

“THAT MUST HAVE BEEN UNCANNY!” EXPERIENCES OF INVISIBLE OTHERS IN CONTEMPORARY FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

This article* examines experiences of invisible others considered uncanny in the context of secularity in contemporary Finland. Drawing from experience-centred theories of religion and spiritual belief by Ann Taves and David Hufford, the article analyses how uncanny experiences are differentiated from other kinds of experience and how they are justified as real in first-person narratives written by Finnish experiencers. The empirical analysis distinguishes four characterisations of experience the authors consider uncanny, which also serve to convince them of the realness of their experience. By conversating these findings with studies of experiences deemed religious or supernatural, the article seeks to reinforce dialogue with research on similar experiences that people rather consider in scientific and everyday terms. The article then suggests a framework for *cross-secular enquiry* that would allow scholars in different fields to address differences in how secularity manifests in different locations. Such a methodological framework may create possibilities to juxtapose and compare similar kinds of experience that people may or may not consider supernatural in different secular societies.

KEYWORDS: experience • Finland • religion • secular • uncanny

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INTRODUCTION

Uncanny experiences of invisible others have been an important mode of knowing in Finnish everyday life. Yet, secular and natural-scientific worldviews are widely held within the population. They also are powerful norms in public discourse, forming the basis for what is considered ‘real’ in contemporary Finnish society. While uncanny experiences share many content features with experiences considered religious or supernatural, as a result of these historical and contemporary realities, many people in Finland do not consider their uncanny experiences to be religious or supernatural matters. Although some experiencers emphasise their belief in God, spirits, or an afterlife, many express their disbelief and commitment to a secular worldview that is informed by natural science, yet insisting on the ontological realness of the invisible and uncanny. Regardless of their beliefs, they frequently problematise the notion of the “supernatural” and remark that uncanny experiences are “natural” (Hänninen 2009; Koski and Honkasalo 2015; Andell 2020).

This article sets out to examine uncanny experiences in the context of contemporary Finnish secular society. Secularity in Finland is characterised by hegemonies of scientific materialism on one hand and Lutheran state church on the other, which together continue to shape the ontological realities and ways of knowing. My research material consists of written, first-person narratives and testimonies of uncanny experiences by contemporary Finns. By asking “how do people know their experience has been uncanny?” – that is, how do they distinguish it from everyday experiences, perceptual mistakes, hallucinations, or mere coincidence – I will outline a set of criteria for what kind of experience is considered uncanny by the authors and how its realness is justified.

My research question has been inspired by Tanya M. Luhrmann’s anthropology of mind, which examines how cultural conceptions of mind interact with and shape lived experience (Luhrmann 2011a; 2020a). Furthermore, I employ elements from the attributional approach developed by Ann Taves (2009) to identify points of analogy between uncanny experiences in everyday life and those that occur in religious and ritual contexts (e.g. Luhrmann 2012a; 2012b; 2020b; Bialecki 2014; Virtanen et al. 2017; Brahinsky 2020), as well as many spontaneous experiences that might occur independent of any prior belief. My analytical gaze, however, is that of a sociologist: I approach first-person narratives as social practices and spaces of negotiation (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020) that mediate experience-based, societal, and scientific meanings and onto-epistemologies. Without an ontological or psychological claim about whether religious or spiritual meanings are only retrospectively attributed to particular kinds of experience, my point of departure is based on the argument Taves (2009) makes, specifically that experiences that share common content features and promote some sense of “specialness” can occur in multiple contexts, and *may or may not* be considered religious or spiritual. To complement Taves’s approach, I will draw from Hufford’s (1995) experience-centred theory of religion and spiritual belief, which questions previous assumptions that such experiences stem from supernatural (irrational) beliefs. Instead, Hufford considers knowledge of invisible others as justified belief that is based on customary criteria of truth.

The article contributes to discussions of experiences of invisible others in contemporary Euro-American societies in two main ways. First, it adds to the body of empirical knowledge regarding how invisible agencies and presences are known through embod-

ied experience and how these experiences are considered and justified as real by the subjects. Second, I develop a framework for cross-secular enquiry that would allow scholars in different fields to analyse diverse experiences that (1) could occur in both ritual and everyday contexts and (2) that people can consider either religious/supernatural or non-religious. In this article, cross-secular serves as a methodological concept that seeks to extend cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary frameworks to the dimension of the secular-religious, since cultural affordances for understanding certain bodily experiences as religious or non-religious vary across secular societies, as the example of Finland shows. My understanding of the secular is in line with studies that draw on the work of Charles Taylor (2007) and address the possibility of disbelief as well as the multiplicity of beliefs and worldviews that characterise modern secular societies. By developing a shared analytical lens through which to view the question of knowing the invisible other, my aim is to reinforce a cross-secular perspective that makes it possible to take into consideration differences in secularity in various societies. Furthermore, I seek to establish dialogue between different academic disciplines that are interested in similar experiences, without blending the basic ontological conceptions held in different lines of academic work.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly discuss uncanny experiences and secularity in Finland. Then, I discuss knowing the invisible others in the light of previous research and introduce the concept of uncanny that I use to describe the experiences of contemporary Finns. Then I discuss Hufford's (1995) and Taves's (2009) experience-centred approaches to religion and spiritual belief, thus foregrounding a cross-secular perspective on experiences that are considered to be uncanny and articulate my analytical framework. Next, I introduce the research material, after which I provide an empirical analysis of these first-person narratives. This analysis distinguishes four central characterisations of experiences that the authors considered uncanny. I also attend to the narrated practices of the authors who seek to justify these impressions. Finally, I elaborate on these findings and consider the potential inherent in experience-centred theories of religion and spiritual belief in terms of establishing cross-secular enquiry into experiences of invisible others.

UNCANNY EXPERIENCES AND SECULARITY IN FINLAND

Uncanny experiences were part of everyday life in Finland until the relatively late modernisation of this society. Before the rapid urbanisation that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century, people in agrarian Finnish society frequently reported and recognised premonitions and encounters with beings such as elves in local communities (Virtanen 1974). Uncanny experiences were especially frequent during wars. For instance, during World War II, people often learned about the death of their loved ones through uncanny sensations or signs (Virtanen 1990 [1977]). Nonetheless, scholars have pointed to long-standing stigmatisation of the supernatural and uncanny experiences, dating back to the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, and to the ongoing anxiety of state officials and expert institutions regarding the preservation of the modernity of Finnish society (Hänninen 2009; Koski 2016b; Honkasalo 2017; 2018; Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020). Thus, fear of stigma could lead people in contemporary Finland to avoid com-

municating their experiences to healthcare professionals and other state authorities that rely on onto-epistemologies that are strictly secular and based on natural science (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020: 66).

The religious landscape in Finland is considerably less diverse than that in many other North Atlantic societies. The vast majority of people with a religious affiliation are members of the Lutheran church. At around two-thirds of the population, their number has decreased remarkably during the last 20 years, as those with no religious affiliation grew to one-fourth of the population (Statistics Finland). The state and the church in Finland are not officially separated, but Finnish society appears quite non-religious when compared, for example, to the US. Although most Finns report believing in some invisible other, the majority are not strictly religious, and the moral values of religious and non-religious people do not differ significantly (see Ketola et al. 2011). Especially among the younger population, belief in God has decreased (Salomäki 2022). The Lutheran state church, which dominates the Finnish religious landscape, does not conceptualise God as interventionist, nor does it promote the idea of a particularly personal relationship with the divine. In fact, especially experiential forms of religion are marginalised in Finland. In contrast to a nation like the US, where various sects perceive the divine in precisely these ways, Finns are likely to reject as too supernaturalist any interpretations of their uncanny experiences as direct interaction with the divine. Thus, shaped by the Lutheran Church, modern science, and the historical and local understandings of the uncanny as part of everyday experience, the worldviews of present-day Finns can be described as prudently secular and basically sceptical, while also being ontologically flexible (see Ketola et al. 2011: 23; Sohlberg 2022).

Nonetheless, public reactions to uncanny experiences might be resentful or hostile, and academic research that has treated uncanny experiences as real instead of mere beliefs or mental errors has encountered serious resistance in both academic and public spheres (Enges 2004; Vuolanto 2013; Koski 2016a; Honkasalo 2018). As a result, space for investigating and theorising these phenomena from the perspective of lived experience has been limited. While much of folklorist scholarship has taken uncanny experiences seriously, there has also been a long tradition of folklorist studies, which has approached them as traditional “beliefs” (Enges 2004; Honkasalo 2017: 21–22). For example, the folklorist Leea Virtanen gradually became a marginalised figure in the Finnish academic world after she abandoned the framework of folk belief and suggested that these experiences should be taken seriously and treated as real.¹ Moreover, the natural science-oriented Sceptics’ movement has influenced both academic and public discourses in Finland regarding what counts as “real” knowledge about the world (Vuolanto 2013). Consequently, thoughts and experiences that cannot be verified by the methods of natural science have frequently been labelled “humbug” or “woo”, thus shaping the ways in which people reason about and narrate their uncanny experiences to others (Andell 2020). Scientifically informed meanings are frequently applied to experiences that are considered uncanny, and people often appropriate scientific knowledge and ways of reasoning to convince themselves and others of the realness of their experiences. This is surely not unique to Finland, but the importance of science as a way of making sense of the self and the world can be highlighted in this context of Finnish secular society. Finns have nevertheless been eager to report their experiences to academic researchers, especially in written accounts and testimonies, as a means of

normalising and legitimising them. Trust in science and research is high, and although institutionalised science often seeks to present itself as secular, non-religious, and committed to a materialist ontology, more than one-third of Finns do not perceive science and religion as necessarily contradictory to each other (Finnish Science Barometer 2019).

KNOWING INVISIBLE OTHERS IN MODERN SECULAR SOCIETIES

Scholars have examined the modern secular and scientific society as a context within which people come to know and make sense of their experiences and articulate them to others, and where the roles of scepticism, rational inference, and reality testing have been widely recognised in deeming experiences to be spiritual, supernatural, etc. (e.g., Hufford 1995; Taves 2009; Luhrmann 2012b; Bialecki 2014; Koski and Järvenpää 2017; Andell 2020; Brahinsky 2020; Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020). In modern secular societies, people are aware of the multiplicity of belief and disbelief; regardless of what they personally believe, they are aware of the dominance of secular and scientific conceptions of the world and the mind, and they are aware that others could hold different ideas (Taylor 2007; Luhrmann 2012a). Luhrmann argues that unlike in pre-modern, “enchanted”, or “never-secular” societies, in which the ontological category of “supernatural” has never been questioned, in modern scientific societies, people must learn to know which particular experiences might be experiences of God, spirits, etc. They must also deal with suspicion, scepticism, and “ontological anxiety” (Brahinsky 2020) regarding the very existence of supernatural beings and realms (Luhrmann 2012a). Another important aspect of the understanding of the secular based on Taylor (2007) is the idea of the self as “bounded”. Luhrmann (2011a: 6) relates this to what she calls “a modern secular Euro-American theory of mind” in which:

People treat the mind as if there is in effect a clear boundary between what is in the mind, and what is in the world. Entities in the world, supernatural or otherwise, do not enter the mind, and thoughts do not leave the mind to act upon the world. The assertion that they do is seen as a symptom of mental illness (thought insertion and thought withdrawal). What is in the mind is not real in the way that tables and chairs are real; one can speak of ‘mere’ imagination. At the same time, what is held in the interior of the mind is causally important. Intentions and emotions are powerful and can even make someone ill.

Studies of the lived experience of invisible others have noted how bodily experience can serve as evidence of the ontological reality of these others and demonstrated how people justify their experiences as real and make further differentiations between particular experiences based on specific criteria (Hufford 1995; Luhrmann 2012b; Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020). In this article, I will suggest that experience-oriented studies of mind, religion, and spiritual belief provide valuable insights to approaching the question of how the invisible other is known and justified as real in different secular societies. Drawing on the insights from these studies, this article sets out to investigate experiences that occur in everyday contexts and do not settle in interpretational categories of religious or supernatural. By doing so, this article seeks to reinforce cross-disciplinary conversations, particularly between the psychologically and phenomenologically informed

studies of religious or supernatural experiences and studies that have addressed the societal and political aspects and power relations involved in uncanny experiences.

Apart from folklore, narrative studies, and religious studies, recent works in anthropology of mind have paid special attention to the content of lived and narrated experiences. They have provided thorough and detailed analyses of how people know gods, spirits, and other supernatural and invisible presences. By developing a cross-cultural, comparative methodology to understand lived experiences that are deemed religious, spiritual, or supernatural, these works have made important contributions to the understanding of the ways in which people come to know invisible others through bodily experience and to consider them real in their cultural contexts (see Luhrmann 2011a; 2011b; 2020a; Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014). Studies in anthropology of mind and Christianity have addressed hesitation over the existence of the supernatural and discrepancies between the subject and society as an integral part of how invisible others are known and how their ontological status can be verified in a modern secular society (Luhrmann 2012a; 2012b; 2020b; Bialecki 2014; Brahinsky 2020). They have pointed out a dialectic of belief and disbelief inherent in these processes of knowledge production, which has also been widely discussed by folklorists who have focused on the supernatural (e.g. Bennett 1999; Dégh 2001; see also Koski 2016b).

However, taking religion or supernatural belief as points of departure could limit the possibilities for comparing a number of experiences by excluding those subjects who do not believe or conceive of their experiences in religious or supernaturalist terms. This poses some methodological and ethical challenges that require consideration if we seek to establish a more comprehensive analytical perspective on the question of how people come to know the invisible other, one that would allow for the juxtaposition of experiences that can either be considered religious or non-religious in different kinds of secular societies. Such a methodological advancement is necessary, because the idea of belief in the supernatural, which has been central to many definitions of “religion” (see Valk 2017), sits uneasily in the accounts of subjects who claim secular, materialist, and scientific worldviews, at least insofar as we consider these experiences in terms that are recognisable to the subjects themselves. Moreover, especially in Finland, “supernatural belief” has become a cultural pejorative with the potential to marginalise. Sticking with such a concept can conflict with the ethical stance of taking the subjects seriously and conceiving of their experiences as real (Good 1994; Latour 2005; Honkasalo 2017; Valk 2017). Experiences like powerful intuitive thoughts and senses of presence, voices that lack a visible source in the physical environment, precognition, telepathy, out-of-body experiences, and encounters with the deceased might seem to lead toward supernatural meanings and ontologies. Yet the experiencer might not approve of these meanings. People choose between multiple registers of belief and disbelief, simultaneously adopting pieces of information from those registers when making sense of the world (Luhrmann 2012a; Taylor 2007).

THE UNCANNY

In context of this article, uncanny serves as a descriptive umbrella concept that allows me to establish connections among a diverse range of experiences that may or may

not be considered spiritual, religious, supernatural, etc., but are nevertheless conceived of as radically different from everyday experience. The term originates from the German concept of *unheimlich*, which translates to “unhomely” (Freud 2003 [1919]). Freud’s concept of *unheimlich* describes a feeling of something familiar becoming strange and frightening. The uncanny is both associated with lived experience and distinct from concepts such as the religious or spiritual, both of which take the context or interpretational framework of the experience as their point of departure. Many experiences of invisible others are conceived of as uncanny or *Unheimlich*, regardless of the prior beliefs or worldviews of the subjects.

However, Freud’s concept of the uncanny is consistent with the modernist thinking and disenchantment theories of his time. For Freud, the uncanny is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (ibid.: 220). He suggested that once one had “completely and finally rid himself of animistic beliefs [one would] be insensible to this type of the uncanny”, and no event could raise “a fear of something uncanny” because “the whole thing is purely an affair of ‘reality testing,’ a question of the material reality of the phenomena” (ibid.: 247–248). Yet, as various studies in contemporary modern secular societies have shown, including those cited above, the fear of the uncanny may not be overcome but rather affirmed by reality testing. Moreover, people can justify their impression of the uncanny in ways that could also incorporate logics and practices of scientifically informed knowledge production.

Since Freud, the concept has been employed and modified within a number of different fields. (For elaboration on the various meanings and uses of the uncanny, see Royle 2003.) It has become what Anneleen Masschelein (2011) calls a sticky concept, “a cluster of heterogeneous conceptual elements like an adhesive tape, that along its travel across the disciplines attracts new associations and variations” (Honkasalo 2018: 2). In this article, I do not use the term uncanny in a strictly Freudian sense, but rather as a descriptive concept to capture a range of lived, bodily experiences in their cultural and societal context. This is in accordance with how uncanny was used within the research project that gathered the archive of first-person narratives I analyse in this article.

The first-person narratives were associated with the Finnish research project *Mind and the Other* (the Academy of Finland 2013–2016). The multidisciplinary research group came to employ the Freudian-based concept of the uncanny to replace labels like ‘supernatural’ and ‘paranormal’, which seek to position these experiences outside nature and normality. They further elaborated on the concept on the basis of how the authors reported and reflected on their experiences. They came to develop the emic concept of *kumma* (‘uncanny’), which seeks to describe a range of lived, bodily odd experiences in their local, cultural, and societal context. In this reading, the uncanny gains a double meaning: in the worldview of societal expert institutions, it is a phenomenon that is strange and disturbing, whereas to the subject, it appears to be odd and unhomely (Honkasalo 2020: 17). This is also my understanding of the uncanny in the context of this article. I will use it as a concept that characterises the lived experience in a particular context of modern secular society that has produced a buffer between the self and world (Taylor 2007), thereby producing a certain kind of experience as uncanny from the viewpoint of both the subject and society.

My further aim in this article is to understand what specific features of an experience make it appear to be uncanny and how people justify this impression. That is, how do

they know their experience has 'really' been uncanny? To accomplish this, I will next elaborate upon the notion of 'knowing' in light of experience-centred approaches in the studies of religion and folk belief. I will then articulate an analytical framework that will enable me not only to answer the research question, but also to see how such an experience in everyday life, by virtue of its content features, can relate to experiences that are considered to be religious or spiritual. In so doing, I will also explore how such an experience can thus allow us to establish cross-secular perspectives and reinforce cross-disciplinary dialogue regarding the question of how people come to know the invisible other in contemporary secular societies.

KNOWING THE UNCANNY: COMPOSING AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Hufford (1995) has suggested certain *core experiences* have been recognised across times and cultures. These experiences seem to occur regardless of prior cultural knowledge and beliefs held by the subject. They share similar patterns and contents and promote parallel interpretations of what they are about. Based on his analysis of sleep paralysis experiences in various cultures, Hufford argues that unusual experiences could promote folk beliefs and religious ideas, and that supernatural beliefs are often perceived as reasonable because they are rationally developed from experience. His experience-centred theory defines knowledge as "true belief that has met customary criteria of justification" (ibid.: 19). Such criteria are conceived of as locally and culturally defined:

In cultural terms, knowledge is what particular people call the beliefs that they consider to be most justified and true. This usage relies on local values and does not require the outside observer either to impose alien criteria or to enter into local debates. (Ibid.)

Hufford (ibid.: 11) also argues that "the reasoning involved in many such beliefs [in invisible agencies] utilizes methods of inference, based on observations, which are commonly accepted as valid" and that the core experiences and spiritual belief do not contradict established scientific knowledge and rational analysis.

Whereas Hufford focuses on the rational inference involved in "spiritual belief" (to use his term), Taves captures the possibility of disbelief and the multiplicity of beliefs and worldviews that characterise modern secular societies. Taves (2009) introduces an experience-centred approach that is somewhat parallel to Hufford's, proposing a "building-block" approach to religions. Her approach is "grounded in the concept of specialness and processes of singularization" (ibid.: 162). She links special experiences with practices that are constitutive of "paths" with specific goals and socio-cultural "composite formations" (namely, religions and spiritualities). She proposes rethinking religious experiences as "experiences deemed religious" (ibid.: 8). She arrives at a redefinition of the object of religious studies by developing a cross-disciplinary theoretic-methodological framework that takes lived experience as its starting point. Rather than considering some experiences to be inherently religious, Taves (ibid.: 25) argues that researchers should begin by mapping characteristics of experiences that are considered special.

Thus, for example, we may choose to focus on experiences [...] that share a stipulated point of analogy such as a feeling of peace, engagement with an unseen entity, or loss of self-world boundaries. If we do not assume that these experiences are inherently religious, then our object of study becomes things that share a stipulated point of analogy as they intersect with meaning-making processes that lead to their characterization as religious or not.

Her *attributional approach* seeks to establish analogies between many special experiences that may or may not be deemed religious, spiritual, etc., which would allow for comparison across the natural-scientific, psychological, and sociological fields. Although the notion of 'special' might be too broad to capture the particular domain of experience of invisible others, Taves's framework allows us to elaborate on the concept of the uncanny for this purpose. By identifying such a point of analogy, we can suggest the term uncanny to describe a certain form of specialness related to experiences that entail "engagement with an unseen entity" (ibid.: 25), "ungraspable presences" (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020: 64), or "intangible agents" (Espírito Santo and Blanes 2014: 1). Such experiences can also be understood as what Taves (2009: 41) calls "suggestive of anomalous agency", a notion that can be extended, for instance, to experiences through which people may come to know God (Luhrmann 2012b) as well as the core experiences described by Hufford. We can also include in the uncanny the notion of "loss of self-world boundaries" (Taves 2009: 25) to establish analogies with experiences described by scholars as "crossing the buffer" (Brahinsky 2020: 45), "in-between the mind and world" (Luhrmann 2020b), and "violating ontological expectations" (Boyer 2000: 197). Thus, the uncanny experiences that I analyse in this article can be generally defined as *experiences of the Other*.

Taves's notion of "experiences suggestive of anomalous agency" suggests that bodily experience alone might not serve as adequate evidence of the ontological reality of such agencies, but subjects could engage in many practices of differentiation and reasoning to justify the realness of these impressions. This has been well illustrated in ethnographic works on US charismatic evangelical Christians. Works by Luhrmann and her colleagues have shown how people create different strategies to cross "the buffer" between the mind and the world and thus provide themselves with evidence that the supernatural is real (Luhrmann 2012a; 2012b; Brahinsky 2020). The existence of God is not self-evident, and congregants have moments of doubt and scepticism which they need to overcome. Luhrmann (2012b) points out how the congregants of the Vineyard Pentecostal Church, as they seek to know God directly through experience, must learn to discern the kinds of thought and perception that are 'really' of God from those generated in their own mind. To do so, they apply a common set of rules to identify real supernatural experiences. For example, God's words are felt more as external sensory perceptions than normal thoughts, or God says God-like things that do not contradict the bible, or God's voice evokes a feeling of peace (Luhrmann 2012b: 41, 64–65).

My article investigates parallel processes among experiencers who are not religious per se, but who nevertheless report ontologically disturbing experiences that violate the cultural boundaries between the mind and the world or the self and the Other. Through these processes they seek to differentiate experiences they consider uncanny. Based on the works introduced here, "knowing the uncanny" is defined in this article through the notions of differentiation and justification. Differentiated from everyday

experience, perceptual mistakes, hallucinations, and mere coincidence, as experiences are “set apart as special” (Taves 2009: 28). Drawing on Hufford’s definition of knowledge as justified belief that has met customary criteria of truth, knowing can be further defined as practices of constituting such criteria in narratives.

THE RESEARCH MATERIAL

The research material for this paper consists of over 200 letters and emails received by the Mind and the Other project between 2013 and 2015. The materials are kept in the archive of the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku. These messages were anonymised and the authors were given pseudonyms. The material includes letters relating to 97 experiencers from all over Finland. Around 45 percent are men and 55 percent women, ranging from 33 to 87 years old. They have various professional occupations and education backgrounds, though many are highly educated. The length of the letters varies from a few sentences to dozens of pages of detailed autobiography and thorough descriptions of uncanny sensations and events.

A notable portion of the experiences concerned death. One-third included some kind of contact with the deceased. Premonitions concerning someone’s death were frequently reported. The authors also reported premonitions related to other things, precognition, telepathy, out-of-body experiences, senses of presence, and déjà vu. UFOs and automatic writing were mentioned rarely. The sensory modes of perceiving the experiences varied: Half involved visual perception (perceived in the physical environment or in the mind’s eye as mental imagery). Auditory perceptions, touches, and multisensory or extrasensory perceptions were quite often reported. Smells and tastes were rarer. Almost half of the experiences manifested within the mind, as intuitive thoughts, feelings, emotions, or dreams. One-fifth were sensed through the body as pain, changes in body temperature, shaking, or automatic writing or drawing. Another one-fifth manifested through the material environment, for example as signs of an afterlife brought by candles or birds, or poltergeist-like phenomena of inanimate things moving or acting by themselves. The rest manifested through other people, such as channels or participants in a religious or spiritual gathering, or through events, circumstances, or social relationships like finding a spouse or surprisingly meeting a person the subject just happened to be thinking about.

The frameworks the authors deployed to explain their experiences were various as well, and were often sophisticatedly constructed by drawing upon multiple forms of knowledge, including natural science, psychology, religion, or spirituality. The authors’ worldviews can generally be characterised as prudently secular, fluid, and flexible. They might also hold a secular worldview while also allowing that something beyond the material world could exist (Aaro). They might emphasise their disbelief in the “supernatural” or “otherworldly” and yet indicate that they have conceived of “the supernatural” as a normal part of everyday life since childhood (Ilona). They might explain how they “started as an atheist” but gradually adopted a worldview that “is like Christianity but interpreted in a very different, supernatural way” (Teresa). They might treat supernatural beings as ontologically real while considering them in terms of subconsciousness and intuition and striving for a neuroscientific explanation to “satisfy

[their] rational mind" (Laura). In their narratives, the authors generally avoid making final judgments about the ontological reality of their experiences, and often leave the final interpretation and explanation to scientists.

I will analyse the narratives from the following perspectives:

- How are uncanny experiences set apart as special, and how are they differentiated from other possible explanations (perceptual mistake, coincidence, etc.)?
- How are the customary criteria of justification and truth articulated from empirical grounds?

The empirical analysis distinguishes four characterisations of experiences considered uncanny by the authors. Uncanny experiences are narrated as (1) bodily and emotionally powerful encounters with the Other; (2) oddly consistent with the surrounding world; (3) material events and traces without an observable source in the physical environment; and (4) uncontrollable events not perceived to be pathological. These characteristics eradicate the cultural boundaries between the self and the Other, mind and the world, material and invisible, and normal and pathological. I pay further attention to the criteria of justification and the practices through which such criteria are customised, and how the impression of uncanny becomes affirmed through narrated practices of reality testing.

As an opening story I will introduce a fascinating narrative by Ilona of her past-life memories. Her story allows us to attend to a number of aspects of experiences that are set apart as special and illustrates the criteria of truth that justify its realness to the subject.

REFLECTIONS ON PAST-LIFE MEMORIES OF A PREVIOUS LIFE IN SOVIET RUSSIA

Ilona, a 66-year-old woman from northern Finland who has worked as a university lecturer in the US and Finland, narrates a compelling story of how she came to recall her "previous life" in the wartime Soviet Union. She notes that since her childhood, she had experienced uncanny feelings around certain people and things. For example, she recalls having an uncanny feeling when, as a young child, she and her sister Irmeli used to visit the home of a family friend and play with their two children, Timo and Kirsti.

Timo, Irmeli and I were playing together, and it felt obvious that the three of us had always known each other. But we didn't know Kirsti. To us, she was a stranger. [...] Another incident during this visit was that they had a portrait of Stalin on their wall, a brownish official one, in which he was wearing a marshal uniform and the only thing showing was the epaulets. I remember that picture clearly, for some reason I had recognised him. Mum asked [the family friend] how they dared to keep "that thing" on their wall, since they could be arrested. They laughed and said "it was back then, at the time of the war, but now it was different." I just stood there and stared at the picture with fear, hoping that they would put it away. It is interesting that also in this life, my first encounter with Stalin was associated with the word "arrest".

Powerful feelings and affects evoked by people and things provided Ilona with knowledge of something hidden and forgotten. Even though she could not yet tell what it was, these feelings left her astonished. Then, when Ilona was in her 20s, a friend told her about a theory that people could have several lives. She became convinced that she had lived a previous life, and “immediately knew that [she] had to travel to Russia in order to remember more about it”.

As soon as we crossed the Russian border, I started to go back in time and become someone else. For the first time, I was back in that country, the smell of Russia, bright colours of cottages and the frames of their windows, chimneys of the burned houses still existed by the road. I was taken over by an oppressive feeling of horror, I looked to the sky, waiting for the howling Stuks, and I remembered the most awful sound that I couldn't name because I had never heard it in this life, the sound that preceded bombers, the siren of an air alert. [My friend] Aila poked my side and kept telling me “it is now 1972 and you are in a Finnish bus”, but I just went to that other world, one that was dark and full of fear. Not only that it was World War II, but that whole previous life of mine had been filled with horror.

In Russia, feelings and bodily states evoked by certain places and related sensory perceptions – of smells, buildings, colours, and sounds – brought her memories of another world. She remembers horrifying sounds that should have been impossible for her to recognise because she had never personally heard them before. This further affirms to her that the memory is true and not just something in her imagination. Unlike just any thought that comes to mind, her experience is an overwhelming feeling that takes over her whole body to the extent that she depicts herself as “becoming someone else” and losing control over her body and mind, despite her friend's efforts to keep her in this world.

After her trip to Russia, she was able to recall some details of her previous life. She had been married, had three children, and two of them had died during the war. The fate of the third child and her husband remained a mystery. It took several decades of uncanny feelings and strange memories that she could not quite recognise as her own before the pieces of the puzzle finally came together. While visiting friends in Russia, she attended the publication party for the autobiography of an elderly Russian actress. She remarked on how the actress noticed her from across the room and kept staring at her until she felt uncomfortable: “I didn't look very foreign so why was she staring? I came to assume that I reminded her of someone.” Later that year, Ilona began to read the autobiography, which gave her a comprehensive explanation of her uncanny experience:

Right on the second page, as the author begins to describe her childhood home, an apartment in 1920's St Petersburg, a big apartment by the river Karpovka, the river whose bridge we had been standing on in 1972, I went back in time again. I was standing on the doorstep and I saw straight into that apartment. “Yeah, this was the one, here I used to be.” The feeling lasted through the first pages, in which she describes her early childhood in that apartment. It was unbelievable to find out who I had been. All the basic things matched.

At this point, Ilona says she came to realise that, in her previous life, she had been the mother of that actress. She reasons that the actress was the third child, the one who went missing, and her husband had actually been her childhood friend Timo, in whose presence she had felt that they had “always known each other”. Thus, the autobiography finally confirmed to Ilona her sensations and memories of her previous life.

Ilona’s story comprises several aspects that generally characterise experiences considered uncanny by the authors and how these experiences are set apart as special (Taves 1999). She describes for example a bodily and emotional powerfulness of her sensations, the correspondence of her experience with the surrounding world, traces in the material environment, and the uncontrollability of these sensations as they take over her body and mind. Next, I will further elaborate on these observations in the light of other stories, aiming to understand what makes certain perceptions and experiences appear uncanny to the subject and how they justify this uncanniness as real.

HOW DO PEOPLE KNOW THAT SOMETHING WAS UNCANNY?

Emotional and Bodily Powerful Encounters with the Other

As was demonstrated in Ilona’s story, uncanny experiences are often described as powerful bodily feelings. For example Ilona’s experience of the portrait of Stalin was narrated as more bodily than everyday thoughts and emotions. The fear she felt in front of the portrait took over her body as she says she could not move but “just stood there” and kept looking at it. Her feelings were also persistent and memorable: for many years, she continued to be sure that there was something real behind them. Again, when she writes about her first trip to Russia, Ilona narrates the knowledge of her previous life as directly received through her whole body and its senses. This experience is so powerful that she becomes fundamentally convinced of the realness of her memory. The uncanny experience leaves persistent traces in her body, which affirms that it was not just an everyday thought or feeling that passes, it was set apart as special.

Even when they manifest through dreams, thoughts, or emotions, uncanny experiences are described as felt through the entire body, which is entered by some force or agency of an unknown source beyond the subject. They are described as deeper than regular thoughts or dreams, more vivid and memorable (see also Luhrmann 2011a: 10). They are often particularly meaningful to the experiencer. Especially when the experiencer is grieving, uncanny instances tend to be emotionally healing. For example, Katariina, a nutritional therapist in her mid-40s, writes about her mourning after losing her little sister three decades ago. Katariina was 18 when her 13-year-old sister, Saara, was killed in an accident she describes as “shocking”. Katariina was devastated, had difficulty accepting what had happened, and had questions that needed to be answered before she could recover from her loss. She also recalls having “an irrational but persistent thought that if I just didn’t give up, God would have to give my sister back”, which she retrospectively attributes to the “stages of mourning and shock”.

In the weeks following the accident, Katariina wrote her feelings and questions in a diary. Her letter includes two paragraphs from her diary, which are quoted here. The first paragraph shows how, through writing, she was pursuing some kind of contact

with her deceased sister to understand what had happened and to know that she was well. Then suddenly, three weeks after the accident, her sister came to answer her questions in a dream that she describes as “particularly powerful”. The second paragraph describes the dialogue between the author and her dead loved one.

Jul 22:

Saara, how do you feel now?

Where are you?

Do you still remember us?

Do you know how we feel?

Come, come to say that you’re well and we don’t need to be sad.

You are a pain in my chest, tears in eyes, shake of hands, my emptiness.

I didn’t know that you weren’t alive anymore [when I saw you] on that ambulance stretcher.

But it was still you.

You can’t die, my 13-year-old sister.

I have maybe 50–60 years left, and you are gone.

Come tell us.

Jul 23:

Saara, you came to my dream.

It was night.

We were all home.

I held you in my arms.

You said that you didn’t have time to realise what was happening.

I asked if you knew how bad we feel.

You said that it [our pain] has felt horrible for you.

There was blood in your hair around your left ear and there was a bump on your head.

You washed your hair.

I told Mom to call our relatives, but it was already 11 o’clock.

Then you turned into a little girl, about a 4-year-old.

Mum asked if you liked her.- I do.

- Do you like Katariina?

- Do you like [our sister] Hanna?

- I do.

Then you said:

- I don’t like Katri Järvinen or Kalle Niemelä or Jaana Virtanen.

Mum thought that you had come back, while I knew that you were only visiting us.

Katariina’s experience is set apart as special in her testimonial account of the event. Her detailed account of the dialogue suggests that the dream was vivid and memorable, and as such, different from ordinary dreams. The dialogue is specific, accurate, and realistic: in her dream, her sister spoke as she did when she was little, and she knew the same people and felt the same way about them. This experience is narrated differently from thoughts in everyday life – as social interaction between two individuals and an intense event that occurs “in-between” the self and other (Csordas 1993; Luhrmann 2020b). The intersubjectivity of Katariina’s experience enabled her to consider this experience as

special and real enough to gain peace of mind. The emotionally healing effects of her experience provide further reason to deem it uncanny. Although Katariina retrospectively thinks that her dream was probably generated by her own mind to comfort her, its power left her with a feeling that her questions had been answered in a satisfying way, as if she had actually conversed with her sister.

Katariina's experience clearly differs from everyday experience because it took place at an important moment in her life, within the grief related to the loss of a beloved family member. The significance and meaning the narrative ascribes to this particular dream is in notable contrast to how Katariina highlights her everyday scepticism – “as a Master of Health Sciences and as a professional nutritional therapist I seek to avoid all kinds of humbug and gut feeling” – and disbelief in anything that might be deemed ‘supernatural’. Yet, with regard to that particular dream, she admits being hurt by a friend's “realistic opinion” that it was “just a dream”. The special context of her dream – that it was related to grief after an unexpected and traumatic event – served to affirm and justify its realness to her.

Odd Consistencies with the Surrounding World

Returning to Ilona's story, we can see that what proved to her that the knowledge she received through her experiences had been right all along, and affirmed the uncanniness of her experience, was that their contents were consistent with the surrounding world. Throughout her story, it is evident how people, places, and artifacts – childhood friends and family members, the portrait of Stalin, Russia, St Petersburg, the bridge over the river Karpovka, the Russian actress and her autobiography – served as sites of memory that generated powerful feelings and affects, providing her with information about an invisible other that cannot really be known. But it was the autobiography that describes real people and shows pictures of real places where they lived, that finally confirmed to Ilona her sensations and memories of her previous life.

Other kinds of experience characterised by a strong sense of knowing about something that cannot be rationally known are the precognitions and premonitions that are frequently reported by the authors. In these stories, the narrator becomes aware of something through visions, images, voices, powerful thoughts, feelings, and in a short time this information proves to be correct because it matches real-world events to the smallest detail. For example, Eila, a woman in her 80s, recalls how some decades ago, she and her family avoided a car crash because of her uncanny vision:

I suddenly got this feeling that a red car, which was driving at incredible speed, would soon appear in the middle of that narrow road. I told my husband to drive our car beside the road. He did what I said, even though he was a little bit amused. Then, on the top of a high hill, right in front of us, there really appeared a red car speeding in the middle of the road. None of us was laughing anymore. We were saved from a horrible car crash because of my premonition. It was an astonishing feeling, both for me and my husband. I suppose that our hearts beat many extra beats. For a brief moment we just stood there beside the road, in order to recover from the shock.

Consistency with the surrounding world is closely related to the meaning that people generally find in uncanny experiences. However, it differs from just any subjective meaning given to such an experience because the accuracy of the content is verified through events observable in the surrounding environment. There is a certain level of accuracy that causes the experience to be perceived as different from mere imagination or coincidence. Details matter. Eila, for example, not only predicted that a car was about to crash into them but that it was a *red* car.

Laura, a former teacher in her 40s who currently works as a life coach and energy healer, explains how she receives information during therapy sessions with her clients through thought-like events that display images, sounds, and symbols she must grasp and elaborate upon in order to help her clients. “Imagination” plays an important role in how she comes to know the uncanny. It serves in her story as a sense organ and a way of knowing that must be taken seriously. Yet its status is ambiguous because she also describes it as a source of made-up ideas and mistakes, either in the subjects’ perception or their interpretation of what they perceived. Experiences considered ‘really’ uncanny are characterised as different from individual thoughts or mere imagination because of their consistency with the external world:

I have helped my clients come into terms with their past, for instance, when a client’s deceased father entered the therapy session. Since the looks and the manner of speech of her father had been similar to those that I perceived during the session, this information has to come from a universal storage of some kind.

Laura also points out that it does not matter to her if her experiences are messages from beyond or inventions of her mind. What matters is whether they resonate with her clients’ particular feelings and life events so that they become understandable and relatable to them. In order to be considered uncanny, an experience must have real effects on the world, for example, on other people’s lives, actions, and well-being. On one hand, the ontological status Laura attributes to her sensations appears irrelevant, but on the other hand, the uncanniness of her experiences is affirmed by the looks or the vocabularies of the presences she encountered matching those of real people (her clients’ loved ones). The uncanniness of the experience then becomes an ontological matter: the correspondence of the sensation with the world convinces Laura of the existence of an invisible realm beyond her own mind and the material world, “a universal storage of information”, a collective consciousness that operates across the boundaries of life and death.

Sometimes experiences considered uncanny are narrated as consistent with the external conditions rather than the exact content of a particular event. A particularly well-known example of this kind of uncanny phenomenon that people find too striking to be mere coincidence is when a clock stops at the time a family member dies. For example, Eino describes how he observed this phenomenon three decades ago:

When my father died in 1988, an old clock on the wall, which had been his wedding present to us, ‘accidentally’ stopped at that very same minute, as we later found out from the doctor’s report. I still have that same clock in my home, and even though I don’t wind it regularly, it works faithfully and it never stops. It hasn’t stopped once during all these years. Therefore, based on my experience, I accept that there is a chance of 1:1,000,000 that it can be explained by mere coincidence.

In summary, when all the smallest details in the content and context of the experience (for example, the times, places, or people involved) seem to match perfectly with what has really happened in the surrounding world, the experiencers are left with some level of certainty that their experience must have been uncanny. The authors' criteria of justification draw on conceptions of truth based on correspondence with the states of affairs, facts, events, conditions, etc., in the material world (David 2015).

Material Events and Traces Lacking an Observable Source in the Physical Environment

Some experiences considered uncanny involve something moving in the material environment. Such presences are often perceived through sensory perception such as visions or hearing voices. In cognitive psychology, such experiences have been explained as false beliefs, errors, associative biases, ontological confusions, and category mistakes (Lindeman and Svedholm 2012). In everyday life, they could be (dis)regarded by the subject as perceptual mistakes, but they can also be set apart as special and conceived of as real to the extent that they come to change the experiencer's worldview. Many authors observed material things like dishes or clocks moving by themselves or falling without an observable reason, or they heard the steps of an invisible being. For some, this kind of materiality serves as evidence that their experience is uncanny. It allows them to differentiate these experiences from "vivid imagination", "gut feeling", or "emotional hustling", which they might associate with irrational or "overly sensitive" people who are likely to experience false perceptions and give "superstitious interpretations of natural phenomena". Teresa, for example, writes about several instances of bowls or jars suddenly gaining animate properties and agency. These uncanny events are so undeniably material that it appears impossible for her to regard them as mere mistakes in perception.

My child had put a porcelain bowl on a toy dining table when we were playing together with toy dishes. We were just sitting, that is, not jumping or pushing anything, when my child looked at the classic picture on the wall, presenting Tobias on a forest road with an angel, and wondered out loud something like if angels do exist, or where do they live. I responded that everyone has their own guardian angel and there are other angels as well, though they cannot usually be seen, that "there might be angels here with us right now, but we just can't see them". At that very same moment the top of the toy dining table fell down and the bowl fell to the floor. Luckily it didn't break. I didn't comment on this situation to my child but I silently thought that the timing was quite appropriate. However, I didn't know if the top was just fixed poorly and if it had thus been an accident. So I stood up and fixed the table and made sure that it was now fixed properly, so that there was no chance it could fall down on its own. I thought in my mind that if it fell now, I'd know for sure that it wasn't just an accident. Then we sat down again and silently in my mind I threw out a challenge that "you fall down now, and I will know it didn't happen by accident!" Immediately when I had said that in my mind, the desk fell down again and the bowl went crashing to the floor so hard that it was broken. This kind of proved to me that the situation had been supernatural.

Teresa seeks to differentiate uncanny events from “mere feelings and hunches” and other impressions generated by herself by describing them as events that become observable in her physical environment. However, she also relates the uncanny events in her physical environment to her own thoughts and intentions. For example, the bowl falling provides her with an impression of uncanniness that has to do with an unobservable link between her thought and the physical environment. The impression is not narrated as an adequate criterion of knowing the experience has been uncanny – it could still have been an accident. Teresa thus remains sceptical until she creates an experimental setting that enables repetition of the incident. She employs disciplined methods for testing her experiences and differentiating them from perceptual mistakes and everyday incidents that could be attributed to the material conditions. By engaging in these practices, she produces evidence to confirm that her experience must have been uncanny.

Stories about haunted houses are further examples of how an experience can be known as uncanny because of the lack of observable, material agency behind irrefutably material events. These stories typically involve a ghost whose steps are heard as he or she walks around the house. Some of the elderly writers recall such experiences from their childhood homes. For example, Eino writes that he and his family heard voices in their house that they thought must have been ghosts because there seemed to be no natural explanation for them. Eino notes that the voices were very different from those caused by the house or animals living in the yard. He also highlights that he and his family are “not the kind of people” who would normally give supernatural meanings to everyday experiences and perceptions or “just imagine any supernatural phenomena behind natural events”.

These stories also serve as examples of how people can justify their uncanny experiences by testing and applying rational methods of inference. For example, Aaro recalls an uncanny ghost experience that took place in his childhood home in the mid-1940s. His family had recently moved to the village. When Aaro got to know other children in the village, they asked him if he was afraid of living in a “haunted house”. People in the village talked about a family named Järnström who had lived in the house before Aaro’s family moved in and had experienced “some kind of an accident”. Aaro says he did not perceive anything exceptional or extraordinary until a few years later. When he was sick and lying in his bedroom, he heard “someone walking back and forth in the attic” above. After this, Aaro remembers hearing the steps in his childhood home dozens of times. The ghost had “a very regular schedule”: “the voices could be heard on the stairs between 9 and 10 pm and in the attic at midnight”. He then gives a detailed description of how he sought to observe the phenomenon regularly, spending his nights in the attic trying to stay awake until midnight. For several consecutive nights, he systematically observed the phenomenon and documented it (for example, the exact times the steps could be heard).

The regular patterns in the phenomenon enabled him to adopt a scientifically informed method that could be used to convince himself and others of the realness of his uncanny experience. Although Aaro’s perceptions might have been consistent with the rumour of the house being haunted, in his narrative, this does not justify the experience as uncanny. He does not articulate any serious belief in the story, nor does he assume that others, even those who were telling it, would believe his experience. Aaro instead differentiates auditory perceptions caused by the “ghost” from everyday voices that he

considers “clearly caused by the construction of the house” and “cannot be confused with the noises caused by e.g. changes in the temperature of the wooden house”. He also remarks that the condition of the building was “excellent in every way”. He notes, however, that some of the noises might have been caused by other people: “the noises in the stairs were quite rare, though, and we couldn’t know for sure if our neighbour possibly went to the attic at that time or if the noises came from the ghost.” However, once, after Aaro and one of his siblings had heard the steps on the stairs, their parents told them that the neighbours had been out all night, so he concluded that these perceptions might be uncanny. Thus, only those perceptions that seemed to have no possible explanation in the material world become certainly known as uncanny.

Aaro’s and Eino’s stories illustrate how differentiating a particular experience as uncanny often involves careful consideration of different possible explanations and exclusion of other explanations, such as natural causes, as impossible. They also suggest that the ghost was perceived not only by themselves but also by others. Thus, although uncanny experiences are most likely to occur when people are alone, this is not always the case. Having other witnesses can also be part of how people come to know their experiences are uncanny and not perceptual mistakes or hallucinations of an individual mind. Witnesses or co-observers are often people, usually family members, but they could also be animals. In some narratives, uncanny phenomena have first been observed by the family pet, which the authors assume to be more sensitive to uncanny presences than humans. A pet becoming suddenly frightened with no observable cause in the physical environment could provide evidence of the uncanny or beyond-human nature of the perceived presence. The fact that the perception is shared by others provides evidence that the presence really acts upon the material environment.

A striking contradiction between the material and non-material characterises the uncanny experiences analysed above. Aaro, for example, recalls being disappointed when he could hear the steps in their house so clearly and yet could never see the thing that caused them. The auditory perceptions of the ghost moving around seemed to come from outside Aaro. Yet, Aaro believes that the perception might not have been heard with “real ears” but might have “come to the consciousness in some other way”. He also notes that technology could now be able to explain the sensory mode of these perceptions. His experience has brought him to ponder “if people have two sides, a physical and a spiritual one” because “if the ghost was a nonmaterial spiritual being, how was it able to make the sound of the steps?” and “what kind of energy did it use?” In the end, he was not able to find an answer to these questions.

Uncontrollability not Considered Pathological

The final characterisation of uncanny experiences challenges the dichotomic treatment of human experience as normal/pathological. The ascription of pathology to experiences that deviate from the normative conception of the self – defined in terms of boundedness and self-control – has been a common trait in modern Euro-American societies. For many of the people who contacted the Mind and the Other project, the experiences were unexpected and surprising. Often they are described as occurring independently of the subject. The authors report that they are “forced to act” in ways that are not typi-

cal for them: their bodies were taken over by some uncanny otherness so that they lost control of themselves or even “became someone else”. They reason that these experiences could not have been a matter of mere imagination, nor could they have been due to their prior beliefs, desires, or actions. This is because they couldn’t affect when these experiences occur or what they contain.

A sudden uncanny experience sometimes evokes such a strong fear that it becomes impossible for the subject to ignore the experience. This fear can be associated with difficulty reasoning about the experience and why it happened. Accordingly, finding an explanation or meaning for an uncanny event (for example, considering it guidance and protection from otherworldly beings like God or deceased family members) can make it less frightening and also more controllable to the subject. Teresa remarks that she used to be an atheist before these experiences began, but she has gradually adopted a new “supernaturalist” world view. This is mainly because she has experienced many of those uncanny events as extremely frightening, to the point that she has sought protection from Christian figures like God, Jesus, or angels.

The narratives’ broad emphasis on mental health issues and the notion of diagnosis illuminates the normativity and the societal power relations involved in understandings of human experience. The authors often anticipate that they will be conceived of as crazy by the academic audience of their narratives and note their healthy mental condition. Many of them criticise modern medical and psychiatric conceptions of uncanny experiences, which treat them as symptoms of mental illness. The authors describe these experiences as normal and explicitly differentiate them from psychotic symptoms.

Ari, a senior citizen from northern Finland, describes having a set of uncanny experiences in his youth when he lived alone in a house in Finnish Lapland. He recalls that when someone was coming to visit him, he often used to know it in advance: “in Lapland premonitions were frequent, and so I used to hear them set their skis against the wall of my house for hours before they actually came.” He does not perceive his uncanny experiences as uncontrollable in the sense that they were imposed on him by a supernatural reality outside himself. Instead, he considers them “abilities” that are innate to all people and cannot be “programmed” or intentionally practiced. He writes that sometimes, when he was home alone, he could open doors and move things without physically touching them. This uncanny experience was not really in his control: “Only a few times I managed to regain this ability, and I don’t know how I did that.” At first, he says, his uncanny ability frightened him, but eventually he came to accept that “that’s the way it is”.

There is no reason to try to diagnose [uncanny experiences] in any way or to place them in any category. All people experience periods of sensitivity when they realise things. Usually this sensitivity is lost because of studies just like this and their supremacist explanations of the so-called ‘facts of reality’. Myself, I’ve had this kind of ability at times, and I’ve never perceived it as odd or as a symptom of some [mental] disorder. [...] Why should we try so much to understand things when it’s obvious that all people have experiences that contradict this commonly agreed, allegedly only reality? Couldn’t we just accept the fact that all of us do have these abilities.

Ari suggests that there is no need to look for an explanation for uncanny experiences through supernaturalist concepts or natural scientific means and procedures like categorisation and diagnosis. To him, the uncanny is a normal part of ontological reality that cannot and should not be controlled, and uncanny experiences are “sensitivity” to this surrounding reality. Uncontrollability then becomes a state of affairs that does not need to be problematised. By learning to accept the uncanny ‘as it is’, Ari overcomes the ontologically problematic character of the experience and designates an ontological order in which such an experience appears normal and mundane rather than deviant and anomalous.

Ari’s narrative displays cultural criticism by associating the uncanny and ontologically problematic character of these experiences with society rather than the experience itself. This is a common narrative trait in the letters. Ari’s stance can be partly explained by his background: he comes from a geographic area where uncanny experiences have long been a vivid part of local tradition and everyday life. Precognitions and premonitions have been particularly common in quiet rural settings in which people live far away from each other and rarely have visitors (Virtanen 1974). For authors like Ari who grew up in such settings, uncanny experiences often seem quite natural and are, at least to some extent, conceived of as part of everyday experience. People might stop having uncanny experiences after moving away, and they might not personally conceive of their experiences as that uncanny, but they still recognise their ‘uncanniness’ in mainstream culture. Ari also narrates these instances as uncanny and different from everyday experience, at least in some sense, noting that he first found his uncanny ability frightening.

In Finland and elsewhere, uncontrollable experiences of invisible others are often understood in terms of mental illness. However, the experiencer might not conceive of these experiences as illness that needs to be cured but instead see them in positive or neutral terms, for example, as natural capacities of the human mind and skills that can be put to use. While the authors report negative feelings, such as fear, horror, and anxiety for their mental health, in the end, they often refuse to perceive their experiences as merely pathological. Even when an uncanny experience first appears as frightening, it can eventually come to promote stability and enhance one’s well-being (Andell et al. 2019). The narratives point to the difficulty identifying with medical accounts that seek to pathologise such experiences. They remark that the mental health concern related to uncanny experiences is not primarily about the frightening instance itself. Rather it is about the loneliness, isolation, and pathologisation of these experiences in a “scientific-rational society” (as Laura puts it).

Laura remarks that the kinds of “intuitive skill” she highly values are not appreciated or considered true knowledge in a society that celebrates rationality. Her story shows how “practicing intuition” means not only learning to pay attention to one’s own sensations but also learning to trust these intuitive impressions. Thus, while the information that people receive through their intuition might be considered a crucial source of guidance and well-being in everyday life, not everything that is perceived intuitively can be justified as real or uncanny. Laura’s narrative illustrates how the experiencer must make additional differentiations between uncanny experiences, regular thoughts, mere imagination, and hallucinations. Laura particularly distinguishes between external sensory perceptions and perceptions that take place within the mind. Sensing the

uncanny “through real ears” she conceives of as a pathological hallucination associated with schizophrenia (see also Luhrmann 2017).

I don’t see with my normal eyes but in my thoughts. I can hear music or words. I hear when a spirit guide, master or person speaks as a resonance in my ears. I distinguish hearing that takes place in the imagination from hearing with my ears. If I didn’t, I think I’d be confused between the physical and spiritual levels, which would mean that I wasn’t healthy but possibly schizophrenic. [...] Sometimes I think if these are creations of my own subconsciousness, but who cares, if they are helpful to myself or my clients and bring good things to our lives, that’s the way to go! It’s only the rational mind that’s rebelling. [...] I know I’m not crazy or imagining [because] so many people have gained help and self-realisation through [my work]. This proves to me that it’s not about my own delusions.

The notion of “sensitivity” appears in many narratives to characterise and explain uncanny experiences. It is often used to differentiate them from pathological experiences related to mental illness. Laura, for example, notes that she identifies with Elaine Aron’s (1998) psychological concept of the “highly sensitive person”, while others like Ari address their sensitivity in more mundane terms. It can also be argued that the notion of sensitivity is adopted by the authors to broaden the space between the “supernatural” and “pathological” and to relocate uncanny experiences within everyday reality as a natural part of human experience. Furthermore, it is used to detach uncanny experiences from medical practices like diagnosis and attach them to other scientific fields like psychology and physics. In Taves’s terms, they are set apart as special. However, they are not set apart as singular, such that they cannot and should not be “mixed and compared” with any other things and experiences (Taves 2009: 31–33) – another feature that she relates to special experiences. The authors emphasise that these experiences *should* be compared with natural-scientific and psychological “things”, and this appears to be a crucial reason for sharing them with researchers. However, many of the authors also strongly emphasise that uncanny experiences *should not* be mixed and compared with experiences considered religious, supernatural, or psychotic.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have asked how people in contemporary secular Finnish society come to know that their experience has been uncanny and different from everyday experiences, perceptual mistakes, hallucinations, or mere coincidence. Having sketched some common features of the kinds of instance considered uncanny in the first-person narratives, I have also illustrated how the realness of such experiences is affirmed and justified through reality testing and the search for correspondence with the surrounding world. Experiences considered uncanny were narrated as (1) bodily and emotionally powerful encounters with the Other; (2) oddly consistent with the surrounding world; (3) material events and traces that lacked an observable source in the physical environment; and (4) uncontrollable events that were not perceived as pathological, but rather as “sensitivity” to the environment. These features can also be understood to constitute the customary criteria (Hufford 1995) that justify the impression that the uncanny is real. The

validity of these criteria is further specified to depend on, for example, whether or not the uncanny instance occurs multiple times (i.e., is recurrent), the probability that the authors calculate that such an event may occur (i.e., how (im)probable it is), the accuracy and number of details within the pieces of information they receive, or how meaningful the experience appears to be from the vantage point of their current life situation.

Based on the findings in this article, experiences that the Finns consider to be uncanny share a great deal, for example, with US Christian experiences of God as studied by Luhrmann and her colleagues, particularly with regard to the process of discernment, which constitutes the criteria the Christian subjects apply to know which perceptions are really of God. For example, the notion that God says things that are in accordance with how God appears in the Bible (Luhrmann 2012b: 64) can be considered a way of finding consistency in the surrounding world. In a similar vein, the Finnish authors found confirmation for their experiences in texts, pictures, or in the details of the material events following their experience. Furthermore, experiences that are considered religious or spiritual are often described as more powerful bodily sensations, more external to the subject than regular feelings and thoughts, while also more internal than and distinct from pathological (for example, psychotic) experiences (Luhrmann 2012b; 2017; Brahinsky 2020).

However, whereas religious people can actively seek to suspend their disbelief and reach to sense the invisible, Finnish experiencers more often seemed surprised by such experiences, as they occurred regardless of their prior (dis)belief. Uncanny experiences can occur in the middle of everyday life and appear to be quite frightening, closely resembling Freud's concept of *Unheimlich*. Considering the number of details and odd consequences narrated in many cases I have analysed in this article, experiences considered uncanny might also be characterised by what Jack Hunter (2021: 5) calls a "sense of high strangeness", which he suggests is at the core of various extraordinary experiences, whether or not they are considered religious. Based on the results of my analysis, I agree with Hunter that religious experiences seem to share characteristics with many other kinds of extraordinary experience that may be difficult to classify based on interpretational framework or type of experience. Accordingly, there could be a certain 'core' underlying a number of experiences, a point that Hufford (1995) has also made in the context of his investigation in the field of folk belief, based on ethnographic observations concerning similar experiences in different historical times and cultures. In accordance with these notions, my findings concerning experiences considered uncanny in Finland support a call to examine a variety of types of experience that occur in different contexts and locations.

The analysis of uncanny experiences in Finland also invites scholars to address the dialectic of belief and disbelief, hesitation, and rational reasoning, whereby the subjects draw on different registers of knowledge, such as religion and science. Through this dialectic, the meaning and realness of their experience can be confirmed in both ritual and everyday contexts in various secular societies. Previous research has addressed the fact that people are aware of the disbelief and dominant scientific worldview of the surrounding society. They engage in various epistemic practices or evidence work (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020: 65) to overcome the "ontological anxiety" (Brahinsky 2020) evoked by the buffer-crossing experience, that is, the concern over and the attempt to convince themselves and others of the realness of the invisible other. Although such

experiences might promote and constitute religious, spiritual, or supernatural beliefs, as suggested by both Hufford and Taves, studies of contemporary Christianity in the US have shown how in a modern secular society, believing in the supernatural becomes a constant effort. It requires subjects to adopt multiple strategies to cross the buffer between the mind and the world, thereby producing evidence of the existence of the supernatural. However, unlike the Christians who simultaneously seek to affirm their belief by displaying hesitation and rational arguments and to establish coherence with the surrounding world (Luhrmann 2012a; Brahinsky 2020: 55–57), non-religious experiencers might adopt resembling strategies to justify their experiences as natural. Finns, particularly, often seek to differentiate their uncanny experiences from “supernatural belief”, even while insisting on the realness of the invisible and uncanny aspects of their experience.

The findings in this article also support the notion that experiences narrated as uncanny often constitute ontological discrepancies between the subject and Euro-American modern epistemology (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020), while also noting the ontological continuity in how these experiences are made understandable and meaningful. Although the uncanny quality of these experiences essentially draws on ontological conflict (Blaser 2013), the experiences are negotiated and justified through practices such as experimenting, systematically observing, testing, documenting, and finally, writing to researchers. Through these practices, experiencers seek to establish continuity with the scientific society they are part of. The concept of uncanny, as it has been defined in this article, addresses both the lived experience and its societal status. It then captures the multiple levels on which ontological conflicts take place, thereby highlighting the fact that these experiences are often perceived as ontologically disturbing and “unspeakable” by subjects “belonging to the dominant society” (Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020: 64).

A further aim of this article has been to develop a cross-secular framework that would allow for juxtaposition of and comparison between experiences studied in ritual and everyday contexts. It would then allow us to grasp a number of special experiences considered uncanny under various interpretational frameworks, such as religious, spiritual, every-day, or scientific, as well as hybrid forms that sit uneasily within the secular/non-secular and science/religion divides. Advancing a cross-secular perspective would mean attentiveness to differences in the forms that secularity might take in different local and historical contexts, resulting in either the facilitation of subjects’ ability to consider some experiences religious or non-religious or restricting this option. (On distinctly secular/religious contexts, see for example Leete and Vallikivi 2011; Luhrmann 2011b; 2012a; Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020; Taira and Beaman 2022.)

As the article establishes, secularity in Finland differs from the Taylor-based idea of the secular as characterised by the co-existence of multiple beliefs, in that the Lutheran state church, on the one hand, and scientism in public discourse, on the other, restrict the number of belief options in Finnish society. In addition, the historical status of the uncanny as part of everyday life could explain why the Finns often reject supernaturalist interpretative frameworks and the very concept of ‘supernatural’. Overall, the uncanny does not ‘read’ as a religious problem in Finland. Rather, people regard it as a secular or scientific one, for example, maintaining that these experiences have something to do with physics or (as yet, scientifically unknown) functions of the mind, body,

or brain, whereas in the dominant worldview promoted by expert institutions and public discourse, the uncanny remains unrecognised, and such experiences are perceived to be merely pathological. The case of Finland illuminates how cultural affordances available to people to make sense of their experiences vary between different secular societies. Consequently, in some societies, certain kinds of experience are more likely to afford religious interpretations, whereas in others, they become understood in secular, scientific, or everyday terms. This calls attention to the need to develop methodology for analysing experiences in different secular societies within which they may or may not be considered religious, spiritual, supernatural, etc.

Taves's (2009) cross-disciplinary framework serves as a promising point of departure in its notion of special experiences, as she calls them. Special characterises the lived experience more aptly than terms like religious or spiritual, which draw from interpretative frameworks of such experiences. Yet it could be too broad as special covers a wide range of secular things and experiences (Fitzgerald 2010). However, in this article, I have used the concept of uncanny to specify a more limited range of special experiences involving encounters with the Other. I have suggested that the common feature of uncanny experiences is that they are considered ontologically disturbing: they cross and blur the boundaries of mind/world, self/other, physical/mental, invisible/visible, etc. When understood in this way, the uncanny enables us to establish points of analogy within a broad range of experiences that have been variously described by scholars as religious (Hardy 1979), mystical (James 1902), spiritual (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2014), supernatural (Virtanen 1974; Hänninen 2009; Rancken 2017), extrasensory perception (Virtanen 1990 [1977]), uncanny (Freud 2003 [1919]; Honkasalo and Koski 2017), anomalous (Cardeña et al. 2000; Taves 2009), counterintuitive (Boyer 2001), sensory overrides (Luhrmann 2011b), high strangeness (Hunter 2021), or core experience (Hufford 1995).

Taves's (2009) framework implies a cross-secular perspective on uncanny or special experiences as it draws attention to how these experiences may or may not be considered religious, spiritual, or supernatural, and yet share common features. By linking experiences, meanings, and practices with paths and goals, Taves provides further methodological tools for analysing the elements of narrated experiences that sit uneasily within the secular/non-secular or religious/scientific binaries, as they can be constitutive of religious as well as non-religious (for example, scientific) beliefs. However, her own examples of special experiences are mainly drawn from the "conventionally-established contours of religious studies", to paraphrase Fitzgerald (2010: 297), and "special things deemed non-religious" are less thoroughly discussed. To reinforce the cross-secular dimension in-written in Taves's work, we would also then need to interrogate experiences that are given non-religious meanings and the ways in which these experiences are set apart as special. Hufford (1995), by regarding belief as empirically grounded, derived through rational methods of inference and reality testing, and not in contrast with established science, foregrounds an understanding of experiences that might promote belief in invisible agencies. Indeed, his definition of knowledge as justified belief invites us to shift the analytical gaze to the customary criteria of truth and justification that are constituted in first-person narratives and accounts. Analysing and distinguishing such context-specific sets of criteria in research material gathered within different sites of research, as well as bringing these findings into conversation with each other by juxtaposition or comparison, can add to our understanding of how (experi-

ences of) invisible others are known as real in various contexts of contemporary secularities.

Investigation of experiences considered to be uncanny in contemporary Finland adds to the current body of knowledge of such experiences. It also complements Taves's (2009) cross-disciplinary framework by shedding further light on those experiences that are not deemed religious or spiritual, but might not be considered strictly secular either. It then calls for an emphasis on the cross-secular characteristic of special experiences. The empirical analysis in this article is merely an opening into these possible contributions. Nevertheless, it proposes further interrogation of processes and practices through which certain experiences are set apart as special and justified as real in diversely secular contexts and research areas.

NOTES

1 Virtanen's seminal work on "supernatural" experiences in the everyday life of modern Finns was based on thousands of written first-person narratives that Virtanen collected from people all over the country in the 1970s. The title of this article follows the title of Virtanen's book *That Must Have Been ESP!* (1990), originally published in Finnish in 1977.

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