

The 7th Annual Joint University of Liverpool Management School and Keele
University Institute for Public Policy and Management Symposium
on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management
Sciences, on 29th – 31st August 2012

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Work in progress, please contact the author before citing.

Second-hand production by second-hand people? Fault lines and civility among the marginalised

I am about to begin a new fieldwork in a middle sized manufacturing-artisanal centre run according to the principles of social entrepreneurship. What I hope to learn there is related to my earlier study (Trux 2009, 2010) in the field of critical organisational studies. The idea of that work was to bring a bit more anthropological conceptualisation of ethnic boundaries into the studies of diversity at work.

Roots of the present study

This alternative was needed to take off from the mechanical categorisations used in so called *diversity management* programmes. The later have been severely criticised in organisational studies for essentialism (Lorbiecki and Jack 2000), instrumentalism (Litvin 2006), silence on power (Linnehan and Konrad 1999) and ignorance of context (Prasad et al. 2006), but the critique seems to have been ignored by practitioners (Bairoh and Trux 2010). At best, diversity management programmes manage to level somewhat the ground for members of minorities in organisations; at worst they reinforce stereotypes and set workers against each other (Foldy 2002). In all cases, programmes that actively teach organisational members to see each other as essentially exotic items in categories of social divisions (such as gender, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, disability and age) – historically constructed/distorted by discrimination – fail to address the problem of inequality (Litvin 1997). Rather, they reproduce the problem in a managerial form. The whole field of diversity in organisations has been characterised as suffering from ungrounded generalisations and crossing interests of various academic and extra-academic parties. In addition, it is poorly theorised (Dick & Cassel 2002).

In recent studies, researchers have experimented with approaches that take on the workers' point of view rather – or in addition to – the employers' or managerial perspective (Zanoni and Janssens 2007, Roggeband and Boogaard 2010). Such studies lead the debate to include agency, process and power. The alternative conceptualisation I have proposed joins these efforts and goes beyond them to thoroughly reconceptualise and re-theorise the field. I share the Barthian view, widely held in social science, of ethnicity as a boundary concept. At work it is actively enacted and constructed by workers as much as managers, and involving all levels of hierarchy. This work and negotiation is an on-going process rather than a set of a priori qualities.

The managerially oriented, mainstream rhetoric concerning diversity in organisations has adopted very ambiguous forms, making it possible for well-aiming campaigners to "sell" the good case to business leaders. Unfortunately, such glossing over has covered a goal shift from equality to economic profit, and moreover, it has the effect of further obscuring an already very complex issue. What is actually meant with "inclusion", "celebrating differences", "harnessing a diversity of ideas" or "employing ethnic (sic) workers"?

Closer inspection allows to sort out ingredients in the rhetoric of diversity: While *counter-discriminatory work*, especially when designed against open forms of discrimination, must use the rigid categories to name the illegal, and will hopefully be led by democratically responsible public authorities to guide the efforts of employers, *identity work* is under no such obligation to limit the use of imagination. It might best be carried out at the floor level, with the people in question as its main authority and source of legitimation. Many other markers may be meaningfully used by professionals for their identity construction, beyond the deep social divides (race, gender...) that reflect and carry the history of discrimination. Professional subcultures are one such resource (see Trux 2010). This perspective shows another spot where current debates on diversity could be rendered more in line with late modern conceptions concerning identity as a fluid reality and on-going, socially situated process and struggle, than it presently is with managerial notions of identities as manipulable, controllable business assets – as in strategic human resource management – in the service of economic goals. Indeed, researchers have met a brick wall that sends their analysis over and over again back to the starting point. Ambiguous rhetorics cannot be analysed with the same ambiguous terms. This is why I set out to identify links to other social science ideas. The area I took under inspection was ethnicity. I used an ethnographic case of a non-standard organisational approach to ethnicity at work, and analysed it with alternative conceptual tools.

Alternative ideas

In the new project, I aim to revisit my alternative understanding to see how it fits in with a workplace reality different from the case where it was originally developed. As the first study made use of a high tech environment with white collar immigrants, the new project would take a blue collar workplace under the same lens. As before, ethnicity would be studied as personal and collective responses in a multitude of *discrepant cosmopolitanisms* (Clifford 1998), bringing people physically close to one another but often failing to give them any true encounters, not to mention equal levels in terms of power. The goal of equality would also be kept in mind similarly as before: reciprocally respectful, relaxed ethnic relations among colleagues are named *civility* (Gomes et al. 2007).

The way to protect minority members from "majority violence" is understood as a respect of *heteroglossia* (Holland et al. 1998), rather than as a managerial collection of kinds of work force. Heteroglossia is made out of 'voices' (ibid.), including both individual professionals and collective alliances. The capacity to hear such 'voices' is understood as a critical or democratic type of multiethnic management. 'Voice' is a crucial concept in this approach, because it merges the idea of critical multiculturalism (Turner 1993) with the practice theoretical view of identity construction in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). I have concretised this alternative approach to practitioners by comparing the "visual" taxonomy of workers constructed by a managerial agent¹ to the "auditive" multitude of 'voices' a manager (and anybody in the workplace) can hear and take seriously.

To heal a gaping fissure between the fields of working life studies and studies of ethnic relations, this approach ties together ethnic civility with the more general idea of (managerial and peer) civility regarding workers' agency in their own work. All workers have a say on their work. Raising their 'voice' about work practices is also raising it as women, minority members etc. Various aspects to identity may be carried out in the same act.

The new project would investigate more closely this practice theoretical line of thought, and place its reality descriptions and policy recommendations on a thoughtful analysis of the complex social reality of work. It would help political decision makers and practitioners (inc. workers) to understand ethnicity as part of work: in its political, moral and personal dimensions, not just as an auxiliary "problem" to "fix". Standardising approaches lead to the wish to fix things with a standard social technology, which in turn becomes part of the problem. If a

¹ A perfect example of a Foucauldian "panopticon", or, if you prefer, a "mantelpiece collection" meriting the scorn of James Clifford (1988).

realistic view on the whereabouts of people and workplaces has always been the hallmark of wise organising, in the present moment of unstable global economy, changing demography and metamorphosing forms of organisation, it has become indispensable.

Moreover, in the present economic outlook in western immigration areas, the potential call and credibility of the Business Case for Diversity is doubtful. When recession turns employer policies more roughly to the bitter side, the occlusive strategy of sweet and bitter cocktail (Legge 2005) no longer functions. In such situation, sharp divisions reinforced by managerial diversity programmes easily slip from intended use and turn into weapons for backlash proponents. These actors not even wish to decorate their outright impulses to discrimination. Celebration of ethnic categories may turn out to be a play with fire. I believe it's high time that employers change vocabulary from the a priori demographic categorisation of employees to the assumption that all workers are full political agents, relative to their work and relative to one another, with all the entailing rights and obligations. Yes, this means a shift towards more "Enlightenment" values, but with the wisdom that the past few decades have given us concerning the complexities of human identification and cultural production.

Preliminary research check-list

At entry to field, I have made a preliminary list of potentially interesting issues. This list is of course not exhaustive, and some issues mentioned may prove to be sidetracks. Here it is, anyway:

- Which discrepant cosmopolitanisms are manifest?
- What is the socio-economic situation of the workers?
- Which ethnic boundaries can be perceived at the fieldwork site?
- How are they created/sustained?
- How do class and gender intersect with ethnicity?
- Which forms of ethnic civility are detectable?
- Which forms of discrimination are detectable?
- Are the workers agents in their own work? How?
- What types of professional culture and communities are manifest, if any?
- How does ethnicity mix with other aspects of practical activity to limit or nourish people's identity construction as professionals and as citizens?

Aware of the gravity of social problems and the complexity of issues in this multidisciplinary research theme, I am grateful for all your questions, ideas and experiences that may help me at this point and later. I have undertaken the disentanglement of the mess, and the production of a realistic description and

recommendations for both the academic community and the public, including participants in the fieldwork site.

The site

Because of the aim to shed light on the workers' perspectives, the main method is ethnography. Another reason for the choice of method is the need of rich, detailed information to understand the power dynamics and moral tensions in a multiethnic social field. Though ethnographic work has its own limitations, it allows at least moving beyond the victim survey of discrimination, and has thus often been undertaken for the study of socially delicate questions.

At this moment, preliminary consent has been stated by the head of the unit planned to offer a site for fieldwork. Both ethnic Finns and workers with immigrant background are present at the unit, which includes several workshops representing different professional and material vocations. The unit's own mission includes recycling of physical material as well as rehabilitating a workforce, people that for various reasons have difficulty entering the profit seeking organisations. Some of them are long-term unemployed, while others, particularly the youth, have not managed through school with good enough grades to enter a vocational education, or have failed to specify their interests.

In the search for a blue-collar workplace, this site was chosen for its emblematic character as a recycling centre of both material waste and human leftover from the neoliberal economy. The unit is categorised as a social enterprise. Previous research has documented cases of social entrepreneurship where the tenets of diversity management are combined with historically earlier forms such as 'equal opportunities' and other resources. It seems that the ambiguity surrounding these terms offers small players – such as local managers and HR professionals – leeway to construct their own eclectic discourses and hold on to the value of social justice, though such balancing make a tightrope walk between the roles of equal opportunity employer on the one hand, and a controlled service provider on the other (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010).

I am curious to see how the tightrope walk takes place in this case. On a first visit, I already saw a poster with the message that people are the true product of this unit – material production is only a means to that end. The manager also told of cases when they have (exceptionally) taken on a more prominent order for a municipal festival or such, and have faced problems to meet the production deadline. In such cases, according to her, what helps to foster a productive effort in people with various degrees of alcoholism, health problems or long-term marginality, is the awareness of the destination of products, with visits of 'customer' representatives like exhibition or festival organisers. The workers

themselves have also been invited to admire the fruits of their labour, ones in use. Such preliminary notes ring the bell of my practice theoretical framework that incorporates the ideas of Alasdair MacIntyre on internal and external goods in work (see below under "Resources").

In this municipally administered unit, where people are rehabilitated and tutored in the skills of second-hand production, we can hypothesize two extreme outcomes. In a showcase, inspiring products are born in the spirit of ecological sustainability and social responsibility, while marginalised individuals are given a new chance in their lives. In a shadow case, waist on both sides is simply brought together to be "handled" quietly out of sight of the winners. Between these extremities, I prepare myself for encountering whatever may arrive. Immigrants, who come as workers (or are assigned) to this establishment, represent the lower end of social spectrum. They are here because they can't find a job in the open market. Same holds for their Finnish peers, but maybe for different reasons. Where discrimination adds to the burdens of immigrants, Finns marginalise for more commonplace reasons. Although Nordic nations have a reputation as the Shangri-La of social equality, economic polarisation is fast changing the landscape even here. Recently, researchers issue warnings about the return of class society in Finland (Erola 2010, Erola and Moisio 2007). In this historical and socio-economic situation, how do the workers come along with each other?

Material and ethical questions

Action research type of interventions may be initiated during the process, if deemed suitable. Geographical situation is close (within the same town), permitting easy keeping in contact with participants during extended periods of time, and intermixing field activities with other duties. I do have some teaching load to carry intermittently with fieldwork. A colleague preparing her doctoral thesis is going to join me part time in this fieldwork. Her research interests partly overlap with my own, focusing more on the vicissitudes of what she terms "sustainable work".

Concrete field methods would include (at least but not limited to) recorded interviews, participant observation (including participation to physical work), photography where possible (maybe also by surrendering equipment to the participants themselves), and the study of existing organisational material. Informed consent of participants would be required and their anonymity protected unless they themselves wish otherwise. Whether it would be possible to lend the material or some parts of it to existing social science material banks, is not yet known. As the intended fieldwork site is a manufacturing-artisanal plant, artefacts may be purchased if estimated enlightening of key phenomena.

Risks in ethnographic work are numerous, but so are fortunately also the chances to change option. If my research questions/interests are not attained by one technique, I can try some other approach. As you will know, that constitutes no deviation from the normal in ethnography. Much depends on the human relations that can be created at the field site. Typical organisational ethnographer runs the risk of being understood by the employees as a government of employer spy. To build trust, the usual remedies of openness and time would be applied. Ethnographies of discrimination, on the other hand, run the risk of passing the phenomenon by because people cover illegitimate action. Against this the remedies are trust, time, and access. If possible, second opinion of academic colleagues can be sought by bringing them on occasional field visit or consulting them back at the Academia. The intention is to enlighten the themes identified as interesting above, and even to discover further ones – all the while respecting participants and their right to a good workplace. My familiarity to workplace development offers me perspective to detect possible production or aggravation of social problems as a side effect of research. My intention is if possible, to give the people at the unit some improvement in their felt conditions of work.

Recently, the intended target organisation has participated in a municipally governed project to improve ethnic relations among its personnel and strengthen its public and internal image as a good multiethnic workplace. That project has terminated. As the most concrete outcome of it, the head of the unit mentions improved offer of Finnish courses for non-native speakers. How this organisational event otherwise may have shaped the situation at the plant remains an empirical question to investigate.

Resources

If I think of my merits in view of the present plan, that would include my previous activity in immigrant research and familiarity with immigrants. These arise from my past work as a psychological-anthropological counsellor for immigrants with learning difficulties, from researcher experience in development of diagnostic methods for the before mentioned difficulties (my licentiate work), from experience as a director of research into societal aspects of immigration and as a fieldworker among white (software engineers) and blue collar (cleaners) immigrants.

Where I hope to draw the ideas includes the combination of theoretical and methodological resources I have gathered during a multi-disciplinary career in psychology, cultural anthropology and organisational studies. This perspective has already allowed me to reconceptualise the field of workplace diversity in my doctoral dissertation (Trux 2010). I hope that this study would enable me to

widen and solidify my understanding of the forms ethnicity takes in today's Finnish (or other) workplaces. It would also establish my position as a provider of alternative views to relevant discussions within the academic fields of diversity studies, working life studies and practice theories. Furthermore, it would help me to provide established academic opinion to satisfy the needs of practitioners.

The academic site of research would be at the Aalto University School of Economics, Department of Management and International Business, more exactly: the discipline of Organization and Management. As a physical nest this institutional location offers all usual office functions, interviewing equipment and academic facilities for meetings, seminars etc. It also offers a first site of distribution of results to business students, most of who are employed as experts in human resource functions across the private and the public sphere. Furthermore, as a theoretical nest, this site offers the context of other organisational scholars, notably the group called MERI (Management Education Research Initiative), which is characterised by the development of a practice theoretical approach to work. I have collaborated with this group and learned its model of work-as-practical-activity by teaching and co-authoring. The MERI group's account of work is a natural ally of my cultural anthropological frame of research. It makes a multidimensional approach to human activity conceived simultaneously as tactical ("technical"), political, moral and personal (see Räsänen 2009).

Within the MERI group, efforts have been made to draw from resources provided by ethnographic studies of work, in order to help business students grasp the need to understand workplace realities based on research, and depicting the points of view of all actors present, not just the managerial view. The present study might strengthen this approach by offering an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork as source of learning to be used in various teaching modes. I could tutor a few promising students interested in ethnography. These present themselves every ones and a while at the department, but have often been turned down by lack of sustained tutoring.

In addition to the above mentioned joint fieldwork and collaboration with the MERI group, the project above all collaborates with researchers of working life and workplace development. I know of several projects in Finland, focusing in gender, age and immigration in the context of work. Other collaborations have not yet been agreed upon, but are likely to reach out to national and foreign colleagues.

Hopes and fears

As already discussed, this research is expected to deepen the existing understanding of ethnicity at work. Its aim is to go beyond the essentialising categorisations produced in the above mentioned diversity management approach, to include agency, process and power in our understanding of what happens at workplaces where ethnic boundaries are drawn. I do not intend to limit the results to criticising diversity management. In the spirit of creative resistance, what people need in order to take off from dominant forms, is the availability of feasible alternative models and vocabulary. These I can provide, based on practice theories and my previous work. By choosing this time a blue collar workplace, I intend to cast light on the intersectionality of ethnicity, class, and gender, together with professional identity. As the study is ethnography, further dimensions are likely and welcome to surface.

Alternative understandings have a tremendous social call. Well-aiming practitioners and civil servants state their need for both methods to tackle the fact of immigrant/minority presence that has become such a big part of European workplaces, as well as the need to understand the situation without recourse to stereotypic images and rigid lists of "best practices". Frequently, these commentators are perplexed in front of the paradox of trying to counter discrimination without treating people according to stereotypes. I believe that I may have an answer to these perplexities, given that the practitioners are willing to embrace a relatively democratic, non-exploitative form of organisation and engage in self-reflexive modes of work. In fact, workplace organisation as a kind of "small society" is a manifestation of one of the hardest and most enduring questions in social studies and philosophy considering multicultural society: how to come along despite /respecting mutual differences?

In order not to disturb ethnic relations at the fieldwork site or aggravate possible existing tensions, I will plan my intervention carefully, consulting workplace development experts among my colleagues - I have already agreed on this with members of the MERI group at my university department. I will also take advantage of the possibility to discuss any arising interactional issue with these same sources. Good and open relations seem to be on their way of being established with the management and administration of the workplace in question. I intend to do the same with the workers, once I'll be in the field. Main informants will be informed in beforehand of any forthcoming publications.

The usefulness of ethnographic results to practitioners (including employers, workers and third sector agents), politicians, civil servants and members of administration, as well as academics, is based on their offering situated and contextualised knowledge of complex phenomena and doing this at best in a

form that is accessible to lay readers. The goal of the planned research project is to assist the citizens of multiethnic societies in their efforts to create satisfactory professional life in conditions of equality. For this goal, besides effective anti-discriminatory legislation, people need mapping of their present whereabouts in the confusing late modern, transnational, rapidly changing workplace reality. Researchers can offer that mapping. People need to know where the dangers of ethnicising and discrimination lurk: in what kind of practices and what kind of habitual forms of thought. They also need cultural resources to craft their personal and professional identity in the broken cultural landscape of late modern society.

Legislative work backed with statistical research is needed to counter open racism, discrimination and exploitation. In addition, subtle but grave problems such as structural discrimination and *de facto* marginalisation of ethnic minorities require research based intervention with data gathering and dissemination modes that allow to convey rich, contextualised information. This is what is here planned. I have specialised in dissemination and popularisation of research findings in a way that keeps its scientific reliability all the while conveying to the readers what the described conditions, events and deeds mean to the participants. My ideal is the kind of media participation and writing mode suggested by Eriksen (2006). Tackling the questions of meaning is central to any account of morally heavily laden issues such as discrimination, and it is also the *sine qua non* of counter discriminatory policies. It is not possible to counter discrimination without understanding what it means, and that understanding must be politically and morally informed. A mere technical approach is not enough.

The above means a departure from mainstream organisational recipes that locate all agency in abstract management initiatives and strategies. These have been plentiful in the past decades, and their fruits in reducing discrimination are debatable (see e.g. Bairoh & Trux 2010). No more paper tigers are suggested in this project. In stead, it proposes understandable information for practitioners to assist them in taking the initiative - and the responsibility - in their own hands and developing themselves the practices at their own workplaces.

In summary, this is a fairly bold suggestion for a radical reorientation in the research of diversity at work. It builds on ideas from cultural anthropology, practice theories and working life studies to foster something like a "Nordic" or participatory approach to diversity, as against something like an "Anglo-American" or managerial approach to it.

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