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DIVERSITY AND SWEDISHNESS – A PARADOX WITHIN IKEA

Anders S Wigerfelt
Center for Work Life and Evaluations Studies, Malmö University, Sweden
anders.wigerfelt.mah.se

ABSTRACT

With the aid of internal IKEA material and interviews the aim of this article is to analyze how the concepts of Swedishness and diversity are represented and used within IKEA. Swedishness is an important part of IKEA's corporate culture and also a marketing strategy that can be linked to the company's expansion in countries outside Scandinavia. Within IKEA there has been a clash between an older view of "Swedes" as natural upholders of the corporate culture, a kind of territorially constructed Swedishness, and a newer, more diversity inspired, inclusive view. However, this friction between Swedishness and diversity is not necessarily antagonistic. Diversity has become part of the newer Swedishness, where a common future is more important than appearance and place of birth.

Keywords: Swedishness, diversity, corporate culture, management, representation

INTRODUCTION

We live in an age in which commodities, information and people increasingly, and more rapidly, transgress borders. Globalization has resulted in an increase in the world's economic integration, where products and services are largely homogenized. At the same time, a kind of fragmenting and consideration of national/regional/local preferences has taken place (Bauman 1998, Lundberg & Tydén 2008:18).

How a large, value-based company like IKEA, with its roots in the rural woodlands of Småland, is influenced by and deals with globalization, is a point of departure in this article. So too is the friction between the international and national/regional/local, especially with regard to corporate culture and staff policies.

IKEA's corporate culture is described by Rask ´et al´ (2010) as ethnocentric (Swedishness), while the organization is characterized in terms of diversity and internationalization. Swedishness is a basic concept within the corporate culture (Björk 1998). Even though today IKEA is a global actor, it still emphasizes its Småland origins. According to IKEA, the company has "... *its roots and its soul in the barren landscape of Småland in southern Sweden...Even today it is the founder's simple origins, his respect for money and the volition to renew oneself and take responsibility that have laid the foundations for the values in IKEA's company culture* (Facts and Figures 2008, IKEA). IKEA's creation narrative tells how a young boy with meager means, ingenuity and thrift gradually succeeded in conquering an entire world. In these narratives Ingvar Kamprad and the company of IKEA become representations of Sweden: *"I can't think of anything more typically Swedish than IKEA with our desire for cooperation across all national and racial boundaries. The industriousness that is so nicely symbolized in the stone walls of Småland – our soul – is constantly mirrored in our everyday aspirations to make the impossible possible. No, there is nothing more Swedish than IKEA"* (Ingvar Kamprad in the document Swedishness in Marketing).

Despite the strong emphasis on Swedishness, IKEA is owned by a Dutch foundation. Inter-IKEA, which owns the concept, is also based in the Netherlands. Inter-IKEA is in turn owned by a foundation in Liechtenstein. How, then, can IKEA be a "Swedish" company? According to IKEA's former CEO, Anders Dahlvig, IKEA is a Swedish company because its values and management style are rooted

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in the Swedish culture: "*It takes its roots from the Swedish way of managing business, which is different from the way they do it in many other countries*" (Kling & Goteman, 2003 and Dahlvig 2011:162). In addition, Dahlvig maintains that "*the Swedish range of products…is one of the most important competitive advantages and differentiates IKEA from other furniture retailers in all markets*" (Dahlvig 2011:162-163).

Regardless of how "Swedish" IKEA is viewed, in one way and another IKEA has influenced how Sweden and Swedishness have come to be understood in other countries, as well as the Swedish self-image (Borneskans, 2008). Swedishness is described as a fundamental identity within IKEA and has meant that Swedish employees are automatically seen as IKEA's upholders of culture and easily become managers in different countries of the world (Björk, 1998). However, as part of the marketing, the trademark, Swedishness did not become all that obvious within IKEA until the global expansion of the 1980s, when the stores began to be painted blue and yellow and "the Swedish shop" was established, where everything from ginger biscuits to Kalle's caviar could be purchased. Inter-IKEA spread the policies and concepts to stores throughout the world, and managers and staff began to be trained in IKEA values and a "cultivated" Swedishness. In the middle of the 1980s the IKEA project – "The IKEA Way" – began, which meant that the company's key staff were drilled in the IKEA values by going to Älmhult, meeting Ingvar Kamprad and being shown the stone walls of Småland.

Following the emphasis on and construction of Swedishness within IKEA, ideas about diversity management reached Sweden from the USA during the mid-1990s. Within IKEA itself the idea of diversity was adopted in the year 2000.

In the literature the concept of diversity management is often defined as a systematic strategy within an organization to recruit and retain staff from different backgrounds. The concept also often includes a positive valuation of differences (often essential, static) (Prasad & Mills 1997:4). Sometimes the categories are seen to consist of ideas about diversity as historically related to disadvantaged groups (Hays-Thomas 2004). For Prasad, Pringle & Konrad (2006), diversity is more than representation, in that it includes respect for and the appreciation of differences regardless of how these differences came about, the combating of prejudice and working towards pluralism (see also Holyoak & Gordon 1984).

At the same time as IKEA has become increasingly globalized, a seemingly insoluble conflict has arisen between Swedishness in the company and the diversity that the company also stands for. Is the solution that IKEA should become less "Swedish" in its corporate culture and management, or is it the actual Swedishness that needs to be reformed and become more inclusive?

The overarching purpose of this article is to analyze how the concepts of Swedishness and diversity are constructed and represented within IKEA, and the relation between them, by focusing on IKEA in Sweden and China. By examining empirical material from interviews conducted in Sweden and China and internal IKEA material, my intention is to contribute to the problematization of the concept of Swedishness and its relation to the concept of diversity in the case of IKEA in a context that is characterized by globalization.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

IKEA is used as an empirical case, a form of case study. According to Yin (2009), the point of departure for a case study is the insight into the complexity of research and the need for a multitude of methods as well as openness to the task in hand. Case studies can thus be regarded as a research strategy rather than a method as such.

The bulk of IKEA's internal material has been downloaded from IKEA's intranet, which is reserved for employees of IKEA and consists of e.g. information (products, news, customer feedback, sales, strategic targets etc), discussion forums and online questionnaires. All IKEA's employees are trained in the use of the intranet and are able to make use of it for their work (see e.g. Chin 2009). The material that has been used in the article is what might be called learning and information material, and here the terms Swedishness and diversity have formed the basis of selection.

The interviews with top managers within IKEA in Sweden and China, 10 in total, consisted of a number of questions that were then discussed by the informant and the interviewer – in a kind of semi-structured interview (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). All except one of the interviews were done through visits (one interview was conducted by telephone). Two of the informants were interviewed twice (follow-up

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interviews). All the discussions were tape-recorded and later transcribed. There are many advantages with semi-structured interviews in comparison with a questionnaire, such as the informant being able to express her- or himself easily and the flexibility of being able to stop and discuss a topic in more depth together with the informant.The empirical material is analyzed as representations of "reality". Among other things, this means that meaning is constructed through language, and is not a "sudden reality" that I have become acquainted with through interviews and documents. Representations of reality are created with the aid of language and do not only reflect reality, but also contribute to the creation of it. Representation through language is central for the processes by which meaning is produced (Hall 1997:1ff). For example, when I analyze interviews and documents I am looking for patterns that indicate how Swedishness and diversity are described and used.

CULTURE AND CORPORATE CULTURE

The idea that an ethnic group should live within a certain territory is often seen a part of nationalism. For example, in this territory the category Swedes is thought to demonstrate certain learned and special traits that are dependent on the cultural context of the territory, often called the nation (see for example Anderson 1996, Österud 1997, Hobsbawn 1992). The concept of cultural identity has become more common in recent years; identity in this perspective is not something that is carried around, but is created in encounters with other people. People are not imprisoned by their culture, but rather make use of different cultural forms in different situations and periods of life. I mainly make use of the procedural in the concept of culture, which is that culture is not something stationary, fixed and clear-cut but an ongoing construction and transformation of collective rules, thought processes and value patterns (see e.g. Ehn & Löfgren 2001 and Hastrup 2010).

A corporate culture like IKEA's includes the company's norms and values, symbols, role models (heroes and heroines) and rituals. Rituals are usually defined as a form of collective activities, a symbolic behavior that is learned. Corporate culture can be regarded as a system of meanings, understandings of reality and symbols that are continually created and recreated in an organization (Deal & Kennedy,1982, Bang, 1999). Ideas, narratives, symbols and values give individuals a cultural reference frame with which to define the surroundings and make judgments. For example, IKEA can use narratives to spread its values and ideas in the company, and rituals can reinforce these. Meetings often take the form of a ceremony, in which speeches, clothes and power structures are vital ingredients. Ideas and meaning-making can, at least in part, be exported through a kind of concept that governs the corporate culture in the countries in which IKEA operates. Sometimes the symbols are reinterpreted and are sometimes given new meaning (see e.g. Salzer-Mörling, 1998; Bang, 1999).

One of the most influential scholars on the relation between national culture and corporate/company culture is Geert Hofstede (1991, 2001 and Hofstede & Hofstede 2005), who in the mid-1970s conducted a study within IBM. IBM employees from about 50 countries, including Sweden, took part in a survey with the aim of determining the differences between national values systems. The point of departure was that organizations were affected by society at large and its national culture (which was regarded as a form of mental programming). Hofstede's results are often made use of, although his research has also been strongly criticized (McSweeney 2002). For example, in a doctoral thesis entitled *The discursive construction, reproduction and continuance of national cultures, A critical study of the cross-cultural management discourse*, Agneta Moulettes accuses Hofstede of ethnocentrism/Eurocentrism and defender of the prevailing neo-colonial order. Moulettes' critique is based on post-colonial theory and critical discourse analysis (Moulettes 2009). She claims that a lot of the management- and intercultural literature is full of stereotypes and prejudices that are based on new-colonial representations. Within the intercultural research discourse representations of different nationalities are often constructed as homogeneous and essential, without considering the enormous differences that exist within the categorized groups (Kwek 2003).

IKEA AND SWEDISHNESS

Nature, national character and lifestyle – values and corporate culture

In the digital document *IKEA Values, An Essence of the IKEA Concept* (2009), on IKEA's intranet site for

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company employees, one can read about IKEA's values and the IKEA culture. In the introduction to the document IKEA's vision is described as creating a better everyday experience for many people with the aid of IKEA's basic values. The text is accompanied by a picture of a fence and green meadows flanked by woods. This is followed by a photograph of Ingvar Kamprad with the caption: "*Maintaining a strong IKEA culture is one of the most crucial factors behind the continued success of the IKEA Concept*". In the document as a whole the text is largely illustrated by pictures from Sweden/Småland (the idea being that people will associate the pictures with that country/landscape) of red wooden cottages, snowstorms, moss on stones in the woods, several stone walls, a beautiful lake with a rowing boat and a ramshackle bridge, birch woods, and an old farmhouse with a Swedish flag on the flagpole and surrounded by a summer meadow in full bloom. The pictures that IKEA makes use of are reminiscent of a time and tradition where nature was part of nationalism and the folklore movement – a form of nature romanticism. In the 19th century the "Romantic" period in literature and art initiated a kind of nationalization of nature that was then accentuated in the 20th century with the creation of e.g. national parks. Orvar Löfgren (1993:52) argues that "…banks of wood anemones and birch groves in the spring, distant blue forests, skerry rocks at twilight, glossy woodland lakes and small red cottages" become charged with emotions that are associated with the nation and with rural environments. The woods of Småland were previously regarded as something frightening and dangerous, but later became a symbol for something beautiful, as well as melancholic. Löfgren writes that two trees have come to symbolize Sweden: the pine and the birch. "The silent, mighty pine forests that fade into the blue heights, the little airy birch grove close to the red cottages or the swards of woodland anemones in the spring" (Löfgren 1993:95).

The beautiful "idyllic" landscapes in the IKEA document are juxtaposed with pictures of Ingvar Kamprad as a young man, a bicycle with a box (to associate with the narrative of when Ingvar cycled around and sold various products) and an outside privy. Lovely but also inhospitable, which demands hard work and willpower.

The link between nature and national/regional culture and character is clear in the digital document. Here we can read that as Småland is a stony landscape Smålanders have therefore been forced to struggle and use the scarce resources that exist in order to make life tolerable. They have thus been forced to respect nature and its forces, and to be stubborn and determined in order to survive.

"*Smålanders have a reputation for being penny-pinchers, thrifty, innovate people with a straight-forward, no-nonsense approach to problem-solving in general and to business challenges in particular. People from this region do not primarily ask for subsidies and assistance. They roll up their sleeves and put the spade into the ground. This Småland legacy is built into the IKEA culture*" (Swedish origin).

After this description of Smålanders we are told how Ingvar Kamprad built up a business, how he, while other youths were out having fun in the evenings, packed up and sent parcels off to customers who had ordered things from him by mail order. The first IKEA employees were Smålanders who thought like Ingvar, although according to the document when IKEA developed it was important to recruit new staff and school them in the IKEA culture with its origins in Småland. This idea can be linked to a kind of inclusive habitus concept (Bourdieu 1986). Here Swedes (Smålanders) have an automatic advantage, in that according to this perspective they have inherited certain thought- and action patterns. However, at the same time there is an inclusive approach, which means that other categories of people can also learn the IKEA culture by e.g. visiting Älmhult, learning more about Sweden from the Internet and/or going on courses. IKEA's goal is for all its senior management to visit Älmhult as a necessary (but not sufficient) prerequisite for understanding the IKEA culture and thereby adopting the basic values and acting in the right way. You could say that there has been a shift from place-based lived experience to narratives and "tourism" in Älmhult. The significance of Älmhult for IKEA's basic values is emphasized in the document *Älmhult – the heart of IKEA*. Here we learn that in order to understand IKEA you have to visit Älmhult – a small town with headstrong people with their feet on the ground. In Älmhult you can experience the entire IKEA "pipeline at work", from the conceptual stage, raw materials, production, marketing and sales. In the town and within IKEA everything is in close proximity, and ideas and decisions happen quickly. According to this way of reasoning, it is logical that IKEA's cultural centre "Together" is located in

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Älmhult. In other words, in IKEA's way of thinking, experiencing the place is important in order to participate more fully in IKEA's culture and values.

The construction of a "classic" Swedishness within IKEA is achieved with the aid of nature coupled to the national (landscape's) character combined with home furnishing ideals (with connections to the welfare state's heyday and the art of social engineering). This "cultivated" Swedishness is disseminated from the centre, Inter-IKEA and IKEA of Sweden, to the periphery, i.e. for example stores throughout the world. However, the periphery is not just a passive recipient, but symbols and other manifestations of Swedishness are sometimes reinterpreted as part of the local meaning-making (see e.g. Salzer-Mörling 1998:169).

Swedishness and China

The question is how this construction of Swedishness is reinterpreted in a country like China. The staff at the IKEA stores in China have a shorter or, if they are managers, a longer induction in "Swedishness" with the aid of the material that is available on IKEA's intranet. However, the personnel manager at the Nanjing store, Sandy Yu, was hesitant about whether customers understood what symbols like stone walls (found at the entrance to the store) stood for: "*I am not sure that the customers understand, but co-workers for sure…We also have Swedish festivals in the IKEA store, Lucia, Midsummer, many Swedish festivals are celebrated in our store, so that´s another kind of way that co-workers realize that they are in a Swedish company*" (interview with Sandy Yu, 13 October 2010).

It would seem that the celebration of "Swedish" traditions at IKEA stores and the pictures of Swedish nature/country life are more important for the employees' and especially the managers' ongoing education in Swedishness and IKEA's values, and only to a lesser extent for the customers.

New perspectives on Swedishness

Even though traditions and archaic images dominate the construction of Swedishness, other expressions are also used. Stereotypes/prejudices about Swedes and humorous advertisements are also part of IKEA's use of Swedishness, for example bed advertisements that allude to "Swedish sin" in a humoristic way. There is also a page showing snuff and other traditional characteristics of Swedishness, as well as pictures of computers and the text from agriculture to dot.com and a picture of a white child and a black child with the caption: "*Tall, blonde and blue eyed?*" The more up-to-date image of Swedishness also includes a liberal view of homosexuality. In controversial advertisement campaigns in the USA homosexual men – a well-to-do group with money to spend – were shown cooking meals together, while in Poland the IKEA catalogue created a stir by showing pictures that were interpreted as IKEA propagating for homosexual marriage (Bengtsson 2010).

Even though the traditional image of rural Sweden dominates, IKEA's marketing managers know that Sweden has changed, and that Swedishness can no longer be construed in the same way as before. There has thus been shift away from an emphasis on the influence of nature on character and culture to a more abstract management thinking with an emphasis on diversity.

Do you have to be "Swedish" to adopt IKEA's values?

In IKEA's internal publication, *The IKEA Symbols, leadership by example* (2002), it states that the Swedish heritage is very important, but that the IKEA culture keeps pace with the global expansion of values and cultures from other parts of the world. However, by and large the original IKEA values are considered to serve all countries, which the former manager of IKEA in Sweden, Jeanette Söderberg, agrees with:

The values can be used everywhere, I'm absolutely convinced about that. Individuals and people are important in the values in general. It's our prejudices and notions of other cultures that get in the way and influence us. There is a resistance to IKEA's informal way of working, although this resistance can be overcome (interview with Jeanette Söderberg, 21 January 2010).

Even though the IKEA values are used everywhere, and are sometimes considered to be universal in IKEA spheres, "Swedes" are sometimes seen as better upholders of the IKEA culture and IKEA management. For example, Anders Dahlvig said in an interview that IKEA's purchasing organization in China has been bad at employing local managers, which is also regarded as a major shortcoming in Johan Stenebo's book *Sanningen om IKEA [The truth about IKEA]*. Stenebo claims that IKEA's purchasing

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organization failed to do business inside China, which is very negative for IKEA (Stenebo 2009:68). According to Stenebo, one reason for IKEA's "failure" is that IKEA "*in principle only has Europeans in important positions*" (Stenebo 2009:68). Stenebo regards the many European managers at the purchasing offices in Asia as a revival of the trend in which Swedes, or at least managers from the West, govern, regardless of the cost: *"These imported IKEA employees from the West have high removal costs because as a rule they usually move with their families. They should live well, the children should go to private English schools, the accompanying spouse should have employment and besides this the salaries are sky high compared with those back home"* (Stenebo 2009:69). Stenebo explains this by saying that "*IKEA's purchasing managers do not trust people with different a skin color, with a different culture and who speak a different language"* (Stenebo 2009:70). Even Ian Duffy, the former CEO in China, considers that the purchasing organization is very Swedish and patriarchal. However, he says, "*if you take the holding company, no there are no Swedes. If you take business services, there are no Swedes*".

When IKEA opens a new store in a new market such as China it is common for many of the staff to come from elsewhere, and especially from Sweden. In an interview Ian Duffy explained that "*…when I arrived in China in 2002 we had no one in our management at that time that was Chinese. And that was one of the very first things I decided to change. And I actually at that point brought in four external candidates into the company…not from IKEA, they are Chinese from outside. And it was a risky strategy. Because normally IKEA experience is a must…But it was a start of something that has really developed of Chinese specialists and Chinese managers….in the management team for the holding company [in China] today there are seven of us, and five are Chinese*" (interview with Ian Duffy, 8 October 2010).

There are different ways of looking at Swedishness within IKEA, although the rapid increase of stores in different parts of the world has hastened the process to the extent that Swedishness has increasingly become a kind of marketing and value base, and less of a staff policy.

The document *Swedishness and co-workers* describes how IKEA's Swedish roots have affected values and informal rules within the company. It talks about simple and direct communication and management by doing things differently. It also says that "*You don´t have to be Swedish to become an ambassador of Swedishness*". According to the document, if you share IKEA's values, believe in them and are passionate about the work that is done, you are an excellent ambassador of Swedishness, regardless of where you come from. Here the place, Sweden, is no longer at the centre and the territory's links with the culture/values less obvious.

In an interview, Ian Duffy, from Great Britain, supported this point of view and claimed that you don't have to have been born in Sweden to be an excellent upholder of the IKEA values. Today, many of IKEA's Chinese-born employees have become "role models" for the IKEA culture. He maintained that "*..with the exception of Mikael Olsson's job, I could honestly say I don´t think there´s any position today that could not be occupied by a non-Swede….I´m not sure how open Ingvar would be to a non-Swede in that position. Over time even that will change*" (interview with Ian Duffy, 8 October 2010).

In short, within IKEA the older narrative is based on a territorial construction of homogeneous Swedishness. However, global social changes have given rise to contradictory discourses and identities that change the narrative. In the newer narrative diversity has been given an important role. It is therefore interesting to see IKEA's construction of Swedishness in relation to the diversity discourse, especially in a time perspective and in relation to the global social changes that have affected and affect production and consumption.

IKEA – DIVERSITY AND MANAGEMENT

The introduction of the diversity concept within IKEA – the historical process

Within IKEA the diversity discourse made a breakthrough in the year 2000. The organization had to some extent already begun to work with gender equality, but due to new thinking from the USA and the American IKEA stores the diversity concept dominated, even though gender equality was still seen as an important issue in itself. IKEA's global expansion at the end of the 1990s contributed to the popularity of the diversity concept within IKEA. The

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corporate culture's emphasis on Swedishness needed to be complemented by diversity management in order to facilitate IKEA's global growth. In the year 2000 seminars on diversity were conducted for some 600 managers and IKEA's CEO, Anders Dahlvig, who had taken over in October 1999, emphasized the importance of the issue (interview with Staffan Lindqvist, personnel officer for Swedish IKEA Sales, 8 April 2009).

When Dahlvig started to work for IKEA he experienced that the culture among the managers was very macho – most of the managers were men who formed their own groupings and partied together, from which women were excluded. This was why at first the question of diversity was more about getting women into management positions, because he felt that there was "*a glass ceiling in IKEA*" that prevented women from occupying management positions in the company.

"*There weren't very many women in higher positions and step one was thus to get women into the executive management team*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

Two women were eventually included in the executive management team – Josephine Rydberg-Dumont, the then manager of IKEA of Sweden (product range) and Pernille Lopez, who at that time was regional manager for North America. At that particular time the executive management team consisted of 8 people. The fact that two women became part of the team "*sent strong signals to the entire organization*" that women would be prioritized for senior management positions. Dahlvig said that it was relatively easy to appoint women to leading positions because there were already a lot of competent women employees. On the other hand, ethnicity was regarded as a tricky issue. Dahlvig thought that even in 2009 IKEA was generally not very good at recognizing the skills and competence of immigrants. However, since then IKEA has become better at employing people from the countries in which IKEA has opened stores, which also includes management positions (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009, also Dahlvig 2011:59-60).

According to Dahlvig, diversity policy was about earning money: "*it was good for business*". Many of IKEA's customers were women and the idea was that female managers had a better understanding of how female customers thought and acted. At the same time IKEA needed more managers, and the potential was seen to exist among women. But it was also about a social context in which gender equality was regarded as something desirable. The first step was that the executive management initiated a mapping of employed women and the positions they occupied (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

An American consultant, Sari Brody, led the seminars in 2000 on the subject of "diversity and management", in which questions concerning ethnicity, nationality and sexuality arose in relation to IKEA values. Every member of the executive management team took part in these seminars, which led to a major involvement: "*It sent very strong signals and stirred up a lot of emotions and people became very engaged in all respects"* (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

One of those attending the seminars when the interviews were conducted in October 2010 was Michele Acuna, the manager of the IKEA store in Shanghai, in October 2010. At that particular time she was working for IKEA in the USA and had an immigrant background from Mexico. According to Michele, the seminars were both very bewildering and very important for her personally, but also for the changes in the IKEA culture and practices that resulted. Even though diversity is a somewhat vague concept, Michele saw diversity in terms of different experiences and disparate ways of looking at things as important: "*There always needs to be someone who can question what the manager says*" (interview with Michele Acuna, 11 October 2010).

To the question about whether anyone was against the diversity seminars, Anders Dahlvig answered: "*Yes, a handful of white Swedish men aged around 50 felt threatened*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009). This is in line with Hearn and Collingsson (2006:302-304), whose research shows that many men try to preserve their dominating power position and want to maintain masculine structures in the workplace.

Nobody was openly negative, though. A policy was adopted that employees and managers should reflect the clientele, which was later implemented in IKEA's various companies. Gender and ethnicity were in the foreground, but sexuality was also dealt with. However, Dahlvig claims that IKEA had always been a popular company among e.g. homosexuals, and that several senior managers were openly homosexual. The fact that IKEA's advertising was directed towards homosexual

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customers in places like the USA at the beginning of the 21st century also strengthened IKEA's reputation as an open and relatively unbiased workplace for homosexuals:

"*There was actually no need to focus on sexuality, because IKEA has always been fairly liberal. We have quite a lot of homosexuals in leading positions and have had for a long time. IKEA seems to attract certain kinds of people who feel comfortable with us"* (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

In an interview in April 2010 Anders Dahlvig summed up his view of how the diversity issue interconnected with the company's business strategy. The company had to reflect the customers, and this applied to the management as well as to other employees. Making decisions was easier if the decision-makers had different experiences. Anders Dahlvig maintained that there were a lot of capable (or potentially capable) prospective employees who would never stand a chance if the diversity perspective was not in the foreground when new people were recruited. According to Anders Dahlvig, in order to give everyone a chance – regardless of background – all the cards had to be on the table and "doing what we'd always done" had to be questioned. IKEA should be a company that champions diversity and equity for those groups that are discriminated against in today's labor market in e.g. Sweden (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 15 April 2010, see also Dahlvig 2011:60-61).

Dahlvig had persistently highlighted the diversity issue for several years "*before a number of other managers who were involved in the issue took it over*." For him the goal was that management would be associated with a positive view of diversity within IKEA and that this would become one of the basic IKEA values (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

Jeanette Söderberg started to work at IKEA in 1983, but was not involved with the company between the years 1994-2002. She noticed a great difference when she returned to the company in 2003:

When I came back to IKEA in 2003 the diversity issue was very pronounced. The diversity issue means that because we serve so many we want to reflect that variety. The composition depends on whether the store is in Haparanda or in Malmö, because we reflect the local population. Given that society changes, that the mix changes, we also have to change. This is not easy, but we are clear about what we want to achieve (interview with Jeanette Söderberg, 21 January 2010).

The number of women in leading positions increased dramatically during the period 2000-2011, and in 2011 amounted to just under 50% for store managers and about 50% for vice CEOs. But men were still in the majority among the senior management, especially with regard to purchasing and distribution. According to Anders Dahlvig, the ethnicity aspect in terms of immigrants had not been successful. "*Attempts were made in some countries to employ more immigrants, but with limited success*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

In contrast, the international composition of the executive management and among senior managers has increased and the number of Swedes decreased, which is mainly due to IKEA's global expansion. "*There were no non-Swedes in the executive management in 1999 but a lot has happened since then*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009). In 1999 English also became the corporate language. All managers must either know or learn English. An important reason for this was that communication would be improved between different parts of the company in the context of a more coherent IKEA.

The multitude must grow – who is included in IKEA's diversity concept in Sweden?

In 2008 IKEA started a new campaign in Sweden called "Long live diversity", with a focus on the customers. A small pamphlet entitled *De många människorna har blivit fler* [The multitude has grown] was published by Swedish IKEA Sales AB and was directed towards IKEA's employees. The foreword is written by Jeanette Söderberg, the then manager of the Swedish store and begins with the words "Hello everyone", followed by:

"*Courage is needed to lead the development. Courage to take new decisions, change and break new trails. A lot of courage is needed in order to change something that already works very well. Like IKEA. But things happen around us. Customer numbers grow and new ones are added. They change lifestyles, change views and act in new ways. And this happens quickly. For us it's about keeping pace with our customers. Diversity among those of us who work at IKEA gives a diversity of ideas and new perspectives. And help us to understand our customers' needs and expectations. At IKEA we are already good at diversity, but we want to be even*

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better. This is why we are launching a new theme. It isn't revolutionary news, but rather a way of accentuating and talking about who we are – a way that really shows that we are courageous enough to stand at the side of many people. That everyone is welcome."

The starting point in *The multitude has grown* is Ingvar Kamprad's motto from the 1970s: "*We have once and for all decided to stand at the side of the multitude*" and is commented on like this: "*Today the multitude looks a little different*."

The document shows that diversity is mainly interpreted as IKEA's employees having to reflect the customer composition in order to be able to forecast the customers' preferences for home furnishings, and so that the diversity of the staff can give rise to new ideas and solutions. The diversity that is expressed is aimed at ethnicity/race, religion, sexual orientation and family situation. The document emphasizes that diversity should be present at all levels and in different capacities, i.e. also in different management positions (*The multitude has grown*).

In recent years IKEA has deepened and developed its work on diversity. In the pamphlet "*An integrated business approach for diversity and inclusion at IKEA*", diversity is defined as "...the collective mixture of co-workers' differences and similarities on primary dimensions (age, gender, physical ability, ethnicity, nationality), as well as secondary dimensions (learning styles, skills, sexual orientation, parental status, etc)." Compared to the document from 2008 gender, disability and age are emphasized as important parts of IKEA's diversity work in order to create an inclusive company, with the aim that diversity and inclusion should be part of the everyday work.

Diversity and staff policy at the Chinese store

In the IKEA stores in China diversity is not in focus in the same way as it is in the Swedish stores. When asked whether there were diversity plans in China, Jack Wang, the Operations Manager of Human Relations in China said that: "*We don´t think it´s a measure but we think it is a recommended way, the female managers and foreigners. We don't have a clear measurement on how we manage diversity*" (interview with Jack Wang, 11 October 2010).

Laysee Dai, the competence development specialist at the Human Relations office in Shanghai, with responsibility for management skills development, talked about why the IKEA concept of diversity is interpreted differently in China and given less priority compared to Sweden: "*We don´t talk about diversity so much, only on the voice-mail. And that is a crucial difference because in China we don´t talk about diversity so much. And the line-manager may not have a common understanding of what diversity really means. It´s not a common topic, it´s not as important as it is in the west.*" However, she also said that diversity was practiced to some extent: "*We have Shanghainese and we also have people from other cities, it is also about diversity*". Dai went on to say that since working in a department store as e.g. a cleaner is not a high status job in Shanghai, in practice there is automatically a kind of diversity: "*And for the cleaner you will never see someone from Shanghai. So it is not so obvious that we work for diversity, but you can see as a result diversity here*" (interview with Laysee Dai, 12 October 2011).

In other words, IKEA's central policy on diversity is less important at the local level in China, which is in line with Salzer-Mörling's (1998) results that parts of the central corporate culture are recreated locally – despite attempts by the IKEA management to create "One IKEA".

She added that diversity was also concerned with age and life situation, e.g. if one had children: "*Our sales co-workers are quite young but our customers are in their 30-40s, so our ambition is to find the right co-workers to reflect the customers' ages. So far in the sales department we have consciously worked for diversity, not only the young guys, we also try to find working mothers to reflect the customer living stage*" (interview with Laysee Dai, 12 October 2011).

According to Sandy Yu, the personnel manager at the IKEA store in Nanjing, even though diversity was not prioritized at the store it was still important. However, for her it was more important for the staff to reflect the customers, especially as in Nanjing many people were young and had no children. Yu therefore wanted to employ more mothers: "*In the recruitment last year we started to analyze the customers' needs and then reflect the co-workers' diversity with our co-workers. For example, most found that our customers have kids and are women. So we started to look for some co-workers with kids because they know their real needs*." For her diversity was important in terms of "*what a person brought to the team, different working methods and ideas to the team*" (interview with Sandy Yu, 13 October 2010).

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Paradoxically, within IKEA in China diversity also meant not having "Swedes" in the management team. Representation thus differs from the "Swedish" understanding of representation.

Swedishness, diversity and management in a global perspective

What happens to Swedishness and IKEA's Småland's origins when the company expands globally and is internationalized? Among other things, this has meant that "non-Swedish" managers have become more common. Dahlvig did not regard this as a major problem, because both employees and managers were recruited on the basis of IKEA's corporate culture, of which "Swedishness" was an important constituent. However, Dahlvig said that dedicating oneself to IKEA's values "*is not stamped in the passport...You can't say that just because you come from Sweden or Småland you have more IKEA values, there are many non-Swedes who have very good IKEA values*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

Here Dahlvig interprets the changes of perspective that occurred in the first decade of the 21st century, when the connection of place (Sweden/Småland/Älmhult) to "natural" IKEA values was questioned and a more inclusive view of diversity became a more characteristic part of internationalization. However, in spite of globalization and IKEA's global expansion, Anders Dahlvig stressed that the basic values were deeply rooted, despite the rapidly changing nature of the world and the fact that IKEA has become a large global company:

"The foundations are the same and are surprisingly strong, which is largely due to the fact that the founder has been around for a long time. He is so strong for them and is the person they look up to with regard to the IKEA culture. But when he disappears things will surely change."

He also said that:

"*Many of the managers have been with IKEA for a long time and are strong ambassadors for this culture, so it hasn't degenerated*." Dahlvig also maintained that even though the basic values are still in place, they have been developed and reinterpreted:

"*Diversity is one of the biggest changes in the IKEA culture, but also engagement in social- and environmental issues*" (interview with Anders Dahlvig, 9 September 2009).

Ian Duffy agreed that the diversity issue was one of the greatest innovations in the IKEA culture. He claimed that IKEA had undergone two major "cultural" transformations in the last 30 years. The first was when IKEA began to price its goods in Euro at the end of the 1990s, rather than in Swedish crowns and the second was the diversity orientation: "*…it was a diversity in terms of nationality, gender, and also personality types or however you define those. And there was a very clear statement that the management group in any country should be diverse in all of those respects*" (interview with Ian Duffy, 8 October 2010).

But there are frameworks and boundaries for diversity and difference. IKEA's basic values are regarded as non-negotiable (Rask ´et al´2010). Söderberg maintained that different perspectives among employees were important within the framework "same basic values": … *working towards employees having different perspectives but the same basic values, such as humility linked to the diversity issue. These values are inclusive. Dare to think differently, dare to think anew, you cannot do this if everyone is the same* (interview with Jeanette Söderberg, 21 January 2010).

Jeanette Söderberg admitted that there was an apparent conflict, a paradox, between Swedishness and diversity: "*We are explicit about IKEA being a Swedish company, that's important. There is a certain paradox between Swedishness and diversity, but IKEA's corporate culture as a whole is full of paradoxes. Tradition and new thinking are examples of this. If you are governed by values then you can live with paradoxes. Things are not black and white, you cannot define everything. IKEA needs individuals who can make their own common-sense decisions in a situational way with the aid of IKEA's values. These values stem from its Swedish roots in Småland, hard work and stark reality. The values work well with diversity and are not contradictory"* (interview with Jeanette Söderberg, 21 January 2010).

An example of IKEA now having a more inclusive approach to Swedishness and the fact that diversity has become more mainstream, was that Michele Acuna, who described herself as a "Mexican-American" and had previously worked in the USA and as manager of the IKEA store in Shanghai. On the 1st December 2010, she became the first manager of IKEA's new cultural centre in Älmhult, called "Together". The cultural centre is envisioned as a place where IKEA staff can learn

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about the IKEA culture and the various processes – from raw material to product – in the stores. This has to do with training and a kind of "impregnation" in the IKEA culture. The fact that Acuna, with her background, is the manager and not a "Swede" is an important representation. Acuna herself said that a global company like IKEA needed a symbol to show that the company was now international and she saw herself as filling that role. At the same time, "Together" is located in Älmhult, which means that ideas about Swedishness also live on in symbiosis with the global development (interviews with Michele Acuna, 11 October 2010 and 4 April 2011).

CONCLUSION

Swedishness has in recent years become an important part of IKEA's image, especially outside Scandinavia. It was also an important part of marketing in the 1980s in connection with expansion in Europe and other parts of the world. That IKEA is a "Swedish" company is often seen as good marketing in order to "stick out" in the global market. Swedishness as a form of business concept within IKEA has conveyed that IKEA as a producer of Swedishness influences what is judged as Swedish, both abroad and in Sweden.

Ideas about "Swedish" values being the basis of IKEA's corporate culture are also linked to the business concept. According to IKEA, these values are based on notions of the beautiful yet barren Småland countryside that has "forced" Smålanders to be thrifty, innovative, strong-willed and humble.

IKEA's values are considered to be appropriate for all countries, although there has been a tension between an older view of "Swedes" as natural upholders of the corporate culture and the newer, more inclusive view influenced by the diversity concept. The older narrative within IKEA is based on a territorial construction of homogeneous Swedishness. The countryside is often a representation of a "white", "unspoilt" Swedishness (Aggeman & Sponner 1997).

Global social changes and other developments have given rise to contradictory narratives that have changed the policy, especially with regard to staff policy. However, the construction of Swedishness using the combination of nature and culture and a Swedish, welfare-state inspired home furnishing ideal is still a cornerstone in IKEA's marketing strategy.

Globalization is a significant factor behind the diversity concept. According to the philosophy of diversity, dealing with staff, suppliers and customers from different backgrounds requires a diversity perspective. It may also be that to some extent diversity can be seen as rhetoric, while in practice those who have traditionally had a lot of power within IKEA have retained it thanks to the older discourse on Swedishness. Diversity does not always challenge the groups that have dominating power positions, but perhaps in some cases strengthens these power relations (Prasad 2006:135, also Elmes & Connelley 1997:158). Essentially, the diversity concept is based on people's differences being seen as more or less static. But people change, and identities can also change at different times and in different contexts (see e.g. Giddens 1984).

Anti-discrimination work is required in order to create a dynamic and creative development and also that different approaches and contradictions are encouraged within the organization. Such "conflicts", together with the remodeling and recreation of meanings, are vital for IKEA if the company is to continue to develop.

The concept of Swedishness is disseminated by Inter-IKEA as a basic idea, although the cultural flow between the centre and the periphery with the aid of e.g. IKEA's intranet has certainly facilitated the creation of meaning that is not dependent on time, space or a place like Älmhult, even though in the process the symbols are sometimes reinterpreted and acquire a different local meaning. The flow of meanings and symbols is multi-directional and creates glocalism, where the local and global connect, although in some cases the local is "stronger" than the central meaning-making. The global can be said to pass through a national, regional and local filter. The latter applies to the view of diversity in China.

Within IKEA in China diversity is not a priority issue, even though the managers there know about and accept the idea behind diversity among the staff. In the Chinese IKEA context diversity is about people with different backgrounds and life situations and from different towns/areas working together.

The interviews conducted in Sweden and the written material can be interpreted as the diversity idea within IKEA stemming from the idea that difference enriches an organization and that the service to the customers is best if the groups of

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customers are reflected by those who are employed at different levels, which is considered to result in greater profits for the company. At the same time, Dahlvig's remarks seem to indicate that equity and changed social norms lay behind the IKEA management's focus on diversity at the beginning of the 21st century. Dahlvig and Söderberg maintain that you do not need to be "Swedish" to adopt the IKEA culture and IKEA values, which makes them advocates of the change of direction that took place later, where a specific country's connection to "natural" IKEA values was partly questioned and internationalization with English as the corporate language and a diversified staff recruitment became all the more important.

Although the image of Swedishness within IKEA is contradictory and full of paradoxes, newer constructions of the concept and of the recruitment of managers indicate that a change took place in IKEA's corporate culture around the year 2000. It was then that influence from the spirit of the time and a major global expansion led to a new corporate culture and new manifestations of this culture.

Global social changes have influenced and will continue to influence IKEA's corporate culture, as will staff changes in leading positions within IKEA. Even if the corporate culture is strong, development will still take place. IKEA's management, at least in Sweden, will reflect a broader clientele through diversity among the staff, even if the priorities are different in e.g. China. At the same time, they will want to preserve the corporate culture and its basic values by recruiting managers that stand for values based on the origins in Småland. This contradiction between Swedishness and diversity can be seen as characteristic for IKEA today. However, this does not need to be seen in terms of opposites.

Diversity has in many ways become part of the newer Swedishness – an inclusive Swedishness where the image of an open and heterogeneous society constitutes an important part of the new narrative, in which a common future is more important than appearance and place of birth. Since IKEA puts great emphasis on how Swedishness is perceived both inside and outside Sweden, a new and inclusive Swedishness within IKEA would have a significant impact.

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