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Department of Sociology

Steering the Client toward Self-sufficiency
Swedish Social Workers' Accounts of Responsibilisation

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SOCM04, Spring 2018

30 ECTS Credits

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A Word of Thanks

I would like to extend warm thanks to my supervisor, David Wästerfors, for providing sharp-eyed, always helpful constructive criticism. I would furthermore like to express gratitude to all the social workers who agreed to be interviewed for the thesis; without their insightful accounts, it would scarcely have been possible to conduct a study such as this one. Last – but by no means least – I would like to extend a warm word of thanks to my dear friend, Hanna Edgren, for her tireless advice and unwavering encouragement.

Abstract

In the last couple of decades in Sweden, there has been an adoption of “workfare”-oriented policy approaches to unemployment (as opposed to the former, less conditioned welfare-oriented ones). Consequently, labour market policies more and more have started to encompass the Social Services Department (in Swedish; “socialtjänsten”). In Scandinavia, active labour market policies are commonly referred to simply as “activation”; i.e., various political initiatives aimed at activating the unemployed – including social services clients – so as to swiftly render them employable. Such measures entail that social workers are expected to regularly control the activation level of clients. Moreover, new organisational models (New Public Management and Lean), have in the previous decades been embraced by the Swedish Social Services Department. The latest such, “the “Trelleborg Model”, entails that the assessment of entitlement to social assistance is undertaken by an algorithm. In the following, the purpose is to analyse how a group of social workers account for their professional life in light of all of this.

From the vantage point of social constructionism and ethnomethodology, I have therefore conducted eight qualitative interviews with Swedish social workers, employed by various municipal Social Service Centres throughout the south of Sweden. I have inquired as to how they account for the day-to-day practices of their work as it pertains to: (1) professional functions; (2) the ways in which the said functions relate to matters of control, discipline and morality; (3) their thoughts on discretion and; (4) ideas regarding new organisational/management models (including automation initiatives such as the Trelleborg Model).

I have found that the social workers define their primary task as that of steering clients toward employment and financial self-sufficiency. With regard to control, discipline and morality, they account for these matters in terms of getting clients to accept responsibility for their own livelihood; and by extension, getting them to accept certain societal norms of labour and financial self-sufficiency. As for discretion, this is a complex matter, which the social workers navigate through myriad facets of their profession (society at large, superiors, peers, legislation, professional expectations, personal feelings and so forth). Hence, making discretionary assessments is by no

means a cut-and-dried matter, as one, in making such assessments, additionally ought to consider if aggravating factors to activation are at hand (e.g., family circumstances, poor education levels, immigration and integration issues and so forth).

When it comes to The Trelleborg Model, it may have positive as well as negative implications, according to the participants of the study. Positive in that it may conceivably free up time, which may be devoted to the more “difficult” clients (those far from the labour market), rather than to timeconsuming assessments of applications; and negative in that such models may entail an underlying view on humanity that perhaps does not have the best interests of neither social workers nor clients at heart.

Keywords: *Social workers, labour market policies, activation, responsabilisation, discipline, control, discretion, street-level bureaucracy, automation*

Populärvetenskaplig presentation

Under senare decennier har det förekommit frekventa politiska utspel såväl som lagändringar när det gäller socialbidragstagande. Dessa hänger samman med ett allmänt omfamnade av ”aktiveringspolitik” när det gäller arbetslöshet i stort. Vi har till följd av detta omfamnande sett en allt större sammanblandning mellan arbetsmarknads- och socialpolitik, vilket har lett till utökad samverkan mellan till exempel socialtjänsten och Arbetsförmedlingen. Det generella syftet med aktiveringspolitiken är att aktivera arbetslösa – det vill säga aktivera dem på så vis att de snabbt uppnår ett specifikt mål – att finna anställning för att därigenom bli självförsörjande. Detta har inneburit att socialsekreterare som arbetar med försörjningsstöd (vilket ibland också kallas ekonomiskt bistånd eller som ovan, socialbidrag) allt mer förväntas utöva kontroll över klienter. Inom socialtjänsten har man även på senare år anammat nya organisationsmodeller, som till exempel New Public- och Lean Management. Som ett led i denna utveckling har man också börjat använda sig av standardiserade bedömningsmanualer. I Trelleborg har man gått ännu ett steg längre och introducerat den så kallade ”Trelleborgsmodellen”. Modellen innebär bland annat att en algoritm tar ställning till huruvida klienters försörjningsstödsansökningar ska bifallas eller avslås. Denna modell har nu också börjat införas i andra kommuner.

Mot bakgrund av detta har jag, utifrån utgångspunkten att en yrkesgrupp i mångt och mycket själv skapar och sätter upp ramarna för den egna yrkesrollen i det vardagliga yrkeslivet, samtidigt som den troligen även påverkas en hel del av yttre förhållanden (samhälleliga och politiska), intervjuat åtta socionomer som arbetar som ekonomiska biståndshandläggare. Syftet med intervjuerna har varit att undersöka hur dessa biståndshandläggare resonerar kring sådant som den egna yrkesrollen; kontroll, disciplin och moral i ljuset denna yrkesroll; det handlingsutrymme (på eng., ”discretion”) som alla socialsekreterare har vad gäller att ta beslut åt ett eller annat håll och, slutligen; kring nya organisatoriska arbetsmodeller som New Public Management- och Lean-modellerna och i synnerhet då, Trelleborgsmodellen.

Resultaten visar att det finns en tendens till att uppleva att yrkesrollen primärt går ut på att pusha klienter mot självförsörjning – med andra ord att få dem

att ta ansvar för sitt liv och uppehälle – men att det även finns en frustration när det gäller detta, som ibland uttrycks som en önskan att kunna ägna sig mer åt ”socialt arbete”. När det gäller den andra frågan, den om kontroll, disciplin och moral, talar studiedeltagarna hur de använder sig av disciplin och kontroll i syfte att pusha sina klienter mot just arbete och självförsörjning. När det gäller moral så tycks de anse att alla fullt friska och arbetsföra medborgare bör arbeta eller aktivt söka arbete. Vad gäller det egna handlingsutrymmet menar socialsekreterarna att detta är komplext: i det vardagliga yrkeslivet navigeras handlingsutrymmet genom sådant som samhällliga önskemål och normer, överordnade och kollegor, klientens individuella förutsättningar och därtill knutna eventuella egna känslor av sympati, empati osv. Att göra bedömningar när det gäller försörjningsstöd verkar med andra ord vara något knepigt; handlingsutrymmet innebär att få saker är svartvita och att det finns en hel uppsjö av faktorer att ta hänsyn till när bedömningarna ska göras.

När det gäller automationsmodeller som den från Trelleborg menar studiedeltagarna att sådana modeller kan få negativa såväl som positiva följder. Positiva på så vis att den kan frigöra tid som istället för att ägnas åt tidsödande manuella bedömningar kan läggas på arbetet med ”svårare” klienter, och negativa på så vis att en del studiedeltagare uttrycker skepsis och oro gentemot den bakomliggande människosyn en del av dem tycker sig kunna skönja när det gäller Trelleborgsmodellen.

1) Introduction

The two largest political parties in Sweden (Socialdemokraterna and Moderaterna) currently both favour a “tough love” approach when it comes to claimants of social assistance (in Swedish: “försörjningsstöd” or “ekonomiskt bistånd”) (Aftonbladet, 16-10-19; 17-05-02). This ought to be viewed in light of a larger European shift, concerning both fiscal and social policy. The said shift entails a move from welfare to “workfare”-tinged policy approaches to unemployment and subsidy issues. More precisely, the shift consists of the implementation of so-called “active labour market policies” which, through increased subsidy conditionality and control measures, are aimed at incentivising the unemployed to work (Brodkin & Larsen, 2013: 57). The unemployment insurance fees of the “regularly” (i.e., insured) unemployed have thus been differentiated in accordance with market considerations, in tandem with tightened controls of their job-searching activity (Fokus: 2012-11-28). By the same token, the control of the extent to which social assistance recipients (in Swedish; “socialbidragstagare or “biståndsmottagare”) are actively applying for jobs and/or taking other measures aimed at rendering them financially self-sufficient, have also been increased (Sydsvenskan, 2012-09 12; Socialpolitik, 2015-09-30).

The transition to active labour market policies may be said to have been officially implemented in the Social Services Department (in Swedish, “socialtjänsten or “socialförvaltningen”) with the revised Social Services Act (in Swedish, “socialtjänstlagen”) of 2001 (2001:453). The implementation, roughly speaking, concurred with the embrace of New Public Management ideals – which stress cost efficiency, slim organisational set-ups as well as standardisation and automation within the public sector (Hood, 1991: 2ff; Hall, 2013: 406ff). Lean production or management models, drawn from similar ideals, have also been embraced during the same period. The hitherto latest effect of both active labour market policies and new managerial ideals in the social services may be viewed to be an automation initiative called the Trelleborg Model (in Swedish; “Trelleborgsmodellen”). In the said model, the assessment of entitlement to social assistance (as well as the calculation of clients’ cost of living and monthly payment amount) is performed by an algorithm (Metro, 2018-02-05; Trelleborgs kommun, 2017).

The aim of the thesis at hand is to examine how active labour market policies, discretion and current organisational issues are perceived by and accounted for by eight professionals employed by the Swedish Social Service Centres (in Swedish, “socialförvaltningar”). This will be done by way of answering the following four research questions:

1.1) Research Questions

- What do social workers, working with social assistance claimants, perceive their professional role to be?
- How do social workers account for matters of control and discipline *vis-à-vis* clients?
- What are the social workers' thoughts on discretion?
- How do the social workers recent efficiency measures such as The Trelleborg Model?

1.2) Disposition

I shall start by providing a synoptic account of the history of Swedish policies regarding labour market and social care, as well as of the current organisational features of social work. A chapter comprising a literature review of previous research as well as a presentation of the most salient theoretical concepts of the subsequent analysis will follow. In the Material and Methods chapter, I shall then discuss how and why I have approached the informants in the way that I have; after which I shall present and analyse the findings of the interviews and, lastly, argue for what may be concluded from them.

2) Background

2.1) Overview of the Past and Present of the Swedish Welfare State

Sweden, along with the other Scandinavian countries, have long since been considered role models of progressive welfare policies (Bambra, 2011: 740). In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, albeit with some interruptions,¹ held power for the vast majority of the last century. Hence, the party, by and large, has set the agenda for labour market as well as social policy. Key features of the Swedish welfare state are e.g., a state-subsidised, universal healthcare system and mandatory, cost-free and equal basic level education (ibid. Bambra, 2011). Additionally, upper secondary school is cost-free and, although not officially mandatory, the vast majority still choose to attend (Skolverket, 2011). University education is also free of tuition-fees and all Swedish university students are eligible for student loans (csn.se). Another key feature of the Scandinavian welfare system is its various elaborated social insurance systems, including a social care system providing a safety net for less fortunate citizens.

In recent decades, alterations in the make-up of the Swedish welfare state have, however, been proposed and implemented: e.g. privatisation measures in the fields of education and healthcare,

¹ During the Second World War, Sweden, the country was governed by a national unity-government (in Swedish; "samlingsregering"), to preserve its official status of neutrality (Johansson, 1985: 416). After the war, the most noteworthy interruptions to social democratic rule occurred with the two-term centre-right coalitions' rule of 1976-1982; 2006-2014 and one-term centre-right coalition of 1991-1994 (Jordahl et al, 2013: 189; Nycander, 2002: 303).

as well as in labour market policies (ibid. Therborn, 2017; (Finansdepartementet, 2006; Therborn, 2017: 275ff; c.f. Sunnercrantz, 2017:26ff; DN, 17-10-02; SR, 05-14-10). These modifications in the make-up of the Swedish welfare state stem from a gradual embracing of neoliberal fiscal policies (ibid. Therborn, 2017; c.f. Brante: 2009:32). Such policies tend to emphasise deregulation, privatisation and market friendly approaches to private as well as public enterprise, owing to a perceived need to stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit in citizens, so as to dynamise the economy (ibid. Brante, 2009). Hence, there has been the introduction of private employment agencies, a tightening of the eligibility for unemployment benefits and a reduction of payment amounts (Kildal, 2000:9). Moreover, the rules regarding work absence due to illness-rules have been revised and narrowed (ibid. Therborn, 2017; Kildal, 2000). In the wake of this, more rigorous control mechanisms, aimed at ascertaining whether unemployed and ailing citizens, respectively, are adequately active in pursuing employment, or ill to the extent to which they claim to be so, have ensued. (Broström, 2015: 222; c.f., Dagens Medicin, 2010-01-19).

Policy revisions aimed at tackling unemployment and subsidy dependency, with the objective of steering those with a history of long-term unemployment away from subsidy dependency and toward swift employment and financial self-sufficiency, have thus also been introduced (Ulmestig, 2007:119; Milton, 2006:29). The state of the Swedish healthcare and education system, respectively, is in opinion polls frequently identified as being of marked importance to voters and is therefore often fodder for political dispute (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2008: 228). Conversely, social policy legislation and the make-up and tasks of the Social Services Department, have seldom attracted the same public concern.

2.1.1) Social Care, Social Assistance and the Shell of Poor Care

The Social Services Department and its branch for assessing entitlement to social assistance is somewhat distinct from the other various branches of the Swedish social insurance system. Other branches of the welfare state have, in time, been made to encompass all citizens, and most every citizen will, at some point in their life, require their services; e.g., if they have children (child benefits [in Swedish, “barnbidrag”] and childcare), fall ill (sick benefits) or when they reach an advanced age (eldercare) (Sunesson, 1990: 54ff). The right to child benefits was made universal and independent of income in 1948 (Duvander & Johansson. 2008:16); parental leave was made gender neutral and universal more than forty years ago (Hirdman, 1998: 197); and sick leave was mandatorily universalised in the 1950s (Edebalk, 2005:7).

Hence, one of the more salient ways in which entitlement to social assistance differs, is that whether not one is entitled to social assistance is based on an individual means test – carried out by individual social workers,² and not on rights afforded all citizens (Socialstyrelsen, 2013:22; c.f., Edebalk, 1996:10f). Healthcare and education, and ideas as to what these fields ought preferably to encompass, are thus constantly discussed, contested and altered, whilst the core of social care has remained within a sort of shell of poor care [in Swedish; “fattigdomsvård”; social care was previously referred to as poor care or social aid], i.e. – it has never branched out of the task of poverty alleviation (ibid. Sunesson, 1990). The reason for this, is that most Swedish citizens will not, during the course of their lifetime, find themselves in a complete lack of financial means, and therefore in need of social assistance (ibid). Correspondingly, a distinction between “merely” being regularly unemployed or being an unemployed social assistance claimant/recipient has long since been at hand in terms of possessing undesired societal standings (Ulmestig, 2007, 142). The distinctiveness of the Social Services social assistance branch and the modest public interest in the service it provides – sociologically speaking – may also be attributed to the notion that the poor have historically been socially stigmatised (c.f., Goffman, 1963:2). This stigmatisation commonly involves the inferring of either individual or group-based moral shortcomings to account for and legitimise social marginalisation and exclusion (Reidpath, et al., 2005: 475).

Even though the Social Services Department is somewhat distinct from the other welfare agencies in terms the limited public interest, the professional tasks of the social workers have nonetheless been furthered in the preceding decades. Although the core task is still that of poverty alleviation, the Social Services Department, just as the Public Employment Office [in Swedish; “Arbetsförmedlingen”] has been affected by the introduction of active labour market policies.

2.1.2) Activation and Responsibilisation – the Social Services Act of 2001

At the dawn of the 1990s, Sweden experienced the most severe economic recession since the 1930s Depression (Kildal, 2000: 9). Consequently, the welfare system was challenged from financial as well as political quarters – and most every facet of it has since been reviewed and reformed (ibid). Relatedly, there was a shift from the public to the individual with regard to

² The Swedish professional title of “socionom” roughly translates to social worker. Social workers usually have acquired a BA in Social Work, and may work alternatively as school counselors, in psychiatry, with asylum seekers, with substance addiction/treatment etcetera. I specifically sought after and interviewed social workers who work with social assessing assistance eligibility (in Swedish, “socialsekreterare”); i.e. when I henceforth, in relation to the informants, refer to “social workers”, I am referring specifically to people whose work, amongst other things, consists of granting or denying social assistance applications.

views on social assistance reciprocity. The said shift meant a change in how clients' rights and responsibilities were perceived at the policy level (ibid.). Whilst the primary obligation of social assistance claimants/recipients had previously been that of, to the best of their ability, look for employment and accept reasonable offers of such, this was during the 1990s transformed into an obligation to participate in municipal work or training projects (ibid.). This transition to workfare policies entail that the state aims to promote the primacy of work, whilst it at the same time attempts to limit welfare expenditure by way of activating the unemployed (ibid.). In the strive to reach the aforementioned goals, politicians at the national as well as the municipal level have, from the 1990s and onward, adopted a "responsibilisation" strategy to social services clients (Garland, 1996: 452: ff; ibid., Kildal: 2000: 9), of which more later.

On the same note, The Social Services Act of 2001 (2001:453), as mentioned, marked something of an official implementation of active labour market policies in the Social Services Department. Whilst the revisions of the 2001 Act ought not be interpreted as signs of the Social Services Department cracking out of its shell of alleviating and amending poverty (c.f., Sunesson: 1990: ibid), it has nonetheless modified the expected function of the Social Services Department somewhat. By the same token, it has resulted in ever-increasing collaborations [in Swedish; "samverkan"] between the Social Service Department, the Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency [in Swedish; "Försäkringskassan"] (Socialstyrelsen, 2013:90ff).

Similarly, even though the Social Services Department is somewhat distinct from its fellow agents of welfare provision, it too has been subjected to the same political and organisational *Zeitgeist* changes, as have the other branches of the welfare state.

2.1.3) New Organisational Approaches in the Welfare Sector

New Public Management comprises a series of fresh approaches to public management, which stress cost and time efficiency, (ideally quantitatively) measurable results and the continuous evaluation and improvement of the said results (Hood, 1991; Brante, 2015: 147f). In New Public Management, matters such as organisational objectives and accountability are largely placed with political and financial actors (ibid.). According to Hood, the ascent of New Public Management ought to be linked to four pervasive trends of public administration: (1) the cutting of public costs by way of more moderate staffing expenditures; (2) tendencies toward privatisation and quasi-privatisation, moving away from a set-up of core government institutions (ibid.) – emphasising instead a decentralisation of service provision. (3) Automation

tendencies,³ in particular regarding information technology in the production and dissemination of public services; and – lastly; (4) the development of a decidedly internationalist agenda, with regard to the “[...] general issues of public management, policy design, decision styles and intergovernmental cooperation [...]”, so as to complement the given country’s existing expertise in public administration (Hood, 1991: 3f).

The term “Lean production” is by proponents viewed as a philosophical/managerial approach or strategy (Petersson et al., 2008: 1). Lean management may (even though some have protested this) be viewed as a continuum of New Public Management approaches, as it purports to facilitate “[...] performance control [...] within new organizational frameworks centered on private sector business models” (Carter, et al., 2011: 86). Originating from the managerial philosophy of Japanese automobile manufacturer Toyota – the Lean approach is guided by key concepts such as, e.g., corporate culture, employing fundamental organising principles – as well as by a stressing the essence of leadership and cooperative spirit (ibid.). The Lean management philosophy aims to eliminate on a gradual basis all organisational waste, in order to achieve greater profitability and competitiveness through steadily increased productivity and flexibility (ibid; c.f., Womack & Jones, 1990: 91ff). In terms of sociological analysis, the implementation of both New Public Management and Lean initiatives marks something of a return to *Taylorism*, insofar that the public sector – in the strive toward efficiency and modernisation – has become imbued with goal-setting, target specificity (stressing of quotas) and inspection (Seddon & Donovan, 2003:34f). In the preceding decades, the public sector in Sweden has taken to heart both these new organisational or managerial ideals (Ibsen et al., 2011: 2304ff). In the case of the Social Services Department, the adoption of such ideals has yielded a quest for more efficient departments in terms of costs, caseload-management skills, and measures directed at promptly activating clients in order to steer them toward financial self-sufficiency (Milton, 2006: 12ff).

In summary: thus far, I have suggested that latter-day Swedish development in labour market and social care policy, which stress the urgency of activation and swift employment, have occurred in conjunction with the adoption of neoliberal economic policies. Moreover, the technological revolution of the last thirty years or so has facilitated concurrent labour market and social care policy developments. The hitherto logical conclusion to the aforementioned development in public management appears to be the Trelleborg Model. The Social Services

³ Which, for obvious reasons, have increased exponentially with the technological advances that have occurred since Hood wrote his piece on New Public Management in 1991.

Department of Trelleborg has, on grounds of cost-efficiency as well as beneficial synergy effects, received a prize for its adoption of automated assessments; the adoption of which was encouraged by Lean Management consultants (Voister, 2017-10-2).

2.1.4) The Trelleborg Model

A new model of working was recently introduced into various municipal social services centres. It is called “the Trelleborg Model” (after the name of the municipality and city from which it emanates) and entails e.g. that the assessment of eligibility for social assistance is undertaken by an algorithm.⁴ Some guiding principles of the model are “employment first” (in Swedish; “arbetsplats först”) and “the flexible refill of skills and competencies” (in Swedish; “flexibel kompetenspåfyllnad”), by way of attempting to match social assistance recipients with private market requests for particular skills and competencies (Trelleborgs kommun, 2017).

At the beginning of 2018, 12 out of 16 social workers at a social services centre in the municipality of Kungsbacka, opted to resign from their positions due to the fact that the Trelleborg Model would be introduced at their department (SKL, 2017; *Metro* 2018-02-05). Such a model lessens and may, in the long run, feasibly more or less eliminate the discretionary aspect long since associated with assessing social assistance entitlement. The objective of the model appears to be to employ automation in order to rationalise away the arbitrariness of human discretionary decision-making, and in so doing, saving time as well as money, whilst simultaneously enhancing the employment opportunities of social services clients. The threat that the model poses to discretionary assessment based on inter-human interaction, and, by extension – to the legal certainty aspects [in Swedish, “rättssäkerhetsaspekter”] of assessments – has been put forward by social workers who opted to resign because as the reason for their resignation (SVT, 2018-01-06).

⁴ The algorithm also calculates the total social assistance sum which will be paid in accordance with the legislated national standard amount (in Swedish; “riksnormen”). According to this, applicants with children are entitled to a somewhat larger amount. The legislated national standard, along with “reasonable” expenses as it pertains to other needs, determines the exact amount of social assistance.

<http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/ekonomisktband/riksnormen> (accessed 2018-05-15).

The fact that the calculation of social assistance level in accordance with the legislated national standard is done by an algorithm is however not of as much concern as is the fact that the assessment of entitlement to social assistance is – at least since 2017 – also undertaken by an algorithm (SKL, 2017). <https://skl.se/download/18.3866560e15ce9b20f9b27fb4/1498719212169/trelleborgskommunbeslut24timmar.pdf> (accessed 2018-05-15).

3) Literature Review and Theoretical Point of Departure

In what follows, I will firstly present brief overviews of previous research, which I deem to have some affinity with the study at hand. Near the end of each sub-section – I will then present some studies that have a more marked affinity with the current one in a more detailed manner, after which I shall present the theoretical point of departure – which is informed by both previous research and the accounts the interviewees.

3.1) Activation, Control and Discipline

Pertaining to active labour market policy, Lødemel and Trickey [ed.] (2001) propose a distinction between labour market attachment and human resource development. The former entails a stressing of swift labour market readiness (i.e., a “stick” or workfare-approach) whilst the latter – although also aimed at employment – additionally takes into account the potential for character growth in individuals, i.e., it is more of a carrot, or welfare approach (ibid.; c.f. Heikkilä, 1999; Hanesch, 1999). Trickey (2001: 278), highlights Denmark as a prototypical country when it comes to human capital development, whereas Lødemel asserts that Norway and the U.S are more directed toward labour market attachment (workfare) than e.g. Denmark (2001: 295). Lens (2008) writes of the shift from mere cash assistance and social support to conditioned workfare programmes in the North American context (Lens, 2008: 215). As an effect of the said shift, there has been a rise in negative client experiences, owing to an increase in discretionary sanctioning (ibid.). Brännström and Stenberg (2007:349ff) have found that social assistance influences future employment opportunities negatively, both before and after the advent of activation programmes.

Nybom’s (2012) study, in which she analyses activation, support and control by interviewing social workers, displays a strong affinity with the thesis at hand. Nybom found some empirical support for her notion that unemployed social assistance claimants/recipients are met with a somewhat sterner approach activation and other support measures, than are “regularly” unemployed individuals (Nybom, 2012:58), which ties to Sunesson’s (1990) notion that this branch of the welfare system may be considered to constitute a shell of poor care. Nybom found that the modes of activation and sanctioning differs somewhat depending upon clients’ age and overall psychical and mental status (Nybom, 2015: 35; 56). She also mentions that her dissertation does not directly address the ways in which active labour market policies within municipal social services centres correspond to latter day organisational changes within the said department (c.f. Nybom, 2015: 70). The current study differs from that of Nybom in this one way. It also differs from Nybom’s study in that the latter applies a comparative, municipal

perspective to activation policies, whereas I do not aim to contrast and compare various municipalities. Rather, I wish to present a more theoretical perspective of activation, discipline, control and current organisational conditions, grounded in the accounts of my informants.

3.2) Discretion

The Social Services Department belongs to a larger category of public agencies, often referred to as street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 1980:4). The work of these public agencies comprises daily interactions with clients, in which the representatives of these agencies are entrusted discretion [in Swedish, *handlingsutrymme*"]; i.e., alternative action choices which individual, street-level bureaucrats are expected to somewhat independently make rulings based on the assessment of individual clients (Svensson et al., 2010)

There have – in the last twenty years or so – been myriad European and North American studies on discretionary judgement in the social services sector, see e.g. (Lindelöf & Rönneback, 2004) on how bureaucratic protocol affects discretion in needs assessment pertaining to eldercare. On a similar, albeit more scientific-philosophical note, Molander, Grimen & Eriksen (2012: 214f) hold that discretion has epistemological implications. These implications are to with the fact that discretionary reasoning at the street-level results in inferences regarding what actions ought to be taken in conditions of uncertainty, in which satisfactory knowledge cannot always be obtained (*ibid.*). This affects the accountability (or lack thereof) of discretionary judgement (*ibid.*). Stranz (2007) highlights how the inclination of Swedish social workers to deny or grant social assistance payments varies depending upon both municipality of employment and personal factors of the individual social worker (*ibid.*).

A study by Wörlén (2010) displays a similar point of departure to the current one. Wörlén's focuses on the relationship between legislation and discretion or, as one might also view it, the relationship between agency and structure (Berger & Luckman, 1966: 78). She has interviewed elected officials, making decisions regarding social policy at the municipal level, as well as street-level bureaucrats of the Social Services Department. Wörlén asserts that the elected municipal officials of the Social Services Board (in Swedish; "*socialnämnden*") – as an effect of their relative autonomy – have a sort of executive power over the Social Services Departments (Wörlén, 2010:40). Furthermore, she holds that laws and regulations are important to the discretionary decision-making process of both elected officials and street-level bureaucrats, but that its framework character (i.e., requiring much interpretation of legislative postulates) makes room for substantial discretion (*ibid.*), but that discretionary assessment,

notwithstanding this, by and large appear to be guided by a rather strict interpretation of legislation (Wörlén, 2010: 33).

Wörlén concludes that municipalities in Sweden in theory have considerable discretion, since they are relatively autonomous; they have the right to, to a large degree, make decisions independently. This entails that each municipality has its own set of goals concerning social services work, which generates qualitative differences as to the availability and make-up of social services (ibid.). This casts the fact that street-level bureaucrats nonetheless account that their work is largely guided by legislation in an interesting light (Wörlén, 2010: 33f). Like Nybom, Wörlén emphasises municipal differences in the employment of street-level discretion, but also, as mentioned, the extent to which assessments are informed by legislation whereas I, drawing on the accounts of my informants, as will be seen, have obtained somewhat different results.

3.3) Organisational Issues

Apart from Hood's (1991) previously mentioned seminal article on New Public Management, there have been a plethora of scholarly work on the subject (see e.g., Horton, 2006 or Griffith & Smith 2014) on the impact at the street-level; (Pollitt & B Bouckaert: 2011) on the state-level impact or; Nordegraaf (2015) on how New Public Management is related to the increasing professionalisation, managerialisation and standardisation of public service work. With regard to Lean Management and standardisation, Ponnert and Svensson (2016: 596) infer that sticking to standardised manuals may be a way in which public professionals can adjust to organisational demands and combine traditional concepts their profession (ethics, care) with calls for evidence-based assessment-models. It may also enhance professional legitimacy on grounds of transparency and predictability (ibid.). A potential pitfall of formal guidelines and standardised manuals is, however, that social workers grow accustomed to a manual and administrative based way of professional reasoning, which may result in uncertainty when individual professional judgement is required (ibid.)

On the note of standardisation and professionalisation, Skillmark (2018) has examined the implications of manual-based standardisation in social services work pertaining to children. One model of manual-standardisation is e.g. "BBIC" [in Swedish; "Barns Behov I Centrum", which translates to "Children's need in focus"] (2018: 17; Socialstyrelsen, 2012). The author concludes that standardisation manuals serve to enhance social workers' professional legitimacy, as it bestows upon them a higher degree of professionalism (i.e. professionalisation), which is conducive to claiming jurisdiction (Skillmark, 2018: 42). On the

other hand, it may, as mentioned, also serve to de-professionalise social work, as it poses a threat to discretionary assessment based on profession-specific sense and skills (Skillmark, 2018: 39). When touching upon the potential implications of standardisation on discretion and proposes a taxonomy of social workers attitudes to the relationship between standardised models and discretion (Skillmark, 2018: 66ff). Skillmark suggests that standardisation models may lead to either a “formalised”, “rationalised”, “negotiation-oriented”, or “radicalised” professional position *vis-à-vis* discretion (ibid. Skillmark, 2018). The formalised position would entail a rigid adherence to the formal routes of action in an organisation; the rationalising one strives to simplify the burden administrative demands (ibid.). The negotiation-oriented position is to do with the discretionary lines of reasoning that are employed when making assessments, which are the product of the authority which stems from professional tradition, knowledge, experience on ethical code and how these factors are negotiated in times of change (ibid). The radicalised position would comprise critical, ideologically tinged objections as to the effects of increased standardisation and governance (ibid.). The sections of this study which touch upon organisational challenges and the Trelleborg model is similar to Skillmark’s study, in that the latter suggests that the standardisation and professionalisation of social work has likely been enhanced by the rise of New Public Management (Skillmark, 2018: 19). To automate completely the assessment process (i.e., The Trelleborg Model) – rather than relying on standardised manuals – is, however, to take a further step in the effort to achieve more homogenous assessments. Whilst standardised, or – as in the case of the Trelleborg Model – completely automated models of assessment – might serve to raise the professionalism of social workers, the latter model might conceivably also serve to eliminate the need for discretion altogether.

In the following sub-chapters, I will present the ways in which I have theoretically operationalised all of these matters for the analysis.

3.4) The Professional Role of the Social Worker

The adoption of active labour market policies entails that social services clients, preferably swiftly, ought to be activated in terms of job seeking and other measures aimed at obtaining financial self-sufficiency.). Conceivably, this has affected professional role of social workers somewhat, in that it implies that social workers ought to emphasise workfare/employmentrelated matters in client interactions. Alterations in the professional role of social workers may also be tied to a larger trend of professionalisation in the public sector. Professionalisation, amongst other things, entails that a group of professionals positions itself

on the basis of its specific resources and qualifications (Brante, 2009: 16f This trend includes calls for evidencebased ways of working; entailing that documented results, based on pre-set manuals, have increasingly started to inform the assessment-making practices of the Social Services Department (Liljegren & Parding, 2010: 281f).

Cooperation with other welfare agencies, as well as streamlined models of assessment, is viewed one possible route of achieving a new, more legitimised professionalism (Byberg, 2002: 62; 67; c.f. Nybom, 2012: 69; c.f. Socialstyrelsen, 2013:90ff). This has been termed as organisational professionalism (as opposed to occupational professionalism which stresses collegial control of the quality of the work), and it favours a bureaucratic control of public employees and evidence-based, i.e., proven, efficient methods of working (ibid.). It may be argued that contemporary social work encompasses both kinds of professionalism, but that it, in latter decades, have been tilted more toward organisational professionalism, which in turn, ties to New Public Management ideals of tighter controls of the outcomes of the public sector (Liljegren & Parding 2010: 271; 284f; c.f. Hood, 1991).

3.5) Activation, Control and Discipline – Theoretical Considerations

Relationships formed between social workers and clients contain a marked power imbalance; one party – the social worker, is expected to exert control over the future material and social life of the other party – the social services client. In so doing, the social worker is expected to discipline the client if the conduct of the latter does not measure up to standards ascertained by the former. Michel Foucault (2017: 227) holds that there is a penal component at the heart of any disciplinary system. The social worker is, after all encouraged to get the client to conform to a certain code of conduct, through the rewarding of that which is deemed to be commendable behaviour and – by the same token – through the sanctioning of behaviour judged not to be conducive to the purpose of the interaction (Foucault, 2017: ibid Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 116). Social workers who assess social assistance eligibility exercise control over clients by: (1) possessing the distributional control over benefits and sanctions; (2) having the power to structure the context in which they interact with their assigned clients; (3) by teaching the befitting code of client conduct of context, and – lastly; (4) having the power to apportion not only material, but also psychological rewards and sanctions *vis-à-vis* clients (Lipsky, 1980: 60ff). This may be said to constitute the *Governmentality* approach of social workers – i.e., the chosen way in which to steer or govern subjects (clients) (Foucault, 1991:92; Gordon, 1991:7ff).

Additionally, I would argue that the relationship between the client and social worker entails moral dimensions. Clients ought to preferably prove that they are not idle or passive, but rather, willing to comply with the actions that they and their assigned social worker have (formally) jointly agreed to (ibid Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 116). Assessments as to whether or not the client has complied thus involves the passing of moral judgement, with regard to clients displaying indolence or passivity when seeking employment. Authoritative disciplining of those not deemed to satisfactorily live up to desired standards is usually undertaken with the aid of potential sanctions; which are intended to serve a normative purpose (ibid. Foucault, 2017; c.f., Sahlin, 2016: 103). Control is exercised in order to discipline the client in some fashion or other.

The control and disciplining of clients appear to have increased as of the embrace of active labour market policies (Milton, 2006:8; Broström, 2015: 207). Clients are expected to activate themselves by way of pursuing employment as much as they can. The jobs they apply for ought to be accounted for through clients providing the names, telephone numbers and email addresses of the employees with which they have been in contact (Milton, 2006: 39. As alluded to in the background section, this may be viewed as a strategy of responsabilisation by way of controlled activation (Garland, 1996: 452). The adoption of this strategy involves (1) “help for self-help”-conditionality; (2) “inter-agency cooperation” (for instance, between the Social Services Department, the Public Swedish Employment Office and/or the Swedish Social Insurance Agency [“Försäkringskassan”] and; (3) the creation of “active” citizens (ibid. Garland, 1996). In this process – the causality of as well as the responsibility for unemployment and poverty is largely removed from the hands of the state, labour market and municipality (ibid.). The responsibility is instead largely placed with the unemployed poor themselves (ibid.). In its responsabilisation strategy to poverty and unemployment, the state aims “[...] to bring about action on the part of 'private' agencies and individuals – either by “stimulating new forms of behaviour” or by “stopping established habits” (Garland, 1996: ibid; c.f., Riley & Mayhew 1980: 15).

The stressing of activation was, as previously mentioned, officially implemented with the passing of the 2001 Social Services Act (2001:453). The 2001 Act states that individuals are first and foremost themselves responsible for their own sustenance (SOU: 1999:97:235). What’s more, the Act stipulates that claimants may be denied social assistance, should they not have exhibited the adequate degree of job seeking activity or fail to provide the proper reasons for not doing so (ibid.). The emphasis on activation lends the Social Services Board permission to demand of social assistance claimants the participation in activities deemed to have the potential to raise their skill and competencies levels (SOU, 1999:97:53). The task of controlling

clients has been facilitated by the technological revolution of the previous decades. This revolution has yielded new possibilities of control, including the checking of bank statements and cross-checks with other welfare agencies, such as the Public Employment Office and the Social Insurance Agency, in order to assure that clients do not receive additional, undisclosed benefits or salaries (SOU 2015:44).

As for the matter of when it is suitable to reward, or sanction a given client, this is determined with the aid policy directives, recommendations and deliberations with co-workers, but the ultimate decision guide this or ruling is the product of the discretion afforded to the individual social worker.

3.6) The Elusiveness of Discretion

Discretion is perhaps not a theoretical concept *per se* but, rather, more of a model of working within in street-level bureaucracies. Nevertheless, it – i.e. the way in which discretionary assessments are approached – has conceivably been affected by the advent of active labour market policies, with its increased focus on control of clients, which might also have affected how the professional role of the social worker is perceived in legislation, policy and by social workers themselves. Hence, matters of discretion have theoretical implications.

As mentioned in the previous, social workers have the power to deny or grant clients social assistance applications on grounds of activation degrees (Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 23). The adequate level of activation is discretionarily assessed, based on a combination of individual client factors, policy directives and professional judgement (Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 21; c.f. Milton, 2006: 51). This entails that there is a somewhat opaque component to discretion, meaning that different departments and different individual Social workers may vary in terms of the expectations, routines and traditions of discretionary assessment (Byberg, 2002: 40; 55). Discretionary assessment may call into question matters of legal certainty [in Swedish; “rättssäkerhet”] (ibid.). Principles of legal certainty and equality before the law are in place so as to guarantee that individual citizens are not treated arbitrarily or biased (ibid.), but there is always an element of uncertainty in discretionary assessment. Although not completely arbitrary, in the sense that it is exempt from rules and consequences, it nevertheless makes room biases pertaining to client-processing (Lipsky, 2010, 140f).

Discretion is something of a prerequisite in street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 2010: 190). This branch of the public sector is complex and unwieldy in nature, and – what’s more – policy objectives are often opaque, and resources scarce, hence the need for discretion (ibid.). Although the legislative, policymaking branches of democracies emanate from elected officials

– street-level bureaucrats such as social workers may also be viewed as policymakers in two respects: (1) in their work, social workers exercise a far-reaching discretion in the decisions pertaining to the citizens with whom they interact; which: (2) taken as a totality, adds up to agency behaviour; it tends to effectively *become* policy (Lipsky, 2010: 13). Considering this, one may view the street-level bureaucrat as a sort of mediator between official national and municipal policy, legislation and policy, superiors, peers and clients. Mediators who do have a degree of agency, as they are able to shape the structure of public policy through going about their work in one fashion or other. One may therefore contend that the relationship between agency (the realm of possible, individual routes of action taken by social workers) and structure (policy and legislation, superiors) is a dialectical one (Berger & Luckman, 1966: 78).

The principal task of social workers, working with social assistance, is assessing whether applicants ought to be granted or denied monthly social assistance payments (Socialstyrelsen, 2013:129). This, in turn, is contingent upon whether the latter have taken reasonable and adequate activation steps toward reaching financial self-sufficiency in the foreseeable future (ibid). The discretion of street-level bureaucrats enables them to deliver benefits or sanctions, which may serve to structure, delimit or create opportunities in the lives of clients (Lipsky, 1980: 4). If a client does not agree or comply with the plan s/he has established with the guidance of the social worker, he/she may face a complete or partial denial of his/her monthly social assistance payment (Socialstyrelsen, 2013:129). Although the client is provided the opportunity to have a say in what is to be his or her course of activation, the executive power, or discretion, to decide the fitting mode of activation of the given client is ultimately the prerogative of the social worker (SOU: 1999:97:235).

It ought to be stressed that the social assistance claimants are entitled to appeal a ruling effectuated by his/her assigned social worker in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act (in Swedish; “förvaltningslagen”, Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 135ff). The right of appeal is in place so as to strengthen legal certainty aspects (Byberg, 2002: 40), though the ratio of granted appeals appears to be somewhat modest due to complex appeal processes long and arduous turnaround time [in Swedish; “handläggningstid”] (Riksrevisionen, 2014: 31ff).

3.7) Organisational Challenges and Discretion

As previously stated, the public sector in Sweden has taken to heart various, relatively new organisational approaches such as for instance New Public and Lean Management (Ibsen et al., 2011: 2304ff; Petersson et al., 2008; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016: 528). Active labour market policies and new public organisational measures aimed at public organisational efficiency,

respectively, may be viewed as two sides of the same coin, of which New Public Management is the organising tool which governs activation measures, whereas activation is the desired outcome with regard to the unemployed (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016: 528). By the same token, such measures will likely affect the way in which discretionary decisions are made. The Trelleborg Model appears a logical next step – pertaining both to the activation of social services clients and to the organisational challenges of the Social Services Department, and what’s more – it may also conceivably affect the discretionary leeway long since associated with the assessment of social assistance applications.

4) Material and Methods

4.1) Theory of Science – Social Constructionism

The methodological (or scientific-philosophical) point of departure is the social constructionist one. In their seminal 1966 book – *The Social Construction of Reality* – Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman propose that society, as well as everyday social life and the ways in which we attain knowledge regarding both, are products of ceaseless social construction and maintenance. Moreover, the point of departure is a social *constructionist* rather than social *constructivist*, in that it is grounded in the ways in which the social workers account for their daily professional lives. In accounting for their professional life, they construct and reconstruct themselves, i.e., their professional selves, based on the knowledge gathered from experiences specific to members of a particular professional group (rather than individual professionals, intermittently belonging to a group as fellow professionals) (c.f. Berger & Luckman, 1966: 86). The social setting (the social services in the era of activation) in which the construction occurs, rather than the individual in the same social setting (as would be the case in a more *constructivist* approach), is thus foregrounded (Gergen, 1995: 24f).

Berger and Luckmann propose a distinction between the “objective” vs. “subjective” reality when it comes to the ways in which society is perceived. By subjective reality, the authors refer to the stock of knowledge attained during primary socialisation (in childhood, by one’s significant others), which is subsequently furthered by secondary socialisation, i.e., “[...] the internalization of institutional or institution-based “sub-worlds” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 158). In secondary socialisation, a sort of “special knowledge”, stemming from the societal division of labour is distributed, and is, from then on, maintained and elaborated by verbal communication, with its various semantic or symbolic meanings or values (Berger & Luckman, 1966: 158ff; 172). In this second process of socialisation, the social world presents itself to the individual as ostensibly objective reality, owing to institutionalising processes in which the

scope of action choices has been habitualised and narrowed (Berger & Luckmann, 53ff). This reality – i.e., the professional one of my informants – forms the basis for the analysis.

Institutions such as e.g. the Social Services Department are, by social workers and clients alike, perceived as having coercive power over individuals “[...] both in themselves, by the sheer force of their facticity, and through the control mechanisms that are usually attached to the most important of them” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 78). A simpler way of putting it would be that a group of professionals, for instance, social workers, are active in a highly institutionalised setting of rules, regulations and required professional legitimation, which appear coercive, but which is solely the product of human action and construct, and thus always open to contestation, negotiation, and change. The professional expectations of a given group are thus man-made social constructs; highly contingent upon individual and societal factors and thus arbitrary by nature (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 69). Such expectations are constantly negotiated, modified or altered, due to the vagaries of political fashion as well as the behaviours of social groups and individuals. The production, negotiation and reproduction of professional roles is then – out of necessity – always a social enterprise (ibid. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Hence, the ontological (i.e., that which can be said to exist) tenet of social constructionism that permeates my analysis, is that there does not, at least as it pertains to this study, exist a world of social service work that may be separated from my informants’ narratives of it (c.f. Jackson, 2011: 28 ff; 141). The best way in which I may attain knowledge (epistemology) regarding the professional life of social workers is therefore by analysing their accounts and draw subsequent conclusions from them (ibid. Jackson, 2011).

4.1.2) Methods

The qualitative research method was chosen as it enables one to pose in-depth queries as to how people *account* for something, rather than to make statistically based inferences about – for instance – a hypothesis regarding correlations between activation policies and clients attaining employment (c.f. Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2014: 146). Hence, I did not approach my informants with any sort of fixed hypothesis that I wish to test on them. I did however, have some prenotions concerning how active labour market and social policies may inform aspects of contemporary social work that I wished to explore.

As social scientists who interacts with the subject of their research are invariably a part of the world they study, it is entirely feasible that my presence affected the accounts of the interviewees in some fashion (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 14). For instance, it could well be that the interviewees wanted to present themselves and their profession in a certain,

favourable light. I, however, got the impression that they wanted to account for their profession in an honest and open fashion, including the difficult aspects of it. The study has ethnomethodological features, in that field of study is the process in which my informants themselves decide that which is true (or real) regarding the professional life through the “ethnomethods” they utilise to reconstruct it (i.e., its challenges, limitations, frustrations etcetera). (c.f. Stinchcombe, 2005: 267). The aim is to lay bare the way in which the informants create and recreate their own settings by way of conversation and interaction (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:8 c.f. Garfinkel, 2011: vii), in keeping with the social constructionist ontological point of departure of the thesis. In summary then, the methodological point of departure and methods were chosen in order to analyse the accounts of certain social phenomena (the professional life of social workers); how it is constructed, maintained and ultimately reproduced through the conscious (and unconscious) actions of people of a certain field (c.f. Görtz, 2015: 53ff; *ibid.* Garfinkel, 2011).

4.1.3) Sample and Interviews

The grounds for interviewing social workers, is that I hold that street-level professionals are best equipped to provide in-depth accounts of the ways in which policy directives are interpreted and negotiated in the everyday dimensions of a given sector. I deliberately searched for informants amongst social workers, who work at various municipal social services centres, i.e., I employed a strategic sampling-method aimed at this subsection of social workers (Bryman, 2008: 392).

To begin with, I emailed and phoned all the social services centres I deemed to be within reasonable geographic vicinity. I also phoned and emailed some social services centres that were not in the same geographic proximity, but in which video interviews could be employed. By-and-by-, people started to agree to be interviewed. At the end of each interview, I inquired as to whether the interviewee at hand would kindly ask his/her colleagues whether they too would agree to be interviewed. In some cases, this yielded positive results, i.e., some interviewees functioned i.e., interviewees functioned, in some instances, as “snowball recruiters” (Hennink et al., 2011: 100, who referred me to additional informants. The sample of interviewees is too small to be representative of Swedish social workers (working with assessing social assistance) in general; i.e. the conclusions I draw from the interviews, while not generalisable, may still provide some insights as to social workers’ apprehension of their own profession. The informants consisted of three men and five women. At the inception of

each interview, I assured the informants that they would be anonymised and that everything they would say would be treated with confidentiality (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:212ff), after which I asked each informant whether I could record the interviews on my phone, which they all consented to.

The interviews were semi-structured i.e., the questions asked were based on an interview guide, but it merely formed the basis for the interviews, and was thus not followed if I assessed that the informants took off on an interesting tangent. The first interview, i.e., the one with Christer served as a pilot interview, in that the interview guide was not yet fully formed (Bryman, 2008: 392). After the mentioned interview, the interview guide – although still semi-structured, became more centred on the themes of the professional functions of social workers, active market policy and organisational/managerial issues. The interviews varied in length, between approximately thirty minutes through a full hour. Some interviewees were more talkative than were others, which is probably to do with the fact that they all were interviewed during office hours at their respective places of employment, meaning that some likely had more busy schedules than others did. It could also be that some informants were somewhat more defensive than were others, which is understandable, as some questions might be perceived as questioning and critical of their line of work. The varying degree of verbosity, in some cases, some initial hesitance, that I took to be a mild suspicion of my motives and some minor technical issues aside, the interviews ran fairly smoothly. This is nonetheless the reason why some of them (e.g. Anna-Karin and Lisa) are featured more frequently than are others (e.g. Julia and Frida).

The informants are all employed as social workers in various municipalities throughout the south of Sweden. The informants were anonymised through names that have no correspondence to their actual names. The principles of anonymity are of importance as I wish to protect the personal identity and professional integrity of my informants (Hennink et al., 2011: 70f). Social workers must sign a confidentiality agreement at the time of employment, wherefore I strove to not only honour the professional integrity of the informants, but also the integrity and anonymity of their clients, which entailed leaving out any detailed biographical or geographical information on clients from the quotes which appear throughout the analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995: 213ff). In one instance, there was a knock on the informant's office door – it was a colleague who wanted to discuss something regarding a joint meeting they were supposed to have with a client later that same day. The conversation was very brief, but I nonetheless, as a courtesy, elected to pause the recording when this occurred (Bryman 2008:137). The fictitious names I opted to give the informants are Christer; Lisa, Anna-Karin, Frida, Jon, Robert, Amélie

and, lastly, Julia. Furthermore, mentions of the municipalities by which they are employed have likewise been removed from the included quotes (Hennink et al., 2011: 73).

The vast majority of my informants (Robert being the most noteworthy exception) had not yet commenced their professional life in the social services before the advent of the 2001 Social Service Act New and the introduction of New Public and Lean Management initiatives. I therefore found it more interesting to inquire about what I view as the hitherto last effect of New Public Management and Lean managerial ideals – The Trelleborg Model – than to compare their present professional life with public life before the advent of the revised Social Services Act and New Public Management and Lean initiatives. For reasons just given, such a comparison would hardly have been fruitful.

4.1.4) Transcription, Coding and Hermeneutics

After the interviews were completed, I transcribed them all in their entirety. I used symbols derived and modified from the Jefferson System of transcription to mark verbal pauses, hesitations and re-takes (c.f. Görtz, 2015: 319; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984: 5). In a first, motif-based coding-cycle, myriad themes unfolded, such as e.g. “Integration”, “Poverty and class” (*vis-à-vis* clients), “power imbalances”, “individual assessments” and “bureaucracy” (Saldaña, 2013: 134). The said cycle was followed by a second one, in which I refined and referred the motifs into more straightforward analytical thematic blocks of codes – i.e. themes (Saldaña, 2013: 205, see Appendix).

It ought to be stressed that my gaze regarding the various facets of social work of the study was not “blank” at the inception (Selander & Ödman, 2005: 10). Before the interviews, I did have some pre-notions regarding the nature of contemporary social work, of which some were corroborated whilst others were contradicted, leading to a furthered and enriched understanding of my informants’ professional challenges, including frustrations regarding certain facets of their profession. One could say that the horizon of my previous understanding and the horizon constituted by the informants’ professional accounts coalesced during the process of interpreting and re-interpreting the interview answers (ibid. Selander & Ödman, 2005). The analytical process, in other words, was a largely a hermeneutical one, in which my understanding of the informants’ was furthered until I deemed the horizon of my understanding to be adequate for providing a satisfactory analysis and conclusions regarding the informants’ accounts (Ödman, 2005: 110f). The line of reasoning of the informants was not always straightforward and therefore not always easily accessible. Hence, the reading and rereading of the interviews it was process of analysing and interpreting rather long and – at times –

ambiguous and contradictory expositions regarding the professional role of the social worker (Ödman, 2007: 98). I wish to present a caveat with regard to this: the accounts of my informants and perhaps – even more so – the way in which they are analysed and theorised, is but one scholarly interpretation the said accounts. Myriad other interpretations are possible, as is always the case when it comes to qualitative and hermeneutical matters (ibid. Ödman, 2005).

During the second coding cycle and subsequent further analytical process, three sub-themes were nevertheless derived from the main theme of (1) Perceived Professional Role. These subthemes – namely: (2) Activation (Control and Discipline); (3) Discretion and; (4) Organisational Challenges, will constitute the lion's share of the analysis. This is not to say that the first theme has less significance than the other ones, it rather, imbues all the other themes to varying degrees, wherefore it appeared redundant to address it directly at great length in the analysis. In other words, all of the themes are inter-related, and the three sub-themes, as will be evident in the following, in various ways relate back to (1) The Professional Role, as perceived and accounted for by the informants.

5) Analysis

5.1) Perceived Professional Role

” [...] the other half of it is finding paths to self-sufficiency”

Lisa

In the interviews, all informants highlight working toward clients obtaining financial self-sufficiency as their singularly most important professional role/function. This should, however, not necessarily be taken to imply that the objective of self-sufficiency, and employment is necessarily what all social workers themselves view *ought* to be their most important professional function when it comes to *all* clients. At times, the social workers are ambiguous and at other times – downright contradictory – when discussing the challenges of their professional life.

Lisa and Anna-Karin, for instance, both express a wish to devote more time to “social work”, but they, as all informants nevertheless identify the goal of clients reaching financial self-sufficiency by way of employment, as the most salient one in light of their professional experience. Frida asserts that clients obtaining employment and financial self-sufficiency is of the essence, this is evident in her stating that if clients are, e.g. assigned, or themselves manage

to secure an internship, said internship is, according to her, merely to be viewed primarily “[...] as a stepping-stone toward employment”. Lisa feels that those who are unemployed and in lack of education and/or formal training, are in no position to pick and choose between attractive employment opportunities, as it is currently required “[...] that you look for work you have a chance of actually getting”. Additionally, both Lisa and Christer feel that financial selfsufficiency on the part of clients is to be stressed as an overarching objective, as does Robert, who speaks somewhat disparagingly about the social services centres of the late 1980s and early 1990s, of which more later.

It has been suggested that elevated stature of labour and the perceived need to address unemployment, is more to do with norms regarding the essence of labour, rather than with actual labour market demands (c.f. Paulsen, 2015: 167). Nevertheless, this is somewhat beside the point as it concerns the purposes of this study. As it concerns this study, it would suffice to say that the elevated stature of labour is evident in the accounts of the informants, and that this conceivably ties to the Social Services Departments embrace of active labour market policies (c.f. Kildal: 2000: 9). Furthermore, I would suggest that the informants’ perception of their professional role ties to a streamlining of professional functions, which has occurred in conjunction with activation policies and which, depending on one’s viewpoint, might be interpreted as tendencies of professionalisation as well as de-professionalisation (c.f. Byberg, 2002: 62; 67; c.f. Nybom, 2012: 69). Two ways in which a professional group might attain an increased sense of professionalism is through streamlining the organisational structure or by referring to evidence-practices and their documented effects (c.f. Hood, 1991: 12; Ponnert and Svensson, 2016: 594), both of which have been factors at hand in the Social Services Department in latter decades.

Pertaining to the first research question: “What do social workers, working with social assistance claimants, perceive their professional role to be?”, one may thus infer that – going by the professional accounts of the informants – the identified, most important professional function consists of steering clients toward achieving financial self-sufficiency. Some informants were however more conflicted than others as to whether this ought to be their most important professional function; although such conflicting feelings seemed to belong more to the private sphere of their lives than the professional one. When working toward steering clients toward self-sufficiency, the uneven power balance between social worker and client must be managed. This entails making judgements as to matters of activation, control and discipline.

5.2) Power Dynamics at Play – Activation, Control and Discipline

“It [being enrolled at a social services centre] should be seen just as any other job: you always have to do something in return and if you don’t, there might be consequences”.

Julia

The relationship between the social worker and the client contains a power imbalance in that the former, to a large degree, may exercise control over the latter (c.f. Lipsky, 1980: 60ff). The informants are aware of this unequal power balance and reflect upon it throughout the interviews. Jon, for instance, says that he, at times, perceives “[...] suspicion and worry from clients”, on account of being “[...] a person of authority and power”. Both he and Christer hold that it is of the essence that they provide the correct information regarding as to what it entails to be a client. Christer asserts that being a client entails “[...] a rather large intrusion into their personal lives, so we must explain why it is that we demand receipts, bank statements and things”. In other words, he appears cognisant of the unequal balance of power at play.

Lisa, for her part, stresses the need to take into consideration the personal circumstances and history of each client. If these are taken into account, and if other measures aimed at activating the client have fallen short, she, however, holds that a payment denial may serve as a disciplining wake-up call to the client:

[W]hen such a client actually *gets* a payment denial, because they have not been looking for jobs, it is really only then that [...], with many people, you see a difference. After this, they start dealing with it: they start looking for jobs – they contact the unemployment office and demand to get an administrator and so on [...].

By Lisa’s account, it is clear that she has witnessed what she views as positive changes in client behavior when she has put her discretion to use in a disciplinarian fashion. The fact that she has witnessed encouraging results likely will strengthen the notion that this is an effective disciplinary tool, which ought to be employed when a positive outcome are deemed plausible (c.f. Foucault, 1987; 1980: 104ff; Larsson & Backman, 2011). An application denial alerts the client to the fact that being denied social assistance is not merely some idle, bureaucratic threat.

I view this as a form of disciplining, with the objective of, by way of sanctioning measures, controlling or steering clients in a certain, desired direction i.e., toward employment and financial self-sufficiency (c.f. Lödemel & Trickey, 2001: 2). These kinds of disciplinary measures originally emanated from the confines of the prisons and mental health facilities of centuries past (c.f. Foucault, 1987: 357; 1980: 104ff; Larsson & Backman, 2011: 37ff). Such

measures are employed as they are deemed, empirically speaking, to be conducive to alter undesired social behaviour – hence their pervasiveness throughout society, for instance, in kindergartens, schools, military training facilities, factories and – as it would seem – social services centres (ibid. Foucault, 1987; 1980: 104ff; Larsson & Backman, 2011). By this, I do not mean to draw any further parallels between, e.g., the penal system and the social services – rather – I merely wish to highlight that the logic that underlies the sanctions is essentially the same in both instances.

Lisa emphasises that a denying social assistance may not always serve the desired purpose. She stresses that whether it will have this outcome or – conversely – make matters worse, by distancing the client further from the overarching objective, is always a matter of discretionary assessment. She holds that social workers should apply their discretion in a disciplinarian or moral learning-fashion only in instances where they view it to be conducive to the likelihood of the client reaching financial self-sufficiency by way of employment (c.f. Nybom, 2015: 23). To Lisa, pre-conditions, such as education level and absence of mental and physical impediments are decisive factors when determining whether payment denial is a fitting disciplinary measure:

Yeah, like I said, I feel that it [payment denial] can be efficient, but of course it's not appropriate when it comes to *all* clients [...] But afterwards [after a denied payment] it has sometimes become clear to them that they really could do more [in terms of looking for employment] than they had thought that they could.

Here, it is evident that payment denials, disciplinarian aspects notwithstanding, under the appropriate circumstances also may alert the client as to his/her dormant capabilities of applying for and obtaining employment. The client has learned a moral lesson, realised that s/he has unrealised potential, and is on a path toward accepting responsibility for his/her own sustenance (c.f. Pyysiäinen et al., 2017: 218f; Garland, 1996: 452).

It is clear that Lisa views that all clients assessed to be able-bodied and of sound mind ought to be made aware that they are in no position to pick and choose when it comes to employment, because, in her words: “[i]f you don't have a job, you can't provide for yourself [...] and then you don't have the same possibility to choose which job you want, I mean, that you don't want this or that job”. The experience of being denied social assistance should then, ideally, as I understand it, serve as cautionary, moral teaching regarding the harsh reality of societal demands. It may be viewed as a responsabilisation strategy – employed to discipline the individual into accepting that s/he is in no position to pick and choose when it comes to these matters. By the same token, the responsabilisation strategy may be said to have an implicit

objective – namely to get the client to accept and internalise certain generally held societal and social norms as to the essence of employment and financial self-sufficiency (ibid. Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; Garland, 1996; Foucault, 1987: 65f). In a responsabilisation strategy, the objective is, as previously mentioned, to remove the responsibility for social occurrences (in this case, poverty and employment) from the hands of the state and place it with the individual citizen (ibid. Pyysiäinen et al., 2017; Garland, 1996). The fact that Lisa views payment denials to be an effective disciplinary tool is not surprising, as she and her colleagues perceive their primary expected professional function to be that of steering clients toward self-sufficiency.

As clients of the social services are not, in any meaningful sense, voluntary ones, they have limited means of protest (c.f. Lipsky, 2010: 54ff). Social workers are in the business of supplying services that the clientele can scarcely receive elsewhere (ibid.). Although the state no longer has the monopoly on all social work (c.f., Sallnäs & Wiklund, 2018: 14ff), municipal social services centres are still, by and large, directed by the state and the given municipal board, notwithstanding if the services of private entrepreneurs are employed or not. Hence, clients may hardly turn to other service providers, should they not be satisfied with the service received (ibid. Lipsky, 2010).

In a strict sense, clients may be viewed to be voluntary, no one will force them to remain should they up and leave, but participation in this facet of the welfare system is, in another sense, hardly a matter of voluntariness. Clients – at least the ones who get their social assistance applications granted – are deemed to be devoid of all alternative sources of income and significant material possessions (c.f. Socialstryelsen, 2013: 93ff; ibid. Lipsky, 2010). Christer is, however, of a somewhat different opinion – when speaking of the bureaucratic protocol of the social services, he says that

it is pretty regulated, what we do: who is expected to do what, how the documentation should look, and then, when we have arrived at the point where an action plan is to be set up, we always involve the client [as] this [the suggested pathway of the action plan] is something voluntary on the part of the client, too, it is in the interest of the client that we are supposed to do this [...] activate the client.

When I ask whether complying with the actions proposed by one's social worker could in any significant fashion be said to be a voluntary, Christer nonetheless agrees that the voluntariness of clients might be called into question and that "[...] the relationship can't ever really be called equal". Christer's notion of voluntary participation might, as he subsequently realised, be questioned on the grounds that even though clients might suggest activation measures and protest against the suggestions of their assigned social worker, the latter always has the executive power not only not to heed the clients wishes regarding activation, but also to deny

the payment of social assistance altogether. With regard to the balance of power between her and clients, Anna Karin says the following:

But I would like to say that the whole authority function [“myndighetsfunktionen”], is of course an obstacle [...] if you want to work preventively, if you want to establish a relationship with people and get them behind you on their terms it [the authority function] can- uh- be something of an obstacle [...] in the end it's always I who make decisions about their economy, and it's on a rather meagre level, too.

Anna-Karin's words imply that the unequal power balance of the social worker-client relationship does not make for a good starting point for establishing trust, as clients are put in a state of dependence *vis-à-vis* social workers, owing to the fact that social workers have the authority to castigate and punish nonconformity to a prescribed yardstick of client behaviour (c.f., Lipsky, 2010: 57f). Anna-Karin's statement highlights the dependent and unequal status of clients. In line with Anna-Karin, I presume that the disciplinary power of the social worker likely imbues the relationship between the social worker and client in significant ways. Social workers work a professional tightrope, in that they are expected to please the expectations of their superiors and peers, of society at large, as well as the needs and wishes of individual clients (c.f. *ibid.* Lipsky, 2010; Svensson et al., 2010: 180). The relationship, although characterised by some degree of reciprocity, cannot then – as evident by Anna-Karin's words – be fully reciprocal or equal, as she possesses a great deal of power as to the immediate material future of the client (*ibid.* Lipsky, 2010; Svensson et al., 2010).

In her frustration with the expectations of her professional role – Anna-Karin goes so far as to advocate Universal Basic Income (“medborgarlön”).⁵

[...] But that's the main reason I think that Universal Basic Income would be good instead [of social assistance] [...] then you could do away with that whole authority thing, because I don't think it's good that some have power while others don't, that whole thing.

I found Anna-Karin's words a tad perplexing, as they run counter to what some other informants said on the matter of control. Lisa, Julia, Frida, Robert, for example, although to varying degrees somewhat conflicted on the function they are expected to have when it comes to controlling clients, all stressed the importance of consequences (i.e., sanctions) in instances where clients have failed to adequately activate themselves. Case in point: Somewhat similar thoughts to Anna-Karin's regarding Universal Basic Income, although laced with more caveats, were also

⁵ A system of guaranteed Universal Basic Income, in short, would entail doing away with the means-testbased, conditional system, with states instead providing” [...] an unconditional income paid to all members of society on an individual basis without any means test or work requirement [...]. <http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore9780190228637-e-116> (accessed 2018-05-04).

forward by Amélie when discussing that the protocol of the Social Services Department is rife with control mechanisms:

Yeah, but it's difficult, we [Amélie, and her colleagues] have for instance discussed universal Basic Income a bit [...] if that could maybe be an option, but I think – I mean – I think it could be a good thing, and this is a philosophical issue more than anything else but... [Extended verbal pause].

After which she went on to say that

if you look at it from the perspective of consequential pedagogy,⁶ which, no matter what you may think of it, seems to work [...] I don't know [pause] for some it [i.e., knowing that they risk being denied payments if they do not comply] seems to work [...]. I don't know if it's because they have the right pre-conditions [...] I mean if the person is conscious of their situation and has the ability to partake in making an active decision of making a plan, only to not honour it [...] then the consequential pedagogy seems justified [...] and with Universal Basic Income, that whole aspect would be lost.

What Amélie appears to be saying – although not in a clear-cut manner – is that she is somewhat divided on the issue of Universal Basic Income. I interpret what it along the lines that a system of universal basic income may conceivably work for some individuals – individuals who already have a sense of responsibility with regard to their own predicament. Pertaining to other, less responsible clients, it would be a different matter, as such a system would remove elements of control and discipline; i.e., remove the consequential pedagogy inherent in the current responsabilisation by way of activation-approach to clients (cf. Foucault, 1987: 357; Garland, 1996: 452). The gist of what Amélie is saying concerning to Universal Basic Income and consequential pedagogy, should then, be interpreted as such that the control of clients – including the discretion to apportion sanctions or rewards, as a means of teaching them that certain actions will be rewarded whilst others will be penalised – is a necessity (c.f., Nybom, 2012:2). Implicit in Amélie's thoughts on Universal Basic Income, is the notion that some clients may not comprehend what is in their own best interest. Similarly, these clients are deemed to be rather indifferent to the generally held norms (i.e., regarding work and financial self-sufficiency) of society at large. If such norms are to be internalised, the possibility of disciplinary sanctioning ought to, according to Amélie, be at hand (c.f. Foucault, 1987: 357; 1980: 104ff; Larsson & Backman, 2011: 37ff). A system of Universal Basic Income would do away with the responsabilisation through activation strategy inherent in the current modes if

⁶ The idea of consequential pedagogy was, this notwithstanding, conceived of by Danish philosopher and educator (in Swedish; "pedagog" Jens Bay (Meland, 2011: c.f., Bay, 2005). Among its main tenets is an emphasis on freedom, choice, action, consequence and responsibility; inspired by existentialism, Marxism as well as humanism, Bay posits that consequences ought not be guided by a principle of retribution, but, rather be seen merely as the effect of a given action (Meland, 2011: c.f., Bay, 2008).

assessing social assistance entitlement; it would be somewhat more akin to the assessment modes and general environment of the social services centres 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

Someone who has experienced both the effects of former Social Services Act (1980:620), (which to a lesser extent stressed activation and thus, by the same token, the sanctioning of inadequate job seeking activity), as well the unfolding and implementation of the revised 2001 one is Robert. He has worked as a social worker for a full thirty years, and views the emphasis on control of the contemporary Social Services Department to be a most welcome change:

I remember when I started working in the municipality of [a larger Swedish City], in those days, we still sent clients informatory pamphlets which said that people were entitled to social assistance, regardless of how the need might have arose.

Robert's memory serves him well, the Social Services Act of 1980, indeed stipulated that all Swedish individuals were entitled to seek social assistance, no matter how the need for it might have arisen (1980: 620; cf., Milton, 2006:23). In the preparatory official proposition, which preceded the implementation of the 1980 Act, it was stated that social assistance may be granted without quid pro quo conditions ("motprestationer"), but that those in need of social assistance were nevertheless required to register at the Swedish Public Employment Service (Prop.1979: 1980, A: 526; c.f., Milton, 2006:23). In light of this, Robert asserts that clients would claim that they had been robbed of their previous social assistance payment and/or other means they had earned in the recent past:

We [the social workers] would grant [social assistance] quite generously, it was rather common in back then that people would come to the social services centre and claim that they had lost their money in some way or other [...] that they had been robbed, lost their wallet at the beach and so forth [...] and then they would arrive at the social services centres with a form from the local police station [...].

Robert puts forward the notion that social services clients of some thirty years ago were free to concoct inventive, as he says "sometimes fantastical accounts" of ways in which they – through no apparent fault of their own – had lost their money. Whilst highly critical of what he views to be the inadequate control mechanisms of those days, he, at the same time "[could] understand it, as they could be granted money rather easily back then". He thus holds that legislation and the Social Services Department at large, rather than individual clients, was at a systemic fault. From Robert's accounts, I could rather quickly gather that he holds the change of the Social Services Act of 2001 to be both necessary and positive. The increased emphasis on controlling clients has, in Robert's view, resulted in "[...] better working conditions and better opportunities to help clients in actual need of help". Apart from the revision of the Social Services Act of 2001, Robert also mentions that the technological development of the last thirty

years has enabled the Social Services Department to crosscheck records with the Social Insurance Agency and the Public Employment Agency.

Robert's account of the lacking control measures available to the late 1980s and early 1990s' social services centres, implies that rather strict control mechanisms are called, as clients otherwise will not be truthful as to their situation, nor will they become incentivised to activate themselves (c.f., Foucault, 1977:111; Harris, 2011: 79; McKay, 2007: 104). At the present, clients are not only controlled more strictly, but – perhaps more importantly – also made aware of the fact that they are being controlled and that “deviant” behavior will be sanctioned (ibid. Foucault: 1977).

Social workers of today may – with the legislative support of the revised version of the Social Services Act implemented in 2001:

[...] assign the client, for instance, any internship or similar measure which we view to comprise competence and skill raising activity, you now, back then, social services clients we more or less seen as hopeless cases by the Employment offices, you know, they were viewed to be either alcoholics, possible criminals or mentally ill, so they were disregarded in a way.

Lisa

The past reluctance on the part of the Public Employment Office to deal with social service clients may, going by Robert's account – be attributed to a past, harsher stigmatisation of social services clients (c.f. Ulmestig, 2007: 142; Goffman, 1963:2). Social services clients were not deemed to be worth same amount effort as were other unemployed individuals – in closer proximity to the labour market. The increased collaboration between the Social Services Department and Public Employment Office, which, according to Robert, appears to have resulted in part from the adoption of active labour market policies, might thus have facilitated a more optimistic outlook on the potential of individuals who previously were disregarded as being more or less incorrigible.

In any case, the Social Services Department of today – to a greater extent than when Robert started his professional life – aims to collaborate with the Public Employment Service, as well as the Social Insurance Agency. Robert, as we have seen, views the legislative revisions of the last twenty years or so (c.f. SOU: 1999:97:235), with its increased emphasis on control and crosschecking, to have paved the way for the aforementioned collaboration. He opines that legislative revisions, coupled with the technological revolution of the preceding thirty years has resulted in his professional life of today being “[...] completely different today, and that's really, really important”.

Robert also appears also appears to hold that social workers have historically been too lenient in client interactions (Milton, 2006: 36). One gets the sense that Robert – if presented with the opportunity to do so – would never want to go back the late 1980s and early 1990s way of working. The problem of the social exclusion or stigma of the poor and vulnerable nonetheless prevails, some changes in the outlook of Public Employment Office notwithstanding:

A lot of the people we get [as clients] have been here with us for a long time, they are people who are not entitled to benefits from the Social Insurance Agency either, people who may actually be sick and may never be able to work [...] because they, perhaps, haven't been in Sweden long enough– [...] or maybe they have an illness that arose before they arrived in Sweden, or maybe, yeah – maybe they are not entitled to sick benefits because they are not deemed to be sick enough by the Social Insurance Agency [...] sometimes I wish we could do more social work.

Lisa

The focus of activation, going by Lisa's accounts, appears to have entailed a streamlining of the professional role of social workers into a fairly one-sided focus on activation and employment. The one-sided focus of activation and the control measures, according to three informants (Lisa, Frida and Jon), means that they have "less time for social work". When I ask what Lisa means by "social work", she says that this refers to "[...] all the things that do not directly have anything to do with the economy or activation of clients", as for instance, "[...] helping clients to get a better social life or working preventively with the poor and vulnerable". By contrast, Robert did not mention any disadvantages as to the current mode of working in comparison to that of the 1980s and early 1990s, whereas Lisa, Frida and John, who have never experienced pre active labour market policy social services centres, still feel that the current emphasis on activating and controlling clients, means that they do not have as much time as they would wish to do "social work" not directly aimed at activation and the future financial self-sufficiency of clients.

With regard to the uneven power balance between social workers and clients – i.e., the second research question: "How do social workers account for matters of control and discipline *vis-à-vis* clients?", the accounts put forward by Amélie, Robert, Julia and Lisa (although not to the same extent, by Anna-Karin) imply that disciplinary control measures (such as, for instance, denial of social assistance payments) are held as necessary components of the job. What's more: a denied social assistance payment may well have a positive effect – given that the client at hand does not display any apparent physiological or psychological impediments to activation. Such measures are however first and foremost applicable in instances where the client is discretionarily assessed to be free of any impediments, and therefore has the potential of

reaching the overarching goal of the social worker-client interaction: (preferably swift) employment and financial self-sufficiency.

Lisa, Frida, and Julia all suggest that a denied social assistance payment may serve as a wakeup call to applicants – hence, the need for sanctions to get the client to comply. In relation to active labour market policies, Robert specifically mentions the revisions of the 2001 Social Services Act as something of a watershed moment in the Social Services Department. He holds that its implementation has led to a more rigorous control of clients' financial situation, as well as of their job-seeking activity, which have been facilitated by the increased stressing on, and technical capability of crosschecking between various welfare agents. In the previous, I have suggested that the increased control measured may be termed a new governmentality approach, or responsabilisation strategy, employed so as to discipline clients into activation (c.f. Garland, 1996: 452; Foucault, 1987: 357). In such an approach, social workers ought not to be passive and or acquiescent in client interactions (Milton, 2006: 36). If such an approach is to work, actions deemed not to fulfil the adequate degree of client activation ought to have consequences, as stated by Julia, Amélie and Lisa.

Relatedly, whilst discussing matters of control and discipline, Amélie touches upon the possibility of a Universal Basic Income-system, though she worries as to what will happen if there suddenly were to be no control; if people (who perhaps could no longer be termed if this were to happen) were to simply be granted a sum of money for living expenses without being expected to do something in return. From this, it should be taken that Amélie worries what would happen if the possibility of sanctioning of clients were to be removed. She views a hypothetical working-model in which failure to comply would not be met with sanctions a philosophically interesting, but in the end, all too uncertain prospect.

Anna-Karin, conversely, does not strike one as being a proponent of neither strict control nor disciplinary sanctioning. She views that her professional role, and the power and authority that stem from it, impinges upon her ability to assist clients in ways that she perhaps would wish to. She appears frustrated with the demands she is expected to make; with and the power and control she is expected to exert on clients. She thinks that this hinders a more meaningful and equal interaction (on the part of both parties). Her advocacy for Universal Basic Income appears to have more to do with ideals of social inclusion and integration than with active labour market policy ones; as she expresses ideals which strive for the possibility of all people to lead a socially rewarding life (c.f. Milton, 2006:34f; Levitas: 1998:7ff). She, consequently, seems conflicted as to her position of authority and the control over people that comes with it.

Robert is – based on his thirty years’ worth of professional experience – a clear proponent of the stricter rules and regulations of the contemporary Social Services Department. He views that the social services centres of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was in a state akin to anarchy, owing to the fuzzy phrasing of the Social Services Act that preceded the 2001 version (c.f. 1980: 620). The Active Labour Market Policy and the 2001 revisions of the Social Service Act – going by Roberts account of pre-2001 social services centres – appears to have lessened the ambiguity of discretionary assessment pertaining to the denial and granting of social assistance payments. Since the 1980 Social Services Act stipulated that individuals were entitled to seek social assistance regardless of how the need arose – the social worker could control and seek to verify the accounts of clients in the same manner as today, and the lesser emphasis of activation, according to Robert, led to passivity on the part of social workers and clients alike. He also suggests a connection between activation policies and increased collaborations between various welfare agencies.

In conclusion then, the informants in general, account for matters of control and discipline as logical necessary components with regard to achieving their overarching professional objective of activating clients. In the accounts of the informants, social inclusion appears to be equated with employment and self-sufficiency. In their accounts of activation, it is clear that my informants largely aim for labour market attachment; the “stick approach” of swift labour market readiness (c.f. Lödemel & Tricky, 2001: 29) rather than human capital development, although the one does of course not exclude the other. In this stick approach, whether or not the given client or not is deemed to have any impediments to successful activation is – on a case-by-case basis – contingent upon whether aggravating factors are assessed to be at hand (c.f. Nybom 2012: 24; 56). All in all, this entails that what is perceived as the most important professional function – that of steering clients toward financial self-sufficiency – is greatly contingent on matters of power, control and discipline. When the interviewees account for these matters, discretion is, in other words a constant recurrence.

5.3) Discretion

Anna-Karin: I mean, you know, we can make individual assessments... [Pause].

Me: Mm, okay

Anna-Karin: I work a lot like that, or I try to [...] try to discuss it with the team, if we can make an individual assessment, you know to get the client with us [in Swedish; “få med oss klienten”]

Me: Mm, okay?

Anna-Karin: I mean, if we can take as step back and actually get the client on track... [Pause]

Me: Okay, yeah, I wonder [...] you don’t always feel like you have the opportunity to kind of support individuals in the way that you would like or ...?

Anna-Karin: That's the double-edged [in Swedish; "kluvna"] part of it, I mean, I previously worked as a counselor at a school here in the municipality, when you're a counselor, you could walk *beside* the individual in a whole other way.

Me, mm, yeah, I see...

Anna-Karin: But, as I said, in here you have a lot more power [Laughter].

As put forward by Anna-Karin, social workers have at their disposal "[...] considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies" (c.f. Lipsky, 2010: 13ff). Anna-Karin describes her professional role as being double-edged or split; split in that she is expected to be supportive as well as being an enforcer of sorts – that this double-edged function is not always conducive to "getting clients with" her. The laugh at the end was somewhat resigned, resigned, it was as if it was a comment on the overall state of professional affairs. One of the paradoxes of the provision of public service, is that such policies should, at least ideally, ensure that people in similar circumstances are treated alike (Lipsky, 2010: 229). That being said, the social worker is also expected to display a responsiveness (i.e., discretion) to the individual case (ibid.). This conundrum is at the heart of the discretionary dimensions of social work. Social workers are dealt the double task of (1): reaching the overarching goal of assisting the client on the latter's path toward financial self-sufficiency and; (2) on a case-by-case basis assess whether the applicant has taken the proper measure to reach said goal – and, ergo – is to be denied or granted social assistance (Socialstyrelsen 2013: *ibid*).

Christer, for his part, stresses the urgency of always employing carefully considered discretion in the day-to-day interaction with clients, that the principal task of social workers' is that of steering the client toward economic self-sufficiency – but there is a need for sensible discretion when seeking to achieve this overarching objective. Christer opines that it is of utmost importance that he considers "[...] the individual pre-conditions and future potential of each client". When I ask whether it is true that there are no pre-set criteria as to the degree to which clients ought to activate themselves, he said that:

We have no such pre-set criteria [...] many [clients] wish that we had one, but it always depends on the pre-conditions of the individual. Sometimes, clients have underlying difficulties which are not always clear to us at first [...] social phobia and stuff like that.

Hence, what Christer implies is that some clients may have underlying difficulties, not always evident at first, it is therefore of the essence that the social worker carefully attempts to assess the individual pre-conditions of clients. A failure to discretionarily evaluate pre-conditions may lead to deleterious consequences for the client; effectively making matters worse, prolonging

the time required for achieving the ultimate objective – employment and financial self-sufficiency. The fact that clients sometimes wish there to be a pre-set criteria of activity levels, likely means that this is not a clear-cut matter for clients. The social workers are supposed to assure that the client comprehends that which have been jointly agreed to in the action plan established by former (c.f. Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 20ff). Most informants say that they were not likely inclined to deny social assistance if they assess that the client had not fully understood what is stated in his/her action plan, i.e., discretion is, by its very nature, rather opaque and elusive (c.f. Lipsky: 2010: 221).

If it is discretionarily assessed that aggravating individual factors are not at hand – e.g. family circumstances, level of education, immigration factors, poor physical or mental health and so forth, clients are expected to pursue employment full-time (Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 87). A failure to comply may result in a partial or full denial of the social assistance payment (Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 18). If aggravating factors are however at hand, the social worker is expected to take into account said factors:

Well, it [the agreed level and form of activity] could then be to contact the healthcare service, to manage one's contact with one's physician [...] then we may, jointly with the healthcare services, arrive at the conclusion that the client does not have the ability to work [...] and then we can working toward the person getting sickness benefits.

Lisa, for her part, stresses that social workers ought always to be empathetic to the needs of the individual client. Like Christer, she holds that the measures of activation should be assessed on a case-by-case-basis (c.f. Nybom, 2012: 35; 56). When it comes to clients with no identified impediments to activation, Frida insists that it is vital that the social worker should be able “[...] to demand something in return “. However, just as Lisa and Christer, she too maintains that whether or not a denial might serve as incentive to activation, or on the contrary, further aggravate matters, must always be assessed with discretion:

Some clients have quite great difficulty with getting to-and-fro places or to do stuff, some have a lot of anxiety: it could be social anxiety and [...] and they may not be able to bring themselves to come to an appointment with us and [...] so yes, some [clients] need a rather long time before we can start to make the usual demands [laughter], we have to look at the individual preconditions [...] and then see whether it's appropriate that we demand that they should look for work or whether we should start with something else.

The “usual demands” typically comprise of applying for a job a day (or thereabout) on a monthly basis – the exact amount is, according to the informants, also a matter of discretion (c.f. Socialstyrelsen, 2013: 23). If clients display health-related obstacles to pursuing

employment full-time, the social assistance secretary may – by way of discretion – be more lenient regarding levels of employment-seeking activity:

It is an individual assessment, always [...] so it is often not quite the same, with the same demands when it comes to job-seeking [...]. We may work toward getting [the client] sickness benefits from the Social Insurance Agency instead, a lot of the people we get have been here [enrolled as clients of the social services] for a long time, it can be people who are not eligible reimbursement [ersättning] from the Social Insurance Agency too, people who are perhaps actually sick and who will never be able to work, but who are not entitled to reimbursement [...] and other ones who can't get them because they have not [...] for instance been in Sweden long enough.

Lisa

It would thus appear that Christer, Lisa and Frida all view that the level of activity it is reasonable to expect from is greatly contingent upon the background of the individual client. It is – in other words – a matter of discretion. If Lisa asserts that the working ability of the client is markedly impaired, she would likely make the discretionary decision to establish cooperation with the Social Insurance Department and the concerned healthcare personnel. Frida would do the same, as would Christer. At the same time, the very nature of discretion is such that this kind of assessment need not necessarily be made, since the estimation of reduced working ability due to psychological or physiological impairment is not always a straightforward matter. It is – to a large degree – relative to what the individual social worker views to constitute impairment and is thus largely a process that takes place in the elusive grey areas of public service.

Nevertheless, such conundrums have conceivably become somewhat more cut-and-dried in recent decades. In Sweden, there is, as previously stated a general political consensus that all individuals who are able to, ought to work in order to ensure their financial self-sufficiency (Socialdemokraterna, 2018; Moderaterna, 2018). Precisely because of this and, for instance, the present Social Services Act's more unambiguous phrasing pertaining to activation, there is the potential of a more homogenous line of discretionary assessment. At the same time, such a line of more homogenous decisions may feasibly render one group, e.g., youths with a completed upper-secondary education, a closer perceived proximity to the labour market – which they, considering the conditions of the contemporary labour market, likely are (c.f. SCB, 2017).⁷ If so, one may ask what becomes of the other group, those estimated to be furthest from the labour market. There is also the matter of resources. Whilst Christer, Lisa and Frida all stress the need for finely-tuned discretion – i.e. the importance of assessing entitlement to social assistance on

⁷ It is assessed that various forms of post upper secondary-education (in Swedish, “eftergymnasial utbildning”) will better young Swedes' future employment chances (ibid.)

a case-by-case basis, Christer also describes how he sometimes feels frustrated that he cannot do more to assist those the furthest from the labour market:

I sometimes wish that more employers would give people a chance [...] I mean, if someone is fifty-six years old with a history of long-term unemployment, then they have nine years left until retirement, in this day and age there are a lot of people who won't stay with the same job for nine years, so there should be more jobs [...] and of course we have noticed that such a person is not exactly attractive to the labour market, even now, when the labour market is good, so yeah: when I look at a lot of the cases we get, there's only so much we can do for them. It's a shame. The shift from welfare to workfare-based labour market policies appears to have reduced the discretionary capacity of the individual social worker to assist clients furthest from the labour market in the way Christer would like to. Although the active labour market policy emanates from the top (i.e., the state, and municipalities), in the form of legislation and policy based directives, social workers nonetheless have the prerogative to discretionarily interpret these directives, as they are recommendations rather than some sort of strict orders that are to be

enforced verbatim. The ways in which ones makes discretionary assessments, however, also appears to be affected by strives for unitary assessments. On this Jon has the following to say:

Sometimes it – I mean – how people assess if they should grant or deny, can become rather square, it's not always easy, I mean, sometimes I feel like: "Yeah, I'll grant this application even though the client has not fulfilled everything he should, according to the action plan", and at other times I want to grant someone extra money! I mean, it's not always easy, we're supposed to get the client's life in the right direction too, and sometimes a granting can be a disservice to the client, and we should have some unity, but we shouldn't become too square, either [...].

Jon arrives at this line of reasoning when discussing how he himself assesses social assistance applications. Some colleagues can become somewhat "square" pertaining to assessments, meaning that there would be protests if one – according to most of one's colleagues – were to be too frivolous in their ways of assessing. At the same time, what Jon is saying is not exactly straightforward. The fact the he speaks somewhat contradictorily when discussing how he juggles between possible personal feelings of sympathy and department strives toward unity in assessments, likely means that he has mixed feelings on the matter. It suggests that discretion is affected just as much – if not more – by the conduct of one's peers, as by individual professional judgement.

With regard to the third research question: "What are the social workers' thoughts on discretion?" it, in conclusion, appears that the informants hold that discretion is an essential tool when helping the client reach and self-sufficiency (which, as it appears, would include employment as well as sick-benefits from the Social Insurance Agency). Taken together, the informants hold that the discretion to deny or grant social assistance ought to always be made on a case-by-case-basis. There appears to be a tendency to make discretionary assessments

which are congruent with active labour market policies. In contrast to the street-level bureaucrats interviewed by Wörlén (c.f. 2010: 33f) my interviewees are however more inclined to refer to strives toward unitary assessments, rather than current legislation when discussing this matter (c.f., Wörlén, 2010f). This ties to Lipsky's notion that the combined code of conduct of street-level bureaucrats i.e., the totality of decisions made, add up to agency behaviour (c.f. Lipsky, 2010: 13). A behaviour which tends to effectively *become* policy (ibid.).

Discretion is a complex tool. The exertion of requires balancing between various demands; hence, the way in which discretionary assessments are made is multifaceted. Discretion, by the same token, appears to be dynamic phenomena, which constantly involves a negotiation between diverging external forces (e.g., active labour market policies, legislation and department aims of unity) as well as personal values and judgements. John and Christer, for instance, appear torn between professional goals of department unity and personal feelings of sympathy, but, going by Anna-Karin, there also seems to be an opportunity to deliberate on tricky individual assessment matters with colleagues.

A Strive for unity, by and large, seems to inform the informants' modes of discretionary assessments more than explicit strives for matching the objectives of activation policy. It is, of course entirely feasible, this strive for unity is an effect of activation policies, which was hinted at by Robert when he discusses the “[...] inconsequential ways [...]” in which discretionary assessments used to be made. Whilst on this subject, I asked Robert whether he also believes the organisational changes of the last thirty years to be an effect of municipal Social Services Departments increasing adoption of new organisational models. He stated that he does not believe that the social services centres in Sweden has adopted such managerial policies as of yet. This struck me as interesting, as several scholars have identified Sweden as being at the top of the list of advanced capitalist countries who have embraced New Public Management approaches to the organisation of public service, including social work (Lauri, 2016: 2; cf., Ahlbäck, Öberg & Widmalm 2016:12). In fact, New Public Management approaches may be viewed as “[...] a means of organizing the *governance* of activation” (Fuentes & Lindsay, 2016: 528). It is, in other words, time to look at the informants' accounts on the theme of organisational challenges.

5.4) Organisational Challenges; New Public Management, Lean and the Trelleborg Model

Even though not all informants are at first familiar with the terms of New Public and Lean Management, they nonetheless all discuss aspects of the organisational make-up up of their

respective place of work in such a way that one understands that they have experienced the repercussions of them:

[Y]eah, I think we talk a lot more about stuff like that today, that the results should be measurable, how many of our clients that join the labour market, saving costs and so on [...].

Christer

Christer started working as a social worker in the early 2000s. He says that there has been an increased emphasis of quantitatively measuring how many clients are able to move on to employment, as well of how to cut down on department expenses. The accounts of Frida – whose professional experience is far more modest in terms of duration than is Christer’s – are similar on this matter:

[O]f course we do have certain operational goals [in Swedish; “verksamhetsmål”] like that, for example: “How many of the clients have we managed to get an employment: How many have we managed to get *out of here*” [laughter]?

Lisa, Frida and Julia did not apprehend the current organisational goals as something new or even that noteworthy. This may perhaps have to do with the fact that all of them are quite young and, consequently, have not been employed as social workers for any great length of time; they lack a comparative point of reference. Christer and Jon did not work as social workers before the revised Social Services Act of 2001 but have nonetheless both worked for a greater length of time than have Lisa, Frida and Julia. Jon questions some current policies and managerial tools more explicitly than do his three more moderately experienced colleagues:

[I]’s a shame, it can be difficult [...] we work a lot with the people who are close to the labour market [...], so I have fought a lot for the people who are furthest from it, because many of them want to do stuff too, but it’s difficult [...]. There are not are not a whole lot of activities for them [...] that’s at the heart of the problem, as I see it, and I see it a lot in other municipalities as too – that they put in the most effort with the people who are closest to the labour market [...] and I think that it’s important that we work with the others, because I see this in many of my clients, they have tried a lot of stuff, but that didn’t work out, and that didn’t work out, because it proved to be a bit too difficult, because they did not get the support they were in need of [...]. In this passage, Jon voices frustration with the fact that the social services centre in which he works (as well as the Social Services Department at large) does not invest more time and resources in the people furthest from the labour market. The resources of street-level bureaucracies are usually rather limited (Lipsky, 1980: 29ff); hence, a fundamental consideration of any given public organisation is always how to utilise one’s resources in an efficient and purposive manner. There currently, due to management developments and the Active Market Labour Market Policy orientation there appears to be a favouring of clients within close proximity to

the labour market (Brodkin & Larsen, 2013: 57; Hood, 1991: 4). The possibility to employ one's discretion in such a way as to assist those furthest from the labour market, correspondingly, has become less of an option (ibid. Brodkin & Larsen, 2013); Hood, 1991; Bergmark et al., 2008: 45). Assisting those the furthest from the labour market does conceivably not yield the same kind of quantitative measurements of successful outcomes as assisting those already within close proximity to it (c.f. Hood, 1991: 4; Brante, 2015: 147f.).

On the same note, Jon describes how he previously worked at the Public Employment Office, with clients not yet deemed to be ready for the labour market, because of disability, substance abuse etcetera. The primary task of his former position was finding appropriate internships or other socially rehabilitative measures for such clients:

We worked a lot with preschools and stuff like that, we could adapt internships after clients' preconditions, it could be that they would simply help with setting the table when the kids were about to eat and stuff [...] and then you could kind of see a change in clients [...] maybe they would all of a sudden put the bottle away because they were like -"but I have to help little Johan fix his bike in the morning!" and stuff like that, then, all of a sudden, they had a reason for getting up in the morning, it's a shame we can't do more stuff like that here [...]."

The frustration articulated by Jon appears to stem from a tendency on the part of his superiors to favour clients deemed to be in close proximity to the labour market, at the expense of clients viewed to be furthest from it. The fact that Jon feels that "it's a shame that [they] can't do more stuff like that" at his current place of employment, ought to be understood in light of the urgency that all informants (although Jon and Anna-Karin to a somewhat lesser extent) articulate of assisting clients in the quest for employment and financial self-sufficiency, which likely puts the clients Jon wishes he could assist further in a secondary position. Amélie voices similar concerns:

Yeah, they hired, you know, Lean consultants, it didn't work out all that great, but at the same time I can see the advantages. We a lot talk about that within our group: "How do you measure success?" I mean, we could measure, like only: "Okay, so and so many have become selfsufficient?" [...] I mean, we use sticks to measure, we do statistics – all that stuff, but with that you can't see [...] I mean you can see if someone is still officially certifiably ill [in Swedish, "sjuvskriven"] after a year, but you can't see how that someone maybe has gone from being suicidal to having an actual functioning everyday life.

Amélie touches upon something important: If the only measurable parable of success are the target specific-goals of New Public and Lean management, then outcomes such as the one she describes does not constitute success in any measurably meaningful fashion (c.f. Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011: 15; Nordegraaf, 2015: 191). The advent of New Public and Lean production ideals in the public sector has entailed that the organisational success of the welfare sector is

evaluated in ways similar to those of private enterprise (c.f. Hood, 1991: 5). Regarding organisational challenges, one may argue that applying careful discretion to each individual case is not conducive to such objectives. If public work is to be run according to same criteria as private enterprise, and if all too lenient discretionary assessments only serve to delay or even hinder the ultimate professional objective of the social workers – employment and financial self-sufficiency on the part of clients – it is only rational to introduce new working models which may, in the long run, render the need for human discretion altogether redundant.

The Trelleborg Model is, as previously mentioned, a model in which the calculation and assessment of entitlement to social assistance is performed by an algorithm (Trelleborgs kommun, 2017). Since I read of the Trelleborg Model just as I was about to start the writing of the thesis, I found it interesting to inquire as to whether my informants were aware of it; and if so, what their respective thoughts on it were. I therefore broached the subject in all interviews. For the record, the model had, at the time of the interviews, not yet been employed by any of the municipal social services centres in which my informants work, but they nonetheless had some interesting thoughts on the matter:

The Trelleborg Model, as it is presented, sounds nice [...] you know, that the simple, routine decisions are made swiftly, because social workers shouldn't make such decisions, they can be made by computers [...] because social workers are supposed to get people to work, or make sure that they get other sustenance [in Swedish; "försörjning"] [...] we should do more social work too [...] But going by what I've heard, that's not how it has worked out in Trelleborg.

Lisa

It appears that Lisa is worried about some of the potential implications of the Trelleborg Model. She (as does Julia) also mentions that her department, as of late, also had been joined by social workers who have chosen to resign from their positions at the Social Services Department of Trelleborg (none of my interviewees are, neither formerly nor presently, employed by the municipality of Trelleborg) because of the model's introduction. She also says that clients who are registered as inhabitants of the municipality of Trelleborg, have come to the social services centre where Lisa works as they "[...] don't get any help in Trelleborg [...]. If implementing the Trelleborg model would lead to opportunities for social workers do direct more of their time and energy toward "more social work", she would be all for it. But in her indirect experience of the model, this has hitherto not been the effect.

As of 2017, an algorithm processes approximately 75 percent of all social assistance applications in the municipality of Trelleborg (SKL, 2017). Lisa's new colleagues – formerly employed by the municipality of Trelleborg – have experienced the model first hand, and according to her, resigned as a direct consequence of it. Apart from the automation of

assessments and calculations, other aspects of the Trelleborg model – such as the way in which it emphasises swift employment and matching skills and competencies of applicants with the wishes of the private sector or market – ought to be seen in light of the, by now, decades-old, embracement of New Public Management ideals of automation and private market considerations (c.f. Brodtkin & Larsen, 2013: 57; Hood, 1991: 3f; Roberts, 2014: 57).

On the street- (or grassroots) level, such changes in policy affect clients as well as bureaucrats in far-reaching ways. Three of my informants, Amélie, Frida and Jon, all said that the job consists mainly of, on a case-by-case basis, “granting or denying social assistance”. The Trelleborg mode of assessing entitlement status by way of algorithm threatens the very core of what some of my informants’ view to be the most important role and function of their particular profession – i.e., to discretionarily assess social assistance entitlement in such a way that it steers the client toward self-sufficiency. On this note, Amélie said that:

[...] I mean, if there is extra information and stuff that you have to put in the form, I mean – if a person does not have the ability to do that, how they are supposed to [...] if there’s not even a number they can call to get to the service centre? As it is now, they may always call, and if they aren’t able to do it themselves, they may get someone else to call for them, to ask about stuff they don’t understand in the form, because in Trelleborg, there is only a form, and therefore only a limited type of answers you could get to questions [...].

What Amélie is alluding to, is the fact that an algorithm obviously cannot apply sensible discretion to grey area conundrums. The algorithm can merely ascertain whether a client has been adequately active – and consequently ought to be granted social assistance or not (c.f., Ponnert & Svensson, 2016: 594). An algorithm cannot discretionarily take into account *why* a client might not have applied for a certain number of jobs, it merely assert that s/he has or has not done so (c.f. *ibid*).

Amélie went on to say that one of the problems with the Trelleborg Model, when it comes to her clients, is that “[...] a lot of them have trouble understanding bureaucratic prose as it is, I mean a lot of them haven’t been in Sweden for very long, but at least I can interpret it for them now”. For obvious reasons – an algorithm cannot explain or simplify dense bureaucratic prose. What Amélie says raises issues of ethnicity as well as class, when such issues are at hands, it is sometimes referred to in terms of intersectionality (de los Reyes & Mulinari (2005: 23f; c.f. Ponnert & Svensson, 2016: 594). Automated assessment of vulnerable strata may likely serve to enhance various, at times, intersecting disadvantageous positions of e.g. class ethnicity and gender (*ibid*). A majority of informants said that people who were not born in Sweden, and who have perhaps only been in the country for a few years, are somewhat more frequently represented in in the Social Services Department than are people who were born in the country.

In the informants account, this group is disadvantaged at the labour market owing to discrimination, wherefore they are somewhat overrepresented in the clientele (c.f. SCB, 201708-29). As for class, two informants also mentioned that some clients (of Swedish origin and not) have “literacy issues”, hence both ethnical and class-based issues may be at play. There was also talk of the matter that some female clients from this disadvantaged group were hesitant to raise matters they might not have fully understood with their social worker, or that they might need time to adjust to the fact that in Sweden, all healthy and able inhabitants are expected to work. Automated assessments may thus lead to misunderstandings, denied or delayed social assistance and a further distancing from the labour market.

However, if one accepts the notion that the core professional function of a social worker, employed by the department for social assistance, is that of assisting healthy and able citizens on their journey toward employment and financial self-sufficiency, the Trelleborg model perhaps ought to be implemented on a nation-wide basis. Automated assessments and denials might be a more efficient mode of disciplining in terms of both a Foucauldian take on the efficient exertion of power and discipline and a Weberian point of departure of a most efficient and rational, ideal-typical bureaucracy (cf. Foucault, 1987; Weber; 1964; O’Neill, 1986).

That being said, one may also pose queries as to what this could imply for the future of social services work. Anna-Karin, for one, is cautiously optimistic and, at the same time, suspicious of potential underlying motives:

Yeah, you know, I mean, I’m not a manager or anything, but I think, [pause] if it’s management researchers, [...] or someone else who works on another level than I do, that have concluded that[...] this [the Trelleborg Model] will free up time for more conversations with clients or preventive work, then we should accept, that. I mean, I’m not against change [*per se*] but I am against the underlying view on humanity⁸ I can sometimes discern when it comes to changes.

Frida is somewhat more optimistic regarding the model than is Anna-Karin is, but she also voices concerns regarding some implications of the model:

It seems like Trelleborg and the other municipalities that have adopted the Trelleborg Model are able to achieve jobs for more clients, but there is also the question of *how* they go about this [...] it [the Trelleborg Model] seems to be so heavily focused on work, but yeah, it [the model] could be good if it is applied correctly.

It is, of course, entirely feasible that the Trelleborg Model will enable the individual social worker to be devote more time to “difficult” clients – i.e. – the ones deemed to be out of the immediate reach of the labour market (c.f. Ponnert & Svensson, 2016: 594). All the same, since

⁸ She used the special Swedish noun: “människosyn”, when discussing this.

one of the stated goals of the Trelleborg Model is that the Social Services Department ought to match clients, and, hence, potential future employees, in accordance with the wishes of the private sector (c.f. Trelleborgs kommun, 2017: SKL), it is perhaps not likely that the model was developed with the clients furthest from the labour market primarily in mind.

I would like to add that although the model may be criticised on legal certainty grounds (c.f. SVT, 2018-01-06), it may, at the same time, be defended on similar grounds. Human discretionary assessments entail that two different social workers could, somewhat arbitrarily, chose to either deny or grant the same social assistance applications. The Trelleborg would remove the potential of such rather arbitrary rulings and ensure that all applications are assessed in exactly the same manner. As such, the model may also be viewed to be more democratic than discretionary assessments made by humans. At the same time, there is the potential of unfair assessments as two clients may have very different reasons for providing unsatisfactory social assistance applications, such as, for instance, a death in the family in the one case and sheer idleness and sense of entitlement in the other. The model may also serve to enhance various positions of disadvantage (e.g. ethnicity – second language acquisition and class: diverging literacy skills amongst both those born in Sweden and not, which in both instances may lead to inabilities to comprehend nebulous bureaucratic prose).

When it comes to the final research question: "How do social workers view recent efficiency measures such as The Trelleborg Model?", one can thus conclude that whilst some informants are cautiously optimistic to the changes potentially brought about by the Trelleborg model, they are worried about some of its potential implications, foremost pertaining to discretion. Whilst the model could feasibly free up time for the more difficult clients, they are, concerned regarding what automation may entail regarding their power to make individual discretionary assessments, and some also raise concerns about the view on humanity that may underlie the model. The witnesses from co-workers as well as clients who have had direct experience of the model do not appear to be encouraging.

5.5) The Findings in Relation to Previous Research

In the Literature review, I discussed previous scholarly work that I assessed to have affinities with the thesis at hand. With regard to activation policies, the accounts of my informants, as Nybom's findings (c.f. 2012: 56) suggest that the modes of activation and sanctioning is contingent upon the given clients age and pre-conditions (e.g. mental and physical health, duration of unemployment etcetera). Nybom mentioned that she did not address directly the ways in which activation policies are tied to organisational changes within the social services

department (2012: 70). On this note, whilst my informants did not to a large degree discuss the connection between activation policies and for instance New Public and Lean Management, e.g., Robert's account of his past and present professional life lend support to the notion that active labour market policies and the new organisational order of the social services department may be viewed as two sides of the same coin. This may conceivably also be tied to the first research question and the fact that the informants largely identify their expected primary professional function as that of working to steer clients toward financial self-sufficiency. Similarly, there also, as it pertains to the second research question, seems to be a correspondence at hand between activation policies how some of the social workers account for matters of control and discipline (e.g. sanctions in the form of denied applications).

Wörlén (2010) found that the social workers she interviewed accounted for the exertion of discretionary assessment with a reliance on a somewhat strict reading of legislation (c.f. 2010: 33). This runs somewhat counter to my informants' accounts of discretion. As it relates to the third research question, they discuss discretion more along the lines of a need for department unity, which of course, indirectly may be tied to current legislation, and, moreover, in a manner which describes discretion as a complex tool which is negotiated between sometimes divergent demands, expectations and personal feelings. Whilst a few informants mentioned the 2001 Social Services Act in passing, legislation was, on the whole, not often referred to when issues of activation and discretion were accounted for.

When it comes to Skillmark's (2018) work on standardised assessment models within the Social Services Department I, as mentioned, view that full-on automation (the Trelleborg Model) may be seen as taking a further step in the same direction. In relation to the final research question then, the positions the informants take when it comes to the Trelleborg Models may, depending on the informant, be spoken of in terms of rationalised, radicalised and negation-oriented ones (c.f. Skillmark, 2018ff) and at times the same informant alternates between these positions within the same sentence. The accounts of the social workers interviewed for this study when it comes to new organisational approaches (New Public and Lean Management) to standardisation or – as in the case of the Trelleborg Model – automation, may at times be tied to all the positions on standardisation and reduced discretion put forward by Skillmark (2018: 66ff). Amélie's critique of Lean consultants and the evaluation of what constitutes successful outcomes may be seen as a radicalised position to such organisational measures, as may Jon's criticism (ibid.) of his departments' inclination to devote more time and effort to clients in close vicinity to the labour market. The same critical or radical line of reasoning is at hand in Lisa and Amélie's thoughts on the potential negative outcomes of the Trelleborg Model (see chapter

5.1.6) on discretion. Whilst Anna-Karin simultaneously seems to take both a rationalised (automating the assessment process may free up time for additional client time) and radicalised (she is weary of the underlying ideological view on humanity) vis-à-vis the Trelleborg Model and Frida is more clearly negation-oriented, given that the model is “applied correctly” (ibid.).

6) Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I have examined the ways in which Swedish social workers, against the backdrop of active labour market policies, account for their professional role. When it comes to the first research question: “What do social workers, working with social assistance claimants, perceive to be their professional role to be?” the informants overwhelmingly put forward steering clients toward financial self-sufficiency by way of employment as their singularly most important professional function. The social workers, however, at times appeared to be conflicted on this matter, and at times, one got the sense that they, at least on a personal level, questioned whether this is reasonable, as they in other instances voiced wishes of being able to do “more social work”. With “social work”, they refer to everything that is not directly related to clients’ finances or degrees or activation. Most informants, then, view their professional role in ways that are congruent with contemporary legislation on social care that stem from the adoption of active labour market policies, although they do not frequently refer to legislation but, rather, to collegial calls for unitary assessments, when accounting for the professional role.

As for the issue of the power that social workers have over clients, more specifically, the second research question – “How do social workers account for matters of control and discipline *vis-à-vis* clients?” – it is clear that they view control and discipline as necessary components to their work. Some interviewees’ thoughts on these matters make evident the way in which they view that, for instance, a denial of a social assistance application, may constitute an efficient disciplinary tool. Although the informants do not explicitly state this, I would suggest that the ideal or norm that underlies such lines of reasoning is the generally held Swedish norm that all who are able to ought to work in order to provide for their own livelihood. That one should “do right” (“göra rätt för sig”) and preferably not be a burden to society. The disciplining thus, for the same reason, constitutes a sort of moral lesson as to harsh realities of society, in terms of conditionality, rights and obligations.

The current “tough love” approach is considered necessary and important by the informant with the most professional experience, whose accounts of the social services centres of the late 1980s and early 1990s portray the past Social Services Department as a case of “anything went”. By his accounts, one gets notions of a milieu of near anarchy, in which clients were able to concoct

fantastical accounts of their lives, which the social workers were then not able to control. This was made worse by a reluctance on the part of the Swedish Employment Office to deal with social services clients. The most senior social worker's (Robert) accounts ties issues of trust; to a notion that people will, if they are not controlled and sanctioned, likely be neither truthful nor incentivised to pursue employment and financial self-sufficiency. A system of universal income would remove completely the possibility of steering the unemployed toward financial self-sufficiency, as it would do away with the consequential pedagogy inherent in the current Social Services Department's current way of working with clients.

Active labour market policies have, furthermore, entailed that the former reluctance on the part of the Public Employment Office has lessened, and the technological revolution of the previous decades has facilitated the crosschecking between departments (e.g. the Social Services Department and the Employment Office or Insurance Agency), as well as the ability to control clients' bank statements. Activation policies has made possible a cooperation between welfare actors, through which it is possible to control the activity and accounts thereof of clients in a swift and efficient manner. Conceivably, this has bettered the chances of clients to land employment, although the correlation between active labour market policies and employment attainment in Sweden needs to be investigated further, as this was not the purpose of the current study. Some informants are, however, more conflicted than other when it comes to power, control and discipline. The conflicted nature of some of the accounts thus seem to imply that control and sanctioning are a necessary means to the end of the first research question, and not something with which all informants are necessarily wholly comfortable.

Regarding the third research question: "What are the social workers thoughts on discretion?" – it is clear that my informants feel it urgent to apply sensible discretionary judgement to all their assigned cases. They stress that the assessments they make regarding entitlement to social assistance and proper levels of activation, are always and necessarily "individual" ones – contingent upon the client at hand. The way in which the social worker makes discretionary assessments and appears influenced by deliberations with colleagues at joint meetings. Hence, discretion is a complex matter; assessments are always made on a case-by-case basis but there is an expectancy to not veer too far from one's colleagues' approach to discretionary assessment. There is, additionally, an expectancy that the social workers take into account the guidelines of legislation and official policy documents and there is the additional matter of possible personal feelings of sympathy, empathy or, perhaps, at times, antipathy. At the same time, "[being] too square" when making discretionary assessments is not portrayed as a desirable trait. Consequently, discretionary decisions seem to be arrived at after being navigated

and negotiated through a maze of, at times, conflicting factors. Discretion thus remains far from clear-cut; it is a game of grey area matters.

The Trelleborg Model has far-reaching implications as to the matter of discretion. The model ought to be viewed in light of the organisational and managerial trends *vis-à-vis* the public sector of the last, approximately, thirty years. When it comes to organisational changes and their ensuing challenges, there was a tendency on the part of the informants of a positive take on active labour market policies brought about by the revisions of the Social Services Act of 2001. By and large, my informants are, perhaps understandably, however less positive and more distressed about changes affecting their professional functions in a more direct fashion, although may to be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Active labour market policies, New Public, and Lean Management are both measures aimed at making public service more cost and time efficient and streamlined. The activation policies are aimed at clients, but the new organisational approaches are intended to efficiently steer activation policies. Both active labour market policies and new organisational measures are, by the same token, matters which will likely affect the lives of social workers and clients, respectively. The fact that the two are inter-related, did not, however, seemed to have occurred to the majority of informants. Perhaps this is only natural; as those kinds of connections are more theoretically than practically interesting. Making such connections is likely of limited relevance to the daily lives of social workers; they are of more concern to people whose line of work entails dwelling on the theoretical, rather than the practical implications of social work and unemployment. It is, all of this notwithstanding, in my opinion difficult to scholarly separate the Trelleborg Model from the changes that have occurred both in labour market policies and the organisational set-up of social work in the decades preceding the current one.

When it comes to the answer to the fourth and final research question: the informants, although none had any direct experience of it, nevertheless had the second-hand experience of colleagues who have opted to resign from previous positions, as a direct effect of the Trelleborg model, as well as that of clients who had previously applied for social assistance in the eponymous municipality. From this, it may be concluded that the social workers employ an account, or ethno-method, in which Trelleborg model – as it is presented – appears to be a reasonable enough measure, they were all positive regarding the amount of time the model might plausibly free-up pertaining to client interaction. Concerns were however raised pertaining to some of the model's possible implications *vis-a-vis* discretion, as the very nature of discretionary judgement stems from the fact that this is usually not a cut-and-dried issue. Social services work is rife with conundrums of a grey area-nature. Some informants were suspicious, as new managerial

and organisational modes of working, does not always seem to have their best interest at heart. The logic underlying efficiency measures such as the Trelleborg model are often the product of cost-saving and time-efficiency concerns, rather than of the working conditions of social workers and the well-being of clients, respectively. The potential effects on discretion was thus of concern, but the informants also felt that they be might able to use it to their advantage, if so, it may enable them to do more social work.

Yet there were concerns as to the effects of the model on clients who are disadvantaged in terms of being able to understand dense bureaucratic Swedish prose (clients with immigrant backgrounds) or clients (of Swedish and other origins) whose literacy level is inadequate. It was put forward that the model could never work when it comes to the more challenging cases. From this, I infer that the model may potentially serve to enhance the vulnerability of those in an already disadvantageous position; they may encounter difficulty in understanding that which is expected of them in order to be granted social assistance and the model may, conceivably expand the already significant distance between these clients and the labour market.

Depending on how one views it, the model may both serve to professionalise and deprofessionalise social work. It may serve to professionalise in that it may free-up time for what is viewed as actual social work (assessments of social assistance applications does not seem to fall under this category) and de-professionalise, as it poses a threat to and may potentially eliminate the need for one of the distinguishing features of the of social work – discretion.

I would however like to suggest that if one accepts the problem definitions of active labour market policies, the Trelleborg Model ought to be viewed as a welcome addition to social services work. All too lenient discretionary judgements may, conceivably, cost the state and its municipalities millions in lost revenue each year, both in terms of lost taxation – i.e., social assistance payments that ought not to be granted, as the individuals at hand might well be able to both look for work and work even though they claim otherwise. Human-based discretionary assessments in the past might conceivably have led to unnecessary strains on state finances. Cost-saving by way of, e.g., automation, is at the heart of New Public Management ideals (c.f. Hood, 1991: 3f; Roberts, 2014: 57). The Trelleborg model thus has the potential to; so to speak, kill two birds with one stone, as it has the potential to save costs on unwarrantedly granted social assistance payments.

If one, however, holds that social policy ought not to be so one-sidedly intent on employment and financial self-sufficiency, this casts the Trelleborg Model, as well as activation policies in

a different light. It might then be argued, then, that the elevated stature of employment is more to do with morality (everyone how is able to so ought to work) and ideology (activation policies) than with actual demands for labour. If one views it as such, the control and discipline that social workers are expected to exert on clients appears both somewhat paradoxical and perplexing. If one accepts this, social workers working with social assistance should be able to assist clients far from the reach of the labour market in ways that has no direct bearing on possible future employment, i.e., should be able to “do more social work”.

6.1) Future Research

I would like to finish with a call to future research; I hereby invite scholars to investigate the long-term effects of active labour market policies on employment. Perhaps this might be done through the conducting of a comparative study of the Social Services Department of the late 1980s/early 1990s with that of the 2010s – as this study does not really touch upon matters such as the employment-attainment ratio of past or present social services clients. One way of doing this might be to compare the employment-attainment levels of social services clients’ pre and post the 2001 Social Services Act. More directly tied to the current study – scholars may also compare the professional accounts of past social workers with contemporary ones. A possible route of doing this could be to seek out informants such as Robert – who have experienced both the past and present Social Services Department, in order to discuss if and how the professional role, including the expectations of social workers and the ways in which they account for discretion have changed over time.

I would also like to invite scholars to investigate further the repercussions of standardisation and automation throughout the domain of the public sector, including the social services sector. If automated assessments were to be introduced on a large scale, it would be important to investigate the effect on social services clients’ chances of attaining employment; including how this might affect the more disadvantaged clients, far from the reach of the labour market. Lastly, I would also like to invite future scholars to investigate the effect of automation on the distinguishing trait of the social worker trade – discretion. Hence, I would encourage future scholars to investigate whether automation will free-up more time for client interaction; if it will enable social workers to – in the words of the informants “do more social work” – i.e. more work that is not directly tied to clients’ economy, or whether it might instead have negative consequences for social workers and clients alike. Future scholars might thus investigate as to whether further standardisation and automation will entail alternative usages for discretion

and/or more client time, or whether it, conversely, will reduce and, in time, possibly eliminate the need for discretion altogether.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

- Hej, tack för att du ställer upp på den här intervjun. Jag heter Daniel Carlsson. Denna intervju kommer att användas som empiri för min masteruppsats i sociologi. Jag vill börja med att försäkra om att jag kommer att anonymisera dig och alla andra som medverkar i studien. Kan du börja med att berätta lite om dig själv – om din bakgrund och hur länge du har jobbat som socionom? Är det förresten okej att jag spelar in vårt samtal?
- Kan du berätta lite kring dina erfarenheter av att arbeta med försörjningsstöd?
- Kan du säga något om vilka utmaningar, praktiska hinder o.s.v. det kan innebära?
- Vilken är den viktigaste funktionen du bör fylla, som du ser det?

- Vilka möjligheter skulle du säga att ni har när det kommer till att hjälpa individer?
- Finns det möjlighet att ta hänsyn till den individuella klientens förutsättningar?
- I forskning som jag tagit del av inför den här intervjun lyfts ofta aktivering fram som något centralt.
Vilka är dina tankar kring detta?
- Vad anser du om motprestationer?
- Vilka är dina tankar kring att försörjningsstödet är villkorat?
- Alla individer har kanske inte samma förutsättningar att leva upp till de villkor som ställs?
- Detta är en mer allmänt samhällslig fråga: Det känns ibland som om välfärdsstatliga och kollektiva lösningar och förklaringsmodeller har hamnat i bakgrunden när det gäller sådant som

fattigdom. Att det liksom är mer individualpsykologiska förklaringsmodeller i dag. Är detta något som märks i arbetet med försörjningsproblematik?

- Vet du om fler individer uppnår självförsörjning i dag, jämfört med när aktivering och kompetenshöjning inte betonades på samma sätt?
- Organisationssociologer menar att offentlig verksamhet styrs på ett annat sätt i dag. Att det är mycket så att välfärdssektorn ska vara målrationell och att organisationer och individer inom i välfärden ska bedömas utifrån mätbara prestationer. Är detta något du märker av?
- Kan du berätta lite om det?
- Vad har innebär det för er?
- För klienterna?
- Har du hört talas om Trelleborgsmodellen?
- Kan man säga något generellt om vilken typ av människor det är som söker försörjningsstöd?
- Utbildningsgrad, ålder, kön och sådant?
- Vilka kan enligt dig några av orsakerna till fattigdom vara?
- Finns det något du vill tillägga?

Informants and Transcription Symbols

- 1) Christer
- 2) Lisa
- 3) Anna-Karin
- 4) Frida
- 5) Jon
- 6) Robert
- 7) Amélie
- 8) Julia

(.) = Paus (1–2 sec.)

(.) = Somewhat longer paus, (2–3 sec)

() = (One unintelligible word)

() = (Two or three unintelligible words)

- = Verbal hesitation or re-take. – =

Interrupted or overlapping speech []

= Interviewer's comment.

Second Coding Cycle Examples

- Professional Role
- Control and Discipline (Activation)
- Discretion
- Organisational Challenges