

Belonging matters at work?

Voices of Internationally Mobile Employees

Presented by: Dan Ha Le



UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU

Why more attention needed?



MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

“workplace belonging leads to a **56% increase in job performance, a 50% reduction in turnover risk, and a 75% decrease in employee sick days**” ([BetterUp, 2019](#))

“**62%** of respondents said **belonging was more important than salary**” ([Cognizant, 2020](#)).

“the **top three factors employees cited as reasons for quitting [jobs]** were that they didn’t feel valued by their organizations (54 percent) or their managers (52 percent) or because **they didn’t feel a sense of belonging at work (51 percent)**” ([McKinsey & Company, 2021](#))

“majority of companies have programs covering each element of DEI&B, **‘belonging’ programs are slightly less common**” ([WebMD Health Services, 2023](#)).

“**Feeling a sense of belonging is the biggest concern.** More than half (57%) of respondents cited “belonging” (they feel valued, that they matter) as needing improvement” ([Caprino, 2023](#)).

“According to the EY Belonging Barometer 3.0, ... **75% report having felt excluded at work. (56%) feel that they can’t share, or are reluctant to share, dimensions of their identity** while at work for fear of it holding them back” ([EY, 2023](#))

“Belonging is becoming the **fourth element of D,E&I.** Belonging creates thriving workplaces” ([Mull, 2023](#))

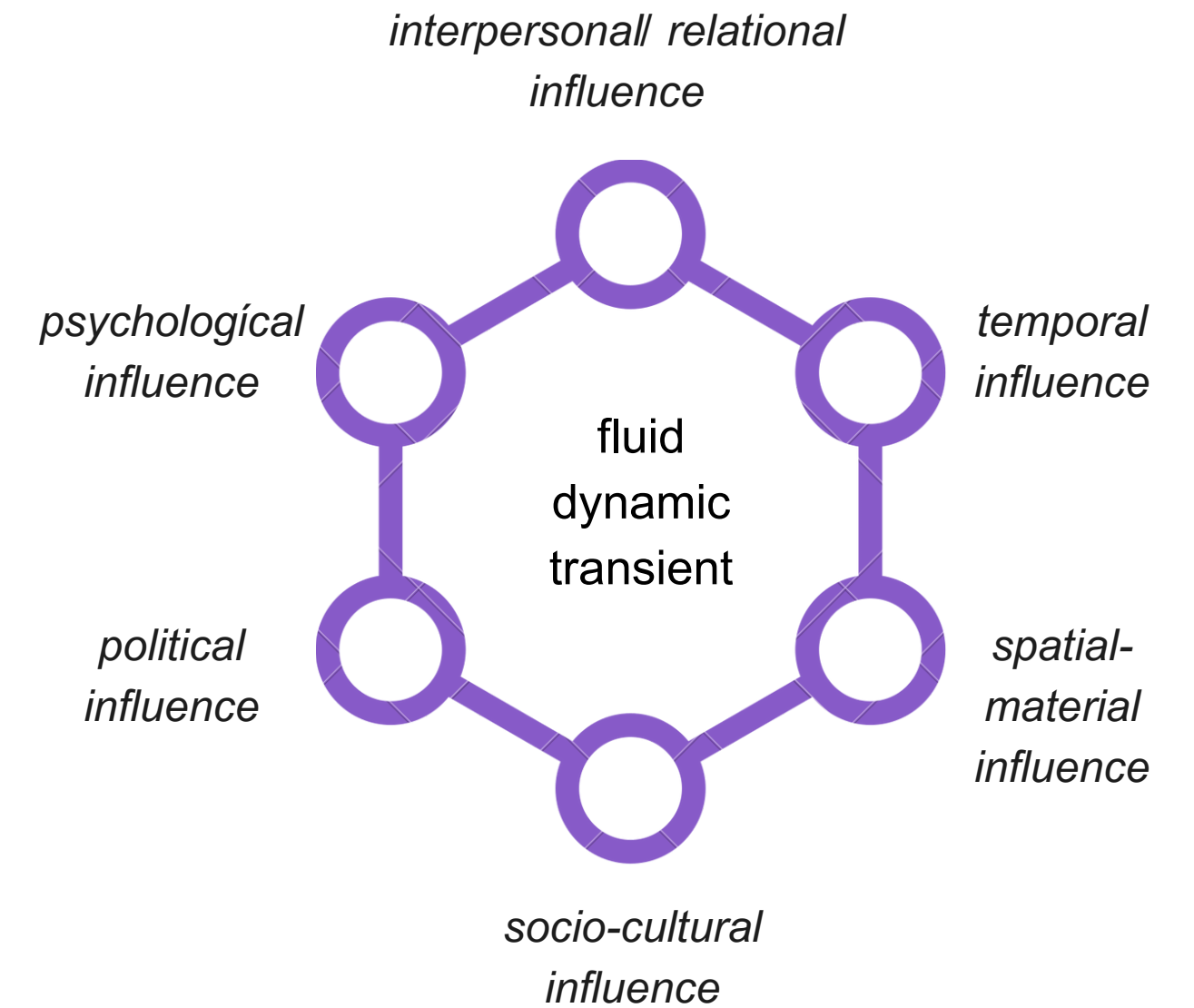
“**Belonging Is A Top 2024 Workforce Strategy, Not RTO**” ([Bruce, 2024](#))



What have been discussed in the literature?

- **Disciplines:** dominantly in psychology, education, sociology (Allen et al., 2021)
- **Contexts:** primarily in non-work e.g., schools (Walton & Cohen, 2007), neighbourhoods, communities, societies (Allen et al., 2021), uncommon in business (Shankley, 2023; Coqual, 2020). It's topical in US (and probably EU)
- **EDI research in business:** focus is still on firm-level benefits, performance (Fitzsimmons et al., 2023)

Work by	Research approaches	Findings
Thissen et al., 2023	ethnographic fieldwork in 2 companies in the Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (un)belonging is an important element for workplace health • belonging influenced by physical/ psychological, social, spatial-material dimensions • belonging boosters: feeling valued, involved in decision-making
Shankley, 2023	qualitative narrative research (Polish women migrant in UK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fragile belonging affected by political situation (Brexit), cultural markers/ social stereotyping (foreign names, accents, language proficiency) • less opportunities to integrate and develop belonging (migrant only workforce, long and unsociable shifts, limited time)
O'Malley and Baker, 2020	Stories from 21 case companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • belonging enablers/boosters: organic person-person connections, individual-level acceptance, recognition/ value and involvement • belonging blockers: lack of face-to-face interactions, i.e., telecommuting, remote work, • belonging killers: exclusion, rejection > unethical behaviour
Kennedy and Jain-Link, 2020	survey of 3,001 employees in the 6 countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • belonging is global human need at work • belonging is built very differently in each market, belonging is culturally influenced
Filstad et al., 2019	photo/ material analysis to identify ingredients of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • belonging at work is a emotive and relational process - becoming part of something larger; as experiencing ... performing, engaging and participating in a workplace
McClure and Brown, 2008	interview-based, phenomenological research with 12 diverse individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 constituents of belonging • different approaches needed for people at different stages. new joiners/workers vs. mature ones >> Temporal dimension. • belonging at work is transient. "The strongest sense of belonging that emerged was the discovery of self within a job" • reality check: belonging killers exist in any organisation



1. Belonging as a process



2. Belonging as a continuum

enablers/ boosters

blockers/ killers

3. Belonging ingredients

What's missing & why problematic?

Research gaps

Assumption:

- everyone has the same need/ desire of belonging at work
- locals and non-locals share typical challenges

Problems

Half truth told/ examined

Realities:

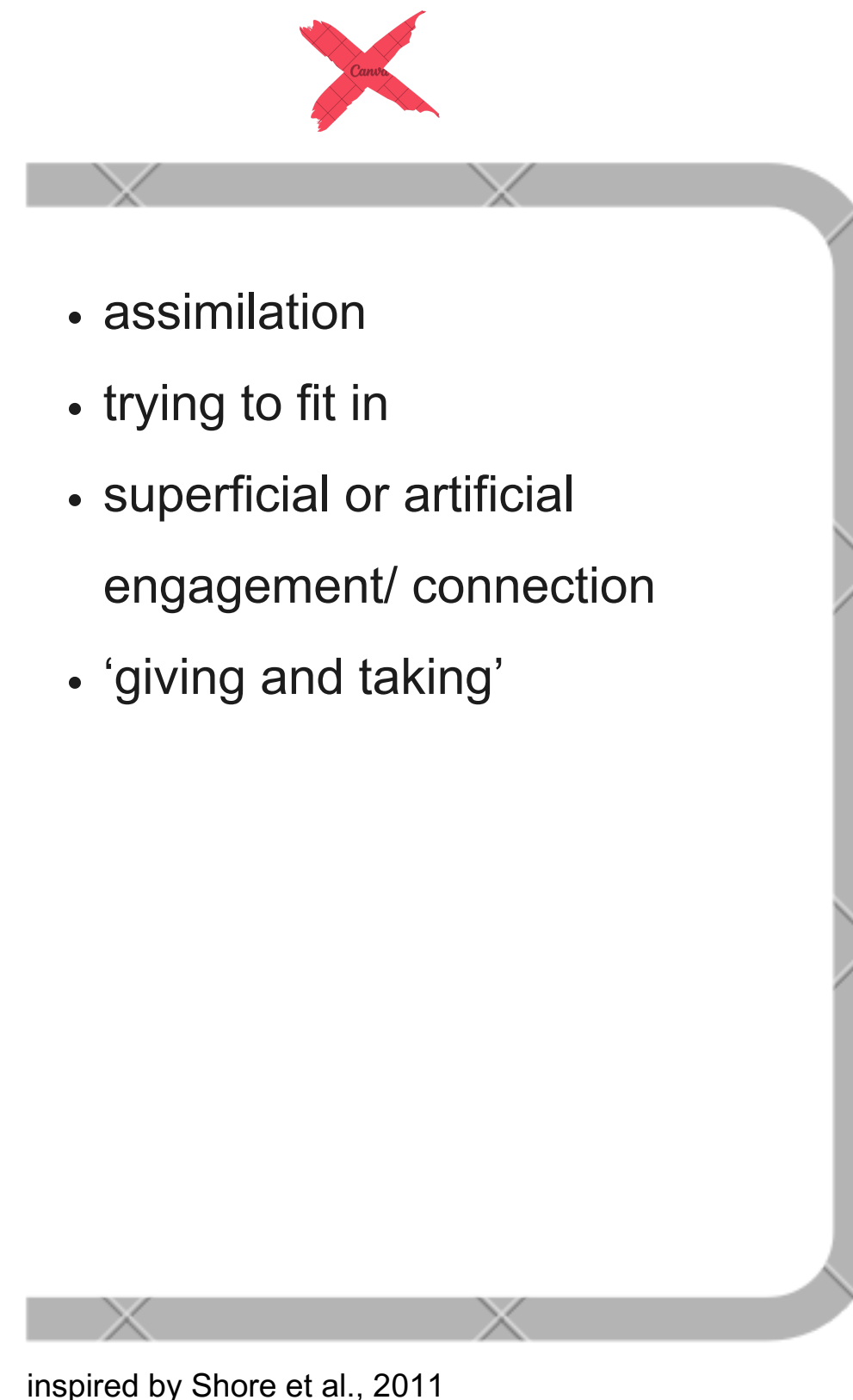
Failure to understand challenges and factors influence IMEs' sense of belonging at work - otherness, barriers, political, social imbalances

Gap-filling or problem-solving

To grasp the true picture and diverse perspectives/ debates on belonging at work experienced by IMEs

**"Does a sense of belonging matter at work for IMEs?
If so, how can it be fostered at work?"**

What is 'belonging at work' and what's not?



Theoretical Base

3

Competencies for belonging:

set of skills and abilities (both subjective and objective) needed to connect and experience belonging, i.e., interpersonal and social competencies

4

Perceptions of belonging:

a person's subjective feelings and cognitions concerning

2

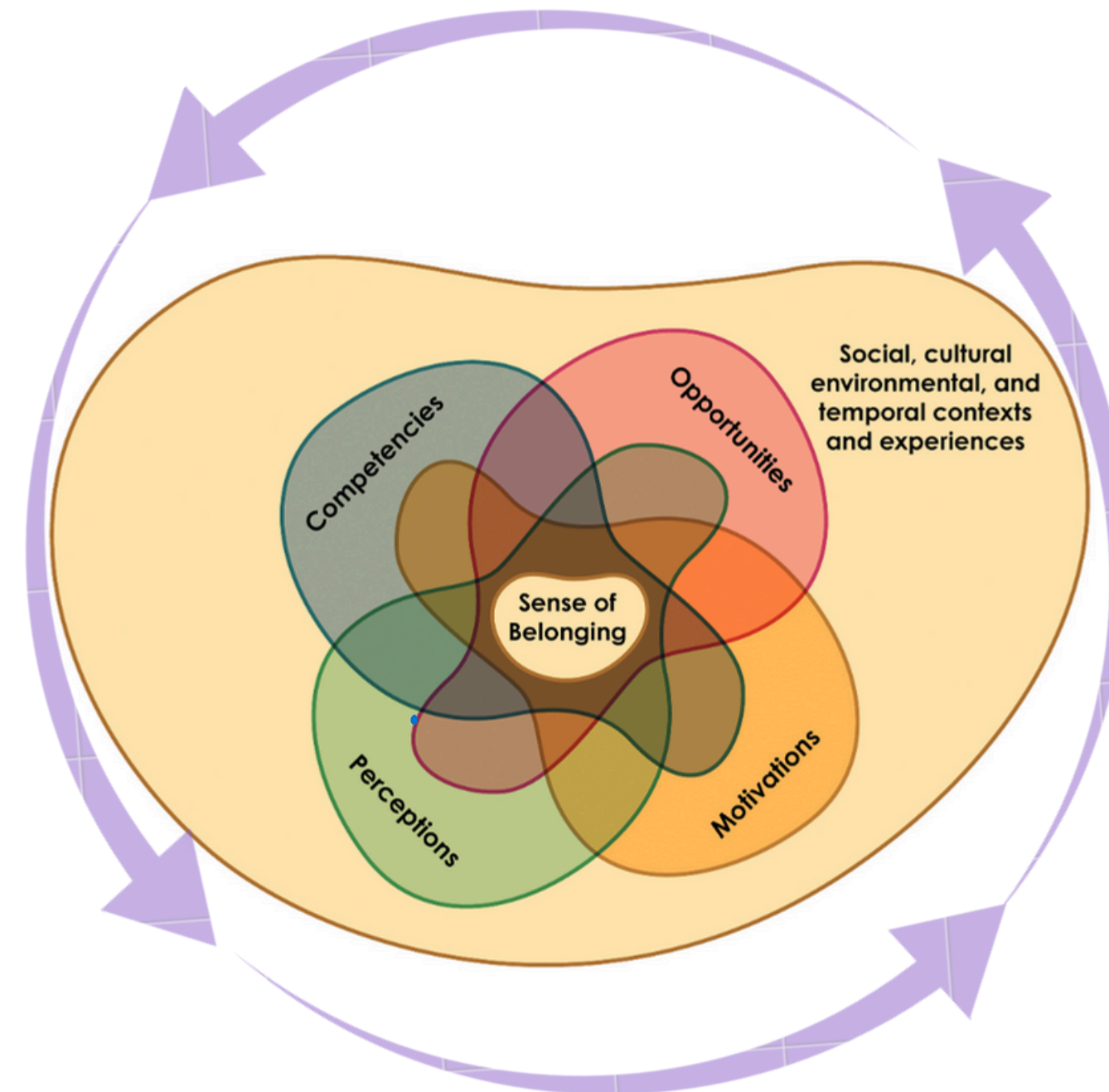
Opportunities to belong:

the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur

1

Motivations to belong:

a need or desire to connect with others,



An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging (*Allen et al. 2021*)

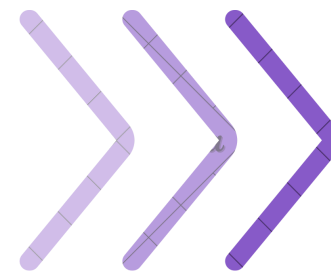
Research Methods

- **Qualitative exploratory** research; **individual** unit analysis
- Premise: “*values and human behavior must be seen in relation to **the particular***” (Flyvbjerg 2001, 70); “stresses the importance of **the subjective experience** of individuals” (Burrell and Morgan 1979, 3)

Data Collection

Informant selection

- Purposeful sampling with max variation (*Patton 2002*)
- 45 informants recruited via personal networks & referrals
- **Gender:** 22 F; 21 M; 2 Trans
- **Age:** 7 in 20s; 11 in 30s; 23 in 40s; 4 in 50s
- **Origin:** 2 Africas; 20 Asias; 4 Australian; 13 European; 2 North American & 4 South American
- **Education:** 4 BSc, 33 MSc and 5 DSc/ PhD
- **Work experience:** 20 below 10 yrs; 17 up to 20 yrs; 8 over 20 yrs. (6/45: C-suite leaders)
- **Common traits:** highly skilled internationals; having lived and worked abroad for over a year



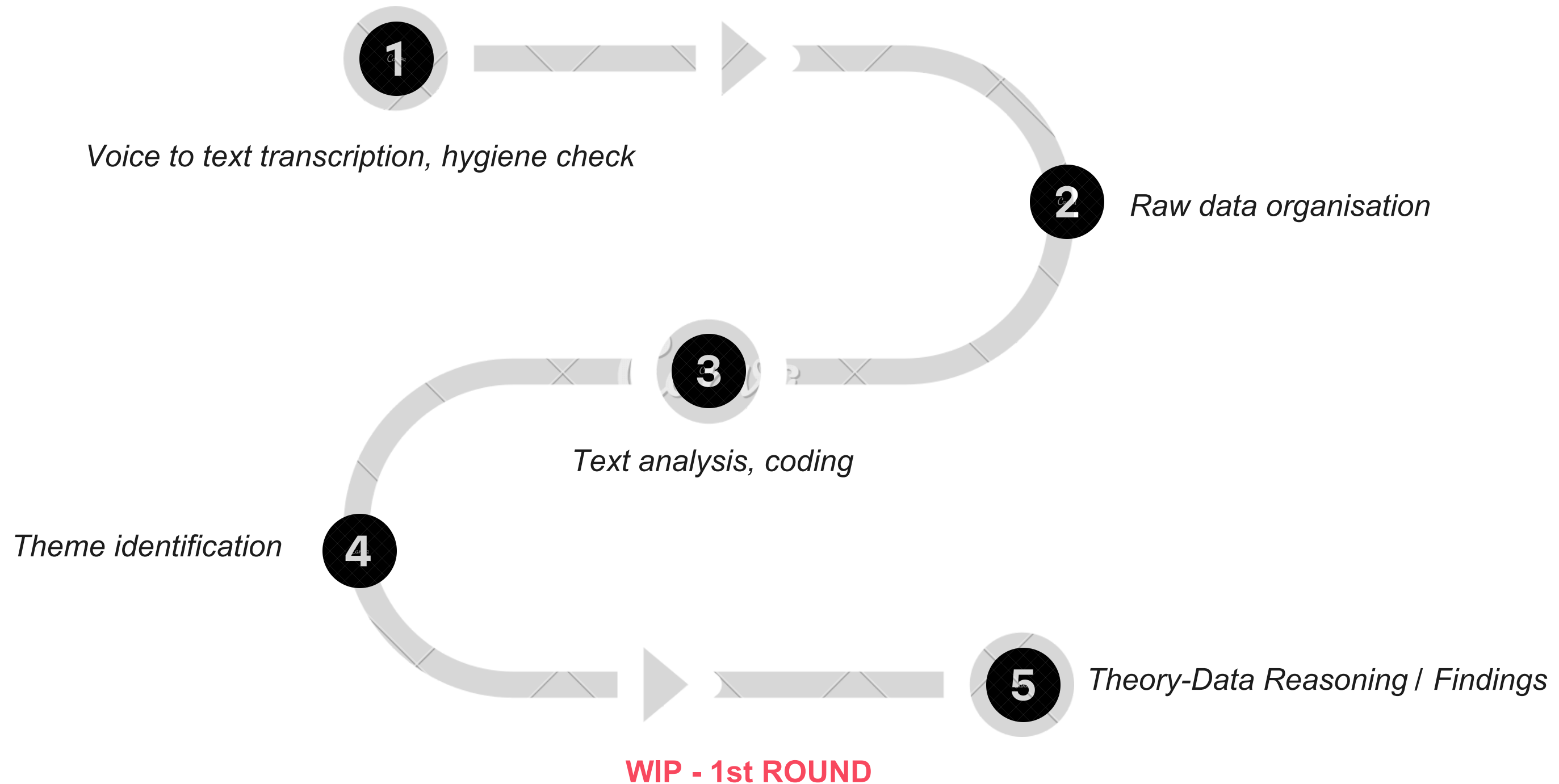
Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews in English, lasting between 1 - 2,5hrs (avg. 1.5h per interview)
- Open conversations, focusing on specific stories/ examples; allowing interviewees to express feelings, reflections on and interpretations of events (*Langley & Meziani 2020*)
- Many interviewees took a pause and appreciated opportunities to think and reflect upon their SoB at work
- Potential downsides: informants might choose to present ‘positive-self-regard’ stories (*Langley & Meziani 2020*). Some agreed to share personal journals (stage 2) for study purpose

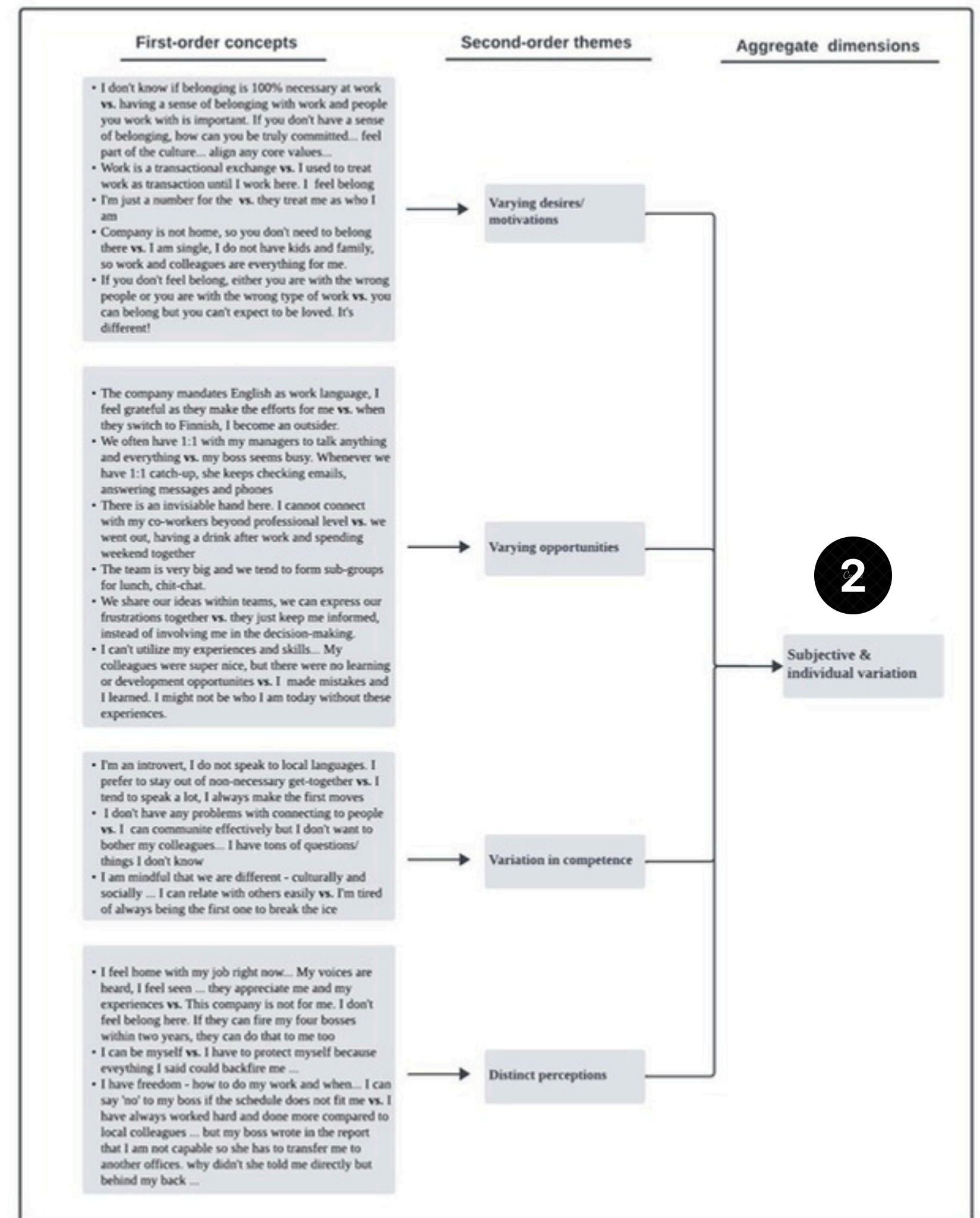
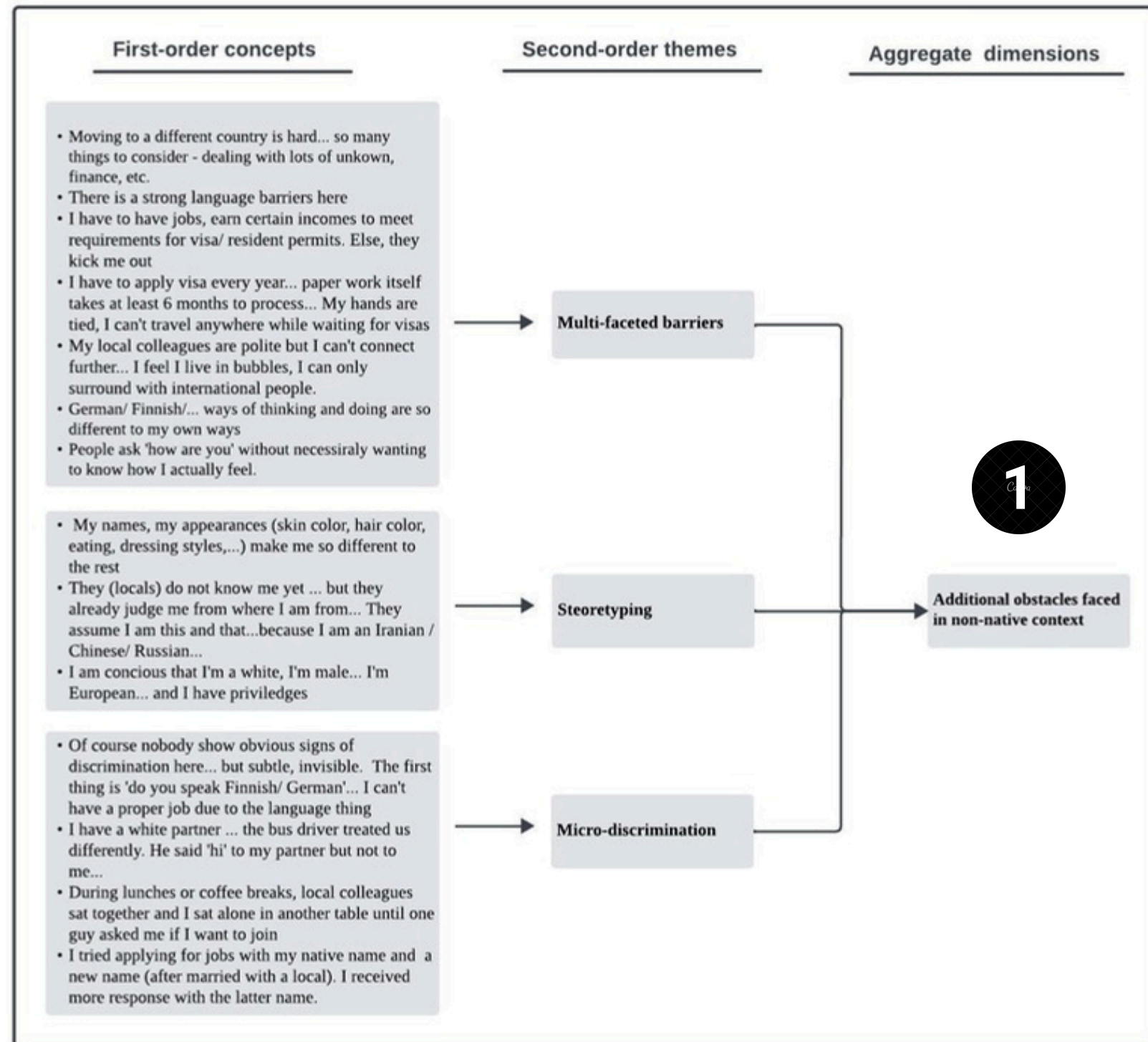
No	Informants	Interview period	Interview duration (hours)	Education	Gender	Age group	Leadership roles	Continent	Current country of residence	Other countries (work, study, live)	Total years of work experience	Types of organization	Industry
1	Violet Carter	Feb-24	1,25	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	Estonia	1	Local	Healthcare
2	Amy	Feb-24	1,17	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland		2	Global	Automobile
3	Kathy	Feb-24	1	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	Italy, US, Spain	2	Global	Sporting
4	Aurélie	Feb-24	1,5	MSc	F	20s		Europe	Finland	New Zealand, South Africa, US	3	Global	Consultancy
5	Grace	Apr-24	1,33	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland	US, Taiwan	5	Local	Education
6	Elen	Mar-24	2	MSc	F	20s		Asia	Finland		7	Local	Education
7	Vio	Feb-24	1,68	MSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland	Czech, Russia	2	Global	Consultancy
8	Sydney	Feb-24	1,17	MSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland	South Korea	5	Global	Technology
9	Bianca	Feb-24	1,75	MSc	F	30s		Africa	Finland	Norway	6	Global	Consultancy
10	Jane	Feb-24	1	DSc	F	30s		Europe	Finland	Italy, US	7	Local	Art and Licensing
11	Roseline	Apr-24	1,42	MSc	F	30s		South America	Finland	US	9	Local	Finance/ F&B
12	Julia	Feb-24	1,58	BSc	F	30s		Europe	France	Germany	10	Global	Healthcare
13	Delia	Mar-24	1,25	BSc	F	30s		Europe	Poland		10	Global	Accounting
14	Mariikka	Feb-24	1,2	BSc	F	30s		Asia	Finland		14	Local	Hospitality
15	Tina	Mar-24	1,17	MSc	F	30s		Asia	UK	Malaysia	15	Global	Energy
16	Whizz	Feb-24	1,25	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Finland		6	Global	Automobile
17	Blessed	Mar-24	1,5	DSc	F	40s		Africa	Finland		7	Local	Education
18	Alex	Mar-24	1,83	MSc	F	40s		Europe	Germany	Netherland, Sweden, UK	12	Global	Electronics
19	Marta	Feb-24	1,58	MSc	F	40s		Europe	Germany	Finland	13	Global	Renewable Energy
20	Cindy	Mar-24	1,5	BSc	F	40s		Asia	Germany		15	Global	Energy
21	Beeta	Feb-24	1,33	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Finland		18	Local	Education
22	Mila	Apr-24	1,17	MSc	F	40s		Asia	Singapore	China, Norway, Netherlands	18	Global	Consultancy
23	Akara	Feb-24	1,5	MSc	M	20s		Asia	Finland		4	Global	Fashion
24	Tom	Mar-24	1,17	MSc	M	30s		Europe	Germany	Czech	5	Global	Education
25	Dangond	Feb-24	1,5	BSc	M	30s		South America	Finland	Columbia	6	Global	Technology
26	Akira	Mar-24	1,33	MSc	M	40s		Asia	France	Brazil	9	Global	Fashion
27	Ahmed	Feb-24	1,5	DSc	M	40s		Asia	Finland	Sweden, UK	10	Local	Education
28	Jim	Mar-24	1,22	DSc	M	40s		Australia	Finland	Japan, UK, Australia	13	Local	Education
29	Lara	Mar-24	1,5	MSc	M	40s		South America	Germany	Brazil	15	Global	Construction
30	Matteo	Feb-24	2,42	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Europe	Poland	US, France, Germany, Russia	16	Global	Electronics
31	Peter	Mar-24	1,28	MSc	M	40s		North America	Malaysia	UK, Negeria, Mexico, US	17	Global	Supply Chain
32	Julio	Mar-24	1,67	MSc	M	40s		South America	Poland		17	Global	Accounting
33	Karem	Feb-24	1,17	MSc	M	40s		Asia	Finland		18	Global	Automobile
34	Carter	Apr-24	1,28	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Europe	Jersey	Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Jersey	19	Global	Finance
35	Pablo	Mar-24	1	BSc	M	40s		Europe	Poland		20	Global	Healthcare
36	Sherlock	Mar-24	1,55	MSc	M	40s		Asia	Hong Kong/ China		25	Global	Banking
37	Lando C	Mar-24	1,5	MSc	M	40s	Yes	Australia	Hungary	Vietnam, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Philippines	25	Global	Banking
38	Mark	Mar-24	1,17	MSc	M	40s	Yes	North America	US	Vietnam, Bangladesh, Jersey, France	25	Global	Technology
39	Dardec	Mar & Apr 24	2,00	MSc	M	40s		Australia	Hong Kong	Vietnam, UK	25	Global	Banking
40	Luis	Dec-23	1,0	PhD	M	50s		Europe	Sweden and Finland	France, Sweden	15	Local	Education
41	Jason	Feb-24	1,55	MSc	M	50s	Yes	Australia	Australia	US, Philippines, Vietnam, India, China, Korea	21	Global	Healthcare
42	Louis	Mar-24	1,25	BSc	M	50s		Asia	Germany		31	Global	Electronics
43	Tiger	Mar-24	2,5	MSc	M	50s	Yes	Asia	Singapore	Dubai, China, India, Germany	35	Global	Technology
44	Charlie	Mar-24	1,08	MSc	T	30s		Asia	Finland		15	Global	Automobile
45	Aida	Feb-24	1,25	MSc	T	40s		Asia	Finland		12	Local	Construction

Data Analysis

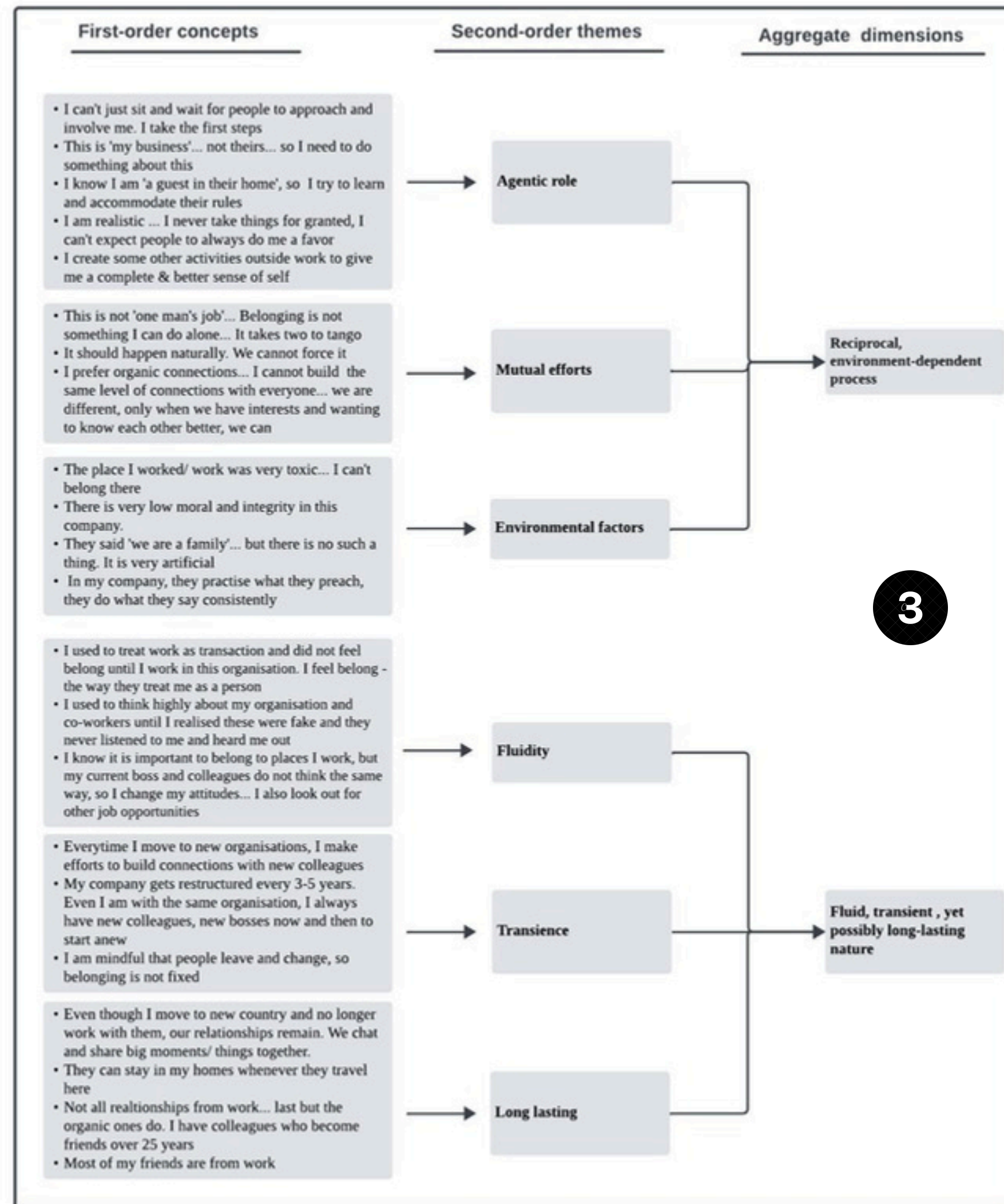
- Interpretative approach, focusing on contextualisation and pluralism (*Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2011*)
- Theme identification, zooming into commonalities and differences (*Berg and Lune 2014*)
- Abuctive reasoning (*Sætre & Van de Ven 2021*) to identify new, interesting (even bizarre) insights
- Done manually and via Nvivo software



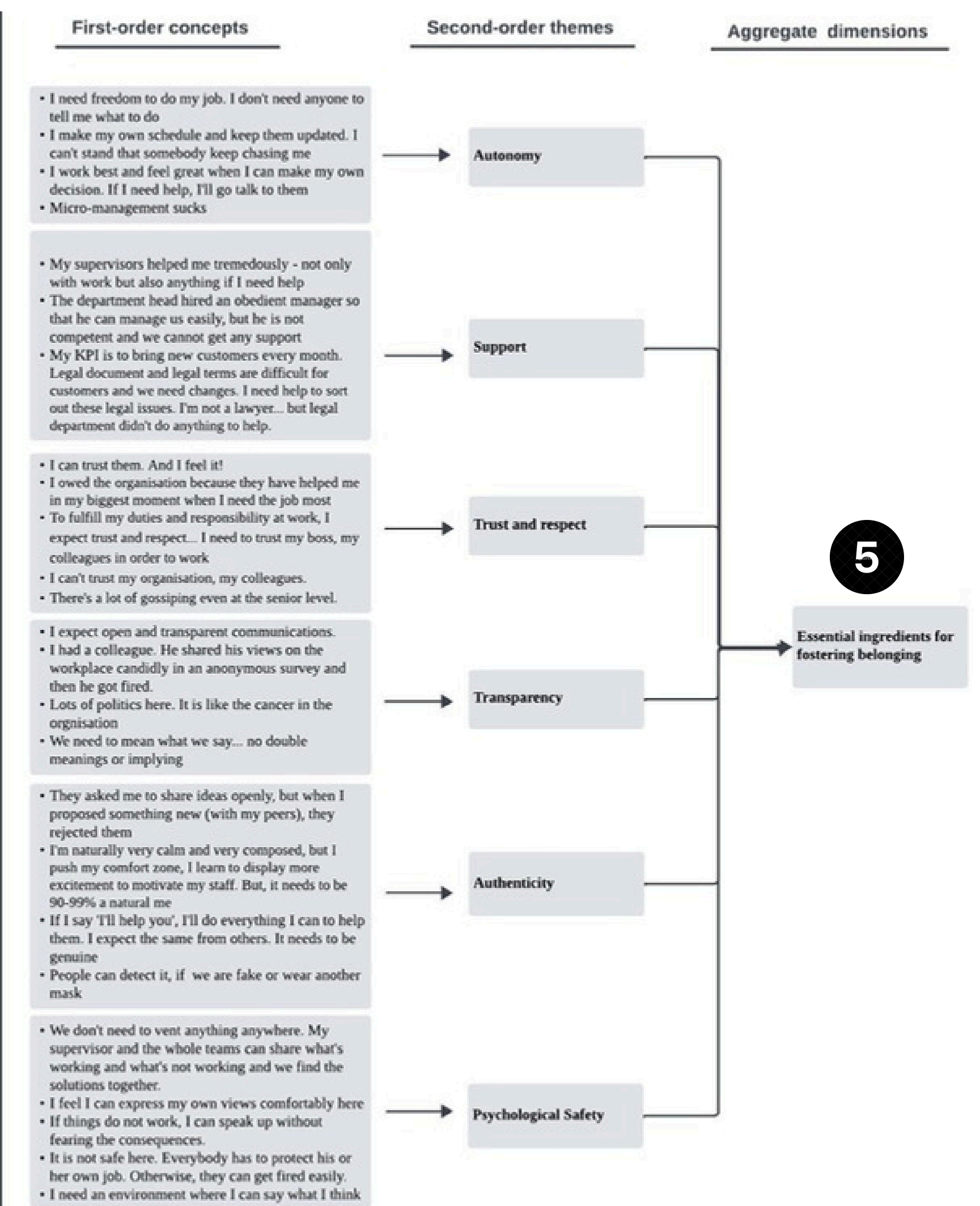
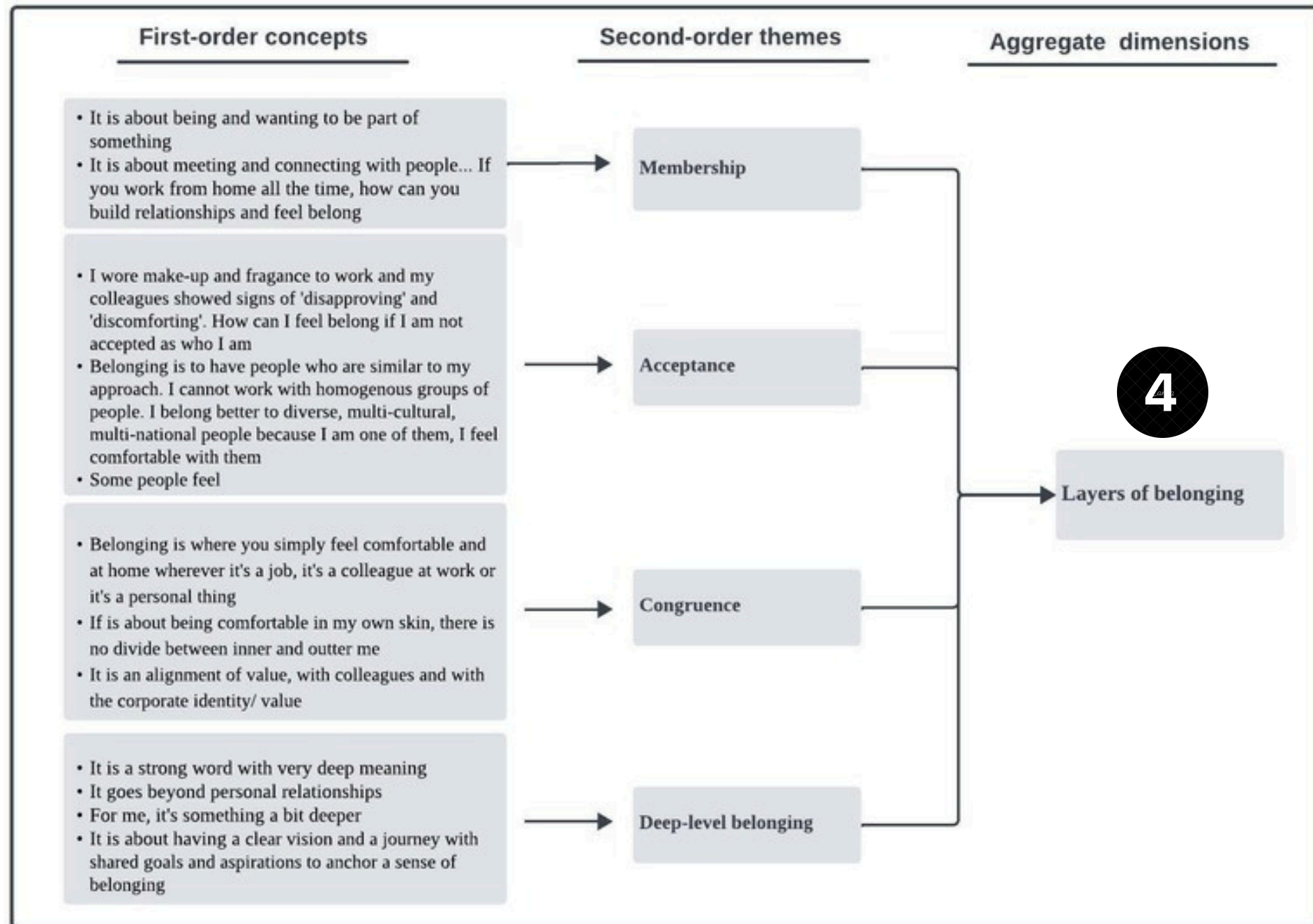
Data Structure



Data Structure (cont'd)



Data Structure (cont'd)



Varying degrees of belonging at work

YES



MAYBE



NO



1

MOTIVATIONS

- it's crucial to have a sense of belonging (SoB) at work
- it's a driving force to work, to connect with colleagues beyond a professional level, to contribute to organisational goals, to overcome bad days at work
- aligning with company's values and ethos

- it's necessary to have a SoB at work; yet, a SoB at work is different to a SoB in the family or in the community (conditional vs. unconditional SoB)
- it's necessary to be accepted, appreciated and valued but unnecessary to be loved

- it's unrealistic (if not utopian) to have a SoB at work
- workplace = a place to work with established rules & regulations > employees ought to segregate a professional vs. personal life
- employees = just 'headcounts' > can get fired if needed

2

OPPORTUNITIES (*)

- company documents; meetings, discussions done in English, rather than local languages
- regular 1:1 check-in with managers to ask/talk 'anything'
- being invited, engaged in activities at work, outside work
- flat hierarchy; open, democratic structure

- no signs of explicit exclusions or ostracism; yet, there exists an invisible 'wall' between locals vs. internationals due to lingual & cultural differences
- internationals stay together in their bubbles; no chances to truly integrate with locals

- awful to be treated as 'tool', rather than a 'person'
- feeling uneasy/ ostracised to be 'informed' or FYI - rather than to participate in conversations, decision-making process
- feeling at lost/ outsiders when colleagues intentionally switch to local languages or get together
- limited chances to get proper jobs to utilize knowledge, skills

3

COMPETENCIES (*)

- being proactive, putting in effort to develop a sense of self, to relate with colleagues, understand backgrounds & positioning, treat others respectfully & to form connections
- having skills to communicate effectively, culturally appropriate, regulate inappropriate emotions, behavior at work

- it's ok to take the first 'moves' - get to know each other, support each other; yet, it feels exhausted to always initiate & put extra effort.
- building a SoB should happen naturally and it 'takes two to tango'

- being 'foreigners'; being introverts; having no good command of local language, or no time, or no patience, or no chemistry, or no motives to connect >> challenging to relate to others/ build 'real' connections

4

PERCEPTIONS (*)

- feeling comfortable in one's own skin
- there is genuine care & interest from colleagues, managers; real connections (it varies from person to person, though)
- it's safe to share personal concerns
- having freedom, flexibility to manage work; no micromanagement
- transparent environment, everybody understands what's happening and why

- people are polite; yet, their 'private world' seems impenetrable > requiring extra time and effort to break the shell & know a person beyond their professional level
- it feels like free-floating without anchor

- no real or genuine connections; artificial/ empty EDI 'slogans'
- organisational politics; competition; jealousy; in-groups; out-groups are like 'cancers' destroying healthy bonds, relationships
- certain people, esp. supervisors, managers show 'power up', putting others in lower hands
- efforts, contributions not recognized nor treated fairly

From findings to the model construction

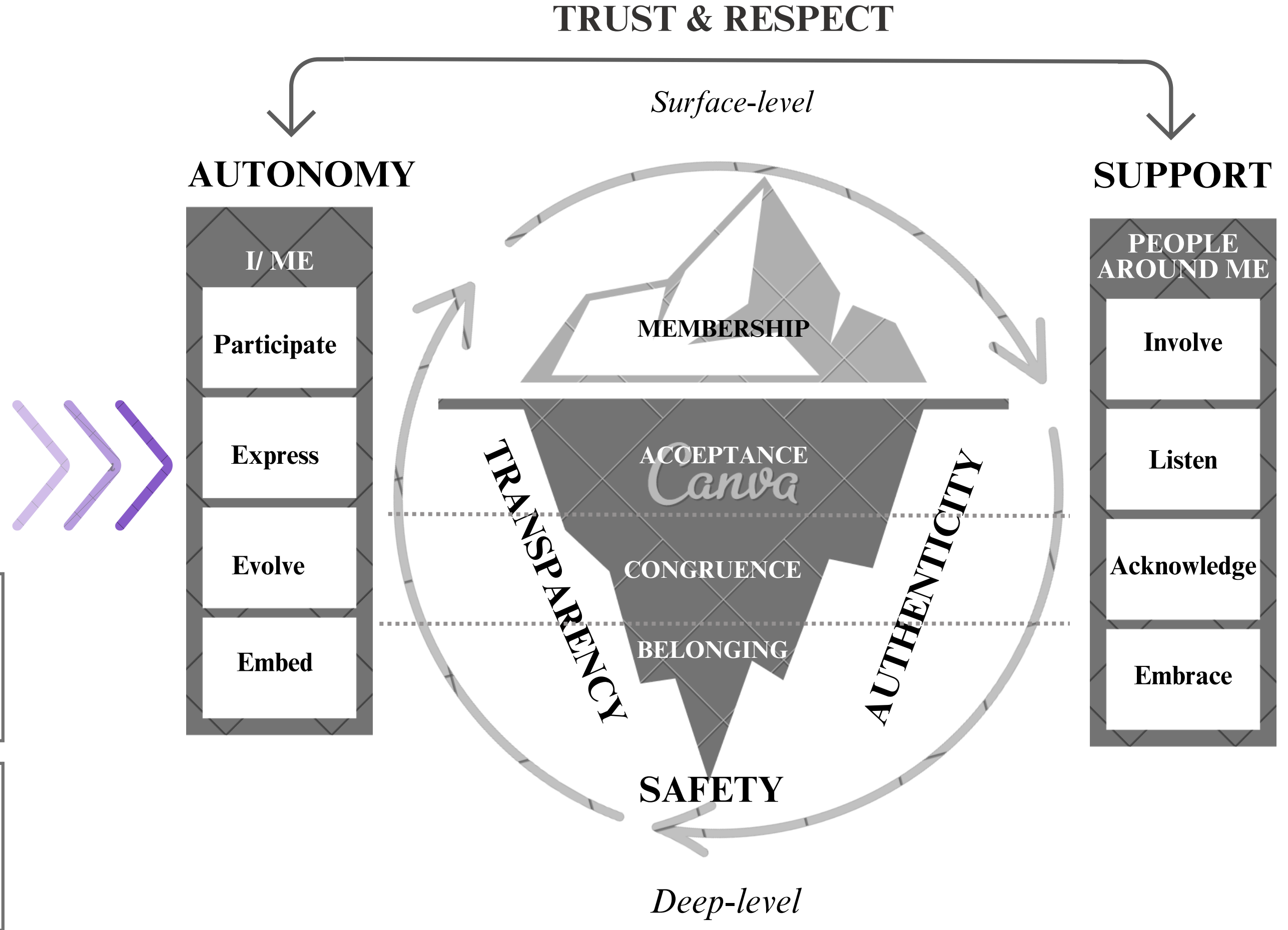
1 None wants to be excluded. Yet, belonging at work is subjective and varies from individual to individual

2 IMEs encounter more obstacles in non-native context, requiring greater attempts (agentic role)

3 Belonging is a reciprocal process and contingent upon mutual efforts and the surrounding environment

4 Belonging is fluid, transient but possibly long-lasting by nature

5 Belonging is a multi-layered concept, requiring several essential 'ingredients'



Potential contributions

Existing knowledge

- belonging matters to everyone at work (*Kennedy and Jain-Link, 2021; O'Malley and Baker, 2020*);
- belonging at work is superficial or false (*May, 2016*)
- belonging is relational and influenced by multi-factors (*Thissen et al., 2023; Shankley, 2023; Kennedy and Jain-Link, 2020; Filstad et al., 2019; McClure and Brown, 2008;*)
- there are elements to boost/ kill belonging at work (*O'Malley and Baker, 2020; McClure and Brown, 2008*)

New insights

- presenting varying degrees of belonging at work (*motivations, opportunities, competencies and perceptions*)
- re-defining belonging as a process, highlighting person-person-environment dimensions
- re-defining the nature of belonging (fluid, transient yet possibly long-lasting)
- presenting obstacles facing IMEs specifically
- putting different constituent elements into a layered model of workplace belonging

consultant-led views:

- employee-employer benefits,
- call for action

scientific evidence

- recognising diverse workplace realities, and
- offering essential elements for devising strategies/ action plans to include everyone and cater for varying needs for belonging at work

Theoretical

Practical

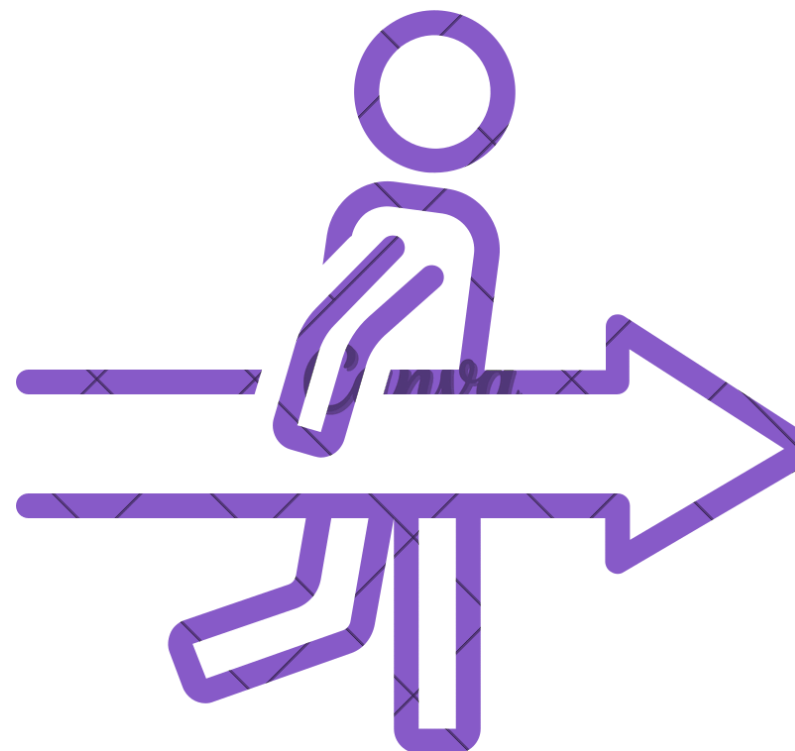
Limitations and way forward

Limits

- controlling Qs (different organisations, different career stages, different demographics)
- biased Qs (researcher = data collector = data analyst = personal experiences)

Future research

- fieldwork observation and interview (desirably same MNC with multinational employees at various level) to test the model
- Necessary Condition Analysis



**THANK
YOU!**





**Get inspired
by science.**



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**