

# Sending an Active Message

A Street-Level Bureaucracy Approach towards Benefit  
Sanctions Targeted at the Long-Term Unemployed

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# Abstract

This thesis analyses how social policy in the form of benefit sanctions targeted at the long-term unemployed is made by case workers within the Swedish Public Employment Agency (*Arbetsförmedlingen*).

Since the 1990s, rising unemployment and fiscal pressures on the welfare states made countries more oriented towards policies of “activation”. In 2007, the Job and Development Programme (JOB), was initiated as the Labour Market Programme specially designed to activate the long-term unemployed in Sweden. In March 2015, a system for benefit sanctions was introduced within Activity Support, the form of economic compensation participants in a Labour Market Programme are entitled to.

This thesis adopts a theoretical framework of *street-level bureaucracy*, in which the case workers’ practice of discretion in their professional interaction with clients, becomes the actual policies. The analysis was conducted through semi-structured interviews with case workers within JOB in local offices in Skåne, Sweden during the spring of 2017.

The results from this analysis provide examples of how case workers practice discretion in order to handle issues regarding how they perceive, for example, resource constraints and clients’ various degrees of deservingness. Discretion took forms of, for example, creaming, client differentiation and protection of those clients considered to be deserving.

*Key words:* Benefit Sanctions, Street-Level Bureaucracy, Discretion, Unemployment, Activity Support

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# 1 Introduction

*“If you don't have rules, then what? Anarchy?”*

– Office A – Interviewee 2

According to the United Nation's declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to work and to be protected against unemployment (United Nations, 1948). Combating unemployment is supposed to be one of the top priorities of any welfare state. However, the trend in Sweden regarding unemployment figures has been in conflict with this ambition, especially regarding long-term unemployment.

In addressing the past decades' increasing unemployment, labour market policies oriented towards “activation” have become dominant within the OECD countries. In Sweden, the Conservative-liberal Government in power 2006-2014 initiated the “Work Line”, with a greater focus on conditionality regarding unemployment benefits and curtailing the access to Unemployment Insurance. However, the first Labour Market Programme aimed at activating the long-term-unemployed was established in 2001 by the Social-Democratic Government (Bonoli 2010; 2011) (Bengtsson 2017) (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 226) (Hollertz, 2016).

In 2007, this programme – the Activity Guarantee – was replaced by the Job and Development Programme (JOB). JOB is a Labour Market Programme specially designed for the long-term unemployed, who for various reasons are not entitled to Unemployment Insurance. The existence within JOB is mainly made up of active job search and regular interaction with a responsible case worker at *Arbetsförmedlingen* (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2015b).

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2015, a new system for benefit sanctions was introduced in Sweden for unemployed participating in Labour Market Programmes. The system had its origin in a legislative bill (Ds 2013:59) issued by the Conservative-Liberal Government in 2013. The purpose of the new system was to harmonize the rules regarding the benefits available to participants in Labour Market Programmes - called Activity Support - with the rules regarding Unemployment Insurance.

This, among other reforms, means that the unemployed now have to regularly give an account of the measures they have taken to find employment. If such measures are considered unsatisfactory by the case worker at the Public Employment Agency (Swedish: *Arbetsförmedlingen*), this will lead to a possible sanction. The magnitude of the sanction increases for every repeated offence, from a formal warning to up to 45 days' suspension from Activity Support. Misdemeanour, such as missing an appointment, rejecting a job offer or causing unemployment, is also considered a reason for sanction. According to the legislator this would particularly underline “that the jobseeker himself has the ultimate responsibility for solving his unemployment situation” (Ds 2013:59, p. 7). In December 2016, the Social-Democratic led Government presented a bill with the

intent to extend the sanction system to also include newly arrived immigrants in the Introduction Programme (Ds 2016:35).

Lipsky (2010) has argued that welfare policies cannot be understood by studying legislative reforms alone. Instead, policy is to be found in the practices on the level of the *street-level bureaucrats* who interpret and perceives legislation, organizational conditions within the agency as well as demands from clients.

One way they do so, is by practicing *discretion*. Discretion can be understood as “the freedom that organizations and street-level bureaucrats are granted when they choose among a number of possible actions to take or not take when interacting with policy targets” (Thorén, 2008, p. 23) and the dimension of discretion as “the space in the rules” (Baker-Collins, 2016, p. 223-224).

A high degree of discretion and relative autonomy from organizational authority is what the policy-making role of street-level bureaucrats is built upon (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). Street-level bureaucrats’ practice of discretion within an agency adds up to the actual policies produced. However, they do so within a certain context, namely the *political-institutional*, the *organizational* as well as their own *normative assumptions* (Thorén, 2008).

This thesis analyses how street-level bureaucrats in the form of case workers at *Arbetsförmedlingen* make policy in the form of benefit sanctions of the unemployed within Activity Support. It does so by using semi-structured interviews with case workers involved in the Job and Development Programme (JOB). The interviews were conducted between the 27<sup>th</sup> of March and the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2017 and consisted of sixteen interviewees within nine different offices around Skåne, Sweden.

## 1.1 Purpose, Aim & Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse policies as they are made by case workers in their interaction with unemployed clients. This includes an ambition to both contribute to the literature of benefit sanctions and street-level bureaucracy theory, while presenting an enhanced understanding on the complex and context-bound process of social policy making. If the supposed effects of policies, such as welfare conditionality, are to be analysed, then the arena of policy making also needs to be targeted. The specific policy in focus is benefit sanctions within Activity Support for the long-term unemployed in JOB.

Research seem to conclude that benefit sanctions indeed have a positive effect on the outflow to employment, although only for those unemployed with an already relatively strong attachment to the labour market. For unemployed further away from the labour market, benefit sanctions seem to have no, or the opposite, effect. These unemployed are also more likely to be sanctioned (Handler, 2006) (Hall et. al 2017) (Van den Berg – Vikström, 2009) (Hägglund, 2002).

The Swedish Unemployment Insurance Board (IAF), which, among other responsibilities, is responsible for exercising supervision over *Arbetsförmedlingen's* work regarding sanctions (IAF, 2017) has shown that the most common characteristics among the unemployed over-represented among benefit sanctions,

are low replacement levels, low education and being born in a foreign country (Westerlind, 2015, p. 4). For the long-term unemployed in JOB, this might mean that sanctions would put them in an even more vulnerable position when they are subjected to sanctions, which in turn is a tension the case worker will encounter in daily practice.

Street-level bureaucracies have been identified as “the mysterious space between formal policy and actual policy outcome”. Even though this “mysterious space” would be of great interest to analyse in political science research, it has often been overlooked (Karlsson, 2015, p. 20) (Brodkin, 2011). Analysing policy through the lens of street-level bureaucracy is to move away from the typical question of “what works?” to the question of “how does it work?”. If a policy “works” or not, might have nothing to do with how legislation is phrased or how it was intended from a legislative perspective (Brodkin 2008; 2011). It is in the street-level sphere policies are actually made. The empirical questions worth asking then becomes *how* and *in what way* do street-level bureaucrats practice their discretion.

This analysis cannot be conducted at a general level on an abstract ideal-type of what a street-level bureaucracy “is” in its “essence”, but must be conducted directly aimed at a specific agency, in this case *Arbetsförmedlingen*. JOB seems like a well-suited object of focus within this specific agency, since this programme is specifically targeted at the long-term unemployed.

Hagelund & Kavli (2009) have specifically put forward how case workers address policies of activation on clients when “work is out of sight”, as an area of certain tension worth researching. The clientele in JOB can be said to, to a large extent, be made up of such clients where employment is more difficult to achieve. Knijn & van Wel (2001) has shown that case workers have a tendency to use their discretion in order to defy legislation or interpret directives in order to conform with their own view on how policies should be adapted and in what way, on who.

How street-level bureaucrats perceive and handle this tension then becomes an obvious area of importance since it directly affects how one of the most vulnerable groups in society – the long-term unemployed – is treated. This also needs to be researched in order to understand how social policies really are made.

The research question of this thesis is then:

*How do street-level bureaucrats at Arbetsförmedlingen practice discretion regarding benefit sanctions within Activity Support?*

## 1.2 Structure of Thesis

This thesis starts with an overview of activation in Sweden, how JOB and benefit sanctions fits within this phenomenon and how the field relevant for the research problem is constituted (section 2). Street-level bureaucracy, as the main theoretical framework of this thesis, is presented in section 3, along with the analytic model developed for this research. The method section is to be found in section 4, and the

analysis in chapter 5. Conclusion and suggestions of further research can be found in section 6.

### 1.3 Definitions

The specific area of this research is filled with jargon and expressions that can be difficult to comprehend and separate for the reader, especially for a reader less familiar with the Swedish labour market and its various policies. In this thesis, the ambition is to explain all relevant terms as far as possible directly when they occur in the various sections. However, the most common are:

*Activity Report* – A report over job search activities the unemployed in a Labour Market Programme should submit monthly to their case worker at *Arbetsförmedlingen*.

*Activity Support* – Economic compensation the unemployed participating in a Labour Market Programme are entitled to.

*Arbetsförmedlingen* – The name of the Swedish Public Employment Agency. Its Swedish name is from here on forwards used throughout this thesis.

*Ersättningsprövning* – Translates “The Unit for Trial of Economic Compensation” and is the name of the unit within *Arbetsförmedlingen* which investigates and makes the final decisions regarding sanctions, after being notified by the case worker. The Swedish term is used throughout this thesis due to the lack of a suitable and user-friendly translation.

In this thesis, “unemployed”, “job seeker”, and “client” are used synonymously. This is because the interviewees often used different terms when referring to their clients. In order to be as accurate as possible when transcribing the interviewees, this has been taken into consideration.

“Benefits” is used as a generic term which relates both to Unemployment Insurance and Activity Support, even if neither of those really are “benefits” in its traditional sense. “Benefits” are usually associated with Social Welfare, which in Sweden is administered by the municipalities. Unemployment Insurance is, however, an insurance, which the recipient has earned through paying member fees, and Activity Support is a rights-based economic compensation for participating in a Labour Market Programme, and based on previous income (Köhler et al. 2008, p. 236). This is important to keep in mind, but for feasibility reasons the term “benefits” is still sometimes used in its generic sense, namely as corresponding to economic compensation, not earned through wage-labour, and paid out by a Government agency with some form of conditionality attached to it.

Since “benefit sanctions” is a well-established general term of different forms of sanctions, through cuts or suspension from different forms of economic compensation, this term is also used in that way throughout this thesis.

## 2 Activation in the Swedish Welfare State

This section seeks to situate the Job and Development Programme (JOB) and benefit sanctions, in the Swedish welfare state development and in the literature on welfare policy. This since JOB can be seen as the most prominent example of how policies regarding unemployment in Sweden have been oriented towards activation of the unemployed. JOB is a Labour Market Programme, initiated by the Conservative-Liberal Government that came into power in 2006. It is a programme designed “to provide people who have been unemployed for a long period of time with individually designed measures in order for them to find work as fast as possible” (SFS 2007:414). The programme is thereby specifically aimed towards combating long-term unemployment, which also is a set priority of *Arbetsförmedlingen*, according to directives provided by the Government and Parliament.

Since the 1990s, high levels of unemployment and fiscal pressures on the welfare state have made many European countries more oriented towards policies of “activation”. Typical policies of activations are stricter welfare conditionality and emphasizing individual responsibility of becoming “employable” (Qvist, 2016, p. 19-20) (Garsten – Jacobsson, 2004).

This tendency also reached Sweden, in relation to the economic crisis in the early 1990s (Dahlstedt, 2012), (Köhler et al. 2008) (Johansson, 2001). The Swedish welfare state has traditionally been understood as characterize by low unemployment, a high degree of unionization and a relatively generous, and universal, access to welfare components such as Health- and Unemployment Insurance (Esping-Andersen, 1990, 26-28) (Broström, 2015, p. 16).

However, social reforms in Sweden was scarce, compared to other OECD countries before the 1930s. For example, Unemployment Insurance was adopted first in 1934, compared to in 1906 and 1907, respectively, in Norway and Denmark. In 1950, only about a third of the workforce was covered by Unemployment Insurance. Instead, the Swedish welfare state was the most far-reaching regarding health and pension policies (Esping-Andersen, 1985, p. 153) (Pierson, 2007, p. 110; 125).

Sweden was, however, a pioneer in adopting Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs). Bonoli (2010; 2011) characterizes ALMPs to “have multiple objectives, but generally they aim at removing obstacles to labour market participation” (Bonoli, 2011, p. 319). In the 1950s, Sweden adopted ALMPs focused on extensive training programmes and upskilling of workers, in order to meet the requirements of a growing post-war economy and increased demand of skilled labour from employers (Swenson, 2002, p. 6-8) (Bonoli, 2010, p. 437). But since the 1980s,

ALMPs have generally been practiced in order to target rising unemployment and stagnant economies. One way of doing this was through job expansion in the public sector, which kept unemployment figures relatively low throughout the 1980s. However, in connection with the crisis of the early 90s, this practice was more or less abandoned (Bonoli, 2010, p. 439-440; 446) (Bengtsson et al. 2017, p. 371-372) (Korpi, 2003, p. 603).

Bonoli categorizes four different orientations of ALMPs according to their focus on: *incentive reinforcement*, *employment assistance*, *occupation*, and *human capital investment or upskilling* (Bonoli, 2010, p. 441). If Sweden used to be oriented towards policies focused on training or upskilling, investments in such policies has fallen drastically since the 1990s, in favour of those focused on incentives reinforcement (Vulkan, 2015, p. 40-41) (Bonoli, 2010, p. 449-450; 2011, p. 331). This also follows the general OECD trend (Kvist & Greve, 2011, p. 146; Bengtsson et al. 2017, p. 371-372) (Knotz, 2016) (Cox, 2004).

In 2001, the possibility to re-qualify for Unemployment Insurance through participation in a Labour Market Programme was removed. A Labour Market Programme named The Activity Guarantee was then created for those unemployed who no longer were entitled to Unemployment Insurance (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 215). The Activity Guarantee was explicitly designed with a purpose to “activate” the participants, instead of being a passive occupation in exchange for benefits (RiR, 2005:17). It also strived to activate groups who before had been more or less exempted from work requirements, such as people with disabilities or people on long-term sick leave. Instead of “being at the disposal of the labour market”, as a basic condition for being entitled to benefits, the unemployed participants in Labour Market Programmes became expected to actively seek employment and not turn down measures presented by *Arbetsförmedlingen* (Hörnqvist, 2010, p. 29; 38) (Bergeskog, 2001, p. 234) (Köhler et al. 2008, p. 274).

The Swedish Conservative-Liberal Government in power 2006-2014 campaigned under the so-called “Work Line”, which included the implementation of several reforms within the Unemployment Insurance, in line with the imperatives of work-incentives, stricter benefit conditionality and reduced benefit generosity (Köhler et al. 2008, p. 258). The Unemployment Insurance was supposed to function as a “transition insurance”, and designed in order to provide incentives for a quick return to the labour market. (Bengtsson et al. 2017) (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 209-210).

After the economic crisis in the autumn of 2008, unemployment in Sweden rose from about 6 percent to about 8,5. Between 2011 and 2014 the figure was stable around 8 percent, but since 2014 unemployment has continuously decreased (Statistics Sweden, 2017).

The trend of decreasing unemployment has, however, not been the case regarding long-term unemployment. Statistic Sweden estimates that 30 % of the unemployed have been unemployed for more than six months and the share of long-term unemployed registered at *Arbetsförmedlingen* has increased from 24 to 40 percent between 2006 and the autumn of 2016 (*Arbetsförmedlingen*, 2017) (Statistic Sweden, 2017a).

Before the economic crisis, unemployment was higher among women, but this has changed since 2008. Now unemployment is higher among men and, during the same period as unemployment has decreased in general, it has increased among the foreign born population (Statistics Sweden, 2017).

Since March 2017, unemployment is no longer decreasing, according to *Arbetsförmedlingen's* own data (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017a). Long-term unemployment continues to grow, with a 1,6 % increase of those unemployed over a year and 5,6 % increase of unemployed longer than two years (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017b). Youth unemployment has decreased together with the overall unemployment figures in the last years, but remains above 20 %, and has during more than a decade regularly been higher than the OECD average (Statistics Sweden, 2017) (Hort et al. 2016, p. 680).

One of the most significant trends regarding the unemployed population in recent years is a decreasing number of people receiving income through Unemployment Insurance.

Sjöberg (2011) identifies the underlying factors behind this to be a consequence of the Conservative-Liberal Government's reforms within Unemployment Insurance in 2006, including the increased membership fees. Membership decreased sharply after 2006 and the possibility to qualify for insurance through a period of studies, which in 2006 one-third of the unemployed between 18 and 24 years old did, was removed. Membership in an Unemployment Insurance Found decreased the most among the young and the old, and among those with the lowest incomes (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 218-220) (Kjellberg, 2010).

Activity Support is a certain form of income support participants in a Labour Market Programme generally are entitled to. Activity Support can be seen as filling a gap between the Unemployment Insurance and Social Welfare, which makes a loss of entitlement to Unemployment Insurance less drastic for those affected (Köhler, et al. 2008, p. 263). This is because the level of an unemployed persons Activity Support is based on his or her previous level of income, even if it still is lower than whatever level of Unemployment Insurance he or she had before. The maximum amount of Activity Support is 910 SEK/day the first 100 days, and after that 760 SEK/day. There are, however, also those in JOB who did not have an income before to function as a basis for the Activity Support. In those cases, Activity Support is set at the basic income level of 233 SEK/day (Försäkringskassan, 2017).

In 2007, 1,5 % of the work force received Activity Support through participation in a Labour Market Programme which had increased to 3,6 % in 2017. Sjöberg argues that this has resulted in an increased differentiation between unemployed relatively close to the labour market and those further away (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 2010).

## 2.1 JOB and Benefit Sanctions

By March 2017, 181 000 people were registered in a Labour Market Programme which entitles to Activity Support, and among them 101 000 were registered in JOB, which makes JOB the largest Labour Market Programme in Sweden (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2017c).

JOB came into effect in 2007, and replaced the Activity Guarantee. As in the Activity Guarantee, an assignment to JOB may take place if an unemployed person, registered at *Arbetsförmedlingen*, has exhausted his or her Unemployment Insurance or failed to qualify for the same. Also, unemployed youth or newly arrived immigrants may be assigned to JOB if they no longer qualify for other programmes specifically designed for these groups (SFS 2007:414).

Participation is voluntary but a precondition in order to be eligible for Activity Support. An assignment to JOB can be revoked if the participant is abusive or disrupts activities, or for any other reasons cannot fulfill the intentions with the programme.

For other, less severe, misdemeanors occurring while in the programme, *Arbetsförmedlingen* is supposed to use sanctions targeting the Activity Support. The unemployed who are assigned are expected to actively search for jobs and to submit a monthly Activity Report. Failure to do so is supposed to result in a sanction. Conditionality is then to be understood as a basis for JOB, and well in line with Bonoli's characterization of incentives reinforcing ALMPs.

A new system for sanctions in the Unemployment Insurance was introduced in 2013, through the amendment of the Law of Unemployment Insurance (SFS 1997:238) (Prop 2012/13:12). On the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2015 a similar system of benefit sanctions was introduced regarding Activity Support. The explicit motives for this reform was to underline "that the jobseeker himself has the ultimate responsibility for solving his unemployment situation" (Ds 2013:59, p. 7).

The new system was based on a staircase model with three parallel staircases depending on the type of misdemeanour. The first staircase related to if the unemployed *mishandles his or her job searching activities*, the second to if the unemployed *prolongs his or her period of unemployment* and the third to if the unemployed *causes his or her unemployment*.

For *mishandling job search activities*, the first sanction is a formal warning, followed by a one-day suspension from benefits for a second offence, a five day suspension for a third offence, a ten day suspension for a fourth and 45 days of suspension from Activity Support after a fifth offence. For *prolonging the period of unemployment*, the staircase is made up of the "steps" five, ten, or 45 days of suspension respectively and for *causing unemployment*, the first step results in a 45 days' - suspension directly. *Arbetsförmedlingen* is responsible for making sure the unemployed comply to the rules regarding benefits (Arbetsförmedlingen, 2015a).

The sanction process can be automatic, semi-automatic or manual, from a case worker's perspective. It is however, a separate unit at *Arbetsförmedlingen* called The Unit for Trial of Economic Compensation (Swedish: *Ersättningsprövning*), who is responsible for investigating every errand regarding sanctions.

Failure to submit an Activity Report before set deadline, triggers an automatic message to *Ersättningsprövning* and informs the unit that a misdemeanour which might result in a possible sanction has occurred. If the unemployed misses a

scheduled appointment, information about a possible sanction is automatically generated, but has to be manually confirmed by the case worker in order for the information to be further sent to *Ersättningsprövning* (Grape, 2016, p. 11-12).

Case workers are supposed to regularly monitor the unemployed person's job search activity and manually report any potential shortcomings in the form of a message to *Ersättningsprövning* about a possible sanction. Case workers are also responsible for matching the unemployed with those jobs available, the case worker considers to be appropriate. If the case worker considers the unemployed person to have rejected an appropriate job offer, or in any other way prolonged his or her employment, the case worker should notify *Ersättningsprövning*.

The overall purpose of introducing the benefit sanctions within Activity Support was to "increase the outflow to work through increased job search activity". This was to be achieved through "combining measures of matching and support with control of the unemployed person's job searching activities" (Ds 2013:59, p. 7-8; 49). In December 2016, the Social-Democratic-led Government proposed a bill to extend the same system for benefit sanctions to also apply for unemployed immigrants participating in the introduction programme (Ds 2016:35).

Although, welfare policies oriented towards greater conditionality, including benefit sanctions, have been a wide-spread tendency among the OECD-countries over the last couple of decades, there are still reasons to believe that path dependency and the type of welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990) play a role in how such policies actually are implemented and materialized (Pierson, 2007) (Clasen, 2006) (Kananen, 2012).

JOB can be seen as a Swedish manifestation of this tendency, with its clear focus on activation, individual responsibility for finding employment, combined with benefit sanctions. But it also fulfils the function of securing some form of alternative income for those unemployed who for various reasons does not qualify for Unemployment Insurance.

## 2.2 The Effects of Benefit Sanctions

Benefit sanctions are often identified as a key component of welfare conditionality and in describing the rise of the so called "workfare" state (Peck, 2001). In the welfare policy literature, researchers such as Dingeldey (2007), Holden (2003), Clasen (2006), Deeming (2015) and Dragsbaek Schmidt & Hersh (2006) focus on the transition from welfare to workfare, drawing on influential welfare theory concepts from Esping-Andersen (1990), Jessop (1993), Gough (1979), Pierson (1994), O'Connor (1973) and Offe (1984). Qvist (2016) and Karlsson (2015) adopts such approaches to various forms of contemporary labour market policies in Sweden, while Broström (2015), Åmark (2005) and Magnusson (2010) focuses on labour market policies in Sweden within a historical perspective.

Van den Berg & Vikström (2009) analyse benefit sanctions in Sweden, through measuring their effect on unemployment. They argue that the transition to employment increased with 23 percent after the introduction of sanctions in the

Unemployment Insurance. However, this effect was attributed to the segment of unemployed people relatively close to the labour market. After being subjected to sanctions, or under the threat of sanctions, these unemployed people tended to accept jobs of lower quality and lower salaries (Van den Berg – Vikström, 2009, p. 34).

This conclusion is in line within similar research. Arni et al. (2009) and Lalive et al. (2005) present signs of the same effect in Switzerland, as well as McViar (2008) in the United Kingdom, Abbring et al. (2005) in the Netherlands, Jensen et al. (2003) in Denmark, Busk (2016) in Finland and Boone et al. (2009) in a cross-national comparative study. They discuss the effects of sanctions as a policy aimed at various forms of unemployment benefits as a trade-off between reducing unemployment at the expense of job quality.

This particular aspect of benefit sanctions cannot be neglected. From a political point of view, the “upside” of sanctions is obvious. Unemployment tends to decrease, and an outflow to employment can be contributed to a successful implementation of activation policies. However, the fact that the opposite effect might occur for the long-term unemployed is likely to be downplayed for the same reasons (Hägglund, 2002) (Köhler, et al. 2008, p. 288-291). In Sweden, studies show that unemployed with low education levels and low compensation levels – both characteristics of the long-term unemployed – and those who are in general “least able to succeed in the labour market”, are overrepresented among those who get sanctioned (Grape, 2016, p. 9) (Handler, 2006, p. 128) (Hall et. al 2017) (Westerlind, 2015, p. 4).

Therefore, there are reasons to believe that benefit sanctions might be both ineffective – in regards to outflow to employment – and result in more severe consequences for the long-term unemployed, such as the clientele in JOB.

There is also a distinguished amount of literature interested in the role of benefit sanctions and conditionality in governing citizens and the effects on citizenships. See for example Christie (2016), Boland & Griffin (2015), Wright (2012) and Wright & Stewart (2016). The latter is part of an on-going research project granted by the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), and carried out by multiple universities in England and Scotland, titled *Welfare Conditionality* (2017).

There is also research focused on the effects of benefit sanctions on other social policies and areas. Machin & Marie (2006) analyse the connection between benefit sanctions in certain areas in the UK and rising crime rates, Adler (2016) focuses on the effects of benefit sanctions on certain groups of people and Beatty et al. (2015) on benefit sanctions’ effect on homelessness.

Welfare policies and conditionality as an exercise of power within the Foucauldian research tradition has also been common, see for example Cruikshank (1999), Hörnqvist (2010) and Henman (2006).

### 3 Theoretical Framework: Street-Level Bureaucracy

This section presents the main theoretical framework of this thesis: *Street-level bureaucracy*, and how the key components of this theory has been modelled to apply to the conditions of *Arbetsförmedlingen*, in order to work as an analytic foundation for this research. This approach is based on Michael Lipsky's (2010) updated edition of his book *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*, which was originally published in 1980.

Lipsky's theory is based on the assumption that the decisions, routines and devices invented to cope with uncertainties and work pressure from public service providers *become* the public policies (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). In order to understand public policy, it is therefore not enough to focus on legislation. Instead, public policy is to be understood as produced by individual practices of the public service workers, and the outcomes of their actions add up to actual policy.

These public service workers, who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and possess a relatively high degree of substantial discretion in the execution of their work, are called *street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky, 2010, p. 3). Street-level bureaucrats includes both professions such as teachers and policemen and case workers at public agencies. How these street-level bureaucrats experience the rules of the organization, the pressures connected to their tasks and environment and what preferences they hold, are all vital components in how policies are made in public sector organizations (Karlsson, 2015, p. 60) (Thorén, 2008, p. 23).

The role of street-level bureaucrats is filled with conflicts. Lipsky argues that “[i]deally and by training, street-level bureaucrats should respond to the individual needs or characteristics of the people they serve or confront”. But, he adds that “in practice, they must deal with clients collectively, because work requirements prohibit individualized responses”. Heavy workloads and time limits are example of conflicts which forces the street-level bureaucrat to develop certain strategies in order to cope with tasks and services that are expected of them to handle. “At best, street-level bureaucrats invent modes of mass processing that more or less permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and thoughtfully. At worst, they give in to favouritism, stereotyping, convenience, and routinizing” (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii-xv).

One of Lipsky's key concepts in understanding the nature of the street-level bureaucrat is *discretion*. Street-level bureaucrats usually practise considerable discretion in regards to determining, for example, qualities of services, including how benefits and sanctions should be provided (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). Discretion can be understood as “the freedom that organizations and street-level bureaucrats are granted when they choose among a number of possible actions to take or not

take when interacting with policy targets” (Thorén, 2008, p. 23) and the dimension of discretion as “the space in the rules” (Baker-Collins, 2016, p. 223-224).

A high degree of discretion and relative autonomy from organizational authority is what the policy-making role of street-level bureaucrats is built upon (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). According to this theory, policies are actually made through the practice of discretion and the importance of formal legislation is subordinated (Thorén, 2008, p. 23). However, discretion is not only to be considered an unwanted by-product from a legislative or a citizen’s perspective, since it may also result in less rigidity and more adaptable service (Lipsky, 2010, p. 23) (Jansson – Erlingsson, 2014, p. 291). Discretion should be seen as inevitable, but also as a necessity within street-level-bureaucracies. As Evans (2010) puts it: “It arises from the need to turn broad goals into practical policy, and to decide how to use limited resources to achieve those goals” (p. 3).

Sometimes reformers will try to limit the discretion of street-level bureaucrats and sometimes extend it. Managers, however, generally have an interest in limiting the opportunities to practice discretion in favour of goal orientation. Street-level bureaucrats, on the other hand, have an interest in expanding it in order to minimize discomforts in their jobs and maximize the work process according to their own preferences. Discretion is here often practiced in order to balance workloads and service demands through creating shortcuts and simplifications of tasks. Such strategies are labelled *coping behaviours* or *coping mechanisms* by Lipsky (2010, p. 16-19).

Using discretion to simplify work and balance the workload may take the form of client differentiation. Street-level bureaucrats might for example practice *creaming*, thereby focusing on those clients they consider most likely to succeed given the available resources. Within *Arbetsförmedlingen*, creaming might be practiced by a case worker through focusing resources on clients considered “easy-to-place” instead of clients considered more difficult and further away from the labour market (Henman, 2006, p. 33).

Client differentiation might also be practiced through biases and hostility towards specific groups of clients, or through conceptions of *worthiness* based on perceptions dominant within society or the specific agency (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107-108) (Thorén, 2008, p. 25). Stereotyping clients is a way of simplifying by using a “mental shortcut” and might result in both positive and negative discrimination when the street-level bureaucrat, for example, makes extraordinary efforts in *protecting* particular clients, while not extending the same effort to others (Lipsky, 2010, p. 142;145). A case worker at *Arbetsförmedlingen* might go beyond their authority – or directly defy legislation – in order to protect clients considered to be vulnerable, while treating other clients extra harsh (Soss, et al. 2013, p. 138).

Since street-level bureaucrats are unable to provide all clients with a maximum amount of resources, due to for example time constraints, rationalization becomes an important form of coping behaviour, both with regards to handling of client demands of clients and in handling the contradictions in legislation (Lipsky, 2010, p. 151-152). Client differentiation is inherent within street-level bureaucracies, but obviously carries the risk of institutionalizing inequalities through biased policies based on conceptions of, for example, deservingness (Lipsky, 2010, p. 115).

Deserving clients might for example be those who are considered to be motivated and doing their best, have disabilities, who are sick or are unable to work due to other external reasons beyond their control.

Undeserving, at the other hand, could be those considered unwilling but able (Barnes, 2006, p. 107-108) (Will, 1993) (Van Oorshot, 2000, p. 39). Conceptions about deservingness might also be tied to whether or not the recipients are seen as responding to assistance with gratitude or whether the people feel they can identify with the recipients. The later might result in that, for example, ethnic minorities are considered to be less deserving (Van Oorshot, 2000, p. 3;38).

To *deny discretion* is also a form of practice, which the street-level bureaucrat might use to avoid responsibility and “hide behind the rules” (Evans, 2010, p. 17) (Lipsky, 2010, p. 149) (Karlsson, 2015, p. 60-61).

Discretion has then been compared to a “black box” of policy implementation, since it is always difficult to monitor how street-level bureaucrats really act when they are interacting with clients. This, of course, both affects accountability and comes with the fact that the street-level bureaucrat’s perspective of the law, the job environment and the client are influencing how discretion – and thereby policy – is made (Thorén, 2008, p. 23-24) (Rothstein, 2010) (Karlsson, 2015, p. 20).

This means that instead of seeing public agencies, such as *Arbetsförmedlingen*, as mere providers of services the content of which is determined by legislation, the interaction between case worker and client is a process through which individuals negotiate their socio-political status (Brodkin, 2013, p. 24).

### 3.1 *Arbetsförmedlingen* as a Street-Level Bureaucracy

Discretion is a practice which may vary significantly among organizations and agencies, thereby producing different results depending on the context (Brodkin, 2007, p. 7). *Arbetsförmedlingen* resembles how Lipsky characterizes work within street-level bureaucracies.

*First* of all, in such agencies, resources tend to be inadequate in relation to the workload the case workers are supposed to be able to handle. *Secondly*, the demand for services tends to increase to meet the supply. *Third*, goal expectations tend to be ambiguous, vague, or conflicting. *Fourth*, performance oriented toward goal achievement tends to be difficult to measure and *fifth*, clients are typically non-voluntary (Lipsky, 2010, p. 27).

One could of course argue that clients at *Arbetsförmedlingen* are there voluntary, and participation in a Labour Market Programme such as JOB is of course not mandatory. It is however, as have been argued, a precondition in order for the unemployed to be eligible for Activity Support, which often is the only available income before the unemployed has to reach out to the Social Services (Köhler et al. 2008, 236).

According to Lipsky's definition of a street-level bureaucracy, it is where case workers' job is characterized by a "high degree of discretion and relative autonomy" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). Karlsson (2015) has identified *Arbetsförmedlingen* as an agency where the range of discretion within the case worker's role has increased in recent years (Karlsson, 2015, p. 33). It is also an agency in which processing of individual citizens into sortable categories in order to rationalize access to services and benefits, is inherent in the overall logic of the agency's objectives (Garsten et al. 2016, p. 269).

This conflict of individual needs and claims becoming subject to categorization, is something Lipsky argues to characterize street-level bureaucracies, and is especially visible in JOB in the conflict between the individually designed measures that are promised to permeate the programme logic, and the reality of the limited resources available to achieve this. Rationalization of the job and client differentiation are used to justify how case workers in the end practice their discretion (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii) (Thorén, 2008, p. 24-25).

The street-level bureaucrats will use their techniques to rationalized workloads, but they cannot control demand for services, since factors such as, for example the employment situation in general, are beyond their control (Lipsky, 2010, p. 222).

To understand how these agencies work, we need to know "how the rules are experienced by the workers in the organization, what latitude workers have in acting on their preferences and what other pressures they experience" (Lipsky, 2010, p. xiii). How the case workers *experience* circumstances, such as policy goals, legislation and organizational conditions, influence how discretion is practiced.

One case worker might experience the organization to be working in an adequate way, and another within the same unit might have a different view. This is inevitable. The issue here is not to agree upon a set "standard" of what characterizes a "good" or "bad" organizational or legislative environment for street-level bureaucrats to work with, but to understand the different perspectives and opinions of the case workers as building blocks of the context within which they practice their discretion within.

If the case worker experiences legislation to be meaningless and resources to be inadequate, then this will affect how they interact with clients, just as their perceptions of deservingness, for example, will do.

Lipsky underlines how questions regarding deservingness especially risk to infiltrate decision making when part of the job involves to make moral judgements (Lipsky, 2010, p. 110). The job to decide whether or not to give a benefit sanction, based upon the "effort" an unemployed person has invested, can be seen as a typical form of such a judgement.

Another key aspect of the process of benefit sanctions at *Arbetsförmedlingen* is the case worker's responsibility to alert a separate unit, *Enhetsprövning*, if they believe a misdemeanour calling for a sanction has occurred.

This division of labour regarding the sanction process, can be seen as an expression of what Lipsky calls "specialization". Specialization is something that many analysts see as more or less synonymous with modern bureaucracy and permits involved case workers to avoid seeing their work as a whole (Lipsky, 2010, p. 146-147) (Larsen, 2013, p. 117).

When street-level bureaucrats have inadequate resources – such as time, knowledge and tools - and clients are from marginalized and disadvantaged sectors of society, there are increased risks of uneven distribution of services (Brodkin, 2013, p. 29). In recent years, matching clients with the labour market has been underlined as a priority for *Arbetsförmedlingen*, in line with the focus on “activation”. This means an increased demand on case workers to strive towards a greater outflow of clients from unemployment to employment, through less focus on training and more on activation policies such as monitoring job searching activities.

The controlling role of the case worker has been emphasized, and with increased control comes increased administration. (Karlsson, 2015, p. 17) (Lindvert, 2011). For the long-term unemployed, enforced job search measures might actually decrease the chances of employment (Malmberg-Heimonen - Vouri, 2005) (Hägglund, 2002) (Köhler, et al. 2008, p. 288-291). This makes sanctions within JOB specifically interesting as a research focus within *Arbetsförmedlingen*.

Increased discretion, heavy workloads entailing a need to rationalize available resources, the need to make decisions that can be likened to moral judgements and the presence of specialization are phenomena which makes policy-making at *Arbetsförmedlingen* well-suited for an analysis through the lens of street-level bureaucracy.

## 3.2 Discretion: Analytic Model

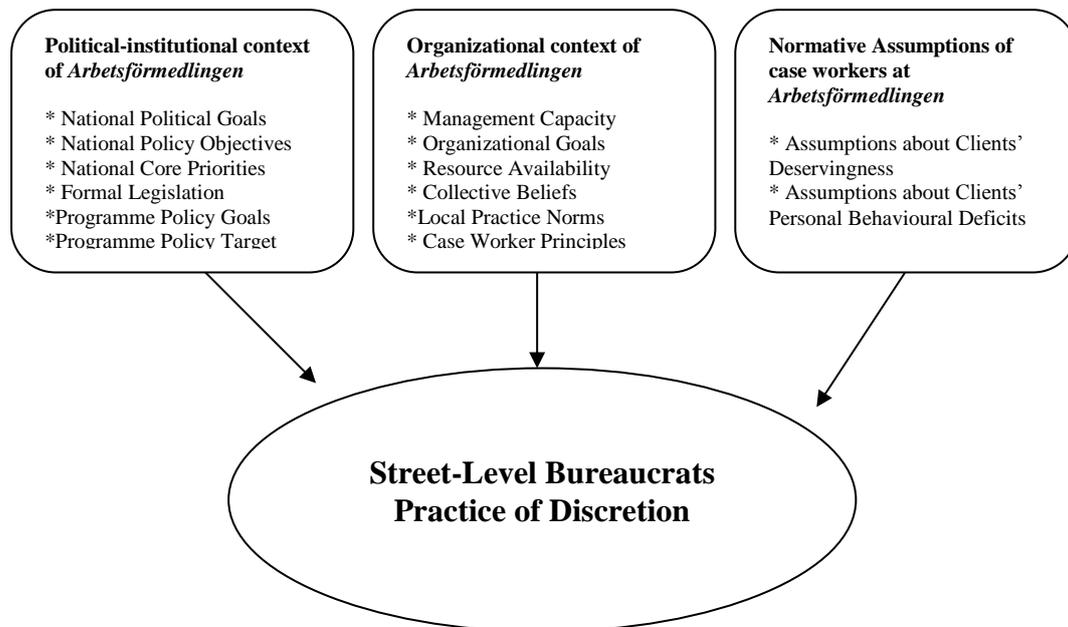
In the revised edition of his book, Lipsky clarifies a common misconception about his theory: The fallacy that the only factor determining how the practice of discretion and policy outcome is the street-level bureaucrats’ individual perceptions. The street-level bureaucrats indeed “make” policy, but do so “only in the context of broad policy structures of which their decisions are a part”. Therefore, it is important to analyse the entire policy environment in which street-level bureaucrats function (Lipsky, 2010, p. 221-222).

Brodkin seeks to bridge street-level bureaucracy theory with political-institutional theory, in order to create a two-dimensional view of how street-level bureaucracies can be analysed (Brodkin, 2013, p. 32-33). A multidimensional approach recognizes how street-level bureaucrats are “neither agents who simply do what they are told, nor fully autonomous actors who simply do what they want”. Instead, they do what they can under conditions that are shaped by the organizational context. Practicing discretion is then to be seen as an adaptive response to that organizational environment (Brodkin, 1997, p. 24) (Brodkin, 2013, p. 23).

How street-level bureaucrats eventually practice discretion mirrors the work routines, organizational context and norms that are in place. The organizational context of an agency and the ideological perceptions about clients are two dimensions affecting how discretion is practiced (Karlsson, 2015, p. 64; 66). Thorén (2008) builds on Brodkin’s approach and proposes a three-dimensional

understanding on how to conceptualize the factors behind the practice of discretion of street-level bureaucrats (Thorén, 2008, p. 37). Those three dimensions are made up of the *political-institutional context*, the *organizational context* and the *normative assumptions context*, all of which contain sub-categories.

Thorén’s model is developed in order to analyse social assistance policies within Swedish municipalities. For this thesis, the model has been modified in order to become suited for the specific agency in focus: *Arbetsförmedlingen* (Figure 3.2.1).



(Figure 3.2.1 – Analytic model of street-level bureaucrats practice of discretion at Arbetsförmedlingen)

This model works as the basis for this thesis conception of the factors determining how case workers at *Arbetsförmedlingen* practice discretion.

As Brodtkin emphasizes, discretion is “likely to produce different results in different organizational contexts” (Brodtkin, 2007, p. 7). For research on for example social services, local political preferences and goals might be crucial to take into account, since municipalities in Sweden have a certain degree of leeway in setting the terms for such benefits. This is, however, not the case when it comes to *Arbetsförmedlingen*, where policy goals are set on a national level with limited or no space for local authorities to influence them.

The sub-categories of all three contexts have therefore been modified accordingly. The *political-institutional context* is made up of how case workers experience the legislative and formal policy framework, which affects the overall objectives, priorities, goals and target groups of various policies. The *organizational context* includes how case workers experience the daily routines, practices and pre-conditions in the agency’s work environment. The context of *normative assumptions* works as the basis for how case workers perceive clients’ characteristics and clients’ needs, in relation to deservingness and behavioural deficits.

There is always a discussion about which context or sub-category is the most important or dominant in influencing how discretion is practiced. Cohen (2015) suggests that it is the political culture within an organization that is the most important variable in explaining the behaviours of street-level bureaucrats (Cohen, 2015, p. 8). Others have put forward the political-institutional context as dominant, especially in explaining differences in the behaviour of agencies between countries (Jewell, 2007) (Thorén, 2008, p. 26-27). There are also those who emphasizes the knowledge, identities and norms of the street-level bureaucrats, and how they are produced within the agencies, as decisive for policy outcomes (Brodkin, 2011) (Henman, 2006) (Watkins-Hayes 2009; 2011) (Karlsson, 2015, p. 60).

This thesis abstains from any deeper search for a solution to this debate. Instead, it stresses the importance of remembering that the configuration of the contexts varies depending on the agency in focus.

## 4 Methodology

In the following chapter, the methodological considerations and structure of the research design regarding this thesis are outlined.

The maxim for method selection when conducting social science research is “purpose, purpose, purpose”. Appropriate methods should “flow” from the answer to “what do I want to learn” (Aberbach – Rockman, 2002, p. 673).

The theoretic approach is what determines the method for gathering relevant material (Lantz, 2013, p. 29). The street-level bureaucracy approach is to some extent inherently oriented towards the subjective, since it is interested in the experiences and normative assumptions case workers.

Qualitative approaches are particularly suited for research occupied with questions regarding how and why political institutions, events or processes came about, and is often used in political science in order to analyse political behaviour inside institutions. Interviews conducted in-depth, instead of through formal surveys, tend to be more exploratory and qualitative and focused on the beliefs and experiences of individuals (Vromen, 2010, p. 249; 258). In the semi-structured interview, the interview questions usually are oriented towards specific themes, but at the same time, take into account the possibility to deepen the conversation about particular topics (Alvesson, 2011, p. 62).

The qualitative research interview is focused on understanding peoples’ experiences and conceptions of the world from the subjects’ point of view (Kvale, 1996, p. 1). Such an approach, if conducted in a fruitful manner, has the strength of capturing contradictions and ambiguities of the human world. The purpose of the qualitative research interview is then to obtain “qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subjects with respect to interpretation of their meaning” (Kvale, 1996, p. 7; 124).

When the area of research is oriented towards attitudes and perceptions, interviews with the possibility of relatively open answers is a common strategy. (Lantz, 2013, p. 66). When interview questions address normative positions, it is less optimal to use highly structured interviewing methods or surveys, since respondents tends to lean towards options that are in line with general assumptions about what is considered morally right or wrong. Lantz calls this the risk of “social desirability”, when the respondents seeks the answer they consider most socially acceptable or politically correct (Lantz, 2013, p. 66-67). Instead, these questions might be more suitable to be addressed in a form which allows the respondents to develop their reasoning and to produce statements of their own, without pre-prepared options to select from.

This does not, however, mean that the semi-structured interview form provides a “vaccine” from respondents’ will to make themselves seem sympathetic. The risk that an interviewee is dishonest or self-admiring when answering, answers

according to “cultural scripts” on how to respond, or is not motivated to participate, is always present, but research using semi-structured or open interviews tends to be more aware of this risk, than is customary in, for example, the survey (Alvesson – Deetz, 2000, p. 65-66; 83).

Sevä (2015) holds that, while an open interview form is best suited when there is no or little prior knowledge regarding the phenomena of research, semi-structured interviews are especially relevant as research method when using the street-level-bureaucracy theory combined with an analytical framework, which provides possible explanatory factors for decision-making and implementation (Sevä, 2015, p. 23). In this case this framework is the analytic model of street-level bureaucrats practice of discretion (Figure 3.2.1).

An analytic model works as a baseline for the semi-structured interview. A typical procedure is that the questions are constructed in order to correspond to those definitions and relations the theory considers to be of significance. The semi-structured design of the interview usually involves areas of questions presented in a set order, with room for follow-up questions if needed. The answers might vary from relatively open to relatively specific (Lantz, 2013, p. 47). Interviews have particular use when the research question strives towards a qualitative conceptualization of a phenomenon, or when the unique and context-bound is in focus (Lantz, 2013, p. 61). This makes semi-structured interviews an ideal research method in order to take on street-level bureaucracy theory.

## 4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Marsh & Stoker considers ontological and epistemological positions to come in form of “a skin not a sweater”, meaning that a researcher should not be inconsistent regarding their approach (Marsh & Stoker, 2010, p. 192-193). This standpoint has been criticized for being too rigid and tends to prevent flexibility of the researcher (Wolf, 2010, p. 154). In the debate of how to perceive reality and how to gather and assess knowledge, there is a risk of ending up in one of two “fruitless positions”. These are labelled by Alvesson & Deetz (2000) “naïve humanism” - where the interviewer assumes that there are objective feelings, experiences and knowledges out there to “catch with the recorder” if the researchers just applies his or her skills in the best possible way. The other position is the “hyper-sceptic”, who assumes that structures determine all and that interviewees necessarily are bound to adapt to norms on how to behave in every exact situation, thereby all the time conceals the sought-after information behind a veil (Alvesson – Deetz, 2000, p. 216).

In the methodology literature, it is common to categorize quantitative methods to be part of a positivist view and qualitative methods as belonging to social constructivists or hermeneutic views. This is to some extent misleading. The idea of however there is an outside world, objective of our own perceptions of it, or not out there to investigate, does not select the choice of method by default. Qualitative and quantitative methods are to be considered tools, and their utility depends on the research questions asked (Kvale, 1996, p. 69).

Theory guides the choice of method and therefore, in this case, the construction of the interviews (Lantz, 2013, p. 63-64). Since street-level bureaucracy is a theory oriented towards the subjective views of street-level bureaucrats and their perceptions of institutions, organizations and clients, a qualitative method is the most appropriate. This does not mean quantitative interview methods should be dismissed as such or automatically includes definitive claims about an objective outside world. The choice of methods is an adaptation to the area of research and theory. This means that methodological approaches might vary depending on research question and theory. However, some distinctions between approaches might still be a good idea in order to reduce the possibilities for measurement errors.

For this particular research, the theoretical basis is composed of the idea that it is the street-level bureaucrats' *perception* of the political-institutional and organizational context, which together with their normative assumptions determines how they practice discretion.

In another analysis, the political-institutional and organizational contexts might be addressed using, for example, a quantitative method – measuring resources in terms of Government funds, analysing legislation through text analysis etcetera – combined with interviews or surveys aimed at the context of normative assumptions. Such an approach would, however, risk to neglect how the need for the practice of discretion actually emerges.

The political-institutional and organizational context cannot be detached from the street-level bureaucrats' perception of them. If the street-level bureaucrat considers the objectives of *Arbetsförmedlingen* to collide with the goals of the Labour Market Programme they work within, then they will act according to that perception. If a street-level bureaucrat considers resources to be inadequate, it does not matter if members of parliament, or a social science researcher, considers them to be sufficient in an international perspective. It is still the street-level bureaucrat's perception that resources are scarce, which makes him or her practice discretion in order to handle it.

Instead of strict distinctions regarding methodology, such as the “a skin not a sweater” approach and in order to avoid ending up in either “naïve humanism”, nor “hyper-scepticism”, the researcher's role is to carefully select methodology based on research question, theory and analytic model.

In the light of the analytic model of this research, applied to street-level bureaucracy, this leads towards the subjective perceptions of the case workers.

Hence, semi-structured interviews become the most suitable method.

## 4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

This section describes how the process for conducting the semi-structured interviews for this thesis was implemented. This is related to the literature on which considerations to take when engaging in research interviews.

There are two common practices of selecting participants for interviews. One is to seek to establish a pool of interviewees which the researcher can argue is

representative for a larger population. The other is to perform selection through quality. This can mean selecting interviewees with certain qualities the researcher considers relevant (Alvesson, 2011, p. 61). This approach is very much in line with the street-level bureaucracy theory. For this research then, case workers interacting directly with clients and working with sanctions are the optimal interviewees.

An email-invitation was sent out to all branch managers of *Arbetsförmedlingen* in Skåne at the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, with the wish to come into contact with staff members working within the Job and Development Programme, who would be interested in volunteering to participate for an interview regarding benefit sanctions within Activity Support (see appendix).

The information was provided that the purpose of the interviews was to gather material for a master thesis in political science. It was also explained that I had a background from working at the Unit of Economic Compensation (Swedish: *Enheten Ersättningar*) – not to be confused with *Ersättningsprövning!* - for nine months, including three months of internship, in 2016.

This information was considered important to reveal, since concealing the fact that the interviewer is an ex-colleague might give rise to questions regarding the intention of the research and provide the impression of a form of “undercover” approach, if revealed at a later stage. Since there were no actual benefits in concealing this fact, it was considered to be best to be as open as possible with it.

Nine offices answered positively with a total of sixteen case workers volunteering. These sixteen interviews were conducted between the 27<sup>th</sup> of March and the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2017.

The strategy of reaching out to branch managers, instead of directly to case workers, was an intentional consideration. If asked directly, case workers might feel they are forced to participate or accept, but in reality be unmotivated. Instead, by going via the branch managers, all participants can be said to have volunteered to participate. In doing this, there was also no way of knowing who had rejected to participate, thereby reducing the risk of any of interviewees feeling obliged to participate against their will.

Two test interviews were conducted via telephone with case workers who volunteered to participate, but the combination of their limited availability to conduct the interviews face-to-face and their offices being located relatively far away, made them better suited to serve as test-interview subjects. Even if those interviews were conducted via telephone, the main priority with the test interviews was to get a sense of how the actual interview questions worked in practice (see section 4.3 for more information about the conclusions drawn from the test interviews).

The interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face at the respective office. One was conducted in the common lunch room, the other fifteen in meeting rooms. At the time of interview, participants initially were asked to confirm how much time they had available. In the initial correspondence, those who had asked me to confirm the time frame for the interview, received the answer that it would take at least thirty minutes, but preferable up to an hour.

Two of the respondents declared that they wished to keep the session within the thirty minutes. The other fourteen answered that they could be available longer, for up to an hour.

The shortest interview session took 25 minutes and 16 seconds, while the longest took 59 minutes and 49 seconds. The average duration was 42 minutes and 10 seconds and the median duration time 42 minutes and 5 seconds, rounded up to full seconds.

At the scene of the interview the interviewee was asked to once again confirm how much time he or she had at her disposal. Lantz considers this a way as a way for the interviewer to setup a framework for the interview, which makes the session more predictable and thereby less tense (Lantz, 2013, p. 91). The same goes for clearly stating the purpose with of the interview (Lantz, 2013, p. 118).

All interviewees were provided with the same basic information: That the purpose of the interview was to be used as material for a master thesis in political science regarding benefit sanctions in Activity Support.

The interviewees were also informed that both the interviewee and the office location would be anonymized, in order for the interviewees to feel as comfortable as possible in being sincere (Lantz, 2013, p. 10; 71). This was done through assigning every office a letter and every interviewee a number, for example, "Office A - Interviewee 2" or "Office G – Interviewee 1".

One of the most important aspects of conducting interviews is documentation. This is of course both an ethical issue and a methodological one. Recording conversations for transcription is widely considered the most effective way of documentation. Taking notes will both distract the researcher from what is actually being said and comes with the great risk that the researcher starts interpreting and summarizing answers on spot, thereby distorting the material (Kvale, 1996, p. 128; 160-61) (Lantz, 2013, p. 77). To avoid such as scenario, all interviewees were asked if they would accept for the conversation to be recorded for transcribing purposes, and all of them agreed.

In the semi-structured interview, the interview plan works as a written template with interview questions stated in a pre-prepared order. An interview plan can be more or less detailed and flexible (Kvale, 1996, p. 129), but for this research the set order was considered to be of some importance and therefore, no deviations from the structure was made.

First, basic information about the interviews was provided, followed by four questions regarding basic information about the interviewee and then followed by the more theory-oriented questions (Lantz, 2013, p. 70-71).

In order for the different interviews to be as similar to each other as possible in terms of structure, the interviewees were asked to be aware of that I for the most part of interview would try to let the interviewee finish his or her reasoning. This is a strategy which is recommended by Kvale (1996, p. 134), although the interviewee might experience this as a rather unnatural structure of a conversation compared to a "normal" dialogue.

Therefore, I chose to prepare the interviewees for this situation by informing them that I would try to stick to my questions and not interrupt or "finish sentences", which is typical in "normal" conversations. When necessary, I would repeat and try

to summarize what the interviewee has said in order to be sure to have understood his or her point of view correctly. This is also a recommended technique, as long as the summarizing does not involve drawing conclusions (Lantz, 2013, p. 76) (Kvale, 1996, p. 135).

The interviewee was given the opportunity to at any moment stop the interview or ask to have answers struck from protocol. No interview questions were known to interviewee beforehand, although interviews in some offices took place after each other and there is always a possibility that an already interviewed case worker discussed or revealed information about the interview to another case worker who was yet to be interviewed.

However, since the interviews were not based on any idea of concealing information or using some sort of “surprise-tactic”, this risk was considered to be of little importance.

The interviews stuck to the interview plan and did not skip or change the order of questions in any case. However, follow-up questions were improvised to a certain degree, usually in order for the interviewee to be able to clarify or present examples, if this was considered to be necessary. This is one of the advantages of choosing the semi-structured interviews as a method (Kvale, 1996, p. 124).

### 4.3 Operationalization Discretion

Theoretical concepts need to be defined and operationalized in order for the content of the interviews to correspond to the actual research problem. The use of categories or dimensions, as in this case with the three contexts, makes this process more lucid (Lantz, 2013, p. 64; 148)

The analytical model of street-level bureaucrats practice of discretion (Figure 3.2.1), is the basis for the operationalization of the theory. Therefore, the interview questions were designed in order to correspond to the three contexts: the *political-institutional context*, the *organizational context* and *the context of normative assumptions*, and directly to the sub-categories. This process will be further developed in respective sub-sections.

There is always the challenge in qualitative research to balance the design of an operationalization, and making it as easy to grasp and adopt as possible, without reducing data and striving to far away from a qualitative approach (Lantz, 2013, p. 148; 155-156). Therefore, an example of how the operationalization of theoretical concepts into interview questions has been designed is presented in Table 4.3.1.

<b>Context</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Interview question</b>
<b>Political-institutional</b>	Formal legislation	<i>What do you think about the sanction system? Both regarding formal legislation and regarding the staircase model as such?</i>
<b>Organizational</b>	Case worker principles	<i>Can you give examples of dilemmas which arises in your work when applying sanctions?</i>
<b>Normative assumptions</b>	Assumptions about clients' deservingness	<i>What are the, in your opinion, most determining reasons behind that some people are long-term unemployed?</i>

(Table 4.3.1 – Principe of operationalization)

There are those who argue that interview questions should be “brief and simple” (Kvale, 1996, p. 132). This was also the initial approach of this research in the test interviews performed via telephone with two case workers. The interview questions then were broad and general, which led to the interviewees ending up in discussions very far off from the topics of Activity Support, JOB and sanctions. Therefore, a reconsideration was done and questions redesigned to be longer, more detailed and specific.

The interviews were made up of 24 set questions, with follow-up questions built into some of them. The questions were, for analytical reasons, separated into four categories. For the complete interview plan, see the appendix.

Four were classified as *basic information*, seven as related to the *political-institutional context*, seven towards the *organizational context* and six towards *normative assumptions*. The number of questions was intended to be maximised to fit the time frame of thirty minutes up to an hour, depending on the availability of the interviewee. Should an interviewee only be able to participate for 30 minutes, it would still be possible to go through all questions.

The four questions classified as *basic information* were:

- (1) *How old are you?*
- (2) *How long have you worked at Arbetsförmedlingen?*
- (3) *How long have you worked within JOB?*
- (4) *Have you worked with anything else at Arbetsförmedlingen? (If yes,) with what?*

Thorén (2008) has found that seniority and experience might be an important factor when case workers practice discretion, since more experienced case workers generally are more confident in arguing for exemptions for clients (Thorén, 2008, p. 92). At the same time, less experienced case workers, might overlook or ignore certain clients' needs for individualized support, for example when it comes to clients with disabilities (Garsten et al. 2016, p. 280).

For this reason, information about age and experience was included in the basic information, together with a question about experience from other units and functions of *Arbetsförmedlingen*, which might be of interests when analysing the answers regarding, for example, deservingness of different unemployed persons.

### 4.3.1 Political-Institutional Context

The first of the context in the analytic model (Figure 3.2.1) is the political-institutional context. This sub-section elaborates further on how the interview questions were designed in order to correspond to the sub-categories related to this context, as exemplified in Table 4.3.1.

Interview questions regarding the political-institutional context were made up of seven questions, in some cases with built-in follow-up questions, representing questions number 5-11 of the interview. Two questions were aimed at the sub-category *formal legislation*.

(5) *What do you think about the sanction system? Both regarding formal legislation and regarding the staircase model as such?*

(6) *In what way could the rules and legislation regarding the sanction system be clarified, modified or adapted?*

*National policy goals, national policy objectives and national core priorities* were grouped together, since it tends to be difficult to clearly distinguish between “goals”, “objectives” and “priorities”. The terms are those used by *Arbetsförmedlingen*, and in communication from the legislator. Therefore, the same terminology, retrieved from the exact quotes from *Arbetsförmedlingen*'s mission and legislative bills, were used in the design of those interview questions.

(7) *An overarching objective from the legislator's perspective with the new sanction system was to increase the outflow to work through increased search activity: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?*

(8) *One of Arbetsförmedlingen's responsibilities is to safeguard that the Unemployment Insurance works as a transition insurance. If Activity Support is considered to work in a similar way: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?*

(9) *An overarching objective for Arbetsförmedlingen is to prioritize support for people who are far away from the labour market: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?*

Two questions were designed to correspond to programme policy goals and targets. “Goals” should be understood as the purpose of the programme, while “targets” refers to the category of unemployed people.

As regarding *programme policy goals* and *programme policy targets*, these were coupled together. This was because the relation between goals and targets, for example if the case worker experiences them to be in conflict with each other, is of particular interest when it comes to discretion.

(10) *Do you think the sanction system is tailored to the needs of the unemployed with Activity Support in JOB? (If no,) what could be done differently?*

- (11) *Do you think there are difference between the unemployed within JOB and the unemployed within the Unemployment Insurance which results in that they may be affected differently by sanctions? (If yes), can you give examples?*

### 4.3.2 Organizational Context

This sub-section provides a review of how the interview questions regarding the organizational context were designed. The interview questions regarding the organizational context was made up of seven questions, numbered 12-18.

As Evans puts it, discretion “arises from the need to turn broad goals into practical policy, and to decide how to use limited resources to achieve those goals” (Evans, 2010, p. 3). Therefore, interview questions were focused on potential conflicts between the sub-categories *management capacity*, *organizational goals*, *resource availability* and *case worker principles*.

Lipsky identifies the tension between management and case workers at an agency to be an arena of struggle regarding practice of discretion. While managers are likely to strive towards limiting case workers practice of discretion, case workers are likely to strive towards expanding it (Lipsky, 2010, p. 19). This potential tension was addressed in question (12).

- (12) *Do you think there are contradictions between the objectives formulated by management – this can be a line manager or higher up – and with what you believe is better for your work or for the unemployed? (If so,) can you give examples?*

Brodkin (2013) acknowledges inadequate resources for street-level bureaucrats to include time, knowledge and the access to useful tools (Brodkin, 2013, p. 29). This worked as a definition of “resources”, in the outline of how the next question was phrased.

- (13) *Do you think you have the resources you need – time, knowledge, legislation, support – in order to be able to carry out your work in the best way? (If not,) how do you handle possible shortages?*

A significant part of the interaction between case worker and client is done through the Activity Report. Mishandling the Activity Report can lead to sanctions.

More or less all clients in JOB are to submit the Activity Report every month in order to have it evaluated by the case worker. Potential practice of discretion when handling the Activity Report was addressed in the question (14). Question (15) was aimed at how the interviewees’ perception of resources are taken into account when he or she makes priorities.

- (14) *Do you think you have sufficient resources to do an adequate review of all Activity Reports that comes in? (If not,) how do you handle this?*

- (15) *Can you give examples of how you handle situations where resources are insufficient for all job seekers and you have to prioritize who and what to focus resources on?*

Questions (16) and (17) were designed in order to connect the case workers’ experiences of the organizational effects on work conditions to the case workers direct practice of benefit sanctions.

Svensson et al. (2008) have specifically underlined how dilemmas for street-level bureaucrats may arise if he or she is supposed to both be a representative for the agency, and be expected to see to the client's needs. Therefore, dilemmas were considered an interesting theme to ask the interviewees about.

(16) *Can you give examples of dilemmas which arises in your work when applying sanctions?*

(17) *When you are to assess whether an unemployed might be guilty of a misdemeanour equal to result in a sanction, what do you perceive as most difficult in that situation?*

The last interview question within the organizational context, was designed in order to correspond to the sub-categories of *local practice norms* and *collective beliefs*.

Lipsky points out how street-level bureaucrats need to practice discretion through, for example, client differentiation is likely to exist for all co-workers within the same unit. Attitudes and conceptions might then “reverberate among” co-workers and contribute to norms and practices at, for example, a local office (Lipsky, 2010, p. 155-156).

This aspect of street-level bureaucracy theory has, however, been neglected in this particular thesis, for feasibility reasons. Although, it would probably be an interesting object of research, for example through using focus groups or ethnographic methods, this thesis is more interested in how discretion is practiced, than how policies are transmitted within agencies.

Question (18) was anyway included in order to at least briefly touch upon how collective beliefs and practice norms might be a part of the policy making process.

(18) *Are there any methods case workers at your workplace have developed together in order to handle situations of resource scarcity, dilemmas or difficulties in assessing specific sanction cases? (If yes,) can you give examples?*

### 4.3.3 Normative Assumption

This sub-section goes through the design of the interview questions corresponding to the third and last context of the analytic model, the context of *normative assumptions*. It was made up of six questions, all of which corresponding to both sub-categories of *assumptions about clients' deservingness* and *assumptions about clients' personal behavioural deficits*.

Lipsky considers “locating responsibility for clients' difficulties” to be one of the most common conceptual instruments street-level bureaucrats use in their work (Lipsky, 2010, p. 153-153), and the interview questions were based on the need off the case worker to categories clients and rationalize services, based on their conception of who are deserving of help and under which circumstances. Interview questions ranged between 19-24.

(19) *What are the, in your opinion, most determining reasons behind that some people are long-term unemployed?*

- (20) *How do you see upon the opportunities of the unemployed in JOB to get out of their unemployment? Can opportunities vary depending on different conditions and characteristics of the unemployed? (If so) How is your work affected by this?*
- (21) *Which unemployed, do you think, are particularly at risk of facing sanctions? Can you give examples of how you handle such a job seeker?*
- (22) *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who should not be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied less strictly? (If yes) Can you give examples?*
- (23) *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who in particular should be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied more extensively? (If yes) Can you give examples?*
- (24) *If you become aware of an unemployed person who risks 45-days of suspension at the next violation and submits an Activity Report with fewer sought jobs or activities than agreed: Are there situations or circumstances that would cause you to consider to not send a message? (If yes) Can you give examples of such situations or circumstances*

#### 4.3.4 Discretion

The interview questions presented above were meant to address the conflicts, ambiguities and constraints the case workers at *Arbetsförmedlingen* within JOB experience.

How they practice discretion, which is the direct research question of this thesis, is investigated through how the interviewees provides examples and ideas of how conflicts, ambiguities and constraints are, or can be, addressed.

This can be through examples of coping behaviours, client differentiation, creaming, how conceptions about deservingness influence various decisions or examples of denying discretion. How such information is meant to be detected will be elaborated further in section 4.4.

#### 4.3.5 Considerations and Limitations

Interviews as a method has a tendency to always confirm the researcher's hypotheses. A reason behind this might be that the researcher interprets answers to agree with his or her theoretic framework (Lantz, 2013, 14-16) (Alvesson, 2011, p. 42). One way to limit such a risk is, as mentioned in section 4.2, to record and transcribe the interviews and perform the analysis on the material afterwards. The resulting material of analyse is as accurate as possible to what has actually been said. A method for analysing the material will be discussed further in section 4.4.

Selecting interviewees based on the interviewees willingness to participate, as described in chapter 4.3, can be seen as a form of "convenience sampling" (Cohen, 2015, p. 17). Case workers unwilling to participate might hold completely different

views than those who actually participated. So how can we, as researchers, be sure that the interviewees that did participate, are representative for a wider population?

In a qualitative approach, where the subjective is in focus, generalizability is rarely a goal in the same meaning as in quantitative research (Lantz, 2013, p. 19) (Vromen, 2010, p. 255). This research, for example, has deliberately avoided to use the approach and the material gathered through the interviews, in order to produce comparative statements.

The interviewees were selected in order to have some common denominators. They were case workers within the same programme, performing similar tasks and interacting with clients in, more or less, the same situations in terms of period of unemployment, eligibility to Activity Support, and subject to the same rules regarding sanctions, for example.

But this cannot function as a basis for comparisons between unemployment situations in general and between municipalities or countries, and nor should it. Unemployment may increase or decrease because of effects which are hard to isolate, regardless of research method. Instead of striving towards as great universality as possible, qualitative research is generally interested in the unique and context-bound, and definitively so in this particular case (Vromen, 2010, p. 259).

However, the analytic-model is still meant to be used as a template in order to conduct similar research on different programmes, agencies or countries, but such approaches always needs to address the specific context.

The key when conducting qualitative interview research, is to be able to clearly describe the interview plan, process, setup and model for analysis in such a comprehensive way that it becomes accessible for the reader. Every interview situation is unique in a sense, and it would not be possible for anyone to replicate an already conducted interview. Although, it should be possible for anyone to follow and understand how the researcher has retrieved the answers, analysed them and drawn conclusions from them (Alvesson – Deetz, 2000, p. 83-85).

Qualitative interview research has been criticized because of the fact that the validity of the results and conclusions can be hard to critically examine. When the methodology is inexplicit and results are presented in a running text, the whole research process can be difficult to grasp (Lantz, 2013, 134).

Kvale emphasizes that “the more interviews the more scientific” is an invalid argument when it comes to qualitative research interviews. Instead, the number of interviews should be a choice based on quality, not quantity (Kvale, 1996, p. 102-103). Svensson & Ahrne (2011) reminds the researcher that there is no way of knowing if a particular case is an abnormality or not. A way of reducing the risk of addressing cases of little, or no, significance for a wider population, is to secure as many interviews the researcher needs, in order to have reason to believe the material to be representative enough for the particular research in mind.

In this case, sixteen interviews were thought to be sufficient and about the maximum number possible, due to feasibility reasons. Conducting interviews is a time consuming process of gathering material and transcribing them. With this in mind, the number of interviews was considered to be sufficient for this research,

but there will always be a continuing discussion of how many interviews *really* makes up the ideal number for research such as this.

There is always a risk of idealizing the interviewee. Interviewees might have many different reasons for participating in a research projects, besides their will to contribute to science. They may have their own agenda, political for example, behind volunteering (Lantz, 2013, p. 39-40).

The interview situation itself will also have an impact on the interviewee and in various way alter how the interviewee acts and answers, compared to how he or she would act and answer under different circumstances (Kvale, 1996, p. 6-7).

This risk is to some extent unavoidable and goes back to the discussion about ontology and epistemology in chapter 4.1. The researcher should neither end up in the “naïve humanist” position – in which he or she searches for the interviewee’s “true” experiences or motives, nor in the “hyper sceptic” position where structures conceal everything. What he or she must do, however, is acknowledge this fact and not attribute the interviewees a status of oracles (Alvesson, 2011, p. 11-12).

As mentioned, to record and transcribe the interviews in order for them to be analysed, is a fruitful way to conduct this type of research.

However, transcribing comes with difficulties, since it is a form of translating the spoken into the written. Tone, body language, comforts or discomforts in the interview situation, jokes and irony are often lost, neglected or downplayed when transformed into written text (Kvale – Brinkmann, 2014, p. 218-220; 224) (Alvesson, 2011, p. 86-87).

In this particular research, interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish. For the analysis, quotes from the answers which became meaning units (see section 4.4 about the coding process) were then translated into English. This dual-language approach adds another “step” of translation which further complicates this process.

All interviews were transcribed in a way which was meant to be as close as possible to what was actually being said. This means that some stuttering, humming, change of path and incomplete sentences were kept for reasons of transparency. In order to preserve the sense of the spoken form, I chose to use contractions – as for example “can’t” instead of “cannot” – when directly quoting an interviewee.

Names and places were anonymized, in order to comply with the guarantees of anonymity. For example, if an interviewee mentioned the specific office location, this was changed into “[this municipality]”.

Recording and transcribing is still the best way of analysing qualitative research interviews, but it is necessary to be open to the fact that translating between formats and languages always will affect the gathered material (Kvale – Brinkmann, 2014, p. 218).

A final consideration in relation to the discussion about ontology and epistemology in chapter 4.1:

“Objectivity” of the researcher, would mean that the researcher would apply methodological tools independently of the researcher. In face-to-face interviews this is impossible. Therefore, all measures to erase the researcher’s effect on the interviewee and interview situation are futile.

However, transparency about how interviews and analyses were conducted, providing quotations of the interviewees' statements and guiding the reader throughout the whole research process helps to uphold the necessary level of intersubjectivity (Lantz, 2013, p. 18) (Vromen, 2010, p. 259).

## 4.4 Coding

The idea of a general model for data analysis within qualitative research can sometimes be neglected, in the constant search for the subjective and unique.

But there is still a need for some sort of approach in order to perform and present an analysis (Lantz, 2013, p. 134). Quantitative research interview methods, such as surveys, comes with standard techniques on how both interview questions and the coding process should be designed (Kvale, 1996, p. 12). Qualitative research, however, is more concerned with meanings instead of frequencies (Alvesson – Deetz, 2000, p. 215-216). Therefore, coding methods for detecting meaning in some sense, have to be developed.

The ambition should be to apply the theoretic lens and search for a pattern in the material on a more abstract level than can be found in a particular statement. Such a pattern can be detected by applying the theoretical conceptions on the interviewees' answers (Lantz, 2013, p. 137). Since qualitative research in general is hard, or impossible, to replicate, the key to uphold scientific legitimacy is through a great level of transparency (Svensson – Ahrne, 2011).

*Meaning condensation* is a method for qualitative research interview analysis based on Giorgi (1975) and, in this research, modelled after Kvale & Brinkmann (2014; 2015). This method is based on five steps.

*First*, the researcher reads through the interview in order to get a sense of the whole.

The *second* step is for the researcher to determine the “meaning units”, as they are expressed by the subjects. If the answer to a questions is fairly short, the whole quote can be the natural unit. But an answer to an interview question may also contain several natural meaning units, for example if the answer is longer or has relevance to other interview questions or aspects of the interview as well.

In the *third* step, the theme of the natural meaning unit is restated by the researcher, formulated as simply as possible. An example of the relation between the second and third step is illustrated in Table 4.4.1.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Natural Unit</b>	<b>Central Theme</b>
Office H – Interviewee 2	<i>I think they in general are pretty thought through... then there are some things which... it becomes very harsh punishment for very small things, at least in my eyes. If you have reached 45 days' suspension... there is no way of re-setting it. And if we should strive towards as many as possible experiencing us in a positive way... it doesn't feel that good...</i>	To harsh sanctions when reaching the last step. May be bad for relation with clients.

(Table 4.4.1 – Third step example of coding”)

The *fourth* step consists of the researcher asking questions about the meaning of units in terms of the specific purpose of the study. For this analysis, this means reverting back to the categories and sub-categories in the analytic model (Brinkmann – Kvale, 2015, p. 235). An example of this is provided in Table 4.4.2.

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Natural unit</b>	<b>Central theme</b>	<b>Deservingness/ personal behaviour defects</b>	<b>Discretion</b>
Office A - Interviewee 2	Well, those 45 days... if it comes to my attention after the sanction has been issued already... it depends. I think it was the Activity Report this one time, he put something down which I thought wasn't enough... but then I revoked it because if I hadn't done that he would have lost his welfare benefits as well and... no. So I revoked it. And that's about how I feel if this should have happened again.	Once a client on welfare got 45 days' suspension, the case worker revoked the decision since this would mean an - in the case workers eyes - disproportionate punishment. Case worker would do this again under similar circumstances.	Clients on welfare can be seen as deserving of protection if needed	Protects unemployed who might risk disproportional sanctions

(Table 4.4.2 – Fourth step example of coding)

The *fifth* and final step is when the researcher ties all themes of the entire interview together into a descriptive statement. This part of the analysis can be understood as

a common approach of presenting results in qualitative research (Brinkmann – Kvale, 2015, p. 234-235) and will be further developed in section 5, including sub-sections.

A benefit of using a model of meaning condensation, is that the researcher can adapt a tool for analysing qualitative data in a way which promotes intersubjectivity, but without an imminent risk of forcing qualitative data into quantified variables, for example by turning answers into scores, percentages or squeezing complicated - and sometimes contradictory statements – into yes or no boxes (Lantz, 2013, p. 138) (Kvale, 1996, p. 192).

However, just because an approach is qualitative does not mean that presenting results in some form of quantitative statements is off limits. If, for example, fifteen out of sixteen interviewees respond in a similar way, this can of course be presented in such a way, together with a discussion.

## 5 Analysis

In this section follows a summary of the key findings from the analysis. In subsections 5.1 to 5.4, the results are discussed in more detail, together with examples of quotations from the interviews in order to incorporate the voice of the interviewees, as recommended by Vromen (2010, p. 259). Interviewees were named according to a letter representing their office, and a number representing the interviewee, for example A1 (Office A – Interviewee 1)

The case workers were in general positive towards the system of benefit sanctions. However, several expressed disbeliefs in the behavioural effects of it. Instead, the aspect of harmonization with the system regarding Unemployment Insurance, and the opportunity to refer discussions regarding sanctions to *Enhetsprövning*, were put forward as positive outcomes. This division of labour within the sanction process can be understood as an example of increase specialization in contemporary bureaucracies, according to Lipsky's definition.

Even among those positive, there was a generally shared disbelief towards the sanction system's effect on the clients in JOB. Instead, the clients in JOB were described to lack distinctive features – such as education, language skills and physical and mental well-being – in order to be employable, and several case workers expressed the opinion that sanctions would have no, or direct negative, effects on those clients. This expressed perception by the case workers, corresponds with previous research on the effects of benefit sanctions, targeted at more vulnerable groups of unemployed people.

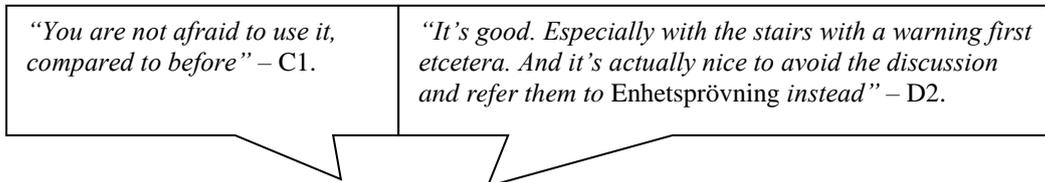
The interviewees did not express any clear perceived contradictions with management and organizational goals. Instead, too little time, too many clients and too much administration (for example with the Activity Report) were seen as the major resource deficits.

In order to handle resource shortages, case workers provided several examples of how creaming may occur, through focusing resources on clients considered to be motivated, willing and relatively close to the labour market, thereby “easy to match”. At the same time, many of the interviewees admitted to neglect the long-term unemployed with the weakest attachment to the labour market.

Case workers used rationalization and client differentiation to motivate this. Clients considered to be deserving were protected by some from sanctions. Such clients include people with disabilities or health problems, with low-language skills or those who were considered to at least make an effort. As undeserving were perceived clients who were considered unmotivated, repeated offenders, “able but unwilling” or some form of troublemakers.

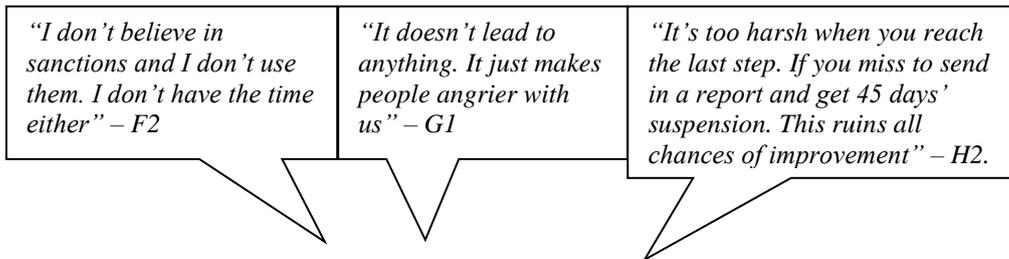
### 5.1 Political-Institutional Context

The general view of the interviewees was positive towards the legislation and model regarding benefit sanctions. Nine interviewees out of sixteen explicitly characterized the sanction system as “good”, although improvements could be done in the uniformity between the system regarding Activity Support and Unemployment Insurance. Six of those positive, labelled the system as lenient, and in some cases too lenient on clients rejecting a job offer, or repeated offenders.



Question (5) - *What do you think about the sanction system? Both regarding formal legislation and regarding the staircase model as such?*

Three of the interviewees were directly negative.



Question (5) - *What do you think about the sanction system? Both regarding formal legislation and regarding the staircase model as such?*

Even among those positive, there were interviewees who highlighted that the system might have a negative effect on certain groups of clients, such as unemployed with disabilities and the youth. Other concerns were a lack of clarity on when to use sanctions and when to revoke programme participation for clients.

Three case workers requested more uniformity between Unemployment Insurance and Activity Support. Two mentioned a need for tougher sanctions in order to target repeated offenders, and two for more lenient interpretations for clients with disabilities.

One case workers, who considered that the staircase model may lead to disproportional sanctions for small infringements, proposed that the staircase should be reset after a time of good behaviour. The case worker most negative to the sanction system in general said that there was “no point modifying since the system does not work”, and mentioned how long-term unemployment continue to

increase, disregarding of the existence of sanctions. Also, among those generally positive to the system, there were still several questioning the proposed logic of it.

*"It works in an enforcing way but does not trigger desired behaviour" – F4.*

*"I mean, the rules are good as they are but sometimes... we have job seekers who needs some adaptation but the unit [Ersättningsprövning] doesn't care" – A1.*

Question (6) - *In what way could the rules and legislation regarding the sanction system be clarified, modified or adapted?*

The distrust in the behavioural effects regarding the clients in JOB became obvious. Twelve out of sixteen interviewees stated that they did not believe in the correlation between sanctions and increased search activity. Instead, several emphasized that clients in JOB would not experience an increased outflow to employment through increased search activity, but through measures like, for example, training and subsidized forms of employment.

Two answered that they were positive in a general way towards this logic, but could not answer if the intended effect actually had occurred. Two interviewees said that there might be small effects, but one emphasized that "motivated will search regardless and those not motivated will cheat regardless [of sanctions]".

*"I mean; I don't think there is a difference on the outflow. Those who wants to search for work will do so, regardless if there is a sanction or not" – A1*

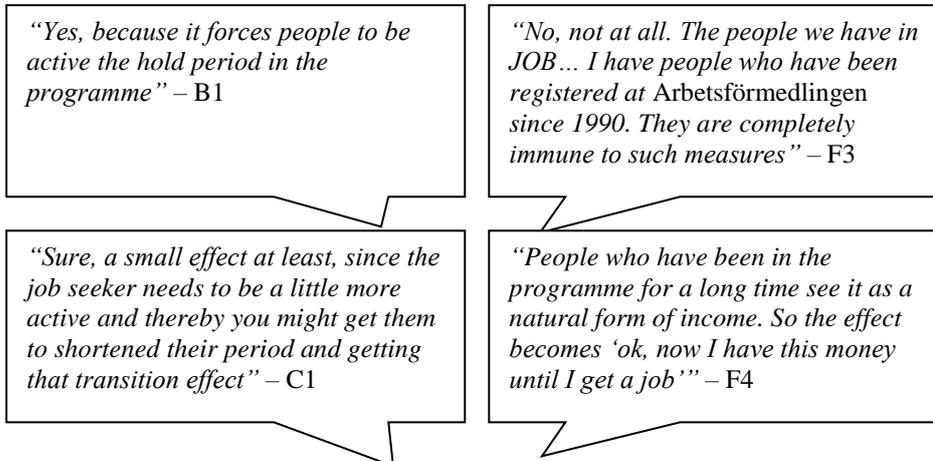
*"I think it's more of a parental role, actually. Sure, a person might not search enough for work, but the sanction is more about the disciplinary measure than changing behaviour" – A2*

*"Unfortunately, I don't think there has been the desired effects. Rather, I think those who search to little are being revoked from the programmes after a while" – D2*

*"Yes, even if the clients don't see it that way. They see this money as a right. It gives me more power to enforce and keep them active" – D4*

Question (7) - *An overarching objective from the legislator's perspective with the new sanction system was to increase the outflow to work through increased search activity: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this??*

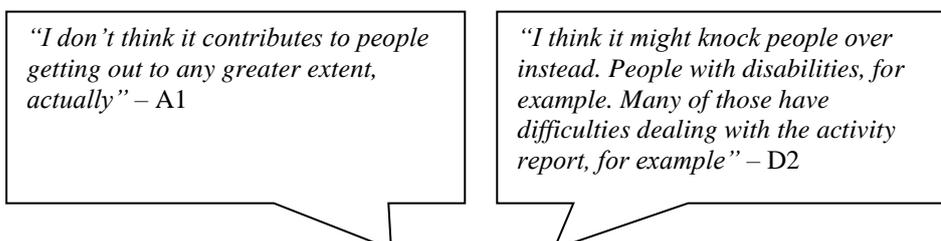
Six interviewees said that they believed the sanction system might contribute in safeguarding the Activity Support to work as a transition insurance, but three of those underlined that they had not observed it. Two considered sanctions a helpful tool for case workers in stimulating this effect.



Question (8) - *One of Arbetsförmedlingen's responsibilities is to safeguard that the Unemployment Insurance works as a transition insurance. If we consider Activity Support to work in a similar way: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?*

Ten interviewees said that they did not believe the sanction system to contribute to *Arbetsförmedlingen's* objective to prioritize those far away from the labour market. One believed this to be because sanctions were "too lenient to have an effect" and seven because they believed sanctions to not have an effect on clients within JOB.

Instead, they proposed more interaction, counselling, training and to be given more appropriate tools to address these clients with. Among those four who said they could see a contribution, two argued that there might, however, be negative effects on unemployed with disabilities. One said sanctions had a "nurturing effect" which could be positive and one was "positive in general, but have no real opinion of what works".



*"I understand the idea behind it, and the legislator's intention. For some people it might work, but not for the small group of clients we have here in JOB" – F3*

*"When it comes to these people I have to say... no, this sanction business doesn't work at all. If you are this far away from work, sanctions don't matter. It's not for them." – H1*

Question (9) - *An overarching objective for Arbetsförmedlingen is to prioritize support for people who are far away from the labour market: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?*

Whether the sanction system can be seen as tailored to the needs of the unemployed in JOB, the answers were more divided. Seven answered positively and eight negatively, while one interviewee considered it only tailored "for some, but not for all". Among those positive, three labelled the system as "lenient" in general. Two specifically mentioned an increased uniformity between the systems of Activity Support and Unemployment Insurance to be an advantage with the new system, and one saw it as positive in ensuring that the long-term unemployed "keep on going". Among those negative, five answered directly "no", and displayed a general distrust in sanctions towards clients in JOB. One interviewee answered that sanctions creates administration, time which instead could be used for interaction with clients.

*"Yes, in general. I think the overall we have pretty lenient rules in Sweden. I mean, if you only let things slide... If you don't have rules, then what? Anarchy?" – A2*

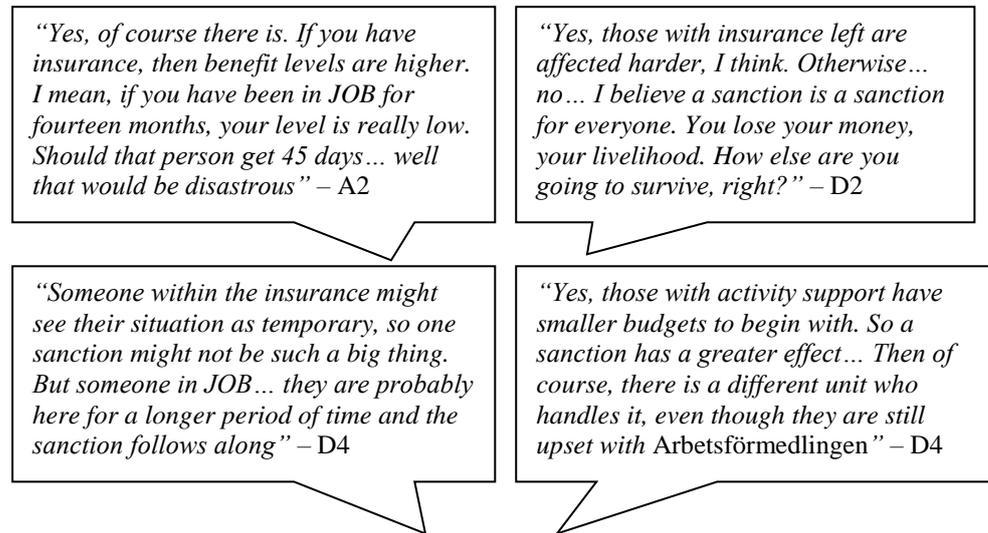
*"No, I don't think so. It would be better to have more time for follow-up meetings, instead of reading through activity reports. So in that sense I don't think it's designed for these people in JOB." – D2*

*"No, the problems these people have are so far-reaching... How much money or instruments I'm given to control them is never enough since they still lack the basic requirements for getting a job" – F3*

Question (10) - *Do you think the sanction system is tailored to the needs of the unemployed with Activity Support in JOB? (If no) What could be done differently?*

Eight of the interviewees answered that sanctions might affect the clients in JOB harder than those within Unemployment Insurance. Among the reasons for this, interviewees mentioned both that unemployed in JOB in general receive very low economic compensation, and therefore a sanction has more effect on income and living conditions. Case worker control of clients was also considered to be stricter in JOB compared to Unemployment Insurance.

Two interviewees answered that it might be the other way around: That those with higher incomes are adapted to a higher standard of living and thereby are affected more by sanctions. The others answered that both groups of unemployed generally responded the same when subjected to sanctions but two mentioned that the mere “experience” of belonging to JOB might work in a self-degrading way, since Activity Support is more connected to a “hand-out” than Unemployment Insurance.



Question (11) - *Do you think there are differences between the unemployed within JOB and the unemployed within the Unemployment Insurance which results in that they may be affected differently by sanctions? (If yes) Can you give examples?*

## 5.2 Organizational Context

Eleven of the interviewees responded that they did not experience contradictions with management’s objectives, although some considered this to have been the case in the past. The tension between street-level bureaucrats and managers Lipsky refers to (2000, p. 19) seemed to be more or less absent at *Arbetsförmedlingen*. Several of the interviewees mentioned that management should see case workers as expert and not interfere in daily practice.

One case worker saw managements lack of experience from front office-practice as negative since that meant that “they are not in touch with daily routines”. Two other interviewees who answered that they do experience contradictions, mentioned management’s focus on short-term goals coming into conflict with the longer perspective on clients applied by of case workers. One interviewee said an on-going conflict with the line manager was the manager’s wish to decrease the case workers

average time spent on clients. One interviewee responded that contradictions occur between objectives “especially from high management and on a political level”.

*“No I don’t think so... our managers know nothing about our work, so to speak, so we are our own men here. One or two maybe have experiences as case workers but in general they are recruited externally” – C1*

*“I think it seems like the agency has entered a phase which is suitable. As I understand it, this hasn’t always been the case. There are rules which could be modified, but I think we are pretty much on the same page there” – F4*

*“We meet these people daily. If you take management, they don’t. I think it’s a general trend within the municipality and all agencies, with a lot of programmes and quotas to fill and then they point with their whole hand” – F1*

*“It used to be more like ‘here’s how things should be done’, but all this has become less strict”. Some might feel like “where is management”, but I think it’s perfect” – D3*

Question (12) - *Do you think there are contradictions between the objectives formulated by management – can be line manager or higher – and with what you believe is better for your work and/or the unemployed? (If so) Can you give examples?*

All but two of the interviewees, fourteen out of sixteen, answered that they lacked time as a resource in the job. Besides time, too many job seekers per case worker were also put forward as a factor behind an experience shortage of resources. Some mentioned the lack of the right “tools” to address clients and of proper training, but the most common inadequate resource was time. The two interviewees who did not answer that time was a scarce resource, had different reasons for this. One had an arrangement with management to be excluded from all meetings and training sessions, partly due to the case worker being close to retirement age. The other was relatively new on the job and had relatively few clients to handle compared to others.

*“No, time is not enough. Vi have the authority, knowledge and influence on our working conditions to a great extent, but we don’t have the time we really would need to exercise those resources” – A1*

*“No, in order to do your job to the fullest extent, you would need to have less clients per case worker. And this really affect the quality of service. In JOB we were supposed to have less than usual, but this is not the case” – D2*

*"We don't have the time. We have rules in order, but knowledge... maybe we could have more if we had the time to study more. But time is the only thing I really lack in my job" – E1*

*"In order to address all these people... maybe a hundred is the limit. To at least be able to do some sort of quality work. I have at least thirty to many clients and many of them take extra time. Plus, half a day of meetings every day" – F3*

Question (13) - *Do you think you have the resources you need – time, knowledge, legislation, support – in order to be able to carry out your work in the best way? (If not) How do you handle possible shortages?*

Nine interviewees said that they did not perform adequate reviews of the all the Activity Reports. Time was the most common reason to why. One case worker confessed to never have failed a report, since they were given low priority in the case workers eyes. Among those who answered that they did have the resources to review the reports, several added that this still was done briefly, or as an “overview”, and not necessarily took any real measures to follow-up or double-check the information stated in the reports. The only one to respond that resources were adequate without any reservations was the case worker with fewer clients than most.

*"I can give you a straight answer there: No [laughs]. I take a glimpse at it and then just 'ok, looks good'. A lot still hands in on paper and you can't really see what they've written so..." – A1*

*"You don't stand a chance since you don't even have the same 150 clients for longer periods, a lot gets added and you don't know them at all. I look through them briefly and maybe picks out one which looks suspicious..." – D1*

*"It depends. If I should double-check everything they put down, then that would amount to a couple of full-time jobs. What I do is that I looks through and if they have ticked in 'nothing to report' I ask them why" – F1*

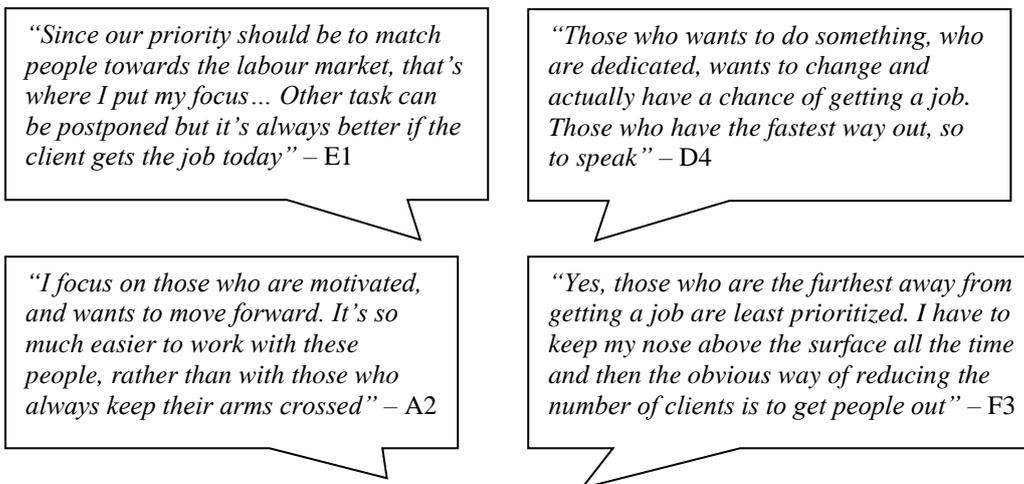
*"I read through and sometimes I fail them, I sure do. And I feel that most really try and spend a lot of time searching. Some misunderstands how to fill it in. In those cases, I always give a second chance" – G1*

Question (14) - *Do you think you have sufficient resources to do an adequate review of all Activity Reports that comes in? (If not) How do you handle this?*

In general, interviewees described as “loud”, “motivated” and “willing” clients as those who get priority when resources are scarce. At the same time, “unwilling”, “least active” and “silent” clients were mentioned as examples of unemployed who in turn easily often gets neglected. Unemployed considered to be closer to the labour market were generally given priority over clients considered to be further away.

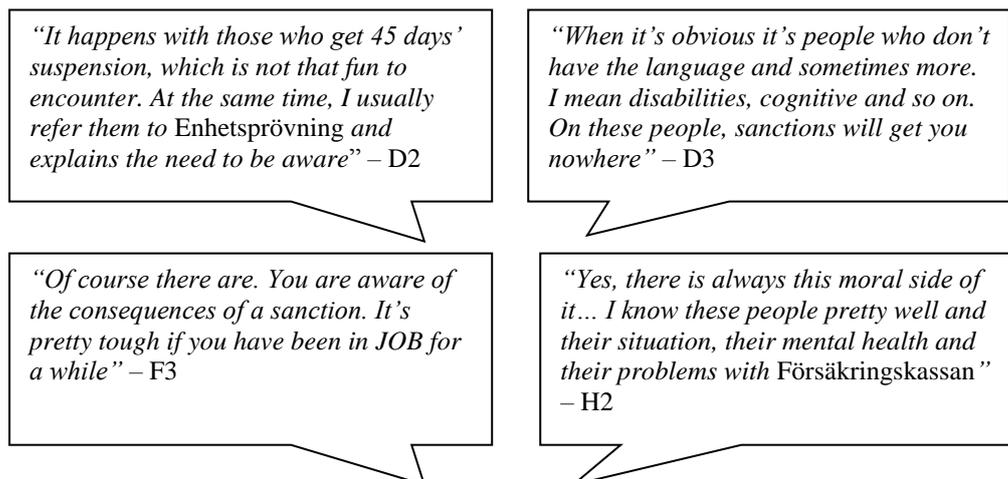
In order to cope with insufficient resources, two interviewees answered that they work extra hours in the day. Two interviewees answered that they tried to aim

priorities both towards those most motivated and active, and towards those least motivated and active.



Question (15) - Can you give examples of how you handle situations where resources are insufficient for all job seekers and you have to prioritize who and what to focus resources on?

The most common dilemma, described by the interviewees, was whether or not to apply sanctions on certain unemployed considered to be vulnerable. Unemployed with disabilities or with low skills in Swedish were mentioned as examples of such unemployed, and three case workers admitted to actively look the other way or revoke sanctions if they considered it necessary. Several interviewees mentioned a relief in being able to refer discussions regarding sanctions to *Enhetsprövning*. Other dilemmas mentioned were: “when to sanction and when to revoke programme assignment”, “when sanctions are a result of miscommunication”, “enforcing uncomfortable rules” and “when clients slip by accident”.



Question (16) - Can you give examples of dilemmas which arises in your work when applying sanctions?

Four interviewees brought forward the role of *Enhetsprövning* in being responsible for making the decisions regarding sanctions. In general, case workers tended to consider this a relief, since they could refer all discussions regarding sanctions to this other unit, even if the cause of the sanction could have been initiated by the case worker. Two interviewees said that sanctions were easier to apply if the client demonstrated a repeated behaviour. Other difficulties mentioned were how to decide between sanction and revoking a programme assignment, how to determine if a client has rejected a job offer, how to address clients who does not return calls or how to validate the consequences of a sanction in relation to the offence.

“When they haven’t submitted their activity report in time. Then they might send us an email and say ‘my computer was broken that day’. ‘Sorry, take it up with Ersättningsprövning’” – C1

“If someone has been absent a month. That sanction is not that difficult to send. And since we don’t have the final call I usually think I can always send the message and let the unit decide” – D3

“No, since it can always be re-examined by Enhetsprövning. And those people who refuses everything... I’m not afraid to admit it. If he doesn’t care, then it’s almost a joy to give a sanction” – B1

“Since the unit has the final call and we only send the message... well, if we have agreed upon a certain level of activity and then this doesn’t work then... then it’s pretty easy to send it actually” – E1

Question (17) - When you are to assess whether an unemployed might be guilty of misdemeanour equal to result in a sanction, what do you perceive as the most difficult aspect in that situation?

When it came to shared methods among interviewees, no such practices seemed to be common among the case workers. Only a few minor examples, such as standard templates and “coffee room talk” were mentioned. No real form of structured cooperation regarding sanctions among case workers – formal or informal – were brought forward as being common, besides from this.

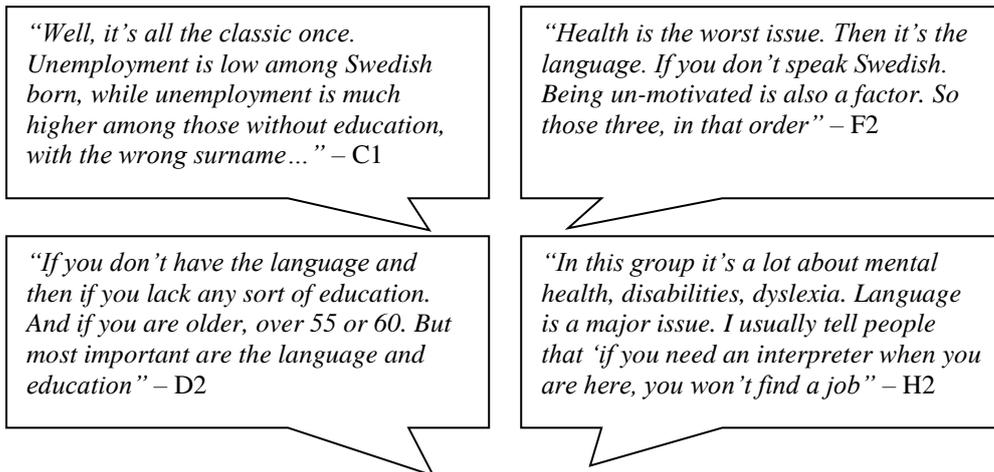
“No, all case workers work very independent with their clients, including when to send a message. We have our common legislation of course, but here everyone has their own way” – C1

“We work individually even if some help might occur... you don’t have the time you might want to sit down with your colleagues and discuss ‘how should we do with these clients’” – H1

Question (18) - Are there any methods case workers at your workplace have developed together in order to handle situations of resource scarcity, dilemmas or difficulties in assessing specific sanction cases? (If yes) Can you give examples?

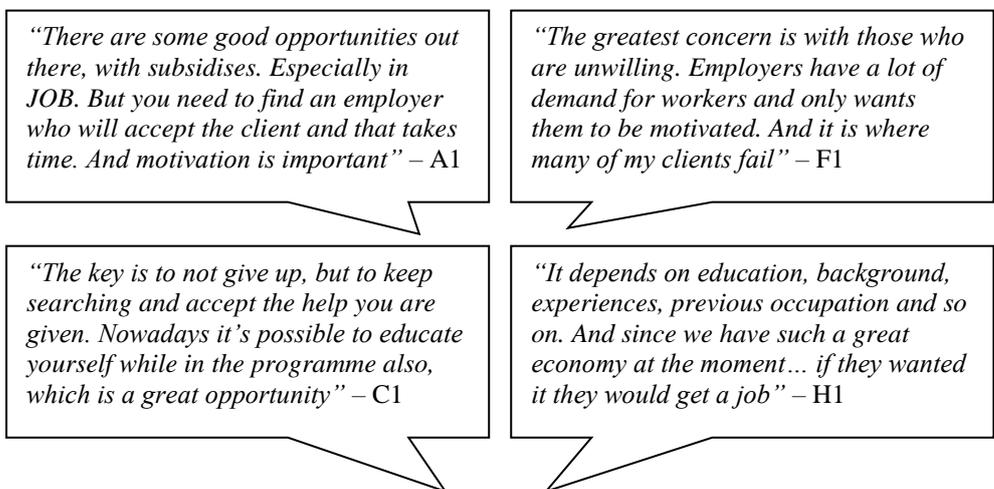
### 5.3 Normative Assumptions

“Low Swedish-skills”, followed by “lack of education” and “illness” were put forward as the most determining factors behind long-term unemployment. Several of the interviewees highlighted combinations of these factors as extra crucial. People with illness, in the form of cognitive disabilities or depressions, might also experience worsen conditions caused by their long-term unemployment, according to two interviewees. Two interviewees mentioned “motivation” and two others external factors such as changing economic cycles and labour market conditions. Other reasons mentioned were discrimination due to ethnicity or age.



Question (19) - *What are the, in your opinion, most determining factors behind that some people are long-term unemployed?*

Interviewees were generally positive towards the opportunities of the unemployed in JOB to get out of unemployment, but added that these opportunities may vary considerable. Tools for motivation such as “coaching”, combined with a willingness from the client to find a job and access to subsidized forms of employment was continuously put forward as a way to foster good prospects for employment. One interviewee pointed out that long-term unemployment continues to increase, even with access to subsidized employment, and that regardless of outflow to work, the inflow to JOB still exceeds it.



Question (20) *How do you see upon the opportunities of the unemployed in JOB to get out of their unemployment? Can opportunities vary depending on different conditions and characteristics of the unemployed? (If so) How is your work affected by this?*

Nine interviewees pointed out unemployed with low Swedish-skills as a group in particularly risk of receiving sanctions. Unemployed with cognitive disabilities were mentioned by five interviewees. For both these groups several case workers admitted to strive to protect them from receiving sanctions. Three interviewees answered that clients lacking motivation were those in risk of being subjected to sanctions and two mentioned unemployed with various social problems, such as, for example, substance abuse.

*“Low language-skills, illiterates...there are a few. Those with low education, of course. Yes... and those with disabilities. I used to work in rehab and there you have to be considerate” – D2*

*“There are always those who don't speak Swedish. People can spend twenty years here in our system and I can't find a single note in the diary. No doctor's certificate, nothing” – F2*

Question (21) - *Which unemployed, do you think, are particularly at risk of facing sanctions? Can you give examples of how you handle such a job seeker?*

Unemployed with disabilities were put forward by eight of the interviewees as a group that should be excluded from sanctions. “Cognitive disabilities” were most commonly mentioned but also unemployed suffering from mental illness, such as depression, were underlined by some.

One interviewee suggested that exemptions from sanctions could be used as “an award for effort for those motivated” and two stressed a need to exclude unemployed in training programs in order for them to be motivated to perform well. Two said that no one should be excluded from sanctions, and one of them instead called for a more extensive practice targeted on repeated offenders.

*“You have to tread very lightly with these people. It about human life. I've had several clients who have expressed thoughts of committing suicide. I'm not going to act in any way so that they may lose their income” – H2*

*“They should be adapted, but not removed completely. No, I think they should extend to everyone, but when it comes to those with disabilities... I mean, if they forget. That's different” – A1*

Question (22) - *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who should not be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied less strictly? (If yes) Can you give examples?*

Repeated offenders alongside known “cheaters” were the dominant categories of unemployed the interviewees expressed should be particularly subjected to sanctions. Those “well-equipped but unmotivated” and “able but unwilling” were put forward as archetype for unemployed with no “excuses”.

*“We have some querulants in this municipality who always know exactly how to balance on the right side of the law. It’s really those we should be out to get”* – G1

*“Yes, those who every time I schedule an appointment have to go to the hospital, or have a sick kid. Within this group there are those who are satisfied and doesn’t want to be bothered. There you would need a tougher sanction”* – D2

Question (23) - *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who in particular should be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied more extensively? (If yes) Can you give examples?*

Nine interviewees said that they would consider to not send a message depending on some circumstances. Those could be that the case worker finds the consequences of a sanction to be in disproportion to the offence, and that some clients should be treated more lightly. Seven interviewees answered that they would not consider to not send a message, all emphasizing different aspects of why they would act in this way. Three interviewees stated that they did not see the positive outcome on enforcing sanctions on unemployed in JOB and therefore would initiate a discussion with the client instead.

*“I don’t believe in enforcing a certain level of search activity for these clients. I believe in dialogue and being too hard on sanctions would ruin that”* – A1

*“Well, of course I would never send a message in that scenario. Never. I mean, if someone risks 45 days then there is something wrong. They got a job or maybe something has happened. It would actually make me curious”* – F2

*“No, never. Not even if there are deaths within the family. I can’t just skip work if that happens to me. If I can’t get vacation and so on, then I have to come in and do my job anyway”* – B1

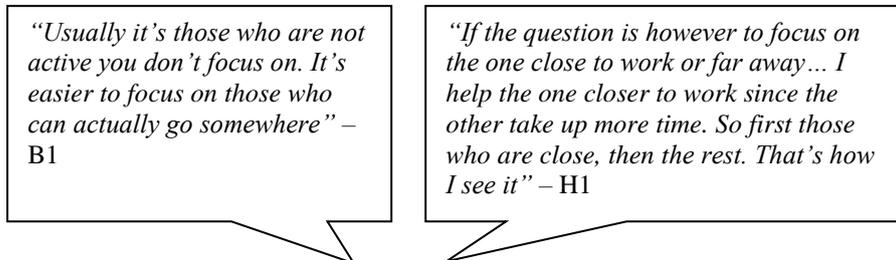
*“No, you can’t do that. I can’t take that moral responsibility. If I did, the whole system gets rocked. And I wouldn’t dare to do it, for my own jobs sake”* – D4

Question (24) - *If you become aware of an unemployed person who risks 45-days of suspension at the next violation and submits an Activity Report with fewer sought jobs or activities than agreed: Are there situations or circumstances that would cause you to consider to not send a message? (If yes) Can you give examples of such situations or circumstances?*

## 5.4 Discretion

Lipsky exemplifies discretion through *creaming* with when employment counsellors send those people to jobs who will have the greatest chance to gain

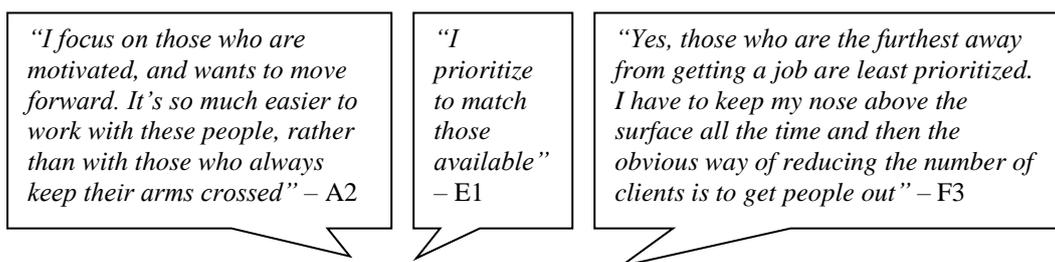
employment anyway, at the expense of those people who will experience more difficulties (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107). This is a common practice, since it both corresponds to the case workers' interest of prioritizing interaction with "easy" clients, and with managements, on all levels, priorities of maintaining as high figures on outflow to work as possible. Creaming was also a prominent practice in order to handle limited resources, according to the interviewees.



There is an obvious conflict in *Arbetsförmedlingen* between both being able to present as great outflow to employment as possible, and to give priority to combat long-term unemployment. When this conflict occurred, the interviewed case workers tended to focus on such a great outflow as possible.

The motivation for creaming, from a case worker perspective, might both come from the (1) political-institutional context, in the form of political pressure on *Arbetsförmedlingen* to present increased outflow to employment from the programmes, from the (2) organizational context, in the form of scarce resources, which makes it rational for case workers to give priority to "easier" clients, or might be based on (3) normative assumptions in the form of case workers conceptions of the deservingness of certain clients.

Clients who are active and willing to participate are given priority over those considered unwilling or "hopeless cases". All of these perspectives were put forward by case workers in the interviews.



Several interviewees presented examples of how they used discretion in relation to a form of *worker bias*. The perceptions regarding of who was considered deserving and who was not among the interviewees were, as mentioned, to a large degree uniform. Unemployed with disabilities, low language-skills, motivated but unlucky, were constantly mentioned as examples of unemployed who deserved to be treated with more care, respect and leniency than clients considered to be recalcitrant, unwilling to participate and repeated offenders.

*“For those in JOB, losing one day of benefits is a huge blow to them. It can actually prevent any progress. They live on such a minimum so... as a case worker I can overlook our relationship to some extent but at the same time I am human and if I give this person a sanction... and it ends up being 45 days’ suspension... how will this help our job? I don’t think it works... specially not on the long-term unemployed” – H2*

*“When it’s obvious it’s people who doesn’t have the language and sometimes more. I mean disabilities, cognitive and so on. On these people, sanctions will get you nowhere. And we have a lot of them in JOB even if they don’t belong here” – D3*

Case workers admitted to practice discretion in order to protect those they considered to be in need. One way was through refusing to send a message about possible sanctions, revoking sanctions and helping clients to work around the system. An example of the latter is what Lipsky calls the power to “convey information” (2010, p. 64), which is something all clients have an interest in knowing but only those the case worker consider deserving will be provided with.

*“To some you can say that... they are in a process of clarifying their ability to work. Then they can be exempted from the requirement to send in activity reports” – A1*

*“I tell the people in JOB that no matter what they have to submit their activity reports and they have to confirm your attendance to Försäkringskassan. So they don’t get cut off” – D2*

Case workers have the possibility to practice discretion in order to exclude clients from having to submit an Activity Report – thereby reducing the risk for sanctions – but carefully selecting who to apply this practice on.

Other case workers said that they tell their clients on what to focus on in order for them to keep their benefits, instead of focusing on employability. There were also examples of more direct actions to defy legislation. One interviewee confessed to never practice sanctions, both due to a general disbelief in sanctions and as a time saving practice, and another used discretion in order to remove mandatory commitments, such as submitting the Activity Support, as a “reward” for good behaviour.

Deserving clients can also be kept in the programme in order to keep their income, if the case worker believes they should be entitled to it.

*“I mean, if you have worked so hard and get a job sixty percent or something and ask ‘do I have to account for my job search during the summer?’ I say, ‘no, you’ve been so good that we’ll skip it until autumn’. Rewarding good behaviour is important” – B1*

*“We have a lot of them in JOB who are too sick to work really, but Försäkringskassan has a different opinion” – F4*

"I try to motivate them, but I know they are not getting any money from Försäkringskassan so I can't remove them from the program. And sanctions... how will that help" – H2

"We are no monsters who kick people out on the street. We have to follow the rules but... some of these clients are so sick that they will never get a job. But Försäkringskassan doesn't agree and then we have to do their job" – F3

To *deny discretion* is, according to Lipsky, also to be considered a form of discretion. Denying discretion is a common way to limit responsibility, when case workers deny that they have influence or can offer alternatives (Lipsky, 2010, p. 149). One interviewee brought up the fact that case workers have the possibility to exclude clients from sanctions to a certain degree, but if they did "the whole purpose of the system would be in jeopardy". A factor behind denying discretion, or avoiding to practice it in favour of clients in this case, might be the presence of *specialization* in the sanction process. Specialization has been considered more or less synonymous with modern bureaucracy and permits street-level bureaucrats to avoid seeing their work as a whole, especially when it is done on formal organizational level (Lipsky, 2010, p. 146-147) (Larsen, 2013, p. 117).

Since the case worker "only" send a message of a possible sanction to the unit *Enhetsprövning*, it becomes suitable to refer clients concern regarding sanctions to the unit, thereby avoiding any responsibility for the outcome. This was something that thirteen of the interviewees expressed in various ways. Specialization of the sanction process had a comforting effect for case workers, which involved a lot of trust in that any potential mistake from their part would be detected, and ideally corrected, by *Enhetsprövning*.

"I have to say that sometimes you just send the message and hope that there is a skilled academic on the other side [laughs]... who know how to interpret the rules better" – F3

"It's good. Especially with the stairs with a warning first etcetera. And it's actually nice to avoid the discussion and refer them to *Enhetsprövning* instead" – D2

"Sometimes you get into that discussion, the client says they was there but we get a signal from the arranger that he was absent. It can be tricky, so then it's good that we can tell the client to write to *Ersättningsprövning*" – A2

"I don't think we should be shy in sending the message. There is always someone on the other side who makes the final call" – D3

The practice of discretion in order to protect and aid deserving clients should also be understood in the light of a general disbelief towards the sanction system for the particular group of unemployed in JOB. As mentioned, when it came to the interviewees' perception of the sanction system in general, nine out of sixteen were positive. But when the sanction system was put in relation to the unemployed in JOB, twelve were negative towards it and ten expressed the notion that the system did not contribute to prioritize those who were far away from the labour market.

## 6 Conclusions

This thesis has been designed and conducted in order to provide an answer to how street-level bureaucrats at *Arbetsförmedlingen* practice discretion regarding benefit sanctions within Activity Support (see section 1.1). Through adopting a street-level bureaucracy theoretical approach, this research problem was addressed by using semi-structured interviews with case workers at *Arbetsförmedlingen's* Labour Market Programme for the long-term unemployed, JOB.

The theoretical framework was, that case workers practice discretion according to their perceptions of the political-institutional and organizational context they work in, together with their own normative assumptions of their clients' level of deservingness and personal deficits.

The main findings suggested that case workers practice discretion in the form of *creaming*, *client differentiation*, and by *protecting* certain clients, based on these perceptions. Case workers also tended to benefit from *specialization* within the agency, since discussions regarding sanctions could be referred to the unit *Enhetsprövning* within *Arbetsförmedlingen*. This made some case workers to rationalize their role in the sanction process within JOB to only "sending the message", since *Enhetsprövning* has the final decision. Even if case workers were generally positive towards the system of benefit sanctions, they at the same time conveyed a disbelief of its behavioural effects, especially regarding the clients in JOB.

Creaming of clients can be seen as a necessity for case workers, in order to address the tension of conflicting objectives within *Arbetsförmedlingen*. On the one hand, *Arbetsförmedlingen* should give priority to, through the tools they are given, stimulate an increased outflow of unemployed clients to employment. On the other hand, JOB is a Labour Market Programme designed to house the long-term unemployed, which is another of *Arbetsförmedlingen's* core objectives to reduce the occurrence of. The motivation behind creaming could be seen to come from various perceptions within all three contexts.

Creaming means that unemployed closer to the labour market are given priority over unemployed further away from the labour market, which means that the later risk of becoming even further marginalized. Other research has concluded that, while benefit sanctions might increase the outflow to employment for certain groups of unemployed, long-term unemployed people are likely to not experience this effect. Instead, they are both more prone to receive sanctions, and to be most negatively affected by them. This perception on the effects of benefit sanctions was common among the case workers. Some admitted to actively protect the clients they considered to be most vulnerable from sanctions. This thesis presents a similar pattern of how street-level bureaucrats experience the effects of benefit sanctions in JOB, as the literature on benefit sanctions concludes in general: That those most

negatively affected by benefit sanctions, are those already considered to be most vulnerable in the labour market.

Client differentiation is, according to street-level bureaucracy theory, intrinsic to street-level bureaucracy and there will always be a need for the case worker to create routines and simplify the work process. In a sense, this seems uncontroversial. Most jobs come with a need to rationalize resources and create routines. But when it comes to social policies, such as benefit sanctions and the distributions of resources within a welfare state agency, this need to categorize clients and rationalize policy might resolve in institutionalizing inequalities and contributing to reinforce stereotypes.

The fact that case workers practice discretion based on their perceptions of work environments and assumptions about clients, was consistently confirmed by the case workers themselves. “Willing”, “motivated” and “easy-to-match” clients were generally given priority on behalf of clients considered to be “unmotivated”, “unwilling” or “repeated offender”. This can be said to be understandable, from a case worker perspective, but questionable as a policy outcome in relation to the general conception of the rule of law, and citizen’s rights to access of equal treatment and welfare.

At the same time, case workers also described how they could defy legislation, provide clients with information about workarounds regarding benefit sanctions and in various ways actively protect clients considered to be deserving or vulnerable. This would, for example, include clients with disabilities, health-related problems or with low language-skills. Some case workers saw this need to protect clients as a way of correcting inequalities and unfair treatment by for example *Försäkringskassan*. Keeping sick, disabled or in other regards “unable” clients within JOB becomes a way of securing those clients well-being.

In all these forms of discretion, case workers’ choices on how to practice it seems to play a big part in the process of who gets what, when and where. Since street-level bureaucracy theory is based on the assumption that policies are *made* when the case worker practice discretion in the interaction with clients, this means that social policy always will be “filtered” through the “black box”, as street-level bureaucracies has been described. This black box is difficult, but necessary to research since it has direct consequences for those who are subjected to policies, and, in the end, for the development and configuration of the welfare state.

The limitations of street-level bureaucracy approaches, are mostly made up of the difficulties to generalize and explain the effects of various social policies. Generalizability is a much desired criterion within welfare state research, and for good reasons. Even though, adapting analytic models as the one which has been used for this thesis, may present an opportunity to perform street-level bureaucracy research according to a more standardized procedure, while at the same time making it possible to incorporate the important aspect of contextual bound circumstances within specific welfare states and agencies, within the same model. Street-level bureaucracy approaches could then be complementary to research addressing the effects of the policies made through the interaction between case worker and client.

To analyse social policy from a mere legislative perspective cannot be enough, in order to analyse welfare states in transition, and not in order to understand how policies actually are made. Instead, the research field of welfare policies needs to incorporate a street-level bureaucratic perspective on the policy process. This is a time consuming, and sometimes unwieldy process. Street-level bureaucracies are bound by context and are difficult to make broad comparisons between. However, the street-level bureaucracy approach cannot be avoided if we are to understand social policy and welfare state functions.

## 6.1 Further Research

Re-organizations are currently taking place within *Arbetsförmedlingen* and certain functions, such as for example the Introduction Programme for newly arrived immigrants, which is being reformed in order to harmonize both the programme structure and the terms regarding the economic compensation connected to it (Introduction Benefits) with those regarding Labour Market Programmes and Activity Support in general. This new programme would be a suitable object for analysis according to the theoretical framework and analytic model, presented in this thesis.

In the Swedish public debate, the introduction of benefit sanctions has been relatively uncontroversial. As an example, the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions abstained from any objections when the legislative bill was referred for consideration by relevant stakeholders (Landsorganisationen i Sverige, 2013). The question of why this has been the case, would be of particular research interest, especially since the debate has been much more ongoing in, for example, the United Kingdom. A research project similar to the ongoing cross-institutional *Welfare Conditionality* (2017) project in the United Kingdom, where various approaches and aspects related to conditionality and benefit sanctions is analysed, would be interesting to adopt into a Swedish context.

This particular system of benefit sanctions within Unemployment Insurance and Activity Support has been active for a relatively short period of time. This means that analyses on the long-term effects of such measures have been rather difficult to perform. But the time approaches were some signs might soon be detectable, for example if benefit sanctions has had any effect on long-term unemployment period or what type of effects it has had on groups who usually are considered to be especially vulnerable to benefit sanctions.

Street-level bureaucracy approaches and interviews on those levels, are necessary in order to understand how policies actually are made, but there will always be a need to also focus on the consequences of such policies. Coming up with suitable approaches towards such research, should be a set priority within welfare state and social policy research in times to come.

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# Appendix

## Letter of Invite to Participate in Research

This email was sent out to all branch managers of *Arbetsförmedlingen* in Skåne the 24<sup>th</sup> of February.

*Hej,*

*Jag heter Erik Haking och arbetade fram till årsskiftet på Enheten Ersättningar på huvudkontoret i Stockholm, där jag framförallt arbetade med sanktioner inom aktivitetsstödet. Denna vår skriver jag min masteruppsats i statsvetenskap, inriktning välfärdspolicies, på Lunds Universitet, vilken även den kommer att fokusera på sanktioner inom aktivitetsstödet.*

*Syftet är att genomföra ett antal intervjuer med handläggare inom JOB:en med fokus på hur de förhåller sig till det nya regelverket som introducerades i mars 2015. Det exakta innehållet i intervjuerna är inte helt färdigt men det kommer ha formen av semi-strukturerade samtal där handläggaren är anonym.*

*Därför önskar jag komma i kontakt med handläggare inom JOB:en hos er som kan tänka sig att medverka.*

*Tacksam för svar. Vänliga hälsningar*

*Erik Haking*

*erik.haking.712@student.lu.se*

*07x-xxxxxx*

### **Translation**

Hello,

My name is Erik Haking and until the end of last year, I worked at *Enheten Ersättningar* at the main office in Stockholm, where I especially worked with sanctions within the Activity Support. This spring I am writing my master's thesis in Political science, oriented towards welfare policies at Lund's University, which also is going to focus on sanctions within the Activity Report.

The purpose is to conduct a number of interviews with case workers within JOB with a focus on how they relate to the new regulation that was introduced in March 2015. The exact content of the interviews is not quite set but it will have the form of semi-structured conversations where the case worker is anonymous.

This is why I wish to come into contact with case workers within JOB with you who may consider participating.

Thankful for your response. Best regards

Erik Haking

erik.haking.712@student.lu.se

07x-xxxxxx

## Interview Plan

- (1) *How old are you?* (Basic information)
- (2) *How long have you worked at Arbetsförmedlingen?* (Basic information)
- (3) *How long have you worked within JOB?* (Basic information)
- (4) *Have you worked with anything else at Arbetsförmedlingen? (If yes,) with what?* (Basic information)
- (5) *What do you think about the sanction system? Both regarding formal legislation and regarding the staircase model as such?* (Formal legislation)
- (6) *In what way could the rules and legislation regarding the sanction system be clarified, modified or adapted?* (Formal legislation)
- (7) *An overarching objective from the legislator's perspective with the new sanction system was to increase the outflow to work through increased search activity: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?* (National political goals, National policy objectives, National core priorities)
- (8) *One of Arbetsförmedlingen's responsibilities is to safeguard that the Unemployment Insurance works as a transition insurance. If Activity Support is considered to work in a similar way: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?* (National political goals, National policy objectives, National core priorities)
- (9) *An overarching objective for Arbetsförmedlingen is to prioritize support for people who are far away from the labour market: In what way do you think the sanction system contributes or does not contribute to this?* (National political goals, National policy objectives, National core priorities)
- (10) *Do you think the sanction system is tailored to the needs of the unemployed with Activity Support in JOB? (If no,) what could be done differently?* (Programme policy goals, programme policy targets)
- (11) *Do you think there are difference between the unemployed within JOB and the unemployed within the Unemployment Insurance which results in that they may be affected differently by sanctions? (If yes), can you give examples?* (Programme policy goals, programme policy targets)
- (12) *Do you think there are contradictions between the objectives formulated by management – this can be a line manager or higher up – and with what you believe is better for your work or for the unemployed? (If so,) can you give examples?* (Management capacity, organizational goals, case worker principles)
- (13) *Do you think you have the resources you need – time, knowledge, legislation, support – in order to be able to carry out your work in the best way? (If not,) how*

*do you handle possible shortages?* (Management capacity, organizational goals, resource availability)

(14) *Do you think you have sufficient resources to do an adequate review of all Activity Reports that comes in? (If not,) how do you handle this?* (Management capacity, organizational goals, resource availability)

(15) *Can you give examples of how you handle situations where resources are insufficient for all job seekers and you have to prioritize who and what to focus resources on?* (Resource availability, case worker principles)

(16) *Can you give examples of dilemmas which arises in your work when applying sanctions?* (Case worker principles)

(17) *When you are to assess whether an unemployed might be guilty of a misdemeanour equal to result in a sanction, what do you perceive as most difficult in that situation?* (Case worker principles)

(18) *Are there any methods case workers at your workplace have developed together in order to handle situations of resource scarcity, dilemmas or difficulties in assessing specific sanction cases? (If yes,) can you give examples?* (Local practice norms, collective beliefs).

(19) *What are the, in your opinion, most determining reasons behind that some people are long-term unemployed?* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)

(20) *How do you see upon the opportunities of the unemployed in JOB to get out of their unemployment? Can opportunities vary depending on different conditions and characteristics of the unemployed? (If so) How is your work affected by this?* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)

(21) *Which unemployed, do you think, are particularly at risk of facing sanctions? Can you give examples of how you handle such a job seeker?* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)

(22) *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who should not be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied less strictly? (If yes) Can you give examples?* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)

(23) *Do you think that there are unemployed – a specific type or groups – who in particular should be subjected to sanctions, or to which sanctions should be applied more extensively? (If yes) Can you give examples?* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)

(24) *If you become aware of an unemployed person who risks 45-days of suspension at the next violation and submits an Activity Report with fewer sought jobs or activities than agreed: Are there situations or circumstances that would cause you to consider to not send a message? (If yes) Can you give examples of such situations or circumstances* (Assumptions about client's deservingness, assumptions about client's personal behavioural deficits)