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Imagined Futures



*A study of work-related uncertainty
in the corporate environment*

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Abstract

Imagined Futures: A Study of Work-Related Uncertainty in the Corporate Environment

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This is a study of uncertainty in the corporate setting from the perspective of individual employees. While some interviewees talk about accepting uncertainty as an unavoidable state, others tell stories of dread and anguish, associated with instability in the work environment. This research shows how uncertainty as a stress inducing factor can affect both productivity and employee wellbeing, by reducing loyalty and creating a disconnect between individuals and the organizations they work in.

This thesis uses as empirical material a collage of intimate accounts of uncertainty at work from internationals who have worked, or are still working, for corporate companies, at different hierarchical levels. A phenomenological framework is used to analyze individual narratives and to account for the intertwining, embodied experiences that accompany perceiving, feeling, and enacting uncertainty. Their narratives are strung together in order to observe how uncertainty manifests both in the individual inner worlds as well as in concrete situations. The relational space between human and organizational bodies is analyzed to find ways in which uncertainty can be integrated in the organizational culture in order to create a supportive environment that accommodates both business growth and employee work-life quality.

Keywords: uncertainty; organizational culture; cultural analysis; phenomenology; corporate; precariat; emotions; stress; workplace.

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Lund, 2019-08-21

Elena Manuela Boghian

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	3
1. Introduction	5
1.1. The Fall of Certainty	7
1.2. The Rise of Work Uncertainty	8
1.3. Studying the Embodiment of Uncertainty	9
2. Methodology: Researching Inner Worlds	10
2.1. Writing Culture	11
2.2. Why Phenomenology	11
2.3. Studying Organizational Culture Outside the Organization	12
2.4. Personal Reflections on Interviewing	14
2.5. Location, Duration, Medium	16
2.6. Translating and Transcribing Meaning	18
3. Fieldwork: Unfolding Uncertainty	20
3.1. What Is Uncertainty?	20
3.2. Uncertainty as a Feeling	26
3.3. Dealing with Uncertainty	29
3.4. A Learning Opportunity	32
5. Discussion: Uncertainty and the Body	34
5.1. Metaphor, Body, Culture	34
5.2. Life and Work as Movement	37
5.3. Potentiality	38
5.4. Embracing Confusion	40
6. Conclusions	42
What Can Organizations Do About It?	43
Recommendations	44
The Emotional Individual	46
<i>References</i>	49

1. Introduction

It is invisible, difficult to grasp, yet we can feel it in our bodies. “Uneasiness in the heart”, “worrying brain” or just “a feeling that stays with you” are a few expressions used by my interviewees to describe the tell-tale signs of uncertainty. They are a reminder of what we do not know, what could happen, what we do not have control over. Individuals live with the ambiguity, worrying, imagining, making plans and preparations for what has yet to happen.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the complex meanings of uncertainty as experienced by corporate employees. We will be looking at how uncertainty is defined through individual experiences, how it is embodied through sensing and practice and how it manifests in the space between organizational culture and individual bodies. By looking at uncertainty from different angles, new meanings about work and organizational culture emerge and we discuss possible directions for improving today’s corporate culture.

The motivation for pursuing this project stems from my own experience of uncertainty in the workplace. Over the past 10 years, I have been an employee, a freelancer and a business owner. I have worked in four European countries and my tasks have varied from interpreting to marketing to business strategy. I have felt the stress of having too much work or not enough and I imagined scenarios of doom. I did not know what was next and that scared me. The flex-time, the trial period, the commission-based work, they were all there to apparently make it more convenient, and yet, they felt unsafe.

As I was writing this thesis, the news came that burn-out was recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a syndrome caused by “chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (WHO, 2019), and manifested through exhaustion, “increased mental distance from one’s job”, negative feelings, cynicism relating to one's job, and reduced work efficiency. Reading through the following pages, one may notice that many of these causes are associated by employees with the experience of uncertainty, whether it is about having a job or not, how performance evaluations are being made or trying to keep up with organizational changes. While companies consider burnout as an employee’s personal matter and not an organizational problem, healthcare for burned-out employees is estimated to cost

\$125 billion to \$190 billion a year in the U.S. alone (Garton, 2017). This thesis will explore the connection between individual wellbeing and the perception of work in order to inform and support corporate management to create a better work environment for both the organization at large and the individuals within.

Finally, this thesis shows individuals that the suffering that occurs because of work uncertainty can take many shapes and it is important to talk about it. I am reproducing below a quote from one of my colleagues after she read a draft of this thesis:

You are touching upon a theme, that for many is laden with so much pain and anxiety and you are opening up a topic that is so hard to talk about. I think that reading this thesis could make people feel less alone with their thoughts on uncertainty, and at the end of the day this is what connects us as human beings; our insecurities, our thoughts, our loneliness and everything that is hard to talk about, but that nonetheless make us feel so much less alone when we do. (personal communication)

The following sections of this thesis present an eclectic portrait of uncertainty, gathering theoretical developments, interview quotes, business readings and my own speculations. This chapter continues with an overview of how uncertainty has been defined in social sciences and what has motivated my approach for studying uncertainty. In the second chapter, I explain how I used interviewing as a research method and reflect on the ethics of doing this research. The third chapter describes the individual narratives collected through fieldwork, grouped under the three main questions I asked during the research: what uncertainty is, how it feels and how one deals with it. The fourth chapter presents a metaphorical analysis of the individual accounts by looking at how bodily experience is shaped through narrative and is connected to experiencing the self in relation to work and companies. The final chapter discusses my findings and offers recommendations as to how business leaders can use uncertainty to improve communication and bring more cohesion in their workplace.

1.1. The Fall of Certainty

In his work *From Certainty to Uncertainty* (2002), physicist David Peat speaks about uncertainty as being a characteristic of the end of the 20th century in opposition with the idealism and absolute trust in technological progress from the beginning of the 20th century. Rather than being nostalgic for the stability and optimism from over a century before, Peat looks at it as a positive development, in which people have become more cautious about politicians' great plans and sweeping promises, and have learned to take more personal responsibility. This coincides with revolutionary developments in science and epistemology - Einstein's relativity principle and Niels Bohr's quantum theory. These now accepted theories that reality has a multiplicity of appearances - depending on the position of the observer - and that the same object could be both A and non-A made room for paradox and multiplicity. In this context, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty brought the collapse of the idea of an objective reality, as he postulates that reality is 'disturbed' by the act of observation (2002:12). For Heisenberg, uncertainty is relational and arises as a result of the interference of the observation act upon the world.

A cultural approach to uncertainty comes from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992), for whom notions of risk and certainty are culturally defined to maintain social order and community boundaries. In a later lecture, Douglas talks about certainty as an institution made possible by blocking doubt (2001: 145). She argues that the prevalence of uncertainty nowadays is explained by the change of the institutions that certainty was based on, such as the work organizations, family and community. The exposure of uncertainty can be beneficial as it brings forth a critical attitude towards claims of absolute truth:

Demography, technology and the labor market may well have brought us into a period in which certainty cannot be institutionalized. Perhaps that does not matter. Certainty is a cheat and a bully. We should put a brake on our uncritical desire to have more of it. Perhaps we should prepare to live with uncertainty, without regrets. The double conclusion is that there can be no strong society without certainty, and no certainty without closure on debate. (Douglas, 2001: 152)

Social psychologist Geert Hofstede names ‘uncertainty avoidance’ as one of the six cultural dimensions that can be used to characterize different group cultures. Based on a transnational survey of IBM employees, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory became a paradigm for analyzing intercultural communication in organizational contexts. In his view, uncertainty avoidance points to “society’s tolerance for ambiguity” and the level of comfort people feel in “unstructured situations”. He categorizes cultures into “uncertainty avoiding” and “uncertainty accepting”. The first type attempts to reduce uncertain situations through “strict behavioral codes, laws and rules, disapproval of deviant opinions, and a belief in absolute Truth”, claiming that people living in this kind of cultural environment are “more emotional, and motivated by inner nervous energy” (2011:10-11). The second cultural type embraces the pluralism of opinion and has more relaxed rules. People are considered to be “more phlegmatic and contemplative, and not expected to express emotions.” (2011:11).

1.2. The Rise of Work Uncertainty

Sociology is the social science most concerned with problematizing work uncertainty. Uncertainty is mentioned in the context of the ‘risk society’, a term coined by sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck, 1992). Beck agrees with Douglas that late modernity is characterized by the breakdown of traditional certainties like marriage, the nuclear family and lifetime employment - which had served as the structure for private lives. These changes led to a “social surge of individualization” (Beck, 1992: 87) in which crises are seen as individual matters rather than social ones and are accompanied by feelings of anxiety and insecurity. The freedom of making life choices creates new types of uncertainties. Unemployment and underemployment are global phenomena and the responsibility for them is assigned to people and institutions rather than being projected on ‘fate’ or ‘God’.

The ‘risk society’ for Beck is also a reflexive society in which individuals learn to be critical of sometimes contradictory expert knowledge and the concern for risk is commonplace. In their cultural study “Risk and Everyday Life”, John Tullock and Deborah Lupton (2003) explain how, among their interviewees, risk was often defined as an action or decision with an uncertain outcome. This ‘uncertain’ quality of risk was reflected in the unpredictability of the labor market, through flexible working hours and decentralization of the workplace

(2003: 62). In “The Network Society” sociologist Manuel Castells talks about the breakdown of social communication as a “structural schizophrenia” that led to individuals becoming alienated and seeing each other as a threat (2010:3). Castells explains that companies move toward a model of “lean production” adapting the production conditions to the volatility of the market. (2010:165). The need for “flexibility” in work organizations is a response to uncertainty as experienced by businesses in the fast-paced markets, rather than the individual’s need for a more flexible schedule. The consequences of organizational ‘flexibility’ are also discussed by Richard Sennet who points out that individuals are required to learn how to cope with constant change, which translates to a general lack of long-term commitment and trust (Sennet, 1998). Sociologist Guy Standing (2011) writes that the shifting work conditions led to the emergence of “the precariat”, a global social class who lacks occupational security, and is therefore “subject to chronic uncertainty.” (2011: 22):

To be precariatized is to be wired into job-performing lifestyles without a sense of occupational development...The workplace is every place, diffuse, unfamiliar, a zone of insecurity. And if the precariat does have occupational skills, those may vanish or cease to be a reliable ticket to a secure identity or long-term sustainable life of dignity...It creates a lottery ticket society, with downside risks that the precariat bears disproportionately. (Standing, 2011: 13)

The solution envisaged by Standing are the “politics of paradise” that address the precariat’s fear and uncertainty based on the principles of the French Revolution: freedom, fraternity and equality. Social solidarity and sustainable autonomy are seen as the keys to coherent and stable life narratives (Standing, 2011: 155).

1.3. Studying the Embodiment of Uncertainty

As we could see previously, social sciences have long associated uncertainty with the concept of “risk”. In the introduction to the volume “Modes of uncertainty: anthropological cases”, Limor Samimiam-Darash and Paul Rabinow (2015) urge academics to separate the two and problematize uncertainty as its own field:

the world is increasingly being populated by forms, practices and events of uncertainty that cannot be reduced to risk. We make the case that scholars should not focus solely on the appearance of new risks and dangers in the world, which no doubt abound, but should also treat uncertainty itself as a problem and examine the forms of governing and experience that are emerging in relation to it (Samimiam-Darash and Rabinow, 2015:1).

While risk is something that organizations assess, calculate and prevent, uncertainty pervades calculations and demands governing measures like precaution and preparedness (Samimiam-Darash and Rabinow, 2015: 5-7).

Moreover, the theoretical perspectives described above present uncertainty in systemic terms that discuss the effects on the individual life yet ignore its tangible expressions through culturally shaped perceptions, sensations and thoughts. The following chapters will explain how uncertainty manifests through the body, is reflected in language and extends into the organizational environment.

2. Methodology: Researching Inner Worlds

In the following section, I will explain my rationale for choosing a certain methodological approach: how did I do research without limiting it to a specific geographical or organizational context? Why did I mainly use interviews to gather empirical material and not participant observation or focus groups, two other important methods for qualitative research? Did I influence the direction of this study towards the more uncomfortable part of uncertainty? How do I, as a non-native English speaker, interview people of different backgrounds in order to write this thesis? How did friendship with some of my informants affect my data? Finally, how did talking about uncertainty affect the people I interviewed? All of the above are aspects that, at different points during this project, raised ethical dilemmas.

2.1. Writing Culture

Culture is a versatile concept. In 1952, anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn counted 164 definitions of culture (Spolaore, 2019). One that I found particularly inspiring is formulated by ethnologist Jonas Frykman (2003):

...the concept culture is not a package or accumulation of texts. There is nothing finished about it. Instead of being the final point, the concept is the starting point for a voyage of discovery. Culture is understood in connection with cultivation - with everyday usage, something that groups and individuals actively apply and appropriate to orientate themselves to; feel themselves involved in; to experience the environment around them and make it happen (Frykman, 2003: 29).

For the purpose of writing this thesis, culture is regarded as something unfinished, something evolving that individuals both appropriate and act upon, a way of creating and conveying “meaning and connection” (Frykman, 2003: 33). In a company, the corporate culture is not something that is stated in a vision document; it is what happens in the everyday interactions in the organization, prescribed by unwritten rules of interaction and the encounter of different processes, management styles, office arrangements, hierarchies, personal beliefs, moods and histories. In *Understanding Organizational Culture*, Mats Alvesson (2002) proposes a new paradigm for analyzing culture within organizational structures called “bounded ambiguity”. This paradigm accommodates the confusion that comes with studying an environment which cannot be isolated from a global, diffuse context, where people shift between their various group memberships and rules and rituals are both shared, interpreted and contested in different ways. This paradigm replaces the idealized perspective that organizational culture is a unified set of ideas, values and meanings used by the senior management to direct the rest of the company (Alvesson, 2002:145-147). Organizational culture can affect (and be affected) by private lives and finds expression in the individual bodies of its members.

2.2. Why Phenomenology

This research uses a phenomenological framework. While phenomenology sounds like a nebulous concept, difficult to grasp in simple words, I found it to be engrained in cultural analytical methods. Behind the different interpretations of phenomenology is a focus on the “lived human experience in all its richness and devoid of distortive interpretations imposed by culture” (Čargonja, 2013: 20). Phenomenology brings the focus to the human body as a locus where culture is being manifested. The complexity of studying culture includes then human relations, past experiences, physiological states and emotional reactions. Through a phenomenological prism, culture becomes something that is lived (Frykman, 2003). We simultaneously think, do and feel culture: we learn about the world with our bodies which also becomes our ground for adhering to cultural standards. It is what we use to attune ourselves and act in the world, switching between inner lifeworld and outside reality. In this context, phenomenology acknowledges both “praxis and poesis” (Frykman, 2003: 33), the practical knowledge that individuals acquire through experiencing something and one’s creative self-expression.

2.3. Studying Organizational Culture Outside the Organization

The main method for gathering the empirical material used in this research is the qualitative interview. I choose this approach because even though I wished to study the corporate environment, I wanted to be able to communicate about the findings of this research in an open manner. The corporate environment is well guarded through confidentiality policies, trade secrets and PR mechanisms, which could have been problematic when it came to writing a thesis with the purpose of being read outside the organizational setting in which the research takes place. Angela Mazzetti (2016) also acknowledges the difficulties of gaining access in business settings in order to collect fieldwork data, explaining that it is not only a matter of “getting in” but also sustaining the access. In order to avoid the possible restrictions for using data in an organizational setting, especially considering the strict confidentiality rules that many corporations have, I chose to conduct my research away from an organization and instead focus on personal, anonymous accounts from people working within the corporate environment. This, nevertheless, points to different perspectives of organizational life that cannot be isolated from a complex, layered and disjunctive global landscape

(Appadurai, 1996) in which corporations imbue everyday life with employment, processes, products and advertising.

Focusing on individual interviews also allows a different perspective on the individualization phenomenon that so many authors (e.g. Beck, 1992; Castells, 2003; Standing, 2011) assign to the modern workplace, as described in section 1.2. Analyzing how individuals create meaning for themselves within organizations is a step towards understanding how organizational structures and individual sensemaking are related, especially if the findings of this thesis serve as guiding knowledge for exploring specific organizational subcultures. Billy Ehn (2011) writes that as an ethnographer doing research with people, one needs to assume that “you *never* know what they are really thinking and feeling, whatever they tell you. You can only get some biased knowledge about what they say and do through observing and listening to them carefully, always in doubt about what they mean” (2011: 62). While I acknowledge the partial and flawed understanding that one can get about other people through interviewing and the dangerous illusion of assuming that we truly understand people based on what they say, the individual narratives of how they create meaning from their experience as they are presented in the interviews have value in themselves.

In order to respect my interviewees’ confidentiality, I took out all specific demographic details. The age of the interviewed people ranges from early 20s to late 70s. They come from Germany, Japan, Romania, Sweden, UK and USA. They are executives, managers, academics who became corporate researchers, young employees, retired employees, corporate contractors, and freelancers. I gave them all pseudonyms so their narratives can be followed throughout the thesis without the risk of exposing their identities.

The goal of this study is to describe the complexity of uncertainty and its effects in the workplace, rather than quantifying and associating different behaviors with demographic groups. The findings of this research are valuable in the sense that they acknowledge and raise questions about different aspects that could be found in any specific organizational context and that would, in that case, need further study. Moreover, many of today’s

corporations have a very diverse workforce which could easily encapsulate the ethnicity, age and background diversity of my interviewees.

2.4. Personal Reflections on Interviewing

In reflecting upon my methodological choices and their implications, I was inspired by Wanda Pillow's (2003) concept of "uncomfortable reflexivity" as a type of reflexivity that "seeks to know while simultaneously situating this knowing as tenuous" (188). In Pillow's view, reflexivity is something that goes beyond the acknowledgement of researcher's subjectivity and the need to establish methodological clarity. It is a process which keeps one mindful throughout the research process and recognizes the messiness of doing qualitative research. The researcher is accountable for the "representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning" (Pillow, 2003: 192). By choosing a subject that focused on the individual narratives around the concept of uncertainty and using interviews as the main method for collecting data, I have been mindful of how the interviews took place and what kind of data they generated, leaving room for the interviewees to lead me into their experiences (Nairn, 2005: 235). At the beginning of the research, when my main goal was to "ground" the abstract concept of uncertainty in empirical material, I positioned myself as an 'apprentice' (Agar, 1980) and listened to my interviewees' individual perspectives. "How would you define uncertainty?" and "can you give me an example from your work?" were the types of questions I would start my interviews with and that led to very different answers, perspectives, bound to personal experience and organizational contexts.

Considering the personal nature of the questions asked, I wanted my interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible. Having rapport established with them before the interviews made it easier for me to pose questions, but it also made me consider how the research process would affect our relationship, something that Carolyn Ellis (2007) calls 'relational ethics'. I wanted this research to happen *with* the research participants rather than *on* them (Hjemdahl, 2011). This was even more important since the interviews often recalled uncomfortable past experiences. At the end of one interview, I asked an interviewee how she felt talking about uncertainty in an interview. Her reply reflects a tension between "talking bad" about her

employer (even after I had mentioned that the data was anonymous) and the necessity of discussing openly about the nature of work today.

It is awkward for me to mention the company's name actually, because there is this loyalty that I don't want to say who am I talking bad about. We, like everybody in the world working in business need to talk about that more because the world is changing and the way we see the world has changed a lot recently, in the last decade, and I don't like how it is so it's good to talk about that. (Elin)

Something that could be considered a weakness for this research is the lack of empirical data collected through alternative sources - such as participant observation or focus groups (Davies, 2008: 106-107) - that could help verify the validity and completeness of existent data. However, taking into consideration the quote above, a focus group or participant observation could have been potentially too exposing for the participants, and could have inhibited them from expressing freely by putting them in a delicate position (Nairn, 2007). Ensuring the full anonymity of my sources and creating a safe space for intimate storytelling was a priority in arranging, conducting and using the interview as a data collection method. Laura Hammershøy & Thomas Ulrik Madsen (2012) from ReD Associates push for an ethical focus on the research process itself rather than the protection of subjects; however, in the case of this research, the protection of subjects was paramount to ensuring a safe context in which data could be collected.

Also, as you will be able to see in the following pages, the individual interviews have proved to be a rich source of data to be explored. More so, when studying the subjective, embodied experience, I considered it to be important to offer interviewees my full attention in order to listen to their experience. We all have our personal projects of identity construction (Frykman, 2003: 10), which require our reflexivity and becoming experts on our own inner worlds. While participant observation or focus groups could point the researcher's attention to incongruences between the lived and the verbalized, it is the way that individuals shape reality with meaning that is the focus of this study.

Another method that was not used for this research is auto-ethnography. It was obvious to me at the beginning of this project that this study is driven by my personal curiosity: my wanting to learn about other people's experience of uncertainty in my own endeavor of understanding and finding ways to deal with uncertainty. However, I decided against describing my own experiences in this thesis since I cannot give myself the same privilege of anonymity as to my informants, and I would risk exposing sensitive information about the organizations I worked for.

2.5. Location, Duration, Medium

Although interviewing was the only method employed for this research, I have made use of it in a versatile way. The interviews ranged from unstructured (which led to the longest interview I did - 5 hours) to structured (written or oral interviews towards the end of the project which took between 20 minutes and one hour) and posting questions on a social media channel. In the face to face interviews, depending on the level of familiarity with the interviewee, I would start by asking them about their background or how they would define uncertainty and let the interview flow from there. In the longest interview for this project, the participant and I did not specifically speak about uncertainty until hours into the interview, however, those hours contained a wealth of descriptions and perspectives about different types of organizational cultures in which the interviewee found himself in along his career. The online and written interviews were conducted in such manner due to distance or lack of time, whereas the social media postings were meant to open an avenue for anyone to contribute and supplement my research material with diverse views. Comments sometimes turned into conversations and I received comments and private messages from 12 individuals, some of them quoted in this thesis. The interviews were all conducted in English, although over half of the interviewees were not native speakers. A majority of the people I spoke with had an international background - born in one country, they worked or settled abroad. The criterion for choosing the interviewees was their connection to the work environment: that they either had worked or were still working for a corporate company.

When I started this research, I did not think that uncertainty would awake so many uncomfortable experiences. When I relistened to the first interviews, I noticed they started

with jokes and laughter and slowly moved onto a more serious tone. A few minutes into the recording, my first interviewees were already talking about insecurities, doom scenarios and stressful situations. While I do not think I influenced the first interviews I conducted, the first personal narratives I listened to and analyzed informed the questions I asked in the more structured interviews later, as well as my choice for theoretical approaches.

For the face to face interviews, I chose the location together with the interviewees. These locations were meant to be both accessible (depending on where my interviewees lived or worked and their time availability), private (so that confidentiality was assured), and appropriate for speaking and recording. The interviews happened away from the participants' workplace: in cafes, the public library and one while walking in a park. It was very important for me that the interview was recorded so I could focus on the conversation rather than on taking notes while the interviewees were talking. All the participants agreed to being recorded, with my promise that I would be the only one to listen to the material for the purpose of transcription.

One type of data that I could have collected during the interview is nonverbal cues. Some authors (e.g. Davies, 2008 & Nairn, 2005) insist on recording data about the contexts, the interactions and the non-verbal language. While I agree that this could have added to the richness of the material collected, it seemed more important to focus on the narrative described by the interviewees and the sense-making conveyed through the telling rather than noting other non-verbal language marks. Also, there was a lot of variation between the empirical contributions I received for this research: from comments on social media, to online video interviews conducted from my home which had the interviewee sitting in front of computer screens in their home, to face to face interviews in public spaces. One stark difference that I noted is between the face to face and the written online medium. In the face to face situation, the interaction is immediate and the environment is shared by the participants while communication takes place by using a range of tonalities, words, expression and context. The online contributions answering the questions I posted were more thought through and were sent from a location I did not have much information about. Also, the contributions I received through public comments were accessible to all the people in my

network rather than just me. After a week of posting the questions, I took down both my posts and the comments, but kept them in my personal archive.

For the purpose of anonymizing my informants and allowing the reader to piece together different accounts throughout the text, I gave the informants pseudonyms. Naming is a very important act which acknowledges people's individuality and identity (Hagström, 2012). Through this I wanted to allow the informants to keep a connection with their quotes throughout the text and make myself accountable and open to criticism for the way I use their words. I also kept some of the quotes longer on purpose, in order to give more context to what they said and to keep some of the emotional nuance of their personal musings.

Both the interviews and the social media contributions abounded with definitions, narratives of what happened in organizational contexts, personal thoughts, emotions and the mental images they conjure up. Uncertainty, just like culture, is everywhere, is ambiguous, and often is unconscious. Even though the focus for interviews was the workplace, the pervasive character of the phenomenon studied took the dialogue into connected areas, such as family stories, climate change, the nature of the economic system or news about Brexit.

2.6. Translating and Transcribing Meaning

All the interviews and data collection for this research project were conducted in English. However, of all the participants, 7 were not-native English speakers. English is also my second language. There were different cultural filters, as some non-native participants translated their thoughts to English and sometimes struggled to find the appropriate words to express what they wanted to say. The reader comes with their own language background and yet, through all the differences and cultures, there is a common thread that traverses through the communications, even though some of the meaning will be 'lost in translation'.

Translation was an essential factor in making this research happen. People from different cultures use English as a common ground for communicating meaning. Yet some elements of what is being said remain untranslatable. The original meanings always remain slightly out of

reach, yet what is left is enough to analyze and create connections in order to bring new understandings (Walter, 1997).

I transcribed the recordings of the face to face and video interviews for a more accurate representation of what was said during the interviews. However, the transcriptions do not include the jokes, the speech breaks, the voice modulations, the chatter about music, relationships or food. The reader of this thesis is presented with a simplified and curated version of what was said, just as I was given the opportunity in a social interview setting to hear a limited translation of what my interviewees think and feel. Nevertheless, the interviews for this project are rich in imagery, examples and personal musings. For this thesis, words, mental images, sensations and emotions are intertwined into a composition that aims to affect the reader on deep, visceral level, that wants to be convincing by “doing something to your gut” (O’Dell & Willim 2014: 797). This thesis is an experiment in researching and writing, crossing boundaries between the academic genre and literary non-fiction, informed and encouraged by my academic environment of the past two years. I am doing this because I want my thesis to be accessible as an exciting, informative and an open-ended reading experience for those both within and outside academia.

While I was not there for the happenings in their lives, there is a quality of witnessing the experience that comes from “being there” (Frykman, 2003) with people as they remember past episodes and make sense of them, dressing them with emotions, impressions, and meaning that might not have been so apparent even if I were to have participated in their experiences. Through interviews, I was shown glimpses of inner worlds, of connections between sensations, thoughts and outside events. As a listener, I became connected to their stories, some of them quite visceral. I experienced the discomfort, the doom, the hope, the resolve, while being grateful that I could collect such intimate accounts for my research. I heard what my interviewees’ managers and colleagues did not hear. The *witnessing* extends to other people’s lives that have been in the same workplace as my interviewees. By asking people to talk about uncertainty, I was revealing invisible, visceral landscapes.

3. Fieldwork: Unfolding Uncertainty

The following chapter presents the data collected for this research project, categorized into three sections describing uncertainty as it is defined, felt and practiced by the interviewees. What transpired through most of the interviews was that uncertainty was something uncomfortable, something that can impact the body in undesired ways. Individuals, companies, jobs, and situations were considered uncertain. Even so, people develop different ways to deal with uncertainty and find a positive meaning.

3.1. What Is Uncertainty?

1. A (sinking) feeling

...the company was so uncertain. It was like being on a big ship, a sort of Titanic, and you didn't know Titanic was going to sink. I could see - this ship is leaking. But I am on the ship and I can't go anywhere else. Of course, you could choose to find a small boat and jump on but... it was very uncertain. (Amy)

Amy was the first person I interviewed. She was laid off as the company she was working for was downsizing. She had moved abroad for this job and the uncertainty started even before the job as she was preparing the legal formalities for changing residence. As I was just starting to explore the meaning of uncertainty, Amy spoke about her last days of work and the dread that thinking about uncertainty can bring:

Whole life is uncertainty, to be honest. Nobody knows about the future. I think it's always there...Society now is very uncertain. People feel it's like the end of the world, it's an apocalypse feeling. (Amy)

Uncertainty appears as an uncontrollable phenomenon. It is something that feels dangerous and is rationalized as not-knowing. Just like water, it transfers from the organizational environment into the inner world, and the impact can feel potentially annihilating.

2. Anxiety

Uncertainty sounds like anxiety to me...It is fear over the unknown. Or an imagined known. (Tom)

After having several jobs within corporations, Tom became a freelancer. He described the anxiety of feeling uncertain as something inescapable, which was easier to handle as a freelancer rather than working for a manager as he had control over his own business decisions.

According to the definition of the American Psychological Association (APA, n.d.), anxiety is “an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure.” Recurring anxiety can turn into a disorder with considerable negative effects for both individuals and the companies they work in. A 2019 World Health Organization white page (WHO, 2019b) estimates that depression and anxiety cost the global economy 1 trillion USD in lost productivity. Among the factors leading to depression and anxiety, WHO indicates inadequate communication and management practices, reduced participation in decision-making, lack of support for employees; and unclear tasks or organizational objectives.

The notion of ‘anxiety’ came up in several interviews, sometimes used interchangeably with ‘uncertainty’. Amy describes it as well:

If you go into the uncertainty, you go into the anxiety. Because you have to worry about every day. Every night you can't sleep. (Amy)

The fear associated with anxiety travels between individuals and organizational bodies: “Anxiety is sticky”, writes Sarah Ahmed (2010, 36), “rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near.” Another interviewee describes how her manager’s stressful life impacted her because “his stress was rubbing off to me” (Maria).

3. Not knowing

Elin works as a contractor for a multinational company. When I asked what uncertainty in the workplace means to her, she answered:

You mean like not knowing if you will have a job like two weeks from now? You don't know what happens to you personally. You don't know contract wise. If I get a contract the next month, will I still work in the same place as I do now? Will I still work with the same people, will I still work for the same project? Or will I end up in another project because mine gets closed down. Basically everything. (Elin)

Behind the anxiety about the future, there is the discomfort of not knowing what will happen and a lack of control over how work will take place. This discomfort can be related to changes in work conditions, market or management, as well as the condition of not having a job. Olof describes some of these situations:

When you don't have a job and are job searching you experience an uncertainty to whether you will be called on that interview, will you be taken further in the employment process and finally hopefully chosen and offered a job (...) Uncertainty at the workplace could be in regards to a general fluctuation of the economy and an incoming recession. It could also be more specific such as it is targeting a certain sector, region or company. If the coal mines are closing down and you work as a coal miner you would feel an uncertainty. (Olof)

4. Facing a choice

If I take in an everyday situation, uncertainty would be having a lot of options...Uncertainty means that there is a decision that needs to be made. (Maria)

Maria described her previous work as being highly stressful. In charge of creating a new department within an existing organization, she tells how her every day was to “put out fires” by handling organizational changes and creating new processes. Her uncertainty was handled by deciding between different courses of action. One of the situations of high uncertainty she

described was the conflicting state when she had decided to quit her job, only to find out that her father was laid off and her family's welfare depended on her having an income.

...he [the boss] said some horrible things to me. I stormed out and, in that moment, I was certain that I was just gonna fucking walk out of this building. Then I got the call from my father that he had been laid off. We knew this was coming. It came around November before the holidays. In that moment, me and my siblings became the sole bread winners of our family. All of a sudden, my certain decision to walk out that door, became uncertain because I had to choose between my pride as a person being treated like shit and the welfare of my family. It became such an uncertain situation for me, and I had the option of walking out or not and I didn't know how to make that decision.
(Maria)

Towards the end of the interview, Maria reflected that uncertainty can be also positive, depending on the options available at that moment:

I think there is positive uncertainty because it's all dependent on the options that are available: You may have to choose between a million dollars and a vacation. Now you have an uncertain situation but it's really a wonderful outcome. (Maria)

5. Insecurity

Uncertainty is the opposite of being sure of yourself. I've been most uncertain when I've known that my level of competence on any subject was inadequate...Uncertainty is not just being able to say I'm not sure about this without being somehow emotionally upset by it. (Henry)

Over his many years of work experience, Henry changed careers from accountancy to psychotherapy. When he speaks of uncertainty, he gives examples from his accountancy years, a career he did not feel particularly suited for. In his case, the locus of uncertainty resides inside the individual rather than an external circumstance, representing a "deep down feeling" (Henry) connected with emotional discomfort. There is a disconnect that happens

between the individual and the environment when one's work is criticized, linking the other's disapproval with one's own sense of security:

I think getting feedback from other people that they didn't like what I've done was also not good for my sense of insecurity, uncertainty. (Henry)

When working within an organization, feedback is critical. Henry considered the perception of other people to be very important for his own sense of security and competence within the organization. As an accountant, he felt that work was judged according to "numbers" and he much preferred the continuous flow of feedback he received from peers and clients in therapy:

Because it's a two-way thing that you're constantly getting affirmations about your degree of competence and you're also getting a lot of support from other people and it's not so much a black and white thing. Therapy it's a sort of living thing really, it's something that it's constantly evolving and you're constantly learning, and you can constantly adapt. (Henry)

Uncertainty can come in the shape of criticism. The control over one's own perception of competence is assigned to the "judging" others. On the other side, the approval of others can also reduce insecurity and make uncertainty "much easier to handle" (Henry). The confirmation from others supports one's work efforts and affirms the ability to have a positive impact and grow professionally. Henry refers to therapy as a "living thing" which allows growth to happen.

6. Lack of organizational vision

One of the most common aspects expressed in the interviews and that links with the risk factors for mental health within companies listed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) is an unclear organizational vision that translates into confusion regarding the future of the organization and one's own role within it. The expectation is placed on the senior management to formulate a vision for the company.

The following excerpts are selected from social media comments of employees in management positions who describe uncertainty in the context of organizational change and explain the effects at an organizational level:

Here are my thoughts on how to define uncertainty: *having no clear direction or vision for future work* [emphasis added]. To give more background, my team was reduced in 2018. Two individuals resigned as a result of two others having their positions eliminated. That alone, in the span of two months created a great deal of uncertainty. What followed was me being a remote member of a disjointed team. I work at an office states away from other team members. After we lost most of my immediate team, there was no gathering of the minds to say, "this is what our new reality is", or our focus to know how to move forward with less people to do the same job. Lack of vision and mission. (Emma)

I have felt uncertain when changes were being made by those higher in management than I was. Lack of clarity led to not knowing what the expectations were for me. (Sara)

Below, Tom, a small business owner, reflects on the “uncertainty of purpose” that he experienced while working for corporate managers compared to being self-employed:

When I'm the boss, I have flaws but I trust myself. So that's one variable taken care of. That's an uncertainty, right? Because I know what my purposes are, what my reasoning is. Because I have me as my boss. But another boss, that's a different thing. If a boss says 'stop what you're doing and do this', I must do it. That's my job...It's like being the captain on a ship, the guys who are the hands on the ship must follow what the captain says. Otherwise it doesn't work...It's the uncertainty that the person that's giving me instructions knows what the hell they're talking about. (Tom)

7. An inescapable fact

There's no certainty. There's no certainty you're gonna wake up tomorrow, there's no certainty you're gonna have a job tomorrow, no certainty you're

gonna have the same health etc. So, you just have to live with the fact that there's gonna be uncertainty and be prepared for that, be able to roll with it and be prepared for lots of different possibilities that may come. But if you have your heart set that it must be a certain way, a certain company, doing the same job, and then things change, that brings a lot of stress. (Mark)

Mark is a senior executive in a tech company. He describes uncertainty as something pervading all areas of life. The discomfort comes not from the uncertainty itself, but rather from being resistant to change:

I think the people that are more successful are the people that bask in uncertainty. And they're: 'ok, what's the best I can make of this situation?' which can be you be being fired. Because that opens up doors to other things that you wouldn't otherwise have done because you're simply just happy with what you're doing. (Mark)

3.2. Uncertainty as a Feeling

During the interviews for this project, speaking about feelings would naturally come up even if I did not prompt for them. From the previous definitions, one can already notice a variety of emotions and attitudes around uncertainty. Whether it is something that we can comfortably 'bask in' or apocalypse announcing, thinking about uncertainty often provokes emotional reactions.

Uncertainty Within and Without

While planning her future, Claudia has been waiting for months for her resident visa to be approved. She does not know yet if she will be able to stay in the country where she currently resides and where she wants to find new employment:

I hate uncertainty because even if I have different contingency solutions, sometimes I cannot take actions beforehand until it gets to a point of time when I have a clearer picture of what stage things are at. Due to that, it delays actions and prevents me from being efficient or making progress. (Claudia)

Even though we sense uncertainty within our bodies, the cause is often traced outside, in an environment that feels hostile. We cannot predict how we are evaluated in our work, how the market will affect the company we work in, what corporate management or government bodies will decide and how that decision will affect us. This hostility can cause the individual to feel separated by its surrounding and implicitly, from one's work:

And that deep down feeling that I wasn't good at it caused me a lot of uncertainty, particularly with accountancy where whatever you do your work appears on the paper as a lot of figures that the rest of the world can look at and check out and tell you whether you're right or wrong or what they think of you. (Henry)

The Suffering

Uncertainty feels like uneasiness in the heart. When I'm uncertain, I start to feel uneasy and I feel like I'm in an earthquake, like my ground is shaking and there's no security. Although I still have a house, shelter, food and money, I just feel completely lost in my body. Like I'm not here. (Amy)

Suffering is a quality of our existence that shifts our focus from what is happening in the world around us to the affected body (Čargonja,2013:35). While in the first part we described uncertainty as something connected to what occurs outside the body, talking about how uncertainty feels redirects our attention to what occurs in our inner, imagined world, experienced on a mental, emotional and physical levels.

That feeling you get deep in your gut. A foggy brain. Feelings of inadequacy. Irritation often at smaller, less important issues. Needing to put on a brave front for employees I was managing (and hoping they didn't see through that facade). (Sara)

Today's workplace requires employees to utilize a complex set of emotional, social and meta-cognitive skills (Väänänen & Varje, 2019). The contradictory states one may experience at work such as the one described above can be considered an expression of cultural boundaries in which fear and confusion are seen as inadequate and "a brave front" (Sara) is what is

projected otherwise. The conflict between what one feels and what one perceives as duty to others is resolved by creating an interface to contain emotion and uphold social appearances.

It feels like anxiety; it feels like a certain level of fear...It's not a feeling that suddenly comes and goes away. It can be quite a long-lasting feeling. It's something that, if you know you've done something that you're not sure of your competence, the uncertainty stays with you. (Henry)

Uncertainty makes its presence known on a physical and cognitive level. It can be difficult to acknowledge the visceral sensations (e. g. “that gut feeling”) mixed up with recognizable emotions (e.g. fear or irritation) and thoughts (e. g. doing something “bad” or acknowledging the need to hide one’s feelings). The intensity of the discomfort can become overwhelming and can turn into physical suffering:

I was afflicted by it [uncertainty]. My body was reacting to it. My hair was falling out, I couldn't sleep. I had to sleep with an elevated pillow behind my back because of the acid coming up from all the stress. I had a horrible immune system and I still had to go to work. (Maria)

Work Is Mechanical...

I was using myself, always *working, working, working* [emphasis added].
(Amy)

Work can feel dehumanizing. A mechanical device rather than a person is able to be “working, working, working”. The ‘device’ only receives attention when it is broken.

... you're just this *number* [emphasis added] that might be kicked out or not.
You're not a person. It feels like that. (Elin)

Mechanical work feels impersonal – it is void of variation, feelings or tiredness.

...and Work Is Alive

In contrast, work can make us feel alive. Living bodies are moving, interacting, responding. They feel, they react, they are relating to the world around them.

Work can be a competition:

In innovation you have to keep on your toes. If you don't catch up, you're out. (Matt)

It can also be something alive in itself:

Therapy is a sort of living thing really, it's something that is constantly evolving and you're constantly learning, and you can constantly adapt. (Henry)

3.3. Dealing with Uncertainty

Uncertainty is observed in relation to change. While this research is based on interviews only, the interviewees talk a lot about action: happenings from outside that affected them and them figuring out how to deal with the discomfort of uncertainty in different ways.

These practices refer not only to what is happening, but what did not happen or what could happen. I grouped them into three categories: disconnection, preparedness and refocusing. These three types of practices merge action with inaction, and mental processes with concrete movements.

1. Disconnection

This happened last Monday, and I realized that by the middle of the week I saw crying colleagues that were fired, I was told that my project might die, that I might be transferred to another project. That leads to frustration and I'm not as motivated. And I'm not as loyal as I used to be...

Interviewer: How do you think that things could be made better?

Partly I would say that individuals could make better with better communication. I know that bosses cannot communicate about the facts but

they could just say, I know you want to know or I know you experience uncertainty for a couple of weeks now, I just tell you here that I know of it, I'm sorry and we will let you know in whatever weeks. Like keeping the communication alive. I feel that my manager does not communicate at all but that's an overall problem in the office. (Elin)

Elin's description exposes a dramatic moment from work life, characterized by change, emotion and a great deal of difficulty. Managers fire, employees respond in grief and all that affects Elin who feels her loyalty to the company decreasing. The result is a distancing between bosses and subordinates which, Elin says, could have been bridged by an honest acknowledgement on behalf of the managers that they can see what the others are going through.

When uncertainty is interpreted as something coming from outside, the separation can happen between the individual and their environment:

I stop meeting people. When you have anxiety or uncertainty, you shouldn't meet people, you should just trust yourself. (Amy)

2. Preparedness

Thinking of a plan of action: ok, I'll do this, and if this doesn't work in three months, this is what I'll try...having a backup plan or you know, deciding I want to try something else and if it doesn't work, I have plan b and c to fall back on... I'm willing to invest this much time and energy up until this point. If it works great, we go forward, if it doesn't, we go sideways, try something else. (Paula)

When I interviewed Paula, she was starting at a new workplace, in a new country and a new industry. The way she navigated the unknowing was designing clear directions that she could take and defining options that she could choose from in case the choice she already made with the new job proved unsatisfying.

A different way of taking control recounted by one of the participants is to mentally accept the worst imagined scenario:

I did feel a lot of anxiety maybe 6-8 y ago when I was feeling very uneasy of my job security and what to do. So, I did speak a bit with my dad about it and he told me to do as the samurai who by accepting death before combat become fearless on the battlefield...But in more normal terms I laid out worst-case scenario and figured out what to do if that happened. Afterwards I felt a lot calmer and stopped thinking about it much in general. So basically, by accepting the worst-case scenario I became a lot less anxious and worried.
(Axel)

3. Refocusing

Uncertainty is made more bearable when one is shifting their attention from the inner suffering to something more positive. Focus is redirected from the unpredictable future to the safe, manageable present:

As soon as I got fired, I just started building my road. I started to look for the light and I started to have the lamp on my road and oh, it's more exciting.... live day by day, one hour by another. I don't look at the future, I don't look back at the past and I look only now, today, and I try to maximize today every day...When I feel uncertain, I always have to do things one by one.
(Amy)

Another type of refocusing is to escape an overwhelming workplace into a space where one reassumes control over one's own movement. While she was working long hours and dealing with a lot of crisis situations, Maria would find balance by going to the gym often, where she felt she had "100% of control in my life" (Maria):

I was constantly working, and I was looking for an escape from my current situation. The only constant was the gym because I had control of everything.
(Maria)

Henry spoke about a different change of focus. The feeling of uncertainty can be overpowered by the feeling that one's work has value and is appreciated:

I think if you have a feeling of competence and if you have a feeling that what you're doing is worthwhile and you have a feeling that other people value you then all that is very good for uncertainty. (Henry)

3.4. A Learning Opportunity

Uncertainty is both anxiety and an opportunity for learning and growth. It is something we feel and something we conceptualize. It is something outside and inside of us. It disappears when we take a decision, or it follows us all the time.

One thing that came up in most of the interviews is the preoccupation with what we do not know and how that could affect us. It stirs our imagination to create possible futures even though we do not know what will happen. Fear is not only about what happens now, in reality, but about what could happen. It prompts us to mentally prepare and plan for scenarios.

The work context in which we tend to become aware of uncertainty is that of organizational change. New leadership brings confusion as to how the company or the department will be run. Reshaping existing structures requires the individuals to re-adjust to the new organizational reality and to question their position within it. The lack of a new vision leaves employees confused and disconnected from their work.

Uncertainty can be used as driving force to mobilize organizational bodies and direct employees towards a collective vision. Below is an excerpt from an interview with Peter, the president of a business that was recently acquired by a larger company. Peter describes the role that uncertainty had in developing his business and how a lack of certainty can in fact be damaging:

The company that I started, there was a lot of uncertainty around it. There's always existential uncertainty when you're a smaller company and you really

have to win a deal in order to be successful. There's also the uncertainty of how to position yourself in the market so you need to be agile. It also breeds a whole bunch of people who were trying to fill the uncertainty with their own part of the vision and they made a bigger vision, which I think of in terms of positive uncertainty.

In some ways, the new company that we have right now is almost not having enough uncertainty because it's so big and moving like a big warship as opposed to the little tech boat that we were before. There's so much certainty that it's almost comfortable and I like uncertainty in order to make people somewhat uncomfortable so that they ask the right questions and figure out what to do for the customer. The people on the certainty side right now they're all sitting there saying "I can tell the customers what they should want" whereas our company was always about "I need to figure out what they need, I need to solve their problem. I don't need to sell them a product, I need to solve their problem, because otherwise I won't have a job". So that was a more positive uncertainty.

While some types of uncertainty can make people feel anxious and powerless regarding their own circumstances, the uncertainty mentioned by Peter makes it uncomfortable enough for employees to be more connected to the fluctuations of the market, understand the clients they are trying to serve and become part of shaping the company vision.

Uncertainty has a multiplicity of aspects, sometimes contradictory, often interconnected. It is something that both organizations and individuals working within organizations experience, a potentially dangerous unknown that our bodies can sense, and our minds want to foresee. In the following chapter, I will analyze the metaphors used by interviewees in order to understand the connection between how uncertainty is conceptualized and embodied.

5. Discussion: Uncertainty and the Body

5.1. Metaphor, Body, Culture

Metaphors used to be something associated with artistic endeavors. However, more recent studies of metaphor show that we use metaphors more than we realize in our everyday linguistic register (Lakoff, 2008). A capital book regarding the understanding of metaphors as a cultural phenomenon is *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), in which cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write about the relevance of metaphors in understanding how language reflects the way we perceive reality. Studying metaphors, the authors say, help us understand the “metaphorical nature of the concepts that structure our everyday activities” (1980: 7). For example, in a very simplified explanation, the authors discuss the metaphor “time is money” that changes the way we relate to time by associating it with money. We think of time as a limited resource and a valuable commodity: this can be observed in expressions like “wasting time” or “having enough time” (1980: 7-9).

There is a growing interest in the multidisciplinary models for the study of metaphors (Gibbs, 2008) which combine cognition, communication and cultural perspectives. Although still controversial, one of the directions of research is how the bodily experience provides a base for understanding metaphor use. The focus is a “conceptual metaphor” (Gibbs, 2008:5) rather than a purely linguistic one, in which its purpose is to help us understand concepts by relating them to others.

Metaphors are helpful in making sense of abstract concepts like time, love, or, in our case, uncertainty. They blend two concepts, establishing a correspondence between a target domain that is being explained and a source domain that describes the first concept. In the case of “time is money”, the target domain is “time” and the source domain is “money” (Lakoff, 1980). In order for a metaphor to function, the two concepts need to have a certain level of compatibility, so their meanings do not inhibit each other. How two concepts fit together depends on the context in which they are used (Lakoff, 2008: 24). For example, “time is a leaf” is a less productive metaphor than “time is money”, since we do not have that many associations between time and leaves.

Experimental research regarding the neural technology of language (NTL) demonstrate that when we use metaphors, our brain computes both concepts at the same time, rather than consecutively, by forming a neural circuit. This is crucial to understand considering that our brain “simulates” experiences that we imagine, in the same way as if they actually happened:

Suppose you imagine, remember, or dream of performing certain movements. Many of the same neurons are firing as when you actually perform that movement. And suppose you imagine, remember, or dream of seeing or hearing something. Many of the same neurons are firing as when you actually see or hear that thing. (Lakoff, 2008: 18-19).

Following this rationale, imagining one is on a sinking ship is interpreted by the brain in a similar way as if the individual is actually experiencing it. This makes the metaphors that we use to describe work and uncertainty important in order to understand the effects they have on our bodies.

There is a strong link between cultural contexts and bodily experiences in the use of metaphors (Yu, 2008). However, bodies are our “lingua franca” (Čargonja, 2013: 45) and we will discuss some bodily experiences that are common across cultures. Using these, we will piece together some of the metaphoric associations encountered in several of the interviews. The focus is the concept behind the word, rather than the (native and non-native) linguistic delivery of the concept.

Uncertainty as Darkness

The ambiguity and confusion often mentioned in interviews as describing uncertainty are matched in metaphors around darkness. “Shadow”, “night” or the inability to see when the perception of uncertainty occurs are contrasted with the desirable “light”.

Being in the dark is a primal experience. Even before birth, humans experience the contrast between light and dark, and our vision keeps developing after birth, gaining more clarity (Koch, 2009). After our vision improves, before we gain self-awareness, we soon take for granted our ability to see things around us. We recognize objects, people, places of interests

and we can move throughout the world based on what we see. The situation shifts when our vision is obstructed. Darkness in a room, no matter how familiar, will make us move with caution. When driving through fog, we slow down. We squint our eyes so we can see better the objects hiding in shadow. We naturally experience hesitation and possibly fear. If we try to move at our normal pace through the dark, we hesitate, knowing that objects we cannot see can trip us. Suddenly we become aware that our clear sight is limited.

Conceptualizing uncertainty in relation to the embodied experience of the dark makes it something that prevents speed and encourages caution towards what we do not know or do not recognize as familiar. It brings the focus to what we do not see or imagine could be there. Not seeing through the darkness means not knowing what is there and that slows us down or even stops our movement. When seeing is what feels comfortable, darkness makes the familiar unfamiliar and causes us to question our surroundings and our sense of safety.

The Company as a Ship

The image of the company as a ship appeared from the first interview taken for this study, in which Amy compared the corporation she was working for with a sinking Titanic. Other interviews compared corporations to a “huge tanker ship” (Tom) or a “warship” (Peter), emphasizing its magnitude, its purpose and capacity to carry a lot of goods and people across long distances. This was in comparison to freelancers and small businesses which were compared to “jet skis” (Tom) and “little tech boats” (Peter). Apart from the obvious size and utility difference, the main difference between a small boat and a tanker ship is its ability to change direction. Once the decision is made to re-orientate, changing direction gets more difficult as the ship is larger.

Thinking of a corporation as a ship predicates the following:

- A company represents a large group of individuals moving towards the same destination.
- The company holds everyone together, navigating through the same landscape.
- The leaders are the ones that are responsible for the direction of the ship, the other members of the crew are working together to achieve it.

- If the company is in danger, everyone feels that danger.
- The company navigates through an everchanging landscape. The unpredictable currents, storms or icebergs can be economic and market fluctuations, mergers or shutdowns.

Finally, comparing a company to a ship implies that there is a navigation system which the high-ranking officers use to direct the course of the ship. They have both the skills and the responsibility to give people on the ship the “vision” to lead them towards the future destination.

5.2. Life and Work as Movement

Lakoff (2018: 25) describes complex metaphors as being composed from several simple metaphors. Thinking of human life in terms of “journey” depicts individuals as being always in motion against a background that is always changing. It also acknowledges that sometimes the traveler advances and will change direction when given the choice or when they will encounter an unsuitable route. A journey takes one on different paths and requires opening different “doors”, all of which open up different possibilities. The destination is somewhere in the future, and often times it is unknown.

Whether people talk about work, uncertainty or life in general, there is a constant reference to a body that is moving and following a direction, whether that is chosen by the individual (as a pathfinder) or for the individual (as it is when you are part of the crew on a ship). In early years, we are taught to follow directions given by teachers and parents. We later follow directions when we drive, hike, or walk around cities. We are told that the path to success is up the corporate ladder. The natural direction for growth seems to be up and forward.

In this context, uncertainty acts as a guiding reference. Depending on how individuals perceive uncertainty, the movement is towards or away from it. When uncertainty is associated with a potential threat that causes fear and anxiety, we naturally want to avoid it. In that case, uncertainty is something we want to minimize and that means orientating ourselves towards elements that can help us get rid of it. In contrast, if we see uncertainty as

something good, an unknown that brings new possibilities rather than threats, it is something we want to move towards. When Mark says “I think the people that are more successful are the people that bask in uncertainty” he associates the ideal of a good life with becoming comfortable with experiencing uncertainty.

The degree to which people move towards or against uncertainty can vary. Sometimes it takes a while until people decide to move (e.g. Henry moving from a career in accountancy that made him feel insecure to the more satisfying career as a therapist). In the meanwhile, individuals experience the contrast of wanting to move away and not moving. “Of course, you could choose to find a small boat and jump on but... it was very uncertain”, says Amy, referring to her work situation before being made redundant. Others, somewhere in between, accept uncertainty as something they would rather not experience, but choose to stay with it: “in regard to work tasks and such, well I have to accept and endure, the problems won’t disappear” (Olof).

Having emotions and sensations towards objects is one of the ways that our bodies move around objects. “Depending on which way one turns”, writes Sara Ahmed (2006: 15), “different worlds might come into view”. One thing that organizations could learn from all this is to consider in what way their employees are orientating themselves around different aspects of work within the organization. Is theirs a work environment that encourages closeness or distance? Possibility or threat? Adaptation or rigidity? In the next section, we will take a closer look at the role of potential in dealing with uncertainty.

5.3. Potentiality

Uncertainty appears in situations in which everything seems possible and yet nothing has happened yet. Interviewees talk about a state of “hanging between things” (Elin) or “wondering what if all the time” (Claudia) suggesting a state of in-betweenness, of waiting for something to happen. In fact, the word “if” to describe a hypothetical situation appeared 108 times in my transcripts.

This state of being in a liminal state brings an idea of threat, of something dangerous that could happen. Coping with work uncertainty means that one might invoke scenarios in which things go wrong and consider failure. Brian Massumi writes about the “impending reality” of a threat: a felt threat is a real threat. “Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future” (2010: 54). This “threat-quality” is present in most interviews, in one way or another. Amy’s crushing feeling of doom, Claudia not knowing about what will happen regarding her visa, Mark’s idea that one could die tomorrow, Henry’s fear of being judged or Maria’s body being “afflicted” by uncertainty. The danger that resides in the metaphorical darkness is expressed through thoughts, emotions and coping practices.

The potentiality of uncertainty comes from the discomfort of not knowing what will happen on an individual and organizational level: What is next? What are others doing? What direction to follow? In order to navigate through this “unknowing” people imagine how the future might unfold and prepare for eventual scenarios. The scenarios envisaged are negative more often than not – one needs to prepare for what is scary. People imagine futures of unemployment, of sickness, of not liking their jobs, of not getting visas, of not being able to support their families. Decisions are sometimes taken in order to avoid a certain scenario, rather than to achieve a goal.

Underlying the perceived possibility of threat is often a lack of trust: trust in one’s own ability to navigate uncertainty or trust in others. What we do not know could potentially take us by surprise and have a negative impact. Searching for security makes us open savings accounts, learn new skills or change jobs. Emily Martin (1994) talks about the need for security as one of the basic human needs. We may search for safety by moving away from a perceived threat (although not necessarily actual danger), in order to create distance. Reality is not the only thing that affects people’s decision-making and morale. It is all the ‘imagined futures’ as well.

5.4. Embracing Confusion

What happens when we end up somewhere that we did not plan? When the unpredictable happens? Depending on where we are, we might feel confused, scared or even despairing. In that moment, depending on the navigation tools and skills we have, is when we consider our options and where we are heading next.

Being lost feels uncomfortable. Yet in those moments of being lost new directions are discovered. It is part of a narrative of “redemption” in which people can make sense of emotionally negative life events by seeing the good outcome that comes from it (McAdams & Bowman, 2001: 28). Beyond the turmoil of being fired lies the choosing of a new direction. Rather than a specific destination, there is a guiding ‘light’, a sense of revelation, of taking back control of one’s personal movements.

Working within a company requires an alignment between individuals towards the company’s growth. Sarah Ahmed (2006) talks about the importance of “being in line” with others as a measure of feeling orientated. Having the same direction as others defines being part of the same community or, in our case, work environment:

We might speak then of collective direction: of ways in which nations or other imagined communities might be “going in a certain direction” or facing the same way, such that only some things get our attention. Becoming a member of such a community, then, might also mean following this direction, which could be described as the political requirement that we turn some ways and not others. We follow the lines that is followed by others: the repetition of the act of following makes the line disappear from view as the point from which “we” emerge. (Ahmed, 2006: 15)

A different model is proposed by Eitan Wilf (2015) in the form of jazz improvisation, where alignment is a dynamic process, embracing disruption and encouraging errors as part of the learning process. According to Wilf, the way in which uncertainty has been interpreted in organizations changed from a mechanical perspective which dismissed uncertainty as negative to embracing it as growth potential. When organizational sciences first developed in

the 1940s, the definition of the organization was influenced by the engineering vision of a “well-oiled machine” (Wilf, 2015: 31), in which the different parts had a specific role and needed to synchronize in order to achieve goals. This view of organizations was seen as the peak of “scientific management” that was meant to eliminate uncertainty by rational procedures.

The difference between the mechanical model of the organization and the informal reality inspired industrial psychologists to come with a new definition for organizations. Focusing on the individual feelings and group solidarity, this definition brought more attention to the need for exercising empathic leadership to affect employees in being more engaged with their work. Uncertainty was explained by the human motivational complexity which was meant to be resolved by managers. The definition that incorporated uncertainty not as something undesirable but as something that has productive potential was influenced by the development of cybernetics after the Second World War, when uncertainty was associated with complexity, as a necessary feature of a flexible system which could adapt to a fast-changing environment. The mechanical model worked for achieving simple tasks, however it was too rigid when it came to shifts in the environment, whereas a more complex system’s uncertainty meant it was also more reactive to new contexts and was able to adapt to change. Thinking shifted from eliminating uncertainty to looking at its advantages. Human behaviors, previously associated with uncertainty, were also the source for a great diversity of responses, a strong capacity to relate to new information and capability of creative responses in new situations. The concern then became designing systems that are able to support “the human element” (Wilf, 2015).

Jazz as an organizational model uses minimal structures that offer flexibility to the members of the band and make use of ambiguity rather than hiding it. In a company, this system supports communication between its members and gives them the ability to synchronize as a team, and not as a hierarchical structure with multiple leadership points. These new structures not only incorporate uncertainty, but also produce uncertainty which Wilf argues is essential for fast-paced industries, such as the tech industry, in which one needs to keep up with the changing market and develop products that could be “the next big thing” (2015: 36).

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore how uncertainty is experienced on an intimate level by individuals who have either worked or are still working within corporations. We began by describing how uncertainty has been previously conceptualized from a cultural point of view. As anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992) says, certainty does not exist and realizing that is a positive thing. The emergence of uncertainty has exposed the complexity of the world, shifting social structures and a work environment that is constantly changing.

Through a series of personal narratives collected through interviews, we looked at how the abstract concept of uncertainty manifests on an individual level through physical sensations, emotions and thoughts and on an organizational level through a perceived lack of vision and organizational change. The embodiment of uncertainty is also reflected in the metaphors people use to describe their experience, which picture uncertainty as darkness, companies as ships navigating an ever-changing sea, and work as something mechanical or alive.

The way we interpret uncertainty affects how we move around it. We can understand it as the threatening unknown which can create a sense of suffering around work and a search for a more supportive environment. Or we can understand it as a ground for possibilities which can lead to learning, opportunity, growth and wellbeing. Individuals move between the two in a search for personal direction. The world in which they move consists of not only what is actually happening but, poignantly, imagined scenarios of how the future could unfold.

The language used by interviewees when talking about uncertainty reveals metaphors related to body movement and navigation. Picturing the movement on the sea from basking in quiet waters to feeling lost on a ship that sinks, the sea as a metaphor for the world at large appears as a fluid medium, difficult to grasp, where being prepared for the unexpected can save one's life. Navigation skills are paramount to keeping a good direction and facing the unknown. When moving on the uncertain sea, the company-ship in which one navigates is the vehicle that keeps one safe from the unpredictable sea while moving towards the destination, or it can make one feel trapped. In the same way, our physical body is a vehicle for sensations,

emotions and thoughts around work, some easier to acknowledge and communicate than others. A supportive work environment needs to accommodate not only the “work, work, work” individual, but also the emotional, vulnerable human who gets tired, anxious or irritated, as well as the potential that uncertainty creates.

What Can Organizations Do About It?

“Do companies really care about people?”, I was asked while doing this research. While I did not have a straight answer, it led me to more questions. How do companies show that they care for their people? Does investing in the “human resources” component of a business count as caring or is it just to drive profit up? The business environment also carries a stigma that it is profit oriented rather than human oriented, and mass-media is full of news examples to support that. For example, H&M’s workers’ rights violation (Guilbert, 2018) or Amazon’s harsh work conditions (Dzieza, 2019) picture corporations as greedy for profit and ignoring the dignity of their workers. For companies to create a socially sustainable organizational culture, it is imperative for their senior management to acknowledge the impact they have in their employees’ lives and create conversation spaces in which the wellbeing of all employees is discussed.

Wellbeing is often something assigned to individuals to do in their free time, in order to improve their performance at work. If companies recognize that they can influence employees’ health while people are in the workplace, they could engage employees to find creative and cost-effective solutions in order for the employees to be more productive, less stressed and more committed to their work. Such cost-effective measures could be creating spaces in the office where employees could have short, restful breaks, short meditations or yoga sessions.

Work today has become more intensive and it requires more emotional and behavioral skills (Väänänen & Varje, 2019). While people are more open to talking about emotional health, the competitive work market makes it more difficult to acknowledge and express what could be considered a deterrent from productivity, such as anxiety or burnout.

Recommendations

1. Ask employees about uncertainty

In a study on how French companies of over 1000 employees are assessing work-related stress, management researchers Florence Allard-Poesi and Sandrine Hollet-Haudebert (2019) found that the questionnaire addressed to the employees included questions about individual wellbeing, however failed to capture the perception around organizational change. In order to address uncertainty and the stress associated with it, organizational leaders must first understand the extent to which their employees are affected by it. This can be determined in different ways: through surveys, in house qualitative research or informal conversations. Organizational uncertainty can be directly addressed by asking the employees to express their views on the organizational strategy, management, work processes as well as the employees' confidence in the future of the organization and opportunities for growth within and outside the company (Allard-Poesi & Sandrine Hollet-Haudebert, 2019).

2. Have informal meetings

Among the directions suggested by sociologist Marc Lorient (2019) for dealing with stress and suffering in the workplace is that "informal meetings and discussions about work should not be considered a waste of time" (2019: 210). As Lorient argues, these conversations can be used on a daily basis in order to improve communication among employees, resolve small conflicts before they escalate and become a considerable stress source, and learn about better ways in which to cope with one's job. As uncertainty is concerned, these conversations can become a forum for anxiety to be dispelled, potential scenarios to be checked against reality and create more understanding and appreciation regarding one's role in the workplace. Informal meetings can create new avenues for communication and allow employees to engage in different ways in the life of the organization, with the aim of creating a more cohesive workplace.

3. Allow employees to get comfortable with "troubled waters"

Lorient (2019) also recommends addressing work conflicts as an expression of poor cooperation and divergent interests of stakeholders within the organization. Ignoring these conflicts, Lorient warns, will turn them into perceived personal failings and generate more stress, professional

disagreement and even harassment. This is reminiscent of the insecurity described in interviews regarding work evaluations and professional criticism. In her research about leadership, social work researcher and popular TED speaker Brené Brown discusses how avoiding having difficult conversations at work (motivated by the cultural norm of being “nice and polite”) affects trust and engagement within the organization, encourages problematic behavior, creates confusion and decreases performance (Brown, 2018).

4. Define a shared direction

By supporting informal meetings and difficult conversations to take place in organizations, communication with different stakeholders can be improved and new insights into how work challenges can be dealt with will emerge. New narratives can be used to define clear direction into the uncertain future that the employees can relate to and follow. As Loriol (2019) remarks, suffering at work does not need to be polarized as either being the fault of the individual or the organization; instead, it needs to be considered as:

the product of a negotiated set of understandings and processes that are linked in complex ways with our own sense of self and how that self is located in a contingent organizational, social and cultural context. (Loriol, 2019:211)

It is important to keep in mind that organizational culture takes time to change and is gradual. Organizational psychologist Edgar Schein, who has worked as a researcher for international companies like General Foods and BP, says that it can take years until the organizational culture changes are visible (Coutu, 2002:105-106). The need for change, explains Schein, can be interpreted as a failure in their leadership and lead to a defensive attitude, especially regarding executives. However, leaders becoming learners can set an example conducive to a safe environment for learning by diminishing the anxiety that comes with change.

The Emotional Individual

In her book *Flexible Bodies*, Emily Martin (Martin, 1994: 207-209) talks about “learning organizations” which can keep their flexibility so as to adapt to and create change. These flexible organizations require flexible workers. After analyzing business training literature and attending corporate trainings at a multinational corporation, Martin explores the bodily experiences that people go through. Looking at the risk training that people are exposed to (the researcher specifically talks about attending rope training), Martin ponders on the companies training their employees to become comfortable with fear and challenge:

The experience models physically the nature of the new workers that corporations desire: individual men and women able to risk the unknown and tolerate fear, willing to explore unknown territories, but simultaneously able to accept their dependence on the help and support of their coworkers. In a word, flexibility. (Martin, 1994: 214)

Martin warns though that beyond flexibility, we need to think about the “common human need for stability, security, and stasis” (1994: 294) Feeling appreciated for one’s work and having the ability to both learn and affect the work environment can provide one the needed recognition and stability to face the ambiguity and discomfort brought upon by uncertainty and see the opportunities that can come with it.

Harvard Business Review start the description of their book series on Emotional Intelligence thusly:

How to be human at work. HBR's Emotional Intelligence Series features smart, essential reading on the human side of professional life from the pages of "Harvard Business Review". (Harvard Business Review, 2019)

The description above predicates that in order for business leaders to be “human” in their workplace, they need to learn about emotional intelligence. The concept of emotional intelligence was developed in the 20th century, after a long history of being considered an inferior part of human nature (Sengupta, 2008). However, it gained immense popularity after 1995, when science journalist Daniel Goleman published his book *Emotional Intelligence*:

Why It Can Matter More Than IQ. (Goleman, 1995). One of the most recent definitions describes it as such:

Emotional intelligence includes the ability to engage in sophisticated information processing about one's own and others' emotions and the ability to use this information as a guide to thinking and behavior. That is, individuals high in emotional intelligence pay attention to, use, understand, and manage emotions, and these skills serve adaptive functions that potentially benefit themselves and others. (Green, 2004)

Emotions are not only something we feel but something we do, acts of intending in the world (Scheer, 2012). They shape and are shaped by bodies and cultural practices. They are "very often described as a merging of body and mind, as a physical involvement in thought" (Scheer, 2012, 218). We experience and become aware of our emotions through our bodies and our cultural programming, and we use them to mobilize, communicate and ascribe meaning. They uncover cultural scripts, personal expectations and embodied learnings. The language register for emotion and business sometimes overlap, creating practices and concepts such as 'emotional management' or 'affective labor'. Emotions become work in themselves and corporate leaders at different levels are the ones who are expected to communicate and lead, shape a supportive culture and inspire with their vision.

A cultural analytical approach is recommended in order to better understand the cultural phenomena around themes that are difficult to grasp like emotional practices or uncertainty. Qualitative research has the potential to confront and change organizational culture and while it may be regarded as ethically problematic (O'Dell, 2009), it opens avenues for healthier workplaces, better communication and a more sustainable way to do business. It also offers researchers the chance to use their knowledge in order to influence social change, both within and around businesses.

Using cultural analysis in big businesses is still work-in-progress and thus on uncertain ground. Anthropologist Kathi Kitner reminds us that corporations are institutions just like governments, NGOs and universities and all institutions pose specific ethical challenges

(Kitner, 2016: 314). Just like any institution, corporations are made of people with different interests and values which need to be critically examined. I agree with Hammershøy & Madsen (2012) who consider that ethics depend on each situation, that there is no straightforward way, no code that can answer every dilemma one can encounter as a cultural analyst. However, we do know that there is a need for more understanding around the complexities of today's workplaces and especially around diffuse and invisible cultural aspects such as uncertainty.

This dissertation comprises a lot of "unscientific" or ambiguous aspects of research. Michael Agar writes: "Much of the world we seek to understand has just those characteristics, including our own involvements in it as researchers. If we only pick up materials that can be welded, we leave a lot behind." (1980:167). If we are to use uncertainty in a positive manner, we need to get accustomed with its pervasiveness and ambiguity without trying to simplify it. By leaving some knots loose and collaging personal narratives, theoretical developments and speculations, the purpose of this thesis has been to encourage reflection and empathy as well as inspire action. More insights can be gathered by analyzing uncertainty in specific organizational settings where the work dynamics and perspectives of different stakeholders can be better connected.

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