

# The significance of *trying*: How organizational members meet the ambiguities of diversity

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## Abstract

We address the uncertain outcomes of diversity work in organizations by showing that diversity management does not let itself be reduced to a matter of success and failure. Drawing upon theories of ambiguities in organizations and 2.5 years of longitudinal fieldwork in a Swedish municipality, we show that ambiguities characterize diversity work, including what diversity encompasses, the goals of diversity management, and its outcomes. To account for these ambiguities, we suggest approaching diversity management in terms of *trying* rather than outcomes. First, focusing on trying emphasizes that working with diversity entails a shifting, relative, and tension-filled notion. Second, it brings forth the tentative performativity of diversity management. Third, it opens up ways of looking at diversity in the workplace beyond a reductionist dichotomy between success and failure. Diversity work has no clear end, but this lack of an endpoint does not call into question its *raison d'être*. On the contrary, it makes it a reason to insist on trying to strive for enhancing diversity.

## KEYWORDS

ambiguity, diversity management, diversity work, performativity, Sweden, trying

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

International migration movements, an aging population, and increasing demands for equal opportunities for women, the disabled, and religious and sexual minorities present modern organizations with the growing need to manage diversity (Nkomo et al., 2019). However, numerous efforts at managing diversity have resulted in disappointing outcomes (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Kalev et al., 2006; Oswick & Noon, 2014). Diversity work does not typically correspond to organizational members' and researchers' expectations (Holck, 2016), and the outcomes may be unintended (Leslie, 2019) or unexpected (Hunter & Swan, 2007). Ferdman (2017) emphasizes that working on diversity can even lead to polarizing opinions and cause challenges and tensions in the organization. Janssens and Zanon (2014), in turn, point out that failures in diversity management can foster stereotypes. This gap between the need for and the outcomes of diversity management is a problem for practitioners and academics who find themselves in the difficult position of advocating organizational efforts with uncertain outcomes.

Various reasons are given for unsatisfactory outcomes of diversity management (e.g., Dick & Cassell, 2002; Kirton et al., 2016). For example, Benschop et al. (2016) point out that it is not the type of diversity practices (e.g., training, networking, or mentoring programs) that determines whether or not the organization transforms, but how the practices are designed. Dobbin et al. (2015) demonstrate that certain types of diversity programs increase the number of minority groups in the organization, while others decrease them; correspondingly, they stress the importance of transparency in recruitment and promotion as well as engaging managers in the promotion of diversity. Furthermore, van Douwen et al. (forthcoming) find that resistance to diversity interventions in the organization may cause unforeseen outcomes.

Others look for structural explanations. Nkomo and Hoobler (2014) attribute the difficulties in increasing diversity in organizations in the United States to the historical succession of different perspectives on racioethnic diversity in the workplace. They suggest that diversity, inclusion, and equality have not yet been achieved in organizations despite decades of work with affirmative action and equal employment opportunities, since historical shifts in ideologies and practices have led to unclear outcomes of working with diversity issues. Similarly, Dobbin and Kalev (2016) point out that litigation avoidance tools, such as training, employment testing, and grievance systems, reinforce bias and inequality. They claim that to achieve effective diversity management, organizations need to build structures where managers are made responsible and accountable.

In this study, we propose a different approach to understand the varying outcomes of managing diversity. We think that understanding diversity management in terms of success and failure is insufficient. It reduces diversity management to a dichotomy of achieving or not achieving goals. However, diversity management is more than a matter of achieving goals. Diversity management is subject to a set of legal, ethical, and administrative principles. It is ambiguous in its contours and goals. Therefore, it is likely that diversity management will become a change process that is both a failure and a success, echoing the findings of Schwarz et al. (2021): organizational failure in implementing organizational change is not an end state or something that must be corrected, resolved, or avoided at all costs, but is part of a process of adaptation that regenerates change. To grasp this ambiguity of diversity management and to avoid understanding its outcomes as either-or, we turn to Meyerson's (1991) epistemology of ambiguity, which claims, in a few words, that the task of researchers is to reflect the multiplicity of experiences and interpretations within an organization.

Our study is grounded in a longitudinal single case study of multilevel diversity work—i.e., the micro-practices and activities that enhance diversity in an organization (cf. Hunter & Swan, 2007)—in a Swedish municipal organization. Developing on Ahmed's (2006) observation that diversity policies are non-performative unless backed up by activities, we focus on the process of organizing (Czarniawska, 2011) diversity work and investigate the performativity of the work attempts. Indeed, attempts are what we encounter when following the activities of people working with diversity management. We call it diversity work to emphasize the concrete character of the object of study. Our analysis confirms that diversity work is among the organizational activities filled with ambiguity and tensions



(Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Bjerregaard & Luring, 2013; Gagnon et al., 2021; Koall, 2011), and point out in the discussion that in front of these ambiguities, people can only be trying.

With the notion of diversity being ambiguous, flexible, and in flux (Ahmed, 2012; Omanović, 2009; Risberg & Just, 2015), diversity work is an ongoing effort that works in one context but not in another. It means different things to different people (Hunter & Swan, 2007), can be viewed as a success by some but experienced as a failure by others (Schilling, 2012), and is amenable to the changing definitions of diversity. Filled with organizational tensions (Nadiv & Kuna, 2020), it never comes to an end but amounts to efforts. An example of this is introducing a language of diversity (Jones & Stablein, 2006) gradually into the organization. How diversity workers manage the ambiguities of diversity work is at the core of this study.

The emphasis on *trying* suggests an understanding of diversity work that transforms the ambiguities inherent in the diversity concept into levers for understanding organizational efforts to adapt to the diversity of the workforce. This emphasis brings to the surface the preliminary performativity of diversity work, which is an attempt to define what diversity is and how it can be managed through actual practices in actual contexts. It shifts the focus from the outcomes of diversity management to the process of diversity work and the politics of trying (cf. Swan & Fox, 2010).

Building on the studies that use the term “trying” *en passant*, for example, to qualify a resistance to gender intervention (van Douwen et al., forthcoming), coping efforts (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021) or attempts to keep on going with the flow (De Coster, 2020), we propose the notion of trying to acknowledge that working on diversity is not something that organizations are ever done with, but an ideal they strive to achieve. In doing so, we pave the way for an understanding of diversity management and diversity work that goes beyond the dichotomy of success and failure. We define trying as if you try to do something, you want to do to it, and you take actions which will help you to do it (Sinclair, 1993). Viewing organizations as trying recognizes the uncertain character of diversity management and the ever-changing perception of its outcomes. Accordingly, a trying organization is one that strives to enhance diversity in the organization.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW: AMBIGUITY IN ORGANIZATIONS AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

Diversity is an ambiguous term (Bell & Hartmann, 2007), and ambiguities are inherent in theories and practices of diversity management (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Risberg & Just, 2015). Meyerson (1991) suggests adopting an epistemology of ambiguity to reflect the variety of experiences, voices, and interpretations existing in organizations, something which seems apt for studying diversity. Ambiguity refers to situations in which a high degree of complexity and a lack of clarity make multiple interpretations of an utterance, phenomenon, event, or situation plausible (Martin, 2002). Ambiguity may be regarded as something unavoidable that one must embrace (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Gioia et al., 2012) or something abnormal which is inherently negative (Kahn et al., 1964; Styhre et al., 2016). Risberg (2003) identified different types of ambiguity to show how employees interpret changes related to a merger process and construct different meanings.

Tatli (2011, p. 239) describes “diversity management as a complex and contested process” as she identified tensions between diversity discourses and diversity practices. Holvino and Kamp (2009) point to the multiplicity of diversity definitions among employees, while Metcalfe and Woodhams (2012) emphasize the differences between central and local interpretations of diversity management. Diversity management can simultaneously acknowledge differences and homogenize diversity (Swan, 2010). Hunter and Swan (2007) claim that diversity is everywhere and nowhere and that despite diversity workers being critical to the focus of diversity work, the outcomes may be reasonable. Koall (2011) suggests using ambivalence to support diversity in organizations. Diversity can serve both as an ideal of equality and as a pragmatic money-making measure, creating tension among those responsible for managing it (Ahmed, 2012).





Correspondingly, the implementation of diversity management is a multifaceted and complex process (Bjerregaard & Luring, 2013; Zanoni et al., 2010). From the vantage point of diversity managers, Nadiv and Kuna (2020) show that diversity initiatives cause tensions in the need for change versus the desire for stability, long-term gains versus short-term losses and control versus flexibility. They believe these tensions undermine the success of the initiatives. Acceptance of diversity is ambiguous, as organizations can accept it and disguise discrimination and harassment (Nkomo et al., 2019; Romani et al., 2019), be positive about diversity, or experience it as a challenge (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). Diversity management can thus be a double-edged sword that brings both benefits to the company and fosters inequality and discrimination (e.g., Aigner, 2014; Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000).

Somewhat ironically, diversity, a relational concept (Litvin, 1997), tends to be described in fixed and easily measurable terms (Litvin, 2002; Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018). Ghorashi and Sabelis (2013) contend that the focus on diversity management to achieve economic advantage makes it rigid and essentialist rather than inclusive. All these unclear aspects of diversity and the tensions it creates lead to diversity and its management being perceived as ambiguous and difficult to manage, with ambiguous outcomes that cannot be easily assessed.

Risberg and Just (2015) developed a theoretical framework for analyzing ambiguous diversity that builds on the notion that diversity and diversity management are inherently ambiguous. The framework consists of three ways of understanding ambiguous diversity: strategic ambiguity, contradiction, and ambivalence. They present the framework as strategies for how “ambiguity may create room for diversity as both a managerial tool and a liberating project” (Risberg & Just, 2015, p. 230). Our study builds on this inherent ambiguity of diversity and its management (see also Kirby & Harter, 2001). However, rather than exploring how ambiguity can be used to strategically advance diversity management, we draw on an epistemology of ambiguity (Meyerson, 1991) to identify it in diversity work and demonstrate how concerned workers respond to them beyond a dualistic logic of success and failure.

### 3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### 3.1 | Case description

Swedish public and private organizations have a tradition of working with equality (Omanović, 2006), influenced in the early 1990s by multiculturalism (Omanović, 2009) and nowadays by diversity (Holgerrson & Romani, 2021). Currently, nearly all medium-sized and large organizations address diversity in one way or another (Proffice, 2015) as the Swedish Anti-Discrimination Act (Svensk Författningssamling (SFS), 2008:567) stipulates that organizations employing more than 25 employees must have a gender equality plan and update it every third year. However, in addition to gender, the Anti-Discrimination Act includes eight other grounds of discrimination: Age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or other beliefs, disability, and transgender identity.

The case organization is a Swedish municipal organization with approximately 20,000 employees that has a diverse workforce and established diversity management practices. At the time of fieldwork, 77% of all employees and 65% of all managers were women and 26% of all employees and 10% of all managers had a foreign background, with 70% of the latter being women.

The municipal organization is led by the municipal council (*Kommunfullmäktige*, 61 members), the municipal executive board (*Kommunstyrelse*, 26 members), and eight full-time municipal commissioners (*Kommunalråd*) who each have specific areas of responsibility, one of them being democracy and equality. In addition to 13 central city administrations (*Förvaltningar*), the municipal organization was divided into 10 geographical city districts (*Stadsdelar*), each with a council (*Stadsdelsfullmäktige*) and a district administration (*Stadsdelförvaltning*). In Swedish municipal organizations, it is common for politicians to set goals that civil servants are responsible to achieve. For example, administrative directors are responsible for achieving the diversity and equality goals set by politicians in strategies and plans.

The municipal council had adopted a diversity policy for the whole municipal organization and city district councils adopted yearly diversity plans for city district administrations. The diversity policy of the entire municipal





organization rested on three goals. First, the percentage of employees with a foreign background should reflect the demographic composition of the municipality's residents, 29% of whom were foreign-born, and 38% of whom had a foreign background. Second, there should be no irrelevant differences in pay for equal work in the municipal organization. Third, all employees should have the right to work full-time or part-time, depending on their choice. These goals were mimicked in the diversity plans of the district administrations, although the first goal on demographic composition dominated the field data.

Diversity was promoted in many ways in addition to these policies and plans. The central human resources (HR) department had a diversity officer and most central and district administrations had a diversity and equality committee. The hiring system was periodically revamped to reduce bias in hiring. External guests gave lectures, and diversity and equality training were held in respective city administrations by the respective HR department. Central HR had developed a serious card game to make diversity and equality a standing agenda item at weekly staff meetings at all levels. Diversity was included as a module in the organization-wide training program for future managers. The municipal commissioner of equality and democracy declared that all staff shall undergo diversity training. To meet this statement, central HR developed a training board game with facts and vignettes on diversity dilemmas. The municipal council decided that the diversity plans must be renewed annually instead of every 3 years. The council also determined that diversity plans should include not only gender, but all nine of the anti-discrimination law's discrimination grounds.

### 3.2 | Data collection

The field work lasted two and a half years and was carried out only by the first author. For 2 months, one to 2 days per week, the first author observed the daily work routine in a city district unit with a workforce that was diverse in terms of gender, nationality, age, language, and education. All eight employees, including two managers, in the unit were interviewed about their understanding of and experiences with diversity and diversity work in the municipal organization. She then followed parallel activities of a city district diversity committee (hereafter referred to as the committee) and the activities of an organization-wide equality and diversity network (hereafter referred to as the network). Meetings, diversity events, trainings, and coffee breaks were carefully observed. Four HR staff responsible for diversity work were interviewed. The administrative manager whose responsibilities included diversity in the city district, for example, approving the work of the diversity committee, was also interviewed. Following Tatli's (2011) advice to include other staff in addition to diversity staff, the municipal commissioner of democracy and equality and three staff who participated in a number of diversity lectures in the city district were also interviewed. The empirical data consists of 71 observations of daily work, meetings, training, and events. It also consists of 18 interviews with employees working with diversity as part of their job description, members of diversity committees, and other employees (see Table 1 for details).

The first author asked for permission to participate and observe whenever she learned about diversity initiatives. While doing fieldwork in the city district unit, she learned about the city district diversity committee and was given ongoing access to its activities. At one of the meetings of this committee, she also learned about the organization-wide equality and diversity network, asked for permission to participate, and was given access. Another notable observation was the diversity board game at a network meeting, having been invited to test and training sessions. When board game training sessions were organized in the city district, once again the first author was allowed to observe. Only once access was denied during the whole fieldwork. Responsible unit managers or HR managers granted all permissions to collect observation data.

In addition, the first author collected archival data such as diversity and equality plans, annual organizational reports, and other internal reports (22). Following interpretative criteria for analytical credibility (Symon et al., 2018), the municipality's diversity work was followed at a distance through media, annual reports, and informal channels after leaving the field.



TABLE 1 Overview of collected field material

Material	Nature	Description	Duration
Filed notes from observation	23 observations	Weekly meetings for all staff	3 months
		A 1-day conference for the employees	144 h of observation
		3 observations of daily work life in the office	
		One day of shadowing of the manager	
Transcripts of interviews with employees of the local work unit	6 interviews with employees	8 individual interviews.	1–2 h per interview
	2 semi-structured interviews with the manager and the acting manager		
Field notes from observations of meetings in the city district committee	18 observations	Participants observations of the committee meetings. About 4–8 committee members participated each time, it varied over time.	2 h per meeting, 36 h of observation
			2 years 4 months
Field notes from observations of events organized by the city district committee	5 diversity lectures	Observation of the events. Each lecture had 50–60 participants, the first diversity training had about 30 participants and the second had 200 participants.	The lectures lasted 2 h each, the intro day 1 h and the diversity training 2 h each.
	1 intro day for new employees		
	2 diversity board game training session		
	1 HBTQ training session		
	1 diversity training session for the city district management team		
Transcript of interviews lecture participants	3 semi-structured interviews	Interviews with employees who participated in the diversity lectures organized by the committee	1 h per interview
Transcript of interviews HR	4 semi-structured interviews	1 interview with an HR strategist with responsibility for diversity in the whole organization,	2 h per interview
		1 interview with an HR strategist working first in the city district and later at central HR	
		2 interviews with HR strategists working for the city district	



TABLE 1 (Continued)

Material	Nature	Description	Duration
Transcript of interview city district manager	1 semi-structured interview	The city district manager had the overall responsibility for diversity in the city district	1 h
Transcripts of observation field notes the organizational-wide equality and diversity network	16 observations	Participants observations of the network meetings, approximately 20–30 participants per meeting	2 h per meeting
		Observation of one meeting with the LGBT network	32 h 1.5 years
Transcript of observation field notes of events	2 observations	One open diversity lecture	2 h per event.
		One conference	
Transcript of observation field notes of diversity training	2 observations	Training session for the diversity board game	4 h per session
Interview transcript politician	1 semi-structured interview	Interview with the municipal commissioner of democracy and equality in the municipality	2 h
Interview transcript equality strategist	1 unstructured interview	The interviewee analyzed equality in the municipality from the inhabitants' point of view	2 h
Archival material, organization documents	22 documents	1 annual report	
		2 municipal budgets	
		5 equality and diversity plans	
		6 employee survey reports	
		3 project reports	
		1 press release regarding an anti-discrimination plan	
		1 strategic plan, city district	
		3 editions of the personnel policy	
Total	18 interviews		
	71 observations		
	22 organization documents		

The researcher always informed participants of the purpose of her presence prior to observation, and remained silent during the sessions, although participants sometimes addressed the researcher. For example, in the committee that she consistently followed, participants sometimes asked about details in earlier discussions because they knew she was taking notes. When the city district unit held a strategy day, she was asked to provide feedback. However, she participated in training sessions as actively as any organizational member. Finally, at the end of the fieldwork, the researcher was invited to the committee to present the initial findings.

The interviews with the members of the city district unit were semi-structured and based on a short interview guide that was adapted to the organizational role of the interviewee and to the progress of the fieldwork. The





remaining interviews were ad hoc when the researcher felt the need to obtain additional information that could not be obtained through observational data. Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees, and all gave verbal consent to participate.

All study participants were assured anonymity, so information is not provided on when the study was conducted. Interviews were transcribed *verbatim* and field notes were transcribed as accurately as possible as to what was said and done during the observations.

### 3.3 | Data analysis

The first round of analysis began with initial coding and memo writing (Charmaz, 2014) during observations and interviews. This initial analysis aimed to identify emerging patterns in the data (Gioia et al., 2013). The fieldwork material was coded in several iterations to chart how diversity work was carried out, how the organizational members experienced it, and how they experienced diversity in the organizational units and groups—as “suggested by the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 120 emphasis in original) to capture the meanings of people interviewed or observed (Langley & Abdallah, 2011).

By observing and participating in diversity committee meetings, the first author gained fundamental insights into the micro-practices of diversity management: how people thought about, planned for, implemented, and experienced diversity and diversity work, and how they connected their other daily activities to the equality and diversity policy goals for the municipal organization. By interviewing employees, the first author understood what diversity and diversity work meant to them and how they related to it. Through observations of diversity training and events, an insight was gained into the tools used in diversity work and the participants' reactions to the events. Diversity trainings provided her with a comprehensive understanding of the various meanings of diversity and diversity work as participants discussed their understanding of diversity in these sessions. Analysis of archived data contributed to this understanding through statistics and contextualization of information. The most important outcome of this round of analysis was the sense that ambiguities in diversity management were pervasive in the case organization.

The second round of analysis aimed to produce a rich account of these ambiguities. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and memos about behaviors, structures, processes, events, and documents were coded *in vivo*. This coding was guided by the analytic questions, “What is obscure?” “How does this impact diversity work and diversity workers?” and “How do daily operations relate to the organization's equality and diversity policy?” Many *in vivo* codes emerged that ensured the account did justice to observations and statements (cf. Gioia et al., 2013). Examples of these codes are provided in the data structure (see Figure 1 in the first-order code boxes).

The third round of analysis aimed to translate this account into a systematic understanding of the types and roles of ambiguity in diversity work in the case organization. The *in vivo* codes were compared in search of commonalities and differences to create first-order codes to classify these ambiguities, such as ambiguities in goals, scope, and outcomes. These first-order codes were used to structure the results section.

Further analytical iterations, this time between the first-order codes and the diversity management literature, aimed to describe the relationships between the different types and roles of ambiguity. These iterations yielded three second-order concepts: (1) confronting a shifting, relative, and tension-filled notion; (2) the tentative performativity of trying to do diversity work; and (3) beyond success and failure.

Final iterations between second-order concepts, the research issue, and the literature, this time on success and failure, made it possible to aggregate second-order concepts into a third-order dimension that explains how people in the case organization engage with the ambiguities that characterize working with diversity. The organization and its members keep trying to work on diversity through new diversity management initiatives and new tools. This focus on trying structures the discussion in the study.



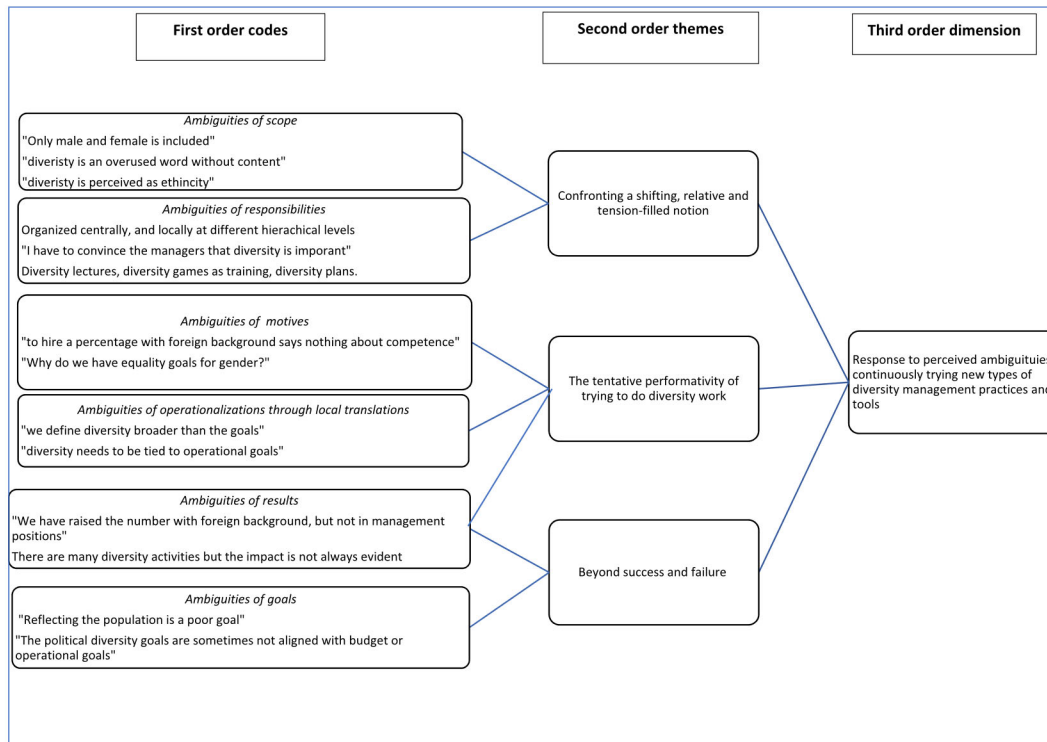


FIGURE 1 Data structure

## 4 | RESULTS: AMBIGUITIES IN DIVERSITY WORK

Just like research emphasizes, diversity is inherently ambiguous (Ahmed, 2012; Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Risberg & Just, 2015). Accordingly, our analysis focuses on the ambiguities in diversity work. We show that it is unclear what diversity encompasses, who is responsible for diversity work, and why it is done. The range of diversity activities is difficult to overview, there are different and sometimes divergent goals, and outcomes are perceived as unclear.

### 4.1 | Ambiguities of scope

The municipal organization's diversity policy did not cover all seven discrimination grounds in the Swedish Discrimination Act (SFS, 2008:257). This difference between municipal policy and legislation often caused confusion among staff, especially diversity workers. Members of the organization expressed uncertainty about what diversity should include. For example, should diversity policy goals be prioritized or should the focus be on all seven grounds protected in the Discrimination Act?

An analysis of the city district's diversity plan showed that the dimension mentioned most often was gender, followed by foreign background. Age was mentioned only once, and the other discrimination grounds were not mentioned. In a meeting on what the diversity policy meant for the unit, one employee said, "diversity includes much more than those three goals," upon which a manager answered that "many departments are therefore creating their own diversity definitions and goals, causing confusion" (Observation notes from a meeting in the city district unit). This uncertainty of what was included in the concept of diversity revealed ambiguities and tensions regarding what diversity work should comprise.

## 4.2 | Ambiguities of responsibilities

Formal and informal responsibilities for improving diversity in the organization were not always aligned. Formally, the municipal personnel policy stated that managers were responsible for promoting diversity and inclusion among their subordinates, and administrative directors had overall responsibility for diversity in the city administrations. However, the picture blurred when it came to who should take responsibility to initiate and implement diversity work.

There were many different diversity initiatives from different parts of the municipality. At the highest administrative level, there was a strategist in the central HR department who was responsible for diversity and equality in the municipality. This person organized and led the municipality-wide equality and diversity network. The HR strategist also organized diversity lectures across the municipal organization and led the development of the diversity board game. At local levels, diversity was a standing item on the agenda for weekly staff meetings. The diversity committee organized lectures in the city district, visited departments and work units to play the diversity card game, and organized and led groups to play the diversity board game. The committee also initiated and gathered information from managers for the annual update of the diversity plan.

Some city administrations had a committee leading the diversity work. In others, HR oversaw the diversity work. In addition, there was a cross-organizational homosexual, bisexual, transperson, and queer network that was a bottom-up initiative. This broad list of initiatives and actors could symbolize the richness of diversity work but also lead to difficulties in getting an overview of the existing diversity work and those who provide it.

Equality and diversity network members regularly lamented the lack of interest shown by their colleagues in general and their managers in particular. One participant said:

[Diversity] is a management issue—but in our department, it is not prioritized. The management sets the tone and slows down or hinders the process; [the managers] have been there for too long and think along the same lines. The management doesn't have time and has no interest in diversity plans. One must meet them at their level. (Observation notes from a training session).

Other participants agreed with this statement; some added that local HR departments are the driving forces, that diversity is not prioritized in terms of budget or time, that there is no clear mandate for diversity work, and that managers lack knowledge about diversity (Observation notes from a training session). Subordinates indicated that they had to push managers and administrative management groups to take an interest in diversity and to initiate work on diversity.

The local diversity plan stated that diversity committee members should initiate, advance, and implement diversity in local organizations. However, committee members experienced that they had an unclear mandate and had no authority to work on diversity. They expressed that the administrative director showed little interest in diversity work. Besides, their resources for diversity work were scarce and many of the diversity activities proposed by the committee were rejected by local management (Observation notes from committee meetings).

The ambiguity of responsibility for implementing diversity suggests a lack of clarity regarding the responsibility and tensions between management and diversity workers. While management teams in the various city administrations were formally responsible for implementing the municipality's diversity policy, in practice, diversity workers expressed that the managers glossed over diversity.

## 4.3 | Ambiguities of motives

The rationale for working on diversity was not clear to the organization's members. The municipal organization's diversity policy was translated into local goals with key performance indicators (KPIs) at the city district level. However, these translations did not necessarily provide diversity workers with a sense of purpose regarding their work. In a committee meeting, a member commented on one of the KPIs for his department "Why should we hire





more male nurses; does it improve our work?" (Observation notes from a committee meeting). Analyzing the KPIs and the discussions in the committee, it seemed as if the focus was more on local goals that could be measured rather than activities to enhance diversity. Many participants expressed that they did not always understand why they should take certain actions to promote diversity. For example, one diversity plan stated that the manager in charge should invite lecturers from different associations to increase awareness and understanding of differences. Although this goal was specific and measurable, it remained unclear how the lectures would increase awareness and how it would be known that awareness had increased.

Even more critically, as a manager put it at a city district management meeting: "Diversity is always about what we want, but not why we want it" (Observation notes from management team meeting). The hierarchical cascade of goals and measurements did not meet the diversity workers need to understand the finality of their work. This lack of sense of purpose led to a sense of lack of support from the administrative and political hierarchy and frustration.

#### 4.4 | Ambiguities of operationalizing through local translations

Local translations gave shape to the diversity plan. A unit manager in the city district explained:

I don't think this unit would have been where it is today if we had been a group of people looking like me and Sue or the like ["typical" Swedish civil servants, our note]. Instead, we have had the benefit of having a mixed group of people, with different experiences, different ages, and different genders. We also have different ethnic backgrounds, different educational backgrounds, not just that one has different experiences but also different exams. I believe that has been an important factor for our success. (Interview with the unit manager).

The deliberate effort to build a team that reflected diversity in multiple dimensions was his way of achieving his operational goals, while serving the municipal's diversity plan. In this way, diversity became a team trait, which he saw as contributing to efficiency, but it was not limited to foreign backgrounds.

Beyond this city district, differences in translations of the goals sometimes led to conflicts between different organizational levels. In its annual report on the municipal employee demographics, the municipal human resource department restated that "One should employ people with foreign backgrounds...to serve the citizens better" (The municipal annual personnel report). However, the municipal commissioner for democracy and equality in the municipal organization strongly opposed this view of why diversity matters. Instead, she emphasized that the municipal diversity policy is a matter of democracy, not a municipal equivalent to a business case. "Because what if it does not lead to better service?" she asked rhetorically in an interview, disapproving openly of this utilitarian translation of the municipal organization's diversity ambitions. Consequently, civil servants' translation of the diversity policy conflicted with political advocacy of diversity on moral grounds because of their focus on efficiency.

#### 4.5 | Ambiguities of goals

The main goals of the diversity policy for the municipal organization were specific but were perceived by informants to be unrelated to day-to-day operations. For example, managers at various levels expressed that the goal of reflecting the demographic composition of the municipal's population in the demographics of its employees did not make sense if it was not compatible with budgetary commitments. Indeed, the diversity officer acknowledged that this specific goal "Is a barrier for the diversity work as many express their frustration with it and do not know how to translate it to their daily activities" (Observation notes from an informal conversation during a coffee break at a network meeting).



Managers experienced diversity work as an onus “on top of everything else” (Observation notes from a city district management meeting). They found it difficult to translate the broad diversity goals for the municipal organization into their local context because these broad goals sometimes conflicted with their operational goals. There were tensions between the diversity policy and goals of the municipal organization and the day-to-day practices at the district level, which limited the practical ways in which managers engaged in diversity work.

## 4.6 | Ambiguities of results

Perceived outcomes of diversity work were ambiguous, and diversity workers had difficulty defining whether diversity work was successful or not. Organizational spokespersons made proud statements about diversity and diversity work in the municipal organization. Many of the informants also expressed pride in the amount of diversity work in the organization. However, many of those who were committed to diversity were also disappointed in the results of this work. Some expressed that there was too much focus on measurable outcomes (e.g., head counts) rather than other outcomes (e.g., inclusion).

Top managers and politicians portrayed how well the organization met the political goal of reflecting the population, as the organization had many employees with foreign backgrounds. In internal and external communications, the activities of the diversity committees were presented as examples of good diversity work. However, the members of the committee and the network held conflicting views about the results of their work. In meetings and interviews, they pointed out that employee statistics did not reflect reality. Employees with foreign backgrounds were well represented in certain areas, such as home care for the elderly, preschool education, and school canteens. However, they were in the minority in other areas of the municipal organization, especially in higher management positions. In interviews, an official from HR and the administrative director of the city district confirmed that people with foreign backgrounds were underrepresented in senior administrative positions. “The city district has 1600 employees, 30% with foreign background, but they work in non-qualified jobs” (Interview with city district administrative manager). In addition, personnel statistics showed that some administrative, operational, or managerial positions were gendered. For example, women dominated preschool education and home care, while men dominated the technical and engineering-oriented administrations. This led to local dissatisfaction with the results of diversity work and local objections to diversity efforts.

The diversity workers were uncertain of the actual impact of their work. For instance, the diversity officer expressed that she was “Tired of her work as no one is asking what she has to offer, for example, tools and support for diversity management,” adding that “She believes that her position has been set up because it is politically correct, but no one is interested in what she is doing” (Observation notes from an informal conversation during a coffee break at a network meeting).

While organizational spokespersons celebrate the municipality's diversity work, people working with diversity at the administrative level are not so sure about the results of their activities, especially since unmeasurable results are not included in official reports on diversity.

## 5 | DISCUSSION: TRYING TO DO DIVERSITY WORK

### 5.1 | Confronting a shifting, relative, and tension-filled notion

The findings show how politicians, managers, and diversity workers working with diversity face multifaceted ambiguities characterizing the efforts to effectively promote diversity in the organization (cf. e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Nkomo et al., 2019).



As the ambiguities of scope show, those who worked with diversity found the term to have shifting content. What was meant by the term diversity constantly changed with the organizational, social, and political context, so that the purpose and content of diversity work were subject to multiple and changing interpretations (cf. Hunter & Swan, 2007). For example, in the case organization, various employees defined diversity in multiple ways (cf. Holvino & Kamp, 2009) along with local and ad hoc interpretation (cf. Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012).

Ambiguities about who is responsible for diversity work beyond formal responsibilities for diversity management added to the reigning ambiguity about what was to be done, why, and how. Latent and salient tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011) started to subtend diversity work. Salient tensions about responsibility emerged, for example, when organizational changes resulted in no one taking responsibility for leading a local diversity committee (cf. Swan & Fox, 2010). But latent tensions also arose when budgetary goals adopted by the politicians were perceived as inconsistent with overall diversity policy. Such tensions make diversity policy, management, and work processes to be characterized by less-than-logical structures, experiences, and outcomes (cf. Tatli, 2011). This shifting, relative, and tense nature of working with diversity can create a sense of frustration, if not rejection, of diversity altogether among those who work with diversity (cf. Kirby & Harter, 2001; Mease & Collins, 2018; Zannoni et al., 2010).

Ambiguity, however, does not stop everyone from doing diversity work. Politicians, managers, and diversity workers in the case organization kept introducing tools to increase diversity, such as new forms of training to raise diversity awareness and a hiring system intended to be nondiscriminatory. In addition, politicians made changes to the diversity policy after the fieldwork ended. Despite the lack of clarity on the outcomes, members of the organization working on diversity did not stop working on it. As can be seen, they continued to try to promote the diversity in the organization. Shifting the focus from outcome to trying is one way to illustrate how those engaged in diversity in the organization under study were doing their job without a clear understanding of why they were doing it.

## 5.2 | The tentative performativity of trying to do diversity work

An epistemology of ambiguity (Meyerson, 1991) invites to make more visible the actual process (Feldman, 2016; Hernes, 2014) of diversity work. Since it is enough to say that you try to have started trying, it points at the performativity of the processes of trying.

The ambiguity of the results suggests that the performativity of trying is no guarantee of success any more than the performativity of the utterances described by Austin (1975), whose ability to do something is predicated on being uttered in appropriate circumstances. In a self-defining loop characteristic of performativity (Pitluck, 2016), trying to do diversity work defines and produces the object of its efforts: Diversity work defines diversity, at least locally, which in turn defines diversity work, also at least locally, and so on.

The motives for why employees need to engage in diversity work and the local operationalizations of organization-wide diversity policies remain ambiguous, open to shifting and parallel interpretations of what is done under the label of diversity. The performativity of trying is tentative in the sense that trying does not necessarily achieve what it seeks to achieve (Hunter & Swan, 2007), but remains an actual attempt to do something.

Diversity work derives its tentative performativity from the attempts at local translations of the municipal organization's diversity policy made by those who work with diversity when they imagine, develop, implement, use, or assess practical measures to enhance the diversity of the organization. For example, trying to implement a diversity policy automatically puts diversity on the organization's list of matters of concern (Vásquez et al., 2018), at least while the trying lasts. Likewise, trying achievements are not fixed, they follow the contingency of becoming. Efforts at working with diversity are a "performative pursuit" (Cabantous et al., 2018, p. 407) to give diversity management practical contours and content. Activities of diversity work attach qualities (Callon et al., 2002) to diversity that amount to tentative definitions open for revision and changes. However, these qualities and definitions remain ambiguous and unstable.





Adopting a trying approach to diversity work:

A trying approach to diversity work embraces an ontological position that is relational and intertemporal, wherein the worlds we navigate are always being constituted, de-constituted and reconstituted through the sayings and doings of the multiple actors who become entangled with one another over multiple issues (Garud et al., 2018, p. 502).

The ambiguities of diversity development are critical to defining diversity as part of what drives diversity work.

As we write these lines, the case organization continues to work on diversity, albeit with changed policies and goals, a new organizational structure, and (in some cases) new staff. With new ambitions, practices, tools, and policies, the diversity workers continue their efforts. They continue to try to do diversity work. As they strive to do so, diversity is increasingly moving from a matter of concern to a matter of authority (cf. Vásquez et al., 2018). The more diversity workers make an effort, the more people inside and outside the organization become aware of inequality, discrimination, equality, and diversity, so that, hopefully inclusion and diversity will become a normal organizational matter.

### 5.3 | Beyond success and failure

Many efforts have been made to measure the outcomes of diversity work (e.g., Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Milliken & Martins, 1996; Richard, 2000). However, such measurements have been found to provide only a small part of the larger picture of how diversity work may influence and change the organization (cf. Gagnon et al., 2021). One could speak of ambiguities of measurements. Diversity is a relative notion as it characterizes how individuals in a population relate to other elements in the population (Litvin, 1997); one is only diverse in relation to others. Thus, it is difficult to operationalize, measure, assess, and communicate diversity in the language of absolute terms characteristic of formal objectives in organizations. For example, the results of working on diversity in the case organization could be considered a success, as managers did, because the number of female employees and employees with foreign backgrounds was high (Kalev et al., 2006). However, the same outcomes could also be seen as failures, as some diversity workers did, meaning that the numbers did not live up to their expectations (Holck, 2016). There were, at times, differences between what managers said and what they did (cf. Tatli, 2011). Some practices were also difficult to classify as successes or failures. For example, although there are seven grounds of discrimination covered by the law in Sweden, the diversity policy focused on only two easily measurable ones (cf. Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018), gender and foreign background; however, diversity workers worked with several more categories, for example, organizing training and lectures on lesbian, bisexual, gay, and trans-gender/person. This part of their work was therefore systematically not considered as part of a formal evaluation.

In addition to frustrating experiences of KPIs as unable to provide them with a satisfying translation of their results (cf. Hunter & Swan, 2007), diversity workers were facing ambiguous goals. Such ambiguities do not need to be a problem, though. As Hirschman (1991) explains, practically no planned changes reach their goals. Still, unexpected and unplanned effects of changes are sometimes better and more interesting than the planned ones, even if people who manage change do not realize it, focused as they are on success and failure of their plans and goals. When reforms either seem to lead nowhere (the “futility thesis”) or produce effects opposite to those intended (the “perversity thesis”) (Czarniawska, 2017; Hirschman, 1991), one cannot simply focus on achievements to understand organizational life. Instead, one needs to pay attention to the continuous changes (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Feldman, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2006) introduced by the practice of trying. In practice, staff expressed that diversity work was successful in some cases and unsuccessful in others. They did not leave it at successes and failures and continued trying to develop the diversity of the organization.



It is good if diversity work shows positive outcomes, but not doing so is not a reason to stop trying. As Johns et al. (2012) argue, engagements in diversity management are grounded in a will to orient organizational life along with principles that are deemed worth fighting for. Diversity work does not exist because of its efficiency or effectiveness. It exists because it conforms to a set of legal, political, or philosophical principles, for example, to eliminate the injustice of discrimination. A trying approach invites us to follow the moral call to work on diversity beyond failures and successes despite the gap between limited means and ambitious goals (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Therefore, one can understand the complaints of the respondents who regretted that people talked more about what they wanted than about why they wanted it.

A trying approach to diversity management opens new ways to engage in diversity work. For example, an organization can start working with diversity without anyone having first decided what it is or why it is worth the effort. A trying approach makes it also possible to accept that imperfection in diversity measures should not conceal the value of striving to improve the diversity of the organization. Trying releases diversity management from the iron cage of success and failure.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS—A WORK WITHOUT A CLEAR END

We adopt an epistemology of ambiguity (Meyerson, 1991) to analyze the manifold efforts to implement a diversity management policy (cf. Bell & Hartmann, 2007; Risberg & Just, 2015) in a Swedish municipal organization. We describe how different actors in different formal positions experience the ambiguity of diversity work in the organization, that is, ambiguity of scope, responsibilities, motives, operationalization, outcomes, and goals.

A focus on diversity work leads us to suggest approaching diversity work as trying. Such an approach emphasizes that defining diversity is an ongoing effort. It also provides ways to advocate efforts at improving organizational diversity beyond a rationale of successes and failures.

Trying is about struggling with the ambiguities of goals rather than simply achieving them. It is driven by will and determination rather than templates and plans, quite unlike the engineering of implementation. It is an evolving combination of available resources, adaptation to changing circumstances, and results that may not be optimal but are hopefully satisfactory. The reasons for engaging with diversity may not be clear to organizational actors, but trying is a matter of practical rather than theoretical rationality; it is based on a sense of situatedness (Figal, 2020), one that addresses the constantly renewed vicissitudes of work life and the rhythms of its contingencies. Moreover, as suggested by the anonymous reviewers, this raises questions such as how organizational actors, who are not actively trying to drive diversity work, relate to those who are engaged and committed to trying, how will and determination drive trying, how trying connects to privileges and power, and whether trying can be considered a mode of resistance—questions that cannot be addressed here for reasons of space but can be addressed in future research.

Grounded in critical questioning (Kelemen et al., 2019), trying is an expression of dissatisfaction with the current states of things, for example, prejudicial norms about competence. It is also an aspiration to see things wished for materialize, such as a future of equal opportunity at work for all. Trying easily turns into a struggle to rectify the state of things deemed unsatisfactory.

Specifically, this means that organizations can only try to work toward diversity, ambiguous as it is. Diversity work must be understood as an ongoing commitment with no end. A tentative way of dealing with diversity makes it clear that ideals guide activities, even if they are unattainable. It is about striving for, about trying. Therefore, it is futile to describe diversity work in terms of success or failure. Indeed, recognizing that ultimate success is unattainable can be critical for those who set diversity goals, work with diversity, and evaluate diversity management outcomes.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.



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