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Abstract

This article continues the conceptual work of developing a process-oriented perspective on belonging by taking up the active engagement of affiliation (and disaffiliation) as an undertheorised yet necessary aspect of accomplishing belonging. In developing the concept we draw on Marx's notion of work as material activity in forms of life and the sociological concepts of face-work and emotion work. We conceptualise belonging work as relational work concerned with shaping situational interactions; webs of relationships; social boundaries; and materials and rhythms as dimensions of belonging. This work is conditioned by social categorisations and patterns of inclusion and exclusion through which it takes place in relation to specific forms of life. The concept of belonging work offers a theoretically integrative and sensitising concept that highlights the relational dynamics of belonging, providing insight and inspiration to social researchers inquiring into the work of belonging and its associated social consequences throughout the research process.

Keywords

belonging, belonging work, emotion work, face-work, form of life, material sociology, social bond, social boundaries, social categorisation, social interaction

Introduction

Human beings need belonging to survive. Exile and isolation have historically been among the most severe forms of punishment. Recently, scholars from a variety of research fields have increasingly engaged with the concept of belonging (e.g. Antonsich, 2010; Bennett, 2015; Guibernau, 2013; Kuurne and Gómez, 2019; May, 2011; Savage

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et al., 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). Studies on belonging have covered a variety of topics including race and transnational migration (e.g. Fortier, 1999; Ifekwunigwe, 1999; Wu et al., 2011), globalisation and cosmopolitanism (Calhoun, 2003; Savage et al., 2005), family and personal lives (Ketokivi, 2015; May, 2011; Ribbens McCarthy, 2012) and neighbourhood-based community formation (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019). In some cases, belonging is formal and based on legal categories. In other cases, it is informal yet highly consequential, as in the case of systematic racism. The consequences of (dis)belonging differ in intensity and scope but are often multi-layered, including social, psychological, material, institutional, financial and/or legal aspects. The concept of belonging, we suggest, sensitises us to see beyond the patterns of group formation to what is relationally and materially at stake – the real consequences that people confront.

Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguished between *belonging* understood as social locations, identifications, emotional attachments and ethical valuations, and the ‘politics of belonging’, which involves the delineation of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Antonsich (2010) continued the analytical framing of the concept and suggested that even the most personal, intimate feeling of being ‘at home’ is unavoidably conditioned by social and power relations, in other words, the politics of belonging. Belonging thus happens at the intersection of these two ongoing dynamics which take a plurality of forms and scales (Antonsich, 2010).

Drawing on the relational work of Simmel and Elias, May (2011) suggested that belonging is the missing link between the self and society. A focus on belonging, she maintained, destabilises the sociological tendency for reifying society, allowing instead for a perspective that is sensitive to how social formations are constructed, maintained and contested. Moreover, belonging is bound up with everyday practices which are often taken for granted and unconscious, but also bound up in dynamic trajectories through time and space. Hence, belonging ‘is something we have to keep achieving through an active process’ (May, 2011: 372). This active process still remains undertheorised.

In this article, we take up this task and develop the concept of belonging work to understand this active engagement as a necessary aspect of belonging. *Belonging work* means *actively shaping social relationships and their practices*, which can be done intentionally, routinely or even subconsciously. It refers to the *relationally negotiated ways of doing belonging*. The concept of belonging work thus continues and specifies conceptual work (Antonsich, 2010; May, 2011; Youkhana, 2015), advancing from naturalisations towards more process-oriented and situational approaches to belonging. These relations involve not only humans but also the materials, rhythms and movements that mediate the bonds and boundaries of belonging (see, for example, Bennett, 2015; Kuurne and Gómez, 2019; Youkhana, 2015). As Youkhana (2015) suggests, belonging comes into being as a result of situated experiences and acts that take place in varied contexts. It is accomplished somewhere, in a situation, by materially mediated actions that are enabled or constrained by patterns shaping the work people have to do to accomplish belonging. In some settings, some belong almost automatically while others have to work hard to achieve belonging. Some people are not even in a position to try. The concept of belonging work not only turns the sociological gaze towards *what actors do to accomplish belonging (or to disaffiliate from something)*, but it sensitises us to *the underlying structural inequalities that their efforts make visible*.

The article proceeds by first developing the connections between belonging and the theories of work as social activity, beginning with Marx's theory of social production as a sensuous human activity, in which people and forms of life are produced and reproduced. We then draw on sociological analyses of face-work (Goffman, 1982) and emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) to further develop the concept of belonging work as a relational activity. We connect belonging work to social bonds and consider how such work is conditioned by symbolic and social boundaries. We then present a working definition of the concept of *belonging work*, and then move on to analytically differentiate between relevant dimensions of belonging work, including situational activity, webs of relations, social boundaries and materials, rhythms and movements. Throughout the article, our aim is to develop the concept of belonging work as a sensitising concept which may be particularly useful in connecting qualitative research on what actors do to accomplish belonging with the critical study of social structures in a wide variety of empirical contexts.

'Work' as the Active Component of Accomplishing Belonging

In this section, we conceptualise the active and processual aspect of belonging as *work* by drawing from Marx's theory of social production and its development as a theory of action concerning the production of things, persons and social relations. We then move to consider the relationship of belonging work to different kinds of work that people do in social interactions and how this work connects to wider processes of relationality.

Work as Material Activity

Marx's theory of social production forms a point of departure for conceptualising the relation between work and belonging through the connections he draws between the production of things, persons and social relations. In *The German Ideology*, Marx (2001: 70–73) outlines a theory of social production, beginning from human beings being separated from animals by the need to produce the means of their subsistence, which is equal to the reproduction of a definite form of life (Marx, 2001: 62). A foundational aspect of Marx's theory is the co-development of consciousness and social relationships in 'sensuous human activity' (Graeber, 2001: 57). This encompasses not only work as production, but also the work of maintaining a form of life, both as life itself and in its social relations (Arruzza, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2020). Through their various activities in relation to a form of life people become produced as particular sorts of persons (Graeber, 2001: 58–59).

Cole and Ferrarese (2018) have further developed the idea of a form of life involving assemblages of established meaning-laden practices which shape the relationships of humans to one another, to their material worlds and to themselves. Humans are thus constantly producing themselves and others as people in relation to a form of life, enmeshed in relationships of belonging, which may also involve inequality and exploitation. While these assemblages appear to be established, they are also continually reproduced and subject to change (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018).

Marx's analysis informs our conceptualisation of belonging work as located in the intersection of personal experience, social processes and materiality. Belonging work is embodied and relational, a constant activity, which takes place in relation to broader forms of life and their reproduction. Nevertheless, the creativity inherent in belonging work as an active engagement with material and social conditions means that it also holds the potential of transforming configurations of social relations. The concept of belonging work highlights action and its social evaluation, which includes the evaluation of persons' capacity to perform actions which are valued or devalued.

Similarly to Graeber's (2001) analysis of value, we highlight how the actions through which belonging is evaluated may be embodied, such as speaking with a particular accent (Loveday, 2016), or objectified in symbolically significant objects or markers attached to persons (Tavory, 2016). Through the recognition of their actions and the possession of valued objects and markers, people are judged in relation to forms of life and their systems of symbolic classification. Judgements of belonging and not-belonging often involve fine-grained evaluations of which actions are proper, which actions actors are expected to undertake and who is judged as more or less worthy of belonging. The practices through which belonging is evaluated can also become objects of struggle concerning which actions are valuable and socially necessary, and whether similar actions by differently categorised persons are justly recognised. Such struggles involve valuations which relate to contestations over who and what matters to the form of life (Collins, 2017: 6).

While Marx's theory helps us to locate broad connections between social action and belonging, in order to understand belonging work as situated action, we draw from the concepts of face-work and emotion work, each of which highlights different aspects of the effort involved in the work of belonging. Face-work (Goffman, 1982) points to the outward behavioural aspect of belonging, the communication and action through which belonging is accomplished and evaluated in social interaction. Emotion work (Hochschild, 1979) points to the affective dimension of belonging, which includes both performative behaviour, inward reflexivity and efforts towards relational attachment. We further connect these concepts to belonging by situating them in the broader theoretical context of relational sociology.

Towards a Relational Conceptualisation of Belonging Work

Goffman (1982: 5) conceptualised 'face' as 'an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes', having a social value which is achieved in interaction with others through verbal and non-verbal acts. While face can be experienced as a personal possession and a centre of security and pleasure (Goffman, 1982: 10), it ultimately rests on an intersubjective accomplishment. Successful face-work demands both perceptiveness in the interpretation of situated action, and skill and willingness to engage in face-saving actions, which can be exercised both in the defence of one's face or in the protection of others' faces (Goffman, 1982: 13–18).

For us, face-work highlights fundamental aspects of belonging as a bodily, intersubjective and situational accomplishment (see also May, 2011: 368–370). At an elementary level, feelings of belonging and claims to belong are dependent on the situated efforts of

speech, comportment and gestures. As an intersubjective accomplishment, belonging involves two sides: efforts, which are often both bodily and social, and the social evaluation of such efforts in relation to belonging. Hence, there is always potentially a gap between efforts made to belong and their recognition. In actors' attempts to bridge this gap, they must draw on their understanding of the conditions of belonging as they are applied to particular roles in particular situations. Achieving belonging through one's actions is thus partly a matter of situated social skill, involving the adjustment of action to the demands of belonging. In daily life, belonging is produced in the microcosm of the behaviour necessary for the performance of social roles within situations. Goffman's concept of face-work highlights socially oriented behavioural adjustment as one aspect of relational work belonging demands.

Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotion work forms a complementary starting point for our theorisation of belonging as underpinned by active efforts of social engagement. In contrast to Goffman's preoccupation with behaviour, Hochschild focused on emotions, distinguishing between deep feeling and surface gestures of emotional display and highlighting the possibility of tension between what is felt and what is shown. An important source of such tensions comes from the socially recognised feeling rules that govern appropriate emotions (Hochschild, 1979: 563–566). Emotion work involves the management of these tensions through the adjustment of both surface emotional displays and deep feeling, with the latter involving a fundamental shift in the individual's framing of the situation (Hochschild, 1979: 568–569).

In relation to belonging, emotion work highlights potential tensions between action, feeling and membership. Belonging is not only about action but also about an appropriate display of emotions. It also encompasses the experience of an inner sense of feeling at home. The concept of emotion work shows how such a feeling is not necessarily automatic but subject to an ongoing inner negotiation. Desires to belong may clash with inequalities embedded in belonging, producing a gap in which belonging as a sense of home is left unrealised. Thus, additional burdens of emotion work are placed on those caught between social worlds, as has been documented for people who have experienced upward social mobility (Friedman, 2016; Käyhkö, 2015; Loveday, 2016). On the other hand, distancing the self from a social identity, group or relationship, in order to belong to something different, may necessitate actively working away from other affiliations.

The concept of belonging work provides a novel perspective for connecting behaviour, 'face' and emotion to processes of social membership, a shift in emphasis best appreciated in comparison to the concept of identity. In a useful analytical contrast, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011) noted how even constructivist approaches to identity must work against connotations of sameness, fixed categories and clear-cut boundaries, whereas belonging considers relationality and the very process of categorisation. Belonging involves relationality generated through senses and performances of commonality, the expectations and obligations of mutuality and attachments linking people to material and immaterial worlds (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2011).

Belonging work thus highlights the active processes through which behaviour, emotions, bonds and boundaries are connected in the joining of the self with others or its disaffiliation from them. It is about forming bonds, maintaining them, organising them and distinguishing them from others. It is about moving actively from distance towards

closeness and from closeness to distance. Belonging work is enacted in a web of relationships, in a plurality of others among which the social self is seeking harmony with personal feelings. It is hence essentially *relational work*, which connects our approach to relational sociology (e.g. Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). Furthermore, in contemporary life, belongings are plural and in need of constant managing. People are often positioned between multiple settings of belonging, which may produce conflicting expectations. Distancing oneself from an earlier affiliation is often demanded in attempts to cross symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

Defining the Concept of Belonging Work

Conceptually, belonging work integrates the social dynamics of face-work, emotion work and active engagement with social and material relationships under one relational concept. Belonging work builds on the integration of these concepts in two significant ways. First, belonging work is essentially *relational work* that does not reside in a person or within social entities but is located *in relationships* and *targeted at shaping these relationships and their practices* (for example, their quality, their dynamics of interdependency, their expectations and their inclusive and exclusive dynamics). Belonging work is an effort to shape the relationships and/or social conditions of belonging to negotiate closeness and distance, and also to reconcile different bonds of belonging or to disaffiliate from unwanted associations. If a person yearns for belonging where she or he is excluded, the situation is tragic and belonging is not achieved. If she or he does not feel a sense of belonging and tries to disaffiliate herself or himself from a social identity identified by others, the resulting social dissonance requires constant explanation.

Second, belonging work has *real consequences* that stem from the interconnectedness of personal and social dynamics, in which one side cannot be understood without the other. Social groupings may enforce their boundaries through (often implicit) norms and sanctions. Failure to meet such demands can lead to the denial of resources, security and recognition, as well as to forms of punitive action. The concept of belonging work is a way to approach social categorisations and inequality from the perspective of which actors manage to gain access to various social and material goods that are distributed on the basis of belonging.

We define *the concept of belonging work as an active engagement in shaping social and material relationships and someone's position in them with respect to belonging in a certain form of life*. This engagement may be *intentional or habitual* and it commonly involves situational aspects, webs of relations, social boundaries, materials, rhythms and movements. As Calhoun (1999) has pointed out, there are different forms of belonging, including community, social or legal categories and citizenship based on public space. Communal belonging is based on dense and personal webs of relations, direct relationships and familiarity, while category-based belonging rests on similarity and involves large amounts of people who do not know each other personally. Neither of these kinds of belonging enables belonging across difference. Thus, public spaces of discourse are needed for different people to come together and participate in shaping the conditions for belonging (Calhoun, 1999). Recognition and attunement to such differences in the quality,

density and dynamics of belonging are helpful when utilising the concept of belonging work. In the following, we develop the concept by differentiating between different analytical dimensions of belonging work.

Analytical Dimensions of Belonging Work in Empirical Social Research

Belonging work, we suggest, is as vital an element of being human as work itself was for Marx. It enables joining with others, which is necessary for a whole gamut of needs, from survival to individual development and social reproduction (Elias, 1978; Winnicott, 1965). Marx's notion of work similarly entails not only the production of the means of subsistence but also the reproduction of life through procreation, nurture and socialisation (Arruzza, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2020; Marx, 2001: 70–73), with both of these being accomplished in meaning-laden practices in relation to a form of life (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018). Belonging is a prerequisite for human survival and the *social* reproduction of population and biological life, but relations of belonging are also framed by processes of *societal* reproduction, which involve the reproduction of an entire system of social relations (see Arruzza, 2016).

In this section, we outline some relevant aspects of belonging work for social research. In Blumer's (1954: 7) sense, the concept of belonging work can be seen as a sensitising concept rather than a definitive one, which is useful in providing general guidance in approaching different empirical instances. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) argued that the generation of interesting and unlikely empirical observations is crucially dependent on researchers cultivating a wide-ranging theoretical sensitivity. The analytical dimensions below are thus intended as inspiration for broadening social scientific imagination and for developing a theoretical sensitivity to belonging work in data production, analysis and interpretation. While each dimension crystallises one analytical aspect of belonging work, empirically they overlap. We exemplify each dimension by drawing on one or two empirical studies. While these studies do not explicitly address belonging work, we argue that re-conceptualising them as belonging work crystallises essential aspects of their empirical findings. We also suggest some ways in which belonging work may be operationalised in relation to each dimension, suggesting ways in which future research might employ the concept.

Behaviour and Social Interaction

Situational belonging work, which may be habitual or intentional, concerns behaviour and entails managing gestures and emotions, as well as tailoring face-work and symbolic communication towards (or away from) belonging, either for oneself or someone else. It encompasses joining others, withdrawing from them and the management of distance. The behavioural aspect of belonging work is not abstract but about bodily presence and concrete efforts in social interaction, in which behaviour and emotions meet the ways in which one is recognised by others as the member of a group. The invoking of membership can be understood via the notion of 'summoning': people are summoned and summon

others to a membership category (Tavory, 2016). The idea of summoning captures well what differentiates belonging work from identification as summoning is not merely about recognition and a sense of belonging but makes people move physically and socially from one place to another (Tavory, 2016: 6). Summoning is *active interaction* in which someone is called *into being as a certain kind of person* (Tavory, 2016: 6–12). To be successfully summoned, a person must act in a way that participants in social interaction can read as meaningful. In Goffman (1982) terms, to act in a legible manner means showing ‘approved social attributes’ through verbal and non-verbal acts. Acting in a legible manner results from successful face-work as an intersubjective accomplishment, which comes with moral and emotional expectations. To be recognised as a ‘member’ also requires a display of appropriate emotions, which is different from a sense of belonging as a feeling (Hochschild, 1979).

The best examples of studies of the situational aspect can be found in ethnographic fieldwork, in which researchers put their bodies in the field, participate in interaction and observe how people act. To exemplify the behavioural aspects of belonging work, we draw on Tavory’s (2016) ethnographic study *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood*, in which he describes the multi-layered work which community membership required of him. In his fieldwork he moved into the neighbourhood and adopted its practices, including wearing a yarmulke, keeping the same routines and structures as other males, respecting the laws of the Sabbath and receiving early morning calls summoning him to attend morning prayers and evening classes several times a week. He was not only summoned by members of the community as a trusted male but also by others outside the community, including in anti-Semitic encounters on the street (Tavory, 2016: 6–19).

Tavory presents the category of *frum* to indicate what kind of people are respected as devout members among the Orthodox Jews. He described a situation that highlights the finesses of behaviour which accomplishing belonging requires. Bringing a friend to a Sabbath meal at another friend’s house, and despite this guest looking quite *frum*, he failed to note that playing an instrument is forbidden on the Sabbath and asked the daughter of the family to show him how she plays. The difficulty of the situation was managed with face-work that protected this man’s social face despite his failure to recognise the moral code. The young girl responded that her mum does not let her play the piano on the Sabbath. Later she asks how Tavory can be friends with a ‘non-*frum*’, expecting him to be *frum* as a regular attendant of his parents’ synagogue (Tavory, 2016: 79–85). Details of this situation show how fine-tuned elements of belonging work are situationally enacted through appearance, knowledge of social practices, moral expectations and behavioural compliance. One might say that the Orthodox Jewish community is a specific case but let us imagine a situation in which one is presented to prospective parents-in-law for the first time. To be summoned as a member of any social entity, one must know social expectations, show appropriate emotions and behave in a suitable manner. To be summoned by others demands fine-tuned belonging work, which becomes visible when not fully accomplished.

Sensitivity to the behavioural aspect of belonging work may be useful in studies relying on ethnographic observation, but embodied belonging work in interaction may also be studied through the integration of elements of observation in interviewing or other

qualitative methods. Behavioural aspects of belonging work may also be studied by analysing narratives describing interaction. Another research strategy may be to follow the dynamics of situational summoning and how they relate to belonging work. The study design has a great impact on whether the situational elements of belonging work are studied through interaction (e.g. observation or other direct data), lived experiences and expectations (e.g. subjective narratives) or the testimonies of interactional practices (e.g. informant interviews).

Webs of Relationships

In this section, we consider how belonging in forms of life is mediated by relationships which connect us to others and to the durable social worlds that stabilise collective life. In the actions which people take to make and maintain their relationships, they are simultaneously making, maintaining and reshaping their memberships in relation to broader forms of life. Tavory's ethnography of Orthodox Jews provides an example of belonging as something intensely experienced through codified rules of behaviour, highlighting belonging work as the situated everyday reproduction of a particular form of collective life. In contrast, in many settings, contemporary life is marked by the fragmentation of structures of belonging into more ambiguous, precarious and unstable forms. Without clearly defined moral communities, actors must increasingly take upon themselves the work of producing and reproducing their networks of practical support and spaces for experiencing commonality.

This relational work is particularly apparent in the spheres of intimacy, kinship and close friendship, which bear much of the burden of sustaining belonging in everyday life. Effort is required in building, sustaining and reshaping such relationships. When bonds are especially tight, distancing and disaffiliation are often needed. The need to work in order to sustain belonging often becomes apparent in circumstances in which existing relationships are lost or destabilised, leaving empty positions in established webs of relationships. In such situations of biographical disruption, the work of forming new relationships involves a reconfiguration of these established relational webs (Ketokivi, 2008, 2012).

While the connection between belonging and relationships is most apparent in the spheres of the family and intimacy, relationships also serve to connect the self to collective forms of life, constituted by assemblages of people, materials and practices. In a study of occupational belonging among workers in the rapidly transforming field of aviation ground services, Vieno (2021) observed a generational shift in the generative mechanisms of the occupational webs of relationships and belonging. The oldest workers in the study had entered their jobs in the 1970s as the employees of national airlines. Their careers within airline organisations had been supported by institutionalised practices, including stable employment relationships, internal labour markets and off-duty communal gatherings facilitated by both the employer and their labour union. A by-product of these practices was the formation of a stable sense of occupational belonging among these older workers, which one of them expressed through the category of 'airport people'. This formation of workers into 'airport people' was the outcome of a decades-long

embeddedness in dense and institutionally supported webs of relationships, involving a minimum of belonging work on their own part.

The experiences of this generation provided a stark contrast to younger workers who had entered the field decades later, at a time when national airlines were divesting themselves of their ground service operations. Older and younger workers both confronted a situation in which employment relationships had become increasingly subject to insecurity. While older workers struggled to maintain their positions in fragmenting webs of relationships, younger workers were more successful in navigating this landscape on their own terms. For them, an active engagement in forming personalised relationships within the airport setting enabled some of them to maintain their positions in the face of generalised employment insecurity. Where they had been laid off, they reached out to their airport colleagues in order to find new jobs; when they were themselves in a position to enable employment for unemployed colleagues, they offered their help. They also drew on chance encounters and sources of employment information, such as a conversation regarding hiring overheard on the airport bus. For these workers, the capacity to forge social relationships and take action was fundamental to determining who might continue to belong in the category of 'airport people'. The burden of maintaining both employment relations and occupational belonging had been shifted from employers onto workers, who were now required to draw on their personal webs of relationships to accomplish the work of belonging (Vieno, 2021).

While negotiation in family relationships and the relational navigation of precarious employment draw from distinct sociological literatures, we see them as exemplifications of the crucial role of webs of relationships in the mediation of belonging to groups, communities and categories. In both families and working life, the destabilisation of structural relationships highlights the significance of personally negotiated relationships. Studying what relationships do for belonging and the work that goes into making and shaping them is thus vital in understanding belonging in its fragmented forms in contemporary society. Inquiring about the work that people put into their social relationships can open up a processual perspective on belonging as a contingent achievement, constantly negotiated in and through everyday relational practices. The multiple axes of power that Yuval-Davis (2006) identified as social locations of belonging can be concretely studied by attending to the relational work people are called on to do in order to belong. Methodologically, this may be accomplished in multiple ways, including qualitative interviews, detailed mapping of social relationships, formal network analysis or observation of the 'doing' of social relationships in physical or virtual environments.

Social Boundaries and Categorisations

In this section we consider belonging work in relation to institutionalised patterns of social categorisation and hierarchies of power. The concept of belonging work points to the disjunction between social location and identification by self and others (Yuval-Davis, 2006) as one that actors themselves must constantly resolve, often while working against institutionalised social boundaries.

Being positioned in a marginalised or stigmatised social location often manifests as an additional burden in belonging work, requiring the constant *disaffiliation* of the self from

this positioning. This demand is clearly developed in Anderson's (2012, 2015) investigations of how the 'iconic ghetto' serves as a stigmatised reference point in encounters between white and black Americans wherein identities are interpreted in a split second. He analyses American social space as racially segregated into black spaces, which white Americans generally avoid, and white spaces, which black Americans are compelled to enter in order to access social rewards and forms of capital connected to work, education and consumption (Anderson, 2015). Anderson (2015) shows how black Americans in white spaces are compelled to engage in a performance or 'dance' of respectability involving aspects of self-presentation such as dress and speech in order to disaffiliate themselves from association with the iconic ghetto. Racial categorisation thus conditions the work that black Americans must do in order to achieve belonging in relation to middle-class respectability.

Similar dynamics appear in Skeggs' (1997) ethnographic account of women positioned as working class in Thatcherite Britain. Skeggs (1997: 74) described their intersecting social location as historically identified with danger, dirt and devaluation, in contrast to working-class men who might derive some social value from their identification with hard work and masculinity. In this stigmatised social location, there is little place for positive identification; instead, disidentification from this location assumed central importance in the ways in which the women positioned themselves (Skeggs, 1997: 74). The imperative to disidentify oneself from a socially devalued category was generative of a disposition towards constant improvement over multiple spheres of life, encompassing maintaining a fit but not overtly sexualised body and appearance, consuming tasteful cultural products and decorating the home in a tasteful manner (Skeggs, 1997: 82–90). Yet the women's achievement of middle-class respectability was always emotionally uneasy and precarious (Skeggs, 1997: 87). Consciousness of the need to 'pass' in order to access value coexists with resentment of this requirement; class is thus embodied and felt as desire, fear, hatred and humiliation (Skeggs, 1997: 92–93).

While they did not frame their analysis through the concept of belonging work, Anderson and Skeggs both uncovered similar dynamics regarding the efforts which persons placed into stigmatised categories have to engage in when attempting to fit in and access value from a dominant hierarchical order. Their ethnographic studies offer instructive examples of how qualitative researchers can build up from fine-grained studies of the everyday relational efforts of belonging to the analysis of patterns of social categorisation and hierarchies of power. Narratives provide another possible point of entry for capturing the lived experiences of such social hierarchies. From another direction, the belonging work imposed by systems of categorisation could be studied from the institutional side, utilising organisational documents and informant interviews as windows into institutionally specific practices of inclusion and exclusion.

Materials, Rhythms and Movements

Belonging is often discussed rather abstractly, as if it did not involve actors that are flesh and blood, mediated by tangible bodies and materials. Yet life is made of matter: humans as bodily beings inhabit and move in a material world doing things with materials that mediate all relationships. Objects are appropriated and mark differences: Tavory (2010)

showed how the visible objects of religious identity, such as yarmulkes, unintentionally delegate boundary work to others who use them as visible markers of social identity. Practices of maintaining a house and a garden, cutting grass or shovelling snow follow cycles of nature and are both material and social (Bennett, 2015; Kuurne and Gómez, 2019). Synchronised movements of materials can bring people together, as well as mark the difference between them. Bodies are mortal and materials decompose, requiring care in their maintenance. Body parts and objects grow old, fall apart and are worn and torn (e.g. Jacobs and Cairns, 2011: 86–93). Moreover, materials are not passive and under human control but sometimes ‘act back’ (Ingold, 2011: 16–17).

Belonging work is undertaken both intentionally and habitually by engaging with bodies and materials in ways in which tangible action and symbolic valuations are interwoven. To exemplify how materials, rhythms and movements mediate the belonging work through which people create both closeness and distance, we draw on an ethnographic study that one of us conducted in an active neighbourhood of Kumpula, in Helsinki. Using materials and movements to join others requires internalised knowledge of specific forms of life, including their valuations and rhythms. In this historic neighbourhood, bonds and boundaries are made through active engagement with wooden houses and their gardens, through their care, renovation and representation (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019). Interpreted through Jerolmack and Tavory’s (2014) idea of how non-humans can act as totems that conjure up awareness and feelings of attachment to a particular social group, in Kumpula the house held such a totemic position (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019). Movements and rhythms around maintaining the house were interwoven with the cycles of nature and the local form of life. Neighbours were often outside, working on their houses and gardens in the same rhythm, and these synchronised the movements of tending to the houses that mattered deeply to them, generating repeated social encounters that created a shared fabric of life (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019).

While the spirit of the community was to recognise the ‘soul’ of the house and to personally take time to renovate the house using authentic materials, a story of earlier neighbours showed how one might fail to notice and uphold these local valuations and the importance of specific materials. According to the story, one family moved into the neighbourhood, quickly had their house spray-painted and installed expensive parquet flooring, without even realising how these actions broke a shared local value regarding the historic houses and their appropriate renovation. They skipped the fine-tuned belonging work of joining with the shared form of life, and this created distance between them and other families in the neighbourhood. Finally, they moved out, declaring they were never accepted among the neighbours. Non-humans (like houses) and persons can come to mutually constitute each other (e.g. Miller, 2010: 80–83) and this co-constitution may be an essential aspect of belonging work. Following the positions, movements and agentic powers of materials and relating them to processes of inclusion and exclusion in a certain form of life can lead researchers to new ways of understanding the orders and divisions of social relationships (see also Molotch, 2011: 74–75).

In thinking about how to study materials, rhythms and movements, one might draw from Lefebvre’s (2004) *rhythmanalysis*, which considers biological, physical and social timescales, and the rhythms of our bodies, nature and society together in everyday life (Lefebvre, 2004: 2; see also Bennett, 2015). Rhythmanalysis – through ethnography,

narrative analysis or other qualitative methods – sensitises us to studying the acts of joining, distancing and disaffiliation, as well as the synchronisation of various time-scales, as tangible rhythmic practices, while attending to the ways in which materials take part in belonging work. Another strategy may be to follow where different materials or objects belong (or do not belong) and how differing entanglements of objects, technologies and actors figure in the dynamics of belonging work.

Conclusion

Discussions on belonging have risen in response to uncertainty and conflicts over belonging, often involving situations in which belonging is being denied for whole groups of categorised people, whether related to ethnic or racial categories, immigration or other situations where there is no taken-for-grantedness of inclusion. Theoretical contributions (Antonsich, 2010; Calhoun, 1999; May, 2011; Youkhana, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 2006) have been helpful in clarifying dynamics of belonging that might otherwise have remained scattered in different empirical discussions. The concept of belonging is valuable in analysing complex situations in which identity does not always take groupist lines involving uniform communities or categories (Brubaker, 2004). Thus, the relational analysis of belonging needs to investigate the processes and practices through which the groups and categories which matter for belonging are constructed and held together. Our contribution joins the efforts of other recent theorists in developing a process-oriented viewpoint, sensitive to the particular processes and materials through which belonging happens (also Youkhana, 2015).

We have opened the black box of belonging by turning our gaze to the undertheorised aspect of the action that is necessary in the making of belonging. The concept of belonging work tackles the agentic aspect of belonging, asking how actors can shape their own or others' inclusion and exclusion, or closeness and distance, in relation to social groups and categories. Belonging, however, is not in the hands of individual actors but is fundamentally relational. Belonging work is thus relational work that actors embedded in social structures engage in to shape and modify their social relations and positions. Belonging is often assumed to be positive, but it may also be complex, ambivalent or negative. Belonging work may hence involve working towards something or away from something. It may be about modifying the existing situation or reconciling various belongings to form a more harmonious, or tolerable whole.

This work is bodily and fine-tuned, involving little gestures, behavioural patterns, social interactions and engagement with materials and repeated acts. The work of belonging is made up of a tremendous amount of constant activity, which may be habitual and/or intentional and often involves both conscious and subconscious dimensions. Subconscious action may be internalised through membership of a certain social position, but it also stems from our instinctually social nature, manifested in processes such as neurological mirroring, which helps us to join others and to form meaningful social bonds (see Carter and Porges, 2011). Humans are hard-wired to undertake the work of belonging as it contributes to our survival. In this neuroscientific view we perceive a link and a complement to Marx's philosophy, in which forms of life are sustained by humans

through the sensuous activity of their practices (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018; Graeber, 2001).

In any setting, for some, belonging is almost taken for granted while, for others, it is an object of struggle. The prevailing politics of belonging enable and constrain the possibilities of belonging work. We hope that the concept of belonging work helps to connect ethnographic and qualitative research to issues of social divisions and structures by addressing what one of us has earlier conceptualised as the *everyday politics of belonging* (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019; see also Yuval-Davis, 2011: 18–19), which frames everyday efforts to belong. One way to connect belonging work to the politics of belonging is by studying the everyday relational arenas wherein belonging is made, maintained and negotiated, including the question of access to these arenas. Investigating the possibilities and outcomes of belonging work is a process-oriented and fine-tuned way to learn about the daily construction of boundaries, which can reveal inclusionary and exclusionary practices that enable and constrain people's possibilities to belong in everyday life (Kuurne and Gómez, 2019).

Although the prevailing politics of belonging form unequal conditions that actors cannot escape, we suggest that contemporary fragmentation of the social demands some belonging work from everyone. Social life is filled with movement in and out of social relationships, categories and identities. In this social fluidity, all actors have to modify and reconcile various belongings, affiliate themselves to desired settings and disaffiliate themselves from past or undesired settings of belonging. Thus, we suggest *affiliation work*, *disaffiliation work* and *reconciliation work among different affiliations* may be seen as subcategories of belonging work.

The concept of belonging work also serves to open the discussion of belonging towards relationality and the material mediations highlighted by the post-humanist social sciences. Belonging never happens in a vacuum but concerns specific relations, bodies and materials that are symbolically highly significant and transformative of social relationships (see Jerolmack and Tavory, 2014). Materials also contribute to the processes of belonging in their own right (Ingold, 2011; see also Bennett, 2015; Kuurne and Gómez, 2019).

Empirically, belonging work is always complex, ambiguous and messy in a sense that cannot be grasped using rigid definitions. When outlining the principles of pragmatist abductive analysis, Timmermans and Tavory (2012) suggested that, in order to make sense of puzzling empirical materials and create relevant but novel insights, researchers should enter the field with a deep and broad theoretical base and develop their theoretical repertoires throughout the research process. We offer the concept of belonging work as a theoretically integrative and sensitising notion that helps in formulating relevant questions, observing the fine-tuned dynamics of belonging and the ways in which human beings navigate the complex relational landscape in which belonging takes place. The concept of belonging work is designed to go deep into what happens in relations and how it does so, and it is broad in the sense that it differentiates between the various aspects of the work done for belonging. We invite social researchers to engage with those aspects of our conceptualisation that they find insightful in designing their own studies. We offer the concept of belonging work as inspiration and insight for theoretically sensitive, empirical and creative analyses of actors' involvement in the making of belonging.

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