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Affective Ethnography: Reflections on the Application of "Useful" Research on Workplace Diversity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to critically reflect on the affective entanglement of both researcher and research objects in a study of workplace diversity with a transformative agenda.

Design/methodology/approach – Events and experiences related to interventions in a municipal center are presented. The study is embedded in critical diversity research and applies engaged ethnographic methods.

Findings – The researcher reflects on how interventions designed to challenge the status quo faced difficulties while considering the impact of the research entry point, efforts to mobilize organizational members in favor of a diversity agenda, and the micro-politics of doing intervention-based research.

Practical implications – The study reflects on how 'useful' research with an allegedly emancipatory agenda might not be considered favorable to neither majority nor minority employees. The notion of affectivity is applied to deal with the organizational members' multi-voiced response to the change efforts, as well as how the researcher's position as researcher– change agent critically shaped the fieldwork experiences and their interpretation.

Originality/value – Few critical diversity scholars engage with practitioners to produce 'useful' research with practical implications. In doing so, this article contributes to critical diversity methods by exploring why presumably emancipatory initiatives apparently did not succeed, despite organizational goodwill. This involves questioning the implied assumption of the inherent 'good' of emancipation, as well as notions of 'useful research'.

Keywords

Intervention-based ethnography, critical diversity, researcher and change agent, ~~micro-politics,~~ affect, reflexivity, useful research

Introduction

Critical diversity research has an important role in highlighting the 'shadows of power' in organizations (e.g. Ahmed, 2014; Ashcraft, 2017; Holck, 2017; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). Curiously, however, there is less interest in developing possibilities for positive transformations. Only a few studies actually trace the effects of specific diversity-related measures (e.g. diversity staff positions, mentoring programs and diversity training) on the inclusion and promotion of historically disadvantaged groups (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). Even fewer critical diversity scholars engage with practitioners to provide practical solutions to the progressive changes that the critical perspective otherwise expounds (for exceptions, see Akom, 2011; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008). With critical research remaining by and large abstract, deductive and disconnected from practice, this research domain has not adequately recognized the active role of the practices through which dominating realities are enacted and has not investigated more fully how the possibilities of agency could be opened up (Ghorashi and Wells, 2009; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, critical diversity scholars increasingly make reference to the need for more critically informed research into the practices of diversity and inclusion (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Holck *et al.*, 2016; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017).

This article aims to examine what happens when critical research goes to work and engages with those who do the work. How does the active, engaged role of the researcher affect interventions, as well as the subsequent interpretation of data? What are the measures of 'success' when intervening to mitigate organizational inequality? Informed by a critical and performative approach, this article explores some of the troublesome aspects of engaging in a transformative agenda involving minority–majority relations intimately entwined with the organizational power landscape. Central in this endeavor is scrutinizing the potential barriers for transformation at the entry point, which can keep a study 'stuck' in a counterproductive diversity agenda (Michailova *et al.*, 2014). The engaged and performative approach imposes a dual role of researcher and change agent (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; Fine, 1994), affected by feelings of shame, anxiety and pride when personally involved in the participants' everyday work lives and the 'drama' of change (Ahmed, 2004; Mikkelsen, 2012; Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008).

Empirically, the limits of 'useful research' are explored by drawing on fieldwork from the municipal center 'MunBiz' (pseudonym). MunBiz was renowned for its diversity profile in the Danish context due to its ethnically diverse workforce providing high-quality services to international businesses.

Research with MunBiz was initially taken up to explore 'best practice' diversity management. As a former diversity consultant, I already knew MunBiz in advance and had depicted their diversity work in popular papers on best practice examples of diversity management. As a consultant, I had been giving advice on how to progress their diversity performance, and we wanted to continue this cooperation to generate practicable but critically informed knowledge on 'how to make diversity work'. However, it turned out that MunBiz was haunted by poor employee satisfaction, as an employee satisfaction report showed how almost 30% of its employees reported experiences of harassment and bullying on issues like language, color of skin and ethnicity. These experiences of harassment apparently interrelated with in-group preferences guiding collaborative patterns and the ethnification of job categories. These excluding practices were targeted by the interventions introduced in this study, which make up the empirical focus of this article.

This article is structured as follows: taking as my outset the research on critical diversity and affect, I explore the enabling and constraining aspects of doing 'useful' intervention-based research. Next, I identify the research methods and the case organization. The subsequent analysis is structured around my experiences with doing interventions and critically examines; 1) the impact of the entry point and the negotiation of 'useful' research; 2) the dual role of researcher and change agent having to navigate micro-political strategies in order to mobilize employees in favor of transformative efforts; and 3) losing access and the measures of 'useful' research. Finally, the article discusses intervention-based methods as means to accommodate more-inclusive organizational practices, as well as future directions within engaged and performative diversity research.

Theoretical background

'Useful' and engaged research on diversity and inequality

Scholars and practitioners seldom contest the importance of diversity in organizations anymore. How to achieve the organizational change required to increase equal opportunities in organizations dominated by majority norms and values is much less obvious (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014; Holck *et al.*, 2016; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). The diversity management activities advanced in the scientific and managerial literature emphasize intervening in heterogeneous groups and workplaces to reduce or eliminate bias and to maximize inclusion and experiences of fairness for all organizational members (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). Most of this literature implicitly assumes that all organizational members consider inclusion and equal opportunities a 'win-win' situation. This is questioned by critical scholars bringing in aspects of power and resistance in

group-related interests, the distribution of privilege and struggles over scarce resources (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Akom, 2011; Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Dobbin and Kalev, 2016 Holck, 2017; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015). Critical scholarship furthermore emphasizes how diversity management activities meant to lessen stereotypes and in-group preferences often prove effortless or even backfire into further re-marginalization of the very minority employees who were to benefit, "leaving organizational structures and routines which reproduce inequalities and normalize the privileges of the dominant group (e.g. white and male employers) unchanged" (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014, p. 2).

Critical diversity research does not step far beyond mere critique but mainly operates in the theoretical sphere, where ideologies and false consciousness are uncovered through deconstructing these discourses (i.e. Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Holck *et al.*, 2016; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). This might partly explain the obstacles that critical diversity researchers experience when relating their theories to practice. Accordingly, scholars propose that critical diversity research should apply a "more proactive, performative perspective that is not afraid to consider alternative approaches and solutions to the practice of diversity management" (Schwabenland and Tomlinson, 2015, p. 3) in order to achieve greater insight into "how organizations can achieve greater equality despite their capitalist nature" (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014, p. 311). Heeding this call, I apply intervention-based ethnographic methods inspired by Ashcraft's (2017) notion of 'embodied critique' to explore engaged and performative ways of researching critical diversity, providing practitioners with relevant implications for practice (Akom, 2011; Ghorashi and Wells, 2009; Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017).

Embodied critique and the researcher–change agent

Ashcraft (2017) highlights how critical research predominantly applies detached critique as disembodied realist tales "seeking relief through a rational mind… by retreating to a safe-room of abstraction and quasi-objectivity" (p. 41). Instead, she recommends shifting to embodied apprehensions of everyday performance by actually inhabiting them: writing from *within* organizations instead of writing *about* them.

Embodied critique favors an engaged researcher, resembling what Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) refer to as the 'hyphen' position of researcher–change agent. The researcher–change agent holds on

to an uncomfortable 'alienating' feeling by placing oneself on the organizational margin while critically questioning and problematizing participant practices. This particular position involves the researcher in political games to mobilize organizational support for a transformative agenda (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008). In pursuit of change, the researcher inevitably develops social relations with participants, as well as gets involved in local micro-politics to identify and consolidate alliances to ensure support for transformative efforts (Mikkelsen, 2012). These include a broad range of activities – how people exert influence, network, challenge, lobby, resist or use other personal strategies in order to effect or resist change or assert their own interests (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). Paradoxically, this political entanglement also delimits the transformative capacity if powerful coalitions go against change or access is blocked out of political considerations.

Affective ethnography

The role of researcher–change agent also implicates the researcher as an accomplice with responsibilities regarding the turn of events. This involves a sense of guilt, shame and pride – highly bodily sensations and emotions, often referred to as affect. Affect has received increased attention not only from psychology but also from (feminist) organizational theory (Ahmed, 2004, 2014; Ashcraft, 2017; Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs, 2015; Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008). The argument is that post-structuralist critique – with its focus on discourse – cannot grasp parts of the human experience that are not only communicated by means of language but are also experienced or sensed through and among bodies. Here, I lean on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004, 2014), particularly her theorization of affect related to emotions, moods, atmospheres and attunement, due to it providing fruitful analytical concepts to grasp the important aspects of embodied critique. According to Ahmed (2004), affect is bodily reactions and changes; affect is the space between bodies and mediates between bodies as a kind of bodily energy, making affect contagious (Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs, 2015). This forms not only the single body's expression but also the whole mood and atmosphere of the situation. Mood – or attunement – is a socially situated phenomenon, not a personal belonging. It is not something we possess but something that takes a hold of us (you *have* a feeling but you are *in* a mood). Mood affects how we experience the world, how we can be in the world and who we can be (Ahmed, 2014) exactly because it is social and contagious. A person's mood can be attuned to or out of tune (misattuned) with the atmosphere, which is the collectively experienced feeling of a space (Ahmed, 2014). In this way, attunement is a way of being for and with others, often with the aim of feeling in harmony "as an expression of the quality of feeling a shared affective state"

(Ahmed, 2014, p. 19). Conversely, misattunement is experienced as being 'out of sync' and 'troublesome', creating the figure of the stranger spoiling 'the good atmosphere'. Hence misattunement is caused by the arrival of specific bodies (Ahmed, 2014).

Affect is shaped though the history of the body – shaped by our hitherto life and experiences. As such, affect sticks to bodies in ways that impress their surfaces and delimit their orientations. The intensity of attachments has to do with the fact that some bodies are 'stickier' than others (Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs, 2015). Affect becomes sticky when it clusters around certain signs or figures (e.g. an immigrant in a majority-dominated situation or a woman entering a male-dominated boardroom). These sticky signs and figures are then saturated by affect and become sites of personal and social tensions (Ahmed 2004). What is interesting is not the stickiness itself but how the particular stickiness of some bodies ties them together in a 'community of fate' and thus does something to relations (Ahmed 2004).

To sum up, this paper critically reflects upon the experiences of the researcher as entangled in the research process and hence finding it difficult to separate personal affective experiences from 'actual' organizational changes. Inquiring into the aspects of efforts to mobilize organizational members and the micro-politics of doing engaged research, this study exposes the organizational dynamics that enable and constrain change (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014).

Methods

Research site

This intervention-based ethnographic study was conducted as a longitudinal investigation of diversity practices in the municipal center referred to by the pseudonym of 'MunBiz'. MunBiz was founded in 2008 with eight employees and instantiated to provide services to international businesses. When this study's fieldwork began in May 2012, MunBiz had just been moved to a new municipal department and had merged with another unit, employing a total of 85 people. In September 2013, the center's size was cut to 35 employees. By the time the fieldwork ended in May 2014, MunBiz was undergoing yet another merge, tripling its size with a new name and department.

MunBiz has successfully applied the municipal policy on diversity and equality, which focuses on the recruitment of staff to mirror the municipal demographic composition. MunBiz's employees differed according to age, gender, cultural (international) background and language skills, and they varied from autodidact entrepreneurs to masters of human and political sciences. By recruiting employees with an international mindset and experience, MunBiz legitimized and qualified its

services. New (especially international) employees were predominantly hired in temporary, training positions (at least initially) to acquire Danish-language skills, knowledge about 'Danish workplace culture' and to keep municipal budgets low. MunBiz wanted to evoke an entrepreneurial spirit through an open-plan office space, a free-seating policy and a team-based organization of work characterized by little formality and few rules. Simultaneously, the formal municipal bureaucratic hierarchy was kept in place through formal top-down power discretionary decisions on task allocation, promotion and recruitment by a CEO and three section managers.

Fieldwork in MunBiz

The data collection ran over a two-year period (May 2012 to June 2014), but the bulk of the empirical data was collected during a nine-month period when I occupied a desk and chair at MunBiz twice a week (November 2012 – July 2013). My data-generating techniques predominantly focused on participant observations, interviews and interventions.

Participant observations were made in multiple routine meeting forums, such as center, section, team and management meetings. These daily observations were reflected in a fieldwork diary, which made up a significant part of my data.

Open-ended interviews were guided by the initial participant observations and included semi-structured interviews with 18 employees and managers (lasting from 30 to 120 min.). The sample was selected considering issues of ethnicity, gender, age and educational background. Initially, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the workplace in relation to the work culture, diversity and the collaborative environment, including information sharing, the distribution of tasks, decision-making processes, socializing, etc. Later on, the interviews centered on feedback and reflections on this study's interventions, which made it possible to detect responses and reactions from a multiplicity of organizational voices. Five of the respondents were interviewed three to seven times on their own request. Especially when I was no longer granted access to the organization, these respondents helped me to reflect on my interpretations of events in retrospect and to avoid strong claims and overly subjective expositions. One particular core informant and my access point to MunBiz was a section manager, Ane (pseudonym), who I interviewed seven times, shadowed on various occasions and had a continuous informal conversation with throughout my fieldwork. After writing up the first draft of the article, Ane read it and we met three years after the fieldwork had

ended. Apart from commenting on my account of events, she reflected in particular on her own, the CEO's and my role. Her comments and interpretations of events and roles are included in the article.

Interventions in MunBiz involved presentations, seminars, participation in debates, informal talks and one report. The interventions communicated my reflections on the organization, collaborative practices and how to deal with employee diversity related to innovation, knowledge sharing, equity and fairness. Two interventions were particularly influential to my research: one was a two-day seminar and two concurrent follow-up seminars on collaborative patterns on Ane's request. The seminars were planned by a committee consisting of employee representatives appointed by Ane and me. The seminars led to the collective formulation of a plan for rotating teamwork, which was never implemented. The other intervention was an experiment with different task distribution, primarily involving Ane and an employee with a Spanish background, Ria. While the seminars were an explicit and open attempt to structurally change collaborative patterns, the task-distribution intervention was more covert and subversive, trying to 'do things differently'. None of the interventions involved the CEO in planning or effecting change. The two interventions are analyzed and reflected on during the analysis. All of the participants are anonymous.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, the thematic content analysis approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was applied. This procedure is based on reducing and abstracting the empirical data through open, axial and selective coding. Initially, I examined the data in order to identify key themes and categories (open codes). The axial coding involved identifying the relationships between the open codes. Finally, through selective coding, I conceptualized these relationships by identifying the themes around which my interpretations of the diversity change initiatives in MunBiz could be generated.

The process of coding data involves the identification of themes through repeated readings of the data. The coding of transcripts and field diaries facilitated my interpretation by enabling a reflective, iterative process through which I explored the content of different themes and the relationships within and between them. I zoomed in on particular aspects of my research by following the details and complexity of a certain segment of my research: experiences of conducting intervention-based ethnography, including the advantages and limits of the methodology. First, a round of basic open coding was conducted with the entire dataset. This resulted in a focus on how the political and organizational circumstances related to my study critically impacted on and shaped it while isolating the words, phrases and interactions observed that connected to the hyphen position as researcher–

change agent. The next step was focused thematic coding, paying particular attention to producing adequate themes related to affective aspects of my growing complex entwinement with and constant navigation of organizational power relations with and between employees. This was intended to trace the ambivalences and interconnectedness between themes and the emerging patterns of how the political and social relations between the researcher and the participants, as well as among the participants, were organized, looking for similarities and differences by using a constant comparative method. This second round of coding brought forth the additional theme of research entry point: how explicitly framing it as a 'diversity' study intersected with the ongoing exploration of diversity at MunBiz, with sensitivity towards the notion of affectivity forcefully impacting events and my interpretations.

Analyzing events

Negotiating the entry point and the purpose of the research

Gaining access and an entry point to a research site while struggling to create relationships that sustain support for a research project throughout its life is a challenging and underspecified topic (Mikkelsen, 2012). As Michailova *et al.* (2014) highlight, access is not a single event but an ongoing process that at any time can be interrupted or turn sour if the researcher relies too much on key access people. The initial framing of the research can also critically shape the research results; as mentioned, this study originally set out to describe the 'best practice' of organizing diversity. My measure of success was initially to portray 'best' diversity practices, as well as to advance a more progressive diversity agenda in MunBiz. Ambitions grew when I started working together with the organization, especially my access point Ane. Ane's motivation for collaborating with me was the poor employee satisfaction, especially among ethnic minority employees, aired in relation to employee development talks and later on during my interviews: they talked about unfairness and a 'cultural hierarchy', with majority (white) profiles in high-status, advancement-prone positions, while less-attractive, operational and representative tasks were reserved for minority employees. Ane had a more nuanced perception of this:

> We do have two with international backgrounds as special consultants [both with minority backgrounds], promoted by the former CEO with Olga and Ole's [long-tenured employees with majority backgrounds] consent. They believed we needed 'these people' in strategic tasks as well. But we definitely had a system of 'stars and water carriers' that I wanted to get rid of through your [the researcher's] help.

These (especially minority) experiences nonetheless formed the motivational backdrop for our interventions: they were meant to promote minority profiles to redress 'ethnified' task distribution

and to induce difference-including collaborative patterns to remedy team composition based on in-group preferences. As such, the notion of co-constructed research was meaningful in this study.

In MunBiz, the topic of my research critically shaped the kind of data I was able to collect; I was used as an excuse to put diversity on the agenda and to defy CEO Dirk's claimed aversive stance towards diversity. Dirk was generally seen as non-promotive of diversity, and I was constantly met with stories about his acts of subtle discrimination: several employees told me about how Dirk constantly mispronounced or gave wrong names to employees with international backgrounds while jokingly exclaiming "I cannot pronounce half of my employees' names". "It is like saying I cannot pronounce these immigrant names. It is really provoking and humiliating," one employee recounted. Dirk made use of my presence on several occasions to make statements or jokes about diversity: at a center meeting when promoting a new website with a front picture depicting North African, Mediterranean and elderly (Danish) employees representing both genders, he addressed me directly: "You see we *are* very different". This gesture was followed up by a minority employee in an interview referring to the website picture: "We are good enough when we can be used for promotion and to look politically correct. However, when it comes to doing the exciting jobs, we are left out". During an interview, an employee revealed: "Before the interview, I was thinking whether I should mention ethnicity at all. Usually, I try to avoid the subject, but I was thinking this is a necessity. She [the researcher] needs to hear about these things". Apparently, she wanted to reflect on her experiences – not as much in consideration of my research but to convey a message to the management and colleagues through my communication of my observations.

Researchers doing longitudinal fieldwork in organizations often run the risk of being enrolled in the participants' political struggles and conflicts (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013; Mikkelsen, 2012). I increasingly took on the role of a 'message girl'; contrary to my intentions, the political implications of my presence grew, making my researcher–change agent role increasingly troublesome. This was to the paradoxical advancement and detriment of our transformative efforts: Diversity was shifting from a shadow to a legitimate theme maintained on the agenda because of my presence to advance the study. However, it was also detrimental, as interventions were increasingly associated with a power game among Dirk, Ane and the employees: different fractions emerged, translating our emancipatory agenda into a power game. My role and data access were thus constantly negotiated according to participants' responses, which reflect the social construction and the 'multivoicedness' of responses to change efforts in research (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008).

Mobilizing majority support

Fine (1994) argues that the researcher–change agent position inevitably involves social and power relations between researcher and participants, which is often asymmetrical; the researcher observes, analyzes and represents the lives of others and hence colonizes (speaks for and constructs their identities) and distances them by writing their voices out of the research. However, the collection of rich and detailed data depends on the maintenance of positive relationships, and these relations are in no way possible to strategically manage or control regarding the outcomes of interactions. Perceiving power as a characteristic of all human relations, researcher and participants simultaneously enable and constrain each other's actions, depending on who needs whom (Benschop *et al.*, 2015). I was involved in a constant power negotiation of my position and range of actions – driven by my need to maintain close contact to obtain rich data and to team up with powerful groups to keep my diversity agenda alive (Fine, 1994). My dependence on Ane as access point entailed a risk, regulating my access to the field and the kind of data I could generate; the interviews and interventions were influenced and limited by her personal relations at MunBiz. We developed a strong relation through daily conversions and mails, and I spent many days of shadowing her work at management meetings, development interviews with members and job interviews but also attending social events with her. The ebbs and flows of the failure and success of our interventions were from my point of view increasingly entwined with 'living up' to her trust and confidentiality and strengthening her position in the organization.

The seminars' challenging the collaborative practices favoring in-group preferences were initiated on Ane's request but inspired by conversations with me on how to create greater opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-professional collaboration. We agreed that altering collaborative patterns was pivotal to activate the different knowledge and competencies of her section members *and* to counteract the employee dissatisfaction related to experiences of harassment and bullying. Ane did not want to use top-down enforcement – this would infringe the organization's post-bureaucratic values of dialogue and deliberation – but to motivate employees' own free will to collaborate differently. To serve this purpose, she appointed a planning committee consisting of eight selected employees whom she believed represented the different 'groupings' and strong individuals to help to carry through the changes she wanted to instantiate. This was her gesture of micro-politics to mobilize a strong alliance to carry through our transformative agenda (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). Through six committee meetings, a row of seminars was planned with the ambition to initiate a process of collective reflection on the present patterns of collaboration, perceptions about the 'other' (out-) groups in the section and new ways of collaborating. These committee meetings also served the purpose of winning over and

committing the section members. The seminars eventually led to the collective formulation of a plan for rotating teamwork to accommodate more difference-inclusive collaborative patterns.

To embark on transformations, you have to build high-trust relations with 'significant' actors capable of setting the organizational agenda. In a team-based organization like MunBiz, successful change rests upon teaming up with the 'right' supporters, together with timing and persistence (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). The informality and project-based work at MunBiz gave rise to an unofficial hierarchy of privilege operating alongside the formal bureaucratic hierarchy in tacit and subtle ways: powerful employees had long tenure, most had majority backgrounds, they were tightly connected to the internal municipal hierarchy and they possessed all the necessary information to perform high-prestige tasks, which predominantly flowed in their direction. They were internally referred to as the 'veterans' and seen as the gatekeepers of the system, distributing prestige and status among peers through favoritism and informal alliances.

Ane and I had to navigate and 'win over' this informal hierarchy of elite veterans to create a strong alliance with the 'right' agents to embark on change. Initially, we enjoyed their support throughout the phase of planning and carrying out the seminars on collaboration. However, their support declined at the brink of implementing the system of rotating teams, as recounted by Ane:

> The plan for rotating teams was all planned and ready to implement: I had appointed coordinators responsible for effectuating the rotating principle so that the teams at any time would reflect a variety of competencies. But continuous internal chaos meant that I could not stress my section members with yet another change. The organization was characterized by internal chaos, and I couldn't take responsibility as a leader any more. Dirk was not backing my decisions as a section manager.

When reflecting on these events three years later, she referred to two decisive aspects related to her decision not to implement the system of rotating teams: continuous restructuring and her power struggle with Dirk. After years of restructuring, MunBiz was going through yet another change. Ane narrated how – on top of an ongoing external structural change implying that MunBiz would be integrated into a new department – Dirk embarked on internal restructuring with the implication that two of the section managers, including Ane, should 'swap' teams:

> The international restructuring was launched completely 'out of the blue'. I kept on thinking what kind of madness the next weeks would bring. Dirk wanted to demonstrate to his leader [the director of the department] that he was strong and could embark on changes in house… I had been working with my team for almost a year, and my specialty was developmental tasks. I would have to deal with new employees in a team working predominately on administrative tasks... Internal chaos and stress were the outcome of all of these restructurings.

The waves of restructurings involved employees in constant acts of reassembling the organization, and many felt that their work was meaningless due to ongoing changes. As Ane mused:

> Every time you make changes, privileges are being 'thrown up in the air' and have to be renegotiated. This might explain the resistance to change. Retrospectively, I should have considered whether struggling with ongoing external and international changes invited yet another change to alter collaborative routines. Obviously, this was hurtful to my employees: some found it intriguing, but the majority felt threatened by this change.

After an intensive period of seminars culminating in the formulation of the plan for rotating teamwork, its implementation was 'suffocated' by ongoing restructuring and employee resentment to embark on yet another change; Ane wanted to give her employees stability and lessen anxiety around ongoing changes.

However, it was her poor relation with Dirk and the lack of his backup of her ambitions that made her give up the implementation of the plan for rotating teamwork and eventually leave the organization. Initially, she had asked Dirk for permission to involve me in transformative efforts targeting 'diversity and equality'. However, he was never informed about the basic intention behind or details on the progress of our interventions, and he never attended the committee meetings when planning the seminars. When reflecting on Dirk's internal restructuring three years later, Ane told me about her constant power struggle with Dirk:

> I believe he was afraid of my position. It wasn't really about our project – it was about me. I shouldn't have this much backup from a group of employees who liked me so much and him so little. Our project provoked him… I also had very high ideals about the kind of change we could initiate. I wanted to show the world that I could handle Dirk. I didn't trust him and didn't know how to embark on significant changes with an untrustworthy CEO. I guess I didn't have the courage at that time. So it was eventually me – not him – who stopped the implementation.

The power struggle with the CEO and the pressure from ongoing restructuring in the organization blocked our intervention and left her fatigued with the situation.

Mobilizing minority support

It turned out that support from hitherto disadvantaged minorities was equally important to obtain support for a transformative diversity agenda. Concurrently with the collaborative seminars, another intervention took place: one of my first interviewees at MunBiz was Ria, a newly recruited consultant with a Spanish background and a Master's degree in human science from a Danish university. Ria confided in me that she was very upset with the way that tasks were distributed, favoring employees with 'native Danish' and political science backgrounds with high-prestige developmental tasks while reserving the low-prestige practical tasks for employees with international backgrounds: "Look around – all the chief consultants and managers are white Danes, and the subordinates have international backgrounds. There is no will to let international employees advance in the hierarchy."

Teaming up with Ane, we conspired to alter this task-distribution practice by giving politico-strategic tasks to Ria, acting as a 'game changer'. Due to informality, there was no formal task-distribution system in place; it was just a matter of distributing tasks differently than prescribed by the managerial discretionary routine. The responses from Ria's colleagues were prompt: "The first thing [a section manager] asked me last Friday was 'Why did you get these assignments on policy? Why are you allowed to do this with your background?'" Subsequently, Ria was more or less left to her own devices to prove that she could perform strategic tasks: "People are constantly questioning whether 'we' – the non-Danes – have the right competencies, especially writing skills. I constantly have to prove that I am good enough".

With no formal supportive structures in place and Ane lacking the resources and time to provide the necessary support, Ria experienced increased professional and social isolation. Despite initial praising by colleagues of her new tasks, they increasingly excluded Ria. At frequent meetings with Ane, I encouraged supportive structures to shelter Ria, like official 'rites of passage' of her appointment, feedback on her work and teaming her up with other strategic-task-performing employees. Ane did try to help her; she instructed Ole to support Ria, but he never did: "I still wonder why Ole didn't comply – what was so dangerous about helping her learn how to make a good memo? He had been with the municipality for 25 years…"

After Ane left MunBiz, Ria was dependent on the 'blessing' and support of the veterans to successfully carry out her new high-prestige tasks. They could have helped her to develop a municipal bureaucratic form and communicative style and could have provided her with access to information and networks. However, none of the veterans offered this support: what seemed to be at stake was the privileged access to managerial-sanctified involvement in core organizational matters – not only one (minority) employee's access to professional and personal development through performing new tasks. As such, MunBiz demonstrated how crafting a more-inclusive organization involved the whole organization and the acceptance of loss of privilege to the benefit of the community. After Ane left the organization, Ria felt very lost and isolated, leading to long-term sick leave. Once back again, she reacquired her old representative tasks.

When reflecting on these events three years later, Ane explained this lack of support as a matter of conforming to an ideal of diversity and perfect results:

> We had an ideal of wanting to be diverse but also deliver perfect results, which necessitate adherence to municipal standards – to deliver memos in perfect Danish, obeying the bureaucratic form. This ideal might explain why majority employees were hanging on to their privileges and interesting tasks, giving

> them access to careers. But it was also a matter of self-interest and not in the interests of the common good.

Hence, the overall ambition of performing in relation to the municipal hierarchy might have persuaded majority employees of the 'good' of ethnic majority Danes' performing strategic tasks involving writing memos, as Ane clarified:

> I inherited a section where Olga and Ole had been constitutionally in charge [two veterans with majority backgrounds]. They were very engaged in leveraging good results and ensuring manageable processes. They always sent the same developmental tasks in the same direction. And Oya [a veteran with a minority background] got all the representational tasks, and she coordinated among 'her people'. So, it all produced great results and everything ran smoothly.

Hence, not only majority veterans gained from upholding the status quo: Oya, a veteran with a minority background, had a secure position of distributing representative work – granting her a privileged position in the organization. By upholding the status quo through doing representative, low-prestige work, minority employees allegedly created secure positions and stability in work life. As Simmel explains, 'strangers' are offered belonging on the conditional term that they perform work that the majority do not desire (Simmel, 1971). Minority employees could exclude others by stressing the valuable language and cultural skills they possessed. Paradoxically, this kept the minority employees headed by Oya from challenging the basic cause of inequality – the stereotypical distinction between majority and minority employees in terms of skills and competencies. In fact, they reinforced this stereotypical view in order to preserve their own power (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2009; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014). In line with Zanoni and Janssens' (2007, p. 1394) observations, minority employees are not helplessly exposed to managerial control attempts but rather "draw on managerially inspired discourses in as far as such discourses allow them to construct a positive identity". Feelings of social injustice strengthened the affective bonds among coworkers with international backgrounds in a 'community of fate' while expanding feelings of alienation from majority colleagues. Ria challenged this secure position of indispensability and 'martyrdom' with her new tasks, increasing her professional and social isolation. The statuses and positions of employees with international profiles were, however, not equivocally low prestige, as Ane expounded three years later: "International profiles were affiliated with being hip, rebellious, urban and cosmopolitan. Especially young majority employees wanted to hang around with them. Everybody was aware of the prestige they created externally, and internally they were seen as cool."

In MunBiz, Ria illustrated how confronting the distribution of status, privilege and disadvantage in an organization often comes at a personal cost (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). In doing so, she seemingly shifted the security of a tight social network based on a predefined practical-representative position

for highly prestigious but alienating tasks – giving her more foes than friends in the organization. Ahmed's (2004) notion of affect as performative and productive of subjects and relations might explain why Ria's case escalated: her body became 'sticky' with affect, such as anxiety of exposing unfairness, as well as shame and guilt for her colleagues not supporting and isolating her. Ria became the cause of misattunement, making her section and prior team 'moody containers'. As constant restructuring characterized professional and social life at MunBiz, Ria spoiled the small amount of 'harmony' and attunement that predictable task distribution created: those who are "not in tune… they become what gets in the way not for attunement, but all it promises: life, connection, empathy, and so on." (Ahmed, 2014, p. 20)

The reactions of physical avoidance and isolation on behalf of both minority and majority colleagues point to how Ria 'spoiled' the mood and harmony by confronting habits of task distribution and the naturalized hierarchy. This affected Ria's body when in the organization: she embodied an ambivalent stranger who both unmasked the artificial character of the minority–majority distinction on which claims of unfairness were based and demonstrated its pervasiveness by demarking the very tangible barriers to equal opportunity. As Ane reflected three years later:

> The way Ria refused to settle with the situation threatened Oya. Something important was at stake – was it survival? There was this secret cinema club that whites were not invited to join: a gesture of resistance that was meant to tease us. Oya was the queen of this cinema club – nobody was invited to join the club without her prior approval. She introduced Ria to the club and she excluded her.

Ria explained this exclusion in very bodily terms: "Troublemakers like me get isolated, kept out of sight" and "It has become very unpleasant to be here, and I get back-stabbed every now and then." The social and physical exclusion can be seen as what Ahmed (2014) calls 'mood work': Misattunement can be directive to modify the behaviors of others. If this is not possible, they get excluded (Ahmed, 2014, p. 19): she was denied access to 'spaces in attunement' to rid her spoiling the 'good mood' in the secret cinema club.

Three years later, Ane was not sure how to interpret events: "How much did Ria really experience collegial resistance? I can recognize the way she spoke about events. But I haven't felt it in my own body like her. Even now after three years, she still does not want to meet any of her old colleagues." Indeed, misattunement and the related awkwardness can be persistent: Ria felt awkward in the organization when colleagues allegedly reacted to her new tasks, and she grew strongly aware of her own and colleagues' bodily reactions, apparently making her feel even more awkward: "Lack of attunement might be how some bodies stumble, become those that get in the way, even of themselves"

(Ahmed, 2014, p. 21). She might even have added to her own exclusion and isolation due to heightened affective energies circulating while she was in the organization, leading to her long-term illness absence – excluding herself from the organization.

Losing access and reflection on change

According to Alvesson and Willmott (1992, p. 447), "Awareness of the anti-emancipatory potential in all good suggestions encourages deeper reflection of how seemingly humanistic ideas lend themselves to ideological usage". The 'dark side of emancipation' has to be acknowledged, which was a lesson learned from my fieldwork. Not only by way of Ria's example: Ane also witnessed the 'dark side of emancipation', investing resources and aspirations in the plan for rotating teamwork, which eventually failed. Her exit left many of her section members highly frustrated by the whole process, as one employee mused: "It is extremely demotivating because we can see everything we have done in these collaborative seminars and our efforts to find some common values, that's all gone, and we certainly have no team spirit left."

Ane's exit also put an end to my fieldwork at MunBiz: my affiliation with Ane and our 'failed' transformative agenda apparently blocked my access. By the end of my study, my feelings towards the whole research process were pretty bleak: when Ane quit, followed by Ria's sick leave, I was guilt-ridden, shameful and emotionally engaged in the events, pondering on the ethics of my research. I wondered whether my body was saturated with affect like Ria's. I was sticky with a history of trying to change the organization in a more progressive direction – which most employees sympathized with as 'good colleagues', living up to the diversity values otherwise thought to characterize MunBiz. This infringed my confidence as a researcher, combined with the vexing experience of seemingly 'successful' interventions ending up in failure and having lost a battle. I could not avoid reflecting my feelings and frustrations in the interpretation of the data; the events and participant statements that I highlighted forcefully shaped my representation of MunBiz (Donnelly *et al.*, 2013). My shame and awkwardness around how to interpret events tied me even stronger to the few people whom I retained bonds with; in the 'aftermath', several participants contacted me, requesting to meet outside the organization. Especially Ane, Ria and a third section member had developed almost therapeutic relationships with me, where we acted as each other's 'listeners' on reflections on more-personal/sensitive feelings of exclusion and unfairness.

The turn of events, Ane's exit leaving frustrated employees behind and Ria's sick leave triggered my reflections on the genuine impact of our interventions. Interventions should not only be applied to

generate 'rich and rigorous' data (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013), which was definitely an outcome of our interventions; I wanted them to produce more-enduring transformative consequences, igniting collective reflexivity among organizational participants. When meeting up with Ane, we discussed 'what went wrong' and the wisdom of embarking on both covert, subversive, 'incremental' changes and explicit, open, structural changes:

> How much should you make it an open, involving process, and how much should it be 'undercover' – an act of subtle, tactile intervention to distribute tasks a little differently, which you can do as a manager? This is what we tried with Ria, and I just did not have a clue about how big this change would seem from colleagues' points of view. I had no idea about how massive their reactions would be. The rotating teams were more explicit, but it wasn't feasible due to continuous restructuring. That shouldn't keep us from acting, but we should have downscaled ambitions for how fast we could implement changes.

The practical relevance becomes important in relation to what kinds of change processes get triggered by interventions. In our reflections on the aftermath of our interventions, we discussed how in engaging with diversity in organizations, especially minority–majority relations, there needs to be a firm assessment of the availability of the necessary organizational support to carry through a transformative, emancipatory agenda. As Ane reflected:

> People wanted each other as colleagues but without implications for their privileges. If you intervene to make people change their behaviors and ways of collaborating, then you force people out of their comfort zone. I did not handle this situation in a timely manner; they just needed stability and predictability in the back office.

Worthwhile change cannot come about solely through isolated individuals acting alone. A critical mass of support must be mobilized on behalf of the organization. At MunBiz, the lack of top-management support was an issue, together with the lack of supportive structures of the opaque, informal system. These organizational features gave Ane and me quite wide possibilities but with a failing ability to embark on substantial structural changes. Instead, the interventions became a battlefield of political struggles between critical section members Ane and Dirk:

> I did lack a thorough assessment of whether the structural framework was in place to ignite major changes. But my biggest mistake was not to involve Dirk. Should we have embraced him with 'love' [laughing]? In hindsight, we should definitely have involved him more; you have to ensure backup from the top. Having a badass CEO shouldn't stop you. If I didn't embark on changes, I would have embodied the reproduction of inequality – I would be just like him. Strategically, we should have incorporated something that could strengthen his position and his stake in the change.

The combination of the lack of top-management involvement, support and interest and the minority and majority veterans being busy consolidating their new power positions in an altered organizational power landscape, especially in the aftermath of continuous waves of restructuring, actively undermined our emancipatory diversity agenda. Hence, barriers to the success of our interventions

might not only have arisen from the research design in isolation. But also from the very complicated task of transforming MunBiz in regard to both structurally targeting interventions and implementing incremental strategies of small steps of 'micro-emancipation' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). However, we did manage to problematize the current collaborative and task-distribution practices, which might trigger bottom-up transformative agency in the long term. As Ane commented three years later you have to evaluate and measure the progress of change over a longer period of time:

> I would like you to make an epilogue – what happened to all of them afterwards? Well, all the 'whites' stayed behind, and they have settled with the situation. All the minority employees have moved on to prosperous, stable positions outside the organization. I have recommended them all. And I am so proud. This feels nice, considering my exit.

Concluding discussion

This study adds to the emerging field of performative and critical diversity research, moving the research away from its foundation in abstract, detached and disembodied research (Ashcraft, 2017; Ahmed, 2014; Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Holck *et al.*, 2016; Janssens and Zanoni, 2014). By applying intervention-based ethnography, this research explored the possibilities of providing relevant and useful research on diversity with implications for practice. Ethnographic-immersed methods provided deep insights into diversity practices, while interventions in collaboration with practitioners problematized and helped to develop practicable solutions to identified problems (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Akom, 2011; Ghorashi and Wells, 2009; Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2008; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). Inquiring into efforts to mobilize organizational members, together with the micro-politics of doing engaged research, this study exposed the organizational dynamics that enable and constrain change (Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). The 'drama' of transformation imposed a key dilemma of needing support from exactly the same powerful elite who benefit from the status quo of the present distribution of privilege and status. However, equally important was support from hitherto disadvantaged minorities clinging on to the privileges of performing 'ethnified', representative tasks (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). This might illuminate why even when the number of minority groups in an organization increases, professional development and career prospects often remain limited (Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014). Indeed, this performative research in MunBiz exhibited the 'stickiness' of privilege and disadvantage, tying certain organizational groups together in 'communities of fate' while involving the research–change agent in intricate processes of inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed, 2014; Donnelly *et al.*, 2013; Mikkelsen, 2012).

Embodied and engaged research invoked affective feelings and reactions on behalf of both researcher and participants. Bringing in the notion of affect as relational, performative, sticky and contagious facilitated a focus on three important considerations when conducting the intervention-based ethnography. First, it shows how an affectively entangled and involved researcher needs to critically reflect on the impact of this entanglement in the research process: how affect makes it difficult to distinguish personal experiences from 'actual' organizational changes. The notion of affect made me critically examine my own role and impact on the implementation of interventions and my interpretation of the events and fieldwork experiences. Secondly, a focus on affect made it possible to discern possible reasons for colleagues' resistance to change: how Ria's body became 'saturated with affect', sticking to her persona and making her awkwardly aware of the unacceptability of her changed tasks (Ahmed, 2004, 2014). The possibility for her to perform strategic tasks made her 'betray' the incarnation of martyrdom otherwise sticking to minority bodies, tying them together in a 'community of fate'. Finally, affect might also explain why Ane after three years still had paradoxical and contradictory explanations and experiences regarding the course of events, oscillating between admitting to majority privileges and an ethnified hierarchy and also denying it, regretting her own 'faults' of not adequately assessing the situation and the readiness for change, and then redeeming herself by referring to the power struggle with the CEO and ongoing restructuring blocking the eventual implementation of the plan for rotating teams. Her wish for an epilogue demonstrates how employees (especially those with international profiles, including Ria) had moved on and left the organization behind.

Engaging in 'useful' research with the ambition to alter the organization in favor of equity and fairness might even point to alternative ways of working with diversity in organizations: in a strategic combination of two different transformative methods simultaneously targeting individual and structural aspects of inequality. These two methods are the explicit and involving method, which pursues "structures and routines which reproduce inequalities and normalize the privileges of the dominant group", based on ethnical in-group collaboration (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014, p. 2), and the incremental 'small steps of micro-emancipation' method, which more subtly problematizes, disrupts and challenges taken-for-granted practices of task distribution (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Ghorashi and Ponzoni, 2014).

So, were our change efforts a failure or successful? In addition, how do you decide the measures of success? On the one hand, our change efforts might be seen as counterproductive, based on a 'self-fulfilling prophecy': by exploring and verbalizing categories like minority and majority employees,

the research forcefully ‘minorized’ and ‘majorized’ the organization (Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs, 2015). These categorizations might even have been reproduced and cemented by our interventions. On the other hand, our interventions did change conversations in MunBiz and facilitated the open articulation of particularly minority frustrations – at least for a while. However, changing conversations need not translate into substantial structural changes altering the organizational power landscape in favor of equal opportunities (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Holck and Muhr, 2017; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2014; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017). In MunBiz, the lack of top-management support and the inadequate supportive structures (materialized in an opaque, informal system) both enabled and constrained change efforts, providing favorable possibilities for change, as no rigid rules or formal procedures blocked change efforts but did impose a waning ability to embark on substantial structural changes fundamentally altering task distribution and collaborative practices, as informality guided these routine organizational practices, perpetuating the status quo (Holck, 2017; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007).

Considering the implications for practice, MunBiz demonstrates how resistance stemming from change efforts need not be avoided. Reflecting on resistance in relation to power illuminates how the process of resistance also involves the reification and reproduction of that which is being resisted, by legitimizing it as an area of political contest (Benschop *et al.*, 2015; Van den Brink *et al.*, 2010). In addition, pressure from the top of the organization is often needed but not always granted. Hence, strategically negotiating top-management priorities and stakes in change efforts can be a necessity, even when compromising some of the ‘emancipative’ potential. Both resistance on behalf of employees and fluctuating top-management support should be expected, navigated, coopted and strategically utilized to keep power and privileges related to diversity on the agenda. After all, diversity change is all about a different division of organizational power and privileges.

Future research

Future critical diversity research needs to dive into the aspect of when and how intervention-based research is timely and researcher strategies on how to cope with unanticipated consequences of this kind of research. I therefore encourage researchers to share their (self-)critical reflections on intervention-based research. I would very much like to see future research engage more explicitly in the ethical aspects of performing interventions linked to problems with the difficult and unpredictable situations that arise from the interventions. This would further the knowledge about what actually happens in the processes of organizing and changing diversity. Only through sharing affective and

awkward fieldwork experiences do we have the potential to create new possibilities for thought and action – not to be stuck in paralyzing angst to do damage or to infringe a critical stance by action. Only through critical friendship and reciprocal engagement can researchers and practitioners find alternative and emancipatory ways of organizing diversity to the benefit of equal opportunities.

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