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Belonging as flickering and in flux in academic work: a collective biography

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore the concept of belonging and its utility as a means for understanding academics' experiences of working in the academy. Transformative changes have reorientated academic work in recent years and continue to do so as we grapple with what it means to work and live in a post-digital, post-covid, world. We engage a collective biography methodology to highlight the embodied spatial-material assemblages in which belonging can be (un)made, the ways in which belonging may stick, slip and slide, as well how we might support colleagues to deal with the fragility and fluidity of academic work. Collectively, we sketch a portrait of the currents, spaces and relations of belonging that sit uncomfortably alongside common conceptions of belonging as linear, or as an internal, individual, emotion. This study therefore offers new possibilities for enhanced understandings of belonging as mobile, flickering and processual, that are generative within education and beyond.

Introduction

Academic life has transformed due to recent changes associated with the encroachment of neo-liberal ideologies, marketization, as well as with increased online working and teaching (Hil et al., 2021). This study adopts a collective biography approach, exploring the role of belonging, connection and affect in higher education, looking specifically at female academics' experiences of contemporary higher education work environments. We start from an understanding that all social life, and academic work in particular, is profoundly emotional (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Olson et al., 2017), and with an assertion that how academics experience a sense of belonging underpins how individuals resonate with one other, with students, and with the communities in which universities are situated. Our collective biography moves to unpack the complexity of experiences of belonging, in order to trouble the limiting assumptions that surround the concept and its use, and to offer original ways of thinking. Engaging Ahmed's (2004)

conceptions of emotions as both sticky and mobile, we consider what is belonging doing to higher education? Through engagement with posthuman and sociomaterial sensibilities (Barad, 2007; Latour, 2007), we contemplate how belonging might be understood within sociomaterial configurations which allow us to connect to spaces, things and each other where we otherwise would not. We, as embodied female actors, are at once pushed and pulled towards belonging and non-belonging. We examine how we can develop a richer understanding of belonging and non-belonging as vital facets of our relationships – as female academics – to the world; and surface alternate ways of conceptualising belonging as circulating and flickering. We also explore how the methodological practice of collective biography can be used as a generative method to elicit new understandings and to create new knowledge, as well as how we might support and foster belonging and connection within different contexts.

Belonging in the literature

This article emerged from a desire to explore a key concept: the notion of belonging, and its potential (or not) as a means of understanding female academics' connections to contemporary higher education. In the university context, student belonging has become a common area of inquiry in recent years as educators seek to understand how to foster belonging to increase attainment, progression and student well-being (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Meehan & Howells, 2019; Strayhorn, 2012). In post-Covid times, even greater attention has been placed on conceptualising and supporting belonging (e.g. Dingle et al., 2022; Procentese et al., 2020). Belonging has been defined as a fundamental human need (Strayhorn, 2012), as an emotional attachment, and as a feeling of safety (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging represents feelings of acceptance and connection, and Baumeister and Leary argue that the need to belong is 'a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation' (1995, p. 497). The assumption that students should belong to a higher education community has today become a key narrative within institutional policy and practice, with students' sense of belonging strongly associated with a successful university experience (Ahn & Davis, 2020), with student wellbeing, academic attainment and retention (Winstone et al., 2022). As a result, how to ensure institutions create inclusive environments, and are able to promote a sense of belonging for marginalised groups are presently primary preoccupations within higher education research, policy and practice (Meehan & Howells, 2019).

And yet, we propose that belonging cannot be easily fostered and fixed. It is not static. Rather, it is mobile, messy and circulates in unexpected ways. Processual and dynamic, belonging evades simple definitions that depict linear journeys and generalised practices and has instead been conceptualised as experienced in multiple ways (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022; Guyotte et al., 2021). Neither is it an inherently individual experience, but results in relational connections and situated experiences (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). In our conceptualisation, we employ the idea of flickering to imagine something that can be absent or present in a fire-like manner (Gourlay, 2022). This notion suggests we think about belonging as intermittent flares of belonging, as something that is discontinuous, partial, multiple. There is a need then to handle belonging with care, to recognise its associated elements of exclusion, boundedness, to use it cautiously and to be open to new ways of understanding this nuanced concept.

This article orients belonging in higher education away from its more common focus in the literature, upon students, and onto ourselves. In particular, as a group of six female academics, working in different international contexts, we aimed to explore the interconnections of belonging, gender and the academy. The specific need to discuss the stories of female academics has been previously highlighted in the literature (Anderson et al., 2020), as well as the power of feminist interventions that surface the affective complexities of academia (Gannon et al., 2019). The goal was to generate new ways of knowing, feeling and doing belonging and non-belonging

in academic working practices, through collectively and reflexively storytelling our own situations and experiences.

Collectively (non-)belonging

This collective biography assembles new ways of knowing and belonging. We take a posthuman practice turn and emphasise *relationality, doing* rather than *being* (Ahmed, 2004; Latour, 2007). Gherardi (2016, p. 39) writes: "Practice is … seen as a mode of ordering, rather than an ordered product: an epistemology rather than an empirical phenomenon." Such a worldview emphasises the "non-human" and suggests that people and things are entangled, and relational, rather than bounded (Barad, 2007; Gherardi, 2016; Gravett, 2023). Relations are key to Karen Barad's (2007) framing of agential realism. One way in which Barad articulates this is via the neologism of intra-action. Using this innovative concept, Barad decentres the "human" as a separate, bounded, category in order to situate the human in relation – with other humans and nonhumans. Thus, posthuman practice theory counters dualisms such as mind/body or individual/society or nature/culture and places renewed emphasis on dynamic relatings or a "choreography of becoming" (Gherardi, 2016, p. 44). In this way, any form of bounding – such as through belonging – both brings together and separates simultaneously and dynamically (Barad, 2007).

At first glance, the posthuman practice turn is concerned with *intra-acting, doing*, *materiality* and *entanglement* and seems at odds with the interior human world. A collective biography about women, the academy and belonging, seems more aligned with understanding our lived experiences, exposing our entangled feelings, memories and ambitions. However, interiority can be seen as a form of *doing*, inseparable from the practices that order the world (Ahmed, 2004). By this we mean, we ourselves are always inscribing our bodies, our feelings, intentions, memories are co-constituted through our bodies, which are enmeshed with past-present-future objects and places.

For educational researchers, then, posthuman theory can create new openings for thinking differently, where the knowing subject does not stand apart from the world. Because all is considered as relational, the researcher is not conceptualised as a separately-bounded self but is intra-acting with the assemblage being investigated. We concur with others in the field who have argued that posthuman research is challenging; that it can be unsettling as well as creative and generative (Ulmer, 2017, p. 833). However, we also believe that "thinking differently invites alternatives to methodological orthodoxy – ones that wonder what else the future of methodology might hold and/or become" (Ulmer, 2017, p. 833).

For us, therefore, belonging is dynamic and relational, rather than a fixed state of being. It allows us to articulate, both viscerally and intellectually, the profoundly emotional and affective nature of academic work (Ahmed, 2004; Hekman, 1990). Yet, our embodied experiences of (non-) belonging in higher education are not limited to the interior; they are shared through the circulating intensities of our biographical task, rupturing from us in the form of tears and laughter. Such affective intensities are, perhaps, culturally more available to us, given that emotions stick to and are expected from certain (gendered) bodies (Ahmed, 2004). Drawing from Ahmed, we consider our emotions as actively *affecting* selves, things, others.

> What do emotions do? The 'doing' of emotions, I have suggested, is bound up with the sticky relation between signs and bodies: emotions work by working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 191)

Ahmed's work aligns with a posthuman practice turn: she considers how emotions circulate between bodies; she contends that emotions involve "(re)actions or relations of "towardness" or "awayness" between actors" (p. 8). Feelings therefore may stick to some objects, and slide over

others (p. 13). She describes how emotions do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as a/effects of circulation. The circulation of objects allows us to think about the "sociality" of emotions. Rather than feelings being understood as coming from within and moving outwards, they are moving, flickering and in flux.

This collective biography is an on-going and dynamic production of knowledge, an epistemic process which moves our inscription of (non-)belonging from our bodies to texts and through to bodies again. In this sense, our communal charting of our intersecting lifeworlds is a dynamic reordering of our bounded and affected but entangled relations – with our collective selves and our materialities – including this text we are producing. Thus, we seek to understand what belonging *does*. We ask: How are we untangling belonging from within the enmeshed places and practices of the academy? How does the (non-)belonging circulating between bodies, spaces and objects "stick" as well as move? How have we inscribed belonging and what has belonging inscribed on us?

Collective biography method

We continue this sensibility, drawing on work that has foregrounded the value of attending to granular micro-moments of experience (Gannon et al., 2019) or minor gestures (Manning, 2016) to understand social life and academic work. Through attending to affective micro-moments of academics' belonging we suggest that we are able to see the academy in new ways and to enhance our understanding of the concept of academic (non-)belonging, enabling us to draw out insights for supporting others and ourselves.

Specifically, this study employed the methodological practice of collective biography, a process grounded in feminist, poststructuralist ways of viewing the world (Charteris et al., 2016; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gannon et al., 2016). Collective biography enables knowledge to be created via emergent, moment-to-moment formations and via affective collective dialogues. Gannon et al. (2014, p. 184) describe the power of collective biography as a process that shifts the focus away from individuals, telling ostensibly linear stories:

> Close attention to specific sensory, affective, and embodied detail is crucial to this type of writing. The processes of collective biography produce embodied accounts of being; each subject's moments of singular sensation and memory are opened up so that they begin to resonate with the memories and embodied accounts of becoming of other members of the research group. In this approach, memories are not merely assemblages of familiar stories, narrated by and about essential and individualized selves; they become data for collective inquiry into processes of subjectification. The observations, questions, and comments that are provoked by each memory-story are crucial to the process of opening these texts to alternative readings and subsequent rewritings.

Collectives explore through writing and discussion their own embodied memories on an agreed theme of common interest. Writing is a "way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis" (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). These writings then become data for collective inquiry into processes of subjectification and shared experience, enabling us to problematise the idea of individualised stories. In the stories and conclusions that follow we explore entangled observations, questions, and threads, but remain mindful that alternative readings remain.

Our collective biography involved the six authors who are all female academics working in universities in Australia or the United Kingdom (UK). Our biography involved us coming together for a series of writing workshops and discussions. First, after completing some pre-reading around both the topic of belonging and the method, we met on two occasions as a large group to discuss the topic and our aims over video conferencing calls. Following this we came together as two small groups to begin writing. This division was partly due to time-zone logistics with four authors based in Australia and two in the UK. During these first two workshops we initially conducted a free-write exercise as a warmup activity, and we then each wrote or developed a plan

to narrate orally a short reflective story about a time in which we experienced a sense of (non-) belonging whilst working in higher education. We were particularly interested in exploring the intersection of belonging with gender, notably Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of affect as sticky and relational, with certain emotions sticking more readily to particular human and non-human objects. Given the importance of social meaning to placemaking (de Certeau, 1980), we started with an interest in exploring the spaces and places in which we found belonging and how we each conceptualised belonging in higher education working practices. We met and shared our stories, discussing some of the questions and issues raised. Like Taylor and Gannon (2018), we considered this research as a fleeting escape "from the capture of minds, hearts and bodies," as well as an opportunity to "disrupt data-writing so that these attunements can emerge" (p. 484).

On three subsequent occasions we met again over video conferencing calls, to share our stories as a complete group. We wanted to explore the entanglements of our experiences. What were the micro-moments of belonging in different spaces? Initially, our distinct life experiences existed as independent stories. But as we progressed, these experiences morphed to create an in-betweenness: a collective space in which belonging was assembled again within the group and in relation to others. Each author shared their story or experience. The rest of the group listened, laughed, cried, took notes, asked questions, reflecting upon the impact of the story and the insights for their own stories/experiences. After all, a key value of storytelling is recognising and further understanding oneself through hearing and feeling another's tale (Frank, 2007). A key aspect for us was to focus on the in-between. What was dis-assembled through the entanglement of our experiences?

We met two further times to discuss themes, ideas for analysis, and then to discuss this unfolding article. Working remotely could be seen as limiting our connections, but given intermittent Covid-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions in place, without videoconferencing technology, audio-visual connection would not have been possible at all. Non-verbal cues are central to relational communication. As such, some might suggest our capacity to share affect-laden stories as a collective may have been diminished due to our reliance on videoconferencing technology. Yet, the tears, emotions in voice, joy and laughter continued – mediated through technology. This was characteristic of prevailing limitations on interaction during Covid-19, with team members facing weeks and months of lockdown and the isolation of hotel quarantine. In this setting, videoconferencing was a valued space – a space we temporally carved out amidst strict public health measures and heightened family and work responsibilities – to transcend isolation and maintain connection to each other during a time of digitally-mediated normlessness.

Notably, the group consisted predominantly of Anglophone women, with secure positions. We do not pretend our experiences can be generalised, and we acknowledge the colonial epistemologies and racism that undermine feelings of solidarity and home for women of colour within higher education (Stewart & Jadhav, 2022). Nonetheless as a group we came together as a diverse collective, of disciplinary backgrounds, institutions, migration, troubled identities, class backgrounds, and pathways into academia – including first in family.

Below, we present each story in turn, followed by an author reflection. While each story appears ostensibly as a separate narrative, both the stories and the interpretations, were formed through the collective discussions and revisions that took place among the team and are detailed above. Following Davies and Gannon (2006), we were not interested in generating knowledge about the individual self of each storyteller, but rather, we employ collective biography "as a means to provide knowledge about the ways in which individuals are made social, are discursively constituted in particular fleshy moments" (2006, p. 4). As Gonick et al. (2011, p. 743) explain: "critical to achieving this goal is the process of revising the stories." Via our conversations over time, group members commented on one another's writings, asking questions, unpacking details, and creating disruptions. The stories were then developed further through

textual revisions and suggestions, via a shared Google Drive space, before being included in this article. This developmental process enabled each story to evolve and merge as intertextual fragments of a broader whole. These collaboratively constructed narratives are now presented below.

Six stories

Story 1: "to be away"

I think some of the most intense feelings of belonging I have ever had have been when I've gone away with colleagues to conferences. And to be away… something about being away that makes you feel like you connect. And there's something very joyous [about being in] Tuscany in the rolling hills and the sort of delight of attending to the ideas and the conversations with colleagues… I'm thinking of sitting at a table in a square in Prato …and watching the families walk around in the evening… Being in that location, which was not my location, it was a place so desperately different to my own. And somehow or other being there with people to whom I was connected with by nothing but the work, engendered a huge sense of belonging.

Where it was …where life and work kind of join together into this sort of glorious thing. And I also, you know, at that very conference … I was trying to negotiate [human resources back home]. Really hard stuff, really heart-wrenching personal stuff … I didn't want to do that, I didn't want to know about it. I wanted to talk about ideas in the golden afternoon sun, [in that] Tuscan sun.

So, Prato is definitely a place of belonging for me. And it's funny that I would associate so strongly with a place that just isn't here and doesn't belong to the university that I work at, but oh gosh if you can ever go there …

If I turn my thoughts back to this story, to how I am constructing myself within the academy, I'm struck, first, by the incongruence of place. Ironically, I felt a sense of belonging to my colleagues most strongly when I was in a space to which I am not bound to others – human and non-human: a space devoid of my usual home-family-commute relational-space routines and commitments. Second, I feel confronted by how romantic it all is. But also how this romance is contrasted with the everyday drudgery (and even horror) of our work. So, I'm asking myself: what does belonging do here for me? It allows me to persist, it stops the "double bind" from becoming intolerable. And it does so in a genuine way. It also allows me to construct myself as a thinker who is dreaming visions bathed in golden sunlight, rather than a grey-faced bean-counter: a bureaucrat. And yet, I was doing both, bringing together both these great imaginaries of academic cultural worlds and belonging to them both at the same time. It is less a paradox of identity than a means of holding myself together. So now, I ask myself, does belonging allow me to be exploited and to exploit others? And simultaneously is it a means of resistance, of sustaining me to reach beyond the everyday? Reducing humans to resources seems to me is the ultimate form of not-belonging: perhaps my imaginary allowed me to overcome this micro-moment of despair.

Story 2: the power of minor gestures

When I reflect on my experiences of belonging and non-belonging as an academic in higher education one experience quickly comes to mind. This experience occurred when I was new to starting an academic position I had worked hard for and desperately wanted to do well in. I was a new parent and had child-care commitments that I needed to juggle my work around. The weekly team meeting for our department took place at 3 pm – collection time for my daughter. The meeting was well attended and an important part of departmental life. However, I quickly realised that organising cover for my daughter's preschool collection was going to be unsustainable and confessed my problem to my manager, feeling

anxious that he would either not understand or would think that I was uncommitted to my role. My manager said that I should not worry and that he would simply reorganise the meeting! I couldn't believe it. But it was what happened next that really made a powerful impact upon me and is something that I have not forgotten. My manager sent an email to the department explaining that the meeting would now be held at 1 pm. He did not include my name or explain why. This made me feel wonderful as I did not feel singled out or made special. In higher education we often talk about being committed to equity, diversity and inclusion. But sometimes the practices do not follow the words. In this example my manager used few words, but his prompt and practical change meant that I knew that I was valued, that I experienced a sense of mattering and felt that I was being invited to belong to the department in an inclusive way, as I could now fully engage in our weekly meeting. The lack of attention drawn to my circumstances showed that flexibility and inclusivity were fundamental values for my manager and did not even need to be discussed. As a result, in my own teaching practice, I try to think carefully about practices, both visible and invisible, of mattering and belonging, as opposed to just discussing these values. I try to notice individuals' situations and to think about the impact small changes can have. I often think about the power of minor gestures and particularly the work of Erin Manning in this area (Manning,2016). My experience was a small moment which has had a powerful impact.

This story surfaces the significance of the minor gesture or micro-moment in understanding how belonging is made, felt and experienced. The small but thoughtful action of one person sent a powerful message about the culture and values of the department I was joining. This then had a sustaining impact upon my career. Here, belonging is shown to exist in the micro-moments of everyday life: what is invisible, what is unsaid as well as what is said. Manning has explored how the idea of the minor can serve as an opportunity for interference. Offering an alternative rhythm or story, that poses a disjuncture to the major key: "a force that courses through it, unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards" (Manning, 2016, p. 1). We can also see belonging as in flux: as located, made and unmade in specific spaces and practices of academic life – the team meeting, the team email. Belonging is also surfaced in this story as an undoing – unmaking existing exclusionary practices. I experience anxieties about my own vulnerable position as a female parent of small children working in an academic world that is not designed around my needs. My manager's action however undoes the anxiety of this reality, and coming from a person of authority, this act disrupts hierarchical barriers.

Story 3: what's in a name?

So, I am a bit nervous because it feels really silly to share this because it feels kind of trivial and superficial, but it actually speaks, I think, to a much broader point about how I have found myself in academia, I guess specifically, but really just how I "fit" in the social more broadly.

I always had like the running joke that my name was both Jennifer and Jessica because I get called Jennifer as much I get called Jessica. And it's just always been this thing. I also have a really good recall memory when it comes to names and faces. I rarely forget a name. And I rarely forget a face. And so I've had a lot of very, very, very uncomfortable moments when I remember somebody and they don't remember me or they think my name is Jennifer. And it's just become a very natural part of who I am - to kind of go through the game of, "Oh yeah, no, I don't think we've met" even though I know we have met at least once or twice.

I'll never forget going to my first Australian Association for Research in Education conference - for the session I was presenting in, I knew some of the presenters, but I didn't know the person chairing the panel. But, when she introduced the panel, she said (after introducing the others) "And we also have Jessica Holloway here, who I was very honoured to see present at another conference earlier in the year." And I remember, like, looking around the room thinking, "Oh my God. How does she remember me?" I felt like a celebrity. I can't even begin to tell you, like, how special it made me feel because I had never been remembered like that.

These memories of misrecognition and recognition stir up all sorts of emotions – imposter syndrome, embarrassment, sadness around always feeling like a stranger, and also great joy to have finally found what I never knew I was missing – to belong in a space that felt foreign. When I re-read the story against the other stories from our group, I have come to see that, to me, belonging is not something tied to a particular place, event or group of people. Despite places, events and people being central to all of our memories of belonging, the belonging *itself* is an affective reaction to a settlement, a peace, within the body. A feeling that emerges, in our cases unexpectedly and in fleeting moments, that says we matter and are seen. In none of these cases does an unbelonging cease to exist; indeed, we could probably just as readily recount stories of unbelonging within the exact same sites we epitomise as places of belonging. But the feeling of mattering has stuck with each of us and transformed how we think of ourselves and our relations to the spaces and people who helped create it.

Story 4: we found a connection

The lighting was soft, and the scent of lavender filled the room. We sat at the table and I felt happy for the first time in months. I'd felt like such an outsider, a second-class citizen, and like I just wasn't good enough to be there. Yet suddenly I felt like I'd found an ally, a confidante, and a friend. She had started working in the department a few months ago, but I'd been so swamped with teaching prep and marking that I hadn't been able to find the time to chat to her. And I didn't realise that we were going to have so much in common. I'd come to her office that afternoon to ask to borrow a book, and ended up staying for 3 hours. Her office felt like a sanctuary, with fresh lavender on the table and the harsh clinical lighting replaced by soft lamps. The pictures on the walls seemed carefully curated to create a sense of calm.

It was in this environment that I suddenly felt able to share a recent experience that had led me to want to leave academia. Up until this point I hadn't felt able to tell anyone; I felt ashamed and completely out of place. I didn't bring it up intentionally; the conversation naturally turned to our perceived place in the department and we found a connection because we had both been made to feel like we had failed by the same person. We found solace in our shared rejection. Knowing that I wasn't the only one who had been through this experience helped me to feel less of a failure. It feels wrong to feel relieved when you hear of someone else going through something so challenging, but for both of us, the sense that we were not alone helped to lessen our sense of being an imposter. We couldn't both be so adrift in this environment, we couldn't both have got things so wrong. Perhaps it wasn't our fault after all. As we talked, we realised that we both shared a passion for teaching and I felt my own enthusiasm and interest mirrored in her face. It was like she knew what I was thinking and I didn't need to explain, she just knew. The light was fading outside the window and the corridors were becoming ever quieter, but I didn't notice the time passing. The feeling of comfort and protection I felt in her office was something I sought out on days when I felt my confidence melting. That first conversation gave me the confidence to carve my own path, knowing that whilst I may not always fit the mould, there are people with whom I can be myself.

Here I paint a vivid picture of the feelings that arose from this experience. This story demonstrates how, so often, belonging feels like it should align with disciplinary boundaries; how we strive to feel that we fit a predetermined mould of what a successful academic in a particular field "looks" like. The amount of detail (edited for brevity) recalled in the story is indicative of the significance of this particular event, where the environment became imprinted upon the memory of the conversation, intertwined with the moment itself – the lavender and lamps of the story are vital actors within this network (Latour, 2007). How often, in the tumultuous day-to-day mayhem of academic life, do we feel the need to seek out a "sanctuary"; a place that feels safe and somehow removed from the stress and strain of the environment? Many experiences of imposter syndrome, including my own, arise because of the lack of conversation and connection. Finding out that someone else has been through a similar experience to me or shares a particular set of

beliefs that in the context of the discipline may appear outside the norm, instantly changes that perception from being a lonely outsider, towards a perception of the possibility to co-create new norms. Being different can lead to feelings of vulnerability, but being different alongside an ally who shares your beliefs and values can be empowering.

Story 5: I don't fit in this box

I sit in a meeting with discipline leaders from across the school: Exercise Physiology, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Physiotherapy, PDHPE: Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. What should the shared honours curriculum include? "Epistemology, of course," I say. Furrowed brows return my statement. "What's epistemology?" they ask.

I am different. I don't fit into this box.

I review the pages of my academic portfolio with my supervisor. "This scholarship of teaching and learning content is nice, but it's extra. It doesn't really count towards your annual review." Despite finding a group of colleagues whose values, priorities and expertise I admire and share, I reluctantly and with a sense of bereavement tell colleagues on a teaching innovation grant I can't be part of the next collaboration.

I am different. I don't fit into this box.

Feeling vulnerable as a sleep-deprived mother of a three-year-old and two-month-old, I introduce myself to a room of very accomplished education researchers as an emotions scholar and health sociologist. "What are you doing here, then?" one asks. Another jumps in, saying I have already contributed substantially to the symposium's aims.

I am different. That is recognised, but also valued.

I join a group of women academics from across the university. Promotion, we learn, is not just about ticking boxes crafted from a patriarchal and Eurocentric platform, imposing their own privileged experience as the universal benchmark of excellence. It is about finding and articulating one's story: a story about what you are doing and why it matters, and leading others on the same narrative quest.

I am different, but I am not lesser. I am me.

I lead a team of researchers and educators interested in doing research in health, healthcare and health professional education differently: more social, more relational, more just, more human. We win a contract to do research that matters, research that enables us to be advocates and help others advocate for their justice-oriented work. We celebrate. But there is dissent. "How can we be so capitalist?" some ask. After years of struggling through epistemic, methodological and disciplinary differences, I now have a group where I feel I belong. How do I reconcile these new and unanticipated divisions?

I am different, I am valued. I am challenged, I am tired.

In reflecting on my story, I (re)feel the despair of difference – imposed by categories, disciplines and siloes advancing narrow and illusive "ideal" pathways for seeing, doing and funding research – which left me feeling unrecognised, overlooked and unappreciated. (Non-)belonging here is contained to a small metaphorical box: a finite, contained and square characterisation of academic doing, a tick mark within a box signifying inclusion/exclusion. That sense of (non-)belonging that circulates through meetings, comparisons and appraisal forms ironically goads further isolation; feeling different from what is expected prompted me to end a collaboration with staff I *did* feel a sense of connection to. The push and pull across the rippled-cardboard box's edge or tick-box line signals the fallacy of conceptualising belonging as something fixed, the violence of boundedness and the liberation of discovering one's own value in a flattened, expanded and self-decorated box. But also, the false security of the box metaphor – once you make it inside a box that you identify with, when you are in a space with others working towards the same or similar pathways of resistance, fractions and fluctuations in (non-)belonging can still emerge. When coming from a place of (non-)belonging in facing such fractions, perhaps the affective difference is one of emotional energy in withstanding the dissonance.

Story 6: making friends

I chose this story because it's a really nice example of both belonging and unbelonging and how it kind of ties in with sense of self and identity and, for me, a lot of - what's the word? - insecurity. I was brand new to academia, in the last year of my PhD, and I had never really done an academic job before. I'd meet with my manager on a weekly basis. I'd have my notes, my pen, my paper and I'd sit there and I'd hope that this meeting would be different. And yet, every meeting I would walk out and I'd have no idea what he was talking about. Only inside, I would just die that little bit more thinking that academia was not for me, I was too stupid for it, I was never going to fit in - I just did not belong.

After this one particular meeting I went for coffee with a colleague. I was almost in tears, "I have no idea what's going on, I go into these meetings I don't understand anything" and she just looked at me and went oh yeah. She had had the same experience. In that moment we had this connection and we've been friends, for a long time now. It says something also about how we interpret things and make sense of things, we [my boss and I] weren't communicating very well. It was something really simple and it didn't mean that I was not cut out for academia and was really stupid.

There is so much energy and emotion extended through questioning my belonging in academia. Perhaps the struggle to find role models that we see ourselves in means we feel insecure. Or perhaps the structures that exist do not offer enough support for beginning academics to find their way and feel that they belong. In this story, the relief and recognition were through happenstance. A coffee with another female colleague – a micro-moment of connection through a resonance in experiences. The constant questioning of place, of fit, and belonging is wasteful and exhausting, and unfortunately never goes away. Bourdieu's notion of habitus implies we will feel "at home" in the right environment where there is "unproblematic alignment between the dispositions of the habitus and the demands of the field" (Reay et al., 2010). Does anyone feel this in academia anymore? Who feels "at home" in this highly performative, competitive and hierarchical/surveillance culture?

Belonging as flickering and in flux

Through this project we aimed to interrogate and to untangle belonging within academic work. Emerging from our reflections, we offer a new conception of belonging as sticky, flickering and mobile. We need to ask not what is belonging, but where is it made and unmade? What does it do? What does it constrain? We see commonalities in how (non-)belonging threads through these six stories. The assemblages of both belonging and non-belonging include identity (mothers, new academics, researchers, friends), places (Italy, café, office), spaces (the square, box, conference room), objects (furniture, coffee, lavender, lamps), entangled with emotions of dislocation, disconnection, fear, anxiety, connection, stupidity, exhaustion, loneliness. These and many other actors tell stories of (non-)belonging. Returning to Barad's (2007) notion of *intra-action*, our narratives show how the various actors (human and material) do not interact as discrete entities acting upon each other, but as relationally co-constituted beings that co-emerge together. We conceptualise belonging as sticky, but also flickering in its instability, entangled with affect, and on the move. Next, we explore the doing of belonging and what constitutes this stickiness.

Belonging as emotional labour?

Previous research implicates devalued emotional labour performed by women academics – specifically, the care work performed with and for students – in their feelings of alienation from neo-liberal higher education workplaces in the UK (Rickett & Morris, 2021). Clearly, there is emotional labour – work performed to manage one's own and others' emotions (Hochschild, [1983] 2012) – evident in our six stories of (non-)belonging. This labour involved the surface acting of managing situated feelings of embarrassment and disconnection: suppressed eye-rolls,

lip-biting to hold back tears, display work to combat the shame of being different-lesser. It also involved the deep acting necessary to quiet a sense of inadequacy. Yet, our stories suggest that the affective trajectory of (non-)belonging involves more than emotion management. It is more than a matter of internal or dyadic acts of concealing, intensifying and modifying to conform.

(Non-)belonging is circulating and relational, involving coming together and at once coming apart. Drawing on Barad (2007), we can replace linear understanding of belonging as work involving emotional and structural compliance with liberating conceptualisations of making and unmaking: connections, affections and spaces. Such an understanding of belonging shifts us away from seeing (internal) human emotions as central, towards centring exterior emotions: the "objects of emotion that circulate" and spill across boundaries, connecting and repelling us towards and away from people, places and objects (Ahmed, 2004, p. 11). Importantly, it involves the making of spaces – temporal, material, affective – for relational (dis-)connection. In short, our stories suggest feelings of belonging are not merely managed by individual academics; (non-)belonging is inflected with power, fluctuating and done simultaneously by, to and through objects, spaces and us.

The imaginaries of (non-)belonging

We contend that belonging is bound up and created via imaginaries. According to Ahmed, emotions are not simply a matter of individual impressions but that this "contact is shaped by past histories of contact" (2004, p. 7). We experienced an emotional stickiness in re-reading the stories – a mediation through bodily memories and resonance with the moments of belonging and non-belonging. The emotional entanglement we feel with others' stories, whether feeling invisible or questioning belonging, gives insight into the power structures of the university. The vulnerabilities of being a female academic are bodily felt in re-engaging with the stories, through the initial telling and drafting and redrafting of this paper. This stickiness (and its residue) emerges through bodily recognition of the injustice, the sadness of being othered, being different or lesser than and the joy in the micro-moments of reclaiming our identities as purposeful academics.

Epistemic authority and non-belonging

Collectively, the stories presented in this paper deal with the perennial tension between structural matters that contribute to non-belonging and the feeling of how structures and systems (of practice, thought and values) make us feel like we belong or not. What happened over the course of our discussions, however, was a grappling with the acceptance that *we are the structures*. That is, sometimes we are the very ones who contribute to others' feelings of welcome *and* isolation. As we've revisited throughout the paper, belonging is ephemeral, and we are at equal times experiencing and *creating* non-belonging. There is not a specific space to which we all orient our individual efforts to belong. Rather, we feel it in unexpected moments and in ways that others might not even notice or experience. This is not to say that we cannot and should not devote energy to creating more inclusive practices that help others feel a sense of belonging. We do, instead, encourage a rethinking of belonging (theoretically, materially and discursively) that privileges emotion, feeling and affect, particularly in places like higher education (including the academy) where such matters have been cast as unprofessional, biased or unscientific. We link this to the epistemological argument that Ramazanoglu and Holland (2000, p. 215) make about feminism and its place within the research community:

> The point is not to defend the boundaries of a fixed group of those authorised to say what counts as knowledge…Rather, the point is both to investigate and to question how and why validation and authority come about, and how differing processes of validation become authoritative or not (reason versus emotion; science versus superstition; masculinism versus feminism; white theory versus black experience).

Micro-moments

What did we understand about contemporary work in higher education through the process of engaging in collective biography? We saw how (non-)belonging is made through micro-moments (Gannon et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2020), where connections arise serendipitously and where people can surprise us by making us feel like we matter. Attuning to mundane, everyday, moments (Taylor et al., 2020) reminds us that we shouldn't dismiss as unimportant things that on the surface might seem small or insignificant. Through our stories we surfaced how seemingly trivial experiences were etched onto our memories in fine detail. In turn this reminds us of how easily we can impact others, even in very small ways. In many parts of our stories, we were at the mercy of others and how they made us feel, and how they shaped our sense of identity. There is a need for sense-making processes that help us to move beyond the restrictive ideals of others.

Through our stories we are reminded that it can be particularly challenging to develop a professional identity and a sense of belonging at an early stage of one's career; many stories were situated at this point in our histories. This time can be characterised by an enhanced vulnerability, where who and what you are belonging to is subject to constant flux. With experience this may become easier to manage; as a junior scholar it is more challenging to understand that there is no single "box" into which to fit. This is particularly important because our stories indicate that (non-)belonging is something we embody. If we feel a sense of non-belonging then this can be interpreted as an indication that we ourselves are wrong or broken; the "belonging" comes into existence when something or someone – however trivial – helps us see ourselves as not being the source of the problem.

Belonging as an evolving concept

An entrenched concept, such as belonging, is imbued with assumptions, myths, and folklore. Words have the propensity to lose their meaning as they become part of policies and strategies, and we contend that our stories highlight the inadequacy of the term "belonging" as it is used in institutional dialogue and everyday parlance. Instead, what we discovered is that belonging is situated, fragile, ephemeral, fleeting, challenging, and not always positive. Employing a more fluid conceptualisation of belonging, we suggest, can lead to more generative ways to support colleagues, students, and institutional leaders to create meaningful environments in HE.

A reflexive coming together and an "over to you," the reader

Belonging was made through this study. The collective biography method itself enabled a new space to emerge among the group. While some of us had worked closely with each other before, this was a new collective. We had to feel our way into this collective by slowly setting out some "ground rules" and ways of being and knowing and recording. There were questions about what gets recorded so that initially some of us met off record and spent time getting to know each other. This allowed for more vulnerable exchanges to occur thus strengthening trust and care. There was emotional labour in carefully listening and understanding (both bodily – in a "that resonates with me way" but also epistemically – "this accords with my understanding and experiences"). We created belonging in this counterspace through sharing, reflecting and caring. Perhaps it is the care element that circumvents the performative culture – the being seen and recognised, not as a cog in a machine, but as a person who matters (Gravett et al., 2021).

In this way, the process also felt like a form of resistance, through making space to talk about our feelings and our memories (good and bad) that produced new knowledge about ourselves as academics, teachers, colleagues, friends and people. The academy is not organised in a way that encourages or promotes belonging to be experienced in diverse ways. Indeed, it is a space in which educational disparities remain entrenched (Richardson et al., 2020); and a space in

which there remains few women vice-chancellors, a disproportionately low number of female professors, and "a shamefully low number of black female professors" (Taylor & Fairchild, 2020, p. 11). To spend so many hours *making* belonging (and with the tools of the academy, no less!), feels delightfully rebellious. As academics we play our own roles in admitting/closing doors, in a way. We assess, judge, hold students on the brink of belonging and not belonging. Oddly, participating in this study has made us mindful of not how we don't belong, nor particularly how vulnerable we are, but how the threads of connection run and play underneath all of our experiences. And the most brutal forms of non-belonging are means of blocking these threads.

As readers of the paper we wonder, do you feel the stickiness of belonging? Does it inscribe on your bodies as it has ours, leaving a residue despite the multiple attempts at processing? Perhaps as readers there is an identification of yourselves in the narratives that might lead to circulating of emotions through the artefact of the paper. A form of belonging in itself — or connections among us. This is the work of our collective biography. Certainly, as educators and researchers who knew or did not know each other at the start of our meetings, we affected and were affected by each other. And so, we end on a question to you, the reader. What sticks for you as you feel your way through this paper?

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