Discourses, Identity Constructions and Well-Being at Work

- a research proposal

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Introduction

The purpose of this research proposal

The purpose of this research proposal is to outline an alternative approach on psychosocial[1] well-being at work. The bottom-line in the argument is that *the way we talk in our organizations about our organizing affects our possibilities to make sense of our actions at work and, hence, affects our identity work and our well-being.*[2] The purpose of the research based on this proposal is to further explore the approach.

When you have read the proposal I hope I have made a strong enough case that:

- Identity work is essential to us as human beings
- Identity work can be seen as an ongoing life story before oneself and before others, i.e. identity work can be seen as a social and discursive activity
- Organizational discourses are important reference points for making sense of our actions at work and thus, also for our identity work
- Our well-being can be damaged if the sense making of our actions (our identity construction) is perceived as impossible, or too strenuous, to achieve.

I also hope that I have made a case that shows that the alternative approach presented in this proposal is:

- Interesting and relevant enough for further exploration
- Not yet sufficiently addressed
- Possible to explore through the suggested research design

The structure of the argument

In order to make my argument I have structured the proposal in different chapters. I will here very shortly present the purpose of each and every one of them and how they are linked together.

Background   *– there is a problem*
This chapter focuses on the importance of the research topic as such and why this is of both a humanistic and a societal interest.

A Changing Working life   *– possibly connected to…*
In this chapter I depict some of the changes in working life that also entail changed working conditions and that, subsequently, also have the potential of affecting our psychosocial well-being. Although I think it is an unsatisfactory label, I use the content and concept of knowledge work research to illuminate the differences from a more traditional working life.

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[1] See Notes: Definitions and Clarifications, No 1
[2] See Notes: Definitions and Clarifications, No 2

Research on Organizations, Individuals and Well-Being   *- what is done*
The changes in working life and its impact on well-being at work are not ignored. In this chapter I make a survey of what has been done in the area. My focus is on Swedish working life research, but I also make a general overview and a small exposition on recent international research.

Problematizing the Outcome of Contemporary Research *- what is not done*
In this chapter I problematize the outcome of contemporary research in order to depict an area, in which further research can be called for. This is where I lay the ground for an alternative approach to organization and individual well-being.

Outlining an Alternative Approach   *- what can be done*
In this chapter I more precisely outline an alternative view on organizations and individuals. The alternative approach is based on the view that organizations and identities are socially and discursively constructed[3]. Simultaneously, I also outline the bedrock for the research approach.

Differences and Difficulties: Consequences in Real Life   *- effects in practice*
In order to demonstrate the practical differences between the more traditional view and the view outlined in this proposal I use a 'real life case'. I analyze a situation from the two perspectives and in so doing, highlight the differences, but more importantly, some of the problems the traditional view might contribute with, if looking on the situation from an identity construction perspective.

So far I have focused on the lack of an alternative work environmental discourse for knowledge workers, and that their conditions therefore tend to be misunderstood and/or ignored. Through the analyses made in this chapter I also demonstrate that, not only is the dominant discourse sometimes irrelevant, it can actually generate health risks in itself.

Research Proposal: Purpose, Question and Design   *- why and what to explore*
Based on the previous chapters I here formulate a research proposal that aims for filling some of the voids in contemporary research. It also includes the design for doing the research.

Methodological Considerations   *- research deliberations*
Here I display general concerns, deliberations and standpoints on research issues, such as ethics, politics and the role of language.

Focus Groups as Method   *- how to generate relevant empirical material*
In the last chapter I go into how I will use focus groups as a generator of empirical material; why they are relevant in this case and deliberations on conducting them.

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[3] See Notes: Definitions and Clarifications, No 3

Background

Introduction

In the 1990's and around the millennium there was an intense discussion in Sweden concerning the rapidly raising days of sick leave. The most rapidly growing diagnoses were psychic diseases (e.g., burn-out, depressions) and the highest increased rate of work related disorders were referred to organizational and social causes (Ministry of Industry, Employment and Communications, 2000). In the beginning of the new millennium measures were taken to lower the number of sick days (not the sickness). The numbers have been lowered, but the decreasing number of sick days is now flattening out and the average sick days per person 16-64 years old in Sweden in February 2009 are 35,3 compared to all-time high of 43 days in 2003. (Försäkringskassan 2009a)

Why the burn-out syndromes exploded during the 90's is not totally clear and most probably there are a number of factors that contributed to the situation. The Swedish labour market underwent a major transformation at the beginning of the 90's, especially within the public sector, where there were both downsizing and a shift in ideology. The downsizing was a result of an economic crisis and the ideological shift was a turn into a more business like managed public sector, also known as New Public Management.

The increased number of sick days were often referred to as the result of an increased pace in changes, work load (fewer doing more) and that the changes made in the early 90's started to show in the sick leave statistics in the later half of the decennium. Although the media discussion is no longer as heated as ten to fifteen years ago, the question is still interesting; is there a connection between our organizations and our well-being at work, and if so, how can we describe and understand these processes and/or phenomena? I do not mean heavy lifting, bad ergonomics, chemistry exposure and so on. What I mean is the actual relation between the organization (the organizing) and the well-being of the persons involved in it?

Only because you are on sick leave it does not mean that you get sick from work. There might be other factors such as a difficult situation at home; kids, difficult teenagers, sick parents, divorce etc. Most probably these factors and many others affect our well-being as humans. In this thesis, however, I will concentrate on exploring the well-being (or ill-being) possibly generated at work, from work.

As the media discussion has decreased concerning this field, you might get the impression that it is 'under control', that we know what generates illness and how we can prevent or take measurements when it occurs. In my experience that is not the case.

Personal experience and interest

I have been working for well over 25 years, the last ten years within the field of psychosocial work environment, as an employee and as a consultant. Psychosocial work environment was also the topic of my last master thesis (Rydén, 2008), where I

conducted an analysis of the official psychosocial work environment discourse in Sweden. Through the analysis it became very clear that the way we talk (the discourse) about psychosocial work environment in Sweden makes groups of employees and their situation invisible.

Our official discourse (legislation, provisions, official websites) is dominated by the job demand-control model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Theorell, 2006). The job demand-control model is based on research made in an industrial context and the new conditions, in the thesis exemplified through the concept of knowledge work, were either not heard, or translated into the concepts of the dominant model. For example: accounts of complexity and dilemmas were described as (i.e. translated into) heavy workload and lack of goal clarity. The dominant discourse makes it difficult for other conditions to be understood, both by the workers themselves and by the inspectors whose job it is to control the work environment.

To not be understood (or to not understand the situation oneself) is indeed a psychosocial work risk so the domination of the job demand-control model then contributes to a double work environment hazard for some workers (Rydén, 2008:72). Hence, we need to find alternative and/or complementary ways of theorizing about our psychosocial work environment, so that every workplace can find a language that can help them make sense of their situation. Otherwise we risk ending up doing things worse, all in good faith (*see Differences and Difficulties: Consequences in Real Life, later on in this proposal*).

Another reason for exploring new ways of theorizing about our work environment also originates from my past experience where I have been involved in occupations and work situations where, according to the model, an almost 'perfect' psychosocial work environment should prevail. And still, people get sick due to working conditions. This contradictive result of the model is also shown in studies, where a 'healthy' working situation i.e. an 'active working situation' (high demands and high control) has been shown to be related to ill-health. In a report from the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2001) disorders were most frequent at people with jobs with high demands, low control and low support (job strain), but at almost the same level of disorders you also found people with active jobs with low support. One conclusion drawn in the report is that workers with high control seem to have difficulties to use it to meet the high demands. Another study shows that women with active jobs had a higher risk of long time sickness absence than women with high demands and low control (Krantz & Östergren, 2002, the study only included women.)

The gender aspect is further explored by Waldenström & Härenstam (2008a). They refer to van der Doef and Maes' (1999) study of 20 years of empirical research, when they write that '…in a relatively large number of female samples, no support was found for the strain hypothesis [high demand, low control, my comment], whereas in male or mixed-gender samples, high strain was associated with decreased general and job-related well-being.' (Waldenström & Härenstam, 2008a:242). In their study they used the questionnaire and complemented it with observation, that is, they compared self-reported working conditions with externally assessed working conditions (using a work content analysis named ARIA). Their conclusion is that self-reported working conditions and health might be underestimated among women reporting on active jobs.

The contradictive results, the mysteries, are thus 'explained' through problems with reporting (Waldenström & Härenstam, 2008a), or people's usage of their decision latitude (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2001). At the same time that the model is critiqued, it is also reinforced: the model works, there is only problem with people's actions in relation to it. In this proposal I put forward that the mysteries might also indicate that it is time for complementary views on our well-being at work.

The need for more ways of theorizing and talking about our well-being at work is evident, even from the horizons of occupational health researchers. Although based on a limited body of research 'Increasing evidence [...] suggests that the organisation of work may be a determinant of job-level hazards.' (MacDonald, Härenstam, Warren & Punnett, 2008). One conclusion is that work organization and occupational health research should be incorporated, for further development of the field.

Theorell (2006) also argues for a renewal of psychosocial work environment research and he emphasize the 'dramatic changes' in working life and that '…we have to adjust our ways of asking questions and establishing relationships with health with this simple fact.' And he continues that the two most used models, job demand-control model and the effort reward model (Siegrist, 1996), for assessing psychosocial working conditions '…should not continue without critique.' (ibid:115)

Even if work is not the only generator of sickness, there are individual, organizational and societal reasons for exploring this topic. In the next section I make a brief survey of statistics connected to the Swedish sickness absence. Even if it does not say so much about what is generated from work, it does say something about the impact of psychosocially related sickness in our organizations and in our society.

Statistical background

Statistics from the National Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*) show that the two major diagnoses for sick leave in Sweden are musculoskeletal disorders and psychic diseases (Försäkringskassan, 2009b). The statistics also show that both these disorders often generate a longer period of sick leave. In 2007, 126 864 cases of musculoskeletal cases were ended at Försäkringskassan, 22 223 (17,5%) of them had lasted more than one year. The equivalent numbers for psychic diseases were 100 153 cases and 23 664 (23,6%) of them had been open for over one year. The total numbers of sick cases were 575 387 cases and 71 143 (12,4%) of them were open for more than one year.

In percentage it means that around 22% of the cases ended in 2007 were diagnosed as musculoskeletal and around 17% as psychic diseases. The third diagnostic label was 'Injuries and intoxications' with 54 864 (9,5%) cases, whereof 3 887 (5,5%) had lasted more than a year.

AFA Försäkring[4] is an organization that insures three million workers in Sweden. AFA publishes an annual report on statistics on long-term sick leave, i.e. more than 90 days (AFA 2008). Their statistics show that the psychic diseases and syndromes are

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[4] AFA Insurance (AFA Försäkring) is an organisation owned by Sweden's labour market parties. They insure employees within the private sector, municipalities and county councils (not the state). Today more than three million people are covered by at least one of their insurances.

especially frequent in the public sector. In the public sector more than 30% of all new sick cases reported under 2005 and 2006 and which led to a sick leave period over 90 days were diagnosed as a psychic disease or syndrome. In the labour collective the equivalent number was just below 20%.

When the numbers are distributed on gender and age there are differences too. In the public sector both men and women have a high percentage (40%) of psychic diseases, especially up to 45 years of age. 45-54 years the share decreases to around 33% and for the interval 55-64 years the share is down to around 22-23%. In the collective the numbers for women are around 30-33% and for men 20-25% up to 45 years, with a similar decreasing curve.

Another way of looking at the statistics is to see how the currently sickness absentees are diagnosed. In June 2008 the two largest groups of sick absent were diagnosed 'Depressive episode' (11,3%) and 'Adjustment difficulties and reactions on severe stress' (9,3%). The third diagnosis was 'Back pains' (7%). In both top diagnoses women constitute more than two thirds of the cases; 69,5 and 77,5 % respectively (Försäkringskassan, 2009b).

The above statistics are based on sick absence regardless of origin of the disorder. The Work Environment Authority in Sweden (*Arbetsmiljöverket*) is responsible for keeping statistics over work-related accidents and diseases. In 2006, 14 186 cases were reported. 7 853 of them were referred to as 'Ergonomic diseases', 3 178 to 'Organizational and social factors', 1 339 to 'Noise', 1186 cases to 'Chemical/biological substances and factors' and 630 without known cause. Here too, the women are in majority with 74% of the reported disorders due to 'Organizational and social factors' (Arbetsmiljöstatistik Rapport 2008/1).

The Work Environment Authority also makes an annual inquiry asking people if they have had any physical or other types of disorders due to work the last 12 months (Arbetsmiljöstatistik Rapport 2008/5). The inquiries show that stress and psychic disorders are the most common disorders among women (12% of women) and the second most common among men (7%) (ibid:19).

Stress and psychic disorders were especially common among social workers, teachers and female managers. The inquiry also shows that only 15% of the respondents who said they had had disorders due to work, had reported it as a work-related disorder (the official statistics over work-related disorders reported above.) The official statistics are thus probably underreporting the actual perceived disorders from work. The statistics presented in the beginning are thus also of interest as they also include unreported work-related disorders which have generated sick absence.

In short we can say that psychic diseases and syndromes are important diagnoses, not just on the individual level but also on the societal level. A large part of the sick leave is due to psychic diagnosis, especially if you work in the public sector and are below 50 years old. This is also the case if you only look at the officially reported work-related disorders. Within stress and psychic disorders, women are in majority as well as several professions within the public sector. Reports also show that the problems probably are underreported.

Summing up

In this chapter I have established a humanistic and societal interest for the topic in this thesis. Work organizational factors are important for our well-being as humans and as workers. The current official discourse on psychosocial work environment is not sufficient to understand the conditions, and the thereby connected risks, for a large part of the Swedish workers.

The next step then is to make a brief account for what these changes in working life consists of, followed by how the changes have been addressed in resent research within the area, i.e. research focusing on connections between our organizations and our well-being at work.

A Changing Working Life

Introduction

It is often stated that we live in a changing world and that these changes also affect our working life. I will not take up on a discussion whether this statement is 'true' or not. In some respects not much is changed compared to 20, 50 or 100 years ago and in other respects there have been a lot of changes. The important thing in this thesis is that there are different kinds of work and work situations and that the current work environment discourse excludes many of them.

So, no matter what is changing or, even if it is changing at all, there are different ways of talking about our job situations right now. There is, what I would call a more traditional discourse, based on rules, regulations, and a strict distribution of power and expected obedience. The discourse originates from Weber and his idea of 'ideal bureaucracy'', which are characterized by hierarchy, rules and impersonality (e.g. at work we 'are' roles and functions, not 'persons'). The organization is, and relies on the idea that everything can be, predefined and planned (Kira, 2003:124).

Another discourse on work can be described as post-bureaucratic, where 'everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole' and a 'we are in this together'-idea prevail (ibid:127). Post-bureaucratic work is characterized by Howard (1995) as cognitive, complex, fluid, uncertain, interconnected and invisible. Working in a post-bureaucratic organization can be seen as a place where opportunities of 'good work' prevail as it offers participation and personal development. Still, post-bureaucratic organizations generate ill-being. Whether this is due to the nature of post-bureaucracies or due to the transition from a bureaucratic to a post-bureaucratic organizing is contested ground. Inventing one's own roles and functions take energy and can be exhausting; the support of the structure given through well-defined responsibilities and expectations and a clear line of command in a bureaucratic organization, can no longer be used as reference point (Hage, 1995; Kira, 2003:134).

According to a study by Bolin (2009:41) most workplaces in Sweden are a mix of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy. This leads to organizations where two different and simultaneous principles of control are exerted. This combination might be contributing to a strenuous work situation:

> 'On the one hand, they have heavy responsibilities but no power 'over' the situation, performing standardized job routines with measurements of results; and at the same time, they seem to have internalized the goals, i.e. they are self-governed under very restricted forms.'
>
> *Bolin & Härenstam, 2008:559*

As earlier stated, the currently dominant discourse in psychosocial work environment is based on this more 'traditional': i.e. bureaucratic or tayloristic working life so I will concentrate on describing the more 'rule-independent' kind of working life and I will do that by using the concept of knowledge work. I use this concept despite that I think it has severe implications. The implications are that there is an implied difference of work conditions connected to a certain kind of work, that is work connected to either the

worker being well-educated or that the work itself requires a lot of knowledge or is linked to knowledge production. I think that the conditions displayed below are not unique for what is traditionally called 'knowledge work'; they are very much present in many occupations and situations we normally would not refer to as 'knowledge intensive'.

However, my concerns are primarily that the conditions are linked and limited to a certain group of workers, and not that they are irrelevant, so in order to make the characteristics I am talking about more clear I will use the concept of knowledge work and knowledge worker and the body of research and literature connected to it. I do urge the reader to remember that the demands and conditions are valid for so many other workers and workplaces, and that the conditions are not applicable to every work situation just because we would label it 'knowledge work'.

Knowledge Work

Alvesson summarizes the characteristics of knowledge work and knowledge workers in eleven points (Alvesson, 2004:21,237-8). The points are meant to highlight what is characteristic of knowledge work, but at the same time they also highlight what (allegedly) differentiate knowledge work from other kind of work. The eleven points are:

- highly qualified individuals doing knowledge-based work, using intellectual and symbolic skills in their work;
- a fairly high degree of autonomy and the downplaying of organizational hierarchy;
- the use of adaptable, ad hoc organizational forms;
- the need for extensive communication for coordination and problem-solving;
- idiosyncratic client services;
- information and power asymmetry (often favouring the professional over the client);
- subjective and uncertain quality assessment
- knowledge work is characterized by a high level of ambiguity in input, process and output, i.e. knowledge intensive organizations are *ambiguity-intensive.*
- due to this ambiguity the management of image is essential, i.e. knowledge intensive organizations can be seen as *systems of persuasion.*
- knowledge work is often carried out between 'rhetoric' and 'everyday reality', which are not always aligned. Knowledge workers are thus often caught between *grandiose discourses at odds with social practice.*
- the ambiguity and uncertainty also highlight the importance of *identity work* for the knowledge workers. *Identity regulation* then can be seen as a managerial task.

The characteristics have its origin in the relation with the clients, the production, the choice of organizational structure and the relation worker - management.

In short you can say that most aspects are more uncertain and less stable than in a more traditional organization, such as a bureaucracy. The uncertainty and the ambiguity entail a more ad hoc organizing, a more independent and autonomous relation to the management but also a different foundation for our identity work.

I use the concept of knowledge work to demonstrate some of the changes in working life. But the conditions of knowledge work are not as stable as (traditionally seen) in a bureaucracy. The characteristics above also show that one of the conditions is fluidity or a constant movement and change; change in customer demands, change in organizational structures, change in work teams etc. Adaptability to external demands becomes a more personal question than just having an adaptive organization, as the 'organization' in a larger degree is 'me', the representative of the organization at the clients, for example.

This constant change also affects our ability to create a coherent identity. Identity work and identity regulation ('managing identities') become different compared to a traditional organization, where stable structures, well-defined functions, relations and responsibility simultaneously also help define our selves, be it good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

Sennett (1998) has addressed these new conditions for our identity work in his book 'The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism.' He argues that the short term focus in the new economy is problematic not only for the economy itself, but also because it is not consistent with 'good moral values' in our personal lives, where, for example, immediate rewards for our actions would be disastrous for a healthy society and family life as they lean on long term values as loyalty, trust and mutual commitment. There has always been uncertainty but this time it is not due to temporary conditions (war, hunger, natural disasters), but inherent in the conditions of a vigorous market economy. Instability becomes normal. The price for being a part of the economy lies (perhaps) in the corrosion of character (ibid:31).

Sennett also argues that the new economy changes our relations to our co-workers and our managers. In the name of decentralization and flexibility we are forced to cooperate with others in 'unauthentic' co-operations and teamwork. The managers are just facilitating our cooperation and thus escape responsibility, as responsibility is put downwards to the team. And as 'good' team players we are not supposed to argue or complain. We are to accept the conditions and comply with them. Sennett argues that this will lead to an ironic mindset and in the long term to an identity crisis.

With the concept of irony Sennett refers to Richard Rorty (1989) who writes of irony as a state of mind in which people are '…never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.' (Sennett, 1998:116) and he continues that this ironic character becomes self-destructive in the modern world, as there is a thin line between believing that nothing is fixed to believing that 'I am not quite real, my needs have no substance' as there is no one who can recognize their worth. (ibid:116). Sennett also says that 'The dilemma of how to organize a life narrative is partly clarified by probing how, in today's capitalism, people cope with the future.' (ibid:117).

Summing up

Changed conditions affect our identity work and our relations to other members in the organization, in other words, it changes the conditions for our psychosocial work environment. New conditions require new understanding. That is not news. Over the last decade there have been made some major efforts for updating our knowledge and our tools for understanding and assessing psychosocial work conditions and risks. In the next chapter then, it is time to go into what recent research has to say about workers well-being and organizational conditions.

Research on Organizations, Individuals and Well-Being

Introduction

The changes mentioned above are not the only changes affecting our working life. Life goes on in a messy and complex way. Apart from new management philosophies and new cognitive demands, globalization and new technology are often mentioned as generators of changed conditions in such texts (Theorell, 2006). It is also argued that these changes call for subsequent changes in how to define, assess and approach psychosocial work factors (e.g. Härenstam, Marklund, Berntson, Bolin & Ylander, 2006; Theorell 2006; Oxenstierna, Widmark, Finnholm & Elofsson, 2008).

In my search for recent research I have delimited myself to Swedish working life research, as it is the labour market, which I am primarily interested to address. It is there I have had my experiences as a worker and it is the Swedish official discourse that I have previously analyzed and found troublesome for 'knowledge workers'.

The changes in Swedish working life and its conditions are probably not unique for Sweden. Globalization makes the world smaller and smaller, but also more and more alike or maybe rather, more diverse and not so culturally and geographically linked. Another aspect is that the dominant model for assessing psychosocial work environment risks in Sweden, the job demand-control model developed by Karasek and Theorell (1990), is also the dominant model in many other countries (Roelen, Weites, Koopmans, van der Klink & Groothoff, 2008). I therefore doubt that the reasoning is not applicable in other organizations and/or countries, but even if the phenomena – identity work and well-being – in themselves can be seen as 'universal', the discourses we use for our biographical stories and to organize our workplaces might not be. In all, and in order to keep the task of the project on a manageable level, the aim for this thesis is limited to explore Swedish working life and its conditions.

In Swedish working life I have found two major institutes that have addressed the changes in organizational conditions and its impact on individuals. One is the Stress Research Institute at Stockholm University (*Stressforskningsinstitutet*) and the second one is the National Institute for Working Life (*Arbetslivsinstitutet*).

Before going into the latest research and research results from these two institutes, I will make a brief account for a survey of relevant research made within the National Institute for Working Life and its research project MOA. The survey puts the topic both in a historical and in a contemporary research context.

The research field – a general overview

In one of the reports from the MOA-project, the organizational impact on working conditions is in focus (Härenstam et. al. 2006). In the report Härenstam et.al. present a survey of research connected to working conditions, health and organizations. In the area of working conditions and health there have mainly been three fields of research; job stress and work organization; organizational change; work organization and work design.

Within the first field, job stress and work organization, most research has been conducted based on the dominant model of control and demand (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Another focus has been on group work and group composition. A third area has focused on the relationship between the individual and the more general labour market conditions.

The research within organizational change indicates that change has a great impact on employee's working conditions and health, but that the results are inconclusive and that the researchers do not seem to agree on the effects of change at work (Härenstam et. al. 2006:16). Sometimes the result has pointed towards positive effects, and sometimes towards negative effects. There have also been varying results that might be connected to the workers educational level, gender and/or age (ibid:17).

The authors of the report also claim that it is still an open question whether these changes are caused or mediated by the organizational or the societal level (ibid:18). They also suggest that in a broader perspective:

> '…changes in working life may also have consequences for the identity of the individual (Sennet, 1998). Identity is formed both in relationships between people and in the relationship to work tasks. Work defines who we are, and what worth we have. It has been shown that when important life values are threatened, the risk of mental ill-health will increase (Brown, 1996).'
>
> *Härenstam et.al., 2006:18*

The third research area; work organization and work design, has developed towards management studies at business schools and does not really focus on health and working conditions. In Sweden, however, the authors claim that there has been a tradition of sociological and psychological organization research (ibid:19). From Gardell's research on organization of production and work satisfaction in the 60's (Gardell, 1971) to Emery's and Thorsrud's research on worker's influence in industrial setting (Emery & Thorsrud, 1969) over to how democratization of office work affected working conditions and health (Stjernberg, 1977) and more recent research on how organizations affects health (Aronsson, 1976, 1980, 1985). (Härenstam et.al., 2006:19).

One body of research within this area has focused on chemical, physical and ergonomic exposures connected to different job tasks. Another has focused the interplay between the socio-technical systems and the social system, i.e. the organization of the workers.

The authors refer to Barley & Kunda (2001) when they conclude that '…there is a need to bring work practices back into organisation research as well as to bring organisations into work and health research.' (Härenstam et.al., 2006:21).

The report also point out two areas that have shown an interest for the connection between organizations, working conditions and health. One area is the critical tradition of organization studies, which is interested in how organizational models affect the individual (e.g. Sayer, 2007). Another is research focused on the individualization process or self-regulation at work. Both areas focus on how power and control is produced and exercised and the consequences of that (Härenstam et. al. 2006:20).

Härenstam et.al. also focus on the methodological difficulties of researching organizational impact on employee health. The authors claim that it is a long known fact that organizational conditions and occupational health are related, but although there have been several empirical studies over the last few years there is '…still a lack of theories and models of how organisational conditions are linked to working conditions and health.' (ibid:1).

Härenstam et.al. also discuss the difference between organizational studies and studies on work and health, that since the late 1960's have been segregated into two different disciplines (Barley & Kunda, 2001). The disciplines have developed their own paradigms and concepts and mostly focus on different levels. This has led to a difficulty of finding theories that aim to explore the associations between phenomena at the organizational level and working conditions and health at the individual level (Härenstam et.al., 2006:8). Härenstam et. al. conclude that to strengthen the field there is a need for a better integration from different disciplines. They also suggest three approaches to accomplish this bridge between the two disciplines; multilevel analysis, cluster analysis and longitudinal studies (ibid:43).

Barley & Kunda are not so specific about the methods, but that methods from different disciplines could be of interest for a better understanding on a phenomenon. Their call for bringing work back into organization studies, is rather for:

> '…a mode of scientific inquiry that rests on close empirical observation of the phenomenon that we hope to explain and a recognition that emerging social developments cannot be neatly compartmentalized by the boundaries of established specialties.'
>
> *Barley & Kunda, 2001:90*

The Stress Research Institute and the demand control model

The Stress Research Institute is one of the promoters of the job demand-control model in Sweden. On their website you can read that a recent study based on the job demand-control model has shown that bad management generates ischemic heart diseases. The results are presented in an article by Nyberg, Alfredsson, Theorell, Westerlund, Vahtera and Kivimäki, (2009) and are summarized in the following quote:

> '…the most important for the employees' health was if the manager gave enough information and feedback, provided clear work objectives, offered sufficient control in relation to responsibilities and could manage change in a good way.' (www.stressforskning.su.se, *my translation*).

The model was primarily used to predict cardiovascular diseases, but is nowadays used for other ordinary stress related disorders such as somatic symptoms, burn- outs, depressions, and sick absence (Widmark, 2005:22).

The institute has recently conducted a revision of the job demand-control model to test its applicability to the changes in working life. The revision was published in 2008 and the conclusion in the report was that the model was valid for contemporary working life, i.e. it is also relevant for knowledge work. Some adjustments were however needed in the questionnaire to make it more updated.

The questionnaire is divided into two main sections: workplace factors and work factors, which have several subcategories with questions. The questionnaire is fully presented in Oxenstierna et.al. (2008). Within the revision several studies were made. One study was conducted by Widmark (2005) and most of the additional questions originate from her study.

Widmark conducted a focus group study with 19 respondents recently sick due to work related disorders. She took the respondents' stories, excluded what is already covered by the two dominant models; the job demand-control model and (the second most dominant model) the effort-reward model (Siegrist, 1996), and formed additional categories of what the respondents perceived had contributed to their health situation. The study focuses on organizational conditions and not on physical conditions or on individual's responsibility for their health, nor on factors outside work that might generate stress and ill-health (ibid:33).

In short the revision resulted in developed questions in the area individual performance and profitability; new areas such as job security, mobbing, conflicts and work-life balance were added; and questions within the area of leadership and control-dimension were changed and complemented (Oxenstierna et.al., 2008:51). To get a better view on the content of the questionnaire the sections and most of their subcategories are presented below. First the workplace factors and then the work factors. The workplace factors are:

- Goals: goal clarity and specified work objectives
- Structure: who does what and when; flexibility, efficiency, stability (task, colleagues, managers, changes etc)
- Management: open, affirmative considerate manager; consulting or controlling; supporting, visionary and coherent
- Freedom: in decision making and doing what 'I want'
- Democracy: freedom of speech; participation; information; fair and just decisions; transparency
- Conflicts: are there any and how are they managed – negotiations, authoritative or laissez-faire
- Humanity and social support: respect and consideration; acceptance and tolerance for 'bad days'.

The work factors are:

- Stimuli: learning possibilities; inventive or repetitive tasks
- Control: how to do, what to do
- Demand: work fast, hard and a lot; emotional and intellectual demands
- Resources; enough knowledge, resources and authority; time for reflection

As previously mentioned there are also studies that have come up with contradictive results (e.g. Arbetsmiljöverket 2001; Krantz & Östergren, 2002; Waldenström & Härenstam, 2008a), i.e. where, according to the model, 'healthy' conditions prevail but where ill-health is significantly higher than expected due to psychosocial factors. The studies do not go into alternative generators but call for further research for a better

understanding of how ill-health is generated. Härenstam et.al. (2006:14) argue that one way of understanding these 'puzzling findings' might be through an organizational oriented approach.

Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, Agostino & Benjamin (2003) have conducted a study that is contradictive to the claim that demand and control are determinants for coronary heart diseases (CHD) or higher mortality. Their findings in a study over a 10-year period indicate that women in active jobs '…were adversely affected for the occurrence of definite CHD…', and that for men '…low education, low occupational prestige and income adversely affected their health.' (ibid:957).

Rostila (2008) studied the development of psychosocial working conditions and related health problems during the 1990's. His results indicate that the job demand-control model no longer is as pertinent as it might have been. In his study the 'bad job situation' was still leading to ill-being, but so did the 'good jobs' too; i.e. the 'healthy' job seems to have disappeared (ibid:133).

Thulin Skantze (2006) conducted a study within the Stress Research Institute where the aim was to explore the impact of the organizational structure on employee health. She conducted two focus groups with 14 managers. Based on the answers from the respondents, she claims that there are several factors in the organizational structure that may affect employee health but that further studies must be conducted to know how much impact each factor has. The factors are:

1. Clear limits for the job tasks of the employee
2. Coordination between job task and competence level of the employee
3. The presence of supporting functions within the organizational structure
4. Sufficient resources and power of decisions in comparison to job task
5. Autonomous decision making
6. Well communicated organizational goals and visions
7. Feedback of goal fulfillments
8. Long term decision making
9. Common policies and organizational values

I would argue that the statements from the respondents are a result of the dominant discourse on psychosocial work environment; i.e. these are the answers given by the 'discourse' and, Thulin Skantze presents them as 'result' without further problematization. The result is thus quite uninteresting as result, but it is interesting as a demonstration of what kind of reasoning and 'findings' the discourse generates and what result is possible when you treat focus groups statements as 'answers' and not as empirical material through which you can discuss your question. *(This is further problematized in the method chapters.)*

The National Institute for Working Life and the MOA-project

The other major research program in Sweden, the MOA project, was conducted by the National Institute for Working Life. The program's main objective was to:

> '…theoretically and empirically explore how work-related health and ill-health are affected by organisational conditions, organisational changes, workplace characteristics, and working conditions. The focus is on psychosocial working conditions, although the impact of organisational conditions is also relevant to ergonomic, physical and chemical exposures.'
>
> *Härenstam et.al., 2006:2*

In a report from 2004 the MOA research group focuses what the aspects are and how they should be assessed, defined, operationalised and analysed, i.e. not so much the linkage between working conditions and health in itself (Härenstam, Rydbeck, Karlkvist, Waldenström, Wiklund & the MOA Research Group, 2004). The research group identifies eleven relevant organisational aspects that impact on working conditions and which they recommend for further exploration. The aspects are:

1. What is produced (type of operations and work objects).
2. Social interaction, technology and knowledge needed for the production process.
3. Position in the production chain.
4. Relations to owners, corporations, competitors, contractors, and customers
5. Innovation
6. Access to resources, leanness.
7. Standardisation.
8. Staffing structure and policy; who is employed and under what conditions?
9. Flexibilisation strategies.
10. Hard and soft management technologies.
11. Organisational changes (type, extent, frequency, implementation and motive for change).

In another report (Waldenström & Härenstam, 2008b) the focus is not on what characterizes good or bad working conditions, but on how these conditions are created. They claim that good psychosocial working conditions were created when the managers had an active strategy upwards (towards upper management), downwards (towards subordinates) and outwards (towards customers and other organizations) and where the employees developed joint strategies for attaining a realistic planning and production delivery; a 'we are in this together'-strategy.

Bad jobs were created in places with vague responsibilities, i.e. when everyone was responsible for everything. This was especially bad in combination with employee strategies characterized by a personal responsibility, in opposition to a collective

strategy. Due to loyalty to a subordinate or a third party (customer/patient etc) the employees did more than the managers expected them to (ibid:21). Other factors contributing to bad conditions were decentralized problem solving (how to maintain quality with less resources), semi-formal management (supervisors with low formal authority), passive problem solving strategies (ad-hoc solutions), and where keeping budget was perceived as more important than quality.

Organizational change and streamlined production are often referred to as having substantial impact on our well-being at work. The study did, however, not yield any significant results for these claims; i.e. in their study change and streamlined production were not found to be generators of good nor bad conditions (ibid:26).

A more recent report connected to the National Institute for Working Life is a doctoral thesis by Bolin (2009), where she tries to bridge the gap between organizational and health research through a multilevel analysis based on data from 90 workplaces and more than 4000 employees. The aim of the study was to '…describe organizational characteristics of different workplaces, and to assess their impact on employees' psychosocial working conditions and health.' (ibid:13) The job demand-control model was used for assessing working conditions.

She concludes that '…organization clearly matters for psychosocial working conditions' (ibid: 42) but '…that individual characteristics and individual exposure to working conditions affect this link' (ibid:43). She also recommends that the delimitation of organization in empirical studies must be discussed as '…the magnitude of the organizational impact on working conditions depends on how organization is delimited' (ibid:42), i.e. other definitions of organizations might give other results (ibid:49).

The study confirms that there is a connection between working conditions and health and that the job demand-control model is pertinent for many of the organizational features characteristic of both bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy.

Summing up

Several studies have been conducted within the field of psychosocial work environment and which focus on organization and health in a contemporary working life. But, as the MOA-report states, it is not easy to summarize the results. And even if the organizational aspects are not unknown, there is '…too little research on important aspects such as the magnitude of the organisational aspects and on which organisational aspects are most important.' (Härenstam et.al., 2006:12).

Another problem addressed by Härenstam et.al., is that there is not that much research done that focuses both the individual and the organizational level. Studies are often focusing on of them. The different traditions within the two research areas also make it difficult to make joint research projects.

In Härenstam et.al. (2006) the authors conclude that the vast majority of studies within the area are focused on individualized exposure-response models and that these studies do not include organizational conditions, and that we '…need to know more about the linkages between organisational phenomena and working conditions in order to

understand how good and bad working conditions are influenced by new management trends.' (ibid:60).

Härenstam et.al. suggest that this should be done through large-scale studies and systematic case studies with a more frequent use of longitudinal studies. They also emphasize the importance of defining what organization level is of interest to find the right data, how to define the demarcation lines for what is 'inside' and 'outside' an organization as the boundaries seems to be quite blurry and, how the individuals are linked and connected to different organizational units and levels. This is also emphasized by Bolin (2009) who suggests that further studies should be conducted for a better understanding of how organizations affect employees' working conditions and health, for example '…characteristics in other parts of the organization that are [also] of importance for job demands and control.' (ibid:49). She also brings forward the need of longitudinal data, as there might be a time lag between cause and consequence.

However, having accounted for the state of the contemporary research within the field of organization and health, I would argue that there are more fundamental problems than demarcation lines on who is connected to which organization or the amount of characteristics and their respective impact within the job demand–control model, and so on. Hence, in the next chapter I will problematize some of the contemporary research and its results.

Problematizing the Outcome of Contemporary Research

Introduction

The two major research institutes that have addressed the question of how the changes in working life influence health at work, have done so in different ways. The Stress Research Institute has primarily focused on whether the job demand-control model is still valid and thus enhanced the exposure-response tradition. The National Institute for Working Life has approached the question from a quite structuralistic perspective where (organizational) structures are determinates of your health. Both approaches have its problems and delimitations and some of them will be addressed in this chapter.

The job demand-control model

The job demand-control model is based on an exposure-idea of work environment. Just like we can be exposed to chemicals, workers are exposed to an environment that generates ill-health. By removing the ill-health generators the problem is solved and the risks vanish. Psychosocial risks are however not always something we are exposed to, but something we are co-creators of.

The exposure-idea contributes to a language that makes the worker a passive receiver of 'bad things' and as a person that has no power over her situation, and a person that is totally dependent on the manager and the manager's good will. The model is based on and strengthens the identity of a worker as a victim of circumstances, not as an intentional human being. This identity stands in sharp contrast to the knowledge worker discourse that depicts the worker as someone in charge of her self, a person that is an active agent exercising her autonomy and who can be held accounted for her actions (Rydén, 2008).

Organizational aspects

The reports from the National Institute for Working Life are based on a quite structuralistic perspective; the organizational structures determine the health risks, thus these reports too contribute to a discourse that depicts workers as non-agential, although Härenstam et.al. (2006:62), as the final sentence in their conclusions, state:

> '…workers and managers cannot be viewed as passive victims of conditions at the workplace or in the organisation, but must be viewed as elective and active humans. This is the case even when there are strong restrictions on their room for manoeuvre.'

Härenstam et.al. (2004 & 2006), Thulin Skantze (2006) and Bolin (2009) say that they need to conduct more studies before knowing the extent and the relative importance of the structural aspects, but I would argue that there are some potential problems with the results, not just that they for the moment are unclear.

Thulin Skantze and Härenstam et.al. identified relevant organisational aspects for working conditions. In both these studies there is an underlying assumption that if we can identify the organisational factors and then make a survey to find the statistical correlation between these factors and reported ill-health, we can take actions to

eliminate the factors. For example: ill-health is significantly higher in organizations with a certain size, production system and place in the production chain. If you are lucky you could find a formula that combines and weighs structural aspects in a way that would make it possible to say; 'That is an unhealthy organization!'

How these findings could be of value for the employer and the employees in a specific situation are more obscure. How can one change a firm's place in the production chain? Are we to split one firm into smaller firms in case size is a determinant for ill-health? What demands can society pose when it comes to changes in the production system? etc.

Another aspect is that the factors in the studies by Thulin Skantze and Härenstam et.al. are seen as independent of the employees. These factors *are* (however sometimes determined by the employer) and the employees *are exposed to* these factors. The employees are not involved in creating their work environment. The 'structural aspects' decide the risk level for ill-health.

Organizing has impact

Even if the current research would be further developed and the results would be very significant, there is still a need for exploring how the organizational aspects are connected to ill-health, not just that they are connected or in what magnitude.

The report by Waldenström & Härenstam (2008b) does focus on how bad and good jobs are created and not just which aspects are important. The results are not really surprising; it is better if the management have a strategy than not, whether it be towards upper management, subordinates or outwards; working together with your colleagues is better than to be left alone with your worries; it is better to have decision latitude than wait for decisions/approval from others.

Even if the conditions in the report are well-known and can be recognized by many workers (including me), it still does not really say why these conditions generate ill-health, but, maybe important enough, the report shows that the way we choose to organize and use our resources affect our well-being. It is not just the resource level itself or whether it is a public or private business, organizational size, change, production strategy etc.

The problem with the findings presented in the report is that they do not really add anything useful or helpful for those involved. The argument is very close to 'It is better to be rich and healthy than poor and sick.' I would be very surprised if the managers and the workers at the 'bad job' workplaces would be satisfied with the current state. Even if this study is closer to the question 'why and how are our well-being affected by our organizing', there is still something missing to better understand both the 'how' and the 'why'; why and how are the 'sick and poor-strategies' generating ill-health?

An alternative approach

Hence, there is a need of exploring alternative and complementary ways of conceptualizing our psychosocial work environment. There is a need of developing concepts that are not based on the traditional working life and that do not strengthen a non-agential identity for workers and, subsequently, an almost omnipotent identity for

the manager/ employer; a power distribution that sometimes might be comfortable (for both parties) but that also can be perceived as impractical, troublesome, and unrealistic.

One way of exploring an alternative view is to use another ontological approach. The abovementioned studies are based on a quite positivist ontology so an alternative view would be to depart from a constructionist ontology, where organizations as well as individuals (read: identities) are seen as socially and discursively constructed. From this perspective, the simultaneous process of constructing our identities and our organizations becomes the most central connection between the 'individual' and the 'organization'; i.e. while constructing our organizations we also construct our psycho-social working conditions and our identities. If we see the psychosocial conditions as socially and discursively constructed, other issues emerge in the foreground, both how they are generated and how they can be detected, prevented and/or intervened in.

Identities can be seen as something a person has, as the essence of a human being. In a social constructionist view identity is fluid, constantly produced and achieved, albeit it sometimes can appear as both stable and really hard to change.

> 'The appearance of stability in any given 'identity' is, at best, a transient accomplishment: discursive construction and re-construction emerge as a continuous process and stability appears to be either a momentary achievement or a resilient fiction.'

> *Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis & Sabelis, 2009:301*

Whether there is anything more than 'identity' to an individual or not I will not even begin to argue for, or against. For the purposes of this proposal the interest lies in the socially constructed phenomena, the presentation of 'self', here labeled identity. If there is something 'in there' or not, I am inclined to join the position of Ybema et. al. (2009:304), that '…we do not know, and perhaps, cannot know.'

Identity is a concept that is used in many ways. The common denominator is that it addresses the existential question 'Who am I?' Identity is often divided into individual identity and social identity. Identity theory (Stryker, 1968) focuses on the personal identity as a collection of identities, each occupying a certain role; mother, woman, worker, friend, daughter, wife etc. Social identity focuses on how a person defines her identity through her membership with a group (Sörgärde, 2006:192) and how this identification process includes the construction of 'the Other'; i.e. what I am not (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

In this thesis the focus is on identity as an ongoing story about myself before others. This means that identity is seen as a continuous social and discursive process and although the identity work is done by the individual, it is a social activity. Social, as the reasoning I use to 'think' are socially constructed, i.e. they are a result of my past life, and social, because when I, in the moment, deliberate and take actions it is a communicative act, i.e. I address an environment and the response from the environment is also included in the outcome of my actions (Asplund, 2002).

Identity work then, in this thesis, is something that is constantly produced, whether it is conscious to us or not. Most of our actions and reactions have become natural to us, we do not need to deliberate on everything that we do and we do not need to stop and

consciously make sense of every action others do. It is often not until when something seems strange or difficult in some way, i.e. when it is no longer 'natural', that identity work becomes a conscious process. This more conscious process makes it easier for us to make more explicit our deliberations and actions. That does not mean that identity work is just made when there are disruptions, it is always ongoing, although quite silent most of the time.

Identity risks (or risks connected to strenuous identity work) thus occur when the story of myself is disrupted and impossible to make sense of in relation to my reference points (e.g. moral standpoints, reasoning, discourses), and /or when I do not receive any response on my existence. The risks are individual, although socially generated.

This standpoint on identity as a social phenomenon (not to be confused with social identity theory) also highlights one of the differences between 'constructivism' and 'constructionism'[5]. Construct*ivism* focuses on how the world is constructed in individual minds, on the meanings the world has for the individuals. Construct*ionism*, although resonant with constructivism, tends to locate the origin of meaning in relationships (Gergen, 2009:26). The focus in this study is on the latter.

Normally I would find it unnecessary to go into the chosen perspective in any depth. No matter if the author mentions it or not, the perspective presents itself, or rather emerges, through the text. This time, however, I think the perspective is of such importance that it is necessary to make a little longer introduction to it than usual, especially since the dominant theories and models within the area are based on a different perspective.

This dominance entails that much of the 'knowledge' generated through them also dominates our mindset; they become omnipresent and talked about as 'truths', they become basic assumptions we normally do not question. To find an alternative way of theorizing about a phenomenon is thus a very tricky task. First, the researcher (I) is brought up within these 'truths' and it contributes to making her blind to alternative interpretations. Secondly, the reader (you) is also used to these 'truths' and even if I would try to say something that breaks with these 'truths', the risk is high that you will read my words in the light of the dominant perspective. This is a difficulty in all communication, and to at least make it possible to both write and read the text from an alternative perspective I think it is necessary to right from the start, frame the scene of the perspective.

My aim is to display the practical consequences of this perspective. I want it to be clear that the choice of perspective matters. It is not just a question of semantics or academic positioning. It has a very practical impact on research purpose, research question, choice of method, analytical approach, research results and so on, but most importantly, it has impact on the subject matter; how we construct our work situations, what we perceive as 'good' and 'bad' conditions and what we construct as relevant measures. So, before I will demonstrate the consequences of the dominant discourse and the consequences of an alternative perspective through a real life case, I will present what I, in this thesis, mean by 'a social and discursive constructionist perspective'.

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[5] See Notes: Definitions and Clarifications, No 3

Outlining an Alternative Approach

Reality is socially constructed

> 'Reality is socially constructed and the sociology of knowledge must therefore analyze the processes whereby this construction is made.'

> *Berger & Luckmann, 2008:10 (my translation)*

Social construction is concerned with the social construction of reality. One consequence of that is that organizations and individuals (identities) *are not*, they *are being produced* (see e.g. Weick, 1979; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). One of the inherently 'good' things about socially constructed phenomena is consequently, that they can be changed. It can take time and it can be hard, but it can be done.

Social construction consists of 'social' and 'construction'. The first part, social, highlights that it is not a mental construction; it is a social construction. Although the interpretative process is personal and 'inside' your head, it is a social activity, even if you are talking to yourself (Asplund, 2002). The meaning making and interpretation of what you see and hear is based on your previous experiences of the world; the result of a communicative process with the world around you, in the past, in the present including an idea of the future. The 'social' is inevitably within you and your reasoning.

The other part of the concept, 'construction', pinpoints that it is an activity. It is ongoing work. Through our activities we support or challenge, define and alter meanings, relations and so on. We thereby contribute to the construction of the world, both in a broader sense (society) and in the more narrow and close situations and contexts we are within. The main tool we have for this construction is language, something I will come back to later on.

Even if some of our social constructions exist without 'me', they would not exist without humans. As they are social you cannot change them without others. If you are the only one acknowledging the existence of X, without any reference to other constructions, then it is not a social construction, then it is a mental construction. 'Social' means some kind of relation to something else (Gergen, 2009).

The research presented in Härenstam et.al. (2004 & 2006) is based on assumptions on causal mechanisms and structuralism (ibid 2004:2); i.e. structure defines man rather than man defines structure. From a constructionist view the interest lies more in how these structures are uphold (created and recreated); how they are motivated; how they are (re)enforced; what reasoning is supported; what is taken for granted to make this kind of reasoning acceptable etc. The focus is on the constructing aspects of our life; how do we create reality, not how reality 'is' or how reality shapes us. The focus then turns to the activities we engage in that contribute to (re)constructing reality, or if you prefer, to make sense of our reality.

In contrast to the above I will depart from Giddens' idea of structure and agency (Giddens, 1997/1991), where he argues that these two aspects (the individual and the environment) are mutually dependent and simultaneously created. Neither can be said to dominate over the other in importance. I have chosen Giddens' writings for two reasons. First, he links the overarching changes in the world – globalization and

technology – with the more local consequences for our social world (society and organizations) and our personal existence. Secondly, he sees identity construction as 'storytelling', i.e. identity is the story we manage to construct before ourselves and before others about ourselves. He thus uses the concept of identity in line with a social and discursive constructionist perspective.

This creation of self and society is primarily done through language, so before getting into how Giddens accounts for the relation between societal change and identity I will briefly clarify why and how language is important for this thesis and some of the consequences of this perspective for the view on organizations.

Language and discourse

> 'To ask whether reality is intelligible is to ask about the relation between thought and reality. In considering the nature of thought one is led to also consider the nature of language.'

> *Winch, 2008:11/1958*

Language and discourse is relevant for this thesis in several aspects. First and foremost, language is the main tool for constructing reality, or the sense making of our reality. Our world is not just socially constructed, it is done so primarily through language.

> 'The things that make up the social world – including our very identities – appear out of discourse. To put in another way, our talk, and what we are, are one and the same. [...]. Without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand social reality, our experiences, or ourselves.'

> *Phillips & Hardy, 2002:2*

Seen from this perspective social reality is mainly based on and (constantly) (re)constructed through discursive interaction. Language thus becomes a social practice that constitutes and constrains our social world. 'A discursive perspective [...] shifts attention from the intentions and attitudes of individuals to their observable linguistic practices and the effects of those practices on social relationships and action (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The second reason for focusing on language and discourse is that it connects the individual, the organization and the larger world. The way we talk in organizations and the way we construct our selves are not independent of 'larger' discourses about work, globalization, individualization, capitalism, power, managerialism, gender etc. The way we talk is connected to our culture and our history; we say things that make sense to ourselves, our organizations and our communities but also to the larger society. At the same time discourses 'decide' what makes sense they also constrain our understanding, what does not make sense. Focusing language and discourse is thus about '…revealing the processes of social construction that constitute social and organizational life.' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002:2).

Discourse is a broad concept that has many meanings. Alvesson & Kärreman (2000) distinguish discourses from Discourses. Depending on your research interest the focus

is on different levels (and vice versa). The differentiation of the discourses into Mega Discourses, Grand Discourses, meso discourses and micro discourses that Alvesson & Kärreman do, also highlights that the discourses (and Discourses) are connected. Instead of trying to focus on one level of D/discourse, I will in this project depart from a specific topic and explore what discourses we use to make sense of it. What levels that are of interest, will emerge through the research process.

The way we talk, our language, is a result of all the discourses we are influenced by in the past and in the present and when we speak we are (re)constructing the world (past, present and future). What we say is thus interesting from many aspects; what discourse do we use to make sense of reality; what consequences might follow of our talk; how do we use language to achieve certain things (laughter, manipulation, empathy etc) and so on. But, it is not interesting because it is a 'true' representation of reality, our inner feelings, opinions and so on. It is interesting because we use our language to construct reality; it is through language we make sense of reality (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Winch, 2008/1958).

Social construction and organization

From a social and discursive perspective an organization is a social system consisting of humans and their relations, constructed through language, or as Gergen (2009:145) puts it: '…a field of conversation.' The 'organization' does not exist without humans producing it, giving meaning to specific structures, events, relations, texts etc. If we (more than one person) do not understand it as an organization it is not an organization. It is therefore more accurate to talk about 'organizing' instead of 'organizations' (Weick, 1979:44) to mark that it is an activity and not a fixed object or a construction with a fixed meaning.

I also prefer the concept 'social systems' instead of 'organizations', to mark that I see them as the result of social constructions. The activities that uphold the (organizing of the) organization is the result of people making lots of deliberations and decisions, more or less consciously. Despite the infinite number of choices that can be made, we tend to reproduce certain patterns of activities. Our choices are limited to what we are a part of, like a partially completed sentence, that:

> '…contains both content already specified and the means for continuation of the sentence. The partial sentence limits the number of ways in which the remainder of the sentence can be finished, but there is still some latitude as to which of several possibilities will actually be realized.'

> *Weick, 1995:50*

Within in a certain social system some acts make sense, others do not. The sense making, and thus also the base of our actions are, in this perspective, made up of language. Through language we construct our world; our own and others identities and our relations, and, consequently our organizations and the limitations and possibilities we attach to being a member of it (Gergen, 2009).

Weick describes sense making as a process that is: grounded in identity constructions; retrospective; enactive of sensible environments; social; ongoing; focused on and by extracted cues; and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995:17-ff).

The sense making does not have to be 'true' or 'accurate,' it just has to make sense within the existing discourse/s; it has to connect to other people. This connecting process can be seen as the story telling (story constructing) we constantly engage in to make sense of our actions and our selves. Sense making, identity constructions and language are thus parts of the same process/activity.

> 'If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, than what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to contrast. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story.'
>
> *Weick, 1995:60–61*

Society is changing…

If we see discourse as a constituting force, the levels of society, organizations and individuals are linked together. In the section on knowledge work I tried to very briefly capture some of the changes in working life that have generated a general interest in understanding new working conditions. In this section I will focus on societal changes and in the next section on its impact on our identity construction.

Giddens (1997/1991) claims that technology (IT, transport) has made the world more accessible and global. Local cultures and traditions are no longer so determining for our choices as they used to be. The global and personal thus become very much linked to each other for the first time in history (ibid:44).

Giddens points at three main factors behind the dynamics of the modern institutions; separation of time and space; disembedding mechanisms and; institutional reflexivity (ibid:24-31).

The separation of time and space is the first main factor. Time and space have been and still are important aspects of our activities, but they are no longer linked through the place of the activity. People still need to coordinate their actions but they are no longer linked together through the place or the necessity of being at the same place for doing so.

The disembedding mechanisms refer to the disconnection of social relations and a specific context. Giddens mentions two types of disembedding mechanisms: symbolic signs and expert systems. Money is a symbolic sign, it has a standardized value and can be used regardless of time and space in a way that was not possible in more traditional societies. Expert systems have an impact on our lives even if we never meet them. They affect what we eat, what medicine to use, the building we live in, what advice we get from the therapist, lawyer, doctor etc. Both systems prerequisite some form of trust. Trust is much more needed when we have no direct contact with the members of our social system. If we can see others in action we can more easily assess, understand and/or balance the consequences of their behaviour.

Institutional reflexivity focuses on the condition of modernity that nothing is forever, 'truths' are 'just for now'. Everything is constantly revised in the light of new information and knowledge. Science is not based on accumulation of knowledge but on doubt. This relation between modernity and the radical doubt is, according to Giddens, existentially troublesome for us in our every day life.

This argument is in line with Sennett (1998) who argues that the values in working life, e.g. short-term rewards and flexibility, are the opposite of what we cherish and need in our family life and in our society, e.g. long-term commitment and loyalty. Working life and family life become decoupled in a way that makes our life story incoherent, which in turn can make us lost and detached from our selves.

…and so are the conditions for our identity construction

Giddens defines self-identity as '…the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.' (ibid:68). Identity is not the sum of traits and/or personal properties. It is not something a person has, it is achieved. A person's identity is thus not to be found in behaviour or in the reactions of others, but in the ability to construct an ongoing story of herself that also makes sense to both herself and others.

In more traditional times, the stories we could construct about our selves where quite limited. A consequence of modernity is that this now becomes a much greater effort for every person. Identity work can be viewed as equally important even in traditional times, but the choices and possibilities are comparatively (almost) endless and constantly changing. The choices are not just many they are to be included in the story of our selves. The construction of the biographical story contributes to make sense of our selves and our actions, before our selves but also before others; it is a communicative act.

One could see this story making as 'fiction' and something that a person invents in order to appear a little bit better than she really is. I do not see it like that. I see this story construction, this striving for a coherent sense of identity as essential for us as humans. It makes sense of our actions in our specific context and it guides us when we deliberate on our choices and the consequences of them. This story construction positions us to a community at the same time as it differs us from the other members of the community. If it is totally fictional we would not be able to connect to others in our every-day life.

A sense of coherence is also the key corner stone in Antonovsky's salutogenic approach, where he focuses on what keeps us healthy instead of on what makes us sick (pathogenic approach). A person with a strong sense of coherence is more likely to cope with the stressors life brings. A sense of coherence consists of three main ingredients; the idea that the world is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. (Antonovsky 1991). What determines a person's sense of coherence is her previous experiences (ibid:128). This sense of coherence is thus a socially achieved state, albeit it is often seen as a personal 'skill', something that Antonovsky does not approve of.

In an article he argues that most writing concerned with well-being '…shows a near-total absence of reference to or awareness of the larger social system in which the body-mind relationship operates. History, social structure, and even culture do not seem to

exist.' (Antonovsky, 1994:3). The focus on the individual and her coping strategies prevents us from understanding '…the social burdens that pressure people to behave in pathogenic fashion and that block them from behaving salutogenically.' (ibid:3). He continues to argue that this 'health within' focus just supports status quo.

This argument is close to the argument in this paper; identity is not a personal construction, is it a social phenomenon and, it is not especially fruitful just to focus the personal coping strategies, as organizational and societal discourses as well as our personal experiences together forms the ability to construct a coherent life story.

Antonovsky argues that it is our social experiences that determine whether we will face the difficulties in life with the idea of life being coherent (based on our experience, that life usually is) or if we face life with the idea of life being chaotic and incomprehensible. I would not argue otherwise, our past is an important ingredient in how we interpret and approach our lives, but the identity I have argued for here is social not just because we, so far, has been formed in social contexts, but that we construct our identity in interaction with our social contexts – past, present and future. With a narrative approach coherence is something that can be achieved, or not achieved, in any given moment. If I understand Antonovsky's model 'correctly' he argues that we can know beforehand what 'kind of person' we have become, that is if we are good or bad at establishing a sense of coherence in general. In the actual situation it is more of a personal achievement than due to a social activity. In this paper, though, 'coping' is seen as a social activity, where we in every instant also include and are affected by our social environment. If we 'fail' or 'succeed' to make sense of our actions are thus not primarily a personal achievement, it is situational and contextual.

Identity risks and well-being

As identity work is essential there are consequences when we fail to make sense of it. Giddens (1997/1991:68-69) refers to Robert D Laing (1965) when displaying the consequences of not being able to construct a coherent story. Then we might feel fear of being obliterated, crushed or invaded by external events forging themselves upon us. Another risk is not being able to form a protective filter that hinders some of the existential threats surrounding us. To escape the dangers hunting us, we might choose to blend in with the environment and make our selves invisible. A third risk is that we fail to establish a trust to our own integrity, with feelings of emptiness and/or an obsessive scrutiny of our selves.

The conditions for our life stories (biographical stories) have changed; our optional life stories are vaster than ever. In that sense we are freer to create our selves without the restrictions of the societal and cultural traditions we were born into. But, this 'freedom' is also a coercion. Everyone must decide 'who I am' in a much more complex, fragmented and changing world, that is without the guidance that strong traditions or stable social systems offer.

We might say that we are in this new era of individualization, all the same, we are living with the discourses of a more collectively created identity at work. This situation is explored from an identity perspective by Wiklund (2007). He departures from a

social constructionist view and that identity is a narrative act positioning us in relation to 'something good'.[6]

Even if traditions are no longer so determinant of our identities we still need reference points. Our deliberations and actions have direction; we act out of our understanding of the world (past and present) and an idea of a desired state (future) of the world and of our selves. We need to create meaning in and between our actions. If we do not have a reference point we would have nothing to relate our ideas, deliberations and actions to. The essential meaning making of our actions, our life story, would then be much harder to achieve. This is also emphasized by Doherty (2009) who argues that (alleged) changes in working life; i.e. being short term, contract-based and episodic, have not resulted in work as unimportant to us as, but that work is still a '…source of identity, meaning and social affiliation.' (ibid:84).

These reference points can also be seen as discourses that we try to include, i.e. position us towards, in our life story (Garcia & Hardy, 2007). If we see leadership as the management of meaning (Smircich & Morgan, 1982), leadership and managing are central to what kind of discourses or reference points that we, at work, are 'forced' to position ourselves towards. The discourses offered by management are thus essential for our well-being at work. 'Leadership lies in a large part in generating a point of reference, against which a feeling of organization and direction can emerge.' (ibid:258). But, as Smircich and Morgan point out, this construction of reference points is a social phenomena, that at least includes two parts; leaders and led.

If we do not know what to connect to, we might feel lost and decoupled from our context. This is a risk Wiklund draws attention to. He has interviewed employees within the graphic industry and within a health care unit, both under strong change pressure during the time period. One of his theses is that in our search for reference point we turn to our work organization in need of a confirmation on our actions as 'good'. If our organization is illusive or fluid we will not get any confirmation on the meaning of our actions at work, i.e. of our significance at work. When our actions are not recognized or when our 'questions' are rejected, there is a risk of becoming 'no one'. Without a confirmation we cannot contrast ourself against a context that will give us shape. Our contour will be vague and at risk being vanished. If the answers (reactions) are not acceptable the employees choose to leave their engagement or leave the organization (Wiklund, ibid:163). This process of 'becoming no one' is also described by Sennett (1998).

Another risk Wiklund highlights is that without a 'moral' reference point, the only yardstick we are offered is that of money; that the only value we can relate to is quantifiable, i.e. pay, production rate, rankings etc. When an organization solely focuses monetary values, alienation arrives and the instrumentalization of employees at work is just as high as in early industrialization where workers were not really humans, just hours for sale.

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[6] Per Wiklund departures from Taylor (1989) who 'defines' identity as a position to a moral value; something 'good'. This view also connects to Sennett's (1999) perspective on character. (Wiklund, 2007:16).

If you do not seek purpose or meaning in or through your work, that will probably not cause any damages to your identity work, but if you, as the employees in Wiklund's cases, also see other values with your work it can be troublesome. This is especially so if you are left alone with the task of getting the different stories – the economic and the more 'moral' ones – put together to a personal story (identity) that is acceptable both for your self and for the community you belong to. Being rejected or left alone are psychological risks. When not being able to construct a coherent story within the context you live and work, you end up with feelings of guilt, blame and anxiety. In a changeable working life the risks of not being able to construct a coherent biography are higher than in a more stable environment.

Wiklund focuses on the psychological consequences of the late modernity we live in and our identity work. He thereby also displays how the conditions for our identity work change; from being a part of a collective and thus also 'given' identity through the social system to a more individualized identity work where the choices are endless and constant and above all, much more uncertain in terms of consequences.

The consequences of a 'failed' story construction is severe and threatening our very existence. If one sees this story construction as an individual phenomenon, the solution to having problems constructing a coherent story is subsequently also individual and does not affect the social system or in this case the workplace. The ability to construct a coherent story is in this thesis, however, seen as a social phenomenon. And as the story is a communication with the world around us, the story also carries with it every level of society that is affecting our talk – it is not just affected by the organization.

Organization studies, identities and well-being

Although the focus is on Swedish working life and research based on that, I will make a small detour to display some of the research being done within the field of identity research. The 'identity turn' in organization studies is around 20 years old, but still, it seems to offer '…creative ways to understand a range of organizational settings and phenomena while bridging the levels from micro to macro.' (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008:7). This is also emphasized by Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis & Sabelis (2009), who view identity as '…a fundamental bridging concept between the individual and the society.' (ibid:300). This is due to identity's dual character; i.e. a 'permanent dialectic' between the individual and society. Identity research is thus also (inevitably ?) linked to the notions of structure and agency (ibid:301).

Alvesson et.al. (2008) are also quite optimistic about the concept of identity and what it can contribute with in understanding our social world and that there still remain opportunities and challenges to deliver on its promises:

> '…to develop novel and nuanced theoretical accounts, to produce rich empirical analyses that capture the inter-subjectivity of organizational life in a thoughtful and empathetic fashion, and to demonstrate how individual and collective self-constructions become powerful players in organizing processes and outcomes.'
>
> *Alvesson et.al., 2008:7*

Both the abovementioned references are editorial articles on special issues. The first in Organization (Alvesson et.al., 2008) and the second in Human Relations (Ybema et.al., 2009). Both issues present a selection of articles within the area. The ones most pertinent for the concerns of this paper are very briefly addressed, but still, it gives a notion of different kind of research being done and what kind of phenomena that might be explored from this perspective. The examples are all based on a social and discursive approach on identities and organizations.

Watson (2009) focuses on the importance of the three concepts of *narrative, identity work* and the *social construction of reality* (ibid: 425, emphasis in original) to better understand people's working lives and organizational involvement. He argues that there is a danger of failing to see the individual as a 'whole person' and forgetting that we all have lives outside the organizations and he concludes with a call for:

> '…to stop talking about people having 'managerial identities', 'professional identities', 'work identities', and the rest and always look, first at whole individual identities and, only subsequently, at the part that organizational, managerial or occupational experiences play in the forming and maintaining of those identities. This will not just only tell us more about human lives and identities generally, but about organizational, managerial and work processes themselves. ' (ibid:450)

Clarke, Brown & Hope Hailey (2009) focus managers and their identity work. They conclude that the discourses drawn upon are mutually antagonistic, and that identity stories may incorporate contrasting positions and antagonism rather than being coherent or completely fluid. They also show that the managers constantly (re)author their selves as moral beings. They conclude the article with a call for further research to investigate how '…individuals broker and adapt to their competing demands, and what implications they have for people's functioning and identification in different organizational setting.' (ibid:347).

Costas & Fleming (2009) investigate what is beyond dis-identification and self-alienation, where self-alienation is defined as '…an experience where dis-identification fails since the boundary between the narrated imaginary of authenticity and corporate defined identity is difficult to sustain' (ibid:360). The awareness of oneself as a foreign place, as an alien corporate self, generates a tenor of malaises and loss; feelings of being 'socially dead', 'invisible' and 'unreal' (ibid: 359.).

Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) writes about workplace bullying and identity work. She concludes that at least one of the reasons why bullying is so damaging is that '…it rends asunder targeted worker's life narratives. Self-narratives are, in a sense, anchors that ground human actors in a world that is in constant flux. When the self-narrative is deeply disrupted, persons lose their moorings and are cast adrift.' (ibid:116). In response to bullying the targeted worker intensifies the identity work, using different strategies in different phases. Examples of identity work strategies are sensemaking, reconciling, grieving and restructuring.

The examples above draws attention to the relevance of addressing other than organizational discourses and to depart from the individual account of which discourses that are important enough to be included in the individual's identity work (Watson,

2009). The articles clearly demonstrate that a disrupted identity work or self-narrative can be damaging and even devastating to the well-being of individuals at work, but also outside work (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Clarke et.al., 2009; Costas & Fleming, 2009).

Summing up

In this chapter I have outlined an alternative approach to the dominant way of theorizing about psychosocial work environment. The alternative approach is based on social and discursive construction and has consequences on how we see and approach social phenomena. I have also depicted how this perspective affects how organizations, identities and thereby connected health risks, can be 'defined'.

I have also briefly accounted for some other, very recent, research within the field of identity and organization studies, focusing on the complexity of identity work and on ill-being due to a disrupted identity work.

In the next chapter I will demonstrate how these two perspectives – the dominant and the alternative – influence how we analyze and define psychosocial risks at work. I will also highlight some of the consequences of the currently dominant discourse and its (possible) impact on identity work.

Differences and Difficulties: Consequences in Real Life

Introduction

In the previous chapter I have outlined an alternative approach for understanding psychosocial risks concerning the organizational conditions impact on our well-being. In this chapter I will demonstrate the differences in practice, i.e. what we can 'see' using the two different approaches and discuss some of the consequences for us as individuals (for employees as well as for managers), for our organizations and for our society.

I will use an inspection notice from The Swedish Work Environment Authority (*Arbetsmiljöverket*). The Authority is responsible for inspecting the work environment at Swedish workplaces. After an inspection the inspectors write an inspection notice where risks and deficiencies are commented. The employer then gets around six months to return an answer on how they will handle the risks and deficiencies. The inspection notice used in this paper was published in April 2009 (Arbetsmiljöverket IMÖ 2009/12653) and is therefore an ongoing inspection when this paper is written.

The inspection is conducted on another national authority; The Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*), and which has undergone a huge and long change process. I will make a short introduction to the situation and to the organization itself based on material from Försäkringskassan. Thereafter I will use the inspection notice to make two parallel analyses.

One analysis is based on the official discourse, dominated by the job demand-control model and one is based on the alternative view outlined above. I do not claim that one analysis is better or more accurate than the other, but that they are different and focus on different aspects of our social life. The different analyses have, however, different consequences. In the discussion I will focus on measures that are counterproductive; i.e. when a measure taken based on the dominant discourse, makes the situation, seen from the alternative view, even worse.

Case description: The Swedish Social Insurance Agency

The Swedish Social Insurance Agency (below the Agency) is responsible for a large part of the social security system in Sweden. The Agency pays out around SEK 445 billion every year. The money includes insurances and allowances for families with children, the sick, people with disabilities and the elderly. They also coordinate rehabilitation for those on sick leave to return to work as quickly as possible. The Agency has around 14 000 employees.

The Agency has undergone several changes over the last years; organizational, technical and legislative. Earlier the Agency had at least one office in every municipality, but they were shut down and National and Local Insurance Centres and Client Centres were built up throughout Sweden in a totally new structure.

The background is, according to the Agency's website (Försäkringskassan 2009c), that they wanted to be a more modern authority with a better customer focus. The organizational change has been introduced together with three customer promises: the Agency must be easy to contact; client shall be informed when decisions and money

will be available; and they will offer qualified help for those who need it (personal case workers). The goal with the change is presented under three main values: easy, fast and correct (*in Swedish, enkelt, snabbt och rättssäkert*).

The IT-system has also changed over the few last years and not as smoothly as expected. To this the Parliament changed the mission with subsequent changes in rules and regulations. In all, a very intense period for several years. The situation has caught media's interest, as quite a lot of clients have had to wait for their money for an unacceptable long time, far beyond the 30 days that are allowed. The unions at the Agency also claim that people get sick by the current situation and that the Agency lose staff due to the situation (DN 2009).

Earlier I used the concept of knowledge work to depict the changed conditions in working life. The work at the Agency might be considered as very traditional and nothing like the knowledge work described previously. I can agree to some extent, but I think the Agency case can work as an example for mainly two reasons. First, the educational level is quite high in general at the Agency and the workers might see themselves as knowledge workers, no matter the characteristics of their work tasks. Second, the two groups of workers that are primarily addressed in the inspection notice are personal caseworkers and managers. Both these categories have highly ad hoc jobs, requiring both the skills of a knowledge worker and in a situation similar to the characteristics depicted for knowledge work.

The Inspection Notice

The inspection notice (Arbetsmiljöverket IMÖ, 2009/12653) is based on inspections from seven offices, but the Authority claims that the risks and deficiencies can be seen as general problems within the Agency. The Work Environment Authority thus make the conclusion that the deficiencies are not related to certain people or certain offices, but that they are related to and generated by organizational phenomena prevailing throughout the Agency.

The deficiencies are divided into five headlines; Difficulties for certain functions; Knowledge and support; Information flow; Heavy workload; and Trust and Participation. I will summarize the sections before outlining the parallel analyses.

N.B: The inspection notice is a direct translation (although slightly summarized) from a real life case. The analyses are however NOT based on real analyses or measures taken by the Agency, but based on the official discourse and the alternative view and is written by the author of this paper. The Agency might make a totally different analysis and take totally different measures.

Difficulties for certain functions
Two of the functions have been found to have more troubles than others to perform their work in a healthy way. The first one is the 'personal case workers' (*personliga handläggare*), who is often criticized by customers, actors around customers and media. The pressure and the questioning from customers and media are very stressful, especially when you work in a small village where you meet your customers outside work. Due to the organizational changes they no longer have an overview of what is

going on and where, and thus they have difficulties performing their job as they would like to and as is promised (elsewhere) by the organization. ´

The other function is office managers (*enhetschefer*), who find it difficult to manage the production when they see how it affects the workers in a negative way. It is a matter of constant (re) prioritizing without sufficient support. Their trustworthiness as managers is also damaged when they convey positive messages from the head office that do not reflect the actual situation at the local office.

Knowledge and support
New work teams are created and colleagues are moved around; earlier networks available as support have been deconstructed and it takes time to build new relations and structures. It has not been made easier since the contacts for questions have been limited to the intranet, where there is no possibility for discussion and dialogue.

Another difficulty has been where the case workers have made decisions according to the rules and then are forced to change them to make the decisions more 'restrictive' due to directives from the head office. It has also entailed longer time for each case as you need to discuss with colleagues and manager before making a decision.

Information flow
Due to the changes (organizational as well as rules) there has been a huge amount of information spread through the intranet and e-mail. The information has been incomplete as well as contradictive, and the amount makes it difficult to absorb and to be updated. The information has, instead of being supportive, generated more work and insecurity.

Heavy workload
When the organizational changes first were presented most of the workers were positive; a case work with high accuracy and high quality, similar throughout Sweden, with supporting instruments and a reasonable workload.

The budget did not turn out the way it was presented and the staffing was cut down in relation to the calculated hours. The cases have piled up and people have quit due to the heavy workload. The local manager has the authority to employ more staff up to a period of six months but that is seldom done. This is because it takes around six months to get a person productive and secondly, during the introduction period it takes time away from the ordinary employees.

The heavy workload, the information (over)flow mentioned before and ongoing organizational changes make it difficult to orient in the new organization, to absorb all information and to have time to catch up with the piled up cases. Psychic overload is at risk.

Trust and participation
The Agency is described as exerting a strong centralized management. The centralization is seen as appropriate to some extent, but during the organizational changes, the budget cuts and the changes in rules and regulations it has 'just been too much'. There is a constant flow of decisions to be executed or things to be reported.

It is also said hat the head office does not seem to have knowledge neither about the local production nor about their conditions. Changes with short notice and the perceived ignorance of how it is to work at the local offices make it difficult to coordinate the every day work and to establish a sense of participation. The local work meetings are mostly just information from the manager and no discussions. The situation has resulted in a lack of trust between the local offices and the head office.

A job demand-control based analysis

Introduction

The analysis is primarily based on the operationalising of the job demand-control model, i.e. the questionnaire based on the model (Oxenstierna et. al., 2008). The questions are not always aligned with the theory (Widmark, 2005), but it is the questionnaire that is spread and thus the questions have become more influential on the official discourse than the actual theory. I have also used my experience of the official discourse and of Swedish working life in general. The analysis is in the end a result of my judgment, my experience and my imagination.

Defining the problems

The Agency is a workplace characterized by high demands, low control and low support, i.e. a high strain job situation and high strained jobs generate ill-health. The work situation demands that the workers work 'hard, fast and a lot' under time pressure and with sometimes contradictory directives (demand). The workers have little influence on how the job is planned and organized (control). The degree of control is not especially high concerning your own job, nor in the control of the organization; i.e. participation in the development of the organization.

The level of social support is not satisfactory either. Social support has two dimensions, emotional and instrumental (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Emotional focuses the personal aspects of support and the instrumental the more practical help you achieve, for instance help with job tasks at peaks.

These are the classical work factors in the job demand-control model and they all contribute to an unhealthy workplace. If we include the workplace factors added in the revision of the model (Oxenstierna et.al., 2008) the analysis of the situation is not improving. The workplace factors are presented shortly in a previous section and are here just repeated by their headings: goals, structure, management, freedom, democracy, conflicts and conflict management, humanity and social support.

In the inspection notice we can read that the respondents state that they have (perceived) problems with goals and objectives, structure, management (especially top management), freedom, democracy and humanity and social support. What we cannot really say is whether there have been conflicts and how they have been dealt with. We can include that too, if we think that having conflicts with the upper management belongs to this factor.

A good workplace is characterized by goal clarity, clear structures and stability, a considerate and listening manager / management, a work situation that allows freedom in decision making and participation, where decisions are based on just and open grounds, and where everyone is treated with respect and care. A good work is

characterized by learning possibilities, non-repetitive tasks, high demands in combination with high control and sufficient resources. The challenge is to get from the current state to the desired state; i.e. take actions for improving the psychosocial work environment.

Relevant measures
The bottom line in this perspective is that the situation is unhealthy due to too much work, low control and lack of social support. The relevant measures will thus be to reduce workload, increase control and strengthen the social support. This can be done in different ways, the measures suggested are not a complete list of relevant measure, but of some, not uncommon, ones.

To reduce workload: the managers need to prioritize, either to take away job tasks or to make a priority list so the employee knows the relative importance between the job tasks and can lean on the priority list when needed.

The manager can hire more people to spread the workload upon. The managers can take measures to avoid unplanned events. It can, for example, mean lowered or at least more structured accessibility; phone hours, visiting hours, e-mail routines etc.

The workload is not just heavy in quantitative numbers, but also emotionally and intellectually. Emotional demands are if the employer needs to have empathic and social skills and ability to handle difficult situations (e.g. in this case, angry and upset customers.) Intellectual demands are if the employee has to solve demanding problems and invent one's own job. A third aspect is called 'new demands' whereby is meant demands to be updated, constantly learning and absorbing new information.

The so-called new demands are frequently mentioned. Possible measures are less information and information with longer duration date. To ease the emotional demands one can choose to direct difficult situations /clients to the manager or to specially trained employees. Intellectual demands (as defined in the questionnaire) are not as obvious in the Agency case (it does not mean that there are non.)

To enhance control: control is about learning new things, required skills, inventiveness and/or repetitiveness. It also includes control over how to do one's tasks and if there is freedom to choose what to do. Control is in general harder to understand based on the included aspects. In the Agency case 'learning and doing new things' might be perceived as a demand rather than a possibility.

Normally 'control' is used as decision latitude and if we stick to that definition there is quite a narrow span within which you can make decisions. The rules and regulations are often explicit but even when there is room for interpretations the directives are to be restrictive when applying them.

Measures are tricky, normally enhanced knowledge and broadened job tasks would be consider 'good measures'. In this case it would probably add to the workload. One relevant measure could be to decrease the level of centralized and detailed management system by which the Agency is managed and controlled.

Another angle on this, which includes both demand, control and social support, is that the employees might get help to lower their expectations, on what they do and how

and why they do it, i.e. to learn to work within the given frames and learn how to deal with the consequences (gilla läget) or learn to say no and not to be so ambitious.

To strengthen the social support: better communication. First and foremost the managers need to take actions to affirm the employees and their achievements. Secondly, the managers need to listen to the employees (emotional support) and take measures to help them when it gets 'too much' (instrumental support; see also workload). Thirdly, in a high strain job situation the employer must secure that the employee takes breaks and do not work too much overtime. Stress is 'normal', stress without time for recovery is bad for the health.

One problem in a very strained situation is that one's colleagues also are under pressure. The support one could get from, or give them, might just add to the workload. In the end it is the employer's responsibility to reduce the risks and not the colleagues responsibility. The colleagues might just endanger their health in the process.

An identity based analysis

Introduction
Taking on an alternative perspective for analysis does not mean that the conclusions made in the previous analysis are not valid. In my experience a balanced workload is better than a heavy one, high control is often better than low control and a supporting atmosphere is better than a lack of it. The main argument is that these 'conditions', and the way we define and talk about them, do something to us as humans. It is not just the conditions themselves, but what they entail.

The analysis is based on the alternative approach outlined in this proposal. That means that the analysis is a result of my experience and imagination from this perspective; on how identity work works (Giddens, 1997; Sennett, 1998) and what kind of risks (Wiklund, 2007; see also Identity risks… in this paper) and ill-being that are attached to this way of looking at identity.

First, a reminder, identity in this paper is seen as an ongoing story about oneself before oneself and others. It is a communicative act that links 'my story' to different contexts and communities that I want to address. For example: a doctor is a doctor and thus has professional obligations and grounds for her action. She is also a citizen and a tax payer and thus she wants to be able to explain her doings so that the community thinks that her actions make sense, thirdly she is human, i.e. she has developed certain personal beliefs, values and convictions apart from the ones 'general' in society or for her profession. All these aspects are present when she deliberates on what to do and how to talk about it. She has to be able to make sense of her actions, in front of others, otherwise she will become 'no one'; without 'you' there is no 'me' and without confirmation (answer/reaction) to' my story' there is no 'me'.

So, we are not blank sheet when we enter an organization. We have ideas and beliefs about what are important values for ourselves, for a society, for our profession, for human interaction and so on.

If we choose to see the workers at the Agency as 'knowledge workers' they might reasonably see themselves as competent professionals, capable of making judgments

and be accounted for them, they would see themselves as autonomous and responsible persons who can and want to be productive and contribute to the organization and the society in different ways.

Working life is often referred to as being a cold place where nothing but profit and personal benefits count, and that might be a highly relevant description, but most probably the workers like to do a good job and to feel proud about themselves, not just because they are being paid, but because they have done something worth doing, (i.e. 'meaning and purpose' are existing discourses that make sense for a lot of people). With this 'knowledge worker identity story' in mind the analysis begins.

Defining the problems

The caseworkers are under pressure by the customers and the media. They can choose to defend their decisions and the time it has taken to make it and indirectly defend the organization they work within, although they might believe that both the organization and the decision are unacceptable in some ways. Or, they can choose to speak up and tell the world why they think it has turned out the way it has. Both actions have consequences and both choices can be troublesome: am I a 'whistleblower' and a potential problem maker, or am I loyal to my employer, my organization and my colleagues by keeping quiet, not rocking the boat in vain? How can I include my choices in my identity story, what choices and consequences can I live with? What society do I want to contribute to? What values do I choose to be loyal to and position myself towards, i.e. who do I want to be?

In the Agency there are several statements that can be related to a severely troublesome identity work; the above mentioned case workers who think that they are forced to make decisions that are wrongful; the manager who manages an office she thinks is damaging to people; the manager who conveys information about things that she does not believe in herself and that also make her appear less trustworthy in the eyes of her subordinates; the manager and other people who is engaged in executing the head office's requests and who is reporting statistics and other information even when they do not see the purpose with it; the personal case workers who are responsible for coordinating and helping customers with more advanced help but cannot find their own way through the organizational structure and so on.

When the choices you are facing and your identity story becomes impossible to integrate there are risks of anxiety, depression and/or a sense of being marginalized, diminished and finally 'no one' (emptiness). 'I am not considered competent enough to be involved in…, I am violating myself and others when I do…, I am not professional enough to be trusted to make judgments without detailed rules and regulations… ', all organizational situations contributing to ill-being through affecting the identity work of the employees.

Discussing differences and difficulties

There is heavy workload at the Agency and the workload in itself is a risk. There is low control, i.e. narrow decision latitude. This is according to the job demand-control model an established risk. But, why do low control and high demands create a risky situation? In this paper a connection between the situation and what the situation does to our identity and our identity work is put forward. In this section I discuss the

practical difficulties of having different analytical approaches and what the traditional perspective, when applied, does to the aspects of the other perspective.

A 'normal' worker at the Agency (as every human being) has different discourses to connect to when constructing one's identity. She is, like the doctor in the example above, an employee, she has a professional belonging, she is a citizen of a society – small and large, and she is a human being, and she (thinks she) is capable of understanding the consequences of her decisions, both for society, the individual and the Agency.

To lean on other people's (the manager's/head office's) priorities are not especially helpful if you see yourself as a competent and capable professional. Then you want to, in discussion with others, make your priorities so that they make sense to you. You want and need to understand and explore the basis for the priorities and then make them yourself. If the manager makes the priorities for you that means that you are not trusted to do that or not even trusted to learn and develop a skill how to do it.

The low control at the Agency is similar. The employer offers IT-support systems, detailed rules, and interpretations of rules and leaves little room for a professional judgment in a specific case. That says something about how I as an employee is seen by the employer: a robot, an executor of other's judgments and decision making. I am not to be trusted to make complex deliberations and assessments. The employer decides what I shall decide and how many decisions I am to do every day and every week.

The measures suggested above to ease the burden are often executed in a way that reduces the employer as a professional and as a human being. And, even if there are more people employed and the workload can be better distributed, it probably means that more people are at risk of not being able to construct a biographical story that makes sense and that contributes to a sense of coherence. Other measures must also be taken.

Another quite common measure is to offer stress management for the employees. Learn to relax, learn to say no and other personal coping strategies. This puts the responsibility for the situation on the individual and leaves the risky situation as it is. The individual symptoms become in focus and not the generative social situation; the organizing and its impact.

Lack of social support is also contributing to the situation. The lack of support can be dealt with in many ways, often it is delegated to the local manager to act more supportive; listen, affirm and/or prioritize.

In the official discourse this is often depicted as if the employer is a child in need of affirmation, no matter the results, and as long as my manager (the authority) sees me, I am happy. This too puts the employee in an asymmetrical position to the manager, to be someone who needs to be taken care of, someone who cannot make her own choices and deliberations without 'mommy' saying: 'well done!'. It contributes to a contradictory identity story, compared to the knowledge worker discourse, but it also does something to the identity work of the manager.

Traditionally the measures suggested are to be taken by the manager, the one with authority and responsibility. That is what they are paid to do; solve problems, taking

car of subordinates, be omniscient and omnipotent, answer all questions, be loyal to and represent the employer and so on.

The managers, who are pointed out as a group of employers at risk in the inspection notice, will probably not have a better situation if to become responsible for all the measures suggested. They might have other ideas of how to deal with things but their possibility to do something local is probably also limited. There is a strong sense of doing the same all over the organization. It is the same production and process system, the same rules and regulations, the same economic frames. Still, very often, measures are suggested from the head office but it is up to the local manager to find resources and ways to execute them.

This belief in managers can be a strong part of the manager's identity story, but it can also be overwhelming, if one sees oneself as a 'normal' human being who sometimes is tired, sad, upset, and worried, but who is not allowed to show that part of herself. It might make things worse for the office if the subordinates think that even the manager doubts the organization's ability to manage the mission. It might be harmful for her if the superior get the impression that she does not know how to handle things. To be questioned or replaced makes things better for neither her, nor for her subordinates. Changing managers usually takes both energy and time from the actual work. If she cannot find a constructive way out of this dilemma her actions might be making things worse, for her herself and/or the workers.

Consequences for the individual, the organization and the society

The examples of how risks and measures currently are defined and talked about in Swedish working life are a result of my interpretation of the official discourse and of the operationalizing of the job demand-control model (i.e. the questionnaire, see Oxenstierna et.al., 2008). The measures are all taken in good faith. The employer and/or the manager do what they are expected to do. This is a reasonable way to meet the demands from the society for achieving a good working environment. Seen from an identity perspective, though, things have been worse.

The situation is a highly complex web of discourses making it possible and reasonable to introduce, implement and maintain certain production and management systems, and a discourse that enables loyalty that goes beyond your own well-being. This is not something someone can change on their own, the discourses that enable these kind of situations are well supported by us all, in different ways. Sometimes they make sense and we do not see them as troublesome but only as reasonable (maybe even the only way), sometimes we can see the dark sides of it but do not know how to formulate a protest or we choose to be silent.

By using the official discourse, dominated by the job demand-control model, we create a society where it is possible to suggest measures that contribute to difficulties in constructing an identity coherent with other discourses in society; what is a 'good' society; what is a 'good' professional; what is a 'good' citizen; what is a 'good' employee; what is a 'good' knowledge worker: what is a 'good' manager and so on. It is when a person faces two incommensurable stories about how their actions at work are to be made sense of that identity risks occur (Wiklund, 2007:166).

Following Taylor (1989), Sennett (1998), Antonovsky (1991) and Weick (1995), just to mention some, a healthy identity situation is where you can combine or at least make sense of your choices, regardless of the circumstances, in a way that includes different, for you, important discourses (even if the story 'from the outside', might seem inconsistent and fragmented). Thus, a healthy working life takes into account the importance of identity work for our well-being.

At the Agency I would say that there are several and severe risks for disrupted identity work. Disruptions that can end up in ill-being in the form of depression, anxiety and burn-out. Most probably most of the disorders are not shown in the statistics as sick absence, but are very real to the employees and the organization in the shape of sleeping disorders, productivity loss, frustration, loss of energy, isolation, cynicism, alienation etc; all of them problems for the individual, the organization and the society.

These ongoing and risky attempts to establish and conquer a coherent story of oneself are what Wiklund labels 'the struggle for human worth'. Wiklund also emphasizes the communicative aspect of this struggle. The identity work is not within the individual. For the individual it is rather a matter of choosing one of the alternatives that are offered through the social interaction, in which the individual also is one part (Wiklund, 2007:180).

Summing up

The manager must prioritize among your work tasks, make sure you take breaks and go home when you are supposed to, listen to you, inform and confirm, maybe offer you self-helping course like; how to say no and how to lower your ambitions. All relevant, expected and, sometimes even demanded measures to improve the psychosocial work environment.

Unfortunately, these measures also address the employee as a powerless and non-agential human being. For an employee, that does not see herself as non-agentic and that refuses to be treated and addressed as someone who cannot be involved in things that concern her, there can be problems.

When the employee cannot put together a coherent life story; to make sense of her actions before herself and others, there are risks of psychic disorders of various degrees, such as irritations, frustration, anxiety and depression.

The analyses demonstrate how some traditional measures make it even harder to establish and maintain a coherent identity as competent and capable, a person that can deliberate on complex situation, make decisions and can be held accounted for her actions. The current official discourse does not just make invisible certain conditions and work situations; they also make them worse. All in good faith.

The analyses demonstrate an urgent need for an alternative perspective on psychosocial work environment and for an extended official discourse. Or we will all be contributing to unhealthy working conditions, whether we are aware of it or not.

Finally, I will emphasize that the analyses made here are just to demonstrate some potential consequences of the alternative approach outlined in this proposal. The analyses are a result of my own experiences and imagination. The question, you might

ask, is whether the analyses are of wider relevance for contemporary Swedish working life or not. I strongly believe that the identity perspective is worth further exploration. I hope I, all through the proposal and certainly through the real life case, have convinced you of the urgency of further research and that I have made a strong enough case for the relevance of the chosen approach.

This finalizes the end of part one; i.e. what I would like to research. In the next part I describe how I would like to research the area in terms of research design, methodology and method.

Research Proposal: Purpose, Question and Design

Research purpose

This research proposal departs from the notion that the current official discourse on psychosocial work environment is insufficient for understanding well-being and ill-being at work in Sweden, This notion also calls for a need of further research to better understand processes and consequences of the way we choose to organize and its impact on our well-being.

In the previous chapters I have summarized and problematized Swedish contemporary research within this field of research: i.e. organizations and their impact on our well-being. I have also pointed towards some problems and inadequacies linked to the knowledge production in the field. That is, it is not just a question of more research, but also about different research.

I have also outlined an alternative view on organizations and individuals, which is based on a social and discursive view of the phenomena of interest.

The purpose with this research proposal is thus twofold. The overall purpose is to extend the official discourse on psychosocial work environment in Sweden. The more specific contribution is to further explore the alternative perspective and its relevance for Swedish working life.

Research questions

Wiklund (2007) establishes the importance of work for our identity work. In Rydén (2008) the analysis demonstrates that identity work is not really an issue in the official discourse. The 'common sense' solutions to many of our work related problems make it even harder for some workers to construct a coherent identity story. The official discourse is thus, in certain situations, not helpful, and sometimes even counterproductive when trying to detect, prevent and intervene in an unhealthy work situation.

When we are in an unhealthy work situation, as in the Agency above, how do we make sense of our actions and how do we include our actions and different discourses in our identity story? What is perceived as troublesome, what stories can we live with (construct) despite that we wished we could have acted differently, and what consequences do they entail? What discourses can we use to bridge seemingly incompatible discourses? How are organizational discourses affecting the possibilities of constructing a life story that makes sense to its members? What can an organization do to contribute to an environment that enables a healthy identity work for its members? These questions put the focus on the individual and the organizational levels and how they are connected.

The Swedish work environment legislation is quite similar to the Norwegian one. In Norway the first paragraph concerning 'Requirements regarding the psychosocial work environment' in the Work Environment Act is formulated: '(1) The work shall be arranged so as to preserve the employees' integrity and dignity.' (Norway, Act of 17 June, 2005 No. 62). In Sweden psychosocial issues are almost not mentioned in the law.

Maybe it is time to include a similar writing in the Swedish Work Environment Act? If so, what do we, as a society, mean by identity and what legal demands can the Swedish Work Environment Authority pose on an organization? What discourses support this approach and which are counteracting or contradictive? What are the consequences of the discourses used in and about Swedish working life in general and psychosocial work environment and well-being in particular? These questions put the focus on the societal level.

The aim with this research project is to address all three levels.

Research design

The research process will be divided into two phases. First, the individual/ organizational phase, where the empirical material will be generated within organizational contexts, primarily through focus groups. The material will be analyzed and problematized with the aim of becoming a material from which the next phase can depart. The aim is to conduct focus groups within five to eight different organizational contexts: e.g. public sector, private sector, knowledge intensive, labour intensive, female dominated, male dominated. The final choice of organizations is a question of time and access.

The second phase is aiming for a material that can be helpful to further explore the impact, the importance and the relevance of the theoretical approach in a broader perspective. This material will also be generated through focus groups, but this time with groups of different stakeholders; e.g. employers, trade unions, HR managers, work environment inspectors and work environment researchers.

These stakeholders view on the material from the first phase will be the empirical material for the second phase. The discussions will be documented and used as material for a discussion on what society can, cannot, should, should not do; what is possible, realistic, desirable etc. The material will also be analyzed and discussed to explore the kinds of discourses that are influencing the discourse on psychosocial work environment in Sweden, and the consequences of them for our working life.

The research process would then be as follows:

- Phase I: focus groups in relevant organizations
- Analysis and problematization of the generated material
- Phase II: Focus groups with stakeholders discussing the material from the first phase.
- Analysis and problematization of the material generated in phase II.
- Analysis and problematization of the findings in the two phases and consequences of that for society, organizations and individuals.

Methodological Considerations

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss my deliberations and choices concerning how to approach the research purpose and the research questions. This discussion serves at least two purposes. The first purpose is to demonstrate the relevance of the choice of method for generating the empirical material and deliberations and choices connected to that. The second purpose is to make myself as a researcher more visible. This is important because the way I have chosen to do research, the research process and the researcher are not two separate processes. Where the researcher 'ends' and where the research 'starts' is not, and cannot be, distinguished; in interpreting research the known and the knower is inseparable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 22).

Every researcher has to address some general problems in qualitative research and some more specific for every study. There is seldom a perfect solution to most of the issues raised, but the issues need to be elaborated and the choices motivated. The less you lean on rigorous techniques and methods the more important that is.

In this chapter I will elaborate on the political and ethical sides of research, and on the issues of representation, authorship and legitimation and finally, some sections on how to study organizations and identities, language's relation to reality, and how to get access to talk. This chapter is intentionally more general in terms of method and methodology. The next chapter 'Focus Groups as Method' focuses on the more specific deliberations and choices made for this study. First, a section on the choice of methods.

Choice of methods

This project has two phases. The first one focuses the organization and the individual. In this phase I need an empirical material where the construction of the organization and identities take place. For this end I can listen to people talk, engage in a conversation with others, or use already written texts. In this research project I will concentrate on empirical material generated through focus groups and existing texts. When observation is used it is not aimed at generating empirical material but to get a better view of the context so I can be a more informed and more competent speaking partner in the focus groups.

In Phase I (focus groups within organizations) the documents are used to understand what the organization's mission and chosen strategies are and how they are articulated. Visions and policy documents are important in forming the organization. They are influencing the organizing and the discourses at play at the workplace, but can also serve as this 'something' to which we relate our actions (Wiklund, 2007). The organizational texts will thus be of interest both before the fieldwork, to understand the organization a bit better, but also afterwards, to understand and analyze the discussions.

In Phase II (focus groups with stakeholders) documents are used in the same way as within the organizational fieldwork. What do organizational texts say about the topic? What discourses are used to justify and support standpoints and decisions? etc. The

texts are used as a preparation before each focus group and as material for the analysis of the focus group discussions.

In Phase II, I have chosen focus groups not so much of their identity producing potential, but because I need material where insightful stakeholders talk to and with each other when the larger world is listening. In Phase II I am rather looking for diversity in perspectives (discourses) on the subject matter, something that focus groups can enhance as the group participants can react on each others accounts, i.e. challenge, explain and deepen their arguments during the group session (Morgan, 1997).

As observation and text are primarily used for a better contextual understanding I will not go in to these techniques for generating and analyzing empirical material. In this methodology chapter I will focus on the more general difficulties with conducting qualitative research. In the next chapter I focus on the more specific deliberations on focus groups as technique for generating an empirical material.

Research as a political and ethical act

Doing research is a political and ethical act, no matter what stand you take or do not take; your research either supports the current state or challenges it. What area of interest you choose to work within, what questions you ask, who you involve in the research, what perspectives you choose to focus on etc, everything has political consequences. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:49).

The overall purpose of this research is to problematize and change/extend/ challenge a dominant discourse that supports certain identities and power relations. The other purpose is to explore an alternative way of theorizing (talking) about organizing and its impact on our well-being. The research is thus positioned somewhere between and within the boarders of what Habermas labels practical (understanding praxis) and emancipatory knowledge interests (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

The focus on the production of power relations and the thereby constructed identities, positions the research proposal within the Critical corner of research society. As the focus is on organization and individuals the links to Critical Organization Studies are quite natural.

The task of Critical research is, according to Alvesson & Deetz (2000) threefold; *insight*: based on local understanding, close and sensitive to people's every-day-life; *critique*: to acknowledge the possibility of dominance and the linkage between local manifestations and wider social, historical and political contexts; *transformative re-valuation*: which focus the more pragmatic aspects of research – insight and critique without support for social action make research empty and sterile. The task for the Critical researcher is to enable a more open discourse among group members, between groups and the wider society in which they are living their lives. (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000:20-21)

The three tasks for Critical research is addressed in this proposal, *insight* through a close encounter with people and their every-day-life, taking departure in their own experiences, frames of reference and language use; *critique* through focusing dominant discourse and their impact on power relations and identities, connecting the local discourses with the grand Discourses; and *transformative re-valuation* through exploring

an alternative discourse and its implications for social action. In short: contribute with a broader, more open discourse in a power related situation.

The political ambition for Critical Organization Studies is explicit and outspoken. The very basis of doing research is to '…unmask the power relations around which social and organizational life are woven' (Brewis & Wray-Bliss, 2008:1521). This political interest also has an ethical aspect.

Being 'ethical' is generally to follow the rules and recommendations from research committees and ethical boards. Within Critical Organization Studies ethics also is (should be?), as I see it, about doing research in line with the ambitions of the political stand. Hence, being unethical as a Critical researcher is to produce what you are trying to change; e.g. unnecessary power relations.

What is ethical and what is unethical differ from different societies and over time. Society changes and so do the conditions and frames within which research can be done. So, even if not working within the Critical tradition the ethical and political aspects of research, its impact on society and what it contributes with are becoming increasingly important. Lincoln & Denzin (2000) write that the future of qualitative research (amongst other aspects) lies in being able to work in a way that:

> '…places us in a noncompetitive, nonhierarchical relationship to the earth, to nature and to the larger world […]'.

> '…is political, presuming a feminist, communitarian moral ethic, stressing the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation […]'.

> '…is based on a philosophical anthropology that declares: 'All humans are worthy of dignity and sacred status without exception for class or ethnicity […]'.

Lincoln & Denzin, 2000:1052

The general implications for qualitative research outlined by Denzin & Lincoln and the specific interests for researchers within the critical traditions should account for a highly ethically conscious contemporary research within Critical Organization Studies, not just when considering the end with the research but also the means used and the actual conduct of doing research. It is in within these ambitions I place myself as a researcher. This is also why a problematization of dominant discourses are just as important as contributing with alternative ways of understanding social phenomena.

If just pointing at the (unwanted?) consequences of the dominant order, you could just as well contribute to a sense of helplessness and despair. Offering an alternative at least makes it possible to exert one's autonomy; to choose to support or challenge a certain discourse. If there is only one way to talk about a topic, totalization rather than democracy, diversity or innovation is at hand. Not even in business life would that be a desired state, for the research society it would be the end of times.

When I emphasize the importance of 'offering an alternative' I do not mean to come up with alternative forms of organizing. I mean alternative ways of talking about

(theorizing, conceptualizing) our organizing; to extend the discourse is to open up for new and/or other ways of organizing, but it does not entail 'the solution'. That is also why I stress the official discourse. The discourse disposition us for certain actions, a broader discourse would 'allow' a larger repertoire of actions.

This is how I see the emancipatory interest of this research project. Emancipation or empowerment is about being able to choose and to be able to influence the development of our society. To be able to influence our lives and our society, we have to have something to choose between, even if the choices are very limited. If we do not have access to several reasoning (discourses) we will not really choose to use one; it will be the only one available, the only one that makes sense; it will be THE way of talking and doing things.

Offering alternative views and discourses on 'common-sense' is therefore as important as to problematize the current state of affairs. This research project is aiming for this emancipatory purpose by problematizing the dominant order, offering an alternative view and by connecting local practices to broader societal discourses (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000).

Representation, authorship and legitimate claims

Denzin & Lincoln (2000) divide the history of qualitative research into moments (turns/challenges). Acknowledging the political and ethical sides of research are the results of such turns. They highlight three other turns in qualitative research that is of special interest for this study; the crises of representation, authorship, and legitimation.

The crisis of representation concerns the issue of 'Who is the Other (the researched)?' and whether it is possible to represent 'the Other' and 'the Other's' experiences in any text written by the researcher or even by the researched herself. And if representation is not possible, how to include the Other in the text? A subsequent question is how to deal with the fact that the researcher and the co-researcher(s) have differences in knowledge, power, structural mobility etc and that '…the subject is always at grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer? (ibid:1051).'

The second crisis is connected to the writing of the text. When the text is written how can we know who is who in the text? Or as Lincoln & Denzin (2000:1051) want to phrase the question: in what degree is the personal, subjective, poetic self (of the researcher/author) openly given in the text?

The third crisis is that of legitimation. This focus on how we can evaluate qualitative research. What claims can we make about the text being 'true, accurate and complete'? (ibid:1051). Is the text faithful to the context and the individuals it is supposed to represent? Does the text have the right to assert that it is a report to the larger world that addresses not only the researcher's interest, but also the interests of those studied? (ibid:1052).'

How these issues are addressed in this specific research project is further discussed in the next chapter: Focus Groups as Method.

Language and social reality

Language is a blunt instrument that cannot be an exact representation of reality (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Words are given meaning in specific contexts and situations and these meanings are constantly (re)produced. The words we use, on the other hand, have a lot of references. The meaning of a word does not derive from its relation to the referent (the 'object' one tries to 'describe'), but in its relation to other words (de Saussure, 1983). The word has a certain (but not fixed) meaning in certain contexts. Words bring with them lots of connotations, and they bring what they are not; i.e. they have a lot of references that make it possible for us to use them for communicative purposes. Even if language is not a perfect instrument, it is our most important tool for constructing and making sense of our social world so, blunt or not, it is essential to analyze if interested in studying organizations and identities as socially and discursively constructed.

When we, in normal, every day life, and in research want to get at 'the truth' we often say 'I wished I could be a fly on the wall'. The statement implies that we then could get access to what really goes on inside peoples' head. Research ethics often makes that kind of 'data collection' impossible, but even if we were allowed we would still not be able to hear 'the truth'. What you get access to is what people chose to say and are able to formulate in this specific context, not their 'true' thoughts and feelings.

Still, this idea of a fly on the wall seems to be very much present in method books when recommending how to 'collect' data. There is often an ambition to collect 'naturally occurring data' or at least as close as possible. That is why the observer is recommended to stay for a longer period in an organization; to eventually blend in and thus not 'disturb' its natural every day life. That is why the moderator in a focus group and an interviewer are advised to keep a low profile, facilitating others to talk in a comfortable and relaxed situation, so that they will say what (really) is on their minds.

The idea of 'truth' is difficult. We all 'know' certain things, we can be very sure about others and we can most certainly say that some things do not add up or are false. From a constructionist view 'truth' exists, but it only exists within a certain discourse (context/culture). In another discourse other 'truths' are possible. This is how discourses work, they defend themselves very successfully by constituting what can be said and by whom; if it is possible to say and to be understood it is already within the discourse. Whatever we say is just comments within existing discourse, and before our statements can be judged as true or false we must be 'within the truth'. The claims for 'truth' we do are thus just within 'our' discourse, not every possible discourse (Foucault, 1991).

The idea of 'inside one's head' is also difficult. This research project is interested in the social aspects of our world; i.e. what emerges 'between our heads'. And as this thesis is based on the assumption that identities, organizations and societies are social constructions, the prime focus is on how we, in a social setting, express ourselves and the constructing consequences of this. The prime interest is thus not on what goes on 'inside people's heads', but what is taking place when there are several 'heads' present, i.e. the social aspects of reality construction (Asplund, 2002).

No matter where and how you collect, produce or generate your empirical material the context and the conditions under which the 'talk is talked' is part of the talk and the

language is language, not exact representations of feelings, thoughts, attitudes etc. As this thesis is based on the assumption that our organizations and identities are constructed through discourse, language becomes the starting point for further analyses and interpretations. Not because it mirrors reality but because it constitutes and constructs it (Phillips Hardy, 2002:13).

Getting access to talk in organizations

You can get access to this talk in different ways, the dominant are through interviews, observations and texts. A seldom described, rarely, but increasingly, used method in organization studies, is focus groups. In most literature focus groups are described as a complementary method in the beginning or the end of a survey. In the beginning to explore what can be of interest to ask, and in the end to explore 'unexplained' findings from the survey (e.g. Morgan 1997; Bryman 2008).

Focus groups have been used as a standalone method when the group dynamic has been seen as an advantage; e.g. in empowering and emancipating purposes when the research is aiming for social change focusing on marginalized groups; women, minorities, patients, children etc (e.g. Jarrett, 1994; Lather & Smithies 1997; Madriz, 1998) or in feminist research (e.g. Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash & Weaver,1992; Wilkinson, 1998). Sometimes focus groups have been used as a time saving technique; you can pose the same question to several people at the same time (a structured group interview). This is often used in market research.

Focus group research is seldom used because it generates a unique and relevant empirical material useful for understanding and researching social and discursive phenomena. In this research project, however, focus group is used as the main method for generating empirical material. In the next chapter I will argue for why focus groups are especially suitable for this field of interest and my deliberations on conducting them.

Focus Groups as Method

Introduction

I have chosen focus groups as the primary way of generating an empirical material. Most literature on focus groups focus on the actual conduct of focus groups (e.g. Morgan, 1997; Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). In sum you can say that they are concerned with how many and how large groups, how to select participants and how to ask questions; how to facilitate a comfortable situation where the participants can speak 'freely'. They are also quite concerned with the design of the focus groups as research method, e.g. how to ensure comparability between groups, how to establish representativity (different groups represented), saturation and, procedures to avoid bias and chance.

The recommendations in the mainstream literature mentioned above are problematic in many ways, among them a 'positivistic thrust' that is not especially applicable in this study. From the perspective of this study the recommendations often rest upon the assumption that there is a 'truth', it is just tricky to get access to it. But, if you have enough number of people from different interesting categories and an encouraging atmosphere at the interview/focus group, you can at least come closer to it (the truth that is). As 'truth' is not the issue here, many of the recommendations in the more common guidebooks on how to conduct focus groups become irrelevant.

> 'Constructionism…disputes the possibility of uncovering 'facts', 'realities' or 'truths' behind the talk, and treats as any attempt to vet what people say for its 'accuracy', 'reliability', or 'validity' – thereby sidestepping altogether the positivist problems raised…From this perspective, what [people] say should not be taken as evidence of their experience, but only as a form of talk – a 'discourse', 'account' or 'repertoire' – which represents a culturally available way of packaging experience.
>
> *Kitzinger, 2004:128*

Thus, this project is not aiming for 'the truth', but for a broader understanding of a social phenomenon. Saturation and representativity becomes overshadowed by relevance. The transferability to other situations and contexts cannot be determined by involving enough categories and/or enough focus groups, the relevance must be assessed by each reader. What I can do is to make the research process transparent, so that you, the reader, have material enough to evaluate the argument and its relevance for your situation.

In line with this idea of transparency I will in this chapter display why focus groups are a highly relevant technique for generating an empirical material for this study. Thereafter I will address some of the practical aspects of conducting focus groups. Instead of addressing them in accordance or contrast to the usual recommendations, I will address them according to the challenges set out in the previous chapter on Methodological considerations; i.e. addressing the issues of representation, authorship and legitimation. First, though, I will start with a general overview concerning the potentials and limitations with focus groups.

Potentials and limitations with focus groups

Stewart et.al. (2007) point at that focus groups have the same problems and limitations as every other research techniques involving human beings (including surveys and experiments) and that is non-representative samples, interviewer bias and demand effect. Additionally, you cannot make statistical estimations and generalizations based on the research as one group only represents one observation.

Its advantages lie in its potential for problems involving '… clarification of perspectives, opportunity, and hypotheses generation and a whole range of exploratory analyses.' (Stewart et. al., 2007:164). The advantages are connected to the possibilities of group dynamics and the possibilities for individual participants to express their opinions in their own words, under the direction of a moderator.

Bloor et.al. (2000) emphasize that focus groups are suitable for research aiming for studying how group meanings and norms are shaped, elaborated and applied but NOT for studying behaviour (if not that of being participant of a focus group). Focus groups are best suited for being part of a multi-method-design where focus groups can be used as a pilot, pre-exploratory, for collecting narratives or for deeper understanding of findings from surveys etc (ibid:90).

As a stand-alone method, though, its only advantage is in researching topics relating to group norms, group meanings, the underpinning of those norms and how they are constructed (ibid: 90) or as Stewart et.al. (2007:163) puts it 'Focus groups are useful […] for exploring the way particular groups of individuals think and talk about a phenomenon.'

Bryman (2008) focuses more on the limitations with the method as such; less control over the process (for the moderator) than with an interview; difficulties with organizing, transcribing and analyzing the discussion; group dynamics, such as more of agreement than disagreement; and more of culturally expected views than in individual interviews.

Whether focus groups contribute to more of agreement than disagreement is under debate. According to Morgan (1997:15) studies show that group discussions just as well can contribute to a polarization of opinions and standpoints taken within the group, than to an enhanced agreement.

Every method/technique has its limitations and problems and even if focus group research has been done for some time and certain practices have been established, there is still a lot of research to be done, about how to conduct focus groups but also comparing and contrasting the focus group to other research methods (Morgan, 1997). The validity of focus groups as method/technique will show in the long run based on whether the research is contributing with useful, interesting and actionable results (Stewart et.al., 2007) and/or if it contributes to asking new or better questions (Morgan, 1997).

Karembelis & Dimitriadis (2005) claim that focus groups are especially useful for researchers who want to conduct different kinds of discourse analyses and that focus groups allows us to:

> '…engage in "doubled practice" where we listen to the attempts of others as they make sense of their lives. It also allows us to resist the seductive qualities of "too easy" constructs such as "voice" as we trouble experience itself, which is always already constituted within one "grand narrative" or another. (Lather, 2001, p.219).'

Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005:903

According to Karembelis & Dimitriadis focus groups are 'rife with multiple affordances' for conducting qualitative research that will '…help it move through (and perhaps beyond) the triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis that has haunted qualitative work for the past two decades.' (ibid:903).

Kitzinger & Barbour (1999), stress the constructive aspects, and write that focus groups are particularly suited to the study of attitudes and experiences, i.e. how they are constructed and expressed, and '…are invaluable for examining how knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context.' (ibid:5)

In the next sections I will outline why and how focus groups are used in this study, connecting it to the political and ethical aspects of research and to the abovementioned triple crisis.

Why use focus groups in this study?

If you see organizations and identities as socially and discursively constructed it becomes interesting to study the talk and language within, from and about social systems. Even though social systems tend to reproduce themselves we can never with certainty predict the next step/action taken by any member of it. What we can do is to, based on 'how we talk', make an argument what is produced by saying it and what will be produced if this talk is put in action; the constructing consequences of our talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987)

We can also through the talk make analyses concerning how we make sense of our past and present; that is how the social system (re)constructs its past and present in certain situations (Weick, 1995:24-ff). The same reasoning goes for our identity construction, as identity in this paper is seen as a social and interactive phenomenon; a biographical story about oneself before oneself and others. Language as a social practice thus becomes in focus.

Using focus groups for generating an empirical material is also in line with the perspective on identities as a communicative act with your community and the larger world. In a focus group (parts of) the community can be present and so can the larger world, through the researcher, but also through making the focus group discussion public (see below).

Focus groups, interviews and observations

What is unique for focus groups is that they give an opportunity to create a situation where you can interact with (selected) members of an organization (profession, situation, condition etc) and through this interaction generate an empirical material

(Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Bloor et.al., 2000). Given the circumstances, this is how this 'social system' formulates itself when talking to an outsider (the researcher) and that is not possible to achieve through one-to-one interviews, where just one 'part' of the system communicates with an outsider. Focus groups explore '...how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms.' (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999:5)

In this case, where I am interested in how the social system formulates itself and what identities are being constructed the strength of the focus group lies in the presence of two 'external' reference points. First, the other participants in the group; what is said is said when other people, having insights in the discussed topic, are present. What you say is thus based on this first premise; you are heard and can be challenged by your 'peers', that is by people within the social system.

The other reference point is the moderator. The moderator is 'the outsider'. You thus say things that you think make sense to people outside your social system. The focus groups conversation can then be seen as a conversation between insightful persons within a social system when the larger world is listening.

In relation to observations a focus group offers the opportunity to pose a specific question to 'the social system'. You are not just subjected to what is openly said and /or to be present when that specific talk you are interested in occurs. You stage a situation where certain questions and aspects can be explored and discussed. You 'trigger' the system with the intervention of a focus group. As an observer you try to avoid being part of the construction of the every day talk and actions as you want to come as close as possible to what would happen without you present: i.e. the 'real', naturally occurring every day life. As a focus group moderator you cannot avoid being part of the result of the discussions, so instead of pretending that I am not influencing the discussions, I use myself and my experiences to ask questions and to together with the participants explore what and how we can formulate what the participants would like to say about the topic.

The strengths of the focus groups are, thus, a combination between the strength of the interviews (specific topic) and the strength of observation (groups of people speaking), (Morgan, 1997:16). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005:900) also emphasize that the special features of the focus groups makes it possible to '...generate kinds and amounts of data that are often difficult, if not impossible, to generate through individual interviews and even observations.'

Another difference versus observations is that they often put 'the observed' in a more vertical position to the observer (and vice versa). How the situation is presented to the larger world is out of control for the observed. When looking at someone's actions you cannot see the sense making of the actions. Sometimes you can ask and sometimes you can hear the observed talk and interact with others. Nevertheless, the material is more difficult to achieve ownership over by the researched. The observed have seldom any control over how they are being presented in the material. It does not matter if you are anonymously portrayed, the feeling of being used for scientific purposes; 'to be represented' by a researcher is indeed a vertical act exerted over another person. To deny the participants ownership and control over the representation of them would enhance the asymmetric relation, already embedded in the situation as such.

I do not think that every observation study has to be vertically conducted, but the risks are higher than when doing a focus group or interview where you quite easily can both establish a partnership in the generation of the empirical material and fulfill that agreement through communication after the focus group or interview. You have their name and addresses and they know that they are involved in a research study. Of course, focus groups can be conducted vertically to, indeed, they usually are if following the more general recommendations on conducting them (e.g. Morgan, 1997; Kreuger & Casey, 2000; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007; Bryman, 2008).

Asking questions

Another aspect of establishing a horizontal relation to the persons involved in the research process is how to formulate and pose questions. Often (always?) the research question and the focus group question are not the same. The 'answer' to the research question is hopefully possible to reach *through* the focus group material, not by the focus group itself (Silverman, 2006:381). This is not an unknown situation in research, but if you want to establish a horizontal relation to the participants you have to come up with a focus group question that is interesting and relevant for the participants to engage in and at the same time can generate a material through which you can illuminate your research question. This has to be done without being manipulative about the research purpose. The participants in the focus group must not feel tricked or deceived when they see the result of the research.

The focus group question should be something that engages the participants. Depending on the situation this can be dealt with in different ways. Sometimes the focus group question can be a result from a discussion between the researcher and the organization, sometimes the question is posed by the researcher but made explicit in the invitation; if you are interested in the topic you are welcome.

In this case the research questions cannot even be posed directly to the focus group participants. Identity work is to a large extent unknown to us, but is and can be made, visible through different activities; e.g. how we move, how we act and how we speak. As identity and identity work is partly unconscious you cannot directly ask people 'How 'is' your identity?' or 'How do you construct your identity?' What you need to do is to introduce a topic that generates a discussion *through* which you can hear how people construct their identities. This topic can vary but if relevant to both the researcher's interest and the patients' interest you can get a material that is interesting on two levels; the content in itself (what the participants say about the situation) and for the identity work embedded in the discussions.

An example: a focus group question could be 'How do you stay healthy?' combined with an encouragement to describe practical situations where the participants had found it troublesome to know how to act. Hopefully, the discussions would generate a material that is interesting as such, the content of the discussions - what is perceived as troublesome? – and simultaneously also generate a material *through* which I can say something on discourses and identities.

This also puts a responsibility on the researcher to actually pursue the question addressed in the focus group and not just leave the focus group when it is over. The

mutual interest for each other's purposes and the agreement (if there is one) to (try to) fulfill both interests does not stop when one of the partners are content. The commitment and the agreement between the researcher and the participants including the process after the focus group have to be quite clear from the beginning; what is a 'fair' agreement/commitment between us so that neither part ends up feeling 'used'?

The construction of the questions, both the research question and the focus group question, is a very crucial activity. Of course, in order to obtain a relevant empirical material and interesting research results in general, but also because it is an important aspect of what relations are produced between the researcher and the participants.

Writing the focus group story

Even if every step of the way is important, the text from the focus group discussion is what will be left when all the deliberations, choices, buts and ifs are forgotten or ignored. The focus group story is the empirical material from where the analyses depart. When it is written it cannot be changed. The most important aspect is that the empirical material is someone's story. I could write it as 'my story' of the focus group conversation, how I interpreted what we talked about. For some purposes that might be highly relevant. For this thesis, not so interesting, though. Although I am writing the story and is part of the conversation, the story must also be that of the participants.

It is impossible not to influence the story (as I am part of the discussion and the writing), but to ensure that the presentation is a fair representation of the participants and their situation the material must also be approved by them. The story is thus sent out to the participants for adjustments and corrections. It will be rewritten according to the comments and sent out again. The story is not finished until it is possible for the participants to say 'Yes, this is a fair representation of our conversation and of us as participants'.

Instead of pretending that I am writing 'their story' I see it as an open co-operation. It is thus important to include the story writing process in the story; i.e. how the story was written, under what circumstances, who were invited and why, how difficulties in the co-author process have been dealt with and so on.

The co-authorship is one way to address the issue of ownership and power over one's own stories. Once published, everyone can make their own interpretations, and each and everyone can be accounted for them. The important thing is that the storytellers have ownership over the story; how they are being represented.

The idea of ownership over a story goes against the tradition of just presenting the parts of the material that illustrate the argument; interview statements, conversation extracts etc. If the participants are co-authors and are given ownership over the story it entails the necessity of making 'the whole story' public, not just bits and pieces of it. This also entails that I will not use transcripts as empirical material. We say a lot of things with different purposes; we try a formulation, we reformulate when we hear how it sounds out loud and/or after other's reaction to it etc. Using transcripts or short extracts are, from this perspective, not fair to the participants. They say 'yes' to the whole story, the whole 'argument', and nothing else. This is why I also think it is

important to present the 'whole story' and to make it public. Everything else is violating the story, the participants and the empirical material.

It is not always possible to include 'the whole story', every text has its limitations, but it is always possible to refer to it and publish it so that other can read and take a stand of their own based on the 'original' story, not just my or other's interpretations of it, which inevitably will contain bits and pieces and not always the whole story.

Co-authorship, anonymity, horizontality and ownership

Co-authorship is not unproblematic. There is always the risk that the main-author (the researcher) through the writing process forces a story upon the other authors. As a co-author it can be easier to say 'yes' than to object or try to formulate what you, as a participant, would consider as a more 'accurate' (fair) description. As there is no exact 'right way' to present a story – the story can be told in many ways and there can be many stories to tell – the question is not if it is a true and/or complete story but if it is a fair story, one you want to tell. I do not think that there is a solution to the inherent power of who is holding the pen, the question has to be addressed and be kept open. How the story has been written and under what circumstances the focus group has been held are, as stated above, also important parts of the story.

Another problem with co-authorship is anonymity. Traditionally, as a researcher, you have procedures that will ensure anonymity or confidentiality. If people are anonymous they are assumed to be more truthful when talking to an interviewer or fill in a questionnaire. It is also a way to ensure that the respondent will not be punished for her views and opinions expressed.

This tradition of offering and demanding anonymity when 'collecting the data' is sometimes problematic. First, in a focus group it is difficult to achieve anonymity. Often the most interesting setting is a known setting, so the participants are often not strangers, and even if they are, they hear each other talk, they might know each other from other places (or in the future) etc.

Secondly, it has impact on the discussion as such. If you know when you start the focus group that you are going to construct a story that will be public and which you will be (partially) held accounted for as a co-author it affects the conversation. In this case, where I am interested in the constructing of identities, the presence of the outside world as a reference point is important. The identities and relations that are constructed by our talk are communicative acts, where not just what you as 'one person' says is interesting but also how we relate to our community (the participants) and our larger world (the public) when saying it. The culture we live in and the discourses we use, understand and accept, are at play when we construct our social world. Knowing that the story is going to be public and that my name is meant to be on it, thus contributes to strengthen the material for the theoretical and analytical approaches in this proposal.

Thirdly, the relationship between the main-author (researcher) and the co-authors. The avoidance of anonymity and the public presentation also produce a more horizontal relation between the participants and the researcher. You do not just hand over information as a 'respondent' and simultaneously also the control of the information. By

signing it (or not signing it) you are maintaining ownership of 'your story' to the public. It does not mean that everyone has to agree on everything in the text, but that it has been said and that it is a fair way of presenting 'us' and our contribution to understanding the topics discussed in the focus group.

The referral process described above is made until everyone can put his or her name on the story or until a decision is made that 'I will not sign this text' (for whatever reason). There must be a possibility to withdraw one's co-authorship along the way and say no to further participation and accountability related to the text. Saying no must be an option if to be able to establish a horizontal relation between the participant and the researcher, but also between the participants.

This co-authorship does not leave me, the researcher, without responsibility or accountability for the text, its distribution or its consequences. I too, have a responsibility not just for what is written and how it is presented but also for what it might entail. The publication of the story must not do harm to the participants or to other persons involved. The co-authorship does not release the main-author from responsibility, neither to research ethics in general, nor to the participants, or the society. The deliberations and decisions concerning anonymity and publication should, no matter the decisions concerning these issues, therefore be openly elaborated on and presented as part of the story.

Documenting the discussions

The focus groups are documented in two ways. First, note taking during the discussions. The discussion will be documented on papers on the wall, so that every participant can see what is noted. This has primarily two reasons. The first one is that everyone can see what the note taker 'gets' and can, if necessary, 'correct' it during the session. It also takes away the curiosity or even anxiousness about what is noted 'did I say something stupid/smart/uninteresting etc?' The participants see what is noted and they can react on it. The other reason is that it actually makes talking and interacting a bit easier. The accounts sort of 'stay in the room' a bit longer. It is easier to remember something if you have both seen it and heard it. It also seems easier to go back and refer to other's account and reasoning during the conversation.

The notes are photographed and sent out to the participants. The notes are then written up and sent out to the participants for comments and /or approval of the text. When the referral process is done and the participants have agreed that it is a fair representation of the discussion, we have the empirical material, in this proposal also called 'the story'.

The discussions can also be tape recorded, but as I elaborated on in the previous section, I would not use it for representing the discussions. It is not that I do not approve of the recording I do not see the relevance here. A transcript is highly relevant for generating material on how we communicate; negotiate, manipulate, how we use silences, words and other sounds to influence and react on each other etc. In this case I am interested in identity production and then it becomes more relevant to use a material that the participants approve of, where they are in control of how they are represented. A transcript cannot be 'approved' or 'disapproved' in that sense, the transcript is just a transcript. Once the words are 'out there' you can never retract or

nuance them, they are no longer within your control. So, even if I do record the discussions, it would just be for my memory when writing up the story, not the empirical material used for my analysis. The analysis will be based upon the approved story.

Analyzing the empirical material

Having a rich, relevant and interesting empirical material is good, but just a prerequisite for an analysis. By now, it should be quite clear that what is going to be analyzed are discourses. If interested in identity and identity work this is a highly relevant analytical approach (Czarniawska, 1998). Discourse analysis can be made in many ways (see e.g. Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004: Silverman, 2006). Analyzing is often an evolutionary activity, but nevertheless, I will in this section illustrate how I plan to approach the empirical material.

The common denominator for the analyses are, apart from that they are all discourse analyses, that they are analyzed by looking for discourses as themes (Frankland & Bloor, 1999) and interpretative repertoires (Silverman, 2006:22). The analyses do not focus on exact language use or how the participants negotiate 'reality' during the focus group sessions. The emphasis on discourse, and not language, also signals that the focus is on action and practice rather than linguistic structure (Potter & Hepburn, 2007). As there is a difference between the analyses made in Phase I, and the ones made in Phase II, I will start with the first phase and then describe the second one.

For the analyses in Phase I the empirical material is interesting in at least two levels. First, it says something about how the participants in the focus groups formulate their situation when others are listening. In this case, for example; what kinds of situations are accounted for as troublesome? What dilemmas, dependencies etc are referred to as difficult to come to terms with? What kind of consequences do the participants say that these situations entail? These accounts say something about how the participants construct their world – why do things happen, how are different situations connected and who are involved in it? What can be done to prevent/facilitate the situation? What would make it easier to handle (if troublesome)? Who can make things happen? etc. This is interesting material in itself, not because they are 'true' or 'surprising', but as material to understand what discourses are used to make sense of the world and our actions in it (when the world is listening). It is also interesting because when we use these discourses we do something to the world; we support or challenge a certain view, order, relationship etc and that leads us to the next level.

The second level is (in this research proposal) what the material says about our identity and our identity work. The discourses we use, what do they say about the identity stories we are in the process of constructing? What discourses do we use and what identities (and relations) are constructed through them – for ourselves and for others?

These two levels of analysis – the more content oriented, looking for discourses; and the identity oriented; what identities are produced through the chosen discourses – are the first two steps of analysis. The third is to elaborate on the consequences of these two levels – inconsistencies, paradoxes, surprises etc. The fourth step is to contrast the

analyses of the empirical material with similar analyses based on the official discourses and the consequences of that.

In Phase II, the focus group story will be used for two purposes, i.e. analyzed from two perspectives. First, the content as such; what do insightful people say about the focus group stories and the analyses from Phase I? What interpretations do they make based upon the empirical material? Are the analyses made trustworthy, relevant, useful or far-fetched, unrealistic or even fantasies…? etc. The focus group discussions in Phase II is thus a way of challenging the interpretations made in Phase I and their relevance in a wider perspective. It is a way of strengthening the analyses (analysis process) as such in Phase I – what is ignored, hidden, forgotten or even invented according to the participants in Phase II.

The other level in Phase II is to extract the discourses used in the focus group discussions. What discourses are used, by insightful persons, when discussing Swedish working life and psychosocial work environment? What identities and relations are constructed through them? What are the consequences of that for individuals, organizations and society?

Finally, a discussion on problems, possibilities and consequences of different reasoning and discourses. This is where all the analyses come together and are discussed from certain perspectives, themes etc that have emerged along the way. The main focus for the analyses is, however always, what identities and (power) relations that are produced.

Summing up

In this section I will summarize the last two chapters – methodological considerations and focus group as method - by very shortly outline the process of conducting a focus group study in line with the above deliberations and ambitions.

The research approach is designed to be aligned with the approach outlined for the phenomena of interest; social and discursive constructions of organizations, work and identities. Focus groups are used for its potential of generating a rich, relevant and interesting empirical material concerning a topic in general, but also for its potential of identity production, i.e. when we speak we also (re)construct identity stories.

A focus group discussion might last around two hours, but the whole process is much longer. First, there are preparations in finding an organization that is interested in participating in the project, then we have to agree on a theme, a focus group question, that could be relevant enough for both of us (the researcher and the organization) to put some effort and time in. Then there is the preparations for the focus group itself; who to invite and how, how many and where, one group or several or the same group several times etc.

A third part of the preparations is to achieve some kind of pre-understanding of the organization and its situation. This can be done through 'hanging around' at the workplace, read organizational texts and texts about the organization and maybe even interviews with some of the stakeholders, e.g. trade unions, employer, the manager etc. At the focus group there should not be too much focus on details you could have found out on a more general level. In the focus group the focus should be on what the

participants can contribute with that cannot be achieved otherwise; e.g. personal experiences. A fourth part of the preparation is to prepare the actual focus group, how to present the project, the process, me, the anticipated outcome etc and to connect that to their organization and situation in a way that (can) establish a sense of partnership for the questions at hand and some trust in me as a speaking partner/ moderator/author/researcher.

The actual focus group will thus be introduced by the researcher/moderator through putting the group session in a context; why I am here, what I think we are going to do, the overall purpose of the study; the process during and after the session, i.e. issues concerning documentation, co-authorship, purpose and distribution of the material. When we all agree that this is something we would like to engage in, the focus group question is introduced more extensively, for example by the researcher depicting her understanding of the situation at the workplace, the question or something similar. After the introduction the discussion is 'free', also for the researcher/moderator.

The discussion is documented on paper sheet on the wall and is open for everyone to see. Photos of the notes are taken and distributed to the participants after the meeting. The notes are then re-written into a focus group story, by which is meant a text that is a fair representation of what was said during the discussion. The participants do not have to agree on the accounts, but that it was said. The focus group story is thus not ONE story, it is rather a story of the focus group discussion, where many, diverse and divergent stories were told. The story is sent out to the participants for comments and corrections. When everyone thinks it is a fair representation of the discussion and of them as participants, the text can be used as empirical material. Included in the story is also the context and the process surrounding the story production – who were invited, who participated, how was difficulties in the authoring of the text handled etc.

The text/s are analyzed from different perspectives. The content; what is said, what discourses are used etc; and what do the discourses entail in terms of identities and relations produced, and, finally, what are the consequences of that for the individual, organizations and society.

Anticipated Outcome

The study aims to explore identity and identity work and its importance for our well-being at work, i.e. how (or if) the way we talk in our organizations about our organizing affects our well-being.

The anticipated contribution of the study is a better understanding of how organizational conditions might be linked to individual well-being, not just that they are.

The study should therefore also contribute to a broadened understanding of psychosocial work environment in general and well-being in contemporary organizations in particular.

It probably also contributes to a better understanding of limitations and difficulties with different ways to prevent, detect and/or intervene in psychosocial working conditions.

In short, the study aims to explore and extend the theories on psychosocial work environment. It also aims to do that in a way that connects to everyday working life and that can be helpful for practitioners through a better understanding of the phenomena as such and, if needed, useful for change in the social and discursive practices we all are involved in at work.

Notes: Definitions and Clarifications

1. Psychosocial work environment is the overall label for issues that relate to interactions between the individual ('the psycho') and its social environment ('the social'). With this follows that changes in organizational conditions is *per se* affecting the psychosocial work environment. There is no agreed upon operational definition of the word but stress, bullying, threats, violence and sexual harassments are issues often included. In this proposal the focus is on the actual organizing and its impact on well-being. As it is a quite new research field there is no agreed upon operational definition of these issues either, so I will use the overall label 'psychosocial' instead of for example the more specific and more accurate label 'organization-oriented work and health research', suggested by Härenstam et. al. (2006).For a more thorough 'definition' and historical context of the concept of psychosocial work environment, see Rydén (2008).

2. It has been drawn to my attention that this might seem as a cause-effect-reasoning. To some extent it is, but not in the sense that if A happens, B follows (or might probably follow). Talking is action (Austin, 1981). Actions have consequences. When we talk we support certain reasoning and discourses and different reasoning and discourses construct different constraints, limitations and possibilities. Within these constraints and limitations the variety of 'effects' (human agency) are endless. The same goes if you see it backwards, i.e. why did something happen? The 'cause' to a certain situation is far beyond a linear causality but also beyond just 'complex' causality. In this paper the interest lies in what discourses are drawn upon (used) and which made it possible to say 'X' and for 'X' to be interpreted as 'X', 'Y', 'Z' etc. Consequences are not predictable as in a cause-effect-reasoning as the 'cause' (talk/action) in this paper, takes a detour around discourses and human agency. The language is however sometimes not as precise as one would like to be and some of the words used are obviously drawing the attention towards a 'cause-effect-idea', without me intending it to. To avoid cause-effect-reasoning I have tried to write words like affects, influences, links etc instead of causes, but I am the first to admit that language is a blunt instrument and there might be some bad choices of words left.

3. There are several ways of using the concept social and discursive construction. I will not engage in a discussion what is what and what is not. The main argument in this proposal is that the phenomena of interest: psychosocial work environment and its affect on our identity work are social constructions, i.e. a result of human interactions in the past and in the present. The constructions may seem very stable and inert and sometimes impossible to change, but they are still social constructions and would not exist without humans and can be changed by humans. The other part of the approach is that it is discursive, and that is because the construction of reality is mainly made, and made sense of, through language. This is also why a discursive approach (focus groups) is chosen to study the phenomenon. For more reading on concepts of social and discursive constructions, see e.g. Burr (2003), Hacking (2004), Holstein & Gubrium (2008), and/or Gergen (2009).

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