



## “The Usual Antisocial Protocol” – Narrative Positioning in the Swedish Office-life

By  
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### Abstract

This article considers experience narratives of “dålig stämning” (bad atmosphere and unease) in Swedish workplaces. The aim of this article is to show how office-employees in Sweden experience, negotiate and understand bad atmosphere and unease in their working life. By analysing personal experience narratives, collected through a qualitative questionnaire, through the lens of narrative positioning (Hynninen 2017; Pöysä 2009; Bamberg 2003; Harré & van Lagenhove 1999). The article shed light on how an uneasy atmosphere is defined and experienced in a Swedish office workplace environment. By analysing narratives collected in the qualitative questionnaire through close reading (Pöysä 2010) concentrating on positions, or who the narrator positions him/herself to be, I conclude that the narrators narrate an experience of lack, and that office unease can be viewed as the attunement phase of a conflict taking place or a call to action to resolve the lack.

**Keywords:** office, workplace, narratology, ethnology, unease, dålig stämning, work life, conflict

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It feels stiff and unnatural in somehow, like the usual antisocial protocol in the office has ceased to exist, one pussyfoots around and wish that someone would say something and break the ice so you can move on. (Clerk b.1988)

In Sweden efforts are being made in offices on a daily basis to alleviate the curious feeling of *dålig stämning*. Bloggers, union, and industry magazines are full of tips how to avoid office unease (Chef.se 10/02 2021, redaktionen.se 08/04, 2021). Even the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs contemplate conflict avoidance in reports on the Swedish self-image (*Bilder av Sverige i utlandet*. UD.05.031).

The aim of this article is to show how office-employees in Sweden narrate, negotiate and understand unease in working life. By analysing personal experience narratives, collected through a qualitative questionnaire, through the lens of narrative positioning (Hynninen 2017; Pöysä 2009; Bamberg 2003; Harré & van Lagenhove 1999) I will shed light on how an unease is defined in experience narratives from Swedish office environments. I will focus on the following questions:

1. How is the unease defined in the narratives?
2. How is the unease used to position oneself in the re-telling of work experience?
3. What strategies of dealing with the unease can be constructed by better understanding the personal experience of bad workplace atmosphere found in the narratives?

The material considered here are experience narratives conveying experience, execution and agency (cf. Smith and Watson 2000: 15). As such, it is a mediation of a separate story world (Herman 2009), in which “a person’s most important concern” (Singer & Salovey, 1993: 4) is conveyed through positioning (Douglas 2010). The value of conducting experience narrative studies on work life unease is (1) to get an illustration of how bad office atmosphere is narrated and therefore made sense of, and (2) show how office uneasiness is perceived and expressed. The benefit is two pronged. Firstly, the analysis will diversify understanding of what is actually narrated when *dålig stämning* is referenced in retellings of situations in the office, which will be beneficial for planning counter measures in everyday office life. Secondly, the analysis will help theorizing the concept itself; thus problematizing the way *dålig stämning* is referenced in planned counter measures by showing how everyday office life can be narrated.

## Approaching the material

The material in this article consists of narratives collected in a qualitative questionnaire distributed digitally in Sweden. To date the questionnaire have collected fifty-seven answers. The questionnaire was constructed in a collective effort as part of the project “*There was an uneasy mood*” – *Daily rituals, clashes and contradictions in multinational Swedish office life*, funded by FORTE. The project aims to discuss the construction of common sense in multinational office environments in Sweden, opening up the question of how Swedish and international professionals make sense of culturally embedded ideas of unease.

The questionnaire was constructed and distributed in collaboration with the Swedish Folk life Archives at Lund University. This methodological choice was partly made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 as conducting ethnographic interviews in person became challenging. Additionally, this method allowed us to get narrative material from a broader spectrum of informants. The questionnaire was open to the public online, but also distributed directly to fifty interest groups connected to Swedish work life and welfare; e.g. NGO’s working with workplace matters, unions, and various state departments. Curiously, the segment one can designate as middle management is overrepresented in the answers to the questionnaire.

In this article I will analyse the positional patterns and techniques used by the narrators through a close read of the material. The majority of answers were written by people working in office environments in Sweden, in contrast to, for instance, factory floors and freelancers. A substantial effort was made to reach as broad a sample as possible: by communicating with unions, the Swedish ministry of Labour and work life actors such as therapists and work life coaches. Despite the efforts to broaden the experience narratives collected, the answers were by large written by people working in an office; ranging from middle managers in the private sector to secretaries in the public sector. Thus, the emphasis in this article is on office workers. This comes with a certain type of informants belonging to the Swedish middle class, with a certain amount of education and with a specific type of experience narrated.

All distinctions vis-à-vis the informants’ persona are self-defined by the informants and only serve the purpose of diversifying them. The informants used here are deemed as representative of the entire material corpus. This means that no extreme positions and narratives are considered in this article. Only narratives that present techniques that are prevalent in all data collected are used. Therefore, the experience narratives discussed here should be viewed as a sample showing the most common narrative positions. The choice to concentrate on the most prevalent type of positioning was done in order to analyse what the majority of the collected narratives tell about the feeling of *dålig stämning*.

The informants are referred to by profession and year of birth, as voluntarily included in the archival documentation. All other personal data is omitted (i.e. names of the informants, gender, place of work and current place of residence) in order to protect the informants' identities. All information disclosed have been voluntarily provided to the Folk life Archives in Lund.

The material has been approached by a method of close reading (Pöysä 2010). Close reading is a process of continuous reading and dialogue with a narrative material corpus, by means of re-reading and notetaking (Ibid:331-334). The method is intuitive and often used by folklorist and ethnographers as a form of attentive analysis of a text with focus on significant textual details. These details let researchers develop a deep understanding of the text's form, function and significance. In the close reading process, I have looked for passages where the informant positions himself/herself within the narrative. Narrative positioning is the construct in which a character is explained in a series of positions vis-à-vis, for example, other characters in the story, other stories or social stages, conveying an understanding of the narrator and his worldview (Herman 2009). The goal is to understand the narrator's view of his/hers experience of office unease as expressed in narrative form. By concentrating on the narrated experience and positioning I will show how the narrator is making sense of the unease.

The questions of the questionnaire were designed to inspire to be answered as freely as possible; that is to say that the questions are open-ended, to inspire the informant to share the everyday life experience (c.f. Marander-Eklund 2012: 65). The questions were grouped in six themes: (1) Bad atmosphere: Write what you mean by "unease" in a work environment. You may give several examples, (2) Situations: Can you describe a situation with unease that you experienced or witnessed? How did it happen? How did it conclude? You can give several examples. (3) I created a unease.....: Tell me if you have experiences of creating unease. Have you (in your opinion) triggered one situation that results in difficult / unpleasant atmosphere at work? (4) Risk of unease...: Are there, in your opinion, situations or places that are more likely to trigger uneasiness at the work? Tell us about different kinds of situations, places and surroundings that pose a risk of unease. (5) Bad atmosphere in a Swedish workplace (and in workplaces abroad): If you have experience of working in countries other than Sweden, tell us about your experiences of bad atmosphere in workplaces in Sweden and abroad. Are there differences / similarities in the handling of unease if you compare? (6) Additional thoughts and considerations: If you have additional comments about a bad atmosphere at work, please share them.

## **Narrative positioning**

Positioning refers to the social and emotional stances that individuals take vis-à-vis real or imagined others (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990). It is concerned with interconnected aspects of interpersonal encounters (c.f. Schiffrin 2010) The interconnected aspects that position theory makes use of is (1) The rights and duties to perform certain categories of actions; (2) The story lines of which such actions are meaningful components; (3) The meanings of people's actions as social acts. (Ibid.). Positioning theory is thus a potent tool in deciphering how people perceive and convey their concerns about the workplace.

The notion of position and positioning within narratology is chiefly concerned with how a narrator positions him/herself within and in the situation of telling a story. Putting attention to actions (including speech acts) within a constructed storyworld (Herman 2009, 106–107), positioning within narratives are textual clues (Herman 2009) that are constructed by putting the narrative self (the representation of oneself) in position against/towards other people, places and contexts within the story (Herman 2009; Hynninen 2017; Löfgren 2020). By analysing the narrated positions one can reveal the positions the narrator takes vis-à-vis co-workers, the boss and social relations within the workplace. Further, it shows how the narrators' thoughts and affective reactions to unease are revealed and made sense of. A main function of narratives is to convey a narrator's thoughts, feelings and stance on a subject matter and/or an experience (Herman 2009).

Positioning theory is used in folkloristic/ethnographic studies of everyday life-narrative, since “[P]ositioning takes place in affective relationships with people, but also with different discourses, practices, places, and spaces” (Hynninen 2017:90). Close reading for positions entails reading a text in search of textual clues in the narrated text, which conveys affectively charged relationships that forms a stance through affect.

Davies and Harré describe positioning as a narrative practice “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants” (1990: 48). Furthermore, positioning makes “storytelling the empirical ground, where identities come into existence and are interactively displayed” (Bamberg 2004: 36). Therefore, positioning theory is also concerned with the construction of the position and identity (self-image) of the narrator. The narrative position constructed in the storyworld through affectively charged relationships reveals the narrators' thoughts about their own position and self-image in the interaction. By using both elements of narrative positioning, I will be able to describe not only how the unease is made sense of in relation to work, but also how the narrators view their own reactions to situations of workplace unease. Knowing how unease is narrated in the relationship to others (how the narrators define/explain their own position in situations of unease) will

render an understanding of how unease is experienced, defined and dealt with ; concentrating on “both on what the talk is about – what they are telling about – and on how they do the telling” (Barkhuizen 2015:100).

Positioning is a technique that is used in an interaction between narrator and narratee. Folklorist Jyrki Pöysä have made the argument that in everyday narrative positioning takes place immediately, in a space-time shared by speakers. Narrative positioning is driven by narrative framing and rhetorical re-imagination (Pöysä 2009:323).

Framing refers to how, in a narrative situation, the common horizon that is immediately shared by those present is extended beyond the present reality in time and place. The narrative frames function as if they were between the immediate real world and the abstract narrative world [...] rhetorical re-imagination usually involves the crystallization of the narrative [text] (the content and form of the narrative are established) and the narrative [performance] (the narrative, stylistic, and thematic features of the narrative that were not present in the original narrative). By re-imagining and at the same time re-positioning, the narrator can construct new actors' positions (Hynninen 2017:263 [author's translation]).

I view the narratives shared by the informants as samples of crystallized forms of unease experiences. That is, the narratives of concern here are re-imagined and positioned versions of situations experienced in everyday life, constructed so that I as a narratee (receiver/listener) am made vary of what-is-to-be-considered as common sense Swedish understanding of unease. By pointing this out I want to highlight two issues. Firstly, the narratives are not everyday office narratives, but rather a crystallisation of everyday narratives. Secondly, the narratives and positions are viewed as tellable because of a perceived common understanding of unease. In these narratives, therefore, also lies what the narrators consider to be common sense behaviour and positions in their place of work.

I will analyse the positioning on a storyworld level (e.g. what position the informant tell). The analysis will be conducted by investigating textual cues of positioning that expresses experience of unease in the workplace through the lens of being an office employee. The textual clues I will concentrate on are positions described in relation to persons present in the narratives; i.e. characters present(ed) in the storyworld.

By conducting a positioning analysis of experience narratives I will also illustrate how the feeling of office unease is utilized to narrate a collective. The narratives are viewed as a construction of a common “we”; a narrative that

uses a “performative we” (Bekhta 2017:107). By narrating a “performative we” the narrator makes themselves a narrative agent for the collective (Ibid), and portrays themselves as a narrative gatekeeper to a collective common sense or the collective experience of *dålig stämning*. One of the basic functions of any narrative is to convey the feeling of having an experience, i.e. qualia (Herman 2009). The concept of qualia or “the sense of what it’s like for someone or something to have a particular experience” (Herman 2009) is used to focus on the subjective experience conveyed in stories. “Qualia is an unfamiliar term for something that could not be more familiar to each of us: the ways things seem to us” (Dennet 1997: 619) and include thoughts, experiences and perceptions of an experience, in this case the experience of office unease. Here, the term will be used to explicate how the informants define and manage *dålig stämning*, in re-telling a “what-it-was-like-to-experience” narrative.

Positioning analysis can be conducted in various depths of the narrative; textually, on a performative level and to conduct narrative interactional studies (Hynninen 2017, Bamberg 1997, 336–337; Bamberg, 2003 358—359). Since the focus of this analysis is the narratives themselves, and beyond the close reading of the questionnaire there has not been any other interaction, the analysis will focus on the positioning in the storyworld; i.e. what position(s) the narrator convey of themselves and others in the telling of the experience. I draw upon earlier folkloristic positioning research (Hynninen 2017, Pöysä 2015, Latvala 2005); discerning who is in the story, and who the narrator positions him/herself to be (cf. Hynninen 2017:264) and what type of a narrator the informants want to portray themselves as.

The close reading has been aimed at finding “positioning cues” used to convey depictions of characters and narrative self. Positioning cues are linguistic elements and discourse constructs such as certain words used to describe characters, constructed dialogue attributed to them, or verbs that reflect a particular position on events and characters (cf. De Fina 2015:360). These cues, and the resulting positions, can have an impact on the qualia of the narrative (Herman 2009). By identifying who the narrator is, and positioning him/herself as in relation to other characters, reveals what-it-was-like to experience *dålig stämning* in the situations narrated. Once I illustrate the qualia of the narrative it shall be possible to see various definitions of unease.

### **Dålig stämning? – a common sense**

In order to explain the positions in the material, I focus on how entrenched the notion of *dålig stämning* is in a Swedish common sense. Common sense is everything we take for granted in the real life world (Stewart 1979), an

understanding that lends its meaning a colloquial sense of tradition and the use of language in everyday life (Ibid).

“Stämning” in Swedish has the same etymological root as the German notion of Stimmung, famously discussed by Heidegger in his work *Being and Time* (2010 [1953]). “Dålig” translates as either “bad” or “ill”, which consequently translates *dålig stämning* as bad or ill mood. Stämning actually could be understood as both “mood” (stimmung) and “attunement” (befindlichkeit) and is determined by discourse (Heidegger 2010:130) and assailing on the world “being-in-the-world itself [...] makes it possible directing oneself toward something” (ibid:133). Attunement is about harmonizing, being aware and finding a tune with the surroundings, in a situation, etc.; to be able to feel, recognize and respond in an adequate way. In a sense, the narrative position taken in the collected stories is a process of directing oneself, and this direction is taken vis-à-vis a common sense understanding of bad mood. To exemplify, I focus on how an idea of conflict avoidance is visible through narratives of *dålig stämning* in this Swedish context.

Among a plethora of common sense elements in any cultural exchanges, there is a communal understanding, even belief (in Sweden), that Swedes are afraid of conflicts, which is most often discussed in the office/work environment; an idea that can be highlighted through the lens of *dålig stämning*. This conviction, for instance, shows up in international comparisons of Swedish work culture, probably best described by Holmberg and Åkerblom: “Swedes are internationally famed for their desire to avoid conflict.” (Holmberg & Åkerblom 2007:49). Although not interchangeable nor equivalent, those two phrases (i.e. *dålig stämning* and conflict avoidance) appear as strongly connected in the material.

It is a widely spread belief that Swedes are afraid of conflict and that this fear, with its connection to “stämning”, constitutes a problem. Stämning and conflict avoidance are mentioned in debates and policy documents ranging from articles in *Chefs tidningen* (The manager magazine) with headings like “Är det låg stämning bland medarbetarna – utan att du som chef förstår varför? Här är 5 orsaker som kan ligga bakom”<sup>1</sup> (Chef.se 10/02 2021); through blog posts from business publishing house *Redaktionen*: “Hur du undviker negativ stämning på jobbet”<sup>2</sup> (redaktionen.se 08/04 2021); to the conclusions drawn about the Swedish self-image and clichés in a Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ rapport on images of Sweden abroad stating: “[The Swedish] mentality: conflict avoidance, silence, slowness, seriousness and melancholy”<sup>3</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs rapport 2005:6). Curiously enough, the words *dålig stämning* were unexplained in the questionnaires and interview questions posed to the informants. That the notion did not need to be explained, neither in Swedish or English versions of the questionnaire, shows that it is an everyday term that is understood as common sense.



In an international comparison on managerial styles Swedish middle managers are described as having a low “conflict inducer” score (Holmberg & Åkerblom 2007:54); meaning that intra group competitiveness is lower in Sweden than in other countries. This is related to the notion and managerial style of seeking consensus leading to a workplace common sense of conflict avoidance; “Rather than seeing conflict avoidance as an end in itself, we believe it is intimately connected with the idea of consensus. Conflict is obviously a threat to the strong norms regarding good conditions for dialogue, so people are consequently expected to be kind to each other and not to quarrel” (Ibid:47). The notions of *dålig stämning* and conflict avoidance appear frequently as the base and point of jokes and humour in Sweden. A famous Swedish/Kurdish stand-up comedian Özz Nûjen made a 90 minute stand up special called “Dålig Stämning” in 2012. Driving on the common sense of the word, he presented uncomfortable jokes about the royal family, Swedishness, and immigration. Still, it is the connection of the office work that makes these expressions pop up the most.

There is a number of ethnological studies that focus on office work and meanings attached to work environments. A classic publication on Swedish workplaces is Birgitta Conradson’s dissertation *Kontorsfolket* (Office Folk). Conradson’s study, which was based on archival material, followed emergence of different groups and the change over time that happened in the office space. Conradson’s aim was “to survey the social and cultural life in offices”, and was meant to be a study of bourgeois culture. But, as she points out, “In reality, however, the office has simultaneously proved to be a meeting place for both the middle class and an aspiring working class” (Conradson 1988:13). Conradson saw the office as a place where different groups could meet, influence each other, and work through different conflicts. The common, ritualistic approach to conflicts and quarrels traced by Conradson through decennia, was overtaken by the individualistic approach, signalling the transition into neoliberal understanding of work and self.

There are several studies that deals with the form and function of narrative within the confounds of narratological studies in/on public life. Barbara Czarniawska (1997) tackled institutions and organizational life’s paradoxes (i.e. following routines with the aim of change, and decentralization in order to control), by applying the metaphor of drama to the study of narratives from organizational life. Within the field of folkloristics, people’s use of narrative coping mechanisms and telling about socially anchored activities with the aim to create opportunity in times of distress were researched (Wolf-Knuts 2013).

Swedish ethnologists, trying to grapple with questions of Swedish mentality, have pointed out that Swedes are afraid of conflict and simply avoid them. In the late 1990s there was an increased interest in the ethnological studies of what

Swedish attitudes and everyday practices are. This was partly due to increasing globalization and EU expansion that triggered a wave of publications aiming to explain working cultures in different countries, albeit often crudely and simplistically. In his study *Svensk mentalitet* (1998) Swedish ethnologist Åke Daun described the Swedish tendency for conflict avoidance as:

“[T]he specially marked tendency towards consensus and “kindness” in direct meetings [...]namely that a certain passivity easily arises, when people encounter a strongly divergent position. In contrast to what is the case in many other cultures, the typical Swede feels no joy or elation at all in the face of the chance to ‘use all his deadly arguments’. Instead, he feels a certain discomfort and waits rather than having to start arguing” (1998, 70).

Besides Daun, ethnologist Billy Ehn claimed that Sweden suffers from the “cultural norm of aggression and conflict avoidance” (1998, 95); a norm made visible in intercultural communication. This leads to Swedes viewing themselves as “less emotional” and less prone to “emotional displays” in debate and discussion. Or in Daun’s words:

If Swedish culture contains a norm that prevents strong emotional expressions, it will be interesting to know how Swedes communicate emotions. The fact that many hold back their emotions does not mean that they lack emotions, it is the strength of emotions and emotional reactions that is less than in many other countries (1998, 147).

*Dålig stämning* emerges as a way to describe passiveness and affects in everyday conflicts. The Swedish public service educational branch also refers to the notion of “dålig stämning” in their series aimed at immigrants in Sweden; making an entire episode of a video production aimed at SFI<sup>4</sup> students on the notion of “dålig stämning” (complete with study material). In the material, a pupil is asked to recognize and define “dålig stämning” as emerging from a slightly awkward student-to-teacher exchange that is not rude, but rather uncomfortable and uneasy. Something is not right, but there are no harsh words or open misunderstandings. Hence, the idea of a norm of Swedish conflict avoidance and the notion of “dålig stämning” is deemed so common sense that it needs to be introduced to people immigrating to the country. One can ponder that Swedish policy documents were actually influenced by Åke Daun, as his research was known and referred to in workplace reports, and reports on Swedish self-image and studies on Swedish work life.

What I claim here is that a norm of conflict avoidance is a part of the Swedish self-image; a common sense that there is a shared belief in Sweden that Swedes are afraid of conflict. *Dålig stämning*, in turn, emerges as an expression of fear of conflict. Hence they are connected as *dålig stämning* is often used to name the affect and situation in which a conflict is avoided; a communally known vernacular to explain instances of conflict. Now I will return to the collected narratives, to explicate how the notion is negotiated and understood by the informants, which in turn will question the connection of *dålig stämning* to the idea of conflict avoidance.

### **The dramatis personae of dålig stämning**

It is pertinent to know who features in the majority of the collected narratives in order to illustrate what positions the narrators take when narrating their experiences. The reason for explicating who is featured in the narratives, is to establish what characters are present in the narratives and affective relations towards them (c.f. Hynninen 2017:90). The aim here is to show the various characters featured in the narratives, a list of dramatis personae considered when trying to explain *dålig stämning*. Often the characters are described devoid of any defining elements or personality, or employment status. In that sense the characters are anonymous and void of any characteristic traits other than the cause of the situation that starts the unease. This is visible in the following example, where the people are referred to as unidentifiable colleague(s):

A colleague had made some material (I think, I do not remember exactly what) and another colleague had commented on this which was not badly meant but possibly a bit clumsily worded. The first colleague became very upset and they basically started a public argument. A third colleague guided them into a room where they could talk out in peace and when they came out of there I think they had reached some form of consensus. (Librarian, b.1987)

Other mentions of individual characters are done in an even more elusive form of “one does” or “someone”, as in this answer to the question “Bad atmosphere? Describe what you mean by “unease” in a work environment. Feel free to give several examples”:

- When someone is too political and it is obvious that the rest do not think in the same way

- When someone talks with full disclosure about private matters and everyone else sees it as embarrassing but not that person
- When someone makes sexist / racist / homophobic jokes
- If someone gives a really bad unprepared presentation
- If someone does not read the room it enters and suddenly takes over the conversation
- The department meeting is always a bad mood! (Postdoc b. 1986).

The characters in these two answers are referred to as singular/individual people who are anonymized. Often, the narrators refer to a collective as “group”, “co-workers”, “employees” or “the management”, as exemplified by this informant:

[M]any co-workers were frustrated because the management was bad at giving directives. It often went wrong, processes were inefficient and some employees were bored while others had too much to do. The distribution of work was poor. Then there was also no progression in the workplace, which many found difficult and depressing. The management shone with its absence (Digital communications adviser. b.1987)

Often the individual character is narrated in relation to a larger collective; ‘someone/this individual/colleague is in fray with the collective/us/them’. As in this informant’s tale, clearly narrating a battle of wills between individuals and a collective:

By “dålig stämning” I mean the behaviours of one or more individuals within a group that negatively affect the whole group rather than individuals (eg. bullying). It can be behaviours and personality traits of individuals that irritate others in the group. People who always arrive late for meetings, who do not “deliver” on time and then slow down the development of projects, who take liberties outside the regulations e.g. use common equipment without first making an appointment for such use. (Biologist b.1978)

The most prevalent individual dramatis personae in the collected narratives, often-featured in narratives concerning individual vs. collective is, perhaps not surprisingly, the boss. In fact, all collected narratives features a boss. In line with other narrated individuals, the boss is described using no other character-traits than negative ones. For instance:

I have had for several years a narcissistic and self-centered boss who is like a big kid. It affected the team I have worked for (4 people + the boss) a lot. She scatterbrains around, is unfocused and starts new things and it is all about getting her to end up in a better light towards her bosses. There is not often an open unease, however, we 4 need to stick together against the boss to survive. So in that sense, it is a bad mood. A lot of energy is spent dealing with the mess that the boss causes. (Administrator at Public Authority. b.1971).

The example shows that the individual is often (but not always) narrated as the source of *dålig stämning* in relation to the collective. The quote also illustrates how the boss-individual is attributed with only negative traits: “big kid”, “scatterbrain” etc. Importantly other attributes are left out, thus keeping the boss fairly incognito.

Common traits in all the collected narratives strive towards unidentifiable characters; be the characters referred to individually or as a collective. The reason for illustrating this is, that in order to further my argument by (henceforth) explicate how the narrative self is positioned in relation to the other(s), it has been necessary to describe the people featured in the stories. I will now turn to the narrative position of the narrator(s) themselves.

Positioning creates antagonists and protagonists by the use of positional cues (De Fina 2015). Positioning can be done vis-à-vis other storyworld depictions than characters. These can be, among other things, materiality and societal discourse (such as political opinions) (cf. Löfgren 2020). In the narratives collected the positioning is overwhelmingly done in relation to human characters in the storyworld. This means that the unease, when narrated, resides within the realm of interpersonal relations and communications, in contrast to, for instance, the material office environment. The positioning also shows that the feeling of *dålig stämning* is described as both collective and individual, leading to the feeling being understood as both “mood” (*stimmung*) and “attunement” (*befindlichkeit*) simultaneously. The situations narrated above show that the unease is present in potential conflict deemed by the narrator as non-resolved, or not-to-be-resolved-now.

## Positioning the individual self and the narrated other

Moving forward, I will ponder the positions narrated in the terms of collective and individual, i.e. who the other individual colleague/collective is and how the narrator's narrative self is placed in relation to the other(s).

The following narrative was given by a workplace counsellor. It was an answer to the question: "Can you describe a situation with an unease that you have experienced or witnessed? How did it happen? How did it end? You can give several examples":

There is criticism from some employees against a middle manager, while others appreciate her and think her shortcomings are excusable. When a senior manager retires and replaced by a new one, she [the senior manager] is made aware of a part of that criticism. The new senior manager quickly forms a perception of the middle manager as a person who does not cooperate. The middle manager is given the choice to return to her basic [earlier] position or resign.

She quits. Some of the employees, despite their own criticism [towards the middle manger], think that the errand has been handled poorly. In the year that follows, it [the handling of the situation] will be one recurring element during unit meetings, that they [employees] bring up [during meetings], how the middle manager had been handled, and express criticism.

The comments are usually not straightforward, but more hints. It creates a unease[sv. dålig stämning]. Some people think that people are dwelling on the matter and that they should quit it, the matter is a closed case, and the [senior] manager who made the decision [to fire the middle manager] is still not present to hear and give answers [to the critique]. How it ended? It slowed down after a while, the people got tired enough. (workplace counsellor. b.1967).

The individuals mentioned in this narrative are chiefly the middle manager and a senior manager, who are in conflict, clearly presented in the position(s) the narrator presents. The main characters are described as an either/or character in the case of the victim middle manager; and a quick on the gun senior manager. Both of them are described only with negative traits. The middle manager is featured as having shortcomings, in some cases seen as excusable; the senior is described as new and quick to form her opinions of the matter at hand. The entire conflict is commented on by the use of (indirectly) narrator herself and (anonymous) others

as bystanders to the situation: “criticism from some employees against a middle manager”, “others appreciate”, “some people”. The unease (*dålig stämning*) is created in the narratives by constant commenting on the handling of the situation, done by the collective workforce.

The two main characters are a perceived protagonist (the middle manager) and an antagonist (the senior manager). The narrator describes the middle manager as a person who is partly appreciated, and with excusable shortcomings; thus positioned as a character with acknowledged limitations. She is also described as someone who have had her fair share of criticism, thus creating a position of someone in the office one was either for or against. The senior manager is mentioned in two segments. First, described as quickly forming her perception and making the decision to let the protagonist go. Second, the manager appears as not being present to hear the criticism in the prolonged “dwelling on the matter”. The positioned senior manager is an antagonist in that she is described, in an insinuating tone, as having the main responsibility, and making a hasty decision, though not being present to face the music. The story of the situation is in itself positioned with the narrator as a bystander who partly tries to explain the origin of the dwelling on the matter leading to unease at the office, and partly insinuating that the senior manager is to blame and should take responsibility for the situation. According to the narrative, the origin of the *dålig stämning* seems to reside in the conflict between the two managers, and the lack of closure of the matter, seeing that it is still dwelled upon. In this case, the narrator seems to be both the one feeling bad (individually), and situating herself as the mouthpiece of a collective of “some people”, thus insinuating that she is not the only one experiencing *dålig stämning*.

A Municipal official described the following situation:

A colleague erupted and spoke quite aggressively to another that he had a difference in opinion with. It was not called, and erupted suddenly. People turned around and started trying to talk about something else. It was kind of ignored, later it was a bit stiff in the angry person's company for a while, but it settled down. (Municipal official b.1971)

Again, the main character is incognito, being described only by the negative emotions of “quite aggressive”. There are another anonymous colleague and another conflict that is witnessed by the narrator as a bystander; with the same conclusion of the situation ebbing out: “it settled down”. There is also a strong presence of an anonymous workplace collective that feels unease in the situation caused by the main characters and a lack of resolving the situation officially. It just died out on its own, without any interventions.

William Labov's famous narrative structure (1972) contains two elements of concern here, (1) complicating action and (2) resolution. In the narratives of concern in this study, there is a lack of/insufficient resolution of the situation. This lack leads to *dålig stämning*. The narratives seem to be in the beginning of a prolonged feeling of office bad mood, as for instance in "later it was a bit stiff", or that people kept dwelling on the matter. In these narratives concerning situations of office unease, it is clear that the positioning of the other is used to describe the origin of a prolonged bad mood. The described situations are the starting points where narrated individuals are positioned as the root of the problem, and the narrator appears as onlooker/reporter of an incident. The unease is caused by a witnessed conflict by people who are not myself- the speaker. Furthermore, the incident have implications for the collective. The situation is narrated by the narrator as eliciting a negative mood collectively, making the narrator part of a we/us and the singled out individuals described in negative terms and positioned as outside a collective we. Thus, the narrator positions him/herself as a spokesperson for a collectively felt unease or "constructs a plural storytelling voice and a plural narrator, communal or collective" (Bekhta 2017:107); a "collective narrative agent" (Ibid). This indicates that *dålig stämning* can mark constructions of 'us versus them' that could with time grow into more serious conflicts. *Dålig stämning* here is then more of an indicator than a problem, thus marking a possibility of action to prevent unwanted developments.

## I – a spokesperson for the collective

The narrative position in the stories mentioned above - the who am I (de Fina 2015:360) – is one of a reporter of events that implicates a bystander role. The narratives are given in answer to the question of giving examples to situations that define *dålig stämning*. When we asked whether the narrators themselves have elicited unease in the office environment, the position changed and therefore, the experience of *dålig stämning*. A social scientist born 1973 provides the following narrative:

I mentioned in frustration at a meeting that I think we have unclear assignments, ambiguity in the [professional] role, and that this is a risk in our puttied work environment because we [who are] in the same professional category have very different pictures of what and how we should work. I said we need to bring this [situation] up, and that it was a pity that the works safety representative was not present, as he should have raised the issue as a work environment risk.



This created discomfort in a couple of colleagues. I spoke further after the meeting with the manager and clarified the issue. However, later that afternoon I was called by a colleague on sick leave who was not present at the meeting, but who was made aware of the fact that I been very upset. She took it upon herself to call me, because the others did not dare. A [other] colleague had, before the following meeting, expressed some concern about how it would proceed at this [next] meeting [concerns] such as that I might still be frustrated and that it [the meeting] would be unpleasant again. (Social scientist, b.1973)

The use of the narrative self like “I mentioned”, “I think” indicates a more active/direct role in the progression of the narrative. The situation narrated is one where the narrative self has an opinion on the conduct of the collective, who are now in a clash with the narrator. The narrator positions herself in relation to others( the colleagues in the “same [professional] role”, the safety representative) in such a way that the narrative self is taking responsibility in the situations like “unclear assignments” and ambiguity in the work role. This suggests that there is a lack of responsibility that needs to be resolved. Further, the situation continues with an intervention of a colleague, not present in the meeting, who takes responsibility to call and voice the collective concerns “because the others did not dare”. A position is thus of trying to resolve a perceived conflict here and now. The position of the others in the narrative is constructed to produce the position of the narrative self as someone who dared stand up and point out the difficult situation, for the betterment of the collective. The narrator raised an issue at the meeting and resolved the differences with the manager. The unease resides in the position of cowardice on behalf of nameless others, who are represented in the narrative by the “colleague on sick leave” and the colleague speaking with her before the next meeting. The origin of this *dålig stämning* resides in the lack of responsibility of both the safety representative, and others who have not dared to speak up about the “of what and how we should work”, as well as in the conversations between the two colleagues trying to express “some concern about how it would proceed at this [next] meeting”. Additionally, the use of “we” in the complaint “how we should work” indicates further that the narrator’s view on the situation is one of taking charge of the situation for the sake of a silent majority (e.g. trying to resolve the situation immediately) The two colleagues wanting to have less unpleasantness in the next meeting, on behalf of the same silent majority, later crack down on her taking charge. *Dålig stämning* appears to be a result of addressing *an* issue and not *the actual* issue. For what one knows from the narrative, there might be real risks at work and safety problems. That is not what *dålig stämning*, as presented by the narrator, is about. Instead, *dålig stämning* resides in how the actual issue was

brought up, presented, and then dealt with, highlighting communication issues and an avoidance of a possible conflict.

A Human Resources employee offers up a similar situation:

Not difficult and unpleasant atmosphere, far from it. However, I have a behaviour that in some [peoples] taste is too straightforward and honest and it can create a bad mood. At the end of a management meeting, I criticized the lack of action in a staff situation, which was directly linked to that the CEO did not carry out his assignment. Then there was a unease for a moment when no one else at the meeting was comfortable telling that to the CEO, as they say it behind the back of the CEO. (HR-employee. b.1978)

The narrator starts with positioning herself as not having caused difficult or unpleasant atmosphere and stating that she “have a behaviour that in some [peoples] taste is too straightforward and honest”. In this situation there are anonymized “some [people]” who see this as a problem. The situation with the lack of action on the behalf of the CEO strengthens the impression of the narrator as one that have taken upon herself the thankless task of speaking up for the sake of the collective good. The *dålig stämning* is here a result of the bystanders’ (“some”, “they”) interpretation of the situation. In that, the experience of *dålig stämning* is a result of the collective’s reaction to the effort made by the HR-employee to resolve a perceived problem. As such, *dålig stämning* in this narrative is described as the fruit of a positive action from the narrator, met by an affective response by the nameless others who are positioned as people-who-did-not-take responsibility for the situation (alongside the CEO).

In both the narrated situations where the ‘I’ is a spokesperson for the others, these ‘others’ are narrated as having *dålig stämning*. The difference to the preceding narratives is that when the narrative self admits ‘I am the cause of it, I had the best intentions’. When other individuals cause *dålig stämning* they are to blame. All the narratives considered here have a relationship to ‘lack’. When the cause of *dålig stämning* resides in other characters than oneself, the unease is a result of a lack of something, be it responsibility, courage or resolution to a situation. When ‘I the narrator’ appears as the cause of bad mood, it is because he/she tried to resolve this lack immediately, a lack of clarity in the communication, a lack of action etc. In this, the what-it-is-like experience of *dålig stämning* can be described as revolving around lack and lacking. Curiously, the narratives given when the narrator him/herself is the self-defined cause of *dålig stämning* also changes the form of narrative dropping the narrative resolution<sup>5</sup>, having a more coda like construction (Labov 1972). A coda, in Labov’s narrative structure has the function of evaluation

of what has been told (Labov 1972). Simply put, a coda can finish or evaluate a tale by summarizing it in a short, precise manner. The narrative structure of the instigator does not contain a resolution of the narrated lack (the “lack of action” is not resolved), but uses the function of the reflection to create the position of the narrator as “have a behaviour that in some [peoples] taste is too straightforward and honest”. The position of the narrator as the instigator emerges in this direct jump from ‘complicating action’ to ‘coda’; meaning that the instigator’s position renders a narrative that jumps to (self)reflection on the situation in contrast to a simple ending of ‘the lack was resolved’. This shows that *dålig stämning* points to a situation that-is-not-resolved in the now, but rather creates a feeling pointing out that a lack is existing. Yet again, when used in a narrative coda, *dålig stämning* is used like a wrapping on a problem, and not an actual problem.

### **The narrators position, the definition, and experience of office unease**

Throughout the examples, different positions have been cued by the narrators. They result in different meaning ascribed to *dålig stämning*. The positions narrated all relate to a relationship between individual and collective, and all transmit an experience of lack that is not resolved in the narratives. When unease is narrated in a situation in which the narrator is not the perceived instigator of the situation, the narrator takes the position of verbalizing a perceived collective unease, i.e. the mouthpiece of others. When the narrator tells of a situation in which him/herself is the instigator of the unease, the position is that of taking action relating to the collective feeling of unease or lack and narrating oneself as daring to take action for the collective (trying to resolve the lack immediately).

When describing *dålig stämning*, then, the what-it-is-like (Herman 2009) lies in an observed collective affect. The narrative position is showing an attunement process, directing the narrator towards a solution, either by verbalizing it or by taking action. Furthermore, *dålig stämning* is used to describe an outcome of a lack in the workplace. The mouthpiece position indicates that a lack has not been resolved, closure of a situation has not been reached and therefore *dålig stämning* lingers. The daring action position is similarly an indication of a lack the narrator tried to resolve, on behalf of the collective. *Dålig stämning* in these cases is a consequence of the collective reaction to the narrator’s attempt of resolution.

*Dålig stämning* is used in the collected narratives to tell about a lack that is perceived to be noticed by a collective workforce. The experience that the informants are conveying, what-it-is-like to experience *dålig stämning*, is thus a lack felt in the collective. The positions taken by the narrators also point towards different phases in a story of trying to resolve whatever is lacking; be it directives,

respect, progression in the workplace or something else. As such *dålig stämning*, when verbalized, is not a result of a fear of conflict and passivity, as Daun would have suggested. That is *dålig stämning* is not necessarily an expression of the common sense understanding of 'fear of conflict'. Rather, it is a signal of a process of attunement and directing the narrator towards taking action to resolve a conflict. When narrated, *dålig stämning* is told as the first step in putting words to/acknowledging a conflict. Furthermore, the term is used to explicate a situation where a conflict no longer is between individuals but perceived as brewing collectively. The narrators taken positions indicate an observed collective lack, and therefore can be understood as a call for action.

### Concluding remarks

In this article I have analysed the positions narrated in situations of mood of unease in Swedish office space. By looking at the positions or who the narrator positions him/herself to be (Hynninen 2017) I can conclude that the narrators view themselves as spokespersons for a collective. By taking this position they narrate *dålig stämning* as an experience of lack that needs to be resolved on behalf of the workplace collective. Because the descriptions of *dålig stämning* has a qualia of lack felt in the collective, I claim that *dålig stämning* is not a result of conflict avoidance or a lack of initiative in relation to a workplace conflict, but rather the attunement phase of a conflict taking place or a call to action to resolve the lack. This phase is visible as the narrators perceive *dålig stämning* in a situation where the lack/conflict is not dealt with in the here-and-now. Both individually and collectively unease shows an 'unresolvement' of a situation that should be resolved. Office place unease (here) is therefore a feeling that is used in the narratives as a 'call to action'.

Knowing this should help in reassessing the engagement with situation of office unease in the Swedish context. Understanding *dålig stämning* as a call to action or the attunement phase, should prompt action. Since the experiences narrated here point towards lacking, office unease could be dealt with by identifying what the lack is. That *dålig stämning* seems to be a result of an individual speaking up or talking action on behalf of a collective, also indicates that there is a perceived collectiveness; the lack is perceived as a common sense understanding within the office. Therefore, it is a sign of a collective issue. By assessing *dålig stämning* as a sign of collective lack as understood and verbalized by an individual, dealing with *dålig stämning* is dealing with a workplace conflict before it is full blown; dealing with a lack in a phase when it is first recognized.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Is there a low mood among the employees - without you as a manager understanding why? Here are 5 reasons that may be behind it. (Chef.se 10/02 2021)
- 2 How to avoid negative mood at work
- 3 mentalitet: konfliktundvikande, tystlåtenhet, långsamhet, allvar och tungsinne
- 4 SFI (Swedish For Immigrants) is a government system to teach immigrants Swedish language and culture.
- 5 What Labov calls “complicating action” is left unresolved

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