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GOVERNING STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACIES

THE ORGANIZATIONAL SHAPING OF CASEWORKERS

Kerstin Jacobsson and Håkan Johansson

Governing Street-Level Bureaucracies

This book examines how caseworkers are governed in today's street-level bureaucracies. It redefines our understanding of public sector governance by highlighting the subtle, informal, and everyday forms of organizational governance that shape caseworkers' subjectivities beyond formal policies and professional identities. Based on four distinct types of normative governance – 'governance by discourse', 'governance by emotions', 'governance by peers', and 'governance by numbers, colours, and symbols', the book shows how caseworkers are shaped as organizational staff members alongside their roles as welfare professionals and welfare state bureaucrats.

Governing Street-Level Bureaucracies will be of interest to scholars and students in organizational sociology, street-level bureaucracy research, public administration, and critical management studies. It also provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to understand caseworkers' responses to public governance and public sector reforms.

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"Governing Street Level Bureaucracies provides a uniquely rich insight into the complex and dynamic realities of two major welfare bureaucracies. Using a multi-method approach and inspired by street-level bureaucracy and critical management theory and studies, the book offers an important contribution to our understanding of the work practices and their management in these welfare state institutions. I fully endorse the authors' claim that the book's relevance goes beyond the Swedish context in which the study took place."

Rik van Berkel, ***Faculty of Law, Economics and Governance, School of Governance (USG), Utrecht University***

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Preface

This book is the outcome of a research project on 'Audit culture and the case-worker: A study of the Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency', led by Professor Kerstin Jacobsson and generously funded by *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond* (grant nr SGO14-1192).

Thus, initially approaching the topic of the governing of these two street-level bureaucracies from the perspective of audit culture, transparency and performance-measurement, we soon discovered that we were studying a moving target. The public sector governance of these agencies shifted literally before our eyes. Moreover, our ethnographic research in these agencies convinced us that we needed to develop an analytical approach that was able to grasp the complexity of the governance of – and within – these agencies, and especially one attuned to capture the subtle forms of governing street-level bureaucrats in their everyday work. It is such a framework for analysis that we offer in this book, and we hope others will find it inspiring.

We are grateful for the close collaboration with the other research participants, especially Katarina Hollertz and Ida Seing, who have been highly involved in the data collection as well as in discussing the findings with us repeatedly during these past years. We also want to thank Christina Garsten who was part of the team in the initial phase, and Ylva Wallinder who joined us later. We are also grateful to Carolin Schütze for sharing data based on her research. A warm thanks also goes to the staff in the Swedish Public Employment Service and the Social Insurance Agency, who have so generously shared their everyday realities at work with us and opened their organizations even for observations. Thanks to *Riksbankens Jubileumsfond,* the book is available Open Access.

Kerstin Jacobsson and Håkan Johansson
Göteborg and Lund 2 December 2024

1 Introduction

Governing street-level bureaucracies

Introduction

This book explores how new forms of governance have changed the ways in which street-level bureaucracies and bureaucrats are managed. In recent decades, scholars have noted the adoption of various managerial models in public organizations, including in traditional street-level bureaucracies. Many European countries have embraced the ideals, concepts, and models related to New Public Management (NPM) (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). More recently, managerial governance has evolved to focus on organizational culture and norms in managing public organizations. Whereas the classical models of NPM emphasize financial control, performance evaluations, and productivity (e.g., Hood, 1991; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994), new approaches – often labelled post-NPM models – aim to influence staff through shared visions, values, and trust in their professional judgement (Christensen & Lægreid, 2010, 2011a; Reither & Klenk, 2019; Bringselius, 2020). Alongside governing street-level bureaucrats by measuring production, public sector organizations seek to shape caseworker behaviour based on ideal norms and values. This calls for novel ways of thinking about and theorizing the governing of street-level bureaucracies, which is what this book offers.

Although the use and combination of NPM and post-NPM models have been extensively studied (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Reiter & Klenk, 2019), theories on street-level bureaucracies continue to view street-level bureaucrats as the outermost link in a hierarchical governance chain. These theories, rooted in the seminal work by Lipsky (1980), highlight frontline staff's relative autonomy and discretion, suggesting that managers have limited control over street-level bureaucrats. However, this perspective provides a partial, and in our view, too narrow, understanding of how street-level bureaucrats are governed in contemporary public welfare agencies. It overlooks the complex web of organizational relationships in which frontline workers are embedded, which not only governs them as 'street-level bureaucrats' or 'welfare professionals' but also as 'staff members'. In this book, we develop a novel framework for analysing these complex forms of organizational governance in street-level bureaucracies. This framework integrates in a new way insights from the street-level bureaucracy

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research tradition (following Lipsky, 1980) and critical management studies (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Spicer & Alvesson, 2024) to theoretically explore and empirically investigate the contemporary governance of street-level bureaucrats in public welfare bureaucracies. The following discussion in this introductory chapter positions our approach relative to the existing literature on public management and street-level bureaucracy.

NPM, post-NPM, and nested governance

This book relates to the wide-ranging debate on NPM, and beyond. The shortcomings of NPM, such as management by objectives and performance (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), are nowadays well known to researchers and practitioners. Performance-based systems have been found to produce numerous side effects (e.g., Smith, 1995; van Tiel & Leeuw, 2002), such as documentation practices and 'paperwork' becoming more critical at the expense of substantive work (Baines et al., 2014; Jacobsson & Martinell Barfoed, 2019), and an obsession with numbers and measurability (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003; Triantafillou, 2011; Hjärpe, 2017, 2019). The aspects of work subjected to quantitative targets and measurement become prioritized, while the qualitative dimensions of work are viewed as less significant (Lindvert, 2006; Carter et al., 2011). NPM models and their focus on performance-based systems promote a concern with impression management, organizational facades, and ceremonial aspects of achievements (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Brunsson, 2006). Ball (2003) argued that this led to a 'performativity culture', including elements of cynical compliance and search for short-term or tactical improvements. Its dysfunctionality is well observed as employees' incentives to tick boxes in organizational checklists override concerns about agency effectiveness or quality of services, as this is not measured (Lindgren, 2006; Hood, 2007).

Underlying these management techniques is a programmatic ideal of transparency and audit control. Such monitoring shapes the room for manoeuvre of staff through the direct alignment of activities with the explicitly monitored goals and the internalization of programmatic ideals (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000a, 2000b; Munro, 2004; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2016). Formal accountability standards often lead to a pronounced preoccupation with transparency (Strathern, 2000a; Hood & Heald, 2006), and as a consequence, organizations and practitioners organize and present themselves in response to established targets, indicators, and evaluations (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2010). Lindgren (2006, 2014) aptly spoke of NPM becoming an evaluation monster permeating virtually all public sector fields, and street-level bureaucracies are no exception (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2016; Hollertz et al., 2018).

Given these shortcomings, public administration research has increasingly focused on public governance *after* NPM due to its (over-)concern with performance measurement and measurability. This is reflected in debates on 'post-NPM' (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2010, 2011c; Cohen, 2016; Klenk & Cohen, 2019), New Public Governance (e.g., Osborne, 2010; Bao et al., 2013), 'co-production'

(Osborne et al., 2016; van Gestel et al., 2019), and 'hybrid' forms of governance (e.g., Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015; Fossestøl et al., 2015; Breit et al., 2018). Post-NPM governance seeks to overcome the fragmentation that NPM governance led to by, for example, placing trust-based governance as the strategy's focus, among other aspects (e.g., Smith, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Reiter & Klenk, 2019). As Christensen and Lægreid argue, post-NPM reforms focus on re-establishing a shared ethic, a public sector ethos, and a cohesive professional culture, and hence with a 'broader cultural perspective than NPM' (2011b: 18).

This book advances a view of contemporary welfare governance as layered and nested governance models and techniques. To capture also the indirect and more subtle ways of securing organizational loyalty, for instance, by 'infusing' organizational values in staff, we draw on the notion of normative control (Etzioni, 1961; Kunda, 2006), or as we phrase it here, normative governance in welfare state bureaucracies. Moreover, rather than speaking of a shift 'from' NPM' 'to' post-NPM, we argue that new governance mechanisms are added to existing ones rather than replacing them (see also Christensen & Lægreid, 2010, 2011b, 2011c; Reiter & Klenk, 2019; Klenk & Cohen, 2019). This is what we mean by layered forms of governance. Christensen and Lægreid (2010, 2011c) also noted that as public administration adopts management techniques from the private sector, the complexity of public sector organizations increases. Capturing such complexity is what we refer to as capturing nested forms of governance. In this respect, street-level bureaucracies (and street-level bureaucrats) are today embedded in an organizational environment in which the logic of markets, hierarchies, networks, and professionalism coexist (Klenk & Cohen, 2019: 144).

Street-level bureaucracies and discretion

Street-level bureaucrats must make choices about services and their delivery (Evans, 2010; Evans & Hupe, 2020b), which requires them to judge and differentiate between citizens when applying general policy to individual cases. At the core of such practices lies the concept of discretion (Lipsky, 2010) as 'the legitimate space for the officials to make their own decisions and exercise their judgement about how public services are delivered and the degree of freedom from external control they have in doing this' (Evans & Hupe, 2020b: 4). This means that rather than merely executing decisions taken at higher authority levels, street-level bureaucrats are *de facto* policymakers (Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin, 2020). The routines they establish and the strategies they use to cope with their working conditions – resource constraint, time pressure, ambiguous or contradictory policy goals, policy complexity, and uncertainty – become part of the policy they de facto carry out (Prottas, 1978).

While discretion points to substantial room for manoeuvre for street-level bureaucrats, it similarly rests on the assumption that management has limited capability to control their work. However, since Lipsky (2010) wrote his seminal book, street-level bureaucracy has been radically redesigned under marketization and managerialism (e.g., Clarke & Newman, 1997; Freidson, 2001; Evetts, 2009,

2011). The literature has focused on how proceduralization, performance auditing, rewards systems, and standardized assessment tools, including e-governance, affect the work of frontline staff (e.g., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Caswell et al., 2010; Brodkin, 2011; Breit et al., 2020; Zouridis et al., 2020). This has evoked a lively debate about whether or not street-level bureaucrats have been able to defend discretion also under NPM (e.g., Evans & Harris, 2004; Taylor & Kelly, 2006; Evans, 2010, 2011; Jessen & Tufte, 2014; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Hupe et al., 2015; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; van Berkel et al., 2017; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Hupe, 2019; Freier & Senghaas, 2022).

'Governing by performance' has had enormous implications for caseworkers and their casework. In line with the above discussion, trust in professionals runs the risk of being replaced by practices linked to mechanical objectivity, to use a term from Porter (1995). Evidence points to increased standardization of client assessments (e.g., Marston, 2005; White et al., 2009; Caswell et al., 2010) and casework becoming a matter of handling clients according to standardized templates. This situation has been amplified by introducing e-governance tools and transforming street-level bureaucracies into system-level bureaucracies (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Zouridis et al., 2020). Zouridis et al. (2020) found that digitalization of street-level bureaucracies fosters a reinforced focus on case production in the quantitative sense (Zouridis et al., 2020: 316), while others have found that street-level bureaucrats take a pragmatic approach also to e-governance tools (e.g., Høybye-Mortensen, 2019).

Some scholars report signs of deprofessionalization, in which professional service delivery is increasingly replaced by bureaucratic programme administration (e.g., van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012). The concern with formal accountability may be achieved at the expense of the scope for professional judgement, 'preserving form without spirit' (Freidson, 2001: 181). Lindvert (2006) summarizes this as a shift from 'doing the right thing' to 'doing things in the right way', as formal rationality replaces substantive rationality and objectives. Other scholars stress that frontline staff have defended discretionary power and professional values despite NPM (e.g., Evans, 2010, 2011; Brodkin, 2011). Although managerialism risks undermining professionalism, a professional discourse continues to exist alongside managerialism (e.g., Evans, 2010: 142; Liljegren, 2012). Instead, professional values mediate top-down demands and enable the preservation of professional autonomy under public management reforms (e.g., Ackroyd et al., 2007). This is especially so for full professions (such as medical doctors) but also for semi-professions (such as social workers), as these can claim loyalty to their professional codes of ethics alongside the NPM-inspired organizational targets and standardized practices (van Gestel et al., 2019). Professionals apply 'creative mediation' or 'pragmatic professionalism' to redefine the demands of NPM to support the desired outcome (Liljegren, 2012; van Gestel et al., 2019). Van Berkel et al. (2010) even found that the performance-oriented management style entailed *more* room for discretion. As welfare professionals, street-level bureaucrats are thus not 'passive victims' of management changes. However, most evidence for the successful defence of discretion comes from social work, in which staff share a professional identity,

ethics, and ethos based on joint occupational training (e.g., Evans & Harris, 2004; Liljegren, 2012). Some seek a middle way, suggesting that not all aspects of discretion are affected by NPM and standardization (Taylor & Kelly, 2006). In this view, NPM can open new spaces for discretion and render forms of 'hybrid professionalism' (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015; Spyridonidis & Calnan, 2011), as 'by creating rules, organizations create discretion' (Evans & Harris, 2004: 883; also Evans, 2010, 2011).

At the heart of this debate lies the assumption that caseworkers oppose organizational control even if managers seek to restrict their discretion. Thus, street-level bureaucrats will find ways to carve out a space for discretion, also under new forms of managerial control. However, to us, Lipsky's (2010) argument that managers have limited ability to control and direct the behaviour of street-level workers seems partly outdated. Indeed, managers might perceive discretion as a threat to – rather than a prerequisite for – achieving organizational objectives (Durose, 2011; Pires, 2011; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013). This is why discretion is explicitly targeted by new management techniques (e.g., Hood, 2020), implying new ways of containing and channelling the use of discretion. For instance, studies of teamwork in the public sector show the subtle ways managers seek to control discretion and promote peer 'policing' of fellow workers (Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021; see Chapter 6). Hood (2020) finds that managers and caseworkers may accept or even initiate arrangements that restrict their discretion. Similarly, Rutz and Du Pont (2020: 283) stress that workers may welcome rules and do not always prefer their discretionary powers. Indeed, as Ellis concluded, frontline decision-making 'represents a dynamic interaction between the countervailing forces of top-down authority and street-level discretion, the precise characteristics of which in any given policy field can only be determined through empirical inquiry' (2011: 241).

Our argument in this book is that rather than treating discretion as an individual phenomenon or in opposition to managers and political decisions, it is pivotal to explore caseworkers' organizational embeddedness and the multiple ways in which they and their discretion are shaped.

Aim and purpose

This book aims to advance empirical research as well as theoretical exploration of how caseworkers are shaped within contemporary street-level bureaucracies. We argue that staff in street-level bureaucracies are included in a web of organizational relationships and forms of control, and our analysis aims to capture this complex, nested form of governance. For this purpose, we integrate the street-level bureaucracy research tradition with critical management studies (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Grey & Willmott, 2005; Spicer& Alvesson, 2024). These two bodies of literature have seldom been used together, and integrating concepts and perspectives from both allows us to present a comprehensive view of organizational governance, focusing specifically on normative governance and the informal processes involved in shaping the 'ideal caseworker' in modern forms of public management. Both classical NPM (e.g., Hood, 1991) and post-NPM approaches

are expressions of managerialism. Instead of studying the relevance of 'either–or', we argue that it is helpful to draw on notions of normative control (Etzioni, 1961; Kunda, 2006) – normative governance in welfare state bureaucracies, in our phrase – to capture the more indirect and subtle ways of securing organizational loyalty, for instance, by 'infusing' organizational values in staff through a variety of means and social processes.

While the analytical separation between NPM and post-NPM models illustrates changes in public governance, we 'cut' the analysis differently. As various forms of normative governance, we speak of 'governance by discourse', 'governance by emotions', 'governance by peers', and 'governance by numbers, colours and symbols'. The distinction between these is purely analytical, as in everyday governance, we expect them to be interlinked, reinforcing, or potentially counteracting each other. Our original framework explores the governance of frontline workers as a combination and interaction of vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms in operation in the daily life of contemporary welfare state bureaucracies. By avoiding a focus on one form of governance in isolation, but on various forms of governance working in tandem, we advance knowledge on the normative and informal organizational shaping of caseworkers in street-level bureaucracies.

To illustrate the usefulness of this analytical approach, we investigate two cases of street-level bureaucracies: the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES). These are two of Sweden's largest welfare state agencies and are instrumental in administering social and unemployment insurance. As a reaction to NPM models, both agencies have undergone management reforms under the label of post-NPM yet partly shifted back to stricter management by objectives and performance measurement. By addressing two cases of public sector agencies with different reform trajectories (from/to NPM/post-NPM), we gain a deeper understanding of how contexts influence the organizational shaping of caseworkers.

Based on our investigations, the book makes the following contributions. First, combining concepts and perspectives from critical management studies and street-level bureaucracy research brings forward an original analytical framework for analysing the informal and subtle methods of normative governance in contemporary public agencies. The perception of frontline staff as the outer edge of a hierarchical governance chain has revealed important insights into the role of professions and political and organizational steering (e.g., Riccucci, 2005; Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015; Evetts, 2011; Liljegren, 2012; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Zacka, 2017; Mik-Meyer, 2018; van Gestel et al., 2019). However, such insights fail to capture the complex and multiple shaping of staff in public agencies. While normative ways of organizationally shaping and controlling staff and their performance have been at the centre of critical management studies (Barker, 1993; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 2006), we introduce and explore their relevance in connection with the governing of street-level bureaucracies. Nevertheless, our framework of 'governance by discourse', 'governance by emotions', 'governance by peers', and 'governance by numbers, colours and symbols' also adds an original contribution to the critical management literature in general.

Second, the book moves away from the individualistic accounts of street-level bureaucrats that have long been used to understand discretion. Instead, we delve into the collective processes of normative governance involved in governing casework and caseworker discretion. This topic has recently gained some attention in street-level bureaucracy research (e.g., Rutz & de Bont, 2020; Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). To capture the collective processes of managing caseworkers, we must bring in the social context and informal structures of bureaucracies (e.g., Selznick, 1957; Downs, 1967, Sandfort, 2000; Riccucci, 2005; Ellis, 2014; Zacka, 2017; Jacobsson et al., 2020). However, collective processes go beyond simply developing a shared perspective on using discretion in horizontal/social interaction (Rutz & de Bont, 2020). Following theories of normative governance, collective processes can also work directly and indirectly as a strategic management device and a means of normative control of caseworkers.

Third, the book presents an original ethnographic study of the governance of street-level bureaucracies. Most studies explore surveys, interviews, or observations, yet rarely in combination. This book draws on a mixed-methods design, including over 100 interviews with politicians, senior managers at all levels of governance, as well as caseworkers and their local managers. In addition, the book draws on extensive ethnographic work, including participatory observations from seven local offices of the PES and the SIA. Our study also includes steering documents from each agency as well as investigations of political regulation. Finally, we explore a survey sent to a representative sample of caseworkers in the two agencies studied. Combining data types and methods allows for an in-depth understanding of how various forms of governance shape the frontline worker.

The Swedish case

Few countries would be more appropriate for investigating the penetration of private management techniques in public bureaucracies than Sweden. In the international literature, the Swedish welfare state is often referred to as a social democratic welfare state with an extensive focus on public funding, administration, and regulation of public welfare agencies. The public sector in Sweden has been prone to 'import' management ideals and scripts from the business sector. Performance management was implemented in Sweden already in the early 1990s. Based on the ambition of an 'innovative public sector', so-called post-NPM management tools have been implemented broadly in municipalities and state bureaucracies alike (e.g. Hall, 2012; Innovationsrådet, 2012, 2013). These include the promotion of a government-led campaign on 'trust-based governance' arguing for the need to 're-professionalize' the public sector in Sweden by 'letting the professionals be professional' (e.g., Bringselius, 2019, 2020; SOU 2019:43). With (selective) inspiration from Toyota, Lean management ideas have been implemented in a variety of public sector organizations, including childcare facilities (Thedvall, 2015), migration services (Wettergren, 2010), and the SIA (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). Much research on discretion in welfare bureaucracies has been conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g., Evans & Hupe, 2020a, 2020b), but also in the

Nordic countries (e.g., Caswell et al., 2010; Jessen & Tufte, 2014; Fossestøl et al., 2015; Olaison et al., 2018; Jacobsson et al., 2020; Schütze, 2022). However, this book's relevance reaches far beyond the Swedish context. The cross-fertilization of critical management and street-level bureaucracy studies opens new avenues for understanding the consequences of new forms of public management for the caseworkers at the frontline, thereby contributing both to public management and street-level bureaucracy research.

Data and method

The book draws on a rare mixed-methods approach to the study of the governance of welfare state bureaucracies and its reception by caseworkers. Whereas we find many case studies of single welfare organizations that rely on interview data with managers and caseworkers, this book builds on a unique dataset: a) over 100 interviews with politicians, senior managers at all levels of governance, as well as caseworkers and their local managers; b) intense ethnographic work including participatory observations from seven local offices of the two agencies studied; c) studies of steering documents from each agency as well as political regulation; and d) a survey sent to a large representative sample of caseworkers in each of these two agencies studied. The mix of data and methods allows for a unique in-depth understanding of how various forms of governance shape the frontline caseworkers and their discretion. A comparison of the two agencies and the study's mix of documents, interviews, and ethnography bring forth insights and nuances into the effects of governance that studies of single agencies do not.

Most data collection formed part of a collaborative research project under the research leadership of one of us (Jacobsson) and with data shared among all project participants. Katarina Hollertz and Ida Seing played a particularly important role in data collection. Continuous discussions among the team members around data and interpretations served to ensure intersubjectivity and validity of interpretation.

Local fieldwork consisted of ethnographic observations of daily work and qualitative semi-structured interviews at seven local offices. We first (and primarily) studied five local SIA offices and two PES offices located in two Swedish regions. Our rationale was to study SIA and PES offices in the same region, thereby operating in largely the same social-structural context. Due to differences in organizational structures, the number of offices studied differs between the two agencies. Therefore, we added a third local PES office in a third region, conducting interviews there but without conducting observations.

The SIA is a highly centralized agency, and for such an extensive (ethnographic multisite) study as ours, consent had to go through the head office. With the PES, access could be obtained directly through the local managers. Both agencies received us researchers impressively openly and posed no constraints on what could be observed (excluding client contact, which would have been more ethically sensitive). All offices and individuals participated based on informed consent,

and we have anonymized both individuals and their offices, as well as the regions in our writings, to preserve their integrity. However, we have retained the names of Directors-General, being official leaders of agencies. Data collection took place during 2015–2017 for the SIA and 2016–2017 for the PES, with a few additional interviews carried out at the third local PES office in 2019.

The study builds on 112 interviews with local managers and caseworkers, central managers at headquarters, and policymakers at ministries. We conducted 85 semi-structured interviews with staff at local offices, including the caseworkers/frontline staff, their local managers, as well as local 'specialists' (38 interviews at the SIA and 47 interviews at the PES). At the SIA, such specialists included local specialists on health insurance and 'insurance medicine advisors' (medical doctors), and at the PES, rehabilitation specialists of different professions (psychologists, occupational therapists, or social workers). At the central level, 16 interviews were conducted at the SIA headquarters in Stockholm, and one group interview was conducted with higher officials at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The PES study includes seven interviews at the PES headquarters, one group interview with the consultancy company involved in organizational reforms at both agencies, one interview with an official at the Swedish Unemployment Insurance Inspectorate, and one interview at the Ministry of Employment.

For our ethnographic observations, we followed the method of 'shadowing' practitioners (Czarniawska, 2007), in this case, the individual caseworkers in their daily work. However, we excluded direct client interaction for confidentiality reasons. The SIA caseworkers, in any case, rarely met clients face-to-face, using telephone contact when needed. PES caseworkers were in the process of implementing digitalization, thus reducing face-to-face client meetings, but they were still meeting clients face-to-face during our study period. Nevertheless, the book's main focus is on the governance of caseworkers and not studies of their interaction with clients, which is much more common in street-level, discretion, and caseworker research. We conducted observations at all forms of collegial settings, such as staff training, management training, staff meetings, manager meetings, team meetings, and informal settings, including interactions in lunchrooms and office spaces, and we also spent time in the agency receptions as visitors came into the agency to seek support. Through observations, we sought to gain valuable insight into how organizational governance actually played out in the daily life of these street-level bureaucracies, as a complement to data collected through interviews and documents.

The study also builds on a survey sent to employees at the SIA and the PES. The survey was part of Carolin Schütze's PhD project investigating discretion in these agencies, including attitudes towards migrants and migration (Schütze, 2019, 2022; Schütze & Johansson, 2020). We sent a web survey to a random sample of 6650 employees working at each agency. Schütze conducted most of the data collection, with Johansson as a participant. To conduct the survey, we cooperated with the largest union (Fackförbundet ST) organizing civil servants in state public agencies. We sent out a web survey and (after two reminders) had a response

rate of 24.3% (N = 1617). Because our focus was on caseworker discretion, we removed respondents not working with client issues, leading to a final sample of 1319 caseworkers. The survey included items linked to workload, work pressure, and discretion. The response rate aligns with other web surveys (Schütze, 2023). We compared our sample with the total population at the SIA and the PES, finding it representative in terms of key social background factors, such as gender distribution and average age.

Outline of the book

The book comprises nine chapters, including this introduction, and the following two chapters set the context for the book. Chapter 2 presents the book's conceptual framework and explores the link between critical management and street-level bureaucracy studies. It identifies four key means by which normative governance is put into practice in public agencies: 'governance by discourse', 'governance by emotions', 'governance by peers', and 'governance by numbers, colours and symbols'. While each type is presented as analytically distinct, we assume they are entangled when put into practice in public welfare agencies. In line with studies of street-level bureaucracies, we stress the agency at play as caseworkers comply, reshape, or resist organizational norms and visions. Chapter 3 provides a contextual understanding of normative governance, addressing 'policy', 'public governance', 'organizational', and 'occupational' aspects of the contexts informing normative governance in each agency. This chapter addresses changes in the active labour market, sickness insurance policies, and state governance, and provides a short background to reform processes inside each agency and presentation of caseworker backgrounds.

The following five chapters provide empirical analyses of normative governance, addressing the four types of governance (Chapters 4–7) and analysing the subjectivities being shaped (Chapter 8). Chapter 4 provides an overview of discursive governance and how managerial narratives convey organizational ideals to guide staff behaviour and to align employee and caseworker identities with organizational goals. Chapter 5 analyses how the SIA and the PES use emotions as governance tools to elicit staff commitment and exert control, illustrating clear differences in emotional regimes in the two agencies, as well as across central and local levels. Chapter 6 engages with an analysis of how normative governance takes place through peers, such as colleagues and teams, and its implications for caseworker control in each of the agencies. Chapter 7 explores numbers, colours, and symbols as examples of visual governance and shows how these frame caseworker subjectivities and supplement and reinforce other types of normative governance. Chapter 8 engages with an analysis of subjectivities shaped by each organization through the normative regime in play, and also explores the subjectivities claimed by caseworkers, thus heeding the agency that caseworkers display in connection with organizational governance tools.

The book ends with a short concluding chapter, offering conclusions on similarities and differences between the normative regimes of the two agencies, the

relevance of our analytical approach in connection with debates on NPM and post-NPM governance, and the implications of our study in relation to the literature on street-level bureaucracies. We go into dialogue with established understandings of caseworkers as the outer edge of a governance chain that starts with government policy reforms. While this is still relevant, the book finds, and richly illustrates, that caseworker governance is far more complex than so.

2 Normative governance in street-level bureaucracies

Introduction

This book integrates the street-level bureaucracy (SLB) research tradition with critical management studies (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Townley, 1994; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Grey & Willmott, 2005) to empirically investigate and theorize the contemporary governance of street-level bureaucrats in public welfare agencies. In the Lipsky (2010) tradition, SLB theories have long underscored the frontline staff's relative autonomy and discretion. However, perceiving frontline staff as the outermost link in a hierarchical governance chain, as often portrayed in this literature, presents an incomplete and overly narrow understanding of how street-level bureaucrats are governed in modern public welfare agencies. This is particularly true with the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) methods but also post-NPM practices, often imported from private companies. Instead of primarily viewing street-level bureaucrats as subject to legal regulations and political decisions, the contemporary staff in street-level bureaucracies are more accurately considered part of a complex web of organizational relationships and governance structures.

This chapter develops a framework for studying the intricate forms of nested governance in contemporary street-level bureaucracies. It draws inspiration from critical management theories, especially theories of normative governance, understood as deliberate ways of shaping caseworker ideals and enforcing behavioural norms. As with other employees, norms, cultures, and identities govern frontline workers, and managers may use various strategies to curtail their discretion by deliberately shaping the normative setting in which they work, including their self-understanding as organizational subjects. Performance targets can achieve such normative 'infusion' of organizational subjects, yet discursive, emotional, and social mechanisms can also achieve normative governance. To empirically investigate how the normative infusion of organizational subjects takes place, we provide a conceptual framework based on four types of normative governance: governance by discourse, governance by emotions, governance by peers, and governance by numbers, colours, and symbols. Combined, these four types of normative governance allow us to consider the linkages between the shaping of caseworkers' self and subjectivity and the larger organizational governance structures in which

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they are placed, including directing attention to how governance systems affect the subjectivity of those involved. The separation between these four types is primarily analytical, and we expect them to be interconnected in everyday governance, reinforcing or, at other times, counteracting one another.

Street-level agency and normative governance

The tradition from critical management studies finds that managers use various strategies to curtail discretion (Evans, 2010: 152). Etzioni (1961) noted that bureaucratic work organizations can be governed based on instrumental rationality through either rules, rewards, or both. However, he also pointed to a third form of control, called normative control. Kunda (2006) later drew on this notion in his well-known study of normative control in a high-tech company. In his view, normative control can be defined as the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of organization members by controlling underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions (Kunda, 2006: 11). Organizational cultures function as a means of normative control by providing norms for staff; in our case, norms for the 'appropriate caseworker' (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Social mechanisms like organizational rituals are related means by which employees are infused with 'the right mindset and the appropriate gut reactions' (Kunda, 2006: 93), thus influencing what they ought to think and feel and what they should regard as proper and possible. The aim is to turn the employee into an 'organizational man' (Whyte, 2002) by embedding caseworkers into organizational cultures.

Normative control thus takes place through expressing and invoking organizational cultures. Yet, as McKinlay and Starkey (1998: 10) argue, it is effective only to the extent that practices and discourses of daily organizational life sustain it. Rather than subjection or compliance, governance success draws on employees' identification with and commitment to the normative order, as when employees have a genuine passion for their work and feel a strong loyalty to the organization (Kunda, 2006: 11). Achieving organizational goals constitutes a source of personal satisfaction for committed staff members. Techniques of normative control thus offer increased freedom rather than tyranny, operating as 'an appeal to the potential existing in people' (Kunda, 2006: 14). Instead of direct control, governance tools tend to be framed as processes of education, personal development, or growth (Kunda, 2006: 6).

We prefer to speak of normative governance while noting that one of its fundamental aspects concerns the exercise of control. Normative governance refers to the deliberate ways of shaping caseworker ideals and enforcing behavioural norms, in our case, in street-level bureaucracies, yet noting that such governance may play out in multifaceted ways and lead to unintended outcomes. With normative governance techniques, the subjectivity of employees is a target for intervention. While theories of normative control tend to view such governance techniques as powerful and often highly successful, we wish to avoid an over-socialized view of frontline staff as organizational subjects by maintaining critical insights from street-level bureaucracy research.

The street-level bureaucracy tradition stresses the agency and the relative autonomy and discretion of the frontline staff (Lipsky, 1980). As street-level bureaucracy scholars Evans and Hupe remarked, 'the director, or *regisseur*, can instruct, advise, and impose sanctions off-stage. *On* stage, however, it is the actors who act and decide' (Evans & Hupe, 2020b: 8). They argued that: 'To understand discretion in any situation one has to understand how it operates within its context—the cross-cutting and asymmetrical network of relationships that reflect different dimensions of power' (Evans & Hupe, 2020b: 8). As governed organizational subjects, frontline staff may respond to governing attempts in various ways. Their responses to governance will be mediated through their personalities, life histories, work experience, and professional identities.

Similar accounts can also be found in critical management studies, stressing that normative governance can never be total since employees are not passive receivers of organizational governance (e.g., Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Employees – and caseworkers – act upon given models (e.g., Maravelias, 2007) and benefit from their ambiguity (e.g., Alcadipani et al., 2018). Accordingly, much scholarly debate on responses to normative governance and NPM focuses on resistance (e.g., Hjärpe, 2020; Lauri, 2016), whereas other scholars stress that compliance tends to be more common (Alcadipani et al., 2018; Husted, 2021; Johansson & Seing, 2022). Compliance might suggest that proposed models align with personal and professional values due to their recognition as a pathway for professional development. Hallonsten (2022), however, suggests that compliance can also embed elements of resistance, for example, expressions of cynical compliance, including a degree of embracement, without the kind of internalization that normative governance models often presume (see also Müller, 2017).

In this view, subject and subjectivity formation is never merely a top-down process (of subjection/subjugation) but entails an element of self-formation (or subjectification) (e.g., Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2023). This is an important insight from the governmentality tradition, which has also served as an inspiration for critical management studies (e.g., Townley, 1994; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998), stressing the active participation of subjects in their subjectivity formation (e.g., Foucault, 1996, 1997, 2005). It is not just a matter of the panopticon as a governance technique (Foucault, 1995); it also requires technologies of self and work on the self, by which governance may – or may not – turn into self-governance. It is essential to call attention to how normative pressure combines with the self-formation and self-governing by individuals, according to ideals and norms conveyed by the organization in question, in shaping the self and subjectivities of those governed. This type of analysis builds on an understanding of power as both constraining and productive, capable of producing 'agentic' selves. It draws attention to the wide range of technologies and practices through which governance and control operate in shaping 'the conduct of conduct' (e.g., Foucault, 1997; Dean, 1999). In the following, we introduce our conceptual framework based on four types of normative governance: governance by discourse, governance by emotions, governance by peers, and governance by numbers, colours, and symbols.

Governance by discourse

Governance by discourse is the central way through which normative governance is achieved in street-level bureaucracies. It is a core instrument for shaping organizational subjectivities, providing norms for the ideal employee (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Bergström & Knights, 2006; Baumeler, 2010). In this respect, discursive governance conveys norms about the ideal caseworkers, their roles, and their purposes. Discourses set standards and expectations for what is seen as appropriate employee behaviour, thus offering the individual something to 'fit to'. Similarly, they constitute a means for an organization and its managers to make staff 'adapt to certain values, norms and ideas about what is good, important, praiseworthy, etc. in terms of work and organizational life' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004: 426).

Organizational narratives are often expressions of discursive governance. They are means for organizations and their representatives to express and manifest organizational culture and caseworker identities. Today, most organizations create a narrative of their work (e.g., Czarniawska, 2007). Not only are they essential in how companies build their trademarks (Maravelias, 2003), but today's public sector organizations also set visions to guide their work and, as we will see in later chapters, seek to evoke an image of working for something greater and grander than 'just being a bureaucracy'. Externally, narratives distinguish the organizations from other organizations. Internally, they provide a set-up of roles and scripts for employees to adapt to (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 620). Narratives shape the available subject positions and legitimate subjectivities within the organization. Organizational narratives include elements of organizational vocabularies, scripts, and other discursive templates for shaping, in this case, the appropriate caseworker (e.g., Bévort & Suddaby, 2016). Hence, they are key to the organizational socialization of caseworkers.

This book considers narrative shifts as an aspect of normative governance. Changes in political regulation might be one reason why public sector organizations explore different organizational discourses and narratives. Another reason might be leadership changes, as new leaders seek to distinguish themselves from previous ones and establish a culture with which they can be associated. Often, such changes are marked by categorical distinctions between past/present, outdated/modern, or good/bad organizational cultures, as present managers envision the future differently from previous ones (Fineman, 2010; Jacobsson, 2023). Periods of change and transformation often elucidate previous and future ideas and ideals about organizational cultures and core narratives.

However, the significance of organizational discourse, and hence normative governance, depends on caseworker adaptation and employees' incorporation of the discursively shaped scripts and discourses into their self-understanding and role identities. As a method of incorporation, most organizations promote (or demand) employees to learn about the organization's visions or values, for instance, through training activities. Although street-level bureaucracies allow caseworkers discretionary powers, they shape these powers through organizational narratives on

organizational culture or preferred professional identities. These narratives are meant to show 'how newcomers are shaped by the organization that they enter' and what this means for how they use their discretion (Oberfield, 2020: 177; also Oberfield, 2014). As Selznick argued, 'a certain amount of social homogeneity is required if subordinate personnel are to be allowed wide discretion in the application of policies to exceptional circumstances' (1957: 114), and organizational discourse is one way to achieve this.

While SLB theory assumes a certain degree of caseworker freedom, the 'storying' of their subjectivities is, in any case, shaped and aided by the discursive templates the organization provides, such as vocabularies and scripts of what it means to be a good caseworker (Jacobsson, 2023). However, employees' identities and subjectivities are not just outcomes of top-down governance or mobilized through 'seduction'. Even though organizational discourses can be seen as a form of control over organizational subjects, individuals can respond to them in various ways. This is why combining insights from critical management and SLB studies is productive because it allows us to capture both the subtle shaping of organization members and their agency as frontline workers.

Governance by emotions

Emotional regulation is a critical component in normative governance, targeted at, among other factors, eliciting commitment and exerting control in organizations. Successful control draws on employees' emotional identification with and commitment to organizational goals because when employees have a genuine passion for their work, they feel a strong sense of loyalty to the organization (Kunda, 2006: 11). Organizational discourse as a governing instrument, as well as other forms of normative governance, gains part of its normative power by being underpinned by and mobilizing desired emotions, capable of creating 'ties that bind' (d'Aoust, 2014). Emotional governance is thus organized around normative goals (Reddy, 2001: 122) and operates by mobilizing emotions conducive to achieving organizational goals.

Although emotional reactions and displays are often seen as aspects of individuals' self and subjectivity, our approach considers them part of a governance system. Organizations guide emotions through implicit and explicit rules and scripts that prescribe what employees ought to feel about work and how to manage and display emotions (e.g., Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Fineman, 2003; Hasenfeld, 2010; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). Reddy's (2001) notion of emotional regimes is illustrative in this respect. It refers to a normative order for emotions, which consists of a (pre-established) set of normative emotions and rituals, practices, and vocabularies that, in combination, allow for what can be felt and said about feelings in organizations. Scholars investigating emotional regimes are, for instance, inspired by Hochschild's (e.g., 1979) concepts of feeling rules and display rules regulating emotional labour.

Emotional governance thus targets the whole person, including the subjectivity and emotional worlds of employees, by encouraging certain emotions

while discouraging others. However, these regimes tend to be ambivalent (e.g., Baumeler, 2010; Fineman, 2010; Larsson, 2014), allowing some space for employees to negotiate normative orders, including emotional norms or feeling rules. Consequently, employees do not necessarily submit to the organizationally prescribed emotion norms and emotion management (e.g., Bolton, 2005; Vincent, 2011). Again, it is essential to avoid portraying individuals in organizations as overdetermined subjects. Individual conformity and alignment with organizational objectives and norms should be captured without underemphasizing employees' agency, autonomy, and creativity. Bolton (2005), for instance, stresses that employees often find room for resistance, for violations of organizational norms, or for a bit of laughter. Vincent (2011) similarly points to different types of 'emotional misbehaviour', that is, emotional displays misaligned with organizational objectives. Different collectives of employees may establish their emotional zones and buffer cultures (e.g., Lindgren, 1992, 2001; Bolton, 2005). Responses might differ depending on when they entered the agency, their organizational socialization, and whether they underwent a particular professional training before their employment.

Approaching emotional regimes as complex and contingent is essential when studying street-level bureaucrats. Different models for governing the public carry different notions of 'emotional professionalism' (Larsson, 2014), which means that public management reform can result in changes in the emotional regimes (e.g., Baumeler, 2010; Fineman, 2010; Terpe & Paierl, 2010; Wettergren, 2010; cf. Reddy, 2001) and the legitimate feeling rules and display rules (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). The role ambiguities associated with street-level bureaucrats, with contradictory demands placed on staff, can also give rise to mixed feelings in organizations (e.g., Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2010). Since welfare bureaucracies must achieve multiple objectives (conforming to cost-efficiency requirements, the rule of law principles, and meeting political targets), their normative – including emotional – regimes are highly complex.

Hence, the notion of emotional governance allows for a combined analysis of the normative and emotional order prescribed by the employer and how the caseworkers negotiate it. We explore the vocabularies for talking about emotions in organizations, as well as the norms (rules) for legitimate emotions and emotional displays, as, on the one hand, prescribed by management in organizational discourse, recruitment ads, internal instructions, and so on, and, on the other hand, experienced and viewed by caseworkers, as expressed in interviews. Although the focus in this book is primarily on the governing of street-level bureaucrats, we also pay attention to their identities, self-understandings, motivations, emotional reactions, and emotional management (Hochschild, 1979) with respect to the organizational objectives and expectations.

Governance by peers

Normative governance and control operate through social mechanisms. Norms of 'appropriateness' are expressed in strategic documents and visions and conveyed

and reinforced in (and by) social interaction. By governance by peers, we refer to such a form of governance and the crucial ways peers are involved in the governance of street-level bureaucrats and their frontline work. Peer governance in street-level bureaucracies may, however, play out in radically different ways, ranging from collegial exchange and decision-making based on shared professional or work norms to the development of 'group thinking' (Janis, 1982) enforced through peer pressure. Either way, we argue that the collective work processes in street-level bureaucracies deserve more research attention than granted thus far. Studies of street-level bureaucracies (especially the tradition stemming from Lipsky) tend to focus primarily on street-level bureaucrats as individuals. However, other scholars have pointed to the development of shared work norms, work culture, and peer relations in SLBs (e.g., Sandfort, 2000; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Nisar & Maroulis, 2017; Jacobsson et al., 2020). Insights from critical management studies are helpful in this respect, as they allow us to explore how normative governance plays out in more subtle ways than highlighted in the classical street-level bureaucracy literature.

Collegiality is a crucial aspect of peer relations and, we argue, of peer governance. It forms an essential social mechanism in most professional work organizations through collegial decision-making or exchanges based on shared work norms and knowledge. We understand collegiality as a kind of solidarity that builds on a social relation over time and an idea of reciprocal obligations. It is closely related to sharing a typical work situation or professional identity (Bovbjerg, 2006: 247). Collegiality and collegial authority are thus based on professional (or work-related) expertise (Waters, 1989: 955). Instead of top-down decision-making, it refers to a collaborative culture comprising evolutionary relationships of openness, trust, and support among staff, where they define and develop their purposes as a collective (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

Street-level bureaucracy research, for instance, finds that even street-level bureaucrats who do not share professional education and background develop distinct collective work cultures (e.g., Sandfort, 2000; Jacobsson et al., 2020). From management's perspective, collegial cultures may entail challenges. Collegial work cultures can function as 'buffer cultures' (Lindgren, 1992) or shelters against top-down management steering signals. However, as we will see, collective collegial cultures may also be operational in enforcing management priorities and thinking.

Street-level bureaucracy studies stress individual discretion as a central element in caseworkers' decision-making. However, collegiality is a core element of collective decision-making, and recently, pooling discretion into collective settings has become a topic of street-level bureaucracy research. Rutz and de Bont (2020) distinguished between *collective discretion* (when workers pragmatically involve others on their initiative) and *discretionary room* (when specific decision-making authority is formally granted to teams). Collective discretion refers to what we refer to as collegiality, whereas in the case of the discretionary room, the collective of caseworkers is formally used as a legitimate decision-maker. However, neither of these ideal types exhausts the collectives' role in SLBs.

Managers also use peer governance mechanisms to reach organizational objectives, as is the case with organized teamwork. Teamwork differs from the ideal types explored above (Rutz & de Bont, 2020: 284). Although it is implemented on the initiative of management, the formal decision remains with the individual caseworkers. Critical management studies conceive teamwork as a strategic management technique for governing collective work processes, tailoring employees' understanding of their work and professional behaviour (e.g., Knights & McCabe, 2003). In this view, the team becomes a distinctive class of group that is more task-oriented than other groups and has a set of rules and rewards for its members (Adair, 1986). Teamwork is essentially a social process, even though as an organized form of social interaction, it is targeted at achieving clearly defined objectives. The normative power of teamwork stems from its capacity to elicit commitment and exert organizational control. In the case of street-level bureaucracies, teamwork functions as a management device for the subtle shaping of frontline workers' beliefs about their mission and the way they use their discretion (e.g., Carter et al., 2011; Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). To use the metaphor of the director or *regisseur*, the manager's role is to initiate, direct, and support social processes to reach organizational objectives.

The two notions of collegial culture and teams are viewed here as two distinctive forms of peer governance due to their differences in cooperation logic. Whereas collegiality is typically based on informal relations in cooperation, teams are based on a formal cooperation structure, such as executive orders and imposed team meetings (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009). As such, teams exemplify a contrived sociality based on administratively contrived peer interactions (cf. Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). Collegiality is based on the freedom of staff to consult and co-decide with their colleagues based on their initiative and self-identified needs. As a management-driven form of cooperation, teamwork rather implies regulated freedom. Employees gain freedom when they have 'learned to self-manage' in line with management's priorities and thinking (Bovbjerg, 2006: 246). Which form of peer governance takes in the two street-level bureaucracies forms a key point of analysis in this book and is explored in Chapter 6.

Governance by numbers, colours, and symbols

Normative governance operates not only through words and social mechanisms but also through modes of visual governance as a management technique to steer and govern work processes and caseworkers. Caseworkers encounter a variety of visual governance tools in their daily operations as a means for organizations to control work processes and work practices. While visual governance has been widely recognized in management studies and the abundant literature on visual management (e.g., Bell & Davison, 2012; Küpers, 2013; Bell et al., 2014), scholars have explored its use in public sector organizations to a much lesser extent (see, however, Thedvall, 2015, 2019). We propose three analytical types of visual governance for our understanding of normative governance in public sector organizations: numbers, colours, and symbols.

Numbers allow for setting clear-cut performance-related targets, whereas colours and symbols are subtle tools of normative governance that are key to understanding the regulation and self-regulation of frontline workers. Numbers play a central role in the governance of public and private organizations and our daily lives. They are a fundamental aspect of the 'quantification of society', where administration, management, and even mundane daily activities are increasingly structured around performance measures, cost–benefit analyses, risk calculations, ratings, and rankings (Mennicken & Nelson Espeland, 2019). The widespread use and acceptance of governance by numbers can be attributed to their ease of circulation within and outside organizations, their perceived simplicity, and their association with neutrality, objectivity, and efficiency. Strathern (2000b) has even suggested that numbers have a symbolic significance as sanctified objects that actors strive to achieve with anticipations (real or imagined) of social and financial rewards.

Although some forms of number governance are, to some extent voluntary, employees tend to face situations with mandatory numbers. Number governance benefits the organization of work, because numbers make individuals and their performances measurable, trackable, comparable, and possible to evaluate (Porter, 1995; Bevan & Hood, 2006). It is beneficial for managers, who, with the authority to decide on numbers for others, can significantly influence employees' subjectivity. By translating organizational visions and goals into numbers, employees are transformed into accountable and responsible actors who can be evaluated in connection with the established target (Shore & Wright, 2015). Numbers thus change how organizations relate to caseworkers and how they relate to themselves due to their constitution as 'calculating selves' (see Miller, 2001). The use of number governance not only fosters a particular type of relationship between organizations and employees but also changes roles and caseworkers' social relationships. Based on their performance, caseworkers can be transformed into a list of winners (or losers), potentially turning professional collaboration into employee competition (Lodge & Gill, 2011; Hjärpe, 2017, 2019).

Governing caseworkers by the use of numbers for steering, evaluating, and auditing their work appears to give rise to professional resistance, as they are seen as intrusive and an obstruction to professional discretion (Hjärpe, 2020). Lauri (2016) found that number governance creates distance between professionals and clients and makes the professionals more loyal to the organization than to the clients their professional ethics expect them to serve. However, Baines (2006) showed that professionals responded to number governance in different ways, for instance, by avoiding filling in forms or reporting results or starting to collect and report numbers on what they considered more relevant work tasks.

Similar to number governance, symbols permeate most parts of professional and personal life (Bell et al., 2014). We engage with friends and colleagues using thumbs, emojis, or smileys as signals of acceptance, appreciation, or checks of emotional status. Managers use flow charts, arrows, and dots to sort and direct work practices in a desired direction (Thedvall, 2015). Workplaces are currently being reformed to differentiate types of activities (rather than roles) and use colours

to signal their differences. Emojis are commonly used for communication and customer evaluation, for instance, after completing a public service task.

Lean models are core illustrations of how symbols are used in public sector governance, and symbols and colours are often used as mutually reinforcing tools of normative governance; the famous red traffic light symbol signals when something goes wrong and mistakes or errors have been made. Green signals the opposite, indicating that processes, practices, and products have reached the target, are approved, and are ready to go. Thedvall (2015) studied the use of Lean models in Swedish public preschools and noted the considerable use of coloured symbols, for example, dots (red, green, and yellow) placed on Lean boards 'preferably with smiling/non-smiling faces' (Thedvall, 2015: 49). Whiteboards became an essential space for management to exercise pressure; nevertheless, they also invited professionals to react to workload. Employees used the coloured dots to signal the group's mood, as colleagues selected emojis to view the team's collegial climate. Aside from the obvious evaluative functions, symbols are thus objects for communication and reflection on common practices, mutual responsibilities, and professional identities.

Colours and symbols offer room for a negotiated meaning of work tasks and performances, potentially providing a sense of reassurance and less constraint than governance by numbers. Manochin et al. (2011) found that symbols and colours were used for performance tracking in their study of social housing, as well as in negotiations on the meaning of good performances and how to 'colour-code' them. Thedvall (2015) noted that Swedish preschools reframed the conventional colour scheme to avoid pressure for constant improvements embedded in Lean models. Against the will of Lean coaches, local units implemented a model of green ('a good day'), blue ('a typical day'), and red ('something is not working'). This suggests that symbols can function as soft forms of control, encouraging employees to steer their work processes in the preferred direction. Hence, these forms of visual governance rest on Foucault's classical governmentality premises as remote surveillance tools (Shore & Wright, 2015) and tools that invite self-regulation (Miller & Rose, 1990).

Both agencies studied in this book, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Public Employment Service, have used Lean management techniques, including visual governance, to various extents. We are particularly interested in governance by numbers, symbols, and colours in how organizations and managers use these tools in connection with work processes and caseworkers' performances. Through our empirical investigations, we aim to capture how they relate to and potentially reinforce other forms of normative governance and their relevance to understanding self-regulation practices among caseworkers.

Conclusion

This chapter develops a conceptual framework to study how normative 'infusion' of organizational subjects is achieved. Drawing on critical management studies as well as theories on street-level bureaucracy, our conceptual framework stresses that staff

in street-level bureaucracies are included in a web of organizational relationships and forms of control. The analysis in the subsequent empirical chapters aims to capture this complex, nested form of governance. Accordingly, two analyses become of special importance. On the one hand, it is essential to investigate the relationship between these four types of normative governance as part of the shaping of caseworkers. In this chapter, although we stress the analytical separation between these types of governance, we expect them to be interconnected in everyday governance practices among managers, as well as caseworkers' encounters with them. Hence, how and the extent to which they are mutually reinforcing are an empirical question, as in other instances, they may work to counteract each other. On the other hand, our conceptual framework stresses that it is essential to analyse how caseworkers relate to each type of normative governance, and in combination, given that they may succeed in shaping caseworker subjectivities in some cases. In other cases, they may evoke resistance. Our analytical approach, therefore, stresses the need to study normative governance as practiced inside organizations. To accomplish this, our book uniquely draws on various data sources, such as ethnographic observations, qualitative interviews with managers and caseworkers, and representative survey data.

3 The organizational context

Introduction

This chapter sets the context for the empirical chapters by describing the two organizations under study and the contextual factors that condition the work therein. Street-level bureaucracy research has argued that four types of contexts matter for street-level bureaucrats: policy, governance, organizational, and occupational contexts (van Berkel et al., 2017; van Berkel, 2020). Nevertheless, it is rare that street-level research incorporates all four contexts. In particular, the forms of daily governance that take place within street-level organizations have been less in focus in previous research relative to the role of current policies, general forms of public sector governance, and the educational background and occupational role identities of caseworkers. In this book, we add a novel contribution to existing research by highlighting the complex forms of organizational governance within agencies that shape caseworker and casework in their everyday work.

We share the view that all four contexts – policy, public governance, organizational, and occupational – are relevant for understanding what happens in street-level bureaucracies. As a background to the subsequent analysis, this chapter discusses these four contexts in turn. It elucidates the key elements of government steering and governance, examining pertinent steering documents, such as laws, letters of regulation, white papers, and interviews with ministry representatives. The chapter reveals the dynamic nature of government steering, highlighting the evolving aim of policies and shifts in the government's ambitions to steer agencies. It also emphasizes the proactive role of the two agencies in shaping the overall discourse on themselves through annual reports and public interviews, demonstrating their active participation in the broader debate on the agencies. Finally, the chapter describes caseworker profiles and working conditions in the two agencies.

The policy context

The most important aspect of the policy context that impacts the governance of the SIA and the PES is that of reinforced activation principles in labour market and sickness insurance policies in recent decades. Importantly, active labour market and sickness insurance policies are not just policies but are also the building blocks

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of the Swedish welfare state and its historical configurations. Historically, local offices could be found in almost all municipalities and constituted what can be called the local extension of the Social Democratic welfare state. Both policy areas and the agencies that were put in place to implement them formed a central element in the ambition of Social Democratic governments to build a welfare state that relied on universalism and social rights on the one hand and a strong work ethic on the other. Each policy area formed an important means to move people into work and allow them security if they could not do this. Thus, the SIA and the PES were, and remain, the extended arm of the Swedish welfare state in shaping norms and implementing welfare policies across the country.

These historically institutionalized roles have evolved, partly due to significant changes in the policy context. In recent decades, a critical task of active labour market and sickness insurance policies in most Western welfare states has been to reduce the economic burden on society (due to sick-leave or unemployment). This has been achieved by stimulating and enforcing labour market participation (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008). Policies have focused on 'early return to work', as work is generally considered good for health and well-being (e.g., Seing, 2014). Accordingly, both Swedish sickness and unemployment insurance have become more restrictive, with eligibility criteria being restrained. Since the early 2000s, the so-called 'work strategy' has been strengthened with demands on an early return to work or otherwise readjustment to a new job in the labour market (Hetzler, 2009; Björnberg, 2012; Bengtsson, 2014; Seing, 2014; Bengtsson & Jacobsson, 2018).

These policy shifts towards enhanced activation pressures have varied, reflecting the shifting political constellation in Sweden. Before our fieldwork began, Sweden was governed by a centre-right coalition led by the Conservative Party (*Moderaterna*) alongside the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*), the Liberals (*Folkpartiet liberalerna*), and the Centre Party (*Centerpartiet*). This coalition was in power for two consecutive terms (2006–2010 and 2010–2014) and saw the leadership of two Directors-General who were critical for the agency reforms we describe later: Dan Eliasson, who served at the SIA from 2011 to 2014, and Angeles Bermudez Svanqvist, who led the PES from 2008 to 2013.

In 2014, the centre-right government lost power, and the Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokraterna*) formed a coalition with the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet*). The Social Democratic Party remained in office until 2022, initially in coalition with the Green Party and later including the Liberals and the Centre Party in January 2019 under the so-called 'January Agreement'. To promote its policy priorities, the Social Democratic government appointed its own Directors-General: Ann-Marie Begler for the SIA (2015–2018) and Mikael Sjöberg for the PES (2014–2019). These changes not only provide a fertile ground to capture styles of normative governance but also to understand the reforms shaping sickness insurance and active labour market policies.

Stricter activation and return-to-work policies have been implemented in Swedish sickness insurance policies in recent decades by the Social Democratic-led and centre-right governments alike. Activation policies designed to reintegrate

people on long-term sick-leave into the labour market were already introduced in Sweden in the early 1990s (Seing, 2014). Policymakers have stressed that sickness insurance should function more as 'readjustment insurance' rather than income protection *per se* (e.g., Bengtsson & Jacobsson, 2018). Nevertheless, a significant enforcement of activation principles, and with great implication for casework in the SIA, was the introduction of the 'rehabilitation chain' by the centre-right government in 2008. The rehabilitation chain is a legislated working method that caseworkers must apply, consisting of a fixed schedule to assess individuals' ability to work and their right to sickness benefits. The rehabilitation chain aimed to standardize the sick-leave process and facilitate early return to work. From day 1 to day 14, employers are responsible for providing sick pay. After that (days 15–180), individuals' ability to work is assessed for any work task the current employer offers. After six months (days 181–365), the assessment is broadened to include the ability to work in the labour market at large. Caseworkers are to assess the client's work capacity in relation to 'normally occurring work in the entire labour market', which means that sickness benefits might end after six months if a person is considered able to work in another job or occupation (Seing, 2014).

A controversial element in this reform, with heated discussion in public debate and the media, was the introduction of a time limit for how long benefits may be granted, regardless of whether the person had recovered from illness or not (with exceptions granted only for persons whose work capacity was permanently reduced following chronic disease and other irreversible injuries). Initially, it was set to 365 days, and later, it was extended and qualified in various ways, depending on the severity and prognosis of the health condition. After this period, the sick-listed client was transferred to the PES, where a labour market introduction programme was offered. The programme lasted for a maximum of three months, after which the client could apply for sickness benefits if considered lacking sufficient work capacity. In cases where the SIA considered an individual to have work capacity while the PES did not, the client was referred to social services as a last resort. The agencies were heavily criticized by trade unions and in public debate for shuffling clients between them, with implications for the shifts in organizational governance.

The controversial end-point of the sickness insurance was abolished in 2016 by the government led by the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, but the overall activation orientation was maintained. In 2016, this government introduced a numerical target regarding the sickness absence rate in Sweden; it was stated that the SIA should work for 'the sickness benefit rate not exceeding 9.0 days per individual per year in 2020' as the national average (The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016). The sickness benefit rate refers to the number of days per person and year if all sick days (and rehabilitation days) are calculated for all insured persons. Furthermore, it was stated that the number of newly granted disability pension should not exceed 18,000 per year during the period 2016–2020 (ibid.). The SIA should contribute to a greater extent to reducing the Swedish sickness absence rate and making sick-leave periods shorter. Case processing would mainly focus on maintaining the health insurance control stations at days 90, 180, and 365 of the sick period (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2015a, 2015b).

However, the number of rejections of benefits after 180 days of sick-leave increased fivefold in 2015–2020, even though the Swedish Government withdrew the goal of 9.0 in 2018 and the law remained stable during this period (Altermark, 2020; Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). Therefore, in 2021 (after our study was completed), the government issued a new instruction to the SIA stating that the goal of reducing the sickness benefit rate should be reached by preventive measures, improved rehabilitation, and stakeholder co-ordination rather than by increasing the rejection rate (Swedish Government, 2021). Another change (in 2022) was that SIA caseworkers could not just refer to 'normally occurring work in the entire labour market' in their assessment of work capacity but had to state the occupation in which the sick-listed client would be able to work. However, during our study period, the numerical target of 9.0 and stricter assessment after day 180 – assessing work capacity against caseworkers' conceptions of 'normally occurring work in the entire labour market' – overshadowed everything else in the local offices. That said, our argument is that policy shifts by themselves are not sufficient to understand what happens in street-level bureaucracies and how caseworkers are impacted. We need to take into account how the policy context interplays with the governance, organizational, and occupational contexts.

Concerning active labour market policies, in recent decades, we have observed a decentralization trend as local authorities have become essential actors in delivering activation services (Johansson & Hornemann Møller, 2009). As a critique of state-governed active labour market policies, local municipalities developed local programmes that focused on groups without access to PES services or training programmes (Panican & Ulmestig, 2019). Similar decentralization trends can be observed in many European countries, resulting in enhanced cooperation between social services and labour market authorities (e.g., Larsen, 2013), as well as one-stop shop models (i.e., organizational integration between social insurance offices, labour market offices, and sometimes also social services) (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2014).

Moreover, Swedish active labour market policies have changed substantially due to their closer connection to integration policies. Previously, this was a task for the local municipalities. However, in 2010, the centre-right government decided to enforce the labour market component in integration policies (Andersson Joona, 2018), which implied changes not only in the competencies of those seeking support but also a more complex intervention portfolio on the part of caseworkers.

Like many other European countries (e.g., Denmark and the UK, see Larsen & Wright, 2014), Sweden has enacted a series of reform activities aimed at increasing the plurality of service providers, often by putting these out for tender and public procurement. This was promoted by centre-right governments (2006–2010, 2010–2014) seeking to reform the policy landscape (Lundin, 2011; see also SOU 2019:3). In 2007, the government required the PES to buy services from private providers concerning two activation programmes (focused primarily on young people and people with a marginal labour market position), which after some years was extended to most groups.

This marketization process started before our study and continued after the end of our fieldwork. In 2019, the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party signed an agreement with the Liberals and the Centre Party, which included a substantial reform of active labour market policies, among other elements. Item 18 of the agreement stated that the PES is 'to be fundamentally reformed' and that it continues to hold responsibility for labour market policy but would be focused on the control of jobseekers, private service providers, labour market policy assessment, digital infrastructure, statistics and analysis (Socialdemokraterna, 2019). This had a dramatic impact on the agency and its caseworkers as it transformed the agency from developing and implementing its own activation programmes to paying others to carry out the work (Nord & Bengtsson, 2022). PES caseworkers became controlling agents, controlling benefit eligibility and the validity of private service providers. Moreover, the agreement implied the closure of approximately 100 local offices. While the agency historically had offices in almost all 290 municipalities, it had fewer than 100 local offices after the January Agreement. The shut down of offices coincided with the digitalization of services and the relocation of caseworkers from the frontline to digital solutions (SOU 2018:47; PES, 2019c). This formed part of a general reorientation of Swedish public services, in which 'simple and unnecessary case management' taking place in local offices and/or 'customer services' should be eliminated on behalf of online tools and solutions (PES, 2019a: 11). However, at the time of our fieldwork, the closure of offices and the full implementation of digitalization had not yet taken place. Hence, our focus is on the forms of governing caseworkers before the January Agreement.

The public governance context

In Sweden, relations between governments and public agencies follow the principle of a high degree of legal autonomy from political steering. Public agencies have a high degree of autonomy in deciding how to implement government decisions, and politicians are expected not to interfere in the agency's operations (Ahlbäck Öberg & Wockelberg, 2020). However, politicians have a series of tools to enforce the implementation of political decisions, for example, instructions, appropriation letters (*regleringsbrev*), and other governance tools, such as dismissing a Director-General and recruiting a new one. Indeed, the relationship is more complex than legal regulations assume (e.g., Sundström, 2016), and informal dialogue between government ministries and top-level management of public agencies takes place frequently.

Public sector governance has been the object of extensive debate in Sweden, especially linked to the introduction of NPM models. In the Swedish context, management by objectives and results was introduced across the public sector as early as the 1990s, leading to the development of an 'audit culture' (e.g., Lindvert, 2006; Hollertz et al., 2018), with transparency requirements and performance measurement and follow-up. Lindgren (2006, 2014) captured this trend by speaking of an 'evaluation monster' in the Swedish public sector governance. NPM models fitted the formal divide between government and public agencies but stood in contrast to

the expectations of professionals and their notions of professionalism inside public agencies, as widely recognized by the media, policymakers, and scholars (e.g., Zaremba, 2013).

In the run-up to the 2014 election, the Social Democratic Party quite unexpectedly made the reform of public services and administration a core issue, capitalising on the public's discontent with public services. Together with the Green Party, the Social Democratic Party launched a campaign with the slogan 'Let the professionals be professional' (Fransson & Quist, 2018) to critique the dominance of NPM in Swedish public sector governance. Hence, the campaign was linked to the ongoing debate on the deprofessionalization of the public sector and the claim to rebuild trust in professionals (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016; Bringselius, 2020).

Hence, after years of extensive NPM governance, efforts were put into restoring public trust and legitimacy for public welfare governance as well as securing professional support within agencies. As the Social Democratic Party came into office in 2014, it continued the path to reform public governance and established a government delegation called 'trust-based governance'. Initially, this delegation focused on the municipal (and regional) welfare sector, that is, schools, health care, and elderly care, to restore trust in professionals and allow them more discretion. Later, the government added a directive to the delegation to propose ways to implement trust-based governance in state agencies, including the SIA and the PES. The reports from this commission (SOU 2018:47; SOU 2019:43; SOU 2020:40) indicated a changing governance context away from NPM governance, aiming to give more leeway to professionals to act according to their competence and expertise, and to reduce the time professionals spent on administrative tasks and thereby provide more time on 'core' work tasks.

However, this changing context did not mean a linear transition from NPM to post-NPM governance. For instance, the two state agencies travelled differently with regard to these broad changes from NPM to post-NPM models. Before our investigation started, the SIA had already been governed by a post-NPM logic for some years. In 2011, the centre-right government commissioned the SIA to increase citizens' trust in the social sickness insurance and the agency, against the background of loud criticism of the agency following in the wake of the reinforced return-to-work principles and a mistrust of the SIA among the general public. This led to extensive internal reforms to move away from the detailed steering of caseworkers. For instance, under the influence of a Lean approach, the SIA introduced teamwork (see Chapter 6), and caseworkers organized into self-managed teams with a joint mission and the responsibility to plan and manage their production (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015).

Whereas many agencies followed the SIA and turned away from NPM, the SIA itself quickly returned to stricter management by objectives and performance measurement. As described above, in response to the increasing cost of sickness insurance in 2016, the Social Democratic government instructed the SIA to work for reducing the Swedish sickness absence rate by making sick-leave periods fewer and shorter, introducing a numerical target for the sickness benefit rate, aiming at it not exceeding 9.0 days per individual and per year by 2020 (as national average).

A new Director-General, Ann-Marie Begler, made this target and performance measurement the key component of her organizational governance regime. Among other consequences, this one-sided performance focus led to an explicit down-prioritization of co-ordination of rehabilitation measures and support of individual clients that later provoked the government's anger. The Director-General had to leave office before her term was completed (in 2018). A temporary Director-General led the agency until a new Director-General was appointed in 2019. Subsequently, the organizational governance partly shifted again. However, in this book, we focus on the period of 2015–2018. Although it is not uncommon for governments to introduce numerical targets in policy guidance, to understand how the 9.0 target was interpreted and used in the governance of caseworkers, we need to analyse the interplay of the overall governance context and especially that of the organizational governance within the agency.

The PES followed a different governance trajectory during our period of study, turning from an NPM-inspired governance model to a post-NPM style of governance. The centre-right government (in office 2006–2014) had enacted a series of NPM-related reforms that significantly reshaped the PES. The agency's central position in a Social Democratic welfare state and its close connections to the Social Democratic Party made it a reform target for the centre-right government. Soon after entering power in 2006, the government centralized the agency. Justified by motives of procedural justice and administrative unity, a one-agency reform amalgamated previous self-governing regional labour market boards (Lundin & Thelander, 2012). The reform aimed to make the PES more governable because the government experienced that the agency obstructed its decisions. One interviewee, previously at the Ministry of Employment, commented that the PES was difficult to govern as it was uncertain 'if the political signals at all had an effect in the capillaries [of the organization]' (interview, senior manager, Ministry of Employment).

The centre-right government's ambition to make PES more governable is also evidenced in how it wrote its ordinance letters, the most crucial tool of PES regulation. Between 2010 and 2014, these turned into detailed instructions on what PES should accomplish *and* how to do it. Some letters even included regulations on how often caseworkers should meet with unemployed clients, as 'frequent meetings constitute an important system of support for the individual client' (Ministry of Employment, 2011: 3). These ordinance letters functioned as 'to-do lists' and entailed regulations on maximum and minimum amounts for every type of activation programme. This marked a clear divergence from the principle of agency autonomy. As noted, the centre-right government appointed a Director-General to implement these policies, and unlike all previous Directors-General, she was recruited from the private sector. This was intended to lead to a more compliant agency, or as expressed by Paulsen (2015) in his PES study, an obeying agency and obedient caseworkers.

However, extensive criticism from the media, academics, and unions inspired changes in governance. When the Social Democratic Party entered office in 2014, it followed the line of allowing professionals to be professionals and changed

PES regulations. Instead of detailed regulations, the government ordinance letters now stipulated a set of broad output objectives, such as 'improve matching in the labour market', 'reduce levels of youth unemployment', 'reduce levels of long-term unemployment', and 'adjust transmittance of available jobs linked to both employers and the unemployed needs' (Ministry of Employment, 2014). This allowed the agency to plan its work more independently. Nevertheless, the government continued to evaluate its activities, as a senior official at the ministry noted:

> We want to allow more freedom, but one [the PES] should deliver. One should have greater freedom to choose the method by oneself, but that the goal is clearly stated.
>
> (interview, senior official, Ministry of Employment)

Part of the governance context also concerns how agencies relate to each other in their search for public support, which is crucial for public agencies and their leadership. Public support is a central mechanism in public governance, primarily due to its link to political decision-making. Theories of policy responsiveness assume that citizens respond to policies and that politicians act upon such policy feedback (e.g., Soss & Schram, 2007; Kumlin & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014). Hence, trust emerges as a currency of crucial relevance for both public agencies and political decision-makers. With trust, agencies can gain autonomy and less political control. Lacking trust puts them and their leadership in the hotspot because poor public support turns into a review of how well the government is doing concerning a policy issue such as unemployment or social security.

Some public agencies have high public support. In contrast, the SIA and the PES have lacked extensive public support and compared with other major agencies experienced low support among large parts of the population (Oskarsson & Bendtz, 2021). The lack of public trust in the PES has even been very low, putting pressure on management and caseworkers. Trust in the SIA has been somewhat higher, although before 2012, it experienced a significant downturn, having low trust numbers similar to the PES (SIA, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g). SIA's somewhat higher public trust might be due to the fact that it administers other social insurances alongside sickness insurance, such as parental insurance, which the public experiences positively. Agencies such as the Police and the Tax Agency have extensive public support, whereas the PES and the Migration Agency have much lower. In Table 3.1, we illustrate support for various public agencies in the period 2013–2022, highlighting differences in support over time.

The value of public support can be illustrated by the actions that agencies and their leadership take to gain it. Erlandsson (2014) noted a significant change in how public agencies communicated about themselves publicly and, hence, whom they sought to impress. He found that Swedish public agencies used their annual reports to deliver their views, sometimes in an effort to counterbalance criticisms from the government. Instead of reporting simply what had been achieved in the last year, reports came to look like those from private companies with glossy images. Annual reports often started with a foreword from the Director-General, who, like the CEO

Table 3.1 Support in public agencies, 2013–2022

	2013	*2014*	*2015*	*2016*	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*	*2022*
The Migration Agency	-29	…	-24	-35	-34	-34	-35	-29	-37	-28
The Police	41	44	44	17	26	36	45	50	54	48
The Public Employment Service	-48	-37	-33	-31	-41	-32	-34	-33	-33	-25
The Social Insurance Agency	-5	-2	7	1	-14	-15	-18	-11	-17	-5
The Tax Agency	54	…	57	52	52	44	54	54	55	54

Note: Own calculations based on Statskontoret, 2024. The table reports numbers on how well the public considers the agency has done its work as a balanced means for those expressing support minus those lacking support. Hence, for agencies with a positive number, a majority of the public expresses support for their work; for those with a negative number, most people consider they do not do a good job.

of a major company, provided a personal reflection and message on the agency's achievements. These annual reports became communication tools to shape public opinion and frame what the agency considered it was doing well, which may not necessarily have reflected the government's view.

We also found that Directors-General often wrote media opinion pieces when appointed or if they came in for severe criticism (political, media, or public). When Mikael Sjöberg started as the Director-General of PES in 2014, he wrote an opinion piece in Sweden's largest daily newspaper. Reflecting the low public support in the agency, he announced that his crucial mission was to gain public trust (Sjöberg, 2014). Agencies also engaged in public campaigns, informing the public not only about what they do and their services but also seeking to influence public opinion. Finally, we found that agencies also looked at what other agencies were doing, especially the Tax Agency (Stridh & Wittberg, 2015). For instance, the SIA commissioned several analyses comparing its (low) levels of public support with that of the Tax Agency (SIA, 2015e, 2015f), including an investigation of whether the media reported negatively or positively about the SIA (SIA, 2015g, see also SIA, 2024). Statskontoret, the Swedish Agency for Public Management, even issued a report on the matter, stating that SIA's search for public support should not inflict on the other tasks the agency was responsible for. Customer satisfaction could not be of equal significance to delivering on the goals that the government had outlined in its ordinance letters for the SIA (Statskontoret, 2016). Thus, we conclude that agencies are not simply implementers of policy but also, in some respects, policy shapers, which necessitates a closer look at the organizational governance processes that take place within the agencies, which is the main focus of this book.

Organizational governance

A third contextual dimension of critical relevance concerns the organizations, their internal governance, and how they are structured and structure casework. Aside from political governance, both agencies are governed by a board that includes representatives from the public and private sectors with expertise and experience relevant to the SIA and the PES. The government, however, appoints board members, illustrating the various ways that political decision-makers can influence public agencies indirectly. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that each agency is a large organization and employer, with approximately 13,000–14,000 employees during our study period. The SIA continues to employ the same number of staff, whereas the PES has decreased staff size substantially due to the January Agreement in 2019. As of 2024, the PES has approximately 10,000 employees and continues to be one of Sweden's largest public agencies.

The SIA is responsible for administering the public social insurance system, which includes sickness insurance for the Swedish population, insurance and benefits for families with children, and insurance and benefits for people with disabilities and illnesses. In this study, we focus only on the part of the SIA involved in administering sickness insurance.

The SIA underwent organizational reforms and internal governance shifts during our study period. Under the leadership of Dan Eliasson (Director-General, 2011–2014), the SIA initiated a reform process called 'Our Common Journey', which aimed to move to 'value-based governance' and develop a joint organizational culture and vision. The focus was on increased service orientation and customer satisfaction, teamwork, coaching leadership, and greater autonomy for caseworkers (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). This reform 'journey' aimed to implement more customer orientation in the casework, although this proved difficult in the hierarchical and production-oriented organizational culture that prevailed (Ståhl & Andersson, 2018), especially in the local offices and among middle- and lower-level managers. However, the agency's mandate quickly changed when the government led by the Social Democratic Party government introduced numerical targets for sickness absence and appointed a new Director-General (Ann-Marie Begler, entering office in 2015). The focus turned to administering the insurance, with increased quality in case management, correct legal enforcement, and increased legal certainty and predictability. The new Director-General emphasized creating increased 'quality' in handling sick-leave cases by the 'correct' and uniform application of the law. Caseworkers were prompted to 'make things right from the start' in case management and 'increase the quality of the investigations' to ensure that 'the right person receives the right compensation' (SIA, 2016: 2) and at the right time according to the 'rehabilitation chain'. The customer-oriented management period was considered to have resulted in a 'too generous' application of the insurance, as evidenced in many of our interviews and as developed in later chapters.

Consequently, the new Director-General abandoned the customer concept and reconceptualized the benefit claimant as 'the insured person'. The bureaucratic ethos among SIA staff was reinforced, whose most important role was conceived of

as gatekeeper to, and guardian of, the insurance (as further developed in Chapters 4–7). This focus on eligibility control and correct admission to the insurance resulted in, among other consequences, less focus on the priority of collaboration with other parties involved in rehabilitation (Fransson & Quist, 2018; ISF, 2018). In contrast to the previous management period, the number of stakeholder meetings conducted was no longer measured, and performance measurement focused on case assessments under the schedule set in the rehabilitation chain and on the number of benefit declines and withdrawals.

Such down-prioritization of stakeholder co-ordination is notable, as the legally stipulated role of SIA caseworkers is twofold: (1) to make assessments and decisions regarding individuals' sickness benefit eligibility and (2) if needed, to cooperate with stakeholders, such as healthcare professionals, employers, and PES officials, in co-ordinating the rehabilitation process (Social Insurance Code, 2010: 10). Although SIA caseworkers' assessments of entitlement to sickness benefits are based on sickness certificates issued by physicians, they make the final decision. For assistance in evaluating benefit eligibility, SIA caseworkers have 'insurance medical advisors' (medical doctors) available in the agency, as well as 'insurance specialists' (legal advisors).

To be eligible for sickness benefits, there must be a medical diagnosis, which implies a reduction in the individual's functional capacity. In assessing work ability, social or financial circumstances must not be considered (Seing, 2014). During our study period, the SIA caseworkers used a specific assessment tool in their scrutiny of the medical certificates, named the DFA chain (diagnosis, functional impairment, and activity limitation), requiring documentation of all three aspects and stressing that there should be a logical connection between them. The DFA chain was a tool invented by the SIA headquarters (the legal division) and was later criticized for introducing an eligibility criterion without support in law, and the Court of Appeals dismissed the lack of a DFA chain as, in itself, a basis for rejections (e.g., Altermark, 2020). During some periods, SIA caseworkers have had rather detailed process guides for their case management aimed at achieving standardized ways of acting when processing a case. As a legacy of the short post-NPM governance period (2011–2014), organizational governance during our study was targeted at training caseworkers in similar ways of *thinking* in case assessment rather than standardized ways of acting. This is in line with normative governance and was presented in terms of 'coaching leadership', for instance, how to think in interpreting a medical certificate to achieve not only uniformity of assessment but also goal fulfilment (i.e., 9.0).

Like the SIA, the PES embarked on a journey of organizational reform, intended to move away from NPM governance and reinstall more trust in caseworkers, enhancing their autonomy, and offering them space for discretion. The reform process started in 2014 and was called the Renewal Journey. It aimed to introduce clear organizational visions and more trust-based activities, combined with self-leadership models and constant improvements according to Lean management principles. It should be noted that both the SIA and the PES used the same management consultancy company for their reform journeys, which explains the

similarities in the terminology used and some core ideas. Although the reform process was expected to be fully implemented in 2021, it was stopped due to the 2019 January Agreement, which implied the closure of local offices, privatization of employment services, increased digitalization, and increased specialization of PES frontline staff.

PES's core responsibility lies in contributing to a well-functioning labour market, including training unemployed individuals and performing benefit eligibility tests. Its long-term objectives are to 'improve the functioning of the labour market by effectively bringing together jobseekers and employers searching for workers; prioritising those jobseekers who are far from the labour market and contributing to a stable long-term increase of employment' (Ordinance, 2007: 1030, see also PES, 2019b). Casework in the PES is organized based on different labour market measures and client needs, for example, job seekers with disabilities, long-term unemployed, new arrivals and immigrants, and supported employment. PES staff may also be responsible for contacting employers or acting as 'specialists' working with job seekers with disabilities. PES casework, however, relies on a set of paradoxes and substantially differs from casework at the SIA. First and foremost, casework at the PES is based on the premise of providing jobs; however, the agency can – in principle – only match job seekers with vacancies and try to equip them to find a job through various tools. Since many labour market measures are available, caseworker flexibility is required in devising individually tailored interventions and job matching. This assumes that PES caseworkers have more discretion in deciding what interventions to use (Schütze & Johansson, 2020).

PES caseworkers, moreover, have a dual role in supporting and controlling job seekers. Aside from providing advice and support, caseworkers are responsible for deciding on entitlement to unemployment benefits. To be eligible, all job seekers must register with the PES. They must also comply with requirements to be considered actively looking for a job, such as participating in coaching activities, attending meetings with caseworkers, and reporting on how many jobs one has applied for in previous weeks. In 2012, PES introduced a digital assessment tool (a web-based questionnaire) for caseworkers to use when meeting new clients. The questions included the collection of personal information (e.g., job history, competencies) and information on local conditions (e.g., unemployment level in the municipality). Based thereupon, the system generated a recommendation on suitable activation measures (Assadi & Lundin, 2018), which challenged caseworkers' discretion. In 2013, new rules were implemented requiring the unemployed person to show that they were an active jobseeker by submitting monthly reports to the employment office on job seeking activities and introducing sanctions for 'misbehaviour' (e.g., Bengtsson & Jacobsson, 2018).

Such stricter activation pressures have been reflected in stricter qualification criteria for unemployment insurance and enhanced demands for occupational and geographical mobility to obtain a job. Nord and Bengtsson (2022) stress that the controlling function of PES casework has increased. However, unlike SIA caseworkers, they do not decide whether a person should receive unemployment benefits because that is a decision taken by the unemployment insurance

organizations. The role of post-NPM principles in the internal governance of the PES and how this 'landed' among caseworkers in the local offices will be explored extensively in the empirical chapters.

The occupational context

The fourth context of relevance – the occupational context – refers to the occupational role of the caseworkers, their educational background, and also their working conditions. Our survey provides fertile ground for portraying similarities as well as differences between caseworkers at each agency. The survey (fielded in 2016) included questions linked to the workplace, the work environment, and client relations. We cooperated with the largest union (ST, the union for civil servants in state-run agencies), whose members made up approximately 50% of all PES and SIA employees. Our survey only targeted those engaged in client/customer-related work at each agency.

We found that caseworkers had worked for a considerable period at each agency, on average 13 years at the PES and 15 years at the SIA. Most caseworkers had a university degree, especially at the PES, where 64% had completed higher education, with 49% at the SIA. SIA caseworkers had primarily studied economics or political science, whereas PES caseworkers essentially had a pedagogy, social work, or sociology background. This underscores differences in caseworker training on client-relational work, as social workers and psychologists are trained to work with individuals. Moreover, the lack of a dominant educational (or professional) background is crucial because it can make it easier for management to shape and socialize the staff. Interviews with managers and the human resources (HR) departments found that both agencies prioritized recruiting employees with a general social science background over social work. This was because those with social work training were considered too inclined to make alliances with the clients; in Maynard-Moody and Musheno's terms (2000), they viewed themselves as citizen agents rather than state agents.

One of our informants reflected on the differences between the agencies, and considered that PES workers had an occupational identity despite lacking a joint professional education, which was a view supported in our research (Jacobsson et al., 2020; Chapter 8). In contrast, caseworkers at SIA were 'social insurance ladies […] who have short education, and, like this, you have binders' (interview senior officer, Ministry of Employment). The term 'binder' may seem crude, yet it suggests that SIA caseworkers simply follow the manual instructions (i.e., contained in binders) on how to apply the different parts of social insurance. In contrast, PES caseworkers were seen as quasi-professionals with professional discretion and an extensive portfolio of programmes they could use. This view is also supported by our ethnographic research.

To some extent, differences between the agencies are reflected in how casework is conducted. In principle, SIA caseworkers assess whether a person qualifies for sickness benefits – a 'yes or no' decision – even if the job entails coordinating rehabilitation support when needed. Caseworkers at the PES have comparatively

more complex tasks to carry out. First, they have two types of clients to satisfy: both job seekers and employers looking for staff to hire. Their work is organized based on different labour market measures and client needs, for example, job seekers with disabilities, long-term unemployed, newly arrived immigrants, and supported employment, which requires the needs of the individual clients to be identified and thus profiled. Staff at the PES may also be responsible for contacting employers or acting as 'specialists' working with job seekers with disabilities. The complexity of their work task requires discretion, which is supported by managers as well as caseworkers.

Consequently, we find differences in how client encounters are structured inside the agencies. The SIA has developed more digital tools, and caseworkers often do not meet with clients in person, but contacts are run over the phone. Personal contacts are even viewed as possibly jeopardising objective case assessment (Fransson & Qvist, 2018; Jacobsson et al., 2020). During our study period, PES caseworkers encountered their clients in physical customer centres, during workplace visits, or by phone and used digital solutions to a lesser extent. However, since we conducted our fieldwork, these differences have decreased as the PES digitalized its services and ways of interacting with job seekers, including digital self-services for benefit claimants (Wallinder & Seing, 2022; Bengtsson et al., 2024).

To conclude, the street-level bureaucrats at the SIA are more strictly rule-bound and have a narrower field of specialization, a greater number of cases, and more substantial pressure on quick decision-making than the PES (see also Johansson, 1992). Their main task is to decide on benefit eligibility, that is, whether a person (applying for sickness insurance, parental leave, or another form of social security-based benefit) has the right to receive state support. Whereas the SIA follows a formalistic work culture, the PES is more pragmatic and driven by finding solutions to the problems experienced by clients (or employers) (Jacobsson et al., 2020; see also Ståhl & Andersson, 2018 and Schütze, 2022). In other words, SIA caseworkers seek to do things 'in the right way' according to formal rationality and accountability. In contrast, PES caseworkers seek to do 'the right thing', with a problem-solving approach to their work in which mastering complexity is a strong occupational ideal. Thus, the two agencies display a striking difference between formal and substantive rationality in case management (Jacobsson et al., 2020), an issue that will be explored in later chapters.

Conclusion

This chapter provides the context for our investigation into the normative governance of caseworkers in the SIA and the PES. While the presentation is primarily descriptive, it emphasizes the importance of different contextual types in analysing the normative governance of caseworkers in public agencies. Although we can theoretically justify the distinction between these types, we assume they are entangled and interconnected. Policy and public governance reforms are closely related, as are organizational and occupational contexts. While these elements may appear to be layers of governance with diminishing relevance in the daily operations of

caseworkers, we believe their significance is much more complex. Certain contextual elements may hold greater importance during specific periods.

The variation between agencies allows us to examine further how different contextual elements influence caseworker governance. Both agencies face similar changes within the broader welfare policy framework, including stricter benefit eligibility criteria and a shift towards a work-first approach that emphasizes individual responsibilities during periods of sickness or unemployment, rather than public responsibilities. The chapter highlights the key differences in the main tasks and functions of each agency, as well as the responsibilities of caseworkers. Policy reforms targeting the PES have mainly emphasized marketization and the involvement of multiple service providers. In contrast, reforms in the SIA have focused on the proper administration of sickness insurance. These differing reform trends reflect the distinct roles and responsibilities of caseworkers in each agency. SIA caseworkers are primarily responsible for accurately assessing insurance eligibility, whereas PES caseworkers are expected to help job seekers enhance their employability and support employers in finding candidates with the necessary skills. Although both agencies can be seen as large public welfare organizations, these differences are crucial for our empirical investigations into how the roles of caseworkers are shaped and how their perspectives are formed.

Moreover, we observe differences in their public governance contexts. The SIA transitioned from a governance model inspired by post-NPM ideals to a stricter governance framework focused on objectives and performance. In contrast, the PES evolved from an NPM-inspired governance model based on objectives and performance to post-NPM governance forms. Both agencies are hence cases of transition and transformation, from one style into another, which enable us to better understand shifts in governance and whether specific governance types remain ingrained in organizational cultures and practices.

4 Governance by discourse

Introduction

Discursive governance is a central aspect of normative governance. Discourses, expressed in organizational visions, vocabularies, and narratives, are essential in regulating caseworkers' identities and subjectivities, mobilizing commitment and support, while designing the appropriate set of subjectivities. A particularly prominent form of discursive governance in organizational life is organizational narratives, which we understand as follows:

> A distinctive form of discourse that shapes meaning through the concerted ordering of story material. Speakers provide particular understandings of personal action and experience by organizing events and objects into meaningful constellations, connecting subjects, actions, events, and their consequences over time.
>
> (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012: 6)

Organizational narratives provide interpretative guides to make sense of events, suggest connections between them, call for action, and build identities. They provide logic and rationality to action, conveying a moral message and giving direction for being an 'appropriate caseworker'. Central to organizational narratives is the concept of emplotment as a discursive presentation that brings together heterogeneous factors into a meaningful whole (Ricoeur, 1984; Czarniawska, 1997). Ricoeur argues that 'events follow the fate of the plot' (1984: 208), and Czarniawska similarly stresses that a narrative 'consists of a plot, comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem' (1997: 78).

Narratives and storytelling thus become central managerial 'tools for change', either to make employees adaptable to workplace cultures and changes or to deal with change resistance (e.g., Brown et al., 2005). Mobilizing narratives (Boje, 2008; Czarniawska, 1997; Brown, 2006) create expectations on employees to identify themselves with the organization and think of themselves as organizational subjects. In this way, narratives and storytelling practices are instrumental in achieving and legitimizing an organizational culture and an appropriate caseworker, especially in times of organizational change. Critical management studies

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have shown that changes in management styles and organizational priorities tend to be accompanied by changes in the legitimizing organizational narratives, typically entailing a distancing from a 'bad' past and the envisioning of a different – better – future (e.g., Czarniawska, 1997; Fineman, 2010; Jacobsson, 2023).

This chapter explores governance by discourse in street-level bureaucracies. It focuses on how organizational discourse is used as a management tool to mobilize commitment, guide organizational efforts, and, by extension, 'achieve' staff who fit the organizational ideals in the two welfare state agencies studied, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Public Employment Service (PES). The chapter, moreover, investigates management-produced 'narratives of change' and 'changing narratives', what they aim to achieve, and how they are received in the two cases studied. We reconstruct the narratives circulating in the two agencies, including the plots, the characters, the ways of reasoning and ascribing causality and order to events concerning casework, and the templates based on them. Although narratives operate through mobilizing the employee (Kunda, 2006), individuals are not passive receivers of managerial reforms but active participants engaged in the transmittance of central narratives into local workplaces or as observers or antagonists distancing themselves (and their work) from what is seen as managerial jargon.

Governance by discourse in the SIA

The SIA is an agency characterized by constant change, as evidenced by our staff interviews and secondary studies (Andersson et al., 2012; ISF, 2016, 2018). Directors-General come and go, and changes in government have implied rapidly changing political priorities and organizational directives. Shifts in organizational management have been accompanied by marked shifts in organizational discourse, including the prescribed vocabularies and legitimizing narratives. As is often the case in the Swedish public sector, each Director-General wants to set the agenda by formulating a new leadership vision entailing new rhetoric and a distancing from the 'bad past'. Changing discourses also reflect the Swedish government's shifting political priorities, as communicated in annual letters of regulation to the agency.

In 2015, SIA top management described in a PowerPoint presentation 'Our Journey over Time' in the following condensed way: the period 2005–2008 was characterized as '*one* Social Insurance Agency' with 'the driving force: security of law' and 'the focus: organization' (SIA, 2015c). The background was that in 2005, 21 formerly independent county insurance offices and the Swedish National Insurance Board (formerly a supervisory agency) merged and became a central state agency, the SIA. In this period, achieving uniformity in the application of rules across all agencies and regions was a top priority. The following period, 2008–2012, was characterized as '*one* Social Insurance Agency' with 'the driving force: efficiency and production' (ibid.). This was when the centre-right government (2006–2010) introduced the 'rehabilitation chain' (in 2008), the legislated working method that caseworkers were required to apply, consisting of a fixed time schedule for assessments of individuals' ability to work and their right to sickness

benefits. The focus was on cost reduction by strictly applying the rehabilitation chain. A time limit for how long benefits may be granted was introduced (regardless of whether the person had recovered from illness), initially set to 365 days (see Chapter 3). During this period, thousands of people lost their sickness benefits, evoking heated media and political debate.

When the Social Democratic government entered office in 2014, the agency was instructed to enhance the public's confidence in SIA and sickness insurance after years of media turbulence. In the PowerPoint presentation noted above, this period was characterized as '*one* Social Insurance Agency, efficient for the customer' [sic] with 'the driving force: confidence' and 'the focus: the customer'. To enforce policy change, the government appointed a new Director-General (Dan Eliasson, 2011–2014). These changes led to the introduction of customer-related speak in the SIA, which was described by the new Director-General as a 'paradigmatic shift' in the agency:

> After years of re-organization and a society with less and less confidence in us we decided to make a clear paradigmatic shift in our operation, where the experience of the customer will be the measure of success. We started a joint journey to form our joint future.
>
> (Eliasson & Brattlund, 2013)

Consequently, the guiding organizational narrative had to change:

> From 2008 to 2012, the focus was on productivity. What happened on that journey was that we lost the customer; we lost those for whom we are there. Thus, public confidence in the SIA nosedived.
>
> (interview, senior manager, SIA headquarters)

The management reform entailed a step away from what was described internally as a hierarchical 'control and management structure' towards giving more autonomy and discretion to caseworkers. Interviewees described management by objectives and results as promoting 'statistical behaviour' (efforts to improve statistics) and 'point-hunting' (*pinnjakt*). The previous focus on internal production goals and productivity was downplayed and complemented by a broader range of performance indicators, including customer satisfaction (see also Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). The shift towards customer orientation moreover entailed a change from what in management prose was framed as 'an "inside-out" to an "outside-in" perspective: instead of asking "what are we there for?" and delivering that, it is now seen "from the outside: what do they [the customers] need"' (interview, senior manager, headquarters). Another senior manager said: 'We should depart from the customer's needs, not our own. It should be the customer's process'. The SIA motivated the use of the customer concept as a reminder of the service orientation that should penetrate all contacts with the agency (SIA, 2014). The agency's customer orientation was summarized in its 'customer promises', developed to guide client encounters, summarized in the keywords 'more human', 'safer', and

'simpler' insurance (as further developed in Chapter 5). Customer orientation, however, required a cultural shift in the agency, and the 'management by values' aimed to both govern and develop SIA's work and the employees based on creating 'a common culture and common values among the employees' (SIA, 2015a).

SIA's management philosophy was explicitly based on Lean production principles to enhance the 'flow efficiency', 'minimizing waste' in the work processes, and working with 'continuous improvement' while consistently placing 'respect for the human being' at the centre (SIA, 2015c). As part of this, teamwork was introduced as a working method for managers and caseworkers (see Chapter 6), and 'coaching leadership' was implemented. As evidenced in interview material and organizational documents, SIA top management wanted to present the agency as a modern and anti-bureaucratic organization, placing customer needs first. This entailed changing the language and replacing words evoking associations with hierarchy and bureaucracy with more personal and positive ways of expressing governing activities. For instance, words like 'control' and 'decide' were replaced by 'coach', 'guide', or 'propose' (see also Tamm Hallström & Thedvall, 2015). Another way of conveying the image of a less hierarchical organization was that management no longer preferred to speak of 'headquarters'. Concerning clients, caseworkers tried to make the language in client letters easier to understand, conveying a less bureaucratic and more personal impression:

> For customers to experience contact with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency as easy, we must also use simple and understandable language [...] An easy way to make written communication more similar to oral communication is to begin letters with 'Hello' and end them with 'Sincerely'.
>
> (SIA, 2014: 14, 15)

During this management period, one ambition was to reassert caseworkers' discretion and release co-workers' potential. Keywords in the management discourse were concerned with 'to want to, to be able to, and to be allowed to' and referred to three critical factors: motivation, mandate, and conditions to perform one's work (interview, senior manager, headquarters). Along with the coaching form of leadership, 'self-leadership' by managers as well as staff was also promoted:

> Leadership is not the preserve of managers. As for leadership, we all need it to varying degrees. And that's where it all started for everyone, with self-leadership, regardless of whether you're a manager or an employee.
>
> (interview, senior manager, SIA headquarters)

Even so, some interviewees felt that the organizational reform had been implemented in a top-down manner despite all the talk of co-worker-driven change:

> This change has still been top-down. Since we have implemented Lean, it has become more co-worker driven, but still the change came from the top. Now we're going to implement a new way of looking at leadership and a system-based

> view, and we're going to work with customer flows. That's nothing coming from the co-workers, so that's why I think there is a gap here.
>
> (interview, senior manager, SIA headquarters)

Others felt much had changed compared with before. A senior manager at the SIA headquarters described in an interview the change in focus during the customer-oriented management period:

> Our governance is shaped to a great extent by politics and what the ministry perceives. […] Dan Eliasson came and worked a lot with the trust. He came in and said: 'If it is the case that you stand and weigh in an assessment, you should rather acquit than convict'. And that was a completely different message than what we have had before. Like when I worked in insurance [...] then it was almost a condition of the job [in Swedish, *beting]* to withdraw sickness benefits.
>
> (interview, senior manager, SIA headquarters)

However, this 'rather acquit than convict' orientation changed drastically when a new Director-General (Ann-Marie Begler) entered office in 2015 (after a short period with a deputy Director-General when Dan Eliasson left his position in 2014 to become Director-General at the police authority). A radical shift in management ideology occurred, emphasizing regulation, quality, and uniformity of case assessment, that is, a return to stricter management by objectives and results and – once again – a 'production' orientation. The new management stressed caseworkers as state civil servants and procedural correctness, and that they should 'make things right from the start', 'increase the quality of the investigations', and ensure that 'the right person receives the right compensation' (SIA, 2016: 2). The new management sought to distance itself from the previous one, arguing that customer orientation had resulted in lax admission control and a 'too generous' application of insurance.

The new Director-General (Ann-Marie Begler) strongly resented the customer concept. The agency consequently stopped using the term 'customers' and adopted 'the insured person' instead. This reflected the formation of its organizational identity as the state's insurance company. As a local manager interviewed by the Social Insurance Inspectorate bluntly put it: 'We are actually the insurance company for Sweden, that is, the insurance company for the state' (ISF, 2018: 16: 88). The new Director-General stressed that the primary task of SIA caseworkers was to administer health insurance correctly, and the second task prescribed by law – co-ordination of rehabilitation needs with other stakeholders – was explicitly down-prioritized, even though the law remained unchanged during her management.

The reorientation towards a new organizational narrative gathered further speed as the centre-left government in 2016 introduced a numerical target for the sickness absence rate. The ministry in charge stressed that the SIA should 'work for the sickness benefit rate not exceeding 9.0 days per individual per year in 2020' as the national average (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016). During our ethnographic research, 9.0 was the guiding goal for all local casework, and we found co-ordination less prioritized. For instance, a co-ordination officer reformulated the

co-ordination task by stating in a staff meeting that 'the most important collaboration takes place in your case-assessment work […] The big thing for the government is that we drive home the target. *Everything we do must affect the target 9.0*' (observation, staff meeting, 2016). In an interview, a local support person told us:

> As soon as we start working on something, she [the unit manager] says that 'we should always ask ourselves the question: how does this help to reach our sickness benefit target of 9.0?' […] It should give the result that we strive for.
>
> (interview, SIA local support function)

This rather drastic change in focus was legitimized by the narrative that the customer orientation of the previous period had led to a mentality that increased the number of days on sick benefits in the country. A senior manager at the headquarters stated in an interview that he welcomed the shift:

> If I'm honest, there were probably quite a few of us who thought it was quite nice. Customer focus is really important but I think we put too much focus on it for a number of years, and it also actually affected our handling and our rule application. I think so.
>
> (interview, senior manager, SIA headquarters)

We found the narrative of 'having been too generous before' spread at all levels in the agency and was reflected in caseworker accounts, as evidenced in our interviews and other studies. Fransson and Qvist reported that caseworkers claimed they had been acting wrongly: 'Before we let them through based on inadequate documents' (Fransson & Qvist, 2018: 163, 199, 174). Our current data do not allow us to comment on whether caseworkers had made sloppy case assessments earlier. However, it was very clear that there was solid normative pressure to conform to the new narrative. By recounting their own experience in terms of the organizationally sanctioned narratives, caseworkers made themselves co-enforcers of the new normative regime.

Storytelling in the SIA

The organizational identity as 'the insurance company of the state' and the Swedish neologism *försäkringsmässighet* (approximately translated as 'insurance-likeness') permeated agency discourse at all levels. Caseworkers had to be 'insurance-like' in their assessments, which meant being meticulous in their eligibility assessment when clients were to be 'admitted to the insurance', as the saying went. Admission to the insurance had to be strictly controlled, which contrasted with past practices described in terms of 'letting people pass'. As explicitly stated in caseworker training and staff meetings, admission control was expected to result in a less generous application of the insurance. As a divisional manager said in an interview: 'insurance-likeness indirectly means rejections and withdrawals'. The new emplotment considered 'over-generosity' to be the main problem, which could be

solved through enhanced 'insurance-likeness', more declines, and withdrawals of benefits.

Aside from establishing causality between organizational events, storytelling is instrumental in communicating – and achieving – the required caseworker ethos and pathos. Following the new emplotment, a caseworker ought to be courageous, having the courage to decline and/or withdraw benefits. Illustrative is one story that circulated in the organization. It concerned 'the caseworker who has never rejected claims' and hence functioned as a counter-story to boost the narrative of 'the insurance-like' caseworker morally. The story circulated at all levels in the agency and could pop up in various settings and situations. A caseworker could say to us in an interview: 'I have colleagues who have never rejected claims'. A local office manager could tell the other managers at a meeting: 'We have co-workers who have never withdrawn benefits or rejected claims'. The ability to reject claims is thus seen as the morally right thing to do, and by retelling this story, caseworkers displayed themselves as having the required guts to act 'insurance-like'.

Caseworkers started to adapt to the organizational script, and we found a strong desire to rethink one's work and role in line with the new management discourse and ideals, even though the legal stipulations of the work tasks remained the same. Some caseworkers looked for expertise and advice to adapt better; others considered it an awakening, morally distancing themselves from previous practices:

> We have tried to involve the specialist working for the whole office and asked him to 'please tell us if we make assessments differently from those downstairs, and if we are not insurance-like enough in our assessments'.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

In the same office, another caseworker commented:

> There has been a rather sharp turn after we started talking about us having to shape up regarding the application of the insurance. […] There is, like, an awakening for us here in the office, that 'now we have to shape up'. And then, one tries to go all in and really structure all cases and look at them with fresh eyes.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

We find other stories similarly functioning as counter-stories to the narrative of 'the overly kind caseworker'. Insurance-likeness required a particular type of caseworker subjectivity, that is, not to be too 'kind' [*snäll*]. 'We approve too many [benefit applications]; we are too kind. That's where the problem lies', a group of caseworkers asserted elsewhere (Altermark, 2020: 75). Caseworkers should not be too soft-hearted in the case assessment. In one local office we studied, caseworkers used the expression 'it is not "feel-sorry-for insurance"', dismissing soft-heartedness as an appropriate caseworker quality. When caseworkers in different offices express themselves in the same terms, this can be seen as the organization speaking through the individuals. The narrative even included a clear distinction

between two groups of caseworkers: old-timers and newcomers. The former, who had been with the agency for many years, were portrayed as too generous. By contrast, new recruits were seen as more compliant with SIA's new philosophy (as also evidenced by Altermark, 2020: 74).

With 'insurance-likeness' as the organizationally sanctioned normative ideal, client interaction became less relevant. Like a private insurance company, caseworkers did not need to meet their clients in person or even have direct contact over the phone but could make decisions based on submitted documents. As an organizational script, it was easier to follow the rules impartially if one avoided personal contact. It was also easier to make 'negative decisions' (SIA vocabulary for the decline or withdrawal of benefits). Personal relationships with clients could jeopardize the objectivity of assessments (see Fransson & Quist, 2018; Altermark, 2020). This starkly contrasted with the previous period, when all clients had a 'personal caseworker' and customer orientation was imperative.

These narratives gained extensive support from the 9.0 goal. An area manager stated at a staff meeting: 'Your task is to apply the insurance, of course – at the same time, you should know that 9.0 is a reasonable level when it comes to sickness benefits. Now we are at 10.5' (observation, staff meeting, 2016). Interestingly, the political target of 9.0 had been transformed into a natural level of sickness in Sweden and thereby naturalized in the internal SIA normative regime. The vision of '9.0' was accompanied by the narratives of 'the excessively high sickness rates in Sweden', 'the overly generous insurance', and 'the threat to legal certainty' in rule application.

Organizational narratives thus obtained the status of rarely challenged truths in the local offices. Another example concerns stories of 'sick-listing is not the best medicine', according to which 'the longer you are sick-listed, the more difficult it is to return'. Work was viewed as rehabilitative in itself. As an area manager said in an interview: 'Work is actually health-promoting. You can feel better by working'. The SIA supported this view by pointing to relevant studies: 'Research in recent years has increasingly found negative consequences from sick-listing as a method of treatment' (SIA, 2015d: 2). A related story told and retold was that medical doctors were much too inclined to sick-list people, even for minor problems, which, in light of the truth discourse about work as rehabilitative, was positioned as almost immoral: 'Many doctors ought to have a more health-oriented attitude. "Of course, you can work 25 percent per day. That's not much" ' (caseworker).

As we have seen, organizational discourse and narratives fundamentally shaped caseworkers' aspirations and efforts, including what they felt was satisfying and rewarding at work. Most caseworkers and local managers experienced and displayed satisfaction in aligning their performance with current targets ('9.0') and scripts (such as 'improved insurance-likeness'). The narratives provided vocabularies, scripts, and templates for being appropriate SIA caseworkers. Simultaneously, the stories conveyed a moral message and gave direction, providing rationales for thinking and acting. While most caseworkers fully embraced the dominant narrative, some felt more ambivalent about it: 'Now it is more just about administering the insurance, about what you are or aren't entitled to, and not

so much co-ordinating and helping people back to work' (interview, caseworker). However, such diverging voices were rare. Our research finds that in the SIA, organizational discourse and storytelling were deliberately used as a management tool. At the same time, the narratives diffused by managers were 'appropriated' by caseworkers to legitimize their new use of discretion, becoming co-enforcers of the normative regime.

Governance by discourse in the PES

Discourse and mobilizing narratives also serve as central management tools in the PES, especially to legitimize change. We entered the agency during a turbulent time. The PES had experienced a series of years with extensive organizational changes, including the amalgamation of regional labour market boards into a state agency, which raised questions about cultural differences between regions and local offices. Although this reform occurred before our studies, the agency experienced low public and political support and had been subjected to extensive political pressure from the centre-conservative government to implement decided reforms (2006–2010, 2010–2014) (see Chapter 3).

At the start of our investigations, the Social Democratic government had just appointed a new Director-General (Mikael Sjöberg, 2014–2019), and the organization was keen to make a new start and distance itself from the 'bad past'. Thus, the scene was set for profound change, and the incoming Director-General introduced a series of reforms under the Renewal Journey label to step away from previous governance models. Here, 'journey' served the purpose of a mobilizing narrative of change: 'turn the ship' and get employees 'on board' on a journey towards a better destination. Soon after his appointment, Sjöberg announced that the agency had to be 'thoroughly reformed' and had to 'turn into a modern agency' (Sjöberg, 2014). With reference to organizational reform as a journey, he stressed that 'it will take time'.

The narrative of the Renewal Journey emerged from a series of seminars with most central managers that took place in the spring of 2014 and led to the establishment of a new vision: 'We make Sweden richer by making people and businesses grow'. The vision was supported by three core values as the guiding principles for all employees. All PES staff should now be 'professional', 'inspiring', and 'trustworthy'. To reach that state, the journey required a strategic map, amply illustrated in how the journey would lead to the desired state of achieving its vision. The reform was envisaged to last seven years (2014–2021) and would require 'courage' and 'perseverance' (PES, 2016a).

Narratives – and the management promoting them – appear to gain power if they are distanced from a previous and different bad narrative. When we met Sjöberg for an informal talk, he stressed that his leadership style differed. He had visited local and regional offices to explain the agency's poor state as it was 'important to mark a distance' from previous management (conversation, Sjöberg). The idea of a journey should influence all levels of the agency and all types of employees, not only caseworkers:

> The big challenge in this Renewal Journey is to create a culture where micromanagement becomes superfluous and where everyone's skills, responsibility, and creativity are freed up to develop the business and bring more significant benefits to the labour market and citizens from a holistic perspective. This assignment is not only aimed at management but at all of us at the agency. So, welcome all managers and employees to a long-term, engaging, and enjoyable journey.
>
> (PES, 2015: 3)

Organizational culture was largely seen as malfunctioning and in need of revitalization. Throughout observations and interviews, managers and caseworkers alike expressed the urge to leave previous management behind:

> We want to go from a weak common culture with an 'us vs. them' feeling that often leads to scapegoat thinking – not my responsibility – to a culture where we see ourselves as a whole and ask ourselves how we can help others to succeed – our responsibility.
>
> (PES, 2016a)

Like the SIA, the PES developed new concepts to bolster change, framing caseworker subjectivity. Whereas they in the SIA focused more on what caseworkers should do, PES neologisms referred to organizational culture instead. Managers, in particular, brought forward the notion of otherism (in Swedish *annanism*) to illustrate a culture in which people sought to avoid individual responsibility and to mark their view on the agency's culture and previous leadership (interview, senior manager, headquarters). Caseworkers brought up stories about 'the click monster'. During the previous management, the agency had used a digital system to sign new clients. Based on individual qualifications, the system automatically proposed an intervention. However, caseworkers considered the proposals to be of poor quality and stopped using them. In response, management 'introduced measurement on clicks. Then you measure the mouse clicks, how much we tick boxes in the assessment support system' (interview, caseworker). Both managers and caseworkers storied the term 'point hunting' ('*pinnjakt*') as a common reference to a culture (and leadership) focused on detailed performance management. One central manager shared her thoughts about the governance model she wanted to leave behind:

> We have micromanaged and chased points to the extreme and had loads of controls. But it hasn't had any effect.
>
> (senior manager, PES headquarters)

To further legitimize the need for change, we find terms like 'gaps', 'abyss', and 'debt' used in strategic documents to define a bad past, and terms like 'transition', 'change', 'flows', 'lifts', and 'leaps' as illustrations of a bright(er) future (e.g., PES, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Strategic documents contained a series of discursive dichotomies like 'control/service', 'I have to/I want to', 'silo/holistic', and 'not

my responsibility/our responsibility' to assert that everyone had understood the gap one had to bridge to change organizational culture, also stressed in interviews by the Director-General (Nordebo, 2015). Although the newly appointed Director-General capitalized on the journey as his reform project, it had been used before by the interim Director-General, then called the Trust Journey (PES, 2013). However, this was not mentioned by Sjöberg, which suggests that distance is a strong narrative tool, as well as neglect, as managers seek to frame change in a novel fashion (Gabriel, 2004).

We had the opportunity to observe how the new discourse was put into practice. We conducted observations at an internal conference, at which Sjöberg entered the stage to Psy, the South Korean singer and rapper, and his song Gangnam Style, an impressive light show, and broad applause from more than 1700 PES employees in the audience. Before Sjöberg's appearance, other leading figures in the agency provided motivational speeches, talking about taking steps away from 'detailed governance', 'putting the customer in focus', and 'changing mindsets to eliminate otherism' in the organization and its culture. Sjöberg added fuel to the fire and spoke about a malfunctioning agency rifted by internal conflicts. He now aimed to change that, and during his speech, he said he was confident caseworkers had the competence to participate in the journey: 'You are doing an amazing job', and everyone in the conference room cheered. Possibly reflecting on how to reform the agency, he compared the Renewal Journey to a jigsaw puzzle. 'We know what the picture is on the box – our vision – but we must find the pieces'. As we spoke with local caseworkers and senior officials during the event, they expressed support for Sjöberg as much as they despised the previous leadership. However, while he gained extensive internal support, it did not match how leading officials at the Ministry of Employment referred to the Renewal Journey.

> I think it is very hard to assess … It can be just blah blah blah… But I lean towards viewing it as something good. But I am not certain at all. I don't know.
>
> (interview, official, Ministry of Employment)

Whereas the central discourse sought to bring forward change, it gained strength through a series of discursive specifications directly relevant to caseworker subjectivity. One of these concerned a new leadership philosophy: caseworkers should no longer be just caseworkers; they should also be self-leaders. The term entered the agency through its consultancy company, and as we interviewed consultants, it appeared as an image they sold to other public agencies, which our studies of the SIA confirmed, given that the two agencies used the same company and also found inspiration in self-leadership models. Self-leadership turned into the norm for all employees, including managers and caseworkers. The Director-General described the ideal as follows:

> We have adopted a new management philosophy, which means that each of us needs to deepen and develop with curiosity our leadership – self-leadership.
>
> (PES, 2015: 3)

The model relied on the idea of a world in rapid change, which required the ability of individuals to lead themselves irrespective of being a manager or employee (Johansson & Seing, 2022). Instead of chasing points to satisfy managers, 'we all take responsibility for our actions, regardless of whether we are managers, or not. This is based on the fact that all of us are able to link our own inner motivation to an understanding of common values and goals' (PES, 2015: 13).

Through the ideals of self-leadership, the organization sought to craft a new subjectivity for caseworkers. Self-leadership was not only words on paper; central managers expressed much higher ambitions about how the philosophy would transform caseworkers. One centrally placed human resource management (HRM) director stated that employees now should 'live the leadership philosophy and the value base, that is how you should be, that is how you should act' (interview, senior manager, headquarters). This was accompanied by slogans such as 'we want, and can, and dare to take responsibility!' (PES, 2015: 14), which sought to inspire, yet also guide caseworkers in a new direction. Another senior manager did not think of the Renewal Journey as a process of organizational reform but as a process of 'behavioural change, underpinned by significant changes in structures of management and evaluation' (interview, senior manager, headquarters).

Self-leadership ideals informed the training of PES managers and caseworkers. Central managers took part in an expensive training programme run by the same consultancy company introducing the concept. Instead of being managers, they learned to be 'change agents' or 'change leaders'. Local managers we interviewed expressed dedication and support: 'If you are not a change-minded person, you do not fit here' (interview, local manager). Caseworkers, for their part, were not offered any training on how to become self-leaders. Rather, they were offered a series of capacity-building training sessions, for instance, on how to make jobseekers take responsibility and become more self-leading.

Another discursive specification concerned a stronger customer focus. 'In the new business logic, customer value steers the daily work' (PES, 2017b; see also PES, 2018). Terms like 'unemployed', 'clients', or 'jobseekers' were used less as the agency aimed to become a 'service agency' creating societal value. Instead of being seen as a 'control agency' with a working method that 'does not provide sufficient customer value', it aimed to become a service agency that 'steers through attraction' (PES, 2017a, 2017b; see also Bengtsson et al., 2024). This had implications for caseworker governance, stressing the need to adapt to new rules and routines. The caseworker should now be adaptive, able to make their own decisions, and customer-oriented:

> The one who is closest to the customer, hears the customers and sees the customers, must be able to act, must have a space here that they can own as well, and come up with individualized [solutions].
>
> (interview, senior manager, PES headquarters)

Customer orientation was also critical in previous organizational reforms, connected to so-called PES greenhouses, a method to explore new services. While

this promised extended discretion, PES customer orientation relied on the premise of clear limits to caseworker availability and responsibility, which required new forms of self-regulation as a caseworker. One local manager described the new script as a shift from an orientation of 'I have my jobseekers' to 'now I provide a service' and '[one should be] able to limit oneself', that is, not become too personally involved in a particular client. In this way, PES management marked a new caseworker mindset, that is, one of limiting their client involvement and abandoning the earlier personal relationship-building orientation toward individual job seekers (Bengtsson et al., 2024).

These main narratives appear partly contradictory. They instil a sense of self-leadership while simultaneously scripting instructions on its limitations. It is perhaps due to this contradiction that customer orientation was mainly framed as giving back the power and agency to the job seeker. Organizational discourse envisaged that clients would 'carry their own case' through the administrative system and process, introducing the notion of 'letting the clients be grown-ups'. Top management explicitly encouraged caseworkers to think in terms of 'cases' and not individual jobseekers, in clear contrast to a personalized approach (as further developed in Chapter 5). Wallinder and Seing (2022) framed this notion as a new script for caseworkers as well as clients because changes implied that 'the client becomes his/her own caseworker'. This trend became more explicit after our study period, when digitalization was fully implemented.

Storytelling in the PES

As the managerial narrative on organizational change, organizational culture, and caseworkers' roles and responsibilities filtered down inside the organization, caseworkers expressed stories of legitimation and delegitimation, especially concerning the notion of self-leadership. Whereas SIA caseworkers and local managers embraced the stories and scripts, managerial and caseworker narratives at PES partly supported and contradicted each other.

The self-leadership model partly overlapped with existing local narratives on caseworkers' roles and subjectivity. However, local caseworkers and managers framed subjectivities differently, using the notion of 'a frame' rather than 'self-leadership'. The story placed laws, policies, and management instructions outside 'the frame' and caseworkers on the inside. The metaphor thus served as a moral enforcer for how a caseworker should act, namely to 'stay within the frame, but preferably be on the edges to make use of the whole spectrum [of available services]' (interview, caseworker). Stories of failed recruitment told by managers further enforced the narrative. One local manager recalled recruiting a person with a law degree, and although she did a great job, she did not fit in. The manager thought she kept herself too much in the middle of the frame and wanted to have 'braces and belts on', that is being over-cautious, and 'that is not possible in our business' (interview, caseworker). Such morally enforcing stories considered bad casework and bad caseworkers as people who 'followed paragraphs', were 'squared in their mindset' (*fyrkantiga*) and identified as 'paragraph persons' (*paragrafryttare*).

Interestingly, the SIA frequently served as a counter-example and represented an employer for whom PES caseworkers did not want to work.

> I think if you can't be flexible, you don't fit here. Because everything changes all the time ... so if you're not inclined to change, you shouldn't come here. That's how it is.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Although self-leadership resonates with the local narrative of caseworkers acting within their frame, local narration delegitimized the managerial models. Caseworkers stressed that they always worked independently, took the initiative, and used their discretion. Central leadership philosophies were seen as 'old wine in new bottles', as caseworkers claimed that they 'always worked like this … now we get it hammered into our heads to work in a new way. Aha, but we have always done like this' (interview, caseworker). Another caseworker said, 'we're already self-leaders', meaning that she already had the professional discretion to decide what, when, and how in relation to client encounters. Others found the model self-evident: 'There has to be self-leadership. Who else could you be? Hello! What is the alternative?' (interview, caseworker). Overlapping elements mainly concerned reflections of the bad past, allowing a different script than performance-driven 'point hunting' and 'click monsters'.

Consequently, self-leadership provoked a series of stories of 'failure' and 'silliness'. These served the purpose of narrative distancing not only from a bad past but also towards the present management model. Caseworkers approached self-leadership as business jargon or forms of 'empty talk' (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Gabriel, 2016; Johansson & Seing, 2022). One caseworker commented: 'Today it's self-leadership and tomorrow something else' (interview, caseworker). Instead of considering this as a reinvigoration of caseworker discretion, this caseworker considered it meaningless, arguing that there were as many interpretations of the model as there were employees. According to another caseworker: 'I feel like asking, "where do you mean we are going?" [with the Renewal Journey]. When he [the Director-General] says we're going to be better, who wouldn't say that we're going to be better? It's self-evident' (interview, caseworker). Such stories were intended to disparage, aligning self-leadership with managerialism, and hence with limited relevance for *real* casework. One caseworker recalled having written an email to the Director-General, whom he somewhat sarcastically called the Saviour:

> 'Please, don't use metaphors, but write what you mean so we understand and then you will have greater credibility.' I didn't get an answer, it was just more and more metaphors, more and more conferences where people don't say anything. ... I know because [a colleague] took part [in a conference], and she came home and sighed and said, 'What is this? It's not about our business, it's about something completely different'.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Whereas SIA caseworkers participated in diffusing organizational discourse, retelling the sanctioned stories and scripts, PES caseworkers met the management discourse with irony or sarcasm (Johansson & Seing, 2022). The fairy tale of the emperor's new clothes was frequently used to capture the model, considering it out of tune and easy to make fun of. Similar observations can be found in other studies. For instance, when the Swedish Agency for Public Management evaluated the Renewal Journey, it concluded that managers had a hard time making the process concrete and explaining the meaning of the agency's vision to caseworkers. Despite caseworkers supporting the idea of self-leadership, they still lacked the organizational tools and managerial support to use their discretionary space (Statskontoret, 2018: 5, 2019: 3).

However, differences depended on the number of years PES caseworkers had worked in the agency. As in the SIA, recently employed PES caseworkers expressed an understanding of the self-leadership model and were less inclined to distance themselves through sarcasm from it. One newly recruited caseworker commented:

> Sure, you can joke about self-leadership; of course, we do, it's nothing to hide, and we can be a little ironic. ... of course, we joke about self-leadership like that. But at the same time, it's also a helpful word. I can say that I'm more confident in my role now than when I started here three and a half years ago. If someone asks me 'how did you think about this decision?', there was no manager in place, so I chose to do this. It was my self-leadership. Then, you dare to use that word and stand behind it. And then we have such great managers here.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Newly employed staff were more inclined to 'buy into' the management discourse and were thus more malleable than experienced staff, who were more ambivalent. One of those 'long-timers' in the SIA told us that she was just 'trying to survive' in the organization until the next management shift.

Conclusion

Organizational discourses and narratives serve as a strategic management tool to align caseworkers with the normative regime, conveying the sanctioned organizational norms and desired caseworker subjectivities. We find similarities across the two agencies in terms of the general function and content of the dominant discourses, yet differences in how they were storied among caseworkers and local managers. In a way, both agencies rallied extensive support for an organizational discourse linked to organizational change, leaving a bad and malfunctioning past behind. This coincided with leadership changes (the appointment of a new Director-General) and reorienting government goals and priorities. These forms of narrative distancing promoted a common 'we' and mobilized support for what was to come; that is, they served as tools to set the scripts to orchestrate work (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004). The distinction between the bad past and the bright future, and the related terms and dichotomies, sorted events into a logical causal order for

change as a form of a master emplotment. Outgoing leaders were characterized as villains, and incoming ones as saviours. Although our studies include two different agencies, many discourses and managerial narratives are fairly similar, customer orientation and self-leadership being the most obvious. However, they also differed, especially as the SIA stressed insurance-likeness, which stood in sharp contrast to PES models of self-leadership. Nonetheless, these similarities stress the role of consultancies as norm entrepreneurs and agencies buying into what appears fashionable.

This chapter, however, finds that to become influential, organizational discourse and narratives need to be supported and reinforced – rather than counteracted – by storytelling practices. Our research finds both fit and misfit between central managerial discourses and narratives and the storytelling practices among local caseworkers and managers. In the SIA, its customer-oriented message did not 'stick' and was soon changed. As Ståhl and Andersson (2018) found, these principles did not bypass longstanding management strategies and top-down measures. Instead, the subsequent discourses and narratives on insurance-likeness resonated with local managers' and caseworkers' self-identification as gatekeepers to the insurance. Caseworker role alignment with managerial discourses led to solid support for performing towards achieving 9.0 and was even seen as a heroic task. In addition, the PES experienced a period of discourse misalignment between a dominant discourse on casework and caseworkers' subjectivities and contrasting local storytelling practices among caseworkers. In this case, performance orientation constituted what the organization and caseworkers hoped to leave behind for greater autonomy and caseworker discretion. However, the managerial discourse was generally conceived as 'empty talk', too distant from reality and with little relevance for daily casework.

Our analysis shows that organizational discourse can be highly effective in 'producing an appropriate individual' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), also in a highly formal and bureaucratic setting. This mainly concerns cases where there is a strong alignment between how managers narrate and discursively define caseworker subjectivities and how caseworkers view themselves. In such cases, caseworkers work hard to follow the script and use the correct vocabulary, even though this might imply counteracting legal regulations and the decline/withdrawal of benefits, as we found in the SIA. However, the opposite outcome can also occur, especially if there is a solid occupational (or professional) culture with which the managerial discourse misaligns. This illustrates parallel normative regimes: one managerial and one embedded in the occupational culture caseworkers support and identify with. That is, in contexts where a strong caseworker culture prevails, an occupational culture can act as a counterweight to management norms coming 'from above', something we found especially at the PES.

5 Governance by emotions

Introduction

Emotional governance is a critical component of normative governance, aimed at eliciting commitment and exerting control in organizations. Much managerial work is geared towards enacting a particular form of organizational experience (e.g., Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), and hence, governance operates in part by mobilizing positive feelings to achieve organizational goals. Moreover, organizations, such as street-level bureaucracies, prescribe what emotions are legitimate to feel and display in professional practice. In both these aspects – mobilization of specific emotional experiences and prescription of organizationally preferred emotions and emotional displays – governance by emotions underpins and reinforces the normative regime.

As different models for governing the public sector carry different notions of emotional professionalism (Larsson, 2014), public management reform also typically entails a change in the emotional regimes of public agencies (e.g., Baumeler, 2010; Fineman, 2010; Terpe & Paierl, 2010; Wettergren, 2010; cf. Reddy, 2001). We understand emotional regimes as consisting of norms for legitimate feelings regarding work and legitimate display of emotions (Hochschild, 1979, 1983), separating highly evaluated emotions from deviant ones. Organization members' 'emotional performance' is heavily influenced by social conventions and the impressions they wish to convey to others (Fineman, 2003: 8). We follow here a common distinction among emotion scholars between, on the one hand, the subjective element of emotions, that is, feelings, and on the other hand, its displayed feature, that is, what we show. The term 'emotion' refers to this social element of feelings and 'feeling' to the subjective experience (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Fineman, 2003).

This chapter examines the role emotions play in governing caseworkers in the SIA and the PES. The analysis addresses how emotions are organizationally prescribed and produced in the two agencies: the social and organizational elements of emotions. Our focus is not on 'emotional labour' and 'emotion work' (cf. Hochschild, 1979, 1983) as performed by the caseworkers but rather on the emotional regime as a form of governance of caseworkers. We are interested in the emotional regime expressed in the vocabulary for talking about emotions and the

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norms for legitimate emotions and emotional displays, as prescribed by management in organizational discourse, internal instructions, and so on, and reflected in interviews. The chapter thus examines the organizational production of pride and other positive emotions, such as joy at work, a sense of security and achievement, and the management and avoidance of insecurity, as well as other negative emotions in the daily work of the two welfare state agencies. As we will see, the two agencies represent radically different emotional regimes, especially at the local level, with different norms for legitimate emotions and emotional displays and different types of emotional alliances and rewards at work.

Emotions in street-level bureaucracies

In many countries, the Weberian model of bureaucratic governance has been complemented – or replaced – by New Public Management (NPM) principles, such as management by objectives and performance and increased customer and service orientation (e.g., Terpe & Paierl, 2010). There has also been a trend towards post-bureaucratic and post-NPM forms of governance, influencing both agencies studied in this book (Bringselius, 2018, 2020). All these forms of public sector management have their distinct emotional underpinnings. However, as management styles and principles rarely replace each other entirely but combine in new ways, this adds complexity to the normative regimes, including the emotional complexity in working life.

Moreover, occupational complexity and role ambiguities in work with contradictory demands on staff tend to give rise to mixed feelings in organizations (e.g., Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2010). Role ambiguities make public service work inherently emotionally complex (e.g., Guy et al., 2010). Welfare bureaucracies typically have to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously, at the same time conforming to cost-efficiency requirements, the rule of law principles, and empathic service orientation, as well as meeting fluctuating political targets, which renders their normative, including emotional regimes more complex. For instance, caseworkers must frequently combine the role of welfare police officer with that of being an empathic service provider (e.g., Howard, 2006; Terpe & Paierl, 2010; Hagelund, 2016; Senghaas et al., 2019).

The emotional complexity of casework in welfare bureaucracies has also been compounded by the discourse on consumer sovereignty increasingly permeating the public sector (e.g., Korczynski et al., 2000; Korczynski, 2009; Bolton, 2005). It positions clients as buyers demanding good service, including high accessibility and efficiency in decisions, as well as politeness, flexibility, and treating customers as unique individuals. At the same time, the logic of bureaucracy is usually maintained, such as the requirement to treat clients based on formal rules and routines (e.g., Bruhn, 2015).

As shown in previous research, welfare bureaucracies encourage employees to suppress inappropriate feelings and evoke or display appropriate ones (e.g., Du Gay, 2008; Guy et al., 2010; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010; Strobaek, 2011; Eggebø, 2013; Larsson, 2014). We refer to this as emotional regimes, consisting of norms

and scripts for organizationally sanctioned emotional conduct, which is one aspect of being 'an appropriate caseworker'. However, existing research has focused primarily on how new emotional norms affect caseworkers' relationship with clients (e.g., Terpe & Paierl, 2010; Penz et al., 2017), whereas our focus is on the role of emotions in governing the caseworkers. Governance by emotions affects the governance of the whole organization, both staff and clients, and it is a form of governance that targets the entire person, including their subjectivity and feelings about work. Again, combining insights from critical management studies and street-level bureaucracy studies offers a helpful lens, drawing also on insights from the sociology of emotions.

It should also be stressed that the degree to which emotional regimes are enforced is an empirical question. Some have argued that emotional regimes can be loose, allowing for caseworker agency, 'navigation' of feelings, and diverse sets of emotion management tools to be fashioned locally, individually, or through subgroup formation (Reddy, 2001: 126). Moreover, organizations have different emotional zones (just as with Goffman's notion of front- vs. back-stage zones). Bolton, for instance, identified spaces for being human, spaces for resistance and misbehaviour, spaces for gift exchange, spaces for a bit of a laugh, spaces for occupational communities, spaces for violations, and spaces for maintenance and creation of identity (Bolton, 2005: 133–152).

Governance by emotions in the SIA

The emotional regime at the SIA relates to external pressures on the agency, especially the low public confidence in the agency and expectations of making the agency more attractive as an employer and workplace. Chapter 4 described how the SIA underwent an organizational reform (2012–2016) based on management by values, coaching leadership, teamwork, and strong customer orientation. Implementing post-bureaucratic management principles, such as team building, releasing co-worker potential, and the 'infusion' of shared values, was part of a human resource management (HRM) strategy to align subjects with organizational values. The agency's policy of customer orientation was reflected in its three 'customer promises', to guide the agency's client encounters:

> You feel always that we meet you with respect and understanding;
> You feel always that we make your everyday life safer;
> You feel always that we make it easy for you.
>
> (SIA, 2015a)

In the shorthand version, the customer promises were summarized in three keywords: 'more human', 'safer', and 'easier' social insurance. Clients' encounters with the agency were to evoke these emotional responses: the feeling of being met as a human being, a sense of safety, and feelings of trust. An official at the SIA headquarters explained: 'This isn't the customer concept of the market forces. It is rather the Lean conception of the customer, namely "those receiving the value

I produce […] is that person satisfied? Does she receive what she needs?"' The Director-General and a higher official described this strong customer orientation as a paradigmatic shift in the agency, by which 'the experience of the customer will be the measure of success' (Eliasson & Brattlund, 2013).

An explicit organizational objective at the SIA during this period was to enhance 'customer satisfaction', and client encounters were to be characterized by empathy. Nevertheless, the agency assessed caseworkers' performance in quantitative (concerning productivity goals) and qualitative terms (their service orientation). This hybrid nature of the SIA's normative order with conflicting organizational expectations on caseworkers is well captured by Korczynski's notion of the 'customer-oriented bureaucracy', which implies that the staff must reconcile the bureaucratic logic encompassing rationalization, efficiency, and a focus on quantitative targets with the logic of customer orientation (Korczynski, 2009; see also Bolton, 2005: 118). In the case of the SIA, the pressure to rationalize was further reinforced by the fact that health insurance had undergone strict activation principles (e.g., Björnberg, 2012; Seing, 2014). The agency thus had to strive to reduce the number of sick-listed people simultaneously with the political objective of increasing the public legitimacy of the SIA.

The organizational reform that took off in 2012 was very much associated with the organizational vision and charismatic leadership style of the Director-General at the time, Dan Eliasson (in office 2011–14). This form of leadership was intended to operate through the invocation of positive feelings, allowing employees to have fun or feel at ease at work, encouraging a sense of feeling at home, thus allowing them to identify and 'be one' with the organization. Governance by emotions is a way to create 'ties that bind' (d'Aoust, 2014). The new management style was also reflected in the spatial organization of the SIA headquarters in Stockholm (as well as in some local offices in the country), where 'activity-based' office space was implemented. This entailed that no personal offices were available, but there were various types of free office areas, including bar areas and sofas, as well as treadmills and a meditation room, for staff to use as they liked. As noted in an organizational document at the time: 'I am convinced that both managers and co-workers have to enjoy work for our vision and the customer promises to be realized. To enjoy work, we must succeed in interpersonal matters' (SIA, 2015b: 2). Trust, respect, and consideration for others were to guide social relationships within the agency and client relations (ibid.).

Although this approach provided guidelines for caseworkers' approach to clients, it did not detail how to approach client-related work, allowing for more autonomy and professional discretion. As expressed in the agency's guidelines for client encounters:

> Engagement is required from our side, that we see the human being and do not reduce her to merely a case and a number in the statistics. The handling of a case must look different depending on the individual needs and conditions of the customer.
>
> (SIA, 2014: 7)

These governance ideals gained strength through the instalment of emotional rules inside the agency or, in other words, an emotional regime (see Table 5.1). Caseworkers were to display empathy without getting absorbed by the client's situation or becoming emotionally affected. The norm was to be 'customer-oriented' while maintaining professional distance and 'not becoming a therapist'. One interviewee described her ambition of having a 'warm heart, cold brain, and clean hands'. The feeling rule was to feel empathy but not sympathy; as a caseworker explained: 'If I actually start to like that person, with whom I have had contact for a year or so, of course, there is the risk that I would give a more generous assessment than someone else would have done'. As caseworkers sometimes had to decline a benefit, there was an organizationally prescribed emotional tactic to start preparing for 'negative decisions' early on in the process (the notion of 'negative decisions' is the organizational vocabulary for rejections/withdrawals of benefits) by informing the client of what may come later on.

However, a rather drastic change in government policies and management occurred in 2015 onwards. The new government (Social Democratic and Green Parties in coalition) (in office from 2014) appointed a new Director-General (Ann-Marie Begler) to turn the agency away from its customer orientation. Instead, it stressed applying the law and caseworkers' bureaucratic ethos more strictly. As developed in Chapter 4, measures were implemented to increase the 'quality' of caseworkers' assessment of sick-leave benefits, ensuring that 'the right person receives the right compensation' (SIA, 2016: 2) and at the right time (in accordance with the legislated rehabilitation chain according to which work capacity was to be assessed at specific intervals). Quality now meant procedural correctness, and

Table 5.1 The SIA emotional regime under the post-NPM period

Feeling rules:
Feel empathy but not sympathy
Be engaged
Be patient
Keep calm
Display rules:
Display polite treatment
Display empathy and understanding for clients' difficult life situations without becoming a therapist
Display seeing and dealing with a person, not processing a case
Display confirmation of the client's feelings
Display calmness and patience
Emotional tactics:
First listen, then explain the rules
'Feel out' where the client is emotionally and adapt the meeting accordingly
Confirm the client's feelings
Inject hope
Wait for the right moment (which may require patience)
Prevent emotional outbursts by preparing the clients for what may come (including negative decisions)
Avoid bureaucratic language

the customer orientation of the previous period was internally heavily criticized for resulting in a too generous application of the law. According to our interviews, the new Director-General strongly disliked the customer concept and stressed 'the state civil servant role' and bureaucratic ethos. Clients were no longer to be labelled 'customers' but 'the insured person', reflecting the organizational identity of the SIA as the state's insurance company. SIA caseworkers had a crucial role to play, acting as the gatekeepers to sickness insurance, controlling 'admission to the insurance', admitting 'the right persons', and avoiding admitting 'too many persons' (as also evidenced in other studies from the same period, e.g., Fransson & Quist, 2018: 174–176; ISF, 2018: 69, 93).

These changes in organizational policies required a different organizational persona, as illustrated in the caseworker role change from 'personal caseworker' to 'insurance investigator'. The former term evoked the wrong expectations and attracted staff who wanted to work with and help clients. The latter term was much more preferred, as it stressed case assessment while down-prioritizing client and stakeholder contacts. However, the law had not been changed and still stipulated a double role, namely assessing benefit eligibility and co-ordinating rehabilitation with stakeholders. Nevertheless, management emphasized the former task. An insurance specialist explained in an interview:

> Our current DG is clear about us having only one task: applying insurance correctly. For the rest, other actors must take responsibility. The health care system must take responsibility for how many sick-listings they have; that's not something the SIA can do anything about. The employers must fix the work environment, and maybe the Public Employment Service needs another type of resource to work with the unemployed than what they have today. So, I mean, we can only take responsibility for what we have here. Maybe we have made our task too broad, sort of.
>
> (interview, SIA insurance specialist, former caseworker)

This attitude coincided with the government's introduction of the 9.0 goal, stating that the SIA should work for 'the sickness benefit rate not exceeding 9.0 days per individual per year in 2020' (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016). The numerical target of 9.0 became a positively charged symbol affecting almost all local office activities, as a benchmark for proper casework.

The politicians' and managers' view of 9.0 as a 'reasonable' sickness absence rate trickled down to the caseworkers. For instance, during an informal discussion at a meeting, one caseworker said: 'I have the feeling we're on the right track'. Their manager had just reported that the number of rejections had increased, admitting that this may lead to negative media reactions, but emphasized that the Director-General would be on their side and support them. At other staff meetings, reporting statistics on benefit rejections – which took place monthly – could lead the caseworkers and managers alike to rejoice. The self-understanding of local managers and caseworkers was part of an obedient and high-achieving administration, delivering what was currently expected, which was now an increased number

of rejections. Feeling happy about these numbers was organizationally expected and a shared sentiment among most – but not all – caseworkers in our study.

The 9.0 vision symbolized the heroic role of SIA staff in protecting sickness insurance against 'excessive usage' in the offices studied. The common identification as gatekeeper to, and guardian of, the sickness insurance rendered meaning to the work and gave a shared sense of purpose, evoking a strong sense of pride among SIA staff. Guarding the 'entrance to this insurance', as it was framed, was nothing less than a heroic task. Not only was the financial sustainability of this insurance at stake, but even the sustainability of the welfare state for future generations. The pride displayed in taking up this role was striking.

Storytelling was important in redirecting the organizational efforts from empathic client encounters to guarding the insurance. The organizational narratives dismissed the 'overly kind caseworker' and stated that 'it is not kind to sick-list people' (Jacobsson, 2023). Empathy with clients was not part of the emotional regime, as it implied the risk of being 'too kind' and soft-hearted. Objectivity in case assessment was interpreted as requiring distance from clients. The new emotional script prescribed a distant and objective relationship with clients rather than one that was personal and empathic. While case assessment previously required knowledge of the client's circumstances, such information could jeopardize proper evaluation according to the emerging emotional regime. As a local insurance specialist explained in an interview:

> That's kind of my task, to be as objective and neutral as possible. They [the caseworkers] sometimes know too much about the individuals. I do not want to know their age. I do not want to know their sex. I do not want to know their name. Because I think I may have blank spots too. Nothing [do I want to know].
>
> (interview, SIA local insurance specialist)

The caseworkers minimized client contact, speaking only over the telephone if needed to communicate something, but primarily by letter. Instead, emotional rewards came from managers and peers rather than from clients. Local managers were present in the daily work, providing encouragement and asking how things were going. Team members offered daily social and emotional support in assessing complex cases (see Chapter 6). The coaching leadership by specialists, medical advisors, and local managers also provided the emotional security to make tough decisions, such as benefit rejections.

Our ethnographic research allows us to conclude that team and staff meetings were instrumental in the mobilization of commitment and in the direction of the efforts towards reaching the goal of 9.0. In such collective fora, positive emotions were produced in relation to the organizational objectives and targets, stressing the role of organizational rituals (Kunda, 2006; see also Collins, 2004) to underpin the normative regime. The SIA staff displayed both pleasure in work and pride related to their collective organizational performance, as measured on team and office levels. The focus was on short-term organizational goals and output, and showing good numbers evoked enthusiasm and pride.

These changes led to the formation of a new emotional regime during this management period (summarized in Table 5.2). The regime expected caseworkers to suppress deviant emotions, such as sympathy and even empathy with the client. Professionalism required bracketing one's feelings and displaying neutrality and detachment in case assessment. A key strategy was to use rules as shields by explaining the insurance logic and stating that there was nothing they, as caseworkers, could do about it. This explanation was often delivered very early in the assessment process, even at the first contact with the client, and even if the client was still entitled to benefits. Providing information about what the client could and could not expect from the social insurance system was a way of preparing the emotional ground for future – negative – decisions and simultaneously a way of levelling down the client's expectations to make them aware that benefit entitlement would not last forever and, just as with private insurances, entitlement was not automatically granted:

> Above all, you are not automatically entitled to sickness benefits just because you are sick. […] It's taxpayers' money that pays the sickness benefits, so we cannot give out to everyone as much as possible, then there would be nothing left in the tax coffers.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Whereas the code of conduct under the customer-oriented management period was to use less bureaucratic language, such language was now used as a shield and as a way to enforce bureaucratic authority. Caseworkers were to display a bureaucratic ethos and persona. Now standardized letters were used in client communication to achieve objectivity and equal treatment but also, in our interpretation, as a way of marking distance. However, just as before, caseworkers were to avoid controversial and emotionally – and politically – loaded expressions such as 'expelled from the insurance' [*utförsäkrad*]. In case of an emotional outburst, the caseworker's strategy was to try to keep calm, not get into an argument with the client, and 'wait him/her out'. A caseworker explained:

> I can try to confirm 'Yes it's a hell and there is nothing I can do about it. The only thing I can do is to refer you to the Public Employment Service or to the employer.' To offer that and then withdraw. Because we cannot solve all problems. And it wouldn't be professional to try to get involved too far.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

The caseworkers narrowed their sphere of involvement and instead stressed the other stakeholders' roles: the sick-listed employer, the health care system, and the PES. Table 5.2 summarizes the emotional regime during this management period.

However, some caseworkers expressed discomfort with the 'tougher' assessments required of them, as well as the down-prioritization of rehabilitation co-ordination. Our observations and interviews, however, show that there was little to no space to articulate such views. Managers, specialists, and most of the

Table 5.2 The SIA emotional regime under the 'insurance-like' management period

Feeling rules:
Feel pride in protecting the insurance
Feel detachment in relation to clients
Be patient
Be calm
Display rules:
Display correctness
Display understanding of clients' difficult life situation
Display processing a case according to existing rules
Display calmness and patience
Emotional tactics:
First listen, then explain the rules
Confirm the client's feelings while delimiting the caseworker's responsibility
Prevent emotional outbursts by preparing clients for what may come (such as a negative decision) and by choosing words carefully
Narrow down the sphere of responsibility and involvement

caseworkers disqualified concerns about better client support. Such caseworkers were seen as unfit for the role of 'insurance officers'. Instead, many caseworkers who embraced a more relationship-building approach quit the job. The number of 'personal caseworkers' quitting their jobs increased from 7% in December 2014 to 19% in December 2019 (according to statistics obtained from the SIA).

The vision of 9.0 functioned as a mobilizing target and source of pride among SIA caseworkers. It was first and foremost attained by increasing the rate of benefit rejections to an extent that exceeded the organization's forecast (ISF, 2018: 16). In fact, the number of rejections of benefits after 180 days of sick-leave increased five times during the period 2015–2020, even though the Swedish government withdrew the goal of 9.0 in 2018 (Altermark, 2020). In 2018, Director-General Begler had to leave her position before her term of office was completed, as the Swedish government had lost patience with the low priority of support for sick-listed individuals and stakeholder dialogue about rehabilitation. As rejections continued, in 2021, the government made a new instruction to the SIA explicitly stating that the agency should reach the goal of lowering the sickness benefit rate by preventive measures, rehabilitation, and stakeholder co-ordination rather than focusing on increasing the rejection rate (Swedish Government, 2021).

Governance by emotions in the PES

The Renewal Journey implied a series of changes in the agency's governance of PES caseworkers. In Chapter 4, we explored the central elements of these changes, and the agency's goal to enhance customer-orientation formed a central component of capturing the emotional regime. However, whereas we find two subsequent types of emotional regimes in the SIA, reflecting management shifts, the emotional regimes in the PES are sorted differently: a central managerially orchestrated

emotional regime versus a local occupationally influenced emotional regime. This might be due to the timing of our data collection. As we conducted our fieldwork, many parts of the organizational reform had not been implemented, which meant that a new emotional regime was in the process of development at the top level of the agency. At the same time, the work in the local offices was characterized by emotional norms institutionalized in the agency for a long time. The already institutionalized regime was built on a relationship-oriented approach to clients. However, part of the new ideal at the PES head office was to break up this form of client orientation (see also Bengtsson et al., 2024).

The central and managerially orchestrated emotional regime must be understood in connection with the agency's attempt to enforce a more substantial customer focus on the organization and among caseworkers. In an interview, one official at the PES headquarters argued that caseworkers attached too much importance to being a caring person: 'sometimes it may have been more fun to take care of people than to make sure they become employed'. 'Customer orientation', as it was phrased at the top level, was instead interpreted as giving back power and agency to the jobseeker, which had a series of implications for how to conduct casework. PES staff was encouraged to think about 'cases' and not individual job seekers. Caseworkers had to delimit their availability and responsibility to clients. As noted, customer orientation assumed a less personal approach to clients and a change from having job seekers to providing service. Clients were expected to govern themselves and their cases, be 'grown-ups', and own their process (PES, 2017c). This formed part of a major rebranding of the agency from being a 'control agency' to a 'service agency' (PES, 2017a, 2017b).

Thus, the new 'customer journey' was introduced for the job seeker's sake. Part of this was the expectation that digitalization of public services would lead to increased customer power:

> Everything shows that the customer, when reality and the world are digitized, the customer automatically gets a little, yes, more power … because the customer has control over more stakeholders, can pick and choose more based on personal wishes and needs. You can find information faster.
>
> (interview, senior manager, PES headquarters)

A PES document stated that by transforming the agency into more digital self-services, 'we let people grow, it lays the foundation for people's autonomy' (PES, 2017a). Moreover, 'customers must have a grip on their situation, and we trust that they want to do the right thing. That's why we work to provide support and service so that they can act' (PES, 2017a: 7). The PES facilities should not be 'a calefactory' for job seekers, as a saying went in one of the local offices studied.

By implementing digital platforms, the Renewal Journey aimed to improve efficiency because 'simple and unnecessary case management' taking place in local offices and customer services would be eliminated (PES, 2019: 11). 'Much of the transfer is that the jobseeker does things herself, i.e., self-help' (senior manager, headquarters). The idea was to develop digital self-services for more 'self-reliant'

jobseekers to allocate more resources to the more vulnerable clients, that is, those considered 'distant from the labour market' (Swedish Unemployment Insurance Inspectorate, 2018: 11). This development took place against the background of a significant increase in vulnerable jobseekers, relative to other types of registered jobseekers, namely those with only pre-secondary education, born outside Europe, people with disabilities, and those aged 55–64 years (PES, 2018).

Internal training also formed a central part of the agency's organizational reform linked to the Renewal Journey. For some time, the agency had already substantially downscaled internal training efforts (interview, HRM official), yet now sought to rebuild them to allow staff members to be self-leaders. The new training policy – called the Competence Upheaval [*Kompetenslyftet*] – included, among other components, a series of podcasts providing instructions for caseworkers on how to handle conflicts, decisions, and organizational change. One component focused on Lean-inspired models of continuous improvement, and another on motivational interviewing, while others offered instructions on handling emotions as employees and caseworkers.

One podcast on 'negative decisions' offered guidance on how PES employees – and especially managers – could make decisions others might consider negative. It utilized different roles, such as an interviewee asking questions (usually an HRM official) and an expert delivering answers, roles that were particularly targeted at managers. The podcast illustrated how to reject an employee's inquiries about taking part in internal training. To avoid emotional outbursts, the expert advised managers to choose time ('not Friday, since that will make them think over the weekend'), place ('not in public, since others can hear'), and inform in advance ('to avoid confusion'). If employees react strongly and emotionally, then 'the best you can do is keep calm and wait […]. With your body language, you can show that you understand the person's feelings. You listen and see the person'. The expert proposed that one should try to mirror the other person, suggesting that managers should reflect the employee's feelings and not express their own. The podcast only briefly touched on delivering negative decisions to clients because, in the view of agency management, this appeared to be a simple task. Negative decisions to clients, which one assumed were sent by letter, could include information on where to turn 'if one needed to talk or had further questions'.

Instead, another podcast instructed caseworkers on emotional management in client encounters. If a client became too affective, it required caseworkers to act in a 'calm, empathetic and balanced way'. Too much empathy was not advisable. Caseworkers had to be 'dismissive, at the same time not going to excesses in your understanding of the other's situation'. They should keep their distance and prevent the client from seeing themselves as a victim. To accomplish this, caseworkers were instructed to ask questions like: 'How do you want it [the future] to be?' and 'What can you do to get there?'. In that way, the podcast expert concluded that 'you sort of put the responsibility back to the person instead of them putting the responsibility on us as an authority'. Caseworkers should thus display empathy, calmness, and patience (similar to the first SIA emotional regime) while pushing

Table 5.3 The central managerial emotional regime in the PES

Feeling rules:
Be empathic
Be patient
Be calm
Display rules:
Display understanding of clients' difficult life situation
Display interest in the individual
Display pragmatism
Emotional tactics:
Show empathy, but not too much
Mirror others' emotions, but disguise your own
Confirm the client's feelings, but stress their responsibilities
Restrict the sphere of personal emotional involvement

responsibility towards the client, including restricting one's feelings and emotional involvement. The centrally orchestrated emotional regime can be summarized in Table 5.3.

These central management models were in the process of being implemented when our study was conducted. Thus, caseworkers still met with job seekers in physical customer centres (in addition to communicating via the web, phone, chats, and video meetings). According to most PES caseworkers – but not all – the replacement of personal face-to-face encounters with a digital, impersonal service conflicted with their view of jobseekers' need for someone who could patiently listen to them during a close physical encounter. A caseworker critical of the reform stressed that most clients wanted to meet a caseworker face-to-face, adding, 'can't we afford that?'. Caseworkers feared that reduced client contact would change the conditions for relationship building, which could adversely affect establishing trustful relationships with clients. A caseworker explained: 'Our work is already an uphill struggle given the media reports about us. I can't work with my job seekers unless I gain their trust'. Another caseworker commented:

> We should have a local office where we meet the individuals. Not because I like to sit and talk to these people, or even ought to do it, but if I do not start there, start to listen, if I do not get the whole picture [I cannot help them] […] I don't think people expect that we will solve all their problems or that there are no rules to follow. But listening to people, that we can do.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

For PES caseworkers, building a relationship with the client was viewed as necessary to start an individual's change process: 'I have to small-talk first […] They are so frightened at the first meeting, I have to respect that. I have to get them on board'. One caseworker, highly critical of the organizational reforms [digitalization

and self-help], expressed in emotional language that he found it sad that not even his employer, the PES, seemed to understand the type of clients he faced:

> We who work with the most vulnerable jobseekers are actually a mixture of employment officers, psychiatric care workers, social workers […] When I see that someone feels miserable, I have to help.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Caseworkers who had worked in other businesses commented that when they started to work at the PES, they finally felt at home. They appreciated working with like-minded colleagues aiming to make a difference. Like a nurse or a doctor, they felt their work was more than a job and rather a calling.

Instead of gaining support, the managerially orchestrated emotional regime caused frustration among caseworkers. As we conducted fieldwork at one local office, a manager had just returned from a conference on digital customer-oriented practices at the agency. However, the manager discovered that the staff did not follow agency policies and brought this up at an office meeting. The manager especially expressed concern that caseworkers did not refer clients to customer service. Instead, they sought to keep personal contact with clients, and the manager found out that they even instructed clients to send them an email after getting a job. This caused debate at the meeting. The manager insisted that caseworkers should instruct clients to call customer service. Caseworkers reacted strongly, and at the meeting, one caseworker said, 'These emails are an energy boost for us!' Although colleagues murmured in support of the caseworker's intervention, the manager responded, 'Yes, but we will not have time or resources for doing that' (staff meeting, 2017).

This small episode stresses the conflict between emotional regimes at the PES regarding the rules for emotional display and support. The emotional regime expressed by caseworkers assumed close and personal relations with job seekers, not the distant relations that managerial models presumed. It promoted an understanding and recognition of clients' vulnerability and limitations, requiring a patient approach:

> I don't think it is good to place too high demands on people so that they fail all the time […] In order to succeed, they need to feel well and do things in which they can be successful. This may require demands on a low level and it's great to let things take their time, not to be in a hurry.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

In this local emotional regime, a good caseworker is someone who can listen and be empathetic but not feel pity for people. They should be creative, straightforward, and honest. It was essential to have a positive view of people, seeing every human being as of equal value. They also had to be interested in people. In that respect, caseworkers were in the human service business and considered personal and emotional involvement a requirement, sometimes extending beyond their formal role. Throughout interviews and observations, they told us about helping

clients far beyond formal tasks, for example, fulfilling the requirement of the SIA to be eligible for sickness benefits and allowing them to get improved medical certificates from health care services to be able to achieve sickness benefits if they did not qualify for unemployment insurance. Caseworkers took pride in going the extra mile for the client's sake.

> If you're personally involved, you have a heart and, this is really important, you know what you can do and if you don't have the knowledge to do so, well then you investigate; it's really easy to look things up.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

This local emotional regime provided rules and a script for emotional rewards, that is, to work with and help clients. PES caseworkers commented that they liked people and were genuinely interested in exploring their life situations, which they also saw as necessary to devise suitable interventions. 'I am interested in people', one caseworker said, and another explained:

> The advantage with working at the Public Employment Service is that it offers the opportunity to do different things and to work with different target groups […] the fun thing is that one meets so many people in different phases of life. It gives me so much to take part of their fates in life.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Similarly, another caseworker noted: 'The target group is very exciting […] If they get some help and support they get really grateful. So, I can see that I do a good job'. Yet another caseworker wanted as many people as possible to have 'a good life and it doesn't have to be getting a job, but finding one's place in life'. If he could help someone achieve that, he would feel satisfied with himself.

This implied that PES caseworkers aimed to build emotional alliances with clients. In contrast to the managerially orchestrated emotional regime, personally helping clients provided them with their emotional rewards: 'That's what I get back from the jobseekers, all the positiveness and the joy'.

> These people, it is often the people who are the most vulnerable and have it hardest in life, when they say 'Hi' to me [in the street] when they are among their friends. Then I feel 'maybe I am the only reasonable person they know'. I usually say 'Hi' back and talk to them if that's what they want. I think I can offer that.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

PES caseworkers typically told stories about successful cases. Success could be a client getting a job, but also experiences of progress in clients' lives:

> When you see those eyes that have moved from being worried or frightened and self-protective to shining […] It's about respect, about joy, about starting

> to believe in something. When they succeed in that, I get my reward. If they get a job or start an internship […] then I feel pride. That's the reward, when they succeed, I am successful. I get many out.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Other caseworkers recalled a good client meeting when they could see something happening to the client – 'a glow, a drive' – that fills them with energy and is emotionally rewarding.

Emotional rewards rarely came from managers, and the PES caseworkers in our study missed such feedback. They spoke about managers being absent from everyday work, partly due to the ideology of self-leadership (see Chapter 4). However, there were exceptions where local managers were present, asking how things were going, displaying interest and concern. Instead, emotional support came from fellow caseworkers. Compared with the social and emotional support structures surrounding the SIA caseworkers, those at the PES were left more to themselves – and to the clients. Several caseworkers stressed that they never got external recognition for their work, but they knew the value of their work from seeing clients grow and finding a place in life. One PES caseworker explicitly compared herself to the SIA staff that she encountered through her work:

> At the Social Insurance Agency, I am convinced that they have to leave themselves behind almost completely. One may ask then: 'Why do they do that? Don't they care at all?' I know how sad people get and how angry people are. To just opt for closing that door and then say 'we just follow the rules'. That's unbelievable.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Observations of these kinds allow us to identify an additional and partly conflicting emotional regime at the PES, represented at the local level (see Table 5.4). It remains characterized by the relationship-building and problem-solving approach and is based on two fundamental emotion norms, or feeling rules, namely being curious and emphatic. It is essential to explore the raw material in depth – the clients and their life situations – to devise suitable interventions. Thus, listening becomes a crucial tool: 'One has to be emphatic and curious in order to ask good questions'.

Despite organizational policies that aim to delimit caseworkers' responsibility and engagement with clients, we were told many stories about how caseworkers extended their responsibilities beyond their formal roles. Although the central managerial emotional model had not (yet) trickled down to the local offices, we found caseworkers expressing discomfort with the changes to come or, in other cases, expressing mixed feelings about them.

The need to build emotional alliances with clients as well as handling the emotionally exposed position as caseworker had to be combined. Consequently, we found that the local regime included two types of emotional tactics, as illustrated in Table 5.4. Building emotional bonds with clients (tactic A) or keeping a somewhat

Table 5.4 A local occupational emotional regime in the PES

Feeling rules:
Like people!
Feel pride in helping clients grow and find their way in life
Feel pride in solving problems (for jobseekers and employers)
Be empathic
Be curious
Display rules:
Display understanding of clients' difficult life situation
Display a genuine interest in the individual
Display pragmatism
Emotional tactics:
Expand the sphere of responsibility and personal involvement (A)
Build emotional alliances with clients (A)
Confirm the client's feelings while stressing the caseworker's role (B)
Display feelings but do not stay in them (B)

more distanced relationship is linked to an ideal of bureaucratic professionalism (tactic B). Some caseworkers pointed to the balancing act that an emotional alliance requires: 'One is torn between being a fellow human being and filling one's occupational role all the time'. Caseworkers thus felt torn between clients and the system. Another caseworker said: 'It is a challenging balance because I feel for the person in front of me, who is exposing their whole life, and simultaneously one should be a civil servant and be professional, but at the same time empathic'. Two ideals of emotional professionalism had to be combined.

Acting professionally requires a series of coping strategies, indicating variation in the local emotional regime. Despite cherishing a close alliance with jobseekers, caseworkers also spoke extensively about drawing a line between work and leisure time, as it could be emotionally draining to have too close relations with clients. As a tactic, they had learned to 'drop things' and 'close the door' when they left the office, not to let experiences at work absorb their private life. This included leaving their phones and computers at work. Another tactic involved breaking away from the emotional alliances and emotionally distancing themselves from jobseekers' problems, concerns, and emotions. Others talked about directing conversations with clients, for example, learning to say 'stop' to the assistance clients may want to get and directing the conversation towards getting a job. Several caseworkers noted that this tactic was time-consuming, as the longer one had been in the profession, the easier it was to deal with job seekers' outbursts or aggressions. However, this situation turned out to be complicated. When some caseworkers were asked how they felt after meeting a demanding jobseeker, they responded, 'Ask my family'.

Conclusion

Governance through emotions is a powerful tool for organizations to steer caseworkers and foster commitment to organizational vision and goals. Emotional

regimes provide a prescribed set of emotions, including how to display and tactically express them. However, this chapter finds that emotional regimes are complex entities within organizations, with caseworkers aligning, promoting, yet also acting against the managerially orchestrated emotional regimes. Evans and Hupe (2020b) remarked that although the manager can act as a *regisseur* and direct the organizational scene, the caseworkers act and make decisions. Evans and Hupe initially had client decisions in mind. Yet, the analogy of a *regisseur* and scene is equally relevant to capture how emotional regimes are enforced and encountered in public agencies.

The emotional regimes in each agency differ on a series of central accounts, as each regime prescribes a specific type of emotional professionalism (Larsson, 2014). Driven by a bureaucratic ethos, emotional professionalism in the SIA – especially in the last regime type – means acting as insurance guardians. The regime is legitimized through top-management policies and visions, yet it is reinforced and internalized through formal and informal collegial interaction rituals in everyday working life. This allowed the SIA to maintain an emotional regime that made perfect sense to organization members but appeared morally outrageous to outsiders as caseworkers rejected insurance applications despite changing political rules and regulations, which is similar to Wettergren's (2010) findings in her analysis of the Migration Board in Sweden. The emotional regime in the SIA brought staff together, fostering an organizational culture driven by higher deeds. It moulded a distinct form of organizational professionalism, according to which achieving organizational targets was what being professional was about. This emotional regime, moreover, was instrumental in forming the agency's 'rejection culture', or 'rejection machine' in Altermark's (2020) terms. Local caseworkers closely aligned with the rules and scripts prescribed, especially during the latter management period.

Some scholars have argued that emotional regimes have different qualities. Some regimes tend to be loose, allowing for the 'navigation' of feeling and the emergence of diverse sets of emotion management tools (Reddy, 2001: 126). Our analysis suggests that the SIA regime, following the insurance script, is tight because it allowed less room for caseworkers to act and reflect. However, this might be a misleading interpretation. An alternative interpretation is that the emotional regime of the post-NPM management period – that of a customer-oriented bureaucracy – entailed too much complexity for local caseworkers, but the 'insurance-like' emotional script with less client contact was seen by SIA caseworkers as facilitating their work. This suggests that tight emotional regimes also allow for caseworker agency, even when there is a perfect match between them.

The PES emotional regime differs from the SIA on several accounts. Instead of being structured as two consecutive regimes that replace each other, the PES regimes are structured across a central–local divide and a managerial–caseworker divide. Although PES top management started introducing organizationally sanctioned emotional conduct in line with the SIA, it remained a looser emotional regime. This quality allowed for the navigation of feelings (Reddy, 2001) and the maintenance of a local emotional regime that significantly differed from the managerial

regime diffused through the PES headquarters. Whereas SIA caseworkers looked upward for emotional support (to managers), PES caseworkers gained emotional support from client contacts to a greater extent. Key emotional zones (cf. Bolton, 2005) emerged organically in client interaction or collegial interaction, rather than organizationally directed and overseen, as in the SIA. For the PES staff, it was the emotional alliances with clients that made work rewarding, whereas for the SIA staff, it was the emotional rewards from managers and peers.

This illustrates important differences in the normative infusion of caseworkers in each agency. In the SIA, the emotional regime was prescribed top-down and mediated, not least by storytelling, by which emotional and behavioural scripts and norms were communicated, enforced, and embraced. In the PES, the emotional regimes were both centrally and locally orchestrated, and in the latter, shaped by caseworkers' shared experiences from the floor as well as by collegial interaction in the local settings. Because of the mutual integration into one emotional regime, SIA staff are 'easier' to shape by management interventions and discourses. Because of the decoupling into two emotional regimes, PES staff are less easy to govern. They are less dependent on management and its guidance in everyday work, and since they gain emotional rewards elsewhere, they can adopt a distant relationship to management discourse. This indicates that the PES is shaped by multiple, potentially overlapping and conflicting normative regimes.

6 Governance by peers

Introduction

This chapter explores governance by peers as a central mechanism through which normative governance plays out in organizations and street-level bureaucracies (SLBs). Peer governance occurs through horizontal rather than vertical work processes and may take radically different forms depending on the nature of the collective work processes and their relationship to management. How horizontal work processes intersect, interact with, and possibly even counteract vertical governance structures in street-level bureaucracies is critical for how governance by peers plays out.

The chapter investigates peer governance at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Public Employment Service (PES) linked to two types of governance by peers: collegiality and collegial autonomy exercised with relative independence from management interference and peer processes closely attuned to implementing management visions and goals through group mechanisms.[1] We are also interested in how peer governance turns into conformity of thinking, peer pressure, and peer 'policing'. In our empirical study, the traditional form of collegiality is represented by the PES offices, and peer governance entailing peer pressure to achieve conformity is represented by the SIA offices, the latter being supported by the use of organized teamwork in the SIA.

Collegiality and teamwork build on two different forms of cooperation logic (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009). Collegiality is a crucial aspect of the work of professions, reflected in mutual advice-giving among professional peers who retain their individual autonomy but exchange information, ideas, and experiences, as well as participate in collegial decision-making based on shared work norms (e.g. Friedson, 2001). Parsons argued (in dialogue with Weber) that an increasing incorporation of professionals into government meant a growing collegialization of bureaucracy and hence, a modification of line authority. Professionals typically assume a 'moral responsibility' for implementing a social commitment (or purpose) as well as a 'cognitive rationality' (Waters, 1989: 947–8; Parsons, 1939, 1969), acquired and conveyed through professional education and training. Nevertheless, shared work norms can also be the result of workplace training and socialization, as we will see in the case of the PES.

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For the purpose of our analysis, we view collegiality as based on a solidarity that builds on a social relation over time, an idea of reciprocal obligations closely related to sharing a common work situation or professional identity (Bovbjerg, 2006: 247). This means that seniority, in terms of work experience, tends to confer status in collegial communities. Collegial cultures and communities may result in an 'us and them' relation to management (Bovbjerg, 2006: 247), where peers form 'buffer cultures' (Lindgren, 1992), sheltering against management ideas and norms coming 'from above' (Jacobsson et al., 2020). Thus, too much collective autonomy exercised by peers may constitute a challenge for management.

However, collective processes and cultures may also be operational in enforcing management ideas and norms. Managers in SLBs can use horizontal governance mechanisms strategically by directing social processes, providing scripts, tasks, targets, and using group mechanisms to enforce them. One way in which group processes and dynamics can be used strategically by management to obtain management goals is in the use of organized teamwork (e.g., Procter & Mueller, 2000), as we will see in the case of the SIA. Here, teamwork is essentially a strategic attempt by management to govern collective work processes indirectly, shaping in a more subtle way the frontline workers' beliefs about their mission as well as the way they use their discretion, which we conceptualize as an exercise of normative control. Such normative governance might be further enforced by peer norms and peer pressure (Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). Operating in such a way, management-induced and directed teamwork may work to reinforce rather than counterbalance line authority.

Collegiality ideally presupposes open exchange based on shared professional (or occupational) norms. However, peers in an SLB – just as other groups of peers – may also develop their own self-regulatory systems of commitment and control. Peer interaction may be conducive to the development of group pressure to conform to majority views, resulting in the suppression of minority views, what Sinclair (1992) described as 'the tyranny of a team ideology'. In her analysis, team ideology tends to camouflage conflicts and power/coercion with the appearance of consultation and cohesion (Sinclair, 1992). Team ideology can be said to build on a notion of 'harmony ideology' (Nader, 1990) where preservation of group harmony is a value in itself, and diverging views are seen as threatening to group cohesion. Whether peer governance turns into such a mode of group thinking and pressure is an empirical question best answered by ethnographic research. In the remainder of this chapter, we look into the real-life social processes in SLBs, involving peers in different ways, and the ways in which governing by peers occurs in the two agencies studied. We start with the SIA and its use of organized teamwork.

Teamwork in the SIA

Teamwork was a key component in the normative governance and control of the street-level bureaucrats within the SIA at the time of our study and the main way in which peer governance played out. It worked as a decentralized form of governance, through which normative control was spread in the organization and built

into everyday operations. Through teamwork, the normative order was maintained and reinforced by team members through peer norms and peer pressure, also in the absence of specialists and managers. Being introduced as an obligatory method of working at all SIA agencies throughout Sweden, teamwork was used as a key instrument for managing caseworker discretion to achieve organizational targets. To understand and conceptualize such work processes built on a strategic combination of vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms, it is useful to draw on insights from governing by teamwork in private companies.

Teamwork as management technology

Teamwork is a widely used management technique in companies, being part of a corporate culture whereby employers seek to achieve simultaneously the twin objectives of employee commitment and pleasure in work *and* efficiency goals (e.g., Barker, 1993). It is a management model based on horizontal structures, team-building, the release of co-worker potential, the 'infusion' of shared values, and the mobilization of positive feelings to achieve organizational goals (e.g., Benders & van Hootegem, 2000). With its emphasis on team autonomy and self-management, we view teamwork as entailing a shift away from hierarchical control towards a more subtle technique for the exercise of normative governance, entailing both the elicitation of commitment and the exercise of control.

According to teamwork ideology, employee motivation and commitment are intended to be enhanced through more collective 'ownership' of the work and by producing a positive group spirit (Benders & van Hootegem, 2000; Sinclair, 1992). Operating through such social and emotional mechanisms, teamwork enhances group feelings of community (Barker, 1993: 422) and 'we-ness' at the workplace. Rather than a question of 'us and them' in relation to management, it is about 'we' as an organization working together to achieve organizational goals (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009). Teamwork may thus function as an instrument for achieving strong identification and loyalty with the organization, aligning individual motivation and organizational rationality (e.g., Knight & McCabe, 2003). Achieving job commitment and satisfaction through sociability and self-actualization at work typically works in tandem with achieving more instrumental objectives of improved performance and organizational efficiency (e.g., Barker, 1993; Procter & Mueller, 2000). Following Adair, a team here is a distinctive class of group, which is more task-oriented than other groups and has a set of obvious rules and rewards for its members (Adair, 1986).

In terms of exercising control, teamwork has been viewed as producing more subtle and indirect normative forms of control, which are more difficult to resist because they are less apparent. While often framed in positive terms, teamwork typically builds on team rules and obligations (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009; Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). Operating through collective responsibilization and peer control, teamwork is both disciplining and self-disciplining (e.g., Knight & McCabe, 2003; Saario et al., 2017). Based on an ethnographic study of team interactions in a manufacturing company, Barker viewed self-managed teams as a 'tightening of

the iron cage', achieving a concertive form of control that is 'more powerful, less apparent, and more difficult to resist' (Barker, 1993: 408) than that of the former hierarchical governance. Team members developed a system of value-based, normative rules that controlled their actions more powerfully than the former system and that became increasingly rationalized and naturalized over time (Barker, 1993).

However, some studies have found that teamwork as a management strategy can evoke resistance. Knight and McCabe (2003) reported that some employees displayed awareness of management's attempt to mould them and rejected the pressure to conform. Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) found that teamwork produced unity against management (as in the case of buffer cultures). Moreover, as teamwork is typically initiated by management, any autonomy implemented tends to be autonomy on management's terms (Procter & Mueller, 2000: 7–8). Consequently, employees may experience the contradiction that management expects independence while teamwork demands conformity to team discipline (Knight & McCabe, 2003: 1615). Moreover, teamwork frequently means an additional task in an already full job schedule, and forced group interaction has been found to produce increased conflicts, frustration, and stress (e.g., Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009; Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). Hence, teamwork may give rise to mixed feelings, as work may become both more demanding and more rewarding (Knight & McCabe, 2003: 1614).

What does teamwork as a management tool do to the exercise of discretion in SLBs, where frontline staff traditionally have been viewed as having a certain discretion in applying general policy to individual cases (Lipsky, 2010)? Whereas private companies target profit-making, public officials have to achieve multiple objectives at the same time, conforming simultaneously to cost-efficiency requirements, qualitative service provision, and assurance of rule-of-law principles, as well as meeting political targets, all of which render their normative regimes more complex. How does such teamwork blend with the logic of a state bureaucracy? On this specific issue, research is generally scarce.[2]

Some studies have been conducted on teamwork in the UK tax agency. Procter and Currie (2004) investigated target-based teamwork and found increased reciprocal interdependence among team members, both concerning tasks and outcomes, although the normative elements of teamwork were downplayed. Carter et al. (2011) found that target-driven work was prioritized at the expense of non-target-driven work, which resulted in a loss of employee control and discretion; moreover, some employees found their public service ethos undermined. Procter and Radnor (2014) reported some evidence of loss of employee discretion, but also that some employees felt empowered by greater predictability in the work and a greater identification with the organization. The better-performing teams in terms of reaching their targets felt a more positive team spirit. Specifically, two studies of teamwork in the SIA have been conducted. Holmgren Caicedo et al. (2015) found that despite talk of autonomy, staff were designated from above, which led to conflicts in the teams. Nevertheless, teamwork enhanced a sense of shared responsibility for cases. However, the highly formalized quality work of 'continuous improvement' that was the focus of the teamwork at the time of their study left less

time for substantive discussion of cases (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). Similarly, Fransson and Quist (2018) found that teamwork was supported by caseworkers when the aim was to assist in casework and help achieve production targets, rather than to take part in quality work.

We view teamwork as an alternative way of securing organizational loyalty and controlling caseworker action and discretion (compared with, for instance, governance by rules and manuals), working *through* the aspirations of employees as well as peer pressure and control. We argue that it is these social forces at play that give teamwork its normative power. Thus, we analyse the mobilization of commitment and exertion of control at play in teamwork, as well as what is accomplished by team interactions in terms of shared understandings, common feelings, and organizational loyalty and identification. We look at both the normative control carried out by management *and* the normative control (re)produced in the collegial interaction in the local SIA offices.

Introduction of teamwork in the SIA

Teamwork was first introduced in the SIA in 2012 as part of implementing a Lean and post-New Public Management (NPM) ideology based on 'value-based governance', with a strong customer focus and notions of 'coaching leadership' and 'continuous improvement' (Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). The political instruction to the SIA at the time was to increase the public's confidence in the agency and sickness insurance and to make the agency more attractive as a workplace. Teamwork was introduced in the entire organization, throughout the country and for all managers and caseworkers. For caseworkers, teamwork was intended to achieve several objectives simultaneously, namely collective learning among caseworkers, increased job satisfaction, and the achievement of efficiency goals. During this post-NPM period, teamwork was oriented towards increased autonomy in casework as well as caseworkers' contribution to quality work (as part of the management ideal of 'continuous improvement').

As elaborated in previous chapters, in 2015, a shift in management ideology took place, emphasizing the correct application of the law and uniform case assessment as well as a return to stricter management by objectives. The numerical target that the sickness benefit rate should not exceed 9.0 days per individual and per year in 2020 as a national average guided the teamwork. The SIA was instructed to contribute to reducing the Swedish sickness absence rate by making sick-leave periods fewer and shorter. Teamwork was now reoriented towards achieving the goals of stricter eligibility control, timely assessments, and, as a consequence, a lower sickness absence rate. The managers interviewed for this research were very clear about the fact that the number of rejections and withdrawals of benefits had to increase, and the development curve was displayed at office meetings monthly. The goal of 9.0 was constantly present in the SIA offices studied, and it was communicated at staff meetings and discussed by caseworkers. One caseworker commented: 'We are fed this all the time, at staff meetings, that we have to get the numbers down, we have to.'

All SIA employees were divided into teams: managers, specialists, and caseworkers alike. Caseworkers were sorted into teams with approximately 8–10 members and organized according to the geographical area covered. At the time of the study, all teams had a team co-ordinator assigned to them, a caseworker selected by the manager to be a link between the management level and team members. The explicitly stated ideal was that the teams should be self-governing. For instance, when in need of help in the casework, caseworkers were first to ask their colleagues for advice. Specialists on the insurance and medical advisors were available as resources for the team for consultation and guidance, but only when the resources within the team were exhausted. The introduction of teamwork in the SIA was connected to a transition in leadership style 'from cop to coach' (Procter & Mueller, 2000: 13), and 'coaching leadership' was conceived as an important part of organizational learning.

Formally, each client had one specific caseworker assigned to them; however, each team shared collective responsibility for their cases. Consequently, the introduction of teamwork in the SIA meant some changes in the work organization compared with before. The caseworker teams now shared joint responsibility for cases within the team, and team members were to back each other up in times of high workload or sick absence. Before teamwork was introduced, caseworkers had responsibility only for the cases assigned to them. In the local offices studied, team performance and productivity came more into focus than individual performance, reinforcing the notion of teams as the main performing unit. At the team level, timely assessment in relation to the rehabilitation chain was the main focus of follow-up, whereas at the office level, performance in relation to the target of 9.0 and the numbers of rejections and withdrawals of benefits were measured and communicated.

Teamwork was a cornerstone in the normative governance of casework. Formal team meetings took place on a weekly basis, in which difficult cases were collectively discussed. However, informal team interactions were considerably more frequent. Daily meetings around team boards, where team members gathered and discussed caseload and team productivity, took place in the offices studied. Such 'pulse meetings' were intended to check the status of the team and the workflow. The teams were also supposed to pass on pulses up in the organization when encountering problems that could not be solved within the team. Because the team shared responsibility for the cases, team members were to help each other with case management when needed. Thus, teamwork was practiced both formally through regular team meetings and informally when caseworkers turned to each other *ad hoc*. Both aspects of teamwork are important to understand the extent of the normative governance and control exerted in and through teamwork.

Team creation as normative governance of caseworkers

As is typically the case with teamwork as a management tool (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009), teamwork at the SIA was compulsory. The sorting of caseworkers

into teams was carried out by local management, that is, from above. A local manager described the process as follows:

> When you take on this role [as a caseworker], you are to work in a team. Full stop. That's the way we work. And we have had the discussion with some caseworkers who have said 'I do a great job, I do not want to work in a team'. Then we have to say, 'well, making exceptions for you does not work. You have to [be in a team], and to develop in your work you have to take on this way of working. This is how we do it here, we understand that you might need time, and you can take it at your own pace. But this is where you are going', and it has turned out really well. It is a question of maturing, a lot of issues related to how much can one show of oneself and how can one cooperate with others.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

Thus, the caseworker's ability to work in a team was conceived as a question of maturity and professional development. We may recall Kunda's view of normative control, namely that to the extent staff are shaped, shaping is framed as a process of education, personal development, or growth (Kunda, 2006: 6), which resonates with the discourse on teamwork as increasing autonomy and enabling learning.

The notion of maturity was also used to describe team processes at the SIA, and some teams were considered more mature than others. The local manager commented:

> There is great variation between the teams. Of all the teams that I meet, there are some that are mature and well-functioning. But I also meet teams that are not in the game. It is more like a group of people who are angry most of the time. […] or a group of people that think lots of different things.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

Participating in teamwork was a way of taking responsibility for one's own professional development. It is also notable in this quote that teams, as units, were expected to develop a common way of thinking.

As a way to improve and facilitate the group processes, in some of the local offices, management arranged teamwork training for the caseworkers. Team development training by process leaders from the SIA headquarters was organized, in which the challenges and advantages of teamwork were discussed. The training was performed with the regular teams, using them as examples and as a basis for discussion. The teams were to highlight their expectations of each other and to articulate 'team agreements' that should guide their future teamwork:

> Well, we do our team agreement for this year. What are the rules? And this includes everything from rules of the game, how we relate to each other in the team, it is about keeping time, the meetings, turning off your phones in team

> meetings, prioritizing team meetings, to talk respectfully with each other and so on.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Team agreements were thus components of the normative governance of each team. Agreeing on team rules is a common component in teamwork and typically concerns agreeing to take responsibility for one's own development and supporting each other, talking and listening to others with openness and honesty, and allowing room for others and recognizing them by praising them (e.g., Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009).

Creating a feedback culture and 'team promises' were themes discussed during the training. Team members were encouraged to give and receive feedback and to conceive feedback as gifts to one another. When it came to changing the behaviour of team members, feedback was considered most efficient if it related to the emotions that a certain behaviour evokes. The facilitator from the headquarters in charge of team development training explained:

> What a person has produced or done has an impact on all of us, on our team. For instance, when you made this, it made me happy. Or, when you are late, I become sad, irritated and impatient. Because it makes me think that you do not care about me or what we have agreed on. I feel as if I am not important to you. But we need to talk about emotions. And this can be difficult, if we are not used to doing so. Emotions can be happy, sad, angry, curious […] if we express our own needs when giving feedback to others, it has a better outcome, if cooperation is our goal.
>
> (interview, SIA team facilitator, headquarters)

Maintaining a team spirit characterized by enthusiasm and commitment is a strong norm in teamwork ideology (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009), but it can also be viewed as disciplinary. The teams were jointly responsible for not jeopardizing the good team spirit, a message clearly conveyed in the team training. Moreover, team rules developed by each team were a way to create a unified team with a shared understanding of what was perceived as appropriate within the team, thereby increasing the level of consensus as well as the normative pressure exerted on the individual caseworker. Negotiated rules were not to be questioned. As the rules were not imposed on the team by management but developed by the teams themselves, they became more enforceable and more difficult to oppose for caseworkers. Not only the actual casework but also the emotions and the well-being of fellow team members were at stake here (see also Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). This understanding of a feedback culture in teamwork became a subtle way of governing caseworkers to perform in line with organizational goals and norms, demanding compliance and team discipline.

Teams as self-governing units in charge of their work were considered by local management as the key to success in relation to improved results. With the

introduction of teamwork, team performance was in greater focus than individual performance, with teams assuming joint responsibility for the results. Observing a manager meeting, we noted that one manager told the others that her office had started a couple of years before to extract indicators on the length of sickness periods, and how the cases were assessed. Soon after, the teams started to ask for these indicators themselves. From the management perspective, delivering statistics more often than once a month did not make much sense. Nevertheless, the teams kept asking for more frequent feedback, illustrating the caseworkers' internalization of their commitment to organizational goals and the collective desire to perform.

Teamwork was used strategically for managing caseworker discretion to achieve the target of 9.0 in the SIA offices studied, and it was stated that it was only by stricter eligibility control that this target could be met. This type of governance was welcomed by many caseworkers who were looking for support and confirmation that they assessed cases as intended by the organization, that is, in the 'right' way. Difficult cases were discussed in the team, with supportive coaching by specialists with medical training in line with the notion of coaching leadership. One caseworker described the benefits in this way:

> You get in like black and white, 'am I thinking the right way? Is it reasonable to have these problems as a consequence of a certain diagnosis?' Because we are not trained in medicine, not at all. We only interpret the medical documentation we receive.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Hence, even if the teams were posited as self-governing and the goal was to have them 'take ownership', ultimately, the organization decided what was the 'right' way to use discretion. Previous ways of working were disqualified, with the motivation that the application of the law had been far too generous (ISF, 2018; Altermark, 2020).

To understand the role teams played in organizational goal achievement, it is important to understand the role teams played for caseworkers, both as an arena for support in the technical aspects of casework and for giving and receiving social and emotional support. Team members were to take – and took – joint responsibility for the assessment of cases in line with organizational goals *and* for the support that team members may need. The caseworkers stressed in interviews the importance of having team members to consult with in cases that required complicated processing and to be able to share experiences and knowledge with peers. The notion of 'our cases' – as opposed to 'my cases' – was an important aspect of teamwork and relieved caseworkers when there was a pressing caseload.

At the same time, it was also clear that teamwork contributed to goal attainment by facilitating tough decisions, such as the rejection or withdrawal of benefits. In the most complicated cases, when decisions were questioned by the clients, the case could be handed over to a team colleague. A manager confirmed the role that teams played in supporting caseworkers when making difficult decisions:

> When it is hard, and when clients are upset, the caseworkers now have the team behind them, and the specialists, and the managers. That gives support in the background, a feeling of 'I am making the right decision'. Otherwise, when you are on your own, you start to discuss with yourself, 'did I really make the right decision? Or am I too tough?' When you have taken the case to the team, you feel more safe and secure as a caseworker. You get more arguments. Even those caseworkers with great difficulties in making rejections and withdrawals, they also feel more comfortable.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

We will now see how teamwork in the SIA played out in terms of peer governance, showing how the normative control entailed in teamwork was taken on board and enforced by the teams.

Teamwork as peer governance

It has been noted that teamwork is typically articulated in an egalitarian language where everybody is responsible for the outcome of their work. This means that employees, to some extent, become managers not only for themselves in 'self-managing' but also for each other (Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009, drawing on Richard Sennet). Viewing the team as a performing unit rather than as individuals, as well as referring problem-solving to the teams, was clearly a way to encourage peer control to be exerted by team members in relation to each other. The shared team discussions, as opposed to individual consultations with managers and specialists, were seen by management as a way to make the work more efficient and secure a more uniform assessment of cases. Caseworkers here learned from each other, but teamwork also created peer pressure to comply with the common norms. Team 'ownership' of the work operated to keep caseworkers in line with what was perceived as appropriate behaviour in casework, while also preventing them from becoming too independent in their work, which in turn created pressure on the individual caseworker to comply. Teamwork prevented caseworkers from deviating too far in their casework, that is, from making too many rejections or too many approvals. In the offices studied, the allowance for such deviation was rather narrow as local managers did not want any caseworker – or team – to stand out. The following caseworker described her perception of the team as both supporting and controlling:

> There is enormous group pressure, of course … Above all, the team is there for us to support each other. But I don't see it only like that. It increases the group pressure enormously. Like, I don't want to be a burden for the team. You don't want to have bad numbers for the team. I am new here, and, well, this is not really healthy.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

The transparency around performance also provided the incentive to comply with norms and expectations. For instance, the recurrent comparisons between offices

and teams functioned as ways to create consensus and avoid too great discrepancies in the casework, as well as to enhance productivity pressures. To avoid shame and not place co-workers in a difficult situation, team members were inclined to perform in line with the expectations. In our study, teams were key instruments for demonstrating performance (cf. Clarke, 2005: 218), in which they strove to excel in organizational goal attainment. In line with the Lean management ideology that had been implemented throughout the SIA some years earlier, in several of the offices, the focus on goals and targets was visualized on team boards openly displayed in the office. Statistics related to the workloads of team members and goal achievement of the team were presented, especially production numbers. A caseworker or a team stood out if their performance was not 'in line' with assumed production. In the teams, deviations became the centre of attention and the target for correction when fellow caseworkers suggested possible ways of improving the work. Thus, the visualization of casework became self-regulating; the manager did not need to interfere as the team did the work on its own.

Collective 'ownership' of performances was also mobilizing. One example of the role of teamwork in this respect was when teams invented reward systems when achieving organizationally set goals (see also Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). Some teams used stars as symbols that were applied to the whiteboard to indicate when goals had been met, both goals in relation to production and the work environment (see also Chapter 7). When a certain number of stars was reached, the team rewarded itself, for instance, by going for an 'after-work' drink together. The rewards were initiated by the team, paid for by the team members, and performed outside of working hours. These self-initiated rewards illustrate the degree to which team members had internalized the organization's goals and ideals, and show how, through social processes, organizational goals were transformed into personal goals (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998: 9). Teamwork aligned individual motivation and organizational rationality in a rather seamless way (e.g., Procter & Mueller, 2000: 17; Knights & McCabe, 2003). This reward system was not enforced by managers. Instead, the team itself invented incentives to achieve organizational targets, thus reproducing the organizational norms. This subtle way of governing through teams meant that self-regulating systems to enhance goal achievement were developed.

Team meetings were also occasions for caseworkers to prove that they possessed the right qualities, being able to make the right – including tough – decisions. Being happy about good numbers – even if these signalled that more clients were declined sickness benefits – was expected and natural; failure to feel that way signalled that one might not belong there. Acting according to the norms and performing according to expectations allowed team members to feel they were on a joint mission, namely to protect the sickness insurance system against excessive usage, a role that evoked collective pride among most – but not all – caseworkers. Criticism against the current interpretation of sickness insurance and the current use of discretion came up in individual interviews, although rarely – if at all – in the collective work processes that we observed. This testified to the strong peer pressure to unite behind the common line.

Newly employed caseworkers were often viewed as tougher in the eligibility controls than more senior caseworkers, who were considered too soft-hearted for the task by fellow caseworkers and sometimes also by the local management (also evidenced in Altermark, 2020). The capacity to be 'tough' in case assessment conferred status in the offices studied as well as evoking pride among the caseworkers. In one of the SIA offices, a local manager reported in an interview that he kept newly employed caseworkers in their own teams. The reason for this was to prevent the relative benefit generosity of the 'old-timers' from influencing the newcomers. As we will see later, this attitude stands in sharp contrast to the PES, where senior colleagues were seen as resources in socializing newcomers, and testifies to the instrumentality with which management used teamwork to achieve current organizational objectives.

Teamwork as a combination of vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms

Teamwork in the SIA was thus embedded in a discourse of coaching leadership and concerned with the horizontal interaction between co-workers and 'coaches'. The discourse played down the hierarchical relation, building on governance by encouragement and collegial support rather than order-giving. Moreover, the low-profile participation of specialists in the teamwork, as a support function to a self-reflecting team, allowed team members to feel that they were the ones doing the thinking, after which they gained the approval of the specialist. This normative control was effective in creating conformity in assessment while evoking less resistance than 'command'-style leadership.

Bovbjerg and Søgaard Sørensen (2009) noted that teamwork is typically described using positive phrases regarding influence, freedom, and autonomy, while quitting the team not being an option. In the SIA, there appeared at times a clear tension between, on the one hand, achieving mature autonomous teams that were capable of controlling their own work, and on the other hand, the hierarchical governing structures. One caseworker noted:

> Well, we are supposed to be self-governing units. But it feels somewhat like a paradox. I perceive that we are an extremely hierarchical organization. I have asked about the degree of autonomy, or freedom, we have as a team. In how we organize. And as I understand it, we do not have that much freedom actually. What every individual does in the team, and how the team selects its members, is nothing that we can have an influence on. It all comes from above.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

While the teams were embedded in a discourse of autonomous units capable of making their own decisions, what was perceived as the right way to do casework was not developed by the teams but prescribed by management and the specialists in a hierarchical structure. Moreover, teamwork in the SIA was introduced top-down, it was compulsory, and team members were assigned, not self-selected. It was also clear that *not* complying with the norms and the current management

goals was perceived as problematic. The managers' explicit position was comply or consider if the SIA is the right place for you to work. If you are not a team player, then working at the SIA is perhaps not the best place for you.

This rhetoric of consensus was reproduced by the team: teams were to be characterized by good spirit and agreement, which readily suppressed more critical voices. While teams could, in principle, develop group norms and use the team support to mobilize against management (Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998), we saw few such examples in the teamwork studied. Caseworkers did not use their team interactions to develop a buffer culture, to protect their own ideals regarding casework. Deviant voices were suppressed in the social interaction processes but expressed to us individually in interviews: 'I am just trying to survive in the organization, till the next management shift comes', a caseworker with long experience in the SIA told us. We interpret this absence of criticism in the collective work processes as an effect of the strong normative control that not only management but also fellow team members exerted on individual caseworkers. The lack of voice opportunities made exit the main option available for caseworkers uncomfortable with the stricter policies. According to data on staff turnover obtained from the SIA, the number of caseworkers dealing with sickness insurance who resigned increased dramatically from 7% in 2014 to 19% in 2019.

However, had governance *only* been hierarchical, it would most likely have evoked more resistance among the frontline staff. We suggest that it was precisely by integrating hierarchical and horizontal governance mechanisms in mostly a seamless fashion that teamwork became such a highly effective way of governing the SIA caseworkers in line with the current management objectives and political goals (the 9.0 vision). Teamwork was instrumental in mobilizing commitment to this specific goal as well as mainstreaming the casework. Importantly, from the perspective of this book, through teamwork, normative control was spread in the organization. We saw that the normative order was maintained and reinforced by team members through peer norms and peer pressure, also in the absence of specialists and managers. We conclude that teamwork was instrumental in establishing and reproducing a culture of consensus in the SIA, whereby the scope for deviation or questioning was reduced while commitment to management goals was created also from below. This meant that the team interactions enforced a groupthink mode (Janis, 1982).

Our study supports the *de facto* loss of individual caseworker discretion by teamwork (Carter et al., 2011). However, interestingly, this loss was largely *welcomed* by the caseworkers, who appreciated the guidance and support from specialists as well as peers in the teamwork. Since the teams met caseworkers' need for support in case processing, teamwork was fully endorsed by most of the caseworkers as long as the focus was on production targets and assistance in case assessment. We suggest that the welcoming of the narrowing down of caseworker discretion must be viewed in light of the normative control exerted through teamwork and other forms of workplace meetings, by which a normative 'infusion' of the staff was achieved. Moreover, teamwork protected caseworkers from emotional dissonance and legitimized the current way of working.

Finally, the question arises concerning what this form of teamwork does to the role of the street-level bureaucrat when implemented in a welfare state bureaucracy. Teamwork, through its collective responsibility for casework, challenges traditional understandings of caseworker discretion and their rather independent role in policy implementation (e.g., Lipsky, 2010). In the case of the SIA, discretionary power was *de facto* transferred from the individual caseworker to the team, and the assessment of difficult or complex cases was discussed and agreed on by the team. However, the clients were completely unaware of this process (as in Saario et al., 2017); officially, decisions were signed only by the individual caseworker. Thus, even if the formal decision remained with the individual worker, the decision-making *de facto* involved team members providing advice as well as exerting peer pressure. We view teamwork in the SIA primarily as a management strategy for managing and controlling caseworker discretion by invoking collective forces and social mechanisms. The teams studied reproduced the organizational norms from above, enforced them through group dynamics and pressure, and thereby naturalized the normative regime, including the vision of 9.0 as a 'reasonable' level of sick days in Sweden. The team negotiations, by which peers developed their own self-regulatory system of control, contributed to mainstreaming casework and were instrumental in creating acceptance for the narrowing down of discretion and in the shaping of casework – and the 'appropriate caseworker' – beyond formal policy.

It should be stressed that despite the use of horizontal governance mechanisms, the SIA remains a very hierarchical organization. Indeed, our study suggests that it is precisely the combination of hierarchical and horizontal governance processes that led to the narrowing of discretion in the SIA – not necessarily horizontal forms of governance *per se* – which could, in principle, play out as increasing collegiality and caseworker autonomy. To explore the defence of caseworker autonomy and discretion and the formation of buffer cultures, we now turn to the PES offices.

Collegiality in the PES

The normative ideals and techniques used in the Renewal Journey included elements of peer governance. Through the lens of self-leadership, employees were expected to take greater responsibility for the organization, its vision, and individual and collegial responsibilities. In previous chapters, this contrasted, and partly overlapped, with an occupational identity at PES offices, in which knowledge and expertise were built by those who do the actual work, namely the employment officers/caseworkers. Unlike at the SIA, where the expertise came from 'above' and was conveyed through headquarters, practice-based knowledge and work experience formed the basis for collegial sharing and authority at the PES.

A practice- and experience-based professionalism

Street-level decisions are typically based on practical knowledge and informal procedures, and are improvisational in the face of unpredictability (Maynard-Moody

& Musheno, 2000: 347). In this respect, PES caseworkers are typical street-level workers. They embraced the practical skills of handling the complexity of work, which, in turn, meant embracing discretion and was considered an essential part of work. As one caseworker spontaneously commented: 'I like problems […] I like complexity, I think it's fun when there are many parts to dig into'. Another caseworker expressed similar support for her work situation and the tasks involved: 'What I like the most is that it's a mix, one day is never like the other, and you can decide a lot yourself, how you organize the work. It is not controlled in that way. I think that's very nice'.

The complexity of their work in part stemmed from the fact that PES officers have two clients – job seekers *and* employers with the task of trying to satisfy the needs of both – while simultaneously meeting organizational goals. The complexity also stemmed from the fact that they have a variety of measures at their disposal, which necessitates exploring their human 'raw material' at depth (e.g., Hasenfeld, 2010), that is, the individual client and their life situation and current needs. Exploring the human 'raw material' of jobseekers required from PES frontline workers the same orientation as Sennett described in the case of nurses in his book on craftsmanship:

> To do good work means to be curious about, to investigate, and to learn from ambiguity. As with Linux programmers, nursing craft negotiates a liminal zone between problem solving and problem finding; listening to old men's chatter, the nurse can glean clues about their ailments that might escape a diagnostic checklist.
>
> (Sennet, 2008: 48f)

Being able to glean clues rather than ticking off checklists was what PES frontline workers considered their job skills to be about. Their focus here was on achieving substantive *outcomes* of their work, such as placing their clients in a job, training, or rehabilitation measures, in contrast to the SIA, where the formal procedures and organizational *outputs*, such as good numbers, were the focus.

Puzzle-solving was part of their 'craftsmanship' and a strong work ideal. Indeed, craftsmanship was a term that caseworkers frequently used in interviews when describing the nature of their work. Handling the complexity of work was part of their competence as caseworkers. They were skilled in tailoring solutions to individual job seekers concerning the local labour market. This, in turn, required discretionary decision-making, pragmatism, external contacts, and networking skills. Through close contact with clients and external actors, they developed personal skills and became skilled at using them (Noordegraaf, 2007).

Production discourse was almost entirely absent in the local PES offices we studied, in contrast to the SIA offices, where caseworkers often spoke of their work in terms of 'production'. Sennett (2008) contrasts craft and productivity and their different views of quality, noting that a production focus tends to associate time with quality: the one who works the most in the least time is deemed 'superior' or more qualified. However, individuals who perform the same work more slowly

are not necessarily inferior just for being slower. Sennett points to 'the craftsman's time, the slow time that enables reflection' (Sennett, 2008: 280). PES caseworkers, just like those at the SIA, felt time pressure. However, for them, reflection – not just individually but collectively – was viewed as essential for good work performance.

Newly appointed caseworkers took part in internal training courses, during which they gained information on the role of a public civil servant, as well as information on the PES and all the types of services for which the agency had responsibility. One caseworker remembers her training as led by other caseworkers and managers, 'telling the newly appointed how it works. That was very good. You also get to learn the system a bit. Then we have a thousand web training sessions you should take part in'. The roles included generalist training and specialist training associated with the particular types of programmes and groups caseworkers would be working with. However, others expressed criticism of these internal training sessions, stressing that they did not offer support for the craftsmanship associated with working as a caseworker at the PES:

> You never really get to learn how to do the job. How does the system work? How do I make decisions, how do I think, what should I prioritize? What is most important?
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

However, the craftsmanship associated with being a PES caseworker was especially learned from shadowing and consulting senior colleagues, in a valuable master–apprentice relationship. Maynard-Moody and Musheno noted that street-level workers tend to be proud of their 'reality-tested pragmatism, which is based on first-hand experiences and handed-down wisdom' from fellow street-level workers (2000: 354). This observation certainly applies to the PES staff we encountered, both regarding their pride in handling task complexity and being able to help clients with complex problems *and* the role of 'handed-down wisdom'. In their practice- and experience-based work culture (Jacobsson et al., 2020), senior colleagues' informal 'schooling' was key. In contrast to the SIA, where senior caseworkers tended to be dismissed as 'too soft-hearted', seniority conferred status at the PES. Colleagues used senior staff as resources and routinely consulted them in everyday work; they were considered critical in the socialization of new staff. A formalized mentoring system for newly employed staff also existed, in addition to three weeks of in-house training. A recently employed caseworker commented:

> We have a mentor. We also had mentor meetings every now and then following a scheme and where we could ask questions and try out things oneself. One learns the job by doing it, but even so, the introduction is important.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Even so, the most essential 'schooling' of newcomers was from more experienced colleagues. Through mentoring or learning by doing, caseworkers learned the

tricks of the trade, such as how to meet with clients and how to greet them. Peer governance at the PES hence resembles that of professions, with a strong shared identity and a common sense of purpose. However, it is acquired based on practice, experience of the work, and master–apprentice relations, rather than a common occupational/professional education.

Building office culture bottom-up

The staff meetings in the SIA were management-led, characterized for the most part by one-way communication; caseworkers were the audience and had very limited scope for discussion of the messages conveyed. By contrast, at the local PES offices, the staff meetings were more informal, noisy, and unstructured in nature. Jokes were frequent, assuming that meeting participants shared a common enough outlook to be able to share jokes. In comparison with the SIA, the relations between PES caseworkers and local managers appeared to be more relaxed and equal. Staff meetings were mostly led by the caseworkers, with the chairperson role alternating between them, while the managers kept in the background. One caseworker reported that she got upset when the managers came and 'kidnapped the meeting': 'They only have one point on the meeting agenda, and still the managers took over the whole meeting.' This caseworker's frustration reflects the way staff meetings were perceived and understood among PES caseworkers: as the agency's most important internal meeting where work-related topics should be discussed from the bottom up. This bottom-up ideology was fully supported by the local management in the offices studied, and it was also encouraged as part of the self-leadership ideology (see Chapter 4).

Work groups and division meetings thus served as a platform to raise topics for discussion and exert influence from the bottom up:

> The closest ones, the working group, and the division are the arenas where I have most scope for influence, and then from there taking the issues higher up. […] My work team meets every week, on Thursday mornings. They have changed over time. We have always had them, but from being a creative swarm when we were fewer people, they have become very structured. We have conversation leaders and a secretary and an agenda, almost like an office meeting. But everyone is free to bring up issues.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

The division meetings also provided arenas for bringing up issues for discussion: 'We have the agenda in our joint map in the computer. Everyone is free to bring up a point on the agenda'. Responsibility for chairing the meetings and taking notes rotated. Managers participated for the most part, but without chairing or leading the meetings. Collegial discussions were an integrated part of the organization of work. Nevertheless, a caseworker with long work experience complained about the silence at the staff meetings in his local office:

> We can bring these issues up at our meetings, at staff meetings, knowledge forum or office meetings. But no, then people get scared, for not believing themselves capable, for being criticized for saying the wrong things, or because there are colleagues who just want to go for coffee and will get irritated if I keep prolonging the meetings, or their career might be jeopardized at the next salary talk.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

He felt there was more scope for deviant voices when he started working in the agency many years before; nowadays colleagues do not dare speak up for their views. Nevertheless, in comparison with SIA staff meetings, those at the PES allowed for much more open discussion and questioning.

The atmosphere was, in general, characterized by scepticism towards current management directives coming from the headquarters, as caseworkers themselves had a clear picture of what was important and needed to be prioritized. The self-leadership discourse was met with sarcastic comments about PES staff always having been self-leaders, referring to their exercising of autonomy in work. The questioning of management directions 'from above' reflects the ideal of autonomy and discretion embraced by PES frontline staff, but it also reflected a sense of 'we are the ones that are doing the real work':

> The next time I hear Mikael Sjöberg [DG at the time], the way he talks and presents himself so self-righteously. He doesn't represent the Public Employment Agency because I'm at least as much the agency as he is. Well, if not more so. Did he ever get any person into employment? Do you understand? I meet employers. I wipe away tears.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Another caseworker commented:

> Sometimes I want to call Ylva [the Swedish Minister of Employment at the time] and say 'come and work with me in Direct Service', or Löfvén [Swedish Prime Minister at the time] too, to experience what this is all about, the handicraft we're doing, how people feel who come in here ... it's so easy to decide on things when you have a helicopter perspective, without experiencing the individual's reaction or the impact decisions have on the individual, but I experience that.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

This 'us and them' feeling was expressed mainly in relation to top management (cf. Bovbjerg & Søgaard Sørensen, 2009), but quite a few participants also complained about the absence of local managers in everyday work. From their side, local managers stressed that they stayed away as part of the reinforced self-leadership ideology. They considered their relative absence strategic as a method

to promote self-leadership among caseworkers. Previously, caseworkers came to her with inquiries, one local manager recalled. Another manager reflected similarly, stressing that it was not his job to explain how caseworkers should do their work, nor to provide detailed guidance on particular work tasks (interview, local manager). Since managers previously had been too involved in day-to-day work, something the current management wanted to avoid, this greater distance from caseworkers was intended to clarify roles rather than avoid responsibilities.

However, absent managers made caseworkers feel a lack of recognition for the work they did. This was in sharp contrast to the SIA offices, where the local managers were very much present in the local offices providing daily pep. One PES caseworker, who was somewhat frustrated with her work situation, noted:

> Our managers, they sit in their managers meetings. At least my [nearest] manager, she's very difficult to get hold of […] The other managers are available but we haven't understood what their leadership is really about because we don't get this coaching leadership.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Managerial ideas from the top level were frequently viewed as too distant from the real work and unfit for practice.

> The problem is that we have an enormous superstructure of indirect staff, I call myself direct staff as I meet clients. So many of them, first I have my division manager, then the office manager, then the regional market area manager, then the regional manager and then the Director-General. […] One would think that one of these managers would some time bring up the target group that I am working with [but no].
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

While the PES caseworkers in our study tended to complain about managers being absent from their everyday work, there were those who experienced managerial support:

> What's good with my boss is that he mostly has the time if I want to ask something. And I feel he takes me seriously if I encounter a challenge. Then I can ask him 'Am I thinking in the right way given the legal framework I have to follow?'. And then he says 'Yes, I think so'. But if I am not thinking in the right way and deviate too much from the legal framework he tells me so […] That sounding-board I cannot have with my colleagues, as they do not have the same responsibility [for the case].
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

In general, looking for confirmation from managers about thinking 'in the right way' was sought far less by PES staff – compared with SIA staff – although this last quote shows that it did occur. By contrast, the collegial support offered by peers was considered critical in the casework at the PES.

Collegial support: the role of the work group

PES caseworkers collaborated in work groups, that is, multifunctional teams where different competencies were combined, and caseworkers working with different target groups and types of measures met. Target groups could be newly arrived immigrants, people with reduced work capacity and need for rehabilitation, or the long-term unemployed. The aim was to improve co-ordination of cases as well as exchange and test ideas, using each other as sounding boards. In contrast to teamwork in the SIA, where caseworkers shared responsibility for case processing and performance, all PES caseworkers had their own clients.

Work group meetings took place weekly but with informal exchange in between. Caseworkers also collaborated at the division level, meeting monthly. Peer relations and peer consultation were considered critical for the work. One PES caseworker commented:

> You cannot do this job without your colleagues, I would say, you're dependent on them to do your job. One has to exchange ideas all the time, check things. I just couldn't sit by myself and work, then I just would not be able to do such a good job.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

A collegial culture was built on mutual exchanges between individuals while retaining their autonomy. Caseworkers took the act of providing collegial support very seriously, viewing it as a core expression of the culture of being a PES caseworker. One caseworker recalled when a colleague asked for advice about a complex case requiring extensive preparation: 'It is important to read up beforehand and consult, as I said, that you talk to your colleagues to make sure we are on the same page'. Preparation and taking peer consultation seriously formed central elements of shared work norms, and important parts of the collegial culture:

> We respect the clients, our customers. There is no bullshitting them, and absolutely no bullshitting colleagues either, in my experience. I like that, a great working environment, in that way.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

> We have a common ground, not just knowledge-wise but regarding values. It's absolutely something shared, which is good. If you don't embrace those values, it would be hard to work.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Colleagues tried to be receptive to the needs of others and to share work in cases of high workload, within the work group, at the division level, or across divisions. The work group was also important for social and emotional support:

> I think it is so important to have someone to talk to at work. If I have had a difficult conversation, just to be able to air that […]. It's important to have trust in one's colleagues, and also the feeling of receiving such support.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Although some groups worked better than others, collegial support was expected and practiced in everyday work. Joint social activities outside of work hours took place, such as horse-riding, watching hockey, or going for after-work drinks together, which in one of the offices studied were organized as a staff club.

Conclusion

'Team spirit' can be used to illustrate the SIA peer governance model. In the SIA, teamwork and other workplace meetings effectively contributed to establishing and reproducing a 'culture of consensus' related to organizational goals, including a 'right' way of thinking in case assessment. The local peer culture was sanctioned and orchestrated by central management, as it promoted its objectives. This gave few opportunities for diverging voices to be raised. Instead, conflicts and diverging opinions were undesirable and considered detrimental to team spirit. SIA peer governance hence fostered an 'us and them' divide, between those who accepted and those who did not accept team norms, sanctioning the latter while rewarding the former. Through formalized teamwork, horizontal and vertical governance mechanisms interplayed, where the caseworker teams studied reproduced the current organizational norms and enforced them through group dynamics and peer pressure, leaving little space for collegial buffer cultures to develop. The cultural rules at play hence presumed 'loyalty', undermined 'voice', and pushed for 'exit', illustrated by the growing numbers of people quitting their jobs during this period.

Collegiality, or 'collegial spirit', can similarly be used to capture the PES peer governance model. While SIA managers and caseworkers alike viewed critical questions as a threat to the team spirit, the PES peer culture relied on open, collegial discussions, critical voices, and critique of management and work processes, but united in the ethos of being a caseworker with the goal of helping clients. Workplace meetings were both structured and practiced bottom-up, relying on the engagement of caseworkers to set the agenda and make some decisions. Unlike in the SIA, the buffer cultures were not built against those who did not agree with group norms but were more against management. Strong collegiality and reliance on senior staff members as 'masters' mentoring 'apprentices' undermined the legitimacy of managers and vertical governance structures. The collegial spirit empowered local caseworkers, or offices, to question or resist directives from central management, especially if they went against collective work norms, occupational identities, and notions of professionalism. This can explain the lack of support for self-leadership, as it constituted an individualized version of casework, missing out on the collegial dimension. Whereas SIA caseworkers aligned in a relatively seamless way with organizational rationality, PES caseworkers constantly

objectified central demands as something coming from outside and hence of less value for local casework. However, despite differences, managers sanctioned both cultures, including PES managers. This might be because local (and central) PES managers often had a caseworker background and were thus socialized into the peer culture before becoming managers.

Each model comes with vertical and horizontal governance challenges. The collective autonomy at the PES constitutes a governance challenge unless central management norms and ideals coincide with local caseworker cultures, or local managers can skilfully bridge and combine cultural divides. Interfering too much or limiting voice can lead to exit, as loyalty mainly lies with helping clients. The strong connection between management and caseworker ideals, illustrated in the SIA team spirit, can imply a lack of caseworker sensitivity as the frontline of the welfare state, which leads to failing to offer support to clients while being responsive to central demands.

Notes

1 This is not to deny that other forms of peer governance exist, such as peer-to-peer governance in self-managing communities. Examples include peer production in open-source software communities (Rolandsson et al., 2011), conceptualized by some as 'bazaar governance' (Demil & Lecocq, 2006). Our interest, however, lies in peer governance in street-level bureaucracies, where hierarchical and horizontal governance processes unavoidably intersect. Indeed, as Demil & Lecocq argue, even if administrative rules can also emerge in peer-to-peer communities, 'the chief difference between bazaar and hierarchy remains the fact that no formal fiat can enforce decisions within the bazaar' (2006: 1454).

2 Most research on teamwork in the public sector focuses on the health care sector, where the existence of strong professional norms may undermine the normative influence of teamwork (e.g., Finn et al., 2010). It should be noted, however, that such interprofessional teamwork is based on a different rationale, namely to bring together *different* roles and competencies to achieve a holistic solution for the patient. Teamwork, as studied herein, rests on the rationale of producing *unity* in thinking and acting, based on the logic of similarity rather than dissimilarity of competence. This is also why it is relevant to discuss group mechanisms and pressure in relation to this type of teamwork.

7 Governance by numbers, colours, and symbols

Introduction

Numbers and performance management have been widely studied and refer to quantifying goals and targets, often in a productivist discourse. Some numbers frame what caseworkers should accomplish and perform, whereas others steer the timing of their work process. However, neither critical management research nor studies of street-level bureaucracy have focused significantly on how organizations employ colours and symbols alongside numbers, or on their own, to shape caseworker subjectivity. While legal rules, policies, and government directives remain crucial sources of governance, Swedish public sector organizations also employ traffic-light management systems to influence caseworkers (e.g., Thedvall, 2015). Colours and symbols serve as subtle tools for managers to instill norms regarding collegiality, individual achievements, and personal development (e.g., Manochin et al., 2011). They visualize and highlight specific aspects of caseworker practices, prompting caseworkers to self-regulate, for instance, by categorising themselves as red, yellow, or green; these colours signal an overload of cases (red) or a willingness to assist others (green). Colours, as well as symbols, can thus be sources of rewards and sanctions and the informal shaping of caseworker subjectivity. This chapter investigates how the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Public Employment Service (PES) use numbers, colours, and symbols to shape caseworker subjectivity and align them with organizations' aims and ambitions. We also explore how caseworkers respond to them, illustrating how visual governance forms part of the normative regimes of the two agencies.

Numbers, colours and symbols in the SIA

Numbers have long played a central role in public agencies. Espeland and Stevens (2008) argue that quantification – or, in our view, number governance – must be understood as a form of social action with multiple purposes and meanings. Numbers order actors and their practices, making specific actions meaningful and placing others outside managerial focus. Number governance can bring together what appear to be different actions, and its widespread use in public sector

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governance can be attributed to the fact that this form of governance is a handy tool for politicians to steer complex agencies and, at the same time, exercise political pervasiveness over the general public. This also applies to managers who use numbers to govern organizations and show performance to various stakeholders. Examples include making caseworkers measurable, trackable, and comparable (Porter, 1995), turn them into accountable and responsible subjects (Shore & Wright, 2015), or 'calculating selves' (see Miller, 2001).

Numbers and peer control

Numbers play a crucial role in how SIA managers and management relate to their caseworkers and how caseworkers build relations with each other. As Miller and Rose (1990) suggest, numbers operates by 'governing at a distance', and the 9.0 numerical target is a prime example of this. The 9.0 goal was introduced by the governing Social Democratic Party to reduce the cost of sickness insurance after costs had been rising for some years (SOU 2015:21; ISF, 2018). SIA management accepted this shift in government policy and adopted the new goal of transforming the government's ambitions into its own. The SIA incorporated the target into its governing documents, and it formed an essential part of the agency's internal discourses, emotional governance, and peer governance. For the agency, 9.0 turned into a threshold of good agency performance. Using terms like 'challenge' and 'forecast', the agency aimed to change its activities, as 9.0 became the number all SIA staff should try to achieve. This can be viewed as normative adaptation as the organization and its managers expressed extensive loyalty to the government's objective:

> 9.0 is a target that the government has set because sickness benefit costs are running away. We have received the goal from the government to reduce the sickness benefit ratio to 9.0. Today we are a little above 10, and before we got that [goal], forecasts showed that if the trend continued, we would be up to 13 or something. So, this is a huge challenge, and it is the clearest message and task that our Director-General has.
>
> (interview, SIA manager)

The performance of the local offices towards the goal of 9.0 was presented monthly at office meetings, including showing the graph curves of benefit rejections and withdrawals, and often in comparison with other regions and the national average. The office performance towards 9.0 evoked enthusiasm and joy among caseworkers and managers alike.

Reaching the goal of 9.0 gained an almost heroic framing as the means to save the Swedish sickness insurance from being overused by citizens. In the agency, we found hardly any debate or discussion on the relevance of 9.0. Instead, it was quickly institutionalized into agency operations and naturalized as a 'reasonable' level of sickness benefit rate. Union representatives also expressed the same kind of loyalty and compliance despite recognising the adverse effect it would have

on members (i.e., caseworkers), and they agreed on the need to steer all internal activities towards the 9.0 target. Protecting the insurance would mean 'a tougher job, more angry customers, sad customers, and desperate customers, who do not get any money. At the same time, we must follow the regulations we have' (interview, union representative). In this way, the 9.0 target gained symbolic value as it was morally charged and given a greater purpose beyond daily casework. In turn, this affected caseworkers' subjectivity and especially relationships with team colleagues.

In interviews and observations, 9.0 was crucial in organizing caseworker subjectivities and interactions at offices. As caseworkers met for their team meetings every morning, they most often used numbers to divide work tasks and reflect on workloads. Meetings were called 'pulse meetings'; to check the team's status and workflow in connection with the overarching goal of 9.0. Teams were also supposed to pass on pulses up in the organization when encountering problems that could not be solved within the team. Numbers – often linked to how many cases a caseworker had – were visualized on team boards, displaying individual and collective performances (e.g., Hjärpe, 2019). A caseworker, or a team, stood out if its performance was not 'in line' with others and one's expected contribution. Deviations became the centre of attention, and those who did not achieve the estimated targets became subjects for correction when fellow caseworkers suggested possible ways of improving the work.

The visualization of casework through numbers shared on team boards became self-regulating. SIA caseworkers started to use 9.0 as a governance tool towards others and themselves. Some of the teams and pulse meetings we observed took collective 'ownership' of their results, sometimes even beyond what managers expected, as they sought to improve their productivity and their numbers. Reaching or even excelling in performance targets signalled that one had met management's expectations and 'asking for more' was thus loaded with positive feelings, providing moral and collegial rewards for their excellent job (Knights & McCabe, 2003). Being constantly exposed to information in the form of numbers fostered a competitive spirit among the SIA caseworkers we studied, especially in terms of competition between teams and offices.

Thus, what emerged as a goal established by politicians quickly became a means for caseworkers to self-regulate. Managers did not need to interfere at team meetings; the team largely controlled its performance independently without the manager's intervention or control. Team members (i.e., caseworkers) replaced managerial control with self-control and, in some instances, peer control. Occasionally, this implied a transition from 'peer coaches' to 'peer cops' (see Chapter 6). As it coincided with peer governance, numbers could play out as self- and peer-policing if people were not doing their share, an issue that was sometimes discussed on team boards. In line with Procter and Radnor's study (2014), the better-performing teams felt more positive 'team spirit', and consequently, 'doing one's share' and 'not letting team members down' turned into norms guiding appropriate caseworker behaviour. Failing to do so could lead to sanctions and a lack of positive rewards by managers and other caseworkers.

Colour coding subjectivities

Numbers and colours are closely integrated in SIA caseworker governance. Like numbers, colours are tools that allow organizations and management to govern at a distance (see Miller & Rose, 2008). They serve as a means for managers to categorize performances and caseworkers; like numbers, colours turn into tools of self-regulation and co-ordination to consciously align caseworkers' subjectivities with managerial goals.

SIA managers and caseworkers expressed a shared understanding of the meanings of colours. Following the traffic light governance model (e.g., Manochin et al., 2011), green was seen as a reference to things being good; there was no need to change anything. Red was clearly the sign of alarm and alert; that work was developing in the wrong direction. Yellow was less often used and had a more ambiguous meaning, for example, needing further attention. Inspired by Lean models, yellow indicated deviation from the plan and a point for further development.

Managers used colours in their governance of caseworkers. For instance, in advance of individual manager–caseworker meetings, they extracted personnel files for each caseworker on their performance. Subtly evaluating caseworkers' performance and instructing them on potential improvement, managers prepared portfolios with information on personal achievements. These included coloured diagrams showing what had been done well and what could be improved. Managers considered that caseworkers appreciated such feedback. As one local insurance specialist noted: 'I often hear them say: "Yes, I'm very grateful for all the follow-ups and all the feedback I can get." So the vast majority experience it positively'.

As with numbers, SIA caseworkers accepted the use of colours as a device for self-control and steering, and they came to play an essential function in how they related to others. Teams used green, yellow, and red to diagnose the team's status, for example, how people felt about their workload. Colours were used at daily (or weekly) pulse meetings, often to divide tasks among team members linked to the rehabilitation chain, that is, decision-making after 90, 180, and 365 days. Inspired by Lean models, team boards displayed statistics on the number of cases for the entire team and incoming cases. Whereas 9.0 was recognized as a top-down objective, caseworkers never reflected upon where colours came from. It appeared natural for them to evaluate themselves and their work using colours, and this process often took place without direct interference from managers.

Similar to Thedvall's (2015) findings in her study of Lean models in Swedish preschools, SIA caseworkers also used colours to govern workflows and identify bottlenecks in producing decisions on sickness insurance. Coloured 'dots' were used on a daily basis for self-governing. Team members placed dots on the board to inform other team members about how they perceived their work situation. Caseworkers even jointly developed rules for the meanings of colours, largely accepting the managerially infused ideas of what these colours meant. As one caseworker explained:

> And then we put a green dot if we think we have control of the situation. I do my job, you don't have to go in and do it. A yellow dot, then you mean that you have a lot going on around you. I can do my own job, but I can't help anyone else. And a red dot, then you signal that now it feels like I need help. I can't fix this.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Colours thus offered a script for how caseworkers could act. Labelling oneself as green meant being able to support others, for example, by taking over cases to ensure everyone could turn green. Being green was primarily seen as the preferred option because then one had done one's part, or even excelled since one had few – or even no – delayed cases. Putting a green dot on the team board provided a source of pride and recognition, especially since 'placing a red dot' could lead to collegial sanctions.

Even if numbers were much used to govern the collective (team), colours tied performances to individuals. The red underachievers, or underperformers, became the target of disapproval or anxious self-scrutiny (Espeland & Stevens, 2008: 416). Green caseworkers expressed dissatisfaction with colleagues who 'did not do their share'. Such dissatisfaction was often targeted at those who were 'red'. The norm of sharing between those 'who were green' and 'those who were red' could lead to norm disputes:

> Some do a lot, and others do nothing. So, there is dissatisfaction. Some have expectations like 'why haven't you done that for me? I do it [for you] when you are away'.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

These negotiations often took place without the interference of managers. However, some caseworkers adopted a different strategy and identified themselves as 'yellow', avoiding labelling themselves as either green or red. This position allowed them to avoid both sanctions – if one did not do one's share – and rewards that could come from helping others.

Symbols for a sharing culture

Whereas colours provide a source for identification and self-governance, symbols further enforce this. The most prevalent symbols in the SIA are 'points', 'clocks', and 'baskets'. These were less often circulated in agency documents and rarely defined, yet often referred to in daily work, and were therefore of crucial relevance for caseworkers. The SIA and its caseworkers considered points (or sticks) as something that had been left behind, being part of a previous system of governance. Sticks often came with negative connotations, and managers and caseworkers referred to them as 'hunting sticks' or 'hunting points'. Most likely, the negative connotation associated with the term depended on its reference to 'individual

competition' and 'aspiration to win'. These ideals were seen as part of a previous normative regime and contrasted with the current regime's emphasis on a 'consensus culture' and 'sharing culture', such as teams sharing numbers. One senior manager commented:

> We had an expression you might have heard of, 'point hunting'. There was quite a lot of that, the anomaly and downside of performance and result management.
> (interview, SIA senior manager)

The agency also used other symbols to govern caseworkers, for instance, digital baskets and digital bells. Digital baskets were where caseworkers stored their cases. Cases stayed inside the basket until the caseworkers had made a decision. However, other caseworkers also had access to these baskets. They could access each other's baskets as part of the team's sharing culture. These baskets thus mainly served to co-ordinate workflows and tasks. They could be full or half-full, and when a colleague was out of the office (e.g., on holiday or sick leave), caseworkers checked in on the absent colleague's basket, ensuring that it was empty. Such access also enforced the sharing culture, as team colleagues could check whether those labelling themselves as red had a considerable workload.

Caseworkers could use digital bells to control their digital baskets. As part of the rehabilitation chain, the agency needed to make decisions on time, in line with the 90-, 180-, and 365-day principles. These digital bells were primarily seen as individual tools that one could use to govern one's work process outside the control of teams. A 'red bell' could symbolize a case that required extra attention or was soon overdue. Caseworkers used these symbols as planning devices to sort between cases and meet deadlines. In that way, baskets appear to be one of the few places where caseworkers sought to claim some discretion over their work. However, that did not prove to be easy. Managers observed their digital baskets and the number of red bells placed on cases. As one caseworker noted:

> You may have a red bell, and you feel like, 'No, I have to prioritize other things today'. And then you move it forward. Most caseworkers I know do this. However, when we changed managers, she discovered I had moved bells forward and questioned why I had moved so many forward. So I said, 'but, that's the way it is. It's my way of prioritizing my tasks in everyday life'.
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

As suggested by the quotation, longer-serving managers were socialized into how things were done at a local office, offering caseworkers more leeway, but this habit was challenged when changing managers. In any case, if a caseworker had too many red bells, it called for a meeting with the manager.

Too many red bells could also cause team frustration. The possibility of personally deciding on when to place a red bell implied extensive co-ordination about what should count as a *red* bell. One local manager noted this and argued that it

occurred if teams included members who, in their view, were too keen to place red bells in their baskets. If that person became sick:

> There will be five caseworkers sitting and working with your red bells because you have a system where you think it is perfectly okay that half the basket is full of red bells.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

Instead, an empty basket was the norm for good casework. One caseworker stressed that 'an empty basket is a desired state, but since cases continue coming in, it is impossible' (interview, caseworker).

In one SIA office we studied, some teams had invented their own symbols of success, applying stars to their whiteboard when meeting production targets or handling workload in a satisfactory way. When a certain number of stars was reached, the team rewarded itself, for instance, by going for an 'after-work' drink together (see also Jacobsson & Hollertz, 2021). These self-initiated rewards illustrate the seamless alignment of organizational rationality and personal sense of satisfaction, which is what normative governance is ultimately intended to achieve.

Numbers, colours, and symbols in the PES

Numbers often become institutionalized into organizations, especially if there is intense external pressure to conform, and they can become internalized into staff and employee practices. In their review of the critical management literature, Spicer and Alvesson (2024) noted that agency and caseworker compliance is often the norm, and acts of resistance 'are often marginal'. However, the ease with which 9.0 permeated and trickled down inside the SIA contrasts with PES's practice and discursive framing of number governance.

Numbers for control

Before our study period, the centre-right government (2006–2014) extensively engaged in reforming public active labour market policies and, hence, the PES. By translating political aims and priorities into numerical goals, the government sought to ensure that political decisions impacted all levels of the organization, including caseworkers, assuming that putting numbers on political priorities implied smooth steering and implementation inside the agency.

To make the agency more governable, the government turned ordinance letters into long highly detailed lists of what the agency should accomplish. Regulations included what to achieve and detailed steering on how to do it, for example, allocating funds to particular activation programmes or stipulating how often caseworkers should meet with clients (i.e., the number of meetings and their frequency). One senior official at the Ministry of Employment recalled political

frustration with PES being unresponsive to political decisions and the concerns of leading politicians: 'Why does nothing happen? Why doesn't it turn out as we imagined?' (interview, senior official, Ministry of Employment). In interviews, officials used terms like 'organizational capillary' to illustrate ambitions to govern all elements of the organization, and politicians' ambitions to steer caseworkers' daily operations. As we exemplified in our analysis of discursive governance, the government sought to regulate how often caseworkers should meet with clients, which caseworkers considered an intrusion into their discretionary space.

This style of governance had its effect, and for some years, the PES had a centrally placed 'production unit'. The person in charge was subsequently the 'Director of Production' and reported to the Director-General. Controllers gained a central role because of their expertise in linking budget and production systems. Controllers controlled the choice and design of performance indicators; in interviews, they thought of themselves as having the power to utilize the numbers from the PES administrative systems. For example, one task was to assemble performance files for local managers. These could include information on each office's performance, how many cases individual caseworkers had, and the number of clients enrolled in labour market interventions (interview, local manager). Central management communicated performance information via email, administrative systems, or reporting documents, which meant holding regular (monthly or weekly) performance meetings at the local level. In hindsight, interviewees recalled a period when questions such as 'how much are we producing' and 'how many people are we putting in activation programmes' permeated most meetings.

Most research on performance-oriented number governance in private and public organizations stresses that it affects social relations and can foster rivalry and competition (e.g., Lodge & Gill, 2011; Knights & Clarke, 2014). The PES was no exception, and the numbers promoted by the central level became a source for caseworkers' self-regulation and internalization of management goals (Reinders, 2008; Paulsen, 2015; Hjärpe, 2020). However, numbers also created distance or even resistance (Lauri, 2016).

Caseworkers considered several indicators absurd and opposed to the essence of casework and the meaning of being a caseworker. This reaction mainly concerned indicators of how many hours caseworkers had to be available on the office phone or how many times they should meet with clients. Caseworkers aired critique of activities that simply required them to click a box in the system, for instance, creating events for job seekers without any real connection to participants' ability to secure a job. One caseworker commented:

> At that time, the goal was for all jobseekers in the Job and Development Guarantee to visit the Public Employment Service monthly. That was the directive. This means that you, as an administrator, had to try to book regular meetings; some people thought it was great, [....] most, those who had been registered with the Public Employment Service for long time, they probably

> realized themselves that they didn't get much closer to a job just because they met me over a desk. Then you [caseworkers] started to create quantity stuff and information events. Lots of people had to go and listen to something, so that you could take attendance and tick off a visit.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

During the course of our study, this NPM governance style was replaced by more trust-oriented governance, with self-leadership as the focus (see Chapter 4). Thus, informants left behind a normative regime and started to reflect upon their role in it. One senior manager who had been in charge of implementing performance targets throughout the organization considered this a mistake: 'Some people felt stressed about follow-ups and faked visits to get counts in the statistics. It was completely absurd' (interview, senior manager, headquarters). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) used the term 'functional stupidity' to refer to organizational processes in which individuals uncritically do what is expected of them and abide by managerial and organizational expectations and norms. While this is undoubtedly correct, these informants also illustrate the infusion of managerial norms and the awakening that takes place when leaving one regime behind. The previous regime had absorbed their minds and selves, and they had done what was expected of them. Yet now, they started to objectivize the previous regime, expressing criticism and distance.

However, some caseworkers had not internalized the previous regime to the same extent. They felt uncomfortable with its performance-oriented culture, which conflicted with their ideals of professional casework. They reacted against managers communicating 'who was leading the percentage league' in internal emails (interview, caseworker). They did not consider proper casework a competition; it was about providing support to clients. Caseworkers felt they did not fit into the agency's performance culture at that time.

> I felt that it was a terrible time. Because it's not at all, it's not me at all. I didn't fit into that organization, just following up on visits and only counting numbers.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Other caseworkers took a different position and appreciated – and potentially wanted to return to – the normative regime ingrained with performance tools and targets. Their use of sports metaphors is illustrative, as it highlights a different view on the role of being a caseworker at the PES. They considered casework a competition, caseworkers as competitors, and performance a rule for deciding who won or lost the game. They identified as competitive spirits and competition as part of their personal identity. Comparing caseworkers with athletes, the agency should (and could) not avoid measuring individual performances and governing casework and caseworkers by them. In their view, this was a more profound outlook, as they thought of people as driven by a competitive spirit. Consequently, if managers did not compile results and measure performances, employees would do so anyway. One caseworker noted:

> I believe that the individual ... It is the same as an athlete. If they do a good result, they will find out, right? Even if they know they have done well. They know they ran very well. I think that is probably something human.
>
> (interview, PES caseworkers)

In their view, if the organization (and its managers) did not count 'how many' or 'how much' one had produced or performed, this led to uncertainty among caseworkers whether one had done a good job (or not). One PES caseworker argued: 'I think it's good with goals and results'.

These responses demonstrate considerable variety in caseworkers' internalization of organizational norms and visions. We assume that those who never felt at home in the performance-oriented number governance would more easily find their place in the emerging model based on trust and self-leadership; those identifying themselves as athletes would find it more difficult unless they could find ways of competing over who was the 'best self-leader'.

Colours to amplify numbers

Much research on number governance suggests that what is measured is what counts in organizations (e.g., Hood, 1991; Michaud, 2014; Mennicken & Salais, 2022). Colours visualize certain parts of the organization and its practices, and even if they do not regulate what is being counted, colours govern what is seen (and what remains hidden) inside organizations (e.g., Beyes, 2017, 2024). Hence, if numbers are painted in colours, they can count even more. As in the SIA, colours were widely used in PES organizational governance, and we found them embedded in administrative systems, performance management tools, human resources instruments, and elsewhere. They were used to display access to information systems, and the PES internal website was divided into two parts: green and red. Access for managers was coded red, which gave them unlimited access to all information, whereas access for staff members was coded green, that is, with more limited access.

Colours were also used as sorting mechanisms in administrative support systems, which is of direct relevance for casework. For instance, cases could turn up red if they contained insufficient information for caseworkers to make proper decisions. This could include a lack of information from external providers or from clients, as one of them or both had failed to hand in all necessary documents. Just like the traffic light symbol, green signalled OK, while red signalled alert – or in the case of managerial access – a restricted area. However, in our interviews, PES caseworkers did not reflect on how the organization used colours, and they were only mentioned in passing. They were just something that was there but not relevant enough to take note of.

PES management, however, combined colours and numbers, often linking time processes and colours. Colours were used to oversee the time caseworkers spent on specific tasks. If a caseworker had two weeks to make a decision, the case turned red when the deadline passed. In addition, managers used colours to monitor caseworker performance and identify so-called green/red caseworkers:

> Well, red numbers signalled we had not achieved our goal. This was reviewed at every staff meeting. The manager stood up and told us that now we had to work harder to reach green numbers. It came from above, and the manager had to answer why we had not reached our goals on the parameters we were measured on.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

One manager stressed the aim of identifying caseworkers who were red and pushing them to turn green, and managers used this goal in their communication with caseworkers. One central manager recalled telling a caseworker that they were red, and that they were expected to turn green (interview, senior manager). Similarly, caseworkers used colours to express who they 'were'. As in the SIA, being green was not only of professional concern; it also brought a moral boost of being good: 'Well, we have had very good results and green numbers, and I think we are probably pretty good now too, actually' (interview, caseworker). The ability to communicate 'being green' brought emotional rewards as an assurance that one had done an excellent job. Being red, in contrast, was seen as a source of alarm and the need to change. The ease with which PES caseworkers identified themselves as a colour contrasted sharply with reactions to being controlled by managers when using numbers, suggesting that colour coding was seen as a less intrusive form of governance than number governance, at least in the case of the PES.

The symbol of the ideal employee

Symbols were commonly used in the PES. They appeared as 'maps', showing direction and planned development towards a desired goal, 'arrows' indicating negative or positive performance or trends, and 'bells' referring to the time planning of a work task. Symbols emerged when the performance-oriented number governance regime lost relevance, i.e. symbols appeared to replace numbers. As one caseworker observed:

> We went from being controlled with red and green numbers, to not being governed at all. We had none. No one had a number. We lacked that information. There was no governance at all.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

For some, the turn away from performance-oriented NPM governance towards post-NPM ideals created a kind of governance lacuna, although it was partly filled with symbols to visualize what was written in words in organizational documents. As part of its leadership philosophy, the PES used the 'water staircase' model to symbolize the flow of communication and information between managers and caseworkers. The agency visualized its vision and the Renewal Journey as a strategic map, including the years 2014–2021, and planned organizational development. Controllers who had a central role during periods of performance-oriented

governance were partly replaced by human relations specialists, with the authority to introduce and interpret symbols as a more subtle and softer governance tool.

The image of the 'self-leader' is a central aspect of how the PES sought to govern caseworkers without any reference to numbers. Instead of governing caseworkers by how much they had produced, it sought to promote people's capacities. At a conference with hundreds of PES employees, the Director-General Mikael Sjöberg proclaimed that the period of performance targets was over, saying it was 'easier to nag about production goals in Excel sheets, but self-leadership should apply to all of us' (observation notes). Everyone was expected to embrace the agency's vision, live the leadership philosophy, and follow the guiding principles explored in the image of the self-leader.

The symbol of the self-leader, visualized in the form of a drawing of a man, came from an external consultancy company and served as a model that was promoted to public and private sector organizations in Sweden (Johansson & Seing, 2022). The model sought to govern the minds of PES employees as an illustration of an ideal rather than of a real caseworker. The image can also be seen as an attempt to make employees internalize the new governance model. The Director-General Mikael Sjöberg stressed the importance of *living* self-leadership as stated in an interview with a trade union journal for PES employees:

> The vision and value base are connected. By living the value base, by permitting it to permeate all our activities, we come closer to the vision, which means we really deliver the societal benefit that is needed.
>
> (Nordebo, 2015)

Self-leadership was an ambitious tool to encourage employees to take responsibility and, by living the idea of self-leadership, reduce the boundaries between being professional and personal within the organization, encouraging staff to 'be one' with the organization. The drawing of the ideal caseworker aimed to accomplish such norm internalization. It included symbols of 'a heart', 'a brain', 'hands' and, 'feet', and each came with explicit expectations on how employees should behave. The brain represented the expectation that caseworkers would think holistically about their work and the agency's role in society. The heart represented the responsibility to develop personal leadership, 'through which we base our values, emotions, and self-awareness'. The hands symbolized how employees 'capture and influence events in the world around us and collaborate with partners'. The feet served to assure that 'we lead by encouraging others. We move forward on the path we have set out together and help each other bring out the best in each other to go as far as possible'. These elements reflected the agency's leadership philosophy and gained meaning when linked to how its management discursively sought to govern PES caseworkers (see Chapter 4). All employees should become responsible subjects. An HR specialist noted: 'Previously, we have had a separate employee policy and a manager policy, now we have something called the leadership philosophy' (interview, senior manager).

As we visited offices and attended meetings, we found the drawing of the self-leader lying on desks, and it was used in discussions on wage-setting, personal development, and role accomplishment (e.g., PES, 2016b). Central management orchestrated the implementation of the model as if local managers or caseworkers were not allowed to provide their own interpretation of the ideal. As described by a senior manager in the HR department, the new self-leadership model should permeate all activities and relations at local offices, including manager–caseworker relations:

> We try to secure the quality of the products from the human resources department so that the values and management philosophy permeate them; for example, I have developed new salary criteria based on the five dimensions of self-leadership. Our new model for individual development interviews is also based on the five dimensions of self-leadership.
>
> (interview, senior manager, PES headquarters)

Visualising the employee as a person (without an organizational context, or clients for that matter) appears to have struck a chord. Several local managers reflected on caseworkers as entrepreneurs, an identity they also considered relevant when hiring new employees. Local managers adopted the idea of self-leadership and started identifying themselves as coaches or change agents (interview, local manager). At one of our interviews, a local manager proudly presented the model using the same image of the self-leader (interview, local manager). She found the image particularly useful to illustrate the steps the organization had taken to move away from the previous regime that was driven by performance management.

At the local offices serving as our cases, the leadership philosophy was fully implemented and used in discussions on promotions, recruitment of new personnel, and (setting) wages (PES, 2016b). Similar to the HR official, local managers used the image and its five dimensions in evaluating caseworkers. Some local managers interpreted the image not as a symbol but as an instruction and indicated that people could not be hired if they were not self-leaders. Unless employees considered themselves change-minded individuals, they did not fit with the new leadership philosophy.

While managers expressed extensive support for the model, using it to shape their and caseworkers' subjectivities, both caseworkers and some local managers were less impressed. Unlike the symbols we found at the SIA, this image never gained traction among caseworkers. As previously observed (see Johansson & Seing, 2022), some expressed compliance with the model, whereas others sought to demystify it, for instance, by making fun of it (e.g., Spicer, 2017). Most questioned its value and claimed the model had no connection to what they were doing as caseworkers at the PES. They considered the symbol disconnected from their occupational identity. The image mainly focused on caseworkers as employees and, hence, did not include their most crucial relationship, namely that with clients. This is likely one of the main reasons managers embraced and internalized the model,

yet caseworkers met it with much scepticism. They thought of the symbol as management talk with less relevance for them as caseworkers.

Conclusion

Numbers, colours, and symbols are means for organizations and managers to steer, guide, and govern casework and caseworkers' subjectivities. Despite their ease of permeation into organizations and across levels and roles, they are not neutral but can rather be viewed as vessels of organizational norms and ideals, contributing to the normative shaping of caseworkers and their subjectivity. In that respect, numbers, colours, and symbols allow managers the governing capacity to visualize certain aspects of caseworker governance, while hiding others. They are essential governance tools for politicians and managers alike because they allow these actors to act at a distance. This chapter demonstrates the importance of studying these elements together because colours are used to enhance numbers in both agencies and symbols in the SIA.

The shaping power of numbers has long been recognized, and this chapter supports such views. Numbers promoted caseworkers as accountable and responsible actors who were evaluated in connection with established targets, and who took responsibility for evaluating themselves in association with numbers as well as colours and symbols. Numbers promoted the identification of winners (and losers) on the premise of counted individual achievements, while colours shaped caseworkers in a more collective sense, morally dividing those who had done their part and those who had not. SIA caseworkers widely internalized this form of number governance, whereas PES caseworkers had mixed feelings about it. Some PES caseworkers even expressed a kind of awakening when performance governance no longer shaped their daily lives, while others perceived a kind of loss when it was gone because they identified with being an athlete and with a culture that was competitive and result-oriented. Yet others found number governance at odds with the ideals of PES caseworkers as driven by doing good for clients.

Whereas scholars have pointed out that quantification and number governance lead to a particular kind of 'calculating selves', our research finds them equally shaped by colours given that colours were sensitive markers of identity and performance inside the agencies. Local managers and caseworkers accepted colours and did not consider colours a managerially orchestrated governance tool. Colours are thus 'sticky' governance tools as they were attached to both numbers and symbols. In a way, colour governance promotes a 'transforming self' given an assumed path of improvement from being red to becoming green. Colours were primarily related to symbols in the SIA and numbers in the PES. They shaped collectives more extensively in the SIA and individuals to a greater extent in the PES, as illustrated in the distinction between PES caseworkers expressing 'I am green' and SIA caseworkers 'we are red'.

Our research finds that colours did not evoke the same responses as numbers or symbols. In both agencies and across a broad set of local offices, some PES caseworkers (but few SIA caseworkers) responded critically towards numbers and

partly towards symbols. However, colours gave rise to no resistance or rebellion. In that sense, colour governance appears easier to permeate the minds of caseworkers, almost as if they assume colours to be neutral. Hence, they can be viewed as a subtle means to make caseworkers incorporate certain types of managerial practices. Finally, we found that colours and symbols are strongly associated with the other types of normative governance investigated in this book, that is, governance by discourse, emotions, and peers, suggesting the nested quality of visual governance tools across types.

8 Caseworker subjectivities and responses to governance

Introduction

Normative governance aims to shape staff as organizational selves. This means that normative governance ultimately aims to target and transform the subjectivities of staff—how they understand and feel about themselves and the world around them—when at work. However, caseworkers play an equally important role in shaping organizational selves and their subjectivities, and how they respond to such governing is an empirical question. Governance might evoke compliance and acceptance, as well as discomfort and resistant subjectivities. How street-level bureaucrats respond to governance may, in turn, affect how they use their scope for discretion available in their work roles.

Whereas previous chapters studied different forms of normative governance, this chapter adds a new dimension, viewing subjectivities as the result of organizational and caseworker practices in conjunction. It synthesizes our research findings across governance by discourses, emotions, peers and numbers, colours and symbols and examines the subjectivities of caseworkers, including their self-understanding of their organizational role, their work orientations, views on how to use discretion and the way the caseworkers relate to management's attempts to mould them. Although this book takes as its point of departure that management matters in public sector agencies (Riccucci, 2005), it is equally clear that there are differences between the two agencies (the Social Insurance Agency (SIA) and the Public Employment Service (PES)) in the degree to which caseworker subjects are open to be managed and moulded by management interventions. The chapter discusses some mediating factors influencing the effects of normative governance in the two state agencies, including structural factors such as working conditions (caseload, time pressure and distance to clients) but also cultural factors, such as the presence of competing professional norms and other work or peer cultures. Such factors can help us explain differences in staff receptiveness to normative governing and self-formation.

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Organizational conditioning of caseworker subjectivity

Caseworkers on the frontline are acting between organizations and managerial demands, on the one hand, and clients' needs and expectations on the other. The tradition from Lipsky (2010) underscores frontline staff's relative autonomy and discretion, perceiving frontline staff as the outermost link in a hierarchical governance. Following Evans and Hupe (2020b: 8), politicians and managers are the *regisseurs* who 'can instruct, advise, and impose sanctions off-stage'; however, caseworkers decide how to act on stage, making the final decisions on casework. Whereas critical management studies largely stress the effectiveness of organizations and their management practices in shaping staff subjectivities, the SLB literature claims that other factors are decisive (i.e., especially the structural work context and hence, working conditions) (Lipsky, 2010).

Our view, as described in Chapter 3, is that policies, public governance models, organizational working conditions and staff occupational backgrounds all serve as important conditions for caseworkers and contexts into which normative governance is embedded. Like SLB theories assume, SIA and PES caseworker subjectivities and their discretion need to be captured in connection to political reforms and policy goals. During our time of investigation, the Swedish Government enforced stricter goals regarding sickness insurance (i.e., the 9.0 target) and reduced the detailed steering of the PES regarding numbers of people in activation measures or use of services. This forms an important contextual condition for the analysis of their subjectivities.

Moreover, caseworkers' subjectivity in part depends on their work tasks. SIA caseworkers are formally responsible for decisions regarding individuals' right to sickness benefits, the establishment of a rehabilitation plan and cooperation with other stakeholders. They assess whether a person qualifies for sickness benefits or not, which, as we mentioned previously, is largely a 'yes or no' decision. During our time of investigation, they used specific assessment tools and were guided in specific ways of thinking when applying them in their case management, which aimed to standardize ways of acting when processing a case. SIA caseworkers are more strictly rule-bound, tend to have a greater number of cases, and thus, there is greater pressure on quick decision-making, as they oversee payment of sickness benefits for which clients are waiting. PES caseworkers have more complex tasks to carry out, as the main aim is to bring people into the labour market through matching, providing services and building capacities through training and advice. However, they are not in charge of benefit payments.

Our survey demonstrated differences in occupational background. Frontline staff in PES more often had a university degree compared with those at SIA. SIA caseworkers had primarily studied economics or political science, while PES caseworkers more often had a pedagogy, social work or sociology background. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this underscores differences in caseworkers' training on client-relational work, as social workers and psychologists are trained to work with individuals. However, in neither agency did caseworkers have joint professional training.

Another condition often expressed in SLB literature regards work pressure, operationalized as caseload (e.g., van Berkel & Knies, 2016; Schütze, 2022). Our survey with SIA and PES caseworkers showed fairly similar results in terms of how they viewed their workload and its effects on decisions and work satisfaction (see Table 8.1). Instead of indicating differences, caseworkers expressed similar experiences and agreed with statements that they were working under unacceptable time pressure, had too many tasks to work effectively, and felt frustration due to their work situation. In both cases, they expressed having too many clients to perform well.

As expected from SLB research, SIA caseworkers expressed lower degrees of discretion compared with caseworkers at PES. This concerned general appreciation of how much they could influence their work, use individual assessments when applying organizational guidelines and experience independence in carrying out their work. For instance, 81% of caseworkers at the PES (see Table 8.2) agreed that they could independently decide how to conduct their work, whereas somewhat fewer among SIA caseworkers agreed. However, 61% of caseworkers at the SIA still believed they could independently shape their work. Moreover, a majority (69%) of SIA caseworkers thought that they had to act within a tight frame to follow organizational guidelines, while somewhat fewer PES caseworkers expressed this view. Nevertheless, 49% answered positively to such a statement. Even more marked differences can be found in how they perceived their discretion in connection with clients, as SIA caseworkers largely agreed that they had to make decisions that negatively affected their clients (76%), whereas 40% of caseworkers at the PES expressed the same. Typically, this illustrates the distinction between formal and substantive rationality in case management (Jacobsson et al., 2020). However, based on the survey, differences are perhaps not as marked as may have been anticipated.

This largely coincides with Schütze's (2022) findings on discretion in both agencies. She concluded that frontline professionals within the PES had more perceived discretion than those in SIA. Based on more complex statistical analysis, she found that organizational context and work pressure were two of the main factors that explain frontline professionals' perceived discretion. However, like SLB literature in general, Schütze could not disentangle *what* in the organizational context mattered in explaining this outcome. Differences in political objectives, work tasks and occupational contexts of the two agencies no doubt play a role in the professional/occupational identities that emerge, but again, they could hardly explain the radically different caseworker subjectivities and role identities that our interview and observational evidence revealed. In the following, we will explore these differences.

Performing subjectivities

The normative governance at play in each agency gives rise to two organizational ideals of caseworker subjectivities, shaping their relations to management, their view on work tasks and their relations to clients. We conceptualize such desired

Table 8.1 Perceived workload among PES and SIA caseworkers (percent)

Statement	*Organization*	*Strongly agree*	*Partly agree*	*Partly disagree*	*Strongly disagree*	*Do not know*	*N*
I work under unacceptable time pressure	PES	17	33	28	21	1	763
	SIA	24	34	24	17	1	623
I have so many work tasks it negatively affects my ability to work effectively	PES	21	35	25	19	1	761
	SIA	24	30	26	19	1	623
I feel frustrated over my work situation	PES	20	31	27	21	1	767
	SIA	28	32	20	20	1	618
I have too many clients to conduct a good job	PES	27	26	23	21	2	755
	SIA	27	25	20	23	5	617

Source: Caseworker survey, own calculations. See Schutze (2019).

Table 8.2 Perceived discretion among PES and SIA caseworkers (percent)

Statement	*Organization*	*Strongly agree*	*Partly agree*	*Partly disagree*	*Strongly disagree*	*Do not know*	*N*
I can, to a high extent, influence how I conduct my work	PES	28	61	8	3	0	763
	SIA	16	54	21	9	0	623
Following organizational guidelines implies that I need to act within a tight frame	PES	9	40	40	10	1	758
	SIA	20	49	23	5	3	621
I can still make my own assessments when using the organization's guidelines	PES	30	61	7	2	0	759
	SIA	17	59	17	6	1	620
I decide independently the ways to conduct my work	PES	24	57	15	4	0	753
	SIA	10	51	22	17	0	620
To abide by organizational guidelines, I often need to make decisions that negatively affect my clients	PES	7	33	38	19	3	760
	SIA	21	35	26	13	5	621

Source: Caseworker survey, own calculations. See Schutze (2019).

SIA subjectivity as an ideal of the 'malleable' subject, a subject that can readily adjust to new priorities, instructions, narratives and scripts. We conceptualize PES subjectivity as the 'sturdy' subject, as an individual who reflects on, challenges or even resists management ideals, based on a bottom-up rather than a top-down shaping of caseworker subjectivities. This difference in caseworker subjectivity largely follows Evetts's (2009, 2011) distinction between organizational and occupational professionalism.

Malleable caseworkers at SIA

SIA is characterized by a strong organizational culture that values top-down performance measures (see also Ståhl & Andersson, 2018; Jacobsson et al., 2020). The organization shapes its caseworkers along the lines of what Evetts (2009, 2011) conceptualized as organizational professionalism. Caseworker subjectivity is linked to hierarchical structures and rational-legal forms of authority, often connected with standardization of work processes and practices of managerial rather than professional control. SIA caseworkers are constantly audited (e.g., Power, 1997) and continuously audit themselves and their team colleagues. However, what characterizes their subjectivity is a willingness to abide by shifting organizational visions, goals and managers' aspirations. This willingness to adjust and remould oneself is captured by our notion of malleable subjects (see also Hansen Löfstrand & Jacobsson, 2023).

Internal organizational discourse speaks of the casework in terms of 'production'. Also, caseworkers speak of their work in terms of them as 'producing' (referring mainly to establishing a case assessment, conducting payments or concluding the case, alternatively making timely assessments according to the time schedules of the rehabilitation chain). Further, it is 'production' that is primarily evaluated and praised. A SIA caseworker stated:

> After all, we say that we should lift each other up in the team and talk about a job well done. Today I received feedback—good feedback—because I had taken many cases, but it's about the production again; it's not about what you actually do and the assessments you make. Actually, I don't think I get any such feedback.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Strikingly, in the SIA, the focus among local managers and caseworkers alike is on organizational *outputs* rather than longer-term *outcomes*. Organizational outputs are first and foremost represented in statistics: production numbers as measured on team and individual levels, numbers of rejections and withdrawal of benefits as measured on the office level and occasionally individual levels, and sickness benefits as measured on the region level, as linked to the 9.0 goal. In the SIA, graphs and numbers are viewed as standards of good performance. A critical caseworker remarked, 'They only talk about statistics, now in the office'. For others, improving the numbers was regarded with positive feelings:

> Our area manager comes here, I don't know, once a month, maybe once every two months. And then he pulls out these statistics. Sometimes we get emails from our managers [with statistical comparisons]. So, we compare a bit. We come out very well here in [region] … it feels great.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

SIA caseworkers in our study mostly displayed joy and pride in performing, improving the numbers of cases assessed according to the set control stations (of the rehabilitation chain), but also increasing the number of rejections and withdrawals of benefits. However, some caseworker interviews revealed dissatisfaction with the pressure to perform and, in a few cases, almost despair in not being able to keep pace, in contributing to bad numbers for the teams or in taking excessive time to assess each case. As we observed in Chapter 7, marking oneself as red signalled being behind or being overburdened in case assessments. Even if the rationale was to share responsibility for case management by team members, we could also note that being marked as 'green' was regarded with prestige while being marked as 'red' with a sense of failure. A competitive spirit was displayed mostly in relation to other offices and regions in the country, but sometimes in relation to other teams in the same office. In his study of how performance measurement influenced the subjectivity of schoolteachers, Ball (2003: 215) wrote: 'The new performative worker is a promiscuous self, an enterprising self, with a passion for excellence. For some, this is an opportunity to make a success of themselves; for others, it portends inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance'. A caseworker described the competitive spirit: 'people like to compare themselves to others. Especially if you feel like a high achiever'. Another caseworker felt that some of her colleagues were 'elitistic': 'that feeling of being better or doing things the right way'. A caseworker who had quite a few years of work experience expressed that she has become increasingly insecure, not knowing if she lives up to expectations or not:

> Maybe that's what makes me feel this anxiety too, that I don't really know clearly when they think I've done the right thing or enough. Because it's clear that they always find things to criticize or you've missed something … And when they draw numbers purely on statistics and such, then they look a lot at how much inflow and outflow, closed cases, you have, and withdrawals and rejections.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Recruitment for enhanced goal achievement was explicit. A unit manager stated, 'We have hired many new case managers who are stricter in their assessment than before. And they should be. We have hired them to make stricter assessments. It is a clear change'. Being on top of things was clearly a goal among newly employed caseworkers, while it tended to be 'old timers' in the agencies who questioned current practices. They could balance current demands and organizational norms with their long professional experience (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Sturdy caseworkers at PES

The PES can be characterized by a strong occupational culture that values bottom-up discretionary practices. Caseworker subjectivity can be explored through Evetts's (2009, 2011) concept of occupational professionalism (i.e., a kind of professionalism based on autonomy, discretionary judgements and strong occupational identities and cultures). It is practitioners themselves who execute control. Practitioners enjoy high autonomy and often operate within frameworks that value expertise developed through education, experience and ethical practice. Unlike street-level bureaucrats at the SIA, this included having a shared identity based on competencies acquired through work experience and socialization with senior colleagues, collegial professional relations and authority, and an occupational control of work characterized by local managerial trust in caseworkers.

PES caseworkers expressed pride in being public servants, yet they often criticized ideals and norms that came from the central level of the agency, especially if viewed as in opposition to an occupational ideal. Central management, that is, the PES headquarters, was perceived as too distant from the caseworkers' reality. The main source of normative governance came from colleagues rather than managers. Caseworkers at PES were socialized into the organization by participating in office meetings and learning from senior colleagues, and consequently, they were less dependent upon instructions or organizational guidelines for the performance of their work. Oberfield (2010) found that entrants shaped by peers and experienced workers were less likely to be default rule followers, while those influenced by training and instructors were more likely to be default rule followers. This captures well the difference between SIA and PES. Peer socialization was crucial at the PES. Caseworkers and managers alike expected caseworkers to exercise autonomy and a pragmatic approach to rules. Employees who preferred strict frameworks and formal rules did not fit in and would do better to apply for jobs elsewhere (e.g., at the SIA):

> I had a person, a really good young woman, she was educated in law but was very 'within the framework' and wanted to be so careful about everything and that's not possible in our work; it doesn't work. You need to use these frameworks all the way out to the edges if you're going to participate in our 'Renewal Journey'.
>
> (interview, PES local manager)

We conceptualize the dominant subjectivity among PES caseworkers in terms of 'sturdiness'. The term 'sturdy caseworkers' refers to them having trust in their own capacity, in stark contrast to the anxious subjects at the SIA, which made PES caseworkers resilient or sturdy in relation to shifting management priorities or discourse. Managers also expressed this expectation, and the available tools and work tasks required extensive individual capacity to make decisions independently. Caseworkers should not remain at the centre of the frame but rather 'use these frameworks all the way out to the edges', as caseworkers—and

managers—frequently expressed. Being squared was almost an invective, in contrast to being highly valued at the SIA.

Caseworkers at PES demonstrated an extensive understanding of their role, suggesting an internalized occupational ethos. Despite limited managerial steering—often absent due to the self-leadership ideology—they felt safe, in contrast to SIA caseworkers, who displayed a fear of doing things the wrong way and wanted confirmation from managers, specialists or team members that they were thinking and acting in the right way. PES caseworkers were the real experts, not management. Like craftsmen, they dealt with clients, analysed cases and made decisions based on experience and practice, acquired knowledge and skills (cf. Noordegraaf, 2007). While SIA staff tried to reduce complexity, PES staff instead embraced complexity as part of their expressed ideal as competent caseworkers. To be able to manage complexity was part and parcel of the 'craftmanship' that was their professional ideal, which required the capacity to be autonomous and exercise discretion in the work. Thus, it is a subjectivity largely shaped bottom-up but sanctioned top-down, as managers did not intervene but supported the occupationally formed caseworker role (see also Andreassen & Natland, 2022). Occasionally, the role contrasted with managerial steering, suggesting tensions in relation to management rather than loyalty. For instance, their occupational professionalism had differed from the previous NPM-inspired performance regime. Following detailed managerial instructions and 'counting sticks' stood in sharp opposition to the embraced ideals of caseworker discretion.

As we conducted interviews, this production discourse was entirely absent in the local PES offices, and central management adopted a clear stance against previous management (see Chapter 4). However, caseworkers continued to refer to this regime, mostly to distance themselves from it, but sometimes with a sense of loss. Although measurement and statistics are certainly part of PES organizational governance, PES caseworkers did not relate to the numbers in their everyday work, nor did they compete for good numbers. Rather than 'doing things in the right way', the focus was on 'doing the right things' (Lindvert, 2006; cf. Power, 1997) as they conceived it. Although the ideal of self-leadership to some extent relied on similar ideals as the local PES caseworker culture—that of autonomy in work—it was considered an expression of managerialism and empty talk, coming from the headquarters and hence lacking relevance to their work (Spicer, 2017; Johansson & Seing, 2022).

The PES caseworker role strongly relies on how to achieve substantive outcomes best (in contrast to organizational outputs), and unlike SIA caseworkers, their focus is on clients. Following rules is important; a good caseworker should remain within the frame. However, delivering results for clients is ultimately what good results are about and is the threshold against which PES caseworkers assess their work. The PES caseworker role relates to flexibility, pragmatism and practical-professional morals and hence stands in clear contrast to the standardized organizational morals expressed at SIA (Jacobsson et al., 2020). Their subjectivity is linked to helping clients and is viewed as more important than strictly following managerial rules and standards.

Whereas SIA caseworkers sought to distance themselves from clients—professionally, physically and morally—PES caseworkers cherished the personal meetings involved. In human service organizations, the client is the 'raw material' (Lipsky, 2010), and according to the PES occupational ideal and standard, you must explore such human raw material in depth, requiring an interest in the person, curiosity and, at times, patience. You have to listen and even if you are not really interested, you have to listen because building a relationship is key to achieving the desired outcomes. In Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2000) terms, street-level bureaucrats in PES clearly viewed themselves as 'citizen agents' in contrast to the 'state agents' at SIA. At the SIA, a relation-building approach to clients was generally viewed as jeopardizing the objectivity of the assessment, placing equal treatment at stake. As one PES caseworker explained:

> For those people, you make quite a difference. If you want to. Because I could be very … formal and very governed by regulations and not at all … not answer a question more than I had to. I'm sure there are those who are also like that, but I feel like I can actually create quite a lot of trust ... I create a good relationship and it feels very good afterwards. Unfortunately, you definitely cannot help everyone, but I still feel that I am making an important contribution.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

In contrast to SIA caseworkers who gained emotional support from team members and managers, PES caseworkers could go the extra mile for their clients, even if this delved beyond their formal tasks. Like professionals (e.g., doctors or nurses), they prioritized clients' welfare and considered their work a calling, for instance, helping clients interpret letters from other authorities or communicate with SIA or medical doctors. This sometimes led to contradictions regarding the legitimate form of subjectivity. One senior manager at PES headquarters argued that PES caseworkers attached too much importance to being a caring person: 'Sometimes it may have been more fun to take care of people than to make sure they become employed'. For the PES caseworkers, their role relied on a client securing a job, something that required a pragmatic and problem-solving orientation:

> There is no reason to dig into what has been, but now we are here and what opportunities do we have from here on. I think a lot in a solution-focused way.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

This allowed the PES caseworkers to derive 'energy' and job motivation from personal contacts with job seekers and employers and the regular feedback they provided. The idea of good job performance is thus connected to guiding and helping job seekers and employers—work that requires complex craftsmanship and considerable autonomy at work.

Responses to governance

Welfare professionals are not passive victims of management control. Although research points to signs of de-professionalization (e.g., van Berkel & van der Aa, 2012; Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016), other studies find that caseworkers defend discretionary power and professional values despite managerial pressure (e.g., Evans, 2010, 2011; Brodkin, 2011; Liljegren, 2012). Our study of the SIA and the PES finds that caseworkers in public sector agencies respond very differently to NPM and post-NPM pressures along the dimensions of caseworker loyalty and resistance.

Organizational loyalty and shunned discretion

SIA caseworkers expressed extensive loyalty to the role currently provided by the organization and its management. They agreed on the need to strive towards a sickness benefit rate of 9.0 and were driven by a strong ideal and ambition 'to do things the right way'. This included strong support for standardization and form rationality to secure equal outcomes. During our study, SIA caseworkers used standardized letters to clients, often with highly bureaucratic language—regardless of whether the client had the language skills or cognitive capacity to disentangle the message. This contrasted with the short post-NPM and customer-oriented period before, when bureaucratic language was avoided. SIA caseworkers could now use their bureaucratic persona as a shield in relation to clients.

Organizational loyalty was further expressed when SIA caseworkers had to 'choose' between clients' welfare and organizational goals. SIA caseworkers actively participated in standardizing assessments, for instance, when implementing the so-called 'DFA-chain' (see Chapter 3), separating diagnosis, functional impairment and activity limitation, and requiring a logical connection between the three aspects. The caseworkers handled this task in an instrumental and 'mechanical' fashion to achieve what Porter (1995) called 'mechanical objectivity' without needing to use professional discretion in case handling. The Social Insurance Inspectorate later criticized SIA for this, i.e., not fulfilling its legally stipulated duty of investigation that required considering all relevant individual circumstances when assessing eligibility (ISF, 2021).

Moreover, the legal department of SIA made a requirement in cases of psychological diagnoses, such as depression, in which caseworkers had to screen clients' medical certificates for 'objective investigation findings'. That is, listening to patients' self-descriptions of their problems was insufficient; medical doctors needed to back up their certificates with objective findings, preferably based on some kind of measurement. The Court of Appeals later dismissed this requirement, and SIA had to change its praxis (Altermark, 2020), but only after thousands of people lost their benefits based on the lack of such 'objective investigation findings'. Prioritizing organizational goals over clients' welfare made perfect sense for SIA staff. This way of working allowed caseworkers to reduce—rather than embrace—complexity in casework and excel in achieving goal achievement (i.e.,

increasing the number of rejections and withdrawals of benefits to reach the target of 9.0).

Instead of claiming discretionary powers, SIA caseworkers largely avoided concern over clients' welfare, in contrast to what Collins argues constitutes a core element of frontline casework: 'although rules may be standardized, client needs and lives are not, and so some exercise of judgment is necessary, even desired' (Collins, 2016: 222; see also Handler, 1986). They thus shunned the essence of being a caseworker, i.e., discretion, as confirmed by a local manager:

> The ones [caseworkers] I still have here, they like frameworks and rules, to know what is right and what is wrong. They don't like having discretion ... I have three [caseworkers] who left to work at the Public Employment Service instead, where they feel they have this discretion.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

A caseworker described, 'This room for discretion—it's kind of gone, but they have to streamline the case assessments that case managers do. And that's right; that's how it should be'. The SIA caseworkers accepted making 'black-and-white' interpretations and implementation of the legislation (cf., Collins, 2016: 229). Their desire 'to do things the right way' led to a wish to have clear instructions or guidance. The script obliged them to remain within the frame, driven by a fear of doing things the wrong way. A manager elaborated, 'it's written in the walls here that "Be careful so that you don't make a mistake" '. A caseworker expressed, 'There is a worry about making mistakes among many but nothing you talk about'. The normatively infused ideals of being insurance guardians fitted perfectly with caseworkers' self-identification of being 'squared' (see Ståhl et al., 2019). This was a positively loaded term at the SIA, and caseworkers could express that 'here at SIA we are a bit square', which for them meant that they embodied the bureaucratic ethos in the desired way. Further, client dialogue was characterized by such a mindset: 'You have to try to be quite square when you talk' [to clients], a caseworker told us.

Their response repertoire mainly consisted of acts of compliance and, notably, a few acts of resistance. Normative governance seeks to embed the employee into the organization, fostering strong feelings of support for the organization's objectives and the visions expressed by current leadership (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004) and SIA caseworkers did not oppose to—rather, they welcomed—such ideals. They used their agency to enhance and make organizational routines more effective, suggesting that they certainly had agency, and used it to contribute to organizational aims and visions, sometimes even over-achieving (such as when asking for statistics on their team performance more often than managers found useful). Hence, compliance too entails an element of agency.

Signs of resistance were infrequent, signalling even further a strong infusion of organizational norms and their acceptance. 'Resistance' had, to some extent, been managed since the agency had moved away from recruiting staff with a professional background and client-focused ethos (e.g., social workers). They were

viewed as inconsistent with SIA culture and, hence, less malleable to the subjectivity shaped by the organization. SIA instead began recruiting caseworkers who 'like the framework' more, as expressed by a local manager:

> A few years ago, we were looking for behaviourists; we don't do that to the same extent now. We have behavioural scientists, so it's not that we don't, that we should get rid of them in some way, but we have mixed our working group more with economists, lawyers, political scientists, those who might like the framework a little more.
>
> (interview, SIA local manager)

Since the room for voice was limited in local teams and at local offices, those uncomfortable with the current priorities and scripts primarily 'voted with their feet', leaving the organization:

> Yes, a lot of people have quit; that's the way it is. In this department there were 19 of us, when we started in 2008 there were 19 of us case managers here and of us there are 3 left now, the rest, 16 persons, have left.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

In particular, caseworkers who had previously worked with stakeholder coordination of rehabilitation expressed frustration over the fact that this task was down-prioritized in favour of case assessment: 'It's more about administering the insurance, what you are entitled to or not, not so much coordinating and helping people back [to work]'. Another stated, 'I was quite annoyed by this, that we don't have time to coordinate. I think that many people feel that we are not being heard by the managers about this'. Arguably, at SIA, caseworkers either opted for buying into the current management ideals and norms wholesale or voting with their feet and leaving the organization. As observed in previous chapters, the collective environment did not allow for voicing criticism in a collective fora. Caseworkers experiencing discomfort with the production orientation and increasing pressure to reduce the average of sickness benefit days by making stricter assessments found seeking a new job their best option, even if we also witnessed examples of caseworkers 'trying to survive in the organization' until the next policy and management shift. Those who embraced the current priorities and ways of working 'wholesale' made malleability a virtue and displayed pride in delivering on the current requirements.

Scepticism of managerialism and embraced discretion

The PES caseworkers expressed scepticism of the role given by the organization and its top-level management. Instead, they embraced the discretion available to them, and as we have observed, the local PES managers also supported and defended their discretion, expecting autonomy from their staff. Caseworkers viewed the ideals conveyed by management's normative governance with some

distance and instead placed their occupational professionalism and client relations first, not organizational loyalty. Whereas we find a goodness of fit between the offered subject positions and how caseworkers responded to them at SIA, the relationship between PES caseworkers and managemental ideals was characterized by distance, 'squeak in the machinery' and practices of resistance.

Embracing and using discretion are core to caseworkers' responses at the PES. It has been suggested that discretion is about understanding the point behind a rule and having the freedom to ignore the letter of the law to better achieve a core aim (Evans & Hupe, 2020b: 5, drawing on Kadish & Kadish, 1973). PES caseworkers had such knowledge and considered having the duty of using it. There is always some leeway in the rules, according to staff at the PES, and the rules can be bent for the purpose of achieving substantive outcomes. Thus, substantive rationality guided their casework, while rules could (or even should) be bent, albeit with some limitations. A PES caseworker explained:

> We can't break the rules. Our work needs to follow the rule of law. But, in practical terms, I still experience that we have a lot of professional freedom. I can still decide and steer things the way I want, within certain frameworks.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Another PES caseworker described her freedom to find the best solutions in the actual cases, 'There is a clear direction towards what we want to achieve and then the "how" comes a little more from below, by those who actually work with things'.

Remaining within the 'frame' while not breaching it relates to Collins's (2016: 228) view on discretion: 'Case managers describe themselves as stretching or expanding (push the boundaries, work the situation, manoeuvre, bend) the room available in the legislation. This kind of discretion might be called using the spaces in the rules'. This was largely the form of discretion PES caseworkers applied, and not discretion as space outside the rules (Collins, 2016). This might be because the available discretionary space filled the need for PES caseworkers to help clients or them not being full professionals with a professional ethos allowing them to change the rules. 'No, you can't break laws', one caseworker asserted, but one could frequently enlarge the room for discretion available in the rules. As explained by another caseworker:

> I am the case manager in charge. I have to adhere to regulations; I have to make sure that my applicants get the right service. If I do something crazy, then I can be reported to the personnel responsibility board, if I don't handle things correctly.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

Hence, PES caseworkers expressed extensive loyalty to their occupational role and the calling of supporting clients. Their criticism of managerial demands did not take the form of overt revolts, as the term resistance might suggest, but in other forms like cynicism, irony, humour, scepticism or sarcasm (see also Fleming & Spicer, 2003, 2008; Harding et al., 2017; Mumby et al., 2017). The PES caseworkers

practised disidentification and disengagement with managerial attempts of identity regulation as they sought to carve out a space to retain and craft their own beliefs and practices.

Caseworkers thus sought to create a buffer zone concerning organizational demands, a practice at play in connection to the strict NPM performance regime they had left behind *and* the self-leadership-inspired post-NPM regime at play when we conducted our studies. They perceived a mismatch between values and norms coming from above and their own role identities and used irony and humour to demonstrate their distance and reflexivity in relation to current management directives and priorities (cf. Paulsen, 2018), such as the self-leadership discourse developed at the headquarters (discussed in previous chapters). At PES, we thus find a caseworker culture of questioning directions from above and embracing bottom-up processes. As a PES caseworker told us in an interview, she had asked her managers:

> Why can't we in this office do what we think is best for the applicant in order to look for work and move on [in life]. This leads to nothing, what you are doing. [referring to the detail management and hands-on governance in the previous management period].
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

The managerially prescribed subjectivities clashed with their own internalized subjectivities and with their role identities as the real professionals in the agency. Caseworkers identified with PES as well as with their work role also outside office hours, accentuating that the caseworkers are 'the true PES'—not the Directors General or politicians initiating managerial changes: 'I am the PES' as one PES caseworker declared in an interview, stressing her embodiment of the agency, expressing an alternative normative regime type alongside the managerially infused one. This again was in contrast with SIA caseworkers, who displayed a certain disaggregation of their professional and their private selves. They were extremely proud of SIA at work while more hesitant to discuss work in private settings, especially when meeting new people, well aware that many people had a negative view of the agency. Also, the PES staff were aware of the negative view of their agency in public opinion polls. However, they just felt misunderstood by public opinion.

The PES staff frequently displayed role distance through humour. As described in previous chapters, their work culture was noisy, with ironic or sarcastic comments and hearty jokes in meetings, illustrating that they had a common enough culture and outlook to share jokes and laughs. For instance, one example of in-house joking (Åkerström et al., 2021: 29) was about the practice of disability coding, used by caseworkers to sort and allocate resources to jobseekers with some functional impairment (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013). At a meeting observed in our study, a caseworker stated, 'We like codes here at the PES. We code everything. You can have one, or a maximum of two codes. But if you have three codes then you are a case for SIA'.

The statement was delivered with self-irony and followed by a laugh by all present. Another PES caseworker had recently been undergoing surgery, walking with crutches. He said jokingly about himself: 'Bloody hell, here I am being so functionally disabled that I ought to be coded'.

Another in-house joke was about the specialists involved in assessing of disability coding. The caseworkers felt that the specialists considered themselves special, not wanting to deal with 'ordinary' caseworkers. Again, this outlook was common enough to spur laughter among local managers and caseworkers alike. Also, in management-led meetings, the use of humour was recurrent. A caseworker described joint educational days:

> In these days ... there are humorous ironic elements, we get to laugh a little at ourselves and it's done in a fun way ... of course we should be able to joke about ourselves. It's done in a good, reasonable way.
>
> (interview, PES caseworker)

As an illustration of the dual normative regimes at play, and the PES caseworkers' knowledge of each, they could flexibly switch between role distance and role embracement. The PES caseworkers hence engaged in what we previously referred to as 'creative mediation' or 'pragmatic professionalism', redefining the demands of top-down models of normative governance (Liljegren, 2012; van Gestel et al., 2019). This suggests that caseworkers at neither SIA nor PES are 'passive victims' of management changes but use their agency differently.

Moreover, responses appear to differ in accordance with a years-at-the-office factor, especially at the PES. Olaison et al. (2018) found that care managers who had extensive work experience were more likely to perceive that they had discretion (see also Schütze, 2022). Similarly, Assadi and Lundin (2018: 166) showed that with increasing job tenure, PES staff were less inclined to use formal assessment tools and less ready to act on new managerial steering signals. Newly recruited and younger caseworkers often showed a more positive attitude towards organizational reforms and central steering. Senior caseworkers more often took a critical stance to managerial demands (Johansson & Seing, 2022), and we find a similar pattern in the SIA. The PES caseworkers acted as occupational professionals, and individuals socialized into the occupation by practising the trade and learning from colleagues. At the PES, seniority brought status, which allowed – and expected—them to question management ideals or even question managers' competence if they did not have a caseworker background. Increasing job tenure thus reduces compliance with policy and management directives, especially among caseworkers shaped by occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2009, 2011).

Caseworkers' self-governance

As powerfully argued by Foucault (1982, 1997, 2005), governance and self-governance need to be studied in tandem, in other words, paying attention to how governance spills over in self-formation, self-monitoring and self-regulation. Opportunities

to self-improve, or as with Kunda (2006), opportunities for learning and personal and professional growth, are instrumental in all forms of normative governance. Caseworkers' practices of self-governance follow two distinct self-responsibilization rationales: at SIA, towards the organization and at PES, the occupation.

Practices of self-responsibilization at SIA can be analysed in connection with management ideals of leadership by coaching and collegial and coaching reflections in organized teamwork. Self-guidance emerged through conversations, or as Foucault (1982) would phrase it, pastoral power, which allowed caseworkers to discover new truths about the clients, themselves and their qualities as caseworkers. For example, managers' coaching sessions and salary and development talks were used to challenge caseworkers to reflect on their performances in relation to those of colleagues. Managers incited subjects to self-inquiry, asking questions like: 'How come that you have done this while the others have done that?' or 'Can it really be reasonable that [anonymized] has done seven benefit rejections, while you haven't done any?' Or, as another caseworker recalled from such a coaching session, 'you only made 75 [assessments], this other one made 125'.

Comparisons between individuals were thus used to govern the behaviour of caseworkers. This soft coaching of caseworkers was used strategically by management to reach set goals and keep caseworker performance in line while operating through the subjectivities of caseworkers by incitement to self-inquiry and self-assessment with the objective of self-improvement:

> My manager constantly follows how I'm doing. Do I do a lot of rejections? Do I do very few rejections? And then discuss why. If I deviate in any way, either up or down, they try to see what's the reason for that.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

We can recall the quotation from a caseworker who, after a training session conducted by a legal expert at the headquarters at which the message had been that they must be more 'insurance-like' in their case assessment, stated:

> There is, like, an awakening for us here in the office, that 'now we have to shape up'. And then one tries to go all in and really structure all cases and look on them with fresh eyes.
>
> (interview, SIA caseworker)

Such 'awakening' entails a new way of approaching one's cases and also oneself as a caseworker. Like conversion experiences generally, it entails a move away from an unenlightened state to a new awareness (Jacobsson, 2023). Moreover, it entails self-positioning as a subject in *need* of awakening (Sunnerfjell, 2020) and thus an openness to receiving guidance to achieve self-improvement, an illustration of the ideal of a malleable self. From management's perspective, achieving organizational selves that go 'all in' (as in this quotation) is more efficient in delivering organizational goals than subjects that need to be commanded what to think and do, and it is what normative governance ultimately aims to achieve.

These practices of self-responsibilization hence occurred in close tandem with managerial practices. At the PES, the distance to managerial governance is greater and PES caseworkers are offered, and claimed, more leeway in connection with managerial norms and ideals. Whereas SIA caseworkers are coached to make responsible choices and use their autonomy, the PES caseworkers are, to a greater extent, 'set free', assumed to use their independence wisely. Office meetings illustrated this as caseworkers set the meeting agenda, and local managers observed what was happening. While one may assume this as more autonomy, they regulated themselves in connection with an occupational ideal, evaluating themselves in connection with the skills of senior colleagues, for instance, by asking for advice on difficult cases. They thus governed themselves mostly in connection with an occupational rather than organizational culture and the roles of an apprentice and master. This took place informally and between colleagues at an office. However, more newly employed PES employees occasionally stated that the formalized mentor system was also important for them and that they wanted to learn things in the right way, according to management ideals (as exemplified in Chapter 6). Compared with SIA, the PES caseworkers were nonetheless less preoccupied with self-monitoring and self-evaluation, and less anxious about how management viewed them and thus safer in their occupational role.

Conclusion

This chapter captures the dominant caseworkers' subjectivities and caseworkers' responses to normative governance through the concepts of malleable and sturdy subjects (see Table 8.3). At the SIA, organizational loyalty and adaptability are achieved and displayed by delivering what management is (currently) asking for, which is what being a competent caseworker at SIA is about. SIA caseworkers welcomed the reduction of the complexity of their work and the narrowing down of their work role to gatekeeping admission to insurance, down-prioritizing client contact, and stakeholder coordination meetings. Not meeting clients face-to-face was also conducive to the internal production orientation. SIA caseworkers welcomed the top-down moulding of their role identities as gatekeepers of sickness. Their

Table 8.3 Malleable and sturdy subjects

	Managerially induced subjectivity	*Cause infused subjectivity*
Casework identity	Organizational professionals	Occupational professionals
Responses to central governance	Compliance with managerialism	Distance to managerialism
Work task orientation	Reduce complexity	Embrace complexity
Relation to clients	Avoid personal relations	Enhance personal bond
Discretionary practice	Shun discretion	Claim discretion

responses were not just pragmatic adjustments to what was currently valued and measured but an active embracement, underlining that compliance with managerial demands also entails elements of caseworker agency. This is why it is more pertinent to speak of this orientation in terms of malleability rather than obedience. In our interpretation, the SIA caseworkers display a quite distinct version of managerial-induced 'organizational professionalism' (Evetts, 2009, 2011), primarily concerned with improving organizational performance and building on organizational—rather than occupational—control of work, rewarding a workforce highly adaptable to shifting internal organizational imperatives.

At the PES, caseworker subjectivity can be characterized in terms of sturdiness, expressing resilience to managerial demands, and loyalty to the task—or calling—of helping unemployed clients secure a job or move ahead in life. PES caseworkers followed central management's general rules and orientations yet constantly moderated them to best promote service for clients. Having and protecting personal relations with clients is of central importance, this being the main mode of emotional support for PES caseworkers. Like craftsmen (and craftswomen), they embraced the complexity of their work, viewing clients as the raw material to be moulded into potential labour market participants. Although they tested eligibility for unemployment insurance, caseworkers at the PES essentially considered themselves to be on the side of clients and jobseekers, hence being somewhat unresponsive to political reforms of enhanced activation and work tests. They were socialized into using the frameworks 'all the way out to the edges', which they did in a way that they thought best benefitted the clients. Hence, they both embraced work task complexity and claimed to have discretion.

Unlike SIA caseworkers, they responded with aversion, distance or even resistance to central governance, considering managerialism less relevant for proper casework. They grumbled about management ideas, such as self-leadership and coaching leadership, but kept working as they always had done. Like sturdy employees, PES caseworkers proved less malleable and less easily changed their way of working and thinking to adjust to management interventions. In our interpretation, PES caseworkers display a quite distinct version of cause-infused 'occupational professionalism' (Evetts, 2009, 2011), as caseworkers' primary concern was the occupational ethos of helping clients and acting in accordance with an occupational logic, seeking support from experienced colleagues and the identity of being job officers and coaches.

9 Conclusion

Introduction

This book aims to advance empirical research and theoretical understandings of how caseworkers are shaped and shape themselves within contemporary street-level bureaucracies. It seeks to rectify the dual gap in street-level bureaucracy research and critical management studies, where the former loses sight of the governing processes taking place inside organizations, whereas the latter expresses less interest in organizations' external surroundings, such as public policies, public governance, and the public's expectations of agencies. While policies and public governance are important elements against which caseworker subjectivity needs to be understood, our research stresses them as being inevitably translated, mediated and filtered through organizational governance processes. In this concluding chapter, we synthesize the book's most important findings and lessons, stressing the organizational shaping of caseworker subjectivities as malleable (at the Social Insurance Agency, SIA) and sturdy (at the Public Employment Service, PES). The chapter combines insights from street-level bureaucracy and critical management studies with the book's study of governance by discourses, emotions, peers, numbers, colours and symbols. Based on this, the chapter presents a model for analyzing caseworker subjectivity in contemporary public sector organizations. The chapter moves away from the individualistic account of caseworker agency, underpinning much research on caseworker agency and discretion, highlighting how caseworker subjectivity is shaped both vertically (through political and managerial directives) and horizontally (via peer interactions and peer pressure, and workplace cultures). Finally, the chapter offers some suggestions for further research linked to the accountability issues our study illustrates.

Organizational shaping of caseworker subjectivity

As street-level bureaucrats, caseworkers can be viewed as acting at the outermost edge of a hierarchical policy chain. However, rather than viewing them as mere policy implementers, the tradition from Lipsky stresses street-level bureaucrats as policymakers in their own right. Instead of merely executing decisions on higher authority levels, they *de facto* shape the policy outcomes that citizens face (Lipsky,

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2010; Brodkin, 2020). Caseworkers' subjectivity is here framed in accordance with the formal rules and regulations and the space for discretion they offer, through ambiguous or contradictory policy goals or due to organizational resource constraints or time pressure. All these factors are relevant for understanding how caseworkers' subjectivities were shaped in the two agencies studied in this book. Government policies, public governance trends, structural working conditions, and caseworkers' educational backgrounds and occupational identities all mattered for how caseworkers perceived their work tasks.

However, this book shows the organizational shaping of caseworker subjectivities as an additional, distinct and significant expression of caseworker governance. A core finding is that policy objectives are filtered through organizations, adding organizational governance alongside political objectives and working conditions, which need to be accounted for in street-level bureaucracy research. Policies and public governance indeed shape caseworkers, yet our studies find them equally shaped – and shaping themselves – by organizational norms, cultures, and ideals. Like any other employee, they are formed by organizational cultures, as well as managerial visions, ideas, and practices. Like employees at Apple, Dell or IKEA, they reflect and respond to managerial ideals and handle managers' ambitions and attempts to incentivize their commitment and loyalty to work. Whereas it is still useful to view caseworkers as street-level bureaucrats, we also need to consider them as organizational men and women (Whyte, 2002), for which normative governance matters – sometimes more than political rules and regulations.

The organizational shaping of caseworkers is a complex process, which this book shows. Organizational normative regimes come into action through governance mechanisms like discourse, emotions, peer governance, and visual governance tools like numbers, colours, and symbols. Our ethnographic approach finds that to gain knowledge of the subjectivity these normative regimes give rise to, we need to combine 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches, i.e., studying organizational visions and ideals in combination with caseworkers' responses and uses of top-down steering tools.

The two distinct types of caseworker subjectivities are illustrations thereof. At the SIA, we identified the 'malleable caseworker' who shunned discretion, avoided personal relations with clients, and aligned themselves closely with the norms promoted by central management as they sought to reduce job complexity to enhance performance accomplishments linked to the goal of 9.0. At the PES, we found 'sturdy caseworkers' shaped by the contrast and conflict between a managerially orchestrated caseworker subjectivity and the role and occupational identity embraced and promoted by caseworkers at local offices. While SIA caseworkers self-managed themselves in line with the discursive shaping of casework as being an 'insurance guardian', PES caseworkers approached top management's ideals of self-leadership, customer orientation, and digital services with mixed feelings, especially since such governance tools challenged their views on appropriate casework, and their ambition to maintain personal relations with clients.

The concept of street-level bureaucrats suggests that caseworkers defend their discretion and make decisions with considerable independence in relation

to policies, as well as organizational regulations or managerial instructions. This indeed reflects the PES caseworkers' self-ideals, but not the SIA caseworkers', as they strongly oriented themselves toward fulfilling managerial and political objectives while shunning discretion. At the PES, managerial expectations of embodying and living organizational leadership ideals fell flat. Caseworkers at the PES viewed such ideas as 'managerialism' as having limited relevance for proper casework. Like a classic street-level bureaucrat, they defended their discretion against managerial demands based on their shared occupational identity and sense of professionalism.

These different subjectivities raise the critical question of whether one or several normative regimes are at play simultaneously and how to explain differences in relation to central governance. The 'squeaks in the machinery' among the PES caseworkers suggest the existence of more than one normative regime. The PES caseworkers' scepticism to managerial demands illustrates an already existing, competing normative regime, infusing the PES caseworkers' subjectivity alongside, or even more forcefully than, the one promoted by the organization. The PES caseworkers relate to other staff members through collegiality and gain emotional rewards from client interactions rather than from managers. The PES caseworkers' subjectivity as 'sturdy caseworkers' is normatively guided and governed by a robust occupational identity, sometimes at odds with an organizationally infused one. The values associated with occupational professionalism among the PES caseworkers allowed them to block and mediate top-down demands and preserve a certain degree of autonomy, using it to forward what they saw as the client's interests. We conceptualize this as a cause-based form of professionalism. It can, moreover, be viewed as a regime misfit between the one orchestrated by central management and the ideals shared among local caseworkers. The misfit was even more evident during the previous strict performance management regime (Paulsen, 2015, 2018).

At the SIA, our research revealed one normative regime shared by managers and caseworkers alike or, better conceptualized, a high degree of alignment between the centrally orchestrated normative regime and SIA caseworkers' subjectivity and performance of work. SIA caseworkers acted as 'organizational professionals', less shaped by a common occupational identity, making them more inclined to follow hierarchical structures of authority and decision-making (Evetts, 2009, 2011). The study thus shows that research into normative governance of caseworkers' subjectivities in public sector organizations must take into account professionalism and occupational identity, as these inform caseworkers' views on appropriate casework and, hence, their internalization of normative governance.

The strong cultural coherence across local offices further justifies the relevance of a normative governance approach. We investigated a variety of local offices at both agencies, with different sizes and working conditions, different challenges related to unemployment and sick leave levels, and local socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics. Despite differences, local managers and caseworkers acted and reasoned similarly, suggesting the ideals of caseworker subjectivity as highly institutionalized in agency cultures. Such similarities across local offices

suggest uniform, thus institutionalized, cultures inside agencies (Kelly, 1994; Ståhl & Andersson, 2018; Jacobsson et al., 2020) and that cultural compatibility matters for understanding alignment/misalignment between managerially infused subjectivities and caseworkers' expressions. Christensen and Laegreid (2011b: 17) assert that public sector reforms 'must go through a cultural compatibility test', suggesting that some public sector organizations might be more culturally compatible with specific managerially infused normative regimes while others are not. The PES study demonstrates this. Normatively shaping caseworkers by public agency leadership (or politicians) is undoubtedly easier if no (or weak) occupational identity and professionalism are already institutionalized in the organization.

The organizational shaping of caseworkers – alongside political or professional shaping – can be summarized in the following model (see Figure 9.1). While policies and public governance are essential elements against which caseworker subjectivity needs to be understood, our research stresses that such governance tools are inevitably guided through organizational governance processes and, hence, informed by them. Instead of primarily understanding and theorizing caseworker subjectivity as linked to what a government does or does not, we find caseworkers as being included in a complex web of organizational relationships and forms of control, forming distinct normative regimes in relation to which caseworker subjectivity needs to be analyzed. The four types of normative governance explored in this book are, in this respect, mechanisms by which normative governance and organizational ideals are put into operation. Yet, they do not function in a 'mechanical' way since we find extensive filtering, mediation, and contestation at play inside organizations, informing and shaping caseworker subjectivities in complex and largely unintended ways.

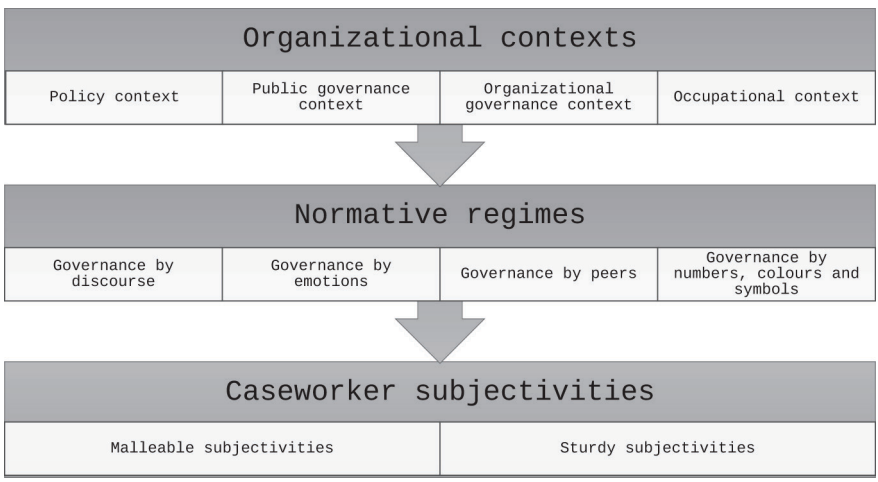

Figure 9.1 Organizational shaping of caseworker subjectivity.

Source: Authors' own.

Vertical and horizontal shaping of caseworker subjectivity

This book finds that the organizational shaping of caseworkers takes place vertically, as discussed above, yet also horizontally, making it a highly contingent process. The Lipsky tradition underscores caseworkers' autonomy and reaction against top-down control to protect and guard professional discretion (Lipsky, 2010). Caseworker subjectivity is indeed framed in connection with political, public, and organizational governance, as well as notions of professionalism. However, we find it equally shaped by the social relations caseworkers have inside organizations, with each other, managers, or clients.

In this respect, caseworkers are embedded in a web of relationships through which their subjectivity is exercised. Their autonomy and control are shaped vertically through political, organizational, and managerial demands and expectations *and* horizontally through interactions and collective social processes at the workplace, including peer pressure. Both are equally relevant, as our research shows, especially as normative governance works through employees' identification with and commitment to top-down steering. Normative governance thus gets its effectiveness by being reinforced through social interaction processes, which is underplayed in both street-level bureaucracy research and critical management studies.

This book offers a different approach to key concepts like compliance/resistance and autonomy/control, central to critical management and street-level bureaucracy research (e.g., Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Maravelias, 2007; Alcapidani et al., 2018). The practices of SIA caseworkers reflect compliance due to their close alignment with and embracement of managerial norms and ideals. The PES caseworkers act differently, manifesting notable distance and criticism of managerial ideals and using sarcasm and humour as central means to distance themselves from and express a critique of managerial steering (e.g., Hallonsten, 2022). Employees who have been in the organization for a long time, are found to have the capacity to act with greater distance to managerial demands compared to newly employed employees, a finding that goes for both agencies.

However, in the case of the SIA, vertical governance got its effectiveness by intersecting with and being reinforced through horizontal governance mechanisms, in this case operating through the collective processes in and around organized teamwork. Peer control and peer policing sometimes turned out to be more effective in aligning caseworker subjectivities with organizational goals than hierarchical governance and managerialism. In the case of the PES, we found that vertical governance became ineffective since it was seen as contradicting core caseworker values. Highly valued collegial relations constituted a 'vaccine' against managerially infused norms, as primary socialization came from senior colleagues and not managers.

Consequently, caseworkers' agency – including views on discretion – should not be viewed as an individual property but must be understood in connection with horizontally shaped subjectivities and the response repertoires that come with them. Partly through discursive governance, yet even more so by horizontal

peer governance, caseworker agency can be viewed as a product of social interaction with colleagues, including local managers and clients. At both agencies, caseworkers participate in office deliberations and engage in local meetings – formal and informal – that inform appropriate views on caseworker subjectivities, including how to best respond to managerial demands.

Compliance as a 'response' is a widely accepted norm formed and enforced through team meetings, collegial debates, and managerially infused objectives within the SIA. It is a practice caseworkers agree upon collectively and individually and should thus not be seen as simple acceptance of managerial norms but as the result – and display – of agency and, in our view, the product of malleable subjectivity. Resistance can similarly be viewed as an expression of sturdy subjectivity, as sarcasm, humour and role-distance are a type of agency the PES caseworkers learned through interactions with senior colleagues and participation in vibrant office meetings. Complying or questioning are, in this respect, the products of collective social processes. We view caseworkers' discretion similarly. This is especially so at the SIA, as discretion is exercised in collective settings and through social processes, that is, in teams, while being individually shunned. While peer interaction and socialization are well known to SLB scholars, their role in governing processes has so far not gotten the attention it deserves, which this book has shown.

A key finding in this book is hence that managerial governance targeting caseworkers' subjectivity can be highly successful in shaping their self-identity and changing practices and relations with managers, clients, and peers, especially when vertical and horizontal governance mechanisms hook into and reinforce each other. Vertical and horizontal governance constitute a perfect match of mutually reinforcing processes at the SIA, as the SIA caseworkers aligned themselves with organizational ideals internalized through the social processes at the workplace. The horizontal shaping of the PES caseworkers occurred differently, blocking rather than reinforcing managerial ideals. This amplifies that horizontal and vertical governance are closely interconnected but can lead to different outcomes. As in the case of the SIA, horizontal shaping reinforces the managerial-infused ideal of a caseworker. However, at the PES reinforcing ideals of an occupational and collegial identity by blocking centrally orchestrated ideals.

Post, layered, and nested governance

The scholarly debate on NPM and post-NPM is extensive, and Christensen (2012) rightfully states that contemporary public sector and administrative reforms represent 'a mixed order'. The NPM reforms that enforced marketization and public sector governance arrangements inspired by business and the private sector have been followed by post-NPM arrangements, stressing integration between sectors and using culture rather than performance to steer agencies and caseworkers. Like NPM reforms, post-NPM has been viewed as an umbrella term encapsulating different reform trends (e.g., Reiter & Klenk, 2019), associated with governance arrangements that seek to 're-establish a common "ethic" and a "cohesive

culture" in the public sector' (Christensen & Laegreid, 2011c: 397), and – at least in a Swedish context – focusing on value- and trust-based management and 'let professionals be professional' (e.g., Bringselius, 2018, 2020).

Our research confirms the idea of contemporary public sector reform as a 'mixed order'. Irrespective of turning from NPM towards post-NPM (as in the case of the PES) or the other way around (as in the case of the SIA), we find that agency reforms do not replace each other as a pendulum swing but are mixed, overlapping and layered, as new governance forms come at the top of old ones. In line with what Christensen & Lægreid and several others contend, the SIA and the PES constitute a layered governance structure (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2010, 2011b; Lodge & Gill, 2011; Reiter & Klenk, 2019; Goldfinch & Halligan, 2024). They are in this respect like institutions, 'inherently open and disjointed, containing many ambiguities, multiple layers, and competing logics' (Hemerijck, 2013: 96). Moreover, the political and public governance reforms, indirectly studied, were not simply applied but subject to interpretation by actors with divergent and conflicting interests, outside or inside organizations (see Thelen, 2009; see also Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Considering that the SIA moved back from being governed by post-NPM principles to NPM principles, suggests that even the prefix 'post' is increasingly arbitrary.

During these stages of transition and transformation, some governance tools turn passive, hidden and out of display. The coming and going of numbers is especially illustrative, as we find it in both agencies. Although the PES stopped using numbers as a governance tool during our study period, central management continued to collect them but avoided using them to govern caseworkers. Moreover, our informants expected 'number governance' to return in the future. When the PES abandoned using number governance, some caseworkers felt a loss and continued using them as a source of self-identification and social sorting of others. In the case of the SIA, the customer orientation promoted by top management was hard to sell to performance-oriented local managers and caseworkers, and the return of number governance was welcomed. Some governance tools thus linger on, being consequential for caseworkers' subjectivities long after being abolished by central management.

While the concept of layered governance stresses governance elements on top of each other, our study finds contemporary public sector governance increasingly nested as actors mix, combine, and link governance tools across the NPM/post-NPM spectrum. We found that classical NPM and post-NPM governance elements were integrated seamlessly in the case of SIA's organizational governance, with a powerful effect on the normative shaping of caseworkers. Discursively, managers framed organizational reforms as a step away from an NPM and/or post-NPM style of governance, distancing from a 'bad past'. The nested quality of contemporary governance is thus a result of actors purposefully applying what can be viewed as such a 'pick-n-mix' strategy. Directors-General strategically downplayed specific governance tools already in place during the previous NPM (or post-NPM) period to justify the reforms they intended to implement, or they picked an element from a previous one and forged it into the present model. For instance, the SIA maintained

teamwork and coaching leadership but used those post-NPM tools strategically to enforce number governance.

Thus, the pre/post debates risk becoming a bit artificial, especially if we link NPM and post-NPM to caseworker governance. This book rather shows the usefulness of cutting the pie differently, arguing that normative regimes and normative governance underpin both NPM and post-NPM styles of governance. Although political reforms and public governance are important, our framework of governance by discourse, emotions, peers, numbers, colours, and symbols shows the relevance of investigating how styles of governance are implemented inside organizations.

Irrespective of whether framed as an NPM or a post-NPM, reforms and regulations are filtered through organizations and embedded normative regimes. We saw that in cases where governance by discourse, emotions, peers and numbers, colours and symbols operated in tandem and reinforced each other, as in the SIA, they could achieve a tight normative order and an effective normative infusion of subjects, as employees and caseworkers. In other instances, such as in the PES, they could work as counterforces, balancing the influence exerted by a particular governance mechanism. In conclusion, our analysis has highlighted the importance of capturing the subtle shaping of organizational subjects taking place within street-level bureaucracies, as well as in relation to their daily work.

Concluding remarks

Drawing on insights from both street-level bureaucracy research and critical management studies, this book has offered a new way of thinking about organizational governance and street-level agency. The extensive policy focus that has characterized the field of SLB research is here shifted to a focus on the organizational shaping of caseworkers. We have highlighted how policy, political reforms, and regulations are filtered through organizations. In this way, we have illuminated the informal and subtle shaping of street-level bureaucrats in contemporary public sector organizations that takes place alongside formal policies through various types of normative governance in organizational processes and which may take policy implementation in unintended ways.

We have shown how the normative regimes developed within organizations are shaped in an interplay between managers and caseworkers through a variety of governance techniques and responses to governance. Caseworker subjectivities are formed in this interplay, with caseworkers internalizing and self-governing along normative ideas and ideals but, in other contexts, challenging and resisting such expectations on remodeling and re-subjectification. Whereas caseworkers' agency can be conceptualized in terms of discretion, we have argued that caseworkers also have considerable agency without defending their discretion. Actively aligning their motivation and aspirations with managerial ideals, as in the case of the SIA caseworkers, is also an expression of agency.

Moreover, the tension between managers and caseworkers, salient in SLB theory, continues to be relevant. Yet, it misses out on the horizontal shaping of caseworkers, their discretion, and subjectivity, which may or may not align with

vertical governance. A key finding is that both fields – SLB research and critical management studies – lack a thorough theorizing of horizontal processes of governance. Our analysis stresses that employees – in public or private sector organizations alike – are shaped by the social relations, social interactions and social settings in which they participate, emphasizing the need for further 'sociologizing' caseworker research.

Finally, this book raises some questions of relevance for policymakers and practitioners, especially regarding accountability, i.e., what caseworkers should be held accountable for and to whom they should be accountable (Brodkin, 2008; Burton & van den Broek, 2008). In the study of public policy, implementation, and street-level research, caseworker discretion has often been seen as the nemesis of formal accountability, as policymakers have had difficulty knowing whether their decisions steer what is happening 'on the street'. Whereas this might endanger how to hold frontline workers accountable upward in the hierarchy, it has benefitted frontline workers' public accountability as they – in principle – can provide services for citizens and clients even when policies say otherwise.

While this stresses caseworker accountability to politicians *and* citizens, our findings make the accountability problem even more problematic. The SIA caseworkers (and local managers) found themselves accountable to the organizational goal to an extent to which they enforced its accomplishment far beyond what policymakers expected – and even contrary to their legally stipulated task (of both performing eligibility control and stakeholder coordination of rehabilitation). Not even extensive public opinion, criticism from media and politicians, and legal cases proving them wrong could convince the SIA caseworkers to change their practices. They were fulfilled by the ideals of the normative regime, leading to extreme effectiveness in handling the task (delivering organizational outputs) but not achieving what politicians or the public expected from them. Their malleability made them bendable to the extent that they lost a sense of their accountability in delivering services to citizens. This raises concerns about the scope for professional judgment and individual accountability in tight normative regimes, where peer pressure is extensive and the scope for questioning is limited, such as in the case of the SIA. The PES caseworkers found themselves accountable to colleagues and clients but less regarding political objectives and goals, raising concern over the room for and capacity of political steering in tight collegial normative regimes. In both cases, the normative regimes led to policy perversion and goal displacement, either in connection to managerial or collegially infused ideals. While this raises a range of questions and concerns over accountability in SLBs, it indeed stresses the need to add organizational loyalty and disloyalty to the governance and accountability conundrum.

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