Rethinking vulnerability of dialogical interactions in an organizational merger through embodied metaphors: a methodological study

Abstract

This study explores the methodological potential of embodied metaphors to capture the vulnerabilities of dialogical interactions in an organisational merger. Although there is an established body of research on the embodied side of work organisations in the field of organisation studies, little is known about how organizational merger unfolds as a highly embodied and vulnerable process. This study is based on a two-year ethnography of an organisational merger. The empirical material consists of 13 dialogues between organizational members, five dialogic interviews, workshop material and an autoethnographic diary by one of the authors written in the midst of the merger process. Based on our in-depth ethnographic analysis, we identified three embodied metaphors which capture the experiences of vulnerability of the organizational members in dialogic interactions amidst the merger – Bambi, a spider, and a bat in a glass box. These embodied metaphors offer a powerfully sensory perspective on the collectively intimate struggles faced during the organisational merger and illustrate their potential in capturing the embodied nuances of this process.

Keywords: embodied metaphors, vulnerability, organizational dialogue, dialogical interaction, organizational merger, ethnography, autoethnography, qualitative methodologies, writing differently

Introduction

Our existence is dialogical, and our language, in its true and natural state, we believe based on our experiences, is dynamically metaphorical. Hence, our language is embodied and vulnerable compared to that of what is usually considered ‘knowledge’ that does not accept the state of

unknowing (Bloomfield et al., 2024). Despite the rapid digitalisation and 'disembodiment' of working life, what is known, sensed and felt flows within and through the body (Beyes et al., 2022). This study scrutinises the analytical possibilities of embodied metaphors – what we can learn by using them as methodological tools and their powerful effect on understanding organisational interaction and behaviour more deeply (Flannely, 2001). We take a relational social constructionist perspective (Hosking, 2011), which focuses on the micro level of organisations – in other words, on how people within a particular setting intersubjectively create meaning through their embodied dialogical activities (Cunliffe, 2002, 2008; Gergen et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2000). In this study, our aim is to understand how vulnerability emerges in organisational dialogue through the use of embodied metaphors and how these metaphors can act as powerful methodological enablers to capture collective feelings and experiences, in our study related to an organisational merger, that are otherwise difficult to verbalise.

Giving primacy to language, dialogue and communication in making sense of organisational life is part of a broader linguistic turn within organisational studies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). However, language is often seen as an empirical phenomenon that helps surface pre-existing meanings (language as epistemology) rather than understanding social experience as constructed through language (language as ontology) (Cunliffe, 2002). Language as ontology emphasises the holistic nature of language (Cunliffe, 2002). Language plays through us as words, sounds, rhythms and gestures that evoke verbal and emotional responses and thus create meanings. It is fundamentally an embodied practice – a key idea on which we base our study. It is metaphorical and indeterminate as well as allusive and creative. It shapes our realities, meanings and selves. What people relationally construct as meaningful in a given here-and-now situation is embedded and embodied in historically and culturally shaped practices, norms and understandings (Larsen and Madsen, 2016).

In this study, we focus on organisational dialogue and the ways in which it unfolds as an embodied and highly vulnerable process. The word 'dialogue' comes from ancient Greek and originally referred to a skilful discussion in which two or more people are engaged in discovering the true nature of the phenomenon under discussion. Dialogue has often been defined as a flow of meaning between multiple parties (Bohm, 1996). Imagine, if you will, a stream of meaning flowing among us, through us and between us – a flow out of which new understanding emerges. Even a single person can have a sense of dialogue within themself if the spirit of dialogue is present (Bohm, 1996). This is the view to which we attach our understanding of dialogue in this study, conceptualising it as a fundamentally intimate, embodied process between ourselves and others.

This is an ethnographic study of a group of practitioners attempting to introduce dialogical practices into an organisation going through a multi-organisational merger. The focus is on the ongoing reflective dialogues of the development team and the alternative social realities they constructed through them. These dialogues were formally agreed meetings in the merger process to discuss the feelings, thoughts and struggles surrounding the changing situation in people's work. The dialogues were characterised by an open and authentic reflection of experience, leading to the emergence of embodied metaphors and poetic language – those subtle wishes, thoughts and behaviours that we discuss in the findings section.

We argue that dialogue creates a space in which vulnerability unfolds through embodied knowing, wispy and finished thoughts, metaphors and the use of poetic language. Dialogue creates a fissure in which vulnerability - present, hidden or concealed - is revealed within a reality dominated by rational thought and seemingly strong action. Our study suggests that dialogue gently opens the iron cage of rationality (Weber, 2001) and allows people to flourish as authentic, embodied and vulnerable beings in the organisation.

Theoretical background

Existing research on the methodological potential of metaphors in the field of OS

There is a long research tradition that examines organisational phenomena through a metaphorical lens (e.g. Flannery, 2001; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Radman, 1996). However, when we went through recent studies of the methodological possibilities of metaphors or 'metaphoring' in the field of organisation studies, the thinness or even the absence of these studies actually surprised us. Beginning with Gareth Morgan's seminal work *Images of Organization* (1986), the focus has mainly been on the organisation rather than on the people (see e.g. Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011).

In this study, we move away from organisation-centred metaphors (Cornelissen, 2004) towards the post-structural view of them (Koro-Ljungberg, 2008), inquiring how people perform metaphoring and have different meanings for their metaphors (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008). The metaphorical lens that we use is essentially embodied. We view humans as bodily organisms that change constantly in response to their environment. Our bodily experiences are our primary way of making sense of the world (Author; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). They form the basis for how we construct ideas and communicate them to other people (Littlemore, 2019). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), embodied experiences are expressed through embodied and linguistic metaphors. Aristotle originally defined 'metaphor' as the act of giving one thing a name that belongs to something else, but it can also be understood more broadly as a device through which we perceive or experience one entity in terms of another (Littlemore, 2019). Intuitive, felt experiences of one's own body that shape metaphorical thinking and language use are described as 'embodied' (Gibbs, 2006).

Rather than viewing language as an essentially representational medium of communication that provides accurate and unambiguous definitions of organisational complexity (Cunliffe, 2002), in this study, utterances are treated as embodied acts of voicing (bodily) experiences. Such utterances have a not-yet-determined quality; they are vocalisations of vague and unnameable thoughts (Cunliffe, 2002). According to James (1890), we have a misleading tendency to ignore such transitory feelings and focus only on outcomes. Thinking in terms of entities still in the making and 'thinking in duration' (Chia, 1998) requires sensitivity to our own spontaneously felt reactions to circumstances.

When we encounter a new circumstance, our spontaneous bodily reactions open a window for new ways of talking and thinking (Shutter, 2008). When the taken-for-granted is challenged, an exploratory, imaginative, reflexive and context-sensitive dialogue is called for – the kind that allows for the creation of new meanings (Cunliffe, 2002). We also imbue our analytical tool with a poetic quality, as poetry is particularly suited to revealing that which is just beyond the reach of language – to gesturing towards the unarticulated (Merleau-Ponty, 1965).

Metaphors have been widely acknowledged in management and organization studies as essential tools for structuring knowledge and exposing underlying meanings (Hatch and Yanow, 2008; Schwabenland, 2012). They offer fresh perspectives on familiar processes, bringing to the fore marginalized or overlooked viewpoints and enabling alternative ways of organizing human experience (Cornelissen, 2004, 2005; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). In general, metaphors appeared throughout the research material, both in spoken language and in the written texts of fieldworkers. The use of metaphorical language was common when people talked about their experiences, but it was particularly rich and vivid in the team dialogues and the ethnographic research diary when the team members purposefully explored and made sense of their experiences. A single word can carry a significant amount of information, experiences and even visual images when analysed. Some of

the metaphors were like sudden disturbances or peaks in the flow of energy. They were new and creative, breaking the boundaries of ordinary language and drawing attention to the embodied relational dynamics of interaction. We are particularly interested in such metaphors in this study.

On the vulnerability of organizational dialogue

Dialogue appeared in organisational sciences in the early 1990s when Peter Senge published his seminal management book *The Fifth Discipline – The Art & Practice of the Learning Organisation* (1990). Senge's work laid the foundation for a long-standing research tradition in which dialogue has been studied in relation to organisational learning (Isaacs, 1993; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Schein, 1993) and organisational development (Bushe and Marshak, 2009; Gustavsen, 1992). A significant amount of research has demonstrated the positive effects of dialogue on companies' individual performance and productivity (Jabri, 2004; Picker, 2006; Yang, 2004). The second line of research is interested in how social reality and organisations are constructed through dialogue. Such studies have examined, for example, identity formation in organisations (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001). Dialogue has also been discussed in strategy-as-practice research, which focuses on the practices of strategising (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

Previous organisational research on dialogue has mainly focused on the benefits of dialogue for organisational efficiency and productivity goals. However, we believe that pre-determined goals and objectives prevent genuine dialogue from taking place and the full potential of dialogue from being realised. Therefore, in this study we take an alternative approach to organisational dialogue. We contribute to a literature stream on relationally responsive social constructionism (Helin, 2013; Cunliffe, 2002, 2001, 2011; Cunliffe and Locke, 2020; Shotter, 2008, 2009, 2014). Our focus is on the micro level and on the ways in which people in a particular setting intersubjectively create meaning through their embodied dialogical activities (Cunliffe, 2002;

Gergen et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2000). Relationally responsive social constructionism emphasises the intersubjective and dialogical nature of experiences (Cunliffe, 2008). Meaning is constructed in a mesh of unique here-and-now situations in which people meet, communicate, generate knowledge and improvise their way forward (Cunliffe and Shotter, 2006). Relational constructionism gives primacy to people's brief, common and everyday communications and how such processes shape the continual becoming of understanding and knowledge (Gergen, 2010; Hosking, 2011; Larsen and Madsen, 2016). The way people communicate within an organisational setting plays a significant role in the development of organisational life.

In this study, we define dialogue as a relational process (Gergen, 1999; Hosking, 2011) in which expression of vulnerability and sense of not knowing (Bloomfield et al. 2024) becomes possible. Although our research is embedded in an organizational context, we draw from Open Dialogue that was developed in psychiatry and family therapy for the purpose of helping vulnerable people. Open Dialogue rests on the idea that not all the thoughts, feelings, and images are articulated. A lot of our thinking and inner dialogues remains unsaid (Rober, Seikkula, & Laitila, 2010). Words and experiences find their meaning through the interplay between inner and outer dialogues and in the context where they occur (Lidbom et al. 2014). Meaning is generated from relational activity, which occurs among 'embodied' persons, who are shaped and constrained by their physical bodies and contextual influences (e.g., Pakman, 1995; Shotter & Lannamann, 2002). Meaning is constantly generated and transformed by the intrinsically unpredictable process of response to response (Seikkula & Trimble 2005).

The key idea in Open Dialogue is to be present in the moment, remaining open to what is taking place in the dialogue (Seikkula & Trimble 2005). Without attunement to the immediacy of the moment and the comprehensive, embodied shared experience, the dialogical process may be

inhibited and the words become merely rational description. Commitment to respond as fully embodied persons, resonating with expressions of emotion, allows the 'not-yet-spoken' experiences to emerge. The shared emotional experiences provide a secure framework in which each participant can address his or her own vulnerability.

As we engage with each other with all of ourselves in what Buber called an 'I-Thou' relationship, we access the feelings that hold us together as relational beings (Seikkula & Trimble 2005). Taking this approach to organizational dialogue shifts it from intervention towards more basic human values. We understand dialogue as an embodied space in which an authentic, thriving working community has the potential to emerge and take shape.

The concept of vulnerability refers to an 'individual's capacity to be open to a variety of wounds' (Wainwright and Williams, 2005: 29). Vulnerability is traditionally understood as related to weakness, dependency and powerlessness (Gilson, 2014). These perspectives contrast with the established sociocultural expectations of managers and employees as perfect, in control, strong, always correct and knowledgeable (Corlett et al., 2019). Vulnerability can be reimagined in a different way: as a form of resistance, of activism and of emancipatory enactment (Author; Plester et al., 2022) and thus both as universally shared human condition and individually experienced phenomenon (Butler, 2012; see also Scheibmayr, 2024). In a similar spirit, Corlett et al. (2019) theorised vulnerability as a relational activity comprising 'processes of recognizing and claiming vulnerability, developing social support to share vulnerability with trusted others and recognising alternative ways of conceptualizing and responding to vulnerability' (557). Hence, in the spirit of Corlett et al. (2019), we theorise vulnerability as the ability to adopt a productive, embodied position to relate confidentially to others. We recognise the interconnectedness of embodiment and vulnerability in all relationships, and we position vulnerability as the core of aesthetic, relational and lively experiences between us.

Following Wainwright and Williams (2005: 29), Hamington (2004) and a more recent study on ethical agency in which vulnerability is conceptualised as a 'ground for *caring with* rather than for others' (Johansson and Wickström 2022, emphasis added), we understand vulnerability as the intrinsic, relational ability of humans to be open to their experiences, reflect upon their existence and navigate their lives together with others. This is especially interesting in the context of this study, in which employees are exposed to both their inner vulnerabilities and vulnerabilities built up relationally by the organisation surrounding them. The context studied here entails the wishes and needs of subordinates and colleagues that employees must navigate. Relational vulnerability is thus an embodied ability to be open to all kinds of life experiences and to navigate them while surrounded by others (Hamington, 2004).

On the other hand, we mobilise vulnerability as a methodological approach through which aesthetic sensibilities and everyday matters of work relations can be explored. Specifically, we theorise vulnerability as an embodied ability (Author; Brown, 2012; Corlett et al., 2021; Mackenzie et al., 2014) that encompasses both the painful and hopeful aspects of our lives (Author) experienced with each other. Vulnerability emerges through our corporeal dependency on and relatedness to other sensing bodies (cf. Author; Valenzuela et al., 2023), making it a shared condition captured by the embodied metaphors in the findings section.

Methodology

Sensory ethnography as our methodological approach

This study takes a sensory ethnographic approach (), whereby a researcher spends an extended period in the field observing and participating in the daily life of an organisation (Yanow, 2009) – in this case, in a dialogic development team. The aim is to achieve intimate knowledge of human experiences, which requires immersion and careful attention to everyday interactions, situations

and occurrences as well as micro-level interactions in which members of the organisation make sense together (Ciuk et al., 2018; Cunliffe, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011). More specifically, we draw from an aesthetic epistemology (Strati 1999; Warren, 2008), which highlights the lived, sensuous experiences of the researcher. More specifically, we argue that doing research as an embodied and relational activity (Mandalaki et al., vuosi; Thoresen & Öhlén, 2015) can lead to the production of alternative research material and interpretations. This study assumes that the social creation of realities is based on embodied and situated dialogue and, therefore, that constant attentiveness to the different voices, stories and imaginative and poetic narratives emerging in the dialogical process is required (Cunliffe, 2002). In this study, organisational members are seen not as sources of raw data but as co-producers of cultural analysis (Islam, 2015). Hence, we highlight the sensory nature of ethnography (see Pink, 2009, 2011) and therefore view our own feelings as researchers and the atmosphere of the research situations as meaningful for this study.

As we immerse ourselves in an organisational culture as researchers, our bodies help us attune to the situation and make sense of our surroundings (Cunliffe, 2002). We use our bodies and senses to create accounts of our intimate personal and corporeal relationships with our experiences of the world (Cunfliffe and Coupland, 2011). Sensemaking is not merely a rational, intellectual process. ‘Making life sensible is a complex interweaving of self-other, of retrospective and prospective, discursive and embodied, routine and creative, explicit and intuitive sensemaking’ (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011: 70).

In this study, we focus on the interpretive and embodied quality of sensemaking and on dialogue and metaphors that are temporally and contextually sensitive (Cunliffe et al., 2004). We build on recent literature pertaining to organizational aesthetics (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011; Ropo & Sauer, 2008; Strati, 1999), writing differently -movement (Boncori, 2024) and the ‘bodiliness’ of academic research (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Brewis & Williams, 2019; Essén & Värlander,

2012; Taylor, 2002; Warren, 2008) to explore the ways in which we can disturb normative research practices by exploring topics about which we feel intensely and sharing our sentiments about those topics in vulnerable and intimate ways. We seek to create a link between individual experiences and broader cultural and social contexts through our headwork and writing. In this study, we deliberately push the boundaries of academic texts as we seek to convey the authentic quality of the embodied experience from which the study is drawn.

Context and research material

The research is embedded in a Finnish public social and health care organisation with over 6500 employees. At the time, the organisation was undergoing a multi-organisational merger in which the primary social and health care services of six separate municipalities were merged with a regional special health care authority. The research was conducted during the first two years following the merger. One of the researchers, Anna (pseudonym), worked in the organisation. Together with two other dialogic developers, she was responsible for developing dialogic interaction and leadership at all levels of the organisation. We refer to this dialogic development team as 'the team' in this study.

The research material consists of 13 recorded and transcribed dialogues, five dialogic interviews and 128 pages of autoethnographic reflections of the dialogue process of the organizational merger. In nine of the dialogues, the dialogic team (consisting of the team leader and two members), reflected on their experiences of dialogue and on their development work within the organisation. Three dialogues between dialogic professionals and team leaders focused on the experiences of workplace dialogue processes. The other two were conducted with the management of the organisation. These dialogues explored experiences at the top level of the

organisation during the implementation of the merger. Each dialogue lasted approximately two hours.

In addition to the ethnographic diary notes and 5 in-depth interviews conducted with the participants of the dialogues, this study entails autoethnographic diary notes of Anna, which describe her experience as a member of the working community in the midst of an organisational merger. Because Anna was closely involved in generating the empirical material through her autoethnographic research diary, we draw on her embodied experiences in the analysis process. The research material also contains a visual image of one of the metaphors, which we chose to include in the findings section of this paper, since it powerfully captures the transformation of one of the embodied metaphors, Bambi.

Analysis process

The analysis began during the fieldwork, taking the form of reflective dialogues and reflective writing in the ethnographic research diary of Anna. We consider this 'thinking in duration' (Chia, 1998) to be an integral part of the analysis process that continued until the very end of writing this article. At the beginning of the analysis phase, the interview material was first transcribed by hand by Helene, which allowed for a deep understanding of its central elements. At some point, Helene became aware of the rich and colourful language used in the dialogues among the organizational members. First-hand experiences of the dialogue participants often seemed to be shared and discussed using metaphors. By going through the written research material, Helene identified eight metaphors that felt particularly interesting and evoked a kind of embodied sensation, a methodologically interesting, aesthetic 'hint' (Author) in her.

Through collective reflection and an intensive dialogue between Anna and Emma (pseudonym) (Gutzan and Tuckermann, 2019), three embodied metaphors (Bambi, a spider and a bat in a glass box) were selected and further analysed reflexively. The metaphors used in relation to human experience in this study were animal metaphors, such as Bambi, a spider and a bat. The animal metaphors identified and discussed in the findings anchor abstract concepts and organisational phenomena, such as the painful process of merger in concrete, embodied experiences.

We deepened this analysis by moving between existing methodological theories of metaphors and vulnerability, examining the research material, and engaging in active discussions to refine our interpretations. This marked the second phase of our analysis. The final phase involved in-depth reflection and exchanges between the two authors during the writing process, with a focus on clarifying the descriptions and interpretations of the three metaphors through the lens of embodied vulnerability. The writing took place in turns, and the analysis deepened with each round, just as new understanding emerges from dialogues. The analysis of personal experiences required a great deal of trust between us, the two researchers.

Capturing the vulnerability of organisational dialogue through embodied metaphors

Understanding the embodiment of vulnerability through the Bambi metaphor

In this findings section, we show how the embodied metaphors we identified from our analysis – Bambi, a spider and a bat in a glass box – reveal organisational dialogue as a deeply vulnerable process. We begin with Bambi, which embodies vulnerability in a particularly powerful way, and then move on to the spider, which describes the vulnerabilities of embodied knowledge inherent in

organisational dialogue. Finally, the bat in a glass box crystallises the organisational power structures that prevent vulnerability from flourishing in organisational dialogue.

The Bambi metaphor was used to make sense of Anna's highly sensitive experiences within the organisation. It captures the complex emotions and vulnerabilities experienced during the merger process. The image of the eponymous young deer from the animated film *Bambi* symbolises innocence, fragility and exposure to the world. Just as Bambi must navigate a dangerous forest, Anna found herself in the similarly difficult position of facing her vulnerabilities and the harsh realities of organisational life.

> The Bambi metaphor has been with me for years, and by the time of the research, it was well established in the language of the team. My ex-colleague called me Bambi when I started my first management job. I was young, inexperienced and trusting – gullible. Bambi believed in people's good intentions and 'showed her belly' – her vulnerability – to other people. Sometimes Bambi trusted the wrong person and was hit on the head with a hammer so that stars were circling around her head, like in a cartoon when someone is knocked out. But Bambi didn't stay down. She got up, trusted and was knocked out again.

In the film, Bambi is innocent and trusting, even too much for her own good. The ability to trust others is her special gift that allows her to connect with other people, but it also makes her vulnerable. The metaphorical Bambi represents Anna's initial approach to working with others: open-hearted – perhaps naïve – and seeing the world and her role in the organisation through an idealistic lens. This Bambi is willing to expose her underbelly, embodying an authentic openness and almost instinctive trust in the benevolence of others. The team's adoption of the Bambi metaphor suggests that this openness was somehow valued among the team members but not in the wider organisational context. Hence, as is often the case in organisations, such innocence was met

with contrasting realities, particularly in competitively charged environments in which intentions are not always transparent or genuinely positive. Anna went on to describe the 'transformation' of this Bambi as follows:

> After being hit in the head many times over, the [metaphorical] Bambi grew antlers and a thicker skull. When the organisation decided to abandon dialogic organisational development and fire the team, this Bambi's evolution took a leap. It became a warrior Bambi or an anarchist Bambi. A colleague of mine saw the warrior/anarchist Bambi as red-eyed and staring, with a knife between her teeth and a safety pin through her cheek. No longer innocent and gullible but ready to fight for her values. At the end of my journey in the organisation, I saw graffiti on the street. It looked like a drained wreck of a Bambi, with eyes staring madly out from a skull-like head, tongue hanging out and ribs poking through the skin. I recognised myself immediately. (Autoethnographic diary note)

Picture 1. Bambi transforming herself into a tougher and fiercer version of herself.

The metaphorical Bambi exposes herself and shows her soft and vulnerable side to others. The hurt comes from the loss of trust in and severed connection with other people. When the trust is repeatedly abused, she begins to protect herself by growing antlers and a thicker skull. She learns to protect herself and hide her vulnerability. However, this is not good for the metaphorical Bambi or for the well-being of the organisation. Extending beyond understandings of vulnerability, this study illustrates how embracing vulnerability can lead to courage in the right contexts, with vulnerability no longer constraining actions to the extent that it does when it is denied or concealed (Corlett et al., 2021).

Therefore, the Bambi metaphor is more than a representation of vulnerability; it shows how Anna was learning from her experiences (Dewey, 1938) and trying to co-construct a trusted space

for learning and vulnerability for herself and others (Corlett et al., 2019, 2021). As the quote above illustrates, the metaphorical Bambi is not just a fragile creature but also grows and adapts to her changing environment. This matches what Anna went through as she moved from being unsure to being more aware of the discussions and actions around her. The Bambi metaphor shows how the researcher's identity actually changed as she learned from her experiences while the organisational dialogue unfolded.

> The reflective dialogues we had about the [metaphorical] Bambi helped me maintain a sense of self throughout the organisational turmoil, but at the same time, I was continuously being reborn. This Bambi allowed me to make sense of the intense experiences and of who I was in the middle of it all. It helped me rediscover myself as an independent thinker and a morally courageous agent. (Autoethnographic diary note)

The initial feelings of helplessness gradually give way to greater competence and insight, much like Bambi eventually learns to navigate the forest and find strength. The Bambi metaphor shows how researching this organisation was not just difficult but a highly emotional and embodied process. Not losing oneself during the radical changes required reflection and sensemaking not only about the situation but also about oneself and one's identity as a researcher and a member of the organisation.

Although the Bambi metaphor originally referred directly to a trusting, gullible person, it later allowed Anna and the team to reflect on and make sense of their experiences in the organisation. Some of the more difficult and painful experiences were easier to talk about and share with the metaphorical Bambi. Metaphoring was thus a tool for gradually uncovering vulnerabilities in an organisational dialogue together (Andersson et al., 2018). Metaphors were important elements in this process. They allowed embodied sensations and deep experiences to be shared in such a way

that everyone could identify with the sensations generated by the metaphor, even if the situations described by the participants themselves might feel alien to them.

In the end, the metaphorical Bambi took on a visual form in graffiti that showed not only vulnerability but also the destruction caused by organisational life (see Picture 1). The contrast between the innocent, happy infant Bambi entering her first management job and the exhausted zombie-like Bambi after the merger and team execution was staggering. Anna described it as follows:

> That was me at the final stage: a drained wreck of a Bambi – the juice of life sucked out of her body – reduced to a pile of bones and skin so dry and tight that it cracked. A zombie Bambi, not among the living anymore. Or maybe it was rabies, the inflammation of the brain – at the edge of collapse. Later, I had a dream-like image of empty skins lying around – a waste product of the organisation. (Autoethnographic diary note)

Here, Anna paints a picture of how her energy and strength were gradually drained away amid the organisational turmoil. She oscillates between catatonia and fighting rage, as the reference to zombies and rabies suggests. She is still upright and partly functional but on the verge of collapse and exhaustion, dehydrated and lacking vitality. Anna describes how she envisions empty skins around her. She knows she is not the only one going through such experiences in the organisation. As the degenerative organisation moves on, it uses the life force of its members and leaves behind drained carcasses. In Anna's experience, it has no regard for individual costs.

Weaving dialogical threads: embodied knowledge in the spider's web of interaction

The spider metaphor captures the embodied knowledge hidden in webs of people and organisational practices. Embodied knowledge is viewed here as a process of "knowing in and

through the body" (Parviainen, 2002: 12). It shows how knowledge is continuously recreated in invisible webs in complex and highly nuanced ways, as the following ethnographic diary note illustrates:

> I was in a meeting with two partners from outside the company. We were talking about my team's work and our plans for the future – or lack thereof. I told our partners that nothing was certain and that we would just have to wait to see how things turned out. I felt that the other two wanted a more straightforward approach – more certainty and decisions about the next steps. Such a direct approach felt uncomfortable, like pushing or forcing something to happen that wasn't yet forthcoming. I felt that more sensitivity was needed. I found it difficult to get my point across and justify my gut feeling. (Autoethnographic diary note)

The metaphor of the spider and its web symbolises Anna's embodied sensitivity and sensible agency, as illustrated in the above diary note. Here, Anna takes the metaphorical form of a spider, sensitive to the vibrations in the web and finely tuned to the invisible nuances of her surroundings. In contrast, the other people's desire and hurry for concrete next steps and straightforward answers reflect a desire for clarity and direction that does not *feel* in tune with Anna's more intuitive, organic sense of proceeding in the situation. Anna is sensing subtle shifts and disturbances in the threads rather than seeing all the parts of the web. Similarly, she seems to feel an underlying need for embodied sensitivity and a hesitancy to impose structure prematurely. Pressing for direct answers seems to interfere with this delicate balance, as if a heavy hand is pulling on the web, making Anna wary and reluctant to commit to what others expect her to do in such a straightforward manner.

The embodied knowledge described in the diary note above – Anna's 'gut feeling' that more patience and openness are needed – is a reflection of a kind of knowledge formed from her

personal experience of working within this organisational network. This embodied knowledge is difficult to justify verbally in the meeting because it is not rational or something that she could easily explain to others. It is knowledge co-constructively built up over time in her body and in social relations, interactions and discourses (Strati, 2007; Yaklef, 2010f). The difficulty of 'justifying' this kind of knowledge to her partners highlights a common tension in organisations – that is, the friction between embodied knowledge and the demand for explicit action plans to achieve something concrete.

On the other hand, the metaphor of the spider exemplifies the potential for individuals to be attuned to the nuances of dynamic shifts and interactions. In the context of the challenging circumstances faced by the merged organisation, the way knowledge was shared and transformed between the individuals involved was important for the collective well-being and creativity of the community.

> I later wrote in my research diary, 'We have wonderful moments of flow, when we make things happen and see the significance of the smallest of movements. When I feel that the spider is on its web, I sense it's movements. The web carries her, and the trap works. Keeping an open mind feels important at this moment; it has been the driving force of our work for a long time. Keeping an open mind is listening to the web, listening to the sound of the doors opening and going with an open mind to see what lives there. The right way to proceed, the right next steps will become visible when I listen with sensitivity and trust my intuition.' (Autoethngraphic diary note)

This quote, with its call for 'keeping an open mind', emphasises the importance of receptivity in dialogue and interaction. This openness is framed as essential for fostering open-minded, collective creativity within the organisation. Listening to the 'web' symbolises the need

to be attuned not only to one's own thoughts and feelings but also to the collective experiences and needs of others in embodied, subtle ways. This suggests that genuine communication requires an awareness of the relational dynamics at play as well as an appreciation for the richness of diverse perspectives within the working community. In this kind of situation, even the smallest and most deliberate actions carry meaning while also exposing members of the organisation to vulnerability.

> I can't see them, but I know they're there. I can feel their presence and movements, which creates tension in the web – a particular kind of energy that vibrates and changes all the time. We are all connected through the web. The 'truth' is in the web – all the possible truths. Knowing that reassures me. I can find my way around by listening to the web. But it is invisible, difficult to put in words and impossible to measure – beyond the reach of a microscope and a telescope. But it is there, nevertheless. (Autoethnographic diary note)

This diary note shows how the spider is connected by the web to its surroundings and a community of spiders, which cannot be detected by mechanical instruments. The web symbolises the interconnectedness of spiders and the energy and information flow that travels through the network. The 'truth' – knowledge – is distributed throughout the network and is different for everyone. The only way to gain access to this knowledge is to listen sensitively to the web.

The spider is not dangling in thin air but is carried by the life-sustaining web, which gives her a sense of security. As long as she is connected to the web and can sense its movements, she is able to navigate organisational reality. Gradually, Anna learns to consciously use her embodied knowledge of the web to direct her actions, as demonstrated in the following diary note:

> The metaphor was transformed into the verb 'spidering', which essentially means listening sensitively to the web. Spider is what it is: an eight-legged creature on the web

> without being consciously aware of it. But spidering is something else – something more. It is at least a partly conscious way of engaging with the surroundings – a strategy of a sort. (Autoethnographic diary note)

The spider sits quietly and still on the web, feeling it. She knows the web with her body; she knows how it is at any given moment and when an opportunity arises. However, this diary note suggests that the shift from spider to spidering signifies a shift in awareness. Anna no longer passively receives information through her bodily senses. She also directs her attention and utilises embodied knowledge for action. That is to say, she gradually discovers her embodied agency and begins to use embodied dialogue as a strategy for managing her surroundings and the network.

Verbalising embodied knowledge requires more time and a slower pace than efficiency-driven communication usually allows. With embodied knowledge, one has to start talking on the basis of a whiff of fluffy thought, not knowing what the thought will eventually turn out to be. Verbalising unfinished thoughts can be a frightening experience, especially when certainty is called for. Unfinished thoughts may come out in a silly form, as in the spider metaphor. Such expressive, even poetic, language can be seen as irrational and lacking credibility, being a sign and a symptom of a lower level of professionalism or even lower intelligence. From this, we recognise two vulnerablilities: the ability to endure uncertainty and the ability to face ridicule. The spider metaphor calls for respecting embodied knowledge in a web of relationships in an organisational dialogue, in which the wisest course is sometimes to let the web resonate on its own, to listen deeply and to surrender to vulnerability and unknowingness (Bloomfield et al., 2024) before attempting to force a response.

The bat in a glass box metaphor: using power to fade away the vulnerable core

The metaphor of the bat in a glass box introduces us to a flying animal that is trapped in a box, leaving it unable to fly freely and preventing it from doing the very thing that bats do. As Anna described it, '*The bat in a glass box metaphor began to take shape in a team dialogue as we reflected on certain power-related difficulties that we were facing in the organisation*.' The bat cannot see the walls around it, but it can sense the confining structures with sonar, its embodied sixth sense. Because the walls are not actual physical structures but are made of bureaucracy and the exercise of power, the bat cannot avoid them. As it tries to fly, it hits the walls and hurts itself. Anna describes this metaphor as follows:

> In the bat in a glass box metaphor, I, the bat, am trapped in a glass box, unable to see the invisible walls around me. I can sense them with my sonar, but I cannot see them. The walls prevent me from flying free, and I hurt myself repeatedly when I try to fly and hit the walls. The harder I try to fly, the more I hurt myself. (Autoethnographic diary note)

Anna's autoethnographic diary note poignantly illustrates the experience of being constrained by invisible barriers, which are systemic and structural but perhaps also psychological. This diary note captures the essence of the metaphor, which is fundamentally embodied: Anna feels frustrated, confused and even the self-inflicted pain that arises when she encounters the invisible glass boundaries that she cannot fully perceive or understand. She continues:

> The bat in a glass box came about in a situation in which certain parts of the organisation, especially the so-called upper level of the organisation, seemed unreachable, even though we were supposed to be developing dialogue at all levels of the organisation. We could

> see things happening but could not participate or make our voices heard through the glass walls. (Autoethnographic diary note)

The walls are made of see-through glass, which separates the bat from the management. It can see outside but cannot participate or make its voice heard. It is as if it has been locked away and excluded.

> Sometimes, the bat just sits there in the corner of the box, helpless. She can see the people outside talking to each other, going on with their lives as if she doesn't even exist. She has been put away, silenced and excluded. Her attempts to fly are futile. She has learned that attempts to fly come with pain – crashing against the glass. But she hasn't given up yet. She is resting, recovering, gathering the strength and will for another push. A push to make a sound that someone is bound to hear. (Autoethnographic diary note)

In contrast to the spider metaphor, in which Anna is connected to her surroundings and other spiders in the network, the bat metaphor shows her isolated in a box that prevents her from connecting and creating a dialogical relationship with the management.

The glass walls of bureaucracy and the exercise of power prevent Anna from interacting, sensing or using embodied knowledge for navigation. Anna describes how the bat sits in the corner of the box, hurt and helpless, after hitting the walls in its attempts to fly. Without interaction and connection with other people, Anna's ability to function is severed. There is only a limited amount of room for manoeuvring in the box, and she is unable to operate the living system the way she does as a spider.

This metaphor indicates the difficulty of introducing dialogue with the top level of the organisation and how the status quo protects itself from an emergent change by denying access and

interaction. Anna finds herself in a particularly vulnerable position in relation to management. Hitting the glass walls and being invisible, put away, silenced and excluded is a hurtful experience, but it also signifies the approaching disaster. As she is unable to engage in dialogue with the management, the interpersonal links are severed, and there is no shared understanding between Anna and the management. Eventually, less than a year later, the organisation gave up dialogic organisation development, and Anna's team was made redundant.

This metaphor highlights the fragility of organisational dialogue and how easily it is destroyed by hierarchy and the use of power. It also sheds light on why organisations stop learning and why many change initiatives fail. The web of knowledge described in the spider metaphor is not working. The bat in a glass box can also be seen as a representation of an experience in a siloed organisation in which dialogue and organic regeneration become almost impossible.

One question remains: why would anyone put a bat in a glass box? As suggested above, the status quo protects itself from unwanted changes. Undoubtedly, a bat in a box is less frightening than a free-flying bat if one happens to be scared of creatures of the night. That is to say, we are sometimes afraid of unfamiliar things, especially if they have features or abilities that we think we do not possess, such as the ability to engage in dialogue, build trust and develop authentic relationships. If we then have tools of power in our hands, we may be tempted to use them in a deconstructive way. What we suggest here is that structures of bureaucracy and the use of power, while often justified in terms of rationality, may in fact have a vulnerable core. The iron cage of rationality protects an uncertain and insecure heart that is uncomfortable with its vulnerability. By changing our fixated ways of thinking, learning to respect our embodied vulnerability (Corlett et al., 2019) and opening up to unknowingness (Bloomfield et al., 2024), there is an opportunity to find entirely new dialogues between people and work communities.

Discussion: embodied metaphors as a methodological opening to understanding the vulnerable dynamics of organizational dialogue

The aim of this study was to 'embody' the subtle, often overlooked aspects of vulnerability within organisational dialogue by employing embodied metaphors – Bambi, a spider and a bat in a glass box – as methodological lenses. Each of these metaphors offers a unique methodological vantage point, enabling a multifaceted reflection on the vulnerable complexities that shape dialogic interactions within organisational settings. Using these metaphors, we illustrated that the practice of dialogue in organisations extends beyond mere verbal or otherwise visible communication; it becomes a rich, embodied experience in which vulnerability, interconnectedness and structural constraints interact dynamically.

The Bambi metaphor allows us to approach vulnerability as both a strength and a kind of sensuous weakness in organisational dialogue. Through Bambi, we understand vulnerability not as a weakness to be hidden but as a 'vulnerability' – an openness to others and a willingness to trust, to expose oneself and to engage authentically. However, as our findings illustrate, such openness is inherently risky in many organisational contexts. When the metaphorical Bambi trusts, she also risks disillusionment or even harm. This metaphor emphasises that vulnerability in dialogue requires a supportive environment (Corlett et al., 2019) – one that values openness as part of human expression and not just as a means to a productive end. In practice, Bambi's experiences described in our study showed that vulnerability can become a source of resilience and insight, fostering a culture in which individuals feel safe to share and connect. However, they also highlighted, particularly where organisational norms and cultures may not fully embrace vulnerability, the delicate balance between openness and self-protection that individuals must navigate.

The spider metaphor offers profound insight into the embodied knowledge that weaves through organisational interactions. Just as a spider senses vibrations on its web, organisational

members rely on embodied knowledge to navigate the complex relational dynamics among them. Our findings demonstrate that this interconnectedness and interdependence is crucial for fostering well-being and humane dialogues and work environments within the work community. The spider's way of knowing – feeling rather than seeing – reflects a deeply embodied awareness of the interconnected web it lives on – that is, an awareness that is sensitive rather than directive. In today's fast-paced working life, we believe that this kind of knowledge is particularly important. Embodied knowledge, in this sense, is about the spider's ability to sense subtle disturbances and adjust its actions not on the basis of visible certainty but through an internal, sensory understanding of its environment.

The spider, reliant on its web, cannot simply 'see' the entirety of its environment; instead, it feels it, sensing the subtle shifts and tremors that signify movements, changes and potential connections. This metaphor underscores that embodied knowledge is not purely intellectual but is felt, sensed and woven through interactions, relationships and experiences. The spider illustrates how dialogue serves as a medium for connecting these threads of embodied knowledge, enabling insights that are tacitly held and gradually woven into a coherent understanding. In this sense, dialogue is an emergent, co-creative process that requires patience and attentiveness to subtle cues. The metaphor of the spider also suggests that such interconnectedness can be fragile – when forced or under pressure, the delicate web of connections may fray or break, mirroring the risks inherent in organisational attempts to formalise, control or streamline knowledge-sharing processes.

The metaphor of the bat in a glass box serves as a powerful representation of the organisational structures and power dynamics that can inhibit vulnerability in organisational dialogue. As creatures of the night that rely on echolocation, bats navigate their environment through subtle cues and sensuous interactions, much like people seeking genuinely vulnerable dialogue within rigid hierarchies. The glass box symbolises existing barriers, such as hierarchical

power relations, bureaucratic constraints and cultural norms that restrict open communication and vulnerability. Our findings suggest that these structures often perpetuate an ‘iron cage’ in which the authentic expression of vulnerability is suppressed in favour of maintaining control and order within the organisational dialogue. This metaphor highlights the challenges faced by individuals attempting to foster genuine dialogue in such restricted situations. It also highlights the need for structural changes that promote openness and reduce power imbalances to allow vulnerabilities in dialogue to emerge.

Conclusion

We argue that open dialogue, with a focus on authentic presence, attunement to the moment and to the embodied experiences of people, creates a new kind of space of knowing. We are talking about a process that is inherently different from the kind of organisational dialogue that aims to increase the efficiency and productivity of the organisation - whether such aims are openly articulated or not. The dominance of rationality in traditional organisational discourse is overwhelming and difficult to constrain. However, we argue that it inhibits the genuine dialogue process and prevents its full potential from being realised.

Our research shows how the co-creation of a safe dialogic space, commitment to respond as fully embodied persons, resonating with expressions of emotion, allows the not-yet-spoken experiences to emerge in the form of metaphors and poetic language. We used three embodied metaphors to demonstrate the sensitive and relational nature of the ongoing dialogical process in which members of the organisation learn to navigate organisational reality, and the power of dialogue to transcend organisational discourse beyond rational thinking.

Methodologically, we argue that open dialogue that generates creative and poetic language, encourages embodied knowledge and a more holistic understanding of organisational life. The

deliberate practice of vulnerable dialogue emerged as a powerful tool for transcending the limitations of conventional organisational discourse and traditional academic research practices beyond rational thinking. We therefore suggest that open dialogue and metaphorring should be used more as part of the everyday work of organisations particularly when dealing with difficult issues. This aligns with the social constructionist perspective that emphasizes the importance of language in shaping our realities, meanings and selves (Cunliffe 2002). The shift towards a more humane and responsive way of interaction fosters a work culture of mutual respect, trust, healing and continuous learning from experience, which are essential for socially sustainable organisational growth.

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