H|J|G Journal

Organising for thin places during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mikael Ring[*]

Department of Education and Special Education

This study aims to investigate some of the socio-spatial aspects of thickness and thinness in large Swedish organisations that arose from working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions that this study aimed to answer are 'How do representatives who manage their staff by allowing or restricting WFH in public and private organisations describe how aspects of thickness, in terms of physical proximity and social relations, changed when their staff worked from home during the pandemic? How can organisational thickness and thinness be further developed to understand the detachment of workers from their working places in terms of consequences for the location and size of offices, leadership, control, and management?'. The study shows that organisations have been able to adjust and develop strategies for coping with long periods of absence from offices and that thin places can be created with the help of technology. Finally, the study shows that the pandemic may have future consequences regarding how work is organised, for instance, in terms of how large office spaces are needed and where these offices should be located.

[*]*Correspondence address*
Address: Pedagogen, Hus A, Västra Hamngatan 25, vân 2 rum 165, Box 300, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden
Phone: + 46 766182114 | *Email*: mikael.ring@gu.se

Introduction

Interest in working-from-home (WFH) studies has been growing since COVID-19 caused many organisations to shut their offices. Some research has been done on teleworking, which can help understand organisational consequences and ways of reasoning. This study focused on the geographical dislocation of workers from their workplace to their home (or elsewhere), where some use new technology and others continue with more traditional paperwork. Some studies claim that familiarity with technology is the crucial and causal component of WFH; others, desires for surveillance and control restrict organisations' use of technology that would free their fettered workforce. One factor in an organisation's enabling or allowing WFH is high mobility among its workers (Brown & O'Hara, 2003). Another is the demand on an organisation to seem 'modern' and contemporary and thus an attractive employer. Although technologies produce complex interactions between the digital and the material world by mediating between workers and organisations (Sassen, 2002), it is mainly the organisation that enables or disables the use and the choice of technologies. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when WFH has been implemented on a large global scale, technology will not likely be the determining force in either a return to the office or the fast and further development of dislocated working. Instead, the process is characterised by an organisational adjustment towards forces from the surrounding world, which requires the organisations to be collaborative, creative, communicative, transparent, trusting, and learning at the onset (Kingma, 2019).

These characteristics often rely on what is called 'thick' places and physical interactions characterised by a particular set of non-representational enactments produced by a working place (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011). The question of WFH is thus not about unifying or integrating virtual and physical environments or merely incorporating digital tools to facilitate new ways of working and develop an aligned organisational culture (Veldhoen, 2005; Derix, 2003). Instead, the dialectics of place and social relations involve organisational readiness to absorb the characteristics of WFH while resisting the embrace and adoption of 'new' and hyped technological innovations and ideas that undermine the importance of place in working processes. This means that different and thin 'places' are constructed, produced, and enabled through WFH. Technology may have been an essential and crucial component when the research theme focused on teleworking. Still, the new challenge is how different places, virtual and physical environments, must be tuned and adjusted to fit working from a distance during long periods of WFH (through assessments, codes of conduct, control, etc.) (Derix, 2003; Kingma, 2019; Veldhoen, 2005). Considering COVID-19, the question of WFH also has to do with strategic choices about adapting or restraining organisations from working as usual (Ramalingam et al., 2020).

Some management literature suggests that problems arise when leadership and management teams are dislocated from an organisation. For example, Wheelan et al. (2020) propose using project groups to solve complex tasks. Still,

when these teams become virtual and dislocated, often involving different cultures and nationalities, their motives usually boil down to reduced costs and cheaper labour (Ferazzi, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to maintain a strong organisational culture by keeping goals fresh and creating values through face-to-face interactions (Shachaf, 2008). Maintaining an organisational culture may work under normal circumstances, but the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the WFH premises.

The aim of this study is to investigate some of the consequences of WFH on socio-spatial aspects of thickness and thinness in the work environment when work shifts from the workplace to home. The questions that this study aimed to answer are 'How do representatives who manage their staff by allowing or restricting WFH in public and private organisations describe how aspects of thickness, in terms of physical proximity and social relations, changed when their staff worked from home during the pandemic? How can organisational thickness and thinness be further developed to understand the detachment of workers from their workplace in terms of consequences for the location and size of offices, leadership, control, and management?

Working from home and teleworking

Many aspects of WFH are related to the knowledge of teleworking and maybe also telecommuting, which has become increasingly common during the pandemic. The proportion of employees working primarily from home more than tripled from 1980 to 2010, from 0.75% to 2.4% in the U.S, and similar trends were noted in the U.K. and Germany (Bloom et al., 2013; Mateyka et al., 2012). In addition, the adoption of telework in Sweden between 2005 and 2012 increased by 20%, with the reasons for telework shifting from individual to organisational needs (LaPierre et al., 2016; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016).

Prominent companies such as Yahoo! and I.B.M. then restricted or altogether banned teleworking, arguing that it interfered with spontaneous interaction and idea-sharing among employees, stifling opportunities for development and innovation (Cain Miller & Rampell, 2013; Keller, 2013; Moses, 2013; Swisher, 2013; Lavey-Heaton, 2014; Eurofound, 2018). Beginning with the spring of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of teleworkers in public organisations exploded (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Barcés, 2020).

Some claim that since telework goes hand in hand with decreased responsibility for the workforce and less inclusive organisational cultures, the market-like detachment and distant connections typical of what is now called 'flexible' working are now accepted in most Western countries (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Haddon & Brynin, 2005; Scott et al., 2012). Others claim that telework is part of another process reflected in the 2002 agreement on telework by the European Observatory of Working Life (Eurofound, 2017; EurWORK, 2002). The agreement may be seen as an effort to balance the new detachment by focusing on the voluntary nature of teleworking, employment conditions, data protection, privacy, equipment, health and safety, and organisation of work

concerning legislation, collective agreements, and company rules with a focus on workload and performance, training of teleworkers, and collective rights (EUR-Lex, 2005).

The fluid spatial boundaries between home-life and work-life raise the question of whether or not work-life balance increases with teleworking and working from home, which seems to have both positive and negative impacts (Bhattacharjee, 2020; Gil Solá & Vilhelmson, 2012; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). Research on productivity shows that home-based workers put in longer hours on average than office-based workers and that dislocated work supplements traditional office work (informally and often with no pay) rather than substituting for it (Eurofound, 2018). Other studies show that managers' reluctance to let workers detach from the office is based on the need for control and fear of unproductivity (Baily & Kurland, 2002). According to Eurofound (2018), regular home-based teleworkers have a slightly better work-life balance than those in a set workplace. The positive effects of teleworking usually include less commuting time, greater working time autonomy, better overall work-life balance, and higher productivity. However, knowledge sharing and proactive performance negatively affect innovation and performance in research and advisory organisations when workers are spatially separated (van der Meulen et al., 2019). Other disadvantages include teleworking's tendencies to lengthen working hours, create interference between work and personal life, and result in work intensification, leading to high-stress levels and negative consequences for workers' health and well-being (Eurofound, 2017).

Conditions and values concerning teleworking and working at home have radically changed during the pandemic. It was expected that large companies like Yahoo!, I.B.M., and perhaps others, would set the benchmark as they had reportedly recoiled against telework for constraining the individual workers' needs to meet other people face-to-face, and share knowledge and experiences (Crandall & Gao, 2005; Jonasson, 2017) as well as their abilities to be creative and innovative in collaboration with each (Amabile et al., 2005) and create a common corporate identity (Pfeffer, 2006). There is a need to reconceptualise traditional organisational knowledge when workers are detached from their workplaces for extended periods. It is suggested that the concept of thin places connected to WFH may be helpful to understand what happens when parts of an organisation have to find other ways to keep the culture and spirit of their workers alive; where virtual meetings replace physical, social interactions; where control and care of the staff need to be made at a distance; when H.R. have to reconfigure and redefine their roles and tasks that aims at keeping goals (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020), and when communication needs to be oriented towards purposes.

Thick and thin places

Geographical theory may consider how place changes work or how the characteristics of different places impact work done in them, often referred to as the socio-spatial dialectics between humans and places (Mallet, 2011). 'Places' are not only containers or settings for material and human relations but also the

product of them: humans, material objects, and the relations between them produce places (Ajzen & Taskin, 2019). I.C.T. impacts organisations' spatiotemporal designs and practices, bringing about organisational and cultural changes. This transformation encompasses the flexible use of home workspaces and the flexibilisation of work (Kingma, 2019). Understanding place and social relations requires a combined analysis of the interactions between people and places where technology enables and constrains the relations necessary for the organisation and its individuals. Brown & O'Hara (2003) suggested that practice and place have a reciprocal relationship in the world of highly mobile workers and 'hot-deskers' (those who share time at the same desk): the places change the work, but the work also changes the places, in the same way that the socio-spatial dialectics shape social relations and place through people sharing the same turf. Adopting a non-representational theoretical perspective orients the understanding of organisational spaces, including homes, towards their material, embodied, affective and other configurations (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011).

Where people work is also determined by the organisation itself and its corporate view of WFH and the change of meaning it brings to different places. The issue is that organisational studies seem to downplay the geographical theoretical dimensions of time, place, and space by referring to them as unknown to organisational studies. Thus, place tends to be either too unproblematic or uninteresting, "containing" stuff or people, or is seen as too abstract, without any actual resonance with physical material realities. At the same time, time is seen as too familiar, as a calendar for marking events, or abstract and beyond sensory experience as untouchable and unseen (Dawson & Sykes, 2016). As a result, the seemingly ubiquitous concept of place has been battered along a continuum of issues regarding everything from bounded places containing facilities (Dale & Burell, 2008) to philosophical perspectives, including socially and materially produced spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) in organisational studies (Arrow et al., 2004; Watkins, 2005; Taylor & Spicer, 2007; Dale & Burell, 2008; Beyes & Steyaert, 2011). It has even been said that organisational theory often avoids localising the problems of change or solutions in time and space (Law, 1994; Czarniawska, 2004; Watkins, 2005). In short, organisational theory may have to pay more attention to the geographical theory concerning place and space to develop tools for understanding contemporary problems that have a spatial dimension, such as WFH.

Organisational places are allowed to be constructed, changed, and mobilised in relation to the work and the environment. Blurring the boundaries between ordinary and fluid and temporary working or home-working spaces through technologies, such as mobile phones and computers, may or may not affect individuals or organisations. However, it still needs to keep the organisation working (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019). One way to investigate the effects of spatial detachment is to view how work relates to embodied enactments of organisational geographies in terms of 'thick' and 'thin' places (Beyes & Steyaert, 2011; Jonasson, 2012; 2017). The thickness of a place can be defined by examining the effects of the non-representational quality of enactments on places characterised as thick.

An organisation's material, corporeal, and physical aspects may create feelings of intensity and of being part of a context that cannot be reduced to routines, material things, habits, meanings, or behaviours. This thickness implies both material and immaterial aspects of the working place and involves the 'imbrications of affect, habit, and meaning, inviting the self's "concernful absorption" in place while presenting opportunities for "personal enrichment" and a deepening of affective experience' (Casey, 2001:684–685; Duff, 2010). Thickness involves the physical presence in a place where humans produce the 'intensities' whereby 'a body affects other bodies or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity of affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality' (Deleuze, 1988:123). In this context, thickness thus refers also to the physical thickness of the place, which consists of the many people present in an ordinary working place, surrounded by gadgets that enable them to do their job and keep reminding them of the organisation they belong to (Jonasson, 2012; 2017). It can be assumed that the thickness of a place produces effects on learning and sharing values, control, and the routine organisation of individuals and groups towards common goals believed to be sustained by physical presence at work. Thick places depend on both the quantity and the quality of co-workers sharing physical and intellectual proximity. However, it is not yet fully understood what happens with this thickness when workers WFH during long periods.

Thin places are defined by the absence of thickness in the aspects mentioned above as a result of working away from the workplace. But, although thinness means detachment and the loss of bodies interacting, it also includes, through the use of technology - as compensation for and a replacement of - the lost bodily, immaterial, and material interactions that create intensities and feelings of being part of a context. Some of the effects of the loss of thickness come from management literature, stating that thinness and detachment from the working places undermine the moral and actual authority accompanying co-presence at the office (Perin & Jackson, 1998), that co-workers' engagement in teams is negatively affected by teleworking (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019), and that the thin connections between workers and working places can lead to social and professional isolation that hampers knowledge sharing (Crandall & Gao, 2005).

Thin places likely offer other ways to shape individuals' professional stability, development, and everyday work through elastic bonds to the organisation produced by I.C.T., such as smartphones and mobile Internet (Afradi & Nourian, 2020). These technologies also have the capacity, without physical contact, to pace and order everyday work activities in ways that expand work-related and organisational relations, routines, habits, space rhythms, meaning construction, and feelings of belonging to a context (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2019). Thus, thin places can support workers by creating and fostering social and organisational environments, commitment, and collective task performance, perhaps lasting even over long periods such as the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic (Collins et al., 2016; Windeler et al., 2017; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). This study intends to fill a small theoretical gap in the relationship between WFH and working places

by examining the dimensions of thinness and thickness in workplaces during the pandemic.

Methodology

At the beginning of this study, it was assumed that large companies like Yahoo!, I.B.M., and perhaps others would have set a permanent benchmark against WFH by calling back their staff from home. However, conditions and values around WFH changed radically almost overnight with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study' focus thus changed from explaining a recoil against teleworking to investigating how organisations at the time of the study were coping with large-scale and long-term detachment from working places. Nevertheless, the same primary theoretical tool – the theory of thin and thick places – was retained to illuminate this new situation.

This qualitative study uses interviews and snowballing inclusion selection among larger or teleworking-dependent organisations that allocated simple tasks to distance working. The study also intended to analyse policy documents from these organisations. Still, since the onset of COVID-19, all previously stated policies were put on hold or were temporarily changed, and that would have altered the aim of the study entirely. Therefore, the study is based on semi-structured interviews where the same questions were put to all participants in almost the same order, but the interview's interest concerning some of these questions has been extended (Longhurst, 2003). Twelve interviews were conducted with middle and top management in three larger public-sector and two private organisations. The selection can be viewed as small concerning the many thousand workers working within some public organisations. Still, the goal was to find respondents on a level where they had the mandate to enable or restrict WFH rather than represent the organisations quantitatively. Data were also collected informally from three additional respondents: one from a larger public-sector organisation and two private companies. Interviews were video recorded through Zoom using a mobile phone and transcribed. One interview was conducted as a focused interview with two participants from the same organisation. The transcripts have been anonymised, with no personal or organisational information retained. The material will be used in follow-up studies after their ethical and legal re-evaluation through factor analysis of information risk. However, the material will be made neither public nor available as an open source. The files, taped interviews, and transcripts will be kept in a locked safe.

Data were continually documented and analysed throughout the study. The researcher is the contact person for the data repository. The project used established ontologies and concepts for describing, classifying, interpreting, and documenting the data material.

This study concentrates mainly on three large Swedish public organisations that have a tradition of WFH but not within the scale of time that occurred during the pandemic. Each of the larger organisations has more than 10,000 employees.

These organisations share a similar view of WFH and collaborate on policies and strategies in different forums. To obtain another point of reference from a source not involved in such collaboration, an international software and high-tech company with a strong emphasis on WFH was also included in the study.

It was crucial to find key representatives from these organisations who had experience enabling, allowing, or restricting WFH during normal circumstances. It was believed that these functions could reflect on the organisational effects of detachment from working places and that they would be sensitive towards directions from the top level of the organisation. The study started by interviewing two of these top-level H.R. managers to get an overview of their general policy perspective on WFH. The interviews were conducted with middle managers who were in daily contact with the reality of enabling or restricting WFH.

Nine interviews were recorded on a mobile phone and one using Zoom. Two additional respondents, one from a private company and one from a large public organisation, complemented the main interviews. These were not recorded. All interviewees signed a letter of consent describing the project and were promised every effort to protect their anonymity, although no guarantees were given (Table 1).

Table 1. Interviewees coding

Organisation	Anonymized name(s)
Public organisation 1	Pub 1a, 1b
Public organisation 2	Pub 2a, b, c, d
Public organisation 3	Pub 3a, 3b, 3c
Private company 1	Priv 1
Respondent public organization 1	Inf pub 1
Respondent private company 2	Inf priv 2

A narrative strategy for producing themes

The policy documents for remote work and teleworking were collected from the organisations. Still, they were not used in the analysis since they did not reflect the situation during the pandemic, and they did not fit the final aim of this study.

The analysis of the ten interviews supplemented by the two additional respondents resulted in five themes: changed views on teleworking and WFH, cultures of thin places, human resources, leadership, and purposeful communication. These themes emerge from two analytical points of departure: they are shared among the participating organisations, or they are significant as individual narrative parts relevant to the aim, purpose, and theoretical framework of this study. Themes were produced by listening to interviews and reading transcripts for significant accounts related to the study aim, questions, and theory. These themes were then elaborated in short texts and assembled into a coherent and logical narrative. Instead of working from minor elements in

interviews to a more general level, more significant themes were outlined from a general sense of the whole before supporting excerpts were assembled and arranged. Thus, the themes are not the product of coding individual statements or words but rather are assembled on a meta-textual level using a narrative technique for analysing interviews.

Interview questions were open-ended and designed to allow the respondents to reflect upon and argue for different viewpoints and ways of managing work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategy was to encourage respondents to talk freely with the prepared questions as a base for producing a conversation, not to limit their responses to specific answers. The interviews were reciprocal and adjusted to the participant's contexts (Mishler, 1986). Some questions involved the situation before the pandemic, and some questions concerned how they thought WFH was viewed pre-COVID-19, during the pandemic, and in the future. The questions involved activities, history of working remotely, how the organisation was affected, how social spaces were created during this period, and the future of working after the pandemic.

Results and discussions

Changing views on thin and thick places

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, respondents expressed restrictive views on teleworking and WFH. Their statements reflected the organisation's need for face-to-face relations and beliefs that creativity and innovation relied on physical presence. One respondent described a change in corporate culture's views on allowing or restricting WFH (Pub 2c). Before the pandemic, public organisations firmly stated that work should be done at the workplace and that WFH was an exception from normal circumstances, for instance, *'when someone needed to visit the doctor or as a way of handling the life puzzle'* (Pub 1b). All the interviewed representatives believed the physical and embodied interaction between members of organisations to be a crucial dimension of successful work.

High-security tasks especially were considered impossible to do offsite: *'We used to be totally against security classified tasks being conducted from home earlier. As an effect of COVID-19, we have let these policies go, and everything, even the highest security tasks, is being done from home'* (Pub 1a). The interview with the representative from the high-tech company was conducted very early in the project. The company had built in WFH deeply within their employer branding strategy and established structures of working independently and in teams. There were no discussions about calling staff back, even though competing companies within their sector intended to do so. Instead, they referred to Yahoo's attempt to call back their employees as an example of: *'…a lack of trust in their employees and a result of them not 'know[ing] their staff well enough'* (Priv 1). The respondent from this private company indicated a corporate tradition of creating 'thickness' in thin places, which their public counterpart now had to learn to do during the pandemic.

The current situation made all the participating organisations change their view on WFH; they now believe that in the future, it will be more common to work at home and alternate between WFH and work at the office. Organisations, therefore, probably need to adjust their policies about WFH and be creative to keep co-workers feeling part of a collective and in alignment with common goals. The pandemic has forced organisations to rethink not only how they perform specific tasks when co-workers telework or WFH but also whether it is possible to do so without any thick places: *'I can see what enormous energy and power my staff has contributed [during the COVID-19 pandemic] … makes one very proud'* (Pub 2b). Before the pandemic, workers had a dialogue with their closest manager to be allowed to telework or WFH: 'Now it is necessary to have a dialogue before going to the office and work' (Pub 3c). When conditions force companies that generally do not allow WFH to use technology instead of face-face relations, the intensity and experience of being part of a specific context remain (Deleuze, 1988; Paterson, 2005).

Performing tasks from home raise new questions, from whether it is possible for WFH to how to replicate routines and manage leadership at a distance over a long period. Even though organisations lose the social thickness evoked by feelings of *'we'* and teamwork when co-workers telework, one manager described how his *'feel-well-group'* organised a *'remote battle'* over assignments that could be completed at home and a *'remote bingo'*, in which co-workers were encouraged to *'jump around the house on one leg or call a colleague and ask how things are going'* (Pub 2b).

The conditions of working remotely changed abruptly, but the organisational views of public managers and policies changed gradually during the pandemic. Managers went from reluctance and scepticism towards creativity and could do things that before were thought impossible in thin places. Their private counterparts have the knowledge and routines for sustaining goals and achieving results by swiftly altering between thick and thin places using short periods of intense work at the office in teams with periods of WFH. Although the public and private companies were aware of their different ways of conceiving how their counterparts viewed WFH, neither believed they actively compared themselves when setting the routines or cultures of remote working. Instead, as shown in the next section, they saw different organisational cultural values as being part of a thin or thick place.

Creating new cultures and thin places of social cohesion

The association between social cohesion and thick places seems to work if the definitions of work and place are set and determined at an organisational level as being created at either a shared workplace or a home-based place. The COVID-19 situation has caused large organisations in Sweden to order staff to undertake WFH in contrast to telework based on agreements between management and staff. WFH requires different strategies to manage intensities, control, communication, engagement, leadership, social cohesion, and keeping staff healthy, thus creating effective thin places by simulating or copying behaviours

from thick places. The problem with WFH and agreed distance working are that it puts ideas of place involving detachment, inclusion, and exclusion, located- and dislocated engagement in a different perspective. In a normal situation, staff who work from home or at a distance are dislocated from their ordinary workplaces. Now, staff working at their ordinary workplaces are dislocated from the WFH staff (sometimes in quarantine). Thick places seem to be constructed when people are present in the here and now, not when they are at home: *'I went into the office a few days ago, but no one was there, so I decided to go back home again, said a middle manager'* (Inf pub 1). Therefore, technology is used to create, mimic, or replace the thickness no longer found in offices. However, public organisations have few opportunities to alternate between physically and materially thin and thick places, as in the example of the private company. Apart from a few members, the staff of the public organisations is at the workplace almost all the time for various reasons (Pub 2a, b, d; Pub 3b, 3c).

When reflecting on how future workplaces would be organised, respondents indicated that they would adjust the size of future office spaces since they thought not everyone would be there simultaneously, thus preparing for a future of alternating between thin and thick places. During the COVID-19 pandemic, office spaces echoed with emptiness as workers did their tasks at home: *'We are hoping to introduce a more activity-based way of working… New working spaces are expected to be cost-effective. There are large spaces that are not used today. Everyone needs to have a working space, but not all of them are here simultaneously'* (Pub 1b). The arguments for alternating between thin and thick places are driven by costs, efficiency, and the realisation by some public organisations that they have too much office space in areas that are too expensive (Pub 1b).

The future may involve organising work alternately in thin and thick places, requiring managers' creativity. The benefits of thick places include managers and staff checking in with each other to see if they are doing well or need anything and the opportunity to resolve issues at the Fika. One respondent referred to a deeply rooted Fika culture in the organisation. The Swedish term Fika is both a verb and a noun. It means taking a break with something to eat or drink, alone or with someone else, with the main idea of slowing things down. Fika places are filled with more complex activities than just drinking coffee and chatting. These activities are perhaps difficult to understand without spending some time there: "Fika can be seen as an in-between-activity of working activities. Fika also helps us organise time and create routines during the day through ritualisation, temporalisation, and sequencing by stating that it is Fika time!"(Jonasson, 2017). Fika socialises members and co-workers in a workplace through what Casey (2001) and Duff (2010) call "the imbrications of affect, habit, and meaning by sharing experiences at the same place and time during the" day and thus also creates thick places. Fika is not meant to be used for talking about work. It may even be considered to be outside the norm to talk about work. However, the Fika consists of a space and place for practices that are performed in between doing and thinking, allowing staff to discuss matters of concern and resolve issues.

The temporalisation and sequencing of work in thin places when WFH is not unlike those in the thickness of the workplace. For example, some respondents made their co-workers check in each morning by Skype or other means and ritualised ticking off an agenda and monitoring workers' logged-in time. They also created *'Skype corridors'* for social interaction, where events from thick places were replaced by technology in thin places (Pub 1b). They also measured production by how many cases or clients passed through the system. H.R. adapted, too, and adjusted their operations to include tips for managers to help them keep up engagement with workers, which seemed to continue regardless of HR-suggested activities (Pub 1b). Social cohesion and relations in thin places when the staff WFH is produced by mimicking relations from thick places using technologies and known methods for ritualising everyday practices.

Challenges for Human Resources in thin places

There were fears that WFH would negatively affect staff teamwork (van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019) and that social and professional isolation would hamper knowledge sharing (Crandall & Gao, 2005). Such outcomes, however, were not reported by respondents. On the contrary, one respondent said: *'Productivity and efficiency have increased… commuters who spend hours every day have saved time by working at home…. The engagement has, I would say, increased. But when it comes to the more holistic view of the work and organisation, it may be the opposite'* (Pub 1, with similar comments from Pub 2c).

Thin places where co-workers are dislocated and dispersed do not automatically seem to lead to disengagement and a lack of work ethos. One explanation could be that workers are reflexive and self-monitoring subjects who may increase their efforts when no one physically monitors their performance.

One of the challenges of WFH is assumed to be difficulty in collaborating (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). However, workers and managers on different levels have proven to be creative in using technology for chatting, sharing work, collaborating, and even maintaining social activities (Pub 2b). The pandemic has also allowed new ways of viewing H.R. Kaushik & Guleria (2020) argue that COVID-19 has forced organisations to rethink their H.R. operations to continue developing employees to be more innovative and proactively committed to their employer.

What seems to be evolving is a new way of thinking that questions the intensive work of making workers committed and dedicated to their employer, which may not be as effective as formerly thought. One consequence of WFH is that some activities usually created by H.R. have been put on hold, while others directed towards supporting managers intensified (Pub. 1b). One of the additional respondents even identified those *'normal activities'* as disruptive: *'Now we are doing what we are supposed to do, without H.R. finding ways to disrupt our work'* (Inf pub 1b). The period of WFH has also been reported as boring, with respondents saying that their workers miss their peers (Pub 2c). Managers have perhaps assumed the role of H.R. to be inspiring, developmental, and supportive of organisational

cultures, keeping staff focused on goals and supporting management in organisational change, but rarely mentioned its disruptive character, which can break the social, spatial, and temporal flow of work, similar to beating a horse who is already running as fast as it can. Without questioning the basic idea of an organisation within the organisation that keeps it on its toes, focused on goals and realising the weakness of the empirical basis of this assumption, it can only be noted that no one in any of the interviews said they missed being involved in H.R. operations and activities.

A more nuanced perspective on the role of H.R. is monitoring and supporting the staff's health and well-being. It has been debated whether staff benefits from working at home or if they lose something from the lack of a working social context in their work-life balance (Gil Solá & Vilhelmson, 2012; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). In other words, the social cohesion and control of thick places that benefit some people could threaten the flexibility and integrity essential to others. Many organisations have had extensive experience with teleworking and WFH due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff have been ordered to work from their homes to help protect and improve human health. In one sense, thick places are associated with social cohesion and well-being, which is essential and often related for many companies to a proportion of the staff present in a permanent working space.

On the other hand, some people, for instance, are particularly vulnerable to alcohol and drug misuse, which may increase if they work from home. And this may be the problem: no exact or well-defined principle works for everyone involved in WFH or thick or thin workplaces. For example, a middle manager of a public organisation said: *'Some persons cannot cope with working from home for several reasons, so they have an agreement on coming in certain days of the week to work at the office'* (Pub 3c). Whether a person is vulnerable or not depends on the organisation's knowledge of the person's embodied disposition and history, so the middle manager needs to monitor and navigate WFH with at-risk workers with concern and diplomacy. Handling these cases is also most often supported by H.R. activities.

The period of WFH also raises questions about activities that aim to both feed and nudge organisations in different directions. Such activities may work better in thick places. Still, there are examples where H.R. has managed to transform activities around WFH by feeding managers ideas about encouraging the WFH staff, for instance, by inviting them to a virtual Fika. The pandemic may open critical discussions about H.R.'s perhaps overly intense role since they seem to work better in thick places. Individual adaptation appears to be the most vital challenge in these places. Work has revealed itself to continue almost as usual. Sometimes even better results when conducted at home or from a distance, but H.R. activities still depend upon and require thick places and face-to-face relations.

Leadership and control in thin places

A challenge to thin places and WFH is leadership. Many ideas concerning leadership are firmly based on face-to-face relations, and trust is believed to be part of such relations. Respondents say that during the WFH period, they have exchanged the usual short and brief meetings in corridors with more intense, structured, and frequent meetings via Skype, Zoom, or phone. Control of staff also needs to be handled differently during WFH.

Before the pandemic, middle managers had to balance between allowing people to telework so they could manage their lives by being able to visit the doctor or attend to other obligations during regular working hours. Still, when WFH lasted too long, it meant '*…losing the feeling of "we" and belonging. And this is an incredible gain when we struggle together*' (Pub. 2b). However, being in proximity does not mean that the staff is always comfortable. Thick places also create friction, make power relations visible, impinge on individual freedoms, and produce negative intensities. For example, one respondent said that in physical meetings, he experienced occasional obstruction and challenges to his leadership from some workers who undermined the importance of the discussion by constantly looking at their watches or making disruptive noises. These demonstrations were neutralised and suddenly disappeared when meetings became digital (Inf Pri 2).

One dimension of leadership in thick places often involves formal or informal face-to-face meetings between managers and staff in front of larger groups. During WFH periods, however, more meetings were conducted on a one-to-one basis with the help of Skype. One respondent reported that one worker said, '*…when it is just me, and you are talking on Skype, I feel that you see me as a person, and that feels good*' (Pub org 2c). Instead of feeling distant and disturbed by the technology between them, the meeting in a thin place felt intense and focused; opposite to expectations, Skype created a thickness in an otherwise thin space.

Despite these moments, effective leadership requires trust between leaders and staff. One respondent said that WFH made him aware of how rarely he usually sees his superiors*: 'We hardly meet at all, but it works fine. He has trust in me'* (Inf pub 1). It seems, then, that thickness may be independent of technology, distance, or frequency.

Trust and control are two sides of the same leadership coin insofar as the social contract between two parts needs to be in place or developed through external or internal (self) monitoring. What is believed necessary for an organisation is likely to vary. Perin & Jackson (1998) point out the fear that WFH would undermine the office's moral and actual authority, indicating a firm belief in external monitoring, co-presence, and face-to-face relations to monitor the staff physically. However, control also often manifests in production measures that can establish every worker's performed share of the planned production, for instance, the number of cases made within a week or month. When such measures were necessary, output in all investigated thin WFH organisations was high, and sick leave was low.

Monitoring in thin places can also be a subtle and sophisticated task: '*…a great concern for each other*' (Pub 1b). Control is thus built into everyday monitoring by caring for and confirming co-workers in thin places. For example, one respondent described how he checked to see whether everyone was well during the pandemic: '*It is more convenient for managers to pass by and ask how things are…. We do not know how things are now during Corona. Managers call workers and try to capture how they are if they are well, but this is done completely differently when people are in place*' (Pub 2b). Concern for staff is a legitimate way to open a virtual door to someone who is WFH in order also to monitor and control them.

Purposeful communication

Communications have different qualities in thick compared to thin or remote places. They also have several other purposes, such as informing, controlling, goal setting, and giving feedback. Communication, thus, is not a clear, undifferentiated, and overall activity that can be executed either with the help of technology or face-to-face. It might be expected that face-to-face communication with an employer would be a better choice than a Skype call. Still, the abovementioned employee reported receiving different and more profound attention when communicating alone with the leader via Skype.

When the situation requires more intense collaboration, and it is necessary to produce excellent outcomes, face-to-face relations and the extraordinary intensities they produce are irreplaceable. One respondent with vast experience in WFH explained how a meeting with staff with different competencies unfolded in the company. That discussion was described as the synchronisation of input on a particular theme augmented by a non-verbal dimension: '*…and boom! You could almost physically touch it. And this is not possible to achieve without [everyone] being in [the same] place…. We usually say that eighty percent of all communication is non-verbal…. We use teams a lot, which makes it possible to reach some of these results, but it is still far from the situation where all the little chemical substances begin to act … and there are so many things going on*' (Priv. 1).

While the private company included in this research has the means to communicate with the help of I.C.T., public companies have been behind in securing the necessary bandwidth: '*When the Corona got started, we had an incredible pressure on our system, which no one was ready for. So now, it was just a couple of weeks ago when we could use our video on Skype for the first time. Before that, we couldn't use the video at all. So when I called someone, we could talk, but we didn't see each other. But we have contact daily*' (Pub 2b).

Thin places may thus produce intensities and energies similar to thick places, but they may rely on the frequency and ways of following up in ways different from embodied and physical interactions (Deleuze, 1988; Casey, 2001; Paterson, 2005; Watkins, 2006; Duff, 2010; Mulcahy, 2012).

Communication depends on the purpose. For example, if the aim is to control or inform, there seems to be little need for the intensities required in face-to-face relations and thick places. On the other hand, when communication is one-on-

one, technology that mimics the intensity of thick places may enhance a focused understanding of a problem or an individual.

Conclusions

It has been taken for granted that WFH in thin places lacks the necessary components for embodied intensities, creativity, innovation, and fostering a sense of belonging in an organisation that has daily face-to-face contacts such as the Fika (Deleuze, 1988, Casey, 2001; Paterson, 2005; Watkins, 2006; Duff, 2010; Jonasson, 2012; 2017; Mulcahy, 2012; van der Meulen et al., 2019). However, the results of this study show the complexity when thick and thin places are added as theoretical components of work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thin places depend on the trust created with the help of frequent, planned, and structured events (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Although the organisations that participated in this study report that the best energies are created in thick places, they seem able to cope with keeping control, encouraging employees, and handling security issues in the thin places created through WFH. At the same time, the benefits of alternating between thin and thick places can be learned from the private company, which seems to have learned how to keep the organisation together with frequency, intensity, and different ways of controlling, communicating, and creating social spaces beyond the physical and immaterial places of work and home.

The results also support the positive effects of WFH during the pandemic reported in earlier studies: shorter commuting times, greater working time autonomy, better overall work-life balance, and higher productivity (Eurofound, 2017). Since the study was conducted with managers, it gathered no information from workers on the effects of WFH on their work hours, professional isolation, or knowledge sharing (Crandall & Gao, 2005; van der Lippe & Lippényi, 2019).

The results show that cultural and organisational beliefs influence leadership's scope and available ways to handle challenges. For example, an organisation that strongly believes that physical interaction is necessary to control staff and execute authority will be challenged during extensive periods of WFH (Perin & Jackson, 1998). The study shows that there are other ways to monitor a thin organisation, including subtle methods such as showing care and consideration for the staff and implementing measurable goals.

More critical studies are warranted on the role of H.R. in thin places. The COVID-19 pandemic may open new arenas for discussions of the roles of over-intense H.R. and general activities that work better in thick than thin places. The results show that work is going on almost as usual and sometimes even better through WFH, but H.R. activities seem to depend on and require thick places and face-to-face relations. The most critical question is who (in terms of roles) is most dependent on thick places and who continues to demand face-to-face relations to create corporate values and keep a solid organisational culture consistent and alive (Shachaf, 2008).

Communications depend on their purpose, and it is difficult to conclude that technology enhances or deepens interactions between workers in thin places. Communicating with several people or teams in thin places may work when the content is straightforward, such as exchanging information or maintaining the frequency and continuity of contact with the organisation. However, the study indicates that one-on-one technology-aided communications in thin places may involve or encourage qualities similar to, or even better than, those in physical meetings in thick places. Technology may release some of the tensions of face-to-face communication, and its use may require more preparation if sensitive matters are involved. WFH requires different strategies for maintaining intensity, control, communication, engagement, leadership, social cohesion, and healthy and happy staff, thus creating effective thin places by simulating or copying what is done in thick places.

This study shows that the theoretical consideration of thick and thin places can aid in understanding the role of physical presence concerning strategies for teleworking and WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic. This consideration can also be used to help understand the consequences of future teleworking or extensive periods of WFH beyond individual needs, for instance, its effects on the market for office spaces, the sustainability of transport and commuting, the recruitment of competencies in broader regional contexts, the development of policies and routines, and the further development of technologies for working at a distance. Finally, the study shows that the pandemic may have future consequences in terms of how work is organised, the size of office spaces needed and where these offices should be located, and in what ways thin places can be created for sustaining a sustainable organisational culture without being dependent on the staff working on-site all the time.

Thick and thin places are created where the staff is. If many staff telework, managers and workers will find ways to develop thickness using technologies and outside offices. Thickness relies not only on physical interactions but also on senses of belonging, identity, and commitment, which can be fostered using technologies to maintain communication, close leadership, and new and different ways of engagement and interaction. However, we do not know much about the long-term effects of WFH, and more follow-up research is needed.

Funding

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