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The bored self in knowledge work

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Abstract
This article draws attention to reported experiences of boredom in knowledge work. Drawing on extensive qualitative data gathered at two management consultancy firms, we analyze these experiences as a particular interaction with identity regulation and work experiences. We conceptualize the reports of the bored self as a combination of unfilled aspirations and the sense of stagnation, leading to an arrested identity. Our contribution is to expand extant conceptualizations of employee interactions with identity regulation, in particular relating to identity work and identification. The findings provide a critical rendering of the glamourized image of knowledge work.

Keywords
boredom, identity regulation, identity work, knowledge work

Identity regulation has become a central way to study the relation between employees, work and the organization (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007a, 2007b; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008; Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Collinson, 2003; Cornelissen, 2006; Empson, 2004; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Watson, 2008). By

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reinforcing certain values, norms and beliefs, identity regulation is seen to indirectly target the very construction of employees' sense of self. It has remained contested as to how employees respond to such attempts. Research has drawn attention to a variety of interactions, such as identification, ambivalence, dis-identification and self-alienation (Alvesson et al., 2008; Collinson, 2003; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Kunda, 2006; Pratt, 2000;). In this article, we explore what we believe constitutes a different kind of interaction, namely that of the bored self. Rather than embracing or distancing oneself from the exhorted organizational self, boredom indicates a kind of arrested identity founded on unfulfilled expectations and the sense of stagnation.

Of course, boredom has long been reported as one typical experience of modern life (Healy, 1984; Goodstein, 2005). One just has to think of the iconic images of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Felix Lang's *Metropolis*: the repetition and monotony of work practices in industrial and bureaucratic set-ups leave little room for creativity and self-expression in the labour process. This leads to a flattened out sense of dissatisfaction, disengagement and simply ennui, which workers may attempt to overcome through 'making out' and engaging in various games (Burawoy, 1979; Roy, 1959; Willis, 1977). What is puzzling about the experiences of boredom we explore in this article is that they are reported in a context that is supposedly radically different from the industrial and bureaucratic set-up, namely that of knowledge work. Such work is commonly understood as giving individuals space for creativity, problem-solving and, therefore, self-fulfillment (Blackler, 1995; Newell et al., 2009; Starbuck, 1992). Tasks are regarded as complex and varied so that work practices cannot follow prescribed routines. This, in turn, implies that knowledge work arrangements mostly employ highly qualified individuals who are granted considerable levels of autonomy and independence in their daily work life.

Given this, why do knowledge workers report boredom? We empirically explore this question by drawing on extensive qualitative data gathered at two globally operating management consultancy firms that are generally regarded as creative, intellectually demanding and prestigious workplaces. We suggest that one way to understand these experiences is by relating them to the workings of identity regulation, which is a pervasive form of organizational control in knowledge work arrangements.

In doing so, the article seeks to make two contributions. We add to the understanding of employee interactions with identity regulation by shedding light on the ways in which individuals can continue to aspire to the identity suggested by management discourses although this identity cannot be enacted in daily work reality. This leads to an identity arrest that drains individuals from drives to mobilize alternative selves. Furthermore, we contribute a more nuanced understanding of everyday work experiences of knowledge work. By drawing attention to knowledge workers' reports of boredom, our article questions the conventional wisdom regarding the nature of knowledge work.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, we discuss studies of identity regulation and the ways in which employees are typically seen to interact with it. Second, prevailing renderings of knowledge work are outlined. Third, after methodological considerations, the management consultancy firms empirically investigated are introduced. Fourth, we analyze the reported sense of boredom by relating it to identity regulation and work experiences. Fifth, the discussion develops the significance of the bored self in

knowledge work in relation to conceptions of identity work and identification. This is followed by concluding reflections on the glamourized image of knowledge work.

Identity regulation and employee interactions

Identity regulation is one common way in which management seeks to indirectly shape and influence employee selves (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Cornelissen, 2006; Watson, 2008; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Cultural resources and practices, such as team exercises, company slogans and value statements, are typically seen as ways in which management attempts to manage meaning and instill values and emotions. In this way, particular identities beneficial to the organization are exhorted (Casey, 1995; Kondo, 1990; Kunda, 2006; Parker, 2000; Van Maanen, 1991). More specifically, identity regulation constitutes the construction, production and maintenance of symbols infused with a particular meaning and preferred interpretation, which aim to prompt individuals to engage in particular forms of identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Such attempts to regulate individuals constitute a form of normative control (Barley and Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 2006). This differs from traditional forms of bureaucratic and technological control (e.g. strict formal protocols, surveillance and monitoring) that directly target outputs and behavior (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004).

Identity can be viewed as a construction and performance that is constituted through discourses and practices (Alvesson et al., 2008; Collinson, 2003; Gioia et al., 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003;). Identity work takes place in a social and interactive process of enacting a shared identity within a certain setting, such as a work community (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). This means that our identities are inherently negotiated and potentially contested (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Identity work always occurs in interaction with the surrounding discourses and practices. Management can seek to tap into this in various ways. For instance, in order to enact particular employee identity work it may attempt to provide a certain organizational membership role, and the scripts to identify with the role (Kunda, 2006).

Studies have also suggested that management might co-opt identity resources relating to consumer culture (Land and Taylor, 2010), ethical and responsible orientations (Costas and Kärreman, 2013), lifestyles (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009) and broad societal discourses (Ybema et al., 2009) to establish and strengthen ties between employee identity vis-a-vis the organization. In particular, this can occur through the exercise of aspirational control (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007a; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Roberts, 2005; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Such control provides identity material that is perceived to be attractive for and aspirational to the employee self, such as high status, well compensated and elite understandings of selfhood (Robertson and Alvesson, 2006).

Attempts to regulate identity can result in different interactions and enactments among employees, such as identification, dis-identification, ambivalence, self-alienation and, of course, exit (Collinson, 2003; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Kunda, 2006; Pratt, 2000;). For instance, identification takes place when employees construct their self around the identity material suggested by the organization (Elsbach, 1999). Thus, the sense of self becomes strongly aligned with the organization (e.g. Grey, 1994; Kuhn, 2006). In

consultancy firms, research has shown how individuals may strongly identify with the ethically responsible self designed by the companies' corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Costas and Kärreman, 2013). However, such identification may build upon robust constructions of the company self that become problematic in times of change (Sennett, 1998).

Dis-identification, on the other hand, implies that employees may reject the identity exhorted by management discourse; they distance themselves from this identity as it is experienced as fake, inauthentic and/or morally compromised (Elsbach and Battacharya, 2001; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). Among other things, studies have drawn attention to cynical selves, humour and forms of resistance by mobilizing alternative selves (Collinson, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2003). While such dis-identification may provide individuals with a perceived space of autonomy outside of management regulation, this very space may ironically allow them to smooth over the contradictions of management discourse and practice and thus operate more effectively (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Of course, such identification and dis-identification may not occur in a clear-cut fashion. Employees may express ambivalence in that they embrace certain aspects, while rejecting other aspects of the identity material provided by management discourse and practice (Kunda, 2006; Pratt, 2000). A further interaction has been discussed as self-alienation whereby individuals seek to, yet cannot, dis-identify because of the experienced lack of alternative identity resources (Costas and Fleming, 2009). Employees may also exit the organization and thus move away from the attempts of identity regulation (Costas and Grey, 2014; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Pratt, 2000).

Knowledge work

Knowledge work is typically framed by attempts toward regulating identity and thus aligning individuals with the organization. This is a consequence of the very nature of knowledge work. Management research commonly contrasts it with bureaucratic and industrial forms of work, which are associated with tedious, repetitive and monotonous labour. Knowledge work differs from this, as here value is created through knowledge rather than labour or capital (Blackler, 1995; Morris and Empson, 1998; Newell et al., 2009). Knowledge is, undoubtedly, ambiguous (Alvesson, 1993) and important to most organizations (Schreyögg and Geiger, 2007). What is particular to knowledge work is the centrality of 'esoteric expertise' (Starbuck, 1992), namely of specific, rare and abstruse knowledge, in the work practices (Kärreman, 2010). As the intellectual abilities and specific expertise of the workforce are the main resources, knowledge workers are usually highly qualified and talented individuals. Furthermore, knowledge work is largely understood to be characterized by creativity, problem-solving and task complexity instead of routines and standardized work processes (Lowendahl, 1997; Newell et al., 2009). As Newell et al. (2009: 127) note: 'knowledge workers typically expect to be given interesting and varied work rather than follow a prescribed routine'. This requires that they are granted a high degree of self-organization and work in relatively loose team structures outside the direct supervision of management.

However, this does not mean that knowledge work is completely free of organizational control. At the same time as traditional forms of bureaucratic and technological control (e.g. strict formal protocols, the regulation and monitoring of output), are arguably more difficult to execute, normative control assumes significance in knowledge work (Alvesson, 2004; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Grey, 1994; Kunda, 2006; Poulter and Land, 2008). In this sense, the target of control is not so much behavior or the measure of output as it is how employees define themselves (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Research has, for instance, shown how knowledge workers' identities are disciplined through performance targets and mentoring processes (Covaleski et al., 1998), time management systems (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001) and routines of time-keeping and billing (Brown and Lewis, 2011). Having said that, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) also demonstrate that identity regulation as one form of control can occur 'in tandem' with bureaucratic controls, exercised through formal HRM procedures, hierarchical structures, division of labour and knowledge management systems. Rather than approaching knowledge work as autonomous and free of control, this strand of research suggests that it is also subject to forms of control, which entail discipline (Bergström et al., 2009; Brown and Lewis, 2011) and compliance (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009).

In this study, we seek to add a richer understanding of knowledge work by exploring people's everyday work experiences. In this sense, our study heeds Barley and Kunda's (2001) call that our field has moved too far away from engaging with 'what people actually do'. This can lead to 'anachronistic theorizations and outdated images of work' (2001: 90) and even worse, we add, reproducing the work ideals and images fostered by prevalent discourses on knowledge work that may be far from people's everyday work experiences. Our interest lies in one particular and arguably under-studied reported experience, namely that of boredom in knowledge work.

That work can be boring is perhaps not in itself surprising. Research on labour processes, for example, suggests that the de-skilling and high levels of technocratic control resulting from the industrial and bureaucratic set-up renders work monotonous and boring. As shown by the classic studies of Roy (1959), Willis (1977) and Burawoy (1979), workers respond to this by engaging in games, counter-cultural activities and 'making out'. Moreover, there has been research focusing on boredom more directly relating it to job design in industrial and bureaucratic work. It regards boredom as an objective 'property of jobs associated with industrial, not post-industrial knowledge economies' (Loukidou et al., 2009: 388). While these studies have provided important insights on work experiences and, particularly, boredom, their insights have less explanatory value for the work setting we are concerned with, namely that of knowledge work. Indeed, knowledge work is often framed as overcoming the particular drawbacks of industrial and bureaucratic work by providing more degrees of freedom and discretion (Thompson et al., 2001). Thus, the prevalence of reported experiences of boredom is a mystery – one that we seek to resolve in this article.

We approach this mystery through exploring the *emic* understandings of boredom. Taking on a social constructivist view, we are concerned with how boredom is ascribed to certain activities and situations, how it is made sense of within particular social contexts and how this, in turn, shapes identity and meaning. We do not regard boredom as necessarily negative (or positive), but instead are interested in the various ways in which

actors in the field understand and relate to it (see also Carroll et al., 2010; Spacks, 1995). Thus, our starting point is the reported experiences of boredom articulated by the informants in the field rather than existing objective (relating to job design) or subjective (relating to personal traits) definitions of boredom as conceptualized by the boredom literature (Fisher, 1993; Genmill and Oakely, 1992; Loukidou et al., 2009; Kafry and Pines, 1980; Melamed et al., 1995; Vodanovich, 2003; Van der Heijden et al., 2011). In this sense, we follow Carroll et al. (2010) who look at the different ways in which leadership socially constructs boredom and its interaction with discourses of challenge and change. They argue that despite its negative connotations, boredom may in fact 'spur' leadership by providing 'an opportunity for reflection, a pathway to enlightenment and a chance to create order out of chaos' (2010: 1046). Building on that, we move the focus from leadership to knowledge workers and their particular work context.

Methods

The empirical basis of this article is founded on two studies of large, globally operating management consultancy firms, Global Consulting (GC) and Elite Consulting (EC). These studies were independently conducted by the authors but yielded similar insights concerning work experiences, identity regulation and knowledge work. Methodologically, the field studies are based on participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis. The fieldwork of the first study was conducted during five years at Elite Consulting. The empirical material consists of transcripts from 52 interviews with 45 persons, as well as notes from participant observation in several organizational gatherings. The participant observation includes following a team for two work days, participation in training sessions, in various settings where organizational members communicated internally, such as in competence group meetings and the annual meeting for all managers, and externally, such as when presenting the company to students. The second study is based on a total of 57 interviews (from analyst to director level), which on average lasted one hour at both organizations. Being part of an internal HR team, the author, moreover, conducted participant observations at EC. At GC she informally engaged with the consultants, by going for lunches, coffees and after-work drinks. The second study also entails the documentary analysis of HR documents, company websites and recruiting brochures.

It is important to consider the risks of over-relying on interview accounts when making specific claims of how people 'really' think or experience their work (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Interviews, like any social interaction, can only be managed to some degree and such efforts can create unforeseen side-effects. There are complexities far beyond what may be seen as 'errors'. This means that interview statements must be understood in their local, situation-specific context. In interviews people are not reporting external events but producing situated accounts, drawing upon existing cultural resources. However, this is less of a problem in our study, since we are not aiming for objective truths but rather for the cultural resources at hand when describing work experiences. Our interview material is also supplanted with observations of everyday conversations between consultants – material that is not restricted by the shortcomings of the interview situation. Moreover, in this particular study, we have the unusual advantage of drawing on material generated in different contexts and countries, and interviews conducted by different researchers of different gender and levels of seniority. Indeed, the prevalence of boredom in both data sets is especially surprising since it was not generated by

the original research questions and thus prompted by leading questions. Both studies used exploratory questions to address the overarching research themes of organizational culture and identity (study 2) and of the characteristics of knowledge work (study 1).

Given the similarities of the companies, we did not conduct a comparative analysis but rather analyzed the empirical material around themes. Our data analysis process followed the logic of abduction (see Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007b; Locke et al., 2008; Van Maanen et al., 2007); the empirical field was approached through established conceptions concerning knowledge work (autonomy, creativity, expertise), culture (meaning, symbols, values) and identity (socialization, identification, roles), yet these were modified in the course of the study given the emergence of the theme of boredom.

Thus, the data analysis process was characterized by openness and the search for surprising phenomena, in our case boredom, which do not fit and even contradict the extant literature's general framing of knowledge work as creative and autonomous. This made us rethink our assumptions and conceptualizations – something that entailed a creative theory building process concerning boredom in knowledge work. This is not to say that every consultant reported boredom (indeed, it is much more in line with the image of and management discourse around knowledge work to emphasize the creative and glamorous aspects of such work and thus of oneself as a knowledge worker). Put differently, the self-reported cases we are concerned with are particularly significant insofar as they contradict the aspirational conceptualization of knowledge work and the knowledge worker. It should also be stressed again that in analyzing these reports, we focus on the emic understanding of boredom (i.e. our interest is not in applying a particular conceptualization of boredom but rather in the meanings expressed by the informants). In coding our data on boredom we developed how the reported experiences of boredom relate to identity work and regulation in a knowledge work setting. Thus, we use the notion of boredom as a first-order concept (one that is used by the informants in their everyday language) and we analyze this through the second-order (i.e. theoretically driven) concept of identity regulation (see Van Maanen, 1979). From our data we developed coding pairs, such as creativity versus repetition or career/development versus stagnation, around which we structured the locus of reported boredom:

1. Creativity ↔ Repetition
2. Autonomy ↔ Standardization
3. Learning ↔ De-skilling
4. Expertise ↔ Clerk Work
5. Elite ↔ Nobody

This data structure constitutes the basis for our empirical analysis and discussion of experiences of boredom and identity regulation in knowledge work.

Introduction to the cases

The firms empirically investigated are multi-services professional organizations. This article focuses on the consulting branch. They can be classified as knowledge-intensive firms: a large proportion of resources are spent on personnel; the companies recruit qualified individuals with academic degrees; and the client services are non-standardized, idiosyncratic and require individual judgment. Both our cases specialize in management

consultancy but with an emphasis on the development and implementation of administrative and technical solutions to organizational problems. The projects are often relatively large, involve several or even dozens of people, and may last for several months or even years. People are known to work hard and frequently experience very long working days – many say that they often work 60–70 hours per week.

Formal structure varies with perceived problems and fashion, but the key unit is the project team. Projects are carefully contracted, designed and monitored. Project teams are temporary and the composition of people working together varies over time, partly owing to the variation of assignments, and partly owing to the fact that the development of employees means they get more senior project roles over time.

Despite the adhocratic nature of work, the organizational hierarchy is strongly pronounced and formalized, with several career steps and associated titles. Most people see the hierarchy as functional, enabling a productive division of labour. Standards, rules and procedures are strongly pronounced. There are rules for dealing with most issues (e.g. elaborated lists of criteria for appraisals and rules for dress codes), which are applied with discretion. There are frequent appraisals and rankings of organizational members, which determine their career development and salary (which are high within the industry). Formal appraisals take place several times per year for younger employees, less frequently for senior employees. A lot of attention is given to rankings and promotions. Low rankings and promotions below medium time frames are clear signals that people must improve or ought to consider leaving the firm. Turnover rates are high in both companies, particularly among analyst and consultant levels (e.g. about one-third of analysts leave the companies within the first two years) – something that we will return to later on when discussing the functions and dysfunctions of the experiences of boredom.

There is a strong cultural emphasis on performance and delivery. Social relations are generally developed and maintained in projects and teams where they can be both intimate and intense, although limited in time. Recruitment and selection are standardized and formalized. Almost all organizational members come directly from top universities and have various academic backgrounds, such as business administration, engineering, history and French. Recruitment interviews emphasize the high demands on employees: on being flexible, able to travel a lot and, at times, to work long hours. They tend to rank high in employer rankings and thus are considered to be attractive workplaces.

Boredom at Global Consulting and Elite Consulting

Consider these extracts from our interview transcripts:

> I find the work quite **frustrating** and **boring**. I mean I can say that I don't love the work I do here . . . It is very difficult for me to work here and find something **interesting**, something I **enjoy** within the company. (Consultant, EC)

> [It is bad] when you are working like you are on **autopilot** . . . Sitting in front of your computer and **doing the same thing all over again**. (Analyst, GC)

> It is not necessarily an intellectual place . . . Someone referred to it once as **the McDonald's of the consultancy world**. I mean it is very true. (Consultant, EC)

These sentiments were surprising to us, but not in the sense that the occasional consultant may feel fed up and bored with his or her work. The surprise is rather the wide-spread nature, as we will demonstrate below, of the sentiments. Boredom does indeed seem to be an integral experience of work in these companies. We suggest that in this context such reports of boredom arise as a result of clashes between the company discourses concerning the nature of work and thus of the consultant identity and the consultants' everyday work experience. In this respect, boredom is reported in relation to five clashes, which we have termed: creativity ↔ repetition, autonomy ↔ standardization, learning ↔ de-skilling, expertise ↔ clerk work, elite identity ↔ 'nobody'.

From creativity to repetition

The official company discourses apparent in the firms' websites, brochures and recruitment leaflets emphasize the creative nature of consulting work and the creative consultant. For instance, the companies advertise that they sell 'creative solutions' (GC) to clients, as they 'apply innovative thinking that anticipates emerging trends and influences' (GC). They depict themselves as being 'one step ahead' of the market, given the 'ground-breaking research' (EC) their 'dynamic, innovative and forward-thinking' (HR manager, GC) workforce produces. Moreover, consulting work is depicted as interesting and thought-provoking, involving varied and multifaceted tasks: 'There is no typical day in my life. My work varies . . .' (Consultant on EC website). As a result, individuals, and specifically graduates entering these companies, expect to be conducting inspiring and creative work and thus being inspired and creative themselves.

However, consultants report how these expectations clash with their everyday work experience (see Table 1). Rather than finding the work interesting, intellectually challenging and creative – the impression provided by company discourses – it is seen to be tedious, repetitive and, indeed, boring. While company discourses raise expectations concerning creativity and innovation, consultants, particularly those at the lower hierarchy levels, feel that these expectations remain unfulfilled in their everyday work life – something that brings about experiences of boredom.

From autonomy to standardization

Related to this, the companies' discourses depict the work as providing individuals with lots of autonomy and responsibility. For instance, consultants remarked frequently how recruitment campaigns fostered their expectations that the consultant role gives them lots of choice and project responsibility. Not only do consultants approach their work with the expectation of having choice with respect to the project they work on and the everyday work practices they engage in (e.g. how they respond to client demands), but also in terms of being able to independently interact with clients. Being a consultant is depicted to entail lots of 'responsibility from day one' (GC), as individuals help high-level business leaders to tackle complex challenges. A manager (EC) summarizes how in the recruitment events the image is fostered that consulting work is 'cutting-edge,

Table 1. Creativity versus repetition discourse.

Creativity discourse	Repetition discourse
We look for people who can **challenge conventional thought** . . . and conceive **innovative** and profitable solutions for [our] clients . . . We want people who bring **intellect** to everything we do. (EC)	Work here . . . is quite **dry** and **demotivating**, quite **repetitive**, **boring**. (Manager, EC)
I sort of **was persuaded by the impression** of working as a consultant . . . someone doing **creative** and important stuff. (Consultant, EC)	[Sometimes I think]: 'oh God I am really **fed up doing this spreadsheet**, oh God if I have to go through this presentation one more time!'. (Consultant, GC)
	I can't be that creative at work . . . I can't sit down and just think about stuff. There is always something to do and it is always quite methodical. Probably less creative and more methodical. (Consultant, EC)

Table 2. Autonomy versus standardization discourse.

Autonomy discourse	Standardization discourse
So, when they did this GC [recruitment] presentation, they talked about the group . . . that was like exactly what I wanted to do, they provide you with **a lot of choice**. (Analyst, GC)	There is **not much space for just thinking** or reflecting very much even if you're looking at the work and your responsibilities in front of you. It is just very much a do it and do the next thing and do the next thing. (Consultant, EC)
People . . . get **big responsibilities**. They interact with executives on top levels in organizations . . . Their work is **relatively free**. They have **independent** access to customers. (Senior manager, EC)	Basically, **you are told exactly how to do things**. Like we have got this problem and this is how to do it. I can understand we are a large and global [company] and you can trust everyone to do the same things. (Analyst, EC)
	This . . . company . . . is based around **standards** and **methodologies** that we are supposed to apply. (Consultant, EC)

challenging and interesting', as employees 'interact closely with senior clients' and 'work on different projects in different places'. As a result, consultants' expectations concerning their everyday work and their work self were constructed around not only being creative but also autonomous and independent.

However, these expectations clash with their everyday work experience (see Table 2). Consultants report engaging in repetitive activities that grant them little space for making autonomous decisions and for thinking and interacting independently with clients. Given that the companies also engage in bigger projects that largely focus on implementing certain

Table 3. Expert versus clerk work discourse.

Expert discourse	Clerk work discourse
During its projects EC calls in **expert knowledge**. (EC)	Serving an analyst role . . . often [involves] large workloads, often quite **monotonous** work . . . There is a lot of **bad and uninspiring work** to do for analysts. (Manager, EC)
Global Consulting [has] . . . unparalleled **knowledge** and **expertise** to solve our clients' strategic challenges. (GC)	Probably when you are at junior grade there is sometimes **little effort to give you interesting things to do**. You're just meant to be the kind of, in some projects, the useful enthusiast who, regardless what work is, just says 'yeah, give me more, I love it, I love doing this, **filing out some numbers** is great'. (Consultant, GC)
Our 'high performance business' strategy builds on **our expertise in consultancy** . . . to help clients perform at the highest levels. Using our **industry knowledge, service-offering expertise and technology capabilities**, we identify new business and technology trends. (EC)	At my level . . . sometimes you are asked to do a lot of team **administration things** and you sort of think it is not really adding much. (Analyst, GC)
	A common phrase I hear: 'we need to do this presentation or this spreadsheet, but don't worry, we get this analyst to do this for us'. So, it's like the **monkey work** we give to the analyst . . . (Manager, GC)

software systems or strategies, their work can follow certain defined methodologies and standards. There is a strong emphasis on delivery and 'getting things done' (manager, EC).

From expertise to clerk work

The clashes of expectations in relation to experiences of everyday work and the consultant self are further reinforced through the lack of expertise consultants feel that their work requires. While company discourses stress that the consultant is an expert with specialized knowledge, individuals report the opposite. Consultants at the lower ranks of the hierarchy seem especially prone to report boredom as here the clash between expectations concerning the nature of work – and of the suggested consultant identity – and their everyday work experience is pronounced (see Table 3). Individuals state having to engage in routine work that reminds them of clerk work that requires little knowledge or expertise. As one manager explains, when he started working at Elite Consulting he got very bored 'having to do monotonous work'. People report having to do 'something very dull like writing interview notes up or proof-reading something' (Senior consultant, GC).

One might argue that doing rather uninspiring work that requires little expertise and provides little autonomy is part of starting a job and that this changes as one moves up the hierarchy. Yet consultants experiencing boredom do not seem to believe in this trade-off (i.e. engaging in monotonous work in the present for autonomy and creativity in the future). This might be the case not only because they feel that company discourses already raised unfulfilled expectations concerning their situation in the present, but also because they feel that the cultural emphasis on learning and development is in tension with their everyday work experience, which is considered to involve some kind of de-skilling instead. Thus, rather than developing and progressing, they feel to be stagnating, or even worse, regressing – something that can further explain the reported experiences of boredom.

From learning to de-skilling

At GC and EC the official discourses celebrate the great chances for learning and development consulting work offers. Indeed, for this reason they present themselves and are often depicted in relevant newspapers and magazines as 'top employers', especially for graduates. GC and EC employees are seen to benefit from incomparable opportunities. These opportunities of learning and 'growing' (EC) are viewed to result from the fact that consultants work with a diverse and highly talented group of people, are offered formal 'tailor-made and wide-ranging programmes of . . . education and training' (GC), and have access to diverse, international and exciting projects of high impact. The firms' large and superior client base across the world is said to offer exceptional 'real-time learning opportunities' (GC). For instance, graduates are said to be provided with relevant 'training and development opportunities to launch [their] career on the right track' (GC) and experienced hires are given the 'opportunity to stretch [themselves], speed up [their] career progression and apply [their] expertise to bigger and more complex projects' (EC).

Yet consultants report that these expectations raised by company discourses are not fulfilled and clash with their everyday work experience (see Table 4). Indeed, individuals report boredom given that the kind of work they engage in leads to de-skilling. Moreover, boredom is associated with staying on a certain project for a long or seemingly never-ending time – something that contradicts the image of the knowledge worker as having lots of learning opportunities and varied experiences.

This suggests that instead of learning and developing, individuals experience themselves as stagnating in their development or even worse regressing (i.e. losing their abilities). This sense of not developing, we propose, can further explain the prevalence of reported boredom among consultants. It shows, in particular, how the experiences of boredom in everyday work life relate to the consultant identity fostered by management discourse, which will be developed below.

From elite identity to 'nobody'

At GC and EC company discourses reinforce constructions of consultants as elite knowledge workers. Such an elite identity is created on the basis of the image these companies enjoy in the industry, on the basis that their clients are large and influential corporations, that they are highly selective in their recruitment and that most consultants have degrees

Table 4. Learning versus de-skilling discourse.

Learning discourse	De-skilling discourse
Whatever your experience, we'll help you to **expand your knowledge and skills** – whether this is through our formal **training** programs, by tapping into our international network of consultants, or through **exposure** to some of the biggest challenges in global commerce. (EC)	We were just talking about our work we were doing at the moment and we were saying that it is probably causing us some amount of **brain damage**, that we probably lost some mental capacity that will never get back. We call it '**irreparable damage**' by doing this work. (Consultant, EC)
Ready for a career like no other? **When does the learning stop at Global Consulting? Simple. Never** . . . We regard unfulfilled potential as waste bordering on tragedy – it's anathema to our culture. (GC)	**I am still relying on the knowledge when I came to the firm** . . . I don't think that you get the exposure [in relation to client projects] . . . I don't think that I get the right opportunities here. (Analyst, GC)
	They are not investing enough in us individuals to skill us up for the future, it just doesn't seem to happen. . . There is **really little training and learning opportunities**. (Manager, EC)
	One of the main things I joined the company for was the variety of experience, lots of different clients, big names, and the training and just learning a lot. **I kind of feel that I don't get that training, I am not learning that much anymore**. (Consultant, GC)
	I hear people working hours and hours every day, **getting stuck on projects** for years, without any chance of change . . . (Consultant, GC)
	A lot of people that were leaving were people that had done similar roles to me, which I had not enjoyed, around process design, which I think is fine to do it once, but assuming you don't want to do this again. I thought the firm was guilty of making these people do that **same role again and again**. (Consultant, GC)
	One of the problems we have is that we say to people that there is lots of variety, **lots of career opportunity. But the reality is that you are looking for a project, you are matching together a small number of people that are available** to a small number of projects. At that point the business will not look at whether the individual finds the project interesting or not. (Director, GC)

Table 5. Elite versus 'nobody' discourse.

Elite discourse	'Nobody' discourse
	We get those people from **Oxford and Cambridge, Edinburgh, the top**… When people join they think that Elite Consulting, the culture, the employees, is **going to be some glamorous creative job** in strategy et cetera, et cetera. But then they find themselves doing very technical stuff for the first couple of years . . . **It is the least bourgeois work**. (Manager, EC)
There was a lot of hype around Elite Consulting and it seemed so glamorous and exciting. (Analyst, EC)	People have a perception of consultancy that does not meet reality. The work can be **far more mundane than they imagine**. My knowledge about it was very different to the reality . . . You don't really think about that it would be so mundane when you see Elite Consulting being advertised. **It looks far more glamorous and you think, 'wow, that looks good'**. You have no idea what really goes behind it. (Consultant, EC)
It is the image of those kind of companies [that made them think that] they were very impressive. (Senior consultant, GC)	When I joined, **I thought I would be a glamorous, high-flying business woman... I just really thought that it would be really glamorous**... I did not expect such sort of work [i.e. tedious testing] at all . . . With the kind of work I was doing I was **absolutely devastated**, I am still quite devastated . . . When you apply to this company as much as to most graduate jobs **your perception to what you will be doing is different to what you will actually be doing**. (Consultant, EC)

from top universities. Individuals are encouraged to make sense of themselves in the ideational ways in which the firms portray consulting work and thus the consulting identity. The companies' discourses foster a consultant elite identity that draws on glamour, high status, excitement and creativity. However, this suggested ideational identity construction clashes with the consultants' reports of everyday work as boring. Rather than living out some kind of elite identity they come to feel like a 'nobody' – a person doing the 'least bourgeois' (manager cited above) work (see Table 5).

Discussion

Our analysis has shown how boredom is reported in knowledge work. Consultants express this in different wordings, such as referring to themselves as frustrated and devastated and the work as being dry, dull, monotonous and repetitive. While, say, devastation does not necessarily imply boredom, in the context of our cases the quotes above generally relate to different expressions of ennui (e.g. the quote of devastation presented above on the 'nobody' discourse was uttered in the context of describing feelings of

being stuck with repetitive testing work). Indeed, boredom, being bored, doing boring things are the most frequent expressions of negative work experience used by the consultants. Again, we do not claim to judge whether they are objectively bored. Instead, we want to explore and question why this particular term is evoked by the consultants. What is its meaning and what does it tell us about the work context?

In some ways, the data suggest that boredom simply results from the nature of work, which some even associate with industrial and bureaucratic set ups. However, this does not mean that consulting work is in fact comparable to McDonald's, a metaphor used by one consultant quoted above. There are still important differences. As aforementioned, consultants are granted more discretion in their daily work life, they work with other highly qualified employees and are given the high prestige of these companies, they have much greater career prospects in terms of salary and development. That is, consultants can easily find senior jobs in the industry (see Sturdy and Wright, 2008). While the work may also entail routine aspects and, thus, be at times unexciting, it is not fed to them in precise pieces supposed to be assembled according to set procedures at a pace decided by a conveyor track. Thus, a labour process argument cannot fully explain the reported experiences of boredom.

It is also perhaps tempting to discount some, if not all, of the reports as the 'whining' of the privileged. That management consultancy work is tedious and taxing toil is hardly news, and elite students from elite institutions are well equipped to find this out before they take on employment. Furthermore, GC, for example, makes a point of describing the dread as well as the glamour in their recruitment process, admittedly in a way that gives working 80 hours a week a certain sex appeal. On the other hand, it seems wrong to only fault the seduced for falling for the seduction. It is clear that both GC and EC work hard to hand down preferred perceptions and aspirations that very much revolve around the notion of creativity, innovation, elitism and empowerment. Employees are promised swift promotion, rich pecuniary and symbolic remuneration, and challenging and developing tasks. All of this fosters an ideational construction of the consulting identity. Indeed, it is here that, we claim, the key lies to the puzzle of reported boredom in knowledge work.

Identity regulation: The bored self as an arrested identity

Our data show how in these knowledge work environments, like GC and EC, identity regulation importantly shapes the employees' constructions of themselves in relation to work and organization. In particular, management discourse provides distinctive discursive material to construct what it means to be a consultant. Thus, implicitly or explicitly, the expert, autonomy, creativity, learning and elite discourses foster and regulate a certain version of selfhood. As the data also demonstrate, such a version of self is deemed as being attractive; it is one consultants aspire to – something that can explain the potency of identity regulation in this context (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007a; Costas and Grey, 2014; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). The management discourses are saturated with meanings that aim to persuade employees that they are the vanguard of the knowledge economy. This idealized conception of the knowledge worker is also reinforced externally (i.e. such as the images provided by the business press and popular management discourse) (Doogan, 2009; Prichard et al., 2000; Thrift, 2005).

This explains why individuals entering these kinds of firms have such high expectations in terms of glamour, excitement and so forth and, indeed, construct their identities around these notions. It is these expectations that are perceived as being unmet when entering the firms. They entail excessive aspirations concerning not only the nature of knowledge work but also of being able to enact such an idealized version of self that are not fulfilled in everyday work experience: doing boring work turns into being bored. That is, the work activities can involve repetitive, unchallenging and unglamorous tasks, which clash with the understanding, image and hence the meaning of the consultant identity. The reports of boredom, we suggest, result from 'misaligned expectations' (Conrad, 1997). Conrad (1997: 474) argues that the construction of boredom depends on individuals' expectations with respect to a certain situation:

> One of the fundamental attributes of boredom may be misaligned expectations. It is possible that we would not be bored if we did not expect more from situations. In our society we expect stimulation and connections from certain situations and events and may feel bored when social occasions fall short of our expectation.

Of course, not every misaligned expectation leads to boredom. However, our data suggest that this plays a significant role here; the workings of identity regulation foster expectations of a particular consultant identity, yet consultants experience this very identity as impossible to enact. This, we propose, leads to a particular state of the self: the bored self.

In this sense, knowledge work arrangements that particularly engage in excessive forms of identity regulation can be argued to be, somewhat paradoxically, susceptible for producing the bored self. Moreover, in companies, like EC and GC, boredom constitutes a taboo, as it undermines the ideational consulting identity. This implies that consultants are not prepared for such experiences of boredom – something that may in fact reinforce them.

But why do consultants describe this state of the self as bored (instead of, say, simply frustrated and disappointed)? One way to explain this relates to the ways in which it allows them to keep up their sense of a superior self (i.e. that they are in fact over-qualified, under-challenged and under-stimulated in their consulting work life). Put differently, they cling on to a self-understanding that informs themselves that they are better and deserve better than this. This points to an interesting identity dynamic that we suggest is different from extant understandings of employee interactions with identity regulation (e.g. Costas and Fleming, 2009; Elsbach and Battacharya, 2001; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kunda, 2006; Pratt, 2000). Identification assumes that the consultants feel able to fully enact the desired consulting self (which some indeed did, but not the bored selves we focus on in this article). In the context of GC and EC, identification means that consultants become 'the useful enthusiast', as one informant put it above, who believes they can live out the identity constructions based on the discourses of creativity, autonomy, learning, expertise and elite in their work life.

Dis-identification, on the other hand, would imply that individuals distance themselves from the consulting identity suggested by management discourse wholesale by constructing their self around alternative discourses (e.g. 'I am actually an engineer and not a consultant'). Self-alienation means that they struggle to even produce such an alternative

self. Ambivalence would occur when they construct themselves around certain aspects of the suggested consulting identity, while distancing themselves from other (e.g. 'I am an expert but do not want to be seen as elitist').

The bored self differs from these identity interactions with identity regulation: there is an identification with the identity fostered by management discourse, yet this clashes with the experiences of everyday work that does not allow for its enactment. In other words, the bored self is neither simply an example of ambivalence, dis-identification or self-alienation, nor one of identification. As our data show, the consultants struggle with and in fact experience themselves in ways that contradict the idealized version of the consulting identity to which they, however, still hold on to. Their distancing from the consulting identity arises from their sense of impossibility of enacting it. The bored self appears to be attached to the half-way house between identification and dis-identification. What makes this significant is the ways in which it produces what we term an arrested identity.

An arrested identity is one where individuals are drained from drives to mobilize alternative selves and thus engage in resistance. This might add explanation to the lack of resistance noted in such work arrangements (Costas and Grey, 2014; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). The bored self arrests their identity as it implies that they still subscribe to the consulting dream, while enduring the disappointment of the work experience blaming the stupid work, and not themselves and their aspirations. One consequence of the bored self is the ways in which it displaces agency from the individual to the company; that is their identity work is arrested both by them buying into the aspirations articulated by company discourse, yet feeling unable to fulfill them.

Moreover, the bored self arrests their identity by the ways in which it involves the sense of stagnating rather than developing, as we empirically analyzed above. In this sense, the reported bored self is corroborated by the ways in which boredom is often linked to time, namely the experience of the present as never-ending and therefore stagnating, as Heidegger famously developed in his example of waiting for the train (Svendson, 2005). What we have here is the sense of stagnation and aimlessness rather than of change and purpose (see also Darden and Marks, 1999; Johnsen, 2011). The resulting arrested identity therefore undermines possibilities of developing and mobilizing alternative selves, at least for the moment in which the actors construct themselves as bored.

Excesses of identity regulation in knowledge work

One might wonder why such organizations as EC and GC take the risks in painting a too pretty picture of the nature of their work and the consulting identity. After all, these companies are not McDonald's, and their work practices are very distant from flipping burgers the Ronald McDonald way. Tradition is likely to play a role here. Not very long ago, management consultancy, law work and accountancy, for example, were much more like craft and much less like assembly work, and not the business of the freshly graduated. In this sense, the image of consultancy work may have evolved less quickly than actual practice, thus inadvertently setting up a structural mis-alignment of expectations.

A more speculative take is to highlight the functions of boredom. Whether by design or by default, the set-up described here functionally operates as an elaborate selection mechanism, geared toward weeding out the rash and the impatient, and rewarding those taking the long view. The glamour attracts a relatively large pool of talented and energetic graduates, while boring work eliminates those who lack stamina and team player capabilities. This might explain the high personnel turnover at these firms, and perhaps makes it more of a solution than a problem – at least for the companies.

It is also important to point out that, although boring, the work often produces tangible outputs. Among other things, this makes it easier for the company to persuade clients that they have got value for money, which is very often a maddening issue in knowledge work given the inherent ambiguity of what knowledge is (Alvesson, 1993). In this sense, the outcomes of boring work may be used as a tool for impression management (Clark, 1995), deployed to convince clients that serious efforts have indeed been involved, as demonstrated by reports, presentations, programs, databases and so on.

Having said that, there are some obvious issues. For example, boredom does not seem to be a very precise selection mechanism. There is no indication in our empirical material that junior organizational members anticipate the test character of boredom and use it as information in their career planning. The companies do not leave any clear hints of this either, officially or unofficially. Thus, it is possible that people who leave are not necessarily the right ones, from the company's point of view. The unfilled aspirations produced by company discourse can have further costs. They may breed disbelief in company discourse and, in the long run, systemically distort company communication, resulting in issues around trust and loyalty.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed reported experiences of boredom in knowledge work. Rather than finding the work creative, innovative and complex, individuals describe it as boring – something that contradicts the image of knowledge work. Of course, this is not to say that boredom is necessarily an inherent feature of knowledge work. As we pointed out before, not every individual at the consultancy firms expressed such an experience. Moreover, one might also argue that the kind of work environment we investigated is particular: the knowledge-intensive firms are large and thus have bureaucratic processes in place (e.g. in relation to HRM systems, hierarchy); the kind of consultancy work these firms offer entails the use of standardized methodologies and implementations. Having said that, the companies are similar to other knowledge work environments in that they employ highly qualified individuals and stress creativity, innovation, autonomy, learning and development in relation to work. Thus, the reported experiences of boredom constitute a surprising phenomenon. Furthermore, we could also imagine that such experiences could arise in work contexts (e.g. in the arts and research) with similar dynamics (i.e. high aspirations, discourses of freedom and self-actualization).

We propose that such boredom is an outcome of the identity regulation fostered by the company discourses around expertise, creativity, learning, autonomy and elite. These discourses construct a distinctive, namely attractive and seductive, consulting identity that individuals, on the one hand, aspire to but, on the other hand, struggle to enact in

everyday work experience. As a result, they develop a bored self. Interestingly, the construction of the self as bored in fact allows them to maintain their aspirations and idealized understandings of themselves. We suggest that this phenomenon can be understood as an arrested identity.

In drawing attention to the bored self as an arrested identity, we contribute to extant conceptualizations of employee interactions with identity regulation, such as identification, dis-identification and so on. The bored self makes it possible to both hang on to the aspirational aspects of the identity suggested by company discourse while dealing with its disappointments. It becomes arrested as the sense of stagnation prevails. This has important implications in that agency is displaced away from individuals, which drains efforts toward mobilizing alternative selves. In this sense, the employee work experiences presented in this article shed light on the importance of people's everyday work practices in their understanding of selfhood – something that we believe studies of identity need to take more into account. Fancy images, fun cultures and glamorous offices, so often associated with knowledge work – all those things around which positive identities can be constructed – cannot completely offset individuals' experiences of their day-to-day work, especially if they run contradictory to the celebrated organizational identity.

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