Inclusion, sustainability, and equality: how can research contribute?

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**ABSTRACT**

Polarisation, segregation, exclusion, inequality, and vulnerability are real threats to our societies. What kind of research can identify and explain the mechanisms involved in creating what we need to strive for integration, inclusion, equality, and social sustainability? What kind of questions shall we raise? How can we decrease the gap between research and practice? In fact, striving to keep to the standards of excellent science might result in missing important aspects and new perspectives. There is a risk that within disciplines, science is too abstract and narrow-minded.

My intention here is to share some reflections on how we can learn from earlier experiences of research on inequalities and to discuss some alternative ideas on approaches that might contribute applicable knowledge.

Irrespective of the researcher’s ambition and ability to be objective and independent of special interests, we are affected by contemporary debates in society and by the systems that distribute resources for research. The feminist psychology scholar Jill Morawski (1997) argues that researchers must be self-critical, as research is always political and linked to the societal context. When reviewing her own discipline, she concludes that psychologists need to liberate themselves from traditional methods and concepts that treat the individual as an autonomous subject and instead see that gender is a relational and contextual concept linked to power structures in the society. Similarly, there are also problems in other disciplines in research on inequalities. For example, in epidemiology, traditional analytic methods with a variable approach and adjustments for sex, class, and so on have contributed to disguising structuring factors and processes in society (Rugulies, 2012; Susser, 1999).

I will take a point of departure in research on work organisation and work environment when reflecting on these challenging issues. Work life research has always been a field that is politicised and where many special interests meet. I argue that how work is organised and manned forms the foundation when building integrated and social sustainable societies. I will also particularly focus upon gender equality, but most arguments are also valid for inequalities between categories other than women and men.

Sennett (2008) argues that the significance of the workplace as a social arena for creating social cohesion is decreasing. Globalisation, new division of labour and production chains, precarious forms of employment, and new technology are examples of phenomena that embed the link between a specific employer and work organisation and the worker (Quinlan, Mayhew, & Bohle, 2001). Although work organisations as entities are less visible as actors and arenas, it is in the way work is organised that individuals are confronted with social structures and processes. It is also here that resources are distributed, which contributes to how inequalities are created as individuals are matched to jobs that are differently valued and meet with different inequality regimes (Acker, 2006; see also Bolin & Olofsson, 2016). However, the mainstream research on work and health in the last few decades has not been very helpful in illustrating this complexity. Perhaps research has in fact contributed to strengthen individualism. It is now important to choose theoretical and methodological approaches that will help to understand the structural processes involved in working life that strengthen inclusion, equality, and social sustainability. Three approaches are suggested here.

**Field studies of organising and work activities**

Until the 1970s, work life research explored how the organisation of work is linked to workers’ working conditions. However, from the late 1960s onward, organisation research and work and health research have been divided (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Mainstream organisation research tended to have a management perspective and occupied scholars at business schools, while research on working conditions and health consequences was explored by...
disciplines that used data on the individual level, such as surveys and health register data, and were performed by behavioural, social, and medical scientists (J L & Schaubroech, 2001). The link between these levels has been left deeply unexplored in the last several decades. To understand complex phenomena and build new theories, we need to contextualise our findings. We need to locate our observations to type of job, industry, region, and so on (Johns, 2001; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Barley and Kunda (2001) argue that lack of knowledge on post-bureaucratic organisations is a consequence of the fact that we seldom explore actual activities at work in conjunction with how work is organised and governed. The sociologist Charles Tilly argues for focusing upon the significance of what occurs in organisations and local workplaces in order to understand how inequality is created (Tilly, 1998, p. 253). This focus means that more field studies are needed that reflect activities in contemporary workplaces and work organisations.

What is produced, the position of the enterprise in a larger production chain, the labour market, and the technology available are examples of factors that influence how organisations are shaped (Giertz, 2000). Such factors also affect the possibilities to organise healthy work (Härenstam & Research Group, 2005). Most organisational aspects that have a direct impact on the work environment can be changed to be more health promoting. Examples of such aspects include how work is divided in time and place and between different groups of employees, how the work process is coordinated, how work is governed and controlled, how the results are measured, how power is executed, and what arenas are available where different expertise, experience, and perspectives are met, discussed, and reflected upon. These formal and informal structures and processes affect the managers and their employees’ actions and interactions that shape practices, logic, rules, and thus also the working conditions and performance.

If individuals begin to act differently, build new relationships, attend new arenas, and take part in new discussions, they attain other experience that enhances reflection, which in turn can lead to changes in structural conditions. This is how people are involved in shaping and reproducing structures and processes (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Layder, 2004). It is a mutual and continuously ongoing process that is not easy to explore. Still, it is very important that research explore organisational conditions to understand why managers and employees act as they do, which in turn gives us an understanding of the work environment and the work-related consequences of work, such as health, job security, and benefits. This issue has recently been actualised as a new regulation of the work environment implemented in Swedish Work Environment law that raises demands on the employer to organise work in ways that lead to a healthy work environment (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2015, p. 4).

The first suggestion is that field studies of activities and interactions in real workplaces are needed, as well as contextualising their findings to acquire knowledge on processes leading to inequality and equality in working life.

### Linking work activities with broader social structures

It is not enough to understand what occurs at workplaces within organisations. We need to link knowledge derived from studies at the micro level to broader social structures, as argued by new structuralists in organisation research (see, e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2001; Baron & Bielby, 1980; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2003). Moreover, in gender research, we find similar arguments for the need to explore and link several levels of society if we want to understand how inequalities are shaped. “We need to look across levels of analysis from the individual to the interpersonal to the organisational to the macro-structural and cultural to discover how inequality processes at each level interpenetrate one another to create and sustain patterns of resource inequality” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 2).

According to many structuralist scholars, categorisation into “we and them” is a central mechanism involved in processes leading to exclusion, segregation, and inequality. Charles Tilly argues that linking exterior categories, like men and women, to interior categories, like division of work tasks or work places, creates durable inequalities (Tilly, 1998, p. 179). He writes that men and women are separated by the way work is organised and occupations and workplaces are manned. This separation means that different types of jobs can be rewarded and ascribed different status (p. 149). Separation is another mechanism that is a prerequisite for the creation of inequalities (see, e.g., Abrahamsson, 2002; Acker, 2006, 2012; Baude, 1992; Hirdman, 1988). Separation of categories in places, such as the division of work into “female” and “male” typed jobs, means that inequality can be created without awareness that men and women as groups are treated unequally. It is much “easier” to argue for different treatment and rewards between jobs, workplaces, and sectors than to do so between certain categories of humans, such as sex, class, and ethnicity. Cecilia Ridgeway (2014, p. 4) argues for status as the most important mechanism: “When a difference becomes a status difference, it becomes a separate factor that generates material inequalities between people above and beyond their personal control”.


An example is how caring work was organised when this sector expanded in Sweden in the 1970s. The jobs were manned almost exclusively with women, operating under a logic that was aimed to maintain patriarchal principles in Swedish society (Gonäs, Johansson, & Svärd, 1997; Walby, 1990). It was considered important that women could continue to have the main responsibility for children and the family. This was achieved, for example, by standardising work to facilitate exchange-ability between employees when a woman was needed to take care of her own children. Work was organised in part-time jobs and temporary employment contracts. Few women worked full time for a whole working life. Work could therefore be organised to be very intense without being hazardous for the health. The jobs were and still are very meaningful and stimulating, which can compensate for the negative aspects such as low pay. Until the late 1980s, these types of jobs were identified as very healthy jobs for women (Härenstam, 2001; Kjellsson, Magnusson, & Thalin, 2014, p. 30). However, along with the economic crisis and decreased resources in the first half of the 1990s, in combination with new principles for governing the public sector, working conditions deteriorated tremendously during the 1990s (Conley, Kerfoot, & Thornley, 2011; Härenstam & Research Group, 2005; Rasmussen, 2004). This deterioration is an example of how a sector that is very gender segregated and organised in a way that was supposed to suit women instead led to large differences in comparison with male-dominated sectors and services. The same development did not occur in male-dominated municipal services that have been observed in several studies of employees and managers in the public sector (Björk, 2013; Björk & Härenstam, 2016; Forsberg Kanikunen, 2014; Westerberg & Armelius, 2000). Changes of contextual factors at a macro level can thus mean that the prerequisites to organise for healthy work can also change and lead to increased gender differences (Härenstam, 2009; Härenstam, Bejerot, Scheele, Waldenstrom, & Leijon, 2004). To explore such complex processes, we need methodological approaches that can link phenomena at different levels and longitudinal studies of broad and varied samples. Processes such as the one illustrated above in the Swedish public sector need at least the time perspective of a decade and combinations of qualitative and quantitative analyses. Cecilia Ridgeway expressed it like this: “if we constrain our analyses to inequality processes at a time, these multi-level mechanisms will continually elude our grasp” (Ridgeway, 2014, p. 2). If findings of studies of government and management practices are not linked to observations of work practices at real workplaces and to workers’ health and well-being, we cannot see how equality and inequality are created.

The second suggestion is that to understand how working life creates inequalities between groups, we need to link levels of analyses and longitudinal studies.

Comparisons as a way to restore or challenge inequality

One problem within work life research, particularly quantitative studies and official statistics on working life, is that it is based on individuals who are often stratified in socio-economic groups or sex. What we see reported today in statistics and in the media are large and increased sex differences in work-related health, particularly mental health, stress, and sick leave. If men and women are compared without reflection, explanations to gender differences tend to be sought in factors related to the individual sex. This pattern means that we can be seduced into a belief that gender difference is all about individual choices, attitudes, behaviour, and capacity. We can easily fall in the trap, as Morawski (1997) writes, of disguising structural explanations and thus also decreasing the possibility of changing these conditions. What we see in the statistics about gender differences in the work environment and ill health are in fact consequences of how the labour market is gender segregated, and there are systematic differences in how work is organised in male- and female-dominated sectors.

Three decades ago, sex-stratified statistics were introduced in official Swedish labour market statistics. This was an important step forward in studies of gender equality. However, now it is time to think anew. We need to break the link between sex and problematic working conditions. It is time to stop talking about women’s work environment. If the more or less unconscious link between sex and the organisation of work is attenuated, inequalities will decrease considerably, according to Tilly (1998, p. 253). We did not talk about men’s work environment when very worrying occupational health risks were found in the construction and manufacturing industries. Similarly, it is important that we do not expand statistics stratified by natives and immigrants as two categories as that might strengthen segregation and polarisation. So, what can we do instead?

At a gender and work environment conference in Malmö at the beginning of 2016, Christa Sedlatschek, the director of European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao, said that Europe faces huge challenges to include the large number of immigrants in working life with acceptable conditions. She argued that public institutions and statistics producers cannot and should not deliver statistics for specific subgroups. If political goals and agendas are set for different categories, such as women and men, young and old, natives and immigrants, it will certainly not enhance an inclusive society and decrease inequality. It is much more relevant for policymaking and preventive actions to identify industry-related working conditions. We should ask where the risks are found. In the next step, we can ask what groups
are found in the riskiest situations. Such knowledge is much more applicable to working life.

When industries are compared and differences found in the quality of working conditions, we can ask whether these differences are motivated. Are certain groups, for example grouped by sex, ethnicity, or age, overrepresented in the most health-hazardous work environments? Second, comparing industries is to compare contexts, that is, real situations where work is done, which means that the facts that we see are directly linked to those conditions and arenas that create the work environment. Here, we find the factors to change and actors with the responsibility for work environment as set by the law.

An alternative approach, which is even more unconditional, is to use contextual statistical methods, such as cluster analyses, by searching for typical patterns of different aspects of working conditions. By using such an explorative methodology, extreme situations of the riskiest and the most health-promoting situations can be identified (Härenstam, Bodin, Karlqvist, Nise, & Schéele, 2003; see also Vänje, 2015; Yoder & Kahn, 2003). In a second step, such situations can be compared and tested if the riskiest situations and the healthiest situations congregate in certain industries and if some categories (by sex, ethnicity, age, and class) are overrepresented in these different situations. If this is the case, we will address these situations and those who are responsible for the working environment directly. There are at least three advantages to such an approach instead of first comparing categories such as women and men, young and old, natives and immigrants, and high and low educated. First, we do not have to do a second wave of analyses to find where the risks linked to specific categories of the workforce are found. Second, we can find variations within categories of the workforce. Third but not least important, research and policymakers do not contribute to linking categories of people to good or bad conditions, that is, we avoid an important mechanism in the creation of inequality.

With a structural and contextual perspective, either by comparing industries or by applying explorative pattern analyses, we illuminate variations within categories such as women and men, natives and immigrants, young and old. With such an approach, knowledge is gained that can be applied to guide the creation of healthy work environments in all types of work and for all categories of the workforce. We already have the necessary requisites in the laws on work environment and discrimination. We need more knowledge on how to create healthy work environments in all types of jobs. If we start to explore inequalities by comparing categories of the workforce, such as women and men, we as researchers might even contribute to restoring the traditional status order. Society is much more heterogeneous than dividing the population into binary categories. Rosalind Barnett (1997) wrote that we cannot explore the impact of working conditions on women’s and men’s health until we regard gender as a marker not a cause of ill health.

The third suggestion is to compare contexts and identify risk situations and beneficial situations first, then explore the groups that are overrepresented in these situations.

How can science contribute?

It is obvious that a structural, contextual approach, including fieldwork and linking microlevel observations such as practices on the shop floor to broader societal structural changes, needs cooperation between disciplines. In line with social scientists such as Derek Layder, we need multi-perspectives if we want to analyse complex social systems (Layder, 2004, p. 222). This means that several disciplines need to cooperate. Highly specialised intradisciplinary research might lose the overview needed. We need to reintegrate disciplines and methodologies (Bejerot & Härenstam, 2010; Bolin & Olofsdotter, 2016; Forsberg Kankkunen & Härenstam, 2015).

Statistical methods such as multilevel analyses that can analyse complex data at several levels at a time have been available for decades. (For more information on such methodology in sampling and analyses, see Kalleberg, 1989; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000.)

There is also a great need for extended cooperation between industries, public institutions, and the academy. In Sweden, compared to many other countries, there are good opportunities to perform these kinds of large and broad field studies, as there is trust between partners in the labour market and the research community. The Scandinavian countries have good reputations in working life and management research. It is now time to take further steps and try new approaches in the search for applicable knowledge. We should raise and try to answer questions such as how organisations react and organise and man jobs when the context (such as legal, juridical, technological, and the market) changes. What strategies for healthy work are needed within specific industries and positions in the production chains that are adapted to their specific conditions? We also need to integrate quantitative studies with advanced statistics and the most relevant selections of entities with qualitative studies in order to understand and link microlevel phenomena with processes on the meso level, such as in organisations and industries. What are the driving forces and hindrances for healthy work within different industries? Finally, men’s and women’s living conditions and life chances are very much affected by their working life. Work is health promoting to most people but not in all situations. That is why it is so important to create fair jobs in all types of industries. In addition, we should address the entity where work is organised and practised: industries
and workplaces. To start with describing different groups is a circuitous road that might even contribute to increased segmentation and inequality in working life.

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