

PHD PROJECT PROPOSAL: MANAGERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF UNCERTAINTY IN THE AFTERMATH OF A PANDEMIC

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Project Description:

As a society we have been recently reminded (as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis) just how provisional our stable understandings of the world can be. The focus of this PhD project is to explore managers' lived experience as they try to make retrospective sense of their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and prospective sense of the newly uncertain futures they and their organizations will need to face and shape.

In societies, organizations and groups we co-construct and enact seemingly stable frames and categories that conceal much of the radical uncertainty which we face, for the most part we are simply getting "*our worlds ready to wear*" Brown (1978: 11). We constantly enact socially legitimated frames for understanding and making our worlds, which vary in the extent to which they are institutionalized and may have a taken for granted quality or be seen as more provisional and malleable. At the same time, these social certainties are increasingly fragile and liquid (Baumann, 2007), where every day human experiences of mostly familiar objects and relations can only ever be a moment by moment accomplishment (Chia, 2000), reliant on categorizing, filtering and framing experience, and making rapid inferences at all levels of mental functioning from perception onwards (e.g. Barbot & Carrasco, 2018; Carrasco & Barbot, 2018; Rock, 1983). We do not objectively "see" the world but make plausible interpretations of selected sense data based on simplifying assumptions and on the emotionally and socially mediated application of prior experience and socially acquired frames and categories.

Knights' (1921) distinction between risk and uncertainty has been widely cited, but much subsequent work has, unfortunately, reduced his distinction to his suggestion that risk concerns situations where all potential outcomes are known and they can be assigned probabilities and that under uncertainty probabilities are unknown or unknowable. Less noticed but perhaps more important, Knight insisted that uncertainty is not just founded in a lack of a basis to infer probabilities but in difficulties in framing and categorizing. He argued that analysis typically depends upon categorizing the world into "*things, which, under the same circumstances, always behave in the same way*" and that "*the chief logical problem, as already noticed, lies in the conception of a 'thing'.*"; noting that "*It is manifest that the ordinary objects of experience do not fit this description closely...*" (Knight, 1921: 204-205). If we are concerned with the lived experience of uncertainty as opposed to a notion of 'objective uncertainty' then it seems likely that these problems of framing,

categorization and meaning play a key role, but are also tied to the ways in which we construct certainty.

In terms of COVID19 there are uncomfortable, but necessary questions to ask, and more importantly, to answer. How might our lived experience be better understood if we accept that much of our world view is concerned with the construction (or even illusion) of ourselves as being in control? Are our endeavors to minimize, avoid or even eradicate uncertainty desirable, even if they were possible? What will happen if we continue to organize in ways that neither confront our limitations, or recognize our place as humans in the world - *part of*, rather than *apart from* animals, vegetables, minerals and others (Haraway, 1984; Clarke and Knights, 2019).

Marris (2006), suggests that the experience of uncertainty is marked by the collapse of meaning, as habitual frames and categories no longer serve to make sense of the world. However, as he notes, we often have strategies for avoiding the experience of uncertainty: *"If we cannot succeed in understanding an event, we may ignore it, pretend it never happened, or remember it differently. When our purposes are disrupted, we retreat to more essential purposes, and learn how to convince ourselves that we can live without what we cannot have. We reformulate ideas and purposes to extricate ourselves from their inherent contradictions. The strategies by which we reintegrate the organization of meaning are subtle, complex, often devious, sometimes enlightening and empowering, sometimes impoverishing and perverting. The measure of their failure is anxiety, defensiveness, depression, and grief."* (Marris, 2006: 4-5). Others, for example Freud and Lacan have pointed to the role of unconscious defense mechanisms that (in the short term) may ameliorate the discomfort of uncertainties, while scholars such as Chong & Tuckett (2014) focus on emotions and ambivalence in how we respond to uncertainty, including selective inattention to information and perspectives which challenge a dominant story.

Proposals are invited for PhD research which focuses on exploring managers' lived experience of uncertainty in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and its relation to their forward thinking and decision-making. While several possible approaches have been mentioned in this call, they are not exhaustive, and we are open to receiving creative (radical) proposals that may incorporate other perspectives. Proposals are also welcome which enquire into the broader setting for managers' understandings of the pandemic and its uncertainties. For example, what taken-for-granted (organizational) practices such as the ways we conduct international trade, relationships with the environment and animal husbandry influenced the genesis and growth of the pandemic and will likely resurface and manifest themselves in even more brutal ways in the future?

A successful applicant is likely to have experience of qualitative research and an understanding of an interpretivist approach to research and theory. However, we do not rule out other approaches if a proposal is well thought through.

About the Supervisors:

Professor Mark Fenton-O’Creevy has been involved in studying decision-making under uncertainty for two decades. He is a founding member of a national research network, ‘[Challenging Radical Uncertainty in Science Society and the Environment](#)’. His research blog which includes recent discussion of uncertainty in the pandemic can be found at <http://emotionalfinance.net>.”

Dr Caroline Clarke is particularly interested in questions of work uncertainty and identity, and the professional anxieties that these matters can provoke. She is also concerned with how impossible expectations, control, and perfectionism collide with professional experiences.

References:

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