



TO DWELL AMONG EGOCENTRICS CHRISTOFER EDLING

Christofer Edling is Associate Professor of Sociology at Stockholm University, where he teaches sociological methods and theory, and Torgny Segerstedt Pro Futura Fellow at SCASSS. He has been a visiting scholar at Harvard University, Stanford University and the European University Institute. His research deals with various aspects of social networks and social contagion. – Address: Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, 10691 Stockholm, Sweden.

Accompanied by Carina, Axel, Tove and Carl, I came to Berlin-Grunewald with little luggage and high expectations in mid-August 2004. Almost exactly 11.5 months later we left with a little more luggage and our most sanguine expectations surpassed.

From the very beginning, the Wiko staff handled almost every practical detail you can think of with great care and efficiency; helping me to office facilities and a place to stay, dealing with authorities, putting us in contact with day-care facilities, child paediatrician, etc., etc. Nevertheless, we spent the first months almost exclusively getting the family going on some sort of normal pace and routine. What little energy that could be mustered after driving to and fro and getting lost in and around Berlin during days and weekends, the intensive German class squeezed out of Carina and me. Our classes were true bonding agents, and the ties that were formed during these first six weeks remained with us during the year. But even as we entered the more relaxed pace of German studies, in my case only 1.5 hour a week, the weekly meetings with my Fellow students remained an important beacon in the Wiko ocean. For Carina, bringing life back into her old German was one of the greatest joys of our stay. Our struggles with this beautiful but difficult language will

remain a fond memory. Anyhow, I really didn't begin to seriously pursue academic work until the official Fellow year began, which was in early October.

I came to the institute with a dawning book project on the Matthew effect. The fundamental idea behind this project was proposed some 40 years ago by Robert K. Merton. He used it with reference to the reward system in science, which he characterised by pointing to a well-known quotation from the Gospel of St. Matthew that says: "Unto every one that hath shall be given and he shall have in abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." In many respects, Wiko is an ideal spot to contemplate Merton's theory of the distribution of rewards. Where else, if not at an institute like this, can you observe the phenomenon that it is the already rewarded who receive further rewards and acknowledgements? With some exceptions for the "young and promising", you will not pass the doorstep to an Institute for Advanced Study unless you are already someone. Part of being someone, by the way, includes prior fellowships at Institutes for Advanced Study. And as this year came to an end, you could already notice Fellows contemplating which institute would be a nice place for their next sabbatical. Other, more fortunate Fellows actually made the transfer directly.

My interest in this project, however, lies not in the reward system in science in particular but rather in the process itself, which I conceive of as a more general mechanism of positive feedback that generates stratification in social systems. I was happy to learn early on that the only other sociologist among this year's Fellows was working on a problem that somewhat overlaps with mine, namely that of inclusion and exclusion. Our approaches to sociology lay far enough apart to ensure peaceful coexistence, but were at the same time close enough for me to learn and benefit plenty from his wonderful sociological style and imagination during the whole year. On a more abstract level, several of the other Fellows worked on topics that apparently coincide with my interest in feedback processes; these ranged over several topics from evolutionary biology to the history of law. I notice that the influence from yet other Fellows on my own work is more insidious, and I expect this experience to extend long after we are separated from exposure to the Wiko 04/05 germ.

A set of case studies on social segregation, network evolution and small-group interactions is to form the core of my analysis of the Matthew effect. The section on small-group-interaction starts with social life in extreme social environments. I therefore spent a large part of the fall and winter reading on concentration camps and especially eyewitness accounts from the Nazi camps. This is disturbing and uncomfortable reading, of course, and I spent more time on it than I had planned. I presented some of this at the Tuesday collo-

quia and received many good suggestions from several Fellows on how to proceed with this part of the analysis. I thus believe the detour was worthwhile, but it is unclear to me at the moment whether this will not actually form a topic of its own.

I made less progress on other parts of the study that I had tentatively drawn up prior to my arrival, but instead worked on a number of other problems dealing with network analysis. One of these is a very large-scale analysis of the so-called small-world effect, which claims that we are allegedly all connected through a chain of only five intermediaries, which promises to be interesting. Another one is an analysis of the evolution of the strategic positions in the network of interlocking directorates focusing on female directors. In parallel, I have worked on a set of new project ideas, which have been and will be proposed to various funding agents. It is my intention that at least one of these projects will develop in collaboration with other Wiko Fellows of this year.

An Institute for Advanced Study really is a remarkable institution. For a while I contemplated writing this report as a discourse on egocentrism and narcissism: At times I had an unpleasant feeling of being trapped with a group of people all calling out at once to secure attention for their own needs, views, obsessions, opinions and what have you; incapable of considering a perspective different from their own and completely in love with the logic of their own rhetoric and the sound of their own voices.

Actually, one of the really good things about a heterogenous group of academic egocentrics is that you learn a lot from just being around them. Needless to say substantially – there’s just no end to the diversity of topics – but maybe more importantly about all the differences between academic styles and small nuances in scholarly and scientific cultures. To dwell among this amazing group of egocentrics was like an extended browsing visit to a breathing, eating and drinking library. For one year I was free to enjoy so many lectures, presentations, discussions and some disputes; and to consult with – or not consult with – scholars whom I would otherwise not have met and in possession of knowledge that I would not otherwise have sought.

I leave Wiko with a much clearer sense of my own place in the temple of learning; an essential asset in future scholarly exchange, I like to believe. It is hard to think of any other arena where you could actually develop these sensitivities. And I think one could argue that it is crucial for the advancement of learning to get to know your own research better in this way.

I thank the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and the Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education for generous financial support.