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Institutional Environments and Sub-Cultural Belonging: Theatre and Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT   *This article analyses a theatre, Olla, which has actors with intellectual disabilities. Using qualitative methods the aims are to analyse how Olla relates to institutional environments and to analyse the social meaning of acting. The results are based on two empirical research projects using three qualitative methods: participant observation; open, non-structured qualitative interviews with both the leaders and the actors; and research circles with the actors. The results were analysed from a neo-institutional and a sub-cultural perspective. The results show that, at an organizational level, Olla is connected to the two different logics, which generate a certain ambivalence in relation to the surrounding environment. Legitimacy is rooted in a duality between process and product, art and therapy. However, the process at hand creates cultural meaning, where the emphasis is on the identification and celebration of difference. By sharing the same cultural belonging and by expressing this in relation to the public, the actors have developed confidence and strength with emancipatory significance. It has given them an instrument with which to deal with their experiences of ambivalence to their environment.*

Working with theatre has become an increasingly frequent and popular activity organized and administered within the disability services in Sweden (Holmgren 2001, Sauer 2004, Ineland 2004). As an activity, however, theatre also has a rather long history in the disability arena. As with music, dance and drama, activity within the theatre previously often had a therapeutic and rehabilitation orientation, whereby the aim was to improve skills and competencies for people with disabilities (Sauer 2004, Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare 2000). Today, the objectives are more explicitly formulated within an artistic discourse. The starting point for this article is a theatre for and with people with intellectual disabilities. This theatre, Olla, is located in a municipality in northern Sweden. During our research Olla comprised 19 persons: five leaders and 14 actors. Participation in Olla is included as one of the rights (guaranteed services) according to the *Act Concerning Support and Services for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments* (SFS: 1993:387) under the category *daily activity*, which means that working age individuals who are not gainfully employed or studying are entitled to assistance in order

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to participate in daily activities. The theatre is, in a formal sense, an organization within the disability services of the municipality. The theatre has its background in the mid-1990s and gained considerable attention in the press with its acclaimed performance of the opera *Carmen*, which was also shown on Swedish public television. This success resulted in Olla becoming a permanent daily activity in 2000, which people with intellectual disabilities could choose.

Aims, Method and Theory

The aims of this article are to analyse how Olla, through its practice, relates to institutional environments and to analyse the actors' experiences of working at Olla. The analysis has been drawn from two empirical research projects, carried out between 2000 and 2004. The two projects had different focuses and were guided by an inductive and explorative approach (Sauer 2004, Ineland 2004, 2005). Three qualitative methods were used: open, non-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale 1997); participant observation (Henriksson & Månsson 1996); and research circles, which are strongly influenced by the participatory research paradigm (Starrin & Söder 2005). Interviews were conducted with the five leaders and the 14 actors with intellectual disabilities, and the research circles were conducted with the actors. In total, the empirical data collection was conducted over a period of 2 years. Based on the aims of this article, the empirical data selected are illustrative examples from which to devise more theoretical implications. The theoretical framework of this article is two-fold. Firstly the analyses will be made against neo-institutional theory, as presented by DiMaggio & Powell (1991); DiMaggio (1998) and Scott (1994). This perspective is quite unusual in the discourse of disability research, but is used here to illustrate the relationship between institutional settings and the social practices of people with intellectual disabilities. Secondly, analyses will be made against a sub-cultural perspective of disability that focuses on questions about how and in what way acting and being part of Olla have had a role to play in the actors self-image and identity.

Disability, Art and Legitimacy

Despite their artistic ambitions, Olla differs in some ways from more professional theatres. First and foremost, Olla is not only an arena for cultural activity but also a specific right under the disability law LSS (SFS 1993:387). From this perspective, Olla is both an artistic arena and a welfare state solution. Furthermore, the people working at Olla are not just actors, but are also clients of the welfare state. Cultural activities in the disability area are, so to speak, part of a wider welfare state context and therefore operate under certain institutional rules. Friedman and Alford (1991) argue that organizational fields always consist of different institutional orders composed of multiple institutional logics, which are available to individuals and organizations as bases for action. According to Scott (1994) logics:

> ... establish the framework within which knowledge claims are situated and provide the
> rules by which the claims are validated and challenged. The logics employed vary over
> time, across societies and organizational fields. (p. 60)

The tension between Olla and the institutional environment is reflected
through the presence of two different logics that express ideals and values that
enable Olla to relate to different aspects of the institutional environment. On
the one hand there is a therapeutic logic that builds on organizational
belonging and a rationale of welfare state responsibility, which put emphasis
on people-changing (Hasenfeld 1992) and the relationship between individual
preferences and welfare state solutions. On the other hand, there is a logic of
art that focuses on the cultural/creative dimensions of Olla that affect the
communication, roles, activities and ways of thinking about the theatre's
ideology and future orientations. The application of neo-institutional theory
is helpful in interpreting the duality between artistic and therapeutic logics as
a consequence of Olla's need to obtain legitimacy from different institutional
environments (see DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Meyer & Rowan 1977).
According to Scott and Meyer (1983) neo-institutional theory can be useful
in understanding how organizational fields are characterized by the elabora-
tion of rules and requirements to which individual organizations must
conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy (p. 149).

Meyer & Rowan (1977) argue that, for human service organizations, the
most important aspect of legitimacy is not recognition of the technical
proficiency of the work in the organizations, but more a matter of conforming
to dominant cultural symbols and belief systems, that is, institutional rules.
The issue of legitimacy is central in understanding how organizations operate
within an organizational field. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) the
concept of organizational fields can help explain the larger world of
surrounding institutions. The term refers to:

> ... those organizations that, in aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional
> life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other
> organizations that produce similar services and products (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:148).

Within organizational fields, common practices are adopted across
organizations based on conformity with legitimized standards rather than
evidence of effectiveness. Organizations that incorporate elements in their
formal structures, which are legitimated and rationalized by society, maximize
their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capabilities
(DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Adjustment and conformity are, however,
complicated, since expectations and institutional rules are often contradictory
due to technical (methods, techniques) and institutional (norms, values)
aspects of the environment. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), tensions
are likely to occur between technical and institutional expectations as well as
between expectations from the institutional environment and demands that
work assignments place on the organization of the work. Their term,
decoupling, refers to a distinction between the formal structure of an
organization and its actual day-to-day activities. The formal structure is

considered to be composed of myths and ceremonies and does not necessarily correspond to technical efficiency. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), rationalized myths are impersonal and collectively define notions about what kinds of means are rational in relation to given institutionalized ends. A number of advantages arise when decoupling the formal structure from the day-to-day activities. The most significant advantage is perhaps the recognition of the organization's wider scope of reaction, and therefore increased ability to adjust to a broader spectrum of expectations from the environment.

A Sub-Cultural Understanding of Disability

The social construction of reality rests on the idea that we construct and reconstruct social phenomena as we try to understand reality (Berger & Luckman 1991). The point of departure is the picture of normality of those who are not intellectual disabled compared with how people with intellectual disabilities are regarded (Söder 1999). Following this line of argument, Solvang (2000a) point out that disability can be understood through three discourses. First, the normality/deviance discourse, which focuses on rehabilitation, normalization and integration; secondly, the equality/inequality discourse, which focuses on economics and equal rights; and, finally, the us/them discourse, which focuses on identity and belonging. All three discourses are necessary in order to understand disability in a societal perspective. An individual with a disability needs to relate to a role of the deviant, which is formulated within the discourse of normality/deviance, to be able to get support and social services from the welfare state. In order for people with disabilities to participate in societal life and have their rights met, resources must be allocated by the welfare state and this perspective reflects the equality/inequality discourse. At the same time, however, disability in other contexts is important as the characteristic that brings people together or as the basis for identification, and this perspective is associated with the us/them discourse. The balance between deviance and normality may be understood as a balance between a societal and an individual interpretation of disability. On the one hand, the welfare state needs to define people with disabilities as clients in order to secure rights in form of support and services. On the other hand this is contrasted with an individual perspective, which involves a self-understanding of being, in most cases, not a client but an individual in everyday life. The welfare state constructs deviance, for example through social policy decisions concerning who is and who is not disabled, which in turn determines who is entitled to services that can facilitate the realization of individuals' and groups' life projects. Such life projects can be understood in terms of normality, for example living independently and being employed. People with disabilities may have a need to belong to the deviant category, "the disabled", as much as they may have a need to reformulate the understanding of this belonging. Belonging to the deviant category carries with it entitlement to services and support, something that may be necessary for handling the consequences of disability. While some groups or individuals make the choice to pass as "normal", others have reformulated and

reconstructed certain social meanings. Nowadays, people create their own individual life projects, which are not necessarily determined by their social and cultural positions at birth. One such example is the deaf (Ladd 2003). The deaf are, from an ethnological perspective, a sub-culture that consists of a cosmology, codes, values and conceptions that are shared by its members. According to Sirnes (1999) these sub-cultures and sub-cultural movements are global, flexible, changing and increasing. As a consequence, this has made it possible for different kinds of groups of ''deviants'' to move from a client-oriented normality/deviance discourse to the us/them discourse, which has identification as its primary concept. For persons with intellectual disabilities, the disability is of importance in most social contexts. According to Solvang (2000b) this circumstance contributes to identity shaping. However, they have not achieved a reformulation of the social and cultural understanding of intellectual disability in the same way as the deaf have. Nevertheless, examples have begun to appear that seem to indicate a trend toward this group redefining their social identity.

Results and Analysis

Art and Therapy – Different Logics in Disability Arts Practice

The increasing number of cultural projects for people with intellectual disabilities may be viewed as an effect of a widespread belief that theatres have a role to play in realizing disability policy and promoting the adoption of moral and normative ideals and values in modern society. Thus cultural activities in the disability area are part of a wider welfare state context and operate under certain institutional rules (Ineland 2004). However, institutional rules might generate potential conflicts between norms and values. Human service organizations therefore need to relate to expectations from politicians, professionals, clients and a broader public. In an Olla perspective the relationship to surrounding environments is somewhat complex. This is most explicit in differences in relation to actors inside and outside the organization. Attention from actors outside the organization, for example, from interest organizations, professional theatres, media and public opinion, suggest that the theatre has a strong legitimacy that affects Olla's self-confidence as a theatre group. This is explicit in the following quote from one of the leaders:

> I have been working with other colleagues from the cultural sphere and many of them have seen *Carmen* for instance and they became so surprised and they said that the performance was breathtaking, and that this is really theatre. So they know what we are doing here...

However, a somewhat different picture emerges regarding Olla's relationship with the social service organization. One leader illustrates a recognized scepticism from the colleagues in the organization:

> Many people [within the social services] think that we are just playing around. But they haven't even visited a theatre. They mean that one must do something meaningful during

the day. But what is meaningful? Does that mean to always do physical work? We do that here too, but it is also important to fantasise, think and talk . . . but from their viewpoint these things are not really worth anything.

Hence, even though Olla is part of the organizational field of social services, the leaders view their organizational belonging as an obstacle to artistic performance. The discrepancy between relations with actors inside and outside the organization can be interpreted as quite an explicit example of the normative tension that surrounds practices in a specific organizational field, i.e. social services for people with disabilities. However, in order to receive legitimacy, organizations need to cope with and relate to various expectations from the institutional environment. From an institutional perspective, one way in which organizations cope with such dilemmas is by decoupling the formal structure from the actual work. By decoupling, organizations are able to maintain standardized, legitimized, formal structures, while activities are guided by more practical considerations (Meyer & Rowan 1977). In order to receive legitimacy and to cope with different institutional rules, Olla has adopted different strategies.

On the one hand, Olla's relationship with the media and a broader audience is legitimated and Olla is portrayed as (essentially) an actor in the cultural arena. As cultural entrepreneurs in the organizational field, Olla's practice is grounded in a cultural logic as well as in broad societal ideals regarding participation, choice and the importance of individual representations. By employing a cultural rhetoric, the media reflects institutional rules held by broader audiences and public opinion. In that sense the media have contributed to an understanding of Olla as culturally conscious and as "moral entrepreneurs" in the field of social services (see Hasenfeld 1992). On the other hand, the manner in which Olla relates to the institutional rules within the social service organization reflects a more therapeutic logic in which the actors with disabilities as disabled individuals are the focus of attention. As argued by Hasenfeld (1983), "people changing" is often employed as a standard for quality in human service organizations whose main activity relates to processing, sustaining and modifying the behaviour of people who come under its jurisdiction. The leaders often highlight the distinguishing features of Olla by referring to learning and personal growth, e.g. increased independence and participation, or a more positive self-image and greater self-confidence. From a human service perspective, the following quote from one of the leaders reflects a belief that acting has a "people-changing" potential for people with intellectual disabilities:

> Take NN for instance. She has been very shy and guarded and she never answered questions. But we have been working quite a lot with her and now when she arrives at the theatre in the mornings she hugs people and talks all the time and is just really happy. It is a hundred percent better.

The shifting focus between people changing and artistic performances – between art and therapy – could be interpreted as an effect of shifting institutional expectations, which are embedded in two divergent institutional

logics (Friedland & Alford 1991, Scott 1994). First, a logic of art emphasizes the cultural aspects and ambitions of Olla and work with theatre as a goal in itself. Secondly, the therapeutic logic is derived from disability ideology and places the emphasis on the process of people changing; theatre therefore becomes a method to achieve aims oriented towards the individual actors. This illustrates a somewhat ambivalent relationship between artistic ambitions in working with the theatre and more therapeutic ambitions, which focus on the ability to promote mental, psychological and social development for people with intellectual disabilities. Olla is shaped by an artistic rationale, although its organizational belonging involves another set of institutional rules. This duality, which is manifested by two different logics, enables Olla to relate to a broader spectrum of institutional rules and can therefore receive legitimacy from a variety of actors in the surrounding environment. However, the duality between art and therapy generates a challenging role for the leaders as they attempt to distinguish coherence to rationalized myths in such a multifaceted institutional environment. On the one hand, they are expected to manage and lead (the work at) Olla with the goal of a future production in mind. On the other hand, they have responsibility for participating in the process of helping the people with disabilities who work at Olla with their personal development. In a sense, they are both cultural workers and care givers, both artistic leaders and responsible for the actors' mental and social status.

Acting, Sub-Cultural Belonging and Self-Image

The tension between, on the one hand, being an organization providing disability services and, on the other hand, being part of the art field is also something that is practised through the daily social processes and actions. The actors become in this way both actors in a theatre and clients of a disability service organization. This could be, with Solvang's terminology, understood as a balancing between the role of the deviant (intellectual disabled) and the role of being normal (theatre actor). This balancing act between both being an actor in a theatre and being a client in the welfare state, however, also creates an important part in the formation of a new role and self-image for the actors. One of the actors expresses this new role in an interview:

> ... then they are [the audience] looking at us in a different way, then we are theatre actors. There (at the stage) we are showing how competent we are, that is something they like – there we are receiving applauds

The artistic logic is practiced in the actors' daily work and in the way of talking and thinking about the theatre. Through this emphasis on the normal, the actors are given new understandings of themselves. They are, at the Olla theatre and when acting in public, understood as and given the role of theatre actor. Those experiences give them confidence and strength; in this way they become valued and appreciated producers of cultural experiences.

An illustrative example of how the audience can respond to the acting is the following narrative:

> ... the day after [the performance] we received phone calls from the audience and from "Dramaten" [The Royal Swedish Theatre], we did not know that they where in the audience... They all thanked us for a wonderful play...they said that they were touched by our acting, then I asked them in which way? There was specially one man, an art director at "Dramaten" who phrased this especially well, he said "I have never been to a play where the acting was so strong, I travelled from Stockholm with the expectation that I would be watching a play with intellectually disabled people but that is not what I saw. I saw and heard a fantastic *Carmen* opera".

The positive response that the actors receive from the leaders in their daily work and from the broader public is a new experience. Those experiences contrast with the role into which they are socialized, a role that can be described as a dependent consumer of disability services. Viewing Olla as an artistic praxis connects with an artistic logic, which has its roots in the artistic ideal concerning the functionality of a given environment, such as when the aim is to produce theatre and to work with artistic activities. The physical environment at the theatre does not demarcate differences between leaders and actors. The environment is guided and shaped through the idea of how best to conduct the theatre activity – in other words, through things connected to rehearsal, light, darkness, acoustics, etc. The emphasis on production of art, together with the physical environment in the theatre represents important aspects in the social meaning of acting at Olla. At the Olla theatre the skills of the actors are in focus, not their intellectual disability.

One aspect of social significance in acting, expressed by the actors themselves, is related to the satisfaction achieved from working in a more creative genre. The work satisfaction is generated by the fellowship prevalent at the theatre and the nature of the work, which differs from their earlier experiences. Working at Olla involves dance, drama, scenery and costume making, theatre exercises, painting and music. This work is not experienced as routine but as flexible and independent – the actors are mobile physically as well as in space and time. The creative work generates space for creativity and individuality. In this aspect the work at Olla differs from earlier experiences of more institutionalized work, which is illustrated by the following excerpt from an interview with one of the actors:

> *Interviewer:* If you compare work at the theatre and other places you have worked...
> *Actor:* I think... it is different here. Here you are working with creative work and you take a break when you decide to. I see this as real work
> *Interviewer:* As real work...
> *Actor:* This is real work! Not a day centre and if they want this to be a day centre then they have to deal with me.

Furthermore, the actors at Olla expressed the possibility of participating in day-to-day decisions. The leaders have adopted a conscious ambition to give the actors influence and control over the daily work at the theatre. Responding to the question about the leaders one of the actors says:

They are great.
How was it at the other sheltered work places where you have been working?
No, there the personnel decided.
And how is it here?
You are allowed to decide yourself.
Are you allowed to take part in decisions here?
Yes, that is my opinion.

An important dimension of the above discussion is that the production of and working with theatre also requires influence and participation on the part of the actors. One of the leaders formulates this in the following way:

> On the stage, something happens, we become equal – we are standing on the stage! And there are not the boundaries between personnel and intellectually disabled, there you are theatre actors, you are equal.

This quotation connects with an artistic logic. The leaders are carrying out their leadership in the same way as they are trained and socialized to when working in more professional theatre institutions. The Swedish disability services are guided by the very same goals; influence and participation are important ideological principals in the disability services. These principals have become a way of relating to disabled persons. In this way influence and participation become therapeutic aims, something that personnel train intellectually disabled people in. The above discussion highlights essential ingredients in both the formation of a new identity and in the social building blocks used in constructing intellectual disability at the Olla theatre. This could be analysed in a sub-cultural perspective, which is characterized through a shared cosmology and shared views and ways of thinking about the Olla theatre and the role of both the actors and the leaders. One of the more essential constituent elements in this specific culture is the fellowship and togetherness that the members at the Olla theatre have with each other.

As pointed out earlier, Olla can be understood as a social hybrid between a professional theatre and an organization within the welfare state. Following Hasenfeld's (1983) line of argument, this means that the actors are "raw material" for professionals to work with in order to realize the aims and objectives of the disability policy. The emphasis on artistic logic also has an impact on the way of thinking and talking about the role and status of both the leaders and the actors. At Olla the actors are colleagues and not only intellectually disabled clients. The emphasis is on the collegial relationship between each other at the theatre, a relationship that also includes the leaders. One of the actors expressed this in the following way:

> *Actor:* As we say here, we are all colleagues, we are not clients. Now we are colleagues.
> *Interviewer:* You don't like the term client?
> *Actor:* No, I don't like it. Such a word should not be used to label any human regardless of whether they are living in a supported housing or a group home. They are humans just like you; people are not calling you a client are they?

The fellowship and relations between the actors is also something that one of the leaders comments on as something special:

> When I came here I noticed that the actors communicate with each other, here they socialize with each other and are work mates. This is not the case in other place where they are talking mainly to and through the personnel. Those working here at the theatre are very bound together; they are a group...

The balancing act between deviance and normality is not only an important building block in the formation of identity; it is also an important element in the formation of a sub-culture. This special situation in Olla, however, has generated fertile ground for the cultivation of a specific culture. One aspect concerns the struggle between the therapeutic logic and the artistic logic, in being both a professional theatre and a disability service organization. The second aspect concerns the role of the actors as both clients to the welfare state and theatre actors. At an organizational level the Olla theatre, as illustrated earlier, has to find legitimacy as a provider of the disability services and as a member of the artistic theatre sphere. In this situation the leaders and the actors joined forces in their ambitions to find acceptance for what the purpose of the Olla theatre should be and how intellectual disability should be understood. This has created a certain "we-sprit" that is expressed in terms of a collegial relationship. The social life at Olla can be interpreted in terms of a sub-cultural perspective. Belonging to Olla has had great importance in the conceptualization of self-image among the actors. The movement has contributed to the individuals viewing themselves as clients to viewing themselves as actors in a cultural arena. This new role is nurtured by the process in in acting and the communication that prevails in the sub-culture that characterizes the Olla theatre. The sub-cultural belonging is influenced by an artistic logic which, as discussed earlier, put the cultural dimensions of acting in the foreground. At both an institutional/ideological level and at a level of identity formation, Olla therefore differs from other disability services. To conclude, the shape of the environment, the nature of acting, the actors' understanding of Olla, and the leaders' approach are all elements that contribute to the formation of a new identity of those involved and to the movement towards a special culture. In a social constructivist perspective this indicates a movement from an identity as intellectually disabled and client of the welfare state towards an understanding of oneself that emphasizes one's abilities as an actor and as a producer of art.

Conclusion

As shown in this article, Olla's formal structure reflects two different logics, which have influenced its relationship with the institutional environment as well as with the actors working at Olla. These two logics are a consequence following the need for human service organizations to obtain legitimacy from the institutional environment. The therapeutic logic puts emphasis on people-changing and the relationship between individual preferences and welfare state solutions. The artistic logic focuses on the cultural and creative dimensions of Olla. Thus legitimacy is rooted in a duality between process

and product, art and therapy. Following Solvang's (2000a) conceptions of discourses in disability theory, it is possible to interpret the two diverse logics as being formulated within two different discourses that "define what is recognized as meaningful in thinking about a phenomenon" (p. 4). The therapeutic logic is formulated in a normality/deviance discourse, which is closely related to the welfare state and the client role. The logic of art is formulated in an us/them discourse, which has identification as its primary concept. Instead of being clients in the welfare state, the process at hand creates cultural meaning in sub-cultural groups, such as Olla, where the emphasis is on identification and the celebration of difference. This duality between art and therapy has had a social meaning for the actors working at Olla. The actors' self-understanding includes, on the one hand, being a theatre actor and, on the other hand, a client to the welfare state. In this sense they are balancing between normality (actors) and deviance (intellectually disabled clients). This balancing act is, however, not experienced as negative. Instead this creates a foundation for identity formation and challenges the established social meaning of intellectual disabilities. It is possible to interpret these experiences as a consequence of Olla's potential to generate a stronger belief in their own capabilities and a sense of pride, which indicates a sub-cultural belonging. Being able to express this in relation to the public, the actors have developed confidence and strength with emancipatory significance. It has given them an instrument with which they deal with their experiences of ambivalence in relation to the surrounding environment.

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