

**Diversity that wasn't there:**  
Theorizing Diversity Management and  
Organizational Identity  
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## **Diversity that wasn't there:**

Theorizing diversity management and organizational identity

### **Summary**

The central themes of this paper are organizational self-identity and boundaries, created through reference to 'natural' differences between Swedes and non-Swedes at a municipal school for adults. The analysis is a reading of the pedagogical narrative of the Swedish essence and the performative enactment of Swedishness at the school. The various ways through which the school attempts to stage Swedishness can be read as an unusually frank admission of the ruptures and inconsistencies in the nationally tainted self-identity of the school. The life at the conceptual border threatens the authenticity of the Swedishness of the school, and it is left to seek out other, more authentic individuals and locations for the staging of 'real' Swedish identity.

**Keywords:** Organizational Identity, National Culture, Postcolonial Theory, Construction, Boundaries, Difference, Power

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The focus of this paper is on the boundaries, conceptualized as an effect of ‘natural’ and ‘essential’ differences between Swedes and non-Swedes, at a Swedish municipal school for adults. Although the school operates within an organizational context which promotes diversity management, the naturalness of such boundaries is taken for granted by the management and the teachers at the school. The boundaries are institutionalized through a set of teaching and recruitment practices, all in the name of the betterment of students’ situation and character. Thus, on one level, my interrogation of these boundaries is a critique of the stereotypical and essentialist view of identity they rest on. Yet my view is that is insufficient to stop there; I also want to bring attention to the ruptures in the school’s self identity, an effect of the boundary maintenance.

The argument that hierarchic difference, not equality, is produced through the diversity discourse is not new (De los Reyes 2001, Prasad et al. 2006, Prasad et al. 1997). Neither is the argument that the discursive hierarchies between the diversity’s ‘other’ – the historically disadvantaged groups<sup>1</sup>, and those in privileged positions of e.g. whiteness, management, Europe<sup>2</sup> serve the purpose of reaffirming the status quo of the management practices (Zanoni & Janssens 2005). The examination of the ways organizations are actively engaged in othering of historically disadvantaged groups is therefore an important analytical move in bringing the organizations back into the analysis of diversity and difference.

Yet the examination of organizations, from my point of view, entails a second analytical move, namely a need to open up the supposedly stable self-identity of organizations and management, affirmed through differentiation, for examination. I would say that the fact that organizations are engaged in the differentiation of historically disadvantaged groups, suggests that organizations have a considerable interest in maintaining certain national, ethnic, racial or gendered self-images.

It has been pointed out by Nkomo & Cox (1996) that identity is one central concept for understanding of diversity in organizations. I want to draw a parallel to recent developments within organization studies, which acknowledge the importance of identity in the study of organizations, as they adhere to a ‘process of becoming’, rather than ‘state of being’ view of identity (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003, Alvesson 1996, Phillips & Hardy 2002, Ainsworth & Hardy 2004, Whetten & Godfrey 1998). Such a view also suggests that identity intrinsically lacks a set of intrinsic and natural characteristics. A sense of identity is achieved through differentiation, i.e. through the process of being distinguished from and defined against others (Hall 1996). Thus, a stereotypical view of others on the basis of e.g. nationality, implies that nationality bears significance for one’s own self-image.

I believe that there is room for cross-fertilization between the field of critical studies of diversity and studies of identity work in organizations. Broadly stated, my aim is to highlight the ethnically tainted aspects of identity work in organizations, and demonstrate the fragmented nature of diversity management. I draw on the view of identity as relational, implied in a non-essentialist definition of identity (e.g. Hall 1996) in order to examine how the self-identity of the studied school is constructed but also fragmented through the differentiation between the Swedes and non-Swedes.

## The review of existing research

Prasad et al. (2006) write that diversity management is intrinsically about the issues of difference and inclusion. Indeed, in the recent years, the researchers within the field of diversity management, have begun to respond to Nkomo & Cox's (1996) call to de-essentialize social identities, inherent in the concept of workplace diversity, and to turn their interrogative gaze at the organizations, previously naturalized into invisibility.

The attempts to turn the analytical lens to organizational subjectivity and organizations' role in the creation and maintenance of inequalities at the workplace can be discussed as two major strands of research. One such strand of research uses neo-institutional theory as foundation. Prasad & Mills (1997), for example, point out that the problems of workplace diversity are related to institutional resistance against minority hiring, or exclusion of nonwhites and women from managerial positions. Another study which places diversity management within the subjective domain is Litvin's (2002) analysis of North American diversity management by using the institutional theory. The study shows that diversity management may be becoming 'common knowledge' in the US. The homogeneity is created, but not change, argues Litvin, and worse, the diversity management rhetoric reinforces omissions of issues such as discrimination or harassment in the pro-diversity work.

The critique of the diversity rhetoric, however, does not necessarily tell us what is happening in organizations when historically disadvantaged groups' are actually present at the workplace. The study of the workplace diversity in terms of the struggles, issues and possibilities surrounding various social groups is currently studied primarily from the social identity theory perspective. Some of the arguments presented by the contributions within this field are that although homogeneous workgroups tend to lead to less conflict, this is not necessarily an organizational advantage. Quite the contrary, group diversity can challenge the outdated norms and enhance group creativity (Hewstone et al. 2001). Hewstone et al. (2001) discuss how group proportions influence group status and integration in organizations, through development of Kanter's theory on gender and tokenism (Kanter 1978). Hewstone et al. (2001) argues that it is primarily groups with lower status that are disadvantaged by a minority position in organizations. Their proposition is that social psychological interventions which change the structure of the social categorization in order to retain the diversity and reduce the negative effects of social identity. Similarly, Cox (1993) proposes that organization develops structures which allow mutual adaptation and acculturation for individuals with different identities in order to prevent the traditionally assimilatory organizational practices.

There are several areas of group interaction in organizations that are left unexplained by the social identity theory. The social identity theory has its roots in social psychology, with a rather socially deterministic and naturalized view of identity as its foundation. Social categorization is therefore viewed as a natural human behaviour. Yet if individuals are always subjective in their outlook, shouldn't the management techniques and the attempts to change the structures of social categorization be also subjective, and therefore limited in their possibilities? Why do certain group boundaries exist, and how do some groups remain as 'lower status groups' despite various attempts to change both the broader social structures and the organizational cultures?

I believe that there is a need to turn away from the generalized models that attempt to grasp group traits, and focus on difference as a relation of power. Paraphrased, the notion that groups have certain stable, objective traits which are also a natural part of the individual

identities, needs to be reconsidered. I also believe that it is important to defamiliarize (see Alvesson & Deetz 2000) the stereotyping which underpins the relations of difference in organizations. The view of categorization and stereotyping as a general human trait, from my point of view, is a gross simplification. Rather, the ways through which the stereotypes about certain groups are produced, and linked with structural, institutionalized power asymmetries, need to be denaturalized. The knowledge of various Others of today's organizations needs to be viewed as a historical creation, rather than a universal human trait to stereotype on the basis of phenotype, language or gender.

One pioneering contribution in the study of diversity as relations of difference, constructed in organizations is Zanoni & Jentsens' (2005) study of diversity discourses by using the critical discourse analysis. Zanoni & Jentsens (2005) show how managers construct difference, rather than diversity, and that these constructions are power-laden and serve to maintain the managerial status quo. Such an analysis of relations of difference is an important step in re-examining the position of historically disadvantaged groups in organizations, yet I also believe that there is a need to go beyond the study of construction of difference in organizations as the means of reaffirming managerial identities.

My argument is two-fold. The broader field of critical identity studies in the field of management and organizations indicate that managerial identities are far from stable (e.g. Whetten & Godfrey 1998), and that the identity construction is a process of becoming, but also of struggle. I believe that there is room for fruitful exchange between the fields of critical diversity studies and the critical study of managerial and organizational identities, and that if the identity work in relation to diversity is to be studied, the inconsistencies and fractures in the managerial identities need to be brought to light.

The fragmentation, rather than determination of managerial and organizational identities, from my point of view, is the necessary analytical step on the local, organization-specific level. Yet I also share Nkomo & Cox's (1996) view that the study of diversity in organizations calls for an interrogation of the supposed organizational neutrality. I believe that this can be done by the bringing to the surface the ways through which organizations are enmeshed in the broader social patterns of inequality. My point is that organizations through construction of ethnicized, racialized or gendered others as inferior also posit themselves as racially, ethnically or gender-wise superior. These claims, I believe, are related but irreducible to managerial discourses of efficiency, economic rationality or liberal view of human nature.

This calls for an analysis of a different order, namely a rereading of discourses of difference in organizations as related to the broader social context and historically produced knowledges of social difference. I use the term postcoloniality to refer to this broader epistemological and social condition, which in this case can be defined as a continuation of representational practices, historical knowledge and power relations established during and through the colonial era (for summary see e.g. Prasad 2005, Ghandi 1998). The condition of postcoloniality is also characterized by the "mystifying amnesia" (Ghandi 1998), which in various ways naturalizes and renders invisible the perpetuation of colonialism's consequences.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the ways through which organizations engage in identity work through construction of difference. I believe that it is important to acknowledge that, as Prasad et al. (2006) point out, that the study of particular disadvantaged identities vary in salience depending on the locality of the study site. My particular case investigates the construction of ethnic/national difference, due to the studied organization's focus on this

dimension of difference. Further, I also intend to read the organizational identity construction and fragmentation within the broader context of postcoloniality. Therefore, my engagement with the fragmentation of organizational identity would be misunderstood if viewed as a celebration of another Master Narrative's fall. Such a task alone would be, as Bhabha (1994:6) expresses it, a 'profoundly parochial enterprise'. The interrogation of managerial and organizational claims of superiority should be seen as a form of resistance to the amnesia of colonial aftermath.

## **Theoretical perspective**

With the abovementioned questions in mind, I would like to present those theoretical ideas that are the cornerstones for the analysis of organizational identity in the context of postcoloniality. I have introduced the a basic outline what a study of identity as a process of becoming means on a conceptual level; in this section I would like to return to the concept of identity and discuss how it can be studied in more detail. But first I would like to take a look at the meanings, associated with what I have referred to as postcoloniality, and what it entails for the study of organizations and identity.

## **Organizing in postcoloniality**

Hochschild (2006), in his study of the history of slavery, makes a note of a slave ship named 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité', not as cruel irony intended by the ship owners, but as a sign of that era – that during that period the idea of human equality and the idea of certain people's subordination were not seen as opposites, nor did they pose an intellectual challenge for the supporters of freedom and equality. In fact, many liberal intellectuals of the time had great difficulties imaging the abolition of slavery, because from their point of view the slavery as a natural effect of a natural difference between people. This example is one of many paradoxical coupling of ideas of equality with ideas of domination that characterized the Western colonial era, which has profoundly shaped the world as we know it (see Prasad 2006 for discussion). The significance of the colonial ear and its consequences lies in it being not only a project of geopolitical conquest, but an attempt to achieve moral, intellectual and psychological domination. The term postcoloniality is therefore less of a temporal marker, which separates the colonial era from its aftermath, and more of a recognition of the need to engage with the epistemological and ideological remains of the colonial era (see Prasad 2006, Bhabha 1994 or Ghandi 1998 for a discussion). It seems to me that the term postcoloniality calls for a recognition that the inequality, created during the colonial era, operated in a variety of ways and it therefore demands a broader range of interventions than redrawing of maps and rewriting of legislation.

The postcoloniality as a prevailing epistemological condition involves a recognition of certain key elements which once made it possible to believe in compatibility of liberty, equality and slavery, and still continue to produce the ways to think of non-West. The overarching structure then is the idea of Europe, or West, which can be used interchangeably (for a discussion see Prasad 2005, Prasad 2006), while the elements through which this idea is perpetuated are binary view of the world and the boundaries, established through the view that the binaries are natural characteristics of the people. The idea of Europe is a product of the imaginary, as a contrast to a realist attempt to subsume everything and everyone European under this term. The idea of Europe can be seen as a discourse, not dissimilar to the discourse

of Occident used by Said (1978). Indeed, the idea of Europe is problematic because it is non-realist representation of Europe as a superior cultural essence.

The elements of the idea of Europe are characterized by a binary and hierarchical structuring of the world view, with Europe as moral and intellectual superior and the other parts of the world, and their people, in a diametrically opposite and inferior position. Europe is therefore conceptualized as the civilized, developed, liberal, modern, scientific, secular, while the rest of the world are seen to be stuck in traditional, superstitious, primitive states (e.g. Said 1978). Similarly, within the idea of Europe, the non-West is imagined in terms of lack, not content. The naturalized, taken-for-granted binaries therefore allow to imagine natural and impassable boundaries between the West and non-West. The idea of lack is particularly suggestive – after all, as long as certain people are conceptualized as lacking the intellectual capacity, or the moral disposition, for tasks such as democracy or decision-making, the exclusion of these people from the position of influence and the moral obligation to lead them will seem as a natural and even as a morally superior choice.

The idea of Europe and its binary structure should not be seen as an internally coherent set of ideas. The stereotyping the idea of Europe entails is ridden with a variety of internal ambivalences, such as conceptualization of non-West as passive, but dangerous and violent. Bhabha (1994) writes that the forcefulness of the idea of Europe, or the colonial binaries lies not so much in their internal consistency, because there is none, but in the relations of power which make it possible to stabilize, to manipulate and to strategically use these images. It is on this level of understanding of the idea of Europe an analysis of organizations in the context of postcoloniality is particularly salient.

In the theorizing of workplace diversity, certain relations, and the ways difference and sameness are represented can very well include references to idea of Europe/West and the binaries and the boundaries it entails. Analytically, it means looking for references to a distinct European/Western or such essence, references to non-Western people's moral and intellectual inferiority, or lack. Prasad (2006) provides a table with the binaries which indicate whereas the idea of Europe is at work at a particular site. Similarly, the Occident – Orient division, discussed by Said (1978) is also a useful analysis of the discursive strategies used in such as differentiation.

### **Borderlands and identity**

The study of organizations in the context of postcoloniality suggests that certain relations within organizations can be haunted by the idea of Europe and therefore marked by boundaries between the supposedly superior and inferior people. Boundaries, writes Anzaldua (1999:25) are set up to “define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition”. Thus, in one sense, boundaries are marked by the identification of insiders, who may gain access and pass the border, and outsiders, who must be kept out. I would say that the border is one juncture where identity control is overt and legitimate, and where the safe passage is preceded by meticulous social screening, i.e. the rules and procedures which are used to determine one's origin, one's destination and the purpose of passing the border.

But boundaries and borders, set up along the lines of colonial binaries, are imagined, centered through power asymmetries and therefore unnatural borders. The borders can be seen as a place where one party, in order to pass the border, is continuously subjected to identity screening and the demand to prove their moral and intellectual capabilities, the other party is in the position of unquestioned authority. Yet another interpretation is also possible, namely that the stereotyping is primarily problematic not only because it fails to represent reality and distributes power in an unequal fashion, but also because it fails to acknowledge that borders are characterized by change on both sides. To subscribe to the idea of Europe is in that sense a detrimental move even for the privileged party, because while one continues to repeat a familiar tale, it can never live up to the tale's non-realist description of itself.

Bhabha (1990:300) writes that “the paranoid projections made ‘outward’ return to haunt and split the place from which they were made”. This statement indicates that if diversity is conceptualized primarily in terms of inferior difference of the minority groups, the affirmation of own normality and superiority will become a form of self-censure for an organization. That which is censured can be hybrid cultural formations, creolized language, not to mention all the characteristics which are attributed to the ‘others’. In other words, the assumption underpinning this argument is that cultural purity does not exist; the boundaries created to secure this elusive purity are traversed by lapses of otherness as well as constant anxiety and perpetual control<sup>3</sup>.

How can these processes be studied? I believe that the two distinct discursive strategies, described by Bhabha (1990) as pedagogical and performative can be a useful way to investigate the processes that take place at the conceptual borders between Europe and its others. The pedagogical in Bhabha's discussion of the term, comes to signify the linear national narrative, within which the people are treated as mere objects of nationhood. The pedagogical would, in my case, be the idea of Europe – characterized by a narrative of a continuous European/Western identity, history and progress as well as its morally and intellectually superior essence. The narrative of Europe represents its citizens in a matter-of-fact sense – as being European, a stereotype with claims to reflect reality. Yet people are never simply ‘historical events’, writes Bhabha (1990:297), and the daily life of individuals and organizations is full of inconsistencies, ambivalences and deviations from the idea of Europe.

The pedagogical narrative of the nation is achieved through the erasure of necessity of differentiation, of creating others, and of struggling with the boundary maintenance. Such a narrative is inherently established not by who it represents, but by differentiation of those it does not represent and a simultaneous move through this differentiation is made invisible. and for as long as this relation of difference remains ‘outside’ of the nation and therefore unchallenged, the order of things can be made appear as an essence of people.

The performative, in turn, is a term Bhabha uses to explore how the presence of the people of ‘outside’ inside the nation, at its narrative margins, subverts the national narrative and exposes its reliance on differentiation of others as a naturalized strategy of maintaining the coherence of the national narrative. Bhabha (1990, also Bhabha 1994) writes of imitation, or mimicry, as a performative use of e.g. national symbols in accordance to the idea of Europe by the non-Europeans. Yet the act of imitation does not turn these Others into Europeans; quite the contrary, although a similarity is achieved, they remain not the same. Bhabha uses the term performative to demonstrate how the national essence, access or inclusion are dislocated

elsewhere; no matter how many of the symbols are appropriated, they keep turning into signs with a trace of the Other within them.

The transfer of meaning, implied in the process of ‘learning a language as culture’, exposes the ways through which, once enacted, the supposedly ‘natural’ symbols of nationality shift in meaning. The nationality as essence is deferred, exposing its dependence on binaries to remain a coherent narrative. Imitated by the people of the margins, the symbols of nationality no longer signify that which they are designated to signify.

## **The empirical case**

### **The empirical study**

The empirical case in this paper is based on a study of a Swedish municipal school for adults, Multilex (a pseudonym) and the diversity work the school was engaged in. The study included semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the management of the school, staff such as teachers and career advisors, as well as managers within the municipality that worked with the pedagogical and diversity related questions in direct relation to the school. The study also included document study, of e.g. diversity plans and personnel policies as well as some observations at the school. The names of the managers and the teachers that are cited in this paper are all pseudonyms.

In total 29 people were interviewed. The interviews with these individuals were open-ended and are best described as conversations. The semi-structured interviews took place with the management of the school, where the structure of the interviews consisted of discussion topics such as organization of the school, diversity policies and the goals and aims of the school’s work, which were emailed in advance. The staff of the school, as well as the managers in higher municipal positions, were not given any questions or topics prior to the interview, other than that the interview would be about their work at /with Multilex. The questions that the individuals received were largely follow-up questions during the conversation.

### **Multilex – a brief background**

Multilex was primarily engaged in offering courses in Swedish and basic school subjects such as English and Math, on the primary school diploma level as well as secondary school level. Although it may seem that the student group such courses would attract would primarily be school drop-outs, this was not necessarily the case for Multilex. Swedish educational system does not automatically accept foreign diploma, which means that individuals with foreign primary or secondary education often need to take one or several subjects at municipal schools for adults in order to become eligible for further education. Similarly, certain courses in Swedish must be passed if an individual wants to become eligible for unemployment benefits. The clientele of the school was therefore often there due to one of the above reasons – either to complete an education they already have, or to take the Swedish courses in order to receive unemployment benefits, or even social welfare. The structure of the education system therefore dictated the background of the students, where the majority had immigrated to Sweden as adults, had secondary school diploma as highest and in some cases were in need of the unemployment benefits or social welfare.

Simultaneously, the municipality was engaged in quite elaborate investments in the development of diversity management in all of its organizations. The municipal organization in this case had set up diversity policy which defined diversity primarily in terms of cultural diversity and social integration of ethnic and cultural minorities. The context of such explicitly limited definition of diversity, as a municipal strategic manager Karin explained to be, was the municipality and the city it represented, had the greatest problems with that type of diversity. Within the context of diversity work as defined by the municipality, as well as the school-specific notions on diversity and integration, the managers of Multilex considered their school to be quite successful. It is also within the context of these ideas on diversity, integration, school's notions of own successes and challenges that the empirical arguments of this paper are located.

### **The analysis of the empirical material**

The analysis of the empirical material was structured with reference to the theoretical discussion in this paper. My analytical approach was that of theoretically informed reading of the conversations with the teachers, and exploring the relationship between the patterns in the texts that the conversations constitute and the theoretically informed context of postcoloniality. Since I was interested in identity work on the dimension of the idea of Europe contra non-Europe, I was looking for binary representations of own and others' identities. The teachers and the managers of Multilex quite often spoke of their students in terms of who they are and what they need. Similarly, the teachers and the management often spoke of the school as have the task of representing 'Swedish' society as one of the school's tasks. Some of the binary structures that were invoked in the talk about the Swedishness of the school and the non-Swedish students were democracy, equality and responsibility as distinctly Swedish values, whereas the students were conceptualized primarily in terms of intellectual childhood or immaturity. I give some illustrations how these binary structures were expressed in coming sections.

The distinction of inside and outside was another significant theme in the conversations, which suggest that the school finds itself living at a conceptual border. The section of the sign of Swedishness is dedicated to the analysis and illustrations on how the identity control is conducted at the school, and also on what basis the boundaries are imagined in the first place. I use the term pedagogical for those elements of conversations where the binary and hierarchic difference, or Swedishness as an essence are spoken of in a taken-for-granted fashion.

I use the term performative to look at the effects of the continuously deferred Swedish identity. Multilex is engaged in a wide range of practices, aimed to represent the Swedish society and language. The school, however, also faces the self-imposed task of assimilating the students, and although it tries to do so through these practices and through the distribution of various symbols, it remains unsuccessful. The school attempts to deal with the uncertainty and ruptures, generated by the performative aspects of the national narrative, and it is these attempts that I trace throughout the paper. Since performative signifies the break down, or perhaps subversion of meaning of the national symbols, it is the search for the better conveyors of the national symbols is the empirical focus in this study.

The conversation excerpts I use in this paper are representative of the themes of the conversations I had with the teachers and the management of the school. The ideas presented in this paper are central to the work of the school, as is my intention to illustrate in the analysis. I have chosen to give more room for conversation excerpts from the interview with the vice-principal, Nils Andersen. My motive for doing so is to illustrate how certain arguments are sequentially constructed, in this case evaluation of an individual's Swedishness.

### **The case of vanishing borders**

*“Actually, we are a school aims to integrate, and with integrate we mean to give people that are educated here a chance to get a footing in the society. We are a part of that process, one way or another. We show the Swedish values, democracy, we work in various ways, for better or worse. That is our goal, our mission.”*

Vice-principal Nils Andersen

Multilex is a school with a mission. Its mission cannot be grasped without at least some clarification of the discursive context of the school's self-understanding, its teaching ideas and similar issues it struggles with daily. Multilex views itself as an organization, living and teaching at a frontier, and although its geographical location would be an urban area in Sweden, far from any national border, it is nevertheless so that the school considers itself to be dealing with a large number of individuals who are outside of the Swedish society.

The notion of students from 'outside' need not be strange; the vast majority of Multilex's students are separated from the teachers not only through their place in the educational hierarchy of the school, but by social and economic class, as well as the complex network of cultural, ethnic and racial boundaries. The admission that the students are outside could be an admission that the society is not open to everyone on equal terms, and that the disadvantages the students face is are unavoidably brought into the classroom. Yet such interpretation of the distinction between outside and inside, used by the school, would be only one part of the story.

Another dimension of the inside – outside division is lies in the conceptualization of the students as lacking the necessary skills, knowledge or values to partake in the societal life. The lack the students are seen to suffer from, makes it possible to justify their non-participation. It would be qualitatively different to speak of exclusion; the blame, the necessity to change would be distributed differently. One illustration of how non-participation is attributed to culture of the excluded is in how vice-principal Karina Lund describes the selection criteria in the recruitment of home language teachers:

*“We placed an add, that we were looking for teachers, and the important quality was that they were familiar with the Swedish society, knew very good Swedish... This is so dangerous, so dangerous, because it can be easily misunderstood. What we wanted was to provide our students with the information about the Swedish society, to give our students a chance to participate, and that it was that information that was interesting, not to get stuck in one's home country's culture,*

*traditions, do you understand what I mean? (We were looking for) people who were in agreement with the Swedish society, the Swedish values. And with that I mean equality, democracy, responsibility.”*

Therefore, the outside and the inside are charted along the lines of values, intrinsic qualities and loyalties. Once the view of borders and boundaries as arbitrary and structural is abandoned, and the notion of intrinsic qualities that separate people is privileged instead, the boundaries become naturalized – and therefore the crossing of a boundary becomes a matter of changing oneself, of proving one’s transformed nature. It is in this context of boundary control and inner transformation as the qualification for passing to the other side that the mission of Multilex can be made sense of.

There is a boundary then, a naturalized one, which cuts right through Multilex, between those who are ‘outside’ the society in terms of privileges, and yet inside since the municipal adult education is something they ‘cannot not want’ (see Spivak 1993), and those who are inside, and yet spend their working hours in interaction with the outsiders, searching for ways to appeal to their ‘different’ sensibilities. What I mean is that Multilex is one of the institutions that provide a stepping stone for those marginalized by school grades, ethnic background and social class. Without the grades from this school, one cannot gain access to higher education, to employment agencies’ services or part-time sick leave.

Yet let us not forget that the borderlands are a place of ‘occult instability’ (Fanon in Bhabha 1990:303), and that ‘insiders’ end up compromising (or even compromised) too. the values that the teachers call ‘Swedish’ prove to be elusive to maintain in reality, or de facto uphold while trying to convey these very values to the students. The binaries such as democracy contra coercion collapse, as they do in this description of democracy by vice-principal Andersen:

*The most important thing is the democracy in the classroom. A teacher must be a good leader, a democratic such, summarize the wishes of the group, discuss them, come with suggestions, with own experience, let the students experience themselves. No, we don’t want to go on a fieldtrip, that is not school – of course it is school, a different kind of school than the one you are used to in your home country... In such situations the teacher has to be a leader and win that discussion.*

The notion of democracy here morphs into the idea of coerced participation, or even forced decision – the argument which teacher has to win, and the alteration of the meaning of democracy it just one consequence and one price of victory that the missionary Multilex seems to be paying for the reformation of the ‘outsiders’. In the analysis below I will examine some of the other consequences of a naturalized boundary for Multilex. The point of departure for my discussion will be the signs of Swedishness, i.e. the symbolic ‘passport’ one must acquire in order to pass the border Multilex is guarding. The second point I want to make is that the critique of naturalized boundaries cannot be limited to their rigidity and reliance on stereotypes – because “the paranoid projections made ‘outward’ return to haunt and split the place from which they were made” (Bhabha 1990:300). My argument is that the insistence of maintaining the borders is a contributing factor, if not indeed the process which ruptures Multilex’s self-identity as a Swedish school.

## The sign of Swedishness

*“And pronunciation is the first contact, the first impression, one’s face, the polished teeth, which give you access. If you have a good pronunciation, and there are those that claim that the pronunciation is vital because it gives you direct access to municipality... when it comes to people you don’t know, a good pronunciation makes it possible to break down the barriers of the first meeting, or makes it easier to come past those barriers.”*

Prior to this quite interesting explanation of what constitutes the meaning of pronunciation, I was told that by the vice-principal Andersen, cited above, that diversity for him consisted of two elements, culture as religion and as language. And Andersen, not unlike many teachers and the other managers, spoke of language as primarily social characteristic and as a world view, in contrast to language as instrumental – as a technical skill. The above statement is intriguing because it states what meanings are attached to pronunciation – namely that it is a sign of cleanliness (polished teeth), as it is also a sign for one’s identity – one’s face. My claim is that this argument is indicative of the view of language, prevailing at Multilex – namely that to know the Swedish language is to know the moral codes embedded in it, but also that such knowledge essentially cannot be taught – because the moral character inherent in Swedishness is an essence that transcends language in the conceptual and grammatical sense. And that is a troubling insight, if the boundaries within the organization can be crossed only by those that possess the right essence.

I use the above quotation to highlight some of the themes that I believe are central to the teaching and management ideas of the Multilex. The connection between knowing Swedish language and the moral character of the individual is one such theme, as the conversation excerpt above indicates. To know the Swedish language is, in other words, to know the grammar of the social life, as Nils Andersen continues to explain:

*I believe that is an important aspect... if you have interviewed people before me, you have surely heard about the cultural language - the social understanding, the decoding of signals in a conversation, giving the right responses to these signals. For me, who is not an English speaker, although I do know English, I can’t get very far in a conversation. I am less capable of having a conversation. You become a child anew, if you as a Swede and move to Germany. You may have the German from school, but you can’t follow a conversation, you become passive, it takes a long time until you have the good enough understanding of language so that you are again the grown up person you were, or you are back at home in Sweden.*

Nils argues that travelling across national and linguistic borders reduces the travelling individual to a state of childhood, or lesser knowledge, which is of course not at all true in a general sense. The argument is used strategically, to support the idea of power inequality implicated in the immigrant status. In consequence, the pronunciation becomes the indicator of an underlying social knowledge, a guarantee that such knowledge exists, which may not necessarily be tested. At the same time, the ‘right’ responses in this case appear to signify the allegiance, or subordination, to culture-specific authority, embedded in and transmitted through language. The educational system, according to Andersen, is permeated with the sanctions against those who do not do ‘the right’ things:

*The type of people that repeat what the power has said – we don't need them any more. We have another type of power which tells you – do what you want, but you have to do what is right, what is expected, and you have to know, because you will not get any instructions. And if you don't, well, you'll get a hell for that. It is much more difficult. And the power, the so-called democratic power, is so much more cynical in the way it uses people.*

The logic, it appears, is as following; the language the school aims to teach, and for that matter to speak, is a cultural code which includes moral guidelines. The knowledge of right and wrong manifests through the communicative skills, whereas the right pronunciation is the sign of the right moral disposition. The conversation excerpt on pronunciation also indicates that there are barriers, boundaries, within the municipal organization, which must be crossed, or which disappear one the 'magic' words are spoken with the right pronunciation. Andersen speaks of teachers with cultural minority background and tries to explain why this particular employee group can sometimes be problematic for Multilex:

*They are certified, qualified, they have passed the national test, and so on, but can still have problems with language, not in the classroom, or with their subject, but within the organization, problems when developing in the organization, to talk theoretically, when it comes to cooperation.*

*Interviewer: Are you saying that there are concepts they do not know?*

*No, not concepts. I am thinking about pronunciation. Sometimes it can be very hard. Not everyone is linguistically gifted.*

What I want to show is how the entire reasoning in this section is suddenly unsettled by this latest statement. The view that mastery of a language is also mastery of the knowledge of the social is very appealing, and can perhaps be seen as a very radical idea on the school's behalf. By admitting that the social codes, not instrumental mastery of language, are important in the Swedish society, the teachers could also attempt to help their students in different, perhaps more creative ways.

Yet it is this final statement, which indicates is a fundamental ambivalence in the entire argument; on one hand, the language viewed as distinctly social, on the other, the theoretical ability inherent in language becomes a question of accent and of 'gift'. My point is that the if boundaries within Multilex are to be crossed, the need to prove one's moral character is related to language but irreducible to language – one must speak Swedish, but also sound Swedish, and perhaps *be* Swedish in terms of some inherent quality which cannot be captured through language. The theoretical ability is therefore located beyond the socially learnt skills, is reachable through 'talent' rather than craft, and is an essence rather than socialization.

### **Lets act Swedish – the gathering of a cast**

The notion of Swedish essence, the 'theoretical' capacity, traced through the way language is spoken by the teachers and managers at Multilex, can be read as a sign of faith in immutable hierarchies among people. The mysterious 'theoretical' capacity, which cannot be reached through formal education, implies that people dispossessing the signs of Swedishness are seen

as lacking the theoretical, intellectual capacities of mind. The effect of such idea is of course that the entire educational project of the school becomes futile; the essence cannot be taught. What I want to demonstrate next, stretches beyond the hierarchical thinking as such, and shows the effects of hierarchical thinking on the individuals caught within such idea.

I would say that the school is obsessed with language, the examination of language, the tracing and measuring of language. The matter-of-fact statements about rigid dividing students and teachers, foreign born individuals and the Swedish born individuals in my reading are what Bhabha (1990) refers to as the pedagogical - the narrative about the national essence. Yet the daily life at the conceptual border the school dwells at does not follow such rigid categorization, as the previous section on the signs of Swedishness indicates. The symbols of Swedishness seem to be impossible to convey through formal education, because the source of Swedishness is seen to lie elsewhere – as a talent, an intellectual quality or an essence. Therefore, the entire task of teaching the language is undermined by such logic.

I want to give one example of the ambivalence surrounding the school's possibility to teach Swedishness. Multilex has a wide variety of activities, aimed to give students the ability to learn more about the language and society, and among these there is an activity called 'the conversations'. The principal of the school, Thomas Stark, explains to me what the purpose of the activity is, and how the people are chosen for these activities:

*And so we have a project, or more than a project, an activity called 'conversations'. We enlist Swedes to come and talk to our students; we have written to the politicians, and to the pedagogical colleges... and so we have politicians, and university students, perhaps teachers coming here. The students leave their class, three or four at a time, and talk to a Swede. Many have it regularly, instead of in-class studies.*

The idea of the 'conversations' is that the students of the school talk to people from outside of school, and the main qualification of the externally recruited individuals is that they are 'Swedes'. Since the category 'Swede' is in itself ambivalent, the definition of a 'Swede' is achieved through stating what 'Swedes' are not, namely 'immigrants', as Stark explains:

*Interviewer: is it then only 'Swedes' who are allowed to partake in 'conversations', or does that include people with foreign background?*

*Well, sure, perhaps, we enlist Swedes, to come and talk to immigrants. but if there are immigrants, who have lived here for a long time, I haven't actually checked. But the activity is not created for immigrants to meet immigrants, it is created so that immigrants meet Swedes, that is the whole idea.*

Yet again, one reading of such a definition of a 'Swede', though what a 'Swede' is not, suggests the difficulty of capturing the meaning of the term though other means than it being something else than an 'immigrant'. And here, yet again, the line of reasoning can be that the notion of the fixed boundary between Swedishness and non-Swedishness is reinforced. But apart from this interpretation, that the boundary is achieved through speaking of these two entities as diametrically opposite, rather than discussing the qualities of each entity, another parallel interpretation springs to mind. It seems that if 'Swedes' have to be sought outside of the school, who are the teachers at the school?

The instability of the notion of authentic Swedishness is not merely a plausible interpretation of ‘the conversations’. It is indeed something that the school is attempting to deal with by the gathering of the ‘cast’ which appears to be more authentic and more capable of maintaining the rigid boundary than the teachers of the school. The activity ‘conversations’ is created to compensate for the collapse of the boundary, as vice-principal Lena Stenberg alludes to in her talk about the reasons for organizing ‘conversations’:

*I don't know if you already have heard about this, but it (conversations) has turned out to be good, we can see that the groups which have ‘conversations’ each week, manage communication much better, than those who do not. They learn to understand faster, they meet people who do not adjust their language, it is as it is in the society. If we talk about a regional dialect, there will be a person who speaks a regional dialect and so on. Here, the teachers are used to immigrants, and speak very clearly.*

*Interviewer: does that lead to another level of difficulty?*

*Sure, we have teachers who get used to broken language, which one perhaps speaks in the beginning, they get used to interpreting what they are saying. Sometimes when they write, I can look at it, and no, I don't understand anything, but the teacher tells me, look, it is this or that, and that it because they are used to it, they know what the common mistakes are. People from the outside do not have the same routine, they ask ‘what’ more often, and they don't speak clearly and slowly either. Rather, it is regular Swedish.*

The example of the setting up ‘conversations’ is fascinating because it illustrates the difficulties of maintaining the boundaries and own authenticity that Multilex struggles to uphold. The rigid boundary between the ‘Swedish’ and the non-Swedish language is clearly eroding at the school, because the interaction with the ‘others’ alters how teachers speak and understand language. The nationally tainted identity of the school is put under a lot of strain. The workings of what Andalgua (1999:19) calls the uncomfortable “alien” element within the consciousness of a border resident are manifesting through the ambivalence surrounding the authenticity of the teachers. The repetition of ‘we are a Swedish school’ alone, as the means of representing own national belonging seems insufficient. And if the notion of Swedishness in this case is understood as an inner capacity, and not an instrumental knowledge of language, one can only wonder whereas the corrosion of linguistic boundary signifies the threat of moral and intellectual corruption.

### **Lets act Swedish – the setting of the stage**

*“The problem with us as a school, or perhaps our limitation, is that we use the brain, information, which is heard, but at some point it must also be felt. That is how it is rooted. And that we cannot always do, it is the situation, experience which makes the information from the brain reach one's heart.”*

Vice-principal Nils Andersen

The performance of Swedishness requires a cast of individuals who are not yet corrupted by the destabilizing forces of the borderlands. Yet the visits of the authentic ‘Swedes’ appears to

serve only one part of the greater task of staging the Swedish society. PE argues that Multilex has the task of showing the Swedish values, an average Swedish organization, and yet insists that the problem the school must struggle with is that it can only inform, it cannot provide students with tangible experiences which are 'felt'.

The notion that knowledge about the society must be experienced in order to become 'real', authentic is problematic in several aspects. The displacement of the Swedish essence into the realm of initiation through participation appears to be similar to the essence of Swedishness, discussed earlier – namely that it is irreducible to language, and in this case also to location. In other words, it is unlikely that the amount of experiences, need for an individual to 'pass' the boundary and enter the 'inside' of the society, is quantifiable.

Apart from the obvious difficulties of privileging the type of knowledge which requires experience, another effect of such reasoning is that the school indirectly denounces its own ability to represent the society. The notion that the knowledge of the Swedish society cannot be gained through reading or even conversations with the 'authentic' Swedes, discussed in the previous section, results in a dislocation of the proper site for learning Swedish to the outside of the school. Here again, the teachers and managers at Multilex have constructed a variety of activities to make it possible for the students to at least catch a glimpse of the society, and hopefully 'feel':

*“But we have done so that all students have gone to their children’s school, and if they didn’t have children, they followed someone else. To look at the Swedish school. Because they have ideas on how the school is, but how can you know if you haven’t been there. And it is the same thing with a work place – how can you know how a Swedish work place works, if you haven’t been there and looked. And how can you speak Swedish if you have never spoken to Swedes. It’s all the same thing.”*

In the conversation excerpt above a Swedish language teacher Anna Karlsson tells how it is not possible to know Swedish schools and Swedish work places without visiting them. A peculiar type of authenticity and knowledge view are conveyed in the conversation excerpt. It is not completely clear whereas it is necessary to visit all the workplaces, all the schools, and speaking to all Swedes prior to work, education or learning Swedish properly, or just some. Of course, if all of them had to be visited, there would be no possibility to speak of a specific Swedish quality they are supposed to have. Yet if there is a need to visit just some, as Swedishness is supposed to permeate these – what does that make Multilex? The negations implied in the statement are quite shocking, since it implies some general sense of Swedishness 'out there', but not at Multilex. What is fascinating is the ambivalence of Multilex status, implied in the statement – because it destabilizes the role Multilex has in either the ability to represent the Swedish society or the ability to educate. The task the school has then becomes an impossible task – as Swedish language teacher Clara Rosen points out:

*“One cannot learn a language just by sitting at a desk and studying, it’s not possible. It is only possible out there in the society, really... so that is a problem.”*

Claras statement signals an impending doom – because why should there be a school then engaged in teaching a language by letting people sit at a desk and study? It seems to me that the elusive Swedishness the school attempts to capture through various representational practices stands in a stark contrast to the narrative of 'being' Swedish. The 'real' stage for

performance of Swedishness, as well as the ‘real’ representatives of Swedishness are elsewhere – not at Multilex.

## Discussion

*” – Picture this, imagine someone who would cultivate the French language.  
What is called the French language.  
Someone whom the French language would cultivate.  
And who, as a French citizen, would be, moreover, a subject of French  
culture, as we say.  
Now suppose, for example, that one day this subject of French culture were  
to tell you in good French:  
“I only have one language; it is not mine.””*

Derrida 1996:1

It seems to me that the teachers and the managers of Multilex are telling a story, similar to the French citizen of Derrida – that Multilex has only one language – Swedish – and yet the Swedish language and the social codes associated with it are not theirs. As I have written once before, Multilex is a school with a mission; a mission that is formulated in accordance to a notion of Swedishness which bears a great resemblance to the idea of Europe. That mission must inevitably fail, according to the teachers and the managers of Multilex. It is, indeed, striking, is how unusually frank the teachers and the managers are, when speaking of the futility of their task.

The mission impossible of teaching Swedish appears to be at a great distance from the diversity rhetoric on how people with diverse backgrounds can be engaged in constructive and creative activity. The concerns of the school’s management and teachers also seem far from the conceptualization of social identity as relatively stable and relatively natural element of the individuals’ social life. The world of Multilex signals a whole other set of ideas, issues and actions. Multilex is engaged in social integration to use their own term, underpinned by an assimilatory ideal – that the students need to learn more about the Swedish society, and also learn to resemble it as much as possible.

If a few words should be said on the behalf of the school, one possible reading of the assimilatory ideas would be that the school attempts to counteract the social exclusion by attempting to provide its students with the means to get past the barriers within the society. I am quite sure that the teachers and the management of Multilex wish nothing other for their students than to get past these borders. Yet it is the specific conceptualization of these boundaries that comes to undermine the many of the attempts to battle social exclusion. The teachers and the managers speak of the boundaries that separate the students and in extent all ‘immigrants’ from the ‘Swedes’, as inherently natural, as a lack of ‘Swedish’ qualities.

In the context of the school’s representation of the students, the school’s mission and the obstacles on the way, all these representations are formulated in a very strong, realist sense. It is therefore unlikely that the personnel of the school can imagine a different order, or a perhaps, a different path to social integration other than transformation of the students. And as a school it that speaks of its pedagogical task in terms of representing Swedish society, showing a Swedish organization, a set of Swedish values, of teaching Swedish language.

It is the performative side of enactment of Swedishness that undoes the forcefulness and the self-confidence of the pedagogical narrative. One fascinating aspect of Multilex's work is that the school attempts to formulate the specific 'Swedish' traits and characteristics which they hope to transmit to their students, and hope that once these symbols are appropriated by the students, the boundary will be crossed and inclusion – achieved. It is the necessity of specifying, and the self-imposed task of transforming the students, as well as the ongoing confrontation with their 'progress' that brings forth the effects of the performative.

The performative is the imitation, the mimicry of the symbols the teachers identify as 'Swedish' by the students. And the effects of this imitation that unfold at Multilex is that the possibility to 'be' or even become Swedish are by no means any greater even if the individuals performing Swedishness are no longer students or are no longer stuck in their 'backward' cultures. The trace of their otherness lingers on, as a trace of an accent that the vice-principal Nils speaks of in the case of employees. The authenticity, the superiority of Swedishness is not there, and it seems that in the final analysis of Nils, the Swedishness is deferred, and dislocated to the realm of talent, of essence, which cannot be taught and cannot be learnt by instrumental means.

I think that the case of Multilex provides us with two important insights. One such insight is the fixation Multilex has on maintaining a non-realist representation of its mission, its identity as 'Swedish', and of the naturalized hierarchy between Swedes and non-Swedes. Obviously, both the teaching techniques and the management techniques (e.g. recruitment and interaction with 'non-Swedes') are tainted by these ideas of Europe. But the second insight is as critical as the first. The close proximity to the performance of Swedishness, and the deference of authenticity leads to an increasing ruptures in the self-identity of the school, at least in this aspect. The mechanisms of becoming, it seems, are not that of continuously shaping organizational self-identity, at least not in the case of essentialist, stereotypical view of identity. Quite the contrary, the learning and adaptation that takes place on both sides, apparently – since the teachers learn to e.g. understand 'bad' language – reduces the school's possibility to represent Swedishness. The loss of their own assumed authenticity is indeed one huge issue that the school attempts to address through new, more authentic individuals, or other, less corrupted locations. This, it seems to me, brings a new set of meanings to the notion of identity as 'becoming' – because in this case the struggle to 'become' is rather a sign of not being.

Perhaps one last question that one needs to reflect upon is whereas the school is a peculiar case of assimilation, paternalistic helpfulness and self-destructiveness, or if it is indeed suggestive of tendencies in other organizations as well. I would say that the binary and hierarchical structuring of the boundary between Swedes and non-Swedes is clearly not an original idea, produced at the school, but a discourse that can be traced to the idea of Europe, the discourses that underpin it, such as Orientalism. Similarly, the effects of maintaining a naturalized boundary, are also likely to emerge at the sites where such boundaries are maintained. That which is particular for Multilex is the forcefulness of the erosion of self-identity, due to the fact that the school is very forcefully engaged in maintaining the boundary, not only by the essentialist thinking, but by techniques aimed to transform the students. I would say that the close interaction of this sort can be theorized to destabilize and fuel the continuous deferral of identity – after all, the relationship between Swedes and non-Swedes is a relation of difference, and each step towards sameness calls for an invention of a new difference.

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of diversity primarily in terms of historically disadvantaged groups is used by e.g. Prasad et al (2006), among other factors due to the systematic nature of the discrimination these groups have face and many times still face in organizations. Please see Prasad et al (2006) for further discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The list of privileged positions is not exhausted here. My view is also that there are possible and probable intersections between the various positions of privilege and power. The term Europe is used here in a similar fashion as in Prasad (2006).

<sup>3</sup> One significant formulation of this assumption can often be traced to Mary Douglas (2002).