

Who decides where we work - the individual, the collective or the institution? Narratives of legitimizing hybrid work practices

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Abstract

We examine how knowledge workers use narratives to legitimize their hybrid work practices in post-Covid-19 work life. We identify three narratives, the 'individualist', the 'collectivist', and the 'institutionalist', as alternative perspectives of hybrid work that people draw on to legitimize their workplace choices to support performativity and well-being. This study contributes to research on organizational policy implementation by explaining how narrative constructions are used to legitimate different choices within same organizations that go through a transition from forced remote work to hybrid work.

Keywords: hybrid work, social norm, flexible work policy, narrative, discourse

1. Introduction

As companies are beginning to grasp the scope of the post-Covid-19 pandemic world, organizations are increasingly implementing hybrid work policies and practices for employees who conduct work both remotely and at the office (Halford, 2005). While they aim to get the perks of both work environments, many organizations and leaders are struggling to navigate the transition to hybrid work and receiving pushback from employees who have enjoyed working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. When Apple CEO Tim Cook, for example, announced in June 2021 that their employees would be required to work at the office three days a week in the fall 2021 (The Verge, 2021), this initiative received immediate and strong pushback from Apple employees who wanted to see more flexibility, and the hybrid work initiative got postponed. How to navigate between managerial control and employee autonomy in hybrid work is hence not an easy task, to which there seem to be no bulletproof solutions.

Traditionally, in work design research, it has been assumed that managers are responsible for structuring jobs and work arrangements, that employees then carry out (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). In hybrid

work, however, part of the scheduling and locational control is passed onto individual workers. The level of employee autonomy related to hybrid work implementations may however differ from one workplace to another. While some organizations offer employees a full agency to decide where and when to work, others have introduced hybrid work policies that strictly define the number of days per week, even specific weekdays when employees should work at the office. While prior research on telework (Raghuram et al., 2019) has primarily focused on the latter situations where remote work is more limited or fixed, e.g., to 1-2 days per week (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), current hybrid work policies seem to be more flexible (Fayard et al., 2021) and it is still unclear how employees and managers will choose to implement these practices. Many workers who were forced to work remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic have developed new routines and want to continue working remotely at least part of the working time (Barrero et al., 2020; Taneja et al., 2021) and may not be happy to comply with management-imposed hybrid work policies. This introduces new questions around spatial and temporal autonomy and work control, which have been identified by Halford (2005) as a potential key tension in managing hybrid work in the future.

In our work here, we rely on qualitative data from five Finnish organizations to study employee narratives of their hybrid work choices and how they legitimize their decisions to work from home or at the office. Although we draw from the theory on social norms (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Schein, 2017), we use a narrative approach to elucidate the competing perspectives and viewpoints that employees and organizations may hold on hybrid work and its effects on performativity and well-being.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Hybrid work policies and social norms

Formal hybrid work policies include, similarly like policies in relation to telework, some level of

employee flexibility in relation to work location choice (i.e., autonomy to determine where the work is done; Golden & Veiga, 2005), work scheduling flexibility (e.g., Fujimoto et al., 2016), and discretion to determine how to schedule work weeks, unpaid personal leave, or sick leave to care for ill children (Eaton, 2003). Such flexible working arrangements have been found to positively impact employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001; Kirby, 2006), work engagement (Griffith et al., 2018), and performance (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Increased flexibility, both in time and place, may also enable workers to adjust work schedules to accommodate family and other personal obligations and preferences (Kossek, 2005; Kossek & Michel, 2011). Research also shows that flexible working arrangements improve employer-employee relationships, and mutually benefit workers and their organization. For example, when employers offer scheduling flexibility, workers often have more trust in the organization, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction (Scholarios & Marks, 2004), and reciprocate the offered flexibility by adapting and foregoing individual preferences to meet workgroup or organizational needs (Nordbäck et al., 2017).

The adoption of formal flexible work policies depends however on the organization's informal policies and social norms concerning how these formal policies should be applied, for example, whether workers feel safe to use the flexible work arrangements without being penalized (Eaton, 2003). Social norms are formed of organizational member's basic assumptions, i.e., their beliefs that operate unconsciously and define its norms in a "taken-for-granted" manner (Schein, 2017). Basic assumptions are expressed in values and norms that explain and validate how things are, why they are like they are, and how they should be (Schneider & Shrivastava, 1988). Social norms therein involve the unwritten rules and standards of behavior that are considered acceptable in a group or an organization (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Such norms are commonly discursively constructed in the members' stories, symbols, and behaviors, which in turn, reinforce, institutionalize, and promote organizational culture (Kilmann et al., 1985).

Prior research has found that employee discourses affect application of workplace policies. For example, Nordbäck et al. (2017) studied the power of co-worker discourses vs. organizational-level policies regarding flexible work arrangements in influencing whether and how employees utilized workplace flexibility. They found that more lean organizational policies tend to support positive employee discourses and effective usage of workplace flexibility, whereas rigid policies may lead to negative employee discourses around

telework, emphasizing that organizational activity should take place at the office. This negative discourse around workplace flexibility, may further reinforce a culture of cynicism and maintain a common perception that distant workers are slacking off rather than working productively (Nordbäck et al., 2017). Based on this evidence, managerial control may thus be co-constructed by workers through their everyday work practices and discourses on flexible work practices.

2.1.1. Managerial control in hybrid work. In 1960, social psychologist Douglas McGregor developed two contrasting theories on managers' views of human nature and managerial control. According to McGregor's Theory x / Theory y (1960), managers who subscribe to Theory x assumptions believe that employees inherently are lazy, incompetent and untrustworthy, and thus require constant direct supervision, coercion, and monitoring to meet organizational objectives. In contrast, Theory y managers view employees as competent, productive and trustworthy, and are consequently more focused on relationship building and promotion of initiative, participation, self-direction, and empowerment.

At the time of Halford's (2005) pioneering study on hybrid work, the common discourse around managerial control aligned rather well with theory x assumptions and portrayed a rather old-fashioned perception of telework as something allowing workers to "slack off". This perception was exemplified by quotes like: "I run the support team ... if there's a problem, you don't know if it's going to be five minutes or two days, so if someone wanted to spend, you know, 50 per cent of their time at home decorating or something, you can't tell if that's what they are doing." (John, Managers' Focus Group) (Halford, 2005, p.29). Such narratives can give clear indications of the social norms in an organization, i.e., the informal rules and standards that are understood by its members, guiding and constraining their behavior (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Social norms can also be explicitly illustrated in organization's policies and practices, for example, in technology training, providing the appropriate technology, encouraging engagement in virtual work, facilitating career development, and ensuring that supervisors and co-workers are supportive of virtual workers. Such practices and managerial behaviors feed into employees' perceptions of how conducive the social norms are to virtual work (Adamovic et al., 2021).

In today's post-pandemic workplace, managerial control is receiving pushback from employees who have established strong remote work norms during the Covid-19 pandemic. The basic assumptions guiding

employee behaviors in hybrid work, is however not well understood. In this study, we aim to uncover knowledge workers' basic assumptions and argumentation regarding performativity and well-being at work to understand how workers may legitimize their hybrid work choices in organizations that have different social norms about hybrid work. Legitimization is a process of giving reasons for why some actions or choices are desirable or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). We focus particularly on the discursive construction of social norms regarding hybrid work practices in five Finnish public organizations, and how different workplace choices are legitimized by the employees. Doing so, we set out to answer the following research question: *How do employees legitimize their workplace choices through different discursive strategies?*

3. Methods

Relying on the perspective of the organization as being socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), we chose a narrative approach for studying how employees describe remote work induced by the pandemic, as well as their personal choices around hybrid work practices. This approach is most valuable when studying change and how people make sense of unexpected events (Currie & Brown, 2003). Further, this approach allows space for different understandings and perceptions that individuals might have about remote work and related policies (Vaara et al., 2016), revealing also perhaps marginalized voices within the organization (Boje, 1995).

3.1. Research Context and Data Collection

Our study is based on 30 interviews with knowledge workers from five public sector organizations in Finland. From mainly office-based working (some with the option of 1-2 remote days per week, but with a policy that you had to ask for permission from your boss), the organizations all went into full remote work in March 2020 according to the Finnish national recommendations. We chose organizations from the public sector, as they were characterized by a rather rigid and cohesive office-based work climate prior to the pandemic, and the shift to remote work during the pandemic constituted a big change to all employees.

Organization 1 was the first one to return to mostly on-site work (at least 3 days per week at the office) during fall 2020. Organization 2 officially has a recommendation of at least 2 days per week at the

office, just like Organization 5. Both organizations launched their recommendations during spring 2022. Organization 4 has a hybrid work pilot since fall 2021 where employees can freely choose from where they work, but this is followed up upon by management in an attempt to understand how workers want to work. Finally, organization 3 had no hybrid work policy at the time of the interviews. The participants from Organization 3 were all working remotely at the timing of the interviews but were allowed to go to the office if they wanted to.

The sample included employees from varying roles (including managers and expert roles), and all comprised knowledge workers who worked in teams, where they had to rely on other members to reach some common goals. All participants delivered services to customers and other external stakeholders. Twenty-five of the participants were female, and five were male. The number of participants per organization was the following: 4 from Org 1, 5 from Org 2, 4 from Org 3, 9 from Org 4, and 8 from Org 5.

The interviews were designed to support an open dialogue around the interviewees work practices and experiences from working during the pandemic and the different changes it entailed. On average, the interviews lasted 65 min and were all transcribed verbatim.

3.2. Data analysis

In our analysis we used a combination of narrative and discourse analysis (Vaara 2002, Sonenshein 2010). We started by looking for themes and metaphors in the transcribed interviews. We paid particular attention to descriptions of control, autonomy, and legitimacy, of choices regarding where and how to work, in addition to sequential patterns. After this, we developed composite narratives (Vaara et al, 2016; Currie & Brown, 2003; Sonenshein, 2010) out of the fragments of stories from the individual interviews. We decided to use composite narratives because this way we were able to summarize the collective meanings of the participants and to look at the different narratives in contrast to each other and allow for possible plurivocality (Vaara et al., 2016). As the base for the composite narratives, we used the perspective that the participants used, or the base that they used for their decision-making regarding where and when to work, ending up with three types of narratives; the 'individualist', the 'collectivist', and the 'institutionalist'. While analyzing these narratives it became clear that the interviewees within and across these narratives used specific discursive strategies to legitimize their choices through improved performativity and well-being. These same strategies

were used in different narratives in different ways to legitimize both their preferences and adopted practices.

4. Findings: Narratives of hybrid work choices

The Covid-19 pandemic forced employees to change the ways of working to “forced remote work” almost over one night. For most of our interviewees, remote work was a familiar phenomenon from before, but very few had used the option to work remotely in the past, due to rigid in-house office cultures in their organizations. Before the pandemic, people were sceptic about whether or not they would be able to work efficiently from home: “Before this, you wouldn’t have considered just hanging around at home over Teams” (Participant 1C)

Most of the interviewees worked remotely for more or less than two years and most were gradually going back to the offices for some kind of hybrid models in (late) spring 2022. In organization 1, most workers had gone back to working at least 3 days per week at the office and in organization 2, most worked at least 2 days from the office. In organizations 3 and 4, most employees still chose to work mostly remotely, with only a few exceptions working primarily from the office. In organization 5, employees worked according to their policy, on given days at the office, otherwise remotely. In the following sections, we will present the dominant narratives around individual workplace choices and the discursive strategies used to legitimize these choices.

4.1. The ‘individualist’

The most prominent narrative in hybrid work practices was that of the ‘individualist’, focusing on individual needs as a base for decision-making. The narrators talked from their own perspective, about their own experiences and feelings, commonly using “I”.

Employees falling into this narrative were predominantly those who chose to work from home most of the time, occasionally coming into the office. Within this narrative, people spontaneously talked about perks of remote work such as ability to have a better work-life balance and easier meet different needs in life, including family needs, among other things. Many felt an increase in autonomy and responsibility. Some felt that they worked more efficiently in the morning and wanted to start working as soon as they got up, which was not possible if they were commuting to the office. Further, participants

enjoyed the opportunity to design their mornings according to their own preferences.

“This is something I am not ready to let go off. I want to continue to be able to take my morning coffee and sit here and go through my emails and plan my day in peace and quiet before the first meeting. . . . Previously, with the time stamping, it needed to be done at the office, but I want to do it at home.” (Participant 4E)

However, when examined more closely the individuals in the ‘individualist’ narrative, even if talking about individual needs before work needs, were still very diligent about work tasks, performance and for example going to the office whenever work tasks demanded.

For the ‘individualists’, a lack of flexibility and strict policies were perceived as a sign of lack of trust from the management. As the national remote working restrictions were withdrawn, and organizations made their own recommendations around hybrid work, some participants felt like they were forced back to old fashioned ways of working. One unit within Organization 2 had a policy that restricted them from working remotely both Friday and Monday, stating that it “would give them a long weekend”, which for the employees felt like a sign of distrust: “Like what have we been doing these past two years? Have we not been working then? If they don’t trust me, why should I trust them?” (Participant 2D)

On the other hand, “office people” commonly felt that they needed to go to the office to work efficiently, and they enjoyed the atmosphere that the office environment brought with it. They managed at home as well, but talked about their home as sources of distractions, stating aspects such as other family members, or chores distracting them. For these employees, the office allowed peace and quiet, and was commonly referred to support them to get into their “professional role”. In essence, whether the choice was to work at the office or at home, the ‘individualist’ story focused on the individual's own needs regarding how they worked most efficiently. Many found the combination of remote work and working on site, the optimal solution, with the focus on autonomy in making the decisions on when to work from where.

“I do not think I would be able to do my job as efficiently if I were to work only from the office. But the feeling of control is important because I have a strong sense of integrity and since I know how I work best and how I best get a job done, then I of course want to get it done in the best possible way.” (Participant 1D)

Several participants described that if they were to perform a task that required concentration, then they

would rather work from home. Many of the participants described an ideal situation as one where they could autonomously decide when to be in the office and when to work from home, according to what kind of job tasks they were dealing with. However, even employees who had their own office chose to stay at home when they needed to concentrate, but this was related to the social interruptions at the office. There was also mentioning of the quality of interaction, namely that people saw the value in social interaction and wanted to interact, but if there were demanding tasks at hand, they could not interact in a way they wanted. They wanted to control the social interaction.

4.2. The ‘collectivist’

“And people are feeling really bad. And then I think you can draw the conclusion that maybe you should think more about caring for your personnel and realize that the social context and the coffee breaks and going to events and having fun together do matter.” (Participant 1A)

Within the ‘collectivist’ narrative the focus was on the working community and its needs as a social context. The narrators often talked in “we” form and about shared experiences and ideas. For many, the main reason for going to the office was social interaction with colleagues. People talked about how important it was for a thriving work community to have informal interactions at the office, and to be able to get help fast, and provide help fast if a colleague came up to you. People often also based their choice of where to work on their colleagues’ preferences. Participants missed especially the spontaneous interactions over coffee or after meetings. Due to the pandemic induced remote work, meetings became very structured, and agenda focused, which many felt was a development in the wrong direction. There was also mentioning of miscommunication in remote meetings, due to the fact that you could not check things from a colleague sitting next to you or after the meeting in the corridor.

Especially those in managerial positions expressed an almost paternalistic view on the wellbeing of their employees. They described how the employees were not feeling good and described this as a consequence of remote working. The manager of Organization 1 decided to disregard the national recommendations of remote work and asked the employees to go back to work on site already during fall 2020. The manager felt it was the responsibility of a manager to enable the employees to work in ways that supported their well-being. There was also a mentioning of equality within the work community, as some tasks were better suited for remote work than

others. Managers felt that clear guidelines and rules regarding remote work reduced felt inequality.

Social interaction was often mentioned to be needed for the work group to be creative, innovative, and efficient. Almost all mentioned that when they need to develop something new, they need the social interaction and preferably on site. On site social interaction was often also related to spontaneity. Social interaction, especially on site, was also linked to “crazy ideas”, which might lead to completely new ideas. This kind of state, that allows for “crazy ideas” was perceived as hard to achieve by yourself. Some also felt that for the work community to work efficiently, you need to meet face to face and spend time together. Remote work was compared to that of an entrepreneur, i.e., working alone and not as a community or group. Those in managerial positions also linked the well-being of the work community to the efficiency of the community and felt that the wellbeing of the community was supported by working on site.

An interesting theme that came up several times was that of the introverts. People in the ‘collectivist’ narrative mentioned that the introverts in the community were more reluctant to return to on site work. They also mentioned that introverts were more likely to hide behind the screen and not say anything during the meetings. People speculated that remote work was probably best suited for introverts, and that these were people who needed to be dragged out of their homes.

4.3 The ‘institutionalist’

“It is like a child said about school and remote school. To go to remote school is like just doing schoolwork, it is not the same as going to school. You only do the assignments and homework.” (Participant 1C)

The ‘institutionalist’ narrative of hybrid work practices focused on the organization and the employer's needs and rights. The narrator commonly referred to a third person, like a manager or management in general, the organization or clients. There was little description of one’s own feelings or experiences. The employer was described as a figure of authority, with the right to demand the employees to work as the employer saw fit. Even though many employees falling within this category enjoyed the ability to have some spatial and temporal control in their work, they mentioned that they would go back to the office, even full time if their organization decided. Especially in organization 1, that went against national remote working recommendations, the employees followed the orders given by the supervisor. A worker

who agreed with the decision made by her supervisor talked about this: “They [colleagues against the return to the office] obeyed the rules that the supervisor set out.” Participant 1C. Interestingly, some of these workers would commute up to two or three hours per day as a result, but yet, they obeyed.

In this organization there were also discussions about whether and how people had used the national recommendations to their own benefit and comfort. In discussions like this, there was cynicism around remote work, questioning home-based work as an efficient option.

Contrary to organization 1, organization 3 lacked rules in relation to hybrid work, and the employees were therefore still mostly working remotely, because that was the last recommendation they had gotten from their employer. These employees talked about how it was not however forbidden anymore to go to the office, so some went there if they needed to for example print something (which was rarely needed). Inherent in these accounts was however obeying by the last rule of the organization, which was forbidding office-based work. Other organizations had more clear guidelines and even strict rules on when (or how much) the employees should be on site and when to work remotely. In organization 5, the hybrid work rules for most employees were set to include two specific office days per week. These were related to the facilities, which could not accommodate all employees at once. Some narrators explained how they need to follow the rules and policies by upper management, in order to justify a need for certain kinds of facilities. These employees commonly were afraid of losing their dedicated space at the office, if not using it. In an attempt to legitimize to himself the strict hybrid work policies, an employee in organization 5 furthermore emphasized how he valued other types of flexibility, such as opportunities to choose which desk to sit at in the office, where to have lunch and with whom and some amount of flexibility in workday scheduling, during days at the office. Within this organization there was also a follow-up, not on on-site days, but on on-site meetings with customers, as the organization wanted to promote face-to-face meetings with customers.

Whereas the first ‘individualist’ perspective described choices made based on individual needs, the perspective of the ‘institutionalist’ emphasizes the organization. Some people felt they were less productive at the office compared to working from home, but they still went to the office when it was required, because that was the “employer’s time”. Others legitimized their employer’s decisions to demand employees back at the office from the perspective of their job and job tasks specifically: “I

see my job as such that it is not me as a person who should direct what I do, but the needs of the job should direct. I don’t think I am irreplaceable.” (Participant 1D)

In organization 2, where most employees would fall into the dominant perspective of the ‘individualist’, a few employees talked about how they accepted their employer’s decision to work 2-3 days in the office every week. These employees oftentimes ended up working even more at the office than required. What characterized these people was that they also talked about how the office environment suited them, and how important it was to meet other people in their work. Therein, they narrated a picture of work as something that was tied to a physical space housing other people.

The ‘institutionalist’ narrators also underlined the needs of the job, from an external audience or client’s perspective. Many described how their organizations have certain external expectations to fulfill, to justify their existence and funding. There was talk about how it would look to the audience if employees were just working remotely – signaling that professionalism was linked to the office environment. The office was linked to a more professional look, and when attending Teams meetings, these employees would commonly use background pictures from their employer’s facilities. In regards of the audience and clients, many of the participants, however, mentioned client needs and how clients appreciated remote events and meetings. Some also mentioned rank and hierarchy, and that if someone ranked higher up than you asked for a meeting either remotely or on site, then you did as that person wanted, irrespective of possible inconvenience.

In sum, the ‘institutionalist’ perspective signaled a strong sense of obedience with the institution and what is best for the employer and its audience (including external stakeholders, students, and customers). This was also reflected in how people talked about their jobs and how the job should look a certain way and fulfil certain standards, to meet the performance requirements of the organization. Table 1 sums our findings regarding the basic assumptions of different hybrid worker narratives.

Table 1. Basic assumptions underlying different hybrid work narratives

	The individualist	The collectivist	The institutionalist
Enablers of high work quality	Environment that supports effective individual performance in one's own work tasks (either remote or at office)	Physical proximity of group members at the office supports teamwork, collaboration and social cohesion	Office environment that supports professionalism in work performance (including a certain "look" and standard of work)
Primary goal of hybrid work choices	One's own performance and well-being	Group-level performance and well-being	Organizational-level performance
Decision power regarding hybrid work practices	Employees take high autonomy to decide their work location and schedule	Group members and organizational leaders negotiate when and where its members work	Organizational leaders decide when and where employees work, and employees obey

4.4. Discursive strategies to legitimize hybrid work choices

In line with Reisigl (2017) we see discursive strategies as the rhetoric techniques that interviewee participants used to legitimize their thoughts, practices and choices. These techniques are used more or less intentionally by employees and managers, to achieve a certain goal or outcome (Reisigl, 2017), here being legitimacy in hybrid work practices. The same strategies were sometimes used across different narratives to justify different types of choices. Sometimes different strategies, like argumentation for performativity and well-being (described in 4.4.1 and 4.4.2) were used together, like in the following quote:

"It is not a matter of principle, but more that I believe that the work is more efficient, I know that the work is more efficient [on site]. I think that people, I know that people feel better psychologically from meeting each other [at the office]." (Participant 1A)

Other participants used a certain strategy very consistently. Interestingly, the same strategies could be used to justify very different approaches, meaning that the same kind of rhetoric was used to pull attention to opposite directions. This demonstrates the aforementioned plurivocality.

4.4.1. Argumentation for Performativity.

Within the 'individualist' narrative performativity was used in relation to one's own efficiency and ways of

working, while in the 'collectivist' narrative performativity was used to explain group-level efficiency and outcomes. The 'institutionalist' narrative focused more on the organizational level performance and outcomes, where "professionalism" was an inherent characteristic of the individualists' performativity. Within this particular narrative, the financial performance was furthermore a more prominent factor of performativity than in the other two: "We have to show results, we need to justify our existence. That is key." (Participant 1A)

Many interviewees used the quality of the work they do to legitimize their choices on where to work. Within the 'collectivist' narrative, the quality of work was related to being physically together at the office, while within the 'individualist' narrative, the quality of work was a means to justify both remote work and work at the office, through one's own work performance. Those who felt they worked better at the office, used this strategy to justify their choice to work in the office, while those who felt they were more efficient or produced more high-quality work at home, used the same strategy to strengthen their argument for remote work. Participant 5G from organization 5 who chose to work remotely most of the time talked about this: "I trust that the outcomes speak for themselves. As long as I follow the laws and regulations, it does not matter how I get to the outcome. This is very important for me." An "office worker" (Participant 4A) whose role was to support multiple projects and to collaborate with about every member in her team on a frequent basis, talked about how it seemed to be a misperception among remote workers that office was a place for socializing:

"I do not go into the office to socialize...When my colleagues who occasionally come into the office, they come in to socialize, and then I am expected to have time to chit chat with them about other things than work. And that time I don't have. My day is filled with work tasks." (Participant 4A)

The Performativity-discourse could also be seen in talk about facilities and technologies, which again could be used to justify choices in both directions (office vs. remote work). The following quote represents a technology-driven performativity perspective: "There is no reason for me to go there and sit behind a computer with poorer technology, poorer working environment and attend the same remote meeting that I could have attended at home wearing comfy pants and having coffee." (Participant 4E)

Others felt they were more efficient at home where they could move around freely when needing to think, or go empty a dishwasher to get a micropause. Other interesting aspects related to efficiency was coworkers. Most interviewees mentioned

interruptions in the office and longer coffee-breaks as reducing their efficiency, however when it comes to innovative tasks and creativity, especially the ‘collectivists’ people felt they needed the support of their coworkers to get into a creative mood: “Like, how crazy ideas are you likely to get at home by yourself?” (Participant 1D)

4.4.2. Argumentation for Well-being. Well-being was a re-occurring factor within especially the ‘individualist’ and the ‘collectivist’ narratives. The ‘individualist’ narrative focused on individual well-being and the well-being of the family, while the ‘collectivist’ narrative focused on the well-being of the work community.

Within the Collectivist-narrative, the social aspect of work and its benefits for both individual and collective well-being was highlighted. Work was seen as more than doing work tasks, and in remote work that “more” was felt to be missing, and thereby affecting well-being. Social encounters like “watercooler talk” and doing and experiencing things together were described as the glue that kept the working community together. Interviewees also mentioned how, for example, asking for help is much easier when you are together in the same office than when you are working remotely. Some also mentioned straight out that they feel bad when not being able to have the physical social interaction with coworkers.

The Individualists on the other hand, focused on their own holistic well-being. For some, this meant creating clear boundaries between work and private life, for example, by going to the office for work or hiding the laptop when the workday was over. This was described as important for their mental health. Others felt that their stress levels were reduced when the boundaries between work and private life were blurred. They experienced an increased feeling of freedom and autonomy, which enhanced their well-being.

5. Discussion

This paper has sought to identify dominant narratives of how knowledge workers (co)construct and legitimize their performed hybrid work practices, as they go through a transition from forced remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic to hybrid work. Focusing on workers in the public sector, who were accustomed to working predominantly at the office prior to the pandemic, we were surprised to see how the hegemonic narrative centered around individual needs, and how those needs commonly were fulfilled through remote work. How did these employees legitimize such a radical change?

Legitimization processes took place through the lenses of the individual, the collective and the institution. While the ‘individualist’ narrative centered around individual needs, and was by far the most common perspective, the ‘institutionalist’ aimed at obliging to organizational needs and rules, and the ‘collectivists’ looked to serve the needs of their social group. We found two dominant discursive strategies which were used to legitimize hybrid work choices within each of these three perspectives, one arguing for performativity, and the other for well-being. Interestingly, while the ‘individualist’, ‘collectivist’, and ‘institutionalist’ narratives differ in many aspects, they also share similarities such as similar discursive strategies to legitimize vastly different personal performances of hybrid work practices.

For instance, while the ‘individualist’, ‘collectivist’ and ‘institutionalist’ narratives were guided by the needs of different levels of the organization (individual, group, and organizational levels), they commonly centered around a wish to stay performative. What performativity entailed, differed however depending on whose perspective was portrayed in the narrative. For example, in the ‘individualist’ narrative, performativity meant having control over own work performance and structuring the hybrid work practices such that the individual could maintain this control. In the ‘collectivist’ narrative, however, performativity implied another type of control where the aim was to ensure that the workgroup stayed cohesive, collaborative, and securing creativity among workers through informal interactions. Socializing with colleagues was an important part of the work itself. Finally, in the ‘institutionalist’ narrative, performativity was as a discursive strategy that commonly legitimized office-based work as an optimal work environment for performing the work, retaining professionalism, and engaging with external stakeholders. These different discursive strategies of performativity portray vastly different viewpoints of what work entails, and how the work goals are best attained, and even further, what the goals of “work” really are. Comments like “I can take care of work tasks at home, but not the whole work” signal a different view of work than a comment like “why would I come to the office when I perform so much better at home”.

Interestingly, there seemed to be a lack of shared understanding of the motivations behind the different perspectives on hybrid work, especially among individuals who more clearly identified with a certain narrative. For instance, “office people” who would emphasize the ‘institutionalist’ narrative, commonly talked about how remote workers chose to work from home to be able to more flexibly combine work and

life, while remote workers commonly motivated their choice through their ability to control and maintain their performativity. Remote workers in turn, commonly identifying with the ‘individualist’ perspective, viewed office persons as people who needed a lot of social interaction. These accounts show evidence of diverse basic assumptions, prioritizations, and legitimization of hybrid work choices among knowledge workers within same organizations. Our findings contribute to the burgeoning literature on hybrid work practices, which implementation have proceeded with fast speed. Our study develops understanding of the underlying drivers of employees’ diverse hybrid work choices and their legitimizations.

Focusing on individual-level narratives, our study moves beyond organizational-level hybrid work policies to explain how individual employees legitimize their own choices regarding hybrid work, that sometimes conflicted with the formal policies and social norms but supported their own performativity and well-being.

While, prior to the pandemic, each participating organization followed rather rigid office-based work arrangements, driven mostly by centripetal forces “that seek to centralize the production of meaning, and establish unitary versions of what is and what should be, excluding other possible realities” (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 564), our post-pandemic narratives (‘individualist’, ‘collectivist’, and ‘institutionalist’) illustrate centrifugal forces opposing and splintering this office-based “core”, which now seem to be a memory of the past. Only in organization 1 which was mostly driven by the institutionalist narrative, employees continued to refer to the office as “the core”, and the virtual as “the periphery”.

In regard to the rather small sample and particular context of the Nordic welfare states, our study is not without limitations. The Nordic context is categorized by high democracy and gender equality, which may impact the employees’ abilities to have a say in their personal workplace choices. In the Nordics, it is more difficult to fire employees than in countries like the U.S. for instance, and employees may consequently make bolder decisions that go against organizational policies. Our small sample does not allow us to draw conclusions on how common our identified narratives are likely to be. Nevertheless, our study contributes with an understanding of the diverse perspectives on work in the hybrid era, which future research may explore more systematically and with larger samples.

Our study has several practical implications, especially for managers and executives. When designing hybrid workplace policies, organizations need to be aware of the diverse consequences different options may have on the organization and its

employees. Our study shows that while individual employees’ need-satisfaction and self-fulfillment may be highest with less rigid policies (in line with theory), full flexibility has a splintering effect on the social norms and organizational culture. Organizations going for a more rigid inhouse policy, in turn, may face resistance and turnover from employees who perceive that they retain well-being and performativity best when they have full autonomy over where they work. Therein, it seems like there is no “one size fits all” hybrid work model, and organizations need to be aware of the pros and cons of each strategy. Independent of strategy, however, it is important for organizations and managers to create an awareness of the different perspectives their employees hold. Evidently, employees are commonly not aware of each other’s assumptions which may give rise to conflicts. By creating common ground, organizations can facilitate more cohesive social norms, which would improve collaboration and bottom line, organizational performance. Finally, organizations need to acknowledge that workers in the post-pandemic era seem to be more holistic than ever, prioritizing also other things than work, such as their well-being.

6. References

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