Teamworking in the public service sector and the meaning of diversity

In this paper, we are discussing teamwork in the public service sector, with empirical material from tele-nursing and from the health care of elderly, and how team composition based on diversity are used and experienced at the workplaces. There will be comparisons made with how teamwork and diversity are defined and interpreted in the private sector and in industry and a discussion on how this has influenced the public sector. The aim of the paper is two folded. Firstly, it is to discuss the role of diversity at the team level, e.g. teams and teamwork. Secondly, it is to discuss the meaning of teams and diversity on different organizational levels; the micro level mentioned above respectively the macro level of the organization, including the management of the organization. We will focus that both teamworking and diversity have been interpreted differently on these two levels, and we will also discuss the relationship between the two levels. The thesis in the paper is that teamwork and diversity are connected on the lowest level of the organisation, but that there is discrepancy between the understanding of both teamwork and diversity on this level and the highest level of the organisation, where both terms are used for ideological, normative purposes.

We will start with a conceptual discussion including how team and teamworking can be defined and how teamwoking are practised in different sectors of the economy. We will end the first section about definitions of teamworking by focusing team composition, especially diversity in teams. Diversity will be the subject for a conceptual discussion in the second section of the paper. We will compare old and new interpretations of diversity as well as diversity in different forms; in business and public cases. The following, empirical section will give examples of cases of diversity from mainly the public service sector and we will give special notice to the ideas of New Public Management. This policy has aimed to partly close the gap between the private and public sectors. In the end of the paper, we will come back to the thesis about the development of teamworking and diversity on the basic and management levels of the organisation and about the separation between the levels. We will argue for that attempts to establish teamworking based on diversity have, if they shall be successful, to be practised in organizations were other teams, and the whole organization, are following a similar route.

Definitions of team and teamworking

There are some aspects that are common in definitions of what a team is. A team are supposed to have a specific goal, linked to the goal of the organization it belongs to. There is a limit in size if a sample of people shall be called a team, often around ten
persons seems reasonable as a limit. Further on, it is supposed to be an internal division of labour in the team; the team members have different roles. Last, but not least, there is a regular interaction going on in the team, however nowadays often by communication devices such as computers and mobile phones. It is important to stress that a team has two functions, both important if the team shall be performing well; the task function and the social function. It follows from the later aspect that the team shall be recognized as a team both by the team members and others, to be called a team (West, 2004:18).

The initial interest for team in working life was focusing manufacturing. Frederick Taylor understood the importance of teams – but in a negative way. According to Taylor, teams were a problem for the employer as the workers collected in teams were not focused on performing the work task. Teams had, from Taylor’s point of view, to be eliminated from the organizations in manufacturing. The Human Relations movement had an opposite appreciation of teams, compared to Taylor’s point of view. The HR movement, started with the well known Hawthorne experiments, had obviously a very positive attitude to teams. It can be seen as a complement, or corrective, to Taylor’s perspective. The socio-technical school, a continuation and development of the HR perspective, was very much stressing the importance of teams, and also observed that a team shall have a high degree of autonomy (Procter & Mueller, 2000).

This is in sharp contrast to a second stream in the research on team and teamworking; the Japanese management practices, later developed in the USA and presented in the book about “Lean Production” (Procter & Mueller, 2000; Womack et al, 1992). It is not until lately that teamworking has been characterized as an important aspect of the management practices in Japan. This has its background in that in Japan often a whole company are regarded as one large team. Consequently, not very much notice has to be made for the small team of limited size. Everybody is supposed to share the vision of the whole company, anyhow. This system are slowly changed by the introduction of “off-line” teams, e.g. quality circles, and a totally new perspective by the MIT-researchers behind the Lean Production book when they concluded that the team are in the heart of the Lean Production concept (Womack et al, 1992, Procter & Mueller, 2000).

Procter & Mueller (2000:7-8) identified in their book, with articles based on papers to the first IWOT workshop in 1997, that changes were going on regarding the research and practice of teamworking. The service and publics sectors were becoming more in focus, while previously manufacturing had been the dominating sector. Also, the introduction of teamworking was more often an employer initiative and the unions, former an actor for the introduction of teamworking, were losing the initiative. With this development followed a more strategic use of teamworking, with more focus on control and less on team autonomy. Instead of increasing the quality of working life for the employees, the customer demands and satisfaction was the main target with the introduction of teamworking.

This development has been illustrated in the research one of the authors of this paper has conducted in Sweden, in collaboration with other researchers, and summarized in a short article (Sederblad, 2004). We studied call centres, travel agencies and, lately tele-nursing
centres, in Sweden. We found, especially in the travel agencies we studied, practises of teamworking comparable to the forms used in manufacturing. However, the difference was that the interaction between the team members was not going on continuously. There is an important difference between work in manufacturing and in interactive services; the employee direct contact with customer (client) in the latter case. That means the teamworking has to be going on more occasionally than regularly. However, in the case of travel agencies the interaction between the members of the team was frequent and they were organized in teams based on their customer relations with the large customers or branches (Lindgren & Sederblad, 2004a).

The call centres, with obvious similarities with the Tayloristic mass production concept with tight worker control, had other forms of practicing teamworking. Here the Japanese idea that whole the organization, the company or at least the local plant, should be regarded as a team, was practiced. What also was discernable in our studies of the Swedish call centres was the appearance of emotional labour (cf Hochschild, 1983). We found that practicing teamworking was used as a mean to handle the consequences of emotional labour for the individual. Interaction between the team members while conducting the work were very rare as the work was very intensive and controlled, but during breaks and outside the work hours the social and emotional relationships between the team members were strong and indirectly increased the possibilities to handle the stressful work situation (Lindgren & Sederblad, 2004b and 2006).

The studies of the tele-nursing centres have given examples of teamworking that both have similarities and differences compared to the findings in the call centre investigations. The similarities are based on the fact that the technology used at the tele-nursing centres basically is the same as used in call centres. This means control of work pace, the calls is measured in time duration, and there is a queue system. However, the calculated time for a call, 3 minutes, is regarded as an average and there is an acceptance of calls up to 8 minutes. Recently, a call back system has been introduced to decrease to intensity of the work situation. The most important difference, however, seems to be that the nurses are professional employees with a personal responsibility for how to conduct the work. This includes a possible refusal to work under not acceptable work conditions. Moreover, the professional work identity in combination with a positive social and emotional climate at the work place and the acceptance of differing call durations creates an interest in knowledge sharing, in practice to leave the work station and to go to a colleague with special competence to ask for advise in situations with diffuse symptoms for the calling client (Sederblad, Andersson & Lindgren, 2006; Sederblad & Andersson 2007).

**Teamwork in service organizations**

In conclusion, there are some specific features for teamwork in service organizations, compared to in manufacturing. The basic difference is that the services are consumed immediately and can not be stored as manufactured goods. This means that the
relationship between the employee and the customer is direct and immediate. There is a “third part” in the relationship between the employer and the employee, the customer (client), who influences the relationship and can not be neglected if the organization shall be effective. This also influences the relationships between the employees in the work team.

However, as have been illuminated above, there are attempts to “industrialize” the service sector; introducing mass production and Tayloristic forms of control, further developed by the use of computerized control systems. The call centres are often mentioned as the most typical work places of this kind. The recent research on call centres gives however a more nuanced picture of this expanding industry, including the identification of different HR-strategies for different segments of the service market and outsourcing, or off-shoring, of standardized mass production to other parts of the world, namely India (Batt, 2000; Taylor & Bain, 2003).

In the research on call centres in Sweden referred to above, we found quite a large variation of work organizations and team work. The size of the Swedish call centres are quite small, in our cases from 30 to approximately 100 employees, and that gives conditions for regarding the whole workplace as a team. The geographical location of these centres, often as green field plants, gave further support for this interpretation from the employees. The control system, based on continual registration of calls and statistical analyses and evaluation, was practiced with reasonable respect for the situation and for the employees. The social and emotional relationships between the employees, and also including the local manager, were characterized by strong social and emotional support.

There was in one of the travel agencies we studied; the largest of them with about 70 employees, a project going on to introduce the call centre technology and control system. The project was restricted to about half of the plant, the other half being organized in groups based on business agreements with large customers or sectors and practicing teamworking. The call centre model was intended to be used for smaller customers and should offer a cheaper, but more standardized, service to the customers. However, some months later we got the information that the company has ended the call centre project and introduced the teamworking concept for the whole plant. We found this an interesting development as it gave evidence for the limits of the use of the call centre concept for qualified services. In the private sector, the demands of the customer are the most important factor for organizing the work, if it shall be profitable.

In the public service sector, in principle the demands of the client should be of comparable weight. However, the effectiveness of the organization is not possible to evaluate by the use of economical measurements only, but has to be complemented with measuring the client’s attitude to the services by using qualitative or quantitative indicators. We also often find work places with professional employees in the public service sector, e.g. in health services doctors and nurses, among other smaller professional groups of employees. This influences the possibilities for teamworking, as it has to be combined with power structures aside the administrative hierarchy. The tele-nursing centre is in this sense an interesting work place, as it almost completely is run by nurses.
As mentioned above, we found interesting examples of teamwork here, with knowledge sharing based on strong social and emotional relationships among the nurses.

Before we continue our argument, we would like to stress that not all service work is of the interactive kind as in the examples mentioned with direct communication between the employee and the customer. There is a considerable share of the service work going on “back stage”, such as financial and administrative work. This is the case in both the private sector and the public sector. This kind of work has not the same demands of direct communication with the customer so the problem with differing languages is not that important. This is the reason why an increasing share of this kind of work, starting in the private sector but also introduced in the public sector, has been outsourced (“off-shored”) to countries with lower wages, most well known is the case of India. In this paper, we will not further discuss these workplaces, but instead focus on the importance of the customer/client relationship and now discuss this in relation to the internal organization of the work team.

**Team composition**

In a paper presented last year (Sederblad & Edvik, 2006), there was an attempt made to discuss and analyze team composition distinguishing between homogenous respectively heterogeneous teams regarding the employees’ competence in relation to permanent and temporary(project) work teams. The preliminary conclusion was that there seems to be correspondence between permanent teams and homogenous team composition, for instance in automotive manufacturing. Heterogeneous teams are often to be found in the services sectors, preferably organized in temporary organizations, or in other words, in projects. We also noticed the existence of heterogeneous teams composed of professional employees, often in the public service sector.

We think it might be plausible to develop this analyze, but instead of defining homogeneity/ heterogeneity based on employee competence, focusing other forms of diversity. This step will lead us into the discussion of team composition and diversity (see West, 2004:30-48). Diversity has a lot of meanings, such as personality, gender and age, but for our purpose we would like to focus cultural background and ethnicity. We think that in a more globalized society and economy, this will be an increasingly important aspect to discuss. In Sweden, this is an discernable development that we think partly can be explained by that the Swedish word for diversity, “mångfald”, has been strong connect to ethnical diversity. Or rather the other way around, this illustrates the fact that Sweden has a large share of immigrant population, appr 10 %, and is strongly connected to the global society. Before continue our discussion, we however would like to introduce the international discussion about diversity.
Diversity: old and new

The American anthropologist Peter Wood (2003) means that it exist an old and a new diversity. The meaning of old diversity is found in the statement that “there are differences in our world”. New diversity on the other hand is, regarding to Wood (and others, see for example Cox 1993), a business and management idea that implies that increased diversity should lead to different kinds of organizational efficiency. Taylor Cox (1993) defines diversity management as “Planning and implementation of organizational systems and methods so that the potential advantages are maximized and the potential disadvantages with diversity are reduced”.

The background of this new diversity is, also regarding to Wood (2003), found in the American history. The history goes back to affirmative action programs started in the 1960’s. During the last decade, diversity has replaced affirmative action and different kinds of organizational benefits are of importance. Diversity is about managing differences towards an organization were all human resources is charged. Different kinds of benefits related to diversity that is described in the literature is economy, globalization, service, morality, laws, find new groups of customers (see for example Schölin et al, 2007; Cox, 1993; Mlekow & Widel, 2004).

Diversity is an organizational idea that is about business. The basic idea of “the business case for diversity” is “…that organizations should recruit and manage diverse personnel to face the increased diversity among customers” (Wilson, 2007:158). Of course, there is expectation to make profit behind the idea of this business case and so far in Sweden, it seems to be the provision merchants and the tele-marketing companies that have been the first to explore this opportunity. However, Wilson argues that the perspective of the business case has to be empirically investigated to be possible to evaluate.

What is important to point out is that in common literature on diversity management is teams and teamwork not in explicit focus. Instead is (as the concept connotes) the focus on managers and different kinds of managing activities. It is important to have this in mind in the continuous discussion, and this is one of the critical starting points for this article. This brings us to the importance of the idea of separating diversity into those two aspects also points out two other and related aspects, namely that diversity on the one hand is to be considered as a organizational idea, and at the other hand (if diversity is understood from a social constructionist approach) as the result of different kinds of relations and situations. This statement means that when discussing diversity we have to understand if the focus is at the idea sphere or the relational sphere. From our understanding what we can call the mainstream diversity (management) literature (Alm 1999; Broome et al. 2002; Cox 1993; Dilschmann 2000; Fägerlind & Wener (red) 2001; Fägerlind 1999; Fägerlind & Ekelöf 2001; Kandola & Fullerton 1998; Lodén och Rosener 1991; Mlekow & Widell 2003; Wrench 2002) this distinction is not done. Instead is the concept of diversity is discussed as something that is global (universal) and measurable.
An alternative to this view is that organizational (teamwork) diversity is created in relations within teams in organizations. Or to be more exact, within the frame of teamwork is differences constructed in the relations in the team. This can partly be done in the teams ‘internal relations’ (between team members), partly in the external relations (relations between team members and customers/clients).

The idea of diversity is in this alternative view not universal or global, instead is the idea constructed and filled with meaning locally. This is the result of the social constructionist approach on differences. The relational based diversity is the ground/base for the diversity idea. Of course, it is not only relations with in a team etc. that is the breeding ground for the locally constructed idea. Other societal factors, such as the nation state, the historical national view on differences, the role of unions or for example different kinds of national myths (Wrench 2002), is also of importance when consider diversity as a idea in this alternative view.

To summarize the discussion above; in the contemporary service society is teamworking often defined through relations between clients/customers and employees. At the same time is the concept of teams often used to, in different ways, indicate and characterize ideas that the whole workplace, or even the organization/company, shall be regarded as team. In the similar way is the concept of diversity constructed in two different (but connected) levels: partly as a relational concept, were differences are constructed in relations to the group (organization), partly as a management and ideological based concept. The basic idea with the division in two different levels is that the later (management) aspect should be based in the former (relational) aspect.

**Empirical case: tele-nursing in Sweden**

The case studies of tele-nursing centres in Sweden give some interesting examples on how the managers handle the question of diversity among employees and clients. There is a reasonable, as well as legal, demand the health service in Sweden shall be open and equal to all citizens. There could have been a case for affirmative action programs to increase the immigrant’s access to the tele-nursing centres and ensure an equal treatment by offering contact with a nurse with similar cultural and linguistic background. In the centres we have studied, in the West and South of Sweden, so far no organized programmes for this purpose have occurred (however, we have heard of services in different languages at the private tele-nursing centre in Stockholm). In interviews with plant managers, a certain ambiguity about how to handle diversity among clients and employees has been noticeable. This can be explained by the fact that the centres are quite new and have had other acute problems to solve. The centres have also been expanding rapidly.

Recently, there are some signs of attempts to deal with diversity at the centres. In the recruitment of new nurses, cultural background and language competence is mentioned as important for employment. Now, there are some nurses with different ethnical
background recruited. Still, they are too few to be organized in special teams with specific cultural background offering 24 hour’s service. We have observed that the demands from clients with different cultural background on equal treatment in health services (and other public services) seems to be increasing, supported by research that gives evidence that unequal treatment, e.g. for pregnant women, is quite common (Ny 2007). This development can be seen as a parallel to the development in public services to “the business case for diversity” as it in both cases is an aim to increase the effectiveness of the organization. In the service sector, this means fulfilling the customer/clients needs immediately.

Diversity management and teamwork in Swedish and British municipal work organizations

Diversity has its background in the USA but is, as pointed out above, at the same time described as a global management idea. It is in public organizations problematic how to motivate diversity as a “business case”. Studies of diversity management in the Swedish context shows that political leaders has got problems when it comes to make sense of diversity with rhetoric’s in municipal organizations (Broomé, 2004). Broomé shows in his study of political rhetoric’s on diversity (the aim of rhetoric’s were to change/develop a municipal organization) that it to a high extent is based on examples from the global diversity management discourse that is “out sketched” above. Broomé shows how the political rhetoric’s do not change the managers within in the municipal organization (who rather seems not to believe that diversity is something for the public organization). The result of Broomé’s study is suitable to the discussions that Prasad & Prasad (in Alvesson 2006) have – they mean that diversity more is an organizational imitation (in theoretical way discussed as isomorphism), fashion and a way of packaging organizations than really change them (see the discussion in Broomé et al 2007).

At the same time as the political leaders have problem with how to motivate managers in public organizations shows studies on managers in public organizations have problems, when it comes to control the diversity idea. Rönnqvist (2006) shows in her licentiate’s thesis how managers in four different parts of the same public (municipal) organization understands and describe the concept of diversity in four different ways. But at the same time Rönnqvist (2006) means that there is a red line in the manager’s way of discussing diversity. Diversity is in those managers “world” rather connected to the clients than the

1 Some researcher means that diversity rather is more about creating a nice packaging than changing values and at the same time that organizations seems to imitate each other (Alvesson, 2006).

2 By control we mean different types of internal social control for example professional or occupational (Simpson 1985), technocratic or socio-ideological control (Alvesson & Kärreman 2001). This types of control has one thing in common, they aims to describe how a actor can know (control) different kind of things (ideas, people, questions etc.).
organizations, the teams. Therefore the problem with finding the “public business case” can be explained with the concept of social engineering. Schölin (forthcoming 2007) shows in studies on superior elderly care managers their problems with the idea of diversity. Schölin shows at the one hand that the superior managers have problems when it comes to incorporate diversity as a qualitative organizational idea with in elderly care. The every day work for the superior managers is, from their view, to handle different kinds of external control\(^3\). As a result the managers mean that they have to focus on things that they relate to the core of the organization (in the case of elderly care to the production of care) and not to the question of diversity. The superior managers create a distinction between a core (production of care) and a periphery (were we find the diversity). The result is that the managers do no explore the diversity idea (Schölin coming 2007). They have problems when it comes to find the benefits and how to explain in which way diversity is related to the core work in elderly care. And as a result diversity is at the one hand defined in statistical body-counting terms and on the other hand as problems (Schölin, 2006).

The main problem for public organizations is that the relation to profit making not is explicit. This problem constitutes the dividing line between the public- and the business case (the later is based on the relation between companies, customers and profit making). In other words, it is possible to say that the public case rather is connected to justice than profit.

In Britain, the New Public Management has been followed by an increased interest for communities and the possibilities for integration of immigrants on the labour market and in society. In order to meet the consequences of “race related” riots and effects on unwanted segregation, the City of Bradford (UK) has initiated a project with the aim to create a more diverse municipal organization. One important aspect of this project has been to work close to different ethnic communities, were the basic idea partly has to been to strengthen the communities, partly that the communities could strengthen the municipal organization (Schölin et al, 2007).

As we now can see is that there is a rather big difference between how the diversity idea is organized in Bradford and in the Swedish case discussed above. When comparing the case from Bradford with the case of for example the city of Malmo, or the city of Bremen, it can be said that concepts like empowerment or diversity is interpreted in different ways. Those differences in the understanding of the concepts are partly caused by different national differences as for example history of immigration, the size and composition of the immigrant population. Bur the causes are also to be found in differences within institutional rules (concepts like diversity are defined by the national conditions). The influence of different kinds of binding institutional conditions at the

\(^3\) This kind of control is the opposite of the internal control and concerns those aspects of control that is performed with the aim to change someone else.
local organizational level (and of course also at the team work level) is in the study observed in different ways:

**“* As four different organizational definitions of empowerment and diversity *

** In the different definitive definitions on the aim and goal of integration **

** In the creation of the meaning of integration (and diversity) **

** In differences concerning the use of “symbols on diversity” and “diversity rituals” and organizational integration.” (Broome et al 2006:50, author’s translation)**

Broomé et al (2006) shows differences between the four local public organizations mentioned above. These differences are above all showed in the hierarchical space that ethnic minorities are given in the different local contexts. In the case of Bradford it is possible to find ethnic minorities in the whole organization, a “phenomenon” that has its causes in cooptation (Broome et al 2006). But in the case of Sweden (and Bremen) the ethic minorities are more often to be found in the organizational periphery (in the lower layer).

But as the same time as managers work with the vague and diffuse concepts of diversity, from the other relational perspective ethnic (and other) differences are constructed in the frames for team and teamwork. Those constructions of differences are not to be considered as a result from different kinds of diversity management activities, but rather as a result of social relations (connected to work or not) in teams in the organization. Schölin shows in his coming thesis how ethnicity is constructed by the use of different kinds of symbols in social relations between at the one hand staff in the work team and between the work team and clients in elderly care. Schölin also shows that the ethnic differences (diversity) so have different social meaning in those two contexts. The ethnic differences that are constructed in the work team can be explained as thin (the differentiation is not connected to problems or for example unwanted segregation). The ethnic differences between the work team and the clients are to be described as “more thick” (they are explicit and often connected with different kinds of negative problems). The important point with Schölin’s findings from elderly care is that ethnicity is constructed spontaneously, with out explicit connections to the superior managers.

**Conclusions**

Teams are increasingly prevalent in the public service sector in Europe, and especially in Scandinavia and in Great Britain. (Procter & Mueller, 2000; Dukulilová et al, 2006). The definition and practice of teamworking has to be adjusted to be used for service work. The forms of teamworking are different, in interactive service work due to the individual work situation and immediate relation to the customer/client. This means that the communication and collaboration with team members have to be more occasional and will take the form of knowledge sharing and social/emotional support. However, with the
influences from Japan followed an interpretation of teamworking applicable on the whole organization, where team refers to “a collective spirit” in the organization (Benders & van Hootegem, 2000:54-55). Thus, this is a more ideological way to use the word team focusing normative aspects of teamworking. This way of using the word team is common in the service sector, as a managerial tool. The relationship between the use of the term team and teamworking on different levels in the organization, the micro respectively the macro level, seems to be vague and based on different situations, employee communication with customers respectively manager’s attempts to control the employees.

Diversity has been interpreted on different levels, as a demand for justice and equal treatment in society, but more recently as a business and management strategy to meet the demands from diverse customers, called “the business case for diversity”. This has to be met with a diverse work force in the companies and also on the lower organizational level, in the team composition. Schölin has in his research found that managers in the public sectors have problems to handle diversity, from neglect to statistical body counting and diversity are causing problems in the organizations. However, we have found some examples of teams in the public sector with a diverse recruitment and positive interpretations of diversity, as a way to meet the client’s demands.

In this concluding discussion it is also important to raise the difference between diversity as an (organizational/teamworking) idea and as the result of relations at the team level when trying to reach the meaning of diversity in teamworking. In the former case, diversity is always contextual and shall not be considered as a global, mainstreamed idea. The meaning of diversity as an organizational and teamworking idea has to be considered in relations to where it is used. The insecurity and confusion that managers seems to experience when it comes to diversity work can from this “idea aspect” partly be explained as a result of some kind of a collision between global (diversity) management trends and national and local interpretations of the concept. At the same time can managers confusion and the different meaning of the concept in different contexts, not be interpreted as that differences not exits. We would instead point out the team level as important in the discussion of diversity. It is in social relations in and between teams that diversity is constructed.4

We have found a parallel development in the private and public service sectors, and “the business case for diversity” can be compared to increased demands from ethнич groups of fair and equal service from the public organizations. It demands a high degree of political activity and strategy to meet these demands, and some positive examples have occurred in Britain on municipal and community levels. The closer connections between private and public service sectors might give inspiration for a “public case of diversity”, including teamworking in teams with diverse composition. The eventual success of this

4 The team end teamwork level and practice has also often been neglected, or reduced when discussing diversity management in common. Anyhow it is of importance to consider this level when discussing the meaning of diversity. Different kinds of differences are constructed in social relations in teams (and between team members). The process is described and analyzed in e.g. West, 2004 and Gustavsson, 2007)
strategy will, however, not be directly countable in money, but in the welfare for the citizens and for the politicians, in the following election.

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