

Article

Experiences of Relatedness during Enforced Remote Work among Employees in Higher Education

Annikka Tapani ^{1,*}, Merja Sinkkonen ², Kirsi Sjöblom ³, Katrien Vangrieken ⁴ and Anne Mäkikangas ³

¹ School of Pedagogical Innovations and Culture, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Kuntokatu 3, 33520 Tampere, Finland

² School of Social Services and Health Care, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Kuntokatu 3, 33520 Tampere, Finland

³ Work Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, 33014 Tampere, Finland

⁴ Occupational and Organisational Psychology and Professional Learning, KU Leuven, Dekenstraat 2, P.O. Box 3772, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

* Correspondence: annukka.tapani@tuni.fi

Abstract: The aim of this study was to investigate experiences of relatedness among higher education staff during enforced remote work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences were investigated both at the earliest stages of enforced remote work (April 2020) and in November/December 2021. Remote work experiences were analysed through the lens of Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory, especially through the concept of relatedness. Within this framework, relatedness is described as one of three basic psychological needs affecting health, well-being, and productivity. The main research focus includes ascertaining which factors affect experiences of relatedness among employees in higher education at work at the beginning of enforced remote work and at the end of it. The study uses qualitative data collected from Finnish university employees, analysed using theory-driven content analysis. The analysis of the two datasets enabled us to identify three categories of relatedness: (1) interaction among co-workers, (2) feelings of care and (3) experiences of connectedness. The results showed that the experience of relatedness was severely challenged during the enforced work period. In the future, the need for relatedness needs to be addressed more deliberately in multi-locational work conditions because remote work is especially affecting the experiences of relatedness. Positive experiences of relatedness can be achieved even in remote work conditions with deliberate and thought-out actions, for example by developing good remote interaction practices within the team and remote leadership practices that convey care for the employees.

Keywords: higher education employees; enforced remote work; self-determination theory; basic psychological needs; relatedness; content analysis



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1. Introduction

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work increased rapidly. It has been estimated that in 2020 almost 37% of all workers in the EU worked remotely. In Finland, almost 60% of workers transitioned to working from home in spring 2020, enabled by the structure of the economy, digitalisation, and advances in information and communication technologies. The number of teleworkers later decreased slightly, but nearly half (48%) of Finnish employees were still working remotely at the end of 2020 [1]. In the post-pandemic era, multi-locational work and different flexible work arrangements are predicted to increase. For example, according to the State of Remote Work Report (2022), 97% of respondents reported that they prefer working remotely at least to some extent also after COVID-19. Therefore, there is an urgent need to better understand what factors contribute to sustainable remote and multi-locational work.

The present study contributes to the existing remote work literature in several ways. First, we focus on factors creating relatedness during enforced remote work caused by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Although social demands, such as loneliness, have been studied widely and identified as one of the core challenges of remote work (see e.g., [2]), there are few studies focusing on relatedness specifically from a qualitative perspective, as this study does. Second, in addition to focusing on qualitative experiences, we utilise a unique longitudinal dataset collected at the beginning of the lockdown in spring 2020 and at end of 2021, when employees had worked remotely for over one and a half years. We chose the first timeline at the beginning of the remote work period because it happened surprisingly and seemed on the one hand, like a crisis but on the other hand, as a new possibility to work. There were no practicalities in how to handle this kind of new situation. We chose the second timeline to study how the employees were used to the situation after 1.5 years of prolonged remote work. The home-based working conditions were not optimal, and the way of working was not voluntarily chosen but some new practicalities had been learned. In this study, the experiences of relatedness were analysed through the lens of the self-determination theory [3]. In this study, we concentrated on how the basic psychological need for relatedness was or was not met in the enforced remote work conditions. More specifically, we studied what factors affected experienced relatedness at the beginning of the enforced remote work and later on when working remotely continued due to the prolonged COVID-19.

1.1. Theoretical Background: Basic Psychological Needs in Remote Work

Self-determination theory (henceforth SDT) views basic psychological needs as essential nutrients for healthy and effective human functioning, and the social environment as central to how these needs are met. An environment that facilitates the satisfaction of basic psychological needs enables the individual to experience motivation and well-being. Autonomy refers to a sense of willingness, endorsement, or volition [4]. It most essentially concerns a sense of initiative and ownership: it refers to individuals' sense that they are the origin of their own actions, and that the nature of those actions is volitional and consonant with their own values and interests (e.g., [5–7]). Secondly, competence refers to a sense of confidence and being effective in one's own actions [4]. It concerns the feeling of mastery, a sense that one can succeed and grow [7]. Thirdly, relatedness refers to a sense of belonging, inclusion and feeling connected to others [4]. It is characterised by experiences of having good, close relationships, and of being understood, accepted, and liked as one is. Relatedness is a two-way experience of caring and being cared for: it has to do with being included and well treated, but equally with experiences of being able to contribute positively to other people's lives. Finally, the satisfaction of all three basic psychological needs is equally important and they are not mutually exclusive and do not contradict each other.

The enforced remote work period included elements potentially detrimental to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and to the need for relatedness in particular that is in our focus. In light of previous findings on interaction, connectedness, and loneliness during enforced remote work described next, the experience of relatedness has possibly suffered most due to being physically isolated from colleagues. Relatedness is facilitated by the conveyance of interest, respect and caring, and in remote work conditions it is not as straightforward as in face-to-face interaction, but likely requires special attention.

1.2. Empirical Evidence: Relatedness as Remote Work Challenge

As expected, and according to the SDT theory, lack of social resources is emphasised as being among the key challenges in empirical studies focusing on enforced remote work. The shift to remote work has inevitably changed the way people interact with each other and the opportunities for giving and receiving social support. For example, over half (52%) of employees working remotely due to COVID-19 reported feeling less connected to their co-workers [4]. Moreover, 24% of the respondents felt lonely while working remotely (see [8]).

Lack of social resources in remote work also leads to negative consequences. In their systematic review, Charalampous and colleagues [7] discovered that working remotely

from home may be a risk factor for burnout if insufficient social support is provided. Similar results were obtained in a recent systematic review that demonstrated that home-based remote work has advantageous effects on well-being, especially in terms of stress and exhaustion [9]. There is also evidence that social support obtained from work protected against the detrimental effects of job demands during COVID-19 [9,10]. Moreover, Gaskell [11] discussed that remote work weakens ties to the employer, especially if connections with colleagues are also curtailed. However, it may also be that experiences of enforced work differ between employees. That is, an individual with a greater need for social interaction or who lacks a social network outside of work will be more negatively affected by remote work [12].

In this study, we focus on higher education employees who—at least in Finland—worked remotely for almost two years due to COVID-19. Some studies have already focused on this occupational group, but most of these quantitative studies investigate employees' productivity [13,14], well-being, and/or stress [8,15–17] and their antecedents during the pandemic. Uusiautti et al. [18] demonstrated in their study that the COVID-19 pandemic did indeed affect communality among university personnel and students negatively, but at the same time, social interaction was highly appreciated and needed. The higher education employees studied here may on average be more accustomed to working remotely than employees in other fields. It is also plausible that, due to the high level of job autonomy and relatively low level of interdependence between employees, this profession may be better suited to remote work than the work of employees, for example, in high-interdependence teams [19]. Nevertheless, the working conditions among this occupational group also changed drastically due to enforced remote work and they were compelled to engage in long-term remote work, thus creating a special thread to relatedness and social belonging.

1.3. Research Questions

In this study, we were interested in how the basic psychological need for relatedness was or was not met in the enforced remote work conditions. More specifically, we were interested in which factors affected relatedness at the beginning of the enforced remote work and later on when working remotely continued due to the prolonged COVID-19. We recognised from the SDT-theory factors creating the experience of relatedness: quality relationships and interaction, caring, inclusion and contribution to other people's lives. We were interested in how these factors were experienced by higher education staff. Our specific research question was: what factors affected higher education employees' experience of relatedness at the beginning of enforced remote work and at the end of it?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The data used in this study were collected as a part of the research project "Safely remotely—occupational well-being and its management in telework", funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund. The overall goal of the longitudinal research project was to examine higher education employees' experiences of enforced remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were employees of a Finnish university who mainly worked remotely from March 2020 due to governmental recommendations. The authors obtained permission to carry out the research from the university's rectors and directors of human resources.

The quantitative data for the study were collected in five waves: April 2020 (T1), June 2020 (T2), October 2020 (T3), February 2021 (T4) and November/December 2021 (T5). At Time 1 (T1), the survey was sent to the work email addresses of 6929 employees through the university's general mailing list. The follow-up surveys were sent to employees who had expressed their willingness to participate in the follow-up and had given their email addresses for this purpose at each measurement. In total 2297 (33%) employees (doctoral students and grant holders working under a resource agreement were excluded) responded at T1, 897 at T2 (65% T1–T2 response rate), 683 at T3 (83% T2–T3 response rate), 530 at T4

(86% T3–T4 response rate) and 417 at T5 (84% T4–T5 response rate). The quantitative part of the survey asked participants questions related to the remote work conditions, well-being at work and general well-being, including physical activity, during the period studied. It was voluntary for participants to answer the questionnaire and they were informed about the purpose of the study and ethical issues. It is a must to make a data privacy announcement for participants in the university before it is possible to start research [20]. Only anonymised data were used in this study. All authors had a view of the data so the results have been seen and verified by using the investigator triangulation method (see e.g., [21]).

The qualitative data used in this study were collected through a quantitative questionnaire focusing on the responses of research and teaching staff to the open-ended questions at T1 and T5. In this study, qualitative data were used as we were interested in experiences of relatedness, information which was not obtained from the quantitative data [8,22].

At T1, altogether 1168 employees representing research and teaching staff participated, and 28% ($n = 324$) of them responded to the request “Please feel free to provide feedback on the survey and share your thoughts about working remotely including ideas for developing and supporting remote working”. The length of the text document concerning these answers was altogether 45 pages. At T5 altogether 181 research and teaching staff responded to the survey and 75% ($n = 136$) of them responded to the open-ended question: “How have you felt about the new or changed work conditions this autumn?”. The length of this text document was 18 pages. In this study, we focus on T1 and T5, the first and last databases to study experiences at the beginning of the remote working period and after it had lasted 19 months.

The background factors of the present sample were as follows at Time 1. The majority (54%) were women. Their average age was 45.7 years ($SD = 11.14$). The sample was well educated: 54% held a licentiate or doctoral degree. Most of the participants (81%) were living with a partner (either married or cohabiting).

2.2. Data Analysis

We analysed the data using theory-driven deductive [23] content analysis. Content analysis is a general term for a number of different strategies used to analyse text [24]. Hsieh and Shannon [25] use “directed” content analysis approach when analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. We used theory-driven content analysis because the structure of analysis was operationalised based on previous knowledge. Our primary aim was to describe the phenomenon in a conceptual form. Our process of data analysis included preparation, organizing, and reporting. In the preparation stage, we obtained the sense of whole and selected the unit of analysis which were words, concepts, sentences or part of sentences, and in the organizing stage, we created categories to answer our research question [26,27].

Similar to Hsieh and Shannon [25], we identified expressions that related to feelings of relatedness. There were expressions dealing, for example, with interaction or connectivity. The categories of content analysis were driven by relatedness as a part of SDT theory: interaction and relationships with others, caring and being cared for, inclusion, and one’s meaningful contribution to other people’s lives [3]. Content analysis is useful in gleaning practical knowledge and in this case, we were interested to see whether the experience of remote work was connected with relatedness (see [28]). Content analysis process brings together fragmented experiences [29] and its idea is to form a comprehensive picture of the informants’ collective experience [30].

The qualitative checklist is completed according to standards for reporting qualitative research [31] and is attached as an extra file to the article (see Supplementary Material, Table S1).

The main idea of the theory-driven content analysis is to give explicit definitions, examples, and coding rules for each deductive category, determining exactly under what circumstances a text passage can be coded with a category [23].

Coding agenda is modified from Mayring [23]: Category is about what are the main concepts identified from the theory, Definition in about how the concept is defined according to the theory, Examples show the diversity of the concept in the data, and Coding rules tell how well the definition and the examples point on together.

3. Results

At T1 and T5, we identified three categories relating to experiences of relatedness. As the data, we used the qualitative data from the longitudinal study based on the quantitative questionnaire focusing on the responses of research and teaching staff to the open-ended questions at T1 and T5. The data were collected on a written form on this online questionnaire. Examples that are shown in the following tables are from this questionnaire and answers to open questions mentioned previously. Tables show the category, its definition according to the SDT theory, examples from the data and coding rules used to determine if the example is suitable to demonstrate the mentioned category. T1 presents the examples of the data in the first timeline and T5 presents the latest examples.

The concept in the theory was defined as dealing with interaction and relationships with others, caring and being cared for, inclusion, and one’s meaningful contribution to other people’s lives. In the result sector, the concept of interaction among co-workers refers to interaction and relationships with others in the university community, feelings of care for caring and being cared for and experiences of connectedness for inclusion and one’s meaningful contribution to other people’s lives. In Table 1, we present an overview of the findings and examples of interaction as an element of creating relatedness. Table 2 shows the findings on feelings of care and Table 3 presents findings on experiences of connectedness.

Table 1. Interaction affecting the experience of relatedness at remote work.

Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules
Interaction among co-workers	Good, close relationships and being accepted and liked as one is.	T1 “It is possible for me to focus on my work much better than if there were some other people working in the same space (and, on the other hand, I don’t feel that I am disturbing others).” “Demands for continuing interaction and meetings create a burden on already stressed employees.” “Remote work is much more intensive and burdensome because there are no breaks and no stimulating interaction with colleagues.”	Themes that concern interaction with others, either in positive or negative ways.
		T5 “Social interaction that I missed feels very stressful now. I feel more tired after working face-to-face than after working remote.” “Remote meetings have made my work more effective because I do not need to spend time travelling. But the working days are very intensive. When I go to campus, I realize how much time chatting with colleagues takes although it is important in order to take care of issues.”	

Table 2. Feelings of care affecting the experience of relatedness at remote work.

Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules
Feelings of care	Meaning caring and being cared for.	<p>T1</p> <p>“For one month, not a single shared conversation time has been arranged. I feel very lonely.”</p> <p>“Management’s communication has been discouraging—concerns about coping have not been be talked about.”</p> <p>“It is important that working hours are not increased by extra controlling Teams-meetings.”</p> <p>“These additional work tasks are not understood but there are some coffee meetings or one-hour-extra-meetings put in here and there on the calendar. They have been said to be voluntary but there have been implications for affecting the jobs of those who do not participate. It is said that these two-hour meetings will be available online if a person has no time to participate. The problem is where to find time to watch them.”</p> <p>“The very strict restriction on access to university premises for staff during the crises has been peculiar. I feel that in this case, the trust of the university’s top management in their personnel is at the same level as in kindergarten children, and the importance of experimental research is not understood.”</p>	Themes that concern the feelings that the staff is taken care of and their well-being is in the management’s interest.
		<p>T5</p> <p>“Other changes to structure, workspaces and so on have added to the sense of an uncaring employer, no physical sense of belonging anywhere and a lack of respect for employees as professionals.”</p> <p>“The managers have shown no appreciation although we have managed the situation well.”</p> <p>“I feel that the university management does not care about recovering from an exceptional situation and moving to new circumstances from the perspective of the well-being of the staff or students.”</p> <p>“This autumn, all the regulations are over, and the personnel has been in charge of all decisions by itself.”</p> <p>“I have got no support or options for how to arrange my work or working conditions. Although the supervisors have been aware of my difficult working situation, I have got no support. This makes me feel that I am not a part of any work community, and my work is of zero value. I am very disappointed with how the university has managed the COVID-19 time.”</p>	

Table 3. Experiences of connectedness affecting the experience of relatedness at remote work.

Category	Definition	Examples	Coding Rules
Experiences of connectedness	Feelings of being included, well-treated and equally contributing positively to other people's lives.	T1 "There is a good feeling while we are having virtual coffee breaks together." "Many things have worked surprisingly well and own workgroup can help in many cases." "Several supervisors in Teams/Zoom meetings have been much more approachable and relaxed than in normal meeting situations."	Expressions of inclusion and being a well-treated, valuable member of the university community
		T5 "It has been a chance for me to laugh—it tells how much I have missed these live meetings and contact teaching. Teams and Zoom are useful and effective but used all the time they reduce the joy, meaningfulness and all effectivity in my work." "I miss my work community but not as much as I did in the beginning of this COVID-19 time." "For me there is a challenging feeling of being an entrepreneur. This makes me think if I am in the right workplace. I have never liked the idea of being an entrepreneur working alone; I am more a team-player."	

At T1 (April 2020), interaction among co-workers seemed to concentrate on interaction on a practical level and "getting things done". There were concerns about colleagues and how they were coping with the situation because there were no opportunities for informal discussions. Participants also voiced ideas about the remote work routines and how remote work could provide opportunities to concentrate on work with fewer disruptions—working alone with no interaction among colleagues was effective. Effective remote working habits provided opportunities to concentrate on basic tasks, not on "small talk".

At T5 (November/December 2021), interaction among co-workers included concerns about colleagues and students. The interaction had become increasingly diverse, and respondents felt there was no opportunity to find a solution that fits all. In this category, we identified some comments about students and interaction with them. Responses referred to how to build online interaction with students or how some students wanted face-to-face teaching while some preferred online. Strict routines were created for working remotely and returning to face-to-face meetings and teaching was not greatly missed. The data also includes comments about how HE policy affected interaction and its prospects: the employer had utilised the situation to make the working conditions worse, for example by changing the working conditions towards non-personalised workplaces and not discussing the changes with the staff. These things had been completed during the remote working period and not discussed with the employees.

A new form of interaction included how family members were connected to working life. Returning to face-to-face teaching and meetings affected family members' health. There has previously been discussion about how to reconcile working life and family life, but the remote working period changed the situation. Children tried to do schoolwork at home while the researcher parents tried to write their articles; new kinds of workmates entered the traditional picture. This example shows new ways to think about academic remote work:

"My family has been very understanding and given me space to work. I feel it is unfair to them when I work 12 h a day and they must be quiet and keep out of the way."

Feelings of care (T1) (Table 3) were related to loneliness and lack of empathy. The main obstacle in working alone was created by the organisation not taking care of the staff, and

not asking how they were coping with the situation, and this caused people to miss the feeling of care and being connected to the community. If no care and connections to others were available, there were feelings of isolation and working alone. If no one, in this case especially management and supervisors, showed interest in one's work, it felt as if no one really cared about how the personnel were coping with the situation.

At T5, feelings of care concerned missing support and changes made in the employees' working conditions without consulting them. Simultaneously with the transition to remote work, the university management made some structural changes concerning personal working places: Not everyone would have a personal working space. Additionally, personnel numbers were cut. Wishes were expressed for supervisors to care more—to keep more in touch or show some appreciation. The employer was felt to be almost merciless because of the structural changes and not being in touch with how employees were coping.

There were some remote leadership practices that were related to impaired working conditions, such as shutting down the campus or having too many or compulsory meetings. Caring seemed to turn into controlling. Meetings were experienced to interrupt the basic work and people felt that they were not trusted. Some informants were already familiar with remote work and online teaching, and they felt that they were not trusted because of too much micromanagement. The total shutdown of the campus spaces felt unfair and seemed to be an attack on one's meaning as part of the community. It was not possible to carry out one's work properly under these circumstances. It was not possible to work remotely with those with whom one would have needed to cooperate and carry out one's tasks properly. Shutting down the campus felt like a failure to comprehend individuals' work, its needs, or employee competencies.

At T5, participants reported crucial feelings that now, when there was a need for leadership, personnel were left alone to decide on practicalities. There was a need for leadership and to discuss the solutions with the personnel. The structural changes were felt to cause stress. The leadership was described as dangerous. Concerns had more to do with the structural arrangements than remote or hybrid ways of working.

Experiences of connectedness (T1) (see Table 3) were about feelings of there still being a shared connection, no matter where the work takes place. Connectedness was created during virtual coffee breaks and participants reported feeling that there still is a community available although it has been transferred to an online environment. It was possible to get help and feel that there are others available, present, and willing to help. Respondents felt it was important that these connections continue.

At T5, experiences of connectedness related to the opportunities to meet face-to-face—it was experienced as a good thing that there was a choice between remote or face-to-face meetings. Some reported missing the community spirit but not so much as at the beginning of the remote work period. Face-to-face connections brought joy and laughter that had been lacking while working remotely. Remote work practicalities also added to feelings of working alone and not being a team member.

4. Discussion

This study focused on the experiences of relatedness at work during the exceptional circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research question was, how did higher education employees experience relatedness at work at the beginning of enforced remote work and at the end of it? In the following, we will discuss the main findings, and their implications and discuss the different experiences of remote work in the beginning and after 1.5 years of the remote work period.

4.1. Main Findings

The analysis revealed three categories relating to relatedness, namely (1) interaction among co-workers, (2) feelings of care and (3) experiences of connectedness.

To sum up, at T1 in the category of interaction among co-workers, there were concerns about colleagues and how they were coping with the situation because there were no

opportunities for informal discussions. There were ideas about remote work routines and how they provide opportunities to concentrate better on work. Interaction with supervisors was especially missed. The main result in this category was that continuing interaction was on the one hand experienced stressful but on the other hand, it was also missed because it afforded a chance to relax during working hours. At T5, interaction among co-workers included concerns about colleagues and students. The interaction became increasingly diverse, and respondents felt there was no way to find a solution for all concerned. Strict routines were created for working remotely and returning to face-to-face meetings felt uncomfortable; face-to-face meetings were not greatly missed. There were also comments on how HE policy affected interaction and its prospects: the employer took advantage of the situation to make negative changes in working conditions.

In this category of interaction (T5), a new aspect entered the personal working area: family members were involved while working from home. Returning to face-to-face teaching and meetings also had the potential to affect family members' health.

Feelings of care (T1) were connected with loneliness and lack of empathy. There were feelings that no one cared or was interested in one's work or how one was coping with the situation. If no care and connections to others were available, there were feelings of loneliness and in isolation. Interest or care on the part of management and supervisors was especially missed. Feelings of care (T1) were also related to deteriorating working conditions such as shutting down the campus or to feelings of there being too many or compulsory meetings. Too many online meetings were experienced as disruptive for the basic work and suggested a lack of trust. This was seen as a sign of micromanagement, not showing care but more like control. Shutting down campus felt like a failure to understand individual work, its needs or employee competencies.

At T5, feelings of care were about missing support and changes made in working conditions without consulting employees. Structural changes concerning personal working places and the number of employees were seen as signs of lack of care. It was hoped that supervisors might care more, keep in touch more or show some appreciation. At T5, feelings of care were even more connected with leadership: there were feelings that now, when there was a need for leadership, the personnel were left alone to decide on practicalities. There was a need for leadership and to discuss the solutions with the personnel. The leadership was described as having features of destructive leadership. Concerns included structural arrangements more than remote or hybrid ways of working.

In the category of experiences of connectedness (T1), there were feelings of still having a connection regardless of where people were working. Connectedness was created during virtual coffee breaks and there were feelings that there was still a community available, albeit online. It was possible to get help and feel that there were others available, present, and willing to help. At T5, experiences of connectedness related to the opportunity to meet face-to-face. Some reported missing the community spirit but not as much as at the beginning of the remote work period. Face-to-face connections brought joy while remote work accentuated feelings of not being a team member.

Earlier research shows that remote work affects employees depending on their characteristics [32]. Our study supports this: there are individuals who enjoy remote work routines and can still feel connected via online tools. For others, face-to-face encounters are an important way to bring joy in work and happiness to work. Earlier research has also reported deterioration in interaction [8,33]. In the later data (T5), the main points concerned the deteriorated opportunities for interaction under these conditions: no personal working places in addition to personnel cuts.

There has been discussion on home-based remote work reducing stress and exhaustion but also conflicting results [32]. Our findings do corroborate the idea of conflicting experiences. On the one hand, the face-to-face community was missed and there were feelings of loneliness while working remotely, yet there were feelings of focusing more effectively on one's work while working alone. This introduced the idea of disturbing co-workers: while working on campus, there are opportunities to converse with others and

this took time. After working remotely, this kind of chatting felt time-consuming. Only the functional relationships were deemed valuable. This is an interesting new finding on enforced remote work conditions and the social side of work—it appeared that the approach towards relationships and relatedness at the workplace shifted more towards a functional approach to relationships and connections. It also appeared that while the employees had hoped for more relatedness in remote work, they also started to give up on it, perhaps because it did not seem that this need would be met. This is significant and requires attention at workplaces in future since there is no reason to believe that the basic human need for relatedness changed during the pandemic.

Social interaction was also felt to be time-consuming. After a day of working from home, there were feelings of not being so tired as after a working day on campus. This connects to topics such as commitment to work [11] and how committed employees really are to work or to work for the community. The negative side of committing to work and not to co-workers is that there is no time to nurture the feeling of belonging, a feeling of relatedness, if these are not deemed important. A profound need for interaction and relatedness is discernible, but this needs to be built up in new ways, as the traditional ones do not apply in remote conditions.

Employees need social support to flourish in their work [19]. To be seen and noticed as an individual employee implies dignity and this leads to doing one's best at work. In this study, feelings of care were the weakest link in remote work: even at the beginning (T1), there were many hopes for contacting the staff, just to ask how they were coping with the situation. At T5, the employer was criticised heavily for not caring about how the staff was coping but also for being almost merciless in introducing the structural changes during the remote period and not discussing them with the employees. According to the self-determination theory [3], relatedness is a two-way experience: it is about caring and being cared for. The practicalities experienced during the remote period did not strengthen this idea. The data shows that the experience of relatedness has been severely challenged during the enforced work period and in future, it needs to be addressed more deliberately in remote work conditions.

4.2. Implications

Enforced remote work during the pandemic has profoundly affected university work, as restrictions and enforced remote work has continued for almost two years, and there have been consequences, for example, in job-related well-being [19]. In this study, we focused on basic psychological needs [3] and especially on relatedness on the assumption that the fulfilment of psychological needs is a prerequisite for well-being.

Previous research has found that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed working relationships and the need for autonomy has been accentuated in remote work: the new normal will require organisations to be creative and deliberate in their approaches to supporting employees to work autonomously.

Our results accentuate that, regardless of how autonomous employees are, they still need support from supervisors and leaders. This is aligned with what has been known based on self-determination theory: the needs for autonomy and relatedness are not contradictory but complementary, and both are essential for motivation, productivity, and well-being [3]. In remote work conditions, maintaining a sufficient level of relatedness and support may require allocating more time to maintaining relationships at work, both among employees and leaders, as opposed to the experience that there is no time for connecting beyond work tasks in remote work.

During the enforced remote work period, the staff were compelled to invent new ways of working in a sudden and exceptional situation. As a continuation, now new ways of leading are needed as remote work is likely to continue as a central way of working also in post-pandemic times [34]. Previous research [35] has proposed new practices that engage technologies to maintain social connections during remote work. It is not only the conditions and technology that count, but also how we use it [36]. There need to be clear

and shared rules and practices of how online interaction is arranged and how the related technology is used. These need to be developed as a result of a deliberate, collaborative and thought-out process [37]. Remote work includes an evident risk for the compromised experience of relatedness, but it does not need to be so—relatedness can be supported in many fruitful ways in these conditions too.

Our data suggested that as a result of exceptional circumstances and compromised working conditions and a sense of connectedness, some of the employees were at risk of not seeing meaning or value in their work anymore and it was becoming less self-endorsed. Some described experiencing oneself to be in a role of a private entrepreneur simply carrying out one's daily tasks alone. In remote conditions, it is highly important for the employees to experience that one's work is a part of a greater whole and that one does it in connection with the work community, no matter where it is done, face-to-face or remote. Employees need to feel that they are cared for and listened to in issues central to their work. In our data, other significant organisational reforms took place as well as during enforced remote work, and many participants reported experiences of lack of care on behalf of university management. In this kind of situation, it is very important to include employees in the process in order to support their basic psychological needs. This not only provides motivation and well-being but also makes work more fluent as typically the employees are the best experts regarding the specific aspects of their work.

This study showed that there is a need to learn new ways of interacting while working remotely. Good quality interaction can lead to experiences of being cared for and, according to our study, this can increase relatedness. This adds to the feeling of being an important part of the work community. We recommend caring leadership [38] as a new way to lead HE organisations. One practical example of it is just regularly asking, how the employees are coping with their tasks and duties. In addition, simply asking, and showing some dialogical will is important: listening, being present, and being willing to discuss, without rushing away at once. Naturally, all employees are individuals with different life situations, and this leads to the idea that there is not a single solution that fits all. This question of individual needs could be better resolved by involving the personnel. In addition, we need new ways of understanding interaction when the work is carried out in a way that includes both face-to-face and online interaction. There is a need to rethink the elements that form relatedness. It is not the same as in the "old days"—new ways to support relatedness are needed. According to this study, practical ways of interaction, showing reciprocal care, and leadership practices all play an essential role.

5. Limitations

One central limitation of this study is that data are from the Finnish university context and its specific characteristics, and therefore it may not apply equally to different kinds of work environments. For example, the contextual factors of leadership are very different in the university compared to other contexts: for many supervisors, supervisory duties come as a secondary responsibility while the main focus may be on other things. A limitation that can also be mentioned is that all authors work in a university context and have had the same kind of remote work period in their working career, so it is easier to understand the problems relating to relatedness.

The data consist of responses to one open question in written format, so there was no opportunity to ask additional questions, which would have been possible in an interview. However, the question was formulated in a very open form so as to encourage participants to bring up topics that they found relevant and to have a fair level of freedom in their expression.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the separation between work that happens face to face or remotely is a very rough one when it comes to practices that are applied in both conditions. Remote work can be arranged in many ways, some of which can be very good regarding relatedness as well, depending on the specific practices of each work community. There is most likely lots of variation between each team on how well the

shared practices succeed or not in supporting relatedness, either when working remotely or face to face, and this does not depend merely on the condition itself.

6. Conclusions

While studying one Finnish HE community and its personnel's experiences of relatedness in remote work, we identified three central categories, namely (1) interaction among co-workers, (2) feelings of care and (3) experiences of connectedness. Based on the analysis, the experience of relatedness has been severely challenged during the enforced work period. Even though it does not apply to every work community, in many, this has been the case during enforced remote work. In future, the need for relatedness needs to be addressed more deliberately in remote work conditions. There is a need to rethink the elements that form relatedness in working conditions that combine face-to-face work and remote work. It is important for the employees to experience that they are working as a part of a well-functioning and caring community, whether the work takes place face-to-face or remotely. The positive experience of relatedness can be achieved even in remote work conditions with deliberate and thought-out actions, for example by developing good remote interaction practices within the team and remote leadership practices that convey care for the employees. In the time following the enforced remote work, it will be focal to find new ways to build and maintain relatedness.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/challe13020055/s1>, Table S1. Checklist for qualitative study.

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