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*Special Issue: Experiencing communality and togetherness at work*

# We-experiences and the maintenance of workplace friendships: Being workplace friends together

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## Abstract

In this article, we are interested in how togetherness in workplace friendships is experienced in the absence of physical co-presence. We explore practices through which we-experiences, that is, shared experiences that produce feelings of togetherness, are realized and maintained across time and space and how different we-experiences constitute different modes of togetherness. Findings from our autoethnographic phenomenological study suggest four modes. Transactive togetherness as vivid and intense we-experiences in the face of tight deadlines but little genuine we-experiences at other times. Retrospective togetherness as re-lived we-experiences when shared memories or stories are retold, recalled, and 'brought back to life'. Associative togetherness as we-experiences that emerge in the light of immediate emotional and personal challenges that are addressed collectively. Projective togetherness as anticipated we-experiences that emerge from a compelling vision of each other in our work and personal life. We add to the current conversations on the continuous entanglement and interlocking nature of we-experiences, the temporality of togetherness at work, and how friendships are actively accomplished through individuals.

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## Keywords

Ethnography, reflexivity, situated learning

## Introduction

Workplace friendships, defined as non-romantic, voluntary and informal relationships in organizational contexts, have been linked to many benefits, such as emotional support, learning or enhanced collaboration (Grey and Sturdy, 2007; Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018). Feelings of togetherness (Siantonas, 2019) and positive relational dynamics (Lee et al., 2020) are central to workplace friendships. Yet, we know little about how these relational dynamics are maintained. This lacuna is particularly problematic when crises and disruptions challenge our sense of togetherness in everyday life (Van Grunsven, 2021), as during COVID-19. Indeed, the reference to ‘place’ in workplace friendship signifies the importance of spatial and temporal proximity of individuals. Yet, little is known about whether and how genuine feelings of togetherness in workplace friendship can be maintained in the absence of ‘physical co-presence’ (Aroles and Küpers, 2022: 5) that characterizes direct face-to-face interactions (Cunliffe and Locke, 2020; Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020).

In response to calls to explore ‘how friendship actually exists and is experienced by people in organizations’ (Grey and Sturdy, 2007: 158) and more humanized forms of theorizing (Cunliffe, 2022a), we ground our exploration of workplace friendship in interpretive phenomenology (Heidegger, 1967; Jedličková et al., 2021). We contend that such a perspective is suitable since it draws attention to the humanness of togetherness and the lived experiences of achieving togetherness in the face of constraints brought about by virtual ways of working. In particular, we draw upon the notion of ‘we-experiences’ (Osler, 2020; Salice, 2022; Zahavi and Salice, 2016); that is, shared experiences that produce ‘affective bond or connection, some kind of unification or identification with each other’ (Zahavi, 2015: 90). We argue that ‘we-experiences’ is insightful for exposing what it means to maintain workplace friendship without physical co-presence, a common feature associated with work arrangements such as virtual offices, work-from-home practices and co-working spaces.

Existing research has identified different types of we-experiences, depending on the constitutive components that produce them (Zahavi and Salice, 2016: 520; see Walther, 1923). For instance, scholars distinguish between instrumental (e.g. common goals and interests) and personal associations (e.g. mutual concerns for each other) that can give rise to distinct types of we-experiences (Osler, 2020; Walther, 1923; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). In addition, a small set of research notes the importance of temporality for how we experience relationships with others and the world around us (Heidegger, 1967; Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). Some we-experiences can arise from immediate concern in the present, while others are grounded in shared histories or imagined futures (Calcagno, 2012; Pokropski, 2015; Walther, 1923). However, the literature has little to say on the practices through which we-experiences are realized and maintained across time and space. Thus, our article seeks to explore the following:

How are we-experiences in workplace friendships maintained when conditions constrain the possibilities of physical co-presence?

To address this question, we researched ourselves through a reflexive, autoethnographic focus (Callagher et al., 2021; Hibbert et al., 2014) as a dispersed group of work friends dealing with the effects of COVID-19 on our typical ways of interacting. Over 2 years, we focussed on the nature and purpose of relationships and a sense of workplace friendship. We sought to characterize the

practices intrinsic to achieving our work friendship and sense of togetherness despite geographical distance and physical isolation. Employing an abductive approach, we adopt a phenomenological lens to focus on how individuals' micro-level activities allow them to 'go on' and participate in the moment-to-moment construction of social arrangements.

Our findings reveal four modes of togetherness that can be distinguished by the relational (instrumental vs personal associations) and temporal (past, present and future) foundations of we-experiences. We also show that each of these modes is susceptible to fractures that threaten experiences of togetherness and introduce the concept of we-sustaining practices. These are enacted reflexively and sustain togetherness in the face of potential fractures that are inherent to each mode. Our findings shift the conceptualization of togetherness in workplace friendships from a stable relational state to a process of ongoing becoming that is accomplished through participating individuals (Laroche et al., 2014; León and Zahavi, 2016). In particular, we highlight the importance of relational and temporal foundations of we-experiences that are explicitly enacted and reproduced through we-sustaining practices (Bailey and Madden, 2017; Pokropski, 2015). In doing so, we contribute to recent calls for an understanding of the 'work that goes into 'being there with and for distant others' (Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020: 1627) and practices that makes us feel together while physically distanced (Gibson, 2020).

To set out our argument, we begin by developing a phenomenological take on workplace friendship literature, considering how this involves temporal and relational aspects. These theoretical insights provide the backdrop for our attention to the problem of how work friends can achieve togetherness when events disrupt the lived experiences of physical co-presence. The methodology used to address that problem follows, along with the findings. The modes of togetherness and sustaining practices that we present in the findings provide the foundation for the discussion of our study's contribution and practical insights, which conclude this article.

## **Theoretical background**

### *Benefits and challenges of maintaining workplace friendships*

Friendship in organizational contexts can be defined as a voluntary, informal, mutual relationship between individuals (Arshad et al., 2021; Berman et al., 2002). Workplace friendship can promote intimacy and openness in communication and provide mutual emotional support (Grey and Sturdy, 2007). Even partially instrumental associations, where the relational bond is focussed on the access to helpful knowledge that the other party holds (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018), can support friendship. Thus, Wong et al. (2021) argue that shared knowledge, such as 'insider stories', are emotionally supportive narratives that strengthen friendships. Once established, workplace friendships provide a climate of trust, intimacy and openness and afford the possibilities for moral learning (Blatterer, 2021). For example, Capozza et al. (2020) showed the value of such friendships in combatting biased perceptions and discrimination (p. 524). Similarly, Callagher et al. (2021) illustrate how a support network based on camaraderie and professional development helped early career researchers deal with identity threats from discrimination in the field.

Nonetheless, maintaining friendships is not always straightforward and can be affected by troublesome contexts. For example, challenges can arise when one party develops a level of affection for another that is not shared. Those encountering this experience need to develop coping strategies after rejection if continued interaction within the organization remains possible (Clark et al., 2020). Similarly, relationship transitions can arise when an individual's formal role changes, especially when one friend steps into a role with leadership responsibilities over the other (Unsworth et al., 2018).

Those issues are not just professional challenges but also lived experience that requires individuals to (re)act. Yet, we know relatively little about the maintenance of workplace friendship as both an organizational phenomenon and a lived experience (Grey and Sturdy, 2007), especially in the face of disruptions that challenge our sense of togetherness in everyday life (Holt and Sandberg, 2011; Segal, 2010; Van Grunsven, 2021). In line with calls for more reflexive and human ways of theorizing to get close to and focus on who we are as human beings and how we experience self, life, and work (Cunliffe, 2022a: 1), we adopt a phenomenological perspective to better understand the lived experience of workplace friendship, especially in cases when traditional (face-to-face) ways of interacting and relating are disrupted.

### *The relational and temporal foundations of we-experiences*

While phenomenology is related to diverse theories, concepts, ideas and methods (Introna and Ilharco, 2004), Tomkins and Eatough (2013) note that ‘the notion of experience is the glue that binds otherwise fairly disparate readings of the philosophical legacy together’ (p. 261). In our article, we build upon the interpretative strand of phenomenology. In its concern with how relations to others and temporality structure meanings and experiences (Gill, 2014; Jedličková et al., 2021; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013), interpretive phenomenology is well suited to exploring and re-thinking existing ways of being in organizations and management (Cunliffe, 2022a; Sanders, 1982), such as maintaining relationships at work over space and time.

The origins of interpretive phenomenology can be found in the writings of Martin Heidegger (1967), who argues that human beings are not isolated entities that exist independently of the world but are intimately connected to and embedded in the world (Ramsey, 2016). Heidegger uses the term ‘Dasein’ (literally being there) to refer to human existence’s inseparability between the world and individuals (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Heidegger argues that Dasein is always already ‘thrown’ (geworfen) into the world, meaning that we are born into a particular historical, cultural and social structure that shapes our understanding of the world and our place in it (Gill, 2014; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Segal, 2010). Two components of connectedness with the world (what Heidegger calls being-in-the-world) are particularly relevant for our analysis: Dasein’s interrelatedness with other entities and Dasein’s intrinsic entanglement with its past, present and potential future (see Moran, 2021a; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). Below, we unpack these.

First, Heidegger maintains that our interconnectedness with others is a fundamental and defining feature of our being-in-the-world (Tomkins and Eatough, 2013; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). Heidegger uses the term *Mitsein* (being-with) to describe that Dasein is always in the condition of being-with other Daseins, irrespective of whether or not they are factually present (McMullin, 2013; Zahavi, 2019). As put by succinctly by Moran (2021a): ‘Human existence is always already structurally related to others (even when one is alone and others are actually absent)’ (p. 111). As such, Heidegger’s conceptualization of *Mitsein* introduces a notion of togetherness that is relatively distinct from phenomenological writings that equate the concept with empathy (Moran, 2021a; Zahavi, 2019). Whereas empathy refers to the ability to understand and relate to the experiences of others, *Mitsein* refers to a shared experience that is co-constituted by two or more individuals. As Zahavi and Salice (2016) note: ‘To be happy or sad because someone else is happy or sad differs from being happy or sad together with others’ (p. 518).

To refer to experiences that transcend I–thou relationships and produce what Walther (1923: 23) labels an affective ‘sense of togetherness’, phenomenologists use the word ‘we-experiences’ (Salice, 2022; Walther, 1923; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). In much phenomenological writing, we-experiences are related to spatial co-presence: People building a wall together (Walther, 1923),

people experiencing silence in maker spaces or hackathons and workshops that amplify relationships between members of online communities (De Vaujany and Aroles, 2021). However, the emergence of virtual ways of engagement has sparked renewed phenomenological interest in the question of whether and how ‘a felt sense of togetherness as we can occur even when the individuals are not spatially (or perhaps even temporally) together’ (Osler, 2020: 570). This stream of research shows that a range of different yet genuine we-experiences can emerge depending on the relational foundation of togetherness (León and Zahavi, 2016; Osler, 2020).

Drawing on Walther (1923), scholars distinguish between instrumental and personal associations that can build the relational foundations of we-experiences. Instrumental associations relate to groups of individuals who are ‘bound together by diverse, often purely egoistic interests or values’ (Szanto, 2018: 92) or a unifying belief or shared intentions to accomplish a particular goal (Salice, 2022; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). For instance, in her work on online community shows, Osler (2020) shows that we-experiences in such groups stem from shared cultural interests, political views or sexual preferences. In contrast, personal associations characterize romantic couples, families or friends and signify we-experiences grounded in relational bonds, mutual concerns for each other or shared emotions (León and Zahavi, 2016; Walther, 1923). As Calcagno (2012) expresses, ‘Friends, lovers or members of a group may dwell together, without exchanging words or signs. But they know they are together as one’ (p. 100). Although relational associations can be grounded in instrumental ones, they transcend explicit goals and interests and become ‘sedimented background-feelings’ (Zahavi and Salice, 2016: 521) of belonging together over time.

Second, for Heidegger (1967), our connectedness with the past, present and potential future constitutes a fundamental component of how we experience the world (Blatterer, 2021; Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). In the words of Segal (2017): ‘For Heidegger, being or becoming is a temporal lived experience’ (p. 476) that emerges from the dialectic interaction between beings, the world and temporal hues of the past and the future (Blatterer, 2021; see Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). Heidegger (1967) uses the term *originary temporality* to refer to the idea that time is not a fixed, objective phenomenon that exists independently of human experience but a fundamental aspect of our being-in-the-world (McMullin, 2013). In contrast to notions of time that conceptualize it as discrete points of ‘nows’ in an ordered sequence, *originary temporality* refers to a non-successive understanding of temporality where the past, present and future are interpenetrating and co-constituting (Bailey and Madden, 2017; Pokropski, 2015; Simpson et al., 2020). As put succinctly by Stolorow (2014) ‘Every present “now” carries the past and leans into future possibilities’ (p. 162).

For Heidegger, time is not only a fundamental component of how we experience the world but also of our being-with-others (*Mitsein*) to whom we are interconnected through shared histories or projections of others (McMullin, 2013; Moran, 2021a). Yet, the temporal foundations of togetherness have received relatively little attention in research on we-experiences, albeit the importance of ‘shared experiences of time’ (Pokropski, 2015: 898) or ‘temporal simultaneity’ (León and Zahavi, 2016: 230) is acknowledged. However, most research seems to be focussed on shared experiences that members of a social group make in the here-and-now (see Mühl, 2018; Walther, 1923). In turn, we argue that Heidegger’s idea of non-successive temporality promises nuanced insights into forms of togetherness that do not rely on temporal co-presence. To unpack the temporal aspects of being-in-the-world, Heidegger (1967) distinguishes between three modes of being – *Befindlichkeit*, *Verstehen* and *Verfallen* – and their corresponding temporal orientation towards the past, present and the future (Blattner, 2007; McMullin, 2013; Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

*Befindlichkeit* (attunement or disposedness) denotes the past as a foundational factor for our being-in-the-world (Slaby, 2021). For Heidegger (1967), our past experiences and memories shape how we experience the world and our relationships with others. As Slaby (2021) puts it: ‘the past in its continued weighing on – and setting the stage for – whatever will unfold or be done from now



on' (p. 248). Second, *Verstehen* (understanding or anticipation) signifies the future orientation of being-in-the-world. Dasein always understands itself by projecting itself into future ways of being (Blattner, 2007; Stolorow, 2014; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013). In the words of Heidegger (1967: 340; translation by Wrathall, 2021): 'To project onto possibilities is to anticipate or foresee, on the basis of present conditions, how different actions or events will generate a new configuration of possibilities'. Third, *Verfallen* (absorption or fallenness) refers to the present and the immediate aspects of being-in-the-world (Käufer, 2021; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013). For Heidegger, absorption in the everyday-ness of life and the constant pull to understand and articulate our possibilities in a way that is co-constituted by others leads to inauthentic ways of being (Käufer, 2021; Wrathall, 2021): 'going with the crowd, following rules and scripts without reflecting on how it could be otherwise' (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015: 1018).

Scholars show that different types of we-experiences emerge, depending on their temporal and relational foundations (Osler, 2020): Some relate to the here-and-now, while others are grounded in shared history, common projections towards the future, instrumental associations or mutual concerns for each other (Calcagno, 2012; Moran, 2021b; Pokropski, 2015; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013; Walther, 1923). However, irrespective of the constitutive foundations of we-experience, they are inherently fragile, and fractures in connectedness can occur (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018). For instance, Walther (1923) notes that actual we-experiences that are grounded in the present are often vivid and intense but tend to 'dissolve quickly' (p. 48), for example, when specific goals are accomplished or joined interests disappear (Osler, 2020). Similarly, Calcagno (2012) notes that we-experiences that are anchored in personal relationships 'can easily wither and die [. . .] if friends do not recognise or activate the signs and products of their communal oneness' (p. 100). This signals a need to shift attention from the foundations of distinct we-experience towards a better understanding of how they co-constitute and re-enforce each other, in particular, in the face of external disruptions that lead to fractures in our relationships with others (Segal, 2010).

An inquiry into how challenges and threats inherent to different types of togetherness are overcome or mitigated over space and time requires a conceptualization of togetherness as an ongoing process of becoming (Holt and Sandberg, 2011; Segal, 2017) and warrants attention to the practices that produce and interlock we-experiences (Cunliffe, 2022b; Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). Indeed, Walther (1923: 69) hints at such a processual view of togetherness in her notion of sedimentation (*untergrundieren*), where instrumental forms of togetherness that are grounded in the present give rise to more relational and implicit associations over time (Zahavi and Salice, 2016). From such a point of view, we-experiences are not simply dependent on constitutive components of being together but 'occur and are realized in and through the participating individuals' (León and Zahavi, 2016: 228). As put succinctly by Laroche et al. (2014): 'Being together has thus to be enacted, that is, it has to be actively, dynamically and autonomously but relationally brought forth' (p. 12).

Returning to our interest in sustaining workplace friendships in the absence of physical co-presence, a phenomenological lens allows us to get close to the lived experiences of friendship in organizational contexts. Adopting the notion of we-experiences affords us the conceptual tools to understand the constitutive components of togetherness at work and the practices that produce and reproduce them. In particular, Heidegger's understanding of originary temporality allows us to explore the temporal foundations of togetherness at work and promises nuanced insights into the role that upholding a shared past, present, and future plays in the ongoing process of maintaining we-experiences in workplace friendships.

## Methodology

Our study explores our we-experience in workplace friendships among our research group, whose members are based across four major international business schools in The United Kingdom and New Zealand. We took an interpretive phenomenological stance (Benner, 1994), intending to theorize from human experiences (Cunliffe, 2022a).

### *The historical context for our patterns of practices*

Some of us knew each other and worked together for almost 12 years, while others first met or joined shared projects along the way. Before the pandemic, it was customary for some group members to meet and spend time together, sometimes for extended periods. Beyond work, we occasionally engaged in social interactions, such as walking tours, to add a bit of ‘holiday fun’ to work-related engagements. Those occasions allowed us to unveil our social and personal selves. In between, we relied on online tools to work on joint projects and maintain our friendship. However, although some group members had frequent face-to-face interactions, the five of us were never together at the same place at any point in our past.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified our physically distant ways of working and connecting. Once COVID-19 lockdowns in our different locations occurred, we started to share how vital our group was to some individuals to maintain a sense of connectedness to our scholarly work and friendship. In sharing individuals’ experiences through social media chat and video calls, we noticed that we often compared and contrasted our group’s experiences to those of groups we were part of. Becoming aware of this common pattern, we intentionally explored how our experiences across work groups shared similar and different features. What struck us was how we described attempts to establish togetherness within other work groups (e.g. through setting up departmental WhatsApp groups): they felt fake or quickly became unfulfilling interactions that gradually dissolved. In turn, we began to wonder how some workplace friendships are sustained in the face of disruption when others fade away.

### *Our phenomenologically informed, relationally reflexive autoethnography*

Cunliffe (2022a) recently called for greater reflexivity from scholars about our being-in-the-world and theorizing from our lived experiences. Yet, as Heidegger (1967) and several phenomenological studies of organizing show (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; De Rond et al., 2022; Yakhlef and Essén, 2013), human practices can be assumed as a ‘ceaseless flow of spontaneously responsive, expressive activity that we are trying to grasp’ (Yakhlef and Essén, 2013: 888). As researchers, we can tentatively survey or grasp as we interpret the inner workings of participants’ experiences (De Rond et al., 2022). In the situation where the authorial team is both the participants whose lived experiences are explored and the researchers interpreting those experiences, we also blend a relationally reflexive approach (Hibbert, 2021; Hibbert et al., 2014) into autoethnography. As well as sharing a common interpretive ontology and epistemology with phenomenology,<sup>1</sup> relationally reflexive autoethnography offers principles for enacting connectedness among a research team and engaging others in the broader field, including editors, reviewers and other scholars, during the research process. Both principles seek to ‘maximise the authenticity and resonance of the understandings generated’ (Hibbert, 2021: 133), benefitting our study’s data generation and interpretation parts.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 illustrates the research process, including the data generation and interpretation phases.



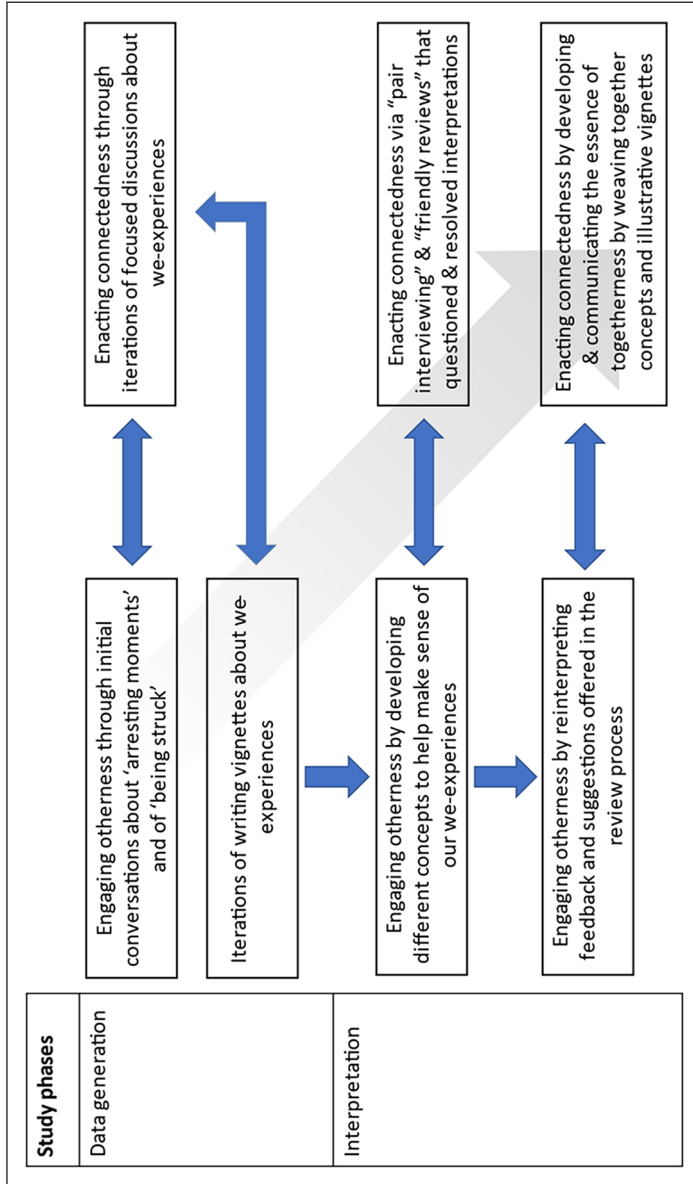


Figure 1. Research phases.

## Data generation

We employed collective reflection methods (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015), starting with collaboratively discussing interpretations of individual experiences among us and ending with individually documenting our experiences in written form. We held discussions via Zoom or MS Teams video calls and auto-recording captured those interactions. We complemented rounds of synchronous discussions with circles of written commentary via social media channels and writing about experiences. Combining verbal discussions and written commentary supported interrogating and examining functions, which Kempster and Stewart (2010) have associated with more honest and learning-oriented narratives. We emphasized generating insights about workplace friendships of shared interest among the group even when discussion topics were uncomfortable (e.g. grappling with the fundamental question of whether we are *really* workplace friends?; handling the heated debates initiated by differing interpretations of experiences to reach a consensus understanding). The open debate among us resulted in a decision that each of us writes autoethnographic narratives about our lived experiences of togetherness. To include the maximum variety of experiences, rather than suppressing detail through a too rigid approach, we set no length limits or format of the narratives.

## Interpretation

The interpretation phase started with us recognizing and drawing out salient patterns. Our inter-subjective analysis involved multiple rounds of joint reflection that took place over four video meetings between May and October 2021. Employing ‘pair interviewing’ (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 56), written interrogation (Kempster and Stewart, 2010), and close reading and re-reading of transcripts (Gill, 2014) among the five of us sensitized us to data that illuminated the essence of our we-experience as modes of togetherness and triggered alternative interpretations and surfaced taken for granted assumptions (Ripamonti et al., 2016). We felt – intuitively rather than based on theoretical debates – that our common projects seemed important to the patterns of togetherness we experienced. Conscious that our connections had long been closer, more developed, and less teleologically oriented than other task-oriented collaborations, we illuminated that a sense of togetherness did not disappear as we increasingly adopted remote ways of working (as in other settings) and allowed us to see how we maintained our work-friendship more clearly.

Our reflective analysis revealed that the foundations of our togetherness were quite different over time: Sometimes, they were grounded in work-related interests and goals, whereas personal challenges and concerns we collectively tackled were more prominent in other instances. In the same way, we realized that mutual feelings of togetherness were sometimes grounded in immediate experiences in the here and now (e.g. tight deadlines) and shared memories or projections towards our collective future at other times. Abductively moving between our data and extant theory, and with encouragement from the reviewers, we landed on Walther’s (1923) conceptualization of we-experiences and her distinction between the constitutive components of distinct forms of we-experiences (León and Zahavi, 2016; Osler, 2020; Zahavi and Salice, 2016). This body of literature gave us the language to differentiate between relational and instrumental associations that can constitute the foundations of we-experiences and differentiate between actual we-experiences in the present and those that emerge from a joint past. To unpack the temporal foundations of we-experiences, we also started to engage with Heidegger’s work on temporality.<sup>3</sup>

This body of work provides the language for characterizing different ‘types’ or ‘forms’ of togetherness that we labelled Transactive, Retrospective, Associative and Projective togetherness. In adopting these labels, we followed advice to name themes that evoke the meanings we were

talking and writing about (Jedličková et al., 2021). These steps also align with Cunliffe's (2022a) call for theorizing that builds from sensibility, sensitivity, reflexivity and imagination of humanness. Following this advice, we extracted excerpts from transcripts and reflexive writings that provided illustrative vignettes of the modes of togetherness and revealed the essence of our experiences.

In addition, Walther's (1923) processual conceptualization of we-experiences provided a critical connection that helped us to describe a feature of togetherness that our joint reflections revealed as crucial for sustaining our workplace friendship over space and time: It felt for us like we were 'shifting' between different modes of togetherness, especially in times where tensions and conflicts threatened our mutual feelings of togetherness. We continued to explore this feature of our work-friendship by focussing on what we labelled we-sustaining practices in the third ongoing phase of data analysis. Depending on whether practice attends to, depends on, or de-emphasizes a particular constitutive component of togetherness, we identified four clusters of we-sustaining practices (work-prioritizing, relationship-building, relationship-prioritizing and projective-integration) that evoke the dynamic shifts between the modes of togetherness that we experienced.

In the 'Findings' section, we use illustrative vignettes (pseudonymized author names are used) to illustrate how we experienced each mode of togetherness and why we-sustaining practices are important for working through possible disruptions to togetherness at work.

## Findings

In this section, we present the four modes of togetherness that we experienced. For each mode – transactive, retrospective, associative and projective togetherness – we use illustrative vignettes that capture the essence of that mode, describe we-sustaining practices that produce them, and elaborate the potential for fractured togetherness that is an unintended consequence of (over)-focussing on a particular mode, which can lead to the dissolution of or disengagement from work-friendship.

### *Transactive togetherness through joint tasks*

At certain points in our relationships, joint projects built the foundation of mutual feelings of togetherness. Tight deadlines, pressures to 'publish or perish', or uncertain employment situations required us to prioritize work outcomes at the expense of relationship considerations. Nevertheless, even such instrumental forms of workplace friendship gave rise to genuine we-experiences. Mutual feelings of togetherness were especially true in periods with looming submission deadlines when the pressure to finish a task was high, and everyone focussed their energy on completing a joint project. Sometimes this involved juggling other personal commitments:

We try and pick meeting times to fit the time zone differences and each other's lives. We know Thom has young children, and we know Edward is a bit of night owl, so it tends to be calls in the UK evening and the NZ morning. But we adjust accordingly when things come up. However, as project deadlines get closer and we know we can't reschedule to another day, individuals adjust when it becomes clear that the group can't accommodate them. Sometimes that means Thom's children are in the background, or he has to leave for part of the call. Other times it means very early starts or very late finish times for some of us. When there is a deadline, some of us just accept that we have to sacrifice something to make the project work. It can be frustrating if you have to juggle other meetings or tell the family they need to change or negotiate, 'I need to do this, so can you do this?'. But those trade-offs at home aren't so bad if everyone on the project is willing to make accommodations so we can meet. Plus, we know that it is not always like that. It's just what we need to do for that project at the time. (Philippa)

Unsurprisingly, transactive togetherness is characterized by rather ‘dry’ modes of interaction centred around the common task: What needs to be done, by when, and by whom. Negotiations or asking if somebody has time and capacity fall away and are replaced with coordination of tasks completed, clarifying questions to address, and decisions to make. This excerpt from a WhatsApp text transcript illustrates how this was experienced as the group worked to finalize a manuscript to submit for a deadline:

**Colin:** Confirming I have been through findings, and hand the paper on to Thom. Some small changes elsewhere too, but have not thoroughly looked at other sections.

**Colin:** Oh, and Conchita has left the team and been replaced by Maximilian 😊

**Thom:** Hi all. This is Maximilian speaking . . . I’ve also been through the findings but most of it read already well (good job Colin). I have added a few thoughts/ questions in the comments mainly for @Colin towards the end of the findings section.

**Colin:** @Thom, I have had a quick look at the comments. The main differences I see are that repositioning is ‘moving’ the researcher towards the participant by focusing on the participants industry (kiwi fruit magazine . . .) or the participants social and cultural context (small talk). Reframing is about making claims that are external to both of these—crudely, bringing the participant’s conceptions into a wider framing.

**Colin:** So one is about positioning the researcher inside the participants current conception; the other is showing that things outside that conception may be worth thinking about.

**Colin:** Does that help? I have not written in the file since I looked via my phone while sleepless 😊

**Philippa:** 👉 yes (at least for me)

**Colin:** I have just been into the file and added more comment replies, Thom. Also fixed a bit of obscure English idiom that I had used: ‘attending to’ means (in one sense) ‘focus attention on’ and in the relevant section of text I have changed it to ‘observing’, which is clearer.

**Philippa:** thanks Colin.

**Jonny:** Went through, a couple of comments. There are a few mega sentences in the lit rev (almost matching 🌟1’s record) that could be broken up maybe . . .

**Edward:** Hi All, went through the paper and made some minor edits and responded to some comments. I personally think that the findings reads really good now and fits well with the front and back end.

**Philippa:** does that mean you’re done with it or are you coming back to it today? I want to clear up a few things so I’m going to do that now as none is using the file.

**Jonny:** Done eight

**Philippa:** 👉

Noteworthy is how periods of transactive togetherness were interspersed with other modes of togetherness, as the previous WhatsApp excerpt revealed. The interaction between Colin and Thom about the nicknames Conchita and Maximilian is a common ‘in joke’ about the stereotypical

pseudonyms used to protect participants' identities when findings are reported. Similarly, Jonny's reference to 'mega sentences' and his colleague, represented as '✱1', connects the current task focus to joint histories shared around attending to unwieldy sentences. Yet, while a set of overlapping relationships may exist, togetherness in this mode is a transient context for establishing or fulfilling transactional ways of working, and not an enduring state. Moreover, it does little to build more personal connections.

*Sustaining we-experiences through work-prioritizing practices.* Our reflections revealed a set of practices that emphasized shared tasks while de-emphasizing any personal relationships within the group. These practices seemed especially relevant whenever social connections threatened progress with work-related aspects. For instance, reflections reveal quite explicit attempts to ensure that personal (friendly) relationships do not cloud professional judgement, as the following vignette shows:

While we have a closer social connection (friendship-esque) and do stuff outside work (going for drinks, meeting each other's spouses, or having BBQs) I also get the most ruthless feedback from the group. Other colleagues usually try to be 'friendlier' when critiquing my work (presumably to not hurt my feelings), but obviously, you can't really learn much from the 'everything is awesome' feedback that you often get (especially in New Zealand). (Thom)

Work-prioritizing practices also involved the explicit accentuation of our professional relationships when 'outsiders' were present or the interruption of non-project-related conversations or digressions (especially before deadlines). In other instances, technology helped us to maintain a focus on the joint task:

Dropbox and social media are good for progressing with manuscripts and putting some kind of pressure on everyone. For instance, you can tell by the 'seen' icon on Signal that everyone is aware of his/her task, the track changes function in Word show you how much someone has worked on a document or the 'last edited' information in DropBox gives you some indication on whether a person is working on a file or not. (Jonny)

Ultimately, work prioritizing practices gave primacy to advancing the tasks associated with the research work in the academic workplace and can interrupt or even avoid moments that might deepen social relationships.

*Possible fractures related to a focus on transactive togetherness.* There were some indications of the fragile nature of we-experiences that characterize transactive togetherness, especially when immediate tasks or challenges were accomplished. For example, an analysis of WhatsApp chats revealed that we did not message as a group for half a year after submitting the initial version of our first joint article. Similarly, we were aware that the instrumental nature of our workplace friendship that characterizes this mode could easily lead to feelings of being exploited or taken advantage of, for instance, when some of us perceived that others are not 'pulling their weight' or delivered outputs that were of inferior quality. The instrumental nature of interactions puts existing relationships at risk, as the vignette from Jonny illustrates:

In recent discussions, the need to hit the target for promotions came up a few times. Was there anything interesting in the idea? Probably not. But it would tick a box. So at times, it felt safer to keep quiet and not to shoot the idea straight away. Similar feelings came when tensions were rising at times, I did not like the ideas or the direction of the paper but then it was just to get it out and tick a box.

As such, the ‘friendship’ aspect in workplace friendship can easily wither and lead to dissolution if togetherness remains (or becomes) a means for individuals to accomplish their (personal) objectives.

### *Retrospective togetherness through joint histories*

In this mode, our we-experiences were produced by remembering and retelling a history that we shared as a group. For example, stories and anecdotes were retold in meetings and passed on to new group members. Over time these became some sort of collective memory of the group. Prompted by the reviewers’ comments, Jonny’s reflective note illustrates the value of joint history in producing genuine we-experiences:

Shared histories continue to be invoked in meetings, providing a scaffold at times of approaching deadlines and hyphenated stress: fond memories of research trips with ice cream or a surf session; laughing at the stories of Philippa fending off farmers’ offers of marriage or a German colleague throwing a tantrum in the car when getting hungry. These shared memories extended beyond just research trips: Colin’s hikes or Edward’s great babysitting skills. Stories of work struggles, for example, dealing with difficult teaching situations, although fewer, also formed an important part of our group identity. These became our shared memories – even though not all members were there at the time. These stories often brought tears of joy during drinks, and featured in our messages and calls. But reminiscing of these ‘good times’ during the calls was just part of the value of these stories. I struggled to see any point of spending time on yet another academic paper –who cares about some piece on reflexive practice or whatever niche theory when your family and friends are increasingly at risk of invasion? Meetings seemed pointless and I was close to disconnect all together. At those times, fond memories, some only experienced through sharing the stories, proved to be necessary to find enough reason to carry on with the projects.

In essence, retrospective togetherness is characterized by practices that evoke and reproduce our shared history. Regular updates on other colleagues that we knew, making insider jokes, or recalling stories that all of us know reminded us of our role in each other’s personal and professional life. Similarly, gentle mocking of personal quirks and behaviours we had observed in each other and sharing throwback photos via social media allowed us to reconnect and bring the relational aspects of our workplace friendship ‘to life’.

*Sustaining we-experiences through relationship-building practices.* Our analysis revealed the importance of relationship-building practices for retrospective togetherness. These create the personal connections and mutual understandings fundamental to other modes of togetherness. Such sedimentation or layering of work and personal aspects of togetherness usually originated in work-related interactions: Having an ice cream after conducting an interview, adding hikes to research visits or hosting BBQs for the group. Indeed, many of the stories and anecdotes that constituted the foundation of retrospective togetherness emerged through these shared moments. Correspondingly, talking about work-related aspects that were perhaps more in the value space (e.g. teaching philosophies) deepened our personal connections and understandings.

Notably, technology was not just a means to overcome physical distance, but (often inadvertently) contributed towards strengthening the social bond between team members and deepened the mutual understanding within the group. For example, the very nature of virtual work gave us insights into each other’s personal life. Indeed, the very fact that children and pets walked into the room during Zoom calls added a personal touch to work meetings and blurred the boundaries



between professional and private lives. Similarly, some authors remarked that they found it easier to establish initial personal connections with other group members on social platforms:

I think the ‘casual’ nature of conversations on Signal makes it easier for me to overcome perceived hierarchical boundaries (e.g., between the big professor and us early career researchers). It’s just easier to be silly and share personal stuff on informal social platforms. For instance, I would never show pictures of my kids in a face-to-face meeting, but on Signal, I do that occasionally). (Thom)

Ultimately, the personal connection, genuine concern for each other and shared memories that developed through relationship-building practices helped the group to sustain togetherness even in the absence of immediate joint concerns (e.g. work projects).

*Possible fractures related to a focus on retrospective togetherness.* At the same time, our joint reflections highlighted some aspects of retrospective togetherness that could threaten our workplace friendship in the long run.

We tend to make the same jokes or evoke the same shared stories and memories over and over again. At times, this is funny and lightens the mood, but at other times it seems a bit forced, and just a means to overcome awkward silences. I do not think this mattered that much in our group because we have plenty of other stuff to talk about. But it always reminded me of conversations with old school friends where the only thing you talk about is how you got drunk together 20 years ago. (Thom)

As this illustration shows, the joint memories and mutual understandings a group developed in the past can quickly become meaningless if they lose their relevance in the here and now, and lead to disengagement from work-friendship.

### *Associative togetherness through joint social relations*

In this mode, we-experiences were produced by immediate shared problems and concerns that were distinctly personal. This form of togetherness became especially relevant during COVID lockdowns when most of us experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness, as Colin’s reflections reveal:

I watched the daily views change in my garden from my kitchen table (my makeshift desk), when the lockdown started. I thought it would be a few weeks and I would be fine. Then the view from the table continued for weeks and seasons . . . a succession of blossom, fruit and falling leaves. Living alone through lockdowns, I only had a family phone call now and then (even my family didn’t like video calls) as social contact. As time went on, my friends in ‘another shelter’ – our WhatsApp / Signal / Zoom connected group – were increasingly my most important social circle. Work projects shifted from the purpose of connecting (or the price of engagement – I felt that all I had to offer the group was my productivity) to the context of social connection, perhaps more for some of us than all of us. I know that in the past, I had been very driven towards a work focus, but as I felt increasingly alone, so I became more willing to entertain daft diversions in the conversation, use apps and message platforms beyond the minimum and for non-serious exchanges (I had been very resistant) – or even take people up these electronic and video call side-tracks myself, as this excerpt from a zoom call transcript shows:

**Philippa:** Okay, that deadline is brilliant (smiling), but what can we agree, can we talk through the work we’ve got? . . . [silence] . . . or not.

**Colin:** Yes, but let's give Edward the chance to share any news.

**Philippa:** Oh yes, see a news update.

**Jonny:** He's [his camera is] on and off.

**Edward:** Nothing much . . . uhh . . . I got a paper accepted today published in [journal name], so that was good.

**Philippa:** Very good. Congratulations.

**Edward:** Thanks.

**Edward:** Ah . . . what else? No, nothing else . . . Yeah . . . yeah I've been wanting to go to see Jonny, but the weather is really bad.

**Jonny:** Oh come on! I'm running out in shorts every day (smiles). What are you on about?

**Colin:** Are you? Are you insane?

**Jonny:** Maybe Edinburgh was a bit, today it was a bit windy, but nothing else.

While task focus provides a proximate purpose for togetherness (or 'the price of engagement', as Colin puts it), it is not given attention in and of itself. As such, this mode is characterized by a set of practices that are of a much more personal nature. This included showing emotion or providing supportive listening. Some of these practices became semi-routinized in our 'virtual hand wave' practices at the beginning of online meetings. Still, they also provided space for unpacking our backstories and nurturing deeper connections between members via 'backchannel' communication.

Significantly, associative togetherness depended on the mutual understandings developed in other modes. Our discussions highlighted that the same practices performed by individuals in other groups (e.g. hastily established departmental chat groups on *WhatsApp* during the first COVID-19 lockdown) often came across as 'awkward' or inappropriate and did not necessarily strengthen the feeling of togetherness.

*Sustaining we-experiences through relationship-prioritizing practices.* We identified relationship-prioritizing practices as integral to this mode of togetherness. These practices not only habitually maintained existing relationships but strengthened them and counterbalanced the threats inherent to other modes of togetherness in two ways. First, they attend to personal components of togetherness and de-emphasized task-related ones. Second, they added significance to the joint understandings and mutual concerns developed in previous interactions, making them relevant in the here and now. Mutual concerns are well demonstrated in this Signal excerpt:

**Philippa:** Hey @Colin, Jonny is just off a call with Edward, which I joined for the last part. Edward's mood is really low. He's going to see his Dr but he's struggling to concentrate. He's never slept well, but he's sleeping very little—all signs of depression. Letting you know this for 3 reasons—a colleague whose struggling with deadlines, a friend in need, and possibly a friend who could do with a few days out of his apartment (but won't ask if he can visit)

**Philippa:** @Edward—this is us saying 'we are worried and we want to help'

**Colin:** Hello. No big deal about the friendship writing—we can pick that up at any time. Happy to catch up on the planned call for a bit of shelter conversation.

**Colin:** @Edward If there is anything that I can do to help, please just let me know. I would be glad to.

**Edward:** Thank you Philippa and everyone. @Colin: Sure I will! I am much better now! I just needed to have some time off, so taking a break was good!

On the one hand, the above conversation illustrates that associative togetherness depends on past relationships and understandings (as about Edward's eating habits). At the same time, there is a clear de-emphasis on task-related aspects and a focus on personal challenges. Increasingly, shared understandings and memories central to this and other modes of togetherness informed our joint future. That is not to say that the shift of focus was completely intentional, as this reflexive note from Colin indicates:

Over time I also became more open about my isolation as we talked about our personal situations, issues and worries more often. There were certainly times, looking back when progress with the project faded out of my workaholic consciousness, and weirdly, I still feel closer to this technologically bonded group than I do to others I spent a lot of time with in-person once the lockdown restrictions eased. And I think we developed a new way of connecting over time that may still be important in the future.

*Possible fractures related to a focus on associative togetherness:* By emphasizing the relational element of togetherness above anything else, the nature of associative togetherness directly threatened progress with joint projects and potentially evoked 'group think' due to the close social relationships that had been formed. Indeed, the reflection from Jonny at the end of the section on transactional togetherness hints at this: On the one hand, he holds back criticism to 'tick a box' (e.g. publish a paper). On the other hand, he is keen not to stress the relationship (e.g. by critiquing the direction a manuscript is going) when tensions are high. As such, there is a risk of a somehow 'charitable' approach to projects, where the team might end up (implicitly) encouraging free riding. Similarly, the inherent focus on the personal concern that signifies associative togetherness can be experienced differently, as Thom's vignette illustrates:

Especially during stringent lockdown when day-care centres and schools were closed, I sometimes got a bit uneasy when we talked about personal stuff for a long time in meetings. At the same time, I felt guilty that I was feeling that way because I was aware that such conversations are meaningful for group members who sit in their house/flat on their own for months. But if you are already stressed out to the maximum because you and your partner work full-time jobs and need to take care of two small kids who are at home 24/7, prolonged social talk (no matter how meaningful) felt like distractions from more pressing issues such as I stay afloat at work or even quality time I can spend with the family.

As this illustration shows, nurturing connections by showing emotion, providing supportive listening, and accommodating individuals' situations as a group is the price of ongoing engagement. Yet, dissolution of work-friendship can develop if the social endeavour becomes the primary component unifying the group.

### *Projective togetherness through a joint future*

While other forms of togetherness are grounded in shared histories (retrospective togetherness) or current problems in the social or professional sphere (transactive and associative togetherness), this mode of togetherness is future-oriented. As such, projective togetherness depends on crafting

and articulating a joint future of the group that integrates social and task-related aspects. Edward's reflective note illustrates how this future togetherness was experienced:

We talk often about the future. Sometimes it is about personal future plans, like Christmas plans, summer holidays, and work-related stuff. But very often it's about our shared future. For example, discussing potential new research projects, call for papers, future conferences, and interweaving the personal with work stuff to create opportunities to meet up. There is this group joke that I am always on the hunt for new call for papers. But I think it wasn't just the projects or call for papers that I was interested in. I found myself often bringing out new ideas or call for papers even if I knew that we are not going to pursue them. At many times, especially during the COVID lockdown, such discussions were about prolonging the meetings and opening new conversations. But also, they were about creating this sense of certainty about and control over the future. In a way, by talking about potential future projects, meetings, etc. it felt like we are creating that future together, we are actualizing these potentialities. It was our way of prolonging our meetings to think together about the future and create future commitments/ projects that somehow extend our group's presence in the future. It was a way of maintaining the continuity of our friendship, in a time (COVID) where everything else seemed uncertain and beyond our control.

This mode of togetherness is characterized by attempts to leverage mutual understanding developed in the past to produce future experiences of togetherness. Examples are articulating (distinctive) ideas/theories from the literature as possible key lenses/frameworks for a new project, which are illustrated well by Edward, who remarks:

We know more about how each of us works (instrumental) and how the group operates, and what is going on in our lives (relational); those discussions are a lot deeper. And we can talk about leveraging the theoretical knowledge built in one project, which we joke about, but we can do that because it has a basis for knowing what we know.

Exploring avenues for future projects that build upon and reinforce the joint understandings developed in other modes added a distinct long-term orientation to workplace friendships. They evoked a compelling vision of each other in our future work and personal life.

*Sustaining we-experiences through future-oriented integration practices.* Creating this shared future togetherness depends on existing relationships and mutual understandings needed to craft a compelling vision of our work-friendships. A shared future is accomplished through what we label future-oriented integration practices. These blend task and relational elements in a future-oriented way. For instance, conversations about new project ideas and potential new collaborators in the group could be discerned to explore future joint endeavours. While these practices would maintain the group's commitment to working together, there was no commitment to pursue all the explored opportunities.

As the reflective note indicates, discussion of these opportunities was often underpinned by an attempt to extend the meeting by weaving the relational with task-related practices through enacting a shared future project. In addition, through sharing special issue Calls for Papers, casual talk about paper ideas, drafting models when ideas for future projects surfaced, talking about potential conference locations where all of us could meet or discussing how we could further leverage the capabilities we have developed as a group, togetherness was maintained through a future potential to generate work-benefits or strengthen our relationship. Thus, the focus here was on the future of the group through an imagined commitment to future projects.

**Table 1.** Summary of we-experiences and their constitutive components.

	Transactive togetherness	Retrospective togetherness	Associative togetherness	Projective togetherness
<i>Characteristics of modes</i>				
<i>Key features of the we-experience</i>	Vivid and intense we-experiences in the face of tight deadlines but little genuine we-experiences at other times	Re-lived we-experiences when shared memories or stories are retold, recalled and 'brought back to life'	We-experiences that emerge in the light of immediate emotional and personal challenges that are addressed collectively	Anticipated we-experiences that emerge from a compelling vision of each other in our work and personal life
<i>Characteristic practices</i>	Formal ways of interacting in attempts to 'get the (immediate) job done'	Recalling and retelling stories and memories	Expressing emotions, mobilizing collective support and care	Exploring avenues for future togetherness
<i>Constitutive components of being together</i>				
<i>Relational foundation of we-experience</i>	Instrumental associations (work-related tasks or interests)	Instrumental associations that obtain personal significance	Personal associations (feelings of mutual concern and relational bonds)	Personal associations that obtain instrumental significance
<i>Temporal foundation of we-experiences</i>	Present: Joint work interests and goals in the here-and-now	Past: Shared experiences that are relived and activated	Present: Personal concerns in the here-and-now	Future: Potentialities that have not manifested yet
<i>We-sustaining practices on which togetherness relies</i>				
<i>Label and relevance</i>	Work-prioritizing practices: These re-establish boundaries between personal and professional concerns and maintain togetherness if relational association threaten work progress	Relationship-building practices: These infuse personal aspects into associations that are of an instrumental nature and maintain togetherness in the absence of immediate goals	Relationship-prioritizing practices: These leverage and strengthen existing personal relationship and avert that relationships turn into purely instrumental ones	Future-oriented integration practices: These create a compelling version of potential we-experiences that transcend the here-and-now and maintain togetherness in the absence of immediate goals
<i>Shift in relational foundation of togetherness</i>	Emphasize instrumental associations and de-emphasize personal associations	Blend the personal and instrumental associations that build the basis for a shared history	De-emphasize instrumental associations in favour of personal ones	Blend personal and instrumental associations towards future projections
<i>Shift in the temporal foundations</i>	Shifts attention from the potential (future) to immediate (task-related) concerns	Shifts attention from (a lack of) immediate concerns to a joint past	Shifts attention from past experiences to immediate (personal) concerns	Shifts attention from the immediate concerns to a potential joint future

(continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued)

	Transactive togetherness	Retrospective togetherness	Associative togetherness	Projective togetherness
Possible fractures of workplace friendship	Dissolution of work-friendship if togetherness becomes purely task-related	Disengagement from work-friendship if joint history fades away	Dissolution of work-friendship if togetherness becomes a purely social endeavour	Disengagement from work-friendship if future potentialities never materialize

*Possible fractures related to a focus on prospective togetherness.* A risk that threatens projective togetherness is a failure to transform at least one of the ideas for future activities into actual projects:

We constantly mock Edward for bringing up project ideas or mentioning potential visits but not going through with them. In one way, this is like when an old ‘friend’ tells you: ‘we should catch up soon’, although everyone is aware that no one involved has an interest in actually doing that. But I know that some of these ideas will transpire and that just thinking about them is quite stimulating.

Jonny’s illustrative vignette above reveals that exploring ideas can be generative in that exploring the idea is stimulating and a part of the knowledge-production process. At the same time, if talks about future projects turn into some social etiquette (the old friends who must catch up knowing that neither party will make such arrangements), then both the task and social relations are at risk of tapering off, and disengagement sets in.

## Discussion

Our article sought to understand *how are we-experiences in workplace friendships maintained when conditions constrain the possibilities of physical co-presence?* Our relationally reflexive autoethnographic analysis suggests *four types of togetherness* that can be distinguished based on their relational and temporal foundations (see Table 1). Each of them is susceptible to possible fractures in our relationships with others.

Our findings reveal an ongoing process of becoming together as different modes continue to co-constitute and reinforce each other (Laroche et al., 2014). This process relies on the reflexive enactment of what we label *we-sustaining practices*: Implicit and explicit ‘acts of unification’ (Zahavi and Salice, 2016: 521) that create a dynamic ‘rhythm’ between different types of togetherness and counterbalance the potential of fractures that are inherent to each mode. We discuss these aspects in turn.

### *Types of we-experiences in workplace friendships and possible fractures*

Two modes, *transactive* and *associative togetherness*, are grounded in immediate challenges that produce we-experiences. Like instrumental forms of workplace friendship described in the literature (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018), transactive togetherness relies on shared goals, interests or beliefs in a common cause (Osler, 2020; Szanto, 2018; Walther, 1923). For instance, transactive togetherness can be associated with projects that bring people together intentionally and clearly



and help them grapple with difficult situations like combatting biased perceptions and discrimination (Capozza et al., 2020) or dealing with identity threats (Callagher et al., 2021). Correspondingly, associative togetherness is grounded in immediate challenges that are distinctly ‘personal’ in nature, such as frustrations or feelings of loneliness, as encountered through COVID-19 lockdowns. In facing such difficulties, feelings of mutual concerns and relational bonds produce we-experiences (Walther, 1923; Zahavi, 2015), and individuals are ‘melded together not just by shared goals but also by shared values and commitments’ (Moran, 2021b: 8).

However, while the presence of immediate challenges produces vivid and intense periods of shared experiences and intense feelings of togetherness these ‘dissolve quickly’ (Walther, 1923: 48) in the absence of instant concerns. Similarly, the literature on workplace friendships has acknowledged that these often discontinue if people move to other departments or employers (Unsworth et al., 2018). Correspondingly, our findings suggest that associative togetherness can fracture if shared emotional and personal challenges are absent, as visible in the often short-lived ‘we are all in this together’ feelings of social groups that prevailed in the early stages of the pandemic. A dominant focus on personal associations can also undermine work progress. For instance, literature shows that strong social ties can lead to over-association with a particular group (Siedlok et al., 2020) or cloud objectivity and criticality (Jørgensen and Boje, 2014). Ultimately, such fractures are related to *Verfallen* (falling) into particular ways of being-with-each-other that become routinized and habitual over time and compromise our ability to question how things could be otherwise (Heidegger, 1967; Käufer, 2021; Segal, 2017; Tomkins and Simpson, 2015).

The two modes of togetherness discussed so far are distinctly grounded in the here-and-now. In contrast, retrospective and prospective togetherness are related to we-experience in a group’s collective history in shared projection towards a joint future (Osler, 2020; Pokropski, 2015; Walther, 1923). *Retrospective togetherness* relies on joint relationships and mutual understandings developed through historic engagements in common work activities. Albeit fundamentally dependent on joint tasks, the memories, ‘war stories’ and deep understandings that a group can draw upon sustain togetherness even without shared concerns in the here and now (Pokropski, 2015; Walther, 1923). As such, retrospective togetherness relies on instrumental associations that gain personal significance over time (Zahavi and Salice, 2016). Such traces of the past continue to weight on how we experience being-with-others and the meanings ascribed to our relationships (Heidegger, 1967; Slaby, 2021; Stolorow, 2014). Correspondingly, *projective togetherness* is grounded in an imagined joint future or anticipated we-experiences that have not yet manifested (Calcagno, 2012; Moran, 2021b; Pokropski, 2015; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013). Only through *Verstehen* (understanding) ourselves in terms of possibilities can we grasp the significance of present actions on our being-in-the-world and our relationships with others (Heidegger, 1967; Wrathall, 2021). In adding a projective dimension to togetherness, this mode renews or reinforces work- and relationship-related associations even in the absence of immediate shared concerns (Moran, 2021b; Pokropski, 2015).

Yet, our findings suggest that their temporal orientation towards the future and the past make retrospective and prospective togetherness. On the one hand, feelings of togetherness that are grounded in a shared history are fragile, particularly when joint memories fade away and members of a group fail to recognize or renew the foundations of their we-experiences (Calcagno, 2012, 2018). Similarly, prospective togetherness is vulnerable to demise, particularly when shared projections towards future possibilities never translate into present actualities. Again, such fractures emerge from *Verfallen* (falling) into routinized and habitual ways of being and relating without conscious efforts to renew and activate the foundational components of we-experiences in the present (Calcagno, 2012; Holt and Johnsen, 2019; Walther, 1923). Indeed, Calcagno (2018) notes that habit poses important challenges to the very possibility of community when the lived realities

of individuals change and ‘the very habits that were once intimately linked to the life of the individuals in the community [. . .] no longer speak to members of a community’ (p. 265).

### *The importance of we-sustaining practices for working through potential fractures*

In contrast to extant literature that has mainly portrayed togetherness at work as a stable relational state, our findings suggest a process of ongoing becoming that is accomplished through participating individuals (León and Zahavi, 2016; Salice, 2022). Furthermore, our findings reveal the role of we-experiences in working through disruptions such as those experienced by COVID-19. Holt and Sandberg (2011) noted that in organizational settings, such disruptions ‘. . . though immediately frustrating and even threatening, remain settled experiences because we are reaching after the prospect of recovery as we gradually immerse ourselves in more and more technologically refined ways of dealing with the world’ (p. 223). We suggest that such a process relies on the reflexive enactment of we-sustaining practices that produce a continuous shift between different modes of togetherness and their unifying components. Such practices that ‘bring forth’ we-experiences can take a more passive or habitual form, for example, when work colleagues increasingly develop friendly relationships without intentionality (Calcagno, 2012; Walther, 1923). Other we-sustaining practices have a more future-oriented and intentional nature as they seek to ‘activate’ (Calcagno, 2012) specific components of we-experiences to counterbalance risks and tensions inherent to each mode (León and Zahavi, 2016). As such, we-sustaining practices renew the foundational components of togetherness in a way that tears us away from *Verfallen* into habits and routines that pose challenges to togetherness (Calcagno, 2018; Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). The practices fall into four groups.

First, *work-prioritizing* practices counterbalance the possible frustration and lack of work progress that arises from togetherness that transforms into a purely social endeavour. These ‘bring work back’ into social relationships, shift attention from past experience or future potentialities to immediate concerns, and re-establish boundaries between social and work if project benefits are threatened. Second, *relationship-prioritizing* shift the foundations of togetherness from joint histories to present challenges in the social sphere and push instrumental forms of togetherness into the background. By de-emphasizing any instrumental aspects of togetherness, the ‘personalistic focus’ characteristic of friendships is strengthened and revived (Sias et al., 2004; Zahavi, 2015). In doing so, relationship-building practices help members of a group come to a sense of belief that the community exists in a way they find to be meaningful (Peñarroja et al., 2019). As such, these two sets of practices signify what Heidegger labels *gegenwärtigen* (making-present) of the future and the past (see Gallagher and Tollefsen, 2019 and Inwood, 2000). *Gegenwärtigen* (a verb) signifies an active (and perhaps intentional) engagement with the future and the past in a way that re-calibrates togetherness in the present. As put succinctly by Calcagno (2012): The past can ‘be activated in memory and made present again; it can be lived and re-lived intensely in consciousness, again and again’ (p. 102). Similarly, Holt and Johnsen, (2019) note that ‘there is always the possibility of revising the future and the past, depending on the events being experienced to which both past and future times are being enlisted’ (p. 1561).

Third, *relationship-building practices* blend social and professional aspects, and mutual understandings, trust, and memories are built (Calcagno, 2012; León and Zahavi, 2016). Such practices add a personal dimension to instrumental forms of togetherness and maintain togetherness in the absence of immediate goals (Osler, 2020; Walther, 1923). Importantly, we find that technology can facilitate the development of retrospective togetherness, as shared memories can be captured in audio-visual documents, and real or perceived barriers between the social and work-related contexts are easier to overcome on digital platforms. Finally, *future-oriented integration practices*

constitute the reflexive construction of future relationships and projects (Gallagher and Tollefsen, 2019; Heidegger, 1967). These ‘bring work back’ into social relationships by exploring togetherness’s future potential. Like the active notion of *gegenwärtigen* (making the future and the past matter in the present), these set of practices suggest a reflexive and deliberate engagement with the temporal foundations of togetherness. These create a compelling narrative of a group’s past and present and offset the feelings of disconnection in the absence of a shared presence, so the very lived experience of togetherness is maintained (Calcagno, 2018; Holt and Johnsen, 2019).

## Conclusion

Disruptions created by COVID-19 have brought into focus the need for management scholars to re-think our existing ways of working together. One pressing aspect of experiencing togetherness at work and the focus of our study was workplace friendship groups. Our study responds to recent calls to understand better how togetherness is maintained among group members (Lee et al., 2020). By taking a processual view of we-experiences that are accomplished experiences of togetherness at work (Gibson, 2020; Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020), we make three main contributions to the literature.

First, previous phenomenological studies have distinguished between different modes of togetherness depending on the unifying components they are associated with (Osler, 2020). Building on this, we draw attention to how togetherness is sustained through the entanglement and co-constitution of different modes (Zahavi, 2015). In particular, we highlight the importance of we-sustaining practices that ‘actively, dynamically and autonomously, but relationally’ (Laroche et al., 2014: 12) bring forth togetherness at work (Aroles and Küpers, 2022; Gallagher and Tollefsen, 2019; Hafermalz and Riemer, 2020). Such practices constitute implicit or explicit ‘act[s] of unification or attachment’ (Zahavi and Salice, 2016: 521) that create a ‘rhythm’ of togetherness through producing ongoing shifts between different instrumental, externally evident and personal forms (Forlè, 2021; Walther, 1923; Zahavi, 2015). Importantly, our findings highlight that not everyone experiences togetherness in workplace friendship in a similar way at the same time (Zahavi, 2015). Yet, the outlined practices ensure that we-experiences are ‘constitutively interlocked with each other’ (Salice, 2022: 203) in a way that helps communities to work through disruptions (Holt and Sandberg, 2011; Van Grunsven, 2021).

Second, we shed light on the importance of an enacted temporality in togetherness at work and find that our we-experiences can emerge from enlisting and revisiting shared timely moments even without sharing a physical space. While most research points to the importance of ‘temporal immediacy’ (Schutz, 1972: 163) for we-experiences to occur, our findings reflect a temporality of becoming where past, present, and future are interpenetrating and co-constituting (Introna, 2019; Simpson et al., 2020). As such, togetherness in the absence of temporal co-presence relies on sustaining the ‘interpenetrating flow of temporality’ that Introna (2019: 750) also identifies in the context of sensemaking. This is accomplished through explicit or implicit enactment of temporality in we-sustaining practices: The recognition, remembering and reference, anticipation, or projection of shared experiences (Bailey and Madden, 2017; Tomkins and Eatough, 2013).

Third, by exploring how togetherness is experienced in organizational contexts, rather than the goals or benefits that workplace friendship entails, we shed new light on how workplace friendships are maintained. Taking a processual view of workplace friendship allows us to move beyond the portrayal of workplace friendship with a stable meaning for all members involved to how different experiences and meanings of workplace friendship are dynamically interlocked and sustained. This is especially relevant in light of recent research highlighting the potential for the fracture and dissolution of workplace friendships (Pillemer and Rothbard, 2018). Ultimately, our findings suggest that workplace friendships are an active accomplishment by participating

individuals. While it might be enacted habitually at certain times, it requires intentional and reflective efforts at other times when stability and balance are threatened.

In conclusion, we see our work as a timely contribution to understanding how communities can maintain togetherness through profound disruptions, but the context of each group or community needs careful consideration. Our context of academic work, particularly research-related work, entails a high degree of freedom regarding whom to collaborate with, shaping the dynamics of togetherness. Thus, we see the potential for our study to support conversations about similar contexts and questions, such as how to reimagine academic conferences as important collaborative sites for enacting inclusion, diversity, community and environmental stewardship in response to the call of Etzion et al. (2022). Reflecting on the nature of such contexts suggests that if we can encourage greater degrees of freedom in non-academic organizations, we might also help to support workplace friendships within them. However, there needs to be an awareness of the past to support future freedom and friendship. As a group, many of us have known each other for an extended period and had prolonged face-to-face interactions before switching to virtual interactions, and this influenced how the different modes of togetherness were enacted. Even with that history, it was sometimes difficult to maintain togetherness, and revealing individual struggles can be challenging. This may be even more of a struggle in ‘born virtual’ communities, but being attentive to the experiences of ourselves and others remains an intrinsic foundation for friendship in any context.

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## Notes

1. See Gill (2014) in ORM for a comprehensive overview of Phenomenology and what he terms its ‘family of phenomenological approaches’ (p. 119)
2. See Hibbert (2021) chapter 6 ‘Case study: reflexive practice in collaborative research’ for description of six process elements for researcher reflexivity in collaborative circumstances.
3. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of exploration and encouraging the conceptualization.

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