



The Uncanny Workplace

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Introduction: Definitions, Disagreement and an Anecdote

The fact that dictionaries fail to agree completely on a definition of *uncanny* is perhaps, in and of itself, an uncanny occurrence, at least in the sense of *uncanny* that we hope to use consistently throughout this paper. (Whether we *do* use this slipperiest of concepts consistently is a matter for the reader to decide.) The writers and compilers of dictionaries, of course, have a job to make their contributions stand out from other similar publications, and a nod towards originality is expected.¹ However, a failure to align semantically – which we might describe as a *non-event*, as something that did *not* happen – feels rich with hidden meaning, especially given that “*the uncanny*” attracts synonyms such as “weird”, “eerie” and (in particular) “unsettling”.

For instance, Cambridge Dictionary (2024) gives us: “strange or mysterious, often in a way that is slightly frightening”. Collins (2024) plumps for: “strange and difficult to explain”. Whereas Dictionary.com (2024) raises the bar somewhat with: “having or seeming to have a supernatural or inexplicable basis; beyond the ordinary or normal; extraordinary”. However, it is Wikipedia (2024) that adds the element of *familiarity* that is important for the purposes of this paper. Its entry reads: “The uncanny is the psychological experience of an event or individual being not simply mysterious, but rather frightening in a way that feels oddly familiar.”

The word for uncanny in Freud’s native language of German is “unheimlich,” which we might translate as either “not of the home” or “not from the home”, and which (in turn) might lead us to a particular sense of unfamiliarity: the sense of something *being hidden* inside the home or *something in plain sight* within the home that takes on a new and unpleasant representation. For example, two people – let us say a husband and wife – are drinking a cup of tea in bed on a weekend morning; the scene is tranquil and unrushed. Early light is making its way into the bedroom. In this tentative illumination, the husband notes something that he has never seen before, despite the fact that the wardrobe has been in the room for at least half a decade; the lines and marks in the wardrobe’s wood resemble writing in this light; *the wardrobe has become a book overnight*.

¹ For a fascinating account of the professional disagreements between dictionary writers, please see “Authority and American Usage” by David Foster Wallace. “[P]robing the seamy underbelly of US lexicography reveals ideological strife and controversy and intrigue and nastiness and fervor...” (Wallace, 2014, p.885).

The husband mentions this to the wife, who is amused. They start to wonder what *genre* the wardrobe is (because they cannot read the freshly discovered language of Wood).

“Shall we just look at the pictures instead?” the husband asks. There are knots and lines of longitude and latitude in the wood; there are pockets of darker greys and browns; there are wonderful impurities and configurations that resemble constellations. And smaller things too: living creatures that might reasonably be found in a bedroom. The husband points and says, “That one looks like a spider.”

Immediately the spell is broken. The wife flinches and tenses. Despite the husband’s protests that the spider is *only in the wood*, and then (in increasing desperation) that it does not look much like a spider at all, the wife is disturbed by the spider that had been there all along, ever since the wardrobe had been fitted; the spider that could only be seen at dawn. The *unheimlich* spider in the uncanny domestic scene. After several months of ever-deepening consternation, the wardrobe door is replaced... by *something less familiar*.

From all of the above we might submit that the uncanny has at least one important function, part didactic and part therapeutic. The uncanny asks us to pose a complicated question to ourselves (and it waits for an answer):

“*What do we fear and what can that fear tell us about who we are?*” It is by asking such questions in the context of the workplace that we now turn.

The Living, Breathing Workplace

Given the definitions above, the workplace is, perhaps, not the most obvious location for explorations of the uncanny. When we think of workplaces, we probably conjure up pictures of functional office spaces, repetitive production lines and poster-mounted retail areas. The atmosphere conveyed is one of transaction and necessity, the quotidian and the everyday. Perhaps one of the reasons why we do not readily connect the uncanny with working environments is that much of the psychological content that occurs within these contexts is unacknowledged or “below the radar”. De Vries has spoken of such circumstances: “What really goes on in organizations takes place in the intrapsychic and interpersonal world of the key players, below the surface of day-to-day behaviors [*sic*]”. (De Vries 2004: 184)

In 2020, many people of working age were required to think again about what “the workplace” actually meant to them, individually and as part of a team, when a pandemic shook the shoulders of the world and forced it to listen. Many of us were told to work from home, and at short notice. We can probably recall those early months, during which we engaged in online meetings with colleagues, some of whom were in their kitchen, sitting on a deckchair with a tea tray on their lap; the sudden nature of the relocation to a work-from-home setting was unsettling for many; uncanny for some; and fairly plain sailing for those who already had a work set-up at home.

Although this is not intended to be a paper “about” Covid, it would surely be futile to pretend that the pandemic left no traces or scars on our working practices. As Wilfred Bion notes: “Since we can do nothing about the dramatic or obvious external event, it provides an interpretation, later to become a free association, for the not-at-all-obvious event” (Bion 1989: 48). When one of the authors of this article used the phrase “I’ll give him a ring” recently, he immediately corrected himself and said, “I mean, I’ll call him on Teams – no one gives anyone *a ring* anymore.” To borrow an incisive formulation from Erich Fromm

(apropos of psychoanalysis), the pandemic threatened – and eventually eradicated – the “pathology of normalcy”. (Fromm 1970) More generally, Fromm’s formulation described a malaise, accepted on the societal level, of stultification and commodification, which results in a shared social life that is often stressful and debilitating.

Is it time to think back to life before Covid with the rose-tinted spectacles emphatically *off*? Did the pandemic interrupt a perfectly oiled and operational workplace machine, or in fact had we been locked masochistically into a pathology of normalcy that we called our own? Or to put the matter in simpler terms, had your workplace been uncanny *already*? Or did it take a global event – a thorough shaking of the system’s shoulders – for us to notice the uncanny in our midst?

Perhaps we should be clear about “the workplace” as we hope we have been up to now about “the uncanny”. *What* “workplace”? *Whose* “workplace”?

When we say “the workplace” to *you*, the reader, what image is conjured up in your mind? Whatever form “the workplace” takes (office space, production line, retail area or something further afield), does it remain the place it used to be? If so, what might you have done, if anything, to ensure that the outward-facing image stayed just the way you had left it – abandoned it – or as close to that status quo as possible? How did you help your work colleagues join the dots between the office of their remembered past and the office of today? Do you still pay reference to the work-from-home chapters in our worldwide Book of Covid, or have you agreed to regard it as the equivalent of what Freud termed a screen memory?

To explore this idea for a moment, let us quote from Laplanche & Pontalis ([1973] 2006: 410-411): A screen memory is a “childhood memory characterised both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content... a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence.” While we must accept the obvious distinction that we do not go to a workplace as children, we do report to a safe physical structure in which we spend a good number of our daylight hours; and the memories are imprinted. It is ventured that many of us will have at least one mental snapshot available for each school that he attended, as is also the case for each job. Accessible via various retrieval cues, these snapshots help us to reconstruct, perhaps even tell, a *memoirish* story (cf. Royle 2023); but is the account wholly accurate? Do we *truly* remember life in the workplace before the system was shaken like a baby’s rattle?

Freud concludes his paper “Screen Memories” with these words: “the falsified memory is the first that we become aware of: the raw material of memory-traces out of which it was forged remains unknown to us in its original form”. (Freud 1899: 322) And an earlier writer still gives us the impetus to search for the truth, however uncanny the findings end up being. In a letter to the English writer Bennet Langton in 1758, Samuel Johnson advocated the eyes-wide-open and mind-wide-open approach. “Let us endeavour,” he suggested,

to see things as they are, and then enquire whether we ought to complain. Whether to see life as it is will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation that is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable; that which may be derived from error must be, like its original, fallacious and fugitive. (Quoted in Bion, 1992: 114; originally in *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, Vol. 1, 1791: 339)

If our ambition is to see things “as they are” (as Boswell would advocate), it is useful to remember that much of what occurs cannot be seen at all. Clarity of vision is a result of

accepting a certain blindness – an inevitable eyesight issue that plays out along intrapsychic lines. For instance, Darren Bourne goes one further than describing the workplace as a living, breathing space: he compares the place to which we go with a person quite similar to who we are. He writes:

...in some senses organisations operate as persons in themselves in other more recognisable ways. Organisations can exhibit uncannily human qualities, like jealousy, anger, compassion, care and so on, often at variance with the company statement of mission or values. If organisations can act like persons, things are clearly not quite what they seem, especially when we work within these “persons”. Individually, from our own inner-world perspective, we know that being a person is actually not so straightforward; often things don’t fit together as neatly as we might wish. Psychoanalysis explores how we each incorporate and negotiate the various drives, impulses, thoughts, emotions, and feelings – often in conflict – that constitute our internal world, further compounded in interaction and relationship (*sic*) with others. (Bourne 2023: 33)

In the psychoanalytic canon, much has been written about what goes on “beneath the surface” of organisations (cf. Obholzer 2021). Recalling the earlier references to the uncanny being recognisable and familiar, while adding an interpretation from Mike Ashley – “Because the uncanny is beyond our understanding it brings with it obvious connotations of fear...” (Ashley 1997: 973), let us pose a couple of questions that mingle the psychoanalytic with the metaphysical.

The first: Is it uncanny that we accept this existence of the complementary, invisible, intrapsychic work done *in addition to* the tasks that we achieve in our workplace? And the second: Do we appreciate that *without* the uncanny, the two levels (or realities) of work might not operate alongside one another?; that it might be the familiarly strange and the perplexingly available – the uncanny – that keeps the workplace moving at all? Bourne continues:

In a similar way, organisational interactions are characterised by complex approaches, needs, agendas and strategies, sometimes deliberately obscured to, or by, other parties. There are often multiple stakeholders, thereby piling on further levels of complication, layers that sometimes seem to operate independently of each other, whether in consort or in conflict. So, perhaps one way of viewing leadership, a working definition, is that which enables navigation of this complex territory. (Bourne 2023: 33-34)

At the same time as we consider an unvoiced proposition – that we swim in the workplace unconscious – we can chew on some other related thoughts. Do we agree that the workplace is the nexus between a physical environment and a crew of well-meaning colleagues, who continue to stir one vast metaphysical pot; it is the uncanny reality of conscious ambition, team endeavour and unconscious interconnecting beams. In Martin Parker’s formulation, we might believe that “formal institutions are wonderful examples of the sinuous way in which structures become inhabited by meanings, places in which the trivial and the serious are always pushing up against one another” (in Plester 2016: vii).

With these ideas around the uncanny in the workplace in mind, it is now worth discussing how they might look in particular instances, how the uncanny operates within given workplace contexts.

The Uncanny in Specific Workplace Situations. An Exploration of Two Examples

Case Study I: The Case of College X (First Author)

In a previous college² I worked for (called “College X” for the purposes of this article), I was employed as a lecturer in teacher training. To give a little bit of background, the role involves teaching colleagues who have come from a range of industrial backgrounds the professional qualifications necessary to remain employed at the college. The qualifications entailed elements of pedagogical theory and practice, government policy on post-compulsory education and aspects of their own professional identities. As part of my job, I had to work quite closely with such colleagues who often were experts in their field (for instance: plumbing, beauty therapy, catering and hospitality, sport and fitness) but needed support and guidance with the complexities of teaching their industrial knowledge to teenagers and mature adults. I was part of a small team that would conduct supportive observations over an extended period of time that encouraged them to grow and innovate as educationalists. I felt part of an “in-house” service that was genuinely fostering notions of both personal and institutional development that benefitted colleagues, senior managers and the students.

During my tenure, however, college leaders became increasingly attracted to ideas and practices that they notionally termed “entrepreneurial”. This involved the college taking a more fulsome line on the need for students and courses to be more “business or industrially-minded”, including the takeover of some small businesses in the local community.

Let me say first of all that I am sympathetic to colleges being more orientated to industrial practice and for students to gain genuine experiential learning. Where things started to become uncanny for me was in the level of prescriptiveness that became attached to the concept of “entrepreneurial”. Slowly but surely, the need to be entrepreneurial and factor entrepreneurialism into all our working practices became an institutional requirement. It became necessary to address entrepreneurialism as part of the professional courses I was teaching on and to see evidence of it in the teaching practice I was observing. Increasingly, colleagues were coming into the training classroom and using the discourse and language of entrepreneurialism, even in occupational areas I would not normally associate with the term or even think it entirely appropriate such as health and social care or animal welfare.

College X no longer felt like the college I was originally working for. Posters and slogans began to appear on walls and doors touting the benefits of the “E” word and television screens were set up in the atrium with staff and student “talking heads” mouthing praise for the new venture. The environment became one that I was gradually alienated from; classrooms, workshops and walkways seemed to fill with the sound of chatter I was no longer entirely familiar with. Appointed staff were discussing the opportunity to travel to colleges abroad to learn more on how entrepreneurial learning was facilitated overseas. There was more evidence of people dressing in self-consciously “corporate” attire in order to fit in with the prevailing ethos. In my naïveté, I had started work at College X under the assumption that I was working for an educational institution - yes, one that was closely aligned with industry

² In the English context, the “college” refers to a general further education college. The closest international comparisons are with technical and vocational schools and colleges in Europe (eg. the German *Berufsschule*), the community college system in the United States, and TAFE in Australia.

but still at a remove from it in terms of values and the “bottom line”. However, the defamiliarization that was occurring was symptomatic of me not realising quickly or deeply enough that I was, indeed, working for a business, just one that happened to have the word “college” on its letterhead.

Case Study II: The Case of Changing Identities (First Author)

One of the occupational hazards of being an educator in adult education is the volume of marking you encounter, especially at certain periods of the academic calendar. As I have spent much of my career as a teacher educator, one of the standard formats that students submit work is in the form of a portfolio encompassing lesson observations, personal reflections, meetings with mentors and such like. The portfolios themselves are usually arranged in a standard order based on the requirements of the course. It’s also important here to state that the time I am talking about is pre-digital, when the portfolios were individual sheets of paper slotted into lever-arch files.

I remember receiving this particular student’s reflective journal entry on a Friday morning. The student (let’s call him “Steve”) dropped it off at the college reception and I got an email to come and collect it. I picked it up from reception around lunchtime, opened the envelope and proceeded to read through Steve’s submission. He was discussing a particular teaching situation where a student was challenging the feedback he had given her on a marked piece of work. The student, in Steve’s words, was accusing him of being harsh and unconstructive and that the overall effect was deflating, such that she was considering whether to continue on the course. Steve’s reflection revolved around the qualms over giving the student honest feedback to help her move forward and improve her work alongside the doubts and worries over his ability to do this in a way that was genuinely supportive rather than confrontational.

I have had more than one occasion where something similar has happened to me in my role as a teacher. As I was reading Steve’s account, I remembered a specific situation in my own career. However, as I was picturing the scene, the image of Steve came into my mind as a replacement for my own presence and it was he rather than I who was chastising the student in this mental episode. I was recalling an incident I knew I was very much involved in and yet this disconcerting memory had exchanged me for one of my trainees. I made some notes on the page and then put Steve’s reflection into the portfolio I kept of his teaching practice. Whenever I spotted Steve’s portfolio in the cupboard afterwards, I always recollected this strange example of changing identities.

What these two separate instances of the uncanny demonstrate is that, in terms of the workplace, the uncanny can operate with both a wide and narrow lens. Defamiliarisation works in the guise of a single piece of writing or at the level of our perspective on a whole institution. Freud wrote “that the term “uncanny” ... applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away and has to come into the open”. (Freud 2003: 132) Whilst neither of the scenarios I have described above can be labelled as ‘secret’ on the surface level (after all, the college’s move to an entrepreneurial philosophy and Steve’s reflective account of student interaction were both intended and the meaning was clear), it was my interpretation that was brought out into the open, that may have been a secret beforehand. Schlipphacke has spoken of “ways in which ... anxiety destabilize[s] linear narratives and one’s relationship to the present”. (Schlipphacke 2015: 164) My perception in these two scenarios could possibly be attributed to an underlying anxiety, a worker ill at ease with the developments in his place of work or with memories of unpleasant professional encounters

with his past. However, as De Vries has pointed out, fear and foreboding is not exclusive to the individual - organizations manifest these phenomena as well:

A psychoanalytically informed perspective can help us understand the hidden dynamics associated with individual motivation, leadership, interpersonal relationships, collusive situations, social defenses, “neurotic” organizations ... and the extent to which individuals and organizations can be prisoners of their past. (De Vries 2004: 185)

On this basis, can it be argued that my reaction to the turn of College X towards a view of entrepreneurialism and education was a manifestation of collective feeling, that my sense of my working environment becoming increasingly unfamiliar was not only my sensation but an accumulation of what others in the organization were thinking and feeling as well? Was my reaction to Steve’s account of his difficulties with a student an example of the triggering any worker senses when they receive an account of a situation uncomfortably close to a memory of their own they are trying to block? I acknowledge that my way of dealing with both of the scenarios described above was a form of “othering” – consciously or unconsciously, I interpreted the atmosphere in College X and the memory of me arguing with a student in a way that made them unfamiliar. Othering is a means by which we project onto others those facets of ourselves that we do not want to acknowledge as our own. This perception is grist to the psychoanalytic mill during individual analyses, but I wonder if greater exploration of the uncanny and otherness within the workplace would be fruitful to draw out underlying tensions and anxieties that impact on the working environment, particularly beyond the remit of standard equality, diversity and inclusion policies? (See Menzies Lyth (1988) for analysis of anxiety in institutions more generally.)

The Psychoanalyst as Consultant: Addressing the Uncanny in the Workplace

What, if any, implications can we draw from identifying examples of the uncanny in the workplace? We hope to have shown, at the very least, that by studying the uncanny in working contexts we can elicit understanding of ourselves, our colleagues and the organizations in which we work that would be difficult to obtain otherwise. As Covid has shown (and the increasing speed with which technology affects the workplace continues to show), defamiliarisation is now a fairly typical occurrence throughout our working lives - things known become strangely unknown either through the passage of time or through our changing perceptions. As Kirshner has stated, “[w]ords are necessary, but they are not sufficient for subjectivity, which is embodied” (Kirshner 2014: 1057) - how we interpret the environments in which we work and our place within them operates invariably at the level of the unconscious. How we navigate new or disturbing situations is so often unstated (even to ourselves).

Where work becomes strange, there is often a sense of feeling disorientated, of perhaps no longer belonging in the same way. This is something that probably can’t be addressed through the normal human resources processes. As De Vries writes:

Though the existing repertoire of “rational” concepts has proven time and again to be insufficient to untangle the really knotty problems that trouble organizations, the myth of rationality persists. (De Vries 2004: 184)

Over recent decades, psychoanalysts have diversified their *modus operandi* and it is becoming increasingly frequent for psychoanalysts to offer their services in the business and corporate world. Podcast series such as Harvey Schwartz’s “Psychoanalysis On and Off the

Couch” discuss (amongst other things) how psychoanalysis operates where the client is a company or department rather than an individual. One can well imagine aspects of work such as the uncanny being a topic when a psychoanalyst specialising in the field would be of more benefit, say, than a more conventional human resources consultant. Creating safe spaces and fora where workers can articulate aspects of their employment that they find disconcerting, generate anxiety or find fearful. Corporations pay lip service to the importance of mental health and wellbeing but it’s harder to find examples of where this is applied in ways that are significant to their workforce. Whilst not all employers or employees could afford accessing the services of psychoanalytically-informed consultants, it is certainly a venture that can and does bring value (as well as productive challenges) to those who are able. (Schwartz 2021)

But we would not wish to finish the paper with the idea that the uncanny in the workplace is solely a pathology to be alleviated and minimised. The bewilderment and state of confusion that the uncanny can inspire in us whilst at work can also have its creative and reflective sides. The uncanny is often the catalyst for flights of ingenuity and innovation or, at a more down-to-earth level, making us ponder on ways of seeing things that lead to more productive and conducive work. Once the familiar loses its everyday veneer, it can be viewed in another light, one that is both frightening and playful.

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