

SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF UNCERTAINTY AND RISK IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES: AFFECTIVE-EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

1

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Uncertainty, risk, insecurity and other terms in the same semantic constellation can be considered the *zeitgeist* of Western contemporary societies, affecting daily life and experience. Both psychological and socio-cultural points of view will be assumed in order to identify some of the antecedents of this phenomenon. Rationality, control and meaning-making processes will be used as conceptual tools to understand psychological organization of life experience in articulation with the decline of grand collective socio-cultural narratives and the parallel evolving process that goes from the emergence of individuality to its extreme version: the consolidation of individual singularity. Implications will be discussed in relation to the understanding of adolescents' school experience and to teachers' educational intervention.

In this sense, the subjective experience of uncertainty will be analysed, following this sequence of steps:

- (a) how the problem has been formulated, *i.e.*, some consider it as a new psychological and social problem, while others take it as an invariant of the human experience of existing in the world; some perspectives elect the social, cultural and/or political level of analysis while others prefer to underline the psychological dimension of the problem; in the interior of psychological perspectives it is possible to observe that some are restrained to the intrapsychic level of analysis while others can be characterized by broader and more comprehensive ways of understanding in different degrees: individual, relational, group, institutional, or community/contextual points of view;
- (b) the most pregnant psychological aspects that emerge from the subjective experience of uncertainty;
- (c) the analysis of a wider dimension of social, cultural and political factors which create the context that might influence the individual feature of uncertainty and risk from which it might be understood the effective valuing, in contemporary societies, of an individual subject, left to his/her own, confronting the task of constructing a viable sense for his/her own existence, *i.e.*, the conscious, autonomous individual and singular subject, considering the range of implications, that stem from this situation (*e.g.*, the "blaming of the victim" phenomenon).

(d) The possibilities of searching for integration of both latter dimensions of analysis (e.g., to which extent is the psychological category the reflection, at an individual level, of social and political features of the societies we live in, or to put in other words, how it is usual that, in our societies, political problems become “naturally” transformed into psychological/individual problems).

(e) The exploration of cultural sources of uncertainty, including the socialization *deficit* (in both levels, primary and secondary), the ideology of rationality and control, and finally, the value of individualism.

(f) Last, but not the least, educational implications will be inferred from previous reflection and analysis.

Uncertainty and insecurity

In effect, uncertainty can be considered one of the main symptoms of our societies. The psychological origin of this feeling of uncertainty (and of insecurity) stems from our attachment relationships in different levels of security [or basic trust, as Erikson (1963) has proposed]. According to John Bowlby's (1982) attachment model, we are condemned to construct a subjective representation of ourselves, the significant other and the world. The psychological management of uncertainty comes from the possibility of representing the world as predictable (in reasonable ways), regarding the relationships between objects/elements, out of our daily experience.

The usual understanding of attachment is to conceive it as a source of emotional relationships meaning. Less usual is the perspective according to which attachment is the origin of how power relationships are understood (Marris, 1996). It follows that the management of uncertainty is an issue of meaning and power/competition (for autonomy and control) in different levels of individual and social functioning. In addition, one may question whether and to what extent contemporary societies undermine the sense of security individuals struggle to attain.

4 This might be a case for considering psychological and social origins of uncertainty and of the ways to manage it. But what is, in this reasoning, understood as psychological? A brief clarification of the concept might be useful to appreciate further analysis. The category of psychological is, here, envisaged from an anti-essentialist and anti-substantivist point of view which could be condensed by the expression: “there is no essence: only existence”. Indeed, the psychological is the outcome of a historical and social never-ending process where the

construction and internal organization of individuals as subjects of meanings, emotions, thoughts and actions takes place. Secondly, the main source of such a construction process is to be looked for in human relationships, particularly those very special relationships that take attachment as their central feature; in other words, close relationships, emotionally invested, affectively charged, having very special and effective channels of transmission and communication (for the best as well as for the worst), and that have, as main pillar, security in different degrees. It is a sort of psychological "consanguinity" that keeps people connected or even attached as if there was a kind of "glue"... In sum, if one risks the use "essence" in reference to psychological phenomena, one should say that it is of a *relational* nature.

Finally, it is worth to complete this conception by saying that, in addition to understanding the psychological as the outcome of a relationships history, one should not forget that it is also the individual expression of a certain culture on different levels (contents, processes and structures).

Psychological and developmental roots of uncertainty and of personal resources to cope with it are to be found in attachment relationships (secure *versus* insecure) or, to use a different framework, in basic trust *versus* basic distrust, as E. Erikson would prefer to put it. In addition, the hypothesis of a social, cultural and political source of uncertainty deserves, also an analysis, since it can be considered that societies may facilitate or create difficulties to the individual search for security. In this sense, what is the role of contemporary societies?

One frequently hears and reads about a growing feeling of uncertainty in our societies. Uncertainty, insecurity and risk are ever present words in dominant social discourse, namely in mass *media*. Is it the case to talk of more insecure, uncertain and risky societies (vd., Beck, 1992)? To begin with, it should be asserted that uncertainty and risk are an invariant of human existence all over the centuries. Was it a certain and secure world the one that was experienced during the Middle Ages? The plagues concerning health, the climatic changes with respect to agricultural harvests or the arbitrary power of feudal suzerains can only lead us to the conclusion that human experience during that era was not so certain, secure or risk-free. Other historical examples could be presented. What is the main reason why people in our societies tend to express more acute feelings of uncertainty? The answer can be found both at individual and social levels.

Why uncertainty is felt as a "contemporary" phenomenon

Regarding the first – or the more psychological one –, perhaps the key factor lies in the inevitable condition of human beings, "condemned", as they are, to construct meaning for their

own experiences of existing in the world. It is, indeed, absolutely indispensable for us to interpret, to understand, to create a meaning for our experiences, for ourselves, as individual subjects, and for the world. It is through the meaning-making activity that a sense of coherence, consistency and, therefore, control can be achieved. The world appears and is felt as liveable if we can symbolize it. In contrast, we are not individual viable subjects if the world is perceived and felt in the absence of sense (diabolic in opposition to symbolic). The emptiness resulting from the impossibility and/or absence of meaning is, in fact, unbearable for human beings.

One should agree, in consequence, on the primacy of meaning (its structures and processes) in human psychological functioning. Furthermore, all the dimensions of psychological functioning express different modes (languages) and levels of such a meaning construction activity. Emotions – we are not concerned here with the differentiation between ground, primary or social emotions, as Damásio (2003) has proposed – are, indeed, a first level of meaning making for our experience. Although primitive, and, precisely because of it, they constitute powerful and decisive ways of meaning construction stemming from the body “theatre”. On a second level, feelings appear as a more elaborated process of meaning construction, this time in the mind “theatre”. When these feelings are submitted to human reflection, reasoning and thought, they attain a more complex shape, one of a cognitive nature. Evidently, since human action is rarely random or without purpose, it should also be considered as a way of expressing meaning in behavioural terms, being regulated by special kinds of meanings we use to call intentions and expectations, among others. In conclusion, meaning making (and its processes and structures) works as an essential device to exercise control at the individual level.

On the other hand, it is common to hear about the crisis of meaning and about the malaise/unease that it provokes in contemporary societies, dominated, as they seem to be, by turbulence, surprise, unpredictability, instability, indetermination and precariousness. The appearance of the main psychological function of meaning making, as a way of creating a world where individual and collective life is possible, a world of relative stability (or of predictable relationships and legitimate expectations), a world that is the adequate context for our projects and actions seems, then, to be threatened.

6 One of the factors that might be related to the growing feeling of uncertainty and to difficulties of giving a sense to human experience in our societies concerns the loss of power of past grand collective and inclusive meta-narratives that used to accomplish that mission of providing a coherent meaning to human existence. To put it in concrete terms: if we go back to the example already mentioned of uncertainty in the Middle Ages, the analysis will be incomplete if we do not consider the fact that medieval societies were dominated by a teocentric culture where the religious and political powers were mixed. In this case, belonging to such a society entailed the integration in a collective meta-narrative that produced a message of this type: “to suffer on

earth in order to deserve a place in Heaven". The world appeared to be organized, predictable and with its own intrinsic order – in psychological terms: ordered, predictable and, thus, controllable. Of course, such a message was effective because this collective narrative was imposed on individuals and communities, leaving no range of manoeuvre for alternatives. It was not susceptible to discussion, questioning or option. To the extent that it was universally inclusive, it was equally oppressive. Nevertheless, the meaning of human life was guaranteed. Other grand meta-narratives emerged in subsequent times. Although not so strong, they played the role of salvation narratives, thus, providing a sense for human existence and a meaning for the future. Such have been the cases of democracy (after the French Revolution and its ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity), promising the resolution of human problems; of political ideologies (like communism) creating the hope of a new man and of a just society; of science and technology, contributing to the illusion that sooner or later all sources of uncertainty and incapacity of control would be explained and mastered.

The evolution with regard to the strength and the inclusive character of these collective narratives has been in the direction of its banishment. They are not so strong (and impositive) and inclusive (it is not a coincidence that nowadays we live in exclusive societies). The counterpart has been the emancipation of individuals and the enlargement of the range of personal options and choices.

It is not also a coincidence at all that Psychology emerged at the end of the nineteenth century accompanying the process of individualization of human life. Indeed, psychological services, professional and interventions play, presently, the role of supporting individual subjects to cope with the burden of constructing by themselves a viable sense/meaning for their lives. Career guidance and counselling are not more than an illustration of that role of the quest for sense (when it takes as reference the relationship with learning and working).

It should be noted that the weakening of collective narratives parallels the process of individualization of human life until its present extreme version: the radical singularity of personhood. In addition to the fact that increasingly we feel obliged to handle by ourselves existential tasks and challenges, we also are expected to have a unique personality that has to be publicly expressed and exposed in order to be socially recognized and/or to accede to social opportunities (e.g., to apply for a job in labour market).

Left to him/herself, the individual tends to experience more difficulties in managing uncertainty (an alternative way to express the notion of control or agency). The complexity and apparent fragmentation of the social realities we live in create additional obstacles to the task of identifying patterns and regularities in events that allow for prediction and control. When things seem to be unpredictable, people keep their choices of action open (for instance, in career

decisions); in more severe situations, the tendency is to withdraw into familiar certainties or fall into despair (Morris, 1996).

The problem seems to be that in an individualized society assets of power, control, agency or uncertainty management are, objectively, unevenly distributed. As Campos (1992) and Law (1991) put it, the problem is that different levels of personal power in interaction with social power produce also different personal and social outcomes. The less equipped, the weakest have, obviously, less probability of effectively managing uncertainty, and, in many cases, their attempts to achieve control over situations produce the sole result of confirming their weakness: social exclusion is in great part the expression of uncertainty in our societies in the absence of personal management resources.

The problem can now be reformulated: it refers not only to individual/psychological versus social/political roots of uncertainty but to their interaction. In more specific terms: the interaction between the personal construction of a sense of agency, in the framework of a subjective representation of a relatively and reasonably predictable world, and, on the other hand, the social organization of powers of control of relationships and freedom of action, unequally distributed by individuals.

According to Marris (1996), this interaction has not been a sufficient and satisfying object of study and research. He claims that this occurs partly because of our social organization of knowledge systems on a disciplinary basis, separating the psychology of individual action from the analysis of social organization and *vice-versa*. For example, Psychology tends to explain, in a self-sufficient way, the origins of anxiety and depression, taking as basis criterion a self-confident, autonomous and secure personality. As mentioned earlier, are not these psychological attributes the sediments (the residual elements) of a personal experience culturally embedded? On the other side, sociological, anthropological and political approaches are more interested in the uneven distribution of wealth and power. Each one does not have much to say about the way conditions are created out of which anxiety and depression emerge and grow and become a generalized sense of social malaise as it appears to occur in Western contemporary societies or about the source of what could be designated as the present growth of the "politics of uncertainty" (*cf.* Marris, 1996)?

The same could be asserted in relation to the observed competition to struggle for autonomy in which each one attempts to protect his/her freedom of action and power at the cost of constraining others, *i.e.*, the weakest from social, cultural and economic points of view. The result is the maximization of uncertainty since that competition undermines reciprocity in human relationships. For the segregated, the options left, in addition to religion (avoiding any value

judgement in this respect) are, in many cases, superstition and magical thinking as strategies of acquiring some sense of control over their lives.

Reciprocity acts, undoubtedly, as a condition for more balanced human relationships, in the sense that the less we are concerned to meet each other expectations, the less trustworthy are the interaction patterns on which we rely, and, finally the more uncertainty we produce for ourselves and others.

The implications with respect to knowledge areas involved in the analysis of personal and social management of uncertainty may be well expressed by means of two types of advertence: (a) social knowledge cannot disregard the individual/personal dimension of social organization and policies; (b) it appears to be urgent to denaturalize psychological assumptions and constructs, paying more attention to cultural and political aspects of human living, as well as to claim for the loss of innocence of some "idealism" and "romanticisms" in some psychological perspectives which tend to ignore the determinant dimension of power in human experience and action, addressing the individual subject as if he/she lived in a social vacuum where extra-personal levels over determination of life did not exist.

The main present problem is that the social-cultural source of uncertainty seems to be its growing influence in everyday life individual experience: "will the plant close?"; "what will be the results of the biopsy?". The common characteristic of these situations is that they require that we act when we cannot predict what the outcome will be. The so-called present social crisis has contaminated family, school and community as contexts of learning how to deal and manage uncertainty. If someone close to us is waiting for the results of a biopsy, we too, are confronted with the possibility of illness, pain, or even death, because psychological preparation is a vital defence against the possible grief of losing the future. Moreover, such uncertainties interact with others related to the personal knowledge about the functioning of the human body; about how the medical practice is regulated; about how competent medical doctors are as members of a system expected to be highly differentiated, intellectually specialized and competent to resolve this sort of uncertainties; about the perception of the social guarantees of quality and effectiveness of the medical profession. In addition, my interpretation of the sick person's own self report (*i.e.*, whether he/she appears to be stoical, complaining, anxious, calm, positive, depressed...) affects also my uncertainty, and, finally, it questions my sense of responsibility for others. With this, anger, fear, irritation or guilt might arise, bringing up unresolved issues in our relationship. The way out can be found by bringing the relationship back into a predictable pattern, trying to provide reassurance, attention and care, using a kind of tacit knowledge, or to express it better, meaning, in order to overcome own and other uncertainty.

Health problems are one of the best examples to illustrate the human experience of uncertainty (which includes many other aspects, not mentioned in the above case, such as indeterminate waits for medical appointments or treatments or the confrontation with inadequate, ambiguous or evasive information in the context of ambivalent relationships established with health professionals, among others).

Individually, we tend to interpret these sort of uncertainties of everyday life in terms of our self doubts rather than considering the social and cultural structures which condition them. We imagine that if we were cleverer, less shy, more secure or confident, we could, perhaps, cope with uncertainty as other people appear to be coping. Then, in result of the fact that each of us tends to hide his/her sense of personal inadequacy, we are slow to perceive how our culture induces these type of feelings. For instance, some women may feel helplessness and despair in managing a double career and caring about children without the emotional support of their husbands. In most cases, they will believe that problems and difficulties are a result of their incapacity and depression (for which psychologists and doctors may be treating them).

Naturally, this tendency to blame oneself for the world is a strategy for mastering uncertainty: to mistrust oneself or others might be less frightening than to acknowledge how dangerously, untrustworthy society may be. *Voilà* the reason why some consider culture as a form of socially organized and institutionalised basic distrust (e.g., in Ancient Iraq writing was invented as memory support to prevent deviations and agreement violations in trade relationships).

All our actions depend on the power to reduce uncertainty to a residue of unknowns within a context of predictable relationships. This is the more general problem of how to construct a meaning for making life seem manageable: to live and act we necessitate "illusions", and simultaneously, to keep always in mind that they are essentially and not more than "illusions".

The aggravation of uncertainty

Skipping frequently mentioned social change factors – as is the case for acceleration of time, scientific and technological development, global competitiveness, work centrality (its scarcity, instability and precariousness), the breaking down of social protection systems, from a never ending list of distinctive characteristics of our societies –, three sorts of phenomena work to aggravate the sense of uncertainty: (a) the socialization deficit; (b) the scientism ideology; (c) the individualization of social life (the individual as the target).

The socialization deficit is revealed by the weakening of collective shared references (including the socio-cultural meta-narratives earlier evoked), both at the primary (family) and secondary

levels (school, community, work...). The consequences can be felt in terms of diminishing social cohesion and inclusion, but also as a sense of insecurity concerning the heritage to be passed from one generation to the following one, or to say it differently: the difficulty of assuming the responsibility for the world (with everything it has of good and bad), to use the expression Hanna Arendt chose, from the part of the adult generation. Such hesitation, uncertainty and insecurity in the transmission of a cultural heritage from one generation to another is, in fact, a double-edged one: it affects not only contents but also processes of transmission (*cf.* Coimbra, 2003).

Democracy in the family private space may be in many cases the expression of the difficulties felt by parents confronted with the task of guiding, influencing and fostering their children's development in order to support them in finding a place in the world ("it is his problem; we don't want to influence his career choices", so we hear).

A second important, although paradoxical, source of uncertainty comes from the effects of scientism, rationality and its illusion of control. A more conscious and reflexive society like the one we live in presently, influenced, as it is, by the power of science and technology, produces higher levels of control expectations. People become more exigent concerning such a control capacity. The necessary result is the production of more uncertainty. The technological possibilities of identifying different and new substances in human food (*e.g.*, animal meat) is creating a feeling of distrust, not to say fear. Our basic sense of inability to control the unexpected and the still unknown by science and technology suggest the sentence by Thomas Lawrence: "life is what happens to us while we are making other plans." However, the information society has a basic premise according to which more information generates more knowledge, which, in turn, produces more power to control. Indeed, it makes sense to speak of information addiction and the deceptions it creates.

A last cause we would like to add to this reflection concerns the role played and the effects produced by individualism and subjectivism in our societies, pushed to its extreme versions: the expression of radical individual singularity. The responsabilization of the individual subject makes it easier to transform him/her into the easy and privileged target.

Frightened by insistent messages of how to live a healthy life or how to behave as a responsible driver, the individual feels guilty, threatened and the feeling of uncertainty grows. If we articulate individualism with the culture of lived experienced, of false immediate satisfaction and gratification (that is to say, immediate frustration), aggravated by the pressure of consumerism and its alienation, the portrait of malaise and insecurity and of the subjective perception of inability to handle uncertainty in individual terms might be clearer.

From such a sort of reasoning exercise, some concluding remarks can be pointed out regarding implications for educational interventions.

Usually, three main problems, corresponding to classical psychological categories, are addressed in the education realm: (a) lack of objective competence; (b) lack of motivation; (c) performance inhibition due to negative emotions. The suggestion is that two orders of concern be integrated: (a) the centrality of meaning (or the subjective construction of reality, including the sense of personal competence from the part of the learner); (b) power, as the decisive factor of understanding the human experience.

In addition, and in a very synthetic way, education should be concerned with the learners' acquisitions (particularly the younger ones) in order to deal and master uncertainty, which has not only instrumental aspects (power/competence) but also relational facets (again power plus the sense of being accepted in reciprocity contexts).¹

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Notes

¹ The author expects that the present reflection has some *meaning* for readers, although he is a little *uncertain* of it.