



Classifying difference in organizing, or how to create monsters

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the operation of classification mechanisms in organizational life, and how they construct the skills and knowledge of initially marginalized client groups.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on an ethnographically inspired case study of a Swedish labour market procedure, which was designed to validate the skills and knowledge of non-western immigrant job-seekers. Qualitative data were generated through observations, in-depth interviews and document analysis.

Findings – The study found that, contrary to policy-makers' intentions, the validation procedure ended up dissociating the non-western job-seekers' heterogeneous experiences, skills and knowledge from the organizing processes of the labour market, displacing them beyond the boundaries of legitimate knowledge, and reproducing their marginalized position on the labour market. As non-western skills and knowledge were found unclassifiable according to the validation procedure, they were deemed too different and monstrous.

Research limitations/implications – The research approach and the specific institutional context of Swedish immigration and labour market policy means that the research results are not readily generalizable to other empirical contexts. Therefore, studies outside of Sweden are needed to generate knowledge about similar policies in other countries.

Practical implications – The classification of skills and knowledge and the organizing of difference does not primarily require new tools and methods, but a whole new perspective, which recognizes the multiplicity and heterogeneity of unusual skills and knowledge as an important part of labour market integration.

Originality/value – The paper examines the monstrous aspects of classification mechanisms within the empirical context of labour market integration efforts, which is hitherto underexplored in the literature on the management of difference and diversity.

Keywords Immigrants, Classification, Organizing, Heterogeneity, Validation of prior skills and knowledge

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sulley: Mike, this isn't Boo's door.

Mike: Boo? What's Boo?

Sulley: That's [...] what I decided to call her. Is there a problem?

Mike: Sulley, you're not supposed to name it. Once you name it, you start getting attached to it. Now put that thing back where it came from or so help me [...] [1] (from the movie *Monsters, Inc.*).

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Contemporary society is characterized by the growing mass displacement and migration of people from the so-called third world countries to the so-called developed countries. Increasing efforts are being made by many countries to manage this migration by means of measuring and evaluating the skills and knowledge of migrants upon their arrival in order to support their entry into the labour market (see, e.g. Andersson and Guo, 2008; Cedefop, 2009; Andersson and Frejes, 2010; Diedrich, 2013). These efforts are often summarized under headings such as “the validation of prior learning”[2], i.e. a set of methods and procedures aimed at identifying, assessing and documenting skills, knowledge and experience with the help of vocational experts or other educational specialists, including questionnaires, personal interviews and practical assessments. In practice, these activities, notwithstanding their positive intentions, have proven difficult to organize and immigrants’ skills often remain underutilized (Reitz, 2005; Andersson and Osman, 2008; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010; Diedrich *et al.*, 2011b; Diedrich, 2013). However, while this issue has received increased attention in migration and labour market studies as well as in the educational sciences, it has been largely overlooked in management and organization studies. More often than not, the existent literature has blamed any failures on the validation tools and methods themselves, in a normative way proposing new and more efficient methods of solving the problems of validating foreign skills and knowledge. With few exceptions, the literature has neglected the political nature of validation practices.

In this paper, I study the validation of the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants as classification work, as an administrative system consisting of mechanisms of classification (Bowker and Star, 2000) designed to fit people into predefined categories. Since classification work is a matter of organizing, I draw on the notions of impurity, ambiguity and monstrosity advanced in organization studies (see e.g. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999; Munro, 2001; Thanem, 2006, 2011) to explore how recent immigrants to Sweden, in the context of these organizing practices, come to be seen as not measuring up to the standards required to work within specific occupations in Sweden. Through these practices, their skills and knowledge become enacted as monstrous, because they do not fit into the Swedish labour market’s neat categories and, consequently, because they disrupt the normal boundaries of occupational/vocational competence in the country. As a consequence, and contrary to initial intentions, the organizing practices aimed at switching from a language of ethnicity to a language of skills risk reproducing the subordinated position of these immigrants on the labour market.

The theoretical argument is grounded in an ethnographically inspired field study, which included in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, of a labour market/integration project aimed at developing and implementing methods of validating recent immigrants’ skills and knowledge as part of their settlement support activities upon arrival in Sweden. Sweden provides an interesting case for studying validation as an organizing practice as recent refugees and other immigrants[3] are targets of extensive national media coverage and political interest. This may be related to the fact that Sweden currently admits more refugees and family members of refugees per capita than any other European country (UNHCR, 2011)[4] and its immigrant population is characterized by a rather high number of people in need of protection – a type of immigration not intended to meet any immediate labour market needs (Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011). Nevertheless, in Swedish media reports, in the academic literature and in political rhetoric, immigrants are largely presented as an indispensable resource, because of their skills and knowledge (see e.g. Dahlhede, 2009).

At the same time, a growing number of reports on the integration of immigrants into Swedish working life and society suggest that this resource is not being adequately utilized, with employment rates for non-Western immigrants continuing to be lower than for Swedish-born labour market participants (Rauhut and Blomberg, 2003; Swedish Govt. Official Reports 2003:75, 2003; Swedish Integration Board, 2006; OECD, 2007; Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2007; Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011). The explanations provided include racism and discrimination, the changing nature of the labour market and the workplace, and inadequate procedures for recognizing immigrants' skills (De los Reyes, 2000; De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002; Rydgren, 2004; Andersson and Osman, 2008; Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011; Diedrich, 2013).

Consequently, policymakers have increasingly focused on developing new practices aimed at helping recent immigrants into employment. One such practice is the validation of prior learning (Swedish Integration Board, 2002; Swedish Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 133; Cedefop, 2009). Although there has been much support for the validation procedure (see e.g. Swedish Govt. Official Reports 2003:75, 2003; Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2007; Swedish National Commission for Validation, 2008), the intended results have not been fulfilled, and employment figures for recent immigrants remain low. Even proponents of the system have found it difficult to find any long-term positive results[5].

The paper is organized as follows: first, I discuss the literature on classification and difference in organizing, focusing on the promise of classification and the problematic effects of ascribing categories to people. I then link the literature on classification work, as a political practice, to the notion of impurity and monstrosity in organizations. Second, I present the empirical setting and method. Next, I analyse my empirical material in order to bring out the organizational aspects of classification work. Finally, I discuss the study's results, implications and conclusions. Here, I highlight how the work of establishing a procedure for validating skills and knowledge dissociates the heterogeneous experiences, skills and knowledge of recent immigrants to Sweden from the organizing processes of the vocational training sector and the Swedish labour market. Rather than embracing the complexity, ambiguity and heterogeneity of immigrants' skills as an integral and important part of organizing, the validation procedure displaces them beyond the boundaries of legitimate knowledge.

Classification and difference in organizing

Classification as a political practice

Classifications pervade everyday life (Bowker and Star, 2000), and scholars from many fields have been interested in the nature of classification and categories and their consequences for people, organizations and societies (e.g. Douglas, 1966; Lakoff, 1987; Hall, 1997; Olson, 1998; Bowker, 1998, 2005; Roth, 2005; Dupré, 2006; Sommerlund, 2006). In organization studies, Gastelaars (2002) critically discussed the effects of classification in attempts to promote equality or manage diversity. In particular, Gastelaars focused on statistical aggregates and the tendency of organizations to categorize people in line with demographic categories such as ethnic origin, gender and age to create physically defined communities with homogeneously labelled members (Bowker and Star, 2000). No one is left out, and as people are ascribed, or born, into these categories, the categories are perceived as real. Hence, they instantly mediate action, and one effect may be that organizations, even with the best of intentions, end up (re)producing the processes of inclusion and exclusion that they seek to resolve.

Sociologists have pointed out that binary oppositions are crucial in this classificatory work, since a clear difference has to be established between things in order to classify them (Suchman, 1994). In organization studies, Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999, p. 626) argued that organizing is about “finding a place for everything and keeping everything in its place”. Much effort is thus undertaken in organizing to impose limits and maintain boundaries – deciding who and what should be a part of the organization, as well as who and what should not (Czarniawska and Höpfl, 2002).

Classification and monsters in organizing

As the classifiers often view heterogeneity and multiplicity as exceptions (Ritvo, 1997; Bowker and Star, 2000), a person who does not fit into any one category – for instance, a person of “mixed race” in a racialized system constituted by the two categories “black” and “white” – is deemed the problematic outsider. Douglas’ (1966) work on purity and impurity strikes a similar chord, treating the impure as “matter out of place” (p. 44), and arguing that ideas, events, actions or objects are understood to be “dirty” or “impure” – anomalous and ambiguous – to the degree that they disobey or disturb the boundaries around which social organization is constituted. Recently, social theorists have further advanced an understanding of impurity and multiplicity in different contexts by decentering the idea of an unproblematic homogeneity (see, e.g. Haraway, 1991; Law, 1991; Ritvo, 1997; Bowker and Star, 2000; Thanem, 2006, 2011). Accordingly, no one or no thing is “pure”, and everyone and every thing inhabits some residual category in some system of categories. Such ambiguity, however, is often unwelcome in organizations. Indeed, organizing often aims at expelling the impure, because it is uncomfortable (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999), and the establishing and maintaining of order may be seen as one of the main tasks of modern, rational management.

Based in part on the work of Douglas, organization theorists have explored such organizing processes in greater detail, by highlighting the role of categorization processes, boundary-making and the relationship between the pure and the anomalous in organizations (see e.g. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999; Munro, 2001; Thanem, 2006). Munro (2001) examined the idea of “impurity” in the context of management accounting. Due to budgets being presented in numerical form and not as narrative, Munro (2001, p. 479) argues, they enact any non-numerical form of explanation as “abnormal” or “monstrous”. Thus, whilst personal reasons such as caring for a terminally ill spouse may be cited to explain the poor (numerical) performance of a manager, this explanation cannot be translated into numbers. Munro stresses that even though it is considered normal to care for one’s spouse in such a situation, this normality is constrained to the private context of family life. Consequently, what is deemed normal and ordinary in one instance may seem monstrous in the next and vice versa (Thanem, 2006, p. 179).

Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999), and more recently Thanem (2006, 2011), have explicitly investigated the monsters of organizing. More specifically, they have examined, among other things, how organizing involves enacting distinctions between the inside and outside of the organization, keeping personal and organizational interests apart, or keeping technical matters away from non-experts. Following Cooper (1997) and Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999) discuss this relationship in terms of “placement” and “displacement”. Placement is about organization – about placing everything and keeping everything in its place by imposing limits and maintaining boundaries; and displacement is about disorganization – about things losing their place (Cooper, 1997). More importantly, organization is enacted through the refusal and

containment of whatever is thought to represent disorganization and instability (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999). These processes of sorting out things and people by dividing the same from the different and the familiar from the unfamiliar are pivotal to regimes of organizing that are bent on assembling “clean-cut, legitimate bodies and elements” (Thanem, 2006, p. 185). Monstrosities challenge, undermine and contradict such determined efforts at establishing boundaries and division, and because formal organization disfavours such challenges, it seeks to subject its insides, and sometimes even its outsides, to detailed forms of control. In such attempts, classification systems are mobilized to constrain and contain things and people that do not fit into dominant categories of privilege (Bowker and Star, 2000). This often involves the “quantifying of difference” (Swan, 2010, p. 92) whereby individuals are converted into cases and numbers, bodies are converted into visual displays, and differences that cannot be quantified within the given framework are ignored. Thanem (2006) questions the ideas about the purity and strict boundaries of organization promoted by mainstream management and organization studies, and argues that instead of expending much effort on protecting organizing processes from the monstrous by keeping them at bay, more focus should be placed on understanding its role as an integral part of organizing. After all, everyone and everything is monstrous in some way.

In the study presented in this paper, I argue that the organizing of a procedure for validating skills and knowledge dissociates the heterogeneous experiences of recent immigrants to Sweden from the organizing processes of the vocational training sector and the legitimate Swedish labour market. Their skills and knowledge are displaced beyond the boundaries of what is considered normal in the context of the Swedish labour market; they are deemed monstrous. Also, the validation efforts fail to promote a better understanding for the allegedly monstrous bodies that interrupt the pure-type-based-category attempts to organize things and persons in the labour market. Instead, and in true managerialist style, they focus on quantifying difference based on what is deemed legitimate knowledge in the context of the Swedish vocational training sector and labour market, whilst ignoring whatever cannot be made explicit in the language of the efforts to manage difference.

Immigration to Sweden and the Validation/Integration (V/I) Project

Immigration to Sweden

In 2008, around 14 per cent of Sweden’s population of 9.5 million were born overseas (Statistics Sweden, 2009). In the early 1970s, the structure of immigration to Sweden had changed in a fundamental way. While a combination of reduced industrial demand in Sweden and labour shortage in the other Nordic countries meant that skill-based labour immigration from these countries dropped to around 5 per cent of the country’s immigration, the number of refugees from other parts of the world without any documented skills and knowledge increased significantly (Lundh and Ohlsson, 1999). For the past decade or so, many immigrants to Sweden have sought refuge from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. Recent research has shown that these groups and their family members face increasing stigmatization and labour market discrimination: Because they are deemed to differ significantly from the native population in terms of cultural background and language skills (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002; Swedish Govt. Official Reports 2004:48, 2004; Swedish Govt. Official Reports 2006:59, 2006; Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011) and because of increasing emphasis on “Sweden-specific knowledge and skills” (including language skills and knowledge of Swedish culture and the Swedish labour market) (see e.g. De los Reyes, 2001).

In line with an intensified European political discourse on work as the key to social inclusion, Swedish policymakers have recently focused on supporting the entry of recent refugees and other immigrants into employment shortly after their arrival through Swedish language courses (“Swedish for Immigrants”), career counselling, seminars on résumé writing, job interview training, etc. To enable them to identify suitable activities, caseworkers at the Public Employment Service (PES) “map the immigrant”, that is, they ask immigrants about their personal and professional background (see also Diedrich and Styhre, 2008). Based on this “map”, caseworkers place their immigrant clients, as they do with all clients, in an occupational category based on the Swedish National Labour Market Board’s Occupational Classification System AMSYK. Here, each occupation has a six-digit code, with each digit representing a level within the system, and occupations are distinguished on the basis of how work is done and what type of qualification is required in Sweden (Figure 1).

Top municipal officials constantly criticized this categorizing of immigrants, claiming that caseworkers did not understand the intricacies of the various occupations, lacked the technical knowledge required to produce a “good and correct” map of the immigrant (including technical details of knowledge and skills), and that they did not know how to ask the “right” questions or where to look for the “right” answers. As a result, as one vocational training expert explained:

Up till now, people could be registered with the Public Employment Service as builders for five, six, seven, or eight years. And only after that might it become apparent that this person wasn’t a builder (Vocational expert MK071109:15).

As a result of being consigned to the “wrong” occupational categories, immigrants were not placed in jobs or in adequate training activities. Validation has recently been proposed as a solution to this problem and as an effective means of integrating recent immigrants into Swedish society and the labour market (e.g. Cedefop, 2009). Validation is based on the establishment of an administrative system consisting of what Bowker and Star (2000) call mechanisms of classification, which are designed to assess the new arrivals’ knowledge and skills by ascribing them to categories. It is assumed that such assessment will produce formal documents that demonstrate, in an objective manner,

Occupational field	4
Office and Customer Service Work	
Main Group	42
Customer Service Work	
Occupational Group	421
Cashiers, etc.	
Subgroup	4,212
Bank and Post Office Cashiers	
Occupation	421,210
Bank Cashier	

Source: Swedish National Labour Market Board (1997)

Figure 1.
Example of the
classification structure
of the National Labour
Market Board’s
Occupational
Classification System

the immigrants' skills and knowledge. Based on these documents, public officials will then be able to unambiguously classify immigrants on the basis of their occupational backgrounds, thereby facilitating immigrants' integration into the labour market.

There has been much support for the validation process, and many projects have been conducted to develop and implement its methods and tools (see e.g. Andersson and Frejes, 2010; Swedish National Commission for Validation, 2008; Diedrich *et al.*, 2011a, b; Diedrich, 2013). In the following section, I will analyse one such project in more detail.

The V/I Project

In 2005, the Swedish government allocated SEK 40 million to stimulate regional collaboration around the integration of recent immigrants. The money was divided among six regional projects. One of them was the V/I Project of the County Labour Board of Western Sweden. Its purpose was to develop collaboration between the local municipalities, the PES and other state authorities, and educational service providers, including ValCenter. ValCenter had since the late 1990s been heavily involved in developing validation methods and a validation procedure "for the recognition and assessment of the skills and knowledge of newly arrived immigrants from non-Nordic countries" as an integral part of settlement support. The V/I Project sought to develop existing validation methods further by adapting them to the target group of "recent immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds" who possess "skills and knowledge that could not be verified in any other way", that is, recent immigrants who lacked formal documentation of their prior vocational training or experience. The goal was to validate 500 recent non-Nordic immigrants with the aim of getting at least 70 per cent of them "into jobs, or into education programmes or other activities that will eventually lead to employment".

The starting point was the assumption that recent non-Nordic immigrants are discriminated against because of their ethnic background: too much attention was paid to where they came from and too little to what skills and knowledge they brought with them. The V/I Project leader explained the situation to his colleagues at a steering committee meeting:

In Sweden, people always begin by saying "a person from Iraq who came here in 1994." You never hear them saying "an engineer who came to Sweden" [...] (JJ070423:1).

The project leader alludes to how, in Sweden, an ethnic non-Nordic background (often represented by stories of people from Iraq, Eritrea and Somalia) is considered problematic, whilst professional categorization is considered unproblematic. Thus, the aim was to reclassify immigrants according to the occupational categories of AMSYK, and in doing so, counteract discrimination and promote integration. To do so, the validation procedure was considered an effective tool because of its promise to objectively measure and evaluate a recent immigrant's skills and knowledge, regardless of where they had been acquired (Swedish Govt. Official Reports 2003:75, 2003).

While the validation procedure was presented as an efficient means of objectively assessing and documenting the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants, and of helping to sort immigrants into the right boxes based on their skills and knowledge, the procedure was not yet in place. Instead, the project consisted of a multitude of activities – meetings, negotiations, compromises, discussions, assessments and so on – bringing together a variety of people, groups and organizations to establish the procedure and, hopefully, stabilize it as a taken-for-granted part of the settlement process.

Caseworkers and other public officials and heads of department could voluntarily become connected to the project on the basis of their work within the settlement process. As caseworkers represented different organizations and worked in different parts of the county, they did not have any regular meeting place. The project called for regular (monthly or bi-monthly) meetings in the four regions of the county. At each of these meetings, the project leaders informed caseworkers about recent developments within the project and caseworkers exchanged experiences of their everyday validation work and work with immigrants.

Fieldwork and analysis

I followed the V/I Project throughout its duration, from 2006 to 2008, documenting connections between actions when these were most visible, usually at the time of their creation. I chose the V/I Project as an interesting case regarding the organizing of difference because it provided a rare opportunity to study the establishment of an “action net” (Czarniawska, 2004) as it unfolded.

The V/I Project provides one point of entry into a highly complex and unruly web of interorganizational actions aimed at establishing a procedure for validation. This wide and still spreading action net is in its formation phase, and has not yet stabilized into a formal unit. Just how important the V/I Project will be in the end is uncertain at present. However, during the study, the act of validating was certainly given a strong priority.

In my fieldwork, I conducted 62 interviews with representatives of municipal and government organizations and agencies involved in the settlement support that Sweden provides to immigrants: The Swedish Migration Board, the PES, Refugee Units, the Social Security Services, the municipal Adult Education Administration, municipal administrations and local private educational service providers. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, were open-ended (Silverman, 1993; Kvale, 1996) and lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. Every interview was recorded and transcribed in full. I also observed 16 project meetings. These included the kick-off conferences, the steering committee meetings, and the so-called cooperation meetings, which gathered the project leaders and caseworkers from the local refugee units, the PES and the educational service providers. The meetings provided an arena where the project leaders, caseworkers, and training experts discussed and made sense of their work. From all the observations, I produced extensive field notes, which formed the basis of my written reports.

Furthermore, I observed eight “occupational assessments”, i.e. validation activities aimed at assessing and documenting practical, occupational skills in interviews and “real life” situations, and I conducted interviews with eight immigrants who were involved in the assessments. The occupational assessments were undertaken by vocational experts and based on guidelines set by Swedish trade and industry organizations. An assessment usually lasted half a day, during which a person’s skills were assessed in two steps. First, the vocational expert asked the immigrant questions about his/her previous educational and vocational experience; this was followed by a practical assessment (a truck driver had to drive a truck; a cabinetmaker had to make a small piece of furniture, etc.). If the expert assessed the person as possessing an “occupational identity”[6], s/he would be issued with a certificate by the educational service provider specifying the person’s skills in the area and included the expert’s recommendations regarding future employment. The PES caseworkers usually only sent people, who they had previously mapped and judged as “possessing some form of occupational identity”, for occupational assessment. I gained access to two educational

service providers that worked with the training and assessment of truck drivers and tradesmen (painters, builders, carpenters, etc.). This enabled me to observe assessments within these occupations, which were the occupations where most of the assessments took place within the project.

Finally, I collected and analyzed a large number of documents. Government reports and statistics and local agreements of cooperation between state and municipal organizations provided vivid evidence of the official intentions behind the project. Memoranda from meetings and e-mails sent between project members gave insights into events and activities that, for various reasons, I had been unable to observe. Lastly, the training materials, assessment reports and certificates issued to immigrants who had participated in a validation activity, constituted important traces of the attempts at transforming persons into quantifiable evidence.

The analysis conducted here focuses on classification as practice (Bowker and Star, 2000). The analytical premises are that one does not understand practice simply by examining its products or outcome; that practice involves joint effort over time and is processual; and that meaning is continuously negotiated and mediated in context. The units of analysis employed here are actions and activities, not individuals or actors. As I began my analysis of the material, it struck me that there was no shared understanding of what activities would count as validation and what constituted the target group for validation. During the meetings and assessments, different versions of validation materialized. It then became relevant to analyze the activities and events through which the different versions of the validation procedure and the target group, as well as the training experts and the caseworkers, etc. were being enacted within the project.

I coded and categorized the field material in accordance with Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory method. In an iterative process, I compared the first interview with the second, the first and second interviews with the third, and so forth. The notes from the observed meetings and assessments, and the documents, were compared to the interviews. As part of the textual analysis, I searched for keywords and themes that indicated shared language of the practice. Over time, the following thematic categories emerged from the field material: "translating skills", "instrumentalizing validation", and "eliminating monstrosity". In the following, I will discuss these categories in further detail as part of my findings.

Constructing a validation process

Scene 1: translating skills

The before-mentioned difficulties experienced by caseworkers when mapping the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants set the stage for the following conversation, which took place at a project meeting shortly after the opening conferences during which a vocational expert from the construction sector (Peter) had presented the proposed validation procedure to the caseworkers:

PES Caseworker: Well, I can tell you that this [Peter's presentation of the validation procedure] doesn't match the picture we have at the PES [...] And, our people are different from those being handled by the refugee units. We all have very different target groups [...] [Also] whenever we've sent our clients to be validated, they've *only* undergone an occupational assessment. So, they just get a piece of paper, instead of a certificate [...]. For, example: I had a painter. He'd worked for some years in Australia. I mapped him and concluded that he could do this and that [...]. And then I sent him to be validated [...] and then you wrote exactly the same things that I'd already written [...].

Project Leader: It seems then as if you've managed to do a good occupational assessment of the person even though you're not an expert painter, and you subsequently arrived at the same results [as the validation expert]. But, there are many caseworkers who can't do an assessment like that [...].

PES Caseworker: I've worked at the refugee units, the Social Security Service and now the PES, and I think everyone's doing similar mappings at the different organizations.

Validation Expert: But, you need an expert to really make good assessments. For example, take the truck driver from Iraq. Sure, he's worked as a truck driver in Iraq, but he was driving a truck made in 1964. That's a completely different truck from the ones we have here in Sweden [...] (Meeting at City Hall, 061205:2).

The scene above, in particular the example of the truck driver from Iraq, is illustrative of a recurring pattern within the project: The displacement of immigrants' skills and knowledge beyond what is considered legitimate knowledge in Sweden. This example is used to highlight the need for the new validation procedure: the recent immigrants' skills and knowledge are deemed monstrous and without validation it is regarded as impossible to identify and contain the impure, "monstrous" in the foreign experience. This alludes to an idea of pure occupations, central to the validation of skills and knowledge. Here it is assumed that every detail of the work practices that are conducted as part of a particular occupation can be known without exception and represented unambiguously, whilst all other details are displaced and made monstrous. This connects to Munro's (2001) idea that any non-numerical form of explanation is enacted as "abnormal" or "monstrous" in the context of an accounting system, because budgets are presented in the form of numbers. However, even though Munro focuses on the enactment of the monstrous in the context of an organizational procedure that is firmly in place and "black boxed" in Latour's (1987) sense of the word, I would argue that the negotiations and mediations that are involved in attempts to establish a new organizational procedure are also deeply implicated in the enactment of the monstrous (even before the system is in place).

The scene illustrates the challenges of translating the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants for the Swedish labour market context. Far from being a neutral process, translating the validation of skills and knowledge into practice and procedure is fundamentally influenced by the socio-material context, including the interests and agendas of the caseworkers and public officials involved. During the process, the immigrant's agency as a skilful, knowledgeable individual becomes profoundly constrained.

The following scenes from the occupational assessments of one Iraqi and one Chechen immigrant may illustrate the ambitions connected to validation process and their translation into practice.

Scene 2: instrumentalizing validation

We are just outside the city at a major vocational training facility in Western Sweden. Ahmad, a middle-aged man from Iraq, is scheduled to undergo an occupational assessment at 9 a.m. He has attended a "Swedish for Immigrants" language course and speaks the language well. From the documentation provided by ValCenter, which had registered him for this assessment, the vocational expert knows that Ahmad had been classified as a carpenter by his PES caseworker and that he currently works as a chef in a restaurant – a job Ahmad does not like:

Trainer: In my papers, it says that you're a carpenter? When I think of carpenters in Iraq, I think of furniture [...].

Ahmad: It's like in Sweden, the same [...] you work with windows, doors [...].

T: But, do they build wooden houses in Iraq?

A: It's almost the same as in Sweden.

T: Later on, we can take a walk outside and have a look at things and you can tell me what you've worked with [...]. So, how do you learn to be a carpenter in Iraq?

A: You have a boss, a master carpenter telling you what to do and then you learn how to do it [...] And then you become the boss. You do things and learn [...].

T: How many years did you work for?

A: Many years [...] five-six [...]

T: What were your duties?

A: Everything.

T: Casting a foundation?

A: Casting a foundation? [...]. No, others do that.

[...].

[The trainer proceeds to ask questions about the work of casting concrete foundations and walls.]

Trainer: It states "carpenter" in your papers, but would you be interested in working as a "concreter"?

A: I don't understand?

[In Sweden casting a foundation is the work of concreters, not carpenters.]

The trainer explains that the vocational training council for the construction trades claims that enough young people have been trained as carpenters to meet the current demands of Swedish industry. Concreters, on the other hand, are currently in demand, as this occupation is suffering from a shortage of skilled labour. Ahmad hesitates. The trainer explains that it is very difficult to get a job as a carpenter today. He hands Ahmad a pamphlet containing information, pictures, and important terms relating to the work of concreting. [...] The trainer takes out construction plans for houses. He tells Ahmad that a concreter may be given one of these plans and then told: Ok, now your job is to cast the foundations of this house. Ahmad says that he has never seen one of these drawings before [...]. Later on, as they take a walk outside, they come across a man who is building a wooden shed. He greets the trainer and then the two men talk. He then turns to Ahmad and asks if he is a carpenter too. "Yes", answers Ahmad, whereupon the trainer says "well, no, not really, he's a concreter" [...] (An occupational assessment at a training college, 081117).

That the caseworker sent Ahmad to be validated even when she had classified him as a carpenter in the AMSYK system means that his prior skills and knowledge became monstrous. They disrupt the boundaries of what is considered normal skills and knowledge of a carpenter in Sweden. Consequently, the caseworker seeks some form of evidence from a vocational expert for her classificatory decision in order to finally enable her to unambiguously classify him. However, during the validation procedure Ahmad is questioned in ways that carpenters, who have undergone training and worked in Sweden are not, further enhancing the monstrosity of his skills and knowledge: when Ahmad is asked whether people build wooden houses in Iraq (wooden houses are widespread throughout Sweden and a country trademark since the Pippi Longstocking books and movies), he is rendered questionable. This example is

illustrative of the questioning nature of validation practice: even though validation was initially seen as a way to assess skills and knowledge, it is now translated into a diagnostic means of questioning the occupational categories of immigrants.

Further, this scene shows how the vocational expert in this example instrumentalizes the validation procedure in a way that effectively puts it at the service of the Swedish labour market, and specifically at the service of a construction industry that faces skills shortages amongst concreters. During the process, the expert acknowledges that Ahmad possesses skills and knowledge, but decides what these skills are – i.e. he decides that Ahmad is a concreter, not a carpenter. In line with this instrumentalization of the validation procedure, Ahmad's chances of staying in the carpenter category diminish. The scene thereby shows the enormous powers afforded to the classifiers in the context of the project.

Scene 3: eliminating monstrosity

Dmitri, a Chechen in his fifties, is scheduled to undergo an occupational assessment. He speaks very little Swedish and an interpreter has been booked for the meeting. The interpreter does not arrive and Dmitri's 13-year-old son, who does speak Swedish, is asked to assist. Dmitri's PES caseworker had mapped him before sending him to the educational service provider for validation. Based on this documentation, she had decided that he has an "occupational identity" as a truck driver. However, she has not classified him as a truck driver in the AMSYK system, because it was still unclear whether he could be considered a truck driver in Sweden or not. Dmitri is not alone in this residual category. According to the PES caseworkers, the majority of the recent immigrants they map have an "occupational identity", and "very few" fit unambiguously into one AMSYK category. The validation procedure, however, is understood as a meaningful tool for changing this, and for classifying immigrants unambiguously, since the evidence derived from it is based on the expertise of vocational trainers in the field.

In Dmitri's case, Stefan logs onto ValCenter's web site and begins to check his details. After briefly asking Dmitri about his schooling, he moves on to talk about his work experience and fills in the information in a standardized ValCenter template on his computer:

S: What was your next job?

D: I drove a taxi for 13 years in Grozny [...] and buses.

[...].

S: And, what else?

D: I drove trucks.

[...].

S: How long did you work as a truck driver?

D: For 5 years [...] altogether.

Dmitri also worked at the airport in Grozny, where he did "everything": He towed aircraft and drove trucks and buses. The airport was destroyed by war, so Dmitri ran a repair shop in Chechnya between the wars. He repaired Russian cars, but also Mercedes and BMWs. He employed 14 people:

S: What kind of repairs did you do?

Dmitri has trouble explaining to his son and says that his son does not know the technical terms. Stefan shows pictures of cylinders, valves, etc. Dmitri nods and points at the images:

[...]

S: If you could choose what you wanted to work with in Sweden, what would you choose?

D: I'd want to repair cars [...] (An occupational assessment for truck drivers, 070504).

Stefan documents the results of the occupational assessment in the form of a certificate; a standardized form drawn up by ValCenter. The document is sent via the intranet to Dmitri's caseworker at the PES. At the assessment, however, the standardized validation form leaves little room to include Dmitri's heterogeneous experience from a variety of different occupations and activities. The summary of the certificate focuses solely on his experience as a truck driver and it is stated as follows.

6.1 Summary of occupational assessment

Dmitri shows very good prior knowledge of both the theoretical and practical elements. My assessment is that he is well prepared and highly motivated to take part in a training course for a CE or a D (driver's) licence (Swedish heavy goods vehicle (HGV) licences).

6.2 Recommendation

Occupational SFI ["Swedish for Immigrants" language course] followed by training for a CE or D licence. Dmitri has a good chance of getting work as an HGV driver in Sweden provided that his language skills improve (Excerpt from "Certificate for completed occupational assessment" (DocOA070504)).

Dmitri is occupationally assessed in order to provide evidence, which would further support his "occupational identity" as a truck driver and thus remove any ambiguity. During his assessment, it becomes apparent that he has done a lot more kinds of work before coming to Sweden. Dmitri has worked in various jobs, had his own business, repaired cars, and driven trucks, forklifts, buses and taxis. He manufactured some of his own tools and he has handled the adversities that accompany earning a living and surviving civil wars and general lawlessness. However, in the certificate drawn up by the vocational expert, the summary of the assessment only includes a description of his skills as a truck driver. Through the process, beginning with his classification by the PES caseworker, who suggested he had an "occupational identity" as a truck driver, and ending with his validation by the vocational expert, the complexity of Dmitri's personal and professional trajectory is reduced. Here, the validation procedure is enacted as a tool for determining the recent immigrant's "true" status in order to make him manageable on the basis of an administrative system.

We see how Dmitri's agency, which would allow him to decide which parts of his heterogeneous past experiences should be emphasized during the validation process, is constrained by the classification process. He is assessed as a truck driver not because of any perceived shortages of labour market skills but because his PES caseworker sent him to be validated, because her "mapping" had provided her with inconclusive evidence as to whether or not Dmitri could be considered a truck driver in Sweden. She deemed him to have an "occupational identity" as a truck driver. As a consequence, Dmitri is unable to make his own choice: He cannot decide which of his heterogeneous experiences and skills he wishes to have validated. The certificate drawn up by the vocational expert, finally, transforms him into quantifiable evidence. His desire to work

as an auto-mechanic, based on his past experience in the trade, is not reflected in that evidence. The validation procedure thus privileges formal accounts, which are regarded normal in the Swedish context (i.e. reference to the different formal training courses for truck drivers). It de-privileges Dmitri's narrative account of his past experiences, rendering it monstrous, because it includes personal "stuff" that is unable to make up for the gaps in the formal grades.

Discussion

As suggested by previous research on classification and difference in organizing, classification work needs to be studied as a situated and political practice (Bowker and Star, 2000). My empirical case, the V/I Project, constitutes a situated reading of Swedish attempts to reclassify recent immigrants on the basis of their skills and knowledge in the context of their settlement after arriving in the country. These attempts are embedded in a context of interventionist labour market policy and integrationist welfare state immigration policy seeking to integrate immigrants in society through employment. In practice, the validation procedure involves a number of classification mechanisms to fit individuals into predefined categories based on their occupational background: that is, the translation of skills, the instrumentalization of validation, and the effort to eliminate the monstrosity of the immigrants' occupational trajectories.

The study emphasizes the difficulties of translating the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants for the Swedish labour market context. People's experience, skills and knowledge are determined, not by their reputed qualifications, but by social settings. In other words, a person is a carpenter not because s/he says s/he is one, or because s/he has a business card which states that s/he is one, but because s/he makes wooden products and acts in ways that – at a specific time and in a specific place and according to the interests and experiences of the observer – are considered to be the typical ways of acting for a carpenter. In the context of the V/I Project, the assessors faced the challenges highlighted by Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1999, p. 630) as the "paradox of ethnocentricity": How to represent the Other times and Other places using only the tools and methods of the here and now? After all, the skills and knowledge that are identified by a training expert as relevant, are the skills that are recognizable to a Swedish training expert, rather than to a carpenter in Baghdad or a car mechanic in Grozny. This paradox remains unresolved through the V/I Project. It is not a matter of a neutral validation procedure delivering objective knowledge about the skills of the immigrant. The assessors decide which areas are part of the skills and knowledge of the immigrant (see also Andersson and Osman, 2008), and the certificate produced is the outcome of the here and now, in particular of the vocational expert's assumptions about the foreign context wherein the prior learning has taken place and his or her assumptions about how this learning can be known and communicated (see also Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999, p. 631).

The study further suggests that the V/I Project, which attempts to do away with ethnic categories, which are seen as problematic, and to replace them with occupational categories, is in line with what has been considered in the past to be "best practice" in organizing difference: neglecting the effects of everyday classifications based on the formal argument that everybody is equal (Sennett, 1991, quoted in Gastelaars, 2002). However, contrary to Gastelaars' (2002) suggestion that organizations are beginning to acknowledge the differences that play a part in everyday negotiations and mediations within organizations, the initial intentions of the (re)classification processes examined in this study continue to be enacted on the formal premise that everyone is equal – that

the skills and knowledge of a carpenter trained in Baghdad are essentially the same as those of a carpenter trained in Sweden, and that the enactment of equality is only a matter of transmitting these skills in an effective way. However, following Ahmed (2012, p. 182), to proceed in practice as if the categories did not matter, because they should not matter, is to fail to show how the categories continue to ground social existence.

Finally, the study suggests that, while the occupational experiences and undocumented skills of recent immigrants would pass muster in their countries of origin, in one way or another, they seem monstrous in Sweden. The Swedish vocational experts acknowledge the heterogeneity of recent immigrants' skills and knowledge as being normal in the context of what it means to engage in an occupation in their countries of origin ("this is how they work in Iraq"). However, this normality is constrained through the validation procedure and thereby operates within the context of prior learning in the country of origin and not of the current occupation in Sweden. The study thus corroborates the point made in the existing literature that what is deemed ordinary in one context may seem monstrous in the next, and vice versa (see e.g. Munro, 2001; Thanem, 2006).

In summary, the study provokes rather sad reflections concerning the possibility of eliminating prejudice by means of "proper" organizing. It suggests that the work of validation builds on the ideal-type notion that there are distinct ethnicities and races, as well as equally distinct occupations. Accordingly, people can be sorted into discrete human groupings – European, Swedish, non-Nordic, non-European, Somali, Iranian – or into discrete occupations such as truck driver, carpenter or auto mechanic, based on a standardized occupational classification system. Validation is therefore an attempt to draw clear boundaries between who is in and who is out by means of classification. The study suggests however, that practical classification in organizing does not follow an ideal-type logic (see also Bowker and Star, 2000). The skills and criteria for working in occupations such as carpentry, concreting or auto mechanics cannot be unambiguously specified. And ethnic categories cannot be monolithic and coherent. Instead, understandings of what an auto mechanic is, what makes him or her skilled or not, as well as stereotypes attributed to different ethnicities, are enacted continuously and change over time on the basis of the interests and experiences of the classifiers. Due to the political nature of skills and the link between skills/knowledge and socio-demographic identities (see e.g. Turnbull, 2000; Grugulis *et al.*, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; Zanoni, 2011), the switch from categories based on ethnicity to categories based on skill, as advocated by the V/I Project, does not necessarily reduce prejudice and discrimination. The cases presented here thereby challenge simplistic, purist categories such as ethnicity, and emphasize the value of ambiguity and complexity when applying any sort of categories to human beings.

Conclusions and implications

To conclude, the study allows reflection on the practical implications that this kind of analysis entails for immigration practice in Sweden. The distinctive Swedish immigration model is facing many challenges on its way towards a future increasingly shaped by ideas surrounding the knowledge economy and the accompanying changes in the labour market and the workplace. The existing immigration model is somewhat ambiguous, being dictated by Sweden's political economy in two distinctive ways: first, in the selection of people for immigration, Sweden's strong commitment to the welfare state plays an important role as people are usually granted residency not on the basis of any immediate labour market needs, but on the basis of their own need for

protection; second, once immigrants have been granted residency, their skills and knowledge are in focus and attempts are made to connect these more effectively to the needs of the labour market. However, as argued above, this is like changing the rules of the game during the game. During the first half of the game, the person's value in the labour market does not matter at all, but during the second half it is all that matters. In this process, recent immigrants have been cast in the role of needy individuals with complex, problematic backgrounds before attempts are made to help them into employment. Within the context of the welfare state, they are not deemed any more monstrous, because of particular needs or requirements for protection. It is through the effort to help them into employment that recent immigrants are deemed more monstrous than others, as their skills and knowledge are displaced beyond what is considered normal in Sweden. The shift from categories of ethnicity to categories of skill mediated by the validation procedure allows public officials to distinguish who is inside (and adhering to the Swedish norm) from who is outside (and not adhering to the Swedish norm) in a way that is acceptable on the Swedish labour market. After all, it is, considered acceptable to exclude someone from the labour market and/or require them to undergo further education and training because s/he is seen to lack the occupational skills needed to perform a job correctly. But it is unacceptable to do so based on ethnic categorizations.

Finally, the study also allows us to reflect on what practical implications this may have for the organizing of difference and diversity through government policy. Such organizing does not primarily imply neglecting certain categories because they should not matter and focusing on others that are considered more favourable by the application of new tools, methods or processes. It is naïve to believe that this removes the everyday classifications that people use to make sense of their world. Instead, it requires a whole new approach, which involves developing a range of new capabilities and understandings among all the actors involved that better enable them to recognize and value the multiplicity and heterogeneity of difference. And, as Gastelaars (2002) argues, because classificatory work will always be with us, as will its aggregating effects and power differences, we need to provide more room than praxis currently allows for the everyday negotiations that surround these classifications "on the floor".

Specifically, wider recognition of the everyday processes of classification and power could move the validation of skills and knowledge away from superficial mechanistic attempts to banish ethnicity in pursuit of sameness and towards an acceptance of diversity and difference. Such changes in the context of skills and knowledge assessment would no longer construct immigrants' self-presentation as professionals as a balancing act of negotiating a constructed disjunction between "occupational identity" and "ethnic identity". The organizing of difference and diversity by means of validating recent immigrants' skills and knowledge should thus aim, to paraphrase Thanem (2006, p. 187), for a monstrous validation instead of a validation of monsters.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Barbara Czarniawska for bringing this excerpt from the movie *Mosters Inc.* to my attention.
2. In some countries, this is referred to as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) or the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL).
3. In Sweden, a refugee or immigrant is classified as "recent" for the duration of the settlement period of up to two years from the time he/she is granted residency by the Swedish Migration Board (in extraordinary cases this may be extended to three years).

4. In 2012, 17,405 residency permits were granted to various categories of refugees in Sweden (The Swedish Migration Board, 2012, available at: www.migrationsverket.se/info/793.html, accessed 19 June 2013).
5. Presentation by the Director General of the Swedish National Commission for Validation (Valideringsdelegationen) on "The Swedish Model of Validation" in Stockholm, Sweden, in October 2007.
6. Interview with project leader (JJ071109:4).

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