The language of discomfort
A phenomenological research on Men, Empathy and Self-Esteem in German Workplaces

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Abstract

The main purpose of this research was to address the possible emotional consequences that working in German workplaces, using the local language, may have on non-native men’s self-esteem and to see if the difficulties they went through could have modified their perception of the power structures at the workplace. Using a feminist phenomenological approach, I interviewed four white cisgender men and focused on their feelings throughout the journey of working in a language that was not their native one, surrounded by German native speakers.

The results showed how controversial might be for men to accept to feel empathy and that showing vulnerability at the workplace is still seen as very negative.

Drawing from Berggren’s theory of “Sticky Masculinity”, I will analyse and explain the results, shedding a light on the participants’ behaviour. Finally, I will posit some “good practices” to avoid the stigmatization of vulnerability in organizational settings and to change the power structures at the workplace.

Keywords

Feminist Phenomenology; Sticky Masculinity; Empathy; Vulnerability; Masculinities; Workplace.
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1. **Introduction**

In September 2012, I was 27 and I migrated from Italy to Austria. I did not *need* to do it, there were no wars in my country, neither my life was somehow threatened by something or someone. Sure, my working condition at that time was not the happiest – my contract was about to expire – but this was something I had in common with many other compatriots under thirty and sooner or later, I would have found a job, though probably below my expectations. No, there was much more behind this choice.

Curiosity pushed me to exit the *comfort zone*. By that time, I had a bachelor in Sociology and many years of working experience in the field of public relations for youth policies, and I was very attracted by working with young people, with women in vulnerable situations and with migrants and refugees. In addition, I wanted to experience a different organizational setting and to compare it with the experiences I had in my home country.

I was very open to where this new start could have happened; therefore, I was pretty confident that something would come to me sooner or later. But I was also quite sure about what I *did not want* to experience. I wanted to work in English or French – the languages I could speak by that time – and I was ready to learn Spanish and Portuguese and to work with them. It was okay to exit my comfort zone, somewhat, but learning a language like German, for example, would have been too much.

As usual, life decides for you. I found an amazing European Voluntary Service opportunity that suited my expectations: one year in a youth centre for girls and young women with migration background. In Austria, a German-speaking country. I accepted the challenge and left. They say *when life gives you lemons, make lemonade*... I made my own lemonade. Sometimes it was very bitter, though.

The first year, as a volunteer, I worked mostly in English with colleagues and clients. It was hard, but still manageable. English was a vehicular language for all of us, a sort of neutral field where everyone was feeling more or less comfortable; German was not, at least for me. However, when at the end of the voluntary service I got offered a more permanent job, things changed dramatically. The working dynamics altered all of a sudden and, of course, I had to use the local language at the workplace.

My German was not as good as it is now – I would have defined it as *basic* – and the power dynamics with the colleagues changed. I often felt discouraged and helpless, like I was not enough for the situation. It was hard to be corrected, to see that people could not get my point or for me not to get theirs. I was not able to perform all the duties (writing complex emails, for example, or answering to phone calls) and I could *feel* that the colleagues trusted me just until a certain point.
Being vulnerable and exposed to my limits was a situation I was not used to.

I moulded my own surviving strategy at work and noticed that I had developed a sort of German personality, a more introverted, quieter and somehow sadder version of the self that I had experienced in other languages. The lack of self-confidence at work influenced my self-esteem as well.

I have been working in German for more than five years now. I got used to it, but it still feels more comfortable to work using other languages; by now, I have collected working experiences in Italian, German, and Spanish in countries where these are the official languages. I have worked in English as well, but never in Anglophone countries. Through the years, I often asked myself this question: Is it just me or do others also feel this way?

This question further developed in the last months, when I started the Master Study in “Gender Studies: Intersectionality and Change”. Throughout the academic year, I got familiar with theories and studies that treat topics such as gender within the workplace, doing gender, masculinities.

In general terms, men seem to be less likely to question themselves at the workplace, especially white western men, because of history of hegemony and of patriarchal patterns and dynamics that keep repeating themselves. Moreover, men (in general) tend to have a higher sense of self and self-esteem compared to women (Feingold, 1994; Kling et al., 1999; Magnusson and Nermo, 2018). How is it then, for white men (especially coming from so-called western countries) to work in another language? How is it for them to work in German, surrounded by native speakers? How does it feel?

Within the following chapters, I will investigate if and how working in German within native speaking contexts may influence white men’s self-esteem, the feelings connected to this experience and the possible changes in their behaviour at the workplace. My hypothesis is that, by being more vulnerable and subjected to critics than they would experience in their own languages and country, white cisgender men may experience lower self-esteem and consequently develop a better understanding of how it feels to be part of a subordinate category at the workplace. To do this, I will rely on feministic phenomenology as methodology and I will use “loose” in-depth semi-structured interviews to address the research questions. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I decided to use an inductive style to analyse the data collected, rather than a deductive one, and to look for theories that could have supported them in a second phase.

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1 With the expression ‘subordinate categories’ I refer to people who may be more likely to be at risk of any form of discriminations, such as women (in a broad intersectional sense), but also men with another ethnic background which is not the so-called ‘western’ one, disabled men, gay men, etc.

2 I will explain further on the meaning of the expression “‘loose in-depth semi-structured interviews”.

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But first of all, I shall shed a light on some key concepts related to my research question and take stock on previous research connected and it.

2. State of the art

Academics have written extensively about men at the workplace during the last decades. However, the existing literature focuses on different angles rather than the one I am interested in.

Several studies refer, for instance, to the relationship between masculinities and working in another country (often using a non-native language) and the impact that this phenomenon has on men’s identities and self-esteem outside the workplace. The research usually focuses on the tension that men face between being the breadwinners for their families and accepting jobs beneath their skills level (e.g. Ip, 1993; Chiswick and Miller, 2003; Mak, 2006; Valenta, 2008; Le, Truong and Khuat, 2014). The negative consequences of experiencing downward social mobility in the new country (Sinatti, 2014) and the development of negative feelings of self-worth and guilt towards the native families (Donaldson and Howson, 2009; Haggis and Schech, 2009; Hibbins, 2009; Pease, 2009) also represent some of the most addressed topics by the phenomenological approach on “migrant masculinities”. In addition, the research tends to deal with other ethnicities rather than the Caucasian-“western” one, which represents an important feature for my research question.

When it comes to the researches connecting feminist phenomenology and phenomenology in general, gender and organizational studies, scholarly engagement has been increasing in the last decade (e.g. Rabe-Hemp, 2008; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2009; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Jyrkinen, 2014; Yates, Riach and Johansson, 2018). However, most of the work is focused on the perspectives of women, while little has been written until now about the relationship between masculinities at the workplace through a (feminist) phenomenological lens (Fisher and Lester, 2000; Berggren, 2014). A large part of the work on men and masculinities belonging to this last category addresses the negotiation of masculinity within women dominated work context, such as nursing (Herakova, 2012; Hancock, Sullivan and Tyler, 2015). Even if this field of research is the closest to my research interest, it is not focused on men’s self-esteem and does not take into account the possible changes in the perception of the working structures.

There is, therefore, a gap within the existing literature in the direction of a phenomenological study of the potential negative consequences of working in another country using a non-native language on men’s self-esteem and on their perception of the workplace. Aware of the lack of research, I shall now give an overview of the state of the art in terms of studies about gender and

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3 The difference between phenomenology and feminist phenomenology will be addressed in chapter 3.
organizations and of masculinity studies to clear up the theoretical framework I am going to create for this research.

2.1. Gender(ing) and organizations: a brief introduction

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, a lot has been written about social structures and power dynamics within the organizational setting, including the relationship between power and gender. Social movements and feminist theorists started to investigate the organizational patterns from the 1960s-1970s, focusing on inequalities such as lower wages and managerial positions and explaining them on the base of predefined gender roles (Calas, M.B., Smircich, L., and Holvino, 2014).

As stated in Calás et al. (ibid.), this first wave of feminist organizational theories can be defined as the study of Gender and Organizations. This branch, which draws from the Social Role Theory, focuses on “the conditions women face in organizations centred on a fulcrum of ‘difference’” (ibid, p. 21), especially when dealing with leadership. According to it, the difficulties women face at the workplace are the product of the expectations about the roles “each gender” should take on and the biased behaviours connected to them. Though Gender and Organizations has been the first theoretical approach that studied gender inequalities within the organizations, this branch takes into consideration almost exclusively the managerial level and does not take into account human interactions as sources of production and reproduction of inequalities.

As represented by the above-mentioned expression each gender, the Gender in Organization branch is especially connected to the relation women vs. men at the workplace and sticks to the binary connotation women/men. In order to focus on the research topic, I do not want to indulge here on the relationship between organizational studies and non-binary identities, however, the main research about workplaces is still focused on binary dynamics and this will need to change in the future.

Another approach to theorize the workplace is the so-called Gendering Organizations. Here, the main focus is on how power dynamics repeat themselves and on the mechanisms that keep them alive and functioning. Along with it, inequalities are produced and reproduced within the organizations – Acker calls them “inequality regimes”(2005). These processes are connected to the social and historical structures that each society is made of (Calas, M.B., Smircich, L., and Holvino, 2014) and are invisible as well (Acker, 2012). Most of the times, the same people working within the organizations struggle to perceive the inequalities at their workplace, just because they became too familiar with patterns of inequality. As Kimmel wrote, “invisibility reproduces inequality. And the invisibility of gender to those privileged by it reproduces the inequalities that are circumscribed by gender” (1993, p.30).
Inside and outside the workplace people do gender by interacting with others. According to this theory, developed by West and Zimmermann (1987), gender is not something that one has, but that one does, produces and reproduces through social interactions as much as other attributes (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990, 1997; Kvande, 2002; Lykke, 2010). But what does it mean to do gender at the workplace? Historically, the organizations have represented “a man’s world”, the arena of masculinity, dominated by result-oriented and rational attitudes. However, as pointed out by Ely and Kimmel (2018):

Gender scholars have long understood that men as well as women “do gender”: we construct our gender identities in social interactions that take place in contexts saturated with cultural messages about what it means to be a man or woman. And we’ve long recognized how the workplace, as one such context, is itself gendered—in its rules and hierarchies, its evaluations of performances, its demands for commitment to work above family, all of which give men who manage to fit conventional masculine norms a leg up. (p. 629)

The workplaces dynamics still seems to privilege men over women, but also over men who do not match with the kind of masculinity they are expected to embody.

2.2. Of Men and Masculinities

The 1970s were inspiring and productive years, not only in terms of gender and organizations, but also of studying male roles and overpowering dynamics (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, it is in the 1980s that one of the most influential concepts for the further development of Critical Men Studies was coined by Connell (1987): the theorization of the hegemonic masculinity theory. As stated by Lykke (2010), “hegemonic masculinity or hegemonic masculinities (to emphasize the plurality of the term) should be understood as cultural and social practices that legitimize gendered power differentials, privileging some men and making it possible for them to successfully dominate and subordinate women and other men.” (p. 63). The concept of hegemonic masculinity, therefore, refers to traditional patriarchal discourses.

The theorization of the concept of hegemonic masculinity accomplished two purposes. On the one hand, it made clear and obvious the power dynamics happening between genders (inter-gender); on the other, it made “men” consciously visible to themselves as well (intra-gender).
As Jahlna Hanmer said, it is important to “name men, as men, as one of the two genders”\(^4\) (1990, p.38). For a long time, but also nowadays, saying “man” seemed the same as saying “human being”, opposite to “woman”. Paradoxically, women know who they are, in opposition to men, while men never had to confront themselves with the other, by being the norm. “Ubiquitous in positions of power everywhere, men are invisible to themselves.” (1993, p.29) wrote Kimmel. Therefore, even if the concept of hegemonic masculinity is now seen as a generalization, it definitely helped to be aware of the social constructs that lie behind the idea of gender, not only from the perspective of women but also inviting men to take their own responsibilities and becoming one of the visible genders.

One of the criticisms of Connell’s theory is that, even if statistics and further studies show that the most normative forms of masculinity are the ones which legitimize a patriarchal system, it would be too easy to take on that hegemonic masculinity is the one that will prevail in any society and any time (Christensen and Jensen, 2014).

Moreover, there could be several kinds of hegemonic masculinities – as Lykke said already – responding to different power discourses (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). The majority of criticism toward the concept of hegemonic masculinity is based on the thought that it does not take into account the way masculinity intersects and interacts with other categories, such as ethnicity, ability, class, and so on. The theoretical framework appears to be weak and not able to address the complex position of men, who at the same time: interact individually within the society, represent the intersection of different social categories, and are part of a gender system, which historically tends to be the dominant one. (Hearn, 2004; Christensen and Jensen, 2014). Men might even take on different kinds of masculinities in the same situation.

Contemporary masculinity positions are seldom either unambiguously equality orientated or oppressive towards women. Masculinities can be identified where men support and practice gender equality while they simultaneously contribute to the exclusion of women. This illustrates the need for analyses that can grasp nuances and complexities. (Christensen and Jensen, 2014, p. 71)

However, by creating the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Connell also introduced three “categories”, that are relevant for my study: complicit masculinities (a weaker version of the hegemonic), culturally subordinated masculinities (for example gay men), marginalized masculinities (for example immigrant men, men of colour, working-class men). Complicit

\(^{4}\)This affirmation could seem very controversial, however, it has to be contextualized. Hanmer was writing these words in 1990, a time when the gender dichotomy men-women was still very present and the queer theory had to be developed as well.
masculinities take advantage of the power dynamics created by the hegemonic ones at the workplace. An example of this kind of masculinity might be represented by men who say that the “gender gap” on salaries is not fair, but do not act in favour of a change in the situation. The complicit masculinity does not interfere with the established dynamics, in order to preserve the possible benefits coming from this power structure. On the contrary, both the culturally subordinated masculinities and the marginalized masculinities are subjected to the power of the dominant ones (Connell, 1995, p.78-81; Lykke, 2010, p.63-64). This can be the example of gay men working in “highly hegemonic” fields (like football, the army, and so on) who prefer to keep their sexuality secret within the organization so that they will not be isolated or will see their chances of career progression limited.

In the lasts decades, however, influenced by the aforementioned doing gender theory, other definitions of masculinity started to be developed. According to Collinson and Hearn, the term masculinity denotes “the discourses and [material] practices which indicate that someone is a man, a member of the category of men” (1994, p.6). Therefore, the concept of masculinity is basically a social structure that turns a person into a man, by gendering him³ (Huijsmans, 2014).

### 2.3. Sticky Masculinities

According to the doing gender theory, people do gender constantly: in every interaction, people reaffirm their identities. However, this process might be contradictory as well, depending on the dynamics operating in the environment where it takes place and on the existing social structures.

As aforementioned in the previous section, men do not adhere just to one kind of masculinity, and sometimes they might even represent more masculinities at the same time.

Through the concept of Sticky Masculinity, Kalle Berggren (2014) gives an explanation to the contradictions and the difficulties that men face when creating their own identity and in their daily lives in general. She draws from what she calls (feminist) “post-perspectives” (p.236) and applies them to the masculinity studies. In particular, Berggren is inspired by the work of the feminist phenomenologist Sarah Ahmed, and from her understanding of the “bodies as carriers of a history of ‘sticky’ impressions” (ibid, p. 245). Writing about the lived experience of the body, Ahmed uses the term sticky with a specific meaning: “‘What sticks ‘shows us’ where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object’” (2004, p.91).

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³ In this sentence, which deals with gendering people as men, I deliberately chose to use the pronoun him.
Berggren stresses that individuals “are constituted in discourses, which are affected by the ‘cultural attribution of masculinity to bodies read as ‘men’” (ibid, p. 245). Discourses are not fixed but rather unstable; however, they are still effective and impossible to avoid.

Masculinity shapes the bodies it encounters as ‘men’; it impresses on them, directs, and orients them. But at the same time, masculinity is not the only ‘discourse’ positioning “men”, [...] While there is flexibility and contradiction, this does not leave subjects unattached; the circulation of norms stick to bodies, and the more masculinity is performed, the stickier it becomes. (ibid, p. 246-247).

The repeated performance of certain cultural norms, such as patterns of hegemonic masculinity, sticks to boys and men, shaping their embodied experience. Of course, traditional masculinity is not the only cultural norm existing, but due to persisting social structures, some of its codes seem more influential than others. For instance, boys are seldom taught to be empathetic, while this is a behaviour people “naturally” expect from girls.

Contrary to the common sense, the process of becoming a man is ambiguous and not linear, constellated by moments of rejections of what they are expected to be, and active adhesion to the model (Salisbury and Jackson, 1996; Berggren, 2014; Christensen and Jensen, 2014).

Therefore, my point is that, within my research, the concept of sticky masculinity is the key to understand gendered dynamics within the organizational field, even when they might appear ambivalent at first sight, and the effects these dynamics may have on men’s self-esteem.

3. Methodology

The experience to migrate to another country, to learn the language and work in a different setting compared to the one that has been experienced in the native land, is something very personal. It is about adrenaline and enthusiasm for being exposed to a new situation, but it is also about fears, expectations and hopes. It is a personal mix of emotions and can vary according to the person and many other factors. I wanted to investigate the phenomenon of working in German among native speakers and its effects on white cisgender men using an approach that could address the embodied experience of a certain phenomenon and the feelings connected to it. The phenomenological perspective seemed to be the best method to tackle the issue, particularly, feminist phenomenology, which sheds a light on the gendered embodiment.

The phenomenological approach is interested in addressing a certain issue from the perspective of the people who are experiencing it by putting a strong focus on the individuals, on how they perceive a certain phenomenon, and what their actions within that framework are. According to the
phenomenological methodology, the process of achieving consciousness about what happens around us passes through the body, which interacts with other bodies with and within the material world. The body – intended as physical body but also as embodied subjectivity – is the place where the aforementioned process happens (Kaylo, 2004). The experience gets a meaning, through connecting the material to the non-material, the feelings to the thoughts (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Leder, 1990; Welton, 1999). As stated by Kaylo, “all perception occurs as a continuous series of relational actions, between the body and the environment” (2003, p.4). Within this scenario, the embodied experience of the actors gives new elements to the researchers in order to explain a situation. The phenomenological approach considers therefore impossible to have one universal reality and contemplate the existence of multiple realities (Denscombe, 2010), instead. However, due to the interaction among people within the social context and the influence they have one on the other, these “realities” are multiple but limited.

They [the realities] are shared between groups, cultures and societies, and it is only at these levels that phenomenology recognizes the possibility of there being multiple realities (ibid., p.97; my editing)

Moreover, dealing with how a person experiences a certain phenomenon and makes sense of it, the phenomenological approach takes into account the possibility of facing contradictions. The embodied experience of the individual is the centre of the investigation, thus, it is part of the process that the complex social dynamics may generate some ambiguities as well. Incongruences are part of life and the researcher needs to take them into consideration. Therefore, phenomenology is considered to be an effective approach to investigate how individuals create social constructions through interactions (ibid.), to make these constructions visible and to promote social change, through policies and other tools (Lester, 1999; Monteith et al., 2018).

The gender perspective missing within traditional phenomenology, lead to the development of feminist phenomenology. The term “feminist phenomenology” is considered to be a generic concept to define a methodological approach focused on the embodied lived experience related to gender and sexuality (Simms and Stawarska, 2013; Berggren, 2014; Gardiner, 2018).

The aim of this work is to tackle how white cisgender men make-sense of their working experiences among native speakers as non-native German speakers, to investigate the way they feel (or have felt) about it, to find out if this has/had affected their self-esteem and to see if this phenomenon changed the perspective they have/had about the social structures related to the organizational field. In this case, the embodied experience of the gendered individual represents the
focus of this study; therefore, I will draw especially from the feminist phenomenology to address the research questions.

Nevertheless, even if this methodological approach appears to be the most suitable to address my research questions, there are some negative aspects one should take into account. According to the Husserl, the pioneer of phenomenology, the researchers should suspend their beliefs while investigating, in order to be free of preconceptions and let the phenomenon appear the way it is (Gardiner, 2018, p. 293). However, even if my purpose was to let the facts to speak for themselves, I personally think it is impossible to avoid our biases and opinions accompany us during the research. I, therefore, position myself close to the perspective of Heidegger, who argued that our beliefs move us towards a specific vision of the world and, consequently, of the research (ibid, p.293). By choosing this topic and how to tackle it, the angle I will see the things from will be already influenced by my opinions, which on the one hand might shed an interesting light on the research question, but on the other, will make the research “partial” from the beginning.

### 4. Methods

In this study I employed a qualitative approach, using in-depth “loose” semi-structured interviews as an analytical method. The choice to use interviews is deeply connected to the feminist phenomenological framework I chose. I wanted to investigate sensitive topics, to get to know about the interviewees’ feelings; therefore, I opted for these kinds of interviews, in order to have the chance to address all the issues that were relevant for the people in front of me.

Due to the delicate nature of my research question, I was actually looking for a method that could allow the participants to “reflect” upon what they had been asked about and to come up with their own conclusions. In addition, when formulating my research question and its related hypothesis, I was sure that I would have dealt with experiences of negative feelings, such as rage, sadness, or inadequacy. Processing pain is harder than working on more positive kinds of emotions, so I did not take for granted that the interviewees could already had an opinion about such feelings. Therefore, the “loose” semi-structured interview format seemed to be the best option also in order to encourage the participants to actively develop a point of view about the feelings of being a non-native white cisgender man, working in German, and surrounded by native speakers, as well as the difficulties related to the experience.

According to Denscombe, unstructured interviews are among the best methods to use within a phenomenological research, because they will help to understand the person’s point of view better than other methods can do. (Denscombe, 2010, p. 100). Even if I do agree with this vision of the
efficacy of the unstructured interviews, my opinion matches the one of Collins and Letherby, who assert that no interview can be defined as unstructured. The decision to interview someone, to set up a meeting, to start the conversation in a certain way, these are “per se” ways to structure an interview. (Collins, 1998; 1.3, Letherby, 2003; p. 84). Consequently, I called my research method in-depth “loose” semi-structured interviews. Conscious about the impossibility not to structure the interviews, I still tried to minimize my “structural” impact on them, especially in terms of conducting style.

As I will extensively explain later on, at the beginning of each interview I gave an input to the participants so that they could start explaining to me their experience of working in German among native speakers the way they would have felt more comfortable to do it. If I was curious about some of the things they told me or when I wanted to know something that they had not addressed yet and that was relevant to my research question, I made some questions. However, I tried to interact with them, following a conversational style and being curious about what they were telling.

4.1. Choice of and contact with the candidates

The target group I wanted to focus on for this research was made of white people who grew up and socialized as cisgender6 men, non-native German speakers, who worked or were still working in German with native speakers7.

As explained in chapter 2.1, (white western) men traditionally do have a privileged role within the organizations. They are more likely to reach higher leadership positions more easily and more swiftly, and to have an easier life at the workplace. Even if these are generalizations and that, especially in certain countries and working fields, things might be slightly different, nevertheless, white men are less likely than other people to face inequalities or discriminations at work. Starting from a more privileged position, white cisgender men might have needed to question themselves probably less than other people did, throughout their working experiences. Perhaps men who fit into other types of masculinities (such as the subordinated or the marginalized) could be more used to deal with difficulties at the workplace and to confront themselves with them.

This is the reason why I decided to focus this research on white cisgender men only and not to open it to other kinds of masculinities belonging to the manhood spectrum (such as gay men, female

6 The word cisgender refers to “someone whose gender-identity conforms with their assigned birth sex” (Broussard and Warner, 2018).

7 According to Braine, a Native Speakers is someone “who speaks the language as his/her [their] first language”, while a Non-Native-Speaker is someone who speaks the local language as “a second or foreign language” (2010, p.9, my editing).
to male transgender people, etc.) and to its infinite intersections (black cisgender men, white gay men with disabilities and so on).

Therefore, according to the aforementioned reasons, the potential interviewees needed to fulfil the following requirements:

- Migrants;
- Non-native (German) speakers;
- People who work or have worked in German surrounded by native speakers;
- They had to have working experiences in their native countries or at least in their native language as well, surrounded by people speaking that language;
- Being raised and socialized as cisgender;
- Being white.

Having recently moved to Germany (Berlin), I looked for potential candidates through my extended personal networks and social networks.

When the contact happened through the gatekeeper, after meeting up with her and identifying three suitable participants, she had the first contact with them, explaining approximately the aim of my study and the reasons that brought me to start the research. If the person showed interested in being involved in the study, I then personally talked to him. During this second contact, I situated myself, gave a more accurate explanation about the study (also in terms of data treatment and of the anonymity of the interviews) and discussed the organizational details (e.g. interview’s lengths, meeting point, etc.). During this phase, one of the candidates dropped out.

In the case of recruiting through social networks, all the requirements were made very clear from the beginning. I posted a brief description of my research aims and of the features that the potential participants were asked to have on several Facebook groups for foreigners/ expats living in Berlin. To preserve the privacy of the possible candidates, I explicitly asked the potential respondents to send me a private message if they were interested in the research. However, many of those who showed their interest in the research expressed it publicly, by commenting on my post. Because of this reason, I deleted the post after I got in touch with a couple of people and I deleted eventual sensitive information that the people shared right after reading them. Then I personally contacted all the potential candidates through private messages. In the private conversation, after thanking the person

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8 The gatekeeper for this research was a very reliable source, a friend and former working colleague, who works in a male dominated environment: the professional gastronomy.
for his\(^9\) help, I deepened the explanation of the research goals’ and made myself available for further questions and if they had any doubts, I then verified whether or not they had fulfilled all the requirements. Approximately 10 men\(^{10}\) got in touch with me; however, just two happened to be a good match for my research.

Among the potential candidates, the choice was made preferring the ones who would have felt comfortable to use a lingua franca during the interview, either English, Spanish or Italian. Although my proficiency in German is quite good, I did not want to use this language for the interviews. Due to the fact that I wanted to investigate the influence that working in German may have on the interviewees and on their self-esteem, it was very important to me to create a “safe place” for them. By using a neutral language, they could have distanced themselves from the working language and from the possible tension that speaking that language might have provoked within them.

The final candidates, who took part in the interviews, were four men in their thirties (from 31 to 38 years old); two coming from Italy, one from Israel (who lived also in France and has French roots) and one from Brazil. Two of them did have a long (and still present) working experience in the gastronomy field, one had a background as a middle school teacher and a lot of experience within the gastronomy as well (especially in German-speaking environment), one had been working within the artistic and cultural field for a long time.

Though all the interviewees had the requirements I was looking for in order to address the research question, I noticed that they somehow represented even stronger and more stereotypical examples of white cisgender men, because they socialized and/or experienced quite patriarchal social dynamics (Italy and Brazil, could fit into this format). Moreover, three out of four participants were coming from so-called western countries, Italy and France.

Finally, even if the results of the research could be representative of a specific category (white cisgender men non-native speakers), due to the small number of people interviewed, it is not possible to generalize its results.

5. The interviews

The interviews took place in April 2019 (Week 16), in Berlin. Each of them lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours.

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\(^{9}\) I deliberately use the adjective his, instead of their, because my research aim was to get to know the opinion of cisgender men and all the participants I had the chance to interact with were cisgender men.

\(^{10}\) Interestingly enough, more women rather then men wrote me in order to share their experiences, even if the posts pointed out the reasons why I wanted to know the experiences of men.
In choosing the location for the interviews, my purpose was for the interviewees to feel very comfortable and safe during the meeting. In my opinion, a phenomenological approach to a research requires specific conditions so that the interviewees can feel at ease to share their vulnerabilities; therefore, I did not want to meet them at their workplace. I did not want to meet at home places, either. Though the domestic setting could have been very comfortable and encouraging for the interviewees, the research questions were actually revolving around the working environment and the feelings one might feel while working, therefore, in my opinion, by entering their private sphere, the interviewees would have felt almost “obliged” to share more than their feelings at work with me. Additionally, I did not personally know them beforehand. Perhaps entering the private space would have meant experiencing an uncomfortable start of the interview, from both sides, or to create different power dynamics compared to what would have happened in a neutral place. Therefore, I met the participants in a comfortable setting – a café – in order for them to feel relaxed, though at the same time able to separate the public from the private sphere. I let the interviewees suggest a café where we could have met; in case they had no specific suggestions, I chose the meeting point, trying to pick something, which could be logistically convenient for both of us. The place was not always the same: I did not want to feel too at ease there and create power differentials related to the location with the interviewees.

Before starting, all of the participants were asked for permission for me to record the conversation and reminded about the voluntary and anonymous nature of the participation in the research. I additionally took notes when they were speaking and after the interviews as well, to add comments or considerations. With two of the participants, the interviews were held in their (and mine) mother language, Italian, while with the other two candidates we spoke in English, a vehicular common language.

Each meeting started approximately with me thanking them, making them at ease or offering them something to drink. I honestly appreciated the help these people gave me and I wanted them to feel it. After getting familiar with the environment and putting them at ease, I introduced again the purposes of my research, I informed them about the anonymity I would use to treat their data and to ask permission to record the conversation. Within the next paragraphs, I will refer to the interviewees calling them Person1 (P1), Person2 (P2), Person3 (P3), Person4 (P4). I deliberately chose not to “assign” a fictitious name to them, in order to preserve their identity symbolically, though in an anonymous way.

First of all, before asking them to tell me about their experiences, I always started the interviews by situating myself and introducing my own experience when working in German, being open about my vulnerabilities connected to that part of my past. I do believe that, if you are authentic with people,
they will be authentic with you. So how could I expect people to talk to me about their feelings without doing it myself first? As stated by Letherby (2003):

The best way to find out about people’s lives is through non-hierarchical relationships where the interviewer is prepared to invest their own personal identity in the research relationship, answering questions and sharing knowledge. […] This type of reciprocity, she argues (talking about Oakley), invites intimacy […]” (ibid, citing Oakley, 1981, my editing; p. 83)

After speaking about my own experience and vulnerabilities, I encouraged them to talk freely about their working experiences in their native countries and in Germany and about their relationship to the organizational structures, always keeping in mind this question(s):

_How did working in German influence your self-esteem? Did it change somehow your perception of the organizational structures?_

5.1. **What was said – analysis of the explicit**

“At work, I was the stupid one […] You know, I wanted to quit everything more than once... I said, ‘Really, this time I do it’” (P2)

“Every damn day I thought that I was inappropriate…Mh… when working in German.” (P1)

Inadequacy, incompetence, frustration. According to all the interviewees, these are some of the most common feelings they felt when they started to work in a German-speaking environment.

Among the participants, just one (P4) could count on basic knowledge of the country’s language when he started to work, while the others learnt it when working already, either attending German courses or at work or combining both experiences.

The first interviewee (P1) waited almost one year after arriving in the new country, before looking for a job; he started by learning the language through intensive German courses, in order to feel ready

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11 “Mh” refers to mumbles. Some of the participants used it more than others. I decided to report mumbling within the interviews because, I do believe that tackling feelings is never easy and linear; a part of the process may be represented by silences and mumbles, therefore, I decided to express them here.

12 From this moment on, I will refer to the interviewees calling them Person1 (P1), Person2 (P2), Person3 (P3), Person4 (P4). I deliberately chose not to “assign” a factitious name to them, in order to preserve their identity symbolically, though in an anonymous way.
to understand and be understood at the working place. P2 and P3, both line cooks, started to work in the kitchens hoping to use English as a working language while learning German.

“I remember when I entered the kitchen the first time. [smiling when remembering it] The chef told me: ‘Forget speaking English’” (P3)

According to previous researches (Föbker, 2011; Föbker & Imani, 2017; Imani, Nipper & Thieme, 2014; Vogel & Rinke, 2008) in countries like Germany – especially in small cities – the knowledge of a vehicular language like English can be very poor. Compared to other countries, Germany appears to have policies of integration closely connected to the knowledge of the language. Achieving a good knowledge of the national language seems to be an important step forward towards a successful integration process. Therefore, immigrants with language difficulties can easily face behaviour such as the one reported by P3 when being asked to speak German, even if they do not feel comfortable enough to do it at that moment or do not have a basic knowledge of the language in order to understand or be understood. However, once ascertained that one has to do his best to speak German if he wanted to be accepted within the working environment, the interviewees recounted on having faced ambivalent reactions, as recalled by P2.

“I felt very frustrated when I didn’t manage to explain myself and someone stepped in!”(P2)

“Mh... Does it happen to you now as well? I mean... you speak the language really well, now...” (me)

“Sure! [Laughing] For some this just means being nice, I mean, we work together and stuff... so it’s like ‘Hey man, I help you’, but for others is... they have no patience. I am slower than them in speaking, like it or not. And the kitchen [as working environment] is suuuuper fast [Smiling]” (P2, my explanations)

The feeling of frustration if someone steps in when not being able to express yourself is something that almost all the interviewees experienced, especially when they started to learn the language. However, as reported by P2, the phenomenon of native speakers stepping in to finish a sentence for you is not just related to the initial phase of the learning process. It is possible to experience it also when the language skills are advanced. In this case, P2 connected it to two different phenomena: being nice to people you know when they facing a difficult situation, lacking patience when waiting for someone to be done with speaking.

Learning a language means also understanding what has been said and all the interviewees reported to have faced great troubles, especially at the beginning, in understanding bosses, colleagues and clients. The obstacles came from two different sides: the objective difficulty in understanding the sounds of a new language and the use of proper language standards by the speakers. Two of the interviewees recounted on having worked with people not willing to use the Hochdeutsch, standard German, in favour of their own dialect, not taking into account how challenging it can be to understand a language variation for a non-native.
“My German is now good, like, VERY good. [...] I am the chief of my department...we [the chiefs of the other departments] meet and we should take decisions together, but... mh... it doesn’t happen, you know? I stare at them... don’t get a word. They [the chiefs of the other departments] come from Southern Germany and speak... mh... schwäbisch\(^{13}\), I guess? It’s their dialect. They start to speak with each other and... yeah, I am gone.” (P4, my explanations)

According to almost all the interviewees, when someone speaks in a non-comprehensible way, asking to be respected by switching to the standard form of the language and being assertive is something that comes after a while. Nevertheless, assertiveness seems to be not only the expression of personal boundaries, but also a specific German cultural code.

“This is something that I learnt when working here [in Germany]: if you feel insecure, they will eat you! [...] Even if you are not sure about how to say something, say that. And they will respect you. People here are very direct... if you are not as direct as they are, they will eat you, yeah [...] if you belong to a lower category, you reeeally have to be even more assertive...polite, but assertive”(P2, my explanation)

Setting one’s limits appears to be very important for non-native speakers, as much as it is doing it in a polite and culturally accepted way. According to Morand (2000), language embodies the power differentials within the organizational setting (p. 236). By achieving a direct though polite way of communicating – which seems to be the main feature of the German language (P3 will confirm in the next statement) – there are more chances to be respected and get integrated into the working environment.

“In Israel, I am usually more polite than the rest of the people, but in Germany... in German, I am almost rude [smiling] ” (P3)

“Here [in Germany] people are ‘zack, zack!’\(^{14}\). They don’t waste words... You wanna say something? Say that!... Clear, fast, direct.” (P2)

“Can we say efficient?”(me)

“Yeah, exactly! Efficient!” (P2)

Mastering a language means to understand its cultural codes as well. As seen throughout the chapter, politeness and assertiveness appear to respond to typical German cultural codes, as recalled by P3 and P2. In general, all the interviewees reported that more than learning the language itself, the most difficult part of working in a non-native language was to understand the implicit cultural rules behind

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\(^{13}\) Swabian. It is a German dialect spoken in the South-West of the country (Swabia). It is known for being quite difficult to understand for German-speakers as well. It belongs to the Upper German dialects, like Bavarian and Franconian.

\(^{14}\) “Zack, zack!” is a German expression to define something that has to happen quickly.
the native speakers’ behaviour. What is appropriate and how should they say it? There is no answer to these questions that books may give, it is a matter of observing and understanding the communication processes happening among native speakers, the ones who are accounted for defining what is allowed or not, even in terms of politeness (Morand, 2000, p. 240).

Based on the interviews, it is possible to say that – in the German case – getting the cultural codes means to develop an assertive communication style, which is direct and polite. Therefore, what I mentioned beforehand about the relationship between assertiveness and setting one’s own limits gains a new meaning. Being used to a very confident communication style, native speakers seem to perceive other approaches as weaker and will not take them as seriously as more direct ones. What happens to the non-native speakers then, when they understand and adopt the cultural codes? According to almost all the interviewees, absorbing the culture of the country where one lives shortens the distances between native speakers and non-native speakers. However, it also influences one’s personality.

“*When I work in German I am more structured, organized... I don’t know why... it comes out with the language.*” (P1)

“*Is it the same in your language as well?*” (me)

“*Nooooo! [laughing] In my language I am definitely louder and less efficient [laughing]*” (P1)

“It’s been many years that I work with them [the Germans]... mh... I got them... you know, I got how they think... what they do expect from me... these things, you know?” (P2)

“*Mh... Interesting. How does this make you feel? I mean, what’s the effect that this has on you?*” (me)

“*Mh... I will never be a local, but I feel way closer to them now. Yeah... totally*” (P2)

According to almost all the interviewees, the experience of learning a new language and working with it enriched them and their personality. P1 refers to himself as to a “*mix of several elements*”, belonging to different cultures. It usually becomes clear when thinking about going back to the country of origin, comparing the organizational structure at the workplace in the homeland and the cultural codes with those in Germany.

“If I would go back to Brazil, I would be more... you know... German. I would be definitely more direct, more assertive... but I love how we are more relaxed, also in the way we speak...This is something I miss. The language is aggressive here...” (P2)

When asked, if working in another language – and eventually learning it in the meanwhile – was a difficult experience that left a mark on them, all the interviewees agreed that it was. However, none of them used words like discrimination, weakness or subordination to describe their condition. Going back to my initial hypothesis, then, I asked them if, after striving to learn German, to understand Germany’s cultural codes and to be accepted at the workplace, they would be more easily aware of
other segregations in the workplace now, compared to the past or to the working experiences they had in their own countries. I wanted to know if they would recognize the struggle that some categories go through more than others in the organizational setting (people with disabilities, people of colour, women, … just to name some) and if they would empathize with them more than they would have done in the past, eventually. My point was to understand if the uncommon experience of having faced difficult conditions, including subordination, at the workplace made for these white cisgender men the struggle of other less advantaged categories more visible.

In fact, all the interviewees did remark that they had more empathy towards people with language difficulties at the workplace after going through their experiences. Being exposed to the same kind of struggle makes it easier to see it when other people are in that position, as P2 points out:

“There are these two guys at my place... they are new, like, they really don’t speak a word [of German], you know? And I see that they suffer... people [in the kitchen] treat them very bad. ... No one has patience with them...” (P2)

“Mh... could you recognize yourself in them? Like, mh... I don’t know... when you started to work in the kitchen?” (me)

“Oh yeah, absolutely. ....I missed someone helping me at that stage ... when I didn’t get a word... When they [the new ones] need something, my colleagues tell them [miming rude manners] ‘Go to [P2 real name]. Talk to him’... I try to help them. ....mh...somehow I feel I am in between.” (P2, my explanations)

In this case, P2 acts as a caring intermediary between the German colleagues, who have no patience with the new ones, and the co-workers with language difficulties, who seem to be at the bottom of the heap. P1 concurs, by recalling a similar experience:

“At the restaurant, I was working there was this guy, his German was really poor.... I mean, not that mine is good either... especially at that stage, but still, I tried to help him whenever I could”(P1)

According to what the interviewees reported, they are now more likely to see the difficulties foreigners working in another language are facing.

Nevertheless, the participants in the research do not think that they will be more empathetic towards other possible difficult situations at the workplace in the future (f.i. mobbing, different treatments due to race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.), nor will they be able to acknowledge them.

“I feel more connected to people learning a language now.” (P4)

“Have you ever worked with foreigners in your country?” (me)

“Mh... no...” (P4)

“Ok. Imagine to be back to your country and to work there, all right? ... There is a colleague struggling with the language... you see that the other staff members are not taking her seriously ‘cause she cannot express herself properly...” (me)

“Mh... (long silence) I would feel very bad for her... I know how it feels” (P4)
“Ok...let’s say that, in the same company where you work, there is this girl, a single mother of two, ok? She ‘complains’ that it is hard to get the permit to bring her kids to school, the management is not very supportive...even if it’s her right to have it...” (me)

“...mh...(silence) I guess that I would think that she wants too much. She has a family and she should arrange her day...right? ...But, mh... I guess that, mh... if she was a friend or someone I would be close to, I would have felt bad for her...” (P4)

“The kitchen is a men-dominated field. [...] I just had two female colleagues in the last six years... they do good, actually. [...] They are very strong and assertive. If you are not like that, you cannot work in the kitchen. But I don’t think it’s a matter of gender...mh... you have to be strong. That’s it”(P3)

According to what the interviewees say, gender does not seem to represent an issue within the working structure, though they know that some workplaces are more gendered than others (“The kitchen is a men-dominated field”, P3). This result may seem contradictory at first, but it confirms that some consolidated hegemonic dynamics of power are still valid, especially in certain workplaces, like restaurants and that the repetition over time of the same kind of interactions straightens the existing dynamics, which is exactly what Berggren defines as sticky masculinity.

Taking stock of what the interviewees said, it seems difficult for them to empathize with people when it comes to different kinds of strains and obstacles rather than the one they might have been (or might be) subjected to.

5.2. What was unsaid – analysis of the implicit

When asked to collaborate with the investigation, all the candidates were informed about my research questions: How did working in German influence your self-esteem? Did it change somehow your perception of the organizational structures? Moreover, I was interested in knowing what their feelings were/ are when working in a German-speaking environment, as well as if this experience helped them to be more aware of the presence of vulnerable categories at work. As emerged in the last section, the interviewees gave intelligible answers about this last issue and, in general, they gave some hints about their perception of the organizational structures and the social constructs happening within them; however, answering the other questions seemed to create some difficulties. In addition, the body language adopted by the interviewees during the interviews often mismatched with what they were expressing verbally, revealing uneasiness.

5.2.1. Hidden Feelings

“You know, it’s somehow interesting... When I ask you ‘how did you feel about this...?’, or...mh... ‘Which were your feelings when that happened... ’... you answer by saying ‘I know it was... ’ or ‘If I think
When I tried to make P1 aware of the fact that he was avoiding to give an answer about his feelings, he was not able to give a reply. Drawing from Descombe (2010) and from my personal feelings, I did not push further on the topic and decided to read between the lines instead. No (explicit) answer is also an (implicit) answer, especially during an interview. By forcing an answer, I could have probably provoked a defensive or less cooperative attitude from the participant during the interview (ibid, p. 180).

In general terms, except P2, who used expressions like “At work, I was the stupid one”, “I felt very frustrated”, most of the time all the other participants had a “distant” approach to my questions about their emotions.

In general, the reasons for this behaviour may be related to several aspects. However, two elements played an important role, in this specific case: 1) the “interviewer effect” and 2) not being used to deal with one’s own emotions or even to recognize them.

The interviewer effect refers to the impact that the researcher has on the interviews and on the interviewees, sometimes just because of his/her/their background and personal identity, especially in terms of age, ethnicity and gender (ibid, p. 178). In this case, my age and ethnicity were aligned with those of the participants, all in their 30s and having a European background or having lived in Europe. Moreover, my own status as an immigrant who experienced language difficulties at the workplace when working in German put me in a position that was very close to the one of the interviewees. Nevertheless, being interviewed by a woman – and a stranger – about sensitive topics may have had an impact on the willingness – conscious or not – to share personal feelings, but most of all, vulnerabilities.15

Secondly, men still suffer the social “pressure” of them being not as good as women in elaborating their feelings, especially the negative ones. In terms of emotional intelligence16, women are believed to be more connected to their emotions and to be able to elaborate on them (Sánchez-Núñez et al., 2008). This is a product of the process of socialization that children go through when too often, boys are taught to be strong and girls to be caring. (e.g. Barrett et al., 2000; Candela Agulló et al., 2002; Sunew, 2004; Garaigordobil and de Galdeano, 2006; Sánchez-Núñez et al., 2008).

15 This point will be further addressed in chapter 6 as well.

16 “Although not agreed on by researchers in the field, two common definitions of emotional intelligence are the ability to monitor the feelings and emotions of the self and of others and to use this information to guide one’s behaviours, and the ability to identify and control emotions in oneself and in others”(Wicks, Nakisher and Grimm, 2018).
However, one positive feeling surprisingly emerged throughout all the interviews: empathy. The difficulties faced when working in German, especially when they were learning the language at the beginning of their time as immigrants, developed a stronger understanding of the needs and feelings of the ones, who are experiencing the same process among the participants. Moreover, in some cases, empathy is so strong that it encourages the subject to act to help others in similar circumstances. For example, P2 helps the new workers to adapt to the workplace; he knows what they are going through and he wants them to feel better. As mentioned above, empathy is a feeling usually connected to women, rather than men, as much as it is to take good care of other people. According to previous studies, women are the ones expected to show these qualities at the workplace as well (Acker, 1990; Abrahamsson and Somerville, 2007; Häyrén, 2016), especially when it comes to very manly workplaces, like restaurant kitchens.

In short, what emerges from the interviews is that the men who were exposed to the difficult situation of working in German, while learning the language and its cultural codes, tend to develop a certain sympathy for people in the same situation, particularly for the ones who have just started the process and they sometimes do support them to go through the whole procedure actively.

Nevertheless, even if this feeling of empathy is strong, the interviews also show that being vulnerable is still perceived as a very negative attitude, which does not fit into the workplace’s organization. As reported above, P2, a very sensitive man, on the one hand, helped his new colleagues to adapt to the working environment, but on the other, he repeatedly told to one of them to “Stop crying like a baby”. The young man, in his 20s, had just started the process of working in German. He had experience in the kitchen in his country, but he did not know the local language and was struggling to be accepted by the German colleagues. P2 often helped him out when he did not understand what was happening and encouraged him to be more assertive with the rest of the staff, but at the same time, he was holding the young man’s vulnerability against him.

“I tell him ‘Say what you think! Even if you make mistakes! It doesn’t matter, they will respect you!’; but he keeps crying like a baby [laughing]... and I tell him: ‘Stop crying like a baby. Be strong!’...Oh man...I feel bad for him [laughing]” (P2)

P3 formulated the principle from another perspective: the kitchen is a place for strong people.
"The kitchen is a men-dominated field. […] I just had two female colleagues in the last six years… they do good, actually. […] They are very strong and assertive. If you are not like that, you cannot work in the kitchen. But I don’t think it’s a matter of gender…mh… you have to be strong. That’s it” (P3)

In a work about the “male sex” dated back to 1976, David and Brannon stressed the basic principles males were supposed to refer to: “no sissy stuff, be a big wheel, be a sturdy oak, and give ‘em hell” (David and Brannon, 1976; cited Berggren, 2014, p.234). Thirty-two years later, Glick, Berdahl, and Alonso created what they called the “Masculinity Contest Culture” index (MCC). The index assessed “four distinct, but highly correlated, masculine workplace norms: show no weakness, valorise strength and stamina, put work first, and dog eat dog competition” (Ely and Kimmel, 2018, p.630; Glick, Berdahl and Alonso, 2018, p.466). The incidence of these norms within the workplaces is variable, but still present and, according to what the interviewees reported, it seems that these factors can still influence their behaviour at the workplace.

What emerges is that the repetition of masculine workplace norms, “sticks” to the men who experience them on daily basis and make the feeling of empathy entering in contrast with their idea of being masculine and of how people should act at the workplace. Analyzed through the lens of the sticky masculinity, the contradictory behaviour showed by the participants, as the one P2 had with his colleague, suddenly makes sense. The interviewees apply typical masculine cultural codes to police masculinity even when they are actually empathic.

The sticky masculinity appears to be the key concept for the interpretation of another phenomenon. In fact, all the participants agreed upon describing the experience of working in German as something very difficult, especially at the beginning, and upon the fact that they now feel stronger thanks to the fact of having interiorized the cultural codes, however, when asked directly if their self-esteem somehow got affected by this experience (even for a short period of time), all of them said “no”.

"By working in German, I always face the tension between my standards and the reality. Usually, they are higher…" (P1)

P1’s statement about his experience of working in German represents an exhaustive definition of what William James defined self-esteem in 1892. “Feelings of self-worth come from the successes an individual achieves tempered by what the person had expected to achieve.” (Osborne, 2018)

Moreover, chapter 5.1 begins with strong statements that recall feelings such as frequent inadequacy and stupidity. If none of the participants said to have experienced a lack of self-esteem, how is it

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17 This quote has already been reported before (chapter 5.2, p.21), however, I found it very relevant for this chapter as well, so I decided to use it again.
possible to find such statements? As discussed in the introduction, men are more likely to have higher self-esteem rather than women, therefore a lack of self-confidence at the workplace will probably not affect their sense of self as much as it might affect people more used to question themselves because they do not usually have a privileged position within the workplace. Gendered self-esteem appears to be strictly connected to stereotypes about what women and men supposedly are respectively good (or not) at doing. The repetition of cultural codes within the social structure sticks to women and men in terms of self-esteem as well. Men’s self-esteem is not connected to a lack of self-confidence, rather to the reiteration of the social construction they are used to.

Therefore, the apparent contradictory attitude of the interviewees of empathizing with people who find themselves in the same difficult conditions they faced and, at the same time, using masculine cultural codes which do not consider vulnerability as something acceptable, make sense through the lens of the “sticky masculinity theory”. Repeating and being exposed to the repetition of traditional masculine norms create a gendered self-esteem that sticks to men and creates mismatching attitudes towards feeling empathy and vulnerability.

5.2.2. Body language and contradictions

Another unexpected side of the interviews was to experience the unconscious body language that the interviewees exhibited. Even though the phenomenological perspective does not explicitly take into account the body language, feminist scholars tend to consider the embodied responses as a part of the lived experience of the individual, especially in case of uneasiness (Gardiner, 2018).

When we feel uneasy, this influences how we move through space (ibid, p.300)

In my opinion, this feeling does not only affects the way we occupy the space, but our body language in general and the gestures we perform.

During the interviews, all the participants had their arms crossed on several occasions and they kept the position for a prolonged amount of time\(^\text{18}\). Approximately, the participants spent the 25%-30% of the time with their arms crossed, especially when addressing the process of learning the language and working in a new environment, with natives, and also when asked directly about something. According to the study of non-verbal language, crossed arms and/or legs are likely to manifest a closure, an attempt to avoid the interaction or a display of anxiety (Ekman and Friesen, 18\textsuperscript{\text{\textregistered}}

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\(^{18}\) The interviews have been audio-recorded, therefore, I can just count on the notes I took during and after the meetings and to the personal memories to estimate the time the interviewees spent with their arms crossed throughout the conversations.
Even if the participants adopted other body positions and gestures during the interviews; the unconscious adoption of a *closed position*\(^{19}\) when talking about specific topics is a very interesting detail to address within this research as well.

Among the participants, P2 was the one who spent less time with his arms crossed compared to the others. He also used more hand-gestures to express his feelings not only verbally, but also through his hands, he smiled more and rubbed his head often, an unconscious gesture, which usually represents intimacy, comfort, but also consolation of others (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Morris, 1971; Meadors and Murray, 2014). At the opposite end of the spectrum, P3 spent the majority of the interview with his legs crossed (knee over knee), and both hands on the upper knee (one over the other), when not crossing his arms on the chest. Legs crossing is considered to be a closed position as well, as much as arms crossing. He was tapping the foot on the ground quite often, usually a signal of the will to escape the conversation or to change topic (Ekman and Friesen, 1969; Meadors and Murray, 2014). P1 and P4 stayed in the middle of the spectrum, adopting less “emotional” gestures than P2, but also recurring less to such “static and closed” positions as P4.

It is hard to tell the reason why the participants unconsciously manifested a closed attitude and discomfort. Reading between the lines, I can interpret the body language as an embodied response of engaging with one’s own vulnerabilities and unpleasant feelings; however, putting myself in their shoes, being interviewed about a sensitive topic, by a woman that they almost did not know, might have contributed to create a feeling of uneasiness among the participants, as explained in chapter 5.

6. Discussion

When I started with the interviews, I honestly thought I would gather different results. While the premises of the work were exactly the ones I expected to face, the consequences surprised me.

More in detail: as aforementioned, by interviewing white cisgender men, my expectation was to deal with people whom, because of these attributes, did not have to question themselves as much as others, especially within the working environment. I counted on interacting with the ones that Kimmel defines “generic persons”:

> When I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I'm universally generalizable. As a middle class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I'm the generic person! (Kimmel, 1993, p.29)

\(^{19}\) As explained before, assuming a position where the legs and/or the arms crossed reveals a “closed” attitude towards the person who is speaking, the topic.
Moreover, I wanted to meet these men after they went through difficult times at work and I was confident that, by experiencing vulnerability at the workplace for the first time (or maybe they experienced it already, but not as much as in this situation), they would have not only perceived themselves as “specific people” and not as “generic” anymore, but that they would have been able to recognize this difficulty in other people as well. As aforementioned, I did not expect them to be conscious of this process already; nevertheless, I thought that this would have happened during the interviews, thanks to the use of the in-depth “loose” semi-structured format. Drawing from the belief that negative experiences make people stronger and from my own experience of discomfort when working in German surrounded by native speakers, I was confident that, becoming aware of their own moment of vulnerability, the participants would have developed a more empathetic masculinity. Consequently, this newly acquired awareness would have changed their perception of the organizational patterns and made them ready to contribute to the creation of more equal workplaces.

However, this is not what happened. The participants seem to have reached just a certain point of elaboration of their experience, by recognizing to have had a hard time at work, but this acknowledgement seems to stop here or not to develop any further and the interviewees end up fostering the same patterns they went through all over again. In fact, the subjects interviewed do not seem conscious about their re-creation of the same systems of oppression of feelings of vulnerability at the workplace ↔ reinforcement of patterns of traditional masculinity. Therefore, when new people enter the working dynamic and struggle with it, they seem to help the new ones to stay and to adapt to it, rather than doing something to change it.

Caring practices, such as taking good care of the ones who are facing a hard time in their integration process or feeling empathetic towards them, are often transformed into less sympathetic comments, creating an ambivalent – and somehow aggressive – attitude. Some of the participants, for example, motivate the new colleagues to be resilient by using a repertoire of “masculine related” expressions, such as, be strong (P2, P3), don’t cry like a baby (P2). Though they went through the same kind discomfort, difficulties and pain, they seem to do nothing to challenge the system and the social constructs which lay behind the organizational patterns. On the contrary, drawing from Connell’s work on masculinities analysed in chapter 2.2, the interviewees take/ took on implicit behaviours, in order to avoid to be culturally subordinated or marginalized themselves.

According to the theory of the sticky masculinity, the repetition, also bodily, of certain behaviours reproduces and justifies a specific kind of masculinity, tougher and stronger. It seems that the interviewees are expected to show toughness at the workplace and expect to see it in the new ones as
well, even if they know that one cannot be though all the times, especially when facing a difficult situation.

Bodies culturally read as “men” are oriented toward the culturally established signs of ‘masculinity’, such as hardness and violence. The repeated sticking together of certain bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity. (Berggren, 2014, p. 246)

In my opinion, the interviews showed that there is a lot of contradiction going on for men in the workplace, even if they end up taking a stance towards the already existing structure. The process of adaptation is neither easy, nor smooth. The tears of the new colleague, the feeling of being inadequate or stupid are embodied signals of the uneasiness that these people felt when entering the German-speaking workplace. Nevertheless, their struggle ends up in absorbing the already existing social constructs. As demonstrated within their study on young masculinities, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) argue that even if the discourses of empathy and vulnerability are present in a man’s / boy’s life, nonetheless the ones of toughness, hardness and aggressiveness are still extremely influential. The process of adaptation is not linear and of course, these discourses are not the only options, but the social structures are mostly embedded with them and the social interactions keep just repeating and making these discourses stronger.

Bodies take on “shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force” (Gardiner, 2018, p. 91; referencing Ahmed, 2006).

The interviewees also seemed to face difficulties in connecting with their own feelings of despair and vulnerability and to share them. As addressed within chapter 5.2.1., several reasons may have contributed to this behaviour, one of them being the “interviewer variable” and the lack of personal bonds between the participants and me. However, the above-mentioned strength of the traditional masculine discourses might discourage men to face their own vulnerabilities, to accept them and to share them, similarly to what happened with P1 when asked to get in touch with his feelings.

Gendered lived experience also includes “pervasive patterns of gendered emotion” (Berggren, 2014, p. 240, referencing Bartky, 1990, p. 84)

According to this research, therefore, men not only feel less at ease to show their weaknesses, but also seem to be expected to manifest just certain kinds of “gendered emotions” within the organization (“be strong”, “don’t cry like a baby”). Being vulnerable seems not to be accepted within these organizational contexts, like when P2 says to his colleague that he should not cry like a baby while helping him to fit into the working structure.
Therefore, the results of the study are consistent with previous researches on organizational structures (f.i. Leitch and Steadman, 2015) and displays that the organizational setting keeps reinforcing the classical visions of masculinity and preserving the existing patriarchal power structures.

7. Conclusion

Drawing from the four interviews, this study disproves the initial hypothesis and shows that working in German, surrounded by native speakers, did not affect the self-esteem of the participants.

However, this experience demonstrates how difficult it is for white cisgender men to renounce traditional workplace dynamics in order to create new and more inclusive organizational settings. In addition, the interviewees did not show a better understanding of the discriminations that some people are usually experiencing at work, even if they faced a situation of weakness themselves. They seem to have developed empathy towards those in their same condition (non-native speakers working in a native environment), but they do have a strong mismatching attitude towards them, ranging from being supportive and caring, to belittling the feelings that the new colleagues are going through (“don’t cry like a baby”, “be strong”). The social construction of gender and the repetition of traditional masculine cultural codes override the ability to be vulnerable in the workplace and express the empathy that men may desire to express.

However, the research deals with a very small group of participants and even though it might shed a light on the situation of a specific target group, it is not possible to make generalizations out of its results. Nevertheless, it represents an innovative approach to the topics of men and masculinities within the organizations, due to the use of feminist phenomenology as methodology.

As addressed within chapter 3, the phenomenological approach is particularly valuable in order to investigate existing social structures and to promote social change. Nonetheless, becoming aware of a problem does not mean that it will be fixed immediately. When it comes to established routines and habits, changing patterns requires a long time, a good plan, some intermediate checks (“milestones”) and a lot of patience.

Coming from the fields of youth work and non-formal education, I can imagine implementing good praxis within workplaces, series of micro-goals, easy to achieve for everyone, repeated for a certain amount of time and finalized to generate a change and to promote structures, which do not perpetrate these old schemes. Sometimes companies do have anti-discrimination policies, but this does not mean that the organizational structure changed or is ready to change. As aforementioned, Acker calls organizations “inequality factories”, therefore, creating policies sometimes is not enough
to promote change. In order to make the change effective, it has to be “interiorized”; it has to become something that everyone at the workplace will consider natural so that people will not even pay attention to it anymore.

According to the good praxis strategy, I would rather suggest to create a long-term plan (1-2 years) and to start with small actions to repeat with a certain frequency. For example, I take my own working environment as a source of ideas: every day, all the employees have to read and “check” two statements on an online platform. The final chief and the Human Resources’ staff are in charge of ensuring that everyone accomplished the goal and people can write them personally if they want to add something more. The statements revolve around the daily duties and people are asked if they confirm to have achieved their daily goals. Keeping this practice, but changing the statements and transforming them into questions, could represent a good example of good praxis at work. For instance, the questions may be represented by simple feedbacks about a highlight of the day and something that went wrong and to ask, which emotions the person felt when these events happened. Repeating this practice will probably encourage people to work on their feelings at the workplace as well and slowly to see the organizational field and the emotional domain less disjointed. The organization may encourage teamwork among people with different levels of working experience, in order to get to know each other and appreciate strength and weaknesses of each one; providing workshops and training on specific topics (such as discriminations at the workplace) could also be a good tool. There is no right or wrong strategy. Every workplace has specific dynamics and the best strategy should be moulded accordingly.
8. Bibliography


