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Fluidity and Flexibility of ‘Belonging’

Uses of the Concept in Contemporary Research

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Abstract

Studies framing ‘belonging’ as a key focus and a central concept of research have increased significantly in the 2000s. This article explores the dimensions of belonging

as a scholarly concept. The investigation is based on a qualitative content analysis of articles published in academic journals covering a large number of different disciplines. The article poses and answers the following research questions: How is belonging understood and used in contemporary research? What added value does the concept bring to scholarly discussions? In the analysis, five topoi of conceptualizing belonging—spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality, and non-belonging—were identified. After introducing the topoi, the article explores their cross-cutting dimensions, such as the emphasis on the political, emotional, and affective dimensions of belonging, and discusses key observations made from the data, such as the substantial proportion of research on minorities and ‘vulnerable’ people. The analysis of the data suggests that by choosing to use the concept of belonging, scholars seek to emphasize the fluid, unfixed, and processual nature of diverse social and spatial attachments.

Keywords: belonging, intersectionality, materiality, non-belonging, emotional attachment, politics of belonging, spatiality, vulnerability

Introduction

It seems that in recent scholarship, the concept of belonging has emerged alongside, and partly replaced or challenged, the concept of identity. During the past decades, researchers involved in the critical academic disciplines of ethnic (e.g., Said 1985; Scott, 1995), gender and queer (e.g., Butler, 1990; Warner, 1999), disability (e.g., McRuer, 2006), and postcolonial studies (e.g., Brah, 1996; Hall, 2000) have developed new theoretical and conceptual approaches to studying identity. Simultaneously, identity formations and processes of identification have been explored using diverse, parallel, and sometimes overlapping conceptualizations such as self-constitution, , place-attachment, displacement, and othering. In general, critical theories have broadened academic discussion on identity by highlighting identification as an ongoing process rather than identity as a stable result of finite processes (Bauman, 1992; Butler, 1990; Hall, 2000; Scott, 1995; Woodward, 1997).

Despite the efforts to conceptualize identity as a multi-layered and fluid process, some scholars have argued that the concept has lost its analytic power. For example, Probyn (1996: 5) notes that there are experiences and positions that go beyond what the concept of identity can capture. For her, '[i]dentity has become a set of implacable statements that suppress, at times, questions about what identity really is for' (Probyn, 1996: 9). Instead, she suggests, the concept of belonging 'captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways

in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state' (Probyn, 1996: 19). Indeed, an increasing number of scholars have addressed the questions of diverse forms of 'attachments' or 'identifications' with an alternative conceptualization: 'belonging' has been applied as a theoretical and analytical tool in the investigation of various forms of social interaction and subjective experiences. The concept of belonging has been used to explore and make sense of a wide range of phenomena that scholars have found difficult to address using the concept of identity.

Like identity, belonging has been extensively discussed in various disciplines. While there is an ever-growing body of literature on belonging, several scholars (Anthias, 2006: 19; Antonsich, 2010: 644; Crowley, 1999: 17; Mahar et al., 2012: 1031; Mee and Wright, 2009: 774) have noted that the concept itself is vaguely defined and ill-theorized. Instead, it is often taken for granted and regarded as self-explanatory. Thus, the ambiguous concept needs further clarification and calls for a detailed examination of its explanatory power in making sense of diverse social phenomena.

This article explores the dimensions of belonging as a scholarly concept in contemporary research. The examination is based on a cross-sectional empirical

analysis of peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals covering a large number of different disciplines. Using the method of qualitative content analysis, the article seeks to answer the following questions: How is belonging understood and used in contemporary research? What theoretical frameworks are applied in making sense of the concept? What added value does the concept bring to scholarly discussions? The article begins with a description of the data and methods and proceeds to identification of the main topoi of conceptualizing belonging in the data. After exploring cross-cutting dimensions and themes in the research on belonging and bringing out key observations from the data, reasons for the upsurge of the concept are discussed. Finally, the article suggests a theoretical definition of the concept of belonging and points out themes for further research.

Data and Methods

The starting point of this study is the observation that the concept of belonging is used in contemporary studies in various ways and is given diverse meanings. The aim is to find out how the concept is used and understood and why it is used in such diverse ways. For the sake of valuing the diversity of the meanings and uses of the concept, the research design is not based on any particular predefinition of the concept or assumption

of its 'correct' use. In order to conduct a broad cross-sectional study on the meanings and uses of the concept in contemporary research, the data gathering was focused on the most recent studies with as broad, substantial content as possible. As the study was conducted in the beginning of 2015, the year 2014 formed a relevant timeframe in regard to the aims of the cross-sectional study design. The aim in the data selection was not to focus on only publications that are the most cited. Following the ideas of Soini and Birkeland (2014), it is not only the most cited scholars who contribute to framing and fixing the meanings of concepts in academia; the notions on concepts are produced and established in a broader discussion.

Following the data selection principles of the study, a body of the most recent articles (year 2014) discussing belonging was searched through the EBSCO Academic Search Elite (ASE), a scholarly database characterized by a variety of journals ranging from sciences to humanities and covering numerous subject areas. By searching the data through the EBSCO/ASE, it was possible to reach all contemporary studies (by both the most- and less-referred-to scholars) in which 'belonging' is used as a central concept. The aim of the data selection was to include all the articles in which the authors themselves defined 'belonging' as a central concept by defining it as a keyword of their articles. In gathering the data, therefore, scholarly peer-reviewed English-language articles published in 2014 with 'belonging' as an author-supplied keyword were

searched. With these criteria, EBSCO/ASE gave 103 hits. A careful pre-examination of all the 103 articles was used to delimit the data to articles that explicitly attempt to define the concept, discuss its meanings and uses in research, and/or operationalize it as a means of analysis. The final corpus of analysis includes 67 articles published in 50 journals representing various disciplines ranging from geography to psychology and from ecology to gender studies.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Tesch, 1990), mixing both its ‘conventional’ and ‘directed’ orientations (Hickey and Kipping, 1996; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). First, the contents of the discussions on belonging in the articles were coded with thematic and theoretical keywords derived from the texts themselves. In addition to the text-based starting point of the ‘conventional’ content analysis, information from the authors’ previous study on the concept of belonging (Lähdesmäki et al., 2014) was utilized. The findings of the study directed the analysis by providing initial coding keywords that were tested with the new data. In careful re-reading of the data, the codes were merged into clusters. As a result of the analysis, divergent, yet interdependent topoi of conceptualizing and using the concept of belonging were identified. The relative academic weight of the separate articles was not specified, but all papers were treated as equal when sorted unto

different topoi. The analysis revealed several cross-cutting dimensions, themes and theoretical approaches to the empirical research on belonging.

Conceptualizing belonging in contemporary empirical research

Previous scholarly discussions on the concept of belonging include some efforts to map its diverse meanings by theorizing the contents of the concept on a personal-public axis and/or in relation to the aspects of place and politics. For example, Yuval-Davis (2006) makes a distinction between psychological and political belonging, while Antonsich (2010: 645) sees the discussions on belonging as structured around two dimensions: 'belonging as a personal, intimate feeling of being 'at home' in a place (place-belongingness) and belonging as a discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)'. Other scholars (Bauböck, 2005; Fenster, 2005; Jones and Krzyzanowski, 2007; Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2007) have distinguished between micro and macro structures of belonging and theorized how the idea of belonging varies in different contexts: the concept has been understood as referring to public-oriented official membership in a community, such as citizenship, or encompassing a private sentiment of attachment and an informal subjective feeling of belonging. In addition to structuring the meanings of

the idea of belonging as personal-public or spatial-social relations, some scholars have mapped the practices in and through which the belonging occurs. For example, Sicakkan and Lithman (2005: 27) emphasize the ‘modes of belonging’ when discussing the broad variety of attachments to places, groups, and cultures.

Indeed, content analysis of the data brought out diverse modes of perceiving and making sense of the idea of belonging: this diversity cannot be encapsulated to follow any two-dimensional polarities. Instead, the diverse modes of making sense of belonging can be perceived as an interrelated network or rhizome in which various theoretical points of view, concepts, and discussions intertwine. It thus needs to be acknowledged that different research traditions have fed into the conceptual development of the notion of belonging. The multiplicity of the ways the notion has been used and reconceptualized within each scholarly field have made it the multidisciplinary and, at times, vague concept it is today. However, the analysis shows that certain meanings and uses of the concept are more frequent and dominant. In what follows, the recurrent modes of making sense of the concept are called topoi: the uses and meanings of the concept of belonging can be structured as different topoi that include certain kinds of theoretical and thematic emphases and focuses. Based on the analysis, five intersecting topoi—spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality,

and non-belonging—were identified. In what follows, these topoi are discussed separately for the sake of analytical clarity.

Spatiality of belonging

In the data, belonging is commonly explored in relation to geographical, social, and temporal spaces. As a spatial concept, it is framed and discussed in close connection to the terms of place, space, and boundaries. The spatial notions on belonging are often ‘multi-scalar’ (Huot et al., 2014), including a wide range of interdependent spatialities, such as homes, domestic spaces, neighborhoods, suburbs, villages or urban spaces, regions, countries, and continents.

In the data, the analyses of spatial belonging are particularly prompted by migration, mobility, and displacement of people and trans-local and national boundary-crossing processes. The majority of the articles discussing the spatiality of belonging focuses on ethnic, racial, or national minorities and/or otherwise marginalized groups. Thus it seems that the concept of belonging becomes topical in research when the phenomena discussed with it are somehow precarious or problematic. The studies on migration and mobility highlight belonging as consisting of various simultaneous place attachments:

migration and mobility may create ‘multi-sited’ (Bennett, 2014; Marcu, 2014) spatial belonging, but also feelings of ‘in-betweenness’ (Huot et al., 2014). The sense of belonging to a place is commonly approached in the data as a temporal process that combines experiences from the past, notions of the present, and expectations for the future. In addition, belonging to a place is often approached as a materialized and bodily experience. The spatiality of belonging is, thus, closely intertwined with temporality, materiality, and embodiment: space functions as a concrete frame connecting various other dimensions, aspects, and relationalities of belonging.

The processes of ‘place-making’ (Castillo, 2014) in the data commonly involve negotiation of the emotional, verbalized, and bodily felt, affective dimensions of belonging. Belonging is associated with the trope of home in the entrenched definition of belonging as ‘feeling at home’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 197), and the trope is often replicated in the studies analyzed here. The idea of home refers to spaces of familiarity, comfort, and emotional attachment, and feelings of security generate a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar or insecure environment. For example, the study by Marcu (2014) demonstrates how the nostalgic and affective spaces of home shape migrant identification, and the study by Kobayashi (2014) emphasizes how family ties are crucial in the formation of spatial belonging among migrants. Indeed, in the studies analyzed here, social relations are inherently embedded in spatial belonging.

In the data, spatial belonging is mostly understood as part of the mundane everyday life that defines who we are and how everyday life is lived. The interest in emotional attachments, however, also marks a shift away from understanding belonging as intrinsically territorialized, local belonging to transnational networks and relations. The desire to belong is not a fixed condition; motions, emotions and affects – we use the latter interchangeably, following Ahmed (2004) – often generate differing articulations of nostalgia, belonging, and attachment according to the given historical situation.

Intersectional and multiple belonging

The intertwining and negotiating of complex and interdependent social categories has been theorized with the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Ferree, 2011; McCall, 2005). It refers to the idea of identities and belonging as multilayered and hybrid (Staunæs, 2003: 101) and as characterized by constant spatial and temporal re-configurations (e.g., Fortier 2001).

Although the concept of intersectionality is not commonly used in the data, quite many of the articles take ‘intersecting systems’ (Bugg, 2014) as a starting point of research.

The studies discuss, e.g., intersectional negotiations and collisions between gender, religion, and ethnicity (Bugg, 2014); indigenoussness, class, gender, and caste (Gerharz, 2014); homosexuality and religion (Lustenberger, 2014); whiteness and indigenoussness (Sonn et al., 2014); and gender and disability (Pestka and Wendt, 2014). The studies emphasizing the intersectional approach in the data indicate how belonging—however individual the experience of it may be—always comprises social and political dimensions.

Closely related to the intersectionality of belonging, many of the articles explore how people simultaneously belong to various groups and places. In these views, belonging is never a coherent or autonomous experience, but a complex, multiple, and ‘partial, fragmented, or segmented’ (Fridlund, 2014) relationship. Notions of belonging as intersectional and multiple emphasize the temporal and processual nature of the concept: belonging is perceived as situational, constructed across one’s lifespan, and constantly being negotiated. As Cuervo and Wyn (2014: 912) state, belonging is ‘in a constant process rather than a fixed property that becomes firm once it has been attained’. Because of its intersecting and manifold character, belonging is even perceived as ‘a messy and uncertain process, fractured along a range of axes and social fields’ (Benson, 2014: 3110).

Materiality of belonging

The conjoining of belonging and materiality represents a move beyond the privileging of language in accounts of social life and cultural phenomena. Before the material turn, with the notable exception of the longstanding Marxist intellectual tradition, anthropology (e.g., Miller, 2001) and feminist conceptualizations of body and nature (e.g., Alaimo and Hekman 2008), social theorists mostly understood social affairs as ‘composed of people and their relations’, thus ignoring materiality (Schatzki, 2010: 126).

Many of the empirical studies on belonging in the data exemplify the dissolving of the nature–culture dichotomy. Attention to physical reality, biosphere, and nature as essential dimensions of spatial and cultural belonging provides new insights into the concept, as the studies do not view it merely as a social relationship between people or people and abstract territories. Instead, belonging is constituted as an intimate interaction with nature, a material relation to the physical environment and biosphere. For example, Poe et al. (2014: 914) develop a framework of ‘relational ecologies of belonging’ and argue that determining ‘who and what belongs in a specific place is not a

reflection of essential nature, but rather arises from the interplay of human and more-than-human agencies with sociocultural, political, and ecological contingencies.'

In the data, the materiality of belonging refers first and foremost to the examination of people's contact with their physical surroundings and how such activities contribute to their sense of belonging to a place or a community. While materialism is often related to social status, materialistic values, or juxtaposed with immateriality, the studies dealing with the materiality of belonging examine the ways in which all human being in the world is entangled in and dependent on the materiality of the physical world. The studies that take materiality as their starting point and deal with practices that involve space and materiality often seek new ways to address communities and situations where socioeconomically diverse groups, 'rooted people', and more recently arrived domestic and foreign-born residents of mixed inheritance cohabit (contested) spaces. Taking materiality into account in the analyses of belonging points both to the post-human, material conditioning and manifestations of subjectivity and belonging as well as to the fact that agency is also constructed through material engagement in social practices.

This shift in focus toward materiality is reflected in the point made by Boccagni (2014: 289): 'there is a need to relocate belonging in something real'. The interest in the

everyday negotiations of belonging exemplifies how contemporary research on belonging focuses on materialized micro-levels of belonging and its internal definitions rather than on formal definitions of belonging, such as citizenship. Indeed, the studies focusing on the materiality of belonging in the data discuss, e.g., an intimate relationship between soil and settlers who put down their roots as a part of their place attachments (Mathiesen, 2014) and the role of food, work, and clothing in the production of women's ethnic and religious identity (Bugg, 2014). The theme most frequently linked to the issues of materiality in the data is the migrants' longing for home. In addition, a number of articles take houses—their construction, function, distribution in geographical space, and the social capital involved—as sites where social and affective processes of cohabiting are experienced and negotiated. Houses are thus proven to be much more than commodities: they manifest the social capital of places.

Bennett (2014), through her phenomenological and critical analysis of the concept of belonging, argues that the materiality of a place is a part of the embodied nature of being, and materiality can enable a caring contact with past experiences, places, and generations. For her, it can produce an ethical way of being in the world. As Killias (2014) points out, however, material practices can also be used to hinder belonging and assimilation.

Non-belonging

Gerharz (2014: 553–554) notes that ‘the advantage of the belonging concept is that it emphasizes the relational dimensions of inclusion and exclusion’. Indeed, the idea of belonging and being included comprises the possibility of being excluded. While the majority of the empirical studies in the data emphasize inclusion and participation, exclusion and social deviance as such are discussed in only a few articles. Discussion of the flip side of belonging, the idea of non-belonging, is rare. Non-belonging is explicitly thematized in only one article, where the possibility of marginality is seen as a mode of belonging that offers ‘a kind of comfort in not-being something’ (Harris and Gandolfo, 2014). In general, belonging is regarded as positive, and as something to be achieved. The concept of belonging emphasizes the social aspects of living in the world with others and relating to others in a certain historical and cultural context. In this approach, belonging and non-belonging are structured and determined by diverse power hierarchies and hegemonies.

However, research on non-belonging could enable critical analysis of the complex dimensions of belonging, such as its social and individual aspects, affective experiences, and structures of power. The study of non-belonging allows dealing with

‘how identity politics and discourses of belonging and exclusion are invoked as a means of access or a denial of rights to political power and economic resources’, as Gressier (2014: 6) notes. The analyses of non-belonging as simultaneously embodied, affectively felt, and socially constructed can be perceived as a means to overcome the traditional distinction between belonging as either a psychological or political process. This is also where its potential for future research lies.

Cross-cutting themes and theoretical approaches

The research on belonging comprises various cross-cutting dimensions, themes and recurring theoretical approaches (cf. Lähdesmäki et al., 2014). In the data analysed here, the five different topoi are connected with each other in rhizome-like manner, albeit the concept of belonging is most clearly intertwined with politics. Politics as the practice and theory of influencing other people (Mouffe, 2005), personal choices, or collective public actions characterizes the notions of belonging in all of the identified topoi. In addition, the concept of the ‘politics of belonging’, formulated by Yuval-Davis (2006), is recurrently used in the articles.

To Yuval-Davis, the politics of belonging relates to national belonging and the participatory politics of citizenship, entitlement, and status, and this emphasis characterizes the empirical studies on the politics of belonging in our data as well. Besides exploring the national-political level of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006) encourages researchers to analyze belonging on the level of ethical and political values, the level of social locations, and the level of identifications and emotional attachments. The studies in the data were sorted following these analytical levels. On the level of ethical and political values, the studies particularly explore various problematic issues of citizenship and national belonging. The main interests in the articles that discuss the ethical stand focus on, e.g., ethical obligations to fellow citizens (Patton, 2014) and the ethics of ‘welcoming’ immigrants (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014) in contemporary plural communities. On the level of social locations, the belonging of migrants to new neighborhoods is the most commonly discussed topic (e.g., Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014), but the studies on the politics of belonging also focus on, e.g., disabled students (e.g., Crouch et al., 2014), minority children (e.g., Moore and McDowell, 2014), dual belonging to different religious traditions (e.g., Kang-San, 2014), etc. Socially, these locations are often about displacement, such as leaving the country of origin, being labeled as a migrant, or transitions taking place in the school system.

In regard to Yuval-Davis's level of identifications and emotional attachments, the theme of identity politics arises repeatedly. In many articles the discussion on the politics of belonging is intertwined with questions of identity, whether 'group identity' or 'politics of identity' (e.g., Milton and Marx, 2014). However, some authors in the data particularly emphasize the distinction between the politics of belonging and the politics of identity. As Gerharz (2014: 554) notes, the concept of belonging 'avoids the "fixations" that the concept of identity necessarily implies' in research on the political dimensions of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, theoretical discussions on identity politics have a history and thus include a certain kind of emancipatory emphasis on, e.g., racial, gender, sexual, class, and dis/ability identities. The politics of belonging instead leads to scrutiny of affective dimensions in the experiences and practices of belonging—and in the political attempts related to them.

Similarly to the idea of politics, emotionality is a common and penetrating dimension of the different notions of belonging: affective dimensions of belonging characterize all identified topoi of the study. Although the data includes articles that discuss emotional attachments and the affective sense of belonging, their role in the politics of belonging is surprisingly seldom explicitly analyzed. However, despite the distinction that Yuval-Davis makes between psychological and political belonging, it seems that Antonsich (2010: 634) is right when he claims that this distinction is false, since 'subjective

experiences of belonging or not belonging are profoundly shaped by political belonging'. Indeed, it seems impossible to separate emotional attachments, psychological belonging, and politics of belonging, e.g., when transnational migration brings out the ambiguities of belonging that are explored, e.g., 'both in terms of personal relatedness and national belonging' (Killias, 2014: 885) or when belonging is seen as 'a fundamental issue in the relations between the nation and the homosexual subject' (Kulpa, 2014: 784).

Identifying the five topoi of conceptualizing belonging highlights the centrality of race, ethnicity, and nationality in the contemporary research on belonging: a great majority of the articles focus on migration and immigration, ethnic or racial relations, and differences faced by people in their everyday life. In addition, the studies foreground simultaneous belonging to a minority and a nation and emphasize the processes of negotiation in the recognition of belonging. The analysis brings to the fore groups that could be described as 'vulnerable', and in subordinate positions in society. In addition to members of marginalized ethnic or racial groups, the articles focus on immigrants and indigenous peoples. Particularly immigrants in the USA and the EU are discussed. African-Americans are the most frequently studied group in the USA, while European research concentrates on British society. In Australia, special attention is given to the aboriginal people, while the studies on Asia and Africa tend to focus on national

minorities or intracontinental migration. This corresponds to Michael Skey's (2011) observation that recent research on belonging has most often been examined in relation to marginal groups rather than those who form a dominant group in a nation. Several scholars have, however, focused on analyzing contemporary forms of national identification and sense of belonging of majorities (e.g., Hage, 1998; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst, 2005; Skey, 2011; 2014).

The research on belonging in the data does not, however, foreground only nationality, ethnicity, and race, but focuses also on the youth, children, and elderly people. These three age groups form a considerable proportion of the people whose belonging is investigated in the studies. These age groups may not form minorities, but they can be considered 'vulnerable' in terms of distribution of power in society. Furthermore, the research often focuses on children, youth, and elderly people with special needs, such as adolescents with behavior problems or immigrant children. Other 'vulnerable' groups scrutinized were people with mental health problems, or LGBT people. Often, for example in the studies that explored African-American youth with learning difficulties or Indonesian domestics abused by their masters in Malaysia, the different categories of 'vulnerability' overlap.

The focus on vulnerable groups emphasizes a crucial dimension of the concept of belonging: belonging presupposes access, as Anthias (2002; 2009) notes. It is possible to identify oneself with a particular group, but in order to belong, the question is whether the person *can* belong or not. Minorities and marginalized and oppressed people are often confronted with explicit and implicit inequalities, discrimination, and exclusion caused by limited or blocked access to belonging. The struggle to belong, and sometimes also a sense and a condition of non-belonging (cf. Anthias, 2006; Christensen, 2009), are important points of view in dealing with vulnerable groups.

The theoretical frameworks of the studies in the data vary greatly. However, the majority of the studies adopt a general constructionist standpoint, approaching belonging as a social phenomenon. The relational character of belonging and the constructed nature of identity are commonly emphasized. The studies that discuss belonging in critical, postcolonial, or feminist paradigms often take an anti-racist, emancipatory stance, while the studies that discuss individual sense of belonging, belonging of children and the youth, or issues of education and learning, commonly resort to psychological frameworks. Recurring references are made to some individual theorists' work, most notably that of Yuval-Davis.

Most of the studies are based on empirical investigation: belonging is explored with a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods, and the concept is operationalized in various ways to meet the demands of diverse sets of data. As a concept, however, belonging remains ambiguous and flexible. This becomes evident particularly when belonging is measured in quantitative research. Although the concept itself is often defined in quantitative studies in order to enable measuring, the results of the studies commonly provide rough categorization, models, or patterns rather than refined understandings of how and through what kinds of means people seek to belong.

Conclusion

Five topoi discussed in contemporary research on belonging were identified: spatiality, intersectionality, multiplicity, materiality, and non-belonging. The timely topoi are closely related to the contemporary phenomena of migration, transnationality, interculturality, and globalization. Rethinking belonging in the context of increased levels of mobility has led researchers to discuss various forms of multiple belonging, such as multicultural, diasporic, and translocal belonging, and to investigate problematic issues such as discrimination, inequality, and tensions between individuals and communities that the negotiation on belonging may include.

The success of various identity political movements of the past decades has influenced the popularity of investigating racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, or disability identities and belonging to minorities. In general, both individualist identity political projects and ‘politics of difference’ (Hall, 1992: 279–280) have become more visible and openly promoted in today’s societies. The scholarly interest in belonging follows these social changes. It seems that the question of belonging has emerged in research for at least two reasons. First, the emphasis of belonging, along with the interests in identity and indigenusness, is part of ‘the return of the local’, as has been suggested by Geschiere (2009). Although globalization is emphasized, people foster their identities increasingly in ways that are deeply rooted in the local. People’s attempts to establish a primordial right to belong are, however, often politically employed in order to exclude others. This view brings us to the second reason: questions of belonging entail practical and political implications, and in the contemporary world acts of inclusion and exclusion, identification, and struggles over identity have become ever more topical. The concept itself has become politicized: it is used to tackle questions of exclusion, discrimination, and inequality.

As a concept, belonging is closely linked to the recent critically oriented conceptual and theoretical discussions on the concept of identity (see e.g., Anthias, 2002; 2009; Probyn,

1996). In these discussions, too, belonging is approached as multiple, shifting, simultaneous, temporary (or even momentary), spatial, and located in—or oriented toward—multiple locations. Furthermore, belonging is also approached as scalar and temporary: one can (feel to) belong to certain groups, to a certain degree, for a moment. However, several scholars dealing with identities and identification have approached the concept of identity in a similar manner (see e.g., Hall, 1991, 1992, 2000; Woodward, 1997). If the concept of identity is already commonly understood as something that people ‘seek, construct, and negotiate’, and as relational instead of a stable or coherent entity every individual ‘has’ (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 2), do we actually need the concept of belonging?

In scholarly discussions, identity and identification refer to a state where subjects or groups recognize the existence of certain identities as a part of people’s subjectivity—whether as a static, ‘achieved’ state or a flexible ongoing process of becoming. The poststructural and critical theories in particular have broadened the discussion on identities by highlighting identification as an ongoing process rather than identity as a stable result of finite processes. Human relations, attachments to other people, and cultural phenomena are, however, profoundly nuanced, and the level of attachment varies and transforms. People may feel that they belong to something without necessarily describing this feeling as an identification or identity. The concept of

belonging opens new perspectives to the discussion on people's social relations and their social and cultural practices that embrace, for example, emotions and affects. The strength of the concept of belonging lies in the fact that it enables the inclusion of subjective, social, and societal dimensions in the study (May, 2011): belonging as a concept is 'person-centered' (May, 2001: 364), yet it refers not only to a private feeling, but comprises both emotions and external relations. It also includes a political aspect and points to the norms, restrictions, and regulations that enable or hinder belonging. The prevalence of studies and debates on migration points to this in particular .

Yet, while in-depth investigations of the processes of belonging often produce rich and grounded analysis of human experiences embedded in the material world, meta-level generalizations and operationalizations of the concept in empirical research, particularly in broad quantitative studies, may lead to rather banal and self-evident results. Thus, while it is necessary to map the multiple meanings of belonging and discuss the basis of its conceptualizations in different research contexts, the strength of belonging as an academic concept lies exactly in its flexibility and adaptability. Due to its fluid nature, belonging helps us explore the shifting character of borders and frontiers (Gerharz 2014). The complexity of the concept is not accidental but necessary, even to the extent that '*multiple* belonging is constitutive of identity' (Fridlund 2014: 273; italics original). Therefore, 'belonging' cannot be defined as a static concept that has similar meanings

and the same explanatory power in different empirical and theoretical contexts. However, the analysis brought out certain dimensions of the concept that penetrate its meanings and uses regardless of the subject area or approach of the study. Belonging, thus, comprises of situational relationships with other people and social and cultural practices stemming from these relationships, which are fundamentally political and include emotional and/or affective orientations. Belonging is best understood as an entanglement of multiple and intersecting, affective and material, spatially experienced and socio-politically conditioned relations that are context-specific and thus require contextualized definitions. The analytical power of belonging lies in the multiplicity of the dimensions it can potentially cover. However, this flexibility calls for extreme carefulness and clarity in its situated applications.

Based on the analysis of the contemporary (2014) articles, eight suggestions for future studies on 'belonging' we listed.

(1) Although belonging is a useful concept, it requires a clearer definition in relation to other parallel concepts and a critical discussion on its operationalization in research. The studies seldom discuss the distinction between the concepts of identity and belonging, although this kind of theorization has been applied, e.g., by Antonsich (2010) and Anthias (2013); nor do they argue the interrelatedness of the concepts, as has been suggested, e.g., by Guibernau (2013).

(2) Studies dealing with cultural products as means and manifestations of belonging are scarce in the 2014 data. While the request by Yuval-Davis (2006) to study belonging on the levels of social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values is often responded to in the studies, a more rigorous theoretical and empirical engagement with socio-cultural frameworks is called for. Cultural practices and phenomena, as discussed, e.g., by Burrell (2006) and Frontier (2000), should be brought to the focus of research on belonging far more rigorously.

(3) What is almost entirely missing from discussions concerning the material aspects of belonging in the data is the role of art works and artists in the negotiations of belonging. While a small number of studies included art praxis in their exploration of belonging, none dealt with representations of belonging in works of art, literature, films, or plays – perhaps also due to the selected database (ASE). There remains a great deal of venues for research that seeks to understand how art can be used to address the questions of belonging.

(4) Although the majority of the analyzed articles focus on marginal or vulnerable groups, belonging is mostly understood as a positive phenomenon. The negative aspects that belonging might involve are seldom discussed. Including those might, however, help to question a certain normativeness of belonging as a desirable end-destination and non-belonging as inherently negative.

(5) The concept of belonging is mostly used in investigations of contemporary issues, although the idea of belonging might well offer new approaches to investigating the historical relationality of people.

(6) While the studies in the data often deal with multiply oppressed people or groups, intersectionality as a theoretical framework is rarely discussed further. Applying a discussion on intersectionality could prove fruitful in analyzing various intersecting experiences, statuses, and recognitions of belonging.

(7) Studies on belonging would benefit from a further analysis of the interdependence between emotions, and politics (Guibernau 2013), that is, the combination of various levels of research.

(8) The flexibility, fluidity, and adaptability of the concept of belonging call for further longitudinal study of its transformation and development as a scholarly concept.

(9) The scholarly interest in investigating discrimination, inequality, and tensions between individuals and communities is remarkable. However, the studies are rarely based on action research or in any other way explicitly aim to develop non-discriminative structures and practices. By denouncing discriminative structures, scholars should actively seek to impact societal discussions and communal practices on belonging and non-belonging.

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