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Defining the work situation in organization theory: bringing Goffman back in

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ABSTRACT

The organization is traditionally assumed as the principal context of work. This assumption no longer holds in post-industrial and post-bureaucratic settings. Conducting meetings from home while juggling household responsibilities can be characterized as a form of organizing, but such contexts is not well accommodated by organizational perspectives. In such contexts, the organization plays a varying and often limited role. To accommodate this decomposition and re-composition of how work is organized, the present study develops a conceptual framework centered on the *work situation*. Building on Goffman's account of social situations (1966, 1974), the analysis draws an explicit distinction between the context of work as a series of potential frames and the work situation as an enacted framework for gestalting the specific work at hand. On this view, the organization as a formal setting or social assembly is just one of many frames that influence what actors do at work.

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Introduction

In the immediate post-war era, Herbert Simon coined the idea of 'organization theory' as a distinct discipline (Simon 1947, 1952; Starbuck 2003). Implicitly, this assumed a symmetry between the organization as theoretical and empirical object (Althusser and Balibar 1970), and conceptually, *the organization* became both the primary site of working life and the principal frame for its analysis. Work was seen primarily as what is done by the 'organization man' (Whyte 1956) – with all the gendered implications that entails – within the frame of *the bounded organization*. As described by Scott and Davis (2016, 6) in their renowned textbook, the organization was generally understood as 'the context influencing the activities of individuals'. According to Bromley and Meyer (2015, 21),

as a socially constructed form, organizations are everywhere envisioned and charted (often legally) as holistic bounded entities. A great deal of boundary and identity-defining work goes on in contemporary organizations and organization theory, as participants imagine their structures as unified: a whole world of managers and management are built on this view.

This organization-centric view of the context of work threatens to limit our sense of the richness and complexity of the influences on what we do and how we do it in contemporary work settings. This is especially the case as the closed workplaces of traditional bureaucracies like the factory floor and the

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office building are giving way to more dispersed forms such as services delivered on the street or in the home (Barley and Kunda 2001; Manning 1977); in client organizations or complex projects (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2011; Bechky 2006; Donnelly 2008; Patriotta and Spedale 2009); or as remote work performed at cafes, on trains, or at airports (Kingma 2016; Knox et al. 2008; Larson 2020); in coworking spaces (Fabbri 2016; Jakonen et al. 2017; Vidaillet and Bousalham 2020); or from so-called 'home offices' (Tietze 2005; Wapshott and Mallett 2011).

These organizationally dislocated places of work have been variously conceptualized as post-bureaucratic work (Barley and Kunda 2001); project work (Bechky 2006); telework (Nicolini 2009); remote work (Olson 1983; Yang et al. 2021); nomadic work (Costas 2013; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 2015; Clegg, Ahuja, and Nikolova 2019; Stephenson et al. 2020); multi-location work (Hislop and Axtell 2009); virtual work (Kingma 2019; Sivunen and Putnam 2019); event-based work (Sturdy, Schwarz, and Spicer 2006); work in liminal spaces (Vesala and Tuomivaara 2018); third work spaces (Kingma 2016); or work at interstitial spaces (Furnari 2014). Typically adopting a phenomenological or interactionist perspective (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010), these studies capture the complex and variable contingencies that differentiate these distributed, dispersed workplaces, influencing how work is performed and how the organization is enacted through interactions as situated phenomena under fluid conditions. For the most part, however, even situated microstudies that acknowledge the emergent and dispersed qualities of the contemporary workplace tend to invoke the organization as the overarching unit of analysis.

Alternatively to this focus on how organizations manifest situated in the world of work, there is a need for a unifying analytical framework to capture how people experience of being at work is organized and the multiple contextual contingencies at play in this process. To that end, the present study proposes a complementary *situation-centric* approach (cf. also Klemsdal et al. 2022) that looks beyond prevailing assumptions about organization as the main context of work, whether in terms of formal and structural arrangement or as performed into being in practice. A situation-centric lens makes us better able to accommodate significant dislocating traits in contemporary working life, and at the same time providing an analytical tool for grasping the limited and relative function of the organization in its various phenomenal shades in this context. This also then responds to recent criticism of situated approaches to organization to be unable to account for the role of formal organizational arrangements in ordering contemporary work (du Gay and Vikkelsø 2016; King, Felin, and Whetten 2010).

The proposed analytical framework builds on Goffman's (1966, 1974, 1983) notion of social situations, which remains underdeveloped and underused in the context of organization and work. In particular, we believe this approach offers a promising starting point for addressing questions about the nature of work situations beyond the spatiotemporal boundedness of the organization.

This paper proceeds as follows. To begin, we consider a range of situated perspectives on organizations and examine how organization theory has pursued a finer-grained understanding of the manifold contingencies that influence organizational and working life, however within prevailing assumptions of organization as the main context of work. The next section of the paper introduces the concept of the *work situation* as an analytical construct to capture the diversity of the frames that order people's experiences of work. To demonstrate the general validity of the proposed approach, we demonstrate its application to traditional police work as depicted in an American television series. In the spirit of Goffman, we use this fictional case study as an illustration of modern working life as flexible, fluid, and simultaneously entangled with an established organizational order. Finally, we reflect on the implications of this situation-centric approach for our understanding of how the organization then contributes to the ordering of work.

Organization theory: situated approaches

Perspectives on organization sensitive to local contextual factors and relationships have been part of organization theory at least since Silverman (1970) and Weick (1969) challenged the prevailing

structural functionalist emphasis on formal organization as the primary influence on organizational actions. These and subsequent situated approaches have generally focused on how the actions and interactions of individual actor's shape and influence organizations as collective entities and how these micro actions and interactions mediate relations between macro organizational variables (Boden 1994; Taylor and van Every 1999; Felin, Foss, and Ployhart 2015). Weick (1969) and followers have focused on how organization emerges through actors sensemaking, which concerns '[turning circumstances] into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard to action' (Weick 2005, 40). Strauss (1988, 164) conceived of organizations as 'ongoing concerns' and as products of 'negotiated orders' and investigated the 'mechanics of work as interaction' (Strauss 1993, 94; 1985, 289–90). Later, Barley and Kunda (2000, 81) proposed to bring work back into organization studies through 'situational accounts of organizational dynamics' that would capture the dynamics of post-bureaucratic service work by studying the concrete everyday activities of employees. In similar vein, practice-theoretical perspectives examine how situated work processes are ordered through face-to-face interactions framed by shared social practices (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010; Heath, Knoblauch, and Luff 2000; Nicolini 2009, 2012; Samra-Fredericks 2004), characterizing practices as 'the sites of organizations' (Schatzki 2005).

Analyses of the 'mechanics of work' or the social practices of organization have not precluded consideration of the broader institutional context in which people organize their work, which is entangled with culture, economics, and politics. Sometimes, because of these institutional pressures, actors may even find themselves out of work – for instance, 'on account of the economy' (Springs-teen 1980). The conceptual universes invoked by Strauss and others refer to 'social worlds' (Strauss 1985, 1993; Clarke 2005) beyond the organization: occupational or professional background, institutional field, or forms of embodiment and identity that may clash when people from different social worlds come together to negotiate working arrangements (Høiland and Klemsdal 2022). For instance, Sluss, van Dick, and Thompson (2011, 521) noted that professionals are 'involved in multiple groups and role relationships within and between organizational boundaries', as in Gouldner's (1957a, 1957b) concept of cosmopolitan latent identities. According to Sluss, van Dick, and Thompson (2011, 521), 'a veritable jungle of role identities ... [can] potentially influence attitudes and behaviors'. Stressing the relevance of occupational role theory for organization studies, Bechky (2006, 2011) employed an interactionist approach to demonstrate how occupational membership and role constitutes organization by influencing local work ordering processes across specific sites, as for instance in recurrent project work. In Gouldner's *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* (1954; cited by Hallet and Ventresca 2006), concrete activities and task performance at the Gypsum plant were constituted by the collision between employees' rural background and formal organizational instructions and expectations regarding what to do and how to do it, 'inhabiting the institutions', according to Hallet and Ventresca (2006). And a range of interactionist-inspired studies has also analyzed how the implementation and use of technology or plans in complex local contexts were adapted to the contingencies of the situation at hand (Suchman 1987; Heath, Knoblauch, and Luff 2000; Orlikowski 1996) to 'perform organization' (Tuncer and Licoppe 2018, 11).

Taken together, these studies represent a range of situated perspectives on work and organization that explore how moment-to-moment, face-to-face interactions produce and reproduce organization in action in contexts shaped by complex institutional, technical, and local contingencies (Klemsdal and Wittusen 2021; Richards 2004; Samra-Fredericks 2004). Still, the basic assumption persists that the organization defines the main context and boundaries of working processes and face-to-face interactions. It is 'the constitutive role of people in organizations' that is addressed (Hallett, Shulman, and Fine 2009, 3). It is the organization that is perceived as situated as 'processual assemblages of social practices' (Schatzki 2005), capturing the 'fine lamination of actions and reactions that build, from one moment to another, into the organization' (Boden 1994, 22).

To further develop this situated understanding and so enhance our ability to account for the organizationally dislocated ordering of contemporary work, this organization-centric approach must be supplemented by an alternative analytical lens to provide a bottom-up account of how

actors experience work. To that end, we coin an analytical concept of the *work situation* as the site of work based on Goffmans notions of social situations.

Framing the work situation

Goffman's work has been widely cited in organization theory and research. Scholars have employed a range of Goffman's key concepts in organization analysis, such as keying/frame analysis, face-to-face interaction, and the dramaturgical analysis of social encounters, as well as role-distance/embrace, front/back-stage, face, repairs, demeanor, and working consensus (Cornelissens and Werner 2014; Patriotta and Spedale 2009; Samra-Fredericks and Bargiela-Chiappini 2008; Manning 1977, 2008, 2012). However, although Goffman's account of social situations is tightly coupled to concepts like frames and interaction orders, it rarely features in analyses of work and organization. This section reconstructs Goffman's account of social situations as the basis for an analytical elaboration of *the work situation* as the site of operations at work.

According to Goffman, social situations are the site of interactions as experienced by the individual actor there and then. As he notes in *Frame Analysis*,

My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitored arena of a face to face gathering. I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question 'what is going on here?' Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to is presumed by the way individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand. (Goffman 1974, 8)

The question of 'what is going on' begs a 'definition of the situation' as W.I. Thomas (1951) famously observed. This definition is not created by the actors involved, nor is it given by the circumstances; rather, it is to be 'found' by the participants:

Presumably, a 'definition of the situation' is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not *create* this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly. (Goffman 1974, 1–2)

In other words, the actors involved are engaged in the social process of finding an adequate definition of the situation to reach what Goffman (1983) describes elsewhere as 'working agreements' about what is going on, creating an agreed 'interaction order' based on the available sources of potential definitions. Although the individual actor always has some say in defining the situation, negotiation dynamics and power mechanisms may enhance or diminish that influence (Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips 2006). Additionally, during negotiations, the individual may misunderstand the situation; as Goffman put it, 'The individual, it is true, can be 'wrong' in his interpretations, that is, misguided, out of touch, inappropriate, and so forth' (Goffman 1974, 26). On this view, social order is constructed on two loosely coupled levels. On a meso or macro level, a *context* of historically available cognitive and normative sources and resources for defining situations ensures a form of objectivity and stability in social life. These sources are then selectively invoked by individual actors in micro-level interactions in pursuit of working agreements to define the specific situation at hand.

The multiple sources of frames

Goffman uses the generic term 'frames' or 'frameworks' to refer to the clusters of rules that constrain what is considered an adequate, appropriate, or meaningful course of action in a specific context or situation.

Social frameworks [...] provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being a human being. Such an agency is anything but implacable; it can be coaxed, flattered, affronted and threatened. What it does can be described as 'guided

doings'. These doings subject the doer to 'standards', to social appraisals of his action based on its honesty efficiency, economy, safety, elegance, tactfulness, good taste and so forth. [...] Motive and intent are involved, and their imputation helps select which of the various social frameworks for understanding is to be applied. An example of a guided doing would be the newscast reporting of the weather. So, one deals here with deeds, not mere events (Goffman 1974, 22–23).

Frames suggest configurations or lines of action (scripts) that are both technically adequate and socially appropriate for actors in specific contexts. By reducing complexity, frames eliminate the need to negotiate or devise an explicit agreement about what is going on, where that might lead, or what historical contingencies might arise. In short, a social situation is constituted by the involved actors based on the available sources of frames for defining what the situation might be about.

What, then, are these sources? In an earlier work, *Behavior in Public Places* (1966), Goffman identified 'social occasions' as a central source of frames for defining the situation at hand. He defined a social occasion as follows:

a wider social affair, undertaking or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment; a social occasion provides the structuring context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely to form, dissolve and reform, while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized as the appropriate and (often) official or intended one [...]. Examples of social occasions are a social party, a workday in an office, a picnic or a night at the opera. (Goffman 1966, 18)

However, social occasions are not the sole or even the primary source of frames. For example, frames can be embedded in material objects as affordances that suggest a line of action or interaction: chairs as devices for sitting or tables for gathering around and listening. Natural phenomena may also be a source of frames, as for instance when a rise or fall in temperature invites a change of appropriate behavior that sometimes are loosely coupled to one's natural reactions (as when light clothing appears as less socially appropriate in cold weather than in hot). In institutional contexts, frames may relate to specific roles and statuses: as theater performer or spectator, bank manager or cashier, there are different guidelines for appropriate behavior and for what is to be expected of others in common institutional settings and social occasions (Goffman 1974, 21–25). Specific social occasions foreground different roles; for example, the priest's role and status during the sermon changes at the coffee break that follows. Similarly, the church's status as institutional setting depends on whether the priest is present. For instance, the social occasion of the sermon commences only when the priest enters, at which point the church as a space for prayer and contemplation becomes a site of ritual congregation. The emergence of a new contextual factor forces frames from the initial social occasion into the background. For example, people standing in line to pay the cashier at the supermarket are primarily engaged in the social occasion of queuing, but in an unexpected event such as an armed robbery, customers and cashiers become victims.

Not least, frames are mediated by personal experiences, cultural practices, and background understanding, based on previous participation in similar or related social situations such as cocktail parties or seminars. To that extent, frames for defining situations also depend on the actor's acquired practical and cultural repertoire; to see it, you must know it. Social situations are constituted, then, by combining a range of contextually available frames in assessing and enacting what is going on. Frames are combined and intermeshed in a working agreement as an integrated *framework* or 'situational gestalt' (Diehl and McFarland 2010, 1743) that defines the situation at hand.

In complex contexts, however, multiple sources of frames and enactments of working agreements may conflict, and the strategic political positioning of actors, networks, resources, and interests may make consensus difficult (Clegg 1989). As Goffman observed,

When participants roles in an activity is differentiated—a common circumstance—the view that one person has of what is going on is likely to be quite different from that of another. (Goffman 1974, 8)

For Goffman, then, *multiple sources of frames* may create conflict when attempting to define a situation:

Once a social situation is referred back to the social occasion that sets the tone for the gathering in it, we must admit the possibility that the same physical space may be caught within the domain of two different social occasions. The social situation then may be the scene of potential or actual conflict between the sets of regulations that ought to govern. (Goffman 1966, 20)

Certainly, contexts will differ in terms of the complexity of available competing frames and the ensuing scope for uncertainty or conflict in defining the situation at hand. For example, while working at a fixed location on an assembly line in a simulacrum of a closed system is not unduly complex. Working with customers, contractors, clients and shifting political expectations and technologies as well as variable physical and institutional locations, is more volatile and negotiable. In work contexts, a complex open system involving a surplus of incompatible frames demands more active and explicit engagement to establish a working agreement about what is going on (Klemsdal 2013). Goffman (1966) distinguished between such contexts in terms of their tightness or looseness:

We usually think of tight occasions as ones in which the participants have many onerous situational obligations and of loose occasions as ones relatively free of these constraints. (Goffman 1966, 207)

However, as he immediately adds, 'this is only partly so' (Goffman 1966, 207). He goes on to suggest that tightly defined social occasions afford 'extreme situational orientation', allowing the individual actor little leeway to modify their behavior but also raises fewer doubts about how to go on. He cites the example of a military parade (1966, 208), where participants are just following the script, and an absence of doubt allows them to let the mind wander. In contrast, loose situations allow more leeway for choosing and modifying one's behavior but also require greater reflection on what to do and how to do it. For example, Goffman (1966, 208) notes that the looseness of a cocktail party requires guests to remain mentally alert to monitor what is going on and what seems the appropriate thing to do or say.

General contexts of work versus specific framed work situations

According to Goffman, then, social life is about choosing from the multiple available frames in the immediate context to establish a working agreement about what is going on in the situation at hand. As part of the context, frames constitute a general cultural and practical repertoire for navigating social life that is 'fixed and left essentially untouched by everyday events' (Gonos 1977, 859). However, the opposite is true of the specific social situations in which frames are deployed; in the words of W. I Thomas (1951, 158), 'social situations never spontaneously repeat themselves, every situation is more or less new, for everyone includes new human activities differently combined'. On that basis, we can draw a key distinction between work situations as unique frameworks (enacted selectively by actors seeking agreement about what is going on here and now) and contexts of work consisting of general frames stemming from a range of sources across space and time largely independent of the specific interactions in the situation at hand. Conceived in this way, work contexts are not characterized by a singular social order and consensus as generally assumed by organization-centric approaches. Rather than being negotiated (Strauss 1978), order at work is created through participants' interactions as they strive to reach agreement about what is going on in the work situation by selecting from a surplus of available frames in the context.

When work situations are defined and enacted, then, the available frames include formal organizational cues (codes, instructions, charters) and social organizing cues (patterned associations among interaction partners) (see the concluding discussion for further elaboration of criteria separating work from other social situations). Any such ordering frame stemming from these organizational sources persists in a relatively stable form across time and space. At the same time, they

compete with other potential frames in that context when actors negotiate and enact specific situations, creating variation in the form and the strength the organizational frames are employed, from situation to situation. Consider for example a care nurse, who follows a detailed scheme when operationalizing her organizational mission for a 20-minute consultation with her client (changing socks, body wash, etc.). Confronted with an elderly client's immediate need to talk about the recent loss of a daughter, the nurse puts her instructions away and sits down to hold hands and comfort the patient. As they reach a working agreement about what is going on in the here and now, the formal organizational frame is suppressed by a combination of other frames prompted by the client's needs and the nurse's sense of professionalism and personal experiences of loss. Because of her training and previous experiences, she 'finds' it more relevant to sit and listen than to complete the practical details of the service scheme. In this situation, the formal organizational frame of purposes and instructions is crowded out by other concerns and becomes a minor part of the framework that defines what is going on and what seems the appropriate thing to do. On leaving this client, however, she resumes the service scheme, which will probably inform her next encounter with the same client, untouched by what happened in the specific situation at hand.

The case of detective Bosch

To further illustrate how a situation-centric lens can aid the analysis of ordering and organizing work, we turn now to two related scenes from a crime series called *Bosch* (Overmyer 2014), which portrays the everyday life of Detective Harry Bosch in the Hollywood section of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). As a dedicated detective, Bosch works 24/7, even on Christmas Day; in one sense, he lives his whole life within the frames of the LAPD, thinking and working non-stop on the cases he is trying to solve. In so doing, however, he is seldom seen at his office at the LAPD Hollywood department. Instead, he is usually out on the street – in the police car he shares with his work partner, alone in his private car, or at a crime scene or other locations in the Hollywood district. In other words, Bosch performs his work in a shifting context involving various social occasions and a range of potential frames that influence how he and other participants define what is going on.

Situation 1: Following a suspect on the streets of LA

As one example of the multiple available frames when Bosch is performing his work, consider the opening scene in the first episode of season one. Bosch and his partner are in their car, following a murder suspect as he walks quickly along a pavement in downtown LA. Suddenly, the suspect becomes aware of the police car and enters the subway. Bosch responds quickly, leaving the car to follow the suspect on foot, disguised by a baseball cap that he pulls down to hide his face. He follows on foot through the subway and the crowded city center station and then back up onto the street. The pursuit finally ends in an alley near Skid Row; in the darkness and the heavy rain, visibility is poor. From a distance, Bosch points his weapon at the suspect and tells him to get down on his knees, holding his hands up in front of him. The suspect gets down on his knees, but instead of doing as instructed, his right hand moves behind his back. Bosch pulls the trigger, and the suspect drops dead.

In this situation, Bosch is acting on behalf of the LAPD. His formal status as a detective gives him the authority and resources that frame both his role and that of the suspect in the situation as enacted. Having framed the other man as a suspect, Bosch is engaged in a manhunt and acts accordingly. However, in figuring out what might be going on, both protagonists also draw on other frames. By leaving the car, Bosch is entering a loose social occasion – the streets of downtown LA – where, as a police officer in civilian clothes, he is confronted by other obligations than merely those of LAPD. Making his way through the crowded streets and ultimately into the dark alley, the frames that Bosch 'finds' are based on his experiences as a US marine fighting guerrillas in Afghanistan and as a young orphan trying to survive on these same LA streets. As part of his practical and

cultural repertoire, those experiences frame what he is 'alive to' (Goffman 1974, 8), influencing his perception of what is going on and how he acts. Those earlier experiences combine with other frames associated with the rain and the darkness. The suspect's movements and his refusal to obey instructions seem to signal attack rather than submission, and Bosch responds by shooting him. In reacting specifically to being followed, the suspect draws on his situation-specific frames. As the situation escalates through the streets and into the alley, what the suspect feels he is confronted with when facing a man in a baseball cap pointing a gun at him in the low visibility of the rain and the darkness, is probably just as readily associated with former confrontations with criminals on the street as with the police, inducing an impulse of defense rather than surrender. Although both are enacting the situation of a street-based manhunt, they never quite reach a working agreement about what is going on. In this case, the conflict ends fatally, as Bosch mistakes the situation – or does he? It is not always easy to say, as the negotiated definition of a given situation selects from multiple available frames, many of them beyond the narrow context of police work, as we will see below.

Situation 2: In the courtroom

We next encounter Bosch in court during a civil lawsuit, where he stands accused of the illegitimate shooting of a suspect – in other words, murder – a completely different frame. As a social occasion, the courtroom differs completely from the streets of LA. In particular, it is tightly defined by the institutional frame of the US legal system, with strict procedures for how to behave and clearly defined roles, expectations, and obligations that effectively predefine what is going on. The interaction follows strict rules and procedures that are explicitly monitored by the judge, who sees to it that all of the participants' actions fall within the institutional frames.

In these circumstances, the enactment of Bosch's role as a representative of the LAPD and associated frames is radically different than it was on the street. On the street, Bosch was acting significantly within the organizational frame of a police officer tailing a suspect, although also drawing on a range of other frames presented by the context, especially as the situation escalated and he moved further and further away from the police car. In the courtroom, however, he is acting as a police officer personally accused of murder. The framework defining what's going on is primarily framed by the court institution and the legal paragraph he is charged by. The role of the LAPD as a source of frame in this context is primarily negative as it mirrors Bosch's failure to follow the organization's rules and procedures, thereby representing a potential threat to the reputation of LAPD.

In both situations, the organizational frames are enmeshed with other frames, with the consequence that the meanings and expectations around his enactment of the role of police officer differ. This difference is well illustrated in the courtroom scene, where the framing of events on the street is negotiated to establish both the facts and the motives that informed the unfolding interaction. The lawyer for the suspect's widow suggests that Bosch's motive was revenge, well beyond his mandate as an LAPD officer. The suspect was alleged to have murdered a woman involved in prostitution, as was Bosch's mother, who was killed when he was a kid. In addition, the lawyer introduces a racist frame, as the suspect (reframed here as victim) came from a Hispanic background. Bosch denies the relevance of these frames, but who knows? Building the case that Bosch operated beyond the bounds of his legitimate role as a police officer, the lawyer suggests that, as a former US marine, he enacted military combat strategies in his police work. Bosch's partner is summoned as a witness, and explains how the 'situation at hand' (as he characterises it) sometimes demands a way of operating that differs from the bureaucratically defined rules and procedures of the police station. In so doing, he implies that if organizational frames determined how police officers define and enact situations on the streets, they would be unable to do their job effectively.

Thus, within the loose main frame of the streets, what is driving potential successful police work is experience from demanding combat-situations in war as well as the breaching of formal rules and procedures to act effectively. These same sources of frames, however, are within the tight main

frame of the court room, the sources of failure in court. Intermeshed with the frames of the court-room institution the significance of the formal role of police officer is reduced to that of suspect or witness; while the suspect on the street are turned into victim in the court. Although the contextual contingencies in the street, the car, and the courtroom includes many of the same sources of frames, the order or gestalt of the framework constituting those different situations varies significantly. As enacted on the streets of LA or at the Los Angeles Courthouse, the LAPD as an organization is only a highly variable by-product of the respective enactments of those situations. Any analysis of these situations as cases of situated negotiation of the enactment of the LAPD as an organization would therefore provide a narrow and skewed perspective on what was going on.

Concluding discussion

In proposing an analytical turn toward the *situation* in studies of work and organization, we aim to supplement the prevailing organization-centric view within organization theory. In this concluding discussion, we begin by explicating the differences between organization-centric and situation-centric analyses of how work is ordered or organized, with particular emphasis on dislocated work situations such as working from home or other remote locations. We conclude by summarizing the analytical affordances of a situation-centric approach to the study of organizations and work.

The prevailing organization-centric view focuses on how the organization and the organizing of work are enacted in practice, whether predefined (as in structuralist approaches) or constituted through situated action and interactions (as in the micro-sociological and phenomenological approaches cited in the literature review above). Situated approaches are generally sensitive to the extensive context at play when people perform their everyday work. Looking through a situated organization-centric lens, Bosch can be seen to accommodate a range of contingencies in his role as a police detective, in variable accord with the rules and regulations of the LAPD, depending on the situation at hand. In the courtroom, an organization-centric perspective might seem particularly apt, as the central negotiation relates to whether Bosch followed LAPD instructions on the streets of LA. This approach assumes that he is acting primarily on behalf of the organization (Ahrne 1993), enacting the organization in local contexts (Weick 2005), or negotiating the organization by invoking occupational roles and institutions (Bechky 2006, 2011; Strauss 1988, 1993). However, this organization-centric view of how the LAPD was enacted, situated, and negotiated in different contexts tends to overstate the role of the organization by default, precluding capture of the finer-grained complexity of the frames that inform how Bosch and others define the situation. In the organization-centric approaches, the organization tends to be *projected* through the myriad available frames, serving as a biased selection mechanism for assessing the relevant sources of influence on what actors do at work.

In contrast, a situation-centric view projects the situation through the myriad potential frames, sensitizing us to their manifold sources and combinations as specific gestalts rather than favoring the organization from the outset. Through this situation-centric lens, we can see how the LAPD's formal organizing function recedes, challenged and shaped by a range of other more immediately relevant frames as Bosch leaves the police car for the street (and so to speak leave the organization behind), deliberately replacing the organization frame with other frames associated with other contexts he is familiar with. The street situation peeks at the fatal encounter between the suspect and Bosch where the LAPD as an organization seems to have disappeared almost completely from the framing of the situation as experienced by both. This is at least the argument made by the lawyer for the widow of the suspect, now turned into victim, in the subsequent courtroom situation where the meaning of several of the frames defining what's going on at the streets is turned upside down by being intermeshed with the dominant legal court frame.

The *Bosch* examples illustrate the analytical potential of shifting from organization-centric to situation-centric approaches to the study of organizing work. Policing is a context of work in which the organization, both in terms of formal rules and regulations as well as in terms of normative

collectives, is manifestly real. It is usually performed in the clear and distinct presence of highly distinctive symbolic artifacts such as uniforms, police cars, the blue light and the soundtrack of the police car, turning even the civilian police cars into definite representations of the police organization. Our example thus demonstrates the relevance of a situational and situation-centric approach for many contexts of work 'normally' associated with clearly bounded hierarchical organization. In principle, every context of work incorporates contextual factors that are situated beyond the organization as legally or rationally constituted, and that sometimes represents far more central sources invoked when people find a definition of what's going on.

The shift from an organization-centric to a situation-centric perspective on work performance and ordering is, however, especially apt in contexts characterized by the 'liquid modernity' associated with the so-called 'new' working life (Bauman 2000; Clegg and Baumeler 2010). Post-industrial and post-bureaucratic developments mean that some elements of the world of work are transitioning from physical spaces like the office building and the factory floor (Stephenson et al. 2020) to contexts usually associated with activities other than work. Examples include meetings in neighborhood cafés and airport lounges (Kingma 2016; Knox et al. 2008; Larson 2020); Zoom video-conferencing from the kitchen table; and writing e-mails in bed (Tietze 2005; Wapshott and Mallett 2011).

The dislocation of the workspace from the physical organizational space has been extensively analyzed in organization-centric studies (e.g. Barley and Kunda 2000; Bechky 2006, 2011; Heath, Knoblauch, and Luff 2000; Llewellyn and Hindmarsh 2010; Nicolini 2009, 2013; Samra-Fredericks 2004). As Larson (2020) demonstrated, organization-centric analyses typically focus on how dislocated workspaces become 'appropriated by the organization', as the simple act of opening a laptop in a café or at the kitchen table to enter a Teams meeting transforms the local context into an organizational space. Similarly, Nicolini (2009) and Kingma (2019) have employed an organization-centric lens to show how digital or tele-technology constitutes the virtual organization through instant organized interaction across geographical space. While the organization-centric lens supports fruitful analyses of the organization beyond traditional spatial bounds, it directs our attention primarily to actions and interactions that constitute the unfolding of the organization as a discrete phenomenon. This is achieved by delimiting the organization's boundaries, regardless of its emergent, performed, and situated qualities and its perforation by other contextual contingencies – for instance, in the café or at home, or on technology-mediated platforms for organizing across spatial boundaries.

However, different configurations appear when we look at the same cases through a situation-centric lens. This approach sensitizes us to how people enact the situation at hand and create a working agreement about what is going on, based on multiple frames that are not confined to sources within or mediated by (technologically enabled) organizational boundaries. The situation-centric lens primes us to see how organization is appropriated and shaped by these other contextual features in the kitchen or at the café, so acknowledging the increasing complexity of contemporary work situations.

This situation-centric perspective offers a more nuanced conception of the 'new world' of remote working than the purported win-win situation for the employee (who gains everyday flexibility) and the company (which cuts costs by reducing the costly square meters of downtown office space). Looking beyond this, we are sensitized to how the organization as social frame is backgrounded as people strive to separate work and leisure or family life while performance indicators compete with the kids or the neighbors for their attention. Imagine sitting in your kitchen as you interact with the world through Teams; you are about to close an important business deal or making a complex academic argument at a seminar when your eight-year-old son shows up from school, angry and in instant need of comfort. Which frame appropriates which: the organizational or the parental? A situation-centric approach can increase our sensitivity to such dilemmas in loose or weakly specified contexts, where frames from sources within and outside organizational boundaries may collide.

This has significant implications for empirical studies of work and organizing. As well as supporting fuller mapping and description of work contexts, situation-centric approaches can capture the characteristics of specific work situations and compare these across contexts. However, this also

raises some problems in real-world settings. Mapping the entire context or capturing the immediate situation precisely at a given time is in principle impossible and therefore futile. As a further issue, how are we to distinguish between work and other situations? These problems resonate with the practical difficulties now faced by many workers, including how to distinguish between work and downtime. When Bosch is eating breakfast with his daughter, he is not at work, but that changes suddenly when he becomes aware of a news report that relates to a case he is working on. He grabs his phone and makes a call to a colleague. In situation-centric terms, we might say that the news report invokes the organization frame and his role as a police officer, turning a family breakfast into a work situation.

The above example supplies a ready criterion for distinguishing work situations from other social situations: whether the organization frame is activated and becomes one of the defining features of the situation. However other situations may be more difficult to assess. For instance, in a later scene, Bosch is suspended from his formal role as a police officer but remains personally engaged by a case. He continues to perform as a police detective but lacks legitimacy in the absence of formal LAPD credentials. Is he then at work? More generally, what is the status of voluntary or informal work that is not commissioned by an organization? To address these questions, a situation-centric approach resists definitive distinctions. Instead it must be taken and used in a clearly 'sensitizing' manner in Blumers terms: 'giving the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances' (1954, 7).

In conclusion, the situation-centric lens offers some important analytical affordances. First, it sensitizes us to the messy complexity of contextual factors and contingencies in contemporary working life that the actor 'is alive to' (Goffman 1974) in her everyday work. Reflection on the context-situation dynamic sensitizes us to a wider range of potentially significant frames in the work situation than either latent social roles (Gouldner 1957) or personal inclinations (Ahrne 1993) and enable us to develop a fuller sense of potential conflicts between frames as experienced by the actors involved.

Second, the key situation-centric distinction between context and situation captures important nuances of *organization* in terms of both formal rules and procedures and assemblages of associated actors and practices. In particular, this helps to avoid overstating or underspecifying the organization's contribution to the ordering of working life by capturing the immersive relational totality of everyday work situations without privileging the organization by default. Rather than assuming that the organization is the main context of work, it becomes just one of many sources of the frames that define the situation at hand. Intermeshed with other frames and *appropriated* by the situation as part of an experienced gestalt, the organization is no longer a discrete entity but competes with other sources in defining what to do and how to do it.

At the same time, the situation-centric approach enables us to appreciate the organization's role as a general co-constitutive contingency of work and as a relatively fixed and stable part of the context within which actors enact their work situation. In some situations, organizational frames may predominate – as for instance in tightly defined settings like assembly lines. In other situations, the formal organization may be less central than other sources of frames, as in service work performed on the street. Either way, the situation-centric approach guards against the tendency of situated perspectives on organization to misjudge the constitutive role of formal organization (see duGay and Vikkelsø 2016) and supports empirical assessment of the organization's specific role in specific situations.

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