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Management Learning

Towards a 'vulnerable co-presence' for hybrid ways of working: Recasting the nexus of co-presence and vulnerability with Merleau-Ponty and Butler

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Abstract:	<p>While hybrid working offers many benefits, its individualizing inclination creates 'new vulnerabilities' by making social ties and work collectives more precarious. A growing number of studies have referred to co-presence to examine how hybrid work arrangements reshape sociality and togetherness at work. However, most consider co-presence as fundamentally distinct from vulnerability, creating a common divide between the two phenomena. This conceptual paper posits a normative argument that recasting how co-presence relates to vulnerability should help to address the 'new vulnerabilities' at stake in hybrid working. After briefly exploring how the literature examines the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability, I draw on existential phenomenology - in particular the ontological arguments of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler - to develop the notion of 'vulnerable co-presence' before introducing three points of attention, namely how it is (1) 'intercorporeal', (2) 'temporo-spatial', and (3) 'ethico-political'. I then outline the two main implications of this framework. First, it lays the groundwork for re-politicizing the hybrid workforce. Second, it offers practitioners a perceptual basis for imagining and learning new skills to 'keep the collective together' in hybrid organisational contexts. Finally, I present this paper's methodological contributions and suggest some avenues for future research.</p>

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Towards a ‘vulnerable co-presence’ for hybrid ways of working: Recasting the nexus of co-presence and vulnerability with Merleau-Ponty and Butler

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an increasing number of workers has moved away from the traditional ‘9 to 5’ office job towards more hybrid ways of working that combine digitally-mediated and ‘direct’, physical co-presence across a variety of workspaces (e.g., office, home, public transport) (Halford, 2005; Izak, Shortt, & Case, 2022; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Digital technologies – such as laptops or mobile phones – play a key role in enabling synchronous and asynchronous collaboration in increasingly ‘loose social collectives’ (Castells, 2000 in Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021). In that sense, the global use of teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic – followed by the widespread introduction of hybrid working – represents a turning point in terms of how individuals relate to their professional and working communities (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Eurofound, 2023).

Hybrid work arrangements, which involve some form of teleworking, have thus been at the heart of recent debates on the ‘new normal’ of work and its consequences on social relations. Inasmuch as it re-organizes physical co-presence, hybrid work challenges conventional understandings and experiences of belonging to a work collective (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Dery & Hafermalz, 2016; Schiemer, Schüßler, & Theel, 2022; Taskin, Klinksiek, & Ajzen, 2023). Many have argued that hybrid working, a post-pandemic arrangement, provides the ‘best of both worlds’, allowing workers to interact and collaborate through different modalities, whether it is face-to-face (i.e., in physical co-presence), virtual (e.g., on video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom), or blended (Baralou & Tsoukas, 2015; Fiol & O’Connor, 2005). While hybrid work offers some advantages (such as increased flexibility across spatial and temporal distances, adaptability to personal circumstances, improved work-life balance, greater inclusion of people with disabilities, etc.), some issues were also identified (Eurofound, 2023).

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3 In particular, there is a gap between formally belonging to a team or an organisation and
4 experiencing feelings of togetherness. As it encourages individualistic attitudes toward work
5 (e.g., being able to work from my preferred location rather than that of the group, choosing the
6 best conditions for my personal productivity, etc.), hybrid working¹ can alter social dynamics,
7 modifying the sense of what it means to be together as a ‘we’ (Cunliffe, 2022; Osler, 2020).
8 The ‘individualizing inclination’ of hybrid working may come at the expense of “*group*
9 *cohesiveness, social ties and other characteristics of the ‘collective’ in organisations*” (Ajzen
10 & Taskin, 2021: 1; Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Campbell, 2016; Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen,
11 2015). This aspect of hybrid work produces what I call *new vulnerabilities*, which materialise
12 at both the individual and organisational levels. At the individual level, people are more
13 exposed to loneliness, social isolation, or a loss of connection with the collective (Eurofound,
14 2023; Sewell & Taskin, 2015) – a new hire may feel more insecure regarding their place in a
15 group or vulnerable because they have not been in physical contact with their teammates
16 (Whittle & Mueller, 2009). At the organisational level, the implementation of hybrid work
17 models can foster certain vulnerabilities – the spatial dispersion of colleagues and the lack of
18 ‘office buzz’ may convey the impression of independent individuals performing tasks rather
19 than a cohesive whole. This can lead to more siloed teams as well as problems with employee
20 retention and engagement, making the work collective’s ‘social fabric’ more fragile and
21 precarious (Blagoev, Costas, & Kärreman, 2019; Endrissat & Islam, 2021) and, by extension,
22 the organisation more vulnerable and prone to become an ‘empty shell’. These *vulnerabilities*
23 are not ‘new’ per se; some of them have existed since teleworking emerged in the 1970s
24 (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2003). Rather, their novelty lies in that they have become more
25 salient with the post-pandemic normalization of hybrid working. Recent debates have drawn
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59 ¹ I will use ‘hybrid working’ interchangeably with ‘hybrid ways of working’ or ‘hybrid work arrangements’, for
60 instance, to express modes of working that involve a combination of face-to-face, digitally-mediated, and blended
social interactions.

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3 particular attention to the specific features of these emerging work models (e.g., in terms of
4 employee relations, office layout, human resource policies), and how to mitigate their
5 potentially harmful impacts on individuals and organisations (Wheatley, Broome, Dobbins,
6 Hopkins, & Powell, 2023). In this sense, the associated *new vulnerabilities* also raise the
7 question of which skills and competencies practitioners need to learn to maintain strong social
8 ties between colleagues and ‘keep the collective together’ in hybrid working conditions (Borg
9 & Söderlünd, 2015; Babapour Chafi, Hutberg, & Yams, 2022; Eurofound, 2023).

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Co-presence refers to being here with others, either as a ‘mode’ or state (e.g., sharing the same meeting room), or as the subjective experience of others (e.g., in a videoconference) (Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). However, being co-present with someone can also mean being attentive to the person’s feelings and needs more intimately, which, I find, is tantamount to recognizing their vulnerability. A growing number of management and organisation studies have mobilized the concept of co-presence to examine how distributed and hybrid models reshape social relations and working communities. The existing literature reveals, for instance, insights into the micro-interactional (Collins, 2020; Vine, 2023), perceptual (Grabher, Melchior, Schiemer, Schüßler, & Sydow, 2018; Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013; O’Leary, Wilson, & Metiu, 2014; Schiemer et al., 2022; Wilson, O’Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008; Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Elesh, 2008), identity-related (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Fiol & O’Connor, 2005; Taskin et al., 2023), and embodied (Aroles & Küpers, 2021; Hafermalz, 101; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021; Vidolov, 2022) facets of co-presence, thus suggesting its usefulness in examining collective phenomena in a post-pandemic world of work. Yet, most of these studies have tended to consider co-presence as fundamentally distinct from vulnerability, thus creating a common divide between the two phenomena.

Vulnerability, defined as the quality of being exposed to physical, psychological or emotional harm, has received increasing attention in the field of work, management, and

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3 organisation studies (Corlett, Mavin, & Beech, 2019; Corlett, Ruane, & Mavin, 2021; Cutcher,
4 Riach, & Tyler, 2022; Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Yet, it has rarely
5
6 been used to examine how technology-enabled, hybrid ways of working affect social relations
7
8 and work collectives. While paradigms of invulnerability and efficiency often permeate how
9
10 hybrid working is practiced and researched, I argue that focusing on the relationship between
11
12 co-presence and vulnerability could be relevant to engaging with the *new vulnerabilities*
13
14 engendered by these models. The rapid adoption of hybrid working – and its potentially
15
16 negative impact on the ‘we-ness’ of work collectives (Cunliffe, 2022; Osler, 2020) – also makes
17
18 it urgent to investigate further the dynamics of co-presence and vulnerability and to make their
19
20 link more explicit. Thus, in this conceptual paper, I seek to advance a normative argument by
21
22 exploring the following questions: *How could developing a conceptualisation that recasts the*
23
24 *interplay between co-presence and vulnerability enable addressing the ‘new vulnerabilities’*
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26 *brought forth by hybrid working? What would be the implications of such a conceptualisation*
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28 *for the organisational research and practice of hybrid work arrangements?*
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35 To reframe the relation between co-presence and vulnerability, I draw on existential
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37 phenomenology, a philosophical tradition and method concerned with describing phenomena
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39 ‘as they appear’ in one’s lived experience of the world and others. Its roots in embodied,
40
41 subjective experience allow for the in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive and make
42
43 sense of their co-presence with others, capturing this phenomenon’s nuances and hidden facets.
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45 This perspective is also particularly useful for examining the lived vulnerability of actors and
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47 the way in which it can be shared through experiences of co-presence. Specifically, the later
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49 ontological works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945; 1960; 1968; 1973) provide a relevant lens
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51 to look at co-presence and its relationship with vulnerability. In particular, Merleau-Ponty’s
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53 ‘indirect’ ontology (i.e., a relational ontology grounded in sensible and bodily experience) helps
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55 to challenge the common divide between co-presence and vulnerability found in much of the
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3 hybrid working literature. In that sense, Merleau-Ponty enables us to shed light on the
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5 ‘intercorporeal’ –a term that highlights how one’s embodied experience of the world and others
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7 is inherently intertwined with that of others –and ‘temporo-spatial’ nature of co-presence,
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9 emphasizing how becoming co-present, in space but above all in time, involves vulnerability.
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11 These two dimensions are very relevant to re-examining the link between co-presence and
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13 vulnerability in hybrid organisational contexts where work collectives are more spatially
14
15 dispersed and precarious. Yet, the ethical, moral, and political implications remain largely
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17 implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s theorizing (Boublil, 2018). To attend to these dimensions of co-
18
19 presence, I put Merleau-Ponty in dialogue with Judith Butler’s recent writings (2009; 2015;
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21 2020; 2022) in which they develop a relational social ontology grounded in embodied, shared
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23 vulnerability. For Butler, it is because we are living, vulnerable bodies that we can be and act
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25 as a collective, further outlining what sharing a co-presence implies ethically and politically.
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27 Building on this combined framework, I put forward the notion of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ and
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29 introduce three ‘points of attention’, namely how it is ‘intercorporeal’, ‘temporo-spatial’, and
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31 ‘ethico-political’. Such conceptualisation provides a novel way of thinking about the
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33 relationship between co-presence and vulnerability, which, I argue, has implications for
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35 addressing the *new vulnerabilities* at play in the age of hybrid work.
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42 This framing has two main implications. First, it lays the groundwork for re-politicizing
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44 the hybrid workforce. By calling into question the basic assumption that co-presence and
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46 vulnerability are separate –instead conceiving them as interwoven through the notion of
47
48 ‘vulnerable co-presence’ –this conceptual paper invites researchers and practitioners to
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50 consider the hybrid team more as a ‘collective body’ that emerges in *moments* (in either
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52 physical, virtual, or blended settings), and which is endowed with a performative and political
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54 force. Adopting such a perspective helps to counter the individualistic inclination of hybrid
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56 working modes, instead emphasizing how embodied, plural action can be sustained –and work
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3 collectives made less precarious— in these conditions. Second, I argue that the three *points of*
4 *attention* described, which relate to ‘vulnerable co-presence’, provide a perceptual basis to
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6 imagine and learn new skills to make hybrid working more relationally sustainable. In
7
8 particular, I claim that practitioners’ learning and application of these *points of attention* would
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10 lead them to better perceive and organize co-presence towards maintaining strong social ties
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12 and work collectives in hybrid organisational contexts and beyond.
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17 The paper is structured as follows. The next section takes inspiration from Alvesson and
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19 Sandberg (2011) to problematize the organisational literature on hybrid working, carefully
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21 examining how it has been treating the interplay between co-presence and vulnerability. In the
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23 third section, I draw on theories from existential phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty’s
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25 (1945; 1960; 1968) ‘indirect’ ontology, which I put in conversation with Butler’s (2009; 2015;
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27 2022) social ontology of shared vulnerability to propose the notion of ‘vulnerable co-presence,’
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29 bringing the two phenomena together. In the fourth section, I present the two main implications
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31 of this combined framework, briefly outline this paper’s methodological contributions, and
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33 suggest some avenues for future research. This paper ends with a brief conclusion.
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42 **EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF CO-PRESENCE AND VULNERABILITY IN** 43 **HYBRID WAYS OF WORKING: A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW**

44 *Co-presence in the hybrid working literature: an absent vulnerability?*

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47 To examine how the hybrid working literature discusses the nexus between co-presence and
48
49 vulnerability, I draw loosely on Alvesson and Sandberg’s (2011; 2020) problematising
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51 literature review to identify ‘common assumptions’ and “*suggest alternative ideas and ways of*
52
53 *thinking*” (2020: 1297). Using co-presence as an entry point allows me to examine how it
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55 relates to vulnerability in the literature. The concept of co-presence has been used
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3 heterogeneously in studies of hybrid work arrangements to describe workers' experiences and
4 relationships. Inspired by the (micro)sociologies of Durkheim (1912) and Goffman (1959),
5 certain scholars assume that co-presence refers to a mainly spatial relationship of 'being there'
6 in the same *here* and *now* (e.g., a physical co-presence in the office on certain fixed days)
7 (Collins, 2020; Felstead et al., 2003; Fiol & O'Connor, 2005; Vine, 2023). While vulnerability
8 is absent from these views, other studies have sought to describe how employees in conditions
9 of hybrid work may suffer from stress (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), 'socio-spatial isolation'
10 (Halford, 2005), or a 'fear of exclusion' (Sewell & Taskin, 2015; Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen,
11 2015). Such scholarly works inform us on what distance or 'distantiation' (i.e., the subjective
12 experience of distance) (Taskin & Edwards, 2007) can do to the psyche of hybrid workers,
13 foreshadowing some causal effects between reduced physical co-presence and emotional or
14 psychological harm (as comprised by vulnerability).

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16
17 While the aforementioned studies highlight the spatial or geographical aspect of co-
18 presence, much of the recent management and organisation literature tends to understand co-
19 presence as a social relationship built on "*mutual awareness, accessibility, and availability*"
20 (Grabher, Melchior, Schiemer, Schüßler, & Sydow, 2018: 5; see also Campos-Castillo & Hitlin,
21 2013; Schiemer et al., 2022; Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Elesh, 2008). Drawing on such an approach,
22 researchers have shown that relational attachment and 'perceived proximity' could be
23 experienced at a distance thanks to the mediation of digital technologies (O'Leary, Wilson, &
24 Metiu, 2014; Wilson, O'Leary, Metiu, & Jett, 2008). For instance, Wilson and colleagues
25 (2008) reveal how geographically distant workers (as is often the case in hybrid working)
26 engage in communication and social identification processes that increase 'the cognitive
27 salience of the other' and help to 'establish common ground' (2008: 12). Their study shows
28 how one's cognitive perception of co-presence enables to communicate openly and share
29 affects with another, whether in physical proximity or in a virtual context, thus shedding light
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3 on a sense of exposure and susceptibility although it is not directly addressed. In a similar vein,
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5 scholars have analysed how the ‘re-regulation’ of co-presence — whether physical or virtual
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7 — could be used in hybrid working models to support social relationships (Ajzen & Taskin,
8
9 2021) or to counter the ‘dehumanising effect’ of teleworking (Taskin et al., 2023). These studies
10
11 are helpful for understanding the influence of co-presence in managing the potentially harmful
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13 effects of digitalization and hybrid working, especially how it affects working relationships and
14
15 collectives. However, this body of literature does not examine in-depth how being co-present
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17 and being vulnerable are related in the experience of hybrid workers, as these two phenomena
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19 are generally treated as distinct from each other.
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24 In this sense, recent research has built on process-oriented and phenomenological
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26 perspectives to explore the embodied and affective dimensions of co-presence (Aroles &
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28 Küpers, 2021; de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019; Hafermalz, 2021; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2021;
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30 McConn-Palfreymann, Mangan, & McInnes, 2022; Satama, Blomberg, & Warren, 2022;
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32 Vidolov, 2022; Willems, 2018). Going beyond a Cartesian, objectifying view of co-presence,
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34 they emphasize the role of bodily and sensory perception in how one experiences the presence
35
36 of others. Instead of taking spatial or social relationships as a point of departure, scholars have
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38 highlighted the ways in which actors, through their lived and ‘embodied co-presence,’ engage
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40 with others in more digitalized, hybrid work settings, such as virtual collaboration (Vidolov,
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42 2022), distributed ‘new culture’ organisations (Hafermalz, 2021), or in digital education and
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44 pedagogy (Aroles & Küpers, 2021). For instance, Hafermalz and Riemer (2020) indicate how
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46 telenurses draw on an embodied sense of relationality and care to create an ‘interpersonal
47
48 connectivity’ with their patients. Their study outlines a strong link between the experience of
49
50 corporeal co-presence and the capacity for human connection, intimacy, and empathy, which
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52 underpin vulnerability. The authors also shed light on the non-linear process of “*becoming*
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54 *present with and for geographically distant others*” (2020: 1639) in both an empathetic and
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3 agentic sense, thus stressing how co-presence can be used for purposes of care (to respond to
4 others' vulnerability) in a virtual context. Even though other post-Cartesian research provides
5 insight into how affective (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021) and ethical engagement
6 (Aroles & Küpers, 2021) are involved in embodied experiences of co-presence, there remains
7 a space in the literature to engage more directly with the very concept of vulnerability and the
8 nexus of co-presence and vulnerability in relation with hybrid working. For practitioners,
9 failing to address this dimension may increase the precariousness of social relationships and
10 collectives, and alter the possibility of a strong and enduring 'we' (Osler, 2020) in hybrid work
11 models. As organisational researchers, continuing to treat co-presence and vulnerability
12 separately could prevent us from inspecting the new forms of sociality and shared vulnerability
13 that take place in these settings. In particular, putting the bodies of literature on co-presence
14 and vulnerability together can encourage more 'care-ful' ways of researching how members
15 relate to each other and experience communality (Cunliffe, 2022) when working hybrid.

35 *Vulnerability in organisational research and its relevance for studying hybrid work modes*

36
37 There has been a surge of interest in vulnerability in recent years. Particularly in the
38 fields of work and organisation studies, researchers have developed different conceptualisations
39 of vulnerability, using it to study participants of an executive education programme (Corlett,
40 Ruane, & Mavin, 2021), older workers (Cutcher, Riach, & Tyler, 2022), or for imagining new
41 research practices (Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024; Plester, Kim, Sayers, & Carroll, 2021). While it
42 traditionally refers to the capacity of being harmed physically or psychologically, vulnerability
43 has been recently re-examined, especially by feminist, new materialist scholarship. For
44 instance, Corlett, Mavin, and Beech (2019) draw on Butler (2004) to reconceptualise
45 vulnerability 'as a strength' rather than as a weakness, recognizing its value for managerial
46 learning and identity work, and challenging dominant masculinised discourses. Their study
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3 enlightens emergent views of vulnerability, arguing that someone's (e.g., a middle or senior
4 manager's) vulnerability should always be understood in relation to that of others, thus
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6 implying a mutual interdependence and exposure. Furthermore, organisational scholars have
7
8 explored 'embodied vulnerability' – i.e., understood as deeply connected to the material and
9
10 bodily aspects of existence – and its implications for ethical considerations. For instance,
11
12 Mandalaki and Fotaki (2020) challenge abstract ethical principles to propose instead a
13
14 'relational embodied ethics of the commons' that considers the role of sharing and recognising
15
16 an embodied vulnerability (e.g., through bodily sensations and experiences) in sustaining
17
18 communities. Their theorization informs the study by Plester and colleagues (2021: 60) who,
19
20 taking the body as "*a site of resistance and knowledge*," delve into female researchers'
21
22 experiences of vulnerability. Taking inspiration from Judith Butler's (2005) work, they
23
24 introduce the concept of 'agentic vulnerability' as a way of encouraging more ethical research
25
26 practices and activism. In addition, Cutcher et al. (2022), examine how vulnerability involves
27
28 dynamics of resistance and recognition by exploring the case of older workers in a call centre.
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30 Drawing on a Butlerian framework (2016, 2020), the authors analyse how "*older operators*
31
32 *resisted recognition regimes by asserting their presence*" (Cutcher et al., 2022: 986), revealing
33
34 the inter-acting relations between situated, co-present workers and the possibilities for
35
36 resistance. In this sense, these contributions highlight the relevance of mobilising Butler's
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38 theories to consider the embodied experiences and ethical implications of vulnerability, as well
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40 as its link with dynamics of recognition and resistance in organisational contexts.
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50 Lastly, Jeffrey and Thorpe (2024) address the challenges posed by the increasing
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52 digitalization in post-pandemic research through proposing a posthuman view of vulnerability
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54 (i.e., one that includes human and nonhuman materialities) and 'digital intimacies' to navigate
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56 the lack of physical co-presence. As a continuation of their study, I seek to examine more
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58 holistically how phenomena of co-presence and vulnerability intersect and how such
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3 intersection is relevant to understanding hybrid work contexts. Although recent studies have
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5 outlined the relevance of Butler's views on vulnerability for exploring the relational, ethical,
6
7 and political facets at play in organisations, there is a lack of research that uses them for more
8
9 digitized ways of working and especially hybrid working. Yet, as discussed below, Butler's
10
11 conceptualisation of vulnerability informs us on the self-others relationship, recognition-based
12
13 politics, and the impact of broader socio-economic factors, which shape the experiences and
14
15 sociality of hybrid workers. By examining such aspects, practitioners and researchers could
16
17 better understand and organize their response to the *new vulnerabilities* generated by these
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19 working models. Therefore, in the next section, I operationalize philosophical ideas from
20
21 existential phenomenology to reflect on the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability in light
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23 of the *new vulnerabilities* associated with hybrid settings. In the next section, I first propose to
24
25 rely on Merleau-Ponty's (1945; 1960; 1968) 'indirect' ontology to rethink the co-presence-
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27 vulnerability nexus. Then, I examine this relationship through the lens of Butler's (2009; 2015;
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29 2020; 2022) social ontology of shared vulnerability and show how putting the two theorists in
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31 conversation allows me to develop the notion of 'vulnerable co-presence,' which bears
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33 implications for the study on and practice of hybrid work arrangements.
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44 **TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL FRAMING OF THE CO-PRESENCE-** 45 **VULNERABILITY NEXUS WITH MERLEAU-PONTY AND BUTLER**

46
47 *A theoretical framework grounded in existential phenomenology*

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49 Phenomenological thinking takes its roots in the study and description of phenomena.
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51 Phenomenology, as first developed by Edmund Husserl, consists of a method for studying the
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53 richness of lived experiences without presupposing the existence of an external, objective
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55 reality, as is the case in the 'natural attitude' – and in most experimental methods – towards
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3 life's objects. While it is primarily concerned with how structures of consciousness are
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5 subjectively experienced, Husserlian phenomenology (also named 'pure' or transcendental) has
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7 influenced a range of thinkers who sought to develop and apply this approach to many aspects
8
9 of human and social existence. Regrouped under the banner of 'existential phenomenology',
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11 philosophers such as Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, and others have
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13 emphasized lived, bodily experience when examining issues of time, space, freedom, or
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15 responsibility. Although their theories vary greatly, the methods they employ, as well as the
16
17 ontologies (i.e., studies on the nature of being or existence) they develop, help to make sense
18
19 of complex social phenomena (Bancou, de Vaujany, Pérezts, & Aroles, 2022). Thus, I suggest
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21 that existential phenomenology provides a rich foundation for examining the interplay of co-
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23 presence and vulnerability, and how they are experienced in hybrid modes of working².
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31 *Reframing the co-presence-vulnerability nexus through Merleau-Ponty's 'indirect' ontology*

32
33 Pursuing Husserl's critique against scientific reductionism, the French phenomenologist
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35 Maurice Merleau-Ponty started to develop, in his later writings (1945; 1960; 1968; 1973), an
36
37 'indirect' ontology to reframe how we relate to others (e.g., persons, living beings, landscapes).
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39 Taking the living, sensible body as a point of departure, Merleau-Ponty (1945: 1968) considers
40
41 that perception (e.g., how we sense the world through senses of touch, sight, hearing, and smell)
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43 is not a mere sensation or a cognitive function of mastering external objects, but the locus of a
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45 living relationship between beings. It is about being in a relationship 'from' life and with the
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47 living. For Merleau-Ponty, this means that we are always in a tension of semi-alterity since the
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49 other is never completely the other, and I can never fully comprehend how they perceive the
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57 ² For instance, existential phenomenology allows to go beyond an individualistic and objectifying view by
58 highlighting how subjects inherently share the world "*in a mutual relationship as embodied, interrelated beings,*
59 *not as a transcendental ego*" (Cunliffe, 2022: 7). This means that our knowledge of and our vulnerable connection
60 with another is not idealized (e.g., situating the other as fundamentally distinct from me) but rather embedded in a
shared materiality, thereby shedding new light on experiences of co-presence and vulnerability.

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3 world. Such a relationship thus constitutes an otherness that remains incomplete or ‘indirect’,
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5 from which Merleau-Ponty develops an ontological theory to further describe its nuances.
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8 In this paper, I argue that Merleau-Ponty’s indirect ontology offers a relevant framework
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10 for studying the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability for two main reasons. On the one
11
12 hand, it provides an ontological shift for conceiving that corporeal presence is never isolated
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14 but always involves a ‘being-with,’ a *co-presence* then, grounding any relationship within a
15
16 common bodily reality. On the other hand, it allows for a holistic exploration of how subjects,
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18 in their embodied co-existence, navigate shared spaces (physical or virtual), engage with others,
19
20 and experience vulnerability. While other phenomenologists, such as Heidegger (1927) or
21
22 Levinas (1961), theorize how being co-present with another constitutes a primordial aspect of
23
24 human existence, Merleau-Ponty brings further attention to the lived, immediate, and embodied
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26 aspects of shared existence, his work being particularly helpful to consider the dynamics of co-
27
28 presence and vulnerability and their interaction in the context of hybrid working. In the
29
30 following paragraphs, I seek to further explore how Merleau-Ponty’s theories allow to recast
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32 co-presence as ontologically inseparable from vulnerability in a two-stage movement: first, by
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34 considering the ‘intercorporeal’ dimension of co-presence and how it leads to further consider
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36 the mutual vulnerability of hybrid workers and second, by emphasizing the ‘temporo-spatial’
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38 nature at play in shared experiences of co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid settings.
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47 *Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality: Being co-present and vulnerable in hybrid working*

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49 In recent years, Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology has inspired a range of
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51 organisational studies that describe individual and shared experiences in more scattered, virtual
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53 work settings. While some have engaged with Merleau-Pontian understandings of
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55 ‘embodiment’ and embodied knowledge (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020; Willems, 2018), others
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57 have discussed the idea of ‘flesh’ or ‘flesh-of-the-world’ (Ladkin, 2013). Yet, others have
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3 drawn on the concept of ‘intercorporeality’ to question the disembodied character of virtual
4 collaboration (Vidolov, 2022). These studies form an emerging line of research to which this
5 conceptual paper seeks to contribute by exploring more comprehensively the relationship of
6 co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid work through Merleau-Ponty’s perspective.
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12 In elaborating his later indirect ontology (also called an ‘ontology of the sensible’)
13 (1945; 1960; 1968; 1973), Merleau-Ponty considers how beings inhabit the world *from* and
14 *through* their embodied perception. Their habitual co-presence also implies an inherent
15 relationality with other beings: “*I experience that presence of others in myself or of myself in*
16 *others*” (1960: 97), therefore outlining the immediate and constitutive nature of our
17 interrelation. Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of ‘intercorporeality’ (*intercorporéité*) as a
18 way to highlight how I am related to the other both in the *visible* world (e.g., in physical or
19 virtual co-presence) and through an invisible, “*interior armature*” (1968: 149) that envelops
20 us. Accordingly, embodied subjects cannot be conceived as independent but always in relation
21 with each other as they share an *intercorporeality* that precedes their relationship in a pre-
22 reflective way. Although this emphasizes subjects’ inter-connectedness and mutual influence,
23 it does not mean a complete and constant fusion between self and other. Rather, the ‘I’ and the
24 other resonate and affect one another through their bodily expressions, movements, and
25 gestures. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality provides an ontological basis to
26 further consider the dynamic interplay of co-present, vulnerable bodies in hybrid working.
27 Especially, it enables us to capture how hybrid workers, through their embodied co-existence,
28 belong to a *collective body* (1968); an inherent ‘we’ that both involves and transcends their
29 individualities across physically and virtually shared workspaces. Such intercorporeal
30 affiliation implies not only that co-presence can be felt in both settings –thus allowing for a
31 togetherness to emerge –but also leads to recognising how vulnerability is intricately woven
32 into shared bodily engagements. While co-presence may be less obvious in hybrid ways of
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3 working, it is nevertheless always accessible through bodily and sensory perceptions. For
4 instance, when feeling lonely during a video call, a new recruit could draw on their sense of
5 touch or smell to literally ‘feel’ the co-presence of their manager who waves at them through
6 the screen. Even though it is mediated through digital tools, their embodied co-presence
7 highlights a shared vulnerability, which, in that moment, both affects and connects them. Their
8 interrelation also manifests while sharing an office space, the same gesture expressing how their
9 mere co-presence entails a mutual openness and exposure.
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21 *Sharing a ‘field of presence’: Towards a temporo-spatial understanding of co-presence and*
22 *vulnerability with Merleau-Ponty*
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26 Following Merleau-Ponty’s indirect ontology, the lived, phenomenal body constitutes a
27 “*primordial field of presence*” (1945: 194) in which the other does not appear as an object but
28 manifests as a ‘perspective’ of my field, and I of his, because of our intercorporeality. This
29 dynamic intertwining with the other goes beyond a static understanding of co-presence,
30 acknowledging the constant flux and mutual influence between subjects. The time in which
31 ‘we’ co-exist is “*not merely the consciousness of a succession,*” following a linear logic, but
32 the combination of different fields of presence in the “*same temporal wave,*” according to a
33 processual view (1945: 277; see also Lipták, 2021). This means that Merleau-Ponty (1968)
34 places time over space when he describes how the presence and absence of others are ‘only
35 variations’ in my field of presence, recognising that the continuity of past experiences, the
36 immediacy of present perceptions, and the anticipation of future interactions all take place
37 within the same field. Therefore, I become temporally co-present with another who occupies
38 my concern “*moment by moment*” (1945: 180) beyond spatial boundaries. Drawing on
39 Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as a ‘field of presence’ *in becoming* has two main
40 implications for approaching the relationship between co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid
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3 working contexts. First, it allows us to move towards a ‘temporo-spatial’ view of these
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5 phenomena, revealing that how we experience them ‘in the moment’ matters more than sharing
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7 the same objective reality. This is particularly relevant in light of the ‘multi-localization’
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9 (Halford, 2005) of hybrid workers who move more freely between fixed and impromptu
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11 workplaces, both private and public (Cnossen, de Vaujany, & Haefliger, 2020), making a focus
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13 on space less warranted to investigate the dynamics of co-presence and vulnerability in those
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15 settings. For instance, when working from home, a hybrid worker can rely on past experiences
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17 in another place (e.g., a recent gathering with colleagues in a café) to sense their colleagues
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19 within their ‘field of presence.’ Second, Merleau-Ponty’s conception further considers the role
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21 of intentions in becoming co-present and vulnerable with others in hybrid conditions. It is what
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23 “*we project ourselves*” towards (1945: 159) that guides our experience of others, allowing us
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25 to bring them ‘close’ (and to become close to them) in the shared temporality of our co-
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27 presence. Vulnerability, in this sense, is continuous even though it can be made more apparent
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29 in certain situations (e.g., when expressing sadness regarding the departure of a colleague on
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31 Zoom or at a weekly lunch meeting). Therefore, a Merleau-Pontian stance leads to see work
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33 collectives in hybrid working not as scattered in an objective space but rather as “*always*
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35 *inserted at the junction of the world and ourselves*” (1973: 191) –and in this sense always
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37 accessible–, making it possible to intentionally ‘activate’ them at any moment in time.
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47 *Bringing in Judith Butler’s social ontology of shared vulnerability*

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49 In the previous section, I sought to re-examine the relationship between co-presence and
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51 vulnerability through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s (1945; 1968) indirect ontology. Doing so
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53 enables to reveal the ‘intercorporeality’ of co-present, vulnerable actors in hybrid working as
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55 well as the ‘temporo-spatial’ orientation of how these phenomena are lived. Merleau-Ponty
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57 offers insight to explore shifting experiences of co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid working
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3 modes, thus constituting a first step towards addressing the *new vulnerabilities* at play in these
4 settings. However, Merleau-Ponty's writings are not as concerned as Judith Butler's with the
5 ethical, moral, and political effects of vulnerability, as these dimensions are largely implicit in
6 his approach. In particular, while Merleau-Ponty provides some detailed descriptions of
7 habitual co-presence — and how it involves a bodily interdependence —, a focus on 'the
8 vulnerability of the body' and the 'normative power of vulnerability' is missing (Huth, 2018:
9 130). Yet, it seems crucial to further consider these aspects in light of the *new vulnerabilities*
10 generated by hybrid work and how its individualizing inclination potentially affects social ties,
11 making work collectives more precarious (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021).
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24 This gap leads me to mobilize the work of American feminist theorist Judith Butler
25 (2004; 2009; 2015; 2020; 2022), who conceptualises shared vulnerability as the basis of a
26 bodily, social ontology. While Butler is mostly known for their theory of gender performativity
27 and identity construction, their recent writings have engaged with themes such as war,
28 language, mourning, social justice, public assembly, (non-)violence, and resistance. In the wake
29 of their 'ontological turn' (Charpentier, 2019), Butler has been developing and honing in a
30 socio-political theory linked to a 'social ontology' (Butler, 2009) in which shared, bodily
31 vulnerability and its recognition occupy a central place. Their inscription within existential
32 phenomenology has been both acknowledged by Butler themselves (2015, 2022) and studied
33 by others (Boublil, 2018; Huth, 2018). Yet, what leads me to draw on Butler's theories is less
34 their intellectual affiliation to existential phenomenology —one of many— than the unique
35 framework they provide to "*stress the implications of a sensible that is always already*
36 *impregnated with an ethical and political sense*" (Huth, 2018: 123). For Butler, the relationality
37 and intercorporeality of living subjects described by Merleau-Ponty cannot be understood
38 outside of social norms and politics, which structure how vulnerability is experienced. I thus
39 argue that Butler's (2009; 2015; 2022) social ontology offers a useful lens to complete Merleau-
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3 Ponty's theories in recasting the interplay between co-presence and vulnerability, extending
4 existing approaches in hybrid working research and practice. Therefore, in the following
5 paragraphs, I develop the second step of this paper's theoretical reframing before outlining the
6 synthesis of this joint framework through the notion of 'vulnerable co-presence,' presenting its
7 relevance for organisational research and practice of hybrid working modes, and exposing three
8 *points of attention* linked to this construct and phenomenon, namely how it is 'intercorporeal',
9 'temporo-spatial', and 'ethico-political'.
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21 *A Butlerian perspective on the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability: Considering the*
22 *ethical and political implications*
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26 Judith Butler's theoretical works are increasingly referred to in work, management, and
27 organisational research (Tyler, 2020). While some studies explore gender in the workplace
28 (Tyler & Cohen, 2010), others expand on 'embodied relational ethics' (Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024;
29 Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Still, other articles draw on Butler to investigate how vulnerability
30 and recognition are experienced and organized in contemporary working life (Cutcher et al.,
31 2022; Corlett et al. 2019; Corlett et al., 2021). Building on this last set of studies, I wish to
32 continue translating Butler's concepts to the sphere of management and more specifically,
33 explore how they reframe our understanding of co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid ways
34 of working. While Butler's writings are often concerned with the impact of state violence or
35 global policies on particularly vulnerable populations (e.g., transgender individuals, illegal
36 immigrants, and prisoners in high-security prisons), I argue that employing their theories to
37 examine the effect of allegedly harmless practices such as hybrid work on social relations and
38 work collectives is worthwhile.
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55 Following Butler's social ontology, thinking of co-presence outside of vulnerability is
56 difficult. Like Merleau-Ponty, Butler considers the social character of bodily life insofar as the
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3 individual living body is never self-sufficient but always exists ‘beyond itself.’ This means that
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5 bodily life depends on other living organisms to sustain itself, whether humans, plants, or
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7 microbes. Not only am I co-present with another through my body and senses, but this co-
8
9 presence makes us “*vulnerable by definition*” (2009: 33). The subject’s corporeal vulnerability
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11 (i.e., their bodily capacity of ‘affecting and being affected’ in Butler’s words) structures their
12
13 experience of the world and others. It is both a general condition of existence and an aspect that
14
15 shapes our lived experiences of co-presence, whether in physical or virtual spaces. While
16
17 Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation of social relations as ‘intercorporeal’ points towards a
18
19 certain ethics, Butler’s social ontology (2004; 2009; 2015; 2022) develops this view by making
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21 the ethical, moral, and political sense of bodily, shared vulnerability more prominent.
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26 First, Butler’s perspective further accounts for how our embodied sense of co-presence
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28 automatically entails an ethical tie to others. Being a body and sharing this embodiment with
29
30 other living beings produces an ethos of interdependence insofar as we are bound to a
31
32 ‘fundamental sociality’ (2009). While ethical relations of reciprocity are ‘always there’, Butler
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34 (2015) suggests there are different ways of being together that serve to collectively perform
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36 such ‘embodied ethics’ (e.g., in social movements) (see Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). They also
37
38 consider the role of digital technologies in enabling “*a form of ethical recognition and*
39
40 *connection*” (2015: 105). For instance, Butler takes the COVID-19 pandemic as a period when
41
42 humanity sought to “*keep visceral connections alive through virtual means*” (2022: 61),
43
44 outlining the possibility of an ethical togetherness in the digital age. For Butler, the co-presence
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46 of bodies –whether it is in a physical space (e.g., a public street, an office) or in a virtual space–
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48 ontologically implies a mutual openness and vulnerability.
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54 Second, Butler considers that such vulnerability, which they link to precarity, is
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56 ‘distributed differently’ because of how socio-economic conditions are structured by political
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58 life (2004). Starting from this premise, Butler elaborates a normative critique of “*induced forms*
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3 *of precarity*” (e.g., state violence, social inequalities, poverty) that make some individuals
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5 *“more vulnerable than others”* (2015: 11). Taking public gatherings such as Black Lives Matter
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7 or Occupy Wall Street, Butler considers that these forms of co-presence in the public space are
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9 enacting a *“collective thereness”* (2015: 197), one that *“asserts and instates the body in the*
10
11 *midst of the political field”* (2015: 11). More specifically, these public assemblies draw on their
12
13 shared corporeal vulnerability to resist and ask that their precarity –both a bodily condition
14
15 (*precariousness*) and one that is determined by socio-political structures (*precarity*)– be
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17 recognised (2004; 2009; 2015). Therefore, going back to the idea of a *collective body* (Merleau-
18
19 Ponty, 1968), the relational social ontology developed by Butler further establishes the agentic
20
21 and political power of being co-present and vulnerable, and recognised as such (Butler, 2016;
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23 Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). According to them, social realities are not fixed or predetermined
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25 but rather performative and constructed through repeated acts and behaviours, thereby laying
26
27 the foundations for more recognition-based politics.
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33 Drawing on Butler, these ethical, moral, and political considerations reconfigure how
34
35 we understand the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid working in two main
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37 ways. Firstly, their social ontology leads to further consider their inherent intertwinement, but
38
39 also to ethically ground experiences of co-presence, whether they are physically proximate or
40
41 digitally-mediated. In hybrid working, when colleagues only see each other in online meetings
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43 for days, weeks or even months, trusting the other and being vulnerable might come less
44
45 naturally. Yet, adopting a Butlerian approach would encourage them to draw on their bodily
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47 sense of co-presence to listen in and support each other in a caring manner, by mobilizing a
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49 shared vulnerability that is always already *there*. This is especially relevant considering online
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51 forms of sociality and togetherness (Osler, 2020) in which our affective and ethical connection
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53 to others may be less obvious due to a lack of shared physical spaces. Secondly, Butler’s social
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55 ontology provides a rich foundation to connect experiences of co-presence and vulnerability to
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3 the ‘politics of recognition’ (2009). Since, as a living body, I am co-present with others and
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5 vulnerable ‘by definition’, I am also subject to normative frames that determine the extent to
6
7 which my vulnerability is recognised. This means that, using Butler, we can no longer think
8
9 about work collectives in hybrid working only as flexible networks of independent workers
10
11 (Castells, 2000; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2020). In opposition to an individualistic
12
13 view, Butler enables to ‘re-politicize’ those collectives by granting them with an inherently
14
15 performative and political force. While hybrid work models tend to isolate workers (both
16
17 spatially and relationally), which reduces their capacity for “*a powerful political contestation*”
18
19 (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021: 10), recognizing their shared vulnerability lays the foundation for
20
21 acting as a *collective body*. In this sense, a Butlerian ontology opens the way for new modes of
22
23 relating and being together in hybrid work arrangements, whether it is to maintain a sense of
24
25 solidarity and ‘we-ness’ (Cunliffe, 2022) or to resist certain normative pressures.
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33 *Combining the ontological arguments of Merleau-Ponty and Butler: Towards the notion of*
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35 *‘vulnerable co-presence’ for hybrid ways of working*
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38 In the preceding sections, I have attempted to recast the interplay of co-presence and
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40 vulnerability through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s (1945; 1960; 1968; 1973) indirect ontology,
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42 before outlining the contribution of Butler’s (2009; 2015; 2022) social ontology of shared
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44 vulnerability. Although Merleau-Ponty and Butler are both concerned with a phenomenological
45
46 description of experiences of selves and others, their theories provide different yet
47
48 complementary perspectives to examine the co-presence-vulnerability nexus. More
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50 specifically, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology offers a thorough analysis of habitual, bodily
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52 experiences of co-presence, enabling us to understand how our embodied relationality or
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54 ‘intercorporeality’ entails a shared vulnerability. His conception of a ‘field of presence’ (1968)
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56 is also important for considering the ways in which co-presence and vulnerability are guided
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3 by phenomenal, not objective, distance in that I become co-present with another who matters
4 for me *in the moment*. While this constitutes a first step in reframing the co-presence-
5 vulnerability nexus, the lack of an explicitly ethical, moral, and political dimension led me to
6 engage with Butler's recent work (2009; 2015; 2022) in a second step. In particular, Butler
7 refers abundantly to the normative frames and other 'politics of recognition' (2009) that
8 structure the subject's experiences of co-presence and vulnerability. If their social ontology is
9 built on intercorporeal existence, Butler emphasizes that such experiences also comprise an
10 ethical response: the bodily capacity of affecting and being affected by co-present others means
11 that we are morally obliged to each other (2015). Co-presence in this sense cannot be thought
12 of outside of vulnerability, nor can moral and ethical aspects be taken out of the equation.
13 Therefore, combining Merleau-Ponty's and Butler's ontologies, I propose to conceptualise
14 'vulnerable co-presence', which allows us to move beyond the common separation of co-
15 presence and vulnerability in the literature, while offering a multi-faceted concept that is
16 relevant to address the *new vulnerabilities* associated with hybrid working. Such notion consists
17 less of a rigid reconceptualisation of either 'co-presence' or 'vulnerability' than a semantic way
18 of problematising the 'received wisdom' (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; 2020) and providing a
19 novel approach to these phenomena and their relationship. Next, I briefly outline three specific
20 *points of attention* to show what 'vulnerable co-presence' entails before describing the
21 implications of such conceptualisation for hybrid working research and practice.
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49 *Three points of attention linked to 'vulnerable co-presence'*

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51 *Point of attention n°1: Intercorporeal.* Considering 'vulnerable co-presence' means paying
52 closer attention to the way in which our embodied sense of self and others precedes our social
53 interactions. This foundational form of co-presence naturally implies a mutual vulnerability,
54 which is shared by all beings and structures both our individual perceptions and shared
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3 experiences. In other words, we do not exist as isolated subjects; rather we are in continuous
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5 relation with the world and others, which also means that we, as living bodies, are not
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7 impervious but always susceptible to various forms of physical or emotional harm. Instead of
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9 hiding or glossing over the body, this *point of attention* emphasizes that bodily interconnection
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11 is essential in understanding how everyday experiences of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ are lived
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13 and shared in hybrid ways of working. If this aspect is largely absent from most studies on
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15 hybrid work arrangements (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Boell et al., 2016; Fiol & O’Connor, 2005;
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17 Schiemer et al., 2022; Taskin et al., 2023), recent phenomenological accounts of virtual or
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19 dispersed organisational contexts have granted it more importance (Aroles & Küpers, 2021;
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21 Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020; Vidolov, 2022; Willems, 2018). This paper complements this latter
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23 set of studies by highlighting this *intercorporeal* dimension in joint experiences of co-presence
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25 and vulnerability, and showing its relevance in examining how hybrid workers relate to each
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27 other and feel together in these conditions. It also sheds light on the role of bodily sensations,
28
29 both remarkable and discrete, in experiences of belonging to a vulnerable, *collective body* of
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31 living beings. Whether our social encounters are physically proximate or digitally-mediated,
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33 our bodies become conduits for connection and togetherness. I further argue that such *point of*
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35 *attention* is relevant for exploring contexts that do not comprise ‘exclusively virtual
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37 collaboration’ (Vidolov, 2022) or extraordinary conditions such as ‘enforced teleworking’
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39 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Taskin et al., 2023). The normalization of hybrid working
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41 models, and the associated *new vulnerabilities*, leads me to re-examine –using a
42
43 phenomenological lens–, how this dimension participates in how we engage with each other
44
45 and act collectively through non-verbal cues, subtle gestures, and other ‘embodied subtleties’
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47 (Satama et al., 2022). If we take the example of a hybrid worker who alternates between
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49 working from home and attending in-person meetings at the office, their body constitutes a
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51 channel of communication and liaison in both settings, although certain nuances (e.g., a posture,
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3 a voice tone) influence their sense of being vulnerably co-present with their colleagues in each
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5 one. Recognising that there are different forms or degrees of ‘vulnerable co-presence’, such as
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7 in situations of apparent absence (e.g., because of partial attention in a meeting room or during
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9 purely-virtual interactions), is useful for understanding new forms of relational engagement,
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11 sociality, and communality in hybrid working.
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17 *Point of attention n°2: Temporo-spatial.* The second *point of attention* leads us to take into
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19 account the primacy of time over space when examining how ‘vulnerable co-presence’ is
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21 experienced and organized in hybrid organisational contexts. Although the spatial dimension is
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23 not entirely ignored, this aspect encourages to focus on the temporal unfolding of co-presence
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25 and vulnerability. Organisational research into virtuality and hybridity at work has generally
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27 emphasized the role of space and place through developing concepts such as ‘perceived
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29 proximity’ (O’Leary et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2008), or ‘spacing identity’ (Ajzen & Taskin,
30
31 2021). This makes sense insofar as hybrid working is very much about arranging the spatial co-
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33 presence of actors. For instance, in their study, Schiemer and colleagues (2022) examine how
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35 creative songwriting takes place in two types of ‘collaborative spaces’, a physical camp and an
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37 online platform, to highlight the importance of “*organizing copresence in different spatial*
38
39 *settings*” (2022: 21). However, I find that examining further the temporal and processual nature
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41 of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ could complement existing studies on hybrid working. In particular,
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43 the *new vulnerabilities* raised by these modes (e.g., hybrid workers’ social isolation or lack of
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45 belonging) happen in space, but also in time, through their lived, ephemeral experiences of
46
47 selves and others. This temporal dimension also underscores the fluidity and dynamism at play
48
49 in social encounters. Drawing on a ‘temporo-spatial’ view, we are more encouraged to see how
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51 participants (e.g., during an in-person, online or blended meeting) ‘become co-present’ *in the*
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53 *moment* –through their phenomenal bodies–, and during which a shared vulnerability
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3 materializes. This process transcends spatial and temporal boundaries, making it highly relevant
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5 to the study of social, collective phenomena in hybrid modes in which actors interact more
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7 fluidly across multiple workspaces. As other phenomenologically-inspired studies have pointed
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9 out (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2019; Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020), being together in virtual or
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11 hybrid forms of work is less about sharing the same space than experiencing a “*specific*
12
13 *temporal simultaneity*” with others (Aroles & Küpers, 2021: 8). This paper, by introducing this
14
15 ‘temporo-spatial’ dimension, extends their findings by re-emphasizing how sharing a common
16
17 time matters more than the space(s) where hybrid activities occur. When in ‘vulnerable co-
18
19 presence’, our sense of time becomes intimately linked to that of others, allowing for
20
21 synchronicity to emerge between spatially proximate or distant colleagues. In addition, this
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23 dimension points to the central role of embodied intentions and how orienting them influences
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25 our experiences of shared moments and rhythms (e.g., of concentration or communality) in
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27 hybrid work. This means that our bodily movements, expressions, and actions are imbued with
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29 meaning and purpose, which also shape how we *live* social interactions. Going back to the case
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31 of the hybrid worker, they would appreciate more the temporality and rhythm in which they
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33 experience social encounters (or the lack of it) than the spatial setting in which they take place.
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35 For instance, by intentionally recognizing how their feelings of loneliness may fluctuate
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37 throughout the day and are influenced by aspects such as the timing of virtual meetings, the
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39 duration of in-person interactions, or the transition between work and non-work activities.
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49 *Point of attention n°3: Ethico-political.* Lastly, the concept of ‘vulnerable co-presence’
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51 encourages greater attention to the ethics and politics that are attached to experiences of co-
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53 presence and vulnerability in hybrid working. Although ‘co-presence’ has long been used in
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55 research articles on distributed and hybrid work (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013; Schiemer et
56
57 al., 2022; Zhao, 2003; Zhao & Elesh, 2008), there is a shortage of studies that thoroughly
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3 examine how this phenomenon is linked to ethical and moral obligations. Yet, being genuinely
4 co-present and vulnerable with someone is not *ethically neutral*– quite the contrary. It implies
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6 recognising the moral demands of another, whether it is an individual or a collective. Such *point*
7
8 *of attention* thus underscores the ethical imperative of attending to the shared vulnerability that
9
10 is expressed in our social interactions. While recent sociomaterial and phenomenologically-
11
12 oriented studies have outlined how being co-present in technology-enabled settings involves an
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14 ‘affective solidarity’ (Endrissat & Islam, 2021), relations of care (Hafermalz & Riemer, 2020),
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16 or an ‘ethical responsiveness’ (Aroles & Küpers, 2021), this paper seeks to expand them by
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18 inviting readers to look for these aspects in hybrid ways of working. In particular, it encourages
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20 them to reconsider what the hybridity of face-to-face and virtual social encounters does to the
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22 ethics and politics of co-presence. For instance, by further perceiving and responding to the
23
24 ethical demands of hybrid workers, whether it relates to a fear of isolation, a lack of community
25
26 bonding, or a request for increased visibility. However, the quest for social recognition can turn
27
28 into a rat race whereby hybrid workers compete for exposure using both embodied and digital
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30 means (e.g., making oneself ‘available’ on messaging platforms outside of normal working
31
32 hours) (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). The “*enormous pressure to fit in and belong*” (Hafermalz,
33
34 2021: 710) may alter the possibility of a genuinely shared vulnerability insofar as individual
35
36 visibilization and self-promotion clash with the *existential* recognition of an ontological
37
38 interdependence, sometimes even leading to increased isolation. A response to the ‘struggle for
39
40 recognition’ and its marketization lies in enacting modes of subjectification and belonging that
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42 are “*different from the ones implied by the governmentality of property ownership and self-*
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44 *ownership*” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013: 159). In this sense, ‘vulnerable co-presence’ provides
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46 a political foundation for individuals to performatively come together in solidarity and
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48 resistance against certain established norms. Collective, political engagements can be more
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50 challenging in hybrid working contexts where encounters are more often performance-oriented,
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3 such as in videoconference meetings that prioritise efficiency over solidarity. The construct's
4
5 'ethico-political' dimension thus offers to contradict this tendency by re-emphasizing how
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7 being co-present (in-person or online) always implies recognising a mutual vulnerability that
8
9 empowers both individual workers and hybrid work collectives. Finally, taking this aspect into
10
11 account means acknowledging that precariousness is unfairly distributed and that socio-
12
13 economic inequalities may be accentuated according to how hybrid conditions are politically
14
15 structured. For example, this leads to further understand how certain employees may find
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17 themselves in more or less precarious situations (e.g., of social isolation or economic distress)
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19 when working hybrid. Therefore, the concept of 'vulnerable co-presence' can also be used as an
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21 ethical and moral compass to guide collective action in combatting such inequalities.
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23 Considering how the hybrid worker struggles with feelings of disconnection or exclusion using
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25 this view, we better recognize how such feelings are not experienced individually but shared
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27 by many others and result from certain norms, politics, and power dynamics involved in the
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29 design and implementation of hybrid working models.
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40 **IMPLICATIONS FOR HYBRID WORKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

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42 The increasing adoption of hybrid models raises new concerns with regard to how
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44 individuals relate to each other and 'feel together' at work (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Boell et al.,
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46 2016; Eurofound, 2023). While most studies on hybrid working tend to separate co-presence
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48 and vulnerability, this paper seeks to address this gap in research and offer a normative
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50 argument for recasting how co-presence relates to vulnerability. Drawing on the
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52 phenomenological ontologies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler, I put forward the
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54 notion of 'vulnerable co-presence' as well as three *points of attention*, which, I argue, contribute
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56 to the literature and practice of hybrid working arrangements. More specifically, the main
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3 implications of this conceptual framing are twofold. First, by challenging the common divide
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5 between co-presence and vulnerability, it lays the groundwork for a re-politicization of the
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7 hybrid workforce, theoretically showing how plural, embodied action can be sustained in these
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9 settings. Second, based on the three *points of attention* of ‘vulnerable co-presence’, this paper
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11 offers a new perceptual basis for imagining and learning skills to make hybrid work models
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13 more relationally sustainable. In the following paragraphs, I thus present these two main
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15 implications before outlining this paper’s methodological contributions and suggesting avenues
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17 for future research at the intersection of hybrid working, co-presence, and vulnerability.
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24 *Laying the groundwork for re-politicizing the hybrid workforce*

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26 The spatial hybridization of work (Halford 2005; Sewell & Taskin, 2015) poses major
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28 challenges in terms of safeguarding strong social ties and communities (Cunliffe, 2022). In this
29
30 context, the notion of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ offers a conceptual response to the question
31
32 ‘what *holds* a group together in hybrid contexts?’. Since our modes of being and relating are
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34 predefined by an intercorporeal co-presence, we are mutually vulnerable together and bound
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36 by definition. By questioning the common separation between co-presence and vulnerability,
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38 this notion offers a phenomenological framework that invites researchers and practitioners to
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40 modify their approach to the social, relational, and collective aspects of hybrid work. In
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42 particular, it lays the foundations for re-politicizing the hybrid workforce in three ways.
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47 First, the concept of ‘vulnerable co-presence’, through its focus on intercorporeality
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49 (*point of attention n°1*), enables us to understand the hybrid team less as a ‘collection of
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51 individuals’ dispersed in multiple worksites (Endrissat & Leclerq-Vandelannoitte, 2021) than
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53 as a *collective body*, that involves members in an embodied and sustainable way. Because they
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55 share a primordial co-presence through their vulnerable bodies, members are never completely
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57 isolated, giving them the constant possibility of feeling together as a ‘we’ (Osler, 2020). For
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3 instance, in the apparent absence of colleagues working from home, there remains a form of
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5 co-presence and belonging to a *collective body*, which remains directly accessible to both on-
6
7 site and remote members by relying on their discrete, bodily sensations (e.g., the voice or smell
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9 of an ‘absent’ colleague). Acknowledging this shared embodiment thus helps to counter the
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11 individualizing inclination of hybrid settings through giving a renewed political sense to hybrid
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13 work collectives and to the organization of actors’ co-presence in these contexts.
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17 Second, considering the hybrid workforce through the lens of ‘vulnerable co-presence’
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19 leads to emphasizing the temporality and processuality (*point of attention n°2*) of becoming co-
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21 present and vulnerable. The other is always potentially *here*, in my ‘field of presence’, as it is
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23 what matters to me *in the moment* that determines my experience of them, opening the way to
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25 feeling a strong sense of the collective beyond spatial boundaries. Drawing on this view,
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27 researchers and practitioners should, for instance, pay more attention to the temporality of social
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29 interactions in hybrid teams (e.g., at what moment in the project do we need to meet). Some of
30
31 these interactions can serve as *moments of recognition* – across a variety of settings –, during
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33 which actors intentionally acknowledge their ethical interconnectedness. Such reciprocal,
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35 embodied relationality thus forms the basis of plural and political action while also reinforcing
36
37 the social ties of hybrid workers and work communities against precariousness.
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42 Lastly, examining hybrid work collectives through the lens of ‘vulnerable co-presence’
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44 calls for considering their performative and political force (*point of attention n°3*). Such force
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46 stems from the ethical recognition of the shared vulnerability between members, which both
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48 affects and empowers them. In contrast to the paradigms of invulnerability and efficiency found
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50 in common descriptions of hybrid arrangements –, it is by performing (i.e., enacting through
51
52 repeated acts and behaviours) a ‘vulnerable co-presence’ –, that groups can act politically both
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54 online and in person. This conceptualisation thus leads to re-politicize the hybrid workforce not
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56 only by emphasizing its collective-ness, but also by shedding light on dynamics of recognition
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3 and resistance within hybrid teams. For instance, it encourages to further consider forms of
4 deprivation, exclusion, and socio-economic inequalities in these settings (e.g., when there are
5 many disparities between hybrid workers' living situations). Therefore, the proposed
6 framework encourages a more critical, reflexive exploration of hybrid work models and the
7 inequalities they may foster. In the next section, I present how the notion of 'vulnerable co-
8 presence' could also guide the practices of workers and managers in these conditions.
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19 *Offering a perceptual basis for developing and learning new skills to maintain strong social*
20 *ties and work collectives in hybrid work arrangements*
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24 This conceptualisation' second main implication is to provide practitioners with a
25 perceptual basis to imagine and learn skills that will strengthen social ties and work collectives
26 in hybrid arrangements. Indeed, *new vulnerabilities* such as the increased risk of social isolation
27 (Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen, 2015; Whittle & Mueller, 2009), a reduced or lost sense of
28 community (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021), or siloed teams (Eurofound, 2023) requires the learning
29 of new skills and competencies (Borg & Söderlund, 2017; Babapour Chafi et al., 2022;
30 Eurofound, 2023). In response, I argue that drawing on the three *points of attention* linked to
31 the notion of 'vulnerable co-presence' would enable workers and managers to revise their
32 skillset toward more relationally sustainable hybrid models of working. In particular, by
33 developing skills based on these *points*, they would be better able to ensure the maintenance of
34 strong social relations, while also fostering the conditions for feelings of 'we-ness' (Cunliffe,
35 2022; Osler, 2020) to emerge in hybrid working. In the following, I explain how each *point of*
36 *attention* can lead to learning new working and managerial competencies.
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56 *Intercorporeal: Towards developing a 'bodysset' for working and managing hybrid.* Following
57 this *point of attention*, practitioners would be more inclined to rely on their embodied perception
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3 and discrete sensations to relate to each other and maintain a strong sense of the collective
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5 across virtual, face-to-face, or blended settings. This shift in positioning leads me to frame this
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7 attitude as a ‘bodyset’ (linked to the body) in opposition to a mindset (linked to mental
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9 representations), which serves to equip practitioners with a new lens to consider the ‘vulnerable
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11 co-presence’ of others. For instance, line managers may find it difficult to find an equilibrium
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13 when managing members who are both teleworking and in the office. Drawing on this
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15 ‘bodyset’, they would become more attentive to the bodily expressions and non-verbal cues of
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17 hybrid workers (e.g., a particular tone or gaze) when they are seeking to create a sense of
18
19 cohesion and engagement. This would be particularly useful during brainstorming sessions or
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21 team rituals that gather participants working in different settings, e.g., by enabling managers to
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23 further identify opportunities for informal checking or to re-activate a sense of ‘vulnerable co-
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25 presence’.

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33 *Temporo-spatial: Focusing on the temporality of co-presence when organizing hybrid work.*

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35 Drawing on the ‘temporo-spatial’ facet of ‘vulnerable co-presence,’ hybrid teams would pay
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37 less attention to the instances *where* they share a space (e.g., ‘presence days’ during which all
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39 employees are asked to come to the office) than *when* and *how* they share it. In particular, it
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41 leads practitioners to further rely on their embodied sense of others – in physically proximate
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43 or digitally-mediated social encounters – to intentionally become more synchronous with them.
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45 For instance, a new hire who has just joined a project in a hybrid mode would further rely on
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47 their bodily sensations of being together *in time* with other team members, e.g., by sharing a
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49 certain work rhythm or the project’s timeline. The role of intentions is crucial in this process as
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51 hybrid workers can easily be overwhelmed by parallel temporalities, such as those of family
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53 members at home or videoconferencing software. In this sense, a ‘temporo-spatial’ orientation
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55 invites line managers to learn how to become more attentive to the quality and intensity of in-
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3 person moments instead of their quantity. They would also become more inclined to rely on
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5 their body and senses to align their intentions with those of others, e.g., to establish lasting
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7 rapport, empathy, and trust between members of a cross-functional project.
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12 *Ethico-political: Adopting an empathetic and caring posture in hybrid working.* By taking this
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14 *point of attention* seriously, hybrid workers and managers would be more inclined to consider
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16 the moral and ethical obligations linked to ‘vulnerable co-presence’. For instance, it incites line
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18 managers to develop an empathetic and caring posture toward the members of their teams. This
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20 might include making informal contact with them, being more cautious about burn-out, and
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22 frequently assessing their morale and potential difficulties (e.g., in their professional activities
23
24 or relationships). In becoming more aware of the vulnerability shared among team members,
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26 they would also be more supportive of care-oriented initiatives, such as creating a ‘hybrid
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28 support group’ or organizing mental health meetings in a blended format. An ‘ethico-political’
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30 view also equips hybrid workers to better recognize the weak signals of difficult life situations
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32 among themselves and provide support to those who need it. Through better acknowledging
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34 their ethical bond, hybrid team members would become more skilled at ensuring that everyone
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36 feels supported and included. Organisational actions could include using asynchronous
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38 collaboration tools for different time zones, offering stipends for home improvements and
39
40 reliable internet, and creating well-being programs for employees in economic or psychological
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42 distress. Collectively, implementing these changes at different levels would help to make hybrid
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44 work arrangements more resilient and socially sustainable.
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51 52 53 *Methodological contributions and avenues for future research*

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56 Although these are not ‘new’ objects of research per se, co-presence and vulnerability
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58 are taking on new importance in this hybrid, post-pandemic world. Existing studies on more
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3 digitized or hybrid ways of working usually focus on one phenomenon or the other, but rarely
4 investigate them in tandem. By putting forward the notion of ‘vulnerable co-presence’, this
5 conceptual paper offers a number of contributions in terms of methodology. Future research
6 could, for example, delve into the new forms or degrees of co-presence in hybrid work
7 arrangements, focusing on how ‘intercorporeality’ (*point of attention n°1*) comes into play. In
8 particular, drawing on this framework, organisational researchers could further analyze how
9 hybrid workers’ senses of touch or smell –in both physical and digitally-mediated interactions–
10 participate in experiencing a shared co-presence and vulnerability. Although it may be
11 challenging to collect such data solely online, the hybridization of work settings allows for
12 interesting explorations, especially through ethnographic and auto-ethnographic note-taking.
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26 Furthermore, by emphasizing the ‘temporo-spatial’ nature of ‘vulnerable co-presence’
27 (*point of attention n°2*), the advanced conceptualisation provides an appropriate posture for
28 researchers seeking to explore (inter-)subjective experiences in ‘multi-localized’ (Halford,
29 2005), hybrid ways of working. In particular, it enables them to see the circulation of hybrid
30 workers across physical and virtual worksites as a dynamic movement rather than a linear
31 succession. To examine how hybrid workers draw on their past, present, or anticipated
32 experiences of co-presence and shared vulnerability, researchers could use diary methods (e.g.,
33 by providing respondents with dated online notebooks to check and compare the
34 (a)synchronisation between their respective narratives). Adopting a ‘temporo-spatial’ posture
35 could also inform future research into the creative ways used by hybrid workers to navigate
36 feelings of absence, passivity or invisibility. For instance, by inspecting how team members
37 can intentionally make themselves co-present to each other in specific *moments* (e.g., exploring
38 which material and virtual means they use, following what temporality or rhythms).
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56 Emerging work and organisational studies have engaged with vulnerability, and how it
57 is shared and experienced in virtual contexts (Jeffrey & Thorpe, 2024). While the study by
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3 Taskin, Ajzen, and Klinksiek (2023) sheds light on the relationship between co-presence,
4 psychological health, and caring relations in ‘enforced teleworking’, this paper offers to
5 complement their insights by focusing on the *source* of care – a sense of mutual vulnerability
6 – and its ethico-political implications (*point of attention n°3*). This aspect of ‘vulnerable co-
7 presence’ invites scholars to orient their research practices in two main ways. First, it fosters a
8 more ‘care-ful’ (Cunliffe, 2022) approach to respondents in hybrid working conditions by
9 highlighting the role of shared emotions between researcher and researched despite reduced
10 face-to-face interaction (which supposedly facilitates ethical connection). Second, future
11 empirical research could pay more attention to how ‘politics of recognition’, power dynamics,
12 and social structures frame hybrid workers’ experiences of co-presence and vulnerability, e.g.,
13 by researching the distribution of precarity among members of a hybrid team and how it is
14 politically structured. Although the bulk of studies on hybrid working focuses on issues related
15 to operational efficiency, technology, or effective communication, conceptualising ‘vulnerable
16 co-presence’ paves the way for more engaged organisational scholarship into the politico-socio-
17 economic realities of hybrid workers, thus joining other critical perspectives on distributed
18 arrangements (Hafermalz, 2021). In the table below (Table I), I summarise the various
19 implications of this notion for the research and practice of hybrid working, based on the
20 structure of this last section.
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Table I. Implications of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ for the research and practice of hybrid work arrangements (HWA)

	Laying the groundwork for re-politicizing the hybrid workforce	Offering a perceptual basis for imagining and learning skills to make HWA more sustainable	Methodological contributions and avenues for future research
Points of attention			
<i>Intercorporeal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the hybrid team less as a ‘collection of individuals’ than as a collective body that involves members in an embodied and sustainable way • Allows the possibility for feeling together as a strong ‘we’ across multiple worksites, thus countering the individualizing inclination of HWA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By developing a ‘bodyscapes’, practitioners learn to further draw on their bodily sensations to relate to others (e.g., for line managers to create a sense of cohesion or engagement in their teams) • Serves to imagine new ways of belonging and being together through particular gestures and non-verbal cues in HWA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This framework invites researchers to further explore how actors’ senses of touch or smell participate in experiences of co-presence and mutual vulnerability in HWA (e.g., using ethnographic methods) • Future studies could explore the new forms or degrees of co-presence (e.g., examining the influence of partial attention in different contexts through an ‘intercorporeal’ lens)
<i>Temporo-spatial</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizing the temporality and processuality of plural action: hybrid workers can maintain a strong collective beyond spatial and temporal boundaries • Sheds light on ‘moments of recognition’ (e.g., in physical or online settings) during which actors mutually and ethically acknowledge each other. It helps to reinforce social ties and collectives against precariousness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioners are more inclined to learn to use their bodies to intentionally achieve synchronicity with others (e.g., for a new hire to feel more included into a project team) • Leads to place more focus on the temporality and intensity of in-person moments rather than their quantity (e.g., organizing the physical co-presence of team members) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an adapted posture for researchers to investigate the dynamic movement and circulation of hybrid workers across physical and virtual settings • Future empirical research could seek to further understand how colleagues draw on their past, present, or anticipated experiences of co-presence and shared vulnerability in HWA (e.g., by using diary methods)
<i>Ethico-political</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering the ethical recognition and mutual vulnerability of hybrid workers can lead to emphasize the performative and political force of hybrid work collectives • Highlights the dynamics of vulnerability, recognition and resistance: leads to paying greater attention to forms of deprivation, exclusion and socio-economic inequalities in HWA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line managers learn to adopt an empathetic and caring posture when managing hybrid teams (e.g., making informal contact with members) • By acknowledging their ethical bond, hybrid workers become more skilled at recognizing weak signals of difficult life situations and providing support at different levels (individual, team, organisation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes a more ‘care-ful’ approach towards respondents in HWA: Highlights the role of shared emotions and ethical ties between the researcher and researched • Future studies could explore how ‘politics of recognition’, power dynamics and social structures influence the lived experiences of hybrid workers (e.g., differences in power relations, unequal distribution of precarity between members of a hybrid team)

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an accelerating moment toward hybrid ways of working, learning, protesting, celebrating, mourning, and interacting in general. In this conceptual article, I have sought to recast the interplay of co-presence and vulnerability and, in doing so, to develop a normative argument for making hybrid working contexts more relationally sustainable. Yet, the phenomenological conception of ‘vulnerable co-presence’ could also be researched and applied in non-work areas of life and society. Merleau-Ponty and Butler, each in their own way, invite us to ‘re-learn’ how to *see* and organize our togetherness with others in the world by revitalizing the ‘co-’ (as being vulnerable with another) of co-presence. Drawing on their ontological views, I have outlined three *points of attention* that, I argue, could enable a re-politicization of the hybrid workforce and inform better management of co-presence and vulnerability in hybrid work settings. In light of how the *new vulnerabilities* affect countless people beyond the walls of their offices, in what some have called an ‘epidemic of loneliness’, it also seems crucial that we, as organisational researchers, engage more with the “*ethical underpinnings and values guiding our scholarly practice*” (Delmestri, 2022) to promote ‘a good life’ (Butler, 2012) and a more inclusive society.

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