UNPACKING “SENSE OF PLACE” AND “PLACE-MAKING” IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES: A TOOLKIT FOR PLACE-SENSITIVE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest in organizational scholarship in the role of place. To support these developments, we offer a framework for place-sensitive research in organizational analysis. The notion of place refers to a unique location (either geographical or digital), endowed with a material from (either crafted by nature or by humans) and a socially constructed set of meanings. In line with the phenomenology of place, our framework first distinguishes between two ontologies of place: place as experience—through which people develop a sense of place—and place as practice—through which people engage collectively to make places. Second, our framework distinguishes between three temporal orientations in relation to place: past, present, and future. We then draw from research in geography to reflect on two under-explored methodological toolkits to collect data on and analyze place as experience and place as practice in organization studies: walking interviews, and geographical videography.

Key words: qualitative research, phenomenology, place, place-making, sense of place, situated emotions, situated practice, videography, walking interviews

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Introduction

In recent years, there is increasing interest in organizational scholarship in the role of place (e.g. Dacin et al., 2018; David et al., 2020). A growing number of qualitative organization studies (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2021; Cartel et al., 2019; Crawford & Dacin, 2020; Farny et al., 2019; Hultin et al., 2021; Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Siebert et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2020; Zilber, 2018) directly or indirectly grapple with place-sensitive questions to advance our understanding of how the materiality, location or symbolic meaning of specific places—such as communities (Vernay et al., 2022), buildings (e.g. Jones et al., 2019) or streets (e.g. Cnossen et al., 2021)—influence organizational actors. The recognition that “place matters to organizational life” (Lawrence & Dover, 2015) is an important step towards a more situated understanding of organizations. Indeed, how people in and around organizations experience place—how they feel about a place, how they remember and imagine that place—and how they practice place—what activities they perform to protect or change these places—affects their actions and interactions with place. To support these developments, we aim to initiate a yet under-examined methodological conversation in the study of place in organization studies by offering some conceptual underpinnings and practical avenues for how to conduct ‘place sensitive research’ in organizational field work.

Drawing on previous work in sociology and human geography (Gieryn, 2000; Relph, 1976), the notion of place has been defined in organization studies as a unique location (either geographical or digital), endowed with a material from (either crafted by nature or by humans) and a socially constructed set of meanings (Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Wright et al., 2020). This view acknowledges the doubly constructed nature of place (Gieryn, 2000): (1) a place is physically constructed in as much as people’s actions may create, maintain, and destroy a place; and (2) a place is socially constructed in as much as it is “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood and imagined” by its inhabitants throughout history (Ibid, p.465). In line with this view of place in organization studies, we draw on Relph’s (1976) phenomenology of place and suggest that understanding people’s sense of place and (re)making of places can be key to understanding their decision-making and behavior situated in and around organizations.
Following the phenomenology of place, our paper outlines some foundations for place-sensitive research that puts the systematic effort to (collect data to) understand *place as experience* and *place as practice* at centre stage in organization studies. By *place as experience*, we seek to understand how people develop a sense of place: how they identify with or feel attached to a place and develop a strong or weak embodied, emotional commitment of place (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974). For instance, by cooking for family and friends, a place may become home (Hultin et al., 2021), by investing in local energy cooperatives which nurtures my local community, individuals strengthen their sense of belongingness (Vernay et al., 2022); and (2) by *place as practice*, we seek to capture how people, either self-consciously or not, make places and develop a socialized meaning of place (Fine, 2010). Place-making is key to the ongoing emergence, maintenance, renewal, and sustenance of place over time. For instance, insiders may be tempted to protect a place they care about from outsiders and engage in self-conscious acts of vigilantism (Crawford & Dacin, 2020). Instead, people may unselfconsciously maintain places by enacting traditional modes of inhabiting these places (Dacin et al., 2010). In addition, communities may engage in collective action to safeguard their culture and traditions over time (Dacin & Dacin, 2019). As such, place work is both multi-level and transtemporal in nature.

We bring together these views for outlining how to study people’s *sense of* and *making of* place in organization studies. Specially, we draw from research in geography to reflect on *walking interviews* (Evans and Jones, 2011; Lenette and Gardner, 2021) and *geographical videography* (Paterson and Glass, 2020) as yet under-explored methodological toolkits for performing place-sensitive research in organization studies.

“Sense of Place” and “Place-Making”

In this section, we introduce our framework for place-sensitive research in organization studies. In line with studies in the phenomenology of place (Cresswell, 2015; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974), our framework is informed by two analytical dimensions. The first dimension relates to the ontology of place: (1) *place as experience*—how people feel about the place and in turn develop a sense of place; and (2) *place as practice*—how people enact place physically and socially and (re)make place over time. The second dimension relates to the temporal orientation that informs people’s interaction with a
place: (a) a past orientation, in which the accumulation of historical meanings around a place informs present interactions with that place; (b) a present orientation, that is the present encounter between people and place; and (c) a future orientation of place in which future ambitions for the place (e.g. utopias) or threats that a place may face in the future (e.g. dystopias) inform people’s interactions with that place.

Table 1 captures these two analytical dimensions and offers a framework which outlines different modes of being in place. Of course, these different modes are not mutually exclusive. Regarding the ontology of place (experience vs practice), it may be argued that people experience a place as they engage pragmatically with it (Garrett, 2011; Relph, 1976). Conversely, place-making is informed by individuals’ experiences of a place. Similarly, regarding the temporal orientation of place, it can be argued that the past, present and future meanings of a place coalesce in the situated present and together inform modes of being in place. Importantly, “phenomenologists reject the very notion that place is a concept suited to a precise definition or that conceptual clarity can be achieved via quantitative operationalization of narrowly defined constructs” (Patterson & Williams, 2005, p. 369). In that spirit, the framework that we offer here is to be understood as a toolbox for qualitative organizational research on place. As exemplified in Table 1, each qualitative study will display a unique combination of modes of being in place and, therefore, call for an original analytical framework.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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**Place as experience: developing a sense of place**

**Defining sense of place.** The notion of a sense of place refers to the subjective and emotional attachment that people develop in relation to a place (Cresswell, 2015; Kibler et al., 2015). It comes from the unique relationship or attachment that people develop with a place, ranging “from simple recognition for orientation […] to a profound association with places as cornerstones of human existence and individual identity” (Relph, 1976, p63). Rooted deeply in phenomenology, human geographers understand sense of place as analogous to the “intimacy of a particular human
relationship” (Tuan, 1977). There is home, there is work, there is where we spend our free time, and, in between, there are all the places that we walk/cycle/drive through daily as we travel from one to the other. Home might be the most exemplary type of place where people develop a sense of place (Cresswell, 2015). It is where people feel most attached and rooted (Tuan, 1974). An authentic relationship to place evolves where one feels compelled to care for a place (Heidegger, 1971). It is a fundamental locus of meaning for individuals (Cresswell, 2015). At work, the physical environment (e.g. private office vs open space), as well as the narrated history of the buildings in which we perform our tasks, influences how we see ourselves in the community and how we feel we fit in the place (Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Siebert et al., 2017). For example, a phenomenological attachment to place manifests itself when soccer fans describe their team’s home stadium as “home” (Bale, 1996). Scholars in this tradition are concerned with the lived experience of place and the meanings assigned to place.

**Developing a sense of place.** Our sense of place is built through our ongoing experience of place. As we inhabit a place and experience it in the present, we remember and enact past experiences of that place, and maybe project a future sense of place. First, our lived experience of a place in the present is first and foremost sensual (Tuan, 1974). Our meaning of place is constructed by this experience. We experience place subjectively, in as much as the primary—most intuitive—mode of knowing the places in which we are situated is sensory (e.g. warm, dark, noisy). As individuals process sensory knowledge of the world around them (e.g. warm, dark, noisy) they develop their own unique emotional response (Creed et al., 2020). Work in human geography further emphasizes the uniqueness of place experience. Depending on their biology, education, upbringing, job, and culture—among other factors—two individuals will experience the same “home” differently (Tuan, 1974, p.59). Meanings are highly personal and are dependent on the unique experiences of a place (Gustafson, 2001). Things such as time spent, narratives about place as input for describing one’s identity or what the place represents all form highly personalized sets of meanings (Grey, & O’Toole, 2020). For instance, in the late 1950’s, Indigenous men and women, when asked to draw a map of Southampton Island, would respectively emphasize the shoreline where they hunt or the settlements where they
connect and exchange goods, reflecting the impact of their gender-roles on their perception of their home island (Carpenter et al., 1959).

Second, our present experience of a place can be informed by past meanings of that place. Every place has a past, and carries the meanings of that past in its narrated form (Cresswell, 2015; Gieryn, 2000). Places, while situated in the present, engage with the past because “material forms are mnemonic” (Jones et al., 2019, p. 212): they evoke memories of a collective or personal past, they stand as embodied symbols of collective or individual history. There are the places that we do not know and the places we know. The places we do not know come with a collective memory. As we draw on this collective memory to develop our own sense of place, we participate in its social reproduction (Welter & Baker, 2021). For instance, Boston’s North End neighbourhood is a waterfront and as such, it has been characterized by multiple waves of immigration over the 20th century (Jones et al., 2019). The collective memory of this place is materialized in the multicultural buildings (e.g. Churches, Synagogues) that those waves of immigrants built as they brought their culture and material practices with them to their new lives. Outsiders and newcomers draw on this socio-material history as they develop a sense of the place (Jones et al., 2019). Instead, the places we know come with our own memories. When coming back to the place in which we grew up, the familiar fragrance of that place immediately brings back memories of what “home” used to be. It may make us feel nostalgic; or it may bring back painful memories (Cresswell, 2015).

Third, our sense of place is informed by the projective meanings we assign to a place (Kibler et al., 2021). There is little research on how a future-oriented approach to place affects our sense of place. One thing is certain, we do not have the same sense of home when we know that we are going to leave soon (maybe for a better home nearby or for another home far away as we accepted a new job) or that we are going to stay forever. When we plan to invite our relatives to celebrate important holidays like Passover, Christmas, Lunar new year, or Eid, we plan for the celebration in the present and our home becomes imbued with the idea of sharing important time with family, whether we associate it with positive or negative feelings. Those feelings, in turn, affect our sense of place in the present. Similarly, our “sense of a work-place” varies according to the situated narratives that we
develop to imagine our workplace in the future. For instance, in North Korea, the local level of institutional instability makes it extremely challenging for entrepreneurs to know which forms of entrepreneurial activities are deemed desirable (Kibler et al., 2021). Entrepreneurs rely on prospective narratives of an imagined local future and situated entrepreneurial engagement in that future.

**Types of sense of place.** As past, present, and future orientations merge into an ongoing situated experience, individuals develop a sense of place. There are a multitude of dimensions to a sense of place, and these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. A first important dimension to understand one’s sense of place resides in their perception of being an insider or an outsider (Relph, 1976). Being outside or inside a place in this case does not refer to whether we are located within certain geographical boundaries but whether we feel that we belong or not. Insideness refers to feelings of belonging to the place while outsideness refers to feelings of exclusion. A second important dimension to one’s individual sense of place relates to whether they have developed an attachment to the place (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001) or whether they feel placeless (Relph, 1976). As we change place, we may become attached to that new place or we may stay in limbo and feel placeless (Freestone & Liu, 2016).

**Place as practice: engaging in place-making**

**Defining place-making.** The process of transforming a given space into a place is described as place-making (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). The notion of place-making refers to how people enact a place, both physically and socially. According to Schneekloth & Shibley (1995, p.1) “place-making is not just about the relationship of people to their places; it also creates relationships among people in places.” Place-making transforms or maintains that place, in either its material (physically constructed) or narrated (socially constructed) form (Gieryn, 2000). First, the physical enactment of a place will affect the material form of that place. For instance, when the inhabitants of a village come together as a community to produce their own, green energy, they want to make sure that energy is sourced in a way that is fair, that nurtures the community, that educates the kids around the importance of caring for the planet. They invest in building solar farms or windmills near the town, which transforms the landscape. This material transformation also changes the social meaning of the
town, which becomes a sustainable and community-based town (Kibler & Muñoz, 2021). Every day as local inhabitants go to work, or drop the kids at school, they can see the windmills that they helped create (Vernay et al., 2022). In turn, such a physical enactment of place consolidates their sense of belonging to the community and their place-identity (e.g. that their hometown is engaging in green energy for the planet).

Second, the social enactment of the place will affect the narrated form of that place (Muñoz et al., 2020). Indeed, when people engage socially, it is never in a vacuum. Social interactions are situated and as such they are influenced by the place in which they take occur. Situated interactions—for instance walking in the streets of a city together—affects people’s understanding of the place, the stories they tell about that place (Pink, 2008) and what other people, who have never been there, know about that place. For instance, when Scottish advocates and their apprentices (devils) socialize in the library of the parliament house, they endorse their role identities. The fact that they are the only ones in the profession who are allowed access to the library symbolizes their status and privilege. In turn, enacting those status positions by accessing the library (or not) contributes to the collective narration of the place as a physical manifestation of privilege and status in the profession of Scottish advocates (Siebert et al., 2017).

**Place-making and time.** While place-making is by nature occurring in the present, it can either be informed by a past, present or future orientation (Relph, 1976). First, a past orientation to place-making refers to an understanding of that place that is guided by historically inherited meanings, which may in turn lead to maintaining or disrupting the place. For instance, performing place-based rituals, which is a past oriented enactment of place, constitutes a powerful act of meaning making which contributes to the maintenance of a place (Dacin et al., 2010). In their study of formal dining at the University of Cambridge, Dacin et al. (2010) show how enacting traditional behaviours is a way to reproduce the meaning of the place and maintain associated, place-based, social orders. Conversely, the current bombings occurring in Kyiv, which are leaving highly emotional imprints in the city’s material and narrated form, may be understood as the disruptive enactment past-oriented feuds between Russia and Ukraine. When Vladimir Putin declares that Ukrainians and Russians are but only
one people, divided by artificial borders, he (mis)uses history to deny the existence of Ukraine as a place in its own right.

Second, a present orientation to place-making refers to an understanding in which the meaning of place is immediate and reactive. When the present circumstances call for it, people, professionals, and communities can engage in place-(re)making (Cartel et al., 2019; Lawrence & Dover, 2015). For instance, when faced with the imminent threat of a carbon constraint, electricity professionals in Europe got together in an experimental space to solve the problem at hand and figure out the best way for their industry to cope in this renewed conjuncture. Their collective efforts in the experimental space ended up creating the early material-digital form of the European carbon trading market-place, and, importantly, the (positive) collective meanings that the electricity industry associated with that place (Cartel et al., 2019). Similarly, imminent threats can lead the inhabitants of a place to realize the value of a place that they did not know they were inhabiting. They will endorse a new identity as custodians and fight to protect that place, both in its narrated and physical form (Crawford & Dacin, 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

Third, a future-oriented approach to place-making refers to planning in the present for the future of the place (Palermo & Ponzini, 2015). This can be done in anticipation of future events such as urban planning on the road networks in anticipation of the densification of traffic, negotiating new construction rules on the coastline to adapt to future climate change and the rise of sea levels (Bowden et al., 2021), or initiations for the renewal of institutions of public water services (Montgomery & Dacin, 2020). People in organizations can engage in long-term projects for a place because they care about their home-town and they want to invest their time and money in projects that will enhance the place in the future. For instance, place-based organizations—i.e. organizations whose identity or revenue is closely related to specific places such as wine-makers—develop a future-oriented relationship with the place. They nurture the place in the present to contribute to its preservation, even though they might not be the ones ultimately benefitting from it (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013). Typically, organizations that rely on agriculture have a strong incentive to nurture the place, which
will not just benefit them but their neighbours, the economy of the region and the future generations. In doing so, they highlight the value of the ongoing custodianship of place (Dacin et al., 2019).

**Types of place-making.** While there are a multitude of ways to engage with place in practice, we can distinguish three main forms: place (re)making (Cartel et al., 2019; Farny et al., 2019), place maintenance (Dacin et al., 2010) and destruction of place (Cresswell, 2015). These three ways of engaging with place in practice are not mutually exclusive. In fact, place remaking often occurs as a result of place destruction (Farny et al., 2019). Similarly, while the maintenance of a place may occur unselfconsciously by perpetuating tradition (Dacin et al., 2010) it may also occur as a response to perceived external threats (Crawford & Dacin, 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

**Collecting Data for Place-Sensitive Research**

*Walking Interviews to Capture Place Experience*

In order to capture people’s experience of place, the researcher needs to collect their personal stories of that place. Social scientists and geographers have been increasingly relying on walking interviews (e.g. Butler and Derrett, 2014; Evans and Jones, 2011; King and Woodroffe, 2017; Lenette and Gardner, 2021) as a way to gather participants’ stories connecting self and place. In walking interviews, the researcher walks with the interviewee through a given location where they work and/or live while asking questions. Walking interviews allow for interviewees to be immersed in the place and access their memories of the place, present feelings, and future aspirations in relation to that place. In other words, they allow for the generation of rich place-based narratives in relation to each temporal orientation of interviewee’s experience of places.

The value of walking interview is that they allow for more spontaneous and contextualized conversations around people’s place experiences than traditional interviews that typically occur in one space unrelated to the (potential) research focus or question (e.g. office, meeting room). The researcher and the interviewee walk alongside each other instead of looking at each other across an office desk, allowing the interviewee to share personal stories about the place, which they might not have felt comfortable to share face to face. Interviewees may even decide on the itinerary, based on
what they believe is relevant as they share their experience of a place. Overall, the level of flexibility and intimacy provided by walking interviews allows to generate rich place-based narratives.

_Geographical Videography to Capture Place as Practice_

Videography is regularly used as a data collection method in studies of human and cultural geography (Garrett, 2011; Garrett & Ward, 2013). It can be used in its weak version, as a way to document field work—as such, it can be considered as an alternative to field notes in ethnographic research—or it can be used in a strong version, as a way to capture bodies-in-place (Paterson & Glass, 2020). Whether it is being used in its weak or strong version, geographical videography can produce rich cultural data in relation to how people practice place. It allows to capture non-verbal communication and, importantly, it allows to access what people do in relation to place—as opposed to what they say they do in an interview (Garrett, 2011). As such, geographical videography allows to capture a sort of situated, idiosyncratic truth that cannot be grasped with interviews. In addition, geographical videography has also been conceptualized as a way for the researcher to engage with the place and actively participate in the place-making process (Pink, 2008).

Place as practice is also inherently embodied in as much as it is a mobile encounter between individuals and the physical environment. The making of place requires individuals to engage bodily with the socio-material environment—e.g. walk in the place, interact with inhabitants and communities (Lawrence & Dover, 2015), protect it from outsiders (Crawford & Dacin, 2020), develop new infrastructure for the place (Vernay et al., 2022). It requires “to become involved in that place with sight, hearing, touch and smell”. Video can convey such multisensory representations.

Videography allows to capture the flow and rhythm that define the mobile encounter between placemakers and a place. As such, videography can also provide a useful ‘culture map’ of the social landscape (Garrett, 2011). Videos and visual material may for instance capture where people sit in a place in relation to one another, which may denote their status position or their role-identity (Bourdieu, 1970).
Some illustrations

Example of a paper using walking interviews in organization studies

Fly fishing is a niche activity that afficionados can practice in rivers, in sometimes remote wild locations, accompanied by a licenced guide. Fly fishing for trout in the US opposes two types of place-based practices: catch-and-release and catch-and-harvest. Crawford & Dacin's (2020) is a study of the situated interaction between guides, who care about the river, as well as the community around it, and anglers. The guides typically enact catch-and-release practices, while the anglers do not, or enact them in the wrong way. This empirical setting emphasizes a dual ontology of where both place as experience and place as practice are important to understand the organizational behaviour of guides. It also emphasizes a present-orientation that guides sense of place and place-making, which is well suited to walking interviews.

To capture the sense of place of guides, the authors relied on long walking interviews. They followed the guides into the wild on their typical workday, which reflects in the length of the interviews (ranging from 8 to 12 hours). Long interviews allowed the researchers to build trust, particularly as they hiked with the guides, sometimes to remote locations (e.g. traversing fatal cliffs) and through extreme conditions (e.g. sub-zero temperatures). Building this connection with the guides allowed the authors to gather rich stories depicting the guides sense of place, as well as to develop their own sense of place. The authors insist on such situated long interviews as a mean of data generation rather than data collection (Crawford et al., 2020).

Walking interviews were important identifying the initial puzzles that the authors worked with. The authors soon noticed rather violent, or at least emotionally charged encounters between fly-fishing guides and anglers. The guides would refer to their sense of place in order to justify their behaviour. For instance, the guides explained that it would make them “really really mad” to see anglers harming the river and the community of people that the river supports. Walking interviews allowed the authors to understand the importance of situated emotions in the construction of the guides’ sense of place, and how in turn those situated emotions triggered vigilantism, which may be understood as an extreme type of place-based behaviour.
Example of a paper using geographical videography in organization studies

Haiti is a place that is regularly touched by natural disasters. In 2010, an earthquake devasted several zones of the island. Farny, Kibler, & Down's (2019) is a study of the recovery of the small town of Limonade, which population substantially increased after the earthquake due to the significant flow of refugees. The inhabitants of Limonade, together with the refugees, worked together for the recovery of the place. This empirical setting emphasizes an ontology of place as practice and a future-orientation to place-making, which is well suited to geographical videography for data collection.

To capture place-making in action, the researchers opted for a “naturalistic mode of inquiry” by collecting ethnographic data over five years. The principal ethnographer (first author) who was the only one to go on site video-recorded several interviews as well as his observations of the daily work practices for the recovery of lemonade such as building new toilets or rebuilding a chicken farm (an edited video which combines the insights of all video material is publicly available at https://vimeo.com/36593964). The videos helped the research team gain a situated understanding of the post-disaster practices at play in the recovery process. The videos helped the two outsider researchers—who had not been on site—indirectly develop their own sense of the place.

Videos were particularly important at the beginning of the process for the three researchers to develop their collective understanding of the situated post-disaster practices: what is located where, who does what, or in what temporal order. The videos allowed to capture a crucial embodied aspect of the recovery process: the emotional response of the inhabitants of Limonade. Such an emotional response would not have been as visible through the transcripts of interviews. The situated-embodied nature of the videographic material proved essential in setting up the analytical orientation of the paper around the role of emotions in situated processes of recovery. The researchers were able to trace both “the emotional suffering and traumatogenic experiences” and “the positive reactions needed for post-disaster community development” (Farny, Kibler, & Down, 2019, p.772). Based on this first identification of the role of shared emotions in place-based processes of recovery, the three researchers were able to develop an adequate analytical coding procedure.
References


Table 1. A Framework to Analyse “Sense of Place” and “Place-Making”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontology of place</th>
<th>Temporal orientation of place experience</th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Future</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Place as experience</td>
<td>E.g. Remembering place</td>
<td>Feeling the memory of a place into the present, restoring a familiar past in an unsettled present.</td>
<td>E.g. Inhabiting place</td>
<td>Developing an embodied sense of place that reflects individual characteristics (e.g. gender roles and sensual experiences).</td>
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<td>Example: Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2021</td>
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<td>Example: Carpenter et al., 1959</td>
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<tr>
<td>Place as practice</td>
<td>E.g. Maintaining place</td>
<td>Performing place-based rituals which maintain the meanings of a place.</td>
<td>E.g. Creating a place</td>
<td>Building a new place as a collective, pragmatic and situated response to field-level issues.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Example: Dacin et al., 2010</td>
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<td>Example: Cartel et al., 2019</td>
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