

# Drinking Coffee at the Workplace Work or Leisure?

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## Drinking coffee at the workplace

Work or leisure?

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### Abstract

Work and leisure are commonly viewed as two distinct activities. The blurred and dynamic boundaries between work and leisure are present in many peoples' everyday life, as well as in studies of boundaryless work and work-life balance. In this paper we examine the problems of rigid categorizations. Studying breaks at work may provide important information about human behaviour and organizational life, information we may partly overlook if we cate-

gorize them simply as non-work. Categories are part of the research processes, but we can experiment with categories and even create new ones, to add nuances and new perspectives to our studies.

**Keywords** #categorization, #work, #leisure, #workplace leisure behaviour; #boundaryless work

### **Work, leisure or both?**

Work and leisure are commonly viewed as dichotomous, and in management studies, leisure is often treated merely as a residual by-product of work (Beatty and Torbert 2003). The aim of this paper is to examine and question the relevance of this division of work and leisure in contemporary work life experiences. First we discuss the concept of work, specifically the changes in work towards immaterial labour (Lazzarato 1996) and boundaryless work (Kamp, Lund and Hvid 2011). Then we discuss leisure in relation to work and the research field of workplace leisure behaviour. We unfold the discussion and call attention to coffee drinking and coffee break routines at the workplace as a boundary zone between work and leisure. Pausing for coffee is much more than just a break from the 'real' or 'productive' work. In fact, any distinction between *work* and *leisure* is always a matter of perspective. Finally, we outline a few new research paths, which we believe can lead to a more nuanced understanding of the overlapping categories of work and leisure.

### **What is work? When and where does it take place?**

Work as a concept is widely used in both practice and in theory and it is essential to keep in mind that any distinction between what is work and what is not work is always political and could be drawn differently (Okhuysen et al. 2013). The blurred boundaries between work and leisure are present in many peoples' everyday life, as well as in studies of boundaryless work and work-life balance. Work activities, such as answering emails, seems to leak into all areas of life: family dinners, holidays and even sleepless nights (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan 2007). As Rosa (2013) demonstrates, technologies that were once expected to make work more efficient, and free up time to do other things, now permeate our lives and are part of a larger acceleration of society. The obvious production benefits of immaterial labour and boundaryless work is that value may be ex-

tracted from immaterial and social processes like networking and communication. Specifically, in this kind of work, the division between work and leisure is blurred. *Work* can be practiced *whenever* and *wherever*, potentially enhancing the time and space of work. This, we argue, is not necessarily a bad thing; it may provide employees with flexibility, freedom and potentially more meaningful or creative work. However, it also places a larger responsibility on the individual to manage this freedom and continuously balance creation and recreation. The industrial society with its eight hours of work, eight hours of leisure and eight hours of restitution (sleep) is no longer - if it ever were - the prevalent division in an economy resting increasingly on immaterial labour (Lazzarato 1996). Changes in the nature of work have also changed the relationship between work, employee and time: focus is now increasingly on getting the tasks done, on meeting deadlines and less on *how* and *where* we are, when we accomplish this (Kamp, Lund and Hvid 2011). Indeed, the division between what counts as work or leisure might be a question of retrospective evaluation: did the activity contribute to recreation or to the achievement of a given task? Did it foster important relationships or feelings of belonging, which in turn may enhance creativity, collaboration, and performance? Is this activity work, or is it leisure, or both? Is this even the right question to ask?

We can use music as an analogy. The jazz musician and composer Miles Davis recognized that the qualities of music is “not captured in the arrangement of the notes, but also in the arrangement of the silences between notes” (Elsbach and Hargadon 2006, 481). Following Miles Davis, if we want to recognize the qualities of many types of contemporary work, we may aim at studying the arrangements of both the notes and the silences. Can we conceptualize work more in line with the qualities and rhythm of jazz music? That is, to acknowledge that silence is part of the music and not something missing in between, just like seemingly non-work activities may in fact be part of the work? And can we go even further and claim that the notes are part of the silence, just like seemingly work activities may in fact be part of leisure? A musical piece to support this claim is John Cage’s composition *4’33”*, which instructs the performer(s) not to play their instrument(s) during the entire duration of four minutes and 33 seconds. The piece consists of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed. “There’s

no such thing as silence”, Cage claimed after the premiere in 1952 (Kostelanetz 2003). We do not suggest that there is no longer such things as *work* and *leisure*. Obviously there are. Rather, we should be inspired by Cage’s recognition of *all* the elements in a performance (or a life) and pay attention to the mutually constituent relationship and interplay between them.

### **What is leisure? When and where does it take place?**

Reviewing the diverse fields of leisure studies, Beatty and Torbert (2003) found three common approaches for defining leisure: (a) the time-based approach (how much time are people not-working?), (b) the activity-based approach (what do people do when they are not-working?), and (c) the intention-based approach (what is the intent behind a leisurely activity?) The time-based approach defines leisure by drawing a line between free time and constrained time. This reflects an industrialized view of the world in which work is scheduled first and everything else is free time. Leisure and work are thus mutually exclusive by definition. The activity-based approach defines leisure in terms of activities. This category of leisure studies focuses on tourism and recreation, and examines leisure activities such as watching TV, reading books, engaging in hobbies or volunteering. The third approach regards leisure as an inner attitude of free engagement and inquiry or contemplation. Aristotle’s philosophy provides the foundation for this approach. For Aristotelians, proper leisure is distinct from relaxation and amusement. Researchers following this approach define leisure as a capacity for silence, intentional listening, and receiving, thus linking leisure to personal development.

The meanings of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ change depending on one’s perspective, making it increasingly impossible to construe and uphold distinct categories. Accordingly, recent research seems to dissolve the two categories in diverse ways. For example, it is now acknowledged that creative leisure outside the workplace can enhance work performance (Eschleman et al. 2014). If higher levels of leisure behaviour outside of the workplace are found to reduce exhaustion and support motivation, it begs the question if transferring leisure behaviour to the workplace can also be beneficial for improving low levels of motivation (Lebbon and Hurley 2013). Workplace leisure behaviour can have both positive and negative

effects and is an object of study for efficiency or motivation purposes (e.g. Lebbon and Hurley 2013, Coker 2011).

Motivation is of great interest to corporations because unmotivated employees typically spend part of their workday engaging in workplace leisure behaviour such as Internet use, text messaging and personal phone calls. Lebbon and Hurley (2013) report that survey research has found that 44% of employees feel unmotivated to work and point to the fact that although U.S. employees work longer hours with less vacation time than employees working in the European Union, productivity remains at similar levels as those in the European Union. Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) note that organizations may increasingly begin to experience long-term underperformance and lack of creativity and innovation due to intense workload pressures and no real opportunities for recreation. Constant speed or acceleration of pace may make you move forward. However, it can take you in the wrong direction, towards failures, adverse events or even accidents, or it could be a short ride to stress and a state of burnout.

Leisure behaviour at work can both disrupt concentration during cognitively challenging tasks and potentially improve employee motivation (Lebbon and Hurley 2013, Trougakos et al. 2008). Lebbon and Hurley (2013) cautiously conclude that spending less than 15% of total work hours on leisure has a beneficial impact on the productivity. Waber et al. (2010) found that the most productive employees were those embedded within the strongest social groups. Their research also showed that giving employees breaks at the same time increased the strength of the social group. They conclude, that the informal context and the social networks of the group of employees are important and deserve attention, even in jobs that are typically not viewed as having a strong social component. Such findings are translated into recommendations for management strategies and workday organization. When managers try to restrict time spend on breaks for efficiency purposes, employees tend to move leisure behaviour outside the formal sites of managerial control (Stroebeak 2013). On the other hand, managers may also try to exploit the creative potential of breaks and schedule leisure-like activities, but what is often lost is precisely the informality of serendipitous interactions and free talk beyond direct observation by power holders such as managers and clients. In general, however,

breaks are often viewed as an individual function that allow employees to recharge, while little regard has been given to the idea that social interaction during breaks may provide employees with a valuable opportunity to discuss difficult issues as well as exchange knowledge about their jobs (Waber et al. 2010). From such an integrative perspective, leisure and leisure behaviour at work are not that easily recognized as distinct activities different from work. As mentioned, we will look at coffee drinking and coffee breaks as a social practice to illustrate this point.

### **Coffee breaks as boundary zones between work and leisure**

Two recent Danish workplace studies scrutinize coffee drinking and coffee break behaviour as an example of the blurred boundaries between work and leisure. Stroebaek (2013) identifies coffee breaks as an important factor for social and personal well-being within an emotionally taxing work environment, while Wegener (2014) analyses coffee as a boundary object and coffee drinking as a crucial activity for nurturing feelings of belonging. Stroebaek (2013) notes that the coffee break is an integral social practice that brings people together at work. Although this distinct social practice is suitable for studying workplace behaviour, coffee breaks at work are, she argues, not well researched. She concludes that 'it is desirable to bring coffee breaks and other "non-work related" social activities within a workplace out of the shadow and to put them into the spotlight of investigation. [...] Within the corners and corridors of workplaces, much social creativity is taking place that might, at first glance, seem unimportant for the researcher's attention' (Stroebaek 2013, pp. 395-396).

While we agree that coffee breaks may provide important information about human behaviour and organizational life, we do not find it productive to categorize them as non-work. It seems much more fruitful to study coffee as a boundary object that allow connections and engagement, and coffee breaks as boundary zones between what is formally categorized as work and non-work. We use the term 'boundary zone' as a way of conceptualizing such social practices where it is possible to integrate different perspectives (2003). In comparison, a boundary object refers to the artefact fulfilling a bridging function (Star 1989, Akkerman and Bakker 2011).

Boundary zones and boundary objects are associated with building relationships between domains and create an in-between context in its own right (Edwards, Biesta, and Thorpe 2009, Johnsson, Boud and Solomon 2012). We regard coffee as both a metaphorical and a tangible boundary object (at least if it is located in a cup), and the coffee break as a social boundary zone. A coffee break gives you access to, not just a stimulating cup of coffee, but also to the collegial community of fellow pausing employees with whom you can engage in the abovementioned informal talk. The coffee culture of Scandinavia in many ways resembles the culture of 'a cuppa tea' in the UK (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg 2007). Coffee is an essential part of showing hospitality and is traditionally integrated into the temporal structures of everyday life, such as the morning and afternoon breaks in the workplaces, where it is often accompanied with morning bread or afternoon cake on special occasions, such as birthdays or anniversaries. Nevertheless, coffee drinking is often associated with ineffectiveness. As mentioned by Wegener (2014), an often heard complaint is that employees in the elderly care sector are 'taking too many coffee breaks' instead of spending time with the elderly residents. Coffee drinking, in some work places, is thus a metaphor for a lack of professionalism. However, at some workplaces, a joint coffee break is used for informal discussions or negotiations (Kjeldgaard and Ostberg 2007). Or as Stroebaek (2013, p. 382), referring Topik (2009) puts it: 'the phrase "let's have a cup of coffee" has come to mean "let's have a conversation"'. The coffee break can thus reflect work / non-work relationships. The informal and spontaneous encounters and conversations around coffee drinking at work are relevant to researchers as important boundary zones of both productivity and recreation.

### **Challenging categories to invent new ones**

While reviewing the two research fields 'the boundaryless work' and 'workplace leisure behaviour' it struck us that if we want to know more about work, we must visit people at their homes, and maybe even join them in their leisure activities outside the workplace. And if we want to know more about leisure, we need to be located at workplace desks and in corners and corridors, out of managerial sight. It may be difficult to tell work from leisure for both the researcher and the people researched. The time, space and



purpose dimensions of work and leisure are fluid. Theoretical concepts may explain phenomena encountered in the field, however, these same concepts also shape the researcher's attention and the language used to describe what they see (Hasse 2011). Researchers need to challenge their categories by paying attention to their own intellectual technologies and, in general, the material and rhetorical practices of research.

As noted by Bowker and Star (2000, p. 287), concepts and categories are historically situated. Moreover, they do not exist in the world as such. Categories are the researcher's constructs, always based on preferences and experiences and situated within the 'optical community' in which a researcher has been socialized and trained to view the world (Zerubavel 1991;1999). When we order information we produce certain forms of organization, which in turn produces certain material arrangements, certain subject positions and certain forms of knowledge (Edwards and Fowler 2007). As stated by Weick (2006, p. 1724), we need to step back from categorisations and actively explore the activity of categorising in order to expand our repertoire and improve our alertness. We can experiment with categories and explore the relationships between them with the aim of adding new theoretical perspectives, and sharpen our methodologies. Dissolving the a priori categories of work and leisure may be a way forward to learn more about human behaviour – both inside and outside the workplace. This, in turn, may contribute to more nuanced theories of how work and leisure activities are practiced, and how they may relate to each other. We may find that we can only tell 'efficient' time (work) from 'idle' time (leisure) retrospectively. If we cannot categorize 'work' and 'leisure' in any meaningful way in advance, we may need to create novel categories such as 'restful work' and 'dutiful leisure'. Doing so may be hard work and great fun at the same time.

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