

Advantages and disadvantages of video conferencing and direct interaction: a conceptual framework for evaluating hybrid work models

Advantages and disadvantages of video

Marianne Thejls Ziegler and Christoph Lütge
Peter Löscher Chair of Business Ethics, Technical University of Munich, Munich, Germany

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyse the differences between professional interaction mediated by video conferencing and direct professional interaction. The research identifies diverging interests of office workers for the purpose of addressing work ethical and business ethical issues of professional collaboration, competition, and power in future hybrid work models.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on 28 qualitative interviews conducted between November 2020 and June 2021, and through the theoretical lens of phenomenology, the study develops explanatory hypotheses conceptualising four basic intentions of professional interaction and their corresponding preferences for video conferences and working on site.

Findings – The four intentions developed on the basis of the interviews are: the need for physical proximity; the challenge of collective creativity; the will to influence; and control of communication. This conceptual framework qualifies a moral ambivalence of professional interaction. The authors identify a connectivity paradox of professional interaction where the personal dimension remains unarticulated for the purpose of maintaining professionalism. This tacit human connectivity is intertwined with latent power relations. This plasticity of both connectivity and power in direct interaction can be diminished by transferring the interaction to video conferencing.

Originality/value – The application of phenomenology to a collection of qualitative interviews has enabled the identification of underlying intention structures and the system in which they affect each other. This research identifies conflicts of interests between workers relative to their different self-perceived abilities to persevere in competitive professional interaction. It is therefore able to address consequences of future hybrid work models at an existential and societal level.

Keywords Video conferences, Flexible work arrangements (FWA), Work from home (WFH), Mediated communication, Face-to-face communication, Organisational hierarchies, Phenomenology, Intercorporeality, Professional interaction, Social isolation

Paper type Research paper



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1. Introduction: future hybrid work models

As the pandemic transferred office work to the realm of virtual professional interaction, productivity was expected to fall. The transfer, however, worked out surprisingly well. Employees were indeed capable of maintaining the same, if not even higher levels of productivity while working from home (Barrero *et al.*, 2021, p. 4). The apparent success of this sudden transformation and the many practical advantages of replacing onsite meetings with video conferences made a return to pre-pandemic requirements less likely. According to surveys conducted during pandemic lockdowns, the majority of office workers would prefer a flexible work arrangement of no more than two to three office days per week. Almost 60% of employees would prefer two days or less in the office (Lund *et al.*, 2020; Kunze *et al.*, 2020; Strack *et al.*, 2021). Some researchers have advised companies and institutions to prepare for employee requirements. Accordingly, working:

[...] from home will be very much a part of our post-COVID economy. So the sooner policymakers and business leaders think of the implications of a home-based workforce, the better our firms and communities will be positioned when the pandemic subsides (Bloom, 2020).

Simultaneously, a survey from 2021 (Microsoft's Work Trend Index, 2022) indicates that workers do appreciate onsite interaction. Accordingly: "73% of workers surveyed want flexible remote work options to continue, while at the same time, 67% are craving more in-person time with their teams" (2022, p. 4). Management would be challenged to satisfy both.

Since the end of the pandemic, the public debate on pros and cons of work from home (WHF) has continued. Questions of productivity and the potential conflict of interest between managers, who want workers to return to the office, and employees, who prefer more flexibility, have been explored with ambiguous conclusions (Tsipursky, 2022). The prospect, that almost 60% of workers would spend two days or less in the office, not only raises practical questions of productivity and the ethical issues of balancing the interests of employees and leaders but the change in work culture would also challenge the very social fabric of society.

Hybrid work models would reduce commuting and increase workers' flexibility and sense of autonomy (Caligiuri *et al.*, 2020). Work persistently performed in solitude, however, can lead to social isolation (Even, 2020). Creative processes, decision-making and connectivity between people who meet for the first time tend to fade in video conferences, and so does personal bonding, spontaneous exchange of knowledge and younger workers learning from older and more experienced colleagues. (Cappelli, 2021). Cross-network communication deteriorates when professional interaction is transferred from the physical realm of offices to that of video conferences (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Hybrid work models therefore raise questions entangled in a web of pros and cons (Colbert *et al.*, 2016).

Work affects individuals' sense of identity at a fundamental level (Honneth, 1995; Arendt, 2018; Honneth, 2023). A substantial increase in WFH will affect the role of work in the lives of office workers at a fundamental level, but it holds the risks of a professional, existential and societal nature. Professional interaction enables the individual to leave home and participate in formal processes of public life. The short-term convenience of working from home can cause the marginalisation in relation to colleagues who are *in situ* in the office and increases polarisation between highly paid office workers who can choose, and those whose physical presence is required (Bloom and Ramani, 2021). A significant decrease in direct contact with fellow citizens can weaken the role of work as key to participation in public life and the experience of oneself as participating in society. At the societal level, a significant reduction in the exposure to fellow citizens outside the immediate sociotope

would diminish interaction with people of diverging backgrounds and values. This can damage social cohesion.

Academics have focused, not just on the political aspects of labour market power relations, but also on work as existentially relevant. A development of this line of thought emphasises that “human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition” (Honneth, 1995, p. 71). Hannah Arendt presents a more radical formulation:

No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings (Arendt, 2018, p. 22).

For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality” (Ibid., p. 50). The reality of the experience of oneself is therefore conditioned by being visible to others. All private passions, according to Arendt, “lead a shadowy kind of existence (ibid.) until they are given a form that is visible to fellow human beings. In this context, the socially embedded professional agency is a source of personal identity.

A substantial decrease in direct professional interaction bears societal risks. It would weaken the relation between organisations and employees and undermine the general knowledge of, and understanding for fellow citizens (Saladino *et al.*, 2020). It would diminish participation in more public spheres of society at the risk of reinforcing social bias. Democracies require of citizens the willingness to identify compromises with fellow citizens despite diverging values. If the exposure to fellow citizens who live outside one’s own sociotope is reduced, it can increase political polarisation.

The debate on the pros and cons of working from home should therefore also consider more fundamental questions on the role of work and the long-term consequences of withdrawing from daily face-to-face interaction with colleagues. It requires a more thorough and detailed understanding of what motivates office workers’ preferences. The possibility of transferring a substantial part of professional interaction to the realm of video conferencing raises ethical questions of fairness and justice. This is because it creates conflicts of interest between people who thrive on direct interaction and those who benefit from video conferencing.

Accordingly, this article examines the following preliminary research question:

RQ1. How do office workers experience the difference between direct interaction and video-mediated interaction, and what motivates their preferences?

This preliminary research question will be refined below with reference to the theoretical framework. Based on 28 qualitative interviews with office workers during pandemic lockdowns conducted between November 2020 and June 2021 (see [Appendix](#)), the differences between direct face-to-face interaction and video-mediated interaction will be analysed for the purpose of identifying the underlying intention structures of the preferences for direct versus video-mediated professional interaction. The research uses the theoretical approach of descriptive phenomenology. The framework has already been applied in numerous management studies (Anosike *et al.*, 2012; Gill, 2014; Resuli and Shehu, 2017; Lehn, 2019; Paring and Pez , 2022), and it has been prevalent in research on computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) (Dourish, 2004; Robertson, 2002; Svanaes, 2013; Tenenberg *et al.*, 2016). It presents a qualitative, phenomenological analysis of interviews with office workers in late pandemic home office environments. The outcome is an intersubjective structural description of the phenomena of direct and video-mediated professional interaction for the purpose of gaining insight into advantages and disadvantages, and into the motives for preferences for direct and online professional interaction.

The descriptions of ubiquitous video conferencing were gathered in the late stage of the pandemic. They serve as a magnifier for insights into the consequences of replacing a significant part of direct professional interaction with video conferences. These consequences could otherwise only be observed as a gradual development. The purpose of the research is to develop a conceptual framework for debating projections on how a change from a five-day office week to hybrid models, with a significant reduction in the time spent in the office, can affect individuals at a more basic existential level.

The research examines how office workers have experienced WFH in the lockdowns, and it identifies the incentives which drive preferences for direct and video-mediated interaction. A more detailed understanding of these incentives will facilitate projections of personal and existential risks of ubiquitous WFH. It will also facilitate reflections at a paradigmatic level regarding advantages and disadvantages of employee flexibility (Bal and Izak, 2020). The incentives, preferences and motivations reveal individual and mutually opposing concerns and interests, which are grounded in basic human needs for contact and recognition, as well as in hierarchical self-perceptions. The aim is thus to enable abductive theory construction capable of outlining the effects of ubiquitous office WFH (Lipton, 2004; Douven, 2021).

The need for interaction and for recognition incentivise preferences according to how the individual operates within the given framework of cooperative and competitive professional interaction. The nature of future flexible work arrangements will accommodate these concerns and interests to different extents. Future flexible work arrangements therefore require a debate grounded in fundamental and political positions on how to weave the social fabric. It requires decisions regarding the inclusivity versus competitiveness of the corporate culture.

It is the task of this paper to explore and to conceptualise these different concerns and interests for the purpose of identifying aspects and dimensions of professional interaction which are to be considered in future research and public debates. The article therefore seeks to qualify the intentions and incentives behind the statistics on remote work. The findings reveal that preferences are influenced by both an immediate but tacit need for connectivity, and by the individual self-perceptions of worker within given organisational structures and hierarchies.

Our initial expectations were vague. On the one hand, the surveys showed strong preferences for WFH; on the other hand, humans are social beings. It was therefore no surprise that the interviews revealed a complex system of opposing forces, such as the need to unite and the need to experience agency and identity, or the need to escape dominance and the need to control disordered communication. The most unexpected finding was the insistence on the strong, but unqualified, longing for direct interaction. We have named this phenomenon “the connectivity paradox”, according to which the personal dimension is existentially paramount, but required to remain unarticulated for professional reasons. Also, the preference for video conferences articulated as a preference for more controlled and impersonal interaction came as a surprise (see below).

2. Theoretical framework

This section will outline the emerging research on WFH and flexible work arrangements and pre-pandemic research of relevance.

2.1 *Emerging research on pandemic WHF*

Research has been conducted on the changing working conditions of remote working employees, on their working hours, on patterns of e-mail and on how video mediated meetings lead to a fusion of work and private life (Vincent and Vincent, 2020; DeFilippis *et al.*, 2020;

Galanti *et al.*, 2021). Pandemic lockdowns were also accompanied by extensive surveys of both researchers and large consulting firms on how employees wish to balance WFH and office work in the future (Lund *et al.*, 2020; Brynjolfsson *et al.*, 2020; DeFilippis *et al.*, 2020; Strack *et al.*, 2021; Kunze *et al.*, 2021; Karl *et al.*, 2022). The findings of these surveys provide the foundation for this article because they consistently reveal a widespread wish to spend less time in the office. According to the “Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes” with 30,000 responses from working age Americans, 65% would prefer to work at least two days from home. A total of 27% would prefer five days per week at home (Barrero *et al.*, 2021). In the BCG survey “Decoding Global Ways of Working” from March 2021 (Strack *et al.*, 2021) 209,000 responses from 190 countries, 80% would prefer at least two days’ WFH per week and 58% at least three days from home. A survey based on a sample of 699 persons reflecting the average German working population indicated that 79% would prefer to WFH at least two days per week, 57% at least three days per week (Kunze *et al.*, 2020).

The value debate on the future of WFH unfolds in the spectrum between emphasising disadvantages in the loss of human connectivity to the detriment of the corporate spirit and emphasising advantages of practical and personal flexibility. Video conferencing has not only served as the best replacement for direct face-to-face professional interaction; it has also created new modes and patterns of interaction and inclusion (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020; Barrero *et al.*, 2021; Georgiadou and Antonacopoulou, 2021). Pandemic video conferencing has been examined from the perspective of media richness theory. Here, the focus is on the effectiveness of specific modes of communication relative to the specific meeting objectives and relative to the extent to which these modes of communication can facilitate the objectives of the meeting (Standaert *et al.*, 2021; Jacobs, 2021). WFH can increase workers’ sense of autonomy and wellbeing (Galanti *et al.*, 2021; Kulik, 2022) and relative to asynchronous communication, it relieves social isolation (Lengen *et al.*, 2021, p. 64; Liebermann and Schroeder, 2020, p. 17). It can, however, also cause work pressure to grow out of control, like a “perennial creeping weed” (Hodder, 2020, p. 265). Workers’ attachment to the corporation suffers from lack of proximity because social relations are amongst the most important factors for holding people in the organisation (Saladino *et al.*, 2020; Cappelli, 2021 p. 32; Lengen *et al.*, 2021 p. 64).

2.2 Pandemic WFH through the lens of phenomenology

At the beginning of this research process, the ubiquitous use of video conferencing was a novel phenomenon, also to academia. A promising approach amongst related areas was found in the literature on CSCW. This research area focuses on the widely defined interaction between humans and technology (Dourish, 2004; Robertson, 2002; Svanaes, 2013; Tenenberg *et al.*, 2016). In a ground-breaking work from 2001 Paul Dourish interprets human-computer interaction through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of embodied interaction. If technological systems become a medium for social conduct, it will change the nature of this social conduct due to the inherently disconnected, representational nature of computer systems (Dourish, 2004, p. 61).

In this article, the phenomenological approach constitutes the theoretical basis for the data collection, i.e. for the qualitative interviews on pandemic WFH and the analysis of these interviews.

The phenomenological concept of embodiment uncovers different levels of connectivity in human interaction. Information is exchanged not only at the semantic level, but also at a pre-perceptive level via recursive consciousness of each other in physical space. The assumption that the person in physical proximity experiences the same room, the same sounds and the same haptics is part of the communication. Sharing surroundings enable interconnectivity and spontaneous coordination (Bullinger-Hoffman *et al.*, 2021, p. 217). This

pre-perceptive communication in shared physical space is missing, or at least radically diminished in video conferences, because: “People and physical space are made of the same stuff, but people and virtual space are not” (Robertson, 2002, p. 308).

The phenomenological approach therefore connects pandemic WFH to more fundamental aspects of human interaction, and the semi-structured interviews of this research were conducted with the aim of encouraging descriptions that would reveal the manifestation of these fundamental aspects in pandemic WFH.

According to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity and communication happen, not between two Cartesian minds, but between two-minded bodies (Tanaka, 2015, p. 462, Vidolov, 2022, p. 1). The concept of the “inter-corporeal” or “intercorporeality”, is based on the idea that:

[...] communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 185; Tanaka, 2015, p. 460).

Human beings in physical proximity therefore have an intuitive and pre-perceptive knowledge of each other. They are like “organs of one single intercorporeality” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 168). Accordingly, “I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thought.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; p. 159, see also Zebrowski, 2022, p. 33).

The theories on intercorporeality and social embeddedness of the self are emphasising the connectivity between human beings. Professional organisations are, however, also organised in hierarchical structures. They constitute fields of interaction, in which contrasting forces of the need to connect and the need to compete are pervasive. The moral ambivalence of these contrasting forces is inherent and fundamental in every human relation, and thus, it is “impossible to contemplate the ‘innateness’ of moral impulse without simultaneously admitting the endemic nature of aggression” (Bauman, 1993, p. 89). Zygmund Bauman was no phenomenologist, but because this research addresses professional interaction, the coexistence of connectivity and competition needs to be included as a basic feature of the phenomena that we are examining. Bauman’s moral ambivalence is, in the context of this research, interpreted as an example of a “systematic analysis of this correlation between subjectivity and world” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 262). This systematic analysis is the aim of phenomenology.

Any analysis of professional interaction should therefore also address issues of competition and power. From a phenomenological perspective, power is “subjectively perceived and experienced by the individual actor who [has] the potential to act against and break out of these structural preconditions” (Dreher, 2013, p. 111). Because professional interaction has a competitive element, a struggle for influence and power, the concept of intercorporeality will be supplemented with theories of power as exercised underneath the surface of rational articulation (Foucault, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 1998). The assumptions of this theoretical framework therefore constitute the framework of the present analysis. Intercorporeality and moral ambivalence are thus seen as fundamental existential circumstances of human interaction.

2.3 Final formulation of the research question

The preliminary research question presented in the introduction was:

- RQ2. How do office workers experience the difference between direct interaction and video-mediated interaction, and what motivates their preferences?

This question can now be specified with reference to the theoretical framework in the following manner:

- Q1. How does intercorporeality and moral ambivalence manifest in the intentionalities of office workers as they describe the differences between direct professional interaction and video-mediated professional interaction?

The purpose of this conceptualisation is to identify the motives for preferences for direct versus video-mediated professional interaction. Understanding motives for preferences is essential for decision-making on the future design of potential hybrid work models.

3. Research design

We examine office workers' lived experiences of a substantial reduction in face-to-face professional interaction using the existential-phenomenological research method (Sanders, 1982; Sokolowski, 2000; Castro, 2003; Giorgi, 2009; Englender, 2012; Gill, 2014; Giorgi *et al.*, 2017; Zahavi, 2019; Englender and Morley, 2021; Giorgi, 2021). The phenomenological approach focuses on the "structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view" (Smith, 2018). The purpose of this method is therefore to "articulate the underlying lived-structure of any meaningful experience on the level of conceptual awareness" (Valle, 1998, p.275). The research method takes the descriptions of office workers at face value, and the material is the individual descriptions of lived experiences. The purpose of the analyses is the identification of underlying themes that constitute these individual experiences (McClure and Brown, 2008). Identifying the underlying theme patterns will enable an understanding of the intentionality of the experience and its context (Churchill *et al.*, 1998, p. 67). The theme patterns are thus identified as explanations for interview statements (Lipton, 2004; Douven, 2021). They are constructed on the basis of the theoretical framework, i.e. on the premise of intercorporeality, that human beings communicate at a non-verbal level in physical space, and on the premise of the moral ambivalence of human interaction as characterised by moral impulse and innate aggression. In this context, the term "aggression" is too strong and should be understood as the intentionality behind identity constitution and self-realisation, that is, the concern for oneself rather than concern for the other.

The existential phenomenological research method has been presented as a four-step process (Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 22; Castro, 2003, p. 49; Giorgi, 2009, p. 128). They include:

- the formulation of a question in which the researcher delineates a focus of investigation;
- the data-generating situation in which co-researchers give a description of her/his experience;
- the data analysis in which the researcher reads the data given by the co-researchers and reveals the meaning structures of her/his experience in a process of synthesis and integration of the findings; and
- the presentation of findings. The steps will manifest in the following manner:

3.1 Formulation of research question (undertaken above)

As identity is socially embedded, changes in work conditions and a dis-embedding of work from its social context will affect the ability and opportunity of individuals to create identity. The research question is therefore aimed at the common experience of pandemic WFH. In

this paper, the question is developed in a two-step process of a preliminary research question and a final research question posed with reference to the theoretical framework. Based on these findings more abstract questions of the effects on the lives of office workers and of their participation in society can be posed. The conceptualisations of the incentives for preferring face-to-face professional interaction versus video-mediated interaction can therefore serve as foundation for the more general discussion on the relation between citizens and society.

3.2 Data generation

The data consists of 28 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in the time-span from autumn 2020 to summer 2021. In total, 15 women and 13 men spanning the 24 to 56 age bracket and including office workers from a variety of private corporations and public institutions in Germany, Denmark, France, Britain and the United States were interviewed in English, German and Danish. Amongst the participants were 14 Germans, 4 Danes, 2 French, 2 Americans, 2 British, 1 Portuguese, 1 Croatian, 1 Greek and a lady from Russia. She was included because she had lived in Germany for over 30 years and worked in several European countries. The relevant passages in German and Danish were translated into English by the authors, and the translations were discussed with a native expert on the English language. The interviews were between 15 and 55 min long with the bulk of them lasting around 25–30 min. The first three interviews were pilot interviews, after which the interview questions were adjusted.

Phenomenological research is not interested in questions of “how often?” or “how many?”. Instead, the sample criterion is the extent to which the participant has had the experience the researcher is looking for (Englender 2012, p. 19). Accordingly, participants were sampled using few, fundamental criteria. The first criteria was that for participants, pandemic home office was to manifest a shift where the tasks previously performed in direct interaction were continued via video conferencing. The second criteria was participants were working in collaborative hierarchies with eye-level relations, which required a balance of horizontal and vertical communication. For this reason, teachers and instructors were excluded. Participants were to be in no immediate danger of losing their position as this could have biased their experience of home office.

A total of 22 participants were working for companies engaging in international business activities. Four participants were working creatively or at the managerial level in a large German organisation, and two participants were working for smaller German companies only active in Germany. All participants had graduated from a university. In his book *The Road to Somewhere. The New Tribes Shaping British Politics*, the journalist David Goodhart distinguishes between “somewheres” and “anywheres”. “Somewheres” are socially conservative, often non-graduate and rooted in a geographical location and community. “Anywheres” are progressive, individualistic, educated and mobile. They place lower value on tradition and nationality and tend to perceive themselves as citizens of the world (2017, pp. 5–6). Accordingly, an “Anywhere” from Britain could have more in common with an “Anywhere” from Denmark than with a British fellow citizen with a “Somewhere” cultural identity. Goodhart (2017, p. 5) admits that “we all have a mix of ascribed and achieved identities”. The identification of cultural divides, which in recent decades have reshaped political landscapes, nevertheless indicates that national differences amongst European and US well-educated office workers may not be as significant as intranational cultural and social differences. In addition, the research addresses professional interaction at an existential level, and thus at the level of basic human conditions. For these reasons, the sample group was relatively homogeneous. Pandemic video conferencing offered a unique

opportunity for data collection because all office workers shared the experience of the transfer from face-to-face interaction to video conferences. The interviews focussed on the very experience of this transfer, and saturation was reached after approximately 22 interviews.

The interviews were conducted by the lead author and recorded via zoom. This mediated communication enjoyed all the advantages and was subjected to all the limitations which are also analysed in this article. The relation between researcher and participant, however, is not subjected to the power relations of competitive hierarchies, and the interviews were thus conducted in a spirit of collaboration, where participants were keen to share their experiences and the researcher grateful for the experiences they shared.

The phenomenological research method prescribes for theoretical knowledge to be bracketed during the data generation to allow the participants to speak for themselves (Hycner, 1985, p. 280; Giorgi, 2009, p. 91; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 31). The necessity of this so-called "epoche", or "transcendental reduction" has been subject to intense debate. Some scholars recommend the use of epoche because the data "may transcend what the researcher thinks he/she knows about the phenomenon, and in fact the researcher wants to suspend pre-understandings in order to discover the meaning of the phenomenon" (Englender, 2012, p. 19; Englender and Morley, 2021, p. 31). According to Zahavi (2019), however, approaching empirical data without pre-conceptions is not comparable to the transcendental reduction of phenomenology in the philosophical sense, which enables a "systematic analysis of this correlation between subjectivity and world". The fact that epoche is essential for philosophical phenomenology does not make it essential to empirical studies. Accordingly, it is indeed possible to conduct qualitative empirical research by "employing notions such as lifeworld, intentionality, empathy, pre-reflective experience, and the lived body in order to understand how different dimensions of human existence are affected" (Zahavi, 2019, p.267). Since researchers are already approaching their data with an open mind to "transcend what the researcher thinks he/she knows about the phenomenon" (Englender, 2012, p. 19), there is no need for epoche to let qualitative researchers engage with the phenomena themselves. Instead, this claim "has led [researchers] astray by making them choke on methodological meta-reflections" (Zahavi, 2019, p. 268).

Insisting on epoche is indeed problematic because it requires a concise awareness of which prior assumptions are excluded when approaching the data. Any phenomenon which is described by participants, however, requires a prior delimitation in order to become a subject of research in the first place. This delimitation includes presumptions about the constitution of the phenomenon. These presumptions cannot be bracketed because it would prevent their identification and thus eliminate the phenomenon.

The discussion around the necessity of epoche in the empirical application of phenomenological concepts nevertheless demonstrates that empirical research requires a clarification of the phenomena and corresponding prior assumptions. In the context of this research, the phenomenon has been specified by the assumptions of intercorporeality and moral ambivalence as characteristic of professional interaction in its direct and mediated manifestations. The research conducts an analysis of the correlation between subjectivity and the world as it manifests in professional interaction (Zahavi, 2019, p. 262). What was unknown at the beginning of the process was *how* these aspects of professional interaction were experienced by office workers in pandemic lockdown and what motivates preferences. What came as a surprise was repeated articulation of the sheer un-reflected need to leave one's home and spend time with other people. Also, the experience of video conferences as a well-ordered space capable of protecting less eloquent participants from the direct dominance of more eloquent colleagues, was new to the researchers.

The phenomenological research method sees participants as co-researchers. During interviews data is produced in collaboration with the participant. The interviews developed according to recommendation of the phenomenological data generation:

- contextualising phenomenon;
- apprehending phenomenon; and
- clarifying phenomenon (Bevan, 2014).

Accordingly, the initial questions concentrated on descriptions of the organisation, a typical day at work before the pandemic, meetings with colleagues and clients and travel activities. The focus then shifted to the apprehension of the phenomenon, i.e. the duration of home office, the frequency and duration of video conferences and participants on video conferences. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked to clarify the phenomenon by describing the difference between a meeting with 5–12 persons in a video conference versus onsite in a conference room, their preferences and reasons for their preferences. The interviews were concluded with discussion on future balances between remote and onsite work. The concluding key questions obtained descriptions of life worlds of pandemic WFH (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p. 150). The questions of the semi-structured interviews generated descriptions of experiences and preferences, and of what it was like to change from direct interaction to video-mediated interaction (Englander, 2012, p. 18). To reduce the risk of social desirability bias, which could arise from the embeddedness of themes in social morality and values, no questions were asked which directly referred to their sense of identity, nor to their experience of professional power relations.

The interviews were transcribed by the lead author in pure verbatim; a process which enabled an initial familiarisation with the content and helped us develop a better understanding of the descriptions provided in the material (Castro, 2003, p. 50; Giorgi, 2009, p. 128).

3.3 Data analysis

The interviews were coded in several rounds with a software to establish clusters of meaning (Hycner, 1985, p. 290). The first rounds of coding classified passages according to descriptions of pros and cons, and their corresponding intentionalities and motivations for preferences (Giorgi *et al.*, 2017, pp. 180-181). These were then ordered in two categories of reasons for engaging in direct professional interaction and reasons for preferring WFH. Further analysis “carefully following the intentionality in the participants’ expression” (Englander and Morley, 2021, p. 35) revealed the specific manifestations of the moral ambivalence where participants wanted not only human contact, but also to engender approval from colleagues through recognition and control over processes.

Based on these clusters, four specific meaning units were identified, which were sensitive to the research topic by expressing a specific intentionality (Churchill *et al.*, p. 65; Giorgi, 2009, p. 129). The four specific meaning units are:

- (1) the need for physical proximity;
- (2) the challenge of collective creativity;
- (3) the will to influence; and
- (4) control of communication.

The first two meaning units manifest Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality. The third and the fourth manifest moral ambivalence of human interaction. Some of the statements, on which

these meaning units were created, will be presented in the final stage of the analysis below, where each meaning unit is developed in the following two steps.

Firstly, the participants' natural descriptions and expressions are transformed into phenomenologically sensitive expressions (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). The meaning units are explored, or to use Churchill's expression "interrogated", to extract the intentions in relation to fellow office workers which lie beneath the articulated experiences. In this first stage, "what the subject presents are not 'brute facts' but dynamic meanings that are haloed with intentions". (Churchill *et al.*, 1998, p. 66, Ital. in original). "We are interested in understanding the *intentionality* of human conduct – not its "causes" or "contingencies," but rather its concerns and contexts" (Churchill *et al.*, 1998, p. 67, italics in original). The first stage therefore defines office workers' intentionality in each meaning unit. In the process, data from various participants are integrated into one intention structure (Giorgio, 2009, pp. 130–131; Castro, 2003, p. 53).

In the second stage of the analysis each meaning unit is synthesised, integrated and related "to the topic under study and [rewritten] into a more psychological language" (Castro, 2003, p. 54). The psychological language is, in this context, the descriptive existential language of human connectivity and power relations inherent in professional interaction.

In the first meaning unit, the need for proximity, participants describe the desire to bond with people they interact with professionally. This bonding is superficial, but nevertheless of great importance to many of the participants. The second meaning unit, the challenge of collective creativity, emphasises the advantage of face-to-face interaction for collective creativity, though participants struggled to provide an explanation. The third meaning unit, the will to influence, was only verbalised occasionally. The reason may be found in societal ideals of non-competitive professional interaction and the corresponding social desirability bias. In the fourth meaning unit, control of communication, the participants evade competitive interaction by subjecting the interaction to the ordering structures of web-conferencing systems. The analysis thus reveals how individual experiences of professional interaction arise from an interplay of different incentives. It uncovers the interplay of moral impulse and aggression in the context of professional interaction (Bauman, 1993, p. 89). The conditions for this interplay change when professional interaction is transferred from physical locations to the realm of videoconferences.

3.4 Presenting the findings

The findings will be presented in four sections, one for each meaning unit. Each section is divided in two subsections a) and b). The sub-sections a) transform the participants' natural descriptions and expressions 'into phenomenologically and psychologically sensitive expressions' (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). The subsections b) examine the intention structures of the meaning units with reference to the connectivity and competition. The purpose is to understand the intentionality of the experience in its context (Churchill *et al.*, 1998, p. 67), and to "articulate the underlying lived structure of [the descriptions] on the level of conceptual awareness" (Valle, 1998, p. 275). The articulation of underlying lived structures conceptualises different concerns and interests regarding direct and online professional interaction.

4. Findings and analysis

The web-conferencing systems enabled office workers to continue their work during the pandemic lockdowns. The systems changed communication by reducing certain aspects of communication while enhancing others. Previously compartmentalised units were

connected, while connectivity between workers used to attending the same office building, but with weaker professional relations, drifted apart (Claude, Susanne and Søren). For firms with divisions in many countries, the collaboration across borders improved. Part of the explanation was that “we are all in the same boat” (Susanne). Because everybody is working from home and because there is no distinction between those who attend the office and interact directly, and those who could not or would not be present in the office, the web-conferencing systems became the standard communication medium.

4.1 First meaning unit: the need for physical proximity

4.1.1 Transformation of the descriptions of proximity into phenomenologically sensitive expressions. The first meaning unit of physical proximity was articulated in two different ways: the first as the social connection by itself and the second as the social connection conveyed by small talk on extra-professional topics. The meaning unit was articulated in terms of what is missing in video conference and in terms of what is appreciated in face-to-face interaction. The social connection as such was labelled rather than explained:

What is missing is the social relation, it is different when I am in the room and when I experience the whole group (Rainer).

Non-specific references to the social connectivity were hesitant and less concise, for example: “In the lockdown phases you have many more online meetings, and so also you are [...] tend to become a [...] a cheese with the holes” (Claude). This mere need to spend time in the proximity of other human beings was also articulated more directly as: “I miss people” (Susanne) and “I want to go to the office; I want to have lunch with my colleagues!” (Magnus).

The second reference to connectivity was given in terms of talking to colleagues about extra-professional topics. Participants mentioned “kids,” “family” and “the weather,” “something you read in the paper,” “the fun and sort of community aspect” and “this human connective tissue” (Fred, Susanne, Eskild). The revelation of minor, irrelevant personal details within the framework of professional, rational interaction thus provides the professional interaction with an element of humanity.

4.1.2 Intention structure of the need for physical proximity. The apparent inability to explain why physical proximity cannot be replaced with video-mediated professional interaction indicates that participants are not used to articulating the importance of human connectivity in professional interaction. Although professional relations are impersonal at a formal level, the interaction conveyed by the rationality of work has a moral gravity. The inability to verbalise this gravity reveals a paradoxical dimension of professional relations. Their significance for the office worker is paramount, but the importance cannot be articulated, because it would add a depth to the relation, which it is not supposed to have. The dialogues about extra-professional themes, which is missing in web-conferences, are of superficial nature. The “chit chat” (Maria), the “chatter” (Fred), the extra-professional conversations are not detailed or personal, but they serve as connective tissue, as humanity confirming indications, that workers do not approach each other merely as a means to an end. Professional interaction is therefore characterised by a connectivity paradox.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intercorporeality, the inability to articulate an explanation for the need for proximity would be the mistaken conception of the human mind as Cartesian, that is, as constituted prior to social relations. The significance of connectivity is underestimated, because the individual is conceptualised and articulated as a Cartesian mind. They are in no need of a body for mutual identity constitution. The concept of intercorporeality reverses the relation between the mind and the social world.

Accordingly, the self leads a shadowy life in isolation and thus depends on shared experiences. They include locations, tactile qualities, light and sounds. For this reason, mutuality:

[. . .] does not hold in virtual space where the public availability of actions and artefacts does not rely on their being made of the same stuff, but on their transformation and representation by the mediating technology (Robertson, 2002, p. 308; Vidolov, 2022).

The communication between filmed heads of video conferences thus weakens the mutual visibility, and thus the experience of oneself as a working individual.

The surveys conducted during the pandemic lockdowns showed that almost 60% would prefer to spend at least three days per week working from home. Though there may be significant practical reasons for not wanting to attend the office, this high percentage could also indicate that office workers underestimate the extent to which physical proximity conveys human connectivity and its significance for their own sense of identity. A general understanding of the mind as Cartesian, and the cultural unwillingness and subsequent inability to articulate this essential element of human existence, could thus enhance an individualism that constructs the citizens as detached from a social context.

4.2 Second meaning unit: the challenge of collective creativity

4.2.1 Transformation of the descriptions of creativity into phenomenologically sensitive expressions. The interviews indicated that collective creativity suffers from being mediated in web conferences.

Creative work is not logical and deductive, instead it uses associations and induction. It is energized when people are in the same room and the mutual energy is there [. . .] We also had workshops over Zoom, and I always thought the results were a bit sterilised and a bit too proper. You won't get any wild new and innovative ideas, only very restrained. The energy is missing. (Franziska)

The creativity which requires physical proximity was articulated as "Getting into a shared sense of flow" (Martin), and in terms of brainstorming (Camilla). In video conferences "you cannot be creative; you cannot make important decisions" (Martin). Again, participants were challenged to identify reasons why creativity suffers when professional interaction is transferred to web-conferencing, and the attempts produced rather superficial expressions, which labelled rather than clarified the phenomenon.

You don't get into the mood which normally characterises good teamwork. You can feel the atmosphere when you enter a room, but you can't see that in a teams-meeting. It is more controlled, more restrained, unpersonal, objective, less creative, less empathy, but more structured (Andreas).

The *mutual* energy, *shared* sense of flow, the *we* indicates that collective intention is weakened when communication is mediated in video conferences. The participants label the collective intention in manners which do not explain why physical presence and direct face-to-face interaction conveys creativity. The articulations of collective creativity in terms of *brainstorm*, *flow* and *we* confirm that we do need bodies to convey collective creativity, but they do not explain why.

4.2.2 Intention structure of the challenge of collective creativity. The reference to *mutual energy* (Franziska), to *shared sense of flow* (Martin) and *getting into the mood* (Andreas) of video conferences grounds collective creativity in the presence of physical bodies. Seven participants referred directly to *body language* (Maria, Fred, Hannah, Eskild, Hugo, Franziska and Camilla). Consulting the theoretical framework, this body language is the pre-perceptive intercorporeality. Due to the social embeddedness of the self, experiences are

reinforced by the presence of others, also at the level of intercorporeality. Accordingly, individual contributions gain momentum and validity by receiving support from other participants. This support is provided at the level of articulation and at the level of intercorporeality. The collective production of ideas thus develops faster because of the additional layer of communication at the level of intercorporeality.

Collective creativity is thus facilitated by physical proximity because verbal communication is supplemented by intercorporeality. It enables communication to take place at verbalised as well as non-verbalised levels. The participants are not reading the other person's body language as they would read a text. The reading and the corresponding reaction happen automatically at the pre-perceptive bodily level leaving, at the most, unarticulated emotional traces in the process. These traces are experienced at a semi-conscious level as that which the participants have articulated by labelling the black box: *mutual energy* (Franziska), to a *shared sense of flow* (Martin) and *getting into the mood* (Andreas). The instant, non-verbal communication and evaluation is only to a limited extent available in video-mediated professional interaction. Especially during online presentations, the presenter is likely to focus exclusively on slides, thus talking to an invisible audience.

Provided that participants intend the collective creativity, i.e. that the wish to engage in collective creativity, intercorporeality of face-to-face interaction speeds up and aligns communication by diminishing centrifugal forces of human interaction. It speeds up communication because many suggestions and intended directions do not have to wait for the acceptance or rejection developed in articulated discussions and supported by rational arguments. It aligns the communication because rejections can be communicated using pre-perceptive body language. An articulated rejection would likely cause a public loss of face and lead to defensiveness and corresponding time-consuming discussions. Instead, the proponent of an idea, who wishes to cooperate, will experience the rejection at a pre-perceptive level, and will thus be able to adjust the communication strategy accordingly. This multi-levelled communication transfers potential conflicts to the realm of intercorporeality and removes a substantial part of competition between employees from the surface of articulated communication. Negotiation processes are thus conveyed by transferring what could be referred to as "ego-coordination" to the realm of intercorporeality underneath the level of articulation and visibility. The diminished intercorporeality of video-mediated professional interaction can therefore explain why the results of online workshops appear to be sterilised (Franziska).

4.3 Third meaning unit: the will to influence

4.3.1 Transformation of the descriptions of the will to influence into phenomenologically sensitive expressions. An important finding is how the will to influence is determined by the close corporal relation to other people in the space of the phenomenological encounter. This is illustrated by the following passage:

It is easier to persuade people, to win them over and also [...] emmm [...]. to assert oneself, to enforce one's own will, if you are sitting across the table from someone. You have a stronger effect on other people (Herbert).

In the 27 interviews, this passage most explicitly defies social desirability bias and articulates the intention to influence others and determine an outcome by overruling the intentions of others. The wish to exercise influence, however, is not only manifested as top-down, but also as bottom-up.

In the corporations, you cannot convince your managers and you can't meet them either, everything progresses in slow motion. That is at least how we experience it, and people's motivation, after one year of lock down, you can feel they have no energy left whatsoever (Hugo).

A third context is that of the salesperson attempting to sell a software product.

In this context we actually need to teamwork. In a zoom meeting, I pose my questions; What do you think of doing X and Y? How would it work in your company? And then they answer: "eeehh, perhaps [. .] ehhh". There is no willingness to cooperate on developing something. (Darya).

The passages indicate that influence is conveyed by the same intercorporeality which enables adjustments between intentions of cooperating partners to take place outside the realm of explicit articulation. Influence is described as an inherent aspect of professional interaction where the desire to experience oneself in the role as cause of action is inherent at all levels. Energy levels are drained due to the lack of opportunity to interact – in this case with superiors – and to experience oneself as an agent capable of influencing causes of action. The transfer of professional interaction to video conferences, therefore, not only weakens human connectivity and the speed of creativity, it also diminishes agency and decision-making in itself.

4.3.2 Intention structure of the will to influence. As with collective creativity, communication is diminished in the transfer from onsite to web-conferencing systems. According to the sociologist Bent Flyvbjerg, the tendency to enact power struggles at a non-articulate level is a fundamental feature of modernity (1998, p. 320). Influence and power are thereby "tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms". (Foucault, 1998, 86). The confrontation inherent in the exercise of influence is thus transferred to the realm of intercorporeality. The passages describe the exercise of influence, not only as an urge to "enforce one's own will" (Herbert), but also as an urge to exercise agency (Huge and Darya). Influence is therefore experienced as agency. The transfer of professional interaction to the realm of video conferencing thus weakens the very ability and willingness to make decisions. It potentially weakens professional agency in a wide sense. The following passage confirms this interpretation.

I think, being in the same room, I think, . . . it is much faster to find a solution. It is probably much easier to organise a meeting if you don't have to be in the same room, but I think, then we just need three or four meetings to get to the same result (Hannah).

Though the ethical dimension of power and influence in professional interaction is normally addressed with the aim of exposure and restriction, the passages show that there is an intimate connection between influence and agency. The debate on the consequences of extensive use of video conferencing therefore also needs to address fundamental and political questions of justice. In this discussion, the urge to cleanse human interaction from the injustice of arbitrary personal differences is in conflict with the risk of denying agents the rights and the opportunities to participate in competitive, professional interaction.

4.4 Fourth meaning unit: control of communication

4.4.1 Transformation of the descriptions of control of communication into phenomenologically sensitive expressions.

I prefer [video conferencing] because the processes are well-ordered. There are no parallel conversations. Instead, one person is speaking, and the others are listening, and not with one conversation here, others chit-chatting there. There is less confusion and less noise, and a stronger focus and I find that more pleasant. (Elke)

Well, I believe, with Teams, you can raise your hand, and this gives everyone who wants to say something the opportunity to do so. In a real meeting, some comments might be lost, because the conversation has moved on, and then you think, never mind. . . . (Elke)

The passages describe the same phenomenon as the meaning units of creativity and the will to influence, but from a different perspective. According to Elke, the mediated interaction where participants raise their hands and take turns and the corresponding reduction of intercorporeal support or rejection, is exactly what enables equal participation. Subtle intercorporeal power struggles are curbed, and thus less confident persons are more likely to prefer mediated professional interaction. “For me it is sometimes hard to approach people and to talk to people. When everything is online it is much easier” (Helena).

Equal participation enables the articulation of every contribution. The outcomes of the meetings rest on a richer process of deliberation and therefore on a stronger foundation, but equal participation inevitably reduces the speed of interaction and decision-making. Video conferencing, however, not only creates problems of efficiency, but also solves problems of perceived inefficiency in onsite meetings.

In Zoom meetings, you very quickly get to the point, you don't lose time with small talk. [. . .] there is less insecurity because, [. . .] one person invites the other participants and he is then leading the meeting and tells everyone, today we are here because [. . .] and this is what we are going to do [. . .], so you immediately get to the point (David).

The efficiency described in this passage differs from the efficiency appreciated by those who prefer face-to-face interaction. Where the latter benefits from a second layer of intercorporeal communication, the former is efficient because it inhibits disorderly participation, i.e. unwelcome interruptions. Video conferencing therefore enables a higher level of communication control. This either slows down the interaction because every opinion has to be heard, and every disagreement is carried out in articulated conflict, or it inhibits participation because the communication is subjected to restrictions and unwelcome interruptions are muted.

4.4.2 Intention structure of control of communication. The references to *confusion*, *noise*, *comments lost* (Elke) and *insecurity* (David) of face-to-face interaction show that the preference for video-mediated professional interaction is a *reaction* to disadvantages of direct interaction. Video conferences enable a distribution of visibility, which is not determined by eloquence and perseverance, but by principles of perceived rationality, equality and fairness. The system can strengthen communicative rationality by diminishing the influence of spontaneous contributions and the significance of inequalities with respect to perceived irrelevant personal attributes, such as eloquence and charisma.

The descriptions exemplify the phenomenological perspective on power relations where the individual can react to power as it is “subjectively perceived and experienced by the individual actor” (Dreher, 2021, p. 111). Elke emphasises equality, fairness and justifies it with reference to the personal experience of the conversation (*more pleasant*), whereas David grounds his preference for video-mediated interaction with reference to rationality (*get to the point* and *lose time with small talk*). Accordingly, the intention structure of the preference for video-mediated professional interaction is twofold. It is driven by a search for fairness and rationality from both a personal and from an objective perspective. From the personal perspective, video conferencing creates a safe space for workers who would tend to be dominated by more eloquent colleagues. From the rational perspective, it extends the leaders' power to secure efficient processes and to define (rightly or wrongly) what counts as rational (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

Control of communication therefore aims to withdraw from the risks of direct competitive face-to-face interaction. When considering human relations, it is according to Bauman

“impossible to contemplate the ‘innateness’ of moral impulse without simultaneously admitting the endemic nature of aggression” (2002, p. 89). Video conferencing enables the curbing of both moral impulse and aggression. By subjecting professional interaction to an order of taking turns, video conferencing can strengthen inclusivity, equality and mutual recognition in the collective search for superior arguments. By controlling who is allowed to talk at a given point in time, it can also prevent valid contributions and thus formalise and consolidate already existing organisational (more or less productive) power structures. Because identity is socially embedded, video conferencing can weaken, not only the experiences of agency, but also the experience of oneself as inferior in relation to more dominating participants. In this case, the transfer enables an escape from dominance.

Depending on the intentions of the initiator, the transfer from direct professional interaction to video conferencing offers the leader(s) of a meeting an opportunity to either establish a more inclusive interaction or to consolidate dominance by extending rhetorical dominance with the power to mute participants. Video conferencing thus enables participants to escape confrontations in a competitive environment and withdraw from the challenges of human interaction at a more basic level.

5. Discussion: a system of intentionalities

The four meaning units conceptualise four basic intentionalities of office workers as they describe the differences between direct professional interaction and video-mediated professional interaction (see also research question). The need for proximity manifests the unarticulated longing for closeness to fellow human beings also in unpersonal and superficial relations. The impersonal collaboration of professional interaction, which focuses on solving practical tasks, satisfies an existential need for human beings to participate in society. In the second intentionality, the impersonal collaboration is amplified into collective creativity. If it is the intention of participants to engage in collective creativity, then the process is weakened by the transfer from direct interaction to video-mediated interaction. Intercorporeality therefore manifests in the intentionalities of office workers as an additional level of communication, which can tacitly convey power struggles. It enables power to “mask a substantial part of itself” (Foucault, 1998, p. 86). However, the transfer of power struggles to the realm of intercorporeality is exactly that, which enables collaboration and avoids that rationality succumbing to power. It enables participants to give in to the better argument without losing face.

The tacit negotiation of right and wrong, of ideas that are accepted by all, and ideas which are not, is muted because the transfer to virtual space silences the body language of intercorporeality. The will to influence is embedded in the moral ambivalence of agency. It thrives on intercorporeality, and the control of communication in videoconferencing enables the withdrawal from the challenges of direct, competitive interaction. The intentionality of the first two meaning units is carried by an impulse to unite, the third and the fourth by the urge to distinguish oneself, as described by Bauman (1993, p. 89). Moral ambivalence manifests in intentionalities of office workers in the third and the fourth meaning unit. Where the fourth meaning unit, control of communication, clearly withdraws from interaction, the categorisation of the third meaning unit relative to Bauman’s moral ambivalence depends on the perspective. The will to influence is thus from the perspective of the agent experienced as agency, but it might from the perspective of a subordinate be experienced as power. This moral ambivalence of agency poses a genuine conflict of interest. Either spontaneous agency is curbed and replaced with more rigid, and (perhaps, but not necessarily) fairer forms of interaction, or settings are created for more spontaneous

agency. The latter favours individual freedom and more dynamic competition at the risk of creating winners and losers.

The four meaning units form a system, where competitive forces in collective creativity and the exercise of influence are productive, but also contain an inherent risk that truth succumbs to the dominance of charisma and eloquence. Increasing control of communication for the purpose of curbing the risk of dominance by either securing a fair distribution of participation options or by preselecting participants, either slows down communication or excludes potentially relevant contributions. The first is unproductive, the second contains a new risk of pacifying agency. As one participant explained:

I believe that because you cannot interrupt, a lot of spontaneity is lost. It becomes more difficult to interfere. It is also easier to lean back and not be active. (Thor)

“[For] me it was a problem, I just end up on the sofa still wearing my slippers, and then one really has to pull oneself together” (Lotte). The lack of motivation also shines through in video conferences: “You can see people are multi-tasking” (Susanne).

This system of intentionalities, which we have presented in this article, illustrates the impetus of the moral ambivalence in human relations. The urge to connect can thus evolve into dominance, which generates a corresponding reaction of attempting to withdraw. After emphasising the innateness of moral impulse and the endemic nature of aggression, Bauman continues: “Indeed, the condition of proximity, the birthplace of the moral self, tends to be from the start torn apart by the impulse to stay and the impulse to escape” (Bauman, 1993, p. 89). The ability to balance the system of attraction and impulse to escape determines the success of direct professional interaction.

The findings therefore also show that the idea of power being exercised underneath the surface of rational articulation (Foucault, 1998; Flyvbjerg, 1998), can be supplemented with a corresponding understanding of affection, also being exercised underneath the surface of articulated professional interaction. This connectivity paradox can be explained in the following manner; just as “power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself” (Foucault, 1998, p. 86), so is the connectivity between professionals conditioned by a mechanism in which the mutual recognition is tied to a specific visible functionality in a collaborative system. The recognition is the reward for the ability and the willingness to contribute to certain tasks. Work is existentially significant because it conveys mutual recognition of abilities. This recognition differs from the affection of intimate relations. The former is conditioned by the success of contribution; the latter is ideally unconditional. If the connectivity would be articulated, it would undermine the functional status of the contribution.

It is thus important to emphasise that the transfer of professional interaction to video conferences can serve as an escape from power, but it is also an escape from the very connectivity which renders work existentially significant.

A substantial increase in the use of web-conferencing could also damage productivity and creativity. As illustrated in the last meaning unit, control of communication and professional interaction would either become more centrally controlled in static power structures or it would become more inclusive. This would risk either curbing agency with inefficiency or it would risk concentrating agency to those who initiate the video conferences. It can liberate people and strengthen their “potential to act against and break out of these structural preconditions” (Dreher, 2021, p. 111), but also enforce more rigid power structures in so far as the direct competitive aspect of interaction is weakened.

These complex consequences of extensive replacement of face-to-face interaction with video conferences require reflections at the paradigmatic level (Bal and Izak, 2020). Only three out of 27 participants articulated a strong preference for video conferencing. The

selection criterion for the interview passages used in this research is the extent to which the participant has had the relevant experience (Englander, 2012, p. 19). Though the question of how many is not relevant to descriptive phenomenological research, the imbalance between the three participants who preferred video conferencing and the 24 participants who preferred direct interaction is in striking contrast to the surveys according to which almost 60% of office workers would prefer two days or less per week in the office. This contrast, however, resonates with the Microsoft survey from 2022, according to which 73% of workers wished for flexible remote work options, while 67% were missing direct interaction during the lockdowns (Microsoft, 2022). The preference for flexibility may reflect a more practical and immediate preference as opposed to the need for direct interaction reflected in the Microsoft survey and in the interviews of this article, which express long-term, existential concerns. The difference may therefore suggest a temporal inconsistency between short-term preferences and motivations at a long-term reflective level. A comparable difference can be found in the coexistence of the appreciation of health and in the short term, the preference for exercising less, rather than more.

The latent incoherence suggests that the overall advantage of withdrawing from face-to-face cooperative and competitive interaction should be debated. Accordingly, managerial decision-makers should be required to address the conflicts of interest between employees and balance short- and long-term consequences of a home-based workforce for creative processes and decision-making in the organisation, before accepting the home-based workforce as “part of our post-Covid economy” (Bloom, 2020). The articulation of the conflict of interests is bound to collide with pre-established social values. These values prioritise inclusivity higher than individual achievement and self-determination over submission to authority. The interests of office workers who thrive on face-to-face interaction can therefore only be accommodated at the expense of those who prefer video conferences and vice versa. Correspondingly, any articulation of management of a temporal inconsistency, i.e. of the possibility that a wish for flexibility in the work arrangement may not be coherent with the employee’s long-term interest and would come across as authoritarian. Despite the cultural dislike for disregarding the autonomy of employees, diminishing the intensity of human interaction by referring it to the realm of video conferences, does seem like an odd solution to challenges of professional interaction with its own potential for latent totalitarianism.

These conflicts between workers who thrive on face-to-face interaction and workers who prefer interaction mediated by video conferencing systems reflect a fundamental political debate between two familiar positions: The first liberal-conservative position emphasises agency and personal responsibility of citizens. It encourages active participation in cooperative and competitive interaction with fellow citizens and accepts the risk of failing as fundamental to human endeavours. The second counter-liberal position emphasises the injustice of consolidated power structures and advocates a centrally organised fairer distribution of attention and recognition. The question of the viability of extensively replacing onsite interaction with video conferencing is thus embedded in a network of more fundamental issues of justice and agency.

The embeddedness of questions of future hybrid work models in this fundamental debate is reflected in a Slack survey from November 2021, according to which “executives are nearly three times more likely than non-executive employees to want to return to the office full-time” (Future Forum October, 2021). If this preference is interpreted as a consequence of the injustice of organisational hierarchies, it speaks for granting employees the liberty to WFH at their own discretion. This liberty would enable employees to escape dominance. It would, however, also deprive them of the opportunity to flourish in face of the challenges of competitive interaction and to gain visibility and identity in an impersonal environment. The endeavour to strengthen a culture of justice and inclusivity will

eventually evolve into a denial of the workplace as a scope for individual agency. The relationship between agency, justice and control, has been addressed in research on what has been referred to as “moral luck” (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981; Rolffs, 2023).

In this context, it is also important to remember that extensive WFH can deepen the gap between those who can increase their influence by being present in the office, and those who WFH and consequently have less visibility in the organisation. Granting office workers flexible work arrangements may therefore increase the very hierarchical power structures it attempts to counteract.

Extensive WFH would not only curb power struggles capable of undermining rationality, but also the energy and momentum of collective as well as individual agency. At the societal level, it would reduce the contact with fellow citizens who are not part of one’s immediate sociotope. Extensive WFH could thus lead to isolation and a “shadowy kind of existence” (Arendt, 2018, p. 50).

6. Conclusion

The findings of this paper show how *intercorporeality and moral ambivalence manifest in the intentionalities of office workers as they describe the differences between direct professional interaction and video-mediated professional interaction*. Intercorporeality tacitly connects professionals. It conveys creativity and renders superficial and functional relations existentially relevant. It also conveys the agency which is always at risk of overpowering its fellow human beings. The moral ambivalence motivates the need to control communication and escape direct confrontation. The polarity between collaboration and competition in professional interaction can be conceptualised in terms of the four meaning units because they constitute explanatory hypotheses for the complex interplay between the need to unite with fellow human beings and the need for identity and recognition. The four meaning units also show how video conferences can enable an organisational culture, where a just distribution of attention and recognition of individual dignity and equality can be created by diminishing face-to-face interaction.

Solving the challenge of granting all employees the desired sense of inclusivity by transferring interaction to the virtual space, however, comes at a price of work no longer serving as a source of identity and as a platform for interaction between people who would not otherwise come together. The development of organisational culture is therefore subject to a genuine conflict of interest between workers who thrive on participating in professional interaction with a strong competitive element, and those to whom latent conflicts and power struggles are intimidating. These conflicting interests are manifested differently according to organisational culture and could also be subject to cultural differences in terms of how, for example, equality, gender and hierarchy are experienced. Such differences would be a subject of future research.

Debates on future hybrid work models should address these different concerns and interests of office workers relative to basic ideas of societal cohesion and the necessity of citizens participating in varied forms of public life. The long-term consequences of undermining the role of professional interaction as key to participation in society may very well weaken the social fabric by its very nature. Academic and public debates on future hybrid work models need to face the question of what constitutes society and what holds society together. It requires paradigmatic reflections on how to balance differing individual and collective concerns and interests and the recognition that the answer to this question is rooted in fundamental debates on the relationship between the individual and society. This fundamental debate thus needs to articulate tacit assumptions regarding entitlements and obligations of both individuals and society. Researchers should also have the courage to

address the genuine conflict between the urge to advance justice and inclusivity in organisational contexts and the risk of de-legitimising human agency.

Advantages and
disadvantages
of video

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Appendix. Interview participants

- (1) Alexandra: Portuguese, based in Germany. Engineer and designer of technical applications for a large German corporation.
- (2) Andreas: German, middle manager in a large international corporation.
- (3) Birgit: German, human resource department of a mid-size German corporation.
- (4) Camilla: German, middle manager in a large international corporation.
- (5) Claude: French, IT specialist in a small local office of corporation with offices across Europe.
- (6) Darya: Russian living in Germany for over 40 years, consultant in IT services for financial institutions and sales representative of software corporations.
- (7) David: German, project developer in a mid-size corporation.
- (8) Eskild: Danish based in Germany, junior partner for small financial institution.
- (9) Dafne: German, project manager for large German manufacturer.
- (10) Fred: American, manager in international corporation with offices in Europe, USA and in Asia.

- (11) Franziska: German, manager and owner of mid-size communication and advertising company.
- (12) Hannah: Danish, internal legal advisor for corporation with over 6,000 employees, responsible for legal aspects of contracts.
- (13) Helena: German, human resource trainee in a small German firm.
- (14) Hubert: German, senior partner in a mid-size consulting firm.
- (15) Hugo: Croatian based in Germany, head of sales for Eastern Europe in a German corporation.
- (16) Katrine: German, trainee in a small German advertising firm.
- (17) Lotte: Danish, project leader in a mid-size corporation with offices across Europe and the USA.
- (18) Maria: British based in Denmark, leading position in a large NGO.
- (19) Martin: German, large, public German organisation, specialist in change management and organisational development.
- (20) Elke: German, large public German organisation. Project manager.
- (21) Nikolaos: Greek based in the UK, managing technical specialist and leader of sales projects for international corporation.
- (22) Pierre: French, account manager in a corporation with offices in Europe and the USA.
- (23) Rainer: German, distribution manager in a large public organisation.
- (24) Sharon: American, project leader for a corporation with offices in Europe and the USA.
- (25) Sieglinde: German, manager of a small German firm.
- (26) Soren: Danish, manager in a large international corporation.
- (27) Susanne: British, based in the UK. Project manager and performance auditor for mid-size corporation with offices in Europe and the USA.
- (28) Viktor: German, portfolio partner in a private equity fund. Responsible for reporting to transaction partners on development of corporations that belong to the fund.

Corresponding author

Marianne Thejls Ziegler can be contacted at: thejls.ziegler@tum.de

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