

GRI-rapport 2008:3

Producing Difference in Organizing – Attempts to Change an Ethnic Identity into a Professional One

Andreas Diedrich

Organizing in Action Nets



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

© Gothenburg Research Institute
All rights reserved. No part of this report may
be reproduced without the written permission
from the publisher.

Gothenburg Research Institute
School of Business, Economics and Law
at University of Gothenburg
P.O. Box 600
SE-405 30 Göteborg
Tel: +46 (0)31 - 786 54 13
Fax: +46 (0)31 - 786 56 19
E-post: gri@gri.gu.se

ISSN 1400-4801

Layout: Lise-Lotte Walter

Abstract

This paper reports how municipalities, state agencies and other organizations working with the induction of newly-arrived immigrants in Sweden cooperate in establishing a system for assessing the immigrants' competencies and qualifications (validation). Among the various practices involved in this "management of difference", one consists in an active casting of immigrants. While such casting is not necessarily problematic, the results of Swedish validation programs have been described by practitioners, policy makers and researchers alike as somewhat disappointing with regard to getting people into employment quicker or integrating them better into society. Some of the shortcomings may be explained by the fact that the efforts to remove inequality involve the categorization of the newly-arrived immigrants as having an "upsetting identity"; they could not be easily identified in relationship to what was considered as the Swedish norm. Instead of finding out what the immigrants could do, the assessment activities concentrated on demonstrating what they will not be able to do in a Swedish context.

Keywords: difference, identity, classification, immigrants, organizing.

Introduction

The management of difference has become a widespread activity in organizations (Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002), often expressed and analyzed in terms of concepts such as “diversity management” (Thomas, 1990; Morrison, 1992; Cross et al., 1994; Prasad et al., 2005; Omanovic, 2006) or gender equality programs (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2007). Typically, initiatives aimed at managing difference in private companies and in the public administration offices have in common the belief that if a heterogeneous workforce (no matter what the differences are) is managed in an efficient manner, it can be at least as productive, motivated and committed to quality as a homogeneous workforce. Such programs are also usually seen as the solution to the problem of discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, etc., which is perceived as hampering efficiency.

Recently, a growing number of researchers have begun to argue that diversity issues cannot be adequately understood and analyzed without taking into consideration the power relations inherent in organizing practices (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Prasad et al., 1997; Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002; Nkomo & Stewart, 2006). Such research takes into consideration that difference is not given, but actively constructed in organizing.

Drawing on Czarniawska’s concept of action nets (2004; 2005), this paper examines how difference is constructed in organizing practices, and the role of classification work in such a process. Viewing organizing as taking place in action nets rather than in separate organizations shifts focus to systems of categories that are created or called upon when actions are being connected to each other (see also Walter, 2005 and Diedrich & Styhre, forthcoming). An action net perspective reveals that actions such as organizing create a human being’s social belonging and not vice versa. In such a perspective, taken-for-granted processes that are part and parcel of organizing may be better explicated.

The study’s ambition is to contribute to a body of research that views human beings as socially situated, and that portrays identity as constructed through organizing activities, rather than as something given (West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Hardy & Philips, 1999; Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002; Foldy, 2002; Hardy, 2003). In this view, classification is by no means a neutral activity. Careful attention should thus be paid to the social consequences of classification as part of the management of difference in organizing. Measures aimed at removing inequality – such as diversity management programs in companies or the induction of newly-arrived immigrants in the public domain – may actually promote inequality by making differences visible and stabilizing them. To put it bluntly, equality measures may produce or increase the inequality they wish to remove.

An ethnographically-inspired study focused on the work involved in organizing a system for the assessment of knowledge and competencies, as part

of the induction of newly-arrived¹ immigrants in one of Sweden's larger regions, experiencing a high influx of immigrants. The induction of newly-arrived immigrants is distributed in Sweden among a number of municipal organizations and state agencies. Recently, and in line with a growing European political discourse viewing work as the key to social inclusion, emphasis was placed on speeding up the entry of newly-arrived immigrants on the labour market. Among other measures, the system was to include an assessment of the competencies of newly-arrived persons and a planning of the support given on the basis of their educational and vocational background. Although the system was not yet fully in place, the involved actors assumed that the tools and methods that had been developed would produce distinct categories of knowledge and competencies. This, they believed, will enable an objective, neutral classification of the newly-arrived immigrants' competencies acquired through "lifelong learning", which subsequently will be efficiently managed.

The following section of the paper presents a theoretical overview of managing difference in organizations. Next, the context of the study and the method used are presented. After that, I outline the case and analyze it, focusing on the role of classification work in the construction of difference in organizing. Finally, I present some conclusions.

Organizing and the Construction of Difference

Difference is seen as a part of the concept of diversity (see e.g. Prasad et al., 2005: 2). The concept of diversity, in turn, has one of its roots in postcolonial thought, which discusses the relationship of a dominating majority with "the Other" (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Styhre, 2007). Another root can be found in the discourse on "managing diversity" seen as a business case, and advocated by the US researchers and consultants since the early 1990s (Glastra et al., 2000; Litvin, 2002; Omanovic, 2006). In organization and management studies, diversity management usually announces a focus on disadvantaged minority groups in organizations. Typical initiatives aimed at managing diversity include the planning and implementing of systems and practices, which aim at facilitating the potential advantages of diversity while minimizing potential disadvantages (Cox, 1994; Nkomo & Stewart, 2006: 533). Such measures include the identification of different social groups as well as their efficient management.

While the diversity perspective originated in the early 1990s with the principal idea of "identity" as something given recently organization researchers have studied diversity issues taking into consideration the power relations inherent in organizing practices (Prasad, et al., 1997; Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002; Hardy, 2003).

Cynthia Hardy and Nelson Phillips, for example, studied refugee systems in Denmark, Canada and the UK (Phillips & Hardy, 1997; Hardy & Philips,

1998, 1999; Hardy, 2003) and could demonstrate how categories are discursively enacted and, far from being simple language games, how they can have significant power effects. The studies showed how refugee systems were constituted by many actors who, based on their particular interests and institutional frameworks, played some or other part in the casting of the refugees. Hardy and Phillips' research takes as a starting point the assumption that difference and identity are not given, but are actively constructed in organizing. Such constructions can serve particular interests, and frequently maintain the already existing pattern of social relations (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). If so, researchers must explore the social construction of diversity in organizations instead of treating it in terms of natural category differences, say Nkomo & Cox (1996).

Classifying Difference

Whereas in much of the research on diversity organizations are seen as given, stable and neutral entities, Karl Weick's foundational work (1979) prompted organization researchers to shift their focus from understanding organizations as such entities to seeing them as sites (among many) of organizing (Law, 1994; Czarniawska, 2004; 2005). Consequently, it is important to examine *organizing*, in order to understand what happens before organizations become stabilized into an appearance of solid entities. Czarniawska (1997) speaks of "action nets", that is, actions that are tied together, because they seem to require one another in a context of a certain activity. Organizing is connecting such actions, stabilizing the connections and mobilizing them when needed. If the connections are stabilized and actions are repeated over time they become institutionalized. Such a perspective, she suggests, would shift the focus from who does what to what is being done (Czarniawska, 2005).

From this perspective on organizing, the organizing process consists – among other activities – of identifying, structuring, defining and ordering various resources (Hetherington & Munro, 1997), of "sorting things out" (Bowker & Star, 2000). Classification therefore is an important part of organizing as it refers to the establishment of a system of categories and consistent principles, in which each category is unique and categories are mutually exclusive (Bowker & Star, 2000). Classifications allow people (and machines) to sort events, things, animals and persons into different categories. Two or more objects can thus be examined and evaluated depending on their similarities and differences. Categories are advantageous in so far as they create structure in everyday life and facilitate it. Classification systems are "spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world" aimed at "making things work" without even being perceived as systems of separation and ordering (Bowker & Star, 2000: 10).

An ideal classification system is expected to be all-inclusive, i.e. each thing, action, or area considered must be possible to categorise and incorporate in the

system. But such an ideal form of classification is impossible to achieve, as every form of classification implies conflicts, exclusion and compromises. While the classification system allows the classifiers to decide what the categories contain and how they are related to each other, there is a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories and the definition of ideas that guide how human beings act (Bowker, 1998; Bowker & Star, 2000).

Bowker and Star, basing on the work of Rosch (1978) and Taylor (1995) distinguished between two types of classification systems: Aristotelian classification and prototypical classification. Aristotelian classification, according to Bowker and Star (2000: 62):

works according to a set of binary characteristics that an object being classified either presents or does not present. At each level of classification, enough binary features are added to place any member of a given population into one and only one class.

Prototypical classification, on the other hand, assumes that in everyday life our classifications tend to be fuzzier than we might think. Instead of drawing on binary characteristics when deciding whether what we hold in our hand is a glass or not, we have a general picture of what a glass is in our minds. Such picture can be extended by metaphors and analogies as the decision is being made of whether the object we direct our attention towards counts or not. According to Bowker (1998: 256) “we call up a best example and then see if there is a reasonable direct or metaphorical thread that takes us from the example to the object under consideration”.

Bowker and Star (2000) examined the classification practices in Apartheid South Africa where everyday classification of race partook of both Aristotelian and prototypical modes, and concluded that there are no pure types of classification systems and that Aristotelian accounts, for example of race, are themselves already prototypical.

Also, in order to satisfy administrative and managerial needs, classification work aims at producing what Bowker (1998) referred to as “homogenous causal regions”, zones or segments that do not include effective subdivisions. Such a zone would mean, for example, that a street cannot be decisively divided into “gravel” or “tarred”, or that there is no real distinction between “hard” and “soft” metal. According to Bowker (1998), the International Classification of Diseases (ICD), which he studied, provides a striking example of the striving towards increased precision in an effort to create homogenous causal regions.

A public highway (trafficway) or street is the entire width between property lines (or other boundary lines) of every way or place, of which any part is open to the use of the public for purposes of vehicular traffic as a matter of right or custom. A roadway is that part of the public highway designed, improved, and ordinarily used, for vehicular travel. (ICD-9, 1996, vol. 1, p. 274 cf. Bowker, 1998)

While this excerpt from the ICD, used in the recording of accident statistics that include the place and manner gives the impression of great precision, Bowker (1997) nevertheless asks the reader "how much of the social and natural worlds would have to be described within the ICD in order to produce an exhaustive system?" There is, after all, always room for further subdividing the world (see also Latour, 1987).

In sum, while organizing as an activity implies processes of classification (Gastelaars, 2002), there are no given, natural or universal classification systems, even if classes in different social contexts are sometimes represented as such. Classification in everyday organizing is prototypical in practice although it is Aristotelian in principle. Bowker (1998) mentioned two main reasons for this: each classification system is tied to a particular set of coding practices, and classification systems generally reflect the conflicting contradictory agendas embedded in the context within which they arise. Since classification is a taken-for-granted part of everyday organizing, organizational members rarely observe the ongoing construction to which they contribute themselves. Viewing organizations as action nets shifts focus to the classifications called upon or created when actions need to be connected to each other (Walter, 2005; Diedrich & Styhre, forthcoming). Furthermore, by studying the classification – in this case of persons – as part of everyday organizing, the mechanisms which contribute to the production and stabilizing of identity, and the consequences thereof, can be explicated (Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002).

In the present study I argue that while the ambition of the state authorities and municipal and private organizations involved in the assessment of the competencies of newly-arrived persons in Sweden was to remove inequality by supplanting ethical identity markers with professional ones, this casting involved the categorization of the newly-arrived persons as having an "upsetting identity", as deviants in relation to what was considered as the Swedish norm. Instead of trying to find out what the newly-arrived persons were able to do, the assessment activities above all specified what they were *unable* to do in the Swedish context.

The Study

The setting

The Swedish immigration policy after the Second World War was heavily influenced by the perceived labour shortage. Immigrant workers were welcomed with open arms, and encouraged to fill the vacant positions on the labour market. This changed from the late 1960s onwards, as the trade unions exerted a growing pressure to curb the influx of foreign manpower. Immigrant policy

became closer connected to the ideal of the Swedish welfare state, taking as its point of departure the moral duty to support the helpless and the poor.

Recently, a growing number of reports on immigrants' integration into working life concluded that the resource immigrants constituted was not adequately utilized (see also Rauhut & Blomberg, 1993; RiR, 2002; SOU 2003:75; Integrationsverket, 2006; Salas, 2007; Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2007). In response, and in line with an intensified European political discourse on work as the key to social inclusion, policy-makers in Sweden have directed attention towards supporting newly-arrived persons into employment shortly after arrival in the country. The induction activities included specialized Swedish language courses, career counselling, job search courses and the assessment of competencies, which is called validation (*validering* in Swedish). Validation was not directed at immigrants only, but the government suggested that it was worthwhile "to validate the competencies of persons with foreign backgrounds in order to facilitate integration in society and entry into the labour market (Integrationsverket, 2002). Although no standardized validation system was in place yet, a large number of projects have been run in various parts of the country, with the aim of developing validation as a viable tool for integration. The development of one of these projects is the case presented in this paper.

The field study

The study was carried out during a two-year period: from the beginning of 2005 until the end of 2007. It included interviews, observations and document analysis.

Interviews	Observations	Documents
73 interviews with newly-arrived immigrants and caseworkers and other representatives from municipal and state organizations involved in the induction process.	Observation of 13 project meetings, 2 occupational assessments, 1 qualification portfolio course 2-4 days a week over a period of eight weeks	Brochures, PowerPoint Presentations, e-mails, training material; memoranda; assessment reports and certificates

Table 1: The field material.

A total of 73 interviews were conducted with immigrants and representatives from various municipal, state and private organizations involved in the assessment of competencies as part of the settlement support to immigrants in Sweden: the Swedish Migration Board, the Public Employment Service, the Refugee Units, the Social Security Services, the municipal Adult Education Administration, the municipal administration and various educational services providers. The

interviews were open-ended (Silvermann, 1993; Kvale, 1996). They were recorded on minidisks and then transcribed in full.

Apart from the interviews, the fieldwork included mainly observations of assessment activities. Over a period of ten weeks I followed a group of newly-arrived immigrants as they partook in a validation activity, the “qualification portfolio”. It aimed at documenting the immigrants’ past experiences and with the help of job search activities making them more “fit” for the Swedish labour market. The qualification portfolio ran for ten weeks and consisted of two weeks of computer training and eight weeks of lectures and job search activities. The educational services provider offering the qualification portfolio ran two parallel courses: one in the morning and the other one in the afternoon. Classes were held five days a week and each class lasted for three hours. I decided to follow the afternoon group and spent 2-4 days a week in class. I also observed two “occupational assessments”, a validation activity aimed at assessing and documenting practical, occupational competencies in “real life” situations.

Additionally, I observed meetings of management representatives and caseworkers, learning how they talked about, and made sense of their work with newly-arrived immigrants and of diversity issues in general. I took field notes which later formed the basis of my written reports from the meetings. Finally, I collected and then analysed various types of documents, such as government reports and statistics, agreements, memoranda, training materials, issued assessment reports and certificates as well as web pages, e-mails and letters.

The analysis of the field material followed the precepts of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In an iterative process, the first interview was compared with the second, the first and second interviews with the third, and so forth. The notes from the observed meetings were compared to the interviews. It then became possible to sort out the material according to similarities or differences among and between the two sets of materials. Finally, the emerging categories were interpreted using theories on classification and its consequences (Bowker & Star, 2000).

The Case – The Validation/Integration Project

In 2006 the Swedish government allocated funds to state authorities and municipal organizations in six different regions of the country in order to develop new forms of cooperation to make the induction of newly-arrived immigrants more effective and more focused on the labour market. This was in line with the shift in policy in Sweden in recent years to activation and employment inclusion in line with developments in other European countries. In each region one project was initiated to establish and develop collaboration around the induction consisting of both educational and economic elements – language classes and work training and induction benefits subject to attendance.

The Vision: Verifying Competencies

One of the projects given funding was the Validation/Integration project. Its purpose was to develop collaboration between municipalities, the Public Employment Service (PES) and educational services providers in the region, and to develop validation procedures for “newly-arrived immigrants from non-Nordic countries”.

The starting point was the assumption that newly-arrived immigrants were discriminated against, because of their ethnic background; too much focus was placed on where they came from and too little on what experiences they brought with them. The project leader explained:

In Sweden people always begin by saying ‘a person *from Iraq* who came to Sweden in 1994.’ You never hear them saying ‘an engineer’ who came to Sweden... [Project leader]

By shifting focus onto professional categories, discrimination will be counteracted and integration promoted, that was the vision at least. Validation was chosen as the focus of the project, because it was widely considered as an effective tool for identifying and defining a newly-arrived person’s qualifications and competencies (see, for instance, SOU 2003:75). Since the mid-1990s, validation methods had been developed all over Sweden. There were assessments intended to provide information about a person and map his or her competencies; practical assessments of vocational competencies undertaken by expert trainers, the results of which were documented in form of a certificate issued by the educational services providers; and a “full validation” aimed at verifying a person’s occupational competencies in relation to the formal requirements of Swedish industry or the formal education system.

The Validation/Integration project sought to develop further the existing methods and to adapt them specifically to the target group “newly-arrived immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds” who had “competencies that could not be verified in any other way”². As part of the project, 500 newly-arrived immigrants were to be assessed using the new methods, with the aim of getting at least 70 percent of them into jobs, or into studies and other activities eventually leading to employment.

Assessment in Practice: Learning to Know a Person

As part of the project, caseworkers working with induction matters were given the task of identifying “suitable cases”, and registering them with the local educational service provider who then matched the applicant with a suitable assessment activity.

Within the framework of the project, two assessment activities were identified as important. The occupational assessment was undertaken by trainers and experts certified by the employers’ association, based on the guidelines set up

by the associations representing the respective industries. It usually lasted no more than half a day, during which a person's competencies and skills were assessed in two steps: an exploratory conversation, during which the trainer asked the person a number of questions about his or her previous educational and vocational experience, and a practical assessment (a truck driver had to drive a truck, for instance). If it was established that the person possessed an "occupational identity"³, i.e. the experience as a truck driver from his home country, he (only men were assessed as truck drivers) was issued a certificate by the educational service provider, specifying his competencies and adding the trainer's recommendations for what he should do next. The caseworkers usually sent to the qualification assessment persons that they had previously mapped and judged as having some form of occupational identity.

The qualification portfolio aimed at "making visible and documenting the knowledge and competencies a person has from a holistic perspective" and collecting these in a portfolio, to be used when applying for work. This was a ten-week, daily course run by the educational service provider participating in the project. The course started with two weeks of computer training. Over the remaining eight weeks, six to twelve pupils listened to lectures on Swedish culture, history and the labour market, attended job-search activities, reflected over their past experiences, and documented their competencies assisted by a "coach".

The choice of whom to register, and for which activity, was not a straightforward one. It was based on the caseworker's subjective experience of their client, as well as the demands and interests of their organizations. As the project was directed at newly-arrived immigrants whose "competencies cannot be verified any other way", the caseworkers needed to assess learning that had taken place in everyday private and work life, and not as part of formal education settings. However, they usually lacked any direct experience of the workplace or of the foreign context within which this lifelong learning supposedly had taken place. Instead, they tried to guess what it looked like, and how the person had lived and worked, by translating the information given by the immigrants about their past experiences into a Swedish context. As a result, the people involved in the induction work told stereotypical and similar stories about the Other in different settings.

One example frequently mentioned was that of the bricklayer from a hot and dry Middle Eastern country. This bricklayer – with many years' work experience – was described as capable, and particularly talented in laying mosaics or tiles. At the same time he was judged to be lacking crucial knowledge needed for working as a bricklayer in Sweden; for example, he did not know how to prevent mould from developing in bathrooms. While this is not a problem in warmer climates, the argument went, in Sweden, with its high rainfall and long winters, special techniques must be used in order to prevent damage caused by water leakages and mould development.

While there is certainly some truth to the fact that climatic differences require different skills, nevertheless the focus was placed on what the newly-arrived

person did *not* know and could *not* do, instead of the knowledge and skills he or she brought along, contrary to the intentions voiced by the proponents of the assessment activities and caseworkers. One caseworker from the PES explained:

Many people come to Sweden with a background that isn't particularly sought after on the labour market. They come from [other] countries... systems and have experience that really doesn't match with what's demanded here in Sweden. [PES Caseworker BG070411:9]

Newly-arrived immigrants often did not fit the neat categories of the Swedish system; they did not know Swedish, their foreign education could not be translated into degrees corresponding to those given within the Swedish education system, or their occupation, though formally the same as in Sweden, had required them to perform different work tasks. One example given by an education specialist involved a person who had worked as an auto mechanic in Cuba for 20 years, mostly repairing American cars from the 1950s and 1960s. He was judged to have different skills from an auto mechanic who had worked in Sweden with a totally different range of cars:

In the first conversation with the person you realise, ok, this guy is an auto mechanic from Cuba. Ok, this is what it means to be an auto mechanic in Cuba...where they had so few cars, so few new cars. They're jack-of-all-trades having had to keep all those old American cars running. This means that they're auto mechanics, they're tyre fitters, they're everything. But, nevertheless, they have very little of what Swedish auto mechanics have. [Education specialist EA070314:11]

Persons with experiences that could not be verified through documents – housewives, carpenters, bricklayers, herdsmen or auto mechanics, for instance – often ended up being classified as having an indeterminate occupation (*yrikesbestämmd* in Swedish):

You can be considered as having an indeterminate occupation [in Sweden] even though you bring along occupational experience from your home country. The occupation simply doesn't fit in Sweden. [...]. For example, a judge, 50 years old, from Iran; it's difficult for him to immediately become a judge in Sweden. Or, let's take the herdsman from Iraq. That's considered as an indeterminate occupation in Sweden. [...]. You may bring with you an occupation from your home country, but it's a very strange one, or the competencies that you bring with you aren't directly compatible with the demands we have here in Sweden [Refugee unit caseworker LL070213:4].

By categorizing persons as having an indeterminate occupation, or classing them as unspecified labourers (*diversearbetare*), their vocational experiences were placed in a Swedish context and problematized (judges from Iraq are tainted; engineers from Iran work with completely different machines than we do in Sweden; herding is not an occupation in Sweden). As these persons were not

seen as possessing an occupational identity, the project representatives did not see the need to send them to an occupational assessment. Instead, caseworkers were encouraged to register them for the qualification portfolio activity to give them the opportunity to “dig deeper into their competencies” and reflect on and document their past experiences.

Qualification portfolios had previously been run for professionals with extensive work experience in Sweden who were unemployed or were looking for a change in career. As part of the project the method was adapted “as far as possible” to the target group – newly-arrived immigrants. Not surprisingly, its members usually did not have well developed Swedish language skills. Project representatives therefore stressed that language should not be seen as a hinder in the assessment, and the help of translators was to be made available and financed as often as needed. However, as it turned out as the project progressed, the Swedish language increasingly became the most dominating factor mentioned as the reason why newly-arrived immigrants could not be properly assessed and failed to gain employment. Subsequently, the focus in the qualification portfolio sessions shifted away from job search activities such as writing a comprehensive CV or a concise application letter. Instead the sessions sought to enable participants to reflect on their own competencies and qualifications. To do so, participants during the sessions were encouraged, under the guidance of the coach, to tell each other stories about their previous work and other experiences. In one session, after the coach informed the participants about the value of the qualification portfolio, the following dialogue ensued:

Coach: You’ve only been in Sweden for a very short part of your life. It’s your previous experiences that are important to us. Maybe you were a housewife...you gain a lot of experience when you’re a housewife. You don’t get paid, but you do a lot... you care for your husband, wash, vacuum, clean the house... that’s a lot of experience. But, is this experience important?
[No one responds]

Coach: Well, let me tell you about a participant from one of my other courses. She told me that she had had 20 birds at home and cared for them before she came to Sweden....

Participant: [Interrupts] I had 180 birds at home...when I was 10 to 14 years old. I built a house for them...and they flew away and came back all the time.

Coach: 180 birds?

Participant: Yes.

[All participants seem to be astonished]

Coach: This is important to know. I asked her [the participant from the other course]...if I had a pet shop and many birds, would you come and work for me? Yes, she said immediately. Now, that’s knowledge.

Whereas there existed documented guidelines and well-established ideas about what constituted formal and informal competencies and skills in a specific occupation in Sweden – for example a nursery school teacher – when it came to newly-arrived immigrants, idealized stories depicting decontextualized episodes were used to demonstrate their value as a resource for the Swedish labor market.

Even the proponents of the qualification portfolio acknowledged that employers were not inclined to hire a person based on the written documentation produced, because of language problems. They stressed, however, that the real value of the qualification portfolio lay in the processes that were triggered "inside the person".

While these processes and exchanges were intended to motivate the participants and give them a sense of pride in their accomplishments, their value as a means of integrating immigrants on the labour market and in society remained questionable.

The Outcome of the Validation/Integration Project

The outcome of the Validation/Integration project was hailed as a success by the project representatives: Over 500 assessment activities had been performed and 70 percent of the participants had ended up in work, or studies or other activities such as internships which might in the future lead to work or further studies, as stated in the project plan.

But, instead of verifying competencies through validation, the project came to focus mainly on the activities aimed at knowing the person and in the end most of the assessments performed were qualification portfolios (see Table 2).

Occupational Assessment - Total	247
<i>Construction</i>	<i>132</i>
<i>Health Care</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Restaurant</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Automotive Engineering</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Trucker</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Welding</i>	<i>24</i>
Qualification Portfolio	315

Table 2: The results from the project (Source: Internal project report).

Also, most participants did not end up in employment once they had been assessed, but in studies or other activities such as internships which "could in the future lead to work or to further studies"⁴. In other words, both with regards to the assessment performed and the outcomes, most of the participants ended up with what can be considered as the less desirable options (internships instead of employment, for example).

Moreover, in some cases the project instead of shortening the newly-arrived immigrants' path into employment, placed additional hurdles in their way, as one caseworker explained:

The two guys I've mentioned before got a job. The one who was a welder got a job as a welder [...]. And the other guy who was a painter got a job as a painter. He couldn't be registered in the system as a candidate for a job as painter, but he still got a job. So, the requirements of the labour market in these cases were lower than the requirements to go through a validation. [PES caseworker; BG070411:14]

While employers in some cases judged a person to be competent enough to work within a certain profession, i.e. as a painter, in the framework of the project the same person could be described as not competent enough to go through an assessment aimed at determining whether or not he or she was a painter. The project brought with it new criteria for assessment and "validatability" (*valideringsbarhet* in Swedish) became a new attribute.

Instead of being assessed based on criteria pertaining to employability, the participants were assessed based on their occupational identity or validatability – prerequisites needed to be admitted to an occupational assessment or other validation activity. The majority of participants in the project did not qualify for such an assessment. Contrary to the project's initial intention, a construction worker from Azerbaijan, for example, was not recognized as a construction worker in Sweden.

The results from the project correspond with the results from the work with validation in other parts of Sweden: the achievements with regards to getting newly-arrived immigrants into employment quicker or integrating them better into Swedish society have been somewhat disappointing to date. Notwithstanding the high hopes, immigrants have usually not ended up in steady employment quicker or on a larger scale, and validation's role in integrating immigrants in Swedish society has proven itself to be difficult to measure.

Discussion

The management of heterogeneous groups of persons involves "sorting things out" (Bowker & Star, 2000). In the case presented here, the ambition was to manage difference by sorting out newly-arrived immigrants, not on the basis of their ethnic background but their professional competencies as a means of speeding up their integration on the labour market and in society. The work in the Validation/Integration project aimed at shifting focus from one classification system to another one, at reclassifying persons.

The notion that there exist distinct ethnicities and races, and equally distinct occupations depends on a kind of Aristotelian ideal-type logic. Accordingly, people can be sorted into discrete human groupings – European, Swedish, non-

Nordic, non-European, Somali, Iranian – or into discrete occupational fields such as transportation, construction or automotive engineering, based on the occupational classification system. With regards to the latter, a truck driver, for example, is someone who at each level of classification presented enough binary features to place him into the class truck driver in Sweden. This includes for instance, being in possession of a Swedish truck driver's license and having gone through truck driver's training.

However, according to Bowker and Star (2000: 19) classification shifts historically and is a situated, material, collective practice. Subsequently, a person's occupation is determined in a social setting, and not by their reputed qualifications. In other words, a person is grouped into a professional class by situating their formal qualifications among other such qualifications in a specific context. Whether the caseworkers and training experts in the project categorized a person as belonging to a certain occupational category or not, in practice they were frequently faced with a set of difficult judgements. They usually did not know the workplace where the competencies had been acquired, and were alien to the context and the life of the Other. In order to pass these judgements, they could engage in a further in-depth mapping of their clients, or in a deeper occupational assessment. Such activities, however, were time consuming, and given the constraints faced by the handling officers, were not seen as practicable. The caseworkers could opt for an easier way, that of using a generalized "other" category. This allowed them to meet the demands of the administrative system, and to return to dealings with clients with "clear occupational identities". In this way, as Bowker and Star (2000: 65) wrote,

... [t]he classical beauty of the Aristotelian classification gives way to a fuzzier classification system that shares in practice key features with common sense prototype classifications – heterogeneous objects linked by metaphor or analogy.

While the initial focus of the project was on a large heterogeneous group comprising *all* newly-arrived immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds, irrespective of gender, profession, class, or other considerations, the specific actions that became connected to one another in the project, helped to construct and reconstruct the categories used. The broad position of newly-arrived immigrant was altered in the process as everything was reduced to questions of competencies; a person was either competent or not. As such, the project operationalized a classification system that was purely spatial. The competencies were localized in the body or not; they could be cultivated or learned in this place but not that, and so forth.

The vision presupposed given identities; persons with non-Nordic backgrounds were painters, engineers, carpenters, truck drivers, or goldsmiths. They were seen as *possessing* knowledge and competencies. The organizations involved in the project wished to make this knowledge visible through a range of mapping and assessing activities, in order to know what kind of support immigrants should be

given to become employed. In other words, they wished to determine the newly-arrived immigrants' "true" status to make them manageable.

The information infrastructure established to deal with professional and educational knowledge aimed at producing ways of knowing defined as being universally true about its subject, and abstracted the contingent, situated historical and biographical flow to uncover the underlying, given reality.

However, the "spatial compartments" (Bowker & Star, 2000) of the system could not hold as life history and duration, implicit in the concept of lifelong learning, were of utmost importance in the context of the project. As the experience of time (learning) met the classification of space, the formal, spatial occupational classification system was bent out of shape as other categories appeared. These generalized "other" categories such as "indeterminate occupation" or "non-assessable" (*icke valideringsbar* in Swedish) were influential in constructing the immigrant identity as part of the project. They are also an example of the arbitrariness of classification work and its at times contradictory face in organizing. After all, participants in the validation project were chosen, because they were categorized as non-assessable according to the criteria of the Swedish system; now they did not fit into the categories of the validation system either. Paradoxically, in some cases, newly-arrived immigrants were employed (and categorized on the labour market) as painters or welders or carpenters even though they had been categorized as non-assessable in the project.

This contradiction in the work with developing a system for validation brings to mind Bertrand Russell's famous paradox in mathematics consisting of a contradiction arising in the logic of sets or classes. In lay terms, Russell's paradox roughly means that if we put objects and persons into classes, some satisfy the criteria to belong to a class and others do not. If we put the persons who do not satisfy the criteria to fit into the various classes into a class of persons "not satisfying the criteria to fit into classes" the contradiction becomes apparent. If they satisfy the criterion needed to fit into this class, they do not qualify.

There are a number of versions of this paradox in real life situations. The Barber paradox, for example, supposes that there is a barber in a small town who shaves men in the town if, and only if, they do not shave themselves. When one begins to think about whether the barber should shave himself or not, the paradox becomes apparent.

The lay versions of the paradox have had their fair share of refutations, but Russell's point seems to have been to criticize the notion of sets within a given theory. The work with developing a system for assessing prior learning in Sweden can be seen as an exemplification of Russell's paradox if one begins to think of this work as a way of putting persons who do not fit into the neat categories or boxes of the Swedish system into a new box. While the ambition is to accommodate all these persons, some do not qualify and need to be removed and placed into different boxes, and so on.

This vision rested on the premise that there is (or ought to be) one universal classification system in which every person or object fits into a neat box. But, as Bowker and Star (2000) suggested, classification work is always multiple; a person may be classified as an immigrant one moment and an engineer in the next; then again a patient or a high-income single parent or a man, and so forth. While each of these categories might appear natural and homogenous in one context, in a different one they may be understood as heterogeneous and unnatural.

In order to satisfy administrative and managerial needs, the validation work had to produce homogenous causal regions that did not include effective subdivisions. However, the system failed to do so. Instead, as was the case with the auto mechanic from Cuba or the construction worker from the Middle East, the competency regions of the persons earmarked for assessment were further subdivided. Being “competent at repairing a car” was subdivided into being “competent at repairing American cars from the 1950s and 60s” and repairing modern cars with all sorts of electronic gadgets under their hoods, for example. And being competent as a construction worker could mean being “competent at building a bathroom in such a way as to prevent water damage and mould” or being “competent at laying out mosaics”. While the prototypical competencies associated with an auto mechanic were described as being in demand in Sweden, the competencies of repairing American cars from the 1950s and 60s were not.

It is not a question of if the *right* subdivisions are being made, and if the work included good or bad ways of creating new definitions. It is however important to mention that the ways of dividing the world are inescapably situated and arbitrary. While there often exists an ambition to describe the world in a simple sense, this world is by necessity modelled through the work. According to Bowker (1998) it is this modelling within any classification system that constitutes the real work, which gets done in terms of the enclosing of political, social, and organizational agendas into the scientific work of describing how things are – in the case described here, in form of competencies.

To sum up, the project work can be said to have followed an institutionalized action pattern (Czarniawska, 1997) where the existing actions were tightly coupled to one another and well entrenched. The action pattern can be summed up as follows: 1) a person should be employed, because social worth in Sweden, as is the case in any Western country, is determined by employment, 2) if you wish to employ someone you must know what they can do, 3) in order to know this you have to assess their competencies and qualifications, 4) to do so you need an assessment system, 5) as newly-arrived immigrants are outsiders, the assessment system in use for Swedes cannot work, and 6) the way out of this is to show how they do not fit the system.

While the connections 1) to 4) were well entrenched and the project representatives did not dare to break the couplings it is nevertheless imaginable that 3) and 4) are problematized: in order to know what a person is able to do, do

you really need to assess their competencies and qualifications? And, even more so, do you really need an assessment system for doing so?

The project representatives failed to do so. They did however agree that couplings 5) and 6) needed to be done anew. The envisioned validation system aimed at closing the perceived gap between the formal systems of knowledge representation (i.e. the documentation within the established formal education system) and the informal, contextual, situated and empirical experience of newly-arrived immigrants. However, while the ambition was to consider *all* competencies and experiences a person brought with him or her, in practice these experiences were compared to the Swedish norm. The assessment activities were based on ideas of what it meant to be Swedish and non-Swedish. The Validation/Integration project, contrary to its original intent, had room for newly-arrived persons only in so far as they left their differences at home, spoke the Swedish language and showed themselves to be adaptable to the Swedish business context. Thus, the way the project representatives eventually did the couplings anew was to simply use the existing actions in negative.

Subsequently, the organizing of a system for the assessment of prior learning in Sweden, while having the intention of managing difference by splitting up the world into useful categories (occupational instead of ethnic), did not reach its goal.

The project fitted well with what Czarniawska (1997:93) listed among the “Ten Paradoxical Commandments” of the Swedish public sector. She argued that public administration, faced with contradictory values that govern Swedish society, such as equality and individual rights, tends to promote differentiation in order to achieve equality. This thriving towards equality through differentiation becomes apparent in the case presented here. For instance, the assessment of prior learning was presented as a new method of assessing and documenting competencies (as opposed to the established formal education system), and a wide range of new methods of assessment were continuously developed and sophisticated to be employed on various target groups.

The ambition of the state, municipal and private actors involved in the assessment of competencies of newly-arrived persons was to remove inequality by supplanting ethnic identity markers with professional ones, but this casting involved the categorization of newly-arrived persons as having an upsetting identity – as deviants in relationship to what was considered as the Swedish norm. Instead of discovering what the newly-arrived persons could do, the assessment activities above all revealed what they could not do in a Swedish context. The case thus shows the paradox evident in so many well-intentioned programs of organizational change, which may well stabilize the casting they purport to overthrow.

Conclusion

This paper shows how difference is managed as part of organizing, and the role of classification work in the process. The classification of the competencies of the newly-arrived immigrants is based on classification systems that are necessarily prototypical, while at the same time presented as Aristotelian – in order to live up to the ideals of management and administration.

While the intention often is to replace certain categories (ethnic) with more favourable ones (occupational), designing systems for managing difference often means that human beings are adjusted to a previously existing reality, which remains intact. Categories entrenched in organizational practice are kept unbroken, and the new ones are adjusted to them. As a result, human beings might be categorized as having an upsetting identity, by being compared to what is regarded as the norm in a specific context.

Seen in this way, classification work, while an integral part of the management of difference, is neither a harmless nor a trivial activity. It serves specific purposes and interests under determined conditions, and can never be able to lay claim to cover all events and occurrences. It is thus contingent, local, and situated. This means that the creation and use of classification systems needs to be based on a better understanding of how such systems operate in practice.

The study has shown that difference is managed in organizing processes not on the basis of self-enclosed or inherently stable categories, but on the basis of a set of local and contingent categories, which are more or less easily mobilized, as various actions become connected and disconnected. Since classifications accommodate a certain degree of ambiguity and are always temporal and fleeting agreements, there is a need for the classifier to be aware of the potential shortcomings and limitations of classification systems in use. While such systems are a means of managing difference in organizing to remove inequality and reduce the cost of administration, they may in fact promote inequality by bringing differences to the fore and stabilizing them and therefore need to be treated with care.

References

- Bowker, G. (1998) The kindness of strangers: kinds and politics in classification systems, *Library Trends*, 47, Fall, 255-292.
- Bowker, G. C. & Star, S. L. (2000) *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Cambridge & London: The MIT Press.
- Cox, T. Jr. (1994) A comment on the language of diversity, *Organization*, 1(1), 51-58.
- Cross, E. Y., Katz, J. H., Miller, F. and Seashore, E. W. (1994) *The promise of diversity*. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin.
- Czarniawska, B. (1997) *Narrating the organization: Dramas of institutional identity*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004) On space, time, and action nets, *Organization*, 11(6), 773-791.
- Czarniawska, B. (2005) *En teori om organisering*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Czarniawska, B. & Höpfl, H. (2002) *Casting the other: The production and maintenance of inequalities in work organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Diedrich, A. & Styhre, A. (forthcoming) Making the refugee multiple: the effects of classification work, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*.
- Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. & Styhre, A. (2007) *Organisering och intersectionalitet*. Malmö: Liber.
- Foldy, Erica Gabrielle (2002) Managing diversity. Identity and power in organizations. In: I. Aaltio and A. J. Mills (Eds) *Gender, identity and the culture of organizations*. London: Routledge.
- Gastelaars, M. How do statistical aggregates work? In: B. Czarniawska & H. Höpfl (Eds), *Casting the other. The production and maintenance of inequalities in work organizations*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 7-22.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Glastra, F., Meerman, M., Schedler, P. & De Vries, S. (2000) Broadening the scope of diversity management, *Industrial Relations*, 55(4), 698-724.
- Hardy, C. (2003) Refugee determination: Power and resistance in systems of Foucauldian power, *Administration & Society*, 35(4), 462-488.
- Hardy, C. & Philips, N. (1998) Strategies of engagement: Lessons from the critical examination of collaboration and conflict in an interorganizational domain, *Organization Science*, 9(2), 217-230.
- Hardy, C. & Philips, N. (1999) No joking matter. Discursive struggle in the Canadian refugee system, *Organization Studies*, 20(1), 1-24.
- Hetherington, K. & Munro, R. (1997) *Ideas of difference: Social spaces and the labour of division*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

- Integrationsverket (2002) *Mångfald som verksamhetsstrategi – en modell för mångfaldsarbete*. Norrköping: Integrationsverket.
- Integrationsverket (2006) *Rapport integration 2005*. Norrköping: Integrationsverket.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Latour, B. (1987) *Science and action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Law, J.(1994) *Organizing modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Litvin, D. (2002) The business case for diversity and the 'Iron Cage'. In: B. Czarniawska & H. Höpfl (Eds), *Casting the other. The production and maintenance of inequalities in work organizations*. London: Routledge, pp. 160-184.
- Morrison, A. M. (1992) *The new leaders: Guidelines on leadership diversity in America*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Munro, R. (1997) Ideas of difference: Stability, social spaces and the labour of division. In: K. Hetherington & R. Munro (Eds), *Ideas of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 3-24.
- Nkomo, S. & Cox, T. Jr. (1996) Diverse identities in organizations. In: S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. R. Nord (Eds), *The handbook of organization studies*. London: Sage, pp. 338-356.
- Nkomo, S. M. & Stewart, M. M. (2006) Diverse identities in organizations. In: S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. B. Lawrence, & W. R. Nord (Eds), *The handbook of organization studies*. London: Sage, pp. 520-540.
- Omanovic, V. (2006) *A production of diversity*. Göteborg: BAS Publishing.
- Parker, M. (1997) Dividing organizations and multiplying identities. In: K. Hetherington & R. Munro (Eds), *Ideas of difference*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 114-138.
- Philips, N. & Hardy, C. (1997) Managing multiple identities: Discourse, legitimacy and resources in the UK refugee system, *Organization*, 4(2), 159-185.
- Prasad, P., Pringle, J. K. & Konrad, A. M. (2005) Examining the contours of workplace diversity: Concepts, contexts and challenges. In: A. M. Konrad, P. Prasad & J. K. Pringle (Eds), *Handbook of workplace diversity*. London: Thousand Oaks, pp. 1-22.
- Prasad, P., Mills, A. J., Elmes, M. & Prasad, A. (1997) *Managing the organizational melting pot: dilemmas of workplace diversity*. London: Thousand Oaks.
- Rauhut, D. & Blomberg, G. (2003) *Ekonomiska effekter av integration och invandring*. Östersund: Institut för Tillväxtpolitiska Studier.
- RiR 2006:19 (2006) *Statliga insatser för nyanlända invandrare*. Stockholm: Riksdagstryckeriet.
- Rosch, E. Principles of categorization. (1978) In: E. Rosch & B. B. Lloyd (Eds), *Cognition and categorization*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, pp. 251-270.

- Salas, O. (2007) *Rörligheten på arbetsmarknaden bland invandrare*. Göteborg: Förvaltningshögskolans rapporter.
- Silverman, D. (1993) *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*. London: Sage.
- SOU 2003:75 (2003) *Etablering i Sverige: möjligheter för individ och samhälle*. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Taylor, J. R. (1995) *Linguistic categorization: Prototypes in linguistic theory (2nd Ed.)*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Thomas, R. R. Jr. (1990) From affirmative action to affirming diversity, *Harvard Business Review*, 68, 107-117.
- Walter, L. (2005) *Som hand i handske*. Göteborg: BAS Publishing.
- Weick, K. (1979) *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- West, C. & Fenstermaker, S. (1995) Doing difference, *Gender and Society*, 9(1), 8-37.

Endnotes

¹ In Sweden a person is classed as “newly-arrived” up to three years after having received his or her residency permit.

² Source: Internal project report.

³ Interview with project leader [JJ071109:4].

⁴ Source: Internal project report.