Reflections on Diversity Production in Organizations: Encounters and the Search for Alternatives

Vedran Omanović

School of Business, Economics and Law, Gothenburg University, Sweden, Department of Business Administration

Tel: +46 31 786 5417

E-mail: Vedran.Omanovic@handels.gu.se

A paper for 2010 Symposium on Work, Organization and Ethnography

1st-3rd September 2010, Queen Mary, University of London

Abstract

In this paper, which describes how I researched and wrote my doctoral thesis, I contextualize this process through a description of my reflections on various encounters that influenced my ideas and interests about my thesis topic – diversity in organizations – and my research approach. The intent of the paper is to show how some of my life experiences and personal learning affected this research process as I both studied and experienced diversity issues in Sweden. In telling my story, I show how the influence of certain social-historical conditions relevant to the lives of researchers may shape their ideas and interests. I also show how we researchers (always) take an active role (within certain social-historical conditions) in the process of shaping the ideas and interests that are (or could be) prioritized as well as the ideas and interests that are (or should be) marginalized in our research.

Key words: *ethnography, reflections, social-historical relations, encounters, interpretation and analysis.*

Introduction

In 2006 I completed and successfully defended my doctoral thesis on diversity in organizations. As is commonly the case for most doctoral candidates, researching and writing my thesis was a process that took several years. The process also involved the constant interaction between my personal experiences and my topic of research. This interaction took the form of direct and indirect "encounters" between my life experiences with diversity and the organizational diversity I studied.

As any one who has written a doctoral thesis knows, many choices have to be made in the process. Some choices are easier than others, some have unexpected consequences and some turn out to be better than others. While each thesis writer faces a special set of choices, broadly speaking, all thesis writers must make fundamental decisions about their choice of topic, research question(s), literature, and methodology and theoretical positions – these decisions are not always easy. A thesis is principally a learning process, but it is also a social process. In the long process of writing my thesis I encountered many people (including those in the literature) – people with different ideas and different interests, as well as different power positions. My decision was always to listen to other researchers, the interviewees of my research, my advisers, my colleagues and other commentators. Sometimes in agreement with their views, sometimes not, I have been inspired by all these encounters to broaden my own thinking and to strengthen my theoretical and methodological arguments.

In this paper, I reflect on several of these encounters, in particular as they relate to the following questions: *What motivated me to study diversity in organizations? Why did I choose certain theoretical and methodological approaches? How did these approaches interact with my research process (e.g., collecting, interpreting and analyzing the empirical material)?* This paper contextualizes my research in its description of various encounters that influenced my ideas about how to study diversity in organizations. This is the story that led to my thesis on how organizations treat diversity in their workforces.

Thus this paper is about my process of writing my thesis. The process was mediated by socio-historical relationships from my early life in Bosnia and Herzegovina (at that time, a part republic in the Socialist Federative Republic Yugoslavia) and from my life as a Swedish immigrant, employee and university researcher. In a sense, the story of my thesis is an ethnographic study that explains the context of how I came to write my doctoral thesis. By contextualizing my research in this way, I show how my personal learning and experiences affected my research process as I both studied and experienced diversity in Sweden. My ambition is to show how the influence of certain social-historical conditions relevant to the lives of researchers may shape their ideas and interests in their research.

I have two other ambitions in this paper. First, I hope to contribute to the important conversation about the methodological problems in studies on diversity in organizations (i.e., by studying "diversity using conventional and/or critical ethnography). Second, I hope to enlarge the debate in diversity research by addressing fundamental issues about the topics, theories and interests worth studying.

The Structure of the Paper

To explain the reasons for my interest in diversity – the area I am now engaged in professionally as a researcher at a Swedish university and personally as a Swedish citizen of foreign origin (thus as a subject of diversity in the current Swedish context) – I begin with my own background. Then I explain how I chose my research topic and the work of the research process itself. I conclude with some thoughts on how my personal diversity encounters influenced the writing of my thesis.

My Process of Understanding and Studying "Diversity in Organizations" as a Dialectic Process

Leaving my homeland

Eighteen years ago, in 1992, I came to Sweden from Bosnia and Herzegovina. At that time the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia was divided into five (later, six) independent countries (federal units before gaining their independence) and the war had begun in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My reasons for emigration were complex, but the main reason was my

protest against the gradual destruction of the basic respect for the principles of diversity and equality among the various ethnic groups living in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Slowly but surely, society was destabilized as these principles were forcibly deformed and reformed in a war that led to the deaths, torture, rape and homelessness of many people. Friends, neighbours and even couples, were separating along visible and invisible lines. A war that was once unthinkable among the people I knew was now a reality. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was often called "Little Yugoslavia" because of the diversity of ethnicities, religions, cultures among its people, the war was a tragedy.

My initial response, as war in Bosnia and Herzegovina became increasingly likely, was to join thousands of other people in demonstrations. When the war began such demonstrations lost their intensity, and I began to think of emigration. In shock and disbelief that our peaceful protests were so ineffective and with little hope that would be resolved by war, I decided to leave the country. I retain utmost respect for the many people who remained and continued to fight for the principles of diversity and equality in a society ravaged by war. My path took me to Sweden, a country internationally recognized for its legalization of human rights. However, at the time, I did not imagine that Sweden would become my permanent home.

An immigrant in Sweden

In coming to Sweden, I changed my country (and later, my citizenship) and took on a new identity – at twenty-six years of age, I became an immigrant. Actually, I did not know what it really meant to be an immigrant or that it was a well-established social/political identity in Sweden. However, I soon learned I could be "boxed" as the young man from Southern Europe, from Bosnia and Herzegovina or from the former Yugoslavia. Thus I was thrust immediately into an ethnographic mode as I learned a new culture through my daily encounters with Swedish inhabitants and Swedish life. I was inspired to understand that culture in the same way that researchers are inspired by conventional/traditional ethnography – from the native point of view. As I would in my future thesis research, I also tried to be sensitive to how some aspects of a culture may privilege certain interests and marginalize or ignore others. Even then, I was interested in understanding both what a diverse society was and what it could be.

Encounters with people in Sweden

Before my arrival, my knowledge of Sweden was limited. I knew, for instance, that Ingemar Stenmark, the great slalom skier and Olympics medalist, was Swedish. I had seen him on television in advertisements for Elan skis (which were manufactured in the former Yugoslavia). Stenmark was also the main rival of Bojan Križaj, Yugoslavia's best skier who usually placed second after Stenmark in competitive ski events. I also knew of the former Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, who had been considered a great friend to Yugoslavia.

Once I arrived, my real learning of Swedish culture began with my encounters with ordinary people – my neighbours, my new friends and representatives of various institutions (e.g., Employment Services, universities, banks, etc.). In these encounters I learned about the country that has now been my home for the last 18 years. I also began to study Swedish so that I could "introduce" myself to these new acquaintances in their language.

After completing the compulsory Swedish language course for Swedish immigrants, I started searching for a job. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the very high rate of employment, I was hired the day I graduated from the university (with a degree in business economics). I thought, naively as it turned out, that with my fluency in Swedish and my prior education, I would soon be employed in Sweden as well. However, the standard response to my job applications letters was something like this: 'Thank you for your interest, but we have employed another candidate for the position'. I shared my frustration with friends at not being invited to job interviews. Some encouraged me to keep trying. Others, who had submitted more than 100 unsuccessful job applications, were less encouraging.

My encounters with Employment Services became more frequent. To my surprise, the advisers at Employment Services recommended that I take various courses (that were not always related to my profession), but offered no specific employment suggestions. Moreover, some advisers suggested that I study IT engineering – at the time, a highly sought after profession in Sweden. I am now glad I did not follow that advice.

At one meeting an Employment Services adviser said to me: 'You're in a much better position

in the labor market than immigrants from Africa, Iraq, Iran, or Chile. You're from Europe – Southern Europe'. A charitable interpretation of this remark is that it was meant to encourage me, but later, when I thought more about it, I was more discouraged than encouraged. If this was the logic of the Swedish labor market – where country of origin was a factor in hiring decisions – then my employment opportunities, as well as those of many others, were rather limited. It seemed quite likely that job seekers from the Scandinavian countries had an advantage. Taking a still more personal perspective, I also wondered why those of us from Southern Europe should be privileged over immigrants from the Middle East, Africa and South America.

This experience challenged my expectations about the Swedish labor market. I began to wonder what it meant to be "a real Swede". Basch et al. (1994) write about *transnationalism* – the idea that nations are constantly destabilizing, fragmenting and developing new forms in which immigrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic and political relationships, create social fields that cross national boundaries. Thus this experience caused me to question my assumptions about who "real" Bosnians and Herzegovinians (or any other nationality) are in Sweden and to ask who is a "real" Swede.

Increasing my competences

As I searched for a job, I also took a variety of courses 'to increase my competences', as the Employment Services adviser phrased it. One 18-month course entitled *Aspirantutbildning* (directly translated from Swedish, 'Aspiration Building') was for immigrants who had completed economic/business administration and legal training in their home countries. The goals of the course were (1) to give students more knowledge about their chosen professions, particularly as such knowledge related to the Swedish context and (2) to improve students' proficiency in Swedish. I was very optimistic about these goals as I began the course. I think my classmates felt the same.

One event in this course was a partial inspiration for my future doctoral studies. Sitting around a table with our instructors, we students, from fifteen different countries, talked about our education, experience and job expectations. In general, we were optimistic about obtaining employment. Then a tall, gray-haired man from Iraq spoke up. (We called him "the

Priest" for reasons I no longer remember). He had a degree in economics from a university in Iraq and years of work experience in accounting. He spoke briefly but to the point. In essence, he said:

> *Unfortunately, I have a feeling that I will not get a job even after this education ... I'm from Iraq, ... I am fifty years old… In addition to this education, I have completed several other courses in Sweden. I have also sent hundreds of job applications to different organizations and companies in Sweden in the 10 years since I came to Sweden ... and I did not get a job! I really no longer believe in the possibility of getting a job in Sweden.*

The Priest was one of the better students in the class and spoke far better Swedish than most of us. He had training and experience in a field where there are typically job openings. He was continually increasing his competences by taking different courses, mostly arranged by Employment Services. Thus I was baffled and shocked that he was unable to find work in Sweden.

As I thought more about the Priest, questions about our new identities as immigrants began to concern me. Why are different minority groups in Sweden positioned differently on the labor market? How important are nationality and ethnicity in this discussion? Why are some immigrant groups in Sweden more employable than others? What relevance do the principles of diversity and equality have in the Swedish labor market?

Working at the Project for Immigrants

Unlike the Priest, soon after completing the Aspiration Building course, I gained employment. The job I took is best described as a kind of temporary employment in the public sector. Even though it was not permanent position, I saw the job as a good opportunity, after my long period of "acclimatization",[1] to work on a project that I was very interested in. I also thought the job might lead to an opportunity to work in a Swedish academic environment on issues important to me – the issues that are very much related to my experiences in Sweden and the experiences of others I have met in Sweden.

In this position, working with an individual who later became one of my thesis advisers, I was involved in a project called "Future Employment and Life in Sweden". My task was to collect and analyze demographic statistics (such as nationality, education level, age and gender) about immigrants in Western Sweden and their positions in the labor market (such as employment status, income level and profession). After a working on this project for a few months I had assembled the required information. I was quite surprised by some results of the study such as the large number of nationalities (184) living in Western Sweden during the 1990s (Author, 1997) and the extremely high unemployment rate among some immigrant groups, in particular Somalians and Iranians, (see also, e.g., Wingborg, 1998). I was less surprised by other results. For instance, I was not surprised that the educational level of all people of working age in Sweden – those born in Sweden and those born abroad – was similar, but that the unemployment rate in the latter group was generally much higher. I asked myself: Why do so few immigrants with higher education obtain (or rarely obtain) jobs equivalent to their educational levels? Additionally, why were some of these people still unemployed after living in Sweden ten years or more?

I obtained partial answers to these questions using macro theoretical models that explain, for instance, the high unemployment among Swedish immigrants. In general, in these theoretical models, researchers identify three main factors that account for the lack of economic integration by immigrants in the Swedish labor market: *technological structure, economic crises and institutional circumstances*, *and discrimination.* Apart from these main factors, researchers identify other factors such as mentality, network and language (see Broomé et al., 1996; Bevelander et al., 1997). After studying this research, I was inspired to learn if there were yet other aspects that would offer further explanations.

Writing a Thesis on "Diversity in Organizations"

Entering the doctoral program at the University of Gothenburg

There has been a general increase in the interest in diversity in Sweden since the middle of the 1990s. This interest, combined with my experiences of everyday life and my involvement in the above-mentioned project, led me to my research at the University of Gothenburg at the end of the 1990s when I enrolled in the doctoral program in the School of Business, Economics and Law. Within the framework of a larger research program titled *Management*

of dissimilarities, I began a research project titled *Management of dissimilarities – A question of persistent strategy.* I worked with two senior researchers on the project who had developed the ideas for this research project (supported by a large Swedish foundation). Later, they became my thesis advisers.

Based on our research for the project, we concluded that companies and organizations should follow a persistent strategy if they are to meet the challenges of cultural diversity. Such a strategy should be long-term, focused and integrated with the company's general development strategies. However, as we worked in the project, I still had some unanswered questions. These questions, listed next, were the guiding questions I posed in my thesis proposal:

- Why do Swedish immigrants who are highly educated and with work experience in their countries of origin rarely (or never) obtain jobs in Sweden appropriate to their educational levels?

- Why are some Swedish immigrants still unemployed after living ten or more years in Sweden?

- Are these Swedish immigrants discriminated against in some way?

- How can the barriers that the Swedish immigrants believe hold them back in the labor market be removed?

Thus my interest in the literature about immigrants' integration into Swedish society and into the Swedish labor market was the beginning of a research process that led me to the literature on related issues. The explanations in these studies, as well as my critical assessment of them, have gradually led me to the literature that focuses on typing/stereotyping (see Author/s/, 2000) and discrimination, as well as to the literature on "diversity in organizations" that has, since the early 1990s, increasingly become an area of interest for organizational scholars.

To better understand what Swedish organizations and companies were thinking and doing about diversity and the diverse workforce, one of my advisers and I conducted a series of interviews with representatives from nine different organizations and companies in Sweden in the Autumn of 2000. Those organizations and companies had begun to work with "the

diversity issue" or had expressed a positive attitude towards the idea of the diverse workforce. The insights from this brief project resulted in a research report (Leijon & Author, 2001) in which we described various characteristics and implementation efforts of diversity work by the entities in the study. This research helped me understand the different arguments in favour of diverse workforces. Perhaps just as important, this research – as I later realized – in combination with my "encounters" with the literature on different paradigmatic and methodological understandings led me to choose critical ethnography as the way for me study the process of diversity production at a large manufacturing company.

Continuing my doctoral research

Thus, as my research progressed, I realized there was greater complexity in the issue of diversity than found in the explanations in the literature related to my research as well as in my own findings. For instance, when discrimination (and diversity) is discussed (in Swedish academic research and in the public debate), it is often in relationship to ignorance, doubts and imperfect information.[2] Or discrimination is often addressed as a search for ways to avoid stereotypes and/or to avoid prejudices. Additionally, discrimination is often discussed on the basis of differences in salaries, employment opportunities, education and competences, while excluding any discussion or investigation of the potential existence of ideological motives for discriminatory acts and attitudes.

I began to question these ways of addressing discrimination problems. I asked myself: Why do those anti-discrimination efforts seldom work or have very limited effect (in Sweden and in other countries). Is it because these efforts are still treated as a part of the discourse that implies there is a bias against seeing the "real" person (e.g., 'We stereotype people because we don't know the real person', or 'We discriminate because we don't value the real person')?

This way of talking about and studying discrimination as a product of stereotypes and/or prejudices was, in my view, a way to diminish or even suppress the existence of discrimination. I wanted to learn more about the underlying assumptions in this way of conceptualizing people. At the same time I asked myself: Are there alternative ways to study discrimination? If so, why have they received so little attention in most of the literature I have

reviewed? Encounters with such theoretical and methodological problems, as well as the self-criticism of my own work, motivated me to learn more about the various theoretical traditions and methodological approaches used in organizational analysis.

Encounters at the University of Massachusetts

From September 2000 to June 2001, I took doctoral courses at the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) in Amherst, Massachusetts. This visit marked an important turning point in my understanding of different social/organization phenomena that influenced the theoretical and methodological approach(es) of my thesis research. During this visit, I met two professors – Marta Calás and Linda Smircich – whose discussions in their doctoral courses, as well as discussions directly related to my doctoral thesis, provided inspiration for the theoretical and methodological approaches of my research. The idea for understanding and studying diversity in organizations, using different paradigmatic and methodological approaches, for instance, stemmed from my encounters with Calás and Smircich.

Thus, while at UMASS, I became aware of ways to think about paradigmatic differences that are based on the theoretical conceptualization of how social phenomena are understood as actively constructed by particular parties. This theoretical conceptualization allowed me to see diversity as a kind of concept or conversation(s) – a part of a larger context in which diversity appears – rather than as the study of a single idea that is universal and unchangeable (as is the tendency of the afore-mentioned research on discrimination).

Understanding the literature on diversity in organizations: Paradigmatically and methodologically

While taking doctoral courses at UMASS and engaging in research discussions with colleagues there and elsewhere, I began to explore the literature on diversity in organizations through the lenses of different paradigms. I also took inspiration from the research by Burrell and Morgan, Kuhn, Berger and Luckmann, and Alvesson and Deetz, among others. The international literature on diversity, diversity management and closely related subjects became one of several important sources for my work with diversity issues in my thesis. In particular, I paid attention to the researchers' theoretical constructions and methods of studying diversity by focusing on the following question: How is diversity represented in this literature?

In exploring diversity in organizations using these different paradigms, I increased my understanding of how various researchers bring different assumptions to what diversity is (or could be), and how they take different positions on the issues of diversity in organizations, ask different questions and/or design different research projects. In short, I examined how and why these researchers take particular theoretical and methodological approaches.

Some of the studies I mention here have helped me understand how diversity affects (or may affect) organizational members' attitudes, behaviour and/or performance (e.g., Harrison, et al., 1998; Gilbert & Stead, 1999; Kirby & Richard, 2000; Mollica, 2003; Kidder, et al., 2004). A fundamental argument in such studies, which is often based on the social psychological approach (e.g., social identities, social categorizations and/or decision-making), is that diverse workforces can have a positive effect on performance, including, for instance, goal achievement, satisfaction, problem-solving and creativity. One such view of diversity is that a diverse workforce is necessary for organizational (i.e., financial) success. Such business interests are typically perceived as in everyone's best interests. Thus, in reading this research literature, I also learned more about the relationships between diversity ideas and the methodological techniques used to study them. I realized that many of these authors used objective data, such as data obtained by survey methods (e.g., questionnaires, scenarios and experiments). Using these methodological techniques, they examine diversity as if it were an objective phenomenon that is independent of managers' and researchers' interests. For me, these techniques seemed problematic because they assume we know what to ask before we even encounter the informants; at the same time, they suppress the complex realities associated with them and the phenomena studied.

Also, in the course of this literature review, I found that some justifications for diversity take somewhat narrow outlooks. For instance, by prioritizing business interests related to diversity, other ideas about the benefits of promoting a diverse workforce are marginalized. These are the ideas about equality and fairness in social and/or organizational contexts. Thus the wider meaning of tensions about diversity in organizations is neglected. As a result, in such studies there is little place for stories like that of my classmate, the Priest. Although such people are the real subjects of diversity, their stories do not directly relate to organizational business

interests. In fact, in the diversity literature, mostly senior managers tell stories about what they, and their organizations, did to promote a diverse workforce. The assumption is that these managers play a crucial role in the processes of working on diversity issues. Without denying the importance of senior management in such matters, it seemed to me that their goals were over prioritized. The role of others in the workforce was simply to meet the goals set by senior management.

Reading this literature, therefore, led me to studies in which different phenomena (or, more specifically, the ideas about different phenomena) are examined as socially constructed (e.g., Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Hacking, 2000). For instance, Hacking's research on women refugees living in Canada in particular inspired me because it shows that individuals are not socially constructed. Rather, according to Hacking, the idea of the woman refugee is socially constructed. This construction of the idea(s) of the woman refugee then has implications for how some women refugees feel about themselves, their experiences and their actions.

I also encountered a few studies where researchers studied the idea of diversity as socially constructed and/or as the product of social activities (e.g., West and Fenstermarker, 1995). The focus in these studies was on meanings and symbolic actions by which diversity was created, sustained and changed (e.g., West and Fenstermarker, 1995; Hermon, 1996; Gilbert and Ivancevich, 2000).

In continuing my research, inspired by the prior research and the questions it provoked, I followed the interpretative tradition(s) that asserts that reality is socially created and socially sustained. In following this tradition, I studied different ideas about diversity as socially constructed by ongoing performance. My advisers supported me since the interpretative tradition is well established at the University of Gothenburg. Yet they sometimes wondered how my dissertation project related to our initial idea of (persistent) strategy and how I would study its implementation in organizations.

At this point in my research, my new encounters with the organizational participants, archival research, and with the literature inspired by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and by a dialectical view, combined with a better understanding of previous encounters, gave me a

sense an "entering" an interpretative position. I also incorporated some aspects of a dialectical-critical perspective that posits that ideas about different social phenomena (e.g., diversity in organizations) embody and represent certain human interests.

Compared to the interpretative tradition, the dialectical-critical perspective places more emphasis on how the production processes shape what can be socially produced (as well as what can be ignored or marginalized in such processes). Therefore, as the goals of my research gradually refined, I tried to identify how general ideas and interests related to diversity (in the Swedish society and at the manufacturing company of my field work) are favored/marginalized. My hope, in analyzing how this favoritism and marginalization occurs, was that my analysis might lead to some (organizational) changes.

However, unlike the interpretative tradition, this second perspective was not well established in my institution. As a result, since new challenges now arose in writing my thesis, I was inspired to strengthen its theoretical discussion.

Empirical Data: Collection and Analysis

The fieldwork

The choice of a company for my fieldwork considered Swedish and Sweden-based companies whose work with diversity I had read about in the media or heard about at conferences and seminars. I also considered companies I had heard mentioned by researchers and consultants in a research group I was associated with.

I had two ambitious in selecting a company for my fieldwork. First, the company would have developed (or be in the process of developing) a vision of diversity. Second, the company would have appointed (or should intend to appoint) a person responsible for co-ordination of the diversity work. A company that met these criteria, I believed, would plan on taking a long-term view of diversity work. My intention was that my research should focus on the ongoing process of the social production of diversity. For that reason, the company I chose would intend to devote considerable time and attention to the work. Thus, at such a company, I could study how it developed and promoted its diversity ideas (and interests)[3] over a relatively long period.

In my search, I learned about a company (referred to here by the fictitious name, Diversico) that had begun the process of developing a vision of diversity and had planned strategic actions in that regard. Furthermore, the company employed a Diversity Director who had the main responsibility for the development of its *Corporate Diversity Business Development Programme*. I contacted this Director (referred to here by the fictitious name, Sara) to request access to Diversico. When I telephoned Sara in September of 2001, she was representing Diversico at the UN Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. She was interested in discussing my thesis research and agreed to meet. On October 1, 2001, I met Sara who gave me permission to study the company's diversity program, and thus my fieldwork, which was to last eight months, officially began on that date.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, neither Sara nor I knew how long the fieldwork would last. It took me a while to discover the people I should talk to and the company events I should observe. After eight months of interviewing Diversico people and observing various meetings and workshops, I believed I had learned enough about diversity production at the company to support conclusions about its production of diversity. I concluded my fieldwork at Diversico in May of 2002.

Three linked components of data collection – and new questions

At the end of this process, my ethnographic research consisted of three linked components of data collection. The *first component* was multiple types of *archival research*. In addition to the international literature on diversity, diversity management and closely related subjects, I had other data where the concept of diversity was discussed. This data included Swedish immigration/integration policies, Swedish labor laws against discrimination, Swedish research and consultant reports, Swedish media articles, and assorted commentaries by various institutions and the Swedish Government. I also had Diversico's internal documents that dealt with their diversity policies and diversity work.

The *second component* was a collection of 23 in-depth *interviews* with Diversico people on their understandings of the issue of diversity at the company. In those interviews, my intention had been to "stand in the shoes of the other" and thus to view the world as they did

(see Smircich, 1984). My main interest was each interviewee's interpretation of the diversity work (its appearance and development) at the company. Therefore, I interviewed people who had worked full-time for Diversico for at least several years. With some interviewees (e.g., the Strategy Manager, the Vice President of Diversico and the Diversity Director) I used the approach of negation by which I attempted to understand the topics they talked about, not as natural or rational, but as exotic, contradictory and arbitrary. For instance, according to the Management Team, the company's objective of increasing the proportion of women in managerial positions to 20 percent was described as 'a reasonable objective'. In order to stimulate new thinking I asked some interviewees: 'Why is 20 percent more reasonable than, for instance, 21 percent? I also asked: 'Were educated immigrant women included in this 20 percent goal?'

After a few months of fieldwork, I began asking questions that were specifically structured for each interviewee. For instance, I asked the Diversity Director questions such as: 'Could you give me an example of how you used the term diversity when you talked about this issue at meetings at Diversico?' 'What are the terms you use for the different kinds of diversity?' 'Has the promotion of Diversico's diversity program inside the organization led to conflict(s) and rejection?' In asking these questions, I wanted to hear the language she normally used in talking about diversity and to hear her interpretations of Diversico people's response.

As I wanted a broader description of the diversity work than the Diversity management people offered, I also interviewed people in non-managerial positions. Therefore I interviewed two factory workers, a former employee, and a salesman who sold company products in the retail market. The salesman, in particular, gave me a different perspective on the company's diversity work and policies. He was known as a "super salesman" because of his sales success among the immigrant population. Despite this record, the company never sought his input in matters related to the company's diversity policies. The interview with this salesman and interviews with others like him gave me a more multi-faceted picture of the company's diversity work and allowed me to hear voices that are normally marginalized in the management literature on diversity.

The *third component* was a group of *observations* I made at 19 company diversity meetings and workshops and at 11 diversity events outside the company. The company observations, which gave me descriptions and interpretations of micro-situations, increased my understanding of how Diversico people presented their ideas and interests about diversity, how those ideas and interests were discussed and even which ideas and interests were prioritized. The outside observations gave me an understanding of how diversity and ideas associated with diversity appear in Swedish society, companies and organizations.

Combined with my collection and interpretations of the empirical material and my reading of the literature, my encounters with the organizational participants have also lead to a partial change of research focus and a gradually reformulation of the questions initially posed in my thesis proposal.

Interpretations of the empirical material

This broad assortment of empirical data was collected over the eight months of fieldwork. I analyzed and interpreted it concurrently with its collection rather than waiting until the end of fieldwork. In producing the story of diversity production that became my thesis, I undertook my analysis during the entire process of reading and analyzing archival material, interviewing current and former employees, and observing meetings, workshops and seminars. Throughout the process, I was actively engaged in decisions about what questions to ask, whom to ask, which events to attend, which documents to study, and how to relate my empirical data to the diversity literature.

Having collected my data and made my initial analyses, the next step in producing the story concerned what Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) call secondary interpretations. In this step, I examined my empirical data in depth. In my initial analyses, I had gained new insights and had seen new relationships. Now I realized still other interpretations were possible. Therefore, the secondary interpretation involved re-reading the literature, various company policy documents and Government initiatives in combination with the textual analysis of the interviews, the notes on the observed events and the internal company documents.

In this step of the analysis, I was able to construct a chronology of how the production of diversity occurred at Diversico. In tracing the appearance of diversity in different policy documents and Government initiatives, I identified companies and organizations (Swedish or Sweden-based) that were involved in diversity issues by the middle of the 1990s. During the course of this archival research I identified Diversico and the first signs of its involvement in diversity. My analyses of Diversico's relatively new way of working and discussing opportunities in the labor market, the so-called "working with scenarios", helped me explain the company's ideas, interests and actions related to diversity. In Diversico's work with scenarios, we find appearances of the new company policy, named "Corporate Citizenship", which was its first official document to mention diversity. These activities influenced Diversico's diversity program that the Diversity Director, Sara, was responsible for.

I mainly used the methodology of traditional ethnography in my research since its procedures allowed me to study closely and thickly describe other ways of life. However, I have also incorporated some elements of a critical orientation within ethnography in my interpretations of the empirical material. In my thesis, I noted that diversity might promote privileged interests (e.g., through domination by powerful interests) and even perpetuate injustices (e.g., through marginalization of alternative opinions).

As an example I present an excerpt from my empirical data that shows how a policy statement may be interpreted differently, depending on the perspective taken:

> *Diversico's customers are men and women, young and old, living in most countries around the globe. For business reasons, we need more people in our management organization with experience of living and working in different countries and with experience of different cultures . . .* [The Corporate Citizenship Report, 2000].

In a traditional ethnographic study, the focus in examining this statement would be on understanding the meaning of diversity without influencing it. Therefore the interpretation would be that the company promotes a diverse workforce simply, and only, because it is good for business – diversity can be achieved by employing more managers with different backgrounds and different experiences.

Taking a critical perspective, we can look at what the statement does not say about diversity. There is no mention of promoting fairness in its hiring policies or of promoting work equality in a society that has a national policy that promotes the integration of immigrants into the labor market. The statement implies that the company's diversity criteria could easily be achieved by employing more company managers of the same ethnicity or gender as the current managers who have *experience of different cultures* and/or who have *experience in living and working in different countries*. In this way, these "neutral" and formally democratic criteria derive from and reflect the particular experiences and perspectives of certain groups, thereby silencing or denigrating those of other groups. Thus the company frames diversity policy in a way that excludes alternative views. How the researcher interprets the statement, then, depends on the perspective taken.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to show how my doctoral thesis was mediated by socio-historical relationships. Consequently the process of writing my thesis was not immune to my own active interventions and alterations. To that end, I partly describe my personal history, my experiences with other Swedish immigrants, the Swedish bureaucracy, my work with immigration research, and my doctoral research that dealt with issues of diversity in organizations. I have described these relationships as encounters with the past and with others in my personal and professional lives. These encounters, some more than others, have increased my understanding of the appearances of diversity issues in Sweden, in general, and the process of social production of diversity at the studied manufacturing company, in particular. Other encounters (e.g., with the literature on diversity) in my research process posed significant challenges for me as I tried to understand and write about diversity. As a result of these challenges, I was motivated and inspired to strengthen the theoretical and methodological bases of my thesis. Once I had selected my thesis topic, it was inevitable that my research would somehow reflect these experiences and challenges that included the struggles I faced as a young Swedish immigrant. In short, this paper aims to show that researchers' attempts to understand the Other through studies of certain phenomena are a production between them and their past, their experiences and people encountered, as well as between them and the research literature.

[1] At that time, the Swedish Government sponsored an orientation program to help acclimatize immigrants when they first arrived.

[2] However, while working on my thesis, I have found that some researchers pay attention to ideological motives for discrimination as well as to the aspects of power. See, for instance, Diesen et al. (2005), Kamali (2005), de los Reyes (2001a; 2001b) and los Reyes and Winborg (2002). In these studies, the authors review and criticize the Swedish literature on discrimination.

[3] The importance of focusing on different interests became much clearer when I encountered various organizational participants at company events and when I began the interviews.

References

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2003). *Reflexive methodology. New vistas for qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Basch, L., Glick Schiller, N. & Szanton Blanc, C. (1994). *Nations unbound. Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states.* New York: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Doubleday.

Bevelander, P., Carlson, B. & Rojas, M. (1997). *I krusbärslandets storstäder - Om invandrare i Stockholm, Göteborg och Malmö*. Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

Broomé, P., Bäcklund, A., Lundh, C. & Ohlsson, R. (1996). *Varför sitter "brassen" på bänken? eller Varför har invandrarna så svårt att få jobb?* Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

de los Reyes, P. (2001a). Diversity, differentiation and discrimination. A critical view of current strategies and discourses in Sweden. In M. Essemyr (Ed.), *Diversity in work organizations.* Stockholm: National Institute for Working Life.

de los Reyes, P. (2001b). *Diversity and differentiation discourse. Difference and construction of norms in Swedish research and public debate*. Stockholm: National Institute for Working Life.

de los Reyes, P. & Wingborg, M. (2002). Vardagsdiskriminering och rasism i Sverige. En *kunskapsöversikt. Integrationsverkets rapportserie 2002:13*. Norrköping, Sweden: Berlings Skogs Trelleborg.

Diesen, C., Lernestedt, C., Lindholm, T. & Pettersson, T. (2005). *Likhet inför lagen. Natur och Kultur.* Falun: ScanBook.

Gilbert, J. A. & Ivancevich, J. M. (2000). Valuing diversity: A tale of two organizations. *Academy of Management Executive* 14(1): 93-105.

Gilbert, J. A. & Stead, B. A. (1999). Stigmatization revisited: Does diversity management make a difference in applicant success? *Group & Organization Management* 24(2): 239-256.

Hacking, I. (2000). Social konstruktion av vad? Stockholm: Thales.

Harrison, D.A., Price, K.H. & Bell, M.P. (1998). Beyond relational demography: Time and the effects of surface-and deep-level diversity on work group cohesion. *Academy of Management Journal*, 41(1): 96-107.

Hermon, M.V. (1996). Building a shared understanding and commitment to managing diversity. *The Journal of Business Communication* 33(4): 427-442.

Kamali, M. (2005). Ett europeiskt dilemma Strukturell/institutionell diskriminering. In P. de los Reyes & M. Kamali (Eds.), *Bortom Vi och Dom. Teoretiska reflektioner om makt, integration och strukturell diskriminering. Rapport av utredningen om makt, integration och strukturell diskriminering*. Stockholm.

Kidder, D.L., Lankau, M.J., Chrobot-Mason, D., Kelly, A., Mollica, K.A. & Friedman, R.A. (2004). Backlash toward diversity initiatives: Examining the impact of diversity program justification, personal and group outcomes. *The International Journal of Conflict of Management* 15(1): 77-102.

Kirby, S.L. & Richard, O.C. (2000). Impact of marketing work-place diversity on employee job involvement and organizational commitment. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 140(3): 367-377.

Mollica, K.A. (2003). The influence of diversity context on white men's and racial minorities' reactions to disproportionate group harm. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 143(4): 415-431.

Omanović V. (2006). *A production of diversity: Appearances, ideas, interests, actions, contradictions and praxis*. Göteborg, Sweden: BAS Publishing.

Smircich, L. (1984). Studying organizations as cultures. In G. Morgan (Ed.), *Beyond method: Strategies for social research*. Beverley Hills, CA: SAGE Publications.

West, C. & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society* 9(1): 8-37.

Wingborg, M. (1998). *Somaliska och irakiska kvinnor på svensk arbetsmarknad*. Falköping, Sweden: Elanders Gummessons.