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Angelika Sjöstedt-Landén, Stig Vinberg & Bodil Landstad

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Inclusive and sustainable work (and) life: possibilities and critical analyses

This special issue for *Society, Health & Vulnerability* builds on the content of the national work life conference (FALF) that was held at Mid Sweden University in Östersund on 13–15 June 2016. The theme of the conference was “inclusive and sustainable work life”. This theme was defined drawing on discussions among our researchers of work life issues about the rapid changes in the labour market towards promoting the performance of individuals at the same time as long-standing structural discriminatory practices prevail and even increase (de los Reyes, 2014). Like other Scandinavian countries, Sweden is often held out as a model country for good and equal labour relations (see, e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990): a model country for combining neoliberal policy with welfare (Harvey, 2007). The contemporary Swedish society and working life is, however, marked by socio-economic, geographical, and health inequality that has risen rapidly since the 1990s.¹ It also stands clear that inequalities and levels of precariousness are ordered along axis of gender, ethnicity, and class (Jonsson & Nyberg 2009; Oke, Braithwaite, & Antai, 2016). Contemporary work life research therefore needs to address what it means to talk about an inclusive and sustainable work life when the labour market is characterized by growing competition between individuals, groups, regions, companies, and organizations. The conference welcomed theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions that could challenge forces that exclude and discriminate against and create groups of precarious workers. It was a call for perspectives that could broaden research horizons and help to understand the forces that shape workplaces and labour markets and contribute to a deepening of the visions about concepts such as inclusion and sustainability in work and life. This gave room to question what currently is given a (natural) place in work and life, and what is excluded and on what terms.

The large number of abstracts submitted to the conference showed that these are pressing issues to discuss and research in the Nordic countries today because we also had participants from Finland and Norway. The contributions were discussed in 17 parallel sessions over three days. Four keynote speakers framed the theme of the conference in innovative and enlightening ways. Three of them

are represented in this special issue as special invites with pieces that build on their address at the conference. Professor *Annika Härenstam* give her reflections on how research can contribute to identify and explain the mechanisms involved in creating what we need to strive for: integration, inclusion, equality, and social sustainability in working life. In addition, she discusses how we can learn from earlier experiences of research on inequalities and gives some alternative ideas on approaches that might contribute with applicable knowledge. Professor *Christophe Vanroelen* points at that making improvements in work sustainability is of utmost importance when we want to keep an older labour force (healthy) at work. Based on the concepts of job strain and precarious employment, he argues that making gains in the sustainability of work is first and foremost a matter of improving job quality at the bottom of the labour market. Professor *Paulina de los Reyes* uses the story of a worker called T as an illustrative example of the multiple discrimination that takes place over the course of a working life. This contribution draws attention to the need for intersectional analyses that can problematize the various ways in which workers are drawn into processes of exploitation.

The cluster of papers in this special issue all contribute to a deepened knowledge of questions related to conceptions of an inclusive and sustainable work life. We want to thank all the authors, and we hope that you will find the papers to be an interesting read.

Note

1. <http://www.oecd.org/sweden/economic-survey-sweden.htm>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Angelika Sjöstedt-Landén
*Department for Social Science, Mid Sweden University,
Östersund, Sweden*

Stig Vinberg and Bodil Landstad
*Department of Health Sciences, Mid Sweden
University, Östersund, Sweden*