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Validation of immigrants' prior foreign learning as a framing practice

Andreas Diedrich

Gothenburg Research Institute (GRI), School of Business, Economics, and Law, University of Gothenburg, Box 603, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the attempts by public officials and caseworkers to manage an overflow of immigrants in the labour market in Sweden. I draw on notions of framing and overflowing, inspired by Michel Callon's (1998) work on the organizing of market-based exchange relationships. I argue that validation is best understood as a *framing practice*, aimed at creating an understanding for the vastness of foreign experience – including skills and competence – of recent immigrants to Sweden, to make this experience measurable and manageable. Validation as a framing practice thereby exemplifies the widespread trust in framing as a way to normalise overflows – to turn overflows into normal flows. However, as the ethnography-inspired study reported here shows, repeated framing does not remove overflows; instead, it produces new and different types of overflows. In the conclusions, I emphasise the heavy investments required by validation in contrast with the fragility of the results it produces in the context of migration management.

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... where there is design, there is waste, and when it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness, the waste is human beings [Zygmunt Bauman, 2004:30].

1. Introduction

This paper explores the attempts by public officials and caseworkers to manage an overflow of immigrants in the labour market in Sweden. Sweden has for many years been the country in the European Union that has taken in the highest number of refugees per capita (UNHCR, 2015). Their integration into the labour market has on the other hand not been particularly successful (Bevelander & Pendakur, 2014; Joyce, 2015). Against the backdrop of growing flows of migrants across the globe (Castles & Miller, 2009; United Nations, 2015) and the more recent refugee “crisis” in Europe, calls for more effective migration management have become ubiquitous in Europe over the past two decades (see e.g. Council of the European Union, 2004; European Commission, 2010; European Commission, 2011:3).

These calls have met with resonance in Sweden, where labour market statistics consistently show that the level of employment among migrants—refugees and other immigrants and their family members—remains significantly lower than for Swedish-born

persons (Segendorf & Teljosuo, 2011). As a consequence, an arsenal of tools and procedures has been developed and introduced to manage this inflow of migrants on the labour market more efficiently, by supporting them into employment as part of their introduction program.

In this paper, I explore one such procedure in greater detail: the validation of foreign learning (in some countries called “recognition of prior learning”, RPL, or accreditation of prior experiential learning, APEL). Swedish policy makers and other public officials described validation as an important part of the resettlement of recent immigrants and, more specifically, an important tool to manage what is perceived as an overflow¹ of migrants on the Swedish labour market – overflow in the sense that labour market participation for immigrants has been shown statistically to be well below that of Swedish-born persons.

I draw on notions of framing and overflowing, inspired by Michel Callon's (1998) work on the organizing of market-based exchange relationships. I argue that validation is best understood as a *framing practice*, aimed at creating an understanding for the vastness of prior (foreign) experience – including skills and

¹ I want to be very clear here that I use the phrase “overflow of migrants” throughout the text to connote the consequence of framing practices, and not in any way to make a politically-charged statement regarding Sweden or any other European country overflowing with migrants. I wish to thank one of the reviewers for bringing the potential risk of misunderstandings concerning this issue to my attention.

E-mail address: andreas.diedrich@gri.gu.se.

competence – of recent immigrants to Sweden, to make this experience measurable and manageable. Validation as a framing practice thereby exemplifies the widespread trust in framing as a way to normalise overflows – to turn overflows into normal flows. However, as the study reported here shows, repeated framing does not remove overflows; instead, it produces new and different types of overflows. In the conclusions, I emphasise the heavy investments required by validation in contrast with the fragility of the results it produces in the context of migration management. The study therefore puts in doubt the consensus of opinion – in Sweden and other countries – which portrays the effective management of migration, and the validation of migrants' prior learning as a panacea, able to solve a wide range of educational, political and social ills.

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by explaining the emergence of the idea of validation in Sweden, showing how it became connected to the integration of recent refugees and other immigrants. Then I suggest that validation can be seen as a framing practice, aimed at managing what policy makers, researchers and other commentators in Swedish society perceive as an overflow of migrants into the contemporary Swedish labour market. Next, I show how repeated framing fails to remove the overflow, and how the new frames produce new overflows. I end listing the insights of this study showing how these may have implications for other domains of migration management. The focus is in particular on challenges associated with translating prior experiences, skills and competence gained in one time/space with the tools, methods and practices of another time/space.

2. Towards validation as a framing practice

Validation of prior learning initially concerned higher education only. In the wake of the focus on student-centred pedagogical approaches at the US universities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, validation was described as a tool for social justice, bringing academia and the rest of society closer together (Michelson, 1996). Even later validation took place predominantly in more formalised educational settings such as schools and universities; other places honoured the validation results (degrees and certificates) produced in such settings.

Over the last two decades, interest in validation has become ubiquitous – in Sweden and elsewhere (see e.g. Colardyn & Bjørnavold, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; Andersson & Osman, 2008; Stenfors-Hayes, Griffiths, & Ogunleye, 2008; Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich, Walter, & Czarniawska, 2011). Researchers, policy-makers and practitioners alike have become interested in validation as the means of promoting equality and inclusion in education and training, of creating a more flexible labour market, and of promoting integration and social cohesion (see e.g. Harris, 1999; Jackson, 2011; Jarvis, 2007). In other words, validation is seen as a panacea for many of the problems facing contemporary Western societies. Until recently, however, researchers have predominantly focused on the effects of validation for individuals, groups, organizations and countries, and largely ignored validation practices as such. Critical researchers have lately refined the literature on validation on methodological and theoretical grounds, challenging the conventional views of experiential learning and the particular readings of knowledge, pedagogy, learning, identity, governance and power, which these views privilege (see e.g. Andersson & Harris, 2006; Brine, 2006; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Field, 2000; Harris, 1999; Michelson, 1996).

Still, the prevalent approach to validation of prior learning focuses on the effects of validation by examining lifelong learning policies and their application to various groups (Chapman, Gaff, Toomey, & Aspin, 2005; Pitman, 2009; Stenfors-Hayes et al.,

2008). This research demonstrated that the agenda for lifelong learning is driven mostly by social inclusion, and it also showed the difficulties associated with implementing lifelong learning policies, including policies regarding the validation of prior learning. Yet many studies and reports adopted a managerialist, essentialising perspective (see e.g. Bjørnavold, 2000; Cedefop, 2009), taking for granted the idea that validation has a liberating effect, and that it promotes social justice and equity (e.g. Jackson, 2011). Such research is based on three assumptions. First, knowledge and skills are objects with essential characteristics. Second, people possess knowledge and skills, which are products of formal, informal and/or non-formal learning (see e.g. Eraut, 2000). Third, there exist methods and tools with 'objective' characteristics that, if implemented correctly, can 'objectively' assess knowledge and skills. Like Clarke and Fujimura's (1992) laboratory scientists, striving to find 'the right tools for the job' in their experiments, validation's proponents search for the best tools to (objectively) identify, document and assess prior learning.

Some researchers have questioned such essentialising approaches to validation and lifelong learning. In a seminal article, Elaine Michelson (1996) criticised the validation literature for its focus on rationality and for treating knowledge as an entity with essential characteristics. Assuming the situatedness of knowledge and learning (the notions developed by Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1993), she argued for an understanding of validation in a particular context. Such a situated learning perspective has more recently been used to examine the validation of prior learning in specific contexts such as migration to Sweden (Andersson & Frejes, 2010).

A few studies have examined validation as an organizing practice consisting of struggles, negotiations, mediations; creating ambiguity and multiple demands from persons, groups and organizations involved, as well as producing a plethora of material artefacts. In organizational practice, the idea of validation is translated, made sense of, and materialised – or not – into a stable process, model, tool or method (Diedrich, 2013a, 2013b; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Joining this growing tradition, I suggest that validation can be understood as a framing practice. Framing, according to Callon (1998), implies a possibility of identifying overflows and containing them. Practice shows that overflows persist, while framing is a fragile and costly element of organizing, which produces overflows rather than eliminating them.

The role of overflow in management and organization studies has been acknowledged more recently (see e.g. Czarniawska & Löfgren, 2012; 2013). Franck Cochoy (2012) argued that management and overflow are adversative notions as management is about channeling flows, not overflows. Indeed, he argued, that if overflow occurs, the "over" can be seen as an indication that management has failed in its attempts at flow generation and control. Thus, once an overflow occurs, new practices and procedures are put in place to channel, reduce or even eliminate the excess. But, as has been suggested previously, managing one overflow problem can lead to a new one (see also Pinch, 2012). Also, as pointed out by Löfgren and Czarniawska (2012: 7), overflows do not have to be managed; they can also be spilled, lost or ignored, or remain unseen, undetected and unregistered. On the other hand, dealing with overflow may also generate new competencies, subjectivities, practices, routines, devices and rituals, and new coping strategies for organizations, groups and individuals.

In what follows, I shortly present the study that forms the basis of the present paper.

3. The study

In this text, I draw on material from fieldwork undertaken by me

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