



The Interconnection between Mental Health, Work and Belonging: A Phenomenological Investigation

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Abstract

It is well-known that a sense of belonging is crucial in relation to gaining and maintaining sound mental health. Work is also known to be an essential aspect of recovery from mental health problems. However, there is scant knowledge of what a sense of belonging in the workplace represents. This study explores the nature and meaning of a sense of belonging in the workplace as experienced by persons struggling with mental health issues.

Using a descriptive phenomenological methodology, sixteen descriptions of the lived experience of belonging in the workplace were analyzed. The analysis reveals that the experience of belonging in the workplace is restricted and fragile until the moment one becomes accepted, but grows stronger and more resilient as one chooses how one wants to participate. Nonetheless, the sense of belonging is haunted by mixed emotions and ambivalence between the wish to be taken care of and the longing for professional appreciation.

Introduction

In any modern welfare state, work is regarded as crucial for not only economic sustainability, but also for mental health and well-being. In Norway, for instance, the Health Ministry has stated that work “helps to secure personal finances, gives structure to everyday life, creates belonging and increases self-esteem” (Helsedirektoratet, 2016). This view is corroborated by research confirming that work promotes the sound mental health and well-being of the individual (Ose et al., 2008), and also by the link established both theoretically and empirically between a sense of belonging and a person’s mental health and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1954/1987). If work, therefore, reduces the dependence on state welfare benefits of those deemed of reduced work ability due to mental illness and also promotes a sense of belonging, then one will, in effect, kill two birds with one stone by integrating people with

mental health problems into the workforce. This would both secure the economic sustainability of the welfare state and serve to promote mental health and well-being. It is therefore no wonder that a common political goal in Norway is to integrate people with mental illness into the work-force, with the national policy in this regard strategically formalised by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) in 2013 in its *Follow-Up Plan for Work and Mental Health 2013-2016*.

However, we have little knowledge of how a sense of belonging in the workplace evolves and manifests itself for persons with mental health problems, and little is known of what is needed in order to promote a sense of belonging in the workplace. Our aim in this paper is thus to scrutinize these issues, based on a phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of belonging in the workplace as reported by a sample of persons struggling with mental health issues.

The Relationship between Mental Health, Work and Belonging: A Brief Review

Being engaged in meaningful work and occupational activity is an essential part of health and well-being. With reference to Aristotle, Wilcock (1999) claims that this is so because the true nature of man is to do; it is through our doing we live out, reflect upon and confirm our current being, but simultaneously also prepare for and actualize our future becoming. She states that “it is through doing that humans become what they have the capacity to be”, and adds that “in combination, doing, being and becoming are integral to health and well-being for everyone and to occupational therapy philosophy, process and outcomes, because together they epitomize occupation” (ibid., p. 10). Work, then, enables us to do, to be and to become, but is that sufficient for us to stay healthy and satisfied? Hammell (2004, 2009, 2014) thinks not. Belonging is equally important, she says, and work promotes belonging by enabling us to connect and contribute to the community we are a part of.

In response to Hammell’s critique, Wilcock (2007) has incorporated belonging into her occupational theory of health and well-being, but not to the satisfaction of Hitch, Pépin, and Stagnitti (2014). They find Wilcock’s conceptualization of “belonging” to be both insufficient and underdeveloped. In that regard, however, Wilcock is not alone: Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2013, p. 1027) conclude in their review of the concept of “belonging” that “[t]he current literature on ‘sense of belonging’ is vast and spans a number of disciplines and with no apparent consensus”. For instance, Anant (1966, 1967) sees belonging simply as being a member of a particular group, whereas Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, and Early (1996) claim that belonging is an intra-psychic state that evolves into an inter-subjective reality through a loving and caring environment. Galvin and Todres (2013) in turn conceptualize belonging as one mood of well-being and argue that dwelling is an ontological and existential prerequisite for belonging. For their part, Tangvald-Pedersen and Bongaardt (2011) describe belonging as a sense of oneness and cohesion, a tranquillizing feeling of time and space merging into an enduring, pleasant and unassuming present moment, a moment liberated from constraints of the past and demands of the future.

Belonging also features empirically as an important and central aspect of what it means to recover from mental diseases. However, what belonging actually means in different recovery studies is equivocal. Mezzina et al. (2006) describe belonging as membership of a social group that provides shelter and opportunities to become something more than being a mental health patient. Sundsteigen, Eklund, and Dahlin-Ivanoff (2009) understand belonging as having experiences and ventures in common. Hill, Mayes, and McConnell (2010) describe belonging as learning to know the surroundings and to connect to the world. Blank, Finlay, and Prior (2016)

emphasize that belonging is a multidimensional and fragile state of mind depending upon the degree of identification with significant others, the ability to access significant places, the ability to appreciate the embodied and manifest feelings of belonging, and the capacity to overcome stigma and shame.

This brief overview indicates that, despite very different perceptions of what a sense of belonging entails, the research does emphasize the importance of community and activity, two components the work place provides. In that respect, it is reasonable to assume that the workplace functions as a homely setting for creating a sense of belonging. The ensuing question, then, is not whether work creates a sense of belonging or not, but rather how a sense of belonging arises and is experienced in the workplace. This is also the question we examine in the following paragraphs by means of Husserlian inspired phenomenological heuristics.

Method

Husserl’s (1913/2001) phenomenology emphasizes lived experience by insisting on going “back to the things themselves”, meaning focusing on the “things” as these appear in our consciousness of them as lived in our own experience, and describing this experience in as much detail as possible. This emphasis on describing things as they appear to consciousness makes Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology well suited to gaining first person knowledge of lived experiences. His phenomenology is, however, a philosophically founded epistemology, and not a scientific methodology. Consequently it needs to be transformed into systematic and transparent heuristics before it can be properly used as a scientific method (Giorgi, 2010). The descriptive phenomenological method developed by Giorgi (2009) offers one way of accommodating Husserl’s phenomenology in a scientific research method, and the present study is carried out in accordance with this method.

Loyal to Husserl’s approach, Giorgi (2009) stresses the minimum requirements any phenomenological method must obey. These requirements are to commit oneself to the phenomenological attitude and the phenomenological reduction, to make use of free imaginative variation and the eidetic reduction in order to tease out the invariant constituent parts of the phenomenon, and to describe the coherence between these constituents. What this implies in terms of practical methodological operations is described in the following subsections.

Commitment to the Phenomenological Attitude and the Phenomenological Reduction

Before analysis commences, descriptive phenomenology demands commitment to the phenomenological attitude and the phenomenological reduction. This involves complying with two methodological demands, namely to bracket previous personal experience and theoretical

knowledge about the phenomenon under study, and to withhold any existential claims about the phenomenon, assuming that what we investigate are not empirical entities but experiential phenomena appearing in the consciousness of informants. Facing these demands, two methodological challenges appear: how to gain access to other people's experience of belonging in the workplace, and how to bracket previous knowledge. We will comment on these successively.

As our research interest was to acquire a better understanding of belonging in the workplace as experienced by persons with mental health problems, we needed to gain descriptions of the experience of belonging from this particular group. Thus, we included as informants persons with some work experience who were receiving or had received professional help from mental health care services. To recruit informants, we disseminated our request for volunteers through a work placement website that caters for users with mental health problems (www.erfaringskompetanse.no/nyheter/hvor-viktig-er-tilhorighet-pa-arbeidsplassen/), and also presented the project, along with an appeal to recruit informants for the project, to executive officers at local employment agencies and various employment schemes. Prior to this, we had applied for and received approval from the Data Protection Official for Research in Norway to carry out the project (Project No. 36275).

To collect data, we made use of both phenomenological interviews and life-experience descriptions (LED) (van Manen, 2014). As forms of data collection, interviews and LEDs complement each other. An interview gives insight by means of a dialogue; a LED gives insight by means of a monologue. A LED is a written account responding to a particular request formulated by the researcher, and in our case the request was as follows: *"Please describe to me in as much detail as possible an event or a situation in your workplace where you felt you really belonged."*

We collected thirteen LEDs and conducted three interviews. The limitation to three interviews accorded with Giorgi's (2008, p. 37) recommendation that "at least three participants [must be] included because a sufficient number of variations are needed in order to come up with a typical essence". All the interviews started with the same request as the LEDs, but in addition allowed the interviewer to ask the interviewee to elaborate on significant details (e.g., "You say that having a relationship with a colleague is an important aspect of your sense of belonging. Can you describe how this relationship appears at work?"). The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews varied between fifteen and twenty typed pages describing several situations where a sense of belonging had made itself felt in the workplace. The LEDs varied in length between one and two-and-a-half handwritten pages, each LED describing only one particular situation.

Concerning the demand to bracket previous knowledge, we aimed for description, and not interpretation, in our analysis of the collected data. According to Giorgi (2009, p. 127), a descriptive analysis is "based solely upon what is presented in the data. It does not try to resolve ambiguities unless there is direct evidence for the resolution in the description itself". In this regard, Giorgi (1997, p. 241) stipulates that "[t]o describe means to give linguistic expression to the object of any given act precisely as it appears within that act". What this implies is that any non-given factors such as theories, hypotheses and assumptions, must be avoided in the process of analysing the data (cf. Giorgi, 2009, p. 89). A descriptive phenomenological analysis nevertheless demands that one translate empirical, common-sense nouns to scientifically more accurate concepts (e.g. "pal" "friend" and "colleague" can be inclusively substituted with the concept of "significant other"). In essence, a phenomenological descriptive analysis thus implies a rewriting and reduction of data into a condensed and essential meaning structure that faithfully captures the phenomenon's essential elements and their interrelatedness in scientifically valid language. For identifying the composition of the essential meaning structure of a phenomenon, the descriptive phenomenological method offers two methodological tools, imaginative variation and eidetic reduction.

Making Use of Free Imaginative Variation and the Eidetic Reduction

Using free imaginative variation means to "mentally remove an aspect of the phenomenon ... in order to see whether the removal transforms what is presented in an essential way" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 69). Eidetic reduction is "a process whereby a particular object is reduced to its essence" (ibid., p. 90). However, prior to making use of free imaginative variation and entering the process of eidetic reduction, Giorgi instructs the researcher to read the entire transcript in one piece in order to get a coherent sense of the whole, and then to divide the text into manageable meaning units for further analysis. To clarify and delimit a meaning unit, Giorgi suggests simply inserting slashes into the body of the text where shifts of focus are evident (i.e., from focus on the shop floor to focus on the boss). Free imaginative variation is then applied to these meaning units in order to assess their bearing on the essential meaning structure of the phenomenon.

The procedure of reading through the text as a whole, dividing the text into meaning units and analyzing the meaning units by means of free imaginative variation was carried out on all thirteen LEDs and three interviews, resulting in 135 pages of analyzed text. These pages were then, by means of the eidetic reduction, reduced to a comprehensive description of the essential meaning structure of the lived experience of belonging in the workplace as described by persons identified as having experienced mental health problems.

Findings Expanded with Clarifying Comments

In the following sections, we first present the essential meaning structure of the phenomenon of “belonging in the workplace”. Thereafter, we expand and clarify the meaning structure by offering a more thorough account of the central themes that constitute the experience of a sense of belonging in the workplace. To validate and demonstrate the occurrence of and coherence between the constituting themes, we make use of excerpts from the data, combining these with clarifying comments. In doing so, we sometimes refer to relevant literature, not to add anything missing in our findings, but rather to illuminate and clarify what is distinct in our findings.

Meaning Structure

The essential meaning structure that emerged from the analysis of the descriptive data reads as follows:

A sense of belonging in the workplace starts to evolve from the moment one’s colleagues choose to let one in. At this point, one’s status changes from being a casual outcast to becoming a naturalized part of the community at work. Until such time as this happens, one is deadlocked in a position of insecurity and bewilderment. Working and not knowing whether one is inside or outside the working group generates a vigilant sensitivity towards colleagues and the workplace, which can very easily evolve into a thwarted sense of belonging or even prevent it from developing at all. As soon as one receives an inviting gesture, the vigilant sensitivity takes new shape. One stops worrying about being accepted or not, and instead starts to assess critically the guiding rules of the working group one is invited into. As a colleague, one must take a stand with regard to two different and apparently incompatible forms of social togetherness. One is based on informality, unity and consideration, while the other is based on formality, differentiation and professional competence. These two forms of being together arouse mixed and ambivalent emotions that jeopardize the sense of belonging in the workplace. Feeling a need for consideration and relief from work, combined with a longing for independence and work, is paradoxical and confusing. To be taken care of, sheltered and relieved of stressful jobs, strengthens one’s sense of belonging in the workplace. Too much focus on care and relief, however, might diminish the sense of belonging, as such a focus initiates a sense of being professionally redundant. On the other hand, being appreciated as a professional worker strengthens one’s sense of belonging in the workplace, but focusing on professionalism alone might also diminish the sense of belonging by arousing feelings of inadequacy. This kind of paradox can be transcended by oscillating between different modes of being involved in the workplace. When feeling fragile, one appeals to those trusted for care and intimacy; when feeling underrated, one insists on being appreciated on the basis of common standards of professionalism. What this implies is that the sense of

belonging in the workplace also includes the ability to make deliberate choices and to control and manage one’s own self-representation. In other words, the sense of belonging in the workplace entails a double choice: The initial choice made by others to let one in, and a choice made by oneself deciding how, when and where to join.

Becoming Accepted, Vigilant Sensitivity, and the Changing Character of Belonging

To be part of a community at work, for someone who struggles with mental health issues, is not a matter of course. On the contrary, experiences of hostility (“*I felt my colleagues at this workstation didn’t like me*”), and neglect (“*...colleagues actually turning their back to me when I entered the room, not greeting me, but treating me as if I was air*”) are often present. Such experiences may lead to the opposite of belonging, namely a sense of not belonging (Clegg, 2006) or thwarted belonging, often resulting in anti-social and self-defeating behaviours (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007). “*I skipped lunch. I withdrew from the others because of all the negative talking; I couldn’t fix it. I wasn’t strong enough.*” What then prevents experiences like this from developing into a permanent sense of either thwarted belonging or not belonging? The informants’ experiences point to positive events of acceptance and inclusion that overshadow former negative experiences of hostility and neglect.

Until such a positive event occurs, the person lingers in a stressful, unsettling and bewildering position. Not knowing what is expected of one in the workplace evokes a vigilant sensitivity, forcing the person affected to be always on the alert. “*I knew that the ladies I was working with wouldn’t hesitate to tell me about the lousy work I was doing, and that of course stressed me out.*” This is a paralyzing and exposed position to be in, leaving the initiative to others. “*I wasn’t able to [make contact] by myself, because I felt that I had shirked the work.*” Encountering the workplace in this way makes the sense of belonging vulnerable and fragile, and this will continue until the person affected receives some gesture or a sign indicating inclusion and acceptance. A small and often unexpected gesture of courtesy is, however, all that is necessary to induce a transformation of the sense of belonging from being vulnerable and fragile to becoming both stronger and more resilient. Receiving an including gesture clears the way for a stronger and more resilient sense of belonging to evolve. “*Thinking the worst part of the job was over, I suddenly heard a ‘Hello!’ behind me, and realized at once that I’d done something wrong. I turned towards my leader and asked her what it was. She was holding two wrecked hot dogs that had passed my workstation and laughingly asked me if I’d been sleeping. I looked at her and smiled and answered: ‘It’s Friday, I haven’t woken up yet’. I’ve never before been so relieved, never felt so at ease, and most of all, never been so sure that I belonged.*” Indeed, an unanticipated sign of amiability and inclusion plants the seed for a strong and resilient sense of belonging to

grow. As one informant said: *“Since I was a newcomer at this place I wasn’t prepared. I was overwhelmed by the support I received – and by the fact that some people had missed me. Suddenly I felt I could relax, be the person I was – and just belong.”*

Feeling confident that one has become accepted, worthy of membership and inclusion, one’s vigilant sensitivity is no longer directed towards being invited in or not. Instead, one’s vigilant sensitivity turns towards the ethos of the inviting community, assessing to what extent one finds comfort and relief in the ruling ethos. The ultimate resolution of these issues is decisive for the strength and resilience of the sense of belonging. That is to say, the more strongly one is able to endorse and connect to the current ethos, the stronger and more resilient one’s sense of belonging will become. In some cases, the sense of belonging can be so strong that it can be difficult to draw the line between one’s individuality and one’s identification with the community. *“It’s your loyalty that’s decisive for how we work together. We all work for the same cause; we work for the benefit of each other. We have a common goal. We want to succeed as a group – and alone.”* Such a sense of belonging implies a willingness to be unselfish and to become part of a greater whole. Further, it also includes a self-confident image of being indispensable: *“In some way you carry it all. You make the foundation and allow others to get support from you. ... To me it’s important to make another person both look and feel good. Later on you’ll get the opportunity to play the leading role.”*

Thus, a strong and resilient sense of belonging endorses homogeneity and equality. As one of our informants put it: *“... to be one among others, to contribute on equal terms and not being looked upon as someone special. Being perceived as equal to others was of tremendous importance to me.”* What is implied is that a strong and resilient sense of belonging contains a natural way of taking part in the community at work – *“even though I was twenty years younger than most of my colleagues, I was always included in the conversations”* – and of being acknowledged for one’s professional competence. For some, the acknowledgement of their professional competence was decisive for their sense of belonging in the workplace: *“To call my professional integrity into question doesn’t create job satisfaction, doesn’t create a sense of belonging. It only makes you long for another job.”*

In short, for a vulnerable and fragile sense of belonging to change into a stronger and more resilient sense of belonging depends upon how one’s vigilant sensitivity takes shape, and one’s ability to respond adequately to what is at stake.

Vigilant Assessment, Ambivalence, and the Need to Oscillate

What is at stake depends mainly on two kinds of social

settings: One personal and unstructured setting of intermingling, which emphasizes care and equality – *“One of my fellow employees was going to law school. In the break, he loved to make a pizza for himself. One day he made the same pizza for me. That was very nice”* – and one professional and well-structured work setting emphasizing expertise: *“Because I had the certificate, and my colleagues didn’t ... I was entrusted with the responsibility to guide [the apprentice] towards the craft certificate”*. These two social settings appeal to two different forms of affiliation. The first form responds to a basic need to be an inseparable and equal part of an undifferentiated whole, calling for sameness – *“to be one amongst the others and to contribute on equal terms and not to be looked upon as someone special”* – and care: *“knowing my colleagues will support me, I’m no longer afraid of having a relapse”*. The second form responds to a professional quest to be a separable and yet integrally necessary part of a complex and compound whole, calling for personal uniqueness and a division of labour: *“I had my own office and a name plate on the door ... and jobs that inspired me”*. Thus, to a person who is confident of being a natural member of the community at work, the sense of belonging in the workplace contains mixed emotions. This implies that one’s vigilant sensitivity is no longer engaged in pondering whether one is an insider or an outsider, but rather in sorting out mixed and possibly ambivalent feelings arising within and between structured work settings and anti-structured intermingling settings. This is explained further in what follows.

In the structured work setting, what counts is to be appreciated and perceived as a skilled worker: *“I want to be respected for the work I’m doing, and in that case people must be allowed to tell me: ‘This isn’t good enough’ or ‘This is good, do more of it’.”* This statement implies a feeling of professional pride. Single-mindedly emphasizing professionalism alone, however, may evoke a feeling of imperfection: *“too much stress petrifies me, and I end up with doing nothing”*. Trying to resolve this feeling of imperfection by seeking relief from work often evokes a feeling of being professionally redundant: *“[not] being assigned difficult jobs, ... not being pushed, ... you become invisible”* or *“As I’m sheltered, I’m no longer reckoned with”*. Hence, a structured work setting easily evokes ambivalent feelings, mixing professional pride, sense of imperfection and fear of redundancy.

A similar dynamic surfaces in the anti-structured intermingling setting. What matters in this setting is closeness, confidence and care. *“My boss told me: Today you are not supposed to do anything. Today is the great hugging day. Receiving this heartfelt joy was a powerful experience. It was almost like a coming-home-to-granny feeling.”* However, too much attention to confidence and closeness might evoke a feeling of intrusion – *“I didn’t care about what kind of medicine my superior used, or what he might have done in the past. So why should he*

pay attention to those factors about me?" – or a feeling of uneasiness: "Appearing in the capacity of just being yourself, that's scary". An anti-structured intermingling setting therefore also easily evokes ambivalent feelings, mixing intimacy, intrusion and uneasiness.

In other words, the sense of belonging in the workplace is not unequivocal, but haunted by mixed emotions and ambivalence. It should be noted that this is not a kind of ambivalence that resembles the pathological patterns of unconsciousness and repression as Bleuler (1911/1950) or Freud (1913/2001) would see it. On the contrary, it is an ambivalence that is transparent and conscious for the person involved. "When colleagues who used to ask you for help stop doing so because they've been asked to shelter me, the result turns out to be a lack of inclusion. I know I ought to be grateful for it, but at the same time this tells me I'm a person who wants to be reckoned with, and if I'm sheltered I'm no longer reckoned with. In that way, it's like 'Damned if you do, damned if you don't'." Here we see that the person is aware of the ambivalence involved, the feeling of gratitude for the care received as well as the feeling of unease of not being reckoned with. However, contrary to denying one of the emotions, the informant acknowledges and considers them both before ending up with a deliberate choice of being "a person who wants to be counted in". However, without denying one's gratitude for receiving relief and care, "what mattered to me was the fact that I was missed as a person, and not only [the employee doing] the jobs." Thus, a strong and resilient sense of belonging implies the flexibility to embrace opposite and paradoxical feelings.

Further, a strong and resilient sense of belonging also rests upon an ability to oscillate between structured work settings and personal mingling settings. These settings demand different *modi operandi*. In the structured work setting, the *modus operandi* is professional and restricted "to applying oneself to the tasks and how these tasks are carried out." In the anti-structured mingling setting, the *modus operandi* is personal and confidential, and concerned with "creating a community by taking care of each other ... allowing others to get support from you."

This implies that, rather than being incompatible and paradoxical, the structured work setting and the anti-structured intermingling setting are complementary and interdependent, often intertwined. "I remember those times it got hectic at work. Then we would often sit down at the table chatting and laughing." This underlines, once again, the importance of being able to oscillate between a sheltered environment when needed and a mandatory environment when required. This, in turn, also indicates that a strong and resilient sense of belonging in the workplace includes the ability to manage and control the content of one's self-presentation, which leads us to the final constituent of the essential meaning structure of the phenomenon.

The Right to Control One's Self-Presentation and the Necessity of a Double Choice

Being in charge of one's self-presentation, meaning how one wants to be perceived, is not a matter of course for a person with mental illness. Being labelled as mentally ill often involves experiences of demeaning conversations or degrading evaluations. "Such [evaluative] conversations, that somebody explicitly wanted to talk to me, always made me nervous because they were usually about something I'd done, or was doing. About something that was all wrong, or as far from normal as possible." If people have been through such experiences, it is understandable that they will become reluctant to reveal their personal case history. Many consider sharing their case history to be socially distressing – "being the person that is special and everybody knows something about ... and you, knowing nothing about them, that's stressing" – or simply socially irrelevant: "it's the jobs at work that make a basis for socializing ... your own previous history is of no concern". However, to conceal one's history is not the essential aspect; what matters is the right to be in control of both what is told and how it is told. "I told them about my troublesome family affairs. My account was kept in a humorous and partly provocative form, a form I have a certain liking for."

Openness and honesty may require the empathic support of a leader that is ready to back one when needed. "My new boss entered the scene. She had been there in the background without me noticing it. She looked at my colleague and said: 'X is our new colleague, she's doubly qualified. It might not be the kind of further education she planned for, but it is a qualification we highly appreciate and welcome'." In addition, openness requires an environment built on reciprocity in sharing personal information. "Everybody has their history and their problems, and because of that it's easy to be the person you are. I felt I was one of the healthiest, I felt I could relax. This was in contrast to my previous job, where everybody appeared to be perfect."

Thus, we see that a positive experience of openness is dependent on who is in charge of the openness, and on whether the openness is reciprocal. Forced openness benefits no one. What matters is not openness in itself, but reciprocity and the ability to control and manage the degree of openness and the distribution of information. "There are different kinds of colleagues, and different kinds of relationships. To some you may tell your story, to others you do not. With those you involve you feel safe and secure. Without actually realizing it, I might be grading my colleagues."

This last excerpt also implies that a strong and resilient sense of belonging is not only a matter of being in charge of one's own self-representation; it is also a matter of choosing how, when and with whom to socialize. Collating this finding with the finding about becoming accepted, we will conclude our analysis by claiming that

a strong and resilient sense of belonging infers a double choice, namely a collective choice of inclusion and an individual choice of joining. Without this double choice, no sense of belonging will ever be engendered.

Concluding Discussion

The outcome of our phenomenological analysis of the experience of belonging in the workplace was that it is restricted and fragile until the moment that one becomes accepted. It grows stronger and more resilient as one chooses the way one wants to participate. However, the sense of belonging is haunted by mixed emotions and ambivalence; with vigilant sensitivity, the person makes deliberate choices concerning how to participate in the work and socialize with colleagues. A resilient sense of belonging in the workplace involves the ability to oscillate between work settings that call for varying degrees of professional credibility or personal confidence. How does this concur with other studies of the sense of belonging?

In their initial endeavour to establish a transdisciplinary and multidimensional understanding and measurement of a sense of belonging, Mahar et al. (2013) proposed five common themes they consider conceptually central. These themes are subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism and self-determination. We find all of these themes in our study. The theme of subjectivity is evident in the emphasis placed on professional demarcation and evaluation. The theme of groundedness is located in the acceptance of the workplace as a both appropriate and desirable place to ground one's subjective feelings. The theme of reciprocity appears in the approval and sharing of a common ethos. The theme of dynamism is found in the tension between professionalism and confidentiality, and the theme of self-determination is apparent in taking control of one's self-representation. In contrast to our own study, the themes of ambivalence and oscillation are not identified by Mahar et al. (2013) as central – even though they recognize that the sense of belonging contains tensions and alternating loyalties, as evidenced by their assertion that the sense of belonging “can best be characterized as a fluid or transitory feeling” (p. 1029). We found, however, that ambivalence and oscillation are central and indispensable themes pertaining to the experience of a sense of belonging in the workplace. In the final part of the paper, we consider why this is so. We also outline a few preliminary reflections on what a healthy workplace might look like, given the findings of our study.

Belonging as a Blend of the Natural Will to Bond and the Rational Will to Play a Part

Tönnies (1887/2001) describes two different kinds of social formations respectively termed “*Gemeinschaft*” and “*Gesellschaft*”. In the English literature, these two opposed German concepts are generally translated as “community” and “civil society” – translations which,

unfortunately, focus on sociological size rather than on human will and motivation. Focusing on sociological size alone and leaving out the aspect of human will and motivation is, in our opinion, to ignore Tönnies's central point. For him, the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is not a matter of sociological size, but a matter of two very different kinds of human will that generate two very different kinds of social formation: A natural will, which generates an organically interwoven community, and, in contrast, a rational will, which generates a mechanically compounded society. The natural will originates from the body's natural and organically defined longing for social attachment and bonding, while the rational will stems from the mind's rational and calculating deliberation of “what's in it for me”. Tönnies (1887/2001, pp. 95-96) describes the difference in this way:

Natural or essential will is the psychological equivalent of the human body; it is the unifying principle of life, conceived of as the pattern of material reality to which thinking itself belongs. ... By contrast, rational or arbitrary or calculating will is a product of thought itself, and comes into being only through the agency of its author.

Further, he describes the link between the human will and its sociological counterparts: “*Gemeinschaft* must be understood as a living organism in its own right, while *Gesellschaft* is a mechanical aggregate and artefact” (Tönnies, 1887/2001, p. 19). Relating this insight to the phenomenon of belonging, we might say that belonging has two sources of origin, one organically and innately defined, and one defined in an ad hoc or rational manner. This coincides with the view of Baumeister and Leary (1995), who argue that the need to belong, even though individually and culturally adapted, is primarily a matter of nature and evolution. Hence, the sense of belonging to a social formation of the *Gemeinschaft* type is experienced as unconditional, indisputable and solid, while, in contrast, the sense of belonging to a social formation of the *Gesellschaft* type is experienced as conditional, negotiable and fluid.

Traditionally the workplace has been perceived as a social formation of the *Gesellschaft* type; indeed if one translates *Gesellschaft* into English, the term “company” qua economic enterprise is as precise and accurate as the term “civil society”. Thus, one can easily jump to the conclusion that the social affiliation reigning in the workplace is a product of the rational will alone, and that the sense of belonging consists only of self-interest and self-efficacy. Such a view finds support in Tönnies (1887/2001), who states that “Nothing happens in *Gesellschaft* that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself” (p. 52). However, we disagree with the assertion that the workplace is a social formation of the *Gesellschaft* type alone. Rather, we would consider

the workplace to be a bricolage of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, with two different kinds of human will forming it. As our analysis reveals, the workplace is a compound of a structured work setting and an anti-structured mingling setting. The structured work setting seems to be infused with an ego-centred and calculating rational will, and the anti-structured mingling setting with an inclusive and self-sacrificing natural will.

The implication of this is that the workplace is a setting where the rational will's determination to achieve a state of idiosyncrasy and differentiation is encountered and confronted by the natural will's efforts to accomplish a state of conformity and fusion. In other words, the workplace can be regarded as a place where one attempts to fulfil both one's natural will to fuse into an organically defined whole and one's rational will to be a separate and necessary part of a mechanically defined whole. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the sense of belonging in the workplace contains ambivalently mixed feelings, and that, if belonging is to thrive, one must be able to oscillate between social formations determined by a rational will and those based on a natural will. As human beings, we thrive when we are able to pursue our own rational will, and yet we cannot survive without a natural will to take care of others and to be taken care of (cf. Maslow, 1954/1987). It can be argued that the rational will and the natural will together form what Bowlby (1969/1982) describes as the attachment behavioural system. This system consists of a repertoire of strategies in order to survive as well as succeed. These

strategies are primarily "a repertoire of behaviours from which an individual can 'choose' (either consciously or unconsciously) the most appropriate means of attaining protection in a given situation" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 13); but they further comprise a repertoire of behaviours for exploration and self-efficiency. Once feeling safe and secure, the reliance on attachment strategies embedded in the natural will fades out and allows the rational will's self-efficiency strategies to emerge. The same applies to the sense of belonging in the workplace. Once feeling safe and accepted, the natural will's behavioural strategies to *be* one amongst others deactivates and the rational will's *longing* for stimulating, challenging and increasing work takes over (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). A resilient and strong sense of *be-longing* balances being and longing.

Tracing these deliberations back to the introductory questions concerning healthy workplaces, we conclude that a healthy workplace is a flexible workplace. It is both a place that provides shelter, care and unity in community (i.e. *Gemeinschaft*), and a place structured to accommodate challenges, privacy and professional differentiation (i.e. *Gesellschaft*). We therefore – to borrow from Galvin and Todres's (2013) theory of well-being – conclude that, in essence, a healthy workplace accommodates "dwelling-mobility", where "mobility emphasizes the call of the future and the energetic feeling of possibility", while "dwelling emphasizes a settling into the present moment with its acceptance of things as they are" (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 74).

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