A Small Cog in a Large Wheel? :

Experiences of Swedish Local Government

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Lund, Spring Semester 2012

Fulfilling the requirements of a M.Sc. in Welfare Policy and Management

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Abstract

The primary purpose to this study was to explore the role of local government in Sweden, primarily through the eyes of some of the people working within one. Consideration of some of the structural characteristics of local government in Sweden, in particular the privileges and responsibilities accorded to local municipalities there and in what context, lead the author to conclude that Swedish municipal governments enjoy a relatively strong position vis-à-vis the central government and a key, independent role in the Swedish welfare state and its delivery of services to citizens. Some of the main structural conflicts inherent to local government which have been expressed in the reform process are also discussed. From this base the study seeks to explore the essence of working within a Swedish municipality as experienced by management and politicians developing and interpreting social policy in these environments in order to gain a second perspective on their role. For this a phenomenological method is employed, and over the course of several interviews conducted in Lunds kommun, a medium sized municipality in the south of Sweden, themes of discussion are developed, analysed, and discussed, outlining the various aspects these workers had experienced before summarising and describing the essence is attempted. This essence is found to be largely concerned with notions of public service. Working in a local government is seen as markedly different from work in the private sector but its identity relative to other levels of government is not emphasised. A clear focus on efficient and effective welfare delivery was also present. These elements lead to the conclusion that the experiences of managers and politicians indeed reflect some of the concerns and structural elements discussed previously but that expressions of local democracy and independence are understated.

Keywords: Local Government, Phenomenology, Sweden, kommun, public servants.

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1.0 - Introduction

The term "welfare state" implies a connection between "welfare" and the provision of welfare services, and "statehood". In the modern liberal democracy complete with welfare state the concept of public (and even private) welfare delivery is linked to that of democracy and government. It is the government which organises and provides the services citizens enjoy and its organisation is in part therefore also the organisation of the welfare state and defines the structures of the bureaucracy providing welfare services to the citizenry. How the government is organised differs from nation to nation sometimes substantially as does the various structures of social services departments, yet most if not all involve some kind of division of responsibilities and powers across geographic lines, some form of local or regional government. How the state's powers are distributed geographically differ as do the roles these local government units have in delivering welfare services. With differing structures come differing attitudes, cultures and experiences of local government and the welfare state, from both citizens and the bureaucrats working within.

In Sweden local government has a relatively significant role in both democratic participation and welfare service delivery making it an interesting case for the exploration of these concepts. This thesis will largely concern itself with developing a better understanding of how local government is experienced and understood in the eyes of some of those working within Sweden's local municipalities.

1.1 - Problem formulation

The focus of research according to Moustakas (1994, p. 104) 'grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic...Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus. Schools of thought in research theory and methodology emphasis the personal aspects of research and the place of the researcher. An clear understanding of the personal context behind research provides some of the tools through which we can justify its existence and also provides a source of inspiration throughout its development, ' the researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire the search' (p.104). With these objectives in mind, my research problem has developed from personal interest as part of a personal journey, it has been my personal history and context that have shaped the problem into its current format over the course of my

research. I see two elements to my personal story impacting on my choice of question and the course my research has taken. Firstly, as a graduating Master's student with a desire to move from my studies into employment within the public sector and especially within welfare policy development I obviously have a keen personal interest in understanding what kind of personal experiences this field of work might generate. My current studies and experiences to date have provided me with relatively little practical experience in what full time work, let alone full time work in the field in which I have been trained entails. This has left me with an intense desire to know more about what it is that is essential and held in common to the experience of working in welfare policy development regardless of what specific field I find myself in, in order to give me some guidance in my early career choices and guide my development. Secondly, I am an Australian citizen. I have grown up exclusively in the state of Western Australia, in the suburbs of its geographically isolated state capital, Perth. This has left me with a rather Australian (or even Perth) -centric understanding of the way the world works generally, and in particular how a nation and its welfare state are organised and structured. I recall my experience while in Australia that some of the Swedes I met there had great difficulty in understanding the concept of federalism, finding the notion of our states and their differing laws and structures not only baffling but amusing when compared to the more unitary state they were familiar with. The local autonomy of the states, the political, philosophical and moral implications of a union of equal states in a historical "commonwealth" (the name we give our federation, hinting at the rhetorical devices perpetuating this belief) are a fundamental and self-evident part of my self-identity and the national character I adopt not to mention the notions of public service I attached to my future career plans, leaving me similarly baffled by their indifference. Upon my arrival in Sweden to begin my master's course I was soon to discover that these notions of local autonomy and independence alongside extensive welfare service provision also existed in Sweden but at a far more localised municipal level, a level I was used to conceiving as being largely concerned with rubbish collection and the repair of footpaths and politically weak. I have always been fascinated by structural differences between nations, their political and welfare systems and their different ways of achieving similar goals, comparing and contrasting, just as I have been so fascinated by the impact cultures and symbolism can have on practice (that of myself and others).

The nature of the above understandings interacting with a predisposition towards such methods, fostered through several years of academic study in the social sciences lead me to naturally see the vehicle of my inquiry being a qualitative one rather than quantitative. Research is not the linear process it can be made out to be at times (Marshall and Rossman 1989, p.21)

and as Creswell (2007) suggests rather than the research questions posed unilaterally deciding the method employed in a straight process it is rather a cyclical process, where my ontological, epistemological, and methodological worldviews interact to influence the questions just as the questions influence choices in methodology. This qualitative setting then leads to a specific understanding as to the rationale behind research and its purpose. Barritt (in Creswell 2007,p. 102) for example offers that 'it is not the discovery of new elements, as in natural scientific study, but rather the heightening of awareness for experience which has been forgotten and overlooked [that is the purpose of human science research]. By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice'. Moustakas (1994, p.105) offers us a checklist of characteristics upon to gauge a human science research question:

1. 'It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience;
2. It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behavior and experience;
3. It engages the total self of the research participant, and sustains personal and passionate involvement;
4. It does not seek to predict or to determine causal relationships;
5. It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions, vivid and accurate renderings of the experience, rather than measurements, ratings, or scores.'

It will be these elements guiding the formation of my questions and the specifics of the methodology I use to answer them. This was not to say that these themes could not in fact be addressed from a quantitative mindset contrasting sharply with the characteristics above, or indeed a combination of both. Take as an example, from the literature discussing personal understandings and adaptations to organisational culture, Jermier et al.'s (1991) exploration of different subcultures within a wider organisational culture within an American police precinct, which used both in depth phenomenological explorations of behaviour and attitudes to policing with categorisation and statistics to good effect. I have chosen however to explore these themes from a solely qualitative background judged along the lines mentioned above.

Creswell (2007, p.102) argues that the strongest rationale behind research questions should come from an understanding of the literature surrounding the topic, identifying holes in the analysis or stories left untold which can then be presented. If we are to see research as a logical progression towards ever greater knowledge of the world then it seems essential that we

look to what has been done previously both by ourselves and others for inspiration and in order not to answer questions that are already answered. Yet even so there is room in the social sciences (and indeed in the natural sciences also) or even a demand to retest answers to questions or approach their answering from a different angle, giving researchers much scope to their activities. While the general theme of my research has come from personal interest, the finer details of the problems have indeed come about from an understanding of what has come before as there are several works dedicated to phenomenological explorations of bureaucrat behaviour bordering the same ground as I hope to cover. The idea of where my research fits in within a wider research background will be explored underneath where my research method is discussed.

The considerations then, of my own personal history, and my understandings of what is knowledge and how it is formulated, lead me to question how local government is understood by people, first-hand and not just abstractly in books and wide ranging theories and how this is expressed. They lead me to seek further knowledge about one specific case, that of Sweden, which is of particular interest in the uniqueness of its character. Previous research focusing on Swedish local government, coming as it has largely from a political science background based on abstract theory has created a deficit in personal experience research on this topic, a valuable avenue of knowledge for the reasons stated above. Taken from another angle, previous explorations of the experiences of bureaucrats have also not effectively touched on people's conceptions of local government.

With these deficits guiding my line of inquiry, I define my research question thus:

"What do people working within Sweden's local governments experience, how is this experienced, and how do these experiences interact with conceptions of local government and democracy?"

Fundamental to both the welfare outcomes experienced by citizens of a region under a regime of regionally divided local governments and the operation of the divisions themselves especially during times of change are the administrators and politicians making decisions at the local level (however the state may be divided). They are some of the ones who are forced to react to changes in the structure of the welfare state and are in a unique position to see their impact on the welfare outcomes of their region and what a regionally divided welfare system

means to them and their constituents. I believe that often in the narratives surrounding such changes the central government, as they are the ones largely responsible for the decision making around the changes (especially in non-federal systems where localised government's power and autonomy are not constitutionally guaranteed) and the overall outcomes of the welfare state, and the welfare consumers (the citizenry) the central government is responding to, are the voices most emphasised in debates around the makeup of the welfare state and the ability of regional bodies to provide the most effective and, especially in this age of New Public Management doctrine and tightening welfare budgets, efficient services. The "middlemen", so to speak, of the welfare state, the regional governments and welfare bureaucracies, and especially so the people working within them as individuals have a unique perspective on both the phenomenon of a regionally divided welfare state and its impact on welfare, and the process of change inherent in many of the states. As such they are to be the focus of the research, both to provide a unique perspective to the body of research and because research especially relevant to this local level of delivery, one with in some instances considerable power to institute welfare reform, may prove valuable in developing better relationships between consumers, administrators, politicians and the different organisational levels towards the betterment of everyone's welfare.

To clarify, limiting the research to focus solely on administrators and politicians involved in local decision making and service delivery is based on the resources available to the researcher and a belief that limiting the focus will lead to a greater logical clarity and structure to the piece. It does not seek to deny other's understandings of the phenomenon of the regional division of welfare states nor precludes further research from other perspectives, which will prove valuable in providing a richer understanding. However, it is believed that this research by its nature is self-standing and capable of being understood discretely such that further research would prove complementary rather than contradictory.

1.2 - Structure of the thesis

From formulating the above research questions the paper shall move straight to answering the first question. Section 2 concerns itself with answering the questions of what is local government and how do these concepts find themselves being expressed in Sweden from

a structural standpoint. This serves as an important background to the main line of inquiry regarding personal experiences within these local government units. From this point we depart the topic at hand momentarily in Section 3 for some brief commentary on some of the research surrounding the concept of phenomenology and occupational culture before proceeding to outline the rationale behind the use of the phenomenological method, the philosophical background to phenomenology and the specifics of how it has been applied to this research problem. This section will also include a brief explanation of the sampling methods and analytical methods used. Section 4 concerns itself with the results of the interviews conducted and their analysis. Section 5 will then discuss these results, describe the essence of the phenomenon studied in accordance with the method, and suggest future research opportunities.

2.0 - Local Government and its role in Sweden

2.1 - Local Government

If the purpose of this research is to better understand the working life of people involved in delivering welfare in Sweden's municipalities then the need for a critical appreciation of the structures and implications inherent in their environment is apparent. I hope to focus my understanding of participants working life through the lens of "local government", its meaning to them personally, to Sweden and the way its citizens experience welfare services. To this end I dedicate this background section to developing a better understanding, through a critical appraisal of some of the literature and its understandings, of the concept of "local government" in western thought, and how it is practiced within Swedish society in a comparative context, in the hope this knowledge will ground the understandings garnered through the primary research I am to conduct and open up the possibility for new understandings.

2.1.1 - What is Local Government?

The first task in any exploration of the topic, defining what is local government presents its own problems. The body of writings on "local government" encompasses a large collection of substantially different models upon which states are constituted. It takes many different forms

and encompasses a broad collection of reasonings behind its existence. However in other ways the term is relatively self-explanatory. For the purposes of the below exploration however, I define "local government" as a form of government within a wider nation state based on smaller geographic boundaries. They have many forms across different nations but exist in some format throughout the western world's democracies. The term may encompass the notion of "Federalism", defined by Solnick (2002, p.174) as 'a compound political system in which each level of government has at least one area of jurisdiction over which it is guaranteed a final say'. Federations differ from other nations, and their forms of dividing jurisdiction and governance, in their scale (states often being larger geographically and more populous than municipal governments (though this certainly does not have to be the case)) and as Solnick observes in their relative autonomy in some areas as being guaranteed (frequently constitutionally) rather than open to the whims of a national government. In fact the level of privilege and autonomy granted constitutionally to local government is just one of the many ways local government can differ practically from one nation to another (Norton 1994, p.15-16), with federations generally affording their regions the strongest guarantees and legal power. The constituent states of such federations do however share much in common with other forms of local government as found within other nations and do fall under a wider interpretation of "local government". Within these states there is often other further levels of local government acting. Local government is based upon the governed's connection to a local region (although the scale of these regions can differ substantially from state to state). It may often also encompass notions of self-determination and local autonomy for the residents of these regions.

Sharpe (1988 quoted in Norton 1994, p.28) suggests more poetically that 'it is possible to hypothesise, without doing flagrant injustice to reality, that local government's primordial role is no different from that of other polities in that it reflects a sense of common identity among its citizens which at its most basic may be defined as the consciousness that they have more in common with each other than they have with people living beyond their communal boundary; and that such consciousness can be given tangible expression (and be tested) by the establishment of a tax on all citizens for the provision of public goods and other forms of collective consumption that the same citizens do not wish to have provided voluntarily or by the market'. Here in a sense Sharpe establishes local government's important links to welfare provision and collective consumption. Local government has existed in some form since well before the establishment of the modern welfare state, tracing its roots in the city states of yore (Norton, pp.4-6). The modern institution though, shares little in common with their forefathers

and the local governments of the advanced western democracies have become essential parts of their welfare states. Roles of government traditionally associated with the "night-watchmen" minimalist state such as militaries, police and courts are usually regarded as the domain of the wider nation state and its central government due to their size and the importance of consistency across the nation. In some cases local governments do provide these services such as local courts and police but always as part of a coordinated system across the nation and in my readings never on their own without providing any other services. The local nature of this form of government lends itself more to specific detailed welfare service delivery and its justification and role is intrinsically linked (as Sharpe suggests) with "collective consumption" and welfare services (See King et al. 1996 for a discussion on the evolution of thought on local government) . As well as establishing public good provision and collective consumption as 'the tangible expression' of local governance Sharpe also touches on the notion of identity and community inherent in justifying and explaining a divided political system based on geography. Across many nations and their systems of government this notion is apparent, that the nation state has a geographic boundary and is divided on the basis that people within the state have more in common with those within than outside of its borders. Language, culture, statehood, and racial characteristics can all be bases upon which the citizens of a polity can feel a sense of togetherness and difference from those outside. Of course practical reality sees many obvious issues with these notions. When one considers it, It is easy to imagine there exists more variety between the individuals that make up a nation than across its borders in terms of individual behaviour, views, politics, culture and even genetics. Furthermore in many cases people living near geographical borders of states share considerable cultural connections with the people of the neighbouring state and their "consciousness of commonality" may differ substantially from those in the geographic centre or closer to the centres of power and influence within the state. Even something as foundational to commonality as sharing a language isn't guaranteed in all states. Belgium, Switzerland, and Canada alongside many others contain regions within their boundaries that speak completely different languages from one another as well as nations where people may speak a common language in public throughout the nation but maintain their different local languages in private contexts. In these circumstances it seems a clear consciousness of common identity with those within a governed community is difficult to establish. There is also a certain "chicken and the egg" argument to the notion that a polity expresses a joint understanding of commonality. Being born into, growing up in, and living in a nation state, provides citizens with a sense of commonality as much as it is an expression of it. Residents share a common experience of a state and frequently through compulsory schooling,

government supported national days and so on the state itself promotes a sense of joint identity and commonality as defined by its leaders, creating notions of commonality in a self-reinforcing cycle. If we look at governments, as expressions of a larger polity at the national level, the idea that they successfully represent a clear consciousness of a joint identity and mutual commonality amongst their citizens, while containing some truth, in that some degree of common understanding must be shared, it is problematic to assume residents within the territory feel they have substantially more in common with people on their side of the fence than on the other.

Local governments as they differ across nations also maintain different strengths of communal feeling and understand this idea of joint identity differently. Local government has been explored and used, especially in the case of federations, to mitigate conflict brought about by ethnic or cultural differences, used as a way of expressing one strong joint identity and sense of community while maintaining some connection with a wider sense of identity (shared with the rest of the nation), though as Ghai (2002) points out many of the original and most successful federations, of the kind that inspire newer constituting nations in their design, are often based on relatively little cultural difference between states and were not used to mitigate substantial conflict. In other cases however the primary connection with others culturally is consistent across the nation state and local sentiment is relatively meaningless. People are considerably more flexible in their ability to move, commute and communicate across the country than they were historically and the connections between local residents within a local government area, especially versus those connections with neighbouring regions, may be relatively weak and intangible (though again even though this may appear to be the case in some nations there can still be conflicts around new boundary negotiations and the amalgamation of local governments into one as was the case in Sweden for example).

Alongside practical differences between what constitutes "local government" across nations - How many different levels there are, their differing responsibilities, size, methods of election, and the details of their formulation etc. - there also exists considerably different conceptions of what local government represents or symbolises. Take for example Norton's (1994, p.22) assertion that while 'peoples in continental Western Europe tend to see territorial community based administrative institutions as a natural part of an organic whole within the political aspects of society, and to stress the desirability of solidarity within and between communities[...] those in anglophone countries on the other hand tend towards instrumental and

pragmatic views of government and to view the national interest as no more than the outcome of competing private interests.'. He speaks generally of two poles with Europeans emphasising social action and Anglophones focusing on individual interests (Norton 1994, p.23). Culturally speaking people across different nations have different conceptions of government, cooperation and the public interest. This may in turn have an impact on people's views of local government, how local government is formulated, and its functions within society. As "local government" and its implementation is not a static concept, these broader conceptions of politics and cooperation and the values alongside them can have a big impact on the the history of local government within a nation and its resistance to change.

To summarise then, "local government" (and the wider but related term "regional government") can mean a wide range of things across the literature and across the varied democratic nations of the western world. In many respects though they are simply governments within governments and do not differ in intent, thinking or execution substantially from that of the governments of wider nation states except that they exist as another level of government within them. The responsibilities of local government and the level of autonomy they enjoy from other levels of government can differ widely across the world. As I consider the term, especially "regional government" it is able to incorporate the notion of "federalism" wherein the states and regions of a federation have their jurisdiction (whatever it may be) explicitly protected, often in a constitution. Local government then encompasses many of cultural and value based understandings of the proper function of government and process that are inherent in all conceptions of democratic government. It is tied strongly in some parts with notions of self-determination and autonomy and due to its sometimes small scale may be where modern representative democracies become closest to their participatory roots. Finally local governments in the modern welfare states of the western world are inherently linked to the concepts of public provision of goods and services and collective consumption, being one avenue through which welfare services are delivered to citizens on top of their roles in planning and development.

2.2- Local Government in Sweden

Sweden along with its Scandinavian neighbours, has a reputation for extensive social policy and all encompassing welfare services. Historically they have been characterised by high

levels of social assistance and services delivered upon the principles of universalism (see for example Esping-Andersen 1990). It has been suggested that 'the Scandinavian welfare state is not merely a "social insurance state", but to a great extent also a 'social service state"' (Trydegård & Torslund 2001), in that through their large public bureaucracies they provide a multitude of services directly.

Local government in Sweden has much in common with that in other nations around Europe, both in regards to the way the government is organised and in that responsibility for providing a wide variety of welfare services comes under their jurisdiction (as well as some similarities in what those services are) (Norton 1994). Nonetheless when exploring its details, history and motivation it maintains a unique character worthy of investigation.

Sweden has three levels of government. The nation is governed by the Swedish parliament, the *Riksdag* and the government it appoints. Importantly this level of government's supremacy over the others is established clearly in the constitution (see for example "the instrument of government" chapter 1. Article 4 which states 'The Riksdag is the foremost representative of the people. The Riksdag enacts the laws, determines State taxes and decides how State funds shall be employed. The Riksdag shall examine the government and administration of the Realm'). Sweden is divided geographically into *län*, which in keeping with convention in the majority of the English-language literature on the topic I now refer to as "counties", and *kommuner*, which from this point will be referred to as "municipalities". The municipalities are located within the counties. The counties then have their own governments (the *landsting*) and the municipalities then have their own governments to. Despite the municipalities being located within the counties their governments are not subservient to the county governments, although the two may cooperate on some issues (such as in health care) they have different roles and responsibilities and both ultimately answer to the Riksdag separately. Both the municipalities and the counties of Sweden share much in common in structure, philosophy and degrees of autonomy differing mainly with regards to what their responsibilities are, with services assumed to need a larger economy of scale and to cover a wider geographic area consistently (such as health care and public transportation networks) being the purview of the counties

While the Riksdag's supremacy in Swedish law is established early on in the constitution local government in Sweden is also mentioned. Chapter 1, Article 1 of the same "instrument of government", states that '[public power] is realised through a representative and parliamentary

form of government and through local self-government. Local government is again mentioned later in Article 7, which states 'Sweden has local authorities at local and regional level'. The two articles broadly outline then that local self-government forms one of 'the cornerstones of the Swedish Constitution' (Gustafsson 1980, p. 12 and Gustafsson 1983, p.11 and see also pp.13-16). In contrast to some local government in some nations Swedish local government is explicitly given the right to exist in the nation's highest laws and is envisaged as playing a fundamental role both in how the nation is constituted and in the lives of Sweden's citizens. However what form Swedish local government is to take is not as explicit. The Swedish parliament reserves the right to change the roles of local governments in Sweden as well as its scope and has done so throughout history. This contrasts on both sides with other systems of local government either where local government is not so fundamental to the constitution and make up of the state and its activities (take for example in England (Norton 1994 and King & Stoker 1996)) or where alternatively, as is the case in many federations, both the sanctity and role of the regional governments is explicit in the constitution. Local government in Sweden is a strong and protected institution explicitly held as important in the highest Swedish laws (a expression of its key role in Swedish governance), however it still exists ultimately under the auspices of the Swedish parliament, its role and scope being up to them, which has lead to a variety of reforms to the role of local government in Sweden throughout history.

One of the key dimensions upon which we can distinguish systems of local governance across nations and place Swedish local government is that of local autonomy, the ability to which local governments can define themselves and their roles and make their own decisions regarding these free from the interference of other local governments and levels of government. The concept of "autonomy" then also has dimensions, two elements which mimic the classical political philosophy divide of positive and negative liberty. Hansen & Kjellberg (1976 in Hudson 1993) for example 'divide local authority autonomy into autonomy over i.) policy goals i.e. local authorities must have independence in framing the goals to be achieved within any municipal sphere of activity; ii.) the means i.e. there must be latitude left to the local authority in its control over the resources necessary to fulfill these goals'. Hudson (1993, pp.36-39) identifies four factors present in the wider national context which then impact and decide upon how autonomous local authorities are:

i.) the political culture, which he suggests encompasses whether in the nation's history there has been a cultural inclination towards centralised or decentralised government, to what extent this culture is committed to the notion of autonomous local government, and whether

historically the relationship between the local and central governments can be characterised by cooperation or conflict (for example as mentioned above where Norton 1994 contrasts English speaking nations as being focused on competing individual interest and the balance of powers with the European model of cooperation and consensus). Obviously this political culture is based on historical precedent but is liable to significant change over time, sometimes rather abruptly with changing political fashions (take for example the reign of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and its centralising impact on local government there (Hudson 1993 and Norton 1994)) especially where the accepted culture has not been set and codified in a constitution.

ii.) the legal and constitutional factors, including whether local government within a country has its power directly by virtue of the constitution or whether they have been delegated via another authority, whether the authority of local government is general or proscribed, and what kind of functions the local government is responsible for and whether they are mandatory or not. Hudson suggests that direct powers, with a general authority to act and no mandatory requirements puts local government in a stronger position when seen in competition against the national government. Yet even in nations where the formal legal rights of local government are relatively strong there is no guarantee of strong levels of autonomy as the national government's rights to supervision and direction may override these notions. Even so the legal framework taken at least as an expression of culture and the understanding of the general public of the role of local government has relevance through its 'symbolic and psychological value' (Hudson 1993, p.38).

iii.) the administrative and professional factors, including the extent of the advice and regulation given to local government by superior levels of government, and the role professional organisations and other external organisations which may work to influence policy across different local governments, have a "nationalising" influence. Regulations from other levels of government may be in the form of guidelines which can be ignored if not fitting with local conditions or directives which must be followed. However, as we will see in the case of Sweden the amount of force behind national government's interventions into local government policy is not fixed but can easily change over time as well. Where regulations are difficult to enforce (or there is a lack of willingness to do so) it may be the case that the wording of regulations isn't as important as how they are practiced. Professional and representative bodies such as for example nurses or public servant unions, can also prove to be a powerful external force changing (and often serving to standardise and make more consistent) policy within local governments. Similarly there may also be a national organisation representing (and at the same time defining) municipalities throughout the nation (or even through these organisations

international organisations going beyond the nation such as for example the Council of European Municipalities and Regions).

iv.) the system of finance, including to what extent and through what methods local governments have the right to raise their own revenue to finance services, and whether the grants local government receives from the national level are earmarked for specific things or whether they are "general" grants available to be spent as the local authority wills. As Hansen & Kjellberg pointed out above a grasp of the means through which local governments are able to finance the services they provide is as essential to an understanding of their relative autonomy vis-à-vis the central government as the responsibilities and freedoms they are granted. Large imbalances between different levels of government revenue raising and spending puts those not in control of their finances in a weaker position and where strict conditions are attached to grants from the national government, local government may find its relative strength undermined.

In many respects with regard to these factors Sweden proves itself to be an exceptional case. Local government plays an important role in Sweden, its democratic functioning and its welfare state and a unique combination of all these factors grants Sweden's municipalities and counties considerable autonomy. In terms of political culture Sweden has had a long and broad history of local decentralised government. The roots of a strong local government culture can be traced as far back as the middle ages (and beyond) and a system of provincial based laws. The establishment of The Local Government Ordinances in 1862 set many of the principles surrounding local government still understood today and actually predated the establishment of democracy in Sweden, a concept with which local autonomy is now intrinsically linked but must not be necessarily so (Gustafsson 1983, p.52). While there have definitely been examples of conflict between the governments and unilateral action by the national government (especially in the case of the municipality amalgamations of the 1950s and 60s) generally and historically speaking, the relationship between levels of government has been one based on consensus and cooperation rather than conflict, a principle consistent throughout many elements of Swedish governance and democracy (Norton 1994, p.294). The principle of local government has strong support politically and historically in Sweden. Yet as mentioned above in the case of Britain, historical precedent and a prevailing culture in support of local government does not necessarily offer protection where a unilateral revaluing of the role of local government is within the rights of the national government and provides little understanding of the degree of autonomy enjoyed by local government in isolation.

In terms of Sweden's municipalities and counties constitutional and legal position, both levels possess their powers and responsibilities largely on the graces and at the behest of the national government rather than through any direct constitutional provisions. That said their right to exist and play a significant role in the governance of Sweden is stated in general terms in the constitution as is importantly their right to collect some forms of taxation (Gustafsson 1983 and Gustafsson 1980). Powers are largely delegated and not direct putting Swedish local government in a weaker position autonomy wise. Importantly in Sweden the local governments' authority to act is under a positive principle. In other words the local government is free to expand and develop whatever services it deems its local constituents to need beyond that mandated by the national government (of course there are some provisions on what can be done as well as tax ceilings that are respected). This is certainly not the case everywhere, British local government for example has developed under the principle of *ultra vires*, a negative principle whereby local government is not only prevented from doing things via legislation but also can not go beyond the scope of the things it is expressly permitted to do by law. This is a great boon for Swedish local governments' autonomy. As mentioned there are some mandatory responsibilities in Sweden prescribed by the national government through special acts for example in education and social assistance, they obviously have greater restrictions and standards for what must be done. Many of the services Sweden's municipalities carry out however have simply come about through this general authority to act in their residents wishes and are free to vary across the nation. In this element again Sweden can be seen to be a strong example of autonomous self government when compared with many other systems across the world (Norton 1994).

With regards to the special acts requiring municipalities to provide certain services there is a deal of regulation and administrative advice within Sweden. However there has been an ongoing trend from a highly centralised system of control through advice and regulation to recently a decentralisation and move towards vaguer "guidelines" though still many aspects are regulated in detail (Hudson 1993, Norton 1994). Once again it can be said in this element things are not static and there has been cyclical motion between two poles with regards to the degree of intervention by the national government in the affairs of local government through centralised departments, which are comparatively small in Sweden. Of particular note in the Swedish case regarding professional and representative bodies however has been the role of The Association of Swedish Local Authorities (*Svenska Kommunförbundet*) and its counterpart for the counties The Swedish Association of County Councils (*Svenska Landsförbundet*) have had. These bodies run a

variety of services assisting local governments including an insurance agency, credit bureau, data processing agency and a policy planning institute for developing health policy (Norton 1994). The associations play an important part in standardising policy and administrative structure (Jönsson et al. 1999, pp.27-28) across the local governments and its advice and standards are frequently heeded by local governments across Sweden. They also serve as an organ through which local government influences the national government and public discourse through a united front (Gustafsson 1983). Norton (1994, p. 316) suggests that many of the full time executive positions in municipalities are held by professionals (although there is no requirement this is so except in cases where the salary is joint funded with the central government (as in the case of the chief education officer)) and so professional influence is high. Swedish local governments are far from free from advice and regulation from external bodies but still ultimately retain a relatively high degree of autonomy with many regulations being more general guidelines and their own representative associations having an impact.

Hansen & Kjellberg's "means", the ability of the municipalities and counties of Sweden to finance their own operations is one of the elements that sets them most apart from many of the governing bodies of other nations. Their right to levy income taxes is enshrined in the constitution. Although they are unable to levy indirect taxes such as VAT, high levels of income taxes combined with some charges and fees for the services provided have allowed Swedish municipalities to remain relatively independent and not rely on grants from the central government as in many other countries (Gustafsson 1980 and Gustafsson 1983). To have permission to receive income taxes and to have this right in the constitution is quite exceptional. Income taxes are taxes with the scope to collect relatively large amounts of revenue and in several other nations (take for example Britain or Australia) are strictly the privilege of the national government to collect and then perhaps offer as grants to local governments afterwards. This control over the means of offering its service accords Swedish local governments a great deal of autonomy in their affairs and contrasts strongly with some other examples across the western world. Take for example in the case of Australia, a federation, which suffers from a degree of vertical fiscal imbalance (an imbalance between the share of services being funded by the various levels of government and the tax revenue they collect) which Dollery (2002) suggests is quite unique in both its magnitude and growth. Here despite the autonomy of the states being constitutionally protected and the cultural, legal and professional factors mentioned above putting Australia's regional governments in an arguably stronger position autonomy wise than Sweden's, their inability to collect income taxes and

constitutional restrictions on excise duties has allowed many aspects of their structures and the services they provide to be dictated to them by the central government as conditions on the grants they require to fund their activities. Control over the purse strings puts Sweden's municipalities and counties in a very strong position autonomy wise. Where grants are received in Sweden their nature has varied over time between general and specific grants. Generally however those payments related to horizontal equity (equity between municipalities, especially between the scarcely populated and geographically massive northern municipalities and the more densely populated, smaller and better economically performing southern municipalities) are general grants to be spent as required by municipalities with relatively little oversight, while those payments related to supporting municipalities in the services they are statutorily expected to provide are more specific in nature.

2.2.1 - Change and reform in Sweden.

As well as the relatively large degree of autonomy Swedish local governments enjoy, their most distinguishing feature according to Jönsson et al. (1999, p.20) is their size, both geographically (averaging 1,437 km2) and also in terms of their populations with the average being around 30,000 residents per municipality. To compare average populations in Danish municipalities is closer to 19,000. Further there are few small municipalities with the vast majority (over 80%) having over 10,000 residents. In Western Europe, only Great Britain has a greater majority where all its municipalities have over 10,000 residents. The scale of Swedish municipalities has had a significant impact on the scale of their activities.

However before 1952 and the first wave of what was to be a radical amalgamation of municipalities, the Swedish political landscape looked much more similar to that of its neighbours. Before 1952 there were around 2,500 municipalities in Sweden (Gustafsson 1983, Gustafsson 1980, Norton 1994 and Jönsson et al. 1999) of which around 2,200 were rural, descending from medieval and ecclesiastical structures and remaining relatively unchanged since the local government ordinance of 1862 where they were standardised. These included many small under-resourced municipalities. In an effort to create units of government where the provision of welfare services in the constantly expanding welfare state of the day could be economically viable and efficient, the *Riksdag* amalgamated several rural municipalities reducing the number of municipalities to around 1000. These changes were relatively unopposed on the national stage due the geographic and political remoteness of the communities forced to fuse together. However this

was certainly a change made **to** local governments not with and some 13 years later surveys were still discovering local politicians concerned by the changes (Jönsson et al. 1999, p.21). 1962 marked the beginning of a second wave of reform considerably more far reaching than the first. Culminating in 1974 it ultimately reduced the number of Swedish municipalities to around 280, ending the distinction between urban and rural environments and focusing on a new principle for dividing municipalities in which every one had a centre "capital" city which served the local surrounding area where residents would live and work all within the same municipality. It was intended to be that all municipalities in Sweden would have at minimum 8,000 residents. While these reforms, affecting almost all of Sweden's original municipalities, where originally intended to be gradual and voluntary, they met with more opposition than expected and frustrated with their progress the Swedish parliament eventually mandated compulsory amalgamations along a clear timeline. Both of these reforms marked significant changes to the role and structures of local government in Sweden and in both cases show historically that in the face of objection the national government is still able to clearly define local government within Sweden as it sees fit. The political reasoning behind both these processes of amalgamation are ultimately intrinsically linked with welfare state expansion and a desire to keep services localised. Efficiency and economies of scale concerns were the primary factor in the reforms, ensuring municipalities had at minimum enough residents to justify separate services and the structure (with the local municipal centres) to administer the services required. The principal objections to these amalgamations were based upon democratic and representative concerns. With the vast reduction in municipalities so too was there a vast reduction in the number of elected representatives. Around 60% of the elected representatives before the amalgamations were to lose their posts, some 80,000 people (Gustafsson 1980, p.66). There was a move away from apolitical direct democracy measures to a more representative, distant politics divided along party lines. The period saw a marked rise in the number of representatives working full time as well as a tendency towards full time bureaucrats taking on tasks that previously had been done by part-time elected representatives.

The position of local government in a nation is often in flux in this way, often also shifting between an ongoing trend towards centralisation and then decentralisation as unresolved (or perhaps unresolvable) tensions continue. This pattern of constant back and forth reform is repeated throughout many nations with regards to local government (Norton 1994 and Kröger 2011). The underlying tension stimulating these reforms in Sweden were predicated on the idea that small municipalities with close links to the community and a high degree of participation in democratic decision making

were ultimately inefficient at providing the expanding degree of welfare services demanded. Quickly following these reforms then was a recognition that there had been damage done to participation and there followed an expansion of the role of deputies/fill in positions where citizens could connect to the process while only participating in times of unavailability of the representatives. So then there was a "settling" after the reform, alongside the breakup of a tiny few municipalities that were unable to work in their new format but these reforms have largely stuck till today. Much of the literature written on these reforms seem to focus largely on this conflict between the understood needs of a welfare bureaucracy and the participation of citizens in decision making. There is a common understanding that a move towards more representative forms of government with fewer decision makers, the professionalisation and specialisation of the work force within local governments, and an overall reduction in the number of local government units (which could also be understood as a increase in the ratio of the number of citizens per representative) makes welfare service delivery a more efficient process and was essential in the expansion of services that has happened in the post-war period. So it can be seen that democracy and the welfare state have been pitted against one another with an expansion in one field leading to a contraction in the other. As both are clearly desirable social goals for most then the two competing interests must find an equilibrium point as it is today, one which constantly changes with political fashions and as policy shifts from one extreme to another. Since those major reforms there have been a variety of changes to the structures and roles throughout the 1980s and 90s (Jönsson et al. 1999 and Norton 1994) there were several experiments in giving more freedom to the municipalities in how they structure themselves and how they divide their responsibilities and geography, all ultimately made in an effort to increase the level of responsiveness to and participation of consumer-citizens (though often with the hope of increasing efficiency also so that the two goals of efficiency and participation then are not always in conflict and gains in both are possible). These conflicts share similar issues and tie in with another trend occurring throughout the welfare states of the western world, that of the increase in publicly funded but privately run services as opposed to the straight public provision of services. In much the same way this can be portrayed as a dichotomy between efficiency (as the private sector is often argued to be more efficient than the public sector) and the focus on accountability and accessibility of the public sector. Despite the two frequently being seen to be in conflict once again the ultimate focus is on obtaining the best of both worlds and improving the efficiency of services while continuing to make them accountable and open to the public to shape.

A second dimension or contradiction between two principles upon which reform hinges, is between the inherent benefits of the local administration of services (the previously mentioned higher degree of democratic participation, less barriers to reform, innovation and development, and a sensitivity to local needs) and a desire to maintain standards of quality throughout the nation. The greater the authority and freedom given to municipalities to deviate from national standards, the greater the variety of outcomes that will emerge between them as some are more successful in their approach to reform and as their local conditions vary. This can have marked consequences for a welfare state founded on universalism and equality and outcomes can end up being considerably different depending on one's location geographically and politically within the state. Kröger (2011) and Trydegård & Thorsland (2010) both develop this concept of a fundamental contradiction or dilemma between universalism and equality, and local autonomy and use it to account for the shifts between periods of centralisation and decentralisation in the post-war period, especially in the administrative control systems used by central government (one of the factors in local government autonomy mentioned above). There have been calls during this "golden age" of welfare development for more local autonomy and less intervention from central government (especially after periods of rapid development in new services stewarded by tight central government control quality control measures) in specific areas such as social care and elderly care. However as local governments were given more autonomy and standards began to become markedly different between different parts of the country demands for a re-centralisation and standardisation became more and more prominent until reforms were made. The literature observes these cycles occurring throughout the welfare state's development but it should be noted that centralisation in one field of welfare policy does not necessarily mean all parts of local government are being centralised. Pushes for tighter control of elderly care provision by the central government for example, could coincide with pushes to decentralise other welfare hierarchies.

2.2.2 - Administrative structures in Swedish municipalities

The form Swedish municipalities take administratively is in some respects determined externally through some regulation by the central government and historically through the advice of the Association of Local Authorities, though this is no longer the case (Jönsson et al. 1999, p. 28). This is an area which has been through some reform. However what has remained is that all of Sweden's municipalities are legally bound to have a directly elected council (the *Fullmäktige* in Swedish). The size of this council is left up to the municipality within limits but must have at least 31

members and have an odd number of members. These elected representatives appoint the committees organising specific elements of the government's activities (the *nämnder*), representatives to other bodies, its chairman and commissioners. They are the ones who decide upon the budget, and tax rates. Also required is the appointment by this council of a chief executive board (known as a kommunstyrelse or in the case of a county: landstyrelse). This board is the main administrative body involved in leading the other committees and governing the municipality. 'It has responsibility for leading and coordinating council business and activities' (Norton 1994, p.314). Under this board (or in the case of mandated committees acting under special legislation "alongside") are a variety of other committees or boards. Services that the municipalities are required to provide under special legislation such as social welfare, education and elections have boards managing them which are mandated by law but in the case of other issues the municipality is free to decide a system of boards to suit their needs (with larger municipalities tending towards more boards). These boards then tend to have a department underneath them with a full time head of department and a hierarchy of staff under them.

3.0 - Research Design and Methodology

3.1 - Research Paradigm

Creswell (2007) in his book on research design states that "The research design process in qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions that the inquirers make in deciding to undertake a qualitative study" (p.15). Developing an understanding of the philosophical assumptions I am taking to the project and fitting it to a paradigm or worldview provides an important guide and justification to my study. After some consideration of my understandings of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology I have come to conclude that the paradigm of "Social Constructivism" as described by Creswell (2007, p.20-21) most closely describes my understanding of research and my approach to the research question.

The general sentiments behind "Social Constructivism" and the wider term "Constructivism" are easy to follow. Social Constructivism assumes people construct subjective meanings through which they understand the experiences of the phenomena

surrounding them and define the way they interact with them. These meanings are therefore complex and layered interacting with one another in a system rather than existing in isolation. These meanings come from individuals as they interact with one another. Hirtle (1996, p.91) discussing constructivism from an education background describes it thus: 'Constructivism is a way of building knowledge about self, school, everyday experience, and society through reflection and meaning making. One of the primary goals of constructivism is to provide a democratic and critical learning experience for students. It serves to open boundaries through inquiry, not through unquestioned acceptance of prevailing knowledge. It is the realization that knowledge is never neutral, that the ways in which knowledge is mediated and created are as dynamic and important as the knowledge itself'. Cooper (2001) suggests research should be humanised and remain more mindful of the role of human volition in the outcomes of research and the nature of the world as well as suggesting the paradigm fits well with social work theory as it itself is based on working with people. These sentiments are what appeal to me and as a researcher I also consider myself a student. As a general concept "social constructivism" fits well with my worldview grounded as it is in postmodern understandings of subjectivity and reality construction especially when opposed to a strictly objective view of the world. However while it is possible to express and agree with its general sentiment easily when one delves into the paradigm looking for methodological guidance it becomes clear "constructivism" is a complex ideology which has many dimensions interpreted differently leading to potentially different developments and outcomes in my research.

Exploring the intricacies of the philosophy behind "constructivism" and the various ways it is interpreted by different authors is beyond the scope of this document. However some brief coverage of its dimensions is warranted considering the impact my stance is to have on my research. Some authors attempt to differentiate between different understandings by using different terms such as "constructionism" and "interpretivism" but a consistent understanding of the basic tenants of each can be difficult to grasp. Some of the notable dimensions upon which the "constructivist" paradigm differs include:
- To what extent constructions come from the individual and their own understandings and to what extent these interpretations come from their interaction with others, how social is social constructivism? and is the contradiction between phenomena not existing beyond the mind of the

individual while simultaneously being able to be shared socially, a fundamental one? (see Lee 2012 and Schwandt 1994).

- ●To what extent are the constructions of people thought to be the only form of reality, is there any form of objective reality beyond these constructions? While it is difficult to argue against the basic understanding that different people understand phenomena in different ways and indeed construct meanings, it is more radical (and more consistent with my understanding of the "constructivist" paradigm) to understand their being no independent reality at all to the phenomena to be "interpreted" only the reality constructed (see both Lee 2012 and Schwandt 1994 for such discussions).
- ●To what extent are conflicting constructions considered valid and how do we judge different constructions? Relying on the work of Guba and Lincoln, Schwandt (1994, p.129) suggests that 'although all constructions must be considered meaningful, some are rightly labeled "malconstruction" because they are "incomplete, simplistic, uninformed, internally inconsistent, or derived by an inadequate methodology" '. Importantly, these malformed constructions must be judged from the specific framework from which the construction comes.

It seems important to keep these philosophical questions around the nature of reality in mind as I begin my research. However, I also note that the concept or phenomena of "local government" is an entirely artificial social construction. While I may struggle to deny some sense of an objective reality of something in the natural world such as a tree or hydrogen which exist independently of human interaction I have no such issues with something such as "local government" which has no form other than that granted by humans. As something which itself arises from the melding of a variety of meanings across society, it seems reasonable to approach its study from a social constructivist standpoint.

There are practical implications to this choice of standpoint. It suggests broad lines of questioning, unfocused on details in order to capture the range of understandings and constructions present in the world. It also necessitates interaction with people, phenomena can not be understood without understanding people's constructions from their own standpoints. It suggests delving into contexts in which people live and work and requires the researcher to

position themselves within the research and remain mindful of their role rather than consider themselves outside of it. The nature of such a paradigm also demands a focus for the researcher on discussions and understandings of knowledge and a certain degree of antagonism towards focusing on methods, which may mask a lack of understanding of the meanings behind the research (Schwandt 1994, pp.118-119). Constructivism 'rests on individuals being comfortable with the blurring of lines between the science and art of interpretation, the social scientific and the literary account' (Geertz 1980 in Schwandt 1994, p.132).

From this understanding of my paradigm, again following the advice of Creswell (2007) I moved to a more specific research methodology he suggested was linked to "Social Constructivism" in its philosophical underpinnings, that of "phenomenology" and begun exploring some of the possibilities this methodology offered which others had used to develop a research base around bureaucrats and their interactions with their work and government bodies.

3.2 - Surrounding Research

When one looks at much of the literature on local government in Sweden or indeed local government in general, as with that used to formulate the discussion above, it is almost exclusively focused on the politics, structures and perhaps philosophy behind the governments discussed. These units are taken as entities in themselves and rarely is it acknowledged they are in fact made up of people with their own unique understandings of local government who ascribe personal meaning to the organisations they are a part of.

Brown (1978, p.378) argues for 'a view of formal organizations that encompassed both politics and moral consciousness', he sees this as being an antidote for the ongoing alienation and apathy of citizenry in the western world and the tendency towards creeping elitism demonstrated by policy makers as they struggle with the contradiction between adopting theory which sees an already determined social world and the assumption inherent in policy planning that the social world can be transformed through good policy. He also suggests that 'organisational realities are not external to human consciousness' (p.378). I share Brown's concerns and these arguments for bringing in personal understandings and "consciousness" as well as the dangers of accepting an external objective view of what he calls "formal

organisations" (a broader term that can include the local government agencies I am studying). These lead me to adopt the "phenomenological" model I have, which seeks to understand personal experience and the essences of phenomena humans experience. Brown proposes that 'formal organisations be considered paradigms in operation, different in degree and content, but not in essence, from scientific paradigms in use' (1978, p.374). If I seek then to encapsulate a local government in Sweden as a "paradigm in operation", it follows I should consider how the people working within this paradigm view their work and the paradigm's impact on it. 'The most taken-for-granted factors of organized life are the products of considerable intersubjective work' (Brown 1978, p.371), in other words it is likely that many of the factors at work inherent in the paradigm of a local government unit involve significant interactions between the constructions of its members that may very well remain invisible or undiscussed as they constitute "commonsense" and taken-for-granted assumptions about what local government is, both within the organisation studied and in the research surrounding it.

From here I began to explore writings related to bureaucrats within public organisations such as the local government agencies I hoped to study where the authors had attempted to answer questions from a phenomenological perspective. These pieces tended to often be a response to the plethora of anti-bureacrat literature about. They sought to counteract the view of both a wide variety of research and indeed the general public that bureaucrats within these kind of organisations frequently displayed unwarranted discretion in deciding outcomes for clients and discriminated against those they believed unworthy. A good example of this type of article is Goodsell's work (1981) on bureaucrats within welfare offices and how both the workers and clients actually expressed their interactions with one another. He uses their general positivity to argue against both an understanding of bureaucracy as 'manipulating and repressive' while at the same time against 'the classic Weberian picture of a dispassionate official engaged in rule-bound, egalitarian treatment of citizens' by bringing in the personal stories of workers and noting their tendency to go above and beyond the call of duty for some (Goodsell 1981, p.764). This is a common use of phenomenology when discussing organisational culture and bureaucracy and represents the notion of "telling of another side of the story" important to constructionist and indeed qualitative understandings of research. Other research such as in Jermier et al.'s (1991) work focuses on the existence of subcultures within a wider organisational paradigm. Such works explore the differences between individuals within a wider culture and how they negotiate its impacts on them and their identity. My goal is to observe how the elements of the organisational culture present within a local municipality in Sweden impact on the shared

essence behind its administrators perceptions. While it shares concepts from both the above lines of thought, importantly my research differs in that it is focused on what people share in common in their experiences and adaptations rather than how they differ in their interactions with the larger organisational culture, that my research hopes to focus on the administrators and politicians behind the policies affecting clients rather than the front-line staff it is common to analyse, and in that rather than seeking to debunk a current understanding of bureaucrats and public servants I am hoping to develop a new understanding that encourages others to develop their own views beyond what they take for granted rather than directly conflict with a view. Using the phenomenological method will hopefully allow me to explore and develop an understanding of the essence of policy making in Swedish municipalities uninfluenced by my own previous understandings.

It was chosen to apply this method to specific cases, interviewing a collection of workers within specific municipalities. The scope of local governance limits the ability of the researcher to seek a comprehensive method capable of generating evidence from the entire gamut of local government in Sweden. A truly complete picture of the experiences of those in local government is seemingly impossible. However a case study of one or two "typical" municipalities, highlighting elements that may be found in a variety of different municipalities, in allowing for a concentration of resources, provides the research with a greater depth and the opportunity for clearer understandings of the "how" of the experience than a broader research design utilising say survey data for example.

3.3 - Phenomenology

I wish to perform my inquiry according to the tenets of Phenomenological Research. According to Creswell a "phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell 2007, p.57. Italics used in the original text). My goal in this analysis is to describe **what** individuals working within a Swedish municipality experience with regards to working in a local government and **how** they have experienced this phenomenon, in order to "reduce [these] individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell 2007, p.58).

Phenomenology is both a method and a philosophical position (Dennis 1974, p.143) and is in many ways the theoretical framework underpinning my work just as it provides me with the

instructions for carrying out successful research. Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994) both demand researchers bring an appreciation for the philosophy behind the method into their research. Unfortunately the concepts behind phenomenology are abstract ones and grasping their intricacies involves considerable study and a grounding in philosophy.

The modern conception of "phenomenology" was developed and championed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and much literature focuses on his work and beliefs. However as others have expanded his views so the principles behind phenomenology have begun to vary substantially yet there are elements most understandings have in common that I have used to guide my understanding of phenomenology and my research method. Phenomenology focuses on description of the essence of phenomena, both what is experienced and how it is experienced (in what contexts) rather than explanations and theories as to why these things are experienced. It focuses on understanding conscious experiences, those expressed by subjects. Phenomenology insists on what Husserl calls *epoche*, that is the suspension of our beliefs as to what is real and natural, the "common sense" of our own understandings so that we can come to the experiences of others with a clean slate. Finally in keeping with the constructivist traditions mentioned above phenomenology demands that 'the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experiences of an individual' and that the 'reality of an object [...] is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it' (Creswell 2007, pp.58-59 summarising Stewart and Mickunas 1990).

Goodsell (1981) shares his concerns with using the phenomenological method and whether his research fulfills its phenomenological ambitions. In discussing these concerns he sets out a clear list of the practical objectives and issues in adopting a phenomenological method which provide me with some insight. He sought first to bracket out his own understandings in the process of *epoche*. This is done in order to fully understand and embrace how the phenomenon is viewed by others and is an essential, if arguably impossible (Creswell 2007, Moustakas 1994, and Goodsell 1981) part of the "transcendental phenomenology" used. While I feel a personal connection with the phenomenon investigated in my research it is not through any great personal experience. In Australia I have worked both in a federal agency and a private NGO funded through both the state government and the federal government. Throughout this work I was aware of my role as a public servant within a network of independent regions and this has had impacts on me. Being a resident interacting with regional and local governments has also had an impact on how I view the phenomenon and what I

expect to hear from the people I interview. I have also been studying social work and welfare policy for some time leaving me with a personal connection to the field in which the interviewees have worked. Despite these personal connections to some of the issues however, I have never experienced working in Swedish local government myself (nor am I likely too). I hope to be able to cast aside firstly my own connections to policy making and the work the interviewees do and also my Australian-centric understandings of local governance and its forms and objectives which may also have a detrimental impact on my understanding of this foreign and new conception of a familiar idea. Goodsell also sought to create a setting whereby he was able to 'establish genuine rapport with the interviewees' with the express ambition of generating 'intersubjective understanding' and 'absorbing wholly and faithfully the respondent's own "structure or reality" (Goodsell 1981,p.767).

In conclusion then phenomenology is a complex abstract philosophical understanding of the nature of knowledge, reality and consciousness which has been developed during the 20th century into a research method capable of intuiting knowledge which reflects those understandings. I will endeavour to meet its requirements for "bracketing" and an understanding of the essence. Ultimately however the purpose of my phenomenology isn't the religious following of the paradigm's tenants but as Polkinghorne (1989) succinctly puts it, that as the reader of the text 'I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that' (in Creswell 2007, p.62)

3.4 - The interviews

The research design necessitated the conducting of several in-depth interviews. Seven people were interviewed during the months of June and July 2012. Polkinghorne (1989) suggests 5 to 25 interviewees (or co-researchers in the language of the paradigm) who have all experienced the phenomenon in question is a reasonable amount. This study fits that requirement however a more thorough study utilising a greater number of interviews would have been desirable. Resource issues were unfortunately to come to prevent this. Ultimately the nature of the paradigm, as one which is intuitive and does not seek to compare or explain means a reasonable picture of the phenomenon could be drawn from the interviews conducted despite there being room for a greater number of voices. The interviews were all approximately one hour in length and the audio was recorded as well as notes taken by the interviewer. All but one was conducted with the interviewer and interviewee alone. One interview was conducted

with two interviewees discussing questions together at the request of the interviewees. All interviews were conducted at the respective interviewee's place of business, either in their private offices or conference rooms.

I attempted to gain access to one medium sized municipality and one small municipality. I used what was essentially a "snowball technique" whereby I contacted originally several people across the municipalities' different departments including some press contacts explaining what I was after and asking for interviews or referrals to others they believed would be able to assist me. From this I was eventually able to arrange some interviews where I again asked for further contacts with the criterion being based on the interviewee's new found understanding of my research. This led to some other interviews. In such a paradigm as phenomenology there is no requirement for randomness or even "typical cases" as all experiences are valid, the main requirement is that the interviewees have indeed experienced the phenomenon being researched. As such this strategy was completely appropriate, however the lack of personal contact made the establishment of a good rapport based on ongoing association and some of the interviews may have lacked depth as a result. It was common for me to contact a head of department via email and telephone message only to have another person lower down the chain contact me in the days following offering an interview. This strategy while successful in obtaining interviews in the medium sized municipality was also unsuccessful in establishing any relationship with the smaller municipalities contacted. Those that responded to the interview requests typically responded that they and their department were "too busy" or short staffed to grant an interview due to their size (with in some cases one person taking on several roles). As such all interviews were conducted in *Lunds Kommun*. *Lunds kommun* is a municipality in southern Sweden nearby Malmö, Sweden's third largest city. It is within the boundaries of the region of Skåne (Scania in English), a historical county and now län. *Lunds kommun* is made up of the city of Lund and some of the surrounding villages. Lund has a growing population currently of around 110,500 residents. The taxes its residents pay are slightly higher than average but comparable with its neighbours (Löfgren 2011). Its character geographically is largely urban and it forms part of a large conurbation surrounding the strait between Denmark and Sweden, the "Öresund", alongside the cities of Malmö, Helsingborg and Copenhagen. The city is home to one of Sweden's oldest and largest universities with many of its residents being young students as well as several high-tech companies and industries. It provides a somewhat typical case and thanks to its size (large but not excessively so) provides the range of services and workers necessary to gauge a good picture of how working in a municipality is experienced.

In terms of interview questions and the structure of the interviews, they were largely conducted in an semi-structured fashion. Firstly the interviewer bracketed themselves and the phenomenon, explaining their background and the nature of what is to be discussed. Respondents were then asked to simply talk about their personal experiences working within their municipality and reflect upon them as well as the situations and things that have influenced or affected these experiences. A list of questions along the same line was prepared in order to prompt interviewees when necessary (see appendix A). Finally the goals of the research, to better understand the common essence of their work, were restated and interviewees were asked if there was anything else missing from their account that might help, before the interview was concluded.

3.5 - Ethical Considerations

Appropriately conducted research of any kind requires some consideration of the ethical implications of the research by the researcher, nowhere is this more the case however than when the research involves human participants. The nature of my research as outlined above leads to several ethical implications considered below (suggestions for some of the issues pertinent to discussion were taken from Cresswell (2007, p.44), Moustakas (1994, pp.109-110), and Clandinin & Connelly (1994, p.422)).

The participants in this research all participated voluntarily. I endeavoured to be as frank as possible about my position, goals, the nature of the research, its process, and what was to be done with their responses and the research in order to set up a clear understanding and mutual agreement on the nature of the research and everybody's role in it. In this respect the open-endedness of the interviews was a great plus allowing a real conversation to emerge and for any questions and/or misunderstandings to be addressed on the spot, this was also a plus when trying to best understand participants' experiences from their own views. I was mildly concerned that even though all interviews were strictly voluntary in nature in some cases it did appear that participants were asked by their superiors who I had contacted previously, to talk to me, where the person originally contacted was too busy or uncomfortable to conduct an interview, perhaps affecting the degree to which the interviews were completely free from compulsion, although this is not a large concern as all participants appeared very willing to talk once in the interview.

The nature of relationships plays a big role in such research. Despite my attempts to bracket myself outside of the research in the process of Husserl's *epoche*, a process

phenomenology literature both demands of researchers and decries as difficult to truly achieve (Creswell 2007, p.62), my interaction with the research and its participants must have an impact. My own views and understandings impose themselves at every turn of the research in both how I conduct my interviews, my approach and my reactions to people and their answers, and how I translate these answers and the data gained into a final research product. There is the potential that my experiences while researching will change me, my understandings and as a result my life. Similarly things may come up in the interviews conducted that may have an impact on the interviewees. Considering the nature of the research it is hard to envisage a scenario where this impact would be a dramatic one but it is impossible to know before the fact. Research should not take advantage or negatively impact its subject, power imbalances between researchers and those researched can play a big role in the research's impact in a community and success, and various authors warn against failing to consider power relations in research. In the context being discussed however the interviewees can not, as managers and politicians with considerable influence on policy, be considered to be in a vulnerable position. The risks associated with personal relationships and their potential to damage is best mitigated by constant on the spot consideration and reflection on the impacts of power and my approach throughout the research process coupled with the endeavour to "bracket" oneself outside of the research as much as possible as outlined in the method. This sees me influencing proceedings and participants as cautiously as possible.

How my findings are finally presented at the end of my research and the way in which participants stories are retold through my theoretical lens is also key. Once again the method demands one attempts to put themselves outside and see the experiences described as much as possible through the lenses of the participants, yet always one falls short of this ambition and some interpretation, as well as desirable reflection through theoretical paradigms, is to be assumed. These conclusions may not fit with participants views or their ways of understanding however. In my research these must take precedence. To this end participants are to be sent a copy before final publication of the research to be reflected on and invited to comment on the success of the retelling of their stories and experiences.

This involvement in the final publication also forms a large part of a commitment where possible to reciprocity, that the investment participants have made regarding their time and the information provided is returned to them in some fashion. I hope the conclusions of the research and my heartfelt acknowledgment will provide ample compensation for their efforts.

4.0 - Data Analysis and Results

The data analysis process began with the transcription of the interviews. These transcriptions were then read through to get a feel for the data set before beginning with the extraction of "significant statements" through a process referred to as "horizonalisation" in the phenomenology literature, whereby 'every statement initially is treated as having equal value... [but]...later, statements irrelevant to the topic and question as well as those that are repetitive or overlapping are deleted, leaving only the Horizons (the textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon)' (Moustakas 1994, p.97). From here I aimed to cluster the "horizons" into a set of themes and then use these to portray a "coherent textual description" of the experience of working in Lund's kommun. The themes are listed below with a description and relevant statements in no order of importance. These statements have sometimes been altered slightly for the sake of flow and coherence.

Theme 1: Local autonomy as an ambivalent concept. Many of the interviewed expressed a degree of mistrust of local government and local autonomy following similar lines to the literature referenced above. One local politician in the study expresses this fundamental contradiction between the desire to localise decision making and the divides it can cause thus:

That is one valuable thing about the way things are handled in the kommuns. That the distance between those who make decisions and those who actually live with the decisions is not that far, they know they can contact us and we can make a difference, maybe if we are in the minority we can not actually make THE difference but we can go out and challenge the majority and so on and that link doesn't exist with the central government, of course not because it so far. We would have to get an all Swedish debate about something and it takes a much longer time and is much more difficult. The downside is of course that it doesn't become equal in all Sweden. It is up to the local authorities, the local kommun, what is happening in the kommun and if the quality is going to be good or bad, so that is the downside of it.

Far from being in favour of ever broadening powers and independence for local government both managers and politicians working in the municipality are wary of how other municipalities and even their managers or other departments within the municipality would use their independence and power to the detriment of citizens. Decentralising reforms are

sometimes characterised by workers within the municipalities as being a way through which the central government "washes their hands clean" of their responsibilities and rather than as a positive expression of confidence in local government it is seen as a dumping. One politician noted while discussing how he had originally supported decentralisation reform in education and had come to regret it,

I think the state should take back responsibility for the schools, of course they are in Lund, the schools, so there has to be some kind of interaction between the kommuns and the state but now the state [wiping his hands] is doing this and looking the other way and it is all up to some lottery as to where you grow up whether you get a good education or not.

Others wish some of the guidelines guiding their work were more enforced such as one woman working in dementia care,

It comes (the guidelines) from the national health service, but in Sweden councils and that, they rule themselves, so here is a bit of trouble you see, we do have this national service that says this is how it should be, but they can't force things, I would have liked them to be harder in what they said... In Sweden it says, if it is a law it is "ska" (will) but in that (the guidelines) it is "bör" (should), but "bör" we say that it should be "ska".

These concerns and issues were especially felt during recent administrative experiments in further partitioning municipalities into smaller geographic administrative units that had come about following a loosening of municipal administrative guidelines by the central government. One manager working in education commented that,

We were just discussing it this morning, you could see a lot of administration because you had to invent the wheel in every part of the kommun. So this is something (the idea of decentralisation) that goes back and forth, this idea. And you can thank the politicians for that. I remember from that time, that the ones who were in favour of this project believed that democracy would come closer to the people, but I don't think we felt that.

Workers in the municipality experience a clear conception of the advantages to democracy local government and a connection with its tenets however they share with this a

profound ambivalence and concern regarding over-decentralisation and the impacts it has on them and their fellow citizens.

   Theme 2: Municipal work as public and/or civil service. When asked to describe their experiences of working in a Swedish municipality the interviewed frequently characterised their role in terms of public service, especially as opposed to work in the private sector. Notions of working especially in a local setting as opposed to another level or arm of government did not play a significant role in how their work was characterised.

   The interviewed experienced and characterised such work as something noble and having some sort of intangible value for them beyond the work itself, such as this woman working in social services,

   It's a very beautiful thing to work in a kommun, you work for the society, I am a worker for society and for that is important, I do something here that brings better things to the people who live in Lund and that is important for me, that is something of great value, I don't want to work at Tetra-Pak (being used here as one example of the larger industries in the local area), I could do that, I could do the same thing I do here at Tetra-Pak, but I don't want to be at Tetra-Pak I want to be at the kommun.

   Working in the public's service is characterised as being principled work requiring some sacrifice, as noted by one working in the care field,

   I have to say working in councils and things like that, you are secure in many ways, you are not going to make a lot of money, the wages are not that high but you are secure and you follow a set of laws, you have to compare that with working in the private sector, the pressure is going to be much greater, you might not be able to follow your principles and beliefs, you might go out and make a lot of money working against your principles but I could never do that.

   Workers see themselves as part of an encompassing public service interacting with the private sector either in relationships characterised by competition, for resources or business, or for the worker's labour itself when comparing conditions between the two, or by cooperation and inspiration as in the case of some right leaning politicians. In either case though the word "kommun" is largely thought of as being synonymous with the concept of the public sector.

Theme 3: Delivering efficient welfare services taking priority over notions of democratic participation. In this theme interviewees expressed their role as being largely concerned with delivering the best and most efficient welfare services possible and regarding democratic participation of the citizenry as a secondary priority. A woman managing in social services explains,

The only thing you want when you go to the hospital is that there is someone, a doctor, to look at you. You aren't interested in the hospital's organisation, you are not, and that is the same with our citizens. I don't think they have to know our map...the person who wants help is not interested in our organisation, we have to have an organisation, but they are not interested in it.

Here municipal workers' conceptions of the priorities and needs of citizens are explored and understood as being focused on the outcomes of services rather than process. Dealing with citizens plays a big role in the experience of the people interviewed, often in the form of handling complaints about the services they are responsible for. These contacts can be a very positive part of the interviewees experience but their merit stems from their ability to lead to improvements in service and in serving their "customers" better. The rights of citizens and the merits of participation for participants sake are not considered a priority in their dealings. Sometimes these interactions are experienced negatively such as in the case of one woman who felt some of the "freedom of information" requests she had had to meet were malicious abuses of the process rather than genuine desires for transparency and participation.

These understandings reflect those of much of the literature on the reform and amalgamation process Swedish municipalities underwent in the late 20th century whereby the construction and expansion of a efficient welfare service took priority over democratic participation considerations with regards to the role of local government. Interviewees reflected this in seeing themselves first and foremost as service providers in the place of expressions of local democracy and participation.

Theme 4: Hard work. In this theme interviewees expressed some of the challenges their roles required. They experienced working in a municipality as both mentally and physically draining. Interviewees experienced complicated roles requiring the juggling multiple objectives as in the case of one social worker who felt,

We are doing social work here, we can't do this as well, it is about the environment, it is about people's health, and it is about staffing, and well it is about a lot of things that in a way come down to us.

Workers described experiencing a great deal of stress at times with physical consequences such as in the case of this woman,

Stress, when I became a boss I actually did end up burning out for three months, my blood pressure shot up, I was dealing with a particularly stressful situation and I suffered, when I get stressed, very stressed with my job my blood pressure goes up, it is job related. You need to have a balance, you need to have a bit of stress, you have got to be pretty tough to do it and that will always be a weakness with me, stress, since I have been through with it once and it stays with you, but I know the signs so I can manage it.

The difficulties of the job are something that one is forced to remain vigilant of. Interviewees experienced a wide range of difficulties and stresses they defined as both unique to the job and more commonplace as they may find in any difficult job. Politicians emphasised the challenges of being in the public's eye at all times,

You always have to careful. I mean, if I am in a bad mood I must never show it, because then you can lose a vote. So you are påpassad (watched), you always have people's eyes on you...you're never quite private

A deal of evening hours and especially stressful periods requiring extra work were also how many understood the challenges of their roles. Many of the interviewed had come into their management roles later in life after a whole host of other experiences and after raising a family and so felt like the challenges of the role did not impact them or their families as much as it might.

But I think, I have been working so long but I think about the younger ones who are becoming bosses and I think it is very difficult for them (previously she had mentioned that following a reorganisation within the municipality her patient and workload had by some measures doubled over the course of a year), I think it is ok for someone like me who has been working for 30 years, ok I am used to it, I have a lot to do but ok, but I think it must be tough for the younger people with children and a family to be a boss, it is tough, you have to work!

The conception of an ever expanding workload due especially to economic pressures alongside the politics of the time was also prevalent. Keeping up could be a concern as noted by this woman who was on the verge of retirement,

Now I am looking forward to being retired, I feel as though I have accepted it now it has been good to have made the decision but I wasn't ready it is difficult to go, but I am leaving and I am not coming back, because once you leave you are not up to date, and it is stupid to come back and not be up to date, you have to be at your top.

As touched upon above though despite the concerns raised about their job this theme also frequently included the notions of coping with, managing with, learning from and even enjoying these challenges as in this case,

What's interesting with working in the municipality from my point of view, with the tasks I have, is that you learn a lot. Because you can get tasks, assignments or whatever from different angles, and sometimes we have never done that before, you should look into it and you don't know where to begin. It could be frightening, but on the other hand it's really interesting.

Interviewees also expressed feeling well looked after by the municipality management who did its best to provide training and good working conditions to alleviate stress (while maintaining and increasing pressures). All in all this theme was characterised by feelings of stress, hard work and challenges, of being at a threshold where their jobs were manageable for them but only just and it was hard to imagine how others may cope in similar positions without their resources, which included personal resources and support and assistance from colleagues and structures.

Theme 5: Making use of local resources. In this theme interviewees expressed a belief in the potential of the municipality's local resources. This could be expressed in terms of lost or underutilised potential as in the case of one of the key local resources identified in the interviews, Lund University, a large research university that dominates the municipality, a deal of frustration was felt as expressed by one woman working in care services,

Even though Lunds kommun is Lunds kommun and we have a university, and we have all the top people there it is just like they are not interested in taking the academic side of it and I think it is a big fault of theirs.

The university was understood to offer a great deal of insight and offer great opportunities for developing services under an academic framework but it was commonly understood that this went against the interests of some. Others however resented its role in the happenings of the municipality and its ability to delay things, as with one worker in the social services field,

It is good that we are so close to the university, I really think that, but in another way it is not good at all because then as we are so close to the university we tend to look at the university and think shall we do it like this then?, shall we do research here?, well we are not researchers, then I would be at the university, I could have chosen that but didn't. I am here and I think that that is one of the issues that I have personally a problem with, that it is very slow and I want to move much faster.

The university was considered either a key resource in policy making at the municipality, a valuable but frustratingly underappreciated resource, or a hindrance. In any case it was not the only local resource elaborated on. Interviewees also described how their experiences incorporated successful parent/teacher/headmaster collaborations in education making use of local participating citizens (something in contrast to theme 3) or expressed general feelings of positivity prevailing about the municipality's future.

In this theme interviewees emphasised what makes Lund special versus other municipalities and how those unique features can be utilised to create better outcomes for the citizens they were working for.

Theme 6: Processes of change, development and progress. This theme focused on describing experiences with development and change. This was especially focused on technological development. Whether in communications infrastructure, medical technology, therapeutic practice, or even management theory technology is something described as having a profound effect on how interviewees experienced their role. One woman working in care services describes,

I have been working 30 years, I have seen a lot of changes, when I was starting in the beginning I didn't have a computer, I think I was a boss in 1983, I just had my desk and a telephone, nothing more but that was ok, I made it no problem, but now I have my computer, I have all my mails, I have a mobile telephone, and I have a telephone on my desk and when it rings it goes to my mobile phone so you can get to me at anytime. I think that is a changing process so that is ok, a development, and I think that is everywhere not just here, but it is fun to think about how it has changed ... maybe it is getting easier for the younger bosses, they can stay at home if they have ill young children, they can stay at home and work a lot so maybe I worry about something that won't happen (referring to her previous concerns that exponentially increasing work loads have been making it more challenging for newer managers).

Technological development then is the impetus for change, the thing which has lead to many of the other developments pivotal to the interviewed's experiences including the increasing work loads, but it is also providing new opportunities to adapt and develop, part of the support that makes these developments manageable.

Alongside redefining personal roles interviewees also experienced the impact technological development has had in redefining the role of the municipality and in its struggles to negotiate its role relative to the other levels of government to the benefit of all the citizens and welfare users of Sweden. One woman explains,

We can use so much technology so now it is not simple, you don't just come in and you are just old, you can come in with high technology, they can have a respirator etc.,we can get everything. When we did this in 1992 (referring to a reform transferring responsibility for care of the elderly into the hands of the municipalities) the council thought they were taking over healthy old people but they are not healthy, they are sick.

The process of developing practices to meet these developments is presented as a complicated one involving interaction from a variety of stakeholders, especially the central government and the guidelines and steering documents it attempts to control development of services in the municipalities with. Despite this however it was also understood in some cases that Lund, the interviewees home municipality was adapting better or leading development while other municipalities were not, these changes and developments were understood as not occurring at a uniform pace across Sweden despite the interaction with others. The reform and development process was not always understood as a linear one either. Mimicking the

understandings of the long term path of development outlined in the literature on Scandinavian local government the reform process was understood as a back and forth one, with the pendulum of policy swinging from side to side rather than being a straight progression towards a better future, especially on the issue of local autonomy.

Despite the sometimes rapid changes experienced by the workers of the municipality some understood the core of their work as remaining unchanged, as in this example from a manager in health care,

Working with staff is all the same, you have the personalities, that never changes, all the technology around is changing but not the contact between the two people, and I think that is very very important that the staff know me and can come and talk about their problems.

Theme 7: Power to affect change. In this theme interviewees expressed both their desire to affect change, especially social change and personal development in the citizens they interacted with, and how their experiences working in a municipality had allowed this. For one politician it was this notion that public service is the means through which changes can be made that lead to her choosing a career in politics,

So when I was at a big party when we came home, I was criticising the Swedish school system and health care system, you always get a few easy laughs when you criticise, but then a woman came up to me and said "if you have so many good ideas, why don't you make anything of it, why do you only criticise ?". That was something I took to my heart. So I became a part time politician.

People are able to experience a real sense of achievement and impact as in the case of this woman working in the education sector,

I can feel that, I have really made an impact on how it is. Sometimes I can make changes, that I know if I hadn't been there it wouldn't have been the same way and I think the result is good.

However this power and ability to affect change also places a pressure on workers for self reflection, part of the experience of making decisions is that the benefit of hindsight can show them to have been the wrong ones.

Sometimes you make a decision because you think it's the best one, but two years later you discover, that wasn't the best way, we should have done it this way instead...but with the information, with the knowledge that we had we took this decision instead.

Where the reform process is both a constant and a cyclical one, and one where the results are difficult to predict, it appears people deciding on policy at a municipal level feel the process by which they came to a decision on policy, where it was proper absolves them of its results (though not the commitment to realising their mistakes and promoting further reform and development).

Interviewees experienced feelings of pride, excitement and triumph related to their own personal achievements and a connection to the achievements of the wider organisation. Their experience often involved some personal projects that they had shepherded over the years and that they were particularly proud of. The feeling of being able to affect change provides real personal benefits as reflected on by this politician,

You have power as a politician and you shouldn't try to hide that, you should use it. Now for instance we have decided to reduce carbon monoxide emissions in the municipality by 50% by 2020, then you have to take practical measures on how to do that. Some people only get frustrated, young people especially, that the world is going to pieces. But as a politician you can do something. If you have so many opinions, do something, don't sit there complaining. I think it is good psychologically and maybe even physiologically that you don't sit there frustrated.

Another key understanding to the theme is the limits to this power. Interviewees experienced a range of limits on their power, those that come from above them, from their bosses or constituents, those that came from the structure of the organisation, from the national government and the European union. Budgets and economic considerations were also a considerable restraint on the powers interviewees enjoyed. In some cases it was the personal emotional resources of the clients (such as in social services) which were a limiting factor. In all cases these limits on power caused frustration which must be managed in some way as in the case of one woman frustrated with the decisions of her superiors from time to time,

There are decisions that are made that you get really annoyed about but you can't influence them, those decisions I am learning now I just can't do anything about so I forget it, before I used to get really

annoyed "why are you doing it like that?". But what you can't do anything about, just forget it because there is no point in using a lot of energy on something that is a decision made by the politicians, you can't alter it so you have to accept it, you can work around it but you have to accept it, when it has got that far just stop getting annoyed, that is something I have learnt the hard way.

Theme 8: An individual within the organisation. In this theme interviewees expressed their uniqueness and status as an individual within the organisation. All had a unique history and background, they came from many different places, both around Sweden and abroad. They came from a variety of different educational and career backgrounds with differing degrees of relevance to their current work.

This journey to where they are now was experienced by some as being rather cyclical, especially in the case of immigrants who had had to build their way back up to the top after starting again in Sweden and also in the case of those changing careers.

Moving to another country, having to do my everything again, working from the bottom up again, I am pleased I got to where I finished in England but it took a long time. I am ending my career where I ended my career in England, it has taken a long time.

Their experiences incorporate an understanding that they and their co-workers are all unique human beings with their own story and traits and come together within the municipality.

Part of this uniqueness also includes an understanding that the individual may not always see eye-to-eye with the organisation. Interviewees identified as both taxpayers and citizens alongside their identity as civil servants and acknowledged the two identities could come in conflict, their private lives and public lives were not always in accordance. A woman in education emphasised the importance of these conflicts in her experience thus,

It's very important also for me to differ between the fact that I'm a civil servant and I have things to do, decisions taken by the politicians that say that this and this should be done. But then on the other hand I am a taxpayer, I'm working and I'm living here in Lund and so I can have opinions, but it is very important for me to have that when I am home not at work. They should not interfere with my work. That's what I meant at the beginning, that I have to be clear about my role.

These different and conflicting opinions are not denied or necessarily a concern, they may have opinions. However, they endeavour to separate them from their work in which they adopt a different set of values.

Ultimately however while personal understandings of what is the right decision to be made can be put aside while working as a civil servant there is an inviolable value core to each person. When the purposes of the organisation drift too far from this core the organisation must be abandoned. In some experiences a fear that trends were leading the municipality in directions inconsistent with personal values prevailed,

I am worried about it (referring to her concerns Europe and Sweden had become too unwelcoming towards refugees and immigrants), and I think we are soon there and then I don't know what to do actually, because maybe I can't work in a kommun any more then, if there is a difference between you and me, then we are in my deep values and they are important and I think that they are important in every person's life the things you believe in, you have to stick with that in a way.

Theme 9: Politics as something from beyond but with direct effects. In this theme, work in the municipality is directly affected by a nebulous concept referred to as politics. In some cases such as with the politicians interviewed it can be interacted with. In other cases it's influence is strictly unilateral. It is "politics" that is blamed for many of the decisions taken by others that influence the experience of workers but that they have no or little influence over. It can be seen as serving its own incomprehensible ends,

They have a big room (talking about recent expansions to nursing home stock to meet higher standards), together it is 35m^2 and they have a fridge and they have a microwave and I mean I don't think I have seen any use them but this is political.

Politics can be seen as something impenetrable, as a deficit of power but not responsibility as in this case regarding meeting educational targets set by the national government,

Then we have the responsibility and we have to find the money and that is the problem, because the one who decides isn't the one who has the money you understand...So we have a dilemma that we don't decide on everything, but we have the full responsibility for everything.

Through "politics" events in other parts of the country ended up affecting their work as in the case of the exposure of scandalously low quality standards in Piteå a small town far in the north of Sweden, which has lead to legislative change that will have an impact on how workers do their job in Lund.

Even though politics and politicians both are blamed for the many inconsistencies in policy or adaptations in working life that must be made by interviewees the politicians interviewed also expressed an understanding of politics as being something beyond their influence at times. Their understanding of politics also incorporated national political trends that restricted their decision making abilities and the challenges and restrictions of being in opposition. Many observed that until recently in Lund the majority party had swapped between the right and the left with every election. While they might strive to perform at their best and win votes ultimately the political preferences of the electorate (and the powers associated with them and a successful election) are considered something in flux and beyond the politicians ability to directly and effectually change.

Theme 10: Cooperation over conflict. Across personal relationships between staff, structures within the municipality, in dealings with other municipalities, and regions and with the national government, cooperation was always a key part of the experience of interviewees as opposed to conflictual or competitive relationships. 'We work together' is frequently heard when discussing relationships throughout the municipality between different departments working towards similar goals.

Where competitive pressures or conflicting responsibilities do play a part, as in the case for example of health care responsibility and its distribution between the regional government and the local government interviewees were inclined to emphasise the successes experienced in forming contractual-based compromises, cooperating to best serve their citizens over emphasising the challenges faced by these overlapping responsibilities.

This emphasis on cooperation was also present in how the politicians explained their experiences such as in the case of one politician who noted,

In Lund up until the last election we used to change majority everytime there was an election. So we learned the hard way "don't fight unnecessary fights, and don't quarrel too much", because next time you will be on the other side...I think that is also important that we can cooperate over party blocks. I mean the questions in a kommun are more practical. You must fix good schools, you must fix good care of the old people, you must see to it that we have cultural events, and so you have to cooperate

This understanding that cooperation is sometime that comes about naturally or is even forced due to the structures and nature of the municipality is also noted above. There are few areas where the workers of the municipality find themselves in direct competition with other departments, local governments, levels of government etc. In almost all areas of service the municipality has a mandated monopoly. In areas where the private sector does operate it is by the grace of the municipality and again relatively cooperative relationships are the experience of the managers and politicians dealing with them.

Competition is also at times denied based on the grounds of the municipality's superior position as in the case of this politician arguing against basing judgments on tax levels on the levels of the surrounding municipalities Lund could be seen to be competing with for residents and business,

They say people will move to Staffanstorp (a neighbouring municipality with lower tax rates) and I say ok let them move, I don't care, they won't move because Lund is quite attractive, Lund doesn't have to compete with low taxes to get people to live here, I don't think so.

Theme 12: Big enough to feel isolated. In this theme interviewees expressed the magnitude of the municipalities structures and the scope of the services it provided and its impacts on their experiences and the experiences of their clients, the citizens of the municipality.

The municipality was sizable enough that workers considered themselves in separate "boxes", discrete and isolated elements of the hierarchy within the municipality. A woman working in care services notes,

Well when you are working in care services like we are, I think we are isolated, we are working in care services and we are meeting the people who are working in care services and you just think about

the problem and the goal and the care so I think you can become isolated, you don't think about other things.

Others share this understanding of being a discrete entity but emphasis cooperation more as in the case of this woman working in social services,

I work together with other parts of the municipality, other, you know we are in small boxes you could say, so with the other small boxes I work.

Attempting to coordinate work between these boxes was one of the key experiences and challenges for some. One interviewee working in aged care had struggled to negotiate a system through which trained Silvia Sisters (Nurses with specialist training in dementia care) could share their expertise across departments where there existed no central financial resources through which they could be distribute them. Instead individual negotiations between the departments and wings was key.

The size and scope created difficulties where workers endeavoured to provide a holistic service to their clients but were challenged by the scope of services provided by the municipality as in the case of this woman working in social services,

It is a large organisation, a kommun of this size, that is you can't know all the things the kommun does, you can't know that because it is so large and that is of course a difficulty, because if someone phones me, I have a lot of phone calls every day, and sometimes I actually don't know what I should do with that person, I can hear that this is not our problem and I want to help them, I don't want to say to a person that phones me "you can phone our switchboard", I want to say "ok you can call this person and he has this phone number".

This scope of services is also believed to be too great for the citizens of Lund by interviewees. One woman from care services asks,

Does everybody know what we have to offer? That is a good question because even though we think we have a lot of brochures and things there are still people at home that have people at home that never get in touch with anyone, and that is a difficulty, how do we reach people?...Do they know who

they have to get in touch with? You can think you have enough material out there but there are still people who don't know who they should ring.

One of the strongest rationales for local government must be its local, human scale yet many interviewees expressed concern that a full and clear picture of the municipality was beyond their conception and that of their clients. They did observe that things may be considerably different in a smaller municipality than Lund, or indeed had been when they had worked in smaller municipalities in the past but also suggested that when there had been experiments at dividing Lund into smaller more manageable partitions this had had a detrimental effect on the quality and efficiency of services. This remained one of the challenges faced in their work, both from a personal and organisational perspective but also one they were most powerless to change individually (despite attempts such as above to always direct clients to the person they seek and to create partnerships across departments and divisions).

5.0 - Discussion

For the managers and politicians working in Lunds Kommun that were interviewed then, the experience of working within a local municipality like Lund was multifaceted. Essentially it involved many emotions and feelings experienced in a variety of contexts and situations. It can be considered to be "largely the same as any other job" in many aspects but offers many unique aspects to those who have experienced it. One of these aspects that comes out strongest though is that the role involves a deep seated concern for both colleagues, the citizens of the municipality, and the clients they serve. This concern manifests itself in discussions of the services and structures of the municipality and the personal projects interviewees had undertaken to improve things.

Working in a municipality involves feelings of both power and powerlessness. As described by the interviewees there is great scope to influence not only the organisation and their peers but "society" also. Workers consider their work empowers them to make the changes they see as improving society and help bring about a better environment for others. This is a fundamental part of why they have chosen their careers and the role can be contrasted with work in the private sector which workers don't believe offers the same opportunities to work for others. These powers are limited however and feelings of powerlessness are critical to

understanding the essence of municipal work. "Politics" and politicians are a stifling, inconsistent and troubling force that is also critical to the work within the municipality, this is the case even for the politicians spoken to. This too is seen to in the eyes of policy makers and managers in the municipality, to contrast with the private sector where bosses and the profit motive create different dynamics. These opportunities to exercise power lead to feelings of triumph and personal security that make up a key part of how work is experienced. They also lead to the frustration characteristic of the work.

The experience of working within a municipality is in essence one of public service, interviewees saw themselves as part of the public service and contrasted their work with that of the private sector. They associated "public" work with self-sacrifice (in terms of accepting lower salaries and their time and effort), and with opportunities to affect positive change in society. They experience their work and the work of the "kommun" as being part of the Sweden's welfare state and a deliverer of services to the benefit of the public. Notions of local democracy and autonomy serve as a background to their experience but ultimately their focus is on the efficient and effective delivery of services to the constituents of the municipality and their work involved a degree of scepticism and ambivalence towards expressions of local democracy seen as excessive and diminishing services.

The experiences of the interviewees and the conception of the essence of their work formed has several interesting interactions with the literature discussed regarding local government and the evolution of the Swedish system specifically. The dimensions through which workers experience power both their own and when it is acted upon them coincide with the strong elements of local democracy hinted at by the literature. Regional antagonism towards the centre was not a commonplace part of the experience, as might be the case in a jurisdiction with weaker powers granted to local government or with clearer and stronger directions outlining how to deliver welfare services. The scope and size of the activities undertaken by Lunds kommun, which interviewees found overwhelming can also be understood through the literature as something relatively unique to Sweden, with its large municipalities with many responsibilities post-reforms. Similarly, the strong customer orientation of the interviewees and their conception of the municipality as a service delivery organisation may also have its roots in wider structural understandings of Swedish government and Sweden's welfare state and the development and reform of Swedish local government historically.

5.1 - Implications and relevance

The goals of this research were to develop a better understanding of the structure of Sweden's government and welfare state and its historical development both from a wide theoretical perspective through literature review and first-hand through the perspective of some of the people working within a municipality and qualitative research. It is hoped my findings can provide insight in several respects and so justify themselves in the process.

Giving a voice to those people within the municipality responsible for the decisions leading to the outcomes citizens experience gives a unique insight and perspective from which a better understanding of how the municipality works, what emotions and experiences characterise work there, and what goals guide it and its workers. This knowledge could prove helpful to interested citizens of the municipality studied and other municipalities in similar circumstances and increase understanding. It was noted by one of the interviewees that greater understanding by citizens of their municipality and its work breeds trust and this greater degree of trust in public institutions can lead to better outcomes for everyone as citizens make use of the help available earlier before more drastic intervention is necessary. These benefits sit alongside transparency and participatory concerns.

Discussing their experiences also gave participants in the study a chance to reflect upon their experiences and consider their roles more abstractly than the day to day business of the municipality usually allows. Many believed this was of benefit to them personally and their practice.

It is hoped that the understandings and conceptions of practice in these settings presented by the research will be of benefit to anyone working or considering work in the welfare field, providing a springboard for reflection upon their own practice and a basis through which they can consider their own work in context. Questions regarding to what extent these experiences are shared or not, what makes them desirable or not, and why it might be the case they are shared or not may provide valuable insight into the practice of others, whether they are working in Lunds kommun, other municipalities or levels of government in Sweden, or globally in radically different welfare settings such as those touched upon for comparison above.

5.2 - Future Research possibilities.

In light of these goals and implications there are several avenues upon which further research is desirable. Due to the challenges involved in building networks and integrating oneself into a community to the extent forthcoming interviews are possible and resource pressures I was unable to investigate any other municipalities in Sweden despite my original plan. As the research is exploratory rather than comparative I don't see this as detracting from the knowledge acquired, however it would be of interest to explore how the essence may be different in different sized municipalities in Sweden (the differences in population can be quite dramatic) especially in smaller municipalities with fewer employees. Similarly there is the potential to repeat and expand the study in other municipal structures across different jurisdictions. All but one of the interviewees was female and almost all were in the twilight period of their careers approaching retirement, this was a feature of the demographic, public service managers being more commonly women and experienced, and in the nature of the sampling technique. Developing a study with a greater demographic variety of people spoken to may lead to even more understandings of the nature of municipal work and a more nuanced conception of its essence.

Finally, the concept of the welfare state is frequently considered intrinsically linked to the concept of democracy, through its links to citizenship and rights and its associations with positive freedom yet both the literature and some of the descriptions provided in interviews show that other conceptions exist. The massive post war expansion of welfare services undertaken by the Swedish public sector and Sweden's municipalities especially during the post war "golden age" of the welfare state brought with it an arguably necessary shift away from the previous "local expressions of democracy and active participatory citizenship" towards the efficiency focused service oriented bureaucracy of today by some reckonings. This idea that welfare state expansion and the promotion of democracy don't necessarily go hand in hand seems to go against the norm and may provide a rich avenue for further analysis (though it has no doubt been considered before as in the case of the literature on Sweden's reforms).

Appendix A

Below lies the general question sheet from which Interviewees were asked questions. However it should be noted not all these questions were asked in every interview and not always in the order given and the wording varied somewhat from interview to interview:

General Question: How do people working to administer welfare services in Sweden's kommuner perceive and describe their experience of working at this local level?

Questions to ask:

1.) What dimensions/aspects, incidents/events and people intimately connected with the experience of working in a kommun stand out for you?

2.) How has the process of coming to work in Lunds kommun come to affect you? Can you pinpoint any personal changes you have gone through that you associate with working here?

3.) How does working in a kommun affect others? How has it affected your family and other significant others in your life?

4.) What feelings has working here brought up for you?

5.) What thoughts stand out when you think about working in a kommun?

6.) How does the experience impact on your body? Do you associate any body states with your work here?

7.) Have you shared everything that is significant for me understanding your experience?

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