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## Visibility in Open Workspaces: Implications for Organizational Identification

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This study takes an affordance perspective to examine visibility in open workspaces and its relationship to organizational identification. Spatial visibility—the possibility for members’ behaviors to be visible to others in organizational space—was investigated in a Finnish organization following a transition to open workspace. Interview and survey data revealed that spatial visibility highlighted similarities among workers’ facilities and enhanced exposure and company branding, making attachment to the organization more salient. Visibility also afforded perceptions of inequality by exposing some workers’ space limitations and other constraints in the sociomaterial context, diminishing their feelings of inclusion. Implications for theory and practice about spatial visibility and organizational identification are discussed.

*Keywords: affordances, organizational identification, organizational space, spatial visibility, visibility, workspace*

"It eliminated gatekeepers. You didn't have to make an appointment to see someone" (Edward Skyler, former deputy mayor who sat several feet from Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York, as cited in Tierney, 2012, p. 1). "After nine years as a senior writer, I was forced to trade my private office for a seat at a long, shared table. It felt like my boss had ripped off my clothes and left me standing in my skivvies" (Kaufman, 2014, para. 1).

These are two workers’ perspectives of open workspaces. Many organizations have adopted open workspaces lured by cost savings and potentially more effective collaboration (Fayard & Weeks, 2011), higher productivity (Brennan, Chugh, & Kline, 2002; Sundstrom, Town, Rice, Osborn, & Brill, 1994), increased innovation (Congdon, Flynn, & Redman, 2014), stronger group cohesiveness (Stryker, Santoro, & Farris, 2012), more spontaneous coworker communication (Pentland, 2012), and improved job satisfaction (Sundstrom et al., 1994). Open workspaces offer other benefits such as closer contact with coworkers, encouraging more interaction and closer relationships (Stryker et al., 2012). As illustrated in the

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opening quote from former New York Mayor Bloomberg's deputy assistant, when management and employees work side by side in shared office space, workers may feel more connected to supervisors and organizational leaders because the perceived hierarchy associated with high-status offices is reduced or eliminated (Knight & Haslam, 2010), which can strengthen workers' attachment and identification (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000).

Despite these advantages, open workspaces afford less privacy for employees, who must perpetually work in full view of management and coworkers (Baldry & Barnes, 2012). Constant surveillance can pressure employees to work harder (Barker, 1993), leading to higher productivity, but the increased stress can reduce worker output (Rashid, Kampschroer, Wineman, & Zimring, 2006). Significantly, the lack of control of one's workspace has been linked to feeling devalued to the organization (Elsbach, 2003).

While studies have examined the effects of open workspaces' increased proximity on coordination and collaboration (Zalesny & Farace, 1987), noise disturbances (Tierney, 2012), and audio privacy (Kim & de Dear, 2013), few studies have focused on the *increased visibility* associated with open workspaces (see Hirst & Schwabenland, 2018; Kim & de Dear, 2013, for exemptions) and visibility implications for employees' membership. As the emerging theory of communication visibility shows (Leonardi, 2014; Treem, Leonardi, & van den Hooff, 2020), visibility can make employees more aware of one another's work and increase knowledge about who has interactions with others. As Wilhoit Larson (2020) recently argued, workspaces have a constitutive effect for members. Thus, visibility has implications for employees' relationships with their colleagues, management, and their organization. Furthermore, exposure to material surroundings in common workspaces shapes individuals' connection to the organization (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Our study highlights the applicability of the theory of communication visibility (Treem et al., 2020) beyond digital communication environments by studying spatial visibility in open workspaces and linking it to identification.

Visibility is an important management issue because familiarity and accessibility to leadership can help workers feel closer to their organization (Hirst & Schwabenland, 2018). Visibility of leaders and supervisors who also work in shared space can enhance workers' unity and perceptions of their own value in the organization (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Hirst and Schwabenland (2018) investigated the effects of visibility following an office renovation that replaced traditional office walls with glass to increase activity and interaction. Although visibility afforded greater coworker awareness, increased visibility was problematic and promoted objectification of women.

This investigation explores the perceptions of workers following the implementation of open workspaces. They describe their work alongside their coworkers and supervisors, their exposure to corporate symbolism (such as signage and logos) in open spaces, and how it shaped their membership in their organization. This issue is important for short-term (e.g., productivity, job satisfaction) and long-term (e.g., promotions, turnover) effects. Better understanding of open workspaces can guide theory development about the significance of spatial visibility offering implications for management involved in designing workspaces and also workers whose membership is affected.

### **Open Workspaces**

Although individuals tend to be attracted to and to develop close relationships with others who are within their close proximity (Stryker et al., 2012), spatial visibility affords greater possibilities for interaction and collaboration (Tuncer & Liccope, 2018). Visibility of coworkers may have similar benefits to proximity, including increasing productivity and their connection to their work and employer (Fayard & Weeks, 2011), but research has given little attention to visual stimulation. Visual stimuli can relieve workers from boredom, but such stimuli may also cause them to lose focus as office-based workers feel stress from continuous interruptions, especially when their coworkers distract them from their work because they are more visible (Fonner & Roloff, 2012). Open workspaces produce more visual stimuli because there are no physical barriers to block visual distractions (Congdon et al., 2014). For example, the sight of coworkers and guests coming and going are more likely to attract employees' attention to greet individuals they know, be introduced to those they do not, or simply cause coworkers to take notice. For employees who need to concentrate, the sight of nearby individuals engaging in conversation can cause them to speculate about the nature of the conversation, join in the conversation, or become annoyed by the excessive stimuli.

### **Visibility as an Affordance in Open Workspaces**

According to Fayard and Weeks (2007), "affordances of an environment are the possibilities for action called forth by it to a perceived subject" (p. 605). Originating from ecology (Gibson, 1979), affordances differ from features or material influence because affordances are not material in nature. Instead, affordances are action possibilities constituted in the relationship between actors and the materiality of their surroundings (see also Treem & Leonardi, 2013). Thus, an affordance perspective provides a lens to understand how individuals' behavior is shaped but never fully determined by physical and social settings (Fayard & Weeks, 2007). Most research in the field of communication considers technological or media affordances (e.g., Rice et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2013); however, some organization studies have also analyzed spaces from an affordance perspective (e.g., Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Koutamanis, 2006). Spatial affordances include accessibility and visibility that are related to moving patterns in museums (Wineman & Peponis, 2010) as well as affordances provided by city infrastructure that enable bicyclists an easy cycling experience (Wilhoit, 2018).

Affordances such as visibility (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Treem et al., 2020) and navigability (Sundar, 2008) offer implications for organizational spaces with different action possibilities with potential capabilities and constraints "relative to the agent's needs or purposes, within a given context" (Rice et al., 2017, p. 109). For example, navigability is the potential to transport from one location to another (Sundar, 2008), and office layouts could afford navigability including how signs, furniture, and daily activities are situated. We echo Rice and coauthors (2017) who claim affordances can be resources through which organizational members accomplish their work. In other words, visibility in a workspace is a resource that is relatively persistent but available to workers, and workers' actions evolve to take advantage of this resource in their environment (Withagen & van Wermeskerken, 2010; see also Reed, 1996). Thus, this study examines visibility affordance after employees' transition to open workspaces and how they perceive this resource through which they construct their relationships with the organization.

Drawing from literature on the emerging theory of visibility (Treem et al., 2020), we define *visibility* as an organizational spatial affordance as a possibility for members to make their “behaviors, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections that were once invisible (or at least very hard to see) visible to others in the organization” (Treem & Leonardi, 2013, p. 150) in an open workspace. We define visibility as a spatial affordance to include those capabilities and constraints that make certain aspects of organizational life and membership visible to the workers in a given workspace. Thus, the sociomaterial context of visibility presents possibilities and constraints that vary related to the needs of members. Here, sociomateriality refers to acknowledging both the material features of the space related to visibility and also recognizing the different social and symbolic meanings that play roles in visibility (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Treem et al., 2020). The sociomaterial context of spatial visibility means that we consider, for example, the number of people present in the open spaces, the number and volume of their visible actions, and the material features of the open spaces (signage, furniture, room dividers) used to enable or constrain visibility. Employees are embedded in this sociomaterial context whether or not they are intentionally managing their own or observing others’ visibility (Treem et al., 2020).

Finally, following the emerging theory of communication visibility (Treem et al., 2020), we propose that visibility as an organizational spatial affordance consists of intertwined dimensions that result from (1) actions that make employees’ communications visible in the open workspaces, (2) intentional or unintentional efforts by others to observe these communicative actions, and (3) sociomaterial context that enables or constrains the visibility of certain communications. The multidimensional nature of communication visibility is extended to include spatial visibility by acknowledging the different dimensions of visibility related to actors, observers, and the sociomaterial context of organizational spaces. Thus, we differentiate visibility as an affordance from other concepts, such as propinquity, as the three dimensions of visibility affordance form a theoretically coherent whole in terms of the consequences they have on organizational membership. Furthermore, while prior scholarship on visibility has largely focused on digital contexts, we show how visibility can be a spatial affordance with outcomes for organizational identification.

### **Organizational Identification and Visibility**

Organizational identification is “interaction or other behaviors demonstrating one’s attachment” (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998, p. 303) and is the belief of shared common values and the perception that membership in the organization is a salient part of one’s social identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Individuals are more likely to form identification with organizations that they perceive strengthen their personal identities, thus seeking affiliation with organizations that enhance their external images (Scott et al., 1998). When members are exposed to symbols such as corporate missions, logos, and impressive offices, these representations can strengthen their identification (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Open workspaces often include unity-boosting visuals such as photographs of organizational events and teams, project boards with team members and goals, publicly displayed recognitions, and reminders about the organizational mission. Even visibility of leaders in the work area may bolster feelings of identification (Tierney, 2012).

Identification is triggered when members perceive their role is valued by the organization (Tyler & Blader, 2003). When members believe they are valued, their feelings of self are enhanced, motivating them to validate that social identity through their behaviors (Fuller et al., 2006). Members’ perceptions of their

worth are affected by cues including organizational structures, policies, and communication with organizational leaders (Fuller et al., 2006). Policies that physically position employees and leadership in shared workspaces communicate that employees' work *also* is valued in the organization. Visible egalitarianism is also fostered by similar work desks and equipment. Rank-and-file workers may feel more valued for their contributions, potentially elevating their organizational identification (Zhu, Tatachari, & Chattopadhyay, 2017). Similarly, while little is known about how spatial organizing of employees is associated with identification, Millward, Haslam, and Postmes (2007) showed that "hot desking" (employees can freely change workstations) fostered employees' organizational identification.

The sociomaterial context related to visibility of open workspaces can also strengthen or weaken organizational identification (Cardador & Pratt, 2006). Workers performing duties in open workspaces with company-branded signage or furnishing are afforded reminders of their membership in the organization. Objects and furniture, such as electronic workstations or big computer screens in open areas, carry symbolic meanings (Sivunen & Putnam, 2020). Similarly, the layout of the office, such as putting workers within view of others, may afford opportunities to develop the collective and more attachment with it (Fuller et al., 2006).

Conversely, open workspaces have the potential for negative relationships with organizational identification. Workers who once had offices with physical walls and privacy, but now must perform in sight of everyone, may feel less distinctiveness and valued, negatively affecting their identification. Zhu and colleagues (2017) found that members' identification decreased when an organization switched from traditional offices to open workspaces that did not offer designated space and privacy. Management may perceive a breach of a psychological contract and wonder why they have worked hard to advance when they are relegated to a desk in a "bullpen" (Zhu et al., 2017). Workers are likely to infer organizational (un)supportiveness based in part on their spatial work environment and the visibility it brings. That perceived supportiveness is reciprocal with implications for the organization (Zhu & Dailey, 2019). Through these mechanisms, visibility provided by open offices is an affordance enabling or constraining members' feelings of value and linkage to the organization.

Visibility afforded by the open workspaces could promote interaction, employees' perceptions of their worth in the organization, and their organizational identification. At the same time, it can lead to low productivity, stress related to a lack of privacy, and diminished organizational identification. On this basis, we pose the following question:

*RQ1: How does visibility afforded in shared open workspaces enable/constrain worker organizational identification?*

## **Method**

### ***Research Site***

This study is a qualitative, in-depth analysis of a Finnish transportation company (TransCo) that built a new headquarters where about 700 employees were located. Previously, employees were dispersed in buildings on a shared campus. In the old buildings, executives were on their own floors that could not be accessed by others; most of the employees worked in their own or shared offices.

TransCo designed its new headquarters as open office spaces to accommodate all employees. Employees from subsidiary companies moved to the new headquarters from a neighboring city. This move also reflected TransCo's internal transformation from a Finnish organization to a more international company. To emphasize that they employed many international workers, they promoted the use of English—a more international language—in their internal communication. Even though the employees were still heavily monocultural and monolingual Finnish, the new building reflected internationalization as its name is an acronym based on English words.

In the new headquarters, all employees had assigned desks and small storage for personal belongings in large open spaces. The spaces were similar throughout the building, and all units worked in areas that were similar in layout, décor, and furnishings. Employees from all levels could see one another freely. The office included a few meeting rooms for individual work that could be used when concentration was needed or for private meetings (on the phone or in person). Common areas featured informal meeting areas, lounges, and kitchens. At the entrance of the building was the TransCo souvenir store, where employees and the public could buy mementos with the TransCo logo. In a nearby area, uniformed members reported for work and relaxed between assignments.

### ***Data Collection***

The data were collected with surveys and interviews. The first author had many site visits to meet employees and subsidiary workers and learn about the company policies about workspaces. During these visits, she made field notes on the physical layout of the office space, what types of artifacts were visible, and the appearance of the spaces. She also made notes comparing the new open office with the old offices, which she had visited previously.

During interviews, workers often discussed their connections to the organization in relation to their new workspaces. Open-ended survey questions asked about the effects of the new office spaces in terms of individual work, collaboration, and communication with team members as well as across organizational units. The survey was sent to all headquarters workers, including individuals who worked for the TransCo subsidiary. We received 295 usable responses (43% response rate), of which 224 provided answers to the open-ended questions.

The interviewees were sampled from different levels and functions (logistics, finance, customer service) as well as from subsidiaries. We e-mailed sampled workers and invited them to participate. The

semistructured interviews with 26 employees ranged from 36 to 77 minutes and averaged 61 minutes and were conducted at the headquarters in Finnish or English, depending on the interviewee's preference. Interviewees described where and when they typically worked and how these spaces supported their work. They described their new workspaces and what it was like working in them. We asked about their communication and collaboration with their colleagues, supervisors, and others in the new headquarters, and whether collaborations had changed. We also asked, given the new office spaces, how attractive TransCo was for them as a workplace. Finally, we asked how strongly they identified with the organization and whether the new offices played a role in how they perceived themselves relative to TransCo. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### ***Data Analysis***

The transcriptions included 587 pages of single-spaced text, averaging approximately 8,000 words per interview. In addition, 224 respondents provided open-ended survey responses. Because the open-ended survey and interview questions reflected the same issues, we examined responses to assess differences in the data sets. Although written responses tended to be more concise, there was no substantial difference in content. On this basis, we combined both data sets into Atlas.ti for qualitative coding. Next, we conducted a comparative analysis (see e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1994) by reading and categorizing the data in three linked subprocesses. This allowed for inductive development and formulation of categories. First, open coding included a line-by-line analysis flagging each instance in which the respondents talked about the new office spaces and their organizational membership, as well as related benefits or challenges. This reduced the data to manageable portions. We used "informant-centric" codes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013), such as "distractions," "encounters," "belonging," and "sense of equality." Rereading the data extracts in their contexts helped in discovering the properties of each code.

Second, through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we compared codes by looking for similarities and contrasting them, leading to refining the codes and formulations of first- and second-order themes. We focused on how informants discussed the possibilities and limitations of visibility (such as getting things done because of spontaneously seeing others, recognizing faces, seeing differences between one's and others' work, and feelings of inequality caused by other employees passing by and seeing one's work). These codes were more "research-centric" (Gioia et al., 2013) and informed by our emerging theoretical interest on visibility, identification, and affordances. As we continued, we linked these codes with perceived consequences on work and organizational membership. Some codes were then merged and others divided and recoded to form final codes.

Third, coding was finalized by distilling the second-order codes to overarching aggregate dimensions by "stepping up in abstractness," helping to finalize the data structure (Gioia et al., 2013). These became the third-order themes in our theoretical model. Examples of quotes reflecting the first- and second-order codes and the aggregate dimensions are in Table 1. We translated relevant coded Finnish transcriptions into English for use in the findings section. Interviewees' names were replaced with pseudonyms and survey respondents' names with numbers.



**Table 1. Sample Quotes and First-, Second-, and Third-Order Themes.**

Sample quotes	First-order themes	Second-order themes (dimensions of the visibility affordance)	Third-order themes/aggregate dimensions
R1073: Networking across unit boundaries is easier and things get done when passing by people when you meet them in a coffee machine/elevator/staircase.	Being visible to coworkers and supervisors	(1) Making oneself visible	Visibility as an affordance fostering identification
Johanna: Now when we have moved, absolutely, I feel more as a part of TransCo people than before. Absolutely, before TransCo consolidated corporation was pretty distant. . . . And it helps when you slowly learn the faces. (subsidiary employee)	Seeing coworkers and managers, learning the faces	(2) Observing others	
Eeva: That you actually see the managers here, and you can say "hello" to them and not go to a separate office (to meet them). I think it's very different (than in the old office space).			
Mark: In some departments, the doors used to be locked, you couldn't go in there. That has been striking, how to bring those silos down (in the organization), and this may be one step (toward it) because now you can walk freely and there are no closed doors.	Being able to walk freely and look around and see others in the office	(3) The sociomaterial context	
Susan: We are more equal (now in the new office). And everybody works in an open office, there's nothing like, that person has such a big office. Everyone has same kinds of office chairs, not so that supervisor would have a higher chair. Those are all things that create a message that we are more equal.	Seeing the equal arrangements in the office		
Jonas: It's incredible, the desk solution everybody now has. You can easily change it			

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as a standing workstation or sitting workstation, and nobody has to anymore sacrifice their time in starting negotiating with their supervisor, "Can I. . .," but everyone can do the work the way it's the best for themselves and without ergonomic concerns.

Anna: I feel that I'm a member of TransCo, and it is emphasized better here than when we were in the city center. . . .When you come here every day and it says TransCo everywhere, it slowly goes to the subconscious. (subsidiary employee)

Seeing company logos, artifacts, and décor

Emilia: The spaces are TransCo-like. . . . What is unique to TransCo has been brought here, and it is supported by the spatial design.

Jonas: Downstairs there will be a brand room, which perhaps strengthens the feel of belonging to this corporation because you look at it every day and show it to your guests.

Susan: Especially, if there's like a call in English, so it feels really embarrassing, if there's really quiet and now I have to shout to the phone, or there's a call from a retiree and you have to shout—so before I didn't even think of whether I yelled on the phone, but here you feel kind of. . .embarrassed. . . . We (team members) can't go anywhere else because if we get a phone call, it's a landline telephone, so we can't leave. (subsidiary employee)

Having to make one's work visible  
  
Differences in workstations and technologies used becoming visible

(1) Making oneself visible, (3) the sociomaterial context

Visibility as a constraint diminishing identification

Julia: We have desktop computers, and we don't have laptops . . . so I can't move to a quiet room to work. And we have landline phones. . . . This is sales work, we do it always on the same spot. (subsidiary employee)

Differences in workstations and technologies used becoming visible

(2) Observing others, (3) the sociomaterial context

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Bruno: We were moving into this (new office building), which is called (English acronym), which means House of whatever, in English. . . . It comes that we should get people (working here) from abroad, with some experience from outside. . . . Why are all the labels in this building in Finnish?. . . . And small thing, these lights. . . . I don't know how to turn on the light. I just need to start trying with it. Same with the lift, when they introduced the thing that you need to scan the card, people didn't know what to do, when they put a piece of paper on it, in Finnish. So it's . . . identification with the company.	Being exposed to artifacts signaling the differences between oneself and the organization	(3) The sociomaterial context
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### **Findings**

Many participants indicated that visibility was associated with how they felt about their work, their place in TransCo, and their accounts linked visibility with their identification to the organization. Next, we highlight the ways in which visibility afforded by the open office strengthened individuals' feelings of equality and belonging, shaping their identification with the organization. Then we show how visibility was a constraint, emphasizing the differences among organizational members, their roles, and ways of working, excluding some of the members with identification implications.

#### ***Visibility Fostering Identification***

When asked about the new office environment, most informants talked about the increased visibility. The open office had no fixed walls between workstations, the doors to different floors were open to employees, and the shared kitchen and coffee corner were used by all employees on the floor, which allowed them to roam freely and afforded new visual exposure. Accordingly, the new open office (1) afforded making oneself and one's communication visible, (2) enabled unintentional or intentional observing of others and their communications, and (3) afforded visual exposure to the sociomaterial context. Informants' accounts made it clear that they associated this increased visibility afforded by the new open office with strengthening their membership and fostering their organizational identification.

First, informants talked about making oneself and communication visible to other employees and their sense of belonging to the organization. Before the move, individuals who worked for TransCo and its subsidiaries worked in offices throughout the city. After the move, not only were all employees working in the same building but so were individuals who worked for subsidiaries. Both types of workers commented that being visible to others by sharing open spaces at the headquarters helped in getting to know one another and feeling included. As Johanna reported, coming to one office building and being visible to the individuals with whom you work had a strong effect on her feeling closer to the organization: "Now when

we have moved, absolutely, I feel more as a part of TransCo people than before. Absolutely, before TransCo consolidated, corporation was pretty distant. . . . And it helps when you slowly learn the faces.”

They discussed increased visibility that promoted movement and lack of visual barriers, such as walls and partitions in the open office space. As employees now moved between floors and between their workstations, shared conference rooms, and kitchen facilities, they were more visible. Respondent R1073 described: “Networking across unit boundaries is easier and things get done when passing by people when you meet them in a coffee machine/elevator/staircase.” As they discussed this, it became apparent that being visible and making one’s communication visible to coworkers in the same space promoted familiarity and that they were linked to the organization. Moreover, being visible to organizational leaders also made interaction with leaders easier and motivated workers to contribute to the objectives their leaders espoused. Susan described:

I go now more often to eat together with my supervisor than before . . . because now we are sitting next to each other and we tend to speak about our plans like, “I’m going to lunch,” “Well, I could join you.”

Thus, being visible to a supervisor or coworker preparing to depart for lunch could spark additional interactions, leading to more time spent together and getting to know one another.

Second, visibility fostered familiarity through the ability to observe other members and being able to see their communicative actions in the open workspaces. They frequently saw colleagues they would have not seen in the old offices, and potential collaborations arose because open office spaces made the activities of others visible, triggering communication. Employee R1003 described: “I run into colleagues I would not even see in the old office spaces.” They added that connecting faces to names and organizational titles helped personalize their relationships with other members. Another employee, R1220, agreed: “You can take care of things by passing by, if you happen to see the other person. People who were sitting in the other building before are now seen more often and more easily.” Others’ work projects and practices also became more visible: “Cooperation has become easier, and you meet a lot of new people and get to know their work” (R1123). Similarly, observing managers working in the same open space and being able to greet them made a difference. Eeva reports: “That you actually see the managers here, and you can say ‘hello’ to them, and not go to a separate office (to meet them). I think it’s very different (from in the old office space).”

While these results reflected responses from TransCo employees who were now collocated with fellow employees, similar results were evident with TransCo subsidiary workers now located in the building. They affirmed that observing others every day while working within the TransCo building made them feel more like members of the TransCo team. Subsidiary employee Anna said:

TransCo is our parent company, so yes, I feel like I’m a TransCo employee, and perhaps it is emphasized more here (in the new headquarters). . . . And now when you see the other people every day, it also feels more coherent and same, that we actually work for the same corporation.

Several described how being present with others and seeing their communicative actions solidified their membership and relationships. This stronger connection to the parent organization was reported by all subsidiary worker participants and illustrated how they felt more attachment to TransCo.

Third, employees' accounts showed that exposure to the sociomaterial context in the open office, such as being surrounded by company logos, brand products, and décor, was also related to organizational identification. This visibility created a constant connection to the organization through the spatial design and décor. Visibility was produced through the open office, where workers were exposed to and constantly worked around various material artifacts in the open corridors and working spaces reminded them about their organizational membership. Thus, it was not just the visibility of oneself or being able to observe other TransCo employees and their communicative actions, but it was also the visible, material objects, spaces, and décor that were linked to identification. Jonas described this: "Downstairs there will be a brand room which perhaps strengthens the feel of belonging to this corporation because you look at it every day and show it to your guests." Further, because TransCo's logo and name are well recognized, these individuals expressed pride about their location in the TransCo headquarters. Emilia (subsidiary employee) similarly agreed: "The spaces are TransCo-like. . . . What is unique to TransCo has been brought here, and it is supported by the spatial design." Finally, the sociomaterial context of visibility fostering equality and belonging was manifested in open spaces that allowed workers to walk freely throughout the building, as well as in equal spatial arrangements among the various workers. For many employees, the open office space meant that they could use any workspaces and they could see that the spatial arrangements—workstations and furniture—were the same for nearly all the employees. Several tied this to strengthened feelings of value in the organization. Susan commented:

We are more equal (now in the new open office). And everybody works in an open office. There's nothing like, that person has such a big office. Everyone has same kinds of office chairs, not so that supervisor would have a higher chair. Those are all things that create a message that we are more equal.

As these workers expressed, the layout of the office, which required they work side by side with other workers and even next to one's own supervisor, communicated equality, especially to those who worked for TransCo subsidiaries. These comments indicate that workers felt more an essential part of and stronger identification with TransCo through making themselves visible, observing others, and the sociomaterial context afforded by the increased visibility of the open office.

### ***Visibility Diminishing Identification***

Even though the three dimensions of visibility as a spatial affordance fostered workers' identification, those same dimensions played out also as constraints that diminished workers' identification. Similar to the factors fostering identification, it was the ability to make oneself and one's communicative action visible to others, being able to observe others' communicative actions, and the sociomaterial context of visibility that emphasized differences among workers. It was evident from the participants' accounts that as the office spaces afforded (1) one's own communicative actions to become visible, it also made the differences in organizational roles visible; (2) observing other workers and their communicative actions

exposed how many of these other workers were complete strangers; and (3) the sociomaterial context of the open office affording visual signals, such as signage and brochures in a language not spoken by all workers, all diminished identification with TransCo.

First, the ability to make one's communication visible in open office was seen as a constraint. John described: "Your work is visible to everyone. If someone behind your screen turns their head, they can see what's on your screen. . . . It is disturbing that others can stare at your work." By having to make one's communicative actions visible, differences related to organizational roles became more evident. For example, unlike most of the TransCo employees, workers in the customer service function did not have the ability to work or take phone calls in private locations. Instead, they were required to use traditional landline phones and desktop computers. Rather than being in a dedicated customer service area, their workstations were in open spaces with others who worked in various roles and functions. Compared with their situations in the old building, they were now much more visible, which caused many to compare the constraints of their mobility with others'. R1012 described the discomfort: "There is no privacy here. . . . All the bypassers will see my screen." They described how their work required them to sit at their workstations and talk on the phone and were sometimes embarrassed, especially if they needed to speak loudly or in a different language. This was most poignant when others who worked in different functions around them were able to move and make their calls in private. Susan described how the new visibility of her communicative actions made her feel different and uncomfortable:

Especially if there's like a call in English, so it may feel really embarrassing, if there's really quiet, or there's a call from a retiree and you have to shout to the phone. Before, I didn't even think of whether I yelled on the phone, but here you feel kind of . . . embarrassed.

She elaborated on the differences between her team's work equipment and other employees' equipment: "We can't go anywhere else, because if we get a phone call, it's a landline telephone, so we can't leave." The changes in workers' office space compared with their previous office settings as well as the fact that their work equipment was different compared with those of other workers made them feel less valued. As Zhu and colleagues (2017) argued, when one's role is less prestigious than before or anticipated, organizational identification suffers.

Having to make one's communicative actions visible to several members in an open workspace through phone calls instead of, for example, sending e-mail, was typical for employees in customer service roles where phones were often used. It was the "aurality" of the message that made it visible to others in the open space instead of sending it in a written form. Hearing a colleague speak loudly on the phone or talking with colleagues or visitors often attracted the gazes of others, making participants feel exposed. This way, having to make one's communication visible to others was a constraint affording the opportunity to see the inequalities among the workers. Also, the sociomaterial context of this new visibility, such as the differences in technologies they used, became more visible to employees and others around them. Being tethered to landline phones signified the unequal status of many subsidiary workers. Increased visibility led these workers as well as others around them to become more aware of their differences. As Fuller and colleagues (2006) noted, these types of interactions may cause members to feel less respected and diminish their perceived status.

Second, observing others and the sociomaterial context and their activities exposed how many of other workers passing by in the open workspaces were strangers. As informant R1293 described: "There are bypassers who are total strangers. I don't know who they are or what they do. It feels like I would work at a busy railway station. No one says hello or presents themselves." Frequent foot traffic near workstations made unknown employees more visible compared with the old offices, where everyone on the floor knew one another. When workers observed strangers frequently passing by, they felt that their workspace had become "a busy railway station" affording the gazes of strangers and making their roles in the organization feel less definitive.

Finally, the history and character of the company as a Finnish organization with a homogenous, mainly Finnish, workforce were more emphasized through the affordance of visibility in the sociomaterial context of the headquarters. A non-Finnish worker, Bruno, elaborated how everything visible in the new office spaces, including signs, brochures, and policies, was written only with the local language (Finnish), even though the name of the headquarters was an acronym from English words. He perceived the symbolic meaning of these materials appearing in a noncommon language, such as the signage and leaflets he was exposed to in the open office, that did not support his identification with the organization but emphasized his difference and exclusion from the Finns at TransCo:

Why are all the labels in this building in Finnish? . . . And another small thing, these lights. I don't know how to turn on the light (because the signs were in Finnish) I just need to start trying with it. Same with the lift. When they introduced the thing that you need to scan the card, people didn't know what to do (because the instructions were only in Finnish).

This worker expressed frustrations offered by workers who did not fit into the Finnish culture. Constant reminders of language and cultural differences signaled exclusion. When workers spent most of their time in private offices, there would be fewer constant reminders, but in open office space, the sociomaterial context of visibility contributed to this feeling of exclusion.

### **Discussion**

An affordance perspective reveals how visibility associated with open workspaces had both positive and negative implications on organizational identification. Workers' visibility to others fostered interaction and was associated with feelings of belonging, often linked to seeing more coworkers from one's network and observing their communicative actions every day. The sociomaterial context of visibility, such as seeing visible signs of egalitarianism through the similar workstations everyone shared in the open workspaces, also supported workers' perceptions of organizational attachment. Similarly, other links between visibility and identification were confirmed with subsidiary employees, who now worked in TransCo offices. Being visible to other TransCo employees and being able to observe them and the parent organization's material surroundings helped subsidiary workers feel valued as part of the parent organization.

Some of these effects might be partially attributed to effects of proximity (Fayard & Weeks, 2007). However, participants reported that by being visible to others, observing colleagues in the open workspaces,

and being exposed to branded symbols shaped how they felt in the workplace and were key in strengthening their identification. This was a difference to their previous workspaces, which in many cases enabled proximity (colleagues worked in the same building) but not visibility (they worked on different, closed floors). As several participants concluded, visibility to colleagues, company logos, and décor reinforced that they were all working for the same company.

Despite these positive results, participants also pointed out how the same dimensions of visibility that fostered workers' identification also constrained it. Visibility of one's own work and communicative actions drew attention to inequivalent resources for workers. Those in some roles were tethered to phones and computers and conducted all their work in full view. These workers felt constrained by being visible to others and their inability to escape visibility, causing them to feel inferior, less valued. This supports previous research that feeling valued and respected is important contributor to members' organizational identification (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Furthermore, observing large numbers of unfamiliar employees daily in the open workspaces diminished feelings of belonging and identification. Finally, international TransCo workers who were in the minority also felt a weaker connection to the organization as a result of the sociomaterial aspects of visibility, such as the exposure to Finnish signage and artifacts within the open workspaces.

### ***Implications***

This study offers several theoretical and practical implications. At a theoretical level, we identify and define visibility as an organizational, spatial affordance and show how visibility in open offices heightens awareness of certain aspects of organizational life and membership that were previously invisible or hard to recognize. Previous studies have treated visibility as performative action through which individuals can strategically make their communications visible to others (e.g., Leonardi & Treem, 2012). Our findings show that through spatial visibility employees often feel they have to make their communicative actions visible, whether or not that was their intention. Employees themselves and others in the open space may also become more exposed to or aware of the implications of visibility, such as organizational identification. Thus, we also extend the affordance perspective showing how affordances can call forth action possibilities (and constraints) for members to recognize and become aware of their relationships with other workers and the organization. Prior research has shown that visibility can have consequences on the ways employees work and learn as observing others can facilitate vicarious learning and avoidance of knowledge duplication (Leonardi, 2014). Our study is one of the first to show that (spatial) visibility can also have implications on organizational membership and identification.

Our study also contributes to the theoretical discussion of affordances as organizational resources (Rice et al., 2017) and extends it to spatial affordances of organizational space. We show how the move to an open office space made visibility a more available resource to workers, who became more aware of organizational life and their membership through it. Despite being an organizational resource, visibility can still create positive or negative implications for workers' identification, as it can draw attention to issues that highlight the equality or inequality of workers, foster or constrain feelings of belonging, and help or hinder connection to the organization. Thus, workplace designers need to acknowledge that affordances can also be perceived as constraints and consider how workers' actions can evolve to take advantage of or ignore this available resource.



Finally, we extend theorizing by Treem and colleagues (2020) on the multidimensionality of communication visibility in digital environments to spatial visibility in open office space. Visibility as a spatial affordance results from (1) actions that make employees' communications visible in organizational space (e.g., required landline phone use amid colleagues in the open office), (2) unintentionally or intentionally observing others' activities in organizational space (e.g., walking past colleagues' desks or following others' discussions in the open office), and (3) the sociomaterial context of the organizational space enabling or constraining visibility and visual cues (e.g., how many workers are present in an open space, what types of partition walls, computer screens, uniforms, leaflets, and logos are visible). Thus, even though spatial visibility afforded by open offices is different from communication visibility afforded by communication technologies (mainly because spatial visibility does not work across distance or large networks), the multidimensionality of visibility prevails. Visibility associated with actors' actions operates independently from visibility related to observers' actions, and the sociomaterial context adds another layer on what becomes visible in open workspaces. Spatial visibility also extends the second dimension of visibility, observing others, which could vary from more or less unintentional viewing to intentional gazing, resulting e.g., from someone speaking loudly into a phone in an open office. Sergeeva, Huysman, Soekijad, and van den Hooff (2017) have labeled the influence that third parties exert on others' technology use as "onlooker effect." This way, onlookers can influence the actions that make others' communications visible in open spaces, either directly by intervening in those activities (e.g., asking them to speak more quietly on the phone), but often indirectly through workers' own assumptions about third-party actors' judgments (e.g., thinking that others see them as less equal because they are tethered to landline phones; see also Treem et al., 2020).

Practical implications can guide management and workspace designers about how workers may respond to the increased visibility afforded by an open environment. Continuously being within the physical setting with signs and symbols of one's membership, and being visible and observing one's coworkers, even if only through a subsidiary link, can strengthen workers' relationships to the organization. Still, integrating employees and work associates into a newly open workspace that grants visible access to individuals who may not know one another and whose work is not connected may also diminish positive feelings about their membership. This situation is exacerbated for workers who cannot take advantage of visibility as a resource the same way as other members and may feel unequal because of it.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Although interviews took place only a few months following the transition to open workspaces, this study would have benefited from a longitudinal approach rather than only reflections from participants following the open-space implementation. Future studies could apply longitudinal methods to see whether and how workers' actions may evolve after an office transition to take advantage of or ignore the new visibility resource in organizational space.

In addition, while our participants discussed positives and negatives associated with viewing signs, symbols, and coworkers, some of the findings may also be related to increased proximity. Future research may compare open office space redesigns that increase visibility and also offer proximity but that do not offer constant visibility as a comparison.

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