The Wires of the Birdcage: Patterned Inequalities and the Inequality Regime of a Swedish Housing Company

Kristina Boréus & Ulf Mörkenstam

I. Introduction

Different kinds of inequality might apply between people at particular workplaces: some people have lower wages than others, some feel less security than others, some have less influence over their working conditions, and so on. The distribution of disadvantages follows a pattern: it is rare that lack of influence over one’s working conditions is compensated for by a high wage. Quite the opposite is true: those disadvantaged in one area are often disadvantaged in other areas as well. In addition, there is another kind of pattern: some groups of people tend to be among the disadvantaged ones, while others tend to be advantaged. The division of labor is a division of people into social classes, and these classes are often both ethnified and gendered (see, e.g., Carter 2003; le Grand, Szulkin & Thålin 2001; Ibarra 1995; Leicht 2008; Neergard 2002).

This article focuses on both types of inequality patterns. It is about various types of inequality between employees of different ethnic origin in Sweden. In Sweden, immigrants are more often than native Swedes employed in subordinated and monotonous jobs with low wages (Ekberg & Hammarstedt 2002, Ekberg 2006, SOU 2005:56, Sjögren 2005). Statistics show that immigrants to Sweden from different parts of the world are more or less disadvantaged. Immigrants from the other Nordic countries, USA and Western Europe earn, for instance, almost as much as native Swedes, while immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America lag behind. In average, non-European immigrant men earn 15 per cent less than native men, and non-European women earn around 12 percent less than native women (le Grand & Szulkin 2002).

Although inequality between natives and immigrants in the Swedish labor market as a whole is well studied, we know less about the processes that generate and maintain inequality at particular Swedish workplaces. Few studies have analyzed processes that produce inequality between groups with different ethnic or national origin at a local level (but see
Olsson 1995; Schierup & Paulson 1994, more refs.), and fewer still have taken the first kind of inequality pattern mentioned above—that different disadvantages tend to go together and be concentrated to individuals—into consideration. In this article we analyze how patterned inequality is reproduced in everyday practice at a particular work-place, a Swedish housing company, by an analysis of the local processes generating inequality. The purpose is to generate a more detailed understanding of how local processes might generate inequality.

Our starting-point is Joan Acker’s (2006: 443) concept *inequality regimes*, by which she means “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations”. In the article we stress the importance of looking at a particular part of the ‘design’ of inequality regimes: how different kinds of inequality between groups of people go together and how inequalities of different types might strengthen each other in ways that make them more difficult to recognize. We present a study of a work-place where we look at particular processes that took place and the generating of certain meanings. To capture some of the practices going on we combine the model of the inequality regime with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977, 2001), here referring to knowledge that is possible to ‘capitalize’ at a work-place, i.e. that results in a higher wage or other benefits. To study the production of meaning we use the concept of discourse.

We believe that the understanding of how inequalities are reproduced in particular workplaces is crucial for explaining why the pattern of inequality on an aggregated level, referred to above, seems almost impossible to change, despite the fact that these patterns are well known, and the fact that many companies and organizations have developed strategies to counteract inequality. Furthermore, we believe that knowledge of local processes is necessary for designing measures to counteract inequality. Analyzing the inequality regime of this specific work-place allows us to go beyond explanations of inequality in terms of individual merit (that certain employees lack specific skills, competences or motivations, i.e. explanations in terms of human capital (refs))—frequently used not only in the research literature but also by wage-setting managers, for instance at our work-place—and focus on the structural conditions enabling and restraining the employees. More specifically, we do this by analyzing inequalities between members and non-members of the majority ethnic group and we address the following research questions:

1. What kinds of inequality between male immigrants and male natives existed at the studied place of work? (2) How were the inequalities produced and maintained through the
local inequality regime? (3) In what way were different kinds of inequality related in upholding this particular inequality regime?

In part II, we will give a brief presentation of the work-place studied and provide an overview of the methodology and material of the study. In part III we report on the different kinds of inequalities between immigrant and native employees that we found, answering our first research question. To shed light on the second and third research questions, which can only be tentatively answered, we discuss in part IV some of the inequality generating practices we found at the Housing Company. In the concluding part V we will discuss how an objective and easily discernible inequality, inequality in income, is interconnected with other kinds of inequality and how they mutually reinforce each other.

II. A study of a Swedish housing company

The work-place chosen for our study was a housing company, a public-service corporation owned by the municipality with an executive committee consisting of members from the political parties in the municipality and union representatives1 The company was in a dominant position on the local housing market—owning two thirds of all apartments for rent in the municipality—and its activities can best be described as part of Swedish public utility. Many of the tenants had immigrated to Sweden, but the proportion of immigrants varied between different residential areas.

In charge of the daily activities of the Housing Company were a chief executive officer (CEO) and a directorate. The company had around 110 employees, of which a majority were men (64 per cent) and most of them were Swedish natives (approximately 80 per cent). The company had a head office, where a third of the employees worked (half of them were women and slightly more than 85 per cent were native Swedes), and several local offices situated in the different residential areas. Writ large, the head office was dominated by white collar workers, while the majority of the employees in the local offices were blue collar workers working as caretakers. The caretakers made up the single largest job type at the housing company (56 per cent).

Just like other work-places, the Housing Company had several values they wanted to communicate, both internally and externally. Apart from the important relations with the

1 It is important to note that our study was not set up by the Housing Company: it had nothing to do with how we formulated our study, how we organized it, or how we interpreted our results. One important aim of our project, however, was to present and discuss our analysis with both the CEO and with all the employees in the local offices. Furthermore, in our final report to the company, we made a list of proposals on how to improve the conditions for equality at the work-place.
tenants—the company ought to be “good, fast and reliable”—there were two dominant values in the rhetoric of the company and in its self-image.\(^2\) Firstly, the Housing Company was the good work-place. The work environment of the employees was exemplary, the employees had a very large amount of independence in their daily work and the company was always open for critical views, no one was afraid of speaking out freely. Secondly, the Housing Company was the equal work-place. Equality was first and foremost considered to be a question of gender equality, equality between native Swedes and immigrants was taken for granted. The yardstick for gender equality was the wages and the number of female managers.

In our analysis, we focus on inequalities between those who were born in Sweden and those who had immigrated to the country after the age of 15, rather than ‘racial’ or ethnicity-based inequalities. The categories usually referred to as ‘immigrant’ and ‘Swede’ have had high salience in Sweden at least since the 1970’s, when ‘immigrant’ replaced the word ‘foreigner’ in the public debate (Ds 2000:43:19; Mörkenstam 2010), arguably much higher salience than different ethnic categories (Borevi 2002; Boréus 2006). They were at use at this particular work-place, just as at so many others in Sweden. Although statistics, like those quoted in the introduction, show that immigrants to Sweden from different parts of the world are more or less disadvantaged (and sometimes not disadvantaged at all), we chose not to distinguish between immigrants from different parts of the world in this study. All male immigrants we interviewed at this particular work-place but one came from Eastern European, Asian and Latin-American countries.

The study was carried out by a variety of methods. The core material consisted of 33 semi-structured interviews with individual employees. The work-place was organised in a head-office and five local areas, of which we studied four. At the time of the interviews 24 native and 11 immigrant men, as well as 11 native and one immigrant woman, worked as caretakers in the four areas (this is why immigrant women are not discussed as a group in this article). Out of these we interviewed ten native and ten immigrant men, as well as ten women.

The interviews were conducted between March 2005 and May 2007 and evolved around the employees’ experiences of their work-days and of different social practices at the work-place, with a particular focus on what they regarded to be hindrances or problems. The bulk of the interviewees, 30 persons, were caretakers and three of them managers. After the interviews we conducted a short questionnaire regarding the employees’ background,

\(^2\) The analysis of the values of the Housing Company is based on the company’s own external communication (homepage, business plan, annual report), internal communication (internal homepage, policy documents, the CEO’s comments on the internal surveys) and interviews with members of the directorate.
including education and language skills. Apart from these semi-structured interviews we carried out several less formal talks with managers at the head-office and caretakers in the different housing areas to gather information. We also conducted three small focus groups in the summer of 2007. All interviews and focus group recordings were transcribed and then analysed with the help of software for qualitative data analysis.

A second kind of material was our field notes taken at visits to the work-place. Most importantly we were present at 16 work meetings with the local manager and the caretakers of the different areas. We also followed some employees during their work. A third kind of material was a questionnaire regarding the working conditions to all employees in all local offices. It was conducted approximately two years after the individual interviews, in 2009, and had 89 respondents. On top of that we analysed different kinds of documents from the organisation, such as the Housing Company’s recurrent studies of how the employees liked their work-place and lists of the employees’ wages.

III. Inequalities at the Housing Company

The different 'kinds' of inequality that structure the presentation below could have been conceptualized differently, for instance, it is not obvious that fear of expressing criticisms should be conceptualized as one type of inequality, while we treat differences in the confidence in one’s ability to influence the work-place as another. This categorization of different kinds of inequality was only partly constructed as an analytical tool in advance of the study (then based in previous research). Some of the concepts grew out of the study. There is a combination of reasons for why we have chosen these particular categories of inequality and not others: some of them are frequently used in the research literature (not least wage-differences), they all seemed to highlight some feature of this particular inequality regime in a fruitful way, and when we presented the results at the Housing Company our understanding of the inequality regime seemed to make sense to the caretakers.\(^3\)

Unequal wages

The wages were the most frequently mentioned topic among our informants when we asked about inequalities at the work-place in our interviews. Many informants found the wages unfair. In their opinion, the wages would be fair if each employee had a salary in accordance

\(^3\) For a more extensive and detailed analysis of the results presented here, see Boréus & Mörkenstam 2010 (in Swedish).
with what they merited. To deserve a higher wage, according to our informants, you ought to have experience of the work-place. As it was stated in one of our focus groups: "I have worked here for 22 years, and a person comes from the outside. He doesn’t even have an education. We are supposed to train him, to break him in. He is paid better than I am. There’s something a little bit unjust there.” Furthermore, a colleague could deserve a higher wage if s/he made an extra effort in comparison with the others in the daily work, worked better or had responsibility for a larger geographical area (thus had more apartments and tenants to handle). When our informants talked about unfair wages it was thus mainly a result of what they claimed to be an obvious neglect of merit: experience and work performance were found to count for nothing at the Housing Company.

Another experience of unfair wages stemmed from what many of our informants talked about as a non-explicit demand for certain language skills: “I can compete with a Swede […] but the Swede’s is better paid than I am.” Knowledge of the Swedish language seemed to be more important than, for instance, technical knowledge, some immigrant informants claimed. One of our informants recounted that his presumed lack of knowledge of the Swedish language was turned into an explicit negative argument when he tried to raise his salary during a discussion on his wage with the local manager: “No, you can’t write in Swedish that well [was the response]. Then you realise that it is the language that keeps the wage down […]”

These different experiences of unfair wages were not equally distributed among the employees. Eight out of ten men born in Sweden did not mention any personal experience of injustice (although several mentioned that some immigrant colleagues were treated unfairly) while all ten of our immigrant informants mentioned that they had an unfairly low salary. In terms of experience they ought to earn more, some of them claimed, whilst others ascribed their poor wage trend to the (implicit) demand of knowledge of the Swedish language. However, only one of our informants explicitly interpreted his low salary in comparison to his (native) colleagues in terms of discrimination: "this thing with the wages is also discrimination of immigrants. As I told you, I’ve been working here for 17 years, but I earn less than everybody else”.

The discontent with the wages the immigrant informants expressed was related to actual wage differences (although our informants only seemed to know what their closest colleagues earned and not the distribution of wages of all employees). An initial analysis of all wages of the Housing Company—divided into five main job positions (see Table 1)—shows that traditional class patterns structured the setting of wages: there were notable differences
between managers and other employees, as well as differences between white and blue collar workers.

**Table 1. Average monthly wage (SEK) for different job positions, spring 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job assignment</th>
<th>Average wage</th>
<th>Lowest-highest wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directorate and other managers</td>
<td>40010</td>
<td>24350-69000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical support</td>
<td>29057</td>
<td>24400-36000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources, economic administration</td>
<td>26843</td>
<td>22800-34800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception, error report (contact with tenants/clients)</td>
<td>25025</td>
<td>23049-28200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caretakers</td>
<td>22726</td>
<td>19600-25995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we compared the wages of immigrant and native male caretakers we found support for our informants’ experiences of being treated unequally. The difference in the average monthly wage between native and immigrant caretakers was just over 650 SEK, which is barely three per cent (Table 2). The wage difference is also unmistakable when we look into the lowest-highest wages within each category respectively.

**Table 2. Average monthly wage (SEK), male caretakers, spring 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average wage</th>
<th>Lowest-highest wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native men</td>
<td>22959</td>
<td>21370-25995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant men</td>
<td>22308</td>
<td>19600-23345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All caretakers</td>
<td>22726</td>
<td>19600-25995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we look into what our informants claimed to be fair arguments for wage differences—and thus not a deviation from the principle of treating all employees equally—our study could not measure the work performance of the caretakers. However, Table 3 shows the relation between wages and experience in terms of the number of years the caretakers had been employed at the Housing Company. The result is unequivocal: immigrant men earned less than native men no matter how long experience they had.
Table 3. Average monthly wage (SEK), caretakers by number of years employed at the Housing Company, spring 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of years employed</th>
<th>0-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>more than 10 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native men</td>
<td>22752</td>
<td>22951</td>
<td>23061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant men</td>
<td>21375</td>
<td>22449</td>
<td>22537</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, no matter how we analysed the wages, immigrant men were the losers.\(^4\)

Unequal possibilities: ethnic division of labour?

If we look into the distribution of positions for all employees of the Housing Company (Table 4 below), the results show that immigrants—in proportion to their share of all employees—were underrepresented as managers: none of the persons in the directorate had immigrated to Sweden and the only immigrant manager held a position low in the hierarchy of the company. Furthermore, in typically white collar positions (HR, economic administration, technical support) there were no immigrants among the employees.

Table 4. Job positions for immigrants and native Swedes (men and women), November 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Directorate and other managers</th>
<th>Human resources, economic administration</th>
<th>Technical support</th>
<th>Reception, error report (contact with tenants/clients)</th>
<th>Caretakers</th>
<th>All employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants</td>
<td>1 (10%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (20%)</td>
<td>17 (27%)</td>
<td>20 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Swedes</td>
<td>9 (90%)</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
<td>13 (100%)</td>
<td>8 (80%)</td>
<td>45 (73%)</td>
<td>90 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All employees</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
<td>13 (100%)</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>62 (100%)</td>
<td>110 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We believe that this ethnically biased distribution of positions could discourage immigrant men from applying for white collar positions at the head office, that they could perceive of a “glass ceiling” within the Housing Company (Fooley, Kidder & Powell 2002). One of our informants explicitly stated that the distribution of job positions was discriminatory, and that

\(^4\) In Boréus & Mörkenstam (2010) we compare three categories among the care-takers: immigrant men, native women and native men (as stated above there was only one single immigrant female care-taker). The general pattern was that native men were at the top regarding wages and immigrant men at the bottom with the group of native women in between.
he avoided applying for an administrative job at the head office since he was convinced he would get a negative reply:

No, since it’s unrealistic, you know, you’ve been there yourself [at the head office], you see there are no immigrants working there. So I’m not talking bullshit, that’s the way it is, that’s reality […] I don’t try because why would I apply, when I’m going to get a “no”…

If we return to the caretakers, the Housing Company made a major reorganisation in 2006, while we were conducting our study. This reorganisation involved a change in the work tasks for the caretakers. When we initiated our project they all basically had the same tasks: administrative tasks, technical/practical repairing, maintenance of the outdoor environment in the residential areas and contact/communication with the tenants. The reorganisation divided the position of the caretaker into three: one occupied with the outdoor environment (outdoor caretaker), one occupied with the rental of apartments including contact with the tenants and a lot of administrative tasks (apartment caretaker), and one only occupied with technical services (menders). This reorganisation was of great interest to us: Could we discern a pattern as to what new roles native and immigrant men were assigned (Table 5)?

**Table 5. Job positions for immigrants and native Swedes (men and women), former caretakers, November 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apartment caretakers</th>
<th>Outdoor caretakers</th>
<th>Menders</th>
<th>All caretakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Immigrant caretakers</strong></td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
<td>7 (33%)</td>
<td>8 (44%)</td>
<td>17 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native caretakers</strong></td>
<td>17 (89%)</td>
<td>14 (67%)</td>
<td>10 (66%)</td>
<td>41 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All caretakers</strong></td>
<td>19 (100%)</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>18 (100%)</td>
<td>58 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The result showed that a majority of the immigrant men was assigned the roles of outdoor caretakers or menders. In the role that demanded most contact with the tenants and included a lot of different administrative tasks—apartment caretakers—immigrant men were underrepresented. That so few of these caretakers opted for the apartment caretaker job or that their local managers tried to influence them to take one of the other two positions might have
to do with either aspect: administration or social contact with tenants. We believe that administrative skills might be seen as demanding a very high level of written Swedish.\textsuperscript{5}

Our analysis thus indicates that there existed an ethnic division of labor at the Housing Company. Firstly, natives and immigrants did not have the same job positions at the Housing Company (no immigrant managers and no immigrant white collar workers); secondly, with the reorganisation the segregation between native and immigrant caretakers increased. This could indicate unequal chances for natives and immigrants with a larger variety of positions open to native employees.

The questions to be posed in this context are what level of Swedish that was necessary for the actual work and whether routines, such as standardised documents, could change the situation. Furthermore, ‘social competence’ was regularly stated as a very important kind of competence for a caretaker in our interviews. If social competence was associated with speaking Swedish the way a native does this could be part of the explanation for the comparatively low number of apartment caretakers among the immigrant men.

\textbf{Unequal influence and unequal feelings of job security}

In the interviews we asked questions regarding the informants understanding of their ability to influence their personal working conditions and what they felt were their chances to influence the work-place at large.

An important aspect of influence on individual working conditions, according to our informants, was the possibility to choose in what area to work and for what street(s) to be responsible. Even more important to some of our informants was to avoid being sent to an area where s/he did not want to work, something that happened regularly. According to the questionnaire conducted in 2009, a little bit over 20 per cent of caretakers and others had the experience of being sent to a particular area to work even though they had told their local managers that they did not want to work there. These unwanted transitions to new areas were to a large extent understood by the employees as a punishment by the management, for instance, if they were “too problematic”.

\textsuperscript{5} In Boréus & Mörkenstam (2010) we show that native women seem, once again, to be a category in between immigrant and native men. The general pattern here was that women had the same access as native men to positions as managers and white collar work but the reorganisation increased the segregation between female and male caretakers as no women became menders (i.e. a job that first and foremost consisted of technical work) in the new organization, although some applied for that position. This could indicate that job positions were gendered at the Housing Company and that women therefore were left with a smaller variety of positions open to them in comparison with men.
These transitions were referred to frequently by our immigrant informants (and by some female native ones) and were obviously perceived of as an underlying threat. Among the native men, however, these transfers were rarely mentioned. According to our questionnaire immigrant caretakers did not seem to run a higher risk of being moved to a new area against their will: there was no significant difference between the groups reporting such experiences. The questionnaire, however, did show a significant difference between native and immigrant men in regard to getting responsibility for a certain street or area against one’s will, even though the cases were few. Apart from that, we did not find important differences in the feeling the employees expressed regarding their chances to influence their individual working conditions.

The inequalities in the employees’ perceived chances to influence the work-place at large and its routines were more pronounced. To feel that you can influence several conditions must be fulfilled: (1) you must feel confident enough to speak and voice opinions at all, for instance on work meetings, (2) you must feel able to express critique and make proposals, and (3) you must have the feeling that you are being listened to and that something actually comes out of your attempts to influence.

We have no systematic evidence showing that the confidence to voice opinions at meetings etc.—condition (1)—was unequally distributed, but some of our immigrant informants expressed that for a person whose mother tongue is not Swedish this might be particularly difficult:

You don’t get through. But as a Swede, you know, there isn’t a problem for her or him. It doesn’t matter if they’ve done a rather lousy job some claim anyway that they’ve done a good job. They can explain. But for a poor immigrant it’s a bit difficult to explain yourself.

A slightly different kind of obstacle would be if there were demands for a ‘Swedish’ kind of behaviour at meetings. One immigrant informant told us that he once wanted to air a problem at a meeting because he did not want to be talking behind people’s backs. The local manager told him after the meeting to refrain from such behaviour since “in Sweden, you ought to know, we don’t like it when somebody tells the truth directly to somebody’s face”.

If you have the courage to talk at meetings you still have to feel secure enough to be critical and come up with proposals that might not be popular with the management if you want to influence the situation—condition (2)—something we asked about in the interviews.
A number of employees expressed that freedom of speech did exist at the Housing Company, that anyone could be critical and come up with suggestions at meetings and to the management without taking risks. Among those making this positive kind of judgement the majority were native men. Quite a few informants, however, did not share this positive judgement and expressed outright fear of being critical. None of these were native men. Several immigrant men expressed that they held back critique fearing negative consequences if they voiced it. A majority (but not all) of the immigrant men expressed this bleak view in our interviews. An immigrant man said that it was easy to get classified as a “problem person” if you told “the truth”. Another one stated:

As an immigrant I cannot say whatever to the company. But as a Swede you can say whatever to the boss. It doesn’t matter. But for me it’s not possible. [...] Not that I’m critical of the company, but if I’d express critique it might be difficult. Perhaps I’d get sacked! [...] That’s the way it feels, I think. I have Swedish colleagues [...] For them it doesn’t matter. [...] No. If I’d express myself in that way, perhaps I’d be summoned to a meeting the next day: “Why did you say that?”

Another immigrant caretaker told us that he had wanted to arrange a meeting exclusively for immigrant employees at the Housing Company, but failed. According to him it was impossible to speak your meaning on work meetings with both ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ present.

The questionnaire carried out in 2009 also showed a clear pattern, according to which immigrant men felt more insecurity than native men (Table 6).

**Table 6. Sense of security in speaking up, by country of birth, June 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>Are you scared of speaking up?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not afraid</td>
<td>A certain inquietude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even if you have the courage to speak up at meetings as well as a feeling that it is secure to be critical and make suggestions it is still not having influence: having influence also means that your attempts to change things are in fact successful—condition (3)—at least sometimes. Our
results are not consistent regarding this aspect of having influence. The questionnaires did not indicate systematic differences in the feeling that you could influence the work-place and its organisation. But in the interviews immigrant men in particular expressed the feeling of not being listened to:

The word is free to express what you think and find adequate. OK, but whether it eventually counts is a different story. […] it doesn’t have the same weight as the words of a Swede. […] those things for instance [refers to critique he has voiced himself], they don’t listen to. The company doesn’t listen to them.

Occasionally the topic of discrimination came up in the interviews. Most natives that commented on the topic were of the opinion that there was no discrimination against immigrants by colleagues or managers, but a few thought that the company made it more difficult for their immigrant colleagues to advance in their careers or to raise their salaries. Some immigrant caretakers who commented on the issue did feel discriminated against by the company but most did not voice such feelings.

Both several immigrant and native caretakers and one manager did, however, report that the immigrant caretakers were sometimes discriminated against by tenants that held prejudiced attitudes. Native employees reported that they had been met with racist comments and complaints about immigrant employees and one immigrant caretaker reported that:

I was badly treated by the tenants. Partly in a clearly racist way, so to speak. By not being accepted. Some expressed explicitly that they wanted me and [colleague X, also immigrant] to leave their apartments because we weren’t welcome. And we felt from some people, some tenants that we met every day, who showed openly that they had no sympathy for you. They wouldn’t even greet you.

Immigrant caretakers also talked about experiences of discrimination in other spheres of life, outside the Housing Company. We think that such experiences, together with the fact that the ‘non-Swedish’ employees constituted a minority at the work-place were related to the feeling of insecurity in the work-situation expressed by several of the immigrant interviewees.

The interviews and the questionnaire thus indicated that male immigrant caretakers felt that they had less influence and felt less secure at the Housing Company than did native ones.
Unequal opportunities to capitalize useful skills

The questionnaire conducted with our informants showed that immigrant male caretakers had slightly longer education than the native males. We had no possibility to judge the value of this for their job. Easier to judge was a skill that the group of immigrant caretakers possessed to a higher degree than the native ones: relevant language skills. While the average native caretaker answered that he spoke Swedish and one other language, usually English, the average immigrant caretaker reported that he spoke three languages: his native language, Swedish and a third (but also sometimes a fourth and a fifth) language.

The linguistic competence that most immigrant caretakers possessed was useful in their daily work. The languages they spoke besides Swedish were often the languages of groups of tenants, many of whom had difficulties explaining themselves in Swedish or understanding Swedish spoken by the Housing Company’s staff. Problems of communication between staff and tenants were referred to in many interviews. All male immigrant caretakers that we asked about it reported that they rather frequently used their knowledge in other languages than Swedish to communicate with the tenants:

there are colleagues from other areas [...] there are occasions when they are having a little conversation or discussion in the laundry room and then they handle [the tenant that has problems understanding Swedish] the telephone so that we should act as interpreters and explain to them in a better way.

One immigrant caretaker told us that he had held instruction meetings about new machines in the laundry room in several languages. Others reported that they used to get phone calls from the head office as well as from colleague caretakers that wanted them to interpret when they could not get through to a tenant in Swedish. A few native caretakers also pointed out to us the usefulness of their colleagues’ language competence.

Thus, their language skills were of frequent use for the immigrant caretakers in their daily work and they were utilized by the company. The caretakers were, however, not able to turn this knowledge into cultural capital in Bourdieu’s sense (Bourdieu 1977, 2001), i.e. into capabilities, knowledge and behavior that are recognized as valuable and thus can be transformed into good positions in the labor market or to money. While their language skills were useful to themselves and the company, they did not render them higher wages at the Housing Company. As we showed above they earned less than their native colleagues. They
themselves did not reckon that they got awarded for their language skills when it came to wage:

No, it’s not a merit. I’ve never heard that it’s great that you know a language. […] Nobody ever said to me, that, gee, how good that we’ve a person that speaks [name of the language].

On the contrary, some of the immigrant caretakers perceived that the fact that they did not speak Swedish the way natives did was something that was negative for their salaries, as shown above.

While we cannot show that their wages or careers were consciously held back by the managers due to them not speaking Swedish as natives do, it seems clear that the immigrant caretakers were not rewarded for their other useful language skills. It was thus not possible to capitalize on this knowledge that was particular to these immigrant employees, but it might have been possible to capitalize on a language skill that was particular to the natives; that of speaking and writing Swedish as natives do.

**Unequal discursive status?**

A number of discourse analytic studies of how ‘non-Swedes’ are discursively constructed or treated in different public arenas has been conducted, among them newspapers (Brune 2004), election propaganda (Boréus 2006), as well as parliamentary speeches, investigations and other official documents (Björk 1997, Johansson 2006, Mörkenstam 2006, 2010, Carbin 2010). These studies show two things of relevance for our study: firstly, foreigners/immigrants are sorted into one category and Swedes into another and these categories are often constructed as non-overlapping. In addition, the immigrant category sticks to persons that have lived for decades in Sweden and sometimes to their children born and raised in the country as well. Secondly, several of the discourse analyses referred to show that those categorized as immigrants are often problematised and associated with negatively valued phenomena, such as welfare dependence, unemployment and crime. This finding is in line with studies of the public sphere in other countries (van Dijk 1993).

Discourses at the public level have bearing for the way topics are understood and discussed in private as well, and private experiences and discourses interact with public discourses in our understanding of a phenomenon. This is not to say that the way ‘immigrants’ are discursively constructed and discussed in the public sphere is mirrored by
the way we categorize and construct people that we know and interact with. My colleague only turns from being a particular person into being an ‘immigrant’ or ‘Swede’ in certain discursive contexts. And not everyone agrees with the problematising tone of the public debate (while others hold much more hostile views than what is usually expressed in the Swedish public sphere).

In this study we postulated that public discourses were of importance to the local discourses at the Housing Company, but not how and to what extent. Due to methodological considerations we have refrained from asking explicit questions about what ‘immigrants’ or ‘Swedes’ are thought to be like or how they are considered to differ, as a high level of ‘political correctness’ can be anticipated regarding these matters. Instead, we analyzed the material we had (transcripts from interviews and focus groups, and notes from work meetings) to see what came up in the discussions without us posing explicit questions regarding these themes. The findings did not give a full answer to the question of whether immigrant employees were discursively constructed as different from or as more problematic than the native majority but it provided some hints.

Most importantly, the division into the categories ‘Swede’ and ‘immigrant’ was at work at the Housing Company as well. This was most obvious in the discussions of tenants. It was seen as important whether there was a majority of ‘Swedes’ or ‘immigrants’ living in the company’s different residential areas, and the areas were often characterized by the proportion of immigrants living there. A residential area could be described as being a “mixed, rather mixed area. There are immigrants but it’s not dense with immigrants, but they are there”. “Dense with immigrants” (invandrartätt in Swedish) was a description often used; an expression that is in use in public debate as well.

A high proportion of immigrants were not necessarily seen as problematic, however. Sometimes it was associated with problems that were not always specified, as when one of the native caretakers stated that she had worked in two different residential areas that were “dense with immigrants” before and did not want to be sent to another one. Some informants, however, told us that they had heard a lot of bad things about these areas before they started to work there themselves, but once they had done so they had found out that people there were “like anybody else”. Some caretakers preferred to work in these areas and they described the immigrant tenants as more friendly and grateful for the caretakers’ work than were other (‘Swedish’) tenants.

In some contexts, but far from all, the categorization in ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ was important and in some contexts, but far from all, we could trace problematisation of the
immigrant tenants. We found fewer examples of the categorization ‘Swede’/’immigrant’ being used between or about colleagues. Once we heard a denigrating joke about a colleague’s ethnic background on a work meeting, and a few times native caretakers did problematise immigrant colleagues in the interviews; usually it had to do with language. Some native caretakers claimed that these colleagues were hard to understand, which made parts of the work more difficult and time-consuming; some others were upset when their immigrant colleagues spoke in their native language to each other at work. They thought of that as disrespectful.

We are aware that people might have been reluctant to discuss these topics in the interviews. Nonetheless, we noted that the important sorting of people into either the category of Swedes or that of immigrants was at work and that there were at least tendencies of problematisation of the immigrant minority. More research needs to be done however, to cast light on the question to what extent native and immigrant employees have unequal discursive status and what implications that has for other inequalities in the labor market.

Patterns of inequality at the Housing Company compared to aggregated data

In sum, and as an answer to the first research question, the inequalities between male native and immigrant caretakers at the Housing Company had several facets: native men earned more in the same jobs, seemed to have broader access to the different jobs the caretaker position got divided into, felt more confident that they could influence, seemed to be less insecure in their work surrounding, found it easier to speak out critically, could possibly capitalize on a competence that the immigrant caretakers could hardly have (to speak and write Swedish the way natives do), and belonged to the ethnic group normalized and privileged in public discourses and perhaps also in local discourses.

The patterns of inequality on an aggregated level mentioned in the introduction were thus easy to discern also in our study of a particular work-place. The wages, for instance, followed the larger societal structures where native men earned more than immigrant men (and more than women) in the same job position. This pattern is also representative of housing companies in general in Sweden. Our study also confirms results from previous research, as we could conclude that the fact of being employed longer than native men did not generate a higher salary for immigrants; on the contrary, they earned less (see for instance Augustsson

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6 Our comparison showed that men born abroad (non-Nordic countries) earned barely 1000 SEK/month less than men born in Sweden at housing companies in general and women earned just over 2000 SEK/month less than men, 20392 SEK/month (Statistics Sweden, dataset 2007).
Furthermore, immigrants were underrepresented in all job positions at the Housing Company, except in the blue collar position as caretakers, which reflects the labour market in general. In Sweden immigrants are underrepresented in all job types except as craftsmen (and in occupations where there is no demand for education) (see for instance Näringsdepartementet [Ministry of Economy] 2000). Our analysis also indicated that there existed an ethnic division of labour at the Housing Company, which—once again—seems to be rather representative for housing companies in Sweden in general, where immigrants are underrepresented in all leading positions.⁷

The other kinds of inequality we discovered at the Housing Company—confidence in one’s ability to influence the working conditions and the work-place, feelings of security, opportunities to capitalize certain useful skills, and ‘discursive status’—are harder to compare on a national level as there are no aggregate data available. Previous research on a local level in Sweden tends, however, to reach similar conclusions: many immigrants experience marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination on the labour market in general, in their daily work, and in a variety of other societal contexts (see, e.g., Arai & Skogman Thoursie 2009; Integrationsverket 2006; Kamali 2005; Myrberg 2007; SOU 2006:60; SOU 2006:79), and earlier research from the U.S. indicates that “white males at all levels felt better than any other group about how they were treated in their organization” (Foley, Kidder & Powell 2002:474), just like at our work-place. There is thus nothing that contradicts our tentative conclusion that the pattern of inequality we found at the Housing Company probably could be found in most work-places in Sweden.

IV. Inequality generating practices

The Housing Company was organized along class divisions and these were gendered. Here, however, we have concentrated on the processes that reproduce inequalities between native and immigrant men. In this section we will point to some practices that go some of the way in explaining inequalities at the Housing Company.

We found several kinds of practices, also focused on by Acker (2006) that resulted in and reproduced inequality at the Housing Company. Firstly, the organizing processes in themselves were of importance—i.e. how work was organized into jobs and hierarchies—and so were the wage setting practices (Acker 2006: 112-118). The reorganization of jobs that

⁷ In housing companies in Sweden 2007, 4.5 percent of the employees were born abroad (Nordic citizens not included), but just over 1 percent held a leading position (Statistics Sweden, dataset 2007).
took place during our study led to stronger segregation. The wage setting practices at the Housing Company were individual, something that seems to increase inequality between groups (Acker 2009), and, as will be discussed below (in part V), the wage criteria at use at the Housing Company could contribute to and strengthen inequality. Secondly, how control was carried out and compliance secured was of importance for the maintenance of the inequality regime (Acker 2006: 122-124). At the Housing Company many control mechanisms worked from top to bottom in the hierarchy. As stated above, one way the managers secured compliance was by compulsive moving of caretakers between local areas. Several caretakers also felt threatened by losing their jobs. This does not explain directly how inequality between natives and immigrants were maintained but native men seemed less sensitive to this kind of pressure than immigrant men. This is an important circumstance to which we return below.

As pointed out by Acker (2006: 118-122), the maintenance of existing inequalities depends partly on their visibility and legitimacy in the organization. Native women and immigrant men seemed more aware of inequalities that disfavored immigrant men than did native men, the winners among the caretakers. The group of managers to whom we initially presented our results seemed quite reluctant to accept that there was a systematic wage difference that disfavored immigrant men the most. They had apparently never compared wages between native and immigrant caretakers, albeit such comparisons were routine in the case of women’s versus men’s wages. The managers also seemed genuinely shocked about the results that indicated that immigrants felt more insecure about expressing criticisms than natives. They did not seem to think that such inequality was legitimate. Instead they denied that there was any real reason for immigrant caretakers to feel the way they expressed themselves in the interviews and that possible wage inequalities were due to individual factors. This is the reaction to be expected. Firstly, wage inequalities based on gender or ethnicity is not accepted in mainstream Swedish discourses while class based inequalities are; and, secondly, ethnicity or race, “is usually evident, visible, but segregated, denied and avoided by members of the dominant group” (Acker 2009:211). Thus, most important for the inequality regime seemed to be a reluctance to see inequality based on ethnicity, not to consider such inequality legitimate.

The processes described above go some way in explaining inequality in incomes and possible inequality in access to different jobs. More importantly, however, we believe that these practices worked in several ways to make the different kinds of inequality strengthen each other. Our understanding of how these inequalities work together could be illustrated by
the metaphor of the birdcage. If we analyze the wires one by one, it is difficult to understand why the bird does not fly away. To understand its imprisonment it is thus important to study all the wires at the same time and how they are arranged together to keep the bird inside the cage. In the concluding part V we will discuss how one of the wires, inequality in income, is interconnected with other kinds of inequality and how they mutually reinforce each other.

V. The inequality regime at the Housing Company

One likely connection is between the inequality in job security and the confidence in being able to influence. de los Reyes (2007) gives several examples of how immigrants at another kind of work-place expressed insecurity in relation to native managers or colleagues when they did not know how to interpret the negative behaviour they experienced: was it discrimination that they had to face as ‘non-Swedes’ or was the behaviour due to something else? We do not know whether or not immigrant men in fact risked more than native men when expressing criticisms but the pure feeling that this might be the case would be enough to diminish a person’s possibility to influence: if you are afraid of expressing criticisms and if you think you cannot influence you are likely to refrain from trying. Thus, those practices that affected job security—such as threats of getting sacked and the disciplinary replacement of staff—might actually diminish possibilities for influence more for certain groups even if the practices are equally pursued against any employee. Those most affected are the ones with previous negative experiences and might also be those who feel as exceptions to a normalized majority group (Vallas, Finlay & Warton 2009).

There were also other factors at work that could have been constantly undermining the confidence of immigrant caretakers. If they felt that discourses tended to problematise them that would be one. Another would be that Swedish spoken and written the way natives do could be capitalized, but that other languages could not. These factors could also have a direct influence on the managers’ wage-setting.

A lack of confidence is thus likely to go together with a feeling of poor chances to influence one’s place of work. A lack of confidence could also affect an employee’s chances of raising her or his salary if what is being rewarded is being a person that makes a difference at the work-place. This was one of the most important criteria the company claimed were at work for the setting of wages. One criterion was called “general competence” and included

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8 This metaphor is to be found in Young (2000: 92-93). She, in turn has borrowed it from Frye (1983).

9 According to the Housing Company’s criteria for wage setting as they were defined to serve as starting-point in the regular meeting between the local manager and the individual employee to discuss the latter’s wage.
creativity, having ideas, taking initiatives and showing an interest in developing oneself and the work-place; all criteria that would disfavor a person that feels less confident in having the possibility to influence and is afraid of voicing critique. Another skill stated as part of the “general competence” was “ability to communicate”. Even though such a criterion could well value useful skills in different languages, as stated above, this did not seem to be the case. On the contrary: our analysis indicates that Swedish spoken the way a native does was more highly valued as an ability to communicate.

Thus practices that undermine the feeling of security for some groups could have the indirect effect that the wages of these groups are kept down. Here we might also find a vicious circle. As Table 2 shows the wage inequalities between native and immigrant men might be considered low: there is not a lot you can do with 650 SEK after taxation (roughly 430 SEK or one meal at a middle range restaurant). But the frequency with which the informants returned to the differences indicates that what was considered important was not so much the money as such but the feeling of unfairness. We think that the informants concluded that the unequal pay represented their unequal value in the eyes’ of their employer. That is a very aggravating feeling that might also undermine one’s confidence as an employee.

Below we visualize how we figure the interconnection of these different forms of inequalities, when we try to explain the fact that immigrant men earned less than native men.
In this article we have presented a study of a particular, yet typical, Swedish work-place. Our results point to the two kinds of patterns regarding inequality that we highlighted in the introduction: that disadvantages come in clusters and that different groups tend to be either advantaged or disadvantaged in several ways. In this work-place native men enjoyed a package of advantages while immigrant men were left with a package of disadvantages.\textsuperscript{10}

A theoretical point of departure for us has been that inequalities at particular work-places can only be explained if we look at the practices at work locally but at the same time see the processes as related to more comprehensive social structures: in Acker’s words we ought to study particular inequality regimes. We did find several of the practices she mentions (Acker 2006)—how work is organized into jobs and hierarchies, wage setting practices, the

\textsuperscript{10} Native women found themselves somewhere in between the two groups. On average they earned more than immigrant but less than native men, while the female caretakers expressed the same kind of insecurity as immigrant male caretakers and also seemed to have access to fewer positions than the native male caretakers.
invisibility of certain kinds of inequalities to the management and the way the management secured compliance—helpful in explaining both the inequality in wages and the tendency to ethnic work segregation that we found.

More important, however, we also found it very helpful to relate different kinds of inequality to each other in order to understand how they could easily reinforce each other. The difference between native and immigrant men in what skills that could be capitalized at the Housing Company, a lower sense of work security, a feeling that you might have less possibility to influence the work-place in combination with wage criteria that reward initiative and discourses that problematise immigrants more than natives, could all help explain the lower wages of immigrant men. Thus, more subtle forms of inequality could partly explain the clearly visible wage inequalities, and these other forms of inequality could, in turn, be reinforced by a lower wage.

If different kinds of inequality strengthen each other it is easy to understand why inequality is patterned. This is bad news in the sense that vicious circles that maintain inequality might easily be established. But it is good news in the sense that braking up one kind of inequality might have a positive influence on other inequalities. The results of our study thus point to a research agenda where the details of inequality regimes at a local level should be focused—and even more important—made visible. We have to analyze all the wires in the birdcage at the same time.

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