A day at the office: In and out of diversity

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ABSTRACT: Using empirical data from fieldwork conducted at a city office in Sweden, the article reflects on how the staff contextualise diversity in such a way that allows them to seamlessly fade in and out between making cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity relevant and irrelevant. Using the concepts of post-Otherness and postmigration, I argue that categories built around ethnic, religious, and cultural stereotypes were made irrelevant by the staff in the office context, while still being significant to them to understand and define society outside the office.

Keywords: Diversity, post-Otherness, postmigration, multiculturalism

Introduction: Avoiding the migranticization lens

Using the concepts of post-Otherness and postmigration, this article aims at showing how cultural and ethnic stereotypes are made irrelevant for the daily work at a city office in Sweden, while still playing a crucial role for the staff, in describing and understanding society outside the office. Although diversity at the office, in terms of ethnicity, religion, and cultural background roughly mirrors the demography of the city, I argue that the staff contextualised this diversity in such a way that it allowed them to seamlessly fade in and out between making cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity relevant while understanding society, but irrelevant in the office environment itself.

The empirical data for this article emanates from participant observation and interviews at a middle-sized city office in Sweden. Sorting out the material from fieldwork, concepts such as superdiversity (Vertovec 2007, 2019), ethos of mixing (Wessendorf 2014), cultural negotiation (Goodhall 2014; Armstrong and Baillie 2012; Wise and Velayutham 2009b), and different forms of urban etiquette (Anderson 2011) well known from research on diversity, were not sufficient to describe or analyse how the staff organised social interaction. This became the enigma that led to this article, in which postmigration and post-Otherness have been used as heuristic tools to show how a practice of sociality was formed at the office, implicitly challenging the idea that in a multicultural society, cultural, ethnic, and religious identities are always at the core of social interaction.

The article starts with a short introduction in this section to the conundrum encountered during fieldwork. Following this, the next section includes a presentation of workplaces as field sites. A conceptual discussion follows, which provides working definitions for the terms postmigration and post-Otherness. After that follows the main ethnographic section in which material is presented and discussed in relation to the analytical concepts to understand how the staff related to cultural diversity and integration. The article concludes with a discussion in which the demotic practice of sociality at the office is given an explicit form in terms of

enduring post-Otherness.

This article takes its point of departure in the notion that Sweden is a postmigration society, implying that migration and diversity have become part and parcel of everyday life. This has led to animated debates about identity, diversity, and integration in politics as well as research. In one way or another, the whole population is affected by, and related to these issues. Migration cannot any longer be seen as a transient phenomenon, but has become an omnipresent component of society and everyday life. These developments follow an international trend, which has in turn triggered vast research on commonplace diversity as well as integration. In most academic texts, commonplace diversity is habitually situated in sites like parks, malls, neighbourhoods, and cafes where encounters are ephemeral and momentary and described using terms such as urban etiquette or cosmopolitanism (Anderson 2011; Galipo 2019; Valentine 2008; Wessendorf 2014, chap 4-5; Wise and Velayutham 2009a, 2009b; Neal et al. 2018). Although tensions and conflicts can arise in these kinds of encounters, they are often flavoured by an air of conviviality, even if that is just a way of concealing resentment. On the other hand, if integration is at the heart of attention, research tends to focus on problems, conflict, and resistance that is allegedly derived from segregation (Fassin 2013; Sernhede 2022; see also Schinkel 2019 and the responses to his article in *Comparative Migration Studies* for an extensive debate on the concept of migration and integration). With a slight oversimplification, two 'typical' sites in research on diversity and integration have emerged. First, the semi-public space, such as the park or neighbourhood, in which differences are negotiated, mixed, and potentially productive; and the second, such as European suburbs, where differences are accentuated, conflictual, and problematic (and where ethnic and religious identities are a focus for discrimination and marginalisation). This division has multiple (and often legitimate) reasons linked to specific research questions, the socio-political materiality of a place, or the methodology applied. However, critiques of integration and migration research (Schinkel 2017; Dahinden 2016; Caglar and Glick Schiller 2016, 2018) have pointed out that as long as 'the migrant' is in focus as the research object, sometimes and variously termed a migranticization lens, ethnicity biased research, or methodological nationalism, such research inevitably foregrounds either one or the other (the productive or destructive) of these 'sites' and ends up (as well as start out) with the 'migrant' as a specific category. Focusing research on 'the migrant' carries with it an implicit assumption about diversity as an exception rather than constitutive of society (Schinkel 2017).

To avoid this polarisation, the staff at the office where fieldwork was conducted, was approached as any local population would be, irrespective of their origins or background, and an effort was made to explore that which "remains unseen when researchers begin with the assumption that although sociabilities can be built across difference, ethno-religious differences always remain central in interactions that involve people of migrant background" (Caglar and Glick Schiller 2016: 18).

Method: anthropology at a workplace

In a seminal quote, Geertz stated that "Anthropologists don't study villages … they study *in* villages" (Geertz 1973: 22, italics in original), meaning that anthropology should address general questions about society, or broad thematic research issues, through a detailed ethnography of everyday life. Anthropology has since experienced a proliferation

of methodologies trying to adjust the 'village approach' to an ever more fluent and mobile society (in a way presuming that the village society was not). One strategy has been to situate the researcher in the social flow, doing fieldwork in such places as malls, parks, and cafes, alternatively moving together with informants, or concepts, tracing them through different sites. Others have tried to find places where people do hang out together for a while, such as schools and neighbourhoods but even then, social encounters seem to be transient and fleeting. Although there exist a substantial number of studies of workplaces with a focus on working environment and organisation, peculiarly few anthropologists have chosen to do fieldwork at workplaces not to study work or organisations, but to study broader social phenomena. To paraphrase Geertz, we need more anthropologists who "don't study workplaces [but] study *in* workplaces", using workplaces as field sites to address general questions in social sciences.

Workplaces are sites where people meet over the years, they socialise, fight, fall in love, in a way one is reminded of the classical village, the actual people come and go, but the structures reproduce new staff cum inhabitants, with the difference that suddenly, at five o'clock, everyone goes home and leaves the village empty.[1] So perhaps the workplace has more in common with a church or a ritual than a village. Whatever the metaphor that might be most appropriate, these (the village, the church, the ritual) are all places where anthropology has envisaged narratives about society being enunciated, negotiated, and established. The working hypothesis here is that this is true for workplaces as well. The workplace is a site where new narratives and practices are emerging, not necessarily just about 'society,' or the nation, or Sweden in this case, but about, and in the form of practices of everyday interaction, modes of interaction, and negotiations of social relations that are intertwined with broader societal structures and discourses. So, doing fieldwork in these places and asking classical anthropological questions about how sociality is formulated, expressed, and negotiated can be the key to understanding the broader society that the interlocutors (and in this case the researcher) are actually part of.[2]

Just as in my first fieldwork in Indonesia many years ago, certain taken-for-granted assumptions were quickly dispersed when fieldwork at the office started. Growing up in Sweden, during elementary school (1969-1980) and later while working in the heavy industry (1980-1986), a certain ethnic 'enclavisation' was in place. For example, in school and at work, Finnish migrants had their specific groups and communities; Polish and Hungarian work migrants arriving between the 1950s to 1970s, had their coffee breaks together with each other; and an odd single West African migrant never found a space in which he could join. This was also a way of organising and describing society that was reproduced in various academic literature. When I later taught courses in multiculturalism at the university, people were described as organising and identifying in line with ethnicity, religion, and culture. This insistence on classifying people in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture is still reproduced

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[1] Workplaces are diverse, in this case a 'classical 9-5' office was chosen. The reason for this was to have the opportunity to work in a place were people sustained relations over time, and with a staff that met on a regular basis.

[2] Defining workplaces as field sites was based on the notion that they are sites in which people do meet regularly over time and navigate social encounters. Apart from that, in Sweden, the political definition of integration more or less corresponds with the idea of getting people out on the job market (although a more value-based discourse is gaining ground in which being integrated does not mean getting a job but to adhere to Swedish norms and values).

in contemporary Swedish media and political debates. Although I set out to explore new ways of socialising over (or beyond) these stereotypical divisions, a presumption was that some of these patterns would still be recognisable at the office. For several reasons however, this was not the case. One might be that the office was just too small to have those kinds of ethnic divisions. But, as will be developed in the empirical section later, it was also that the diversity in a way, was too profound to allow for those kinds of ethnic pacts. In any case, my ingrained folk views on how a multicultural local society worked, were severely challenged. There was obviously a need for new concepts to understand and describe the field.

Postmigration and post-Otherness: the art and politics of living together with differences

Using the two concepts – postmigration and post-Otherness – I argue that moments in which stereotypes of Othering are made irrelevant, such as in the office, have a potential to transcend their contingent character and transform into everyday practices. However, as these practices are mundane and colloquial, they go unnoticed and have not translated into social or political narratives, although they do challenge dominant discourses in which diversity is alleged to create conflicts in terms of failed integration and multiculturalism.

Although not explicitly asking about origins, yet getting acquainted with the office, and through personal interviews, starting to notice the broad variety of ethnic, cultural, and occasional religious backgrounds among the staff, Wessendorf's ethos of mixing[3] was expected to become part of the analysis, and perhaps that cultural negotiations and urban etiquette would come in as handy concepts to describe the sociality at work in the office.

However, when presenting the research, a slight consternation arose among the staff. They did relate to the interest in diversity and integration since their work consisted of facilitating translation services, booking interpreters to help new arrivals to get in contact with Swedish authorities and social services, and their initial response was that a project concerned with cultural diversity should be located in the everyday life of the interpreters. In my view that was a bit on the side, since the research objectives were focused on how diversity was formulated at Swedish workplaces, hence in their office. They, on the other hand wondered why a researcher should hang around at the office to study diversity or integration. I had to admit that my expectations were somewhat ethnocentric in relation to the field site. What I experienced as obvious and striking – the diversity in ethnic, religious, and cultural background among the staff – was not anything they contributed with any specific significance. A new approach was needed to describe the situation in order to name and define it. Two concepts, postmigration and post-Otherness became heuristic tools to start understanding the form of sociality encountered in the office and to help reformulate the approach to the field site.

Anne Ring Petersen, Moritz Schramm, and Frauke Wiegand (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) and Anna Meera Gaonkar, Astrid Sophie Øst Hansen, Hans Christian Post and Moritz

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[3] Living in a superdiverse society, the ethos of mixing becomes an explicit value, "Interacting with people who are different in their religious, ethnic, educational or socio-economic background …is commonplace" (Wessendorf 2014, p. 102). Not mixing becomes the deviation of the norm. However, there is an implicit 'although' in the ethos of mixing. Although being aware of cultural, ethnic, and religious differences one should mix (socialise) to avoid conflicts, as epitomised in a citation used by Wessendorf in a subheading on p. 117, "You should not forget where you come from, but you must interact." Although the ethos of mixing is an explicit value, the cultural, ethnic, and religious differences are still premiere categories in defining the form of interaction.

Schramm (2021) provide a comprehensive overview of the development and use of the concept of postmigration. One way of conceptualising postmigration is to apply it to describe a condition of societies characterised by debates and negotiations concerning "Who are we?" (Ring Petersen et al. 2019a: 7). Such societies are full of tensions, conflicts, and negotiations concerning this question, and are obsessed with understanding themselves as defined by migration. Ring Petersen et al. define the postmigration society as a historical period characterised by irreversible migration. This does not only affect cities with a heterogeneous population, but it is also evident in rural and sparsely populated areas with few migrants, where issues of migration are central topics of discussion. The differences in attitudes are not mainly between urban-rural, right-left, low-highly educated, but between a basic approach to diversity as natural/good or unnatural/bad (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Hence, postmigration is a way of describing a condition, but it also indicates an analytical approach. In Ring Petersen's account (Ring Petersen et al. 2019b) academics apply the concept to avoid what, for example, Römhild (2017) has termed 'migrantology,' that is, research on integration that takes its point of departure in an implicit notion of homogenous collectives defined by the absence or presence of a history of migration. In that case diversity (and especially cultural, ethnic, and religious differences) becomes a category of exception and not a constitutive part of society. The concept of postmigration signals an analytical approach that does not focus on specific groups marked as 'ethnic minorities' or migrants; yet, it is still characterised by an interest in social heterogeneity and change as integral dynamics of society. It provides a broad analytical point of departure for research that tries to move beyond pre-defined categories, and instead focuses on the changing forms of sociality in contemporary societies.

Although 'post' is a problematic prefix, signalling that something has passed, I have chosen (also due to the lack of any better concept) to keep the post prefix. In this article the term 'postmigration' is used as a heuristic device, iterating between a descriptive and analytical mode. Putting on the postmigration glasses, the society is irreversibly and profoundly constituted by migration, going, staying, and leaving. That means that the category of 'migrant' is not any longer an exception but the rule, hence the 'post'. Postmigration, as used in this paper, means that the category of migrant is taken to be a standard, rather than exception. Post does not signal the end, or after migration but the normalisation of migration as a constitutive phenomenon of society. Post means _after_ the time when migrant versus non-migrant was a telling and meaningful core distinction to explain and understand society. Ergo, if the description starts out with the observation that a constitutive force of society is migration, the analytical research question becomes what 'constitutive' implies when it comes to everyday social interaction.[4]

A second term that is related (but not necessarily so) to postmigration is post-Otherness, referring to moments of social interaction when stereotypes entrenched in a colonial history of othering are transcended or outmoded. As with the concept of postmigration, the 'post' prefix is, again, problematic. However, in my understanding, 'post' in this case does not mean that stereotypes and discrimination have disappeared. Post means that these are moments when differences (for example, ethnic, racial, cultural) can be present, but do not dominate

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[4] I am following Ring Petersen et al. in choosing postmigration instead of postmigrant to emphasise the use of the term to denote a societal condition rather that referring to personal experiences (Ring Petersen et al 2019a: 9).

how relations are defined or the way people socialise; also termed heterotopic moments of conviviality and cosmopolitan interventions (Römhild 2018: 64, 66). The term takes its point of departure in the postcolonial Othering as a dominant and oppressive discourse, where post-Otherness is used to define moments when the colonial and postcolonial division between self and Other is momentarily rendered insignificant. Römhild shows how these moments are trivialised and "actively forgotten" (Römhild 2018: 69) as they do not fit into the dominant colonial history of an incommensurable difference between Others and self. According to Römhild, moments of post-Otherness are hidden and supressed since they are instances in which the dominant distinctions between migrant (Other) and non-migrant (Self) become irrelevant. Römhild makes the argument that most of the post-Otherness moments are almost unnoticeable parts of everyday life. The experience refers to such "ephemeral, hardly comprehensible moments in which hegemonic boundaries and hierarchies are frustrated in everyday practice and temporarily suspended" (Römhild 2018: 64).[5] It is moments recognisable to many but acknowledged by few, "We all know such moments that occur again and again in everyday life and briefly open up new views on what could be possible, whether in interactions in the subway, in anonymity of the urban public, in the neighbourhood, in school class, at the workplace. Those moments point to a long tradition of shared experiences of living together under conditions of inequality" (Römhild 2018: 64). The emphasis is on the fleeting moment, that they are brief, in a way unforeseen and contingent. One could question the universal claim "we all know such moments," first from the perspective of who is defining the moment, and second that all people probably have not experienced that. However, the importance here is that they are a potentiality, and are empirical.

Othering has a long history connected to colonialism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Zigianism, but also to the nation state and its othering of migrants and a number of different alleged enemies within. To cite Ndikung and Römhild (2013) at length:

> […] Europe […] actually consists of a multitude of minorities. Confronting this situation, the dominant politics of integration increasingly have to overemphasize constructions of ethnicized, racialized, Other in order to still keep up the fiction of national, European, western domination over and distinct from culturally inferior marginalised subjects [….] In that paradoxical moment, the figure of the post-Other emerges, a figure still bearing the sign of historical Othering […] In the shadow of the dominant political imagination a cosmopolitanized reality of convivial struggles unfolds, speaking and acting against that imagery. The moment of post-Otherness, however, is still in the state of emergence: it unfolds in the everyday practices of the "unconscious" kind when, e.g., the anonymity of urban life allows for infinite examples of everyday cosmopolitan interactions or when the students in the classroom "forget" about the ethno-racial taxonomic regime which governs their relations. Such practices are still waiting to be united and made visible (Ndikung and Römhild 2013: 214).

What I intend to show in this article is an example of post-Otherness enduring over time, not being dependent on the anonymity of urban life, or that people momentarily "forget" about a dominant taxonomic regime. Instead of looking for them in art, or in the

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[5] Thanks to Docent Jan Bachman for helping with the translation from German.

fleeting meeting in the classroom, park, or shopping mall, I argue that workplaces are sites where these moments have the potentiality to endure over time. As will be shown in the ethnography, the postmigration society is a fundamental prerequisite for this to happen. The social interactions at the office relate to experiences of living in a postmigration society. The office is not a disconnected island. Post-Otherness emerges in relation, and in response, to a society in which migration is the normal.

For the purpose of this article, post-Otherness has been applied in a restrictive way; as a heuristic tool to name ongoing social interaction in which stereotypes of otherness connected to multicultural and integration policies, that is, related to religion, ethnicity, race, and nationality, are made irrelevant in the day-to-day office interactions.[6]

In sum, as a working definition, the term postmigration denotes a societal condition in which moments of sociality in form of post-Otherness can (potentially) be stretched out over time transforming from a momentary practice into an enduring form of sociality. However, these practices are ordinary instead of being extraordinary, and because of that, these go unnoticed and do not take the form of socio-political narratives.

Ethnography: contextualising diversity out there but not here

As far back as in 1993, Stuart Hall foreshadowed that "the capacity to *live with difference* is, in my view the coming question of twenty-first century" (Hall 1993: 36, italics in original). This section provides examples of how the staff at an office in a middle-sized Swedish town approaches diversity in 2022.

This specific workplace where fieldwork was conducted, offers interpretation and translation services. The staff in the office acts as a mediator service, connecting interpreters and translators with clients. There are six persons working in administration, four managers,

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[6] One place where a narrative is emerging that captures this form of sociality is in literature and art. Moslund (2019) in his excellent review off Smith's book *NW* points to how the text conveys an experience of post-Otherness in a postmigration society that is different from a migrant perspective, or extra-ordinary experiences related to having a migrant background. Instead, Smith makes identity into a multifaceted prism where different aspects of this prism take precedence depending on the situation. In his review, Moslund notices that the novel offers "moments of interhuman connection and social spaces where ethnic and racial identifications lose validation and often disappear entirely - …- but it all coincides with a social reality that is still marked by continued every day and structural dynamics of racialization and discrimination" (Moslund 2019: 97). Moslund defines migration in *NW* "as something that is significant and commonplace at one and the same time" (Moslund 2019: 97) and that "Smith manages to blend the obvious migratory force … into the heterogeneity of a locally embedded everyday life" (Moslund 2019: 98). In a similar vein to how the staff at the office make diversity relevant and irrelevant Moslund sees in the text that "As for the big issues of changes caused by migration, its significance to the individual never disappears out of sight, although it waxes and wanes, in and out of the inconspicuously commonplace" (Moslund 2019: 98). In sum, the book reflects a "historical reality, and a consciousness within that reality, that is marked by migration as a major and permanent factor in shaping society, i.e., a postmigrant condition … while at the same time the fact of migration no longer appears with the imprint of exceptionality" (Moslund 2019: 99). This could, more or less, be a review of a day at the office.

two persons working with competence development and recruitment and two with text translation. Twenty-three of the staff are facilitators (Sw. tolkförmedlare), matching customers with interpreters. It is a modern office, located in a new, tall building in the city centre. The daily work is tech-driven, as the whole staff works sitting by individual screens and carries on their practical work through e-mail, chatting, electronic booking systems, and over the phone.[7]

Walking into the office there is a buzz of voices when people are arranging interpreters over the phone, solving acute situations (for example, interpreters needed for traffic accidents), directing interpreters who have got lost in the traffic on their way to an assignment, or solving technical issues (phones and links that do not work properly). Others take a break and chat with their colleagues about the latest sitcom, problems with local transportation, exchange tips for the upcoming vacation or complain about technological hang ups, impolite customers, or discuss working conditions. As they have wireless headsets, some of them stretch their legs and move around while answering phone calls. One is reminded a bit of an airport control tower (or the popular image of that).

Spending time in the office at different free desk spaces, an undercurrent of intimacy became prevalent in the day-to-day interactions. Although none of the staff hung out together regularly outside office hours, they cared for each other and entrusted intimate details about health and private life to specific individuals. Conversations moved seamlessly between professional issues, people helping each other out with the perennial problem of finding shortcuts in the malfunctioning IT systems, for example, into questions about family, and other ordinary small talks. Caring gestures came in the form of touches, but also as personal treats, like bringing favourite snacks for a friend.

I conducted 32 individual interviews, arranged six focus groups, participated in coffee breaks, lunches, staff meetings, After-Works, and have generally been hanging around in the office, for half a year (not every day).[8] The staff included about 35 people who as I understood when I got to know them better, had personal backgrounds and/or family relations in Finland, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Italy, Iran, Turkey, former Yugoslavia, Russia, Armenia, Mexico, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Germany, Guatemala, Estonia and all kinds of small towns in Sweden – very few, if any, had a family background from the city in which the office was located. Their ages ranged between 25-67. Most of them identified as women, six of them as men.

Deducing from the interviews, I found that about twenty of the interviewees were either born abroad or had at least one parent who has migrated to Sweden. Some of them have been working at the office for a very long time (more than 10 years), most of them at least 2-3 years. People move in and out, but the staff turnover is not exceptionally high (rather the opposite). One person used a veil, otherwise no religious symbols, rainbow stickers, ethnic flags, or other conventional diversity markers were visible. What has become a kind of standard Swedish office celebration, was performed by them around Christmas (and Easter), emphasising more their traditional, rather than religious features.

There are three different sections in the office: 1) Administration; 2) Recruitment,

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[7] All names are pseudonyms, small changes have also been made in the details that can identify the office or specific individuals.

[8] The focus groups were formed in line with the administrative divisions in the office. Hence the leadership formed one group, the admin group was one, etc. In this way people in the groups knew each other quite well.

Competence Development, and Written Translation; and 3) Interpreter Facilitators (Sw. Tolkförmedlare). These sections are physically distinct in how the office is organised, each section inhabiting a specific space. The facilitators work in three different teams, to cover for each other, when one team is on a lunch break, for example. Although certain social interactions depended on which section or team people worked in, the caring and professional atmosphere extended over these borders, as also over the age and educational differences, and to a certain degree, over gender differences. The reason to dwell on the theme of professionality and care reaching over social, physical, and administrative borders, is to underline the absence of collective categories in forming social interaction. Instead, personality was fronted as the quality that should be accounted for in establishing and entertaining social relations.[9]

Cultural diversity out there

When conducting individual interviews, a common response to the question on diversity and in what way it was relevant at the workplace, was to start talking about the specific assignment at the office. That they fulfilled an important task in helping with integration, facilitating translations between cultures, easing out potential societal conflicts, providing access to social services, etc. The organisation they worked for was explicitly seen as a medium for integration; and their profession of facilitating this service for integration, was what united them as a group.

In this way the work and the workplace were considered part of an integration process. Still, when mentioning differences based on cultural or ethnic signifiers they were, more or less, always, placed outside the office, used to define and discuss interpreters, customers or societal problems. Diversity was also mentioned (often in a slightly more stereotypical way) during lunchbreaks and private conversations, like when mentioning an interpreter's cultural background, such as in comments like "Somalis are difficult to get to take assignments early in the morning," or in endowing individuals with specific cultural traits "you know he is Hindu he even wears a turban" and of course, in conversations about migrants and criminality (since that was a huge topic in the ongoing Swedish election campaign in 2022). These differences were always located among people outside the office.

Placing culture, diversity, and integration outside the office could be defined as spatial distancing, while time was a second strategy used to create distance from conflicts perceived to be related to culture, religion, or ethnicity. For example, there was a memoir about a pious Muslim man wearing a military outfit and praying in the office; who, according to the story "conveyed a certain unease" and after a while decided to quit. Christmas celebrations were presented as being an area that had caused, if not conflicts, at least animated discussions in the past about what to serve and how to celebrate in a manner that would not be insulting to Muslims or others who did not celebrate Christmas, in terms of what food to offer and what decorations to use. Although occurring at the office, these were tensions now considered "solved" or "overcome," and so to speak ousted from the office or put behind in the past.

Another way to highlight cultural differences was when some of the interviewees pointed to the differences between Sweden and their country of origin (sometimes called

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[9] There did exist (minor) complaints about differences in working conditions between the sections. In these cases, the categories of the sections were used when defining the differences. Such as "why are we (facilitators) not allowed to work from home when the admin is?".

hemlandet, the homeland), joking about how relatives and friends found them different after living in Sweden and taking on customs and values considered odd. One of the staff just laughed out loud thinking about what would happen if he had treated a superior in a Southern European country the same way he dealt with them in Sweden; summing up that he could never move back and that he really appreciated the Swedish way of organising an office. This is not to say that there were no complaints about Sweden or that Sweden was made into an ideal, only that when formulating differences, and especially differences which were unequal or competitive in one way or another, the staff located them outside, or as in this case, in relation to the office.

Although this tendency to make culture, ethnicity, and integration outside the office significant, surfaced in many cases, it became especially clear when conducting focus groups. One topic in these conversations was the need for competence development in questions related to diversity. A reason to raise the question is that there exists a plethora of consultants offering courses in diversity management in workplaces. Diversity work is also often part and parcel in cultural institutions (Vitting Seerup 2019) and in work environment policies. Thus, as there seemed to be a great demand for competence development in terms of how to deal with cultural diversity, one question in the focus groups was about the need they felt for those kinds of courses.

As in many of the groups, Astrid in this case, started the conversation by saying "No not for me, no not for our workplace," and several of the participants agreed and nodded to underline the statement. The discussion then quickly turned to the relevance for customers and translators of having some sort of cultural competence development. As in this example, "No, we don't need it at all, we don't have that kind of situations. However, different ways of relating to time for example could be good to introduce to new interpreters, it is not self-evident to them that they should be exactly on time, for example." A telling example of how cultural and ethnic diversity was made irrelevant for the people in the office but important and significant when turning the gaze out on society or the work of the organisation in society.

The interface between customers and interpreters was an area that kept reappearing as important for different kinds of competence development in terms of cultural interaction. Some of the interpreters had recently attended an educational learning session in intercultural communication which resulted in a role play called cultural dialogues in which interpreters and customers met to discuss what interpreting could imply in cultural terms and how to avoid misunderstandings. As stated in the focus group, "We have the cultural dialogues and that is a good way of educating interpreters and customers, they are the ones involved with cultural diversity and how people react to that." The interpreters as well as customers were seen as the actors directly involved in cultural encounters. Cultural diversity was constituted as "something that is significant and commonplace at one and the same time" (Moslund 2019: 97); being so commonplace in the office that it loses its exceptionality, while being significant to understand and explain society outside the office.

Sometimes a distinct line was drawn between the office and the outside society. As one of the participants put it "Even if it (competence development in cultural diversity) is not so useful here at the office, it could, perhaps, have helped us to navigate society, you know on your way to work you meet people from all the world." Although in rough terms the demography of the office corresponded well to the city population and what you could expect to meet on the street, the "world" was located outside the office. Several of the staff

also affirmed of being racially abused outside the office but vehemently insisted on that it had never happened at the workplace.

A last example of how cultural differences were present as viable concepts, or notions, but at the same time distanced from being significant to the social interaction in the office, is when in one of the focus groups they brought up that certain neurological diagnoses may not even exist in all countries (in this case ADHD in Somalia was made into an example) and that the interpreters in that case not only had to translate the words but to explain what they meant. In the everyday work of the interpreters, it was obvious that cultural translation was crucial. The staff had a highly developed sensibility about the importance of cultural negotiations, as being part of an interpreters' daily work. The point is that terms like integration, diversity, cultural translation, and negotiation were not absent from the office discourse, they were specifically contextualised as important concepts to understand social relations and practices outside the office.

This section has presented how cultural differences, occasionally framed in terms of ethnicity or nationality were significant and viable concepts in explaining a society outside the office. Hence, they are not obliviated from consciousness or non-existent. What the next section shows is that they are not hegemonic in the sense of being constantly present. Instead, the office is a site where post-Otherness is the norm. Post-Otherness being moments in which what is significant in society is made commonplace and non-consequential. So, in a way post-Otherness can only exist in a society constituted by migration where the concepts of culture, ethnicity, and religious diversity is of significance. The next section will provide an ethnography of this change from significance into commonplace.

But not in here (at the office)

In one group, an interesting twist was noticed when one of the participants turned the perspective around stating that in a way the staff was quite homogenous, as most of them were born in Sweden. Apart from the fact that several of the senior staff members were born outside Sweden and that several others although born in Sweden had been brought up abroad, and finally that almost 50 per cent of the staff would count as descendants of migrants in official statistics, the comment makes perfect sense in a context of post-Otherness, where these distinctions are so commonplace that they are inconsequential for social interaction. It is just when an especially inquisitive researcher asks explicit questions about them that they surface as worthy of discussion.

In these moments of surfacing, individuals moved instantly and seamlessly between making differences so commonplace that they lost an explanatory value versus being significant in explaining society. An example of that surfacing was highlighted in one of the focus groups when discussing the need for diversity management courses. The questions about diversity management often triggered self-reflexive comments and discussions that in a sense made explicit the different approaches to diversity outside and inside the office. As in the following excerpt from a group conversation.

- No, it (diversity) comes naturally here.

- You just get used to it.

- Yeah, you don't think of it.

- As we work together you don't think of it, it comes naturally for us.

- It is just the way it is.

- We learn from each other, from the different countries and cities we come from.

- Such education could perhaps be better used at a place where all are the same. Perhaps they need to understand that people are different (laughs).

This is just one example of the overall assumption among the staff that dealing with diversity is a skill growing organically through practice. It is nothing explicit, not something to be negotiated or mixed into something.

In the conversation cited above, one of the participants placed cities and countries on an equal footing, cities in this case referring to Swedish cities (if background was discussed, Swedish born staff always referred to their home city while foreign born staff to the country of origin). This levelling of moving in from another country or a small Swedish city came up sporadically but regularly as something, although acknowledged not being the same, considered an important move. It could be joked about, but was also seriously discussed; such as when discussing integration, as in a discussion initiated by Elena in one of the focus groups.

"We do not have that many new migrants at the office, well we have the people from Kramfors. How was it to move here?" asks Elena, who grew up in South America, tongue in cheek. The guy from Kramfors laughs but does give a serious response on how he thought it was a big difference arriving in the anonymous city compared to living in a small town. The comment developed into conversations about moving from the countryside to big cities and someone added a perspective of moving in from a city like Sao Paolo into what, from that perspective was conceived of as a small city in Sweden. All were, of course, aware of the different conditions when arriving as an international migrant or a Swedish citizen. However, there was also an acknowledgment of moving as a profound experience (although, again, of course, individually situated).

These examples are just a few of many to exemplify the pattern in all focus groups to play down the need for diversity work at the workplace while acknowledging its relevance for the assignment of the organisation. Although a distinct pattern, the discussions were nuanced and reflexive. One of the participants cautioned that it is important to keep questions about diversity inside the office alive as well. As an example, she mentioned the SRHR (*Sexuell och reproduktiv hälsa och rättigheter*, Sexual and reproductive health and rights) education they had a while ago. "I thought I knew how to think, but in that education, I really learned something new." In this case diversity was made relevant to the staff, and in the way they should relate to others although not in cultural terms but in relation to sexuality, health, and reproduction.

When asked to describe the diversity at the office in their own words, many did of course raise the different "backgrounds" in the staff (no one explicitly mentioned ethnicity, culture, or religion) and the differences in age, a few mentioned genders. But it was vague and imprecise descriptions. After that, the follow-up question regarded if they thought the diversity they just described, affected them in any way in their work, or the workplace. A

frequent answer to this included reflections like "No, we are so different that I have stopped thinking of it." It was as if they had all read Susanne Wessendorf's (2014) monograph on common place diversity and citing it. Mind you - this was not multicultural Hackney where cultural diversity and mixing was an explicit norm, but quite an ordinary office in Sweden, although the assignment of working with translation services may have attracted a slightly higher number of staff with international backgrounds (one respondent mentioned that the diversity at the office mirrored what Sweden looks like today), where it was rather the interview questions, that triggered the reflections.

The interviews often turned into conversations, and as they went on from the initial, "we are so different, so it does not matter," people pointed to rewards of working together with colleagues with different skills and experiences; mostly that age made them having differences in technical skills, and secondly that some of them were former interpreters and could bring that experience into their everyday work. Differences were acknowledged, but intuitively when thinking about them, they mentioned specific personal skills, such as language competence and technological competence, not differences in religious or ethnic belonging. As when Inger provided an example of how diversity smoothens out the work: "I do not think of us being different or having different backgrounds although I, of course, know it. It is just when it comes in handy, as if a customer asks for a specific Arabic dialect, I ask Aisha about that because she knows". This commonplace approach to diversity was also well illustrated when talking to Boyana who fled from a war zone and has lived in Sweden since she was 19, she said, "Hm, I think that it (diversity) is so natural here that you do not think about it. I am not sure exactly how to explain it, but it is not something I think about. When you come into something that is just there you need to take a step back to see it. At the previous company I worked for, there were only five people with a different background (than Swedish) out of 100, and in that case, you were really aware of the differences. However, when I started here, and all of the staff have different backgrounds you don't even think about it. So, it is difficult to say if it (diversity) affects us or not at the office, it is just the way it is. I think it is a relief (*skönt*) that you don't even have to think about it because it is so normal." An almost identical story was told by Monica. Explaining that at the former workplace they had only a few people with non-Swedish ethnic backgrounds, and that they often explicitly pointed that out to mark themselves as different. She continued, "You know here no one ever does that, here all are different, so no one seems odd." Cultural differences were not made insignificant as a result of conscious neglect, it was rather a mode of being.

It was not that cultural, ethnic, or religious differences were a taboo. During lunch break someone took the opportunity to ask Adeline about a specific dish served in her country of origin, someone else brought snacks bought on a trip "home," occasionally a joke was cracked between people from former Yugoslavia about ethnic stereotypes, etc. The differences were brought up in a casual, contingent manner, and as far as I understood it, not very different from when asking someone who had moved in from a small town, what they thought about the move.

An apt illustration of this is a conversation with one of the seasoned co-workers.

I don't think we discuss diversity much. Not at staff meetings, or coffee breaks and such. It more just pops up sometimes if someone has a different background. Like Daphne who was born in Greece, I worked there for a couple of years and now I am practicing my Greek with

> her. Or as when I was going home the other day and met Majken at the bus stop and her bus was delayed. I then got to know that she lives in a western suburb of the town. I had no ideeea! Just like that, suddenly you get to know something new about people.

The citation above does not imply that people did not differentiate between what it meant to be born in Greece, and the new knowledge about someone living in a specific suburb, as shown in the excerpts from the conversation. However, this was an ordinary way of dealing with social categorisation where migrant/non-migrant did not become the main watershed. Differences were instead situated in terms of personal traits and skills (like living in a specific suburb or knowing a specific language). The post-Otherness concept highlights the obfuscation of stereotypical categories for social interactions in the office as a meaningful absence which emerges in contrast to the significant presence of the categories in ordering society outside the office.

The exception that proves the rule

Sitting down with one in the leadership at a revisit, she told a story about a new employee who had started to work in the office.

> You know, I have to tell you this since it is related to your research. We hired a new staff recently, a young woman, and she wears a veil. That is not a problem, of course. But, after contracting her and she had settled in to work someone raised the question if we had asked her in the interview about the hand shaking policy? And it struck us that none of us had thought about asking that. You know we have this policy when it comes to interpreters that they either must shake hand with all or none in the room when they meet the customer. Suddenly we realised we had not asked her about that. This caused a bit of commotion among us. How should we handle this? Should we expose her to a test? We also talked with some people in the staff about this. However, we soon came to our senses, of course, and one in the leadership just talked to her and asked about that, explaining that we have this policy. And she was just fine with that.

This was a policy explicitly directed towards the interpreters. No one in the leadership had thought of having to implement it at the office, and it hit them like a bolt from blue skies that such may be the case. Again, this is an example of how diversity and integration are concepts allegedly to be situated and significant outside the office, but not considered relevant at the office. In a way this instance exposed in a very clear way the division between the supposedly problematic diversity outside that had to be regulated in policies, and the non-existent problem of diversity inside the office. When the question arose in terms conventionally used to contextualise diversity outside the office, it stirred up emotions and questions exactly because it was supposed to be a non-issue in the office. The example also illustrates Moslund's description of how the significance of changes caused by migration "never disappears out of sight, although it waxes and wanes, in and out of the inconspicuously commonplace" (Moslund 2019: 98). It is not that stereotypes are unthinkable in the office, but there is a mode of interaction which avoids these stereotypes. A mode the staff refers to as being so "normal" that it goes unnoticed. Stereotypes may become relevant from time to

time, as in the issue with the Christmas celebration and the new employee, when they must be negotiated. However, these are the moments of exception.

Personalities

If differences outside the office were related to culture, differences between persons in the staff were tied to personalities and individual features. At their staff meetings for example, they had worked with the book Surrounded by Idiots (Erikson 2017) in which humans are divided into four types of personalities; at the time of fieldwork the book was a best seller in Sweden. This was made as an effort to discuss social interaction at the office and start reflecting upon reasons as to why conflicts may occur. They had also worked with company values which were presented as something everyone had to relate to. In one of the interviews, the participants brought up their thorough work with company values, as an example of how they approached diversity. "All these assignments we have had about company values which have been about how you think as an individual and how others think, what matters to you and such stuff."

Why and with whom to socialise with, came up sporadically in everyday conversations and interviews. Whom people chose to socialise with was a mixture of *ad hoc* pragmatism, depending on times for breaks and who brought a lunch box or not, and specific choices where shared interests or fitting personalities were given as reasons to hang out. Over time, someone said, "you get to know each other and learn how and with whom you can crack a joke" or start to get irritated by someone's "personal nature." As one of the staff born outside Sweden put it,

> I do not want to be put in a category, I want to be judged as a person, that is the only correct way, not as part of a group. If someone criticises me, I assume that it is because of me having some sort of lack in my competence. I would never think it was because of who I am. To me it (cultural differences) is outmoded at the office, perhaps relevant in the society but at the workplace we are all here to do a good job and if there are any complaints, they are related to how someone perform their task.

When talking about diversity at the office, it often ended up in a discussion about personalities.[10] You hang out with people who fit your personality and share your personal interests. While talking about diversity outside the office, it was described in collective (often cultural) terms, although they did keep a critical eye on stereotypes and simplifications. Maybe not a big surprise, still it was a distinct pattern. No one would imagine saying that "it is because she is a Kurd" about a college but could use similar categorisations about people outside the office (in explaining why people committed crimes for example).[11]

The mode of socialisation in the office is a telling example of post-Otherness. Stereotypical identities have not disappeared, but they are rendered insignificant. The two

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[10] What did unite them was an identification with a professional community dedicated to their respective tasks.

[11] The office did not lack conflicts and frictions. What did cause complaints, were technological shortcomings, alleged favouritism, hierarchies, and work environment. The workplace created its own logic in which people positioned themselves.

ethnographic sections, "out there" and "not here", illustrate what Moslund has described as "moments of interhuman connection and social spaces where ethnic and racial identifications lose validation and often disappear entirely [...] but it all coincides with a social reality that is still marked by continued every day and structural dynamics of racialization and discrimination" (Moslund 2019: 97). Hence, post-Otherness, as a form of meaningful commonality of diversity, appears as a specific mode of sociality in the postmigration society.

Concluding reflections

This section returns to the question of how moments of post-Otherness can transform into an enduring style of social practice.

In relation to the general success for nationalistic (far-right) political parties in Europe, it has become an even more pressing issue to explore how and if alternatives to the nation-based society (for example, postmigration society) are imagined (Schinkel 2017), and how these imaginaries are formulated. The argument pursued here is that we can start knowing that by studying how people socialise in their everyday life and observing the unspoken, following the anthropological premise that in small places hide large issues (Eriksen 1995); using the classical anthropological approach to understanding how society is conceptualised (Kuper 1992) by turning the gaze onto mundane, everyday life.

One consequence of living in a society constituted by migration is that cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity is permanently present, but does not take absolute presidency in creating alliances and in forming socialisation, although specific differences can be utilised in specific circumstances, exemplified at the office when asking for advice regarding a specific dialect. This is not the same as being colourblind, rather the opposite, and it is not relegating ethnic (and other) differences to the level and status of differences in, for example, hair colour (or a shirt you can take on and off). There are significant differences related to categories such as ethnicity, race, culture, and religion, that can be activated in certain contexts, but they are also so commonplace that they usually pass unnoticed. For example, the experience of migrating from a different country or a small Swedish town does not activate a distinction between migrants versus non-migrants, but initiates a general conversation about migration, which of course, takes specific forms and experiences. Or, as mentioned, several of the staff did testify to having experienced racist treatment outside the office, but never at the workplace.

The ethnographic examples show how classification among the staff avoided ethnic, cultural, and religious categories in the formation of their social interactions, although they were seen as potentially useful to solve problems, or gain information and use appropriately when discussing society outside the office. Instead, differences in personalities and personal inclinations were decisive in forming social interaction. Other social categories (like belonging to management, administration, or the facilitator section) were important in structuring the material environment, present when discussing working conditions, and to a certain extent in patterns of socialising.

The importance of context

Analysing "is sorting out the structures of signification" (Geertz 1973: 9) and how different frames of interpretations are established in a specific situation. Context is by no means given

but something created by informants and researchers to provide meaning (Dilley 1999).

In interviews and conversations, it was striking how diversity was recognised among the staff as being a crucial feature in society and highly relevant to their assignment, and at the same time considered (almost) irrelevant to the work environment as such. Diversity was acknowledged as a fact at the office but rather inconsequential (apart from adding value to how to solve the assignment). Diversity in explicit terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture was always out there, somewhere else.

People moved quite seamlessly between different frames or scales of interpretation and understanding; making diversity relevant for, and in society, and then let it fade out of the picture making it irrelevant in the intimate context of the office, such as in the examples given from the focus groups. In a sense it is banal to state that depending on the context, the force and scope of the dominant discourse that separates migrants from non-migrants, varies. However, in this case it is the same situation, we were at the office all the time, but the staff chose, or created, different contexts for their arguments and statements. This aligns well with how Dilley (1999), in his discussion about 'The Problem of Context', points out that context is not a background against which something is played out, but emerges through, and in practice; in this case, verbal practices that situated diversity within a context of 'multiculture' outside the office, but in form of personal traits inside the office.

If my description of this office is correct in terms of it being part of a postmigration society, then people in that society can be considered masters of contextualisation. Diversity and integration are conscious and present as concepts and practices. They are concepts that helped the staff to establish a context, but the extent to which they were used differed from a multicultural or superdiverse society, where the concepts of diversity and integration have a sort of constant presence and always have to be negotiated. At the office people created a context for culture as being significant to describe conflicts and misunderstandings in society, but being so commonplace at the office that it lost its significance and explanatory power. This flexible way in which the staff contextualised diversity was not restricted to any specific group, but recurred in casual discussions and interviews with the leadership, the administration, and the facilitators. It was a mode of socialising in the office and of conceptualising society where heterogeneity at the workplace was considered "normal", while cultural differences could be problematic in society. In this sense the office was a site where post-Otherness dominated not only contingent moments, but signified a sociality that endured over time. It was not an ethos needed to be kept alive through negotiations, compromises, or office etiquette. It was as Boyana mentioned in the interview, a "normal" state, which only became visible if you took a step back and observed it from distance (for example, as evident through an interview). The staff was sidestepping, or overcoming, categories based on race, ethnicity, religion and culture, creating a demotic (Bauman 1996), office-specific, practice in which diversity had a potentiality of being benign and productive, but did not matter in everyday interaction, except in terms of personalities and personal skills.

As Ring Petersen et al. (2019a, 2019b, 2019c) have shown, a postmigration society is rift with negotiations, antagonism, and ambivalence, and in this case, it is a tension between a dominant discourse of (failed) integration (which the office has as its objective to help resolve) and a post-Otherness social practice. This brings us back to the notion of post-Otherness practices as criticisms of the dominant discourse. If, as Römhild (2018) claims, the erasure of post-Otherness moments from the collective memory is a strategy

of domination in colonial and post-colonial society, does that work in the postmigration society as well? Probably not, because in this society it is a (potential) commonplace social practice, not just ephemeral moments. However, it is a practice not yet named or given words in either colloquial or political languages (in contrast to how words like multiculture, diversity, and integration are used in political as well as everyday situations to explain and understand social interactions). Hence the need for utilising the kind-of-awkward heuristic tools of postmigration and post-Otherness.

To actually give a name to and describe this situation, we have to ask, what kind of society do these interlocutors, the staff, live in, obviously not in the tribal village, nor the phantasmagorical spaces of the nation-state. It is like they are ducking the dominant discourse that is formulated on the principals of the nation-state and failed integration, to work out an alternative way of socialising beyond categorisations of migrant/non-migrant. A style of sociality that goes unnoticed because it is so trivial or miniscule, perhaps even not conceivable in the dominant discourse. Benedict Anderson (1983) in his seminal work of nationalism postulated that all "communities are to be distinguished […] by the *style* in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1983: 15, italics mine). In this case, the social practice of the community is in the style of post-Otherness, but what are the colloquial words in which to describe it? The hegemonic political and public discourse of failed integration in this case stands in contrast to a demotic (hidden, pragmatic) practice of post-Otherness. One way of conceptualising this, is to see it as an everyday embedding process countering dominant discourses on diversity; a practice helping the staff hide from being Others as a form of resistance strategy. But is it really a strategy of hiding or resistance? The staff does accept the hegemonic discourse in their work assignment. They and the organisation they are part of, have as their explicit objective, to integrate society. They do not hide from the dominant discourse. What the ethnography points to, is that the mode of sociality (the style of imagining) is part of the society they inhabit, that enduring post-Otherness practices have a potentiality to emerge in postmigration society as the postmigration society simultaneously harbours both the conflictual and the convivial aspects of migration, and this is the society the staff navigates.

Despite the resemblance to Wessendorf's ethos of mixing, the social practice did not build upon negotiating differences at the workplace; although it did happen, as illustrated by the discussion about Christmas celebrations and the newly employed staff with a veil. Post-Otherness was not an ephemeral moment of urban etiquette. These were relationships sustained over years, in some cases developing into friendship that stretched outside the office, but also in terms of working relations, they were complex and intimate. Could one say that the organic growth of how to deal with differences was a form of implicit negotiation of ethnic and cultural backgrounds? Probably not. There existed an explicit knowledge about how people through time chiselled or shaped (*slipades*) against each other. However, these processes were described in terms of learning how to deal with personal traits, temperament and such like, not in terms of people's ethnicity, culture, or religion. There were instances of 'negotiation' exemplified by how to celebrate Christmas where compromises were made (they served halal food but included sweets with gelatine). However, these were delimited or specific instances, and not ongoing processes.

This analysis is not to deny structural discrimination or experiences of being marginalised or stigmatised, or that processes of Othering are still at work; quite the opposite, that was

noticeable in the way cultural others were conceived of, and situated outside the office. However, if this analysis is correct, then there is also a kind of counter narrative emerging; or perhaps not yet even a narrative. As Ndikung and Römhild (2013: 214) put it, it is a practise that is "still waiting to be united and made visible". It is a practice of sociality, as yet only visible through analytical concepts such as postmigration society and post-Otherness, which does not align well with social categories sustained in, and by, dominant discourses on diversity – it is a practice that still await its socio-political narrative form.

Acknowledgements

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