants (whether it was in their journal or during the interview), it was given as a primary explanation for the irruption of a non-work-related activity (see “Results” for further development). The process leading to labelling a specific activity as characteristic of “boredom” was directed by the careful reading of the elements noted by the participants, and a specific attention towards what Costas & Kärreman (2016) elaborate as being symptomatic of boredom: “bureaucratic and industrial forms of work, which are associated with tedious, repetitive and monotonous labour.” Therefore, by reading the mentions of specific emotions and some specific tasks labelled by the participants as being repetitive, tedious, monotonous, we had a hint pointing towards possible boredom. It so happened that specific moments in the interviews favored the emergence of boredom as a central topic of discussion: it was when the participants were asked what they liked and disliked the most in their job tasks, therefore pointing at the emotional dimension of boredom (you have something to do, but you are not interested in it and get bored/find it boring), and quite interestingly, when mentioning unsolicited interruptions by coworkers (you are bothered⁹). Therefore, we paid a close attention to stressing boredom as the expression of a vacuum in the working day activity, and of being bored by an external intervention implying others. This extensive apprehension of boredom allowed for taking into consideration the qualitatively rich nature of boredom, which led us to consider tales of more positive dimensions of boredom (notably, when you indulge in getting

9 In French, boredom encompasses two dimensions: “s’ennuyer”, et “être ennuyé”, which implies a negative interaction such as disturbance.

bored). Eventually, for each participant, we built a board compiling occurrence of boredom and coded it in terms of nature of activity depicted, also noted the various elements pointing at labeling it as “boredom”, and tried to elaborate on a specific “type”, or facet, of boredom. This last operation thus allowed us to develop a general framework encompassing the various testimonies of boredom (see “Results” and annex for an example of the preliminary coding work on boredom).

3. RESULTS

Overall, the primary findings advocate for a plural understanding of the phenomenon of boredom at work. The variety of the situations mentioned is a strong signal of it, as is shown in the following excerpt from a corporate lawyer’s self-diary:

“ 10.09-10.12AM go get a coffee (**it took a while because I tried not to go at the same time as S, my stupid boss**) (...)
 10.12-10.15AM Emails **again**.
 10h15.10.26 AM M (my co-worker) comes back from reunion. He tells me what happened during the week I wasn’t there (he is very talkative) Apparently, E (the one who sleeps with the managing partner and who is outrageous) asked for days off in a savage way again last week.
 10.26-10.47AM emails review
 10.47-10.48AM Coffee n°2
 10.48-10.50AM emails review
 10.50-11.10 AM Actually, I have to declare the hours of May of my cleaning sir+ do some banking transfers.
 11.10-11.11AM **No alternative, I have to get back to** reviewing emails. (...)
 11.59-12.31AM conference call on a file with London and Milan offices (**total boredom**) (...)
 2.26-PM review of an **important** file translation for a case
 2.26-2.46PM **Actually I did something else (mostly whatsapp)**
 2.46-3.04PM translation review. **It is super annoying**
 5.04-5.09 M interrupts me to tell me how much E is outrageous
 3.10-3.44PM **I don’t remember. I think I just bugged.**” (Day 1)
 “10.50-11.53AM **It never stopped.** Another email on compensatory rates+reunion organization. 11.44AM We received a summons in a case again. **It never stops. I want to jump out of the window.**
 11.53-12.36AM **I try to plan a drink. I feel better.**” (Day 2)

This very precise¹⁰, yet lively collection of activities at work shows that several elements point at boredom, among which the most obvious is the very depiction of a task as boring (“(total boredom)”, “super annoying”). Plus, the redundancy of some tasks (“emails review” repeated several times, together with specific words such as “again”, “it never stops”, no

¹⁰ Corporate lawyers, he said, have to carefully write down their time allocation for invoicing reasons.

alternative”) points at boredom in the sense that, like Sisyphus, this lawyer constantly has to repeat this task. Besides, the most striking element in this testimony lies somewhere else, in the specific comic tone employed: it is obvious in the sentence “I want to jump out of the window” for instance. Also, the way he transcribes the gossip his coworker makes is, in this perspective, quite revealing, for it can be understood in a plural manner: either it shows the absence of interest, the mundane character of this “info”, or it shows that our lawyer finds some distraction in such a not-very-constructive moment. Eventually, the comic *détachement* he puts between an “important” file translation and his treatment of it (“actually, I did something else”) conveys the lasting impression that his days of work might be *intrinsically* boring.

This example shows the richness of the testimonies collected, as well as the various possibilities of interpretation one can read out of them. After a careful reading and coding of those specific moments where boredom seems at stake, we ended up with a primary typology, as shown below. Depending on the nature of the emotions attached to those moments (*‘positive’*, like “I try to plan a drink. I feel better.”, *‘negative’*, like “it is super annoying”, *‘other’*, like the ambiguous recollection of the gossipy colleague’s interruptions), the length and/or recurring character of it (ex: punctual/prolonged, for instance avoiding the “stupid boss” while fetching a coffee vs constant email reviews) and the factors involved in the display of those moments (*task-related*, like the “translation review”/*coworkers-related*, like the coworker’s gossips), we ended up with defining 2 levels of boredom at work: boredom as a symptom, and boredom as a practice.

3.1. LEVEL#1: BOREDOM AS A SYMPTOM

The level#1 boredom points at a mostly punctual, mostly task-related type of boredom. The feelings attached to it are very varied, as is exposed in the following table.

Table 2. Level#1 boredom: key manifestations and meanings identified

Verbatim	Activity manifested	Meaning & emotions attached
Corporate lawyer:		
“11.22-11.52AM Give instructions to an intern on a task (but from 11h26 to 11h35 I looked at stupid things on the internet+whatsapp)	Momentaneous lack of concentration	Desire to have a break; involuntary drop out of an ongoing task
11.52-12.08 I don’t remember, I think I just glanced at the window. 12.07-12h10. Send text messages to complain about the weather” (day 2)	Individual dimension	No clue on feelings

<p>Journalist: « In the afternoon, the coworker I investigated with for the 2nd article decides to write it. As a result, I don't do much. (...) Then I search for other people to interview and get in touch with them, unsuccessfully (they are unavailable, don't answer, etc.)" (Day 1)</p> <p>Editing head (Public structure – social): "I am waiting for a document I am supposed to read over and mark before tonight. I get nothing, and my other tasks are blocked in the meantime. I am stuck, there is nothing I can do. It is irritating because I have to put up with it (...)" (day2)</p> <p>Banker: "Back to office: long waiting for documents to get from lawyers and funds (...) I call that immobilism period of time (...) the documents will get there with one hour delay... My activity starts again. (PM, day2)</p> <p>9AM : I am at the lawyers; I wait, it is long, I sign some papers, get my documents, give remote instructions to the back office to send the funds... AND I wait for a confirmation from them, everyone waits for me in the firm to know if the money was transferred right, it's long, I fill in talking about the client's firm business, we talk about the Brexit "<i>Of course¹¹</i>", and finally comes the confirmation from the teams, after an hour (...)" (Day 3)</p>	<p>Recurring moment of suspension</p> <p>Connected to the very nature of the job as interactive: external factor</p> <p>Reactive, snowball boredom</p>	<p>Collective & processual nature of task</p> <p>Agenda conflicts with interlocutors → call for time-filling of the waiting worker</p> <p>Fairly negative feeling</p>
<p>Journalist: (Day 1) "At the conference, I don't listen much because I won't write about it <i>a priori</i>, I am just here to talk to a speaker on a precise matter. I have the feeling that I am wasting my time. At the end of the conference, I stay to talk with the speaker but the journalists are dragging and I want to be alone with him so I wait and chit chat with other journalists and the press attaché but I am impatient. Eventually I get to briefly talk with the guy but I don't get the info I was looking for, I come back empty-handed and I am aware of the time: it is already noon and I haven't "really worked" yet, even if all I've done so far is required as part of my job."</p> <p>Telephony firm employee: "2-3PM Roadmap committee where I don't have to speak, I work on personal projects during the reunion and don't pay attention to what is being said. It is a recurring reunion, in which I never have to speak up.</p> <p>3-4PM reunion on a topic which concerns me. You get it, this firm is suffering from acute "reunionite". Reunions allow not to lock oneself in a personal whole anyway." (day1)</p>	<p>Recurring moment pointing at the very nature of the task, judged less strategic (or very unuseful) for the work in the eye of the worker</p>	<p>Feeling that the worker's time could be more usefully spent</p> <p>Feeling quite negative (journalist)/ more nuanced (telephony firm employee): reunions seem to be integrated into the "daily work life", taken as occasions for doing something else, quite positively engaging the employee in the possibility of interactions (last sentence)</p>

¹¹ In English in the diary

Self-entrepreneur (website and social media content): “A <i>beneficial monotony in my work everydayness</i> [title given by him] - My work everydayness comes along with an undisputable monotony, but not in the negative sense: there is simply a uniformity in my days of work but which reassures me, on a personal level.” (<i>meta comment</i>).” Corporate lawyer: “10.50-11.53AM It never stopped. Another email on compensatory rates+reunion organization. 11.44AM We received a summons in a case again. It never stops. I want to jump out of the window. 11.53-12.36AM I try to plan a drink. I feel better.” (Day 2)	Repetition which becomes characteristic of the job itself Work seen as intrinsically boring?	Feeling that boredom is deeply mingled with everyday life at work Dual feelings about it (example of positive feeling-entrepreneur/negative feeling-corporate lawyer)
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Therefore, level#1 boredom appears as a symptom, depending on/revealing of a certain organizational plasticity. The link with dropping out points at individual characteristics, but also at collective and task-related characteristics. In such a perspective, boredom indicates a rupture, but can also appear, depending on the feelings attached to it, as a continuity in the daily activities workers have to tackle.

Moreover, level#1 boredom is a symptom of a specific relationship:

- (1) to others at work
- (2) to one's job/organization
- (3) to one's professional and personal self

Indeed, depending on the factors at play (coworkers and/or tasks to do), boredom takes a specific coloration. Boredom is indeed a dual word: in French, people distinguish between “s’ennuyer” (active boredom) and “être ennuyé” (passive boredom), a dimension that we will now investigate.

Table 3. Selection of illustrations of boredom as symptomatic of a specific relationship

Verbatim	Activity manifested	Meaning & emotions attached
Editing head (Public structure – social): “once I really start to work, I want to do it right and I loathe being interrupted: my non-work moments, I want to choose them. A coworker breaks into my office to chit chat a few minutes on a personal matter, take a coffee or make customary platitudes, I don’t see it as a break. I take it as an aggression in my personal work organization.” (<i>meta comment</i>)	Interruption by coworker for chit chat Work prevented by other	Strongly negative Feeling of time stolen
TV employee: “11.03. Cigarette break, because irritation towards coworker	Escape	Strongly negative

who once again didn't provide me with info, and tacks to give me the least possible (...). Pissed off, need to be alone and need of nicotine. 11.19AM coworker talks to me, I try not to pay attention to work (no answer/"mmh"/") (...) I put my helmet on so that my other coworker doesn't interact with me" (day 2)	relationship/ recover from negative interaction Work prevented by other	Feeling of necessity to cool down
Self-entrepreneur (websites/social media content) : "You'll never get my freedom to goof off. [title chosen by him-allusion to a popular French song] A few weeks after I arrived in my coworking space, one of the coworkers offered me to take his communication plan online in charge. I declined, because I didn't want to be overwatched during my breaks; I wished to be able to keep on goofing off as I pleased on Facebook, Whatsapp and so on without having an on-the -spot client blame me for it." (meta comment)	Escape judgement Non-work prevented by other	Anticipation of annoyance Strategy to preserve personal space/time allocation

In such a perspective, boredom is symptomatic of an interruption; the feeling attached to it is strongly negative in those examples, and quite interestingly, it doesn't constitute a positive break occasion, *unless the interruptor is appreciated* (be it because the current task is boring, or because of his/her intrinsic interest for the employee). Otherwise, the interruptor is diabolized. Such type of boredom is the symptom, therefore, of the status of a relationship between coworkers.

Other types of boredom convoke the key part played by colleagues, but in a more organizational perspective insofar as it points at precise, ritualistic moments that are recurrent in the daily life of organizations and call for a specific meaning attached to what is at play during those instants:

Table 4. Boredom as the symptom of emotional labor

Verbatim	Activity manifested	Meaning & emotions attached
Editing head (Public structure – social) : 1.15 PM. "Lunchtime is dragging on; it is way too long to my taste. My coworkers use this time to debate at length on various topics, or to share more or less kind anecdotes on coworkers. In a word, they create and nurture personal bonds, which, in the middle run, considerably simplify their professional intercourses, and therefore their everyday work. In this perspective, those moments are to me very close from work. They even require a true effort from me. I read them as an investment:	Lunchtime not considered as a break because of the effort it costs to appear interested in interactions	Effort-triggering, feeling of time waste Negative feeling Points at emotional labor: extra work asked to the employee, during

<p>partaking in those personal times makes me be truly integrated in a team, which afterwards facilitates my job (...)” (day1)</p> <p>10;15.AM “A coworker (...) makes fun of the fact that I am all alone in the office on a long weekend day. I know he expects me to offer him a coffee – so I offer him a coffee. I am upset because I was interrupted in my morning personal time, and I am not very keen on such imposed breaks. I make the effort, because I know it is important for the team cohesion. (...)</p> <p>10.35 AM My coworker leaves, I am relieved” (Day 2)</p> <p>(...) 12.45 PM “I work really efficiently, and I don’t want to spoil this rare moment, so I find an excuse for not having lunch with my boss and I stay behind my desk working. (...)</p> <p>2.30-2.45PM My boss comes in to talk to me about various work-related topics in a very disjointed manner, so totally pointless. I politely listen to her, knowing that this exchange won’t be of any use.” (Day 2)</p>	<p>Feeling of obligation to make time for informal interactions</p> <p>Work and efficiency in the balance</p> <p>Feeling of obligation+ hierarchical dimension</p>	<p>an ‘official break’</p> <p>Double injunction: strategic interest of indulging in such moments to bond with coworkers (useful for work), and yet, boring</p> <p>All-the-more boring as it is recurrent?</p>
<p>Analyst (public structure for economic support): “12.15-12.45AM We get out of reunion and I know that we are going to have lunch soon so I don’t get back to work. (...) Lunch break: since it is a time surrounded by colleagues, I have a hard time defining it as non-work-related, to be honest. I include it in my working day” (day 1)</p>	<p>‘Official break’</p> <p>irrupts as an interruption preventing efficiency/ concentration</p>	<p>Points to emotional labor in the sense that it is perceived and labelled as “work”</p>
<p>NGO employee (marketing): “Today it was very hard for me to wake up given the amount of demotivation I experience from my work. So I called office saying that I had been sick during the night and I couldn’t come to work in the morning. After sleeping a bit to gain some strength, I eventually had to compel myself to go to work. I dread this work because of what it is mostly, but also because of the distance to get there. (...) I am already depressed to be there.</p> <p>My relationship with my manager is very bad and the only thing I think of is to get out of this place. I count the hours till the end of the day. To disconnect I listen to music all day while working. (...) My days of work are therefore calm but pass by slowly, which is very unpleasant. But I refuse to keep up giving my all if my true worth is not recognized. During the afternoon I look at my personal emails and job offers in a discreet manner, so that I won’t be noticed. I drag on the only thing that “relaxes” me, my statistics chart, that I complete</p>	<p>Escalation in degree of annoyance: true suffering</p> <p>Too much effort to bear the professional posture, yet ‘hides’ non-work</p> <p>Boredom= symptom+ attempt to escape</p>	<p>Very strong and negative emotional labor, resulting on rejection of the relationship and the job</p>

and that at least distracts my mind” (day 1)		
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Boredom can be a symptom of a relationship’s state between the employee and his/her coworkers, work and organization. Boredom can express disorganization, can reveal the possibility of something better/more interesting, and even rejection, in most extreme cases. Negative feelings are hidden, in an effort for both recollecting oneself (through isolation or on the contrary, expressed in selected interactions), and being able to go back to work (processual dimension of boredom: a parenthesis/interruption point). In this perspective, boredom as a relational symptom points at emotional labor, with varying intensity depending on the feeling attached to it. Let us now study the way boredom is displayed.

3.2. LEVEL#2: BOREDOM AS A PRACTICE

Boredom can also become a true practice, beyond being a symptom, as the introductive example of the corporate lawyer showed. Boredom can convoke specific interruptions aiming at alleviating the current boring course of the day. An extreme yet striking example of that is to be found within the testimony of a project manager in an energy firm, who has an empty job:

Project manager (energy firm) : “NOTHING. EMPTINESS. I am a project manager without any appointed project, and no identified means to get one.” (*meta comment*)

“The content of my day is “non-work” insofar as this project isn’t part of my missions, I imposed it for the sake of feeling useful.”(day 1, *meta comment*)

Yet, her self-diary is, quite strikingly, very similar to those of workers who cannot complain of having almost fictitious jobs:

“Wake up 7.20AM, leave 7.50AM. Arrival at 8.40AM. I spend 4 hours in improvised reunions to determine the next steps to follow on my project that doesn’t interest my manager that much. In total, I interview 4 people. Then I go back to my office. I get organized for the next step, the morning time flies. I get down for lunch at 1PM with my colleague. At 2PM I meet an external service provider who introduces me to a solution, still in the context of that specific project, I test, it lasts 2 hours. At 4PM I return to my office, I call other people to have their opinion, which proves to be very useful to me: I gather a large amount of information in a short period of time, which allows me to plan the next steps. Except that those tasks are a little out of my scope. For that matter my interlocutors are quite surprised that I am alone dealing with all of this, I should do that within a team. I make sure that the

testing environment for the only project I was given is still out of order, I send an alert and move on: my days off and administrative tasks akin to it, and I leave at 7PM at the same time as my coworker.” (day 3)

Boredom, apart from being a symptom of a very problematic job definition and purpose, was an alarm calling for creatively filling the days with activities: it became a practice.

Boredom as a practice is also an elaborate means to stage oneself, or on the contrary, to unmask oneself at work. Indeed, many participants expressed the feeling, while discussing their job evolution or even carrier changes, that they needed to face “new challenges”¹². Talking about boredom can therefore be a staged means to show one’s expertise (as Costas & Kärreman, 2016, stipulated) to their coworkers and their organization. In a similar yet different perspective, in the day-to-day office life, the use of artefacts, especially new technologies, appears as a very convenient tool for maintaining a surface of seriousness while secretly indulging into private activities when boredom comes, as is shown below:

Table 5. Practices of boredom thanks to artefacts, notably NTIC

Verbatim	Activity manifested	Meaning & emotions attached
Merchandizing designer (luxury cosmetics): “10.h07AM – The meeting starts. The first part of the meeting deals with the store design, which is A’s part. So I can keep up working on what I am going to present. One ear listens to A, my hands make modifications in the 3D presentation, my mind is somewhere else.” (Day 1)	Dispersion management (Datchary, 2004), professional posture maintained	No clue on emotions attached
Editing head (Public structure – social): « Here is what I was able to spot : among the « youngest » (those under 30) it is easy: non-work, roughly, is the mobile phone. Not very discreet, this time. I confess having trouble understanding what they find on their phone that they wouldn’t find on their computer, but I must miss something here, for it is systematic: when entering an office too quickly, one always catches a youngster the eyes on the phone. In here, for the people my age (30-35), non-work is on the internet. In my share office space, everyone is calm, seems very focused, and all of a sudden	Tentative typology of NTIC uses in connexion to collective non-work-related activities as a discrete practice	Appearances of fun Possibilities to interact in a chosen, deliberate way Negative feeling expressed towards the staging dimension of such activity, which

¹² A recurring French expression was « J’en ai fait le tour » (“I’ve seen it all”)

<p>my colleague calls me to show me a condo announcement and I realize that he has spent an hour looking online at renting websites, and I thought that he was working on a powerpoint presentation. Daily, everyone sends by email to the others funny articles that they come across online. We all, to the least, have Twitter and Facebook pages opened permanently on our computers.</p> <p>However, what I notice among the “oldest” (from 35-40 onwards) is that non-work is discussion -in real-life! It can appear in the form of a never-ending coffee break at a colleague’s, of a cigarette-break that lingers quite a while, an improvised shopping excursion between two people, a never-ending lunch at the canteen, a chit chat on personal topics in the corridors after a reunion...</p> <p>If we add up all those moments when they talk with one another on personal topics, I am pretty sure that we come close to the amount of time the young spend surfing online. Only, here, it is socially more appropriate to spend an hour in the courtyard smoking with a colleague (you can always pretend that you discuss work-related topics...) than spending an hour booking your summer tickets online. I find it quite unfair, and stupid. Yet, I lie low, for I am well aware that my work/non work method wouldn’t be understood by the oldest, those who do not experience this internet addiction. It so happens that the managers all fall into this category! So the taboo remains, and the young are doomed to hide.” (<i>meta comment</i>)</p>	<p>maintaining the illusion of professionalism: use of phone by the youngest, computer by the in-between, official breaks by the oldest</p>	<p>shows the ‘taboo’ dimension of it</p>
<p>Analyst n°1 (public structure for economic support): she notes that regularly steps out of her office (shared with coworkers that she appreciates) to a specific room to talk to her “mentor” colleague with whom she often discusses the managerial wanderings they have to endure.</p> <p>Analyst n°2 (public structure for economic support): “To catch a breath, I look at my apps from time to time. I also go refill my water bottle, and I decide to go to the water fountain on the other side of the floor rather than to the toilet room situated right next to our office. It is 2 minutes saved from capitalism and it allows me to get some fresh air a bit.” (Day 3)</p>	<p>Specific locations/ rituals to recollect with chosen coworkers from emotional labor imposed by some coworkers/ organization/ tasks</p>	<p>Positive feeling “Decompression chamber” in comforting interaction/isolation</p>
<p>Editing head (Public structure – social): “Since I am alone, which never occurs, I take up again with an activity I used to dedicate much time in my previous job, when I had an office of my own: look through the window and think, staring into space. Since I share my office with 2 other people, I don’t</p>	<p>Specific, opportunistic solitary activity providing calm</p>	<p>Positive feeling “decompression chamber” in positive solitude</p>

do it anymore, for fear of being considered a sociopath. It is a great pity, because to me it is a very “regenerating practice”, which makes me regain calm and focus.” (day 2)	and evasion	
Analyst n°1 (public structure for economic support): morning ritual with a coworker at the cafeteria at each beginning of the week Publisher: “On Mondays, except if there are reunions, I always have the hardest time to get back to it, to go back to the madhouse, I lack courage at times. And I am lazy, so lazy of everything (...) (Day 1, <i>meta comment</i>) 10-11AM: OK, the Tuesday morning motivation isn’t there yet, I dawdle on Twitter to self-spoil on the latest TV show I watch. 11AM: time necessary to change mindset, coffee-smoke with a coworker-friend. And back to it, this time, it’s the right one!” (day1)	Cyclic tendency (morning) to idleness/foot-dragging, dedicated at permitting entering gradually into the working day	Positive process of extraction from dullness to engaging in an activity <i>at the worker’s own pace</i> Allusions to some effort

Those opportunistic « breaks » allow individuals to catch their breath in the daily activities or collect their courage before starting working. By doing so, they resort to specific activities that allow them to inhabit differently the workplace, and manipulate work objects in other ends. It can be considered an opportunistic, active boredom.

4. DISCUSSION : BOREDOM AS AN AMBIGUOUS ODYSSEY: A REVEALING SYMPTOM OF THE MEANING OF WORK AND AN ENABLIGN PRACTICE FOR THE EMOTIONAL WORK OF REAPPROPRIATION OF THE SELF?

All in all, it appears that boredom is not only a symptom (i.e. *expression/manifestation*) of personal fatigue, irritation, lack of interest and motivation (as was expressed by the participants through numerous descriptions of negative feelings, especially in terms of physical effort), which is congruent with the diagnosis made by authors reflecting on suffering at work; it is also a symptom (i.e. physical and mental *reaction*) of organizational lacking and lack of meaning, as was depicted in literature review on the CMS approach of organizations. The level#1 boredom typology clearly illustrates such a conception, revealing that boredom is the manifestation of a troubled relationship that individuals have to deal with at work, with others, some tasks, their job, and themselves (tension between professional and personal self at work), as was displayed in *Tables 1 & 2*.

In particular, *Table 2* shows that boredom is often the manifestation of a time interruption that appears as a disturbance of the working, *and* non-working, self. This interesting result points at considering boredom as symptomatic of work (i.e. a symbol), and its practical conditions,

but interestingly enough, also of non-worktimes. In such a perspective, boredom can be interpreted as a dual experience deeply representative of the everyday life at work, as *Table 3*, which focuses on typical activities encountered at work (such as lunch break, reunions and chit chats) shows. Boredom, just like those activities, can belong to the “frontier” blurring the lines between what is work and what is non-work *for workers*. One key element to allow access to the meaning of such activities might therefore lie more in the careful attention paid to the feelings attached, rather than to the mere collection of tasks or activities while at work.

This finding constitutes an interesting counterpoint to D’Abate’s approach (2005), which Paulsen (2014) qualifies as being “from the managerial perspective” rather than worker-focused; in her typology of personal activities at work (which, interestingly enough - and adding to the overall confusion about work and non-work-related activities at work, she chose to label “personal *business*”), we can clearly consider that even personal activities can be boring insofar as it expresses another type of personal or social obligation “not to waste time”, which deeply questions the emancipatory capacity of those activities for the workers. In such a perspective, this approach somehow fails to provide a differing view on the common representation of general intensification, acceleration, etc., that we evoked in our literature review. It sheds an interesting light on the colonizing effect of work on other life domains, but does not entirely manage to assess the reverse phenomenon, where personal life deploys in the office. Indeed, in her “Results section”, D’Abate displays several activities that her respondents reported engaging in: “using phone”, “sending or receiving e-mails”, “social conversations”, “surfing the internet”, “making appointments”, “paying personal bills”, “leisure reading”, “Organizing or planning for personal time”, “betting pools” “daydreaming” and “visits with friends or family”.

In such an approach, we do not have access to the emotions at stakes for the respondents who take part in those activities. Consequently, we cannot understand fully the signification of such activities, because we only get access to *practices* that do not take into account a potential *symptomatic* meaning. We remain at the surface of things, so to speak. Also, another problematic issue raised by this work is that the collection of such activities might very well miss the fundamental part played by the staging of the professional self on the part of respondents, as our *Table 4* shows (especially in the display of the various NTIC used to indulge in personal activities while maintaining the illusion of professionalism). In this perspective, we miss a little the richness of the “practice” dimension of personal activities at work.

On the opposite side of this, our results can prolong Paulsen's work on "empty labor" in an interesting manner, insofar as it focused on tales of non-work-related activities on the part of a more "classic" sample of workers than the sample Paulsen chose to study. This specific focus allows us to mitigate the idea that those activities might undoubtedly point at organizational incongruences, or even aberrations. It mitigates another commonly shared vision (that of CMS) of work as the kingdom of domination, where any attempt at resistance leads to a dead-end. Our attempt at showing the practices of various workers who remain fairly occupied and are often interested in their day-to-day job provides an interesting addition to the search for meaning of work beyond tackling the working conditions *only*. We believe it can enrich the discussion about the meaning of work *in general*, with a special attention to take into account the ambiguous meaning it can have for workers themselves, who can oscillate, without it being necessarily a disturbing symptom of schizophrenia, between pleasure and pain, satisfaction and disillusion at work.

Eventually, we believe that the findings of our study provide an interesting contribution to the notion of emotional labor. By interpreting boredom as both a symptom and a practice of "the bored self" and connecting it with emotional labor (through the tension that boredom displays between professional and personal self, in a Goffmanian perspective following the road paved by Hochschild), we can shed an interesting light on this phenomenon considered as an invisible work, source of suffering for the workers precisely because it distorts the professional and the personal self. We think that the study of boredom can reveal an interesting perspective for this fundamental notion, which is extremely useful to apprehend in a close, rigorous and complete manner the everyday life of workers and its impact on emotions.

Our findings suggest that boredom can also constitute a fruitful field for staging one's professional *and* personal self at work, and their inherent paradoxes, as discussed in the literature review in terms of injunctions. Since boredom is widely condemned and diabolized, it is displayed in very specific and subtle manners. The main explanation to it, to us, is that the experience of boredom at work displays a fundamental tension between the necessity to do the daily tasks and the urge for meaning and interest while doing it.

The balance between the necessity to focus right here, right now and the possibility of something more interesting somewhere else constitutes, to us, a very interesting case of emotional work. In such a process, workers navigate between their professional and their personal self. They alternate between being spectators (passive state) of their daily work and

actors (active state) of their daily work-filling. Such suspended moments provide specific suspended times when workers, by distancing themselves from the current flow of activities, can search for the meaning of their tasks. Sometimes, they do not find it. Other times, it is precisely those moments that enrich the day, notably through interactions.

Such interactions reveal the ambivalence of boredom: if passive, they bore individuals, they irritate them, they even create deleterious perspectives at work (NGO marketing employee). If active, they constitute rich parenthesis allowing for possibilities of amusement (corporate lawyer), reflexivity (analysts in the public structure for firms' economic support), even some poetic times (Editing head in the Public structure contemplating the outside through the window). Interactions seem quite inescapable, rendering isolation very hard to get (so the refilling of the water bottle becomes a lonely stroll through the corridors; the journalist commented, on his day out in search for scoops, that he ended up isolating himself in a church while waiting for his interlocutor to show up) ; and therefore, those specific moments of boredom, of 'suspension', are precious : boredom is the possibility for contemplation, peace of mind amid the racket of the open space, it is the occasion to nurture a true relation to the self. In such moments, as our various tables showed, the worker not only reconnects to his/her own personal self, (s)he also domesticates the office in this attempt, as was shown by the part played by spaces, selected coworkers, and office tools such as NTIC. This work of domestication creates familiarity, i.e. the conditions to "experience the vivid nature and texture of time" as Chollet puts it, where the "bored self" builds a safe space to freely express itself.

Of course, this study is confronted with various limits and would definitely benefit from further developments. Some key methodological considerations were already mentioned, and to some extent addressed, in the Methodological section. They mostly point at the possibilities for generalization provided with a fairly small sample of respondents and to more specific methodological choices that can be legitimately questioned, such as the choice to rely on relatives, and the possible bias akin to such a decision. To us, such choices allowed for the possibility to dig under the surface of the staging of the self, but more reflexive work needs to be done to better remedy the possible flaws brought by this decision. A promising addition could be to add observations of unknown workers to the data collection, which is to date a work in progress.

On a theoretical level, a major point for discussion lies in the operationalization of the concepts of work, non-work, and frontier that were developed to apprehend in a dynamic

manner the specific, and yet fairly floating, phenomenon of boredom. This difficulty was already mentioned by Paulsen, who reports experiencing the same difficulty with his respondents; we decided to envision it as a key issue, enabling interesting reflection on the very nature of what is, nowadays, considered as “work” or to put it in a more polemic manner, what *is not* work, since work seems to be found everywhere (even in the intimate realm of our personal emotions!). In our view, the choice to co-construct what is work and what is not with the participants appears as the more satisfying answer to such a burning issue, even though such delimitation work remains largely to be reinforced. That is the reason why we added to this empirical construction a theoretical work of synthesis convoking Organizations studies, Law, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy to better grasp the variety of apprehension of work and its delimitations. An interesting promising area for research, in this perspective, might lie in the study of the very odd period of confinement that people experienced at a never-seen-before scale with the COVID-19 epidemic, which resulted in propagating telework. Such phenomenon would undoubtedly enrich the analysis of boredom as the possibility for appropriation and creating familiarity at work, since it stages the very home of workers.

5. CONCLUSION

The present paper wishes to question commonly shared assumptions on boredom in the workplace. As we inscribe this work into an eclectic theoretical frame on productivity, motivation and rationality at work, we wish to call for other readings on the everyday life at work as a rich display of paradoxes, tensions and rhythms. We built a theoretical framework advocating for considering boredom as both a diabolic and symbolic phenomenon, deeply connected to the representations of interactions at work and the way professional injunctions shape them. We believe this work can contribute to the existing literature studying emotional labor. In such a context, we collected data on non-work-related activities provided by various office workers who honestly noted the instants when they do not work at work. Among the rich collection of such activities, boredom emanated as a specific and complex element that totally partakes in the everyday life of the participants. The present work will definitely benefit from investigating further such practices; it can also be completed, mitigated and reinforced by other types of data, such as direct observations and other tales on the everyday life at work.

Boredom is both symbolic of the working life and a diabolic experience. It constitutes a specific rhythm, as was highlighted here through the analysis of the variety of practices. It takes place in interstices, beyond the inquisitive eyes of the coworkers or the organization, below the public display of seriousness and professionalism. We believe that boredom partakes in the staging of the self at work insofar as it is a reenactment of mundane yet specific frames of time, mundane yet specific artefacts and scenes. If it can become at times an unbearable mask to wear to keep up with the comedy of work, it can also, if mastered as a true practice, constitute the ferment of the unveiling of work farce: « *De la politesse, pourquoi? Des cérémonies, pourquoi? Entre nous!* »¹³ When people at work can frankly display their boredom, when they do not feel the need to mask their boredom from the eyes of their coworkers, it means that they are in a familiar place.

¹³ “Politeness, why ? Fuss, why ? Between you and me...” (*Huis clos*, Sartre, translation made by the author)

ANNEX - GENERAL DISPLAY OF THE INTERVIEWS: FRAMEWORK & CODING

THEMES	DESCRIPTIVE	INTERNAL	SUB THEMES
	CODING: LEGEND		
WORK	Day-time-place	Feelings about the	School experience
	Protagonists	task/interpretation(s)	Professional experiences
	(coworkers)/employer	Asperities	Possible data on non-work (on past experiences)
	(+hierarchy)	vocabulary	Current job – general description
	Nature of the task	Weird elements /	Tasks/main activities
	Objects/material	emerging new topics	« everydaylife »
			Workplace
			Coworkers
			Hierarchy
			Other interactions
			What (s)he likes/dislikes
			« Professionnalism » : work ethics, values/employer's values
			Other
NON WORK	Day-time-place	Feelings about the	Moments of non-work
	Protagonists	task/interpretation(s)	His/her definition of NW
	(coworkers)/employer	Asperities	Perception of NW as a notion
	(+hierarchy)	vocabulary	interrogation on relationship to performance / efficiency / usefulness
	Nature of the task	Weird elements /	Other
FRONTIER	Objects/material	emerging new topics	
	Day-time-place	Feelings about the	Blurring
	Protagonists	task/interpretation(s)	His/her relationship to efficiency
WEIRD ELEMENTS	(coworkers)/employer	Asperities	Other
	(+hierarchy)	vocabulary	
	Nature of the task	Weird elements /	
RETURN ON DIARIES / JOURNALS	Objects/material	emerging new topics	
			Addings/corrections
			Elements of surprise twd exercice
			Other

PHASE#1: testing phase (4 participants) and strengthening of the process; open interrogations (« sub themes » section) on (1) work context and vision, (2) vision of non-work and how it appears in the interviewee's everyday life at work, (3) meta data on the self-diary/journal.

PHASE#2: deployment of the data collection; addition of the notion of blurring, constitution of the notion of frontier, treated in the coding in the same way as sections Work/Non work/Return on journal exercise. Special place dedicated to « weird » elements allowing for taking into account possible new themes/sub themes.

PHASE#3: constitution of the descriptive internal coding; deliberately highly descriptive (left part of the legend) in order to gather a detailed and precise collection of non-work instants, and access to their meaning(s) (right part of the legend). Re-reading of the documents with highlighting each part with the coding system developed.

ANNEX –FRAMEWORK & CODING ON BOREDOM : EXAMPLE

Excerpt	Nature of activity	Sign of boredom	Labellization
<p>Publisher: “On Mondays, except if there are reunions, I always have the hardest time to get back to it, to go back to the madhouse, I lack courage at times. And I am lazy, so lazy of everything (...) (Day 1, meta com)</p> <p>10-11AM: OK, the Tuesday morning motivation isn't there yet, I dawdle on Twitter to self-spoil on the latest TV show I watch.</p> <p>11AM: time necessary to change mindset, coffee-smoke with a coworker-friend. And back to it, this time, it's the right one!” (day1)</p> <p>Editing head (Public structure – social): “Since I am alone, which never occurs, I take up again with an activity I used to dedicate much time in my previous job, when I had an office of my own: look through the window and think staring into space. Since I share my office with 2 other people, I don't do it anymore, for fear of being considered a sociopath. It is a great pity, because to me it is a very “regenerating practice”, which makes me regain calm and focus.” (day 2)</p> <p>Corporate lawyer: “11.22-11.52AM Give instructions to an intern on a task (but from 11h26 to 11h35 I looked at stupid things on the internet+whatsapp) 11.52-12.08 I don't remember, I think I just glanced at the window. (day 2)</p>	<p>“Monday / “Tuesday morning boredom” →Entering workday</p> <p>Practice/ ritual</p> <p>Regenerate</p>	<p>Physical effort Wait Failure Salient elements: “courage” Reunions : antidote ?</p> <p>Emptiness Alone</p> <p>Salient element : aware of possible – interpretat°</p>	<p>Agenda/ cyclic boredom</p>

ANNEX – THEORETICAL ELABORATION OF NON-WORK-RELATED ACTIVITIES

To study non-work-related activities, one has to apprehend it in relation to work. We chose to define work as what Habermas calls “instrumental acting” (Renault, 2008) and Le Lay and Pentimalli “functional exchanges” (2013). Those two expressions encompass a plural vision of work as both actions and interactions, and hint to a fundamental element, that of utility. The aim of those activities would be productive endings. Consequently, as suggested by the term « non » in « non-work-related activities », the latter is to be defined in opposition as every non-instrumental or non-functional action or interaction, hence not useful for the organization and/or the work to do: slack periods of time, recreation time, rest...and boredom. This tentative definition is to be supplemented by the valorization and rejection of certain norms, or professional ethics or culture shaping professional identity, characterized by seriousness (effort, good willing, motivation, competency or implication), that we refer to as “professionalism” : what has to be done and how to behave at work, in order to allow efficiency and productivity.

Once this rough definition was settled, it appeared that for the informants, it was very hard to define what activities and tasks belonged to the category ‘work’, or not. Consequently, the notion of frontier was developed. At the extremity of the spectrum, the notion of anti-work came to complete this conceptualization (this part goes beyond the present focus of the research).

The theoretical conceptualization is therefore also elaborated in context, empirically, to gain in operability : the researcher asks the people involved to express their own definition of work-related activities and non-work-related activities, and the blurred frontier between both (which was a primary finding that the researcher and participants further investigated), in a co-constructive perspective. This dimension seems quite new in the Organization Studies field, providing an interesting methodological contribution.

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