

The fluid affective space of organizational practices

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The fluid
affective space

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Abstract

Purpose – The article contributes to affective ethnography focussing on the fluidity of organizational spacing. Through the concept of affective space, it highlights those elements that are ephemeral and elusive – like affect, aesthetics, atmosphere, intensity, moods – and proposes to explore affect as spatialized and space as affective. **Design/methodology/approach** – Fluidity is proposed as a conceptual lens that sits at the conjunction of space and affect, highlighting both the movement in time and space, and the mutable relationships that the capacity of affecting and being affected weaves. It experiments with “writing differently” in affective ethnography, thus performing the space of representation of affective space.

Findings – The article enriches the alternative to a conceptualization of organizations as stable entities, considering organizing in its spatial fluidity and in being a fragmented, affective and dispersed phenomenon.

Originality/value – The article’s writing is an example of intertextuality constructed through five praxiographic stories that illustrate the multiple fluidity of affective spacing in terms of temporal fluidity, fluidity of boundaries, of participation, of the object of practice, and atmospheric fluidity.

Keywords Agencement, Posthumanist practice theory, Spacing, Affective ethnography, Affective space, Fluidity

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Introduction

Space as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity (Massey, 2005, p. 9)

How can we account for those forces that make up the meaning and the feeling of a “place” and are produced and reproduced by organizational practices, yet are ephemeral, always changing, and difficult to re-present in traditional academic writing? In this article, these issues are addressed through a discussion of the relation between space and affect approached via posthumanist practice theory (Gherardi, 2022a).

The concept of “affective space” focuses on affect as spatialized and space as affective and draws attention to those ephemeral elements which have the power of holding all the practice elements together and give a qualitative tone to what is accomplished in practising. This approach entails a rethinking of space as processual, performative, multiple, affective and fluid. Consonant with the turn to practice, the turn to space and the turn to affect, I focus on the everyday spatial becoming of different organizing practices in order to rise the methodological question of how to conduct empirical research on affective spacing as an ephemeral and fluid phenomenon, that I name “fluid affective spacing”.

My approach to organizational space departs from the more traditional objectivist approach to space prevalent in the literature: the distribution of positions in space, the isolation of space, the differentiation of spaces, and the intersection of distinct spaces (Weinfurter and Seidl, 2019). It is positioned within the ongoing debate on space in



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organization studies that expresses as a move from “space” to “spacing” and – I suggest – to “spacing practices”. This move is inspired by [Beyes and Steyaert \(2012, p. 48\)](#), who introduced the gerundial form akin to the well-known conceptual shift from organization to organizing, arguing that spacing “entails a rethinking of space as processual and performative, open-ended and multiple, practiced and of the everyday”. A reframing of space as spacing “implies exchanging a vocabulary of stasis, representation, reification and closure with one of intensities, capacities and forces; rhythms, cycles, encounters, events, movements and flows; instincts, affects, atmospheres and auras; relations, knots and assemblages” ([Beyes and Steyaert, 2012, p. 48](#)). With the introduction of the concept of spacing, the classical distinction within space – as objective, measurable and related to scale – and place as invested with meaning and value, is blurred ([Wilhoit Larson, 2021](#)). Both space and place require material objects, discourses, meanings and people to come into being and hang together within an organizational practice.

The article is positioned within the theoretical framework of affective ethnography ([Gherardi, 2019c](#)), a label that gained momentum after few years from its introduction in organization studies. It denominates a research practice that I will illustrate in detail in what follows. I anticipate that the motivation for working within affective ethnography is that, despite “spacing” and “placeness” are dimensions somehow present in organizational ethnographies inspired by the sensory and the aesthetics ([Pink, 2015](#); [Strati, 1999](#)), by corporeal engagement with the research site ([Dale and Latham, 2015](#); [Latham and Wagner, 2021](#)), by critical diversity methods ([Holck, 2018](#)) and by affect and embodied writing ([Katila et al., 2020](#); [Kuismin, 2022](#); [van Eck et al., 2021](#)) there is still a need to explore more carefully how its concept of placeness is theorized in relation to affect as spatialized and space as affective.

The aim of the paper is therefore to contribute to the way of thinking and writing emplacement in organization and management studies, considering ethnography as a situated research practice in which writing is a constitutive activity and – according to [Winthereik and Verran \(2012\)](#) – ethnographic stories have in them a capacity to re-present the world in ways that are “generative” for the practices we study. In writing stories about fluid affective spacing, I intend to write a space of representation [\[1\]](#) for affective spaces.

In the following, I will introduce an approach to the empirical analysis of situated practices based on posthumanist practice theory, and delineate a methodological framework for discussing the entanglement of affect and space in affective ethnography. In the second [section I](#) will focus on “thinking-space and writing-affect” as a short methodological note that anticipate how I wrote five short stories about affective spacing. The stories illustrate very different practices: a prefiguration of a practice of technological control at a distance, a transnational practice of surrogate motherhood, a new social practice of bike commuting to work, an organizational practice for handling blood as a multiple object, and finally a neologism (*flygskam*) that gives name and sustains an affective atmosphere. The five stories about practice that I weave together, like in a collage, construct my argument about the fluidity of affective spaces: fluidity of time, of boundaries, of participation, of the object and of atmosphere. A reflection on the contribution that fluid affective spacing offer to affective ethnography and organizational studies conclude the article.

Framing the relationship between space and affect via posthumanist practice theory

In organization and management studies there is a debate around what has been called a “spatial turn” ([Beyes and Holt, 2020](#); [Beyes and Steyaert, 2012](#); [de Vaujany and Mitev, 2013](#)) and space becomes a theme of inquiry both in regard to its physical and architectural properties ([Clegg and Kornberger, 2006](#); [Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006](#)), to its sociomateriality

(Kuhn and Burk, 2014; Cnossen and Bencherki, 2019), its performativity (Ratner, 2020; Kuismin, 2022), and the active place work that make an organization “present” (Crevani, 2019). The main tenet of these very different approaches can be summarized in a vision of space within a relational ontology, a move from space to spacing, a conflation of space/place as structuring social relations and being structured by them.

Under the influence of Massey’s (2005) concept of space as always “under construction”, space is space-time combined in becoming, since interactions – involving human and nonhuman actors – do not occur in space, rather they create it. Space is, thus, created out of the heterogeneous and simultaneous coexistence of networks of relations at every scale from local to global. Massey (2005, p. 9) presents us with a performative view of space, a “simultaneity of stories-so-far”, that can then be imagined as the coexistence of multiplicity and heterogeneity. Her work has been influential in the emergence of poststructuralist studies that associate space with dynamism, openness, heterogeneity, liveliness, and presence (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Crang and Thrift, 2000; Thrift, 2008). Affective spaces should be conceived within a renewed conception of space/place.

Taking a position within the spatial turn, I consider that all organizational phenomena are materially, discursively and affectively emplaced, and “places are made through human practices and institutions even as they help to make those practices and institutions” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 467). Organizational practices do not simply occur *in* space, but actively produce it as the effect of the way that the practice elements (human, nonhuman, material-discursive) are entangled and express an active and aesthetic capacity of affecting each other and being affected by their intra-actions. Affective spaces “suggest and engender, via their sensual qualities, specific forms of affectivity relating to them, between intimidation and cosiness, between conviviality and the sublime. Once again, this is an aesthetic dimension in the broader sense of the term” (Reckwitz, 2012, p. 254).

For positioning the relationship between spacing, affective spaces, and affective ethnography in the study of situated organizational practices, I need to briefly introduce the posthumanist epistemology of practice theory (Gherardi, 2019a). Its first claim is that nothing in the social world is prior to practice: not ideas nor meaning; not structures nor mechanisms, nor space and time. Moreover, it is through epistemic practices that the “object” of inquiry (in my case fluid affective spacing) takes form and actualizes ethics in practice (what Barad (2007) name ethico-onto-epistemology, stressing an anti-substantialist view). The demarcations between “social” and “natural”, “nature” and “culture”, “structure” and “agency”, “humans” and “nonhumans” are the effect of epistemic practices, and “material agency” is temporally emergent in relation to practice (Pickering, 1995; Hui *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, it is aligned with those post-epistemological assumptions that decenter the human subject as the central seat from which intentional action unfolds, the so called “human exceptionalism” (Braidotti, 2013). However, the project of decentering the human subject does not mean to cancel it, rather to consider that humans are not privileged over materials as the main (and the only) source of action, the only “ones” who have agency. Subjects are relational effects in the same way that objects are and all practice elements are entangled. A position of constitutive entanglement (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007) privileges neither humans nor technologies, neither knowing nor doing, rather it points to their becoming together within a practice *agencement* [2] in which the researchers and their epistemic practices are part of it. Researchers are *inside* the practices they study; they are part of a research *agencement*. As a last point, a posthumanist epistemology of practice theory contributes to the conversations on feminist posthumanism and new materialism. Spatiality and temporality are at the core of the concept of situatedness both in the feminist tradition (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1991; Hinton, 2014) of situated knowledge/knowing and in the methodological choice of situating the researchers and their epistemic practices within the process of inquiry (Gherardi *et al.*, 2018).

It is within these premises that affective ethnography has made its appearance and has been theorized in relation to the active presence of the researchers and their embodied knowing within a research *agencement* and in embodied writing. Affective ethnography has been defined not as a methodology (not an ethnography *of* affects) but as “as a style of performative ethnographic process that relies on the researcher’s capacity to affect and be affected in order to produce interpretations that may transform the things that they interpret” (Gherardi, 2019c, p. 742). It is a style of doing research on organizational practices that acknowledges that all elements – within a practice *agencement* – are always already entangled in complex ways, and they should be read through one another, as data in motion/ data that move. For navigating such a research practice three concepts to think-with have been suggested: researchers’ corporeal engagement, placeness and power to act. The first concept highlights the researchers’ corporeal engagement in doing fieldwork and their bodily capacity to affect/be affected. It refers to the ability to resonate with, become-with, and the capacity for affective attunement (Stewart, 2011). The material-discursive production of space is formulated through the second concept in terms of “placeness” (i.e. as space made meaningful and specific) to denote the material, sensory and affective production of space. The third concept – affect as the power to act – highlights the researchers’ embodied presence in the research *agencement* and their capacity to “make do”, either intentionally or unintentionally.

This style of doing affective ethnography has been taken up and enriched with an attention to unexpected moment of awkwardness (Sløk-Andersen and Persson, 2021), critical engagement with moments of wonder (Christensen, 2021), affective resistance (Marsh and Sliwa, 2022), affective oscillation (Resch and Steyaert, 2020), the transformation of affective dissonance into affective solidarity (Baxter, 2021), embodied meaning-making (Pors, 2021), ethical enchantment (Bell *et al.*, 2021), and collaborative affective ethnography (Parolin and Pellegrinelli, 2023). However, the attention to space/place remains rather under track and becomes more precise only in reference to entrepreneurial hubs co-constructing entrepreneurial identity (Katila *et al.*, 2019), or cultural events as film festivals (De Molli *et al.*, 2020), urban art (Michels and Steyaert, 2017), or patient community interactions on Twitter (Vidolov *et al.*, 2023). For this reason I propose to go back to the second pillar of affective ethnography – namely placeness – and re-think it in terms of the spatialization of affect and the affectivity of space.

Within this formulation of affective ethnography, we find that the term “affect” is used in the singular and in the plural, as a verb and a noun. In the singular – as a verb-it is used to denote affect as bodily mediated and following Deleuze’s (1988) reading of Spinoza, Massumi (2002), Thrift (2000), it is defined as pre-individual forces that escape and exceed the human body. Affect is, thus, the capacity of things and bodies in social space to affect one another. In the plural – as a noun – the term is used as “ordinary affects”, meaning that “ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected, and this means giving to everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences” (Stewart, 2007, p. 2). There is no contradiction between the two uses since the concept of ordinary affect is a powerful lens for looking at, noticing and sensing the small details of everyday life, its placeness, its ephemeral qualities, its aesthetics, its sensory texture of connections and subtle movements of change. This embodied capacity takes the form of a sharply impassive attunement to the ways in which a research *agencement* comes to hang together as an affective space/place that has qualities, sensory aesthetics and lines of force that may account for emergence and for experiencing a situation as being “in” something (Stewart, 2011).

Within this theoretical framework, I propose to experiment with thinking-space and writing-affect in performative stories about the fluidity of the affective spaces enacted by organizational practices. However, before doing it, a methodological note is appropriate.

Thinking-space, writing-affect: a methodological note

The concept of “affective space” is focused on affect as spatialized and space as affective and it draws attention to ephemeral elements – like feelings, aesthetics, atmosphere, intensity, moods – which have the power of holding all the practice elements together and give a qualitative tone to what is accomplished in practising. These elements are more easily felt, at a conscious or unconscious level, that understood cognitively. They circulate and are transmitted in embodied ways (Brennan, 2004), are more easily communicated when written in poetic mode and often they are left out from organizational studies because uncanny elements.

However, when affective space has become a relevant dimension in the inquiry on spacing (Duff, 2010; Lury, 2013; Slaby, 2020), we have been invited to experiment with “thinking-space” – as opposed to thinking *about* space – (McCormack, 2008, p. 3) as a means for exploring the corporeal, affective, and perceptual within a politics of space. Thinking-space opens to encounters and creativity in research, it “might be better understood as the co-intensive sensing, in affective-dynamic terms, of the creative processuality of something in the world forcing us to think”. It is about intensities: the light that causes our eye to flinch (Katila *et al.*, 2023), the sound that makes us start (Henriques, 2010), the image of violence which raises our body temperature (Page, 2017). Being in the world imply being and becoming vulnerable (Vosman *et al.*, 2016; Rozmarin, 2021) and the pathic dimension is widely considered in organizational aesthetics (Strati, 2019).

Sensing and knowing through the senses is part of our being in the world and our wordling the world (Stewart, 2011; Gherardi, 2022b) and, in the case of affective ethnography, it is a research practice mediated by writing. Ethnography, as the etymology of the word goes, is about writing (*grapho*) and here I go back to the question with which I opened the article: How can we account for those forces that make up the meaning and the feeling of a “place” and are produced and reproduced by organizational practices, yet are ephemeral, always changing, and difficult to re-present in traditional academic writing?

I experiment with “writing from within affect” (rather than about it) and invite the readers to think-space, imagining how the organizational practices that I describe design an affective space, and how the space thus imagined is a fluid and on-going changing movement. It implies to go beyond words in reading what is not written, what exceed the speaking/writing subject. Writing-affect or writing with resonance – to use the term proposed by Meier and Wegener (2017) – facilitate an emotional, bodily, and sensory connection between the text and the reader. Moreover, the stories that I propose are not fictional in a strict sense, but are extrapolated from other texts, other ethnographies or praxiographies as Annemarie Mol calls the ethnography of practices defined as “a story about practices” (Mol, 2002, p. 31), in which “activities take place, but leaves the actors vague” (Mol, 2002, p. 33). I experiment with “writing differently” composing my stories along a storyline that narrates the fluidity of affective space and perform it in the relational and imaginative encounter with the reader. The movement “writing differently” (Gilmore *et al.*, 2019) in organization studies has been premised on how it works to liberate it writing from strict academic norms. My stories have been influenced by Kathleen Stewart (2014) compositional writing of ethnographies. Therefore “my stories” do not aim to describe what a place is or what a fluid affective space is, rather they have been constructed out of ethnographic experiences of other authors in order to perform how they affected me and how I delineate a space of representation of affective spaces for inviting the readers to feel and to attune to how things seem to hang together in those organizational practices that I re-construct and how they may affect the reader as well. My writing is thus relational and performative.

In the next section I stage five different affective spaces surrounding organizational practices and I explain here what guided me to choose these stories and not others. The first reason is that these stories “talk” to me and when I met them, I felt bodily affected by them.

Any aesthetic and affective experience is highly subjective and I can only hope that my writing will resonate with readers' affective experiences. I do not aim to convince the readers about a rational argument, rather to sense and attune to the situations I stage for them. The second guiding principle is that I want my stories grounded within organizational practices that extend the boundaries of the organization outside the single organization and connect organizational practices and social practices at large. The spatial extension of affective spaces can thus be staged. In the end, I gave a storyline to "my stories", since they are constructed around a theme: the fluidity of affective spaces.

The rationale for choosing the five stories is arbitrary rather than the product of a systematic literature review. They are not meant to be representative examples of affective spaces but rather constitutive events in themselves that animate the points of confluence where the affective and material emerge. I wrote these stories trying to be loyal to the research authors' voices, however my intent is to write in order to illustrate moments of intensities in a fluid spatial topology (Mol and Law, 1994) that enable me to stage space as "in continuous deformation" (Ratner, 2020). I wish to highlight the complex interrelations between my stories and the texts that has been taken as a basis for their creation. I use an intertextual approach that focuses on the process of composition in order to reveal my intention to perform affective spaces, while allowing for the reader's role in producing the meaning of those texts and mine. Each story offers a fleeting opportunity to catch the intermingling of time, materiality, discourse, affect, subjectivity, and space in the *agencement* of an organizing practice. Each is a unique story, however in their composition they perform the messiness of conducting/ writing affective ethnography on fluid affective spaces. The collage of texts constitutes a model to think-with the concept of fluid affective spacing and I invite the readers to engage affectively with what they are reading and how, in reading, they relate to themselves, others, texts.

Fleeting praxiographic stories

In this section, five brief stories are presented, and the readers are invited to immerse themselves in the situation trying to imagine what they can hear, smell, taste in their mouths, how they might feel the intensities created by each narrative. Thus, the readers may engage with an exercise in imaginary aesthetic participant observation [3] (Strati, 1999) in which they are imaginatively taking part in the situation through sensorial faculties rather than intellectual abilities. At the same time, they may like to notice how affect, space and fluidity are performed in narrating the situated organizing practice as a material, affective and discursive *agencement*.

The praxiographic stories focus on very different organizing practices: (1) a "new" practice that was supposed to be introduced at Amazon in Italy; (2) the transnational practice of surrogate motherhood in the organization "My Baby"; (3) the collective unintentionally formed by the practice of biking for commuting to work in the US; (4) the organizational practices of blood treatment in a Belgian establishment; and (5) the social atmosphere created by "*flygskam*", that is the shame linked to flying in Sweden that also spread in Europe by affective contagion.

Amazon's bracelet story

This story (Gherardi, 2019b) concerns a huge debate that was spread by rumour in 2018 [4] of the introduction of a wireless bracelet (a newly announced practice tool) at Amazon in Italy, where two new centres have been opened, with a total of 1,600 jobs. The bracelet, just patented in the US, had been designed to speed up the search for products stored in warehouses by employees, monitoring where they put their hands, vibrating to guide them in

the right direction, and controlling all their movements. These details were to be transmitted on the minicomputer to the employee's wrist to take the goods, put it in a box, and switch to the next task. News of the patent appeared in nearly all the newspapers, and almost all the exponents of the government and political parties reacted on social media, accusing the company of transforming their employees into new slaves of the capitalist system. Speaker of the House Laura Boldrini declared that "Working is not a crime" and called the proposal "degrading and offensive". Even the Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni put a word in, saying that the challenge facing Italians was "quality jobs, not jobs with wristbands", and that Italy has labour laws that apply to every company, thus suggesting a comparison with other countries.

What did a wireless bracelet – a new tool that was not yet in use – produce? It made evident the sociomaterial relations in a texture of practices [5], producing an *agencement* in which the reputation of a company (that turns employees, paid little, into human robots who work near real robots, carrying out repetitive packaging tasks as quickly as possible, with the goal of achieving the ambitious delivery targets set by Amazon) was materialized. Moreover, the wireless bracelet produced the visibility of retail services that work with narrow profit margins, that minimize the cost of labor, that use work contracts that advise workers of their schedule time with little notice, that use algorithms to organize staffing according to optimization of presence. We can see the bracelet's performativity not only in its capacity to reveal the connections between working and organizing practices, but also in its capacity to bring to light a question of moral (and not only economic) value. The bracelet made audible/readable/tangible/knowable a societal ethical issue: What is the value of work? What is the meaning of work in a life and in a society? The (potential) political and ethical materialization of a practice within a society (and different from other societies) is made sayable in the fluid affective spacing of the announced "new" practice not-yet introduced.

The Amazon story may exemplify how a rumour (but was it a rumour rather than a non-accomplished intention?) was transmitted and spread within a social network of people that used several material media of transmission, which materialized as activities of relating, linking and connecting (Kuhn *et al.*, 2017). The sociomateriality of the bracelet activated multiple connections, and it was a different "thing" within multiple relations: from being an instrument in a cooperative relation with humans, to being a material symbol of slavery, to being an issue of labour relations. Moreover, in the story of a practice projected into the future, communication may be seen as a site of struggles over meanings, whose affective spacing emerge from multiple interpretations. This narrative enables us to think of the constitutive role of communication in spacing practices (Vásquez and Cooren, 2013; Ashcraft, 2021) that materialize organizations, place actors in space and time, create a sense of coherence, and perform multiple moods around discursive practices.

The affective spacing enacted by a not-yet practice is coloured by moral indignation that spread from within a company to the media, to the public discursive space of political debate in the highest institutions of the country. Its fluidity moves the boundaries between future and present and not only materializes the bracelet as a multiple "thing", but also has circumscribes different affective spaces in which the bracelet is discursively narrated as an affective object.

"My Baby" story

This is a story about the practice of transnational assisted reproduction and the global market which it creates. I borrow it from Müller and Schurr (2016) whose research case is presented and discussed theoretically for exploring similarities and differences between assemblage thinking and Actor Network Theory. Their study enables me to illustrate how the affective spacing around a transnational practice is configured, stabilized, and changed.

Transnational assisted reproduction crosses over space through organizations such as “My Baby”, a surrogacy agency, whose head office is in the Republic of Georgia, where it was founded in 2008, after which it started to expand, first to other Eastern European countries and then later to India (2010), Thailand (2011), Mexico (2012), Nepal (2013) and Cambodia (2014). Similar agencies are a new form of organizing that originated for trying to solve, a central problem of transnational assisted reproduction, that is how to bring together the diverse actants in the process of assisted reproduction and how to make them cohere long enough, at least, to produce a baby.

The authors, in order to illustrate the flow of the working practices that realize the transnational assisted reproduction, invite us to imagine a couple – Manuel and Rodrigo from Spain – who want a baby and have the money to try to cope with all the uncertainties of the assisted reproduction. They should meet the egg cell of Anita, an egg donor in Sweden, and the womb of Benita, a young mother of two from Chiapas, and Dr José in Cancun, whose clinic is equipped with state-of-the-art medical technology from the USA. Not only do they need to meet, but they also need to meet at the right time, and under the right circumstances. “My Baby” conducts this intricate choreography across distance, since it is a true multinational enterprise that governs one of the most technologically, emotionally and ethically challenging processes: the creation of new life. We have also to consider that this assemblage is a very fragile one, since Müller and Schurr (2016, p. 223) write that “Just about 20–50% of cycles is in fact successful in the sense that they result in a live birth”. This actor-network arrangement pursues a fragile accomplishment, working as intended in some instances, but producing unexpected results in others. Müller and Schurr (2016, p. 223) employ the term “network fluidity” to stress how change without rupture unfolds:

At first glance, it may seem that “My Baby” has a rather immutable, standardised and uniform business system consisting of templates, contracts and manuals, circulated to its associates around the globe. But “My Baby” could not exist without network fluidity. In fact, it is an integral part of its business strategy. The final outcome – the baby – needs to be held constant, but the associations that bring it about shift all the time.

In considering a transnational organizing practice, this story enables us to see how the boundaries around a practice are fluid and always changing. As the authors argue, similar forms of organizational practices achieve reliability and stability by shifting their boundaries and internal structures incrementally: “when new branches open, structures, contents and business strategies are not transported immutably but are transformed and translated through mediators such as country managers, local lawyers or new Facebook campaigns seeking surrogate mothers” (Müller and Schurr, 2016, p. 7).

However, it is desire which plays a key role in “My Baby” story. It brings affective relations into being, in making visible the fluidity of desire together with its force in making the practice elements merge and hold. The authors understand desire as a positive and productive force, following Deleuze and Guattari (1983, p. 6): “Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented”.

The intensity of affects – and their spatial and fluid extension – is a becoming-with the practice in its unfolding, rather than its outcome. In fact, the affective spacing of the transnational assisted reproduction practices is enveloped in a swirl of desire that materializes its force in bodies affected by it and enacting a power to act not only at an individual level but also within a civic arena of reproductive rights and changing forms of parenthood. From Manuel and Rodrigo to the right of the new born to be legally recognized in their country, a fluid affective space is materially and discursively deployed. This story stages the fluidity of organizational boundaries made porous by the force of desire.

Bike commuting to work story

I borrow this story from an article by [Wilhoit and Kisselburgh \(2015\)](#) who discuss the material constitution of a collective by illustrating the birth of a new practice. Bike commuting to work is not a recognized social practice in the United States, where less than 1% of Americans ride bikes to work and therefore bike commuting typically implies a clear commitment. This embodied activity involves a visible spatial presence on the road, and the introduction into the workplace of biking material artifacts, equally visible. Bikers enact a sudden visibility on the roads as well. Sometimes they ride on the sidewalk or trails, however they are required by law to ride on the road and are given the legal rights of vehicles. Therefore, they are clearly present on the road, alongside the other drivers and communicating with them as well. This public visibility grants them the possibility for becoming an alternative group within a dominant space. In fact, many cyclists who iteratively and constantly reclaim and reinterpret spaces intended for cars or pedestrians as places where bicycles are present bring forward a change demand for both other drivers and for city planners.

Bike commuting to work is not a coordinated activity, however it remains collective as individuals' actions combine. The collective of bike commuters is communicatively constituted – as a collective – by drivers' and other externals' discourses while participants' narratives evince that they do not feel members, thus illustrating a disconnection between the external constitution of the collective and its internal recognition. When bike commuters are interviewed, they say that they do not experience bike commuting as a collective or organized activity, and even discursively distance themselves from other bike commuters. [Wilhoit and Kisselburgh \(2015, p. 582\)](#) bolster the case that “bike commuters are engaged in collective action although unintentionally”. Therefore, cycling takes place in opposition to the normative meanings and practices of the road: “particularly as certain parts of road are retraced over and over by bike commuters, that road takes on a new meaning for the bikers, as well as the drivers, city and campus planners, and policy makers” ([Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015, p. 583](#)).

The authors conclude by suggesting that *no* organization, coordination, or communication is needed among participants for collective action to emerge. In this new practice of bike commuting to work, although it is human agents who literally move this material and put it into action, the human passions which animate the material are not intended to create an organizational effect, but personal passions have the unintentional result of animating the material to constitute a collective.

Biking to work is an individual practice that becomes a social practice when it enacts an alternative social group that unintentionally urges road norms to adapt when the collective acquires visibility and discursivity. The public space of the city is re-designed both by the materiality of human bodies-with-bike (on the road and at their working place) and by the passions of a loose and fluid social collective in which membership is contested or unclear and in which boundaries are open or permeable. The fluidity of participation enacts an affective space shaped by desire, contestation, negotiation, unintentionality and new subjectivity.

Blood story

Based on a praxiography in the departments of a Belgian blood establishment (the Service), [Wittock et al. \(2019\)](#) illustrate how blood is a multiple object and how the organizational mode of coordination is very successful in rendering the multiplicity of blood workable.

With the term “multiplicity” it is meant that blood is enacted differently in different organizational units, as [Mol \(2002\)](#) argues in the case of arteriosclerosis, or [Law and Lien \(2013\)](#) in the case of salmon. It is worth stressing that “multiplicity” is not “pluralism”, in which different actors focus on the meanings of different aspects of the object. Multiplicity implies that different empirical ontologies are enacted in situated practices and therefore that

different epistemological practices construe different “objects”, as illustrated already in the Amazon’s story and in biking to work.

In the case of blood, since the publication of [Titmuss’ \(2018\)](#) classic work *The Gift Relationship*, blood donation has been imbued with a highly symbolic status of altruism and it has become a “core professional belief” of blood establishments. Nevertheless, since the 1970s blood has gone through a process of bio-objectification, in which blood has become a renewed object of concern, due to the continuous interplay between blood as a biological substance and novel techniques that shift previously unquestioned boundaries. Blood is also and simultaneously the object of a blood economy, risk governance, and biological citizenship. Understanding blood management practices in this increasingly complex environment require an inquiry into the organizational practices which shape what blood “is” and how ontological versions of it are brought into being, sustained, or allowed in situated sociomaterial practices.

In different departments blood is enacted differently. In the fixed and mobile collection centres the staff members of the Service directly mediate the relationship between donors and the blood establishment. Direct contact with the donors results in an enactment of blood reminiscent of its representation as a gift, but the absence of donors in other units shifts the blood ontology from that of a precious gift to that of a *potentially* harmful substance. In the ScreenDpt blood is enacted as a *suspicious object* where blood is not allowed to leave it until it has been cleared of suspicion through negative results on the tests to which it is subjected. In the ProdUnit, blood is processed at the same time that it is tested in the ScreenDpt. Within this context, the relative absence of donors translates into the possibility of enacting blood as a depersonalized, *economic object*. Like the ProdUnit and the ScreenDpt, the R&D Lab is characterized by the absence of direct contact with donors. This allows for the enactment of blood as a depersonalized *object of research* instead of a gift. The enactment of blood as an object of research incites a further enactment, which emphasizes blood as *a biological substance*. Other departments involved in the organizational mode of coordination enact another empirical ontology as the organization of *the blood supply as a managerial affair* or on blood as *the object of economy*.

While we are familiar with multiple ontologies from several Science and Technology Studies, the specific contribution of this blood story resides in highlighting the organizational dimension and the mode of coordination that make multiple ontologies workable inside the same organization. How do organizations prevent tensions between different ontologies while acknowledging the affective dimension of blood as gift? The organizational mode of coordination decomposes the empirical ontologies assigning versions of it to specific departments along functional and chronological dimensions. For each department the mode of coordination defines what blood is and what the conditions of possibility are in handling this object. The physical separation of departments along an architectural divide minimizes the contact between staff from different departments through the chronological sequencing of tasks.

This story illustrates the heterogeneity and fluidity of spacing practices that construct boundaries around the departments belonging to the same organization and how multiple affective spacings interfere and coexist around what appears as a unified object of practice. However, not only blood is a multiple object but also it is enacted within multiple affective spaces, coloured both by the feelings associated to gift and generalized reciprocity and by other more mundane feelings that characterize the field of economy, safety or laboratory research. This is a story about the fluidity of the object of practice.

The story of a new buzzword: Flygskam

Recently climate activists have stepped up efforts to convince travellers to boycott air travel, with Swedish campaigner Greta Thunberg spearheading the trains-over-planes movement and making “flygskam”, or flight shame, a buzzword in the Scandinavian country. The idea

was originally championed by Olympic athlete Bjorn Ferry, gained momentum after Greta Thunberg, and it is now becoming an environmental movement across Europe.

At the end of 2018, the word *flygskam* or “shame linked to flying” was named as one of 33 words that entered the Swedish language and defined Swedish society that year. It came after studies showed that while Swedes may be more climate-aware than many other nationalities, they fly far more often and further than the global average.

The airline industry has been under fire over its carbon emissions, which at 285 grams of CO₂ emitted per kilometre travelled by a passenger far exceed all other modes of transport. Road transportation follows at 158 and rail travel is at 14, according to European Environment Agency figures. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) estimates that air transport is responsible for two percent of global CO₂ emissions – roughly equivalent to the overall emissions of Germany, according to consulting firm Sia Partners. But aircrafts also emit particles such as nitrogen oxides, which can trap heat at high altitude, meaning the industry is responsible for five percent of global warming, according to the Climate Action Network, an umbrella group of environmental NGOs.

The question is therefore: is *flygskam* having an impact? In Sweden, definitely. Over the last years, even before COVID-19, the movement has picked up momentum and it is still present in the after-pandemic discourse and the renewed travelling boom. Another buzzword made its appearance: *Tagskryt* *which* translates as “train brag”. The idea is that people encourage each other to travel by train instead of by plane through posting pictures from their rail trips online, using the hashtag #tagskryt on social media. There have been critiques of the movement which is accused of placing blame and feelings of embarrassment onto passengers, while it is the airlines and the associated industries who should be considered guilty for the impact they have on the planet.

We can say that the buzzwords spreading in Europe create a sort of atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Michels, 2015; Riedel, 2019) around the ordinary practice of taking a flight, inducing a feeling of shame and a nudge for alternative and friendlier ways of travelling. In this *agencement* of humans, discourses, and technologies, affect is working to surround all these elements within an atmospheric veil that is transmitted as a transcorporeal contagion. The empirical study of atmospheres allows for the exploration of affect not only located in the human body and in material environment, but as emerging from the resonances between the various elements entangled in a practice. Atmospheres, as Jørgensen and Holt (2019, p. 673) suggest, “are not entirely stable and present: the interior is porous to outside influence, and the interior is never wholly ordered”. Atmosphere has been the most studied phenomenon within affect studies since it is one of the most common affects and the physical atmosphere is an easy metaphor for fleeting and fluid collective moods.

Discussion: the multiple fluidity of affective spacing

The fluidity, that characterizes the affective spacing of a practice, is manifested by the permeability and porosity of the practice boundaries, by the mutable identities of the practice elements, by the way in which such elements are entangled and mixed but do not collapse easily, by the way they transform themselves and by the way they connect and disconnect. Conceiving spacing as a fluid process brings some elements of Lefebvre’s and Massey’s theorization forward, since the processes of materialization and the tension between the representation of space and the space of representation comes to the foreground with issues of multiplicity and heterogeneity.

The five praxiographic stories perform for the reader the particular affective tone that each of them evokes in the chiasmic wave of stability and fluidity. The five affective spaces illustrate fluidity as multiple: fluidity of time, fluidity of boundaries, fluidity of participation, fluidity of the object, and fluidity of an affective atmosphere.

The story of Amazon's bracelet illustrates an aspect of fluidity linked to temporality; it works on anticipatory action. The new object, the new working practice that would be associated with its use, and the change in existing practices is something not-yet there, something existing only as a possibility in a future time that is anticipated in the present. Nevertheless, the not-yet practice produces effects and affects in the present. It is made present in the media, and it reaches institutional actors at higher levels of the political sphere, who act as spokespersons of a discourse on the value of work in Italian society and law. Moreover, what the potential practice of wearing an electronic bracelet at work activates is an atmosphere of indignation around the idea. The potential workers would be affected in their dignity at work, and this would affect working conditions in a retail sector whose reputation is at stake. The spacing of this practice involves a fluid temporality in between the future and the present that affects the discursive practices shaping the conditions of possibilities.

The story of "My Baby" illustrates the fluidity of organizational boundaries, not only because the practice of surrogate motherhood is a transnational one, but mainly because the elements of this practice may be easily transported elsewhere, and adapted to a new local context, introducing small changes that do not alter the identity of the practice since they do not introduce difference. Fluid boundaries mean that the elements of the practice may combine and re-combine easily while the practice maintains its own identity. However, the most important thing that this story makes visible is the power of desire for parenthood, but desire is a fluid and mutable force stronger than other material-communicative elements in connecting and realizing potentialities for actions. In fact, desire constitutes a vibrant force that connects the actual with the virtual but at the same time it always exceeds it.

The story "Bike commuting to work" narrates how a collective actor takes shape without coordination or communication and how the material may constitute a collective beyond the human discursive recognition of it. In this story we see a loose and fluid social collective in which membership is contested or unclear and whose boundaries are open and permeable. An emerging new affective spacing of belonging and participation is traced by the material and spatial elements that make the collective visible on the roads, audible in relation to the drivers, and tangible also at the workplace.

The story of blood multiplicity illustrates the heterogeneity and fluidity of the "object blood" in spacing practices within a single organization and the sociomaterial effects it produces. The multiplicity of the object helps us to understand not only how and why the various enactment are separated and coordinated, but mainly how they are mixed without creating organizational problems. Blood, in the Belgian establishment, is narrativized as a coherent whole despite its multiplicity, and this story illustrates how multiple affective spaces may interfere and coexist.

The diffusion of the word *flygskam* draws our attention to a social phenomenon of "something in the air" that emerged at a certain point in time and space within a situated discursive community and quickly underwent a process of contagion and of social influence in a wider space. In this story, as in the story of "My Baby", we can see how affect operates and colours a situated spacing. In the social diffusion of "*flygskam*", as a specific affect, we can imagine how the circulation of the idea, objectified in a name, creates a resonance among bodies who enter into contact by effect of a social phenomenon which constructs a subjectivity on the basis of the process of affecting/being affected. Similarly, with the story of bike commuting to work, a collective is materially formed by a name that is foundational of a discursive subjectivity. *Flygskam* can be interpreted as an atmosphere that surrounds a texture of practices with a moral judgement about the relationships of the humans with the earth of which they are part.

A posthumanist practice approach to the entanglement of space and affect illustrates how in a practice the relations between the elements that achieve agency in their being connected can change, often gradually, without the practice falling apart as a result. Moreover, this

processuality of fluid participation and changing connections is linked to an idea of spatiality as excess, as an affective and atmospheric surfaceless space that surrounds a mode of practising and envelopes it as an ephemeral veil of cloud. I am proposing this image of an affective spacing that surrounds and envelops the *agencement* of the elements in a practice to stress that affect is not just another element in a practice among humans, nonhumans and discourses, rather it is the intensity, the atmosphere, the colour and the smell of a practice, that is the fluid and ephemeral air emerging in and by its *agencement*.

Conclusion

Some cautions are necessary, in concluding the article, regarding the construction of “affect” and “affective spacing” as research objects. The rationale for resorting to stories and their evocative power resides in trying to avoid a definition of affect as an “it” and proposing performative texts that could evoke the intensity of affects. In posing the question of what might count as “empirical” within studies of affect, Lisa Blackman (2015) argues that it is not a method that provides evidence for what affect is, rather it refers to entangled processes, which are not easily seen, and which extend across time and space.

In this article, writing affective stories is the means for experimenting with affective, ethnographic writing as a research practice that brings forwards a processual understanding of spacing, placeness, and affective spacing. I contribute to the conversations that emphasize the sociomaterial, affective and open-ended emergence of organizational space as being in constant deformation across different topological shapes. My contribution is framed within affective ethnography (Gherardi, 2019c) as an invitation to deepen one of its pillars, namely placeness.

My argument has implications for organizational and management studies because it enriches the alternatives to a conceptualization of organizations as stable entities (Brummans, 2018; Cooren, 2020) and it offers a methodological illustration of the possibility of conducting empirical research on organizational phenomena considered as “elusive” thus minor and thrown out of “serious” organizational theorization. This shift is generally considered the first step to a processual approach and to noticing and enacting relationships differently (Simpson and Revsbaek, 2022). A second step can be afforded in considering organizing in its spatial and temporal fluidity and in being a fragmented, affective and dispersed phenomenon. When organizing is put in relation with spatial-temporal-affective fluidity, the attention of researchers is directed to organizing in boundaryless forms, to organizing without a clear actor’s identity, to organizing as the effect of entangled and multiple elements and degree of intensities, to organizing in relation to emergent affective states and corporeal sensing.

The article contributes to the emergent body of organizational literature at the crossroad of the so-called turn to practice, turn to affect and turn to spacing offering conceptual tools for reframing fluid organizing.

The turn to practice has implications for organization studies (Hui *et al.*, 2017; Shove, 2022), since it assumes practices as the unit of analysis and in de-centring the human subject it contributes to the conversation about post-epistemologies (posthumanism and feminist new materialism) thus acknowledging vital materiality (bodies included) and their entanglement with the discursive (Bennett, 2010). Moreover, as I illustrated through five praxiographic stories, it offers a methodology for the study of organizing practices as an *agencement* though which agency emerges as a flow and not as free will of human actors.

The turn to affect shares similar concerns and it has implications for affective methodologies in organizational studies (Hunter and Kivinen, 2022; Knudsen and Stage, 2015) since it allows to see affect as a resource enacted through the researcher’s embodiment in the research practice (Cnossen, 2023; Kolehmainen, 2019). Organizational phenomena like atmosphere, contagion, transcorporeality, the vitality of matter and the effects of affective

elements on how organizing take place differently, are only a few topics on which considering affect may change the kind of questions and problems addressed by organization studies (Fotaki and Pullen, 2019). Affect studies join a wider movement towards new materialism (Fox and Aldred, 2016) and feminist new materialism (Cozza and Gherardi, 2023).

The turn to spacing has re-framed the way of conceiving of organizational spaces (Mitev and de Vaujany, 2013) and this article contributes to it with a specific attention to affective spacing. In highlighting how space fluidity may serve as a conceptual lens that make visible both temporality and spatiality and the entanglement of affecting and being affected. The fluidity of space may be described as a social topology in which a non-Euclidean space, that is curved rather than flat, that is not represented by the geometry of flat, two-dimensional spaces, is talked about as a surfaceless space, as an affective space surrounding the becoming of a practice and enclosing it as a sort of air or a veil of cloud that allows organizational scholars to describe the intensity of affect and its transmission. In particular, the notion that entangled elements make their own space-time have been a significant source of inspiration also in organization studies, since the continuity of transformation organizes forms of social life in ways that supplement and extend those of Euclidean geometry (Lury, 2013). For example, in the field of social studies of technology, topological ideas have helped to dismantle the view that technology and society occupy different domains, contributing instead to the concept of “*agencement*”, composed of social, technical, discursive and natural entities (Latour, 2005). Posthumanist practice theory has embraced the concept of practice as *agencement* along similar theoretical premises that reformulate agency as emergent and fluid.

The implication for management studies is to face a methodological challenge: how to conduct empirical research when time and space, from a position of “*a priori*” categories are turned into “*a posteriori*” categories? For example, it is proposed that the methodological choice to shift from thinking about space to thinking-space as “*both* a processual movement of thought *and* a privileged site at which this movement is amplified and inflected by novel configurations of ideas, things and bodies” (McCormack, 2008, p. 2, italics in original), is a facilitating environment and a generative activity. The same shift may be operated with thinking-affect or thinking-affective space, as I have illustrated experimenting with writing praxiographic stories. A common denominator for bringing together similar and distinct research tracks is affective ethnography – and affective methodologies at large – in which several post-epistemologies converge and whose focus is on how life takes shape, instead of looking for hidden meanings and values waiting for the researcher’s ultimate representation.

Notes

1. In delineating a space of representation, I follow Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of space that describes the production of space in three levels, beginning with spatial practices (as movements, migrations, routines) followed by the representation of space (as objects that made sense of space, such as maps, films, or books) and by spaces of representation (as lived space, or the experiences of spaces). Representations of space and spaces of representation are suspended in tension with one another, which in turn produced spatial practices in which ideological and political battles occur within the context of spatial conflict and can be vanquished with the production of new spaces and alternate ways of life.
2. The word *agencement*, which has the idea of agency in its root, is currently used in French as a synonym for “arrangement”, “fitting”, or “fixing”, and it has been used as a philosophical term by Deleuze and Guattari (1987 [1980]) with the sense of “in connection with”. The problem, however, is that its translation into English as “assemblage”—that is, a final state—has changed the original processual meaning of acquiring agency as an ensemble of elements (Gherardi, 2016).
3. By virtue of participant observation conducted through the imagination, the readers “see”, “hear”, “perceive”, and “are aware of” the research process in which they are imaginatively taking part through sensorial faculties rather than intellectual abilities (Strati, 2003, p. 59)

4. https://www.repubblica.it/tecnologia/prodotti/2018/02/01/news/amazon_brevetta_un_braccialetto_elettronico_cosi_controllera_merce_e_dipendenti-187790348/?refresh_ce
5. A texture of practices can be defined as composed of activities and practices interconnected in constantly changing patterns (Gherardi, 2019a). Other authors have used similar terms like constellation, mangle of practices, bundles, nexus, or plenum (Hui *et al.*, 2017).

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