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Language: English
ISBN 91-7246-236-1
Doctoral thesis, 2006
323 pages

A Production of Diversity

Appearances, Ideas, Interests, Actions, Contradictions and Praxis

A history of two management concepts, valuing diversity and managing diversity, has its cultural and historic origins in the U.S., or, more exactly, in the management/organizational literature produced in the U.S. context. However, the ideas of valuing and managing diversity, rooted in this context, have been appropriated by other countries and partly re-created with new ideas, specific to these other contexts.

The focus in this thesis is on the notion of diversity, its appearance and its varying conceptualizations and practical manifestations in Sweden. More specifically, I have studied the process of social production of diversity at a large, manufacturing company that is located in Sweden and is owned by a large, American company. An overall purpose of this study is to understand how the idea(s) of diversity was produced and why it was produced in particular ways at the studied manufacturing company. In that sense, I was interested in learning, by studying the process of diversity production at this company, whether particular sectional ideas and interests were privileged while other ideas and interests were marginalized.

In order to understand and to study diversity in this way, I have used a certain methodological approach that is inspired by (critical) ethnography. In that sense, apart from some general characteristics of traditional ethnography, such as the procedures for how to understand another way of life from the native point of view and how to include several components of data collection (an archival research, /participant/ observations over a long time period, and interviews), I have also incorporated some characteristics of the critical orientation within ethnography. Those characteristics include focusing on diversity in terms of injustices (e.g., discrimination and marginalization) and domination (e.g., domination of particular sectional interests in regard to diversity). In addition to those characteristics, I have also challenged taken-for-granted ways of thinking (in regard to the studied phenomenon) and have reflected on how my involvement in the research process has affected my collection and analysis of the empirical material. The analysis is inspired by social constructivism, critical (organization) theory, and a dialectic approach to the study of organizations.

The study shows that the social production of diversity can be strengthened with the intentions of progressive practice by promoting equal opportunity; accepting, welcoming and understanding different perspectives and participants of different "types"; minimizing expressions of racism and sexism; and increasing productivity, creativity and teamwork. However, the study also shows that the social production of diversity can also be (systematically) distorted, by restricting, suppressing and limiting ideas and interests related to diversity. In other words, certain ideas and interests concerning diversity are privileged, while other ideas and interests are marginalized. In such cases, the actions aimed at the production of diversity reproduce rather than change the established order. In the company under study, the process of diversity production created a vacuum around a number of (potentially) conflict-laden areas (areas the organizational participants describe as "uncomfortable"). As a result, despite being core components of the problem and the reasons for diversity action, these areas were suppressed and marginalized in the message produced and therefore were not included in the formulation of strategies.

Key words: diversity, ethnography, critical theory, dialectic view, social-historical process, hybridization, domination, univerzalization, naturalization, and disqualification.