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Belonging at work: the experiences, representations and meanings of belonging

Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores what *belonging is* through the represented experience of people at work. Our aim is to investigate employees' interpretations of belonging at work and its interrelation with the material, aesthetic and emotional aspects associated to the where, the how, the when workplace is inhabited.

Design/methodology/approach

In line with the *practice turn* in social sciences, our study uses the visual method (snaplogs), which includes pictures and texts.

Findings

Belonging is situated in and integrated with social interactions, materiality, emotions and aesthetics. Belonging is about: 1) being part of something, 2) the process of becoming through constant mediation between material aspects and social components, 3) the process of experiencing boundaries and 4) the attempt to perform, engage and participate (and find spaces for shared practices) in a workplace. Together, they constitute the situatedness, the here and now, of experiences of belonging and the perceived interpretation of being one among equals across organizational boundaries.

Research limitations

Data were only collected at one point in time. We also relied on our own interpretations of pictures and texts and did not involve the informants in the analysis.

Practical implications

Being, becoming and belonging are comprised of material, social and affective dimensions. These dimensions should be addressed in order for employees to belong at work.

Originality/value

This study contributes to the belonging literature on perceived interpretations of what belonging is at work. The paper is also original in terms of the visual method used to grasp the practice representation of belonging experiences.

Keywords: belonging, learning, materiality, spaces, socio-material practices, places, workplace

Introduction

The complexity, rapid changes, globalisation, education and digitalisation in our society challenge workplaces in substantially new ways. As argued by Fenwick (2010), “Work life is fully entangled with material practice, technologies, vehicles, architectural spaces, roads and roadblocks, nature and objects of all kinds, in ways that are often not even acknowledged in the preoccupation with understanding human activity and meaning-making” (p. 104). Hence, workplace learning calls for an understanding of the dynamics at play when socio-material aspects are considered. To be more specific, workplace learning is nurtured both by relational, social and cultural aspects and by the material conditions in which actions and practices take place, in the connectedness of action or texture as temporal, spatial, bodily and material (Elkjaer and Mossfeldt Nickelsen, 2016; Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002; Hopwood, 2014).

Belonging is critical for understanding individuals and the processes of inhabiting and contributing to the workplace. Belonging to the workplace, and belonging at work, is linked to the possibility of sharing practices in community, creating meanings, participating in common goals, learning through participation, grasping new shapes of identity through relationships with others and changing personal investments, representations and growth.

Workplace learning thus requires an understanding of the practices and places as the core spaces in which belonging materialises and community forms and develops (Fenwick and Nerland, 2014). Workplaces act as mediators in people’s experiences, transforming places into spaces (i.e., the “practiced place”) filled with practices and meanings (Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010; Mengis et al, 2018). Regarding current organizational contexts, these spaces and places for employees to practice are expanding. Globalisation and digitalisation create possibilities of being in different sites at the same time, and smart working reduces the need for physical offices and boundaries and enhances the capacity to work from anywhere at any time.

Investigating belonging to, or belonging at, the workplace in the changing nature of space and place is central to understanding workplace learning. Belonging is a cloud of connected concepts ranging from fundamental human needs (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), social identity (Brewer, 2007), identification and meaning-making (Wenger, 2009) and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to experiences as negotiated in communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Wenger, 1998, 2003). Practitioners from different sites and geographical locations practicing around the same epistemic objects might develop a shared sense of belonging (Fenwick and Nerland, 2014, p. 28), and this dynamic interdependency is even stronger when considering the physical places in which objects materialise. Therefore, we

find it to be particularly relevant to study such boundaries (and the involved materialities) applied to the sense of belonging, from which new processes of learning begin and are articulated.

This paper explores what *belonging* is through the represented experience of people at work. Our aim is to investigate employees' interpretations of belonging at work and its interrelation with the material, aesthetic and emotional aspects associated with where, how and when the workplace is inhabited. We address these issues through an inductive study.

The two components of the term "belonging" help us play with some hidden meanings of the concept. "Be" and "longing", or "longing to be", present a view of *belonging moved by affective dimensions*. "Be" and "long", or "being for long", present an alternative view of *belonging moved by spatial and temporal dimensions*. Following the affective dimension, belonging is at play when we experience practices of being in a social and relational place (see Wenger, 1998) and the concept of being and belonging in a community of practices. Our approach and ambition is to consider and investigate belonging both as a socio-relational experience and under more material conditions, made of spatial and temporal features. These conditions represent the environment for possibilities of belonging to a community, its rules, relations, expectations, identity, creation of meaning and learning (Berg and Kreiner, 1990; Gherardi and Strati, 2013; Kornberg and Clegg, 2004; Nicolini, 2012; Yanow, 1993; Van Marrewijk, 2009).

What belonging might be

Belonging is known to be an essential human need and critical to human existence. The need to belong influences human cognition, emotions and behaviour (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Malone *et al.*, 2012). Belonging relates to gaining acceptance and avoiding rejection by being part of interpersonal events and one's environment (Hagerty *et al.*, 1992; Hofmann *et al.*, 2012). The social psychological literature therefore demonstrates reduced prosocial behaviour and increased engagement in interpersonally harmful behaviours when people do not experience belonging (Baumeister, 2012; De Cremer, 2002; Thau *et al.*, 2007; Twenge *et al.*, 2007). "*Belonging to*" refers to belonging as a relational phenomenon, in which people feel valued by being part of a group or an organization (Hagerty *et al.*, 1992). From a philosophical perspective, belonging is a "process of creating a sense of identification with one's social, relational and material surroundings" (May, 2011, p. 368) and the sense of belonging to a

community of people through social relationships, geographic places or specific localities (Miller, 2003).

The perceived belonging of individuals is, however, more than the dichotomous classification of “I belong” or “I do not belong”. Belonging is the foundation of social identity, where the degree of people’s perceived belonging to groups comprises cognitive, emotional and evaluative elements (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Brewer 2007; Tajfel, 1972). Creating a sense of belonging to a community is therefore reinforced when it incorporates a person’s understanding of his or her identity: “Who am I?” or “Who do I want to be?” (Child and Rodrigues, 2003; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Hence, in accordance with the argument that social identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), Pickett *et al.* (2002) show that individuals opt to identify socially with a particular group when it allows for belonging and uniqueness.

The learning literature, developed from the original contribution of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991), stating that learning is relational and culturally situated in social practices, argues that belonging influences possibilities for being invited to learn, participate, connect and be included (McClure and Brown, 2008). Situated learning revolves around gaining access and achieving full participation through the dual processes of belonging and negotiating meaning in social relationships within a specific social and cultural context (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003; Lave, 1997; Wenger, 2007; Wenger, 2000). Social and cultural learning processes therefore affect being engaged in a work/organizational experience. The question is what types of social engagement and what types of cultural participation create the best conditions for a dynamic and virtuous circle between learning and belonging. For a learner to engage in learning, the challenge can typically be in-groups that have incongruent identities with others (out-groups) or when a learner does not want to conform to a group’s identity as a required basis for belonging. Carlile (2004) argues that knowledge boundaries between different social groups create a stronger sense of identity and belonging within a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, incongruent identities might result in less social interaction and engagement (Delahunty *et al.*, 2014).

Communities of practice (CoPs) is a well-known concept that provides further passages to situated learning scenarios in which individuals discover what characterises their group’s social practices (Elkjaer, 2004; Gherardi, 2009, 2010; Swan *et al.*, 2002; Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Situated learning in CoPs involves integrated learning processes that combine learning as

belonging (to the community), learning as becoming (because all learning has a significant influence on who we become), learning as practicing and learning as experiencing (Wenger, 1998). CoPs were then transferred to management domains by Brown and Duguid (2001), where most definitions of CoPs focus on the importance of shared practice, interests and knowledge, as well as common repertoires, face-to-face interactions, frequent and mutual engagement, and the informality and self-organising character of CoPs (Agterberg *et al.*, 2010; Mork *et al.*, 2008; Van Baalen *et al.*, 2005; Wenger, 1998). In other words, a virtuous circle of participation exists where the more people participate, the more they learn and the more they identify with a group (Thompson, 2005).

Accordingly, a CoP refers to a group of people who are spontaneously and informally bound through their sense of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of common resources. Participants are informally bound together by collectively developed knowledge, social interactions, established norms and relationships reflecting their interactions and communal resources including language, routines, artefacts and stories (Hislop, 2004; Lesser and Everest, 2001; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2000). On the other hand, lacking a sense of community or feeling disconnected from a learning community would result in feelings of isolation, lower self-confidence and inability to portray who one is (Delahunty *et al.*, 2014; Filstad, 2014). Wenger (1998) says little about potential conflicts and tension in learning together in CoPs (Masika and Jones, 2016; Mork *et al.*, 2010). What he does refer to, however, is identity construction as ongoing processes of negotiation within a CoP, arguing for the integrated processes of being, belonging and learning through negotiative participation in CoPs. The importance of understanding belonging and identity as integrated processes is also supported by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) within the concept of identity work through people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identity construction in organizational discourses and struggles.

Wenger (1998) argues that in order to make sense of identity formation and learning in CoPs, three modes of belonging need to be considered. The first mode is *engagement*, which is the active negotiation of meaning through the formation of trajectories and the unfolding of histories of practice. Mutual engagement creates a sense of shared reality in which to act and construct an identity. Shared histories can lead to negotiation of meaning but can also create barriers to learning through their power of sustaining social identity. The second is *alignment*, which coordinates energies and activities so that participants' behaviours are in line with the

perceived collective enterprise and shared goals in order to contribute to broader structures. The participants do what they need to do to become part of something big, as a process of becoming. Alignment can amplify participants' power and sense of the possible but can also be blinding and disempowering, making participants vulnerable to delusion and abuse. The third mode, *imagination*, refers to extrapolating one's own experiences through time and space. It is about constructing an image of oneself, one's community and the world, which enables development of a reflective orientation towards one's situation beyond direct engagement (Belle *et al.*, 2015; Wenger, 2000). Imagination can create relationships of identity anytime throughout history. Imagination is illustrated by Wenger (2000) with a picture of two stonecutters, doing the same job, who differ in their sense of what they are doing and of themselves as individual stonecutters. One is "cutting a perfectly square shape" while the other is "building a cathedral". Hence, when focusing on imagination, attention is drawn from the more visible engagement and alignment with the social processes of doing and practicing, where employees' identities are formulated through relationships with others (Belle *et al.*, 2015).

However, Wenger (2000) argues that most of what participants do involves a combination of engagement, imagination and alignment. He therefore states that "to differ is due to different required conditions to work on these three modes to get a sense of belonging. Each has different and complementary strengths and weaknesses and they work best in combination" (p. 187). To our knowledge, there is a lack of empirical studies investigating the characteristics of belonging at work, how the different modes claimed in the literature are, or are not, integrated and in what way the new patterns and changing nature of how and where people work are linked to belonging. Therefore, our ambition is to address these issues in an inductive study in which we leave it up to our participants to illustrate and explain their sense of belonging at work through its link with the material, aesthetic and emotional aspects associated with workplaces and the practiced place.

Methods

To investigate what belonging is at work, we used inductive methods and explored participants' own interpretations of belonging or not belonging at work, keeping an open mind about what belonging is to them. In line with our approach to the practice and material turn in social sciences (Bramming *et al.* 2012; Gherardi, 2017), we found that visual methods would be best

suites to highlight the essential performative aspects of belonging and the role of materiality and spaces rather than only using the representational nature of belonging through words. Our choice of method was snaplogs, which highlight the point of performativity and situatedness.

Use of snaplogs is a qualitative technique that asks participants to take their own photos (snap) and write short texts (log) about the photos. Snaplogs are a type of participant-only photographic production which requires organizational members to take pictures in a field setting (Ray and Smith, 2012). Given that we investigate belonging, snaplogs enable us to tap into perceptions of the performative aspects of belonging, which are not necessarily a part of the participants' awareness or easily articulated verbally. Using such multi-method approach (composed by the richness of the visual aspect and the narrative potential intrinsic in the written words) gives us holistic and direct information and opens up the field to speak to us (Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Gorli *et al.*, 2012). Ray and Smith (2012) contend that photographic research has the potential to capture aspects of organizational reality in real time without distortion caused by other methods (for example, questionnaires or interviews). Using photos in organizational research allows participants to include actions, emotions and aesthetics (Vince and Warren, 2012) and multiple coexisting elements (such as actions, places, spaces and material artefacts).

The participants voluntarily produced their own pictures and texts. The authors did not provide any guidelines to participants, except for asking them to take only one photograph with their smartphones that illustrates what belonging at work means to them and then asking them to write short texts explaining why they think their pictures illustrate belonging. The authors emphasised that there were no right or wrong pictures or texts, nor any definition of belonging, and simply asked for their pictures of belonging at work.

The authors used convenience samples from their networks or from their classes for a total of 51 participants. The first group of 22 participants was recruited through the authors' LinkedIn social network and by using a snowball method, whereby people were asked to participate via the authors' Facebook accounts and other social media. The next group of 29 participants included 18 part-time students attending an executive course at the Norwegian Business School, Oslo, Norway, and 11 participants from a master of science in management course, an executive course for employees, at the Università Cattolica, Milan, Italy. Forty-nine per cent of the participants were women and 51% were men; 63% were Norwegian, 22% were

Italian and the remaining 15% were people from a variety of countries ranging from Holland to Albania to Vietnam. Ages ranged from 20s to 50s.

Most participants took only one picture; however, four participants took more than one picture, either using a collage or a series of pictures. The texts ranged from 22 words to 300 words; some contributors used bullet points, while others provided detailed explanations.

For the scope of this paper, and with the specific aim to engage in exploratory research through the snaplog method, the authors concentrate on the outcomes produced by the collection of photographs and texts. The data came from two sources: visual information (what was captured in the photographs and images) and written information (what was written by the participants in the texts). The first step of our analysis was to examine the texts and photographs, summarise the texts and analyse the text/picture relationships and the contents of the photographs. The pictures and texts were explored by the authors inspecting the pictures' content and then using thematic analysis for both pictures and texts. First, the authors individually examined the pictures, looking for what was in the foreground and background, the presence of people, objects or places, and noted their findings. The texts were all translated into English, and then each author explored the text and noted keywords and phrases. These individual observations were then shared and discussed all together. By examining the texts and the photos first separately and then together, we were able to additionally analyse possible tensions between pictures and texts, and consequently, a large variety of content in terms of perceptions and expressions of belonging was explored. Our inductive approach gave rise to challenges in our analysis due to the interpretation of both the illustrations and texts provided. The more a study is coherently assumed as inductive, the higher is the challenge to link with the complexity of the analysis of the subjects' experiences and data provided (Scaratti et al 2017). Through a number of discussions on possible interpretations among us, clarifying our different approaches to our own interpretations and perceptions in the analysis, we were able to discuss and identify some themes and common ground for the where, what, when and how of belonging at work. In addition, we were able to explore possible linkages to performance, participation and learning. Using snaplogs enabled us to gain insight into overall patterns; however, we did not attempt to give a complete summary of each participant's perception of belonging because this was not the goal of the inquiry.

Results: the components of the experience and representation of belonging

Belonging as being part of..

Participants took pictures of symbolic objects (e.g., bells, lighthouses and flowers), for which they provided interpretive and explanatory texts, and concrete pictures of teams (e.g., working, playing and eating), for which they provided more descriptive texts. For example, a picture of an orchid is followed by a text explaining that the orchid represents how the institution, through small gestures, shows that it genuinely cares about and values its workers. Another picture shows a team eating lunch together, and the participant describes that belonging at work is experienced through sharing daily lunches.

Being part of something could mean a group, an activity, the organization, or colleagues. For example, some participants described belonging as being part of their organization's strategy or initiatives, while others described being part of a team or group. Doing activities with others at work figured in many of the pictures, from bowling to eating, playing, dancing and working. Belonging is represented either explicitly through activities or through relationships with other people.

Being part of something at work emerged from various sources of belonging. Several participants referred to the organization as the source of belonging. One claim was that an organization is responsible for creating an authentic and caring work atmosphere that fosters belonging. Another comment was that the company "competence and mutual support between colleagues is in the blood of the organization". Other comments focussed on relationships with co-workers and stated that "belonging at work consists of the small social moments" and "colleagues who enjoy what they do and are positive". The informants' texts indicate that belonging can be both interpersonal and initiated by individuals or context-related and originating from an organization or connected to professions. Breadth, creativity and variety were reflected in the participants' responses. To them, belonging also included different aspects of identity and material dimensions, not only social relationship components.

Belonging as becoming (the dialectics between material and relational dimensions)

Belonging appears as a dynamic movement between entering a material dimension and a relational one. The participants clearly articulated these dimensions, which sometimes overlap and at other times remain separate or even in tension. Looking at the images independently, a substantial number of buildings, corridors, desks, computers, logos, clocks and other artefacts can be seen. In their illustrations of materiality and objects, people were seldom present.

Something similar happened in images with people. When individual or groups of colleagues appeared in the pictures, material objects rarely accompanied them (except for the appearance of chairs in which people sit and chat). From the images, one can therefore see that the participants often separated the material and the relational when illustrating what belonging is to them.

When words accompanied images of material objects, they recalled relational meanings (although in the images, relational component was totally omitted, i.e., no people were present). For example, a photo of an ordinary computer combined with a participant's written words brought people to the forefront (e.g., the participant recalled in writing the meetings, conversations and circulation of rules and values that were communicated through the computer). A clash between what an image represents to an external observer and the role it takes on when accompanied by the words of a participant was observed. Words attach the informants' meanings to the images; the same level of understanding is not reached if an image is viewed alone. This does not happen the other way around: when words accompany an image of people chatting, the words seem to act as an expansion of the meaning that is already very clear by the presence of the relational dimensions in the image. For example, an image of people talking is very understandable for an external observer (who sees people talking), and the text elaborates on the image rather than introducing or adding materiality. By using these two media together (images and text), incongruence between an image and text can be detected when an image reproduces objects and materiality, and congruence can be detected when an image reproduces people. Although the presence of materiality was pervasive in many pictures, the meaning was unknown until words were used to explain them. Where objects and materiality were represented in the pictures, the materiality could take an external observer far away in terms of possible interpretations of belonging. If an image is not accompanied by a story of the building illustrating belonging and not belonging, then the meaning will be lost to an external observer. It is only when the text is accessed that one may grasp the multiple meanings and understanding of belonging, especially related to materiality and the use of artefacts such as information technology. Examples are shown in Pictures 1–5.

Insert Picture 1 here

Looking at Picture 1, one sees an anonymous building, modern and typical of current worldwide architectural choices (iron and metal, offices as boxes). When one reads the text, one encounters seemingly unexpected connections to brands and values and the feelings of pride and belonging. Belonging to the organization that owns the building “where I meet all my colleagues”, a logo

that “represents a brand and values, what the company means to me” and “a canteen where all that discussion of ideas, socializing happens across departments” all explain what belonging is.

Insert Picture 2 here

The clock in Picture 2 could be a normal, neutral and functional tool to determine time during working hours. However, for this participant, the clock illustrates feelings related to her private life, having something from home to feel more at home when at work.

Insert Pictures 3, 4, 5 here

We received many pictures of laptops followed by worlds of meanings such as relationality, culture and feelings (Picture 3: laptop as “mutual support”/“availability to colleagues”/“relational trust”; Picture 4: laptop as “positive culture”/“spirit of mutual help”; Picture 5: laptop as “both joy and pain”). These laptops appear as artefacts and objects, as “work tools”. However, when one reads the texts, the laptops become a “whole world to be explored” through interactions and relationships with others.

In contradiction to pictures that included objects such as laptops, a clock and an office building, which constituted a substantial part of the total pictures, pictures that included images of people (often smiling and/or posing to illustrate relationships and/or collectives) were more self-explanatory. Pictures 6–10 give examples.

Insert Pictures 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 here

In the pictures of employees “experiencing a scene together”, the keywords are conversations, relationships, togetherness, listening, engaging, committing, all contributing and being one among equals, which are all related to becoming someone in relation to the social, cultural and material dynamics at work.

Belonging as experiencing boundaries

Our participants clarified the boundaries of belonging: existence to non-existence, degrees, and spheres of a boundary experience at work. One picture illustrates the absence of belonging, exemplifying the border between belonging and not belonging (Picture 11). The picture shows an empty corridor, closed doors, no colleagues to meet during lunch hours, limited sharing of

experiences, “sharp elbows” and few social arenas. The non-existence of belonging is indicated by the absence of people and opportunities for being together and is represented by the physical space devoid of people.

Insert Picture 11 here

In other examples (Pictures 12 and 13), when reading the texts, we found that the demarcation of belonging appeared concrete and pictures illustrated these physical boundaries. The pictures are of turnstiles through which employees enter and leave the workplace. Belonging exists within the turnstiles but ceases to exist upon exiting the building. The physical boundaries were described: “When you get in to the turnstiles, you find the whole organization ... the turnstiles act as dividers for enclosing and containing my whole work world. It is a physical and material barrier. To be honest, it is also very normative because you cannot get out before a certain (given) time.... It is a sense of belonging, but a little ‘forced’ one”.

Insert Pictures 12 and 13 here

In other instances of Pictures 12 and 13, the existence of belonging was not evaluated for the overall workplace but varied within the job and was represented in degrees of strong to weak belonging. Boundaries of belonging were found within a person’s job. One participant described gradations of belonging at work depending on the task at hand. “The main belonging is together with my colleagues”, she stated, but their work took them to other institutions to which they did not strongly belong. “Our service comes into the school with an outside perspective without loyalties so that we can see the bigger picture of the organization and what we should change. Too strong belonging to the school could prevent good systems work”.

Insert Picture 14 here

For some participants, belonging at work encompassed the private sphere, extending the borders of belonging at work to require inclusion of one’s private life. These pictures and accounts of belonging at work were associated with “opening up” one’s private life or connecting one’s private life with work. The previously mentioned clock (Picture 2) is an example. Here, the informant described a sense of belonging when she could bring private articles from home to work. A second example was a work-arranged initiative where employees were encouraged to bring their families to work (Picture 17). “One of these initiatives has happened today: all the

employees' children have been invited and hosted for one day. The idea is to make them experience the parents' world outside home, where parents spend the many hours without their sons and daughters. Everybody is invited to participate...". A clear demarcation of belonging to the work sphere is contested by these accounts. Demarcations of where and when people belong at work ranged from physical places (the turnstiles) to more fluid understandings in terms of degree (depending on the job task or group) to belonging in the work sphere requiring crossing over into the private sphere.

Belonging as performing

Belonging as performing together in shared activities was evident across the group of participants but not always by addressing specific work goals. Through verbs, participants described their belonging in a way that was closely related to photographs of action. In the texts, statements such as "I am doing what I love; it's engaging and motivating and gives me a sort of belonging" and "I feel belonging because I am involved in important processes and decisions" can be found.

Insert Pictures 15, 16, 17, 18 here

From the pictures, we observe that belonging takes place when individuals perform activities at work and outside of work, in both formal and informal social arenas. Whether dancing at work (Picture 15), going bowling after work (Picture 16) or holding team competitions or celebrating a holiday (Picture 17), belonging was based on engaging in activities together.

One participant argued that working in itself is critical for belonging and that belonging is not just being with others but comes from doing work together. The text for Picture 19 describes: "The ship's bell rings every time someone has got a job (they are a public work service). But this also symbolizes that I have a valuable job. This is the same for my colleagues and my employer. I feel belonging to a community that has the same goals, namely to help people back to work and therefore back to belonging".

Insert Picture 19 here

Other examples of belonging also confirm the importance of performing activities together. Belonging can be felt through participating in large overall goals, such as developing a strategy together, as well as through simply partaking in minor activities such as meeting colleagues over lunch, talking or having a cup of coffee.

Discussion: belonging at work

The aim of this paper was to explore our participants' subjective interpretations of belonging at work, as well as possible links between belonging and socio-material dimensions, following the different modes of belonging in literature.

Addressing belonging at work implies putting together many associations of ideas, experiences, places, activities and people that inhabit the workplace scene. Such richness fills in the concept of belonging with a complexity of meanings that the snaplog method helps to nurture. We found snaplogs to be useful because they provided an inductive design with no prior interpretations or guidelines on what belonging might be. The illustrations provide an immediate feeling of what social, material, physical and practiced spaces affect belonging. The images and texts captured a wide variety of accounts that enabled us to explore the complexity and variety of belonging at work, including multiple representations and interpretations of belonging across individuals. A great deal of variety was found in how participants, illustrated with pictures and explained through texts what belonging is. This can extend knowledge of what belonging is and how belonging is felt, perceived and understood by people at work.

In our analysis, belonging surfaced as: 1) the experience of being part of something, 2) the process of becoming through a constant mediation between material aspects and social components, 3) the process of experiencing boundaries and 4) the attempt to perform (and find space for shared practices) in a workplace.

The fundamental need to belong is reflected in the theme of *being part of something* (the group, the organization or one or more colleagues, with close relationships to who the person wants to be [identity, in relation to the other]). Belonging includes the material dimension of where a person belongs.

Belonging is always a situated and dynamic experience. It is about belonging here and now, through activities, common goals, achieving something together, being proud of the workplace and being part of something on equal terms. Within the situated learning approach, Lave and Wenger's early work (1991) argued for the importance of the dual process of belonging and negotiating meaning through shared identities, which later was followed up by Wenger (2000). This is where the link between belonging and becoming can be found because through the active, participated and engaged experience in a workplace and within processes of

meaning creation, we understand what we belong to, where we can grow and develop and how we can nurture new social practices and individual/organizational learning. *Becoming*, for our participants, is about engaging in different activities, sharing stories and working with each other's best interests in mind, creating a sort of common ground where everyone is equal. Accordingly, Lave and Wenger (1991) use the term "legitimate peripheral participation", where becoming is about moving from being a peripheral member to established participation in communities of practice at work. Becoming, to our participants, is often a question of being appreciated for who you are more than your place in the hierarchy, or what the literature refers to as the feeling of being unique or experiencing oneness with a social group or practice at work (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Pickett *et al.*, 2002).

Becoming is fuelled by social, material and relational dynamics, including tensions. It is in the becoming that engagement is fundamental but also where negotiation of meaning is central for learning how to belong. This dual process of belonging and negotiating meaning in social practices therefore affects to what extent participants are part of social practices (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003; Wenger, 2007), boundaries for being and becoming and therefore possible hindrances for belonging. Our participants' perceptions related to being equal, uniqueness and so on, and, to a large extent, focusing on informal social practices; thus, the formal organization or structure can be one boundary. Another is leaders; lack of leaders, to our knowledge (because they did not describe them as leaders if they were in some pictures), might be another boundary. The private life versus work life can be yet another boundary given that the "practiced place" can be anywhere, in local and extended contexts (Fenwick and Nerland, 2014), where the material world becomes even more dominated (Gherardi and Strati 2013; Nicolini, 2012). Our study pinpoints some of these challenges due to our participants' argument for the importance of the face-to-face interactions, being together, achieving something together and engaging in informal activities together, and the situatedness, to a large extent, requires being in the same social practice, the here and now. As argued by Wenger in 1998 (before the digital age as we experience it today), the affective dimension is being in a social and relational place. The picture of computers represented substitutes for a "real workplace" but moreover combining private life with work life due to distance or family or creating their own workplace but still looking for other options. Creating a social community "on-line" to replace possibilities for physically being at work was not at all confirmed in our study. It is more about convenience than a means to be part of or belong at work. We therefore argue that belonging at work is challenged by the conditions that the digital age represents, at

least until we find or create new ways of interacting and/or overcome the barriers of not being physically in the same place and how digital solutions can help overcome these barriers.

We have discussed our results in relation to being part of something and becoming in relation to the dynamics and social and material dimension, but also the tension and negotiations of becoming and, finally, possible boundaries and the importance of performing and engagement for belonging at work.

The different modes claimed in the literature are, or are not, integrated

Wenger's (1998) first mode, belonging as engagement, is where participants create a shared reality in which to act. Belonging as engagement was shown in pictures of colleagues being together for lunch, dancing together, bowling, solving work assignments together or engaging in other forms of common formal or informal activities. Our participants referred to activities in which all participated on equal terms, not necessarily highlighting negotiations of meaning, but rather talking about shared histories. The second mode, belonging as alignment, was seen in photos of computers or a map of a firm's European destinations and text on the broader enterprise and its connections. Alignment is about becoming part of something bigger and everything being possible. The third mode, belonging as imagination, was seen in pictures of an orchid, clock or empty corridor. However, it was also included in all pictures taken. Imagination is about creating an image of personal experience in which participants differently sense the same experiences. The picture of the empty corridor provides different imaginations and perceptions of personal experience through time and space. Wenger's (1998) argument is that these modes have different and complementary strengths and weaknesses and therefore work best in combination. We also find it difficult to contradict Wenger's (1998) modes of belonging because he argues that the bottom line of belonging is engagement. However, the modes are, in general, difficult to grasp and certainly difficult to apply in terms of how to facilitate belonging at work. We find that our studies contribute to what belonging is in a more practical way through our participants' perceptions of experiences in their daily lives at work.

Across all participants, the importance of belonging at work seemed to radiate. One informant not only recognized the value of a community at work for belonging but also claimed that having a job is the essence of belonging in a society in the first place. Belonging can occur in many situations and through many different types of interactions. In some situations, the belonging–not belonging continuum seems clearly defined, whereas in other instances, there

are degrees of belonging and overlaps between personal and work life. The boundaries of belonging are not consistent across participants or even individuals within their jobs. The link between belonging and identity as becoming is acknowledged by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003). They argue that individuals and groups strive to shape their identities in an ongoing struggle of belongingness. Struggles of belonging or not wanting to belong are also argued for by Delahunty *et al.* (2014), where not belonging makes people unable to portray their identities and who they are. Hence, not just engagement but also possibilities for engagement are crucial for belonging. It is about being invited in, having access to communities at work that are often informal. A number of photos were taken in informal settings at or in connection to work, with no formal leader responsible for the activities, which could be a reason some participants said that they did not belong at work. However, the literature on belonging focusses just on that, belonging, and does not explore why employees do not belong at work. Not belonging can be understood in the here and now; as one of the participants explained, “We were struggling, it was challenging, but we made it! Hence, we are proud of our performances and the belonging lies in having mutual experiences, where everyone had an important contribution to the achievement”. These experiences create histories and common experiences, where belonging can emerge within communities for those who have access to and possibilities for engaging in these communities.

People in the digital age: belonging between materiality, sociality and practiced places

We found, in line with Jaitli and Hua (2013), that belonging needs to be understood in relation to relevant material and physical spaces. Belonging is bodily, as claimed by Yakhlef (2010), and for that reason, our participants often express emotion when explaining why they belong or do not belong. It is about the longing to belong. Gherardi (2017) argues that researchers need to explore materiality as being and belonging, embedded and situated in the social and cultural relationships at work. This is evident in many of the images and texts used by the informants in which belonging was linked to feelings, emotions, learning, participating, connecting and being included (as predicted by McClure and Brown, 2008; Wenger, 2000). Exploring belonging means accounting for belonging with its multitude of meanings and allowing for a wider understanding that includes being and becoming. As such, we find our study to be an important contribution. We found that not only did interpretations and impressions develop, but so did the salience of the tensions between some of the texts and photos. This might be due to

materiality and relations being treated separately and not, as argued by Gherardi (2017), because the two are interrelated and embedded in practice. Within a situated approach to belonging (and learning), we can direct our attention to where the bodily experience stems from (i.e., the material dimension in which we move and act). These spaces (practiced places) become sources of imagination about who we are, what we are called to do or to become, and how.

Through the exploration of participants' representations of belonging, we grasped a vivid experience of belonging as engaging in social and material practices at work. Furthermore, we found that the where, how and when of belonging are challenged with how the new work life is developing concerning material practices, spaces, roads, roadblocks, nature and objects of all kinds (Fenwick, 2010). The where, how and when of practiced space and the where, how and when of participants' social interactions have consequences for belonging at work.

Concluding remarks

Previous literature does not account for materiality in belonging, which is problematic. Through our study, which used an inductive and exploratory effort to grasp the represented experiences of people at work, we found that exploring materiality, but also emotions and aesthetics, increases the understanding of belonging, which also adds to the literature on modes of belonging. Understanding belonging is about addressing several aspects that influence belonging simultaneously and not isolating one aspect on behalf of another. Belonging at work is about one's creation of meaning and appearance and one's social construction of belonging at work and to work. Instead of one formula for belonging, a number of central elements for belonging derived from multiple sources were found: social relationships, common activities, symbols, artefacts, profession, inhabited or empty spaces, objects and reference points for the work practices. It was also found that trust, being one among equals, informally bonding at lunch and other meeting spaces, contributing in the best interest of the group, achievements and taking care of each other are important for belonging.

These results can be beneficial to those organizations willing to explore the lived and practiced experiences of their employees, both in search of their position with respect to activities and to meanings associated with such activities and their professional development (the being, the becoming, the belonging to performances and across boundaries). This is

especially relevant in the actual time during which workplaces are disrupted by different locations, size and place reduction and flexibility of work with a possible impact on the belonging experience.

Future studies

One limitation of our study is the fact that data were collected at only one point in time and so are unable to fully capture the dynamic nature of belonging. This paper also relied on the authors' interpretations of pictures and texts; informants were not involved in the analysis. This is a promising pathway to pursue in future studies, where the efforts to work on people's representations could be combined with reflexive sessions in which the creation of meaning occurs together with the data analysis and elaborations.

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