

# **Bore-out, boredom and finding meaning in the workplace.**



A study about task disengagement, boredom and finding meaning in office environments.

Master Thesis -Theology RHW

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## Abstract

*Introduction:* A bore-out is a concept that relates to how workers in an office can suffer from boredom and paradoxically maintain this state of being through avoidance coping strategies. This thesis focuses on whether a bore-out is purely connected to task-related boredom or whether other factors such as boredom proneness and meaning making processes exist that can also influence the situation.

*Methods:* The theoretical concepts of finding meaning at work, the concept of bore-out and how boredom affects individuals, groups and on societal level are discussed. A quantitative study of office workers compares these theoretical concepts with real-life work situations.

*Results:* A positive relationship was found between the proclivity for a bore-out and boredom proneness. The study also showed a relationship between lower scores on finding meaning in life and work and such proclivity. Social demographic factors like age, years in service, gender and being overqualified/underqualified seem to also have an impact.

*Discussion:* This study suggests that a bore-out is not only affected by tasks, but that social demographics, an underlying propensity for boredom and personal outlooks on meaning in life and work also are related. More research is needed to find out why and how such factors affect a person's propensity for a bore-out.

## Introduction

In 2007, Rothlin and Werder claimed that if employees had no job satisfaction and felt constantly tired and lethargic, then they might suffer from bore-out. This affliction, according to the authors, has become widespread in offices around the world. Symptoms are very similar to that of burnout: exhaustion, alienation and reduced performance. However, bore-out is thought to be related to understimulation at work rather than to stress caused by overstimulation (Rothlin & Werder, 2007).

Since the concept of a bore-out is relatively new, the question arises whether it is accurate to exclusively relate symptoms to understimulation, or whether it connects to a broader problem related to the effects of boredom in general and finding meaning in our working lives. The importance of learning more about a bore-out is threefold: 1) by recognising factors that contribute to a bore-out, the personal wellbeing of employees can be further enhanced; 2) by improving employee efficiency, the financial wellbeing of companies can also be strengthened; 3) to prevent the potential detrimental societal consequences of an increasing number of people unable to function to the best of their ability.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first three parts outline the theoretical framework concerning the overlapping phenomena of finding meaning, boredom and a bore-out. Due to the broad scope of these concepts, they will be interpreted through the use of available research and theories from micro, meso and macro levels. Societal influences, work environments and individual differences will be explored, giving a cohesive background into the various underlying factors that can possibly influence a bore-out. An interconnected summary of all three elements will lead to the final part of the study. Since most information available about bore-outs are connected to office life, this paper will focus exclusively at work-connected and office working conditions. While other stress-related conditions like compassion fatigue in health care are possibly also interrelated, such factors will not be included in this study.

The first part will focus on the ways we create meaning in our lives, especially at work. In looking at work-related aspects, it is important to define the idea of “meaning making” and

how this process evolves at work. In order to do this, I will focus on the factors that influence our relationship with the products that we produce and where we find purpose. I will also look at how work influences how we view ourselves, and how individuals and groups as well as societal factors can influence perceptions of finding meaning in our work.

The second part of the theoretical framework will focus on the phenomenon of boredom. The state of feeling bored and having a mental underload is a prominent feature of a bore-out. Yet since boredom does not only occur at work and affects people in all areas of life, this part will be divided into two sections. Firstly, I will focus on how boredom affects the individual, varying propensities towards boredom and how people cope with boredom. Secondly, I will analyse how working environments, elements of obligation and types of work can affect boredom.

The third part will examine the characteristics of a bore-out, examining how it differs from a burnout and why recognizing it may be problematic. I will also analyse how the nature of modern office work and technological advances can possibly facilitate the phenomenon and why bore-outs are a condition that predominantly affects office workers.

The fourth part consists of an empirical quantitative research based on a survey of office workers. Through a questionnaire, I am able to establish a number of links between the theory and actual office working experiences, and determine how the prevalence of bore-out symptoms relates to concepts of task-related boredom, finding meaning and purpose.

My aim with this paper is twofold: 1) to determine whether a bore-out is exclusively caused by task understimulation; and 2) to identify which underlying factors exist related to the processes of finding meaning at work and boredom. Sub-questions relating to these aims are:

1. Why do we work and what is our relationship to the product of labour?
2. How does our relationship with work affect our meaning making processes?
3. What elements are needed to find purpose in work?
4. How do we define and recognise boredom?
5. Do certain individuals have a higher proclivity for boredom?

6. Why do individuals get bored?
7. What is the relationship between boredom, work and coping?
8. What are the causes of bore-out?
9. Why can office environments exacerbate feeling of bore-out?
10. What are the differences between bore-outs and burnouts?

## Meaning and work

This chapter focuses on the reasons why individuals work, our relationship with the products of our labour and how we try to find meaning and purpose between these two spheres. The question of how we relate to our work is not only an important factor in finding meaning, but also in creating boredom. The chapter will look specifically at: Why we work and what is our relationship to the product of labour? How does our relationship with work affect our meaning making processes? What elements are needed to find purpose in work? These questions will be answered by looking at various societal and workplace influences that affect our relationship with labour and how meaning making processes are formed.

The chapter starts off with a short introduction on the evolution of labour and how our relationship with the products of our work has changed over time. Although this is a rather generalised view, it does contextualize the present situation and how, in a relative short period, our relationship to labour and the workplace has evolved.

### The evolution of work and distance to the product

Before humans turned to large industries in the nineteenth century, people predominantly lived in agricultural societies where the benefits of labour could directly be connected to its output, such as having more food or more barter possibilities. According to D. Kellner, a Professor of Philosophy specialised in Cultural Studies, minimal distance existed between the product and work involved in these societies since agricultural work fluctuated seasonally. This constituted meaningful work because the product entailed a vital necessity – that is, food (Kellner, 2006).

According to historian Yuval Noah Harari, the Industrial Revolution brought about changes where large numbers of people moved from small agricultural-based communities to large towns for factory work (Harari, 2015). Labour was no longer a means of producing something for yourself, but workers themselves became the means of production for factory owners. They received money to be exchanged for products as compensation for their time and energy. In contrast to agricultural society, these factory workers had no control over the process or their working hours. Factory work enforced individuals, for instance, to follow



work schedules of the factory and to perform repetitive routines. In doing so, they created a product not necessarily useful to them directly but rather generated wealth for their employer (Kellner, 2006). According to John. W. Budd, a Professor in Work and Organisations, this process towards being employed changed the relationship that people have with work. It transformed from being work done based on daily needs to a job with exclusive obligations to someone else. This movement away from a household-based economy to an industrial capitalist system not only changed the relationship with work, but also rendered the household work of women who stayed at home as 'invisible' (Budd, 2011). As a result, paid work connected to an industry or organisation became to be viewed as the only work that was 'valuable'.

The increasing distance to the end product was not only true for factory work, but also for a number of other jobs created to regulate the processes around workers. This meant that practices to monitor and motivate employees became part of industry operations—the administrative and managerial functions of present day (Budd, 2011). Modern technology has made the distance between functions and end products even greater. For example, the central product of an insurance company is to insure products and people. Yet employees in such companies are more likely to support and maintain IT infrastructures than dealing with insurance solutions.

In addition to changes to our relationship with the fruits of our labour, the impact of missing out on these fruits in modern society has become less of a problem. To put it simply, loss of a job in Western Europe often does not lead to a lack of food supplies. The modern-day welfare state consists of a series of social safety nets through which governments help people find other work. Compensation and retraining opportunities are offered after reorganisations and job losses. Even when people become unemployed, social welfare provides enough benefits to live off, however small these amounts might be. This certainly is not a desirable situation, but such benefits do prevent extreme hunger and deprivation. In that regard, extreme deprivation has been replaced by relative deprivation i.e., we can exist but not as well as other people.

## Why we work and finding meaning

Why do people work? The first answer relates to payment. It is a functional action to earn money. People work in order to eat, this is a basic premise of labour and employment. Money is not just a means to an end, it also opens other possibilities. Having extra money than just for basic subsistence promotes meaning in other areas of life, giving access to learning possibilities, hobbies, travel, building a family, etc. As philosopher and psychologist Jordan Peterson put it, “Most people enslave themselves for eight hours a day so that they can be free for the other sixteen” (2021). Although material gain can never be completely removed from the reasoning of why we work, other underlying aspects exist in addition to that of pure utilitarianism. Since work for many is a necessity, combining this obligation with underlying reasons of finding meaning in work can become complicated.

It is important to state that finding meaning in work is not the same as *doing* meaningful work. Michael Steger, a Professor of Psychology, claims that meaningful work would profess to be of use to society and for the greater good whereas finding meaning in work focusses more on the beliefs, significance, definitions and values that people attach to their work (2016). His study focuses on the concept of how a person finds meaning in work and not what is socially deemed as meaningful. While these ideas could be connected to each other, they are not mutually exclusive. Meaningful work is a subjective experience. For example, a care worker or a manager for a large charity may very well have meaningful work in the eyes of others, but that person might not view their work as meaningful - or indeed find any meaning in it.

## Meaning

Various theories exist about how to find meaning in life. According to the Vereniging van Geestelijk VerZorgers (VGVZ, Association of Spiritual Caregivers), four dimensions are concerned with finding meaning and developing a philosophy of life (Vereniging van Geestelijk VerZorgers, 2016): 1) The existential dimension of mundaneness with experiences of horror and wonder and everything in between; 2) The spiritual dimension that touches on transcendent meaning and experience; 3) The ethical dimension that refers to societal values, norms and accountability; 4) The aesthetic dimension that connects the meaning of experiences with beauty in both culture and nature.

These dimensions are important facets to how a person develops on a spiritual level, and gives a baseline in this thesis to general questions about finding meaning. In the following paragraph, we see that meaning making is not a static construct but rather a dynamic that constantly adapts to our experiences and emotions. It is not only important to how we construct our own identity, but also to our place in the world and how we manage with adversity.

Finding meaning or fulfilment is not just something that happens by itself, it is a phenomenon that intertwines social, cultural and psychological elements. P. Bendassolli, a Professor of Psychology and Human Behaviour, argues, for instance, that sometimes ambiguous meaning making becomes an ongoing process of construction, change and abandonment (2017). This dynamic of constant review and adaptation not only informs us of who we are, but also of who we would like to be. According to Jordan Peterson, it helps regulate our emotions and determine the significance of things we encounter in our lives, however positive, negative, or irrelevant those might be. Even in working life, where rules and regulations are more rigid, we compare an unsatisfactory condition to that of our ideal when things start to go badly. This idealized world is constructed through all the information we have at our disposal, and we compare our interpretation of the world with a desired world. What we want instead of what will be. Such constructs very often motivate our behaviour, identity and become intertwined with meaning making and actual events (Peterson, 1999).

There are various interpretations on how to find meaning in life. Philosopher René Gude, for instance, puts forth that people used to get their meaning from religion, with a reason for our being given from above. Since we now live in a secular society, meaning has become something that you need to find and create for yourself (Steenhuis, 2019). Gude has described four aspects of human capacity that are needed in finding meaning: *pleasure* (appetitus), *desire* (voluntas), *the senses* (sensus) and *reasoning* (ratio). When all four are translated respectively into feelings of 'enjoyment', 'aesthetics', 'what is good/significant' and 'truth' then meaning making will occur. According to Gude, these are factors that can be trained to some degree. For example, 'the good' can be learned through sport, 'Aesthetics'

by visiting an art gallery, and 'truth' by reading about philosophy or religion. What connects them are feelings of *pleasure* (or enjoyment). If we do not achieve pleasure from learning about philosophy, for instance, it will not induce a curiosity in finding truth and, in turn, not stimulate the development of *reasoning* through philosophy. This is the same for the other capacities as well. Gude's four aspects of human capacity eventually lead to four different types of meaning: *the sensual* (food, drink, lust, a cuddle with a loved one), *sensory* (aesthetic, art, nature), *meaningful* (hobbies, stamp collecting, playing football) and *truth* (philosophy, religion). These are all interconnected, and not one is more important than the other (Gude, 2017).

The four dimensions as defined by the VGVZ outline what can influence a person in forming a philosophy of life and a search for meaning. Gude's theories suggest how we can help facilitate these meaning making processes. For the purpose of this thesis, they help to frame a theoretical base since they connect the generality of finding meaning in everyday life with the search for meaning in work. It is important to mention that work is not the only way meaning can be found in today's society. That being said, this paper explicitly deals with questions that revolve around finding meaning at work.

### Society and work

Varied theories exist about how people extract meaning from work in relation to society and how this in certain instances can distance us from work. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the Marxist theory of alienation, Georg Simmel's theory of disengagement and boredom and Peter Conrad's theories concerning the failure of expectation.

According to Marxist theory in a capitalist economy, the worker themselves become the commodity. Marx recognises four types of alienation that occur in this system, with workers becoming alienated from their product, from the act of production, from the essence of their species and from other workers (Marx, 1988). Although a very short summary of an expansive theory, it must be mentioned in its relationship to office work today. People in today's world might now be earning more and living better lives than nineteenth-century English factory workers, but they produced tangible products and only failed to share in the benefits of the profit. In a modern-day office, the distance between workers and the end

product has increased. People play a small role in the greater working of an administrative machine, never seeing what is produced or not being connected with the product. Emptiness and boredom could very well result without having this interaction or sense of connection, with the only advantages being increased consumerism and purchase power. By using Georg Simmel's theory, I am able to demonstrate how consumerism and money are the cause of more alienation and indifference in modern society.

Simmel believed that the money economy has equalized all values, with it becoming the rational equivalent for anything and everything. In other words, all things are interpreted through the measure of money (Simmel, 1997). Simmel noted that if value can only be understood in quantifiable terms, then our social, personal, and emotional values are also quantifiable. The individual becomes indifferent to things since they no longer can be distinguished from each other. Money becomes an end in itself and, as the money economy accelerates, individuals find it more and more difficult to keep up with the things that they feel they need to produce and consume (Simmel, 1978). By being constantly bombarded by more and more stimuli, the mind, out of self-preservation, relies on the intellect which is rooted in emotional detachment to set up a defence mechanism against all incoming stimulus (Simmel, 1997). The resulting disengagement and indifference to our everyday lives then gives rise to boredom. This theory could influence the meaning-making capabilities that we have discussed in the theories of Gude (2017). The so-called "base" pleasure principle to all other meaning-making factors may become overstimulated through stimuli and stressors. As a result, the further three factors of the sensory, meaning, and truth are not further developed due to the mind disengaging. Simmel lived between 1918 and 1958 yet his theory of acceleration in the digital age is very apt in describing our present-day situation. Constant information, social media, and consumption possibilities could mean that self-detachment becomes part of self-preservation.

Such detachment can also be found in Peter Conrad's idea that boredom (and lack of meaning) relates to a failure of expectation. Our expectation for society is stimulation and connection. These expectations can be general in terms of social interaction and specific in terms of activities: work, entertainment, and so on. When these expectations are misaligned with the reality of the activity, then boredom arises. Boringness is not "out there" but rather,

in the words of Conrad, “between there and us,” which indicates an alienation from the moment (Conrad, 1997). Factors like social media and perceptions of others raise our own expectation of working life and pleasure, with these ideals often falling short of reality. A sense of disappointment and uneasiness with the situation can then raise the level of boredom. All these societal pressures can influence unconsciously how we view and relate to our work.

### Personal fulfilment, social relation and identity

In “The Thought of Work” (2011), John W. Budd outlines ten different concepts about work with various intellectual/philosophical roots: a curse, freedom, a commodity, occupational citizenship, disutility, personal fulfilment, a social relation, caring for others, identity and service. Some of these bring the concepts of obligation and compassion into focus such as *caring for others* and *service*. These relate more to the idea of meaningful work than to finding meaning *in* work. Other concepts relate to negative images of the work experience i.e., that of a *curse* or those that relate to Marxist theories such as *disutility* and a *commodity*. Although such perceptions have an important role in forming meaning, I will mostly be looking at Budd’s concepts that can be construed as being beneficial in finding meaning in office work: *personal fulfilment*, *social relation* and *identity*. I have chosen these three specific ones, since these recur in other works and theories like those in Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs*. In Maslow’s model, based on the theory of motivation it demonstrates categories of human needs which dictate a person’s behaviour. The highest point moves downwards from self fulfilment needs (actualisation) and psychological needs (belonging, prestige) to base physical (food, water, safety) needs (Maslow, 1954/1997).

### Personal fulfilment

The concept of personal fulfilment can be connected to other occupations like care work, but it very often translates as *job satisfaction* when it comes to office work (Budd, 2011). According to Hackman and Oldham, work needs to have five necessary elements in order to achieve job satisfaction: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). The latter is related to the degree to which a worker receives input about the effectiveness of their work, i.e. in what part they play in the scheme of the

end product and how important that part is.

Personal fulfilment (and job satisfaction) is connected to that of *pleasure*. Heidi Jansen, a researcher in finding meaning in work, notes that pleasure, satisfaction and significance are often considered the most important aspects of working life by people interviewed. This underscores Gude's first principle of finding meaning through pleasure. As Jansen describes, striving for pleasure has become the central pillar of our society, with expectations existing to have fun as much as possible and to enjoy yourself at every moment. Satisfaction is derived from delayed pleasure insofar that people are often only satisfied after a certain action has been successfully carried out, for example by starting a new business or completing a thesis. In turn, this can then be connected to the concepts of self-realization and accomplishment. The third aspect that Jansen names is that of significance, which she describes as the process of giving meaning to something or somebody. This also means that it often costs time or money to help others (Jansen, 2017). This is not necessarily something specifically related to work, but it does play an important factor in people's perspectives of what is important in the workplace. It would not seem unlikely that the other principles in Gude's theory also return in some shape or form during work. Yet in these works they appear to be less tangible. Since the pleasure principle, according to Gude, is a precursor to the other principles it would suggest that this, as a minimum, needs to be present.

It is important to note that finding pleasure at work does not correlate directly with having job satisfaction. Enjoying a coffee break or sharing a joke with a colleague might increase the pleasure of a working day, but this is very different to being content with one's work. Finding pleasure may not predicate task-related satisfaction, and both aspects influence how a working day is experienced, enjoyed or tolerated. Another important note is that studies that question what an individual views as important in their work may very well be influenced by rigid societal pressures. In modern society, these very often relate to ideas of success and wealth. People may very well focus consciously or unconsciously on these aspects as measurements of success because of ingrained societal influences.

In a study on organizational behaviour and people analytics, Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski (2010) identified seven factors that gave a person meaning in work: authenticity, self-

efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemaking. These factors focus more on general meaning making principles than purely on job satisfaction, and underline the importance of not only task related, but also on other aspects of work. According to the authors, meaning can be found at work if and when these seven factors are present. Together, these can illicit high intrinsic work motivation, high job satisfaction, high quality performance and low absenteeism in types of employment where people use a variety of skills and talents. This is also closely related to the ability to follow the progress of a job from beginning to end (Steger, 2016). Not only does it seem to be significant how employees relate to the product of their work, as we have seen mentioned in the theory of Hackman & Oldham, but also how the dynamic factors of belonging and interpersonal contact play a role in finding meaning and purpose.

### Social relations

Budd conceptualizes social relations as “human interaction experienced in and shaped by social networks, social institutions, and socially constructed power relations” (2011, p. 108). This means that interaction at work is not just an individual response to tasks.

Working life can have positive social aspects. It becomes a place to go and connect with like-minded people. It can even enthuse a sense of belonging, helping us to share practices, participate in common goals and create meaning. In an interdisciplinary study of organizational behaviour and psychology, Filstad, Traavik and Gorli identified four aspects of belonging at work: as the experience of being part of something, a process of becoming through a mediation of the material and social, experiencing boundaries as a process and as an attempt to perform. The second aspect, in particular, is interesting because it focuses partly on both actualisation and acceptance through work. For the participants of the study by Filstad, Traavik and Gorli, it often related to a sense of feeling appreciated for who they were rather than for their place in the workplace hierarchy. The authors claim that the experience of belonging and uniqueness in a group often translates to a feeling of oneness (Filstad, Traavik, & Gorli, 2018). Philosopher Joke Hermsen, who uses the theories of Hannah Arendt, Ernst Bloch and Lou Andreas-Salomé in her work, claims that people can have a sense of despair at their perceived loss and the complete meaninglessness of existence. This then can transform into feelings of impotence, insecurity and despair.



According to Hermsen, the only antidote to this is love, rest, attention and social connectedness (Hermsen, 2017). A 'healthy' work environment where people feel a sense of belonging might help to act as a buffer against the underlying feelings of despair. The workplace may, therefore, be an important tool in modern society to acquire a sense of belonging. As already mentioned in Marxist alienation theories, lack of connection and estrangement from each other may very well prevent us from achieving this.

Belonging in modern society also has other connotations. Doing well in modern society often connects to hierarchical structures of the workplace, and success in this area is very often indicative of our hierarchical place in society. The workplace has become an environment where people can cultivate prestige, and also provides an area where people can acquire and exercise power. In today's socio-economic climate, success is often measured on the basis of performance, competition and earnings, and based on the very idea that someone had worked hard to achieve that level of success (Jansen, 2017). It can be suggested that an individual is torn between a society that alienates us from our work but also places importance on work related success. This conflicts furthermore with the other social needs that a person needs to find through work, belonging. These conflicting needs reflect the theories of clinical psychologist Paul Verhaeghe, who claims that humans have evolved into having two opposing tendencies, that of being social and sharing (belonging) vs. individuality and taking (success). He further notes that a form of social Darwinism has evolved especially in organisations that negatively focus on the concept of individuality (Verhaeghe, 2012). These conflicting needs could possibly be underlying factors in how we perceive our work and how we approach it.

### Identity

Budd suggests that identity at work is found through the combination of the concepts of social relations and personal fulfilment. Here an individual tries to establish a positive, multidimensional self-identity that is partly self-determined and partly determined by social dynamics. This is frequently being renegotiated as new experiences and interactions arise (Budd, 2011). This echoes the idea that identity just like meaning making are, in fact, dynamic constructs that constantly adapt to our experiences and emotions. Budd also notes that when work is fulfilling and socially prestigious, then it can create a positive identity.

Budd's arguments, seem to suggest that, while influenced by external factors, we also have some sense of agency on developing a positive identity at work. This agency may very well be related to the concept of success in society but as noted many (social) factors may very well suppress this. Our own perception of freedom may very well be misleading.

That work can have such a large influence on our identity in modern society, may very well be problematic and at odds with other meaning making moments in life. In other words, success at work and in your career can have detrimental effects to other factors in life. It can be said that having too much of a focus on work may even harm a person's development. As mentioned in an article in The Guardian, "Even your best job will never love you back. So where do we find our life's purpose", it focussed on the movement towards less working hours and questioned how other activities could enhance meaning and allow a person flourish (Williams, 2021).

Even when personal fulfilment is present at work, recent developments in digitalization and globalization have meant that many social aspects of work have become lost. Indeed, as Filstad, Traavik and Gorli have argued, belonging at work can be affected by the challenges of the Digital Age (2018). The Covid-19 pandemic also resulted in an even more digitally distanced work environment. An insular life, working from home and behind a screen, in which we focus on the same tasks but with no interaction with co-workers could severely impact our self identity. On the other hand though, it may mean more time for more non-work related activities.

Psychologist Hans Alma claims that it is within this solitary (digital world) (written pre-Covid 19) that people become lost, and echoing Verhaeghe's social Darwinism, we only give meaning to things based on their market value and monetary success. Alma focuses on what she calls 'resonance relationships': rather than paying attention to distinct differences in things (such as the objective vs. the subjective or secular vs. the religious), she focuses on the unique qualities of 'the other'. This other can be a person, animal, or a thing. These resonance relationships can affect us when we realise what the 'good' is in our contact with them, and will help us to eventually act in a manner that is not only morally proper but to also look further than what our immediate stimulus is (Alma, 2020). By describing the loss of

real relationships, and how these can be regained, Alma confirms the materialistic, economic arguments of an individualistic, success-orientated society. Moreover, it illustrates how losing contact with products and people has become ingrained in our present social structures and how this could impede the development of meaning and positive self identity.

### The awareness of purposelessness

In the previous part we looked at how we find meaning and therefore purpose in work. In 2013 a theory was promoted by the anthropologist David Graeber called 'Bullshit Jobs'. It was based on the theory that jobs people had served no purpose and furthermore the people doing these jobs were aware that their tasks had no purpose.

His theory is based on the opposite of Keynesian economic theory which had promised that more technology would eventually lead to more production for less working hours. This theory has become a reality for people who are employed in industry and farming but the number of people working in service industries such as banking, managerial and clerical work has grown dramatically. He claims that much of these service industries have been automated but that this technology has been organized in such a way as to make us work more (Graeber, 2013). Although the theory of Graeber is very much connected to economic theory he also believes that this situation damages us morally and spiritually.

Graeber notes that the actual time worked in an office is low compared to hours spent in an office. If the work has been completed and idleness is not accepted people slow work down in order to extend the periods they seem to be productive (2018). People spend their working lives performing tasks that they secretly believe do not need to be performed. What Graeber also claims is that not only the purposelessness of work is distressing but also its falseness. One interviewee who recognized his 'bullshit job' claimed that it was comparable to the story of the Emperors New Clothes. Everyone is aware of the purposelessness of it all but no one dares mention it (Duong, 2019). Graeber is himself very careful not to define what a bullshit job is, although he does give plenty of examples. His main argument and also of importance to this study is that the employees themselves view their work as completely devoid of purpose.

As discussed earlier, being aware and involved in the process around the product of our labour is an important factor in finding purpose and fulfilment. Graeber goes further by claiming that part of being rests in the realization that we can have an effect on the environment i.e., what we do has cause and effect. Bullshit jobs mean that activities have very little or no effect on anything outside the office space, inducing feelings of hopelessness, depression and self loathing (Graeber, 2013). Employees interviewed about their bullshit jobs claimed they felt trapped in a Kafkaesque world which incorporated Orwellian Newspeak. In other words, they felt powerless to fully understand or control what is going on and where language and grammar are reduced in order to limit an individual's ability to think (Duong, 2019). Playing along with the pretence that you are usefully employed – while being fully aware that you are not - will have consequences on the idea of the self. In this situation, there are no feelings of self importance and the idea that we can have any meaningful impact on the world then also ceases to exist (Graeber, 2018).

The theories of Graeber have been the focus of some critique. Soffia, Wood and Burchell (2021), for instance, note that although Graeber claims his hypothesis is testable, he uses no empirical studies to prove his theories. The authors show in their own study that the actual number of people who have felt without purpose in work is actually quite low. Reasons for feeling dissatisfied were mainly related to toxic workplace environments and bad management practices.

John Danaher, who has a background in law, philosophy and emerging technologies, claims that advances in technology lead to less employment and the creation of a non-work society. He argues this could undermine human flourishing since our income/welfare would not depend on work anymore. While employment might be without purpose, it would still be preferable to having no work at all. Danaher hopes that an integrative approach to technology could contain this threat of non-work (Danaher, 2017). He ultimately claims that having a bullshit job is preferable to no work.

Such counterarguments to Graeber do not discount the idea of the bullshit job, but they do seem to suggest that causes might be different and alternatives might even be worse. It is important to note that relating work to having purpose highlights the cognitive and affective

elements that individuals experience while being at work. As Budd puts it, “This conceptualization allows us to see work as a source of psychological well-being, stress, and maybe even joy” (Budd, 2011, p. 106). In other words, when no purpose can be found in work, then the positive aspects of employment are also erased or replaced by negative connotations.

### Chapter summary

This chapter aimed to look at the reasons of why we work and our relationship with the products of our labour. Work can be viewed as a necessity, but a certain voluntariness also exists to it - insofar that people are occupationally mobile and those without work are able to still live in relative wealth. Payment is not the only benefit of work however, it can also promote a sense of belonging and fulfilment. What seems to be of importance in finding meaning in the workplace is how employees relate to the end product of their work. Yet the distance to the product of our labour seems to be increasing due to technological advances, and also seems to be further exasperated by social influences as laid out in the theories of alienation, disengagement and failure of expectancy.

A second aim of this chapter was to look at the elements necessary to finding meaning in work. As noted in the work of Hackman & Oldham (1980) and Steger (2016), our relationship to the end product, and how efficient we see our role in its creation, is an important part of experiencing fulfilment. Certain social aspects also play a role in finding meaning at work. On the one hand, the office is a place where we feel we need to belong and can participate in shared practices. On the other, it is a place of hierarchy and competition where our own perceived success is connected to our own abilities.

Lastly, this chapter aimed to look at the relationship of work to meaning making processes. I suggested that meaning making and the development of our identity constitutes a dynamic construct influenced by various cultural, psychological and social factors. Its formation is a process of construction, adjustment and abandonment. Since work is a major part of our lives, it takes up a prominent role in this process. In today’s secular society though, meaning is something we need to create for ourselves – with work becoming an integral part in this process. Certain attributes can help to improve processes of meaning making at work. As

mentioned, a feeling of belonging and achievement all seem to be beneficial.

It appears that conflicts can arise between our needs of belonging at work on the one hand and societal pressures of being successful at work on the other. Alienation, disengagement and failure of expectation are all stressors on this relationship. Furthermore, if work and success become a primary way of to find meaning in life, the question arises how this relates to the distance from our work to the end product. If we are indeed so distanced, then how can we find meaning and how does this influence the experience of work? For one, Graeber believes that all these developments have meant that many office workers view their job has having no purpose (2018) – which, in turn, can be morally and spiritually damaging.

The next chapter looks at a specific by-product of a lack of purpose: boredom. It aims to answer the question of how this can affect the individual and how it manifests at work.

## Boredom

One central theme in this thesis is that a bore-out is task related, insofar that having no purpose can create feelings of boredom. The previous chapter examined the ideas of why we work and how work plays a role in finding meaning and purpose in today's society. Since boredom and a lack of purpose are important aspects to a bore-out, this chapter focuses on the very concept of being bored. Specific questions related to this chapter are: How do we define and recognise boredom? Do certain individuals have a higher proclivity for boredom? Why do individuals get bored? What is the relationship between boredom, work and coping?

In the first part, I analyse the internal workings of an individual in relation to boredom in order to demonstrate how an individual reacts to this state of being, and how we define and recognise it. I will also examine the reasons why individuals can feel bored and how we cope with these feelings. The second part will look at external aspects, especially relating to the relationship between work and boredom.

### Boredom and the internal

#### Defining boredom

The main problem with studying boredom is the fact that defining it can prove difficult, especially since it can be viewed as a psychological, sociological or a philosophical condition. Research indicates that the causes of boredom can be either external –in relation to an activity - or internal - it being a trait or due to proneness. This further complicates the issue of defining boredom as an activity-based emotion. Will some individuals always be bored in almost all situations and can others better cope with boredom inducing activities?

This means that it can prove difficult to identify and describe boredom on an individual level. Labelling distress or any other affective emotion as boredom is not always possible or recognisable. One study in 1989, for example, found that some individuals attributed being distracted to background noise to feelings of boredom. With noise levels becoming louder, they experienced more difficulty in completing the tasks due to concentration problems (Damrad- Frye & Laird, 1989). This was also the case in another study from 2006, where

people also experienced difficulty in describing feelings of being bored. In fact, no participant could identify stages of boredom (Marion, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). In other words, individuals seem to have difficulty in recognising and describing boredom as an affective emotion that is present at a certain time. When does boredom become anger, frustration, sadness or tiredness, or are these all coexisting elements of boredom?

Another problem in defining boredom is the fact that it constitutes a rarely studied phenomenon in the workplace. While various studies exist that relate factors like workplace efficiency, job satisfaction, activity levels and motivation to feelings of boredom, they primarily focus on how change can be implemented rather than on the actual condition itself.

#### Obligation and character

In their work, psychologists Marion, Sadlo and Stew (2006) show that boredom can be divided into three different situations: people who are only bored at home, people who are only bored at work and people who are bored in both situations. They found that a sense of obligation was very often the cause of triggering distress through boredom - for example, relating to work, childcare or school. According to Marion, Sadlo and Stew, people who feel bored at home often experience difficulty with unstructured time or struggle with feelings of loneliness. The people who experienced boredom at work related this to a sense of obligation to earning a living, repetitive tasks and working in an uninspiring environment. People who were bored in both situations felt extremely restless, often coupled with feelings of tiredness and lethargy. Guilt and depression also played a role, which relates to how people think they do not spend their time in the most productive way and, therefore, often feel that time slips away. (Marion, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). This feeling of boredom and obligation was also reflected in another study who claimed that people experiencing boredom described feelings of being trapped in their situation (Malkovsky, Merrifield, Goldberg, & Danckert, 2012 ).

Boredom however is not something that affects only certain individuals, it is an inherent part of life but it would seem that certain people have a greater threshold to tolerate or experience boredom. Joseph Boden, a social psychologist, claims that this proneness to



boredom can possibly be considered a personality trait linked to cognitive, attentional and neuropsychological phenomena (2009). The recognition that people have a differing propensity for boredom is an important factor in its capacity to affect people in differing situations. Why do some people get bored by certain tasks, while others do not? Recognising that individual differences exist and having a better understanding of the person instead of the task at hand offers the opportunity to improve the situation.

Cynthia D. Fisher, a psychologist whose work is very often cited in studies, has researched how boredom - and, more importantly, how the propensity for boredom - is connected to certain traits. Some early theories suggest that intelligent people are generally more prone to boredom. Other theories suggest that qualitative overload can also be a cause. People with certain personality types sometimes also require more external stimulation in order to maintain levels of arousal and activation. This is one reason why extroverts are more likely to experience boredom than introverts. In her work, Fisher indicates that prolonged frequent feelings of boredom that are independent of immediate situational causes, can be pathological. Many people with this pathological state blamed their boredom and their deficiencies on the external i.e., blaming a work environment for their unhappy circumstances (Fisher, 1993). Another general cause given was again that of obligation, i.e., people could not escape from a boring situation because they felt trapped by duty and/or responsibility.

Various characteristics play a role in increasing propensity for boredom. Some studies into social psychology, for example, found that conscientious people tend to be less bored and able to perform monotonous tasks better because of a sense of duty (Sansone, Wiebe, & Morgan, 1999). A study by psychologists Sommers and Vodanovich, who created the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) as a way of to measure boredom, suggested that significant connections exist between negative social orientation – i.e. the feeling that people are unfriendly or dislike you – and boredom proneness (Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000). This could be explained in two ways. On the one hand, people who are chronically bored often become less social because they suffer from distress and other problems related to boredom. On the other hand, it could be possible that due to social constraints, anxieties and shyness, people have less distraction from boredom inducing activities and suffer more.

The concept of boredom might also be related to underlying psychological illnesses and personality disorders. Psychologists Malkovsky et al. discovered, for instance, that people with a high proneness to boredom also score high on symptoms of ADHD and depression. This boredom could be divided into two types: agitated and apathetic. The former relates to attention lapses, and the latter with decreased sensitivity to errors of sustained attention and increased symptoms of adult ADHD (Malkovsky, Merrifield, Goldberg, & Danckert, 2012). In other personality disorders, feelings of chronic emptiness are also often symptomatic (American Psychiatric Association, 2016, p. 456). This feeling of emptiness is closely related to that of boredom. While not further researched in this thesis, it is important to recognize that such psychological-related factors can affect boredom proneness or induce feelings of emptiness.

#### Boredom as a trigger for action and a source of deactivation

Some studies propose that boredom has, in fact, a function. Just as sensing heat tells you to move away from a fire, feeling bored might act as a trigger for action when doing something unstimulating. Andreas Elpidorou, for instance, claims that boredom promotes the pursuit of interests and leads to an awareness of new situations. Boredom is a form of stagnation that can be utilized – a trigger- in contributing to growth and a meaningful life (Elpidorou, 2017). Sociologist Jack Barbalet notes that an individual with symptoms of boredom - like restlessness and irritability – can set that person in motion towards curiosity and change. This does not only relate to the level of diversity at work but also to the meaning we give to that work (1999). Boredom can, therefore, be seen as a form of self regulation in this context. It makes people strive for challenge and stimulation, and should facilitate change. According to social psychologists Tilburg and Igou, the experience of boredom “informs a person about the situation and the self (and) that the present activity or situation lacks challenge and meaning, and that some effort needs to be taken in order to resolve this issue” (2012, p. 192). This sign should act as a trigger to open up other possibilities but are curtailed if a person feels trapped by obligation. Curing boredom at work is not always possible by simply stopping with an activity or moving on to something else. Indeed, the element of obligation eliminates such flexibility i.e., in the short term a task must be completed due to deadline obligations, and in the long term due to financial worries and uncertainties. In this situation boredom and its consequences becomes a problem.

Jack Barbalet describes boredom as a feeling of not being engaged or involved in events and activities. In such instances, the possibility to move on has (temporarily) been removed. As a result, a loss of vitality occurs combined with a sense of irritability and restlessness. The absence of interest is not necessarily the distressing factor in this case, but boredom is. According to Barbalet, the distortion of time and the future expectation of this distress then becomes “an emotional apprehension of meaninglessness” (1999, p. 637). In other words, when people experience boredom the perception of the meaningless is highlighted and a state of waiting becomes prevalent. Although boredom should be a trigger for action its very deactivating nature prevents movement towards a more uplifting endeavour and people become trapped in a situation.

Psychologists Loukidou, Loan-Clarke & Daniels claim that boredom as an emotion or affective state can be defined in two major relations: pleasure-displeasure and activation-deactivation (2009). Boredom not only involves feelings of restlessness, but also notions of a situation or activity serving no purpose. Like feeling depressed or tired, people then feel unpleasant and deactivated. It is within this situation that individuals start to perceive a situation as meaningless. Yet whereas boredom is a restless feeling of dissatisfaction with such a state of being, depression is also characterized by despondency, fatigue and resignation. Depression is directed inwardly to the self. Boredom is directed outwardly towards an activity and environment. In that regard, displeasure becomes conflicted with pleasure and obligation. While this need for pleasure should motivate people to engage in more meaningful activities (a trigger for movement), deactivation becomes a hindrance to action. As a result, displeasure and frustration grows.

#### Chronic and responsive boredom

A study by organizational psychologists Gary Gemmill and Judith Oakley distinguished two types of boredom, chronic and responsive. The latter is an instant effect caused by a certain action, for example task A is uninteresting therefore it produces boredom. Chronic boredom is for the most an unconscious experience which relates to finding meaning in one's working life (1992). This revolves around the idea that boredom is not just a reaction but can also be pre-emptive. The anticipation of boredom becomes a chronic form of distress.

The anticipation of boredom is related to the concept of *bored behaviour* developed by Hooff and Hoofst, who specialise in organisational psychology. The emotion of work-related boredom evokes boredom-based behaviours. Since boredom is a negative feeling, such behaviours will be aimed at reducing this feeling (Hooff & Hoofst, 2014). One way to prevent feeling bored is to simply cease the activity. Yet, as already discussed, obligation often prevents this. It is then that bored behaviour becomes activated and associated with adverse consequences. Hooff and Hoofst found that bored behaviour mediates the relationship of work-related boredom with distress and depressive complaints (Hooff & Hoofst, 2017). They also concluded that work-related boredom often rolls over to the following day, affecting levels of motivation and enforcing boredom expectancy.

The concepts of chronic boredom, anticipation of boredom and deactivation suggest that boredom is not only directly related to the activity itself, but is also anticipative. Boredom may occur through, or triggered by, associations with specific events or circumstances. It involves coping interventions, with bored behaviour being just one example of that. As described by Fisher, an individual copes with boredom at work in two ways: they either try to focus on a task or seek additional stimulation (Fisher, 1993). This, of course, is not always possible and deactivation often sets in.

#### Coping and boredom

Boredom can be stressful, and coping with those feelings is a process that attempts to handle demands created by stressful events deemed to be too much for a person's capacity. This process can either be action-orientated or more psychological in the sense that a person tries to manage or tolerate the demands of a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978).

As already explored, there are certain psychological traits and illnesses that can predicate a certain proneness to boredom or feelings of emptiness. It is also true that people with certain psychological conditions - including depression, anxiety, autism and schizophrenia - can experience further difficulties in managing coping resources (Taylor & Stanton, 2006). Taylor and Stanton claim that differences in things like optimism, personal control, high self

esteem and social support can have an impact on mental health and, therefore, on the possibilities of coping. Proneness to boredom combined with any underlying coping deficiencies can make dealing with boredom even more difficult.

Coping can be divided into two mechanisms: avoidance and approach-oriented. Approach-oriented strategies, are tied to positive psychological and physical benefits. However, avoidance coping strategies can also be useful, especially with short-term, more uncontrollable stressors. At the same time, such strategies sometimes lead to increased distress and even prompt damaging behaviours – for example by self medicating on alcohol/drugs or inducing intrusive stress-related thoughts and emotions (Taylor & Stanton, 2006). A study by John. W. Whiteoak, a researcher of small group dynamics, showed that boredom coping may be influenced by stable personal dispositions such as openness, conscientiousness and self belief, such as attitude to challenges and interests. Personality traits and skills are, therefore, important factors to how we cope with boredom at work. Furthermore, Whiteoak suggests that group dynamics that support individual engagement was better for boredom-coping. People who leave dysfunctional groups, for instance, are more likely to cope better with monotony at work (Whiteoak, 2014). I would also suggest that the above-mentioned traits of openness, conscientiousness and self-belief are also important factors in developing a successful career in the current socio-economic climate. These could play a role in avoiding boredom-inducing employment. Moreover, being more occupational mobile by having the above traits could make career changes easier.

A study by Annilee Game, a researcher in organisational behaviour & business ethics, suggests that individuals that score higher on job-related boredom coping scale had significantly lower levels of work-related depression and anxiety. Some strategies developed by so-called 'high boredom copers' when faced with a boring task was to increase the value or significance of the task to themselves (and/or others). This made completing a task more rewarding. 'Low boredom copers' rather tended to deal with feelings of boredom through partial engagement or disengaging strategies, resulting in higher levels of boredom in the work environment (Game, 2007). This theory suggests that the ability to actively control attention is thought to be the key in enabling a situation to be restructured if perceived as boring. Some people may tend to experience boredom very easily, but others may be

predisposed towards recognising it and implementing strategies to alleviate it.

### Boredom and the external

The previous section looked at how individual differences can influence a person's propensity for boredom and how someone responds and copes with such feelings. This next section looks at how work, in the sphere of an office environment, can influence the experience of boredom.

### Work and boredom

There is no linear line that defines the effects of boredom for an individual, and this is no less true when measuring boredom in the workplace. The first reason for this is that there are few available studies. The second, as already discussed, is that an affective emotion such as boredom can be difficult to describe for individuals. As a result, unsatisfactory work may very well be mistakenly related to boredom, job satisfaction or stress. Some studies, for example by Fisher (1987), suggest that the main reason why 55% of people at work are bored, relates to having nothing to do. The second and third reasons are caused by qualitative underload and overload. Qualitative underload is related to monotony and repetition; overload, is related to the fact that tasks were too difficult for an individual to perform. In that case, concentration would diminish, leading to boredom.

Monotony at work can be viewed as a factor contributing to boredom. Yet studies have shown that levels of monotony at work and how work is structured are not as straightforward as may first appear. An interesting study from the 1920s, conducted by psychologist and an organizational theorist Elton Mayo, claimed that semi-automated work produced more boredom than automated and non-automated work. The explanation for this was that a person could daydream and engage in conversations while carrying out automated work. Non-automated work absorbs the attention since high concentration levels are needed in order to deal with unexpected situations. Semi-automated work, the area with the most boredom, also required concentration but no absorption in the work (Mayo, 1960). Although this study is dated, it can still be related to present-day office work, especially since many actions have become semi-automated. In the strict rules of office life involvement with

work stems from finding meaning in the actions that you carry out. The repetitive nature of certain types of activity deprive employees of feeling involved and the removal of obstacles, which can make work interesting causes us to eventually become disengaged.

In the modern office, a fine line exists between a task being automated, semi-automated or non-automated. Automatization, bureaucratic procedures, rules and regulations, audits, risk analysis and so on all formalize tasks in a way that becomes routinized. In turn, it then becomes difficult to cross boundaries or to approach obstacles when they arise – especially considering how rigid job descriptions and standardisation define the scope of work. A problem that arises, for instance, will not to be solved by one person directly, but rather gets reported to a certain workgroup. Such constraints on behaviour, could be a factor in generating boredom through underload (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992) (Fisher, 1993). A study by Sandi Mann, an organizational psychologist, suggested that underload is further exasperated by the fact that in offices an increase in the educational levels of the workforce plus the use of technology has meant that the skills of workers in many white-collar jobs exceed their requirement (Mann, 2007).

Hooft & Hooff claim that too much freedom and autonomy could actually increase feelings of boredom. In a study they suggest that boredom and frustration are linked to levels of perceived and provided autonomy . They indicate that when perceiving high levels of autonomy, boredom is associated with higher levels of depressed affect than when perceiving little autonomy (Hooft & Hooff, 2018). Autonomy for office workers, as described by Rothlin and Werder, means that they face small periods of stress when deadlines need to be reached but for the rest of the time do little apart from looking for distractions (Rothlin & Werder, 2007). In that regard, autonomy and a lack of interest can promote the possibility of work avoidance and, therefore, the onset of boredom.

As already mentioned, finding meaning in work can be seen as purely financial. This element of work can also possibly prevent feelings of boredom. In Mayo's study, for instance, boredom was less likely in situations with rewards based on output (piece rates) than on payment for the hours worked (Mayo, 1960). This suggests that, as long as repetitive action/involvement is minimal and other means to a certain end exists, individuals are less

prone to being bored. When the repetition loses its function, then an involvement of a negative kind can arise, namely boredom. Payment in the form of piece rates can be seen as a share in the profit - i.e., more effort will involve more payment. Although this method ultimately means that an employee has to work harder to earn money, it may very well prevent boredom. Another factor that seemingly prevents boredom is a lack of job security. One study discovered that people in temporary employment could actually cope better with frustration and boredom at work than people in permanent jobs (Marion, Sadlo, & Stew, 2006). While the lack of job security and financial uncertainty at work may stave off the effects of boredom, it does not necessarily translate to a healthy work environment and may even exasperate complaints of burnout.

Another concept connected to boredom at work related to being forced to pay attention and to concentrate. According to political scientist Erik Ringmar, this is a relatively new way for humans to behave. Modernization has reorganised the ways in which people pay attention. We now need to pay constant attention to teachers, employers, and so on (Ringmar, 2017). In the digital modern age, this form of forced attention has been extended even more. Since explicit attention is easily diverted, the result becomes boredom. We are connected to a constant stream of stimuli and stressors that require attention. The only way to stop this is to not pay attention which, in turn, paradoxically results in boredom (Hand, 2017). Trying to relieve boredom in a digital working environment by digitally escaping results eventually in finding digital immersion also boring.

### Chapter summary

Whereas the first chapter looked at broad influences that relate to finding purpose in work, this chapter looked at the concept of boredom in how it affects an individual and how work influences boredom. Since boredom is a reaction to a displeasing task, connecting it to finding purpose and meaning is an important factor in this thesis.

This chapter shows that defining and recognising boredom is difficult. The combination of this emotional, unpleasant condition with a pervasive lack of interest often results in difficulty of concentration. Proneness to feeling bored or not seems to vary from person to



person, and not only relates to certain personality traits but also to psychological and personality disorders.

An important factor in the study of boredom is that it constitutes a phenomenon that is part of daily life. It not only arises out of interaction with a task but also directs and defines it. As mentioned, feelings of boredom may very well signal that it is time to move on to another task. Yet doing so can be difficult due to a sense of obligation to continue to conduct the tasks at hand. Moreover, boredom eventually leads to deactivation which makes change even more difficult. Finding no purpose in work can also lead to feelings of boredom, with tasks becoming increasingly meaningless to an individual. As a result, boredom transforms from being reactive or responsive emotion to being a chronic and anticipative one. These two latter two forms can give rise to coping strategies in order to combat the distress that boredom brings about.

There is not one defining element to explain why and how boredom exactly arises. There are various, sometimes conflicting, elements that can foster boredom at work. It seems to be connected to overload as well as underload. Monotony connected to semi-automated work as well as rigid work boundaries that allow for very little problem-solving capacities. On the other hand too much autonomy seems to stimulate disinterest. This could very well be connected to the concepts of belonging and that not working in a group tends to promote distance and lack of purpose. Personal digital distractions also seem to exasperate the problems of boredom.

As discussed in the first chapter, the distance to the products of our labour and the lack of interest that this promotes suggests that boredom and deactivation could set in. The concepts of alienation, disengagement and failure of expectancy may all be contributing factors in boredom at work. This creates a possible conflict with the concepts of success and belonging not only leading to boredom and deactivation but also damaging beneficial elements such as pleasure, belonging and fulfilment. In the following chapter we will discuss how these factors, disengagement, boredom, lack of purpose, chronic boredom and coping strategies can possibly lead to a bore out.

## Bore-out

In this chapter, I will look at the phenomenon of a bore-out: a condition related to workplace boredom which becomes chronic through the use of avoidance coping techniques. The chapter aims to clarify the concept and causes of a bore-out. Why an office environment can exacerbate feelings of bore-out? What are the differences between bore-outs and burnouts? This chapter will help to define a bore-out in relation to the previously discussed concepts of meaning and boredom.

### Development, definition and causes of bore-out

The term bore-out was mentioned for the first time in 2007 by Philip Rothlin and Peter Werder when they published “Bore out – Overcoming workplace demotivation”. Rothlin is himself a project manager in the banking sector and Werder has a PhD in philosophy and works as a business consultant. They claim that if you were staring at your computer all day, have no job satisfaction and feeling constantly tired and lethargic then you could be suffering from a bore out. It has according to the authors become widespread in offices around the world but it has only recently been recognized by employers. Their approach to a bore-out is that it is solely based on task related boredom. A paradoxical situation then arises as the employee tries to keep this state of low activity intact. The proliferation of this situation eventually worsens the mental state of the employee (Rothlin & Werder, 2007).

While no formal diagnosis exists, a bore-out has ingrained itself into the language of human resources, occupational health and counselling programs as a serious problem. In the Netherlands, for instance, the Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen (UWV, Employee Insurance Agency) offers tools for employers to help prevent a bore-out among staff (UWV, 2019). On de ARBO-online (Arbeidsomstandigheden wet) website, there are two articles concerning a bore-out. The first stems from 2010, and covers how the number of bore-outs increased in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The article mostly focuses on the fact that about a third of university graduates and 20% of higher education graduates worked in occupations below their level, creating a situation where managers needed to reassure their employees that this constituted a temporary situation (ARBO, Bore out door crisis, 2010). The second article from ARBO mentions how the method of ‘job-crafting’ can

help prevent a bore-out by either reducing or increasing task pressure, changing the resources used in carrying out tasks and looking for more challenges (ARBO, 2017). As these examples are taken from semi-governmental websites that promote general health in the workplace, the language communicated in this information is very often related to underlying problems of efficiency and productivity rather than to human aspects of suffering or disengagement.

As mentioned, a bore-out has two aspects. The first is the state of feeling bored and the second relates to how coping strategies paradoxically maintain such feelings. The first aspect relates to the fact that a person is under stretched, both in a quantitative and a qualitative amount of work. The lack of meaning in the qualitative means that people feel that they can never distinguish themselves, purpose is removed and disinterest sets in. Disassociation and lack of commitment stems from this first characteristic. Employees become alienated from their co-workers and their employer. Workers become trapped by an internal dialogue dominated by the need to do something and why anything should be done at all (Rothlin & Werder, 2007). No purpose, no inclination for working but an instilled work ethic means that empty time is unacceptable and intolerable.

A bore-out progresses slowly. People start suffering but develop behavioural strategies in which to hide the problem. The central aspect of this strategy is to “control both the other person’s level of expectation and your own productivity” (Rothlin & Werder, 2007, p. 27). The goal is to give the impression of working while freeing up time for personal activities. The notion that free time at work will release the suffering of boredom leads to more detachment in so far that they can also find no long-term stimulation in the personal activities that they perform at work. As mentioned earlier in the theory of Hand, digital immersion can eventually lead to even more distancing from the end product (2017). The creation of time for yourself leads to the second aspect - and that is exactly where the paradox of a bore-out lies. The central theme of this paradox is that employees refuse to do something to escape the suffering that the feeling of boredom entails and resort to strategies that prolong this feeling. Work is experienced as unpleasant therefore people adopt strategies to avoid work or to prolong an activity (working slowly) to free up time later. A growing feeling of stress with work related activities means that avoidance becomes

central. This is done by withdrawing into oneself leading to further alienation (Rothlin & Werder, 2007). A bore out is not just the avoidance of work but also the avoidance of colleagues and group dynamics.

This paradox stems from the idea that it is easier to do things we enjoy at work instead of doing work that we dislike. This can be very much related to Conrad's theory (Conrad, 1997) which holds that boredom relates to a failure of expectation. Work and even digital distractions are always less exciting and fun than expected. This empty form of labour which describes all private activities at work is very prevalent in an office situation. Studies that have analysed the prevalence of so-called 'cyberloafing' - i.e., spending time on private internet activities - showed that non work is very much a part of modern office life (Blanchard & Henle, 2008). This does not mean, however, that employees automatically suffer from a bore-out, some people are better able to balance both while others try to find peace and solace in such moments of private activity.

### Symptoms

People affected by a burnout often devote their free time to work-related matters, those with a bore-out have no interest in their job whatsoever – leading to eventual disinterest in all spheres of life. According to Rothlin and Werder, the paradox of a bore-out and the tendency to prolong this state of being can eventually lead to a whole range of problems. Some people wake up, for instance, with a “queasy feeling” and worry about meaningless tasks they need to avoid. They need to conceal low activity levels, as the consequence of being caught not doing their work can become stressful and tiring. Yet it is after work hours that a bore-out “shows its truly invidious character”. It is something that cannot be switched off at home. As a result, feelings of, tiredness, irritability, dissatisfaction with everything, listlessness and spitefulness towards partners who have no idea of the emotional state of a person become predominant (Rothlin & Werder, 2007, pp. 64-67).

According to Marjo Crombach, a psychosocial counsellor with a background in literature and language, physical symptoms of a bore-out include stomach aches, hyperventilation, headaches, eczema, high blood pressure and dizziness. Psychological symptoms are related to a loss of confidence, restlessness and passiveness. It can also cause depersonalisation,

concentration and sleeping problems. Moreover, behaviour patterns are given shape by cynicism and negativity. Crombach claims that these symptoms will not necessarily be solely caused by a bore out but that an underlying condition will be exasperated. If a person is sensitive to alcohol use, for instance, they will drink more; a negative personality will be more likely to develop depressive symptoms (Crombach, 2021). A study by the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health of the University College of London found that those who experience boredom at work are also more likely to die young (Britton & Shipley, 2010). But as the above argument of Crombach shows, it is a proxy for risk factors by being indicative of harmful behaviours which are then exasperated by boredom at work.

### Bore-out vs. burnout

Unlike its counterpart, a bore-out is not an officially recognized condition. The ICD-11 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) defines a burnout as follows:

*“Burnout is a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment. Burn-out refers specifically to phenomena in the occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life.” (ICD, 2020)*

In the workplace, the phenomenon of a burnout is a disorder that affects many people. In the Netherlands this is 74.9% of all psychological disorders that are categorized as an occupational disease (Volksgezondheidszorg, 2020). As advised in the *Handboek POH-GGZ*, a psychiatric first line of help connected to a general practitioner, there are different phases of a burnout, while recognizing stressors and working on physical fitness as well as resting being part of the process to recovery. Work should be avoided in the first few weeks but restarted within a period of three months. In most cases, it takes about six months for people to completely recover from burnout. Structuring and planning techniques should help against a future relapse (Mok, Wenning, & Vries, 2016). A study comparing possible treatments of burnout by the University of Utrecht and TNO (a research company for

businesses and government in the Netherlands) concluded that both individual and organization-oriented interventions can be effective in reducing effects of burnout symptoms. It also claimed that continuous attention to managing of burnout is necessary to maintain these positive effects (Taris, Houtman, & Schaufeli, 2013).

On a sidenote, it is important to mention that certain uncertainties exist about the exact causes and treatment of a burnout. Wilmar Schaufeli a professor of work and organizational psychology, has noted that that the nature of a burnout remains unclear and that research has been based on complaints rather than it being a mental disorder. What is concluded - and what is also of importance to this study - is that a burnout is always caused by work and relates to complaints that stem from work activities (Schaufeli, 2018). This last point is important because it illustrates how work can impact your mental health and how work itself should be incorporated into the recovery process. This is an important element for a bore-out insofar that the employee and employer need to be aware of the situation and therefore their role in recovery.

#### Who is susceptible to a bore-out?

As already noted some people have a higher proclivity for boredom and certain aspects of office work seem to stimulate a reaction such as boredom. Rothlin and Werder claim that people working behind a desk in the service economy are mostly prone to a bore-out. People can be under a lot of stress in peak periods but do not know what they are going to be doing most of the time. Independence only exacerbates the problem, as delaying or stretching a task out over an extended period can become very easy (Rothlin & Werder, 2007). This is a particularly important aspect to a bore-out, and why it entails something different than just task boredom. A waiter, assembly line worker or health care worker might find their work boring or meaningless, but they will not fall into the paradox of a bore out since work must be done immediately without the possibility of procrastination. Not completing a task or delaying a task will be noticed and could have a detrimental effect on that person staying in employment. The further availability of digital distraction in an office environment also suggest that disengagement from work can be maintained and could be a major contribution to developing a bore-out.

Yet the possibility of delay and being a desk worker is not just the only contributing factor. People who are self-employed are unlikely to be affected by a bore-out, even while working from behind a desk. People who have their own companies are intensely involved in what they do. This means that the adoption of time wasting strategies would have no benefit to them (Rothlin & Werder, 2007). This corresponds to the previously discussed theories concerning the obligatory (feeling trapped) nature of work and how we relate to the end product.

### Chapter summary

A bore-out is not a recognised condition and its prevalence can be challenging to detect with symptoms being similar to that of a burnout. It is essentially a form of boredom that manifests itself in office spaces, which can become paradoxically worse through the use of avoidance coping strategies. As with other forms of boredom, deactivation occurs and frustration sets in. Boredom is no longer responsive to a particular task but has become chronic. The anticipation of boredom and long days lead to bored behaviours in which the sufferer tries to maintain a distance from work, but eventually only succeeds in prolonging and worsening the state of despair

Compared to a bore-out, a burnout is caused by being overwhelmed by stress and having no time to recharge. Rest is a vital part of the recovery process. The fact that the prevalence of a bore-out is unknown and that the symptoms are very similar to that of a burn out, make it very difficult to identify. Furthermore, the possible reluctance of an employee to share the causes/complaints of a bore-out or be self-aware about the underlying cause may well result in a diagnosis of a burnout being given. Similar symptoms would also suggest the same treatment, this is possibly not the best treatment or could further exasperate the problem.

The paradoxical maintenance of boredom is very much a form of avoidance coping. Detachment which has already been triggered by boredom and the obligation to stay at work may increase the level of alienation that employees have towards their colleagues and the end product of their labour. The availability of digital distraction in the present day suggest that work can be actively avoided and the level of autonomy in an office and the lack of connection people have with each other exasperates the situation. By attempting to

remove yourself mentally - but not physically - from the working environment, suggests that the possible benefits of finding meaning in relation to identity, belonging and personal fulfilment in the workplace are lost.



## Summary

I have analysed three interrelated concepts so far, questioning whether a relationship between a bore-out, boredom and finding meaning at work exists and if the causes of a bore-out are only related to task dissatisfaction.

Based on theoretical work, I suggest that a bore-out is associated with task disinterest – something that plays a major role in symptom development. While task dissatisfaction and purposelessness are important aspects to a bore-out, the study of boredom suggests that not one reason exists why a person may experience such feelings in an office. Overload, underload, monotony or too much autonomy all seem to play a role. Individual proclivity for boredom seems also to be an important factor, as do feelings of obligation. This feeling of obligation coupled with the idea that boredom is a possible trigger for change, would make a person feel trapped and possibly further exasperate a bore-out and boredom.

I have noted how work occupies an important space in our lives, contributing to the constant dynamic that forms our identity and our meaning making processes. Personal fulfilment, especially related to our connection to the end product of our labour and a sense of belonging, seem to be important factors in creating a positive self identity and finding meaning and purpose in our work. Both fulfilment and belonging seem not to be only causal but also threatened when people begin to suffer from bore-out symptoms. According to Graeber's (2018) theory on bullshit jobs, a situation rises where many office workers have become aware of the purposelessness of their tasks. This purposelessness then becomes possibly further intertwined with the societal concepts of disengagement and a failure of expectation. These latter two may also be a cause of boredom and deactivation at work.

As also mentioned in the study symptoms relating to a bore out are very much related to cynicism, spitefulness and negativity (Crombach, 2021; Rothlin & Werder, 2007). Since these complaints of a bore-out eventually spread to all facets of our lives, these tendencies could very well be an influence in creating a negative image of finding meaning in work as well as in our broader lives.

When people suffer from a bore-out, movement to another similar job might not necessarily cure the problem. As discussed, an office work environment constitutes an environment that can stimulate the development of a bore-out. Not only do technological developments in office work affect our relationship to the end product of our labour, but other factors like rigid boundaries and an overqualified workforce play a role as well. The possibilities for personal digital distraction may very well eventually turn into avoidance coping in order to avert boredom and eventually all work itself. A bore-out seems to be very closely related to these last aspects. Boredom and bored behaviours (distraction) become chronic and are paradoxically maintained. Further distancing from our work and from colleagues can also paradoxically lead to more alienation and boredom.

The next part of this thesis will be an empirical study based on the above suppositions that will shed further light on possible relationships between different concepts. It will aim to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is there a relationship between a proclivity for boredom and experiencing a bore-out?
- 2) Is there a relationship between finding purpose in work and a bore-out?
- 3) Is there a relationship between proclivity for boredom and finding purpose in work?
- 4) Is there a relationship between a bore-out/proclivity for boredom with recognizing purpose and meaning in life?
- 5) Is there a relationship between feeling trapped at work with boredom and bore-out?
- 6) Is there a relationship between finding pleasure, purpose and belonging at work with a proclivity for boredom/bore-out?

In addition, I will analyse some of the social demographic factors that could possibly also affect bore-out complaints in real-work situations.

## Methodology

In the previous chapters, I looked at various theoretical concepts related to finding meaning at work, boredom and a bore-out. The following section will compare these theories with the real-life experiences of working people through the use of quantitative data.

### Participants

Since the theories in this thesis focus on office work, one inclusion criteria for the study entails office employees. I define office work as the act of working from behind a screen in an office environment for the majority of the day. As the theories of Rothlin and Werder (2007) and of Graeber (2018) both focus on workers in service industries, I decided to choose a company in this industry as well. It was decided to keep the name of the company anonymous for ethical reasons.

The company has approximately 1000 employees with a large scale of function variation, ranging from call centre workers with direct customer contact, IT specialists, clerical/administrative functions to various management posts. Since the aim of this research is to look at office work in general, and not just one type of function, it is important that a wide range of functions can be found. This also broadens the cohort in terms of education level. Other people employed in the company such as catering, cleaning and janitors were excluded from the study. One disadvantage of only distributing to one company is that a homogenous company culture may influence the results and might possibly be an exception in service industries.

### Procedure

Access to the company was attained due to connections that the author of this thesis had with the HR department. Data was collected using an online questionnaire created via Qualtrics and distributed via email to all eligible employees in the company. Ethical guidelines were assured by securing the anonymity of the participants from both the readers of the thesis as their employer. The results of the study would not be shared with the company itself. Furthermore, the company would also remain nameless and questions - especially social demographic ones - were formulated in such a way that neither individuals

nor the company involved could be recognized. Information regarding the anonymity of the participants was shared in the mail that accompanied the questionnaire. Since the survey was carried out on a Dutch-speaking population it was decided to use Dutch language questions to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation.

### Data collection

Data collection was achieved using existing questionnaires that were combined into one inquiry form. These questionnaires can be divided into 6 sets of questions relating to: Social Demographic, Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL) (Jager Meezenbroek, et al., 2012), Finding meaning in Work (MW) (van Dijk, Muthert, Visser-Nieraeth, & Mulder, 2021), Boredom Proneness (BP) (Zondag, 2007), Bore out symptoms (BO) (Verveling op het werk? Doe de 'bore out test", 2021). The questionnaire contained 90 questions.

The social demographic questions concerned gender, age, years in service, highest achieved qualification and functioning at level of highest achieved qualification. These questions were multiple choice, giving enough information to make certain distinctions and give a baseline in comparing certain factors which might affect overall scores.

Questions relating to meaning in life were derived from the Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL) (Jager Meezenbroek, et al., 2012). The original SAIL questionnaire consists of 26 items divided over seven subscales. In order to keep the number of questions to a minimum, it was decided to just focus on the subscale of meaning. The questions herein related to a person's perception of meaning and purpose in their lives. The scores have a Likert scale, scoring from 1 to 6. The higher the score per item, the more positive the answer is viewed. The highest score available is 18 and the lowest 3.

Questions relating to finding meaning at work (MW) were based on 12 questions from a survey that looked at the wellbeing of students (van Dijk, Muthert, Visser-Nieraeth, & Mulder, 2021). The items related to having a goal (knowing what you want and what inspires you), values (what is important and can you give direction), meaning (what is your contribution and is it important for you), appreciation (feeling appreciated), trust (how you experience trust and how you give trust), security (feeling safe and welcome), pleasure

(enjoyment), connectedness (sharing with like-minded people and feeling supported), tolerable (is work endurable and can you keep going), autonomy (can you be an individual), satisfaction (feeling of self-respect and pride) and ethics (can you justify your actions and methods). While the questionnaire was still untested at the time of writing this thesis, it was nonetheless chosen for the fact that it consists of a broad range of items that can be measured in a short survey. The scores have a Likert scale, scoring from 1 to 5. A higher score will demonstrate a more positive view on the meaning of life. Low scores can be measured from 12, the highest being 60.

Three specific aspects of meaning at work were assessed, using 3 questions each from the above questionnaire (MW). Purpose was evaluated through the questions about meaning, goal and values; pleasure through the questions on pleasure, satisfaction and meaning; and belonging at work through security, appreciation and connectedness. Scores on these aspects could range from 3 to 15, with higher scores indicating more purpose, pleasure and belonging.

Individual proclivity for boredom was measured using the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) created by Hessel Zondag (Zondag, 2007 ). This scale includes seven dimensions: listlessness, prolonged sense of time, emptiness, lack of concentration, restlessness, need for excitement and disinterest. In total, it contains 56 questions using a Likert scale scoring from 1 to 7. The scale can be used per subscale or as a total score. 392 is the highest possible score to show the most propensity for boredom, 56 being the lowest score.

No validated questionnaire relating to a bore-out exists. Therefore, an online test was chosen through which people can see whether they may have bore-out symptoms or not (Verveling op het werk? Doe de 'bore out test", 2021). For the purpose of this study, these questions were used because they closely identify with the symptoms as described by Rothlin and Werder (2007). The questions have a multiple-choice format of 'yes' and 'no'. The option of 'I don't know' was added in order to maintain the openness of the questioning and to give participants an extra choice when in doubt. The website where the questions were taken from claimed that 6 'yes' answers showed a proclivity for a bore-out. It must be stressed though that scoring 6 or more does not necessarily mean that an individual suffers

from a bore-out, but signals that they might have certain symptoms that could lead to a bore-out. One question was removed from the list, that being “Do you send personal emails during your working hours?” This was done because of an overlap with another question, “Do you often arrange private matters at work?” After doing so, it was decided that the limit for the propensity for a bore-out would still be 6 or more ‘yes’ answers.

One last question was added pertaining to not feeling trapped at work. This was deemed valuable since many theories claim that a feeling of obligation (not being able to leave a situation) can be a cause of boredom. This question could be answered through a ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘I don’t know’

The number of completed forms was higher than expected, with 306 returned forms recorded. Forms missing five or more questions were excluded from the study. Using these guidelines, 206 questionnaires were included in the final analysis. It should be noted that from question 19 onwards, there was a drop off of approximately twenty individuals per twenty questions. The length of the questionnaire was deemed a problem and resulted in many incomplete forms.

### Data analysis

Data analysis looked at various relationships between theoretical concepts that have been discussed in this thesis. The first part was a cross-sectional study that examined the relationship between social demographic factors and bore-out symptoms. Crosstabulation was used to examine the proclivity of bore-out symptoms with years in service, level of education and if you are employed in work that is higher or lower than your achieved level of education. It also looked at the possible relationship between boreout and factors as age and gender.

The second part of the research were Pearson correlation tests that looked at possible relationships between the broader concepts that have been discussed in the theory. The cut-off p-value used to determine statistical significance was set to  $P = <0.05$ . Two tests were first used to validate finding meaning at work (MW) in comparison to finding meaning in life (SAIL). The following concepts were then compared:

- Relationship between the proclivity for boredom and experiencing a bore-out.
- Relationship between finding purpose in work and a bore-out.
- Relationship between proclivity for boredom and finding purpose in work.
- Relationship between a bore out/proclivity for boredom with recognizing purpose and meaning in life.
- Relationship between feeling trapped at work with boredom and bore-out.
- Relationship between finding pleasure, purpose and belonging at work with a proclivity for boredom/bore-out.
- Relationship between aspects of boredom proneness with bore-out symptoms.

## Results

### Cross-sectional study of social demographics and bore-out

A crosstabulation was used to compare the results of social demographic aspects with bore-out scores. A proclivity for a bore-out would be recognised if 6 or more answers were registered as ‘yes’. In total, 34 out of 206 people (so 16% of all participants) scored positively 22 out of 96 men had high scores (23%), and 11 of 109 women (10%). Nonbinary/no given gender was 1 of 1 (100%). Yet seeing that this was a singular example, no inferences can be formulated. In this survey, men were twice as likely to report a bore-out than women.

**Table 1:** Crosstabulation of social demographic aspects and bore-out.

Age	18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+
<u>n</u>	11	40	37	79	38
<u>n with BO</u>	0	11	9	12	2
<u>% with BO</u>	0%	28%	24%	15%	5%
Highest education	MBO	HBO	WO	Dr/PhD	Other
<u>n</u>	33	108	56	2	7
<u>n with BO</u>	3	17	9	1	3
<u>% with BO</u>	10%	16%	16%	50%	43%
Working at highest achieved education	above	under	equal		
<u>n</u>	32	28	146		
<u>n with BO</u>	6	12	16		
<u>% with BO</u>	19%	43%	11%		
Years in service	<1	2-5	6-15	16-25	25+
<u>n</u>	21	61	51	42	31
<u>n with BO</u>	5	16	8	5	0
<u>% with BO</u>	24%	26%	16%	12%	0

Table 1 shows the social demographic scores and propensity for a bore-out. When connected to age, it can be seen that people between the ages of 18 and 25 have no bore-out complaints. This rises to the highest percentage between the ages of 26-35 (28%) and then falls again at each subsequent age group. This suggests that the propensity for bore-out generally reduces as people become older.

Participants with high levels of education score higher on bore-out complaints than people



with lower education levels. In the most prevalent group, 16% of the people with a vocational bachelor degree (HBO) suffer from a bore out. This percentage can also be seen in participants with a scientific bachelor (university) degree (WO). For people with doctoral degrees (Dr/PhD), the percentage is very high at 50%. Yet very little assumptions can be attributed due to the low number in this group. For participants with a maximum achieved schooling of further college education (MBO), only 10% seemed to suffer from a proclivity for a bore-out.

In the survey, participants who work below their highest achieved education (thus deemed overqualified) have a high propensity for a bore-out, this being 43%. Participants who are underqualified and work above their highest achieved education have more of a propensity for a bore-out than people who work at their achieved level, at respectively 19% and 11%. In this study, it seems that being overqualified or underqualified relates to bore-out complaints.

In addition, less years in service seem to suggest a relationship with bore-out symptoms. People who have been in their jobs for under a year and between 2-5 years have a respective 24% and 26% chance of a bore-out. The longer people work for the same company, then the less chance they have of bore-out complaints. After reaching 25 years or more in service, this reached 0%.

### Correlation tests

In the table below, an overview of the mean, median and mode scores of all subscales within the questionnaire are shown.

**Table 2:** Frequencies concerning all subscales in questionnaire (n = 206).

	BP	SAIL	MW	BO	Pleasure	Belonging	Purpose
High	<u>392</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>18</u>
Low	<u>56</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>
Mean	<u>152,28</u>	<u>12,92</u>	<u>47,57</u>	<u>2,72</u>	<u>12,29</u>	<u>12,07</u>	<u>11,56</u>
Median	<u>147,00</u>	<u>13,00</u>	<u>48,00</u>	<u>2,00</u>	<u>12,00</u>	<u>12,00</u>	<u>12,00</u>
Mode	<u>135,00<sup>a</sup></u>	<u>15,00</u>	<u>46,00</u>	<u>2,00</u>	<u>12,00</u>	<u>12,00</u>	<u>11,00<sup>a</sup></u>

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

A higher mean score for Sail, MW, Pleasure, Belonging and Purpose demonstrates a positive score in terms of wellbeing. A higher mean score for BP and BO would demonstrate a higher proclivity towards boredom proneness and bore-out. The results tend to show a symmetrical distribution in so far that the mean and median scores are very close to each other. The mean scores of SAIL, MW, Pleasure, Belonging and Purpose demonstrate that approximately two-thirds of all answers given are positively inclined. The mean score of bore-out is relatively low, with an average score of only 2.72. For Boredom Proneness, the mean score is 152, 28 out of a possible 392. A score under the mean translates to 39% of all answers.

In the section below, the correlation between the concepts of bore out, boredom proneness, finding meaning in work and meaning in life will be laid out, with the correlation coefficient ranging in value from -1 to +1. The larger the absolute value of the coefficient, the stronger the relationship between the variables. For the Pearson correlation, an absolute value of 1 indicates a perfect linear relationship. A correlation close to 0 indicates no linear relationship between the variables.

Meaning in Life (SAIL) and Meaning at work (MW)

**Table 3:** Pearson correlations between Meaning in life (SAIL), and meaning at work (including purpose, pleasure and belonging) (n = 206).

	<u>r</u>	<u>p</u>
<u>Meaning at work (MW)</u>	<u>.48</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Purpose</u>	<u>.58</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Pleasure</u>	<u>.54</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Belonging</u>	<u>.39</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>

**Table 4:** Pearson correlations between Meaning in work (MW), and Meaning in life (SAIL), purpose, pleasure and belonging at work (n = 206).

	<u>r</u>	<u>p</u>
<u>Meaning in life (SAIL)</u>	<u>.48</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Purpose</u>	<u>.87</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Pleasure</u>	<u>.89</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Belonging</u>	<u>.87</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>

The tables above demonstrate the relationship between finding meaning in work and meaning in life. In the study, Meaning in life (SAIL) was positively associated with finding meaning at work (MW) and with finding purpose, belonging and pleasure at work. As expected, as can be seen in Table 4, there were very high positive correlations between purpose, pleasure and belonging with SAIL. These positive correlations were much higher than those recorded when correlating finding meaning in life with purpose, pleasure and belonging. The results do suggest that participants who had a positive outlook on the meaning of life also experienced positive aspects of finding meaning at work and vice versa.

#### Bore-out

**Table 5.** Pearson correlations between bore-out, and meaning in life, meaning at work (including purpose, pleasure and belonging), boredom proneness, and feeling trapped at work (n = 206).

	<u>r</u>	<u>p</u>
<u>Meaning in life (SAIL)</u>	<u>-.47</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Meaning at work (MW)</u>	<u>-.59</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Purpose</u>	<u>-.56</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Pleasure</u>	<u>-.66</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Belonging</u>	<u>-.47</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Boredom proneness (BP)</u>	<u>.59</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Not feeling trapped at work</u>	<u>-.29</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>

Bore-out was negatively associated with SAIL, MW and with purpose, pleasure and belonging, and positively associated with Boredom Proneness. The data suggests that people with a tendency towards a bore-out will not only have a higher propensity for boredom, but also score lower on the other questionnaires related to wellbeing. A bore-out was also negatively associated with not feeling trapped at work. In the survey, people who did not feel trapped had less of a propensity for a bore-out.

## Boredom proneness

**Table 6.** Pearson correlations between boredom proneness, and meaning in life, meaning at work (including purpose, pleasure and belonging) bore out, and feeling trapped at work (n = 206).

	<u>R</u>	<u>p</u>
<u>Meaning in life (SAIL)</u>	<u>-.65</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Meaning at work (MW)</u>	<u>-.59</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Purpose</u>	<u>-.55</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Pleasure</u>	<u>-.63</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Belonging</u>	<u>-.53</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Bore Out (BO)</u>	<u>.59</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Not feeling trapped at work</u>	<u>-.23</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>

In very similar scores to the ones above related to a bore-out, boredom proneness was negatively associated with SAIL, MW, purpose, pleasure and belonging and not feeling trapped at work. It was also positively associated with bore-out, suggesting that participants with a propensity for boredom will have a higher propensity for a bore-out and also score lower on factors relating to wellbeing.

As mentioned, the Pearson correlation scores were very similar to those of a bore-out. One major difference was that a negative correlation score was higher when comparing SAIL with boredom proneness than with a proclivity for a bore out: -.65 as opposed to -.47. This suggests that people with high boredom proneness scores have more chance of a low SAIL score, meaning they might have more of a negative outlook on the meaning in their lives. When BP and BO were related to finding meaning in work (MW), the scores were identical.

Boredom proneness subscales

**Table7:** Frequencies of boredom proneness subscales and bore out

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
<u>Listlessness</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>16,00</u>	<u>97,00</u>	<u>43,2476</u>	<u>16,37046</u>
<u>Ongoing awareness of time</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>11,00</u>	<u>64,00</u>	<u>21,3447</u>	<u>9,99915</u>
<u>Emptiness</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>6,00</u>	<u>39,00</u>	<u>13,6942</u>	<u>6,34832</u>
<u>Lack of concentration</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>6,00</u>	<u>38,00</u>	<u>18,1602</u>	<u>5,90977</u>
<u>Restlessness</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>5,00</u>	<u>33,00</u>	<u>19,0631</u>	<u>6,57496</u>
<u>Need for stimulation</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>5,00</u>	<u>31,00</u>	<u>16,0049</u>	<u>5,37972</u>
<u>Disinterest</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>7,00</u>	<u>35,00</u>	<u>20,7670</u>	<u>5,26600</u>
<u>Bore-out (BO)</u>	<u>206</u>	<u>0,00</u>	<u>10,00</u>	<u>2,7184</u>	<u>2,08323</u>
<u>Valid N (listwise)</u>	<u>206</u>	-	-	-	-

**Table 8:** Pearson correlations between bore-out (BO), and subscales of boredom proneness: listlessness, prolonged sense of time, emptiness, lack of concentration, restlessness, need for excitement and disinterest.

	<u>r</u>	<u>p</u>
<u>Listlessness</u>	<u>.60</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Ongoing awareness of time</u>	<u>.52</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Emptiness</u>	<u>.53</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Lack of concentration</u>	<u>.41</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Restlessness</u>	<u>.04</u>	<u>0,553</u>
<u>Need for stimulation</u>	<u>.43</u>	<u>&lt; .001</u>
<u>Disinterest</u>	<u>.01</u>	<u>0,171</u>

Bore-out was positively associated with 5 of the subscales of the boredom proneness scale. Two of the subscales showed very little to no correlation, namely Restlessness and Disinterest. That disinterest scores so low was unexpected, especially since it is claimed that this is one of the core causes of a bore-out. These results will be discussed in the following chapter.

## Discussion

The effects of social demographic elements in this research seemed to influence a proclivity for a bore-out. Certain results were quite noticeable. The results demonstrate that the prevalence of a bore-out in the company researched was 16%. While not specifically approached in the empirical study and difficult to quantify, it could be suggested that such a high number reflects the discussed societal influences of alienation, disengagement and a failure of expectancy. The latter all provide a framework in which employees could be suffering from a bore-out. This especially relates to how employees relate to the end product and when there is no connection to how disengagement and (digital) distraction arise.

The distribution between genders was also biased towards men, 23% as opposed to 10% of women. There are numerous factors that could influence this result, such as the number of women in part-time work compared to men in full-time work (Portegijs & Brakel, 2018). Although financially disadvantageous, this situation may very well benefit part-time workers in preventing a bore-out.

Gender was not the only notable social demographic that could influence the proclivity for a bore-out. Age was also of importance. Excluding the youngest age category, the percentage of people suffering from bore-out complaints would fall as age would rise. This could suggest that people recognize work that they find tedious and develop other more pleasing career paths as they age. Years in service was also a factor, with employees with the shortest time in employment suffering the most bore-out complaints. Although this is a surprising result due to the fact that years in service could also mean more repetition, it may suggest that people tend to move away from work that they find tedious. A plausible reason for a bore-out being more prevalent in younger ages and for people with less years in service is that it might very well be related to the time that it took to find work of interest. As discussed in the theories of Andreas Elpidorou, boredom can promote the pursuit of interest and this leads to an awareness of new situations (2017). Yet years in service do not necessarily mean that they were employed in the same function, which may have influenced the result.

The results show that education and bore-out complaints seem to be related. Employees with higher achieved education levels would seem to have more proclivity towards a bore-out. This confirms the mentioned study by Mann (2007) that an increase in educational levels plus technology has meant that the skills of white-collar workers very often exceed requirements. The fact that 43% of overqualified participants demonstrated a proclivity for a bore-out suggests that working below your highest achieved level of education increases the chance of getting bore-out symptoms. This supports the study by Fisher (1993) which maintained that qualitative overload and underload were related to workplace boredom.

What these social demographic results suggest is that the proclivity for a bore-out has a bias towards certain demographics. This information can be used to help recognize certain groups that are possibly at risk. Further research needs to be conducted in order to discover why these groups are prone to bore-out.

This empirical research aimed to determine whether a relationship existed between the proclivity for boredom and a bore-out. The results suggest that an underlying proclivity towards boredom would increase the chances of a bore-out at work. We can assume that this constitutes a causal relationship since one precursor of a bore-out are feelings of boredom. Since people have various dispositions for boredom proneness it could be suggested that all other things being equal (education, age, interests etc.) some people will always have a higher propensity for experiencing boredom at work. This information is very important in the possible treatment of a bore-out.

A second aim of the research was to look at the relationship between a proclivity for a bore-out with finding meaning in work. A correlation was found insofar that a lower score in finding meaning at work suggested a higher proclivity for a bore-out. This was very much to be expected since bore-out can be caused by boredom, disinterest and alienation from colleagues and work.

There was also a correlation between the subscales of finding purpose, belonging and pleasure. It could be suggested that a lack of purpose and its relationship with bore-out connects to the Graeber's theory on bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018). People not finding

purpose in their work having a conscious awareness of this purposelessness might lead to a bore out. Furthermore, by attempting to hide low activity and avoiding work, a bore out is connected with distancing from colleagues. This could relate to lower scores when connected to belonging. As noted, the study by Sommers and Vodanovich (2000) demonstrated that a significant connection exists between negative social orientation and boredom proneness. Further research would be helpful to determine whether these scores are primarily caused by a bore-out or do people with a propensity for boredom feel less socially connected.

The subscale of finding pleasure at work and a bore-out constituted the score with the highest negative correlation compared to the other subscales. This was to be expected insofar that a bore-out negatively impacts pleasure at work. An important question for further research would relate to the length of bore-out complaints and how long these take to develop. Is there a defining moment when no purpose is seen to be found, or is it a gradual decay that eventually becomes intolerable? It remains unclear whether a bore-out is causal in reducing pleasure, purpose and a feeling of belonging at work, or whether these traits that can lead to a bore-out are missing on an individual level.

When evaluating how boredom proneness correlates with all aspects compared to that of a bore-out, there are similar scores in terms of negative correlations. One major difference is that the negative correlation with SAIL is higher when compared to boredom proneness than that of a bore-out. This suggests that boredom proneness has a greater (negative) influence on finding meaning in life than a bore-out.

These results provide new insights into the relationship between boredom and finding meaning in life. As discussed, meaning making is a dynamic factor which takes place in all parts of our lives. It not only shapes meaning but also our identity. This research suggests that suffering from boredom and bore-out possibly reduces the opportunities to fulfil our goals and find what our purpose is. Returning to Gude's theory of pleasure and meaning (2017), if the pleasure principle is not activated how can we move on find other deeper forms of meaning making. As explained by Joke Hermsen (2017), purpose and especially belonging helps us to share practices, participate in common goals and create meaning. It is



also a necessity in protecting us against the meaninglessness of existence. Since finding meaning according to the VGVZ (2016) is an aspect that can help protect us against distress these meaning making possibilities could very well be restricted by boredom.

There was also a slight negative correlation between not feeling trapped at work with bore-out and a proclivity for boredom. Although this did not correlate as high as the other factors, it does show that feeling trapped is a factor. The correlation for a bore-out was higher than that for boredom, which suggests that the factor of obligation plays a larger role at work than life in general.

One surprising score was that there was very little correlation between a bore-out with the subscale scores of BP- *disinterest* and *restlessness*. That restlessness is reduced by digital distraction may very well be a factor. Since disinterest is a core element of a bore-out this low score is more difficult to explain. One theory is that people may not wish to view what they do with indifference and would rather consciously or unconsciously try to give it more value. This may very well be related to an ingrained work ethic. This opinion needs to be further researched.

Even though there are notable findings in the empirical study there are certain limitations to this research. As mentioned, the questionnaire would have benefitted by adding questions about the length of time in a function and if a person was working either full- or part time. This information would have improved the results concerning social demographic attributes. It should also be noted that the survey was distributed during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time in which a large number of those questioned had been working from home for longer than a year. This could very well influence factors.

As also noted, people employed in catering, cleaning and janitor services were excluded from the study. In retrospect, it may have been useful to include such employees as a control group for comparative reasons, and validate the hypothesis of a bore out only being applicable to desk workers.

Much of the consulted theoretical research material was written before the digital age which

makes it less applicable to the modern-day office. As the possibilities of distraction through technology is still rapidly growing, the question about how this affects attention and distraction in the workplace calls for further research.

## Conclusion

The first aim of this thesis was to explore whether task understimulation was the only cause of a bore-out. The research and the theory suggests that task understimulation is certainly a factor, but that also underlying factors exist. There are possibly many societal aspects which contribute to the nature of our dissatisfaction. For one, the growing distance between employees and the end product make it more difficult to connect with ones labour. This form of alienation coupled with boredom and disengagement could make it even more difficult to find purpose in office work. The prevalence and possibility of digital distraction in an office work space allows employees to avoid work more easily. The paradox of a bore-out in the form of avoidance coping is at the heart of why it is so prevalent in office spaces.

Individual attributes also seem to be of importance. As noted in the research, individuals with a higher propensity for boredom tend to suffer more from a bore-out. This new information can be useful in assisting people who suffer from bore-out symptoms by not only focusing on tasks but on gaining insights into the mechanisms of how boredom in general affects them.

Social demographic factors - especially gender, age, being overqualified/underqualified and years in service - all seemed to impact the proclivity for a bore-out. Why certain groups have a higher proclivity for bore-out is important for future research in searching for ways to prevent these groups from suffering. Treatment and recognizing risk factors is an important step in helping people. Focussing especially on how coping methods can be learnt that focus on approach orientated techniques rather than avoidance. Learning more about the characteristics, causes and prevalence needs to be done and the information collected in this study can be used as a first step for further research.

The second aim of this thesis was to determine which underlying factors to a bore-out relate to processes of boredom and finding meaning. As demonstrated, work has an important role in creating our identity. But work also has an obligatory nature to it. In cases where people can not find fulfilment and a sense of belonging in their work, then this can be detrimental to their personal development. The empirical study suggested that individuals suffering from a bore-out (and a high proclivity for boredom) scored lower in finding meaning at work and

recognizing purpose in their greater lives. Having work that is therefore fulfilling and gives purpose would seem to reduce emptiness and promote wellbeing. The very disadvantages of a bore out is that it is unfulfilling and solitary. A question remains, however, whether having a high proclivity for boredom and bore-out symptoms are also indicative of not being able to find meaning in life. Or does unsatisfactory work affect our perception of finding meaning in life?

Societal and cultural factors, although not included in the empirical research, play a significant role in determining where we find meaning. Being aware of these underlying factors could possibly help people who suffer from a bore-out. Treatment, instead of becoming intertwined with those of a burnout could focus more on aspects of finding meaning and purpose in and outside of work.

Since a bore-out seems to be very much related to office work, future research should focus on our interaction with changing technology. With automation and digitalisation changing and bringing new challenges to office environments a bore-out may very well be connected to this evolution. Learning to incorporate technological developments might be an important factor in dealing with problems like a bore-out - whilst still finding purpose, belonging and fulfilment at the same time.

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