

Boredom in meetings

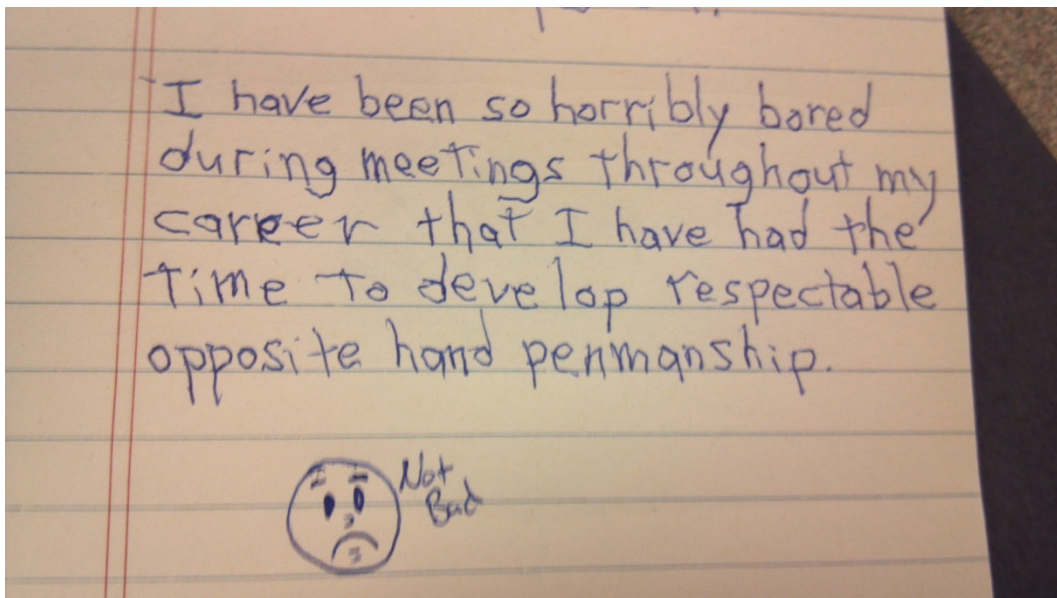
For managers, meetings may be an arena “where the action is”: situations to display competence and moral character. However, others may feel less involved, and meetings may be experienced as nonsense, as meaningless and worthless. A recurring theme in various studies is complaints about meetings, particularly regarding their frequency, their emptiness, and the forced attendance, taking time from what the employees consider their core tasks. In this paper I discuss such experiences: in interviews by retold experiences or stories, in field observations by noticing small talk, by photographs of side-involvement such as meeting scribbles or observing the use of smart phones or laptops during meetings, and other practices of “aways”.

Meetings are social phenomenon characterized by a sociological ambivalence (Merton 1976). Formal meetings are events that are a peculiar mixture of sense and nonsense, and of drama and dullness. On the one hand, formal meetings express power, authority, and hierarchy: they are consequential. As such they are events that may harbor drama and excitement. Meetings form occasions where executives, managers and employees may formulate policy and execute power. In such settings, meetings are the event where the action is. Such features may not be exclusive for executives and managers but excitement and involvement in meetings may be found among grassroot bureaucrats as well (see for instance Åkerström, 2017)

On the other hand, there is a common critique of meetings as meaningless. Meetings are often commented on in a critical way: researchers pointing to “empty” bureaucratic tendencies of increased administration and grumbling is voiced locally among members of organizations.¹ In several empirical studies containing interviews and fieldwork among academics, on youth institutions, and on the police there were recurring retold experiences of boredom and complaints about meaningless meetings. I began to wonder what this boredom is about, and what people do when bored.

Boredom is thus visible both in accounts of meetings, and in the imagery of meetings. Such imageries are found in abundance on the Internet, and can thus be seen as forming

part of a globalized critique (obviously containing other ingredients) against formal meetings. Below are a few examples found on the internet: In the first image, slow is spelled "sloe" which is a type of berry which you can make gin out of, "sloe gin". This might be an intentional spelling, but probably it is just a spelling mistake. The message however is clear: the image centers on an implicit understanding of meeting as boring.



Boredom and meaninglessness

But what is boredom and how does it connect with meaninglessness? Researchers in the field of the sociology of emotions differentiate boredom from depression and ennui. According to Jack Barbalet boredom "is a feeling that express a dissatisfaction with the

lack of interest in an activity or condition. Boredom, in its irritability and restlessness (conditions not present in ennui), is not a feeling of acceptance of or resignation toward a state of indifference, as ennui is. Boredom, therefore, is not a passive surrender to those conditions that provoke it.” (Barbalet 1999:634)

In an article by Donna Darden and Alan Marks (1999) on boredom, the authors relate Darden’s experience from a meeting as the inspiration to consider this feeling sociologically. They collected material based on 400 telephone interviews with adults, 400 written responses from 400 students, and informal unstructured interviews with 50 other people. Based on this data, they derived the following definition of boredom, as a: “...socially disvalued emotion we experience in a setting where the drama fails for some reason; when the only scripts and props available are too well rehearsed and overly familiar; any roles which exist are undesirable and without the possibility of negotiation; there are no others whose roles we can or want to take, and we feel distant from our roles. The situation has no apparent future, in sense of anticipation, although it may have a temporal dimension, because time seems to stretch endlessly ahead without a foreseeable denouement.” (Darden and Marks, 1999:18)

Time, as noted both by Barbalet, and by Darden and Marks, might be experienced as an empty and slow interval. A Swedish author, Torgny Lindgren, has described this feeling in a book called *Övriga frågor* (Additions to agenda), on meetings in a small association of the Social Democratic party. The afternoon meetings are depressing:

...when going to them it is still light outside and the world is full of people, then you are enclosed in the meeting, often with a strong sense that time is not moving, neither forwards nor backwards, and when the meeting is over and you get out, it's dark. (Lindgren, 1973:22)²

Boredom is furthermore associated with questions of meaningfulness. Meaning, in turn, can be understood in two different ways: intelligibility and involvement. Sitting through a meeting held in Mandarin, or one discussing theoretical physics might be quite boring for those who are not versed in these languages. Sitting through a meeting held in a perfectly understandable language discussing the future vision of your organization might be quite tedious if you have heard it several times before, and if you do not feel involved.

Indications of boredom during meetings: “Always”

Given the imperative to meaningfulness in social activity, engagement in ostensibly irrational or perverse activities can frequently be explained, therefore, in terms of their provision of a defense against or as consequences of boredom (Barbalet, 1999:641).

Researchers have studied what people in different professions or situations do when they experience monotony. Factory worker, writes Molstad (1986), daydream, sing and make small talk: distractions that do not disturb the work. When policemen "have nothing to do", they reduce feelings of boredom by engaging in their environment. They stop and control traffic or patrol the neighborhood to stay busy and pass the time. (Phillips, 2015) Tea Bengtsson (2012) has studied how young people in a youth institution are involved in risk-taking activities to handle their boredom.

Meeting participants also get involved in “always”, whether or not due to boredom; more than half of managers in a recent survey explain that they turn their attention away “at times” or “often” during meetings. (Svenska Dagbladet 11 dec 2012, källa: *Position, Novus*)³

But what do meeting participants occupy themselves with? They can hardly hum on a melody or sing a song like the industrial workers, patrol the meeting room like the policemen or engage in drug-dealing or sneaky drinking like the youngsters in youth care. The formal meeting is a relatively disciplined ceremony which van Vree has written about (1999) with rules for codes and ~~manners~~ manners. In addition, the meeting room is mutually surveilled by the participants, there is a rather broad transparency in the activities of others, which makes the social control quite extensive.

One way to study people’s managing of boredom is to study how they escape from meetings while being stuck in the meeting room. The most extreme disappearance or “away” during the meeting can be exemplified by falling asleep, as the principal that Harry Wolcott (2003) followed during a fieldwork, did at times. This is obviously a deviation from “involvement obligations” when people are in each other’s presence. People express involvement through ways of dressing, facial expressions, posture, what tasks they are dealing with and the objects they deal with (paper and pencils, computers, etc. in meetings (1966/1963: 44). But most of all in paying proper attention to each other in face-to-face situations. Goffman differentiates between “main involvement” and “side-involvement”. Commenting on alienation from interaction he notes on

symptoms of boredom: “The initiation of side-involvements, such as leafing through a magazine or lighting a cigarette. ” (1967/1982: 127)

In addition, Goffman differs between dominant and subordinate involvement; waiting may be the dominant activity but you can chat, browse a newspaper while waiting for a turn in a waiting room to quickly step up when your queue number is called up (1966/1963: 44). Goffman notes (1963: 44) that main activities are often dominant, but not always.

For the meeting participants, the interest in the meeting should be the main activity and the dominant involvement, but they can engage in both side involvement and subordinate actions. The point is that side-involvements or subordinated actions should not interfere with the meeting, and the participant should conceal their misinvolvement. (Goffman, 1967/1982:126) Even though many are impressingly capable of returning to the meeting when called, or when their point on the agenda is up, the participants who exchange ironic commentaries leave their attention to the meeting for a while, and at times miss the Chair’s or another participants comments in ways that reveal that the meeting that is supposed to be their main involvement is subordinated to other activities.

But meeting participants then makes excuses thereby honoring the ceremonial order of the meeting. Meeting culture, as the social historian van Vree (1999), has pointed out has become more and more civilized. The participant should listen to the speaker, seem to be interested, and respond in neutral terms, so as not to disturb the ceremonial order of the meeting.

During a number of field-work and informal interviews of retold experiences or stories of border police, staff at juvenile homes, and Chairs at academic departments I and my collaborators took notes of side-involvement such as meeting scribbles or the use of smart phones or laptops during meetings, and other practices were seemingly used in part to conquer boredom.

These were used in different ways. Originally I looked for boredom *and* experiences of meaninglessness as many of those we spoke to in *interviews* associated these concepts in the same sentence or commentaries.

However, the *fieldnotes* from our studies of various project on formal meetings refute in part this association. People may enjoy meetings when they co-construct a shared meaning of the event as meaningless. During such events they form a temporary community during short intervals in a meeting and enjoy their common experiences through making fun of what happens or enjoy being morally upset together. (more on fun below).

A niche in the study of side-involvement during meetings may recognize a socio-historical shift, where *doodles* may be less common as technical advances such as smart phones, laptops, and Ipads have facilitated our side-involvements. But doodles are still with us. Most of us engage in this during meeting, and have witnessed others doing this. One colleague explained to me that this was the only way she could stay seemingly alert during faculty meetings, “Scribbling in the margins looks like I am taking notes. Even lawyers in courts, meetings with a clear involvement and at times high stakes, explain that they scribble in order to stay awake during some period of a trial.⁴ Whether scribbles are done to conquer boredom or not, such scribbles may be transformed to art.⁵

“Sneaky work”

People may also engage in “sneaky or hidden work” done by doing one’s *ordinary work* during the meeting. Such work is often through the help of laptops or mobile phones. This may be done between participants who are present during the same meeting such as when some participants send emails to each other or text messages. In the meetings we have studied “hidden work” seems more often being done by one person for him/ herself. Such hidden work is done by placing oneself so that one is not too visible for the chair or a talker in front of the audience. To be able to hide such activities depends both on meeting territoriality (Hall, et al.) and size of the meeting. “Round table-meetings” as well as smaller gatherings increase the potential for mutual monitoring.

As is illustrated below such hidden work need not be done through laptops or mobile phones but “aways” may be achieved through ordinary paper books.



Participant at a personnel meeting in academia reading Malešević's book *The Sociology of War and Violence*

Such hidden work may also be referred to by participant in talks before or after the meeting, and during meeting breaks. They may be framed differently, they may be expressed *provocatively*, as someone who complained about an upcoming meeting at his department: "I plan to write my lecture during the next personnel meeting". Comments may also be formulated as *confessions*:

During a lunch break at whole-day meeting for personnel at a department, a participant turns to me and one of her colleagues, and says in a low voice, while smiling in an excusing way:

"I think I'll try to leave at 15.00. I sneaked in some work during the morning. – "So did I", say her colleague, turning to me: "Well these things (discussed during the meeting) we've heard it all before"

Hidden games, enjoyment, diversions –

Meeting participant may, with the help of new technology engage in more "aways" than the artwork of doodles. They may look at photographs in their mobiles, play games, text each other with ironic comments, or get involved in internet games.



The above concerns an academic seminar held in Rhodes, Greece and the graduate student is looking at a Swedish weather site. She explained that it was difficult to hear what was being said and therefore the meeting was meaningless. This can be seen as a rather harmless distraction, but perhaps a bit more shameful if discovered than “sneaky / hidden work”.

Social control

Pure “play” may however be more morally harmful if discovered especially if the subjects discussed are framed as having potentially serious consequences for others. This was the case during a public debate in the Norwegian parliament on military defense, involving NATO, when the leader of Venstre, Trine Skei Grande, was

discovered playing “Pokemon go” on her mobile phone. ⁶ Another politician, a high profile Republican in the U.S. John McCain, was discovered playing internet poker on an electronic device during a Senate hearing on US and Syria conflict. When publically exposed, McCain explained ironically:

As much as I like to always listen in rapt attention constantly with the remarks of my colleagues over a three-and-a-half-hour period, occasionally I get a little bored ⁷

Both Trine Skei Grande’s and McCain’s case resulted in public shaming, involving not only reports in newspapers, but also “scandal commentaries” in newspapers’ commentary fields, such as:

Love these hacks getting paid on the public’s hard earned dime! Maybe if you’re so bored Johnnie we ought to get a younger, fresher guy who’ll pay attention to the taxpayer’s needs. Sorry national security is so boring!!!

But less conspicuous and public cases may cause embarrassment as meeting participants mutually monitor each other. One meeting participants told me about how she started to played a video of her kids and did not realize that the sound was on, during a particular dull meeting. Another told about watching the presidential debate during a meeting and accidentally put the sound.

The same technical equipment and devices that facilitate “aways”, such as lap tops, Ipads and smart phones, may also facilitate surveillance of side-involvement.

Boredom as background for fun: ceremonial profanations

There are however instances when meeting the demands of the meeting ceremony while perceiving the meeting as boring, may be transformed to fun. As Goffman noted in writing on deference and demeanor: “Profanations are to be expected, for every religious ceremony creates the possibility of a black mass” (1967/1982:86)

The boring qualities and the ceremonial order are exactly the quality that produce humor and irony. Humor inhibits situations and places found in incongruity, in contrasts between the expected and unexpected, in two incompatible views of a scene. The humor often derives its punch from an implicit perspective containing a rational

expectation of meetings: a social form that rationally and instrumentally enables and directs collective action to a certain goal.⁸

The images taken from the internet shown above are one such instance.

In our own material we have also found such instances, not in the interviews, so far, but in our field-notes. One illustration was collected during a two day meeting attended by teachers and researchers in a university in Northern Sweden.

Before the meeting starts, we sit and drink coffee outside. Sunny, nice, people do not want to leave for the conference room. We decide to wait for the Dean and Chair to call us. After a while we see them stand up at a distance and chat with each other but not calling us, one at the table mutters "So, *now* they plan the conference", "Don't be nasty" says another. "Well, let's see if it's more coherent or as meaningless as last year". "You look shocked" – to a new employee" who smiles: "I'm new, don't dare to make comments".

In the large conference room about fifty people are gathered, and we sit at different tables for four people, all turned towards the front where The Dean who chaired the meeting was standing. When she reads the agenda from a Power-point, I manage to catch a few sarcastic comments

The second item on the agenda says: "Written feed-back from last meeting". One of the participant whispers: "Yippee".

Then the chair reads aloud from a Power-point shown on the screen in front of the room, point by point in the agenda for the two upcoming days. Someone close to me, whispers to his closest neighbor: "Everything is up there - points to the screen /whiteboard -, we can read, no-one here is blind."

(i.e. why does she have to read the agenda aloud)

One of the items to be discussed is the need for "internationalization". The Chair mentions a new committee, or group, "Internalization-group" that will be formed, then another at our table whispers: "I hope it's someone who has been abroad, who has left Sweden at some point".

Later on in the afternoon, the Dean ends a discussion with “We’ll take this issue with us” (“vi tar med oss frågan) when someone writes a note to me, “Typical meeting cliché..... But nothing ever happens”

Before we leave for group discussions, someone asks “At what time is the coffee break? “At 15.00” “I’ll set the alarm for that then”, and someone else looks around and ask for a member supposed to be in his group, “Where is Anna Bengtsson” – “She’s gone home” “Well, that was a smart decision”.

All these comments are ironic and form part of the humorous exchanges – and mild form of enjoyment in small subgroup of the meeting, sustaining the understanding of a temporary ”We”. Such ”Wes” are often built by earlier trusted relationship – people whom one knows, and thus expect that such mutterings and irony will be welcomed. This was the case in this meeting. Moreover such moments may cement allegiances and harbour narrative possibilities- recalling previous moments of fun. (Fine and Corte, 2017)

Discussion

There are a number of themes that should be addressed more fully. First of all:

What may be boring to one person may be fascinating and meaningful to someone else. Boredom is not intrinsic to any event or object. Czarniawska-Joerges discuss how shared meaning might not be crucial for collective action, and she gives the following illustration:

“My two colleagues went to hear a speech by a well-known businessman. One “participated in a most exciting encounter between the wisdom of practice and curiosity of theory,” whereas the other “took part in an extremely boring meeting with an elderly gentleman who told old jokes.” They are each, nevertheless, members of the same organization, and what was common for them was that they went to the same room at the same hour, sharing only the idea that their bosses expected it.” (1992:33)

What makes for involvement? In the case above it might be the content of the speech, or the way it was delivered. But often meetings gather a number of people whose roles or

interests only concerns some or one of the issues on the agenda that will be discussed or decided upon. But, there is also a sociological element as to ascribed roles and division of labor that influence how meetings are experienced differently.

When interviewing Chairs at different departments it was evident that they differentiated between meetings where they were the chair, and those they had to attend to as ordinary meeting participants. As someone explained: “When you attend the large Faculty meeting where the Dean informs all the Chairs from different departments, it becomes very much “informing us”, rather boring, that’s when you start looking at your emails, and so on.”

On the other hand being a chair is involving, it demands orchestrating and directing the meeting, it demands attention, and moreover a chair might have a plan about what the meeting is to accomplish. Thus, in interviews, managers explain that when they are chairs even though they are caught in their meetings, they are usually not bored, in contrast to meetings which they do not chair.

A second theme concerns both variations of meetings, and changing norms in meeting culture as to “multitasking” during meetings. When an interviewed retired civil servant compared his meeting experiences he emphasized the more common use of laptops and mobile phones during his last working years even in elite, formal meetings. This would have been unthinkable before but was now perfectly acceptable. Wasson (2006) has studied virtual meetings where people “multitask” during the meetings. They preferred to stay in their own, individual offices for this reason, rather than in a conference room.

A third theme concerns handling other’s boredom. Chairs may notice when others are bored. In our interviews with chairs and managers who lead meetings, they talk about noticing when people start nodding or start to draw doodles, or playing with the phones, looking at their watches. When asked what they do, one of them answers:

”In the afternoon, when you see them sitting like this, /bends forward,,head in his hands/, looking down. Then you may say: ”Well, now we’ll take a coffee break”.

But one may also use participants’ perceived boredom, in order to shorten a meeting, as a Chair explained: ” Don’t let them open the window, do not take a coffee break. Such initiatives will make the meeting go on forever.”

If meeting participants sometimes have to engage in emotional management in order to hide being bored, representatives of the meeting industry instead promise “emotional achievements” by promises of engaging and involving meeting (Yang, 2000). The ambitions of the burgeoning meeting industry to shape more effective meetings, is partly founded on meeting designers’, facilitators’ and consultants’ promises to construct an affective atmosphere (Anderson Cederholm, 2010) that will ensure creativity, authenticity and intimacy.

Finally, as to the boring qualities of meetings as “fun-creators”, scholars have noted that fun may be found in constraining workplaces. (See Fine and Corte, 2017), ” fun is not merely pleasurable action but action that produces social cohesion, in contrast to alienating forces of routine and coercion.”

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Notes

¹ In Schwartzman's (1989) seminal work on meetings she writes about meeting critique, and exemplifies with "the committee" as the most ridiculed meeting form as ineffective. Recently, a large collection of various empirical studies, by Allen et.al. *The Cambridge Handbook of Meeting Science* (2015), investigated contemporary working life. Some authors in this collection also reflected meeting critique and mention meeting fatigue (Kello 2015), 'stressors' (Scott 2015), and 'meeting burnout' (Olien et al. 2015:17) among future research questions worthy of exploration.

² Det är också beklämmande med dessa eftermiddagsmöten: när man går dit är det ännu ljus i världen och fullt av medmänniskor, sedan sitter man innesluten i mötet, ofta med en stark känsla av att tiden inte rör sig, varken framåt eller bakåt, och när mötet är över och man kommer ut är det mörkt." (Lindgren, 1973:22)

³ <https://www.svd.se/svenska-chef-halften-av-alla-moten-meningslosa>

⁴ Such periods may be after lunch, and when police are questioned as they have already read their reports or during larger trials when part of the trial concern an accused having another lawyer (Lisa Flower, researching emotional themes pertaining to being a lawyer, personal communication).

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/jul/18/borderline-scribbles-readers-margin-doodles>

⁶ http://www.dagensps.se/nyheter/politik/partiledare-jagar-pokemon-go-pa-jobbet/?utm_source=rule&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dagliga_25aug_morgo
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⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2013/09/04/mccain-on-smartphone-poker-i-get-a-little-bored/#comments>

⁸ Entire TV comedy series are now made about this, for example *The Office* is based on working in a boring office and all the dull things that one has to put up with.