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# Mitigating work alienation: what can we learn from employee ownership?

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## ABSTRACT

Work alienation, driven by powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement, negatively affects job performance and wellbeing. Yet it remains under-researched. This paper elaborates on alienation theory by exploring it in a novel context – employee-owned firms – and contributes to employee ownership, psychosocial work environment, and employee relations literature. Based on interviews with 33 employees, we reveal structural, psychological, and cultural characteristics that suppress alienation. Psychological and structural empowerment create perceptions of powerfulness. Psychological ownership, effort-reward balance, and prosocial values provide meaningfulness. Community, equality, and inclusive discourse lead to belonging, while personal development, ethic of care, and authenticity drive self-realization. Since these characteristics need not be exclusive to co-ownership, the study provides insights to conventional firms on how to foster organisational belonging. A further contribution to theory and practice is our identification of tensions inherent in co-ownership, arising from information sharing, decision-making, distributive justice, and organizational citizenship behaviour, that inadvertently drive alienation.

## KEYWORDS

Alienation; Employee ownership; Powerlessness; Meaninglessness; Social isolation; Self-estrangement

## 1. Introduction

*Being alienated...means having become distanced from something in which one is in fact involved (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 25)*

*Being employee-owned has opened my eyes to the culture you can create within a business. We're all in this together. This is our business collectively. (Eleanor–interviewee).*

Despite changes in the workplace since Seeman's (1959) seminal paper on alienation, the concept remains just as relevant to contemporary organisations. O'Donohue and Nelson (2014) maintain that an increase

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in routines, systems, and technology-driven processes is reducing employee autonomy and increasing isolation, leading to alienation. Yuill (2011) highlights alienating conditions such as the intensity of the working day and the prevalence of emotional labour. More recently, the transition to hybrid working in the aftermath of COVID-19 has highlighted increased incidences of work alienation (Mehta, 2022).

Yet in recent years, alienation has suffered from neglect (Conway et al., 2020), prompting Shantz et al. (2015, p. 382) to call for a revival in the study of this ‘nearly forgotten concept’. Its marginalization may be due to increased focus on employee engagement/disengagement. However, disengagement differs from alienation because it is not inherently negative and does not necessarily lead to poor performance (Afrahi et al., 2022). Nair and Vohra’s (2012, p. 43) conceptualization of alienation identifies unique antecedents and consequences compared with conditions such as disengagement and burnout, concluding that ‘ignoring alienation would lead to a poor understanding of factors and consequences that may influence the organisation and its working.’

This paper responds to calls to re-examine alienation but does so by applying it to a novel context – employee-owned businesses – thereby creating an opportunity to reveal new insights. Given the relationship between hierarchical control systems and alienation (Johnson, 2006; Sarros et al., 2002), there is justification for investigating whether the participative form of management found in employee-owned firms reduces alienation. However, only a handful of studies have investigated the impact of co-ownership on alienation and almost all are conceptual (e.g. Henschen, 2020; Johnson, 2006; Jossa, 2014; Rothschild-Whitt, 1986). To the best of our knowledge, there is only one empirical paper – Kociatkiewicz et al.’s (2021) ethnographic case study of two co-operatives in Poland – that considers alienation in the context of co-ownership, exploring the notion of ‘work as home’. Our paper differs in that it investigates the impact of co-ownership on the antecedents of alienation. In addition, employee-owned businesses differ from co-operatives in that they are indirectly, rather than directly, owned, and are predominantly knowledge-intensive professional services rather than food production and retail businesses (Mygind, 2023).

This study is important because work alienation is harmful. It has a negative impact on job performance, satisfaction, commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, and well-being (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Golden et al., 2008; Gonçalves et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2022; Hua et al., 2023; Isham et al., 2021). There is a strong rationale, therefore, for research that identifies mitigating factors. We believe these might be

revealed by exploring alienation in the context of employee ownership. Thus, our research question is:

*What characteristics and practices of employee ownership suppress the antecedents of alienation?*

To answer this question, we conduct 33 interviews with employees across 11 employee-owned firms. We focus on the UK which witnessed a 37% increase in employee-owned firms between July 2022 and June 2023 (Employee Ownership Association, 2023). Our study is concerned with firms that are 100% employee owned, where shares are held on behalf of employees by an employee ownership trust (EOT). This form of indirect ownership accounts for 80% of employee-owned UK firms (Pendleton et al., 2023). We exclude firms with an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) because the financial stake is minimal and there is no involvement in decision making (Kaswan, 2022).

Our study makes two principal contributions. First, we elaborate alienation theory by examining its constructs in a novel setting, thereby revealing structural, psychological, and cultural factors that suppress alienation. However, because these factors are not the exclusive preserve of employee-owned firms, we simultaneously inform related literature streams. Both psychosocial and employee relations scholars have called for researchers to adopt an alienation perspective to advance learning in their respective domains (Øversveen & Kelly, 2022; Thanem & Elraz, 2022). More broadly, there is growing recognition that alternative structures such as co-owned firms might offer insights to conventional firms on how to foster organizational belonging and commitment (Bryer, 2020). Second, in responding to the call from the employee ownership literature for qualitative research that explores micro-level beliefs and attitudes rather than macro-level firm performance (McConville et al., 2020), we reveal tensions arising from employee ownership that can have the unintended effect of driving, rather than mitigating, alienation for some employees.

The paper is structured as follows. Our review of the literature discusses the definition of alienation, its antecedents, and its relationship with the psychosocial, employee relations, and employee ownership literature streams. We finish the section with a theoretical framework based on existing knowledge of co-ownership and alienation. Next, we explain our research design, with a description of our sampling process, interview guide, and analytical process. Our findings show the mitigating influence of co-ownership on alienation but also reveal the unintended consequences of tensions inherent in employee ownership. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Alienation: definition and antecedents

The conceptualization of alienation as a socio-economic construct is attributed to Marx (1975/1844) who argued that capitalism institutionalises alienation through the separation of workers from the products they create, the activity through which they are created, their fellow workers, and themselves (Sayers, 2011). Seeman (1959, 1972), the catalyst for academic debate about alienation, proposed that alienation is a socio-psychological state with six variants: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation. Blauner (1964) adopted four of these dimensions – powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement – and related them specifically to the workplace. They have endured as the core variables associated with work alienation (Conway et al., 2020; Shantz et al., 2015). We adopt these four, rather than the original six, as the organising framework for our research, because of their relevance to the workplace, and because of what we perceive as the overlap between cultural estrangement and social isolation, and normlessness (which encompasses purposelessness and an absence of values) and meaninglessness. However, we adopt the perspective, in line with growing empirical evidence, that they are antecedent conditions, and that alienation is unidimensional (Kanungo, 1979; Nair & Vohra, 2009; Shantz et al., 2014). Advocates of this school of thought interpret alienation as separation or dissociation (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Kanungo, 1979; Shantz et al., 2014). Nair and Vohra (2009, p. 296) refer to alienation as ‘estrangement or disconnect from work, the context, or self’.

The literature is undecided on how best to denote the opposite of alienation. One approach is to add a prefix, *unalienation* (Marx, 1844/1975) or *disalienation* (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Prasad & Prasad, 1993). A second is to use a positive work concept such as *involvement* (Hirschfeld et al., 2000) or *connection* (Shantz et al., 2014). However, our view is that that these concepts fail to capture the complexity of alienation, even though *connection* is the opposite of *separation*. For this reason, we use *disalienation* to imply ‘not alienated’. We choose this in preference to *unalienated* because of the latter’s connotation of being released from alienation, suggesting that alienation is the default condition.

Regarding alienation’s antecedents, studies show that excessive formalization and centralization are associated with feelings of *powerlessness* (Adler, 2012; O’Donohue & Nelson, 2014). *Meaninglessness* is a function of working on tasks that lack variety, perceived significance, and identity (Bailey et al., 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). *Social isolation* is the exclusion

from, or absence of relationships with, colleagues (Marshall et al. 2007; Rayce et al., 2017). Finally, *self-estrangement* – feeling out of touch with one's real self – is a consequence of longer office hours or working at home, inability to work to one's full potential, lack of self-fulfilment, or poor person-organisation fit (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Hirschfeld & Feild, 2000).

Although its roots are in sociology, alienation is measured primarily as a psychological construct in organizational research (Chiaburu et al., 2014; Conway et al., 2020). Yuill (2011) suggests it is a bridging concept between social conditions and individual response. As such, it is not surprising to see an association between alienation and the psychosocial work environment literature. Desirable psychosocial factors such as control over one's work, task identity, a social network, support for self-development, and time to fulfil responsibilities at home, clearly resonate with (dis)alienation (e.g. Dul et al, 2011; Hoff & Öberg, 2015, Kompier, 2002). Alienation has also been adopted in employee relations literature to study emotional labour, the reorganization of working practices, and platform work (e.g. Bansal, 2017; Glavin et al., 2021; Harris & Ogbonna, 2012). Models such as demand-control-support and job demands-resources, that feature in both these literature streams, reflect aspects of alienation (Rugulies, 2019). However, while recognising the interrelationship between alienation and other literature streams, we follow the prevailing view that alienation is a theory in its own right (e.g. Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015; Yuill, 2023) and our primary aim is to extend its understanding by examining it in a novel context.

## 2.2. Employee ownership

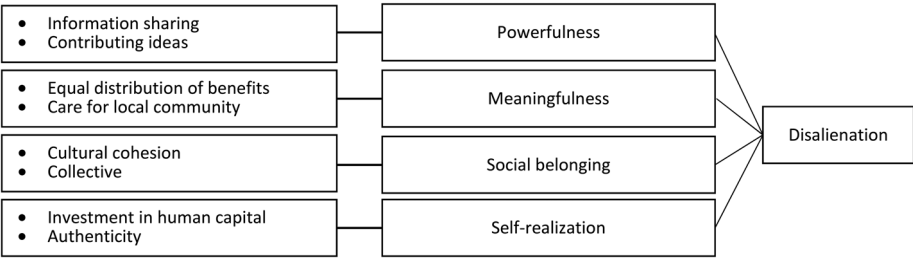
The relevance of employee ownership to alienation stems from its ability to fulfil three motives – control, sense of belonging, and maintenance of identity (Pierce et al., 2003). Early studies into firms with employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), where employees own stock in their own companies and benefit from profit sharing, identified the concept of psychological ownership, which is associated with job satisfaction and commitment (Dawkins et al., 2017). Research into employee ownership is still a niche field (Mirabel, 2021). Mygind and Poulsen's (2021) meta-analysis of empirical studies of employee ownership in Europe and the USA since the year 2000 identifies 31 studies, of which only eight relate to firms where the majority of employees own the majority of the company.

Most studies of employee ownership measure its impact on firm performance. O'Boyle et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis reports a small but

positive association between employee ownership and firm performance. Similarly, Kim and Patel (2017) find that, while positive, the impact of employee ownership on firm performance is small and contingent on industry, country, and year. However, both studies define employee ownership purely in terms of share ownership. O'Boyle et al. (2016) acknowledge they were unable to assess the impact of employee participation and autonomy on firm performance because of the limited number of relevant studies. Blasi et al. (2016, p. 74) found that shared financial rewards, combined with policies that empower employees, have a positive effect on financial performance but highlight the need for more research on the impact of policies that give employees 'the means to make a difference in the workplace'. In terms of impact at the micro level, both McCarthy et al. (2010) and McConville et al. (2020) report that employee share ownership has limited impact on attitudes and behaviour, while Wichman (1994) identifies cynicism towards share ownership schemes from all but senior leaders. However, these results may not be indicative of employee ownership trusts (EOTs) because they are based solely on employees who have a financial stake in the business whereas employees in EOTs, besides indirect ownership through a trust, participate in decision making. Of Mygind and Poulsen's (2021) eight studies relating to firms where a majority of employees own a majority of the company, there is evidence of information sharing, the ability to contribute ideas, and a cohesive culture. They found less evidence of investment in human capital and care for the local community. Regarding the limited number of studies that address, albeit conceptually, ownership's impact on alienation, there is agreement that democratization ought to ameliorate powerlessness, a primary cause of alienation (Henschen, 2020; Johnson, 2006; Jossa, 2014; Rothschild-Whitt, 1986). Kociatkiewicz et al.'s (2021) empirical study revealed a perception of the workplace as home (i.e. social belonging).

Our study contributes to the alienation literature by investigating the concept in the context of employee-owned firms. We focus on the antecedents of alienation because, given its negative impact and the imperative to suppress it, antecedent-based interventions are likely to be more effective. The theoretical framework in Figure 1 draws on employee ownership and psychological ownership literature. It shows characteristics and practices likely to suppress the antecedents of alienation and drive the obverse of each, ultimately leading to disalienation. These characteristics and practices are distal antecedents, while powerfulness, meaningfulness, social belonging, and self-realization are proximal. We use self-realization, rather than self-connectedness, as the obverse of self-estrangement because it captures both authenticity and self-actualization (see Martela & Pessi, 2018).





**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Research context

The context for the research is employee-owned professional service firms. This sector represents 38% of employee-owned firms in the UK (Employee Ownership Association, 2023). We focus on firms that are 100% employee owned and structured as EOTs. In this model, each employee can receive a tax-free annual bonus of up to 3,600 GBP, and each has a say in how the firm is run, usually through an employee council. The typical conversion to employee ownership sees shareholders selling all, or a majority of, shares to an EOT which holds the shares collectively for employees. The EOT is run by a corporate trustee whose directors might include executive directors of the company, employee representatives, and an independent professional trustee. The EOT holds the board of company directors to account, ensuring the company is well managed and operates according to employee-ownership principles. The EOT borrows to buy the shares and the company pays contributions, from its profits, to the EOT to repay the loan.

#### 3.2. Research design and data collection

We considered qualitative research appropriate because of our approach (theory elaboration), purpose (exploratory), and our interest in individual views and experiences. Our intention was to describe and explain rather than establish prevalence or calibrate (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017; Lee, 1999; Ritchie et al., 2014). While recognising the trade-off between breadth and depth, we opted for cross-sectional research across multiple organizations, rather than a single case study, so we could capture the perceptions of organizations at different stages of the employee-ownership journey. The potential for confounding effects from cross-organization variance was reduced by a sampling frame limited to professional service firms – law, architecture, and management consultancy. Their shared characteristics—knowledge intensity, low capital intensity, and a professionalized workforce



(Von Nordenflycht, 2010) – assured structural and cultural similarities across organizations. We used semi-structured one-to-one interviews to enable us to collect the level of contextual detail needed to explain beliefs and attitudes (Bryman, 2012).

Our sampling frame was a publicly available list of professional service firms who are members of the Employee Ownership Association. We emailed the managing directors of 65 firms from across the UK. Eleven firms agreed to participate. In nine of the firms, we were able, as a result of a company-wide invitations from the managing directors, to interview multiple participants of varying seniority. Interviewing senior leaders helped provide an overview that was not always evident to individual employees. In all, there were 33 individual participants. For all but one company (Company 6), participants had been with their respective firms long enough to have experienced the transition to employee ownership and were thus able to contrast pre-, and post-, transition. Participant companies varied in size from less than 50, to more than 250, employees. While we did not identify any significant differences attributable to size, this may be because of our limited sample.

After conducting and analysing all the interviews, we decided that there was unlikely to be any additional insight from collecting more data. The final three interviews (all three participants were from different firms) failed to reveal new themes so we decided we had reached saturation (cf. Francis et al., 2010). Table 1 provides contextual information for the participants. To preserve anonymity, we use pseudonyms and exclude job roles.

Interviews took place between March and August 2022 and were conducted on Microsoft Teams by two of the research team. Hybrid work patterns made it difficult to organise in-person interviews. That said, we do not believe that interviewing remotely made any difference to the quality of the data. Interview guides covered the four antecedents of (dis)alienation and were informed by our reading of the literature. To strengthen face validity, we asked a senior leader in an employee-owned firm to check the interview guide for relevance and clarity. Our interview guide explored perceptions of powerfulness (e.g. ‘How much power do you have to influence what the organisation does?’; ‘Do you know what’s going on in the organisation?’); meaningfulness (e.g. ‘How do you benefit from what you do?’; ‘Does what you do benefit others?’; ‘Do you know where your role fits in the grand scheme of things?’); sense of belonging (‘Is there a community spirit?’; ‘Is there support for you from the organisation?’); and self-realization (e.g. ‘Is there scope for progression?’; ‘Can you be yourself at work?’; ‘Do you have a work-life balance?’). Throughout the interviews,

**Table 1.** Contextual information for participants.

| Company    | Company size<br>(employees) | Year of transition to<br>employee<br>ownership | Participant<br>(pseudonym)                              | Senior leadership<br>team |
|------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---------------------------|
| Company 1  | 100–149                     | 2019   | Alan<br>Bruce<br>Ivy<br>Josie<br>Oscar                  |                           |
| Company 2  | 100–149                     | 2018   | Charlie<br>Hilary<br>Jane<br>Natasha<br>Tim<br>Veronica | Yes<br>Yes<br>Yes         |
| Company 3  | <50                         | 2019   | Linda<br>Kayley<br>Mark                                 | Yes<br>Yes                |
| Company 4  | <50                         | 2020   | Abigail<br>Eleanor<br>Jocelyn<br>Joel                   |                           |
| Company 5  | <50                         | 2017   | Mary<br>Patricia<br>Rose                                | Yes<br>Yes                |
| Company 6  | >250                        | 1997   | Chloe<br>Conor<br>Robin                                 |                           |
| Company 7  | <50                         | 2018   | Colin<br>Rhys   | Yes                       |
| Company 8  | 150–199                     | 2021   | Daisy<br>Lilly<br>Roy                                   | Yes                       |
| Company 9  | >250                        | 2021   | Maddy   | Yes                       |
| Company 10 | <50                         | 2020   | Pauline<br>Zara   | Yes                       |
| Company 11 | 50–99                       | 2022   | Dominic   | Yes                       |

we probed to ascertain whether the transition to employee ownership had resulted in changes in relation to each of the four organizing variables. Given the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, we adjusted the guide for senior leaders (e.g. ‘What mechanisms are there for employees to be heard?’; ‘To what extent do you consult employees when making decisions?’). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to avoid bias in the selection of information. Average interview duration was 55 min.

### 3.3. Data analysis

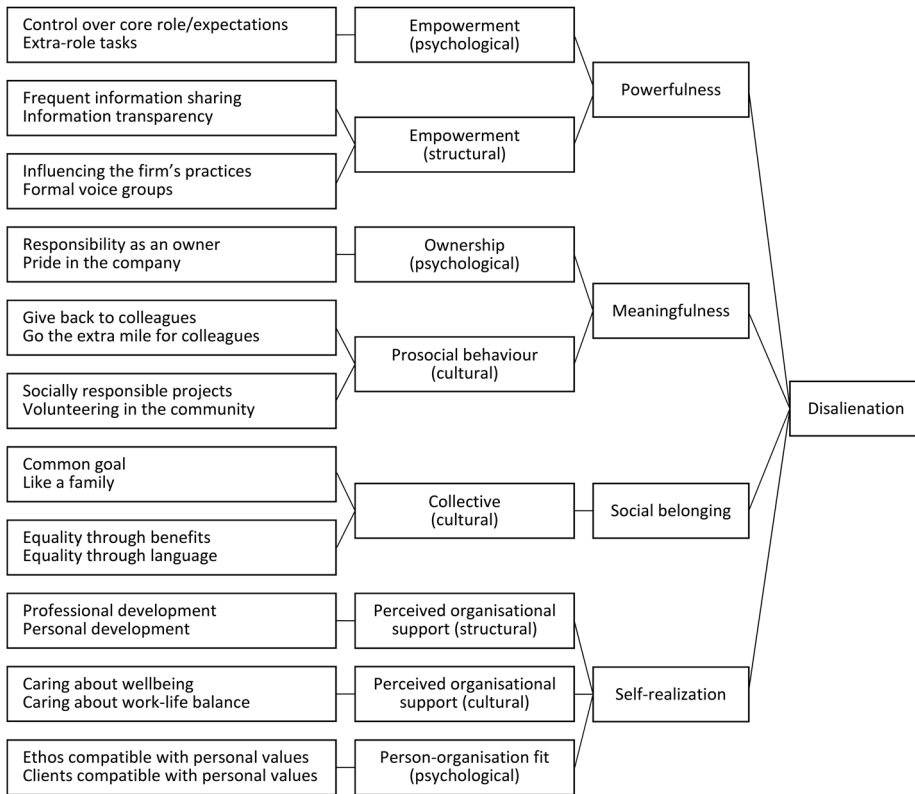
Two of the research team conducted the data analysis. We used NVivo 14 for coding, and the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2013) for abstraction to second-order theoretical themes and aggregate categories (the four disalienation antecedents). We began by selecting one leader, and one non-leader, transcript at random and coded them independently.

We each attached descriptive codes to what we considered conceptually meaningful text in each of the transcripts, creating our own respective codebooks. We met to compare codebooks and to agree a coding framework. We then randomly selected, and independently coded, a further four transcripts (two leaders and two non-leaders). Next, we used NVivo's coding comparison query to calculate Cohen's (1960) *kappa* coefficient for two users, across four sources, at all codes. We exported the results to Microsoft Excel and calculated the average coefficient for intercoder reliability as 0.77 which lies at the upper end of *substantial agreement* – 0.61 to 0.80 (Landis & Koch, 1977). We considered this acceptable. We jointly examined the coding for each of the four transcripts, resolved inter-coder discrepancies, removed redundant codes, and finalised the codebook. Thus, six transcripts (18% of the data set) were multiple coded, falling within the typical range of 10 to 25% (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We shared the remaining transcripts and completed coding, alerting each other to any new codes that emerged during the process.

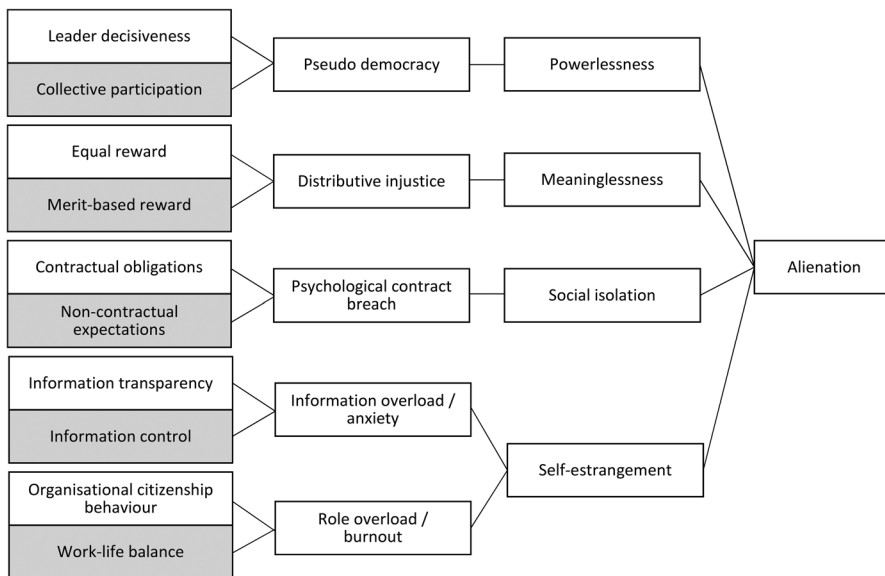
With coding complete, we assigned our first-order descriptive codes to second-order themes from the alienation and ownership literatures, and more broadly, human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB). We distinguished between psychological-, structural-, and cultural-based themes. For example, the freedom to shape one's core role and the opportunity to take on extra-role tasks were abstracted to psychological empowerment (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Information sharing, information transparency, voice groups, and the opportunity to influence the firm's practices were abstracted to structural empowerment (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Figure 2 shows the first-order codes, second order theoretical themes, and summative categories, the latter being the obverse of the four antecedents of alienation. Our research also identified tensions arising from employee-ownership that had negative consequences, driving, rather than suppressing, the antecedents of alienation (see Figure 3). Once complete, we shared our analysis with three of our participants who confirmed our interpretations were credible.

#### 4. Findings

The findings are presented according to the four summative categories (the antecedents of disalienation) and their component themes. We then discuss tensions associated with co-ownership that emerged during the research and which inadvertently drive alienation. Additional participant quotations are shown in Table 2.



**Figure 2.** Data structure (disalienation).



**Figure 3.** Data structure (tensions and alienation).

**Table 2.** Additional participant quotations.

|                  |  |   |
|------------------|--|---|
| Powerfulness     | Empowerment<br>(psychological)                         | Since employee-ownership, there's definitely a sense that I'm leading what the role should look like rather than being told what I should do. I'm able to make a difference. (Tim)<br>I definitely think that happens more now since being employee owned...Whereas I felt like it used to be 'this is how we do things' I feel now we're really encouraged to think of new ways of doing things. (Veronica)<br>We talk about empowerment and part of that is removing elements like having to ask permission, so I'm in charge of how I deliver things. (Conor)  |
|                  | Empowerment<br>(structural)                            | Regular updates and sharing of sensitive information about our financial performance and what the impacts of it are, is a result of employee ownership. We're all owners and we all have a right to know. (Roy)<br>As a member of a voice group, I have a fair amount of power to shape and change things and in fact the expectation of me is that I will do that. We're encouraged to come up with ideas and suggestions. (Alan)  |
| Powerlessness    | Pseudo democracy<br>( <i>tension</i> )                 | It's getting that balance between consultation and getting on and doing things. I think sometimes that can get a bit messy. It's not easy (Linda)   |
| Meaningfulness   | Ownership<br>(psychological)                           | What employees do for the client has to be top notch because it's on their heads. It's their company. (Mary)<br>I think it's nice to feel that kind of ownership and engagement that you get with it. (Jane)<br>They're excited by the fact that this is their company. (Mary)  |
|                  | Prosocial<br>Behaviour (cultural)                      | We have a core value now which is to own it, and that's about behaving like somebody who owns a business. It's showing a sense of caring for the business and caring about other people in the business. (Oscar)<br>There's a lot that we've done on climate-related things because it's something people feel strongly about...I think it would have happened much more slowly if we were in a standard structured company rather than in the employee ownership thing. (Alan)<br>Everyone's got a day a year to go out and spend a day volunteering for whatever good cause they want. It was a policy that was influenced by employee feedback. Most people find it very rewarding. (Veronica) |
| Meaninglessness  | Distributive injustice<br>( <i>tension</i> )           | There must be something more than just this flat EOT bonus rubbish. There's no leadership bonus scheme. I get the same bonus as everybody else, yet they don't do anywhere near as much work as I do. It's demoralising. (Patricia)   |
| Social belonging | Collective (cultural)                                  | I do think employee ownership has really helped with things like a sense of working together towards a common goal. (Tim)<br>We're often described as a family. (Mark)<br>Yeah, definitely feel connected, and all the more since we became employee owned. I think it just feels much more like it's ours and acting in everyone's interests. (Alex)<br>Everybody sees everyone else as an equal. For example, with the bonus, we decided that the pot should be divided equally among everyone in the company, regardless of seniority or length of service. (Daisy)  |
| Social isolation | Psychological<br>contract breach<br>( <i>tension</i> ) | There are the ones that are active and contribute ideas. Then you've got the middle ground - people who want to know and to be kept informed. Then you've got the others who aren't interested and just want to turn up, do a good job, and go home. (Daisy)<br>Some people really don't care that we're employee owned. To them it is a job. They come to work, do their job, go home, thank you very much, and they might get a bonus, they might not, it doesn't really worry them. (Abigail)  |

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

|                   |   |   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Self-realization  | Perceived organisational support (structural)   | Now that we are employee owned, the money that was going to the owners of the company is being invested in people at all levels. (Natasha)<br>It's [employee ownership] definitely encouraged us to do more personal development. Some of that will be directly related to work and some of that will be more about developing your broader skill set. (Alan)<br>That's been a change since employee ownership, allowing people to develop in areas that interest them. (Hilary)                        |
|                   | Perceived organisational support (cultural)     | It's about an equitable relationship between the business and the employee. It has to feel balanced, and I guess that comes in a whole host of ways, one of which is work-life balance. (Lilly)<br>Everybody now accepts it's not healthy for people to be working late nights and early mornings. We all need a life outside work. (Hilary)<br>If they start putting in 50-h weeks, we think 'hang on a minute, what's gone wrong?' Are we giving you too much work? We're pretty hot on it. (Dominic) |
|                   | Person-organisation fit (psychological)         | The company's values and culture is definitely a good fit for me. (Pauline)<br>There's definitely a reason why you work for [C1] and that's because it now has a very strong ethical stance (Ivy).  |
|                   | Information overload/anxiety ( <i>tension</i> ) | I'm very engaged and I find that I end up expending too much energy trying to understand things. It's draining. There's a point at which I get fatigued by it. I want leaders to lead and take responsibility. (Chloe)  |
| Self-estrangement | Role overload/burnout ( <i>tension</i> )        | Probably the level to which we're asking people to get involved is maybe three times as much as we ever would have done beforehand. (Oscar)<br>When you're working for something you're passionate about, it's hard to stop it creeping into your home life. For me, it's a mental churn of ideas rather than 'I need to take that phone call'. It's the darker side of empowerment. It engenders a sense of wanting to do the best but at the expense of your headspace and home life. (Mark).         |

#### 4.1. Powerfulness

##### 4.1.1. Empowerment (*psychological*)

There was an overwhelming consensus that moving to employee ownership increased control over job role and implementation, thereby enhancing psychological empowerment:

I have very high levels of control over what I do. I've also had discussions with my managers about the kind of projects I want, and don't want, to work on. This has definitely become more of a possibility since employee ownership. (Ivy)

The biggest difference I see in an employee-owned firm is that it is what I would describe as an adult working relationship rather than parent-child. That manifests itself in terms of being able to define how I go about my job. (Mark)

Participants spoke of a new organisational mindset that encouraged ownership of individual roles and freedom to propose improvements: 'Our democracy lets me have opinions and influence what I'm doing in my job'. (Catherine). There was scope to influence expectations too: 'Where expectations have been unreasonable, that's where our democracy

has kicked in and changed things'. (Robin). A further contributor to psychological empowerment was the opportunity to take on extra-role tasks: 'Since becoming an employee-owned trust, there's the ability to take on things beyond your immediate job description'. (Rose).

#### **4.1.2. Empowerment (structural)**

Information sharing, a component of structural empowerment, was identified as a key characteristic. Employee ownership was responsible for more transparency, with the opportunity to ask questions and challenge directors. Leaders acknowledged employees had a right to information:

I'm at company town hall meetings every week where employees can ask questions about business performance and decisions we've taken as a board. We open ourselves up to challenge. I don't think you would see so much transparency in other companies. Part of being employee owned is the obligation to explain. (Rhys).

A second characteristic of structural empowerment was the ability to influence the firm's practices, policies, and procedures. There were multiple channels through which employees could voice opinions and make suggestions. Some firms had 'voice groups', each focusing on a specific domain such as wellbeing or civic engagement. Examples of policies influenced by employee voice included maternity and paternity benefits, car parking, and salary adjustments during COVID. Many firms collected data on the number of employee suggestions received and the proportion implemented which, in one firm, was as high as two-thirds. As one leader commented: 'The stuff we do is richer as a consequence of employee ownership. The value they [employees] add is enormous and it genuinely informs how the leadership team approaches things'. (Lilly).

### **4.2. Meaningfulness**

#### **4.2.1. Ownership (psychological)**

Besides being indirect legal owners, participants alluded to a 'sense' of ownership which we refer to as psychological ownership: 'I think it just feels much more like it's ours now' (Alan). 'Where I would credit employee ownership is to say there's no sense of 'other'. There's no 'other' that our efforts are benefiting. It is 'ourselves'. (Mark). With ownership came accountability, which made work more meaningful: 'You're not just an employee that comes to work, does a job, and goes home. It's your company. You have a responsibility'. (Natasha). One participant likened employee ownership to having one's name above the office door and spoke of a feeling of gratification: 'I have a sense of pride being part of an employee-owned business' (Chloe).



#### 4.2.2. *Prosocial behaviour (cultural)*

Participants distinguished between internal and external prosocial behaviour. A common theme was the meaningfulness derived from helping colleagues. This was most obvious among leaders and representatives on employee councils and voice groups:

If I can create an employee ownership culture where people feel they can shape their roles, are rewarded fairly, and genuinely have a voice, then I will have made people's working lives more meaningful, which is a really attractive proposition for me. (Lilly)

If all the ownership is with people who work here, then you'll have more engaged employees. I'm not going to bed at night thinking 'how do I make this private equity firm happy?' It's more rewarding for me to know that employees are happy and engaged than it is for me to hit numbers for investors. (Rhys)

Regarding external prosocial behaviour, employee ownership triggered a re-assessment of the firm's wider societal impact both in terms of the type of work the firm engaged in and activities that fell outside the firm's core activities. It was made possible because, while needing to be profitable, the firm was not 'enthralled to shareholders – it's one of the luxuries of co-ownership'. (Charlie). One participant said the firm was now measuring its *social value* return on investment, aligning the firm with employee ownership values:

We're focused now on working for clients in the not-for-profit space, socially progressive organisations that are doing good in the world. It's part of our narrative of being employee owned and I think people draw great meaning from that. (Oscar)

The driving force for change came as much from employees as leaders. Often, this was accomplished by setting up a task force to consult employees and define organizational values: 'The social impact of what we do now in society is quite high and that is very rewarding'. (Natasha). In addition to engaging in more socially-responsible projects, many firms were giving employees the opportunity, during work time, to volunteer: 'I'm in a group that focuses on volunteering – giving back to the community. I know what I do makes a difference and that gives it meaning for me'. (Ivy).

### 4.3. *Social belonging*

#### 4.3.1. *Collective (cultural)*

The transition to employee ownership was responsible for a positive cultural impact and a heightened sense of a 'collective'. This was attributed to a feeling of working together for a common goal as a result of shared ownership: 'This is our business, collectively'. (Eleanor). Several

participants used the word ‘family’ to describe the collective and spoke of looking out for each other: ‘More things have been put in place to ensure we are checking in on each other.’ (Joel). One participant said employee ownership helped people to understand ‘where they fit in the organisation and their individual importance to the organisation.’ (Jocelyn). Another said employee ownership helped to maintain cohesion as the firm grew.

Employee ownership engendered a perception of equality. In part because everyone received the same annual bonus regardless of seniority, contracted hours, or length of service: ‘It means everybody sees everyone else as an equal.’ (Daisy). Besides the bonus, equality was signalled through policies such as equal access to parking spaces, and a nine-day fortnight, previously the preserve of directors. Language was an important leveller too:

We’re colleagues and co-owners, never staff or employees. We don’t use those words. They reflect a servant/master relationship. If you are colleagues, you’re all on a level playing field. It’s a collegiate way of thinking. As a co-owner, no one has any business thinking of themselves as above anyone else. That’s why employee ownership is quite a left field way of thinking because it’s based on the notion that we’re all equal’. (Mary)

#### **4.4. Self-realization**

##### **4.4.1. Organisational support (structural and cultural)**

Employee ownership was a catalyst for increased structural and cultural organisational support. Structural support was reflected in a focus on people development. Profits previously diverted to shareholders were reinvested in employees: ‘We’ve got some money. How can we develop the team?’ (Linda). People development was a priority:

We’re trying much harder to invest in people, in personal and career development. In the past, we were guilty of just trying to be an efficient money-making machine. We now have a clear focus on making sure employees have rewarding careers. (Oscar).

Some also mentioned support for non-role-related learning: ‘You get £200 towards a personal enrichment course – learning a musical instrument or a language’. (Conor). In addition, employees perceived a change in culture, evidenced by greater organisational support for wellbeing and work-life balance:

Since transitioning, we are now an organisation where, if you work weekends, you need permission, and it’s frowned upon. If you’re working in the office until seven o’clock at night, it’s not ‘Well done, keep up the good work,’ it’s ‘What do we need to change?’ We’re a people-centric organisation and work-life balance is incredibly important. (Colin)

Employees noticed the change: ‘If you feel like you’re becoming overwhelmed, we’re told to talk to someone. It’s the biggest thing I’ve noticed since employee ownership’. (Abigail). There was a feeling of an elevated duty of care: ‘We were always a nurturing company, but employee ownership has made it even more of an imperative. The bonus is one benefit of employee ownership but more important is how individuals are treated’. (Mary). One firm had a wellbeing voice group which reported employee concerns to directors, with noticeable results: ‘It’s a much better place to work. They care more about wellbeing and about being supportive’. (Ivy).

#### **4.4.2. Person-organisation fit (psychological)**

An emphasis on benefitting society – ‘we’re more discerning about the projects we go for’ (Hilary) – was responsible for improved person-organisation fit: ‘In terms of social responsibility, fairness, and equity, it ticks all the boxes for me’. (Oscar). Some rated this above remuneration: ‘I could earn more elsewhere, but I care about working for clients who do good’. (Ivy). The employee ownership ethos was also a compelling recruitment message, particularly for younger people: ‘It resonates with their desire for social equity’. (Lilly).

### **4.5. Tensions**

#### **4.5.1. Powerlessness**

Some participants perceived contradictions or inconsistencies in co-ownership which we refer to as tensions. We regard these tensions as drivers of alienation rather than concepts such as disengagement, frustration, or dissatisfaction which do not fully capture alienation’s relationship with anxiety, distress, and loss of self (Nair & Vohra, 2009).

#### **4.5.2. Powerlessness**

Our findings revealed a tension between swift decision making and employee consultation. For some, the concept of employee ownership had implied power to influence strategic decisions. When this turned out to be illusory, there was disappointment:

I was naively looking at the concept of employee ownership thinking that implicit in ownership is the idea that you can be involved in all decisions. I thought it would be democratic. That’s a misnomer for me. (Mark)

A minority concluded that employee ownership was a pseudo democracy, and that the locus of control had not shifted. This scepticism dampened motivation to voice opinions:

We've had a few occasions where people have felt that it's been too late for them to have an impact on a decision. Some people have said, 'What's the point? They're already happy with the decision they've made. What I think is irrelevant'. (Jane)

Indeed, one leader admitted that company leadership style had remained directive, in order to facilitate decision making:

You could set up an employee-owned business and run it as a democracy, but in my view that wouldn't work. We don't do decision by council. We don't do decision by voting. The directors make the key decisions. That hasn't changed, and that's deliberate. (Rhys)

However, for most, any tension was the result of ambiguity and uncertainty about how to balance decisiveness with participation:

There's a lack of clarity on exactly what the employee council should and shouldn't be consulted on. It's a big challenge and I don't know how to solve that because obviously you wouldn't want to consult on everything. Nothing would ever get done. (Pamela).

#### **4.5.3. Meaninglessness**

Several participants perceived an injustice relating to the annual bonus. There was a tension between the equality of a standardized bonus and recognition of individual effort:

Some don't see their broader responsibility to drive the business forward. But that creates an issue around fairness with some saying, 'Why is it they don't contribute to the greater cause when I'm doing all of this, yet we both get the same bonus'. (Roy)

Those who were more engaged questioned the meaningfulness of their input: 'Some people feel perfectly happy to let others get on with it, but they appreciate the extra benefits that it brings. This makes me question whether I should bother trying'. (Alan).

#### **4.5.4. Social isolation**

For some, employee ownership created a tension because of the inconsistency between pre-, and post-, transition expectations. We refer to this as a psychological contract breach. This was reported to us second hand by several participants: 'They are thinking, "I didn't sign up for this. I just want to get on with my job"'. (Veronica). Their lack of involvement in extra-role activities resulted in social isolation from the majority who engaged in co-ownership behaviours. In some instances, isolation led to employee exit:

There was one person who said, 'I'm not into all this altruistic waffle. I just want to do my job'. Not everyone is going to be fully on board. So long as you've got

80 percent engaged, I don't think it matters too much. In any case, it all comes out in the wash. A year or two later, those people will move on elsewhere. They don't fit. (Mary)

#### **4.5.5. Self-estrangement**

A tension emerged in relation to information sharing. While transparency is empowering, selective sharing can protect employees from complex and potentially concerning information. Some participants spoke of information fatigue and anxiety: 'We're bombarded with figures. What does it mean? Are we doing ok or not?' (Jane). One participant, who sat on an employee council, acknowledged the tension: 'I'm trying to understand what information to share and when to share it, or whether you shouldn't share information because it would create anxiety and more problems than it solves.' (Natasha).

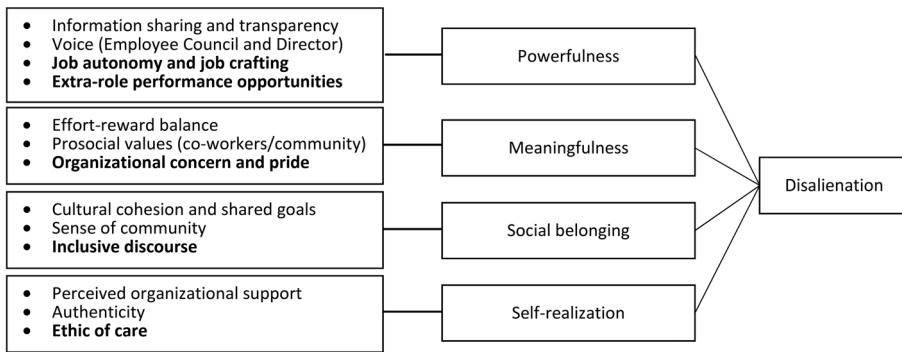
Some referred to the tension between a sense of responsibility to take on additional roles, such as employee council representative, versus prioritising their wellbeing and work-life balance: 'The employee ownership role is taking up so much time, despite the generous allowance we're given. It's time consuming. There's a lot of following up and chasing people.' (Ivy). One participant referred to implications for mental health:

Since taking on the employee council role, I go home, and I have a lot of stuff going on in my head. I'll be like, 'I need to do this, and I need to be thinking about that.' I definitely take it home with me. It does bother me a bit. I've got a nine-year-old so I'm juggling the mental load of all her stuff and the mental load of my employee council stuff. (Chloe).

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Theoretical implications**

Notwithstanding the assertion that we might be witnessing the 'unexpected return of alienation' (Ilfie & Manthorpe, 2019, p. 55), it remains a neglected concept (Conway et al., 2020). This is surprising given its negative consequences which include poor job performance, counterproductive work behaviours, staff turnover, and mental illness (Bousquet, 2023; Yuill, 2023; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Viera-Armas, 2019). Seeman et al. (2021) recommend using alienation theory to provide lessons for improving the workplace. We respond by using an alienation lens to capture the experiences of workers in employee-owned firms. Given that employee ownership implies greater control over what one does, and an increased likelihood of identifying with what one does and with whom one does it (Jaeggi, 2014), one would expect to find



**Figure 4.** How employee ownership drives disalienation.

disalienated workers. Our article is opportune given the growing interest, among academics and policy makers, in alternative ways of structuring organisations (e.g. Berry & Kato, 2018; Bryer, 2020), particularly in the light of evidence showing a positive association between employee ownership and productivity (Mygind & Poulsen, 2021).

Our primary contribution is to alienation theory. By applying it to a novel context that is in stark contrast to the setting in which it was first developed, our research enhances existing theory and extends its scope. Specifically, we identify factors that suppress the antecedents of alienation and produce a disalienating effect. Our findings confirm and build on our theoretical framework (Figure 4 – new variables shown in **bold**). We also contribute to the employee ownership literature by highlighting tensions, inherent in employee ownership, that have a potentially alienating impact. More broadly, we inform the OB and HRM literatures by identifying characteristics of employee ownership that could positively influence policies and practice in conventional organizations.

Employee ownership has a significant impact on perceptions of powerfulness. We confirm the importance of information sharing and information transparency. Whereas the latter is typically identified as empowering from the standpoint of wage bargaining (Rosenfeld & Denice, 2015), our research shows how it emphasises the accountability of the leadership team to employees. As expected, we found employee voice to be empowering, but we show that a formal infrastructure, such as a voice council and an employee director on the board, reassures employees that their ideas and suggestions will be given serious consideration. We found that job autonomy (discretion in how to complete tasks) and job crafting (freedom to make improvements to job design) increased perceptions of powerfulness (cf. Kim & Beehr, 2022; Park, 2018). We also reveal the disalienating effect of extra-role tasks which broaden the scope of employee involvement in, and contribution to, the

firm. Although related to prosocial behaviour, our study shows the empowering effect of extra-role behaviours.

With regard to meaningfulness, our study confirms the importance of a perceived balance between effort and reward (through the financial bonus mechanism) and of prosocial values. The latter was evidenced both in relation to improving the wellbeing of co-workers and the welfare of the local community. In this, our findings echo existing studies which suggest that organisational democracy fosters prosocial behaviour, and that prosocial behaviour is associated with job meaningfulness (Barakat et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2009). Transformation to co-ownership encourages a sense of responsibility for others, liberating employees to pursue social and environmental values that may have been stifled in an organization where profit was the principal goal (cf. Vieta, 2014). Noticeable in our findings is the link between organizational concern and meaningfulness. A sense of responsibility for, and pride in, the company, derives from the perception of psychological ownership and from a positive evaluation of the company (e.g. Guarana & Avolio, 2022; Tyler & Blader, 2001).

Co-ownership fosters shared goals and values, and a cohesive culture and community, which contribute to a sense of belonging (e.g. Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991). However, our research goes further by revealing the disalienating effect of language. A new organizational lexicon (e.g. ‘partners’ rather than ‘employees’), which is the direct result of the conversion to employee ownership and a reflection of a change in power dynamics and status, evidences the role that discourse can play in the social construction of organisational change (e.g. Grant et al., 2005).

We confirm the contribution of organisational support for professional and personal development to self-realization. The intensification of support after transition to employee ownership underlines the fundamental belief in the development of human capital. Our research shows how the values of employee ownership create an environment that allows employees to identify more closely with their organizations. We contribute to the alienation literature by revealing the importance of an ethic of care (Carmeli et al., 2017; Saks, 2021) – an organization-level construct reflecting employee beliefs about the extent to which the organization is responsive to the ‘needs, interests, concerns, and wellbeing of its members’ (McAllister & Bigley, 2002, p. 895). Our findings suggest that an employee ownership culture places organizational care centre stage. Overall, organisational support for self-enhancement, the active promotion of wellbeing and work-life balance, and strong person-organisation alignment, drive self-realization.

Finally, we contribute to the employee ownership literature by revealing the *potentially* alienating effect of tensions (tensions are not experienced uniformly – Hahn & Knight, 2021) which emerge because of



inherent competing demands in co-ownership. By doing so, we provide a contrast to previous research which focuses on the positives of co-ownership. The duel between decisive versus participative leadership can create feelings of powerlessness both for leaders, who become trapped in lengthy consultation processes, and for employees who expect greater influence (cf. Huang, 2012). We found a tension between equality and equity. Individuals who consider themselves to be higher performing, or more engaged in ownership duties, are aggrieved when they receive the same reward as their ‘free riding’ peers. This perceived distributive injustice can undermine the meaningfulness of work (Miles & Klein, 2002). On the other hand, those who fail to engage in ownership activities they never wanted, feel socially isolated (cf. Esper et al., 2017, on co-ownership in worker-recuperated enterprises). Clearly, this is less likely to be an issue for those recruited to a company post transition. The remaining tensions we uncovered – fully transparent versus controlled information sharing, and organisational citizenship versus healthy work-life balance – have the potential to negatively impact wellbeing. Excessive information sharing and honesty about the firm’s vulnerabilities can be overwhelming and can create anxiety which negatively affects personal lives (Graf & Antoni, 2023). Similarly, employees who are highly engaged in behaviours related to co-ownership continue to think about work at home, preventing them from being fully immersed in family life, and driving self-estrangement (Guercini & Cova, 2018; Tang & Vandenberghe, 2020).

### **5.2. Managerial implications**

Our study has implications for multiple business models, whether conventionally structured, employee-owned, or contemplating the transition to employee ownership. Our research shows how the characteristics and practices associated with employee ownership can address perceived power imbalance, deliver mutual benefit and a sense of purpose, foster stronger connections with peers and the community, strengthen individual identification with the firm, and create a more caring and enabling workplace. This chimes with calls for a more critical approach to HRM which has been accused of putting capitalism’s interests above those of workers (Omidi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the requirement for sustainable, but high-performing, HRM to meet current challenges is more likely to be achieved in employee-centric organizations which balance organizational performance with individual wellbeing (Aust et al., 2020; Richards, 2022). In fact, Cooke et al. (2023) suggest that, those tasked with increasing firm performance and employee productivity, could learn from the co-ownership model.

Organizations may already have in place some of the policies, practices, and processes identified in our study as disalienating. Employee ownership is not necessarily a pre-requisite, though our findings suggest it enhances them where they already exist and acts as a catalyst for development where they are embryonic. We recommend firms promote employee participation in decision-making through information sharing, voice channels, and voice roles which have genuine influence. At an individual level, enabling an element of job crafting, that gives employees the autonomy to optimize job design and processes, can have positive consequences. Although financial bonuses may not be appropriate in all contexts, other mechanisms for demonstrating an effort-reward balance can be explored such as professional and/or personal development. We recommend firms implement tangible organizational support for employee wellbeing. For example, policies that encourage employees to speak up about work overload or that facilitate flexible working arrangements demonstrate organizational commitment to work-life balance. Enabling a company-wide conversation about organizational values, and what this means in terms of stakeholder engagement, can positively influence employee identification with, and concern for, the firm. Firms should note that organizational discourse can be a signifier of respect, equality, and inclusivity. Small modifications can have a significant impact on employee perceptions.

Despite many benefits, firms (including employee-owned firms) should be alert to the potential for unintended consequences that can aggravate, rather than alleviate, workplace alienation. Leaders should establish, from the start, where consultation and collective decision-making begins and ends. Equal, rather than equitable, rewards can lead some to feel they are being exploited by free riders. Leaders could consider using an individual reward system, in conjunction with collective rewards, to recognise those making exceptional effort. In addition, they should stress that the common good is equally served by those who simply want to come to work to do their job. Our findings suggest that the 80–20 rule is relevant in many employee-owned firms – 80% of discretionary, ownership-related, activities are undertaken by 20% of the workforce. Thus, managers should be alert to the danger of employee overload and intervene early.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

As might be expected, the limitations of our study also suggest avenues for future research. First, while a minority of our participants were sceptical of some of the supposed benefits of employee ownership status, most were advocates of this business model. We did not talk to employees who, as suggested by the testimony of some participants, were

alienated by the transition to employee ownership. Thus, while self-selection sampling within each firm provided us with willing participants, the disadvantage was a sample that was not fully representative. The full anonymity implicit in a quantitative study might encourage critics of employee ownership to come forward and express their views. This would increase our knowledge of the potential for unintended consequences resulting from employee ownership.

Second, all of our participants worked in professional service firms. While this is the dominant sector among employee-owned businesses in the UK, future research could broaden the sample. A professional service firm is characterised by an intellectually skilled workforce which often already benefits from a degree of autonomy. Firms and workforces from more diverse sectors, with more varied backgrounds, may respond differently to employee ownership.

Third, a quantitative study could compare levels of alienation in employee-owned firms versus conventional firms, measuring the extent to which employee ownership mitigates alienation, and identifying the contribution of individual factors to disalienation.

Fourth, we limited the focus of our study to four alienation antecedents, and there is precedence for doing so (see Shantz et al., 2015). Future research could explore the relative importance of specific sub-dimensions of the core antecedents. For example, Chiaburu et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis identifies role ambiguity, need for achievement, and leader concern as predictors of alienation (the latter two variables being negatively related). Besides meaningfulness, self-expressiveness, and work relationships, Nair and Vohra (2010) found that justice perceptions have an effect on alienation among knowledge workers (as emerged from our research in relation to employee ownership tensions). Conway et al. (2020) identified prosocial impact as being negatively related to alienation among public sector workers. Thus, a more nuanced and context-dependent approach could be taken in exploring antecedents of (dis)alienation.

Finally, almost all of the firms that participated in our study were recent converts to employee ownership. Many were still in an experimentation or 'bedding-in' phase. Future research could specifically target firms with 10 or more years of employee ownership to investigate whether the factors that were disalienating in our study continue to have an impact once they are fully embedded and once the 'honeymoon' period is over.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Ethics approval

Ethics approval granted by institutional ethics committee on February 16, 2022 (Ref: 22.01.022).

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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