

‘If I Don’t Get That Belonging Among Us It All Falls Down’: How Middle Managers Experience Belonging Through Self and Others

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Belonging at work is a fundamental yet complex experience, associated with acceptance, inclusion and recognition, and underpinned by relational dynamics in organizations. Despite increasing interest, little is known about how belonging is experienced by middle managers, a group positioned between hierarchical levels and responsible for others. Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, this paper explores this issue. The findings show that managerial belonging is structured through two interrelated orientations: self-focused and other-orientated. Self-focused belonging reflects managers’ experience through organizational alignment, role legitimacy and interpersonal relationships. Other-orientated belonging captures how managers’ own sense of belonging is shaped through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong. Rather than operating separately, these orientations are mutually constitutive, producing a recursive dynamic in which managers evaluate their own belonging through the perceived belonging of their teams. This extends the notion of double-relationality by showing how managers’ intermediary positioning can have recursive consequences for their own belonging. The paper contributes empirically by foregrounding middle managers as a distinct group within belonging research and conceptually by showing how managerial belonging can be recursively evaluated through managers’ perceptions of the belonging of those for whom they hold responsibility.

It is a combination of aligning [with] my organization, believing in what we say and aspire to be. That is the core starting point for my belonging if I am deciding if I even align [with] an organization. The other thing would be relationships, making connections with the people around you, be it my team, my fellow managers, or my seniors. A human being doesn’t work in isolation without feeling the effects and losing that belonging, so relationships are really important. And I suppose the other thing is about making sure my team is ok, in good shape, and have a good sense of culture that continues to align to values and goals. That is my responsibility at the end of the day. It’s weird really because I don’t really think about it [belonging] a lot, but it affects different things. It’s always a complex balance especially with managing people and keeping connected to them but then also having to report above. Sometimes tensions can happen that affect my sense of belonging, but I accept that, I am the middleman, it’s the nature of management

– Interviewee P9 describing managerial belonging.

Introduction

Middle managers’ experiences of belonging at work remain underexplored. Although belonging has gained increasing attention in management and organizational studies, it is often conceptualized through a ‘cloud of connected concepts’ (Filstad, Traavik and Gorli, 2019, p. 117), creating ambiguity and fragmentation (Antonich, 2010). It is frequently associated with organizational identification (Ashforth, Harrison and Corley, 2008; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), inclusion and diversity (Shore *et al.*, 2011) and well-being (Waller, 2020, 2021). However, these perspectives are often examined in isolation, limiting understanding of belonging as a relational experience.

Following Filstad, Traavik and Gorli (2019), belonging can be understood as ‘an essential human need’ and

a process 'of inhabiting and contributing to the workplace' (p. 118). This framing positions belonging beyond *fitting in*, to the negotiation of social relationships, emotions and organizational conditions, emphasizing its relational rather than fixed or singular nature (Reeves, 2021). Despite this, existing research predominantly conceptualizes belonging at the individual level, commonly through self-reflective questions such as *do I belong* (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). As a result, belonging is typically understood as something individuals assess within organizations, with less attention to how it may be shaped through relational roles involving responsibility for others (e.g. middle management).

While recognized as central to organizational functioning (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020), middle managers are more often positioned as facilitators of others' belonging and well-being (Waller, 2020, 2021) rather than as employees with belonging needs of their own. At the same time, middle manager roles are contested (Balogun, 2003; Currie, 1999; Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Tarakci *et al.*, 2023), positioned between 'the strategic apex and operating core' (MacNeil, 2003; Wai-Kwong, Priem and Cycyota, 2001, p. 1325). They are 'sandwiched' (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) between organizational levels, interpreting and translating strategy while implementing daily practice (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014) and advocating organizational values (van Rensburg, Davis and Venter, 2014), creating a structurally relational role shaped by competing demands.

This paper argues that managerial belonging cannot be understood solely as an individual experience but must also be considered in relation to managers' perceptions of whether those they manage belong. Managerial responsibility provides the relational context for this dynamic: middle managers experience belonging themselves while contributing to the relational conditions through which belonging is produced for others. The paper therefore examines how middle managers experience belonging at work and how this is influenced by their perceptions of the sense of belonging among those they manage.

Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups, the paper identifies a dual-relational dynamic comprising two orientations: self-focused and other-orientated belonging. While both are relational, they differ in direction: self-focused belonging captures managers' experience within organizational, role-based and interpersonal contexts. Other-orientated captures how managers' belonging is shaped through their perceptions of whether those for whom they hold responsibility belong.

Empirically, the paper foregrounds middle managers as a distinct group whose 'sandwiched' position shapes experiences of belonging. Conceptually, it extends existing research by theorizing belonging beyond an individual's own evaluation of themselves. Managers

interpret whether those they manage belong, and these perceptions feed back into evaluations of their own belonging and legitimacy in the managerial role. For middle management theory, this extends understandings of managers' intermediary and interpretive work (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau, 2005) by showing that its consequences can also turn inward, shaping managers' evaluations of their own belonging and legitimacy.

The paper first reviews literature on belonging and middle management before outlining the methodology and findings. The discussion develops self-focused and other-orientated belonging as a dual-relational dynamic, before considering implications for theory, practice and future research.

Belonging at work

Belonging is a prominent concept in organizational research, understood as the experience of being accepted, included and recognized within social contexts (Hagerty and Patusky, 1995; Hofmann, Vohs and Baumeister, 2012). It is associated with connection, validation and alignment, and linked to well-being (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Filstad, Traavik and Gorli, 2019; Malone, Pillow and Osman, 2012), engagement and performance (Carr *et al.*, 2019). Across definitions, belonging is understood as emerging through interaction, recognition and mutual acknowledgment (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). It is shaped through interpersonal dynamics and processes of being recognized and valued (Hagerty and Patusky, 1995) and is often most visible when absent or threatened (Dávila and Jiménez, 2012; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009; McClure and Brown, 2008). These relational processes unfold between employees, colleagues and managers. Adjacent literature reinforces this, including inclusion research on uniqueness and sameness (Bryer, 2020; Cuganesan, 2017; Shore *et al.*, 2011), and organizational identification theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

Despite this relational grounding, belonging is predominantly conceptualized at individual levels of analysis. Much of the literature focuses on how individuals perceive and evaluate their belonging, framed as, *do I belong?* (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Belonging is therefore treated as a psychological state, internalized, measured and located within individual experience (Belle, Burley and Long, 2015; Jena and Pradhan, 2018; McClure and Brown, 2008). Even where belonging is treated as socially constructed, it is largely analysed at the level of individual perception. Social identity theory, for example, conceptualizes belonging through perceived group membership (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1972). Related work on identification and identity regulation emphasizes how individuals internalize

organizational categories and identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Although these perspectives foreground social context, belonging remains understood primarily as something individuals experience.

Moreover, organizational roles shape patterns of interaction and responsibility, yet how occupying particular roles shapes experiences of belonging remains underexplored. This is especially salient for middle managers, whose roles are inherently relational and involve responsibility for fostering team cohesion, well-being (Waller, 2020, 2021) and alignment with organizational objectives (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). In such contexts, responsibility for others may provide a relational context through which managers' perceptions of others' belonging become consequential for their own. This requires extending beyond individual psychological states to consider how belonging may be evaluated through relational responsibilities embedded within organizational roles.

Accordingly, this paper distinguishes between self-focused belonging (how managers experience belonging through their own organizational and relational experiences) and other-orientated belonging (how managers' belonging is shaped through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong). We conceptualize managerial belonging as involving interconnected orientations, encompassing managers' own experiences and their interpretations of the belonging of those for whom they hold responsibility. In so doing, we show how role-mediated responsibility creates a context in which perceptions of others' belonging can feed back into managers' evaluations of their own belonging.

Middle managers in organizations

Middle manager roles are described as paradoxical, ambiguous and inconsistent (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Tengblad and Vie, 2012). Central to this is double-relationality, where middle managers are accountable to senior leaders while also managing their teams (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). This positions them across multiple relational interfaces, requiring navigation of upward and downward relationships. Consequently, they occupy a 'sandwiched' position within organizational hierarchies (Beech, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003), balancing competing expectations and negotiating their identity in relation to senior leadership and subordinates (Weber *et al.*, 2022). This intermediary position also involves interpretive work. Middle managers have been conceptualized as change intermediaries who interpret organizational intentions while translating and implementing them locally (Balogun, 2003). They are also considered sensemakers and sense-givers who interpret and communicate organizational change across relational interfaces (Rouleau, 2005).

Their intermediary position therefore involves ongoing interpretive, relational and identity work.

These dynamics are intensified by broader organizational and environmental pressures (Hassard, McCann and Morris, 2008). Restructuring, declining autonomy and changing work designs (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003), alongside external shocks such as recession and austerity (Harris and Ogbonna, 2020), increase demands on middle managers and complicate relational boundaries (Hassard, McCann and Morris, 2008; McCann, Hassard and Morris, 2008). As a result, middle managers frequently experience stress, emotional strain and vulnerability (Anicich and Hirsch, 2017; Ford and Harding, 2003; Hassard, McCann and Morris, 2008), work-life imbalance (Ford and Collinson, 2011) and disorientation (Thomas and Linstead, 2002).

While this literature highlights the structural, interpretive, relational and emotional complexity of middle management, it pays less attention to how these conditions shape middle managers' belonging. Existing literature acknowledges how their dual position as both superior and subordinate (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) contributes to role strain, identity tension and performance outcomes. Less considered is how middle managers locate themselves within organizational social contexts, despite increasing expectations to foster employee well-being and belonging (Waller, 2020, 2021).

This positions middle managers not only as participants in organizational belonging processes, but also as key actors responsible for enabling them. Despite this dual positioning, limited research examines how middle managers experience belonging, or how their perceptions of the belonging of those they manage may shape their own. Existing work has instead focused on collegial structures (Empson, 2007) and supportive organizational relationships and values (Lampinen *et al.*, 2018).

Although middle management research emphasizes double-relationality and belonging research highlights relational foundations, these perspectives are rarely integrated. As a result, little is known about how occupying a role defined by interpretive and relational work across multiple directions shapes middle managers' own belonging. This raises two questions: (i) how do middle managers experience belonging at work? and (ii) how do managers' perceptions of others' belonging become consequential for their own?

Research design

The wider study

Data for this paper were drawn from a broader exploratory study examining how agile working arrangements shape managerial belonging. The wider study adopted an interpretivist approach, viewing reality as socially constructed (Williams, 2000; Yanow and

Ybema, 2008). Agile working referred to flexible arrangements concerning where, when and how work was undertaken, including remote, hybrid and other forms of flexible working (Grant and Russell, 2020). Accordingly, agile working was an inclusion criterion for the wider study but was not sector-specific; participants could work within such arrangements across public, private and other organizational contexts. The present paper focuses on a distinct finding that emerged from this wider study concerning how managers understood and experienced belonging itself.

Research methods

Data were collected through 22 semi-structured interviews and 2 online focus groups involving 28 unique participants across the study. Combining methods enabled exploration of individual accounts and collectively discussed constructions of managerial belonging. Interviews were conducted first to elicit private accounts of belonging with minimal social influence (Morgan, 2012). A semi-structured guide invited participants to define managerial belonging and reflect on specific experiences of belonging and non-belonging at work. No prior definition was provided so as to minimize researcher framing (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).

Interview data informed the design of the focus groups, which used a facilitative interactive format rather than question-and-answer structures. Activities included elicitation tasks (e.g. generating words associated with belonging and sharing these via the online chat), group discussion and engagement with purposively developed statements from interview data (e.g. 'social interaction at work significantly improves my belonging as a manager'). This enabled comparison between individual accounts and those co-constructed, consistent with a relational understanding of belonging (May, 2011). Rather than seeking consensus, the focus groups explored convergence, tension and reinterpretation of belonging as participants engaged with each other.

Including participants across both phases enabled sequential comparison of how accounts were elaborated through individual to collective discussion (Flick, 2018; Morgan and Hoffman, 2018). The focus groups formed a planned second phase following the interviews, enabling emerging interpretations to be explored through group interactions. Of the 19 focus group participants, 13 had previously taken part in an individual interview, while six participated only in the focus-group phase. Participants were allocated across two groups to support heterogeneity (Barbour, 2007), with three allocated according to scheduling constraints.

Interview data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively. As recurring patterns became increasingly evident across participants' accounts, interviewing

continued to examine whether subsequent accounts generated substantively new themes or challenged the developing analysis (Alam, 2020). Following a further series of interviews in which no substantively new themes emerged, individual interviewing concluded at 22 participants (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). The subsequent focus groups developed these interpretations through collective discussions rather than increasing the interview sample.

Participant recruitment and sampling

Participants were purposively sampled to generate rich, in-depth insights (Patton, 2014). Inclusion criteria required participants to:

- (i) work in a managerial role and
- (ii) operate within agile working arrangements.

A fixed definition of 'managerial role' was not imposed; instead, participants self-identified as managers, reflecting the diversity of managerial titles and responsibilities (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020).

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how managerial belonging is experienced across organizational contexts. Rather than comparing across sectors or organizational forms, the aim was to capture the heterogeneity of experience and identify shared patterns of meaning-making. Participants were purposively sampled across sectors, organizational sizes and levels of managerial responsibility prioritizing analytical breadth, conceptual development (Patton, 2014) and pattern recognition over structural comparability (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Participants held a range of managerial titles and responsibilities. During analysis, however, a shared intermediary positioning became apparent across participants' accounts. All described occupying a 'sandwiched' position (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020), reporting upward to more senior leaders while holding formal responsibility for those they managed. This reflects the dual accountability and operational responsibilities associated with middle-management positioning (Currie, 1999; Tengblad and Vie, 2012). Importantly, this positioning extended beyond line-management responsibility: participants described receiving and implementing organizational decisions, translating these for their direct reports and balancing strategic expectations from above with the operational needs of those they managed (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). This shared intermediary positioning provided the analytical basis for subsequently conceptualizing participants as middle managers; whether their direct reports were themselves managers was not a defining criterion. Fourteen participants managed other managers and 14 managed non-

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Pseudonym for participant	Gender	Age range	Organization code	Number of direct lines	Managing of other managers	Does P have a line manager?
P1/FG2.3	F	40-49	O1	2	No	Yes
P2/FG2.1	M	50-59	O1	5	Yes (5)	Yes
P3/FG1.1	M	50-59	O7	2	Yes (2)	Yes
P4/FG2.2	F	50-59	O1	1	No	Yes
P5/FG2.11	F	20-29	O2	1	Yes (1)	Yes
P6/FG2.4	F	30-39	O4	4	Yes (2)	Yes
P7/FG1.3	M	30-39	O2	3	Yes (3)	Yes
P8/FG2.5	F	50-59	O2	12	Yes (3)	Yes
P9	F	40-49	O1	2	Yes (2)	Yes
P10	M	50-59	O5	4	Yes (4)	Yes
P11	M	50-59	O2	3	No	Yes
P12	F	30-39	O2	3	No	Yes
P13	M	50-59	O3	8	Yes (6)	Yes
P14/FG1.5	F	40-49	O4	8	No	Yes
P15/FG1.6	M	50-59	O6	5	No	Yes
P16/FG2.10	F	40-49	O8	5	No	Yes
P17/FG2.9	M	30-39	O2	2	No	Yes
P18	F	30-39	O4	5	Yes (3)	Yes
P19	F	40-49	O4	5	No	Yes
P20	F	50-59	O4	7	Yes (3)	Yes
P21	M	30-39	O2	5	Yes (2)	Yes
P22/FG2.8	F	50-59	O2	6	No	Yes
FG1.2	F	30-39	O11	5	No	Yes
FG1.4	F	50-59	O12	6	No	Yes
FG1.7	M	40-49	O10	8	Yes (3)	Yes
FG1.8	F	40-49	O9	2	Yes (1)	Yes
FG2.6	M	50-59	O1	6	No	Yes
FG2.7	M	60-69	O13	3	No	Yes

Table 2. Organization demographic information

Code	Total number of participants	Size	Sector	Legal status	Multi-site
O1	5	Medium	Social care	Charity	Yes
O2	8	Large	Local authority/Public services	Public Sector Corporation	Yes
O3	1	Large (MNC)	Engineering/technology	Private (closed corporation - GmbH)	Yes
O4	5	Large	Higher education	Charity	No
O5	1	Large	Healthcare	Public Sector Corporation	Yes
O6	1	Large	Insurance	Public Limited Company	Yes
O7	1	Small	Social care	Private Limited Company	No
O8	1	Medium	Legal	Private Limited Company	No
O9	1	Small	Publishing	Private Limited Company	No
O10	1	Large	Defence and armed forces	Public Sector Corporation	Yes
O11	1	Large	Higher education	Charity	No
O12	1	Medium	Legal	Private Limited Company	Yes
O13	1	Small	Information services	Private Limited Company	Yes

managerial staff. Participants ranged in age from 28–60; 16 identified as female and 12 as male (Table 1).

Organizations varied in size, sector and legal status, and most were based in the East of England (Table 2).

Data analysis and coding

A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2006), supported by Atlas.ti. analysis focused on responses describing managerial belonging, ensuring themes reflected experiences independent of agile-working contexts. Codes and themes were also

compared across sector, organizational size, managerial level and tenure to examine whether accounts clustered by structural context. Although sectoral variation was anticipated, no systematic patterning in the core themes was identified within this sample. Given the exploratory design and sample size, this was not taken as evidence that organizational context was unimportant, only that core patterns were not systematically differentiated within this dataset.

The first author conducted primary coding to ensure continuity with data collection (Braun and Clarke,

Table 3. Thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Stage	First-order codes	Example quote	Second-order code	Analyst role
Coding	Organizational alignment	‘For me it [belonging] is a combination of, aligning to my organization believing in what we say do and aspire to be. To me that is almost the core starting point for my belonging’ (P9).	Organizational belonging	First author
	Role-based alignment	‘It also is belonging to a particular profession or job’ (P19).	Role belonging	First author
	Connections and relationships	‘I think it is feeling like you are part of a team’ (17)	Relational belonging	First author
	Responsibility for others	‘It’s important that my staff feel they belong. If not I am not doing my job and wouldn’t feel I belong either’ (P3)	Collective belonging (later contingent belonging)	First author

2006). The second author independently reviewed the coding and theme development to challenge interpretations and resolve ambiguities (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Analytic memos were used to document decisions made throughout. Initial first-order codes (Table 3) captured participants’ descriptions of belonging, such as organizational alignment, role-based alignment, interpersonal connections and responsibility for others.

The analysis was broadly inductive, grounded in participants’ accounts. However, the first author was familiar with existing literature on belonging and identity, which functioned as a sensitizing framework (Blumer, 1954). No a priori categories were imposed; links to established concepts (e.g. organizational identification and role identity) were developed iteratively as patterns were refined.

First order codes were then grouped into second-order codes (Table 3), reflecting organizational, role, relational and collective belonging. Following refinement and review by the second author, analytic memos highlighted overlap between relational and collective belonging. Through discussion, ‘collective belonging’ was provisionally renamed ‘contingent’ to better reflect the data. A further interpretive stage identified cross-cutting patterns: themes were not experienced as discrete but organized around two relational orientations – self-focused and other-orientated belonging. These orientations provide an analytical framework capturing managers’ own experiences of belonging and their interpretations of belonging among those they manage. These two orientations structure the findings section below.

Analysis also attended to accounts that did not fit dominant patterns (Patton, 2014). While participants broadly agreed on the definition of managerial belonging, focus group discussions revealed variations in how orientations of belonging were prioritized. These differences are included in the findings.

The analysis was informed by the first author’s prior research on belonging. This shaped an initial focus on

hybrid working and the limited attention to middle managerial belonging. At the outset, belonging was approached through an individuated lens. However, analysis revealed that managers’ belonging was also shaped by their perceptions of whether those they manage belong, prompting further theoretical development. In line with reflexive practices, attention was given to how researcher assumptions shape analysis (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2017). The second author, less embedded in belonging research, provided a critical perspective, helping to challenge interpretations and ensure themes remained grounded in the data.

Two dissemination workshops (n = 15, 4 in-person, 11 online) were conducted as reflective discussions rather than validation sessions. Feedback, recorded notes and a survey, emphasized avoiding oversimplification of managerial belonging, helping to refine the analysis. No dissenting views emerged. The findings are synthesized into two relational orientations: self-focused and other-orientated belonging.

Findings

Participants described managerial belonging as complex, multifaceted and difficult to reduce to a single element. As one explained, ‘belonging is not just one single thing [...] It’s a bundle of things [...] it’s a feeling but a lot of things affect it’ (FG2.10). Others similarly described it as a ‘mixture’ (P11), likening it to a recipe: ‘it reminds me [of] like a recipe really. Lots of things coming together to make something nice. It is hard to define in one single way’ (FG1.6). Across accounts, managers consistently drew on organizational, role and interpersonal connections when describing belonging, with no systematic contextual patterning in these core themes identified within this sample. This shared framing indicates a common orientation toward belonging as a set of interrelated aspects of working life (Allen *et al.*, 2021), aligning with conceptualizations of organizational identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), role identity (Stryker and

Burke, 2000) and relational ties (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Hagerty and Patusky, 1995).

Participants did not present belonging as uniform in emphasis. While drawing on similar forms of belonging, they differed in what they foregrounded. Some positioned organizational alignment as central, describing it as ‘fundamental’ (FG1.7). As one participant explained:

When I first think about it, I would consider alignment to the organization. That is most important to me (FG2.10).

Others prioritized interpersonal experiences (particularly in hybrid settings). For example, one participant noted,

For me it boils down to relationships, some of my closest friends are from work settings and that contributes to my belonging at work and outside of work. The lines are not easily drawn with this (FG1.3).

These accounts suggest that, while managers draw on similar organizing frames, the salience of organizational, role and interpersonal connections varies across individuals and contexts, rather than forming a hierarchy.

Building on this, the analysis identified two orientations of managerial belonging: self-focused (how managers experience their own belonging) and other-orientated belonging (how managers’ belonging is shaped through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong). Together, these orientations frame managerial belonging as a relational, role-based experience. Participants rarely described these orientations as distinct; their own belonging was often intertwined with their perceptions of others’ belonging. Experiences of organizational alignment, role legitimacy and interpersonal connection were frequently evaluated through whether others appeared included, connected and supported.

Self-focused belonging

Self-focused belonging includes organizational alignment, role-based legitimacy and interpersonal connections.

Organizational alignment. Organizational alignment reflects participants’ sense of fit with the wider organization. For many, this served as the ‘core starting point for my belonging’ (P9). Rather than equating alignment with organizational identity, which refers to self-definition and categorization within the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), alignment captures how managers assess their fit with the organization.

Participants emphasized the significance of ‘embody[ing] the organization[al] values’ (P1), highlighting how pride in the organization reinforced belonging. For example, P15 stated, ‘I work for a big entity, and having that name behind me is quite good. You belong to

that name and feel proud of it.’ Organizational alignment is thus intertwined with social and professional dimensions of managerial life.

Authenticity was also important, with managers highlighting the need to genuinely align with organizational values to experience belonging:

It’s also really and truly aligning to the organization you work for. I truly believe in what we do and to a certain extent I wouldn’t be able to fake that’ (P8).

Alignment was also reflected in managers’ advocacy for the organization. In its absence, belonging was weakened. As P20 explained, ‘if I don’t truly believe in the values, then I don’t belong here or to the organization. I couldn’t wholeheartedly advocate for something I didn’t believe in.’ Advocacy thus emerges as an expression of organizational alignment and managerial belonging.

Role legitimacy. Role legitimacy captures how managers link their sense of belonging to their organizational role and broader professional identity as managers (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006; Stryker and Burke, 2000). These two dimensions (role enactment and occupational identification with ‘being a manager’) were often intertwined in participants’ accounts.

Holding a managerial role was not only about responsibility but also about personal validation and professional identity. One participant explained, ‘you almost feel you need it [belonging] personally within your role, just to make sure you are kind of upholding and being a good advocate for the organization’ (P1). Others located belonging directly in being a manager:

I feel like I get a real sense of belonging, and satisfaction purely [from] hold[ing] that role. It comes with responsibilities, and tensions between managing and getting things done, but overall, I belong to that role because it’s always what I have aspired to be. That part of my identity at work, ‘I’m in a management role,’ I’m important and valued, I’m bloody proud of that, I belong because I am a manager (FG1.2).

This illustrates how role enactment and identification with ‘being a manager’ intertwine, with valued role performance reinforcing belonging through recognition and meaningful work.

However, participants also highlighted tensions associated with managerial positioning, particularly stigma and ‘sandwiched’ pressure. As one participant explained,

It is easy to forget that we are employees too. As a manager, I get passed to the side. We do sit in the middle [...] wedged and sometimes take the brunt of that. That stigma around management [and cutting middle managers out]. Being the manager does affect my belonging to the role. Like I am not important just because managers as a role can be cut out (FG1.5).

Perceived devaluation of the managerial role therefore weakened role legitimacy and belonging, emphasizing the importance of recognition (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Professional identity shaped belonging especially when managers experienced 'purpose' and impact through their work (e.g. P10). One participant explained, 'being part of a profession, [it is] not just a job, [it] really matters to me. I think I belong to my role, which is about managing people and delivering results' (P11). This connects belonging to purposeful role performance and professional validation.

Conversely, feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome undermined belonging, particularly when managers felt they were not meeting role expectations. One shared, 'sometimes I feel like I'm not living up to the title [manager] and that makes me doubt if I really belong' (P21). Another reflected:

'I belong in my role when I'm in control, making decisions and influencing outcomes. But when things get tough, I feel like an outsider in the organization' (P2).

Perceived inadequacy therefore destabilized both managerial confidence and belonging, showing how role legitimacy could be disrupted when managers questioned their capacity to meet role expectations. Overall, role legitimacy connected belonging to managers' perceived capacity to meet role expectations and sustain a valued professional identity.

Interpersonal connection. Interpersonal connection captures how multiple relational ties with teams, peers and line managers inform managerial belonging through recognition, support and validation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; May, 2011). Relationships or 'connections whether 1-2-1 or within a team' (P13) were among the most frequently cited contributors to managerial belonging. One participant expressed, 'a human being doesn't work in isolation without feeling the effects, so relationships are really important' (P5). These connections operated across 'three [multiple] levels' (P5), encompassing senior management, peers and their immediate team. Participants highlighted both vertical (manager-senior management; manager-employee) and horizontal (peer) ties: 'I think it's about relationships and building those with your team, other colleagues, [and] my manager' (P5). These relationships were interconnected, and when 'one becomes [out of] balance then it is like a weighing scale [...] everything can misalign' (P1).

Vertical ties, particularly with teams, were important to participants. One stated 'I belong in my team' (P16). Managers felt most connected through informal interaction, describing informal check-ins, humour and celebrating 'small wins' together (P5). Many described actively fostering togetherness: 'I work hard to make sure my team have that togetherness' (P11). This shows

ongoing expectations of support, recognition and coordination, which underpin managers' belonging.

Others described their belonging as strongest in relation to the people they manage. For example, one participant said, 'on a day-to-day basis I feel more like I belong with my team' (P1). Hybrid working required more deliberate effort to sustain these ties through 'intentional touchpoints' (P1), including informal Teams-based chats and regular check-ins. These practices helped maintain interpersonal connection and togetherness despite physical distance. Hybrid settings therefore increase the need to deliberately sustain relationships, linking interpersonal belonging and role-legitimacy.

Support from line managers also shaped belonging: 'having regular check-ins with my manager helps me feel connected to the organizational goals' (P6). Such vertical ties affirmed support, with another participant noting, 'it's important to me that my boss understands my challenges and provides the support I need' (P1). However, there was little reference to experiencing belonging with senior management.

Horizontal connections also supported managerial belonging and role identity. One participant said, 'it's nice to be able to connect to those in similar roles, I can almost align more easily to that group as we have the role in common' (P5). Peer relationships provided professional reassurance and opportunities to 'discuss ideas, problems that you might be experiencing as a manager' (P14). They also facilitated shared learning:

'Having a good group of peers around you is just so important to belonging. If you come across something that you don't know, you've got someone that you get on well with that you can go and talk to' (P5).

Peer interactions therefore provided social connection, shared learning and professional reassurance.

However, some participants reported that weak peer connections, especially in hybrid work settings, undermined belonging. For instance,

Everything that I've learnt so far is a bit self-taught. I guess that makes me feel like I am not really part of the managerial community. I haven't really had anyone to bounce issues off which is strange because in an office you would. I don't really have relationships with other managers, I don't feel like I have that sense of belonging. It doesn't exist like it does with my team (P5).

Limited peer interaction can, therefore, diminish managerial belonging, reducing professional support and opportunities for shared role learning.

Together, vertical and horizontal relationships supported managerial belonging through social connection, recognition and professional support. However, these self-focused experiences were not separate from the responsibility managers felt for others. Managers'

sense of legitimacy, confidence and belonging was also shaped by whether they perceived their team to be connected, supported and aligned. The following section explores this outward-facing responsibility through other-orientated belonging.

Other-orientated belonging

Other-orientated belonging captures how managers' own experience of belonging is affected by their perceptions of that of those they manage. From this perspective, belonging is not only located in the self but shaped through managers' interpretations of others' belonging and what this means for their own managerial effectiveness. Managerial responsibility provides the relational context through which perceived team belonging becomes consequential for managers' role legitimacy and their own belonging. A central feature of other-orientated belonging was managers' strong sense of responsibility for their team, which directly influenced their own belonging. One participant explained,

I think as a manager, you feel that responsibility [for] people that you're managing. So that belonging. If they don't have it, I feel responsible for that. It affects my belonging (P1).

Others framed this as a 'main responsibility' (P7) of their role. Managers' belonging was therefore closely tied to role legitimacy, with their perceptions of team belonging providing one basis through which they evaluated their managerial effectiveness. This sense of responsibility also extended to managers' ongoing efforts to sustain team well-being and connection in everyday practice. For example,

The responsibility for their [team] wellbeing and belonging. This is important to my belonging. I have to confess [it] seems to be the onus is on me really to build it [belonging] not only for myself but everyone else too. If I don't get that community among it all falls down (P16).

Others similarly described how their own belonging was affected when teams were struggling or disconnected. Managers questioned their own place when team well-being was undermined: 'part of my job is making sure people feel safe and supported – if that's not happening, I feel like I'm not belonging' (P11).

Such responsibility was evident in everyday interactions, including conversations, Teams chats and in-person meetings. These practices sustained team connection while informing managers' perceptions of how team members were doing. Managerial belonging was therefore embedded in responsibility for others, which functioned as a marker of managerial legitimacy, linking perceptions of others' belonging to perceptions of competence. As one participant explained, 'having the responsibility of making sure others below me

belong, is really important for my belonging it shows I can do my job properly' (P18 and P7). Additionally, P14 noted the implication was 'failing as a manager.' Belonging, therefore, is tied to evaluative judgments of managerial performance, where perceived belonging among those they manage can signal competence, while perceived non-belonging can threaten legitimacy.

This shaping of belonging also introduced tensions linked to managers' 'sandwiched' position (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Managers described push-pull tensions balancing organizational alignment while ensuring team connectedness. One participant explained, 'it's always a complex balance, especially with managing people and keeping connected to them but then also having to report above too' (P9). This required reconciling personal alignment with collective responsibility for instilling values in their teams, with tensions intensifying when managers perceived team belonging to be lacking. One manager explained, 'if your team doesn't belong, then my belonging will break down too' (P14). Managerial belonging is shaped by simultaneous upward and downward demands, where perceptions of others' belonging become central to experiences of role legitimacy and fit. Focus group discussion further linked these dynamics to organizational alignment:

My job is the middleman which isn't always easy, but I feel very responsible for my team which is to do with their belonging and my own belonging. I suppose my belonging is closely tied to making sure my team feels aligned to the organization (FG2.11).

Thus, perceived team alignment provided another reference through which managers evaluated their role performance and their own belonging.

The outward-facing nature of belonging was further evident in how managers navigated tensions between their own needs and their responsibilities toward others, particularly in balancing attention across self, team and organizational expectations. One participant illustrated this dynamic using a Venn diagram, describing the challenge as 'finding the bit in the middle that works for everyone [sometimes] there's no space in that Venn diagram to put the manager's needs' (P1). This reflects how managers make sense of competing relational demands, often prioritizing team belonging and organizational alignment over their own needs. Belonging therefore became both a personal need and a source of managerial responsibility and vulnerability, with role legitimacy shaped through managers' evaluations of their capacity to navigate these demands.

Contextual conditions, particularly hybrid working, intensified these dynamics:

The switch to [hybrid] working has made me get to know the individuals in my team really well [...] And then as long as they're happy, that makes my life easier (P1).

Managers described how dispersed working required more deliberate practices to sustain connection. Examples included daily email chains with non-work prompts, and Teams chats dedicated to light-hearted banter, which 'lightened isolated days' and created 'a sense of belonging when we are coming together and belonging too' (P2). These interactions also provided cues through which managers interpreted whether those they managed were connected or becoming isolated. As P13 explained:

I kind of know if there are people in my team that I haven't spoken to in a while, making sure that I make a note to reach out to them, check they're okay, or send them a Teams message or something [...] there definitely has been times where someone's reached out and said, 'you might want to speak to so-and-so because they're not in a good place,' and you haven't seen it.

These interpretations were informed by patterns of interaction and informal feedback, but also by more direct interpersonal cues. For example, one manager explained that in-person contact meant, 'I can pick up on issues better. Body language etc.' (FG1.5). In other cases, team members themselves articulated experiences of disconnection. P17 described,

there has been some feedback from teams where they feel separate to the particular team or service [...] some of that experience is that they feel a little detached.

Managers' perceptions of others' belonging were therefore informed by a combination of observed interaction, embodied cues, informal feedback and employees' own accounts. Managers' interpretations of others' belonging also exposed challenges in integrating new employees, particularly in hybrid settings:

It's harder to embed, build belonging, and integrate [new staff] if they're working from home. This negatively impacts my belonging, because I am not doing my job if they do not belong too (P10).

In contrast, managers described belonging in co-located settings as more natural, 'something I didn't have to think about' (P3).

Finally, managers described a recursive dynamic where their perceptions of team belonging fed back into their own. For example, P11 said 'I would say that my sense of belonging is quite reliant on my team's well-being and how they connect together.' This was echoed by P16: 'if I don't get that belonging among us it all falls down. That is not always easy, but it affects my own sense of belonging too.' This illustrates a recursive relationship: managers' perceptions of team belonging fed back into evaluations of their own belonging, strengthening or destabilizing it.

Overall, other-orientated belonging shows that managers' belonging is not solely self-focused but can be

shaped through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong. In addition, rather than operating sequentially, self-focused and other-orientated belonging were recursively connected: managers' interpretations of others' belonging fed back into evaluations of their own effectiveness, legitimacy and fit.

Discussion

This study shows that middle managers' belonging is experienced through two orientations: self-focused and other-orientated belonging. Self-focused belonging captures managers' experience of organizational alignment, role legitimacy and interpersonal connections. Other-orientated belonging captures how managers' belonging is shaped through their perceptions of that of those they manage. Rather than operating separately, these orientations are mutually reinforcing and sometimes destabilizing (Figure 1). While self-focused belonging centres on managers' own experiences, other-orientated belonging is role-mediated, with perceptions of others' belonging feeding back into their own.

In this way, managers move between asking, *do I belong* and *do they belong, therefore do I?* As we have outlined earlier, while scholarship recognizes belonging as socially produced, it is framed at the individual level – *do I belong?* (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). Our findings extend this by showing that middle managers' belonging is shaped both through their own experiences and through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong (*do they belong?*). These perceptions become part of how managers evaluate their own legitimacy, connection and organizational fit (*therefore do I belong?*).

This recursive dynamic extends existing theorizing in three related ways. First, it extends belonging research beyond the predominantly self-referential question of 'do I belong?' by showing how managers' own belonging can be evaluated through their perceptions of whether those for whom they are responsible belong. Second, it extends identity and role-legitimacy perspectives by showing that perceived belonging among direct reports provides an additional relational reference through which managers evaluate their effectiveness and legitimacy in the managerial role. Third, it extends understandings of middle managers' interpretive and intermediary work (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau, 2005) by showing that this interpretive work can also be recursively inward-facing; managers' interpretations of those they manage feed back into their own experiences of legitimacy and belonging. Self-focused belonging reflects three interrelated domains: organizational alignment, role legitimacy and interpersonal connection. These align with established literature on organizational identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), role identity (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006; Stryker

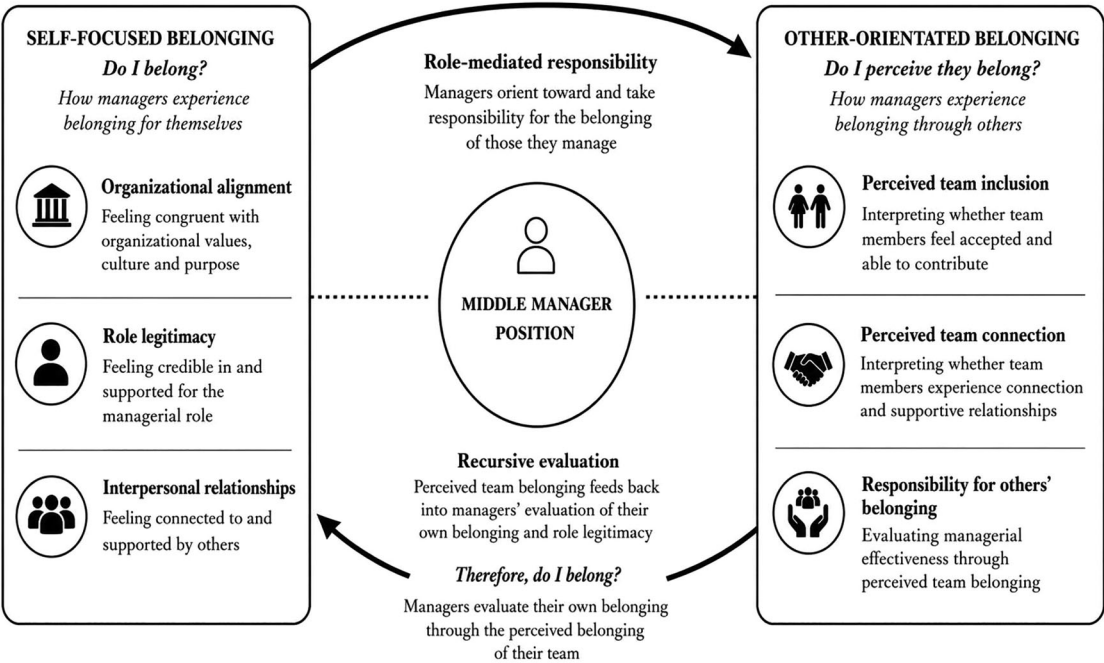


Figure 1. A recursive model of managerial belonging

and Burke, 2000) and belonging through relational recognition, support and validation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; May, 2011). Together, these domains establish the self-focused basis of managerial belonging, providing the foundations for examining how managers’ perceptions of others’ belonging feed back into evaluations of their own alignment, legitimacy and connection.

However, the findings also extend belonging literature by exploring other-orientated belonging: how managers experience belonging through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong. Other-orientated belonging is distinct from emotional labour (e.g. Hochschild, 1983) and identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). It is not concerned with managers’ regulation or display of emotion in performing their role, nor with the shaping of organizational identities. Central to the dynamic of other-orientation is managers’ responsibility for others. While employees experience belonging relationally, middle managers occupy a distinctive position through their responsibility for those they manage (Waller, 2020). Managerial responsibility provides the relational context within which managers’ perceptions of their direct reports’ belonging become consequential for their own belonging. While role legitimacy is implicated in this process, other-orientated belonging is not synonymous with role legitimacy. Perceived belonging among those they manage becomes one basis through which managers evaluate their own effectiveness and legitimacy in their managerial role.

The analytical focus therefore shifts from what managers do to how their perceptions of others’ belonging feed back into their own sense of legitimacy and connection. This establishes managerial belonging as an outward and reflexive process, extending relational accounts of belonging beyond the focal individual’s own experience (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; May, 2011). Managers’ belonging is closely tied to whether they perceive their team to be included, connected and aligned with organizational values.

This dynamic is recursive rather than linear. Managers do not first establish belonging for themselves and then assess perceptions of team belonging. Or vice versa. Instead, these processes are co-constituted. When managers perceive their team to be connected and cohesive, managerial belonging is reinforced. When teams are perceived to be disconnected, managers often interpret this as a reflection of their own effectiveness. Perceived team belonging therefore becomes both a reference for managerial effectiveness and a condition shaping managers’ own belonging. This explains why managerial belonging is experienced as meaningful yet vulnerable; it is shaped partly through team and organizational conditions that managers cannot fully control.

This dynamic reflects the logic of double-relationality (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Middle managers are simultaneously positioned within organizational relationships while also being responsible for shaping the relational conditions of belonging for others. They orient upward, sideways and downward across organizational levels, interpreting relational conditions across

these interfaces. While prior conceptualizations emphasize organizational collaboration (Weber *et al.*, 2022) and the 'sandwiched' positionality of middle managers (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020), our findings show that double-relationality operates through belonging, positioning managers between their own belonging and the belonging of others. This helps explain the push and pull dynamics of managerial belonging. Managers are pulled downward through relational responsibility for teams and connection and pushed upward and sideways through organizational expectations and peer recognition. For example, role legitimacy can be strengthened when managers perceive their teams to be cohesive and aligned, but also when managers feel recognized by peers and line managers.

Hybrid working further intensified these dynamics. Consistent with prior research (e.g. Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020), hybrid arrangements increased the need for deliberate practices to sustain belonging. Informal interactions required intentional reproduction through check-ins, digital communication and deliberate efforts to integrate new staff. Hybrid working therefore made managers' interpretations and maintenance of team connectedness more salient to their own belonging. These findings reinforce research on the structural pressures of middle management (Harris and Ogbonna, 2020; Hassard, McCann and Morris, 2008; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003), while showing how hybrid work can intensify the relational demands associated with sustaining connection (Orel, 2024). Managers may consequently deprioritize their own needs while balancing organizational and employee expectations (Teng-Calleja *et al.*, 2024).

The salience of other-orientated belonging is also likely to vary across organizational contexts. It may be particularly pronounced where managerial roles involve close responsibility for employee well-being and relational connection (Waller, 2020, 2021). Hybrid working may further heighten this dynamic by reducing the immediacy of relational cues through which managers interpret others' belonging (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). However, the present study does not establish whether other-orientated belonging is stronger across sectors, organizational forms or managerial arrangements. Rather, these represent boundary conditions for future comparative research examining when managerial responsibility makes perceptions of others' belonging more or less consequential for managers' own belonging. This reveals a form of managerial vulnerability, exemplifying the paradoxes of middle management (Tengblad and Vie, 2012). Managers derive meaning from their perceptions of others' belonging, but this creates fragility because their own belonging becomes partly dependent on relational conditions they cannot fully control. When managers perceive teams to be disconnected or experience weak organizational support, their own belonging can become less secure. Vulnerability, therefore,

arises through relational and organizational conditions that lie beyond managerial control. This extends prior research beyond structural insecurity or role ambiguity (Sims, 2003; Thomas and Linstead, 2002), showing relationally produced vulnerability through the conditional nature of belonging itself. In other words, positioned between organizational strategy and team experience (Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014), belonging becomes simultaneously personal and professional, self-focused and other-orientated, supported and vulnerable.

The findings also strengthen links between belonging, identity and liminality. Managers are required to embody organizational values while advocating for their teams, navigating conflicting expectations from above and below. This reflects liminal and role-conflict literature (Beech, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Wooldridge, Schmid and Floyd, 2008). Their legitimacy depends on self-positioning and how they negotiate belonging across multiple relationships. Belonging, therefore, is central to how managerial identity is formed, affirmed and threatened (Grey and O'Toole, 2020). In this sense, belonging and identity are intertwined but not synonymous (Almarode, Saltus and Strayhorn, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper explores how middle managers experience belonging at work, addressing the limited empirical attention to this group. Empirically, managerial belonging is structured through two interrelated orientations: self-focused and other-orientated belonging. The former reflects managers' experiences of belonging through organizational alignment, role legitimacy and interpersonal connections. The latter captures how managers' belonging is shaped through their perceptions of whether those they manage belong. These orientations are recursively connected, as managers' perceptions of whether their teams are connected, supported and included feed back into evaluations of their own belonging. Middle managers' 'sandwiched' position (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) therefore generates simultaneous relational pressures: upward through organizational expectations and downward through responsibility for team cohesion and well-being. Managerial belonging emerges as a continuously negotiated and relational experience.

Conceptually, the paper challenges dominant accounts of belonging as an individuated psychological experience (e.g. Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Instead, it shows that middle managers' belonging is also shaped through an outward-facing evaluative orientation: *do they belong, and therefore do I?* This reframes managerial belonging as a recursive process in which managers' interpretations of others' belonging become an additional relational reference through which they evaluate their own legitimacy, connection and organizational fit.

It extends belonging theory beyond the predominantly self-referential question of whether one belongs, while extending identity and role-legitimacy perspectives by showing how perceived belonging among direct reports can inform managers' evaluations of their own effectiveness. It also extends double-relationality (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020) by showing that middle managers are not only structurally positioned between organizational levels, but also interpret relational conditions around them in ways that feed back into their own belonging.

These findings raise important implications for how organizations understand and support managerial work. While middle managers play a central role in sustaining the social fabric of organizations (Tarakci *et al.*, 2023), their own belonging is often implicitly assumed rather than actively supported. This study highlights the need to make the relational demands associated with belonging visible within organizational systems. HR and organizational development practices should recognize that managers' responsibility for fostering employee belonging can also shape their own well-being and role legitimacy.

Supporting middle managers therefore requires more than generic well-being interventions. Practices such as peer networks, mentoring and communities of practice (Kulik and Roberson, 2008) can help distribute the burden associated with fostering belonging. Leadership development should also address the challenges of dual-relationality, particularly in hybrid work contexts where responsibility for fostering connection intensifies. Recognizing this relational work within performance and development management also reinforces that responsibility for belonging should be shared across managers, senior leadership, HR systems and wider organizational practices.

This study has several limitations that suggest avenues for future research. First, the study draws solely on managers' accounts. It therefore examines managers' perceptions and interpretations of others' belonging rather than whether team members themselves experienced belonging in these ways. This distinction is central to other-orientated belonging as theorized here, but future research incorporating employees' accounts could examine how managerial interpretations correspond with, or differ from, employees' own experiences. Second, while the heterogeneous sample enabled exploration of managerial belonging across sectors, organizational contexts and levels of managerial experience, the study was not designed for systematic patterning within this sample should not be interpreted as evidence that sector, organizational size, managerial level or other structural characteristics are unimportant. Comparative research could examine how other-orientated belonging varies across these contexts and in other roles characterized by responsi-

bility for others' well-being or performance. Third, the study provides a cross-sectional account of managerial belonging and therefore cannot capture how these recursive evaluations develop over time. Longitudinal and case-based studies could examine how managerial belonging evolves through organizational change, changing team relationships and hybrid working.

Finally, future work could examine the tensions embedded in other-orientated belonging, including whether its reflexive and responsibility-laden nature intensifies self-monitoring or increases expectations of relational availability. This would extend understanding of belonging not only as a source of connection and legitimacy, but also as a potential site of strain within contemporary organizational life.

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