Isomorphic processes and discursive strategies: Swedish study associations caught between civil society, the state and the market

Pelle Åberg, Johan von Essen

Ersta Sköndal University College, Stockholm, Sweden

Several challenges, both external and internal, to the identity and position of civil society organizations present themselves today. There can be interests pulling organizations closer to the state as well as incentives to become more market-oriented. At the same time, remaining a civil society organization in the eyes of both oneself and other actors can be important for an organization. This paper will elaborate on issues relating to these struggles through an investigation of Swedish study associations, involved in Swedish popular education or folkbildning.

The development of the nine Swedish study associations that receive state support exhibits isomorphic processes (DiMaggio & Powell 1991), leading to increased homogenization. At the same time these organizations are under pressure to remain different from each other if they are to remain legitimate. The act of balancing these different demands provides this study with its research question:

How do Swedish study associations maintain a distinct ideological profile while under isomorphic pressures?

Historically, the study associations trace their origins to different Swedish popular movements. The connection to popular movements has been institutionalized through the federative structure of the study associations where the member organizations, especially the founding organizations, were parts of these movements. However, a recent study demonstrates that this connection is not as strong today, due to a development where many more civil society organizations, with a less clear affiliation to any popular movement, have entered the federative structure of the study associations (von Essen & Åberg, forthcoming). Thus, the federations have broadened and become less ideologically distinct which means that there are less clear distinctions between the different study associations. The state support available to the study associations is also conditioned, which influences the organizations and their activities. Previous research also indicates that the more organizations within a field is involved in cooperation with the state, the more likely it is that they will become increasingly homogenous (DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Ramanath 2009).

The state support is substantial, in 2009 totalling more than 1.5 billion SEK (FBR 2009). The distinction made between the study associations and commercial and/or governmental organized educational actors are put forward as legitimating factors for this support. At the same time it is also put forward that the study associations should have distinct ideological profiles, making them different from each other (Prop. 1997/98:115, Prop. 2005/06:192). Thus, there is an external pressure on these organizations demanding that they should be both similar to and different from each other and other actors.

The latter condition has been handled through "embedding" (Granovetter 1985) the study associations in different popular movements. However, the connection to popular movements and specific ideological profiles also contributes with an internal pressure on a study association to maintain both a civil society identity and a distinct profile that differentiates it from other study associations.

At the core of these issues is that the study associations need to balance two different demands: 1) they should be similar to each other, sharing an identity as civil society organizations, exhibiting distinct traits that distance them from the state and the market, and 2) a study association should be different from the other study associations, exhibiting a distinct ideological profile. Thus, a study association has to, simultaneously, show similarities
with and differences from other study associations to remain legitimate in the eyes of different stakeholders (i.e. the state and the member organizations).

The theoretical point of departure for this study is that the rhetoric of social movements and non-profit organisations can be thought of as "cultural resources" (Swidler 1986) and can be analyzed in the same way as more conventional structural resources (Williams 1995). Preliminary results indicate that study associations attempt to solve problems created by increased homogenization by using a rhetoric that is to demonstrate the distinct character of the organization.

This paper will study and discuss what strategies the Swedish study associations apply to balance the different demands, both external and internal, that are placed on the organizations. This is done through a discourse analysis of annual reports from the study associations and interviews with leading representatives of these organizations. The annual reports are produced for the stakeholders, which means that they are the front stage or "window" where the study associations can demonstrate that they should still be regarded as legitimate in the eyes of both the state and their members. The interviews performed with representatives of the study associations also show how they attempt to strike a balance between the different demands and how they construct a discourse that can handle the somewhat contradictory elements in these demands.

References:


