
RAPPORT

Dimensions of discretionary practices: Swedish social insurance officials assessing work ability in a highly regulative context.

Anders Bruhn, Mats Ekström & Elin Thunman

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Introduktion på svenska

I den här artikeln diskuteras arbetsvillkoren för handläggare på Försäkringskassan som utreder och beslutar om människors rätt till sjukbidrag (sjukpension). Som sådana är de typiska så kallade gräsrotsbyråkrater (Street-Level Bureaucrats, Lipsky 2010) som i mötet med klienter/sökande har att tillämpa lagstiftning och regelverk i bedömning och beslut gällande enskilda individers situation och behov. Den delstudie som ligger till grund för artikeln har utvecklats inom ramen för ett forskningsprojekt: *Samtalspraktiker i mötet mellan handläggare och försäkrade: En studie av hur Försäkringskassans uppdrag, målsättningar och regelverk hanteras och omsätts i handling i samtal med de försäkrade*, som vi genomfört under åren 2016–19 (finansierat av Forte).

För människor som drabbats av sjukdom och ohälsa är Försäkringskassan (FK) den viktigaste myndigheten inom det svenska socialförsäkringssystemet. FK's övergripande vision är: "... ett samhälle där människor känner trygghet om livet tar en ny vändning." På senare år har dock myndigheten drabbats av stark kritik från såväl allmänhet som forskare och opinionsbildare. Denna kritik handlar först och främst om att sjuka människor utan reella möjligheter att försörja sig själva i allt högre grad kommit att nekats sjukskrivning (och sjukersättning). Kritiken drabbar i hög grad kassans uppdragsgivare, dvs. politikerna i regering och riksdag för att dessa driver en omänsklig politik där målsättningar om kostnadseffektivitet och besparingar prioriteras på bekostnad av ekonomiskt stöd och hjälp till människor som saknar försörjning till följd av sjukdom (se t.ex. Altermark 2020). Kritik har emellertid också framförts av flera forskare om att kassan går än längre än de har mandat för, att de avsiktligt feltolkar lagar mm i sina avslag när sjuka människor söker ekonomisk hjälp (Mannelqvist 2019).

De som ska omsätta bestämmelserna i enskilda fall är kassans handläggare. Typiskt för en sådan grupp gräsrotsbyråkrater är att de ska tillämpa allmänna regler på unika fall. I deras yrkesroll ligger då att tolka, omsätta och prioritera hur regler ska tillämpas utifrån den individuella klientens specifika situation och förutsättningar. Detta kräver ett omdöme och en balans, samt inte minst ett handlingsutrymme att balansera och prioritera i regeltillämpningen. Ofta handlar det då om att väga specifika bestämmelser mot helheten i den sökandes situation och möjligheter till rehabilitering. Rättssäkerhet är inte enbart en fråga om tillämpning av "lagens bokstav" utan även av dess syfte och anda.

Försäkringskassans handläggare är idag mycket hårt styrda i sin yrkesutövning. I takt med glidningen mot en mer restriktiv sjukförsäkringspolicy och en allt striktare administrativ styrning i kassan har deras handlingsutrymme inskränkts avsevärt jämfört med tidigare. För det första, såväl i fråga om sjukpenning som sjukersättning ska den sökandes befintliga arbetsförmåga prövas mot möjligheten att ta ett normalt förekommande arbete. Om sådan möjlighet finns utgår inget bidrag. Trots formuleringen *normalt förekommande* skall kassan inte bedöma om sådana arbeten de facto existerar på arbetsmarknaden (vilket naturligtvis är en logisk motsägelse). Det handlar enbart om huruvida personen rent fysiskt/intellektuellt kan utföra vissa arbetsmoment (med eller utan särskilt stöd och särskilda hjälpmedel) som man föreställer sig förekommer i vissa arbeten (se t.ex. Bruhn m fl. 2018 i denna skriftserie). Denna bestämmelse har vidare lett till att de i sammanhanget så avgörande läkarutlåtandena underkänns i allt högre utsträckning. Kassans handläggare instrueras att leta

öppningar för vissa arbeten som skrivande läkare inte ”täppt till” (således oavsett om de existerar på arbetsmarknaden eller ej). För det andra så har den interna handläggningen av ärenden via dels krav om kostnadseffektivitet, dels teamuppföljningar, obligatorisk insyn från så kallade specialister i bedömningarna samt öppen insyn via digitalisering mellan kollegor och ledning i ärendehantering. Det senare har lett till starkare intern kontroll och nedslag vid eventuella avvikelser (se t.ex. Hollertz m fl.).

Trots den allt hårdare styrningen existerar fortfarande ett handlingsutrymme för handläggare när det gäller att väga in utredning och beslut i relation till dilemmat mellan rättssäkerhet och likabehandling å ena sidan och individens unika situation och uppenbara behov å den andra. I vårt projekt blev det tydligt att trots den hårda styrningen så agerar enskilda handläggare ofta ganska olika i hur de utreder och beslutar i enskilda fall. Balansen i ovan nämnda dilemma sker utifrån lite olika utgångspunkter. Vissa lyfter klart och tydligt det som handlar om omsorgen om den enskilde, om dennes rätt till trygghet i enlighet med den officiella visionen, andra håller strikt på att regler ska tillämpas på samma sätt, lika för alla, oavsett att viktiga tillkommande fakta i det individuella fallet till dels förskjuter bilden. Hur detta är möjligt i en så hårt styrd verksamhet och hur man kan förstå varför, är temat i den här artikeln. Vi menar att detta i grund handlar om handläggarens yrkesrollsuppfattning. Detta är inget specifikt för vårt fall utan en problematik som uppenbart existerar inom de flesta yrken där utövaren besitter egenkontroll och handlingsutrymme. Orsakerna till sådana olikheter i handlingsmönster bland utövarna av en och samma yrkesroll inom en och samma organisatoriska kontext diskuteras sällan inom forskning kring gräsrotsbyråkrater. Artikeln innehåller ett förslag om teoretisk analytisk utveckling av förståelsen för fenomenet genom tillämpningen och integration med sociologisk rollteori men också teorier om professionella grupper. Vi menar att en sådan integrering bidrar till att utveckla förståelsen för hur gräsrotsbyråkraterna utnyttjar sitt handlingsutrymme i yrkesutövningen. Det ger dessutom argument för vikten av en diskurs kring vilka som rekryteras till tjänster som till sin karaktär innebär socialt arbete.

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Abstract

Frontline work is most often performed in direct encounters with clients. Several scholars have developed models and methods for analysing these encounters to explain the distinctive features of discretionary practices. Such an analysis must move between several layers of social reality, and therefore it requires the integration of several different types of data. In this article our main objective is to develop a ‘multi-level’ approach for understanding how discretionary practices grow in the interplay between conditions at institutional, as well as interactional and individual levels. We hope to contribute to an enhanced understanding of frontline work in today’s public sector. Our data comes from a group of officials in the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) investigating the needs and rights of applicants to receive sickness compensation (sickness pension). It includes recorded phone conversations, qualitative interviews, and both administrative and regulative documents. In spite of being a strictly regulated business, and even in cases of very similar situational conditions, the analysis reveals important variations between officials in their approaches to clients, and in ways of acting in dilemmatic situations. Such variations are traced back to individual-level differences in moral dispositions and professional beliefs.

Introduction

Extensive research has investigated the discretion of frontline workers, and how they use it to act in dilemmatic situations, and how moral aspects are balanced, and occupational roles negotiated in the process of handling individual cases (e.g. Ellis 2007; Jewell and Glaser, 2006; Kallio and Saarinen 2014; Lipsky 2010; Prior and Barnes 2011). Frontline work is most often work undertaken in direct encounters with clients, face-to-face or by phone. Several scholars have developed models and methods for analysing these encounters to explain the distinctive features of discretionary practices (Bartels 2013; Dubois 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012; Raaphorst 2018; Rice 2013; Zacka 2017). A common denominator in such attempts is the insight that such an analysis must move between several layers of social reality. Such moves in turn often require working with, and integrating several different types of data in the analysis (Bartels 2013; Rice 2013). *Our main objective in this article is to develop such a ‘multi-level’ approach* (Bruhn and Ekström 2017). In our case, this means a multi-layered analysis of the variation in the discretionary practices of officials when interacting with clients but also related to the institutional framework and the conceptions of the occupational role of the individual bureaucrat (ibid.; see also Lindahl & Bruhn 2017). In short, discretionary practices develops situationally in the meeting between frontline staff and clients. But the meeting takes place inside a regulative framework and an organisational culture heavily affecting the room for action, and besides this the agents meeting have their own motives and values. In the case of frontline staff they have their own expectations about how to perform in their occupational role. This may differ between different actors.

Our interactional data comes from a corpus of recorded phone conversations. What happens in the course of such encounters, what roles are enacted and how, are related not only to the activities as such, but also to what the context allows, and how the actors’ – the Street Level Bureaucrat (SLB) and client – themselves understand their roles. The organisational and institutional framework sets the scope of discretion, i.e. the formal and informal

organisational expectations of role performance. However, the SLB also interpret and act inside this framework on the basis of their own moral dispositions, experiences, and expectations about role performance (Zacka 2017; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). We have used qualitative interviews (with officials and managers), documents and case journals to analyse the impact upon the discretionary practice of these levels.

This paper has a twofold aim: we want to show a way to develop a multi-level analysis in this area of research, and we want to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the practice and the conditions of work for SLBs in today's public sector. The Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) is perhaps the most important single authority in the Swedish welfare insurance system. SSIA defines its fundamental role as "to create a safety net should life take a new turn." (website). SSIA is responsible for benefits, compensation and allowances for families with children, as well as for people with disabilities or illnesses. The core of the SSIA's business is handled by typical SLBs, officials working with applicants to one or more of the welfare measures and benefits the authority has to handle. The officials studied in our case investigate and assess applications for sickness compensation (SC, i.e. sickness pension). Despite this being a strictly regulated business their interactions with, and the way they act towards clients (here called "applicants"¹) reveals important variations.

Studying these frontline workers – analytical approach

In this section, we will present the theoretical approach that has guided our analysis. As stated above this means analysis on three levels – the institutional, the interactional and the individual.

Institutional level: formal and informal frames of discretion

The occupational role of SLBs rests on a latent dilemma about how to balance fundamental moral standards. One side involves treating clients in accordance with their stated rights as citizens, i.e. the rules, regulation and state welfare policy, and the other side, and in accordance with the spirit of rights and laws, involves treating them with fairness and respect, having their situation valued and measures adjusted to their unique circumstances (Lipsky 2010). In the framework of their discretion, SLBs are practical policy makers, and they develop different ways to understand and handle formal regulations in different types of cases, which is something management tries to counteract using different measures, such as the refinement of rules, written instructions, and surveillance (ibid.).

To understand the character of SLB work today it is important to understand the impact of the New Public Management (NPM) doctrine (Hood 1991; Power 1997). By using Freidson's (2001) distinction about different logics of governance, we can say that NPM means governance via a bureaucratic logic, in combination with a market logic, pushing professional logic away. Increasing details in regulations and instructions about how to apply rules becomes combined with an expanding amount of control measures at the output level, such as performance targets (Ståhl and Andersson 2018). Further, the high degree of transparency

¹ The term used for the insured by the SSIA has varied through the years and changes in policy – "insured", "client", and "customer" are only a few. In this article, we use "applicant" because it is reasonably neutral in relation to policy changes.

resulting from these measures and the ICT systems that carry them may also increase horizontal control between colleagues counteracting differences in work practices, an ‘isomorphic approach’, creating norms and limits of discretion at an informal level (Hollertz, Jakobsson and Seing 2018; Bruhn 2015, Barton 2008). Evetts (2011) notes how the “managerialism” of NPM prompts employees to orientate towards an organisational professionalism, i.e. ideals of organisational performance and effectivity in production at the expense of values grounded in occupational beliefs. Pressure on SLBs regarding cost-effectiveness may be at risk of jeopardising services to unique clients (Zacka 2017). It may also jeopardise correctness in the application of rules. SLBs today are thus really operating in a tension between three poles: judicial security; effectivity in production; and, the unique needs and circumstances of clients.

A highly controlled and regulated business does not automatically mean a lack of discretion. Rules are by necessity vague and open-textured. The situations that they are meant to cover are never identical. There are ambiguities and borderline cases, alternative fields of application, and rule conflicts demanding adjustment and prioritisation (Evans and Harris 2004; Hupe and Hill 2007). Prior and Barnes (2011: 269) highlight the prevalence of ‘agencies of resistance’, which may subvert management policy in different ways. This may be by officials who adopt practices that differ from official policy, or by the clients who use resources to reach personal goals through their interactions (c.f. Brodtkin 2011; Gofen 2013).

Interactional level: role performances in client contact

Welfare institutions become “real” in the ways they are constantly (re-)enacted in work practice (Rice 2013: 1043). We have to study the micro processes of encounters taking place between frontline staff and their clients to understand how this happens. Researchers have explored strategies through which policies are interpreted and negotiated (Prior and Barnes 2011), how different organisational elements structure the translation of policy goals in frontline interaction (Jewell and Glaser 2006), how interactions with clients affect decision-making (Raaphorst and Loyens, 2018), and the nuanced pragmatic judgments in concrete situations (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012). This research has mainly relied on interviews and observations, without analysing the dynamics of real-time conversations in any detail (cf. Bartels, 2013). As mentioned, our point of departure is to study how officials choose to act in real time (telephone) conversations with clients, and their situation dependent “modes of appraisal” (Zacka 2017:86). These modes of appraisal are then analysed against the background of qualitative interviews. This approach gives us the opportunity to ask officials about their reflections on the different ways to value and act in different situations. This can reveal the more enduring moral beliefs and dispositions that lie behind their modes of appraisal.

Zacka (2017:88) has presented a useful tool for understanding how SLBs act in real time situations. He makes a distinction between *three modes of appraisal* that the SLB has to balance while performing their occupational role. The *Enforcer* mode is about approaching the case with suspicion that the client will try to take advantage, i.e. guarding the system and preventing abuse. Being *Indifferent* means focusing on information that is relevant in an administrative sense, being neutral, keeping distance, and handling the case as efficiently as

possible. The *Caregiver* mode involves the service provider – being empathetic with the client, and concerned with meeting their particular needs “rather than with allocating her services most efficiently or most equitably” (ibid. p.86). Leaning too much on one mode at the expense of the other two is pathological because it negates the others and the necessary balance (ibid.). How officials behave in relation to these three modes may vary between situations of different character, and also due to more enduring moral dispositions and conceptions about their occupational role.

Individual level: moral dispositions and conceptions of the occupational role

The modes of appraisal (above) give indications of more fundamental views about professional performance during client contact. In agreement with Zacka,(2017) we hold that these three extremes are common to all kinds of SLBs. This is true even if the content of each and the optimal balance between them differs between different kinds of occupational roles (c.f. a social worker and a police officer). It may also differ over time because of policy changes in the specific authority. The role-expectations of an organisation must therefore be identified. Further, Zacka holds that the moral dispositions of the frontline workers also is an important factor. By this he means that their individual moral views and values may differ. In relation to this we prefer to use the concept of (individual) role-expectations because individual approaches is not only a question of moral views but also of experiences and knowledge on individual as well as group level. How to perform, and why certain measures are taken at the expense of others, connects to questions of ethics and loyalty and ethics of care (Evans 2013). These are influenced by ideas about the aims and specific tasks that are connected to the work role, anchored in both moral values, but also in work experience and education. This builds up the conceptions of the occupational role, the expectations that is the official’s point of departure when performing the role negotiating it under the conditions of the organisation’s, colleagues’, and clients’ role-expectations (Goffman 1999).

Data and method

As mentioned in the introduction, our multi-level approach in this study builds on recordings from phone calls between officials and applicants (clients), qualitative semi-structured interviews and different kinds of written documents. The recordings and interview are mainly from two local offices (A, B) of the SSIA. Data concerning authority policy and organisation comes from authority-level programmatic writings, evaluative reports, follow-up statistics, laws and internal guidelines, information meetings with staff at Head Office and three qualitative interviews with senior executives.

Our study of phone calls is inspired by conversation analysis (CA, Heritage and Clayman 2010; Sidnell 2010). Even if this is not an “orthodox” CA-study we share the aim of revealing how various tasks and institutional objectives are handled in conversation. The interactional data consists of 27 recordings of telephone calls made by three officials in Office A (spring 2017), and 94 recordings by six officials in Office B (autumn 2017). All participants in this study were volunteers and gave their informed consent. The officials at the two offices were informed of the study at a staff meeting and by written text. The phone calls were recorded over a period of two weeks and with the help of a recording device installed on the officials’ phones. Applicants were informed and consent collected at the beginning of the call. All data

was anonymised, and stored on hard drives protected in accordance with the data security routines in our department.

In the second step we analysed interviews and documents (e.g. case journals, rules and programmatic documents). Semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out at Office A with the local manager and all three officials. In Office B the local manager and four of the six officials who made recordings were interviewed. All respondents were women. Interviews were analyzed using meaning categorization. Basically this means sorting into different categories on the basis of a dialogue between data on the one hand, i.e. findings in the speech recordings, interviews and documents, and theoretically established concepts on the other (Layder 1998). Analysis rests on a hermeneutical approach interpreting data by a conscious use of different theoretical perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann 2008).

The Swedish Ethical Vetting Board has approved the study.

The case and the institutional context

There are several reasons for choosing this authority as a case through which to study discretionary practices. As mentioned in the introduction, the SSIA is an important part of the Swedish welfare insurance system. It represents highly regulated frontline work that is sensitive to all of the prevailing trends in government policy. The overall trends towards tighter regulations, control systems and standardisation at the cost of officials' discretion can be seen clearly in SSIA (Bringselius 2012). The authority has gone through several policy changes towards stricter rule application and cost-efficiency (Ståhl and Andersson 2018). Increased follow-up and control has increased the role of rules and performance targets as tools for the self-discipline of officials (Hollertz et al. 2018). The advantage of choosing only one type of allowance among the many that SSIA has to handle is that it makes comparative analysis between individual and groups of officials much easier to handle. There can sometimes be relatively big differences between the parts of the organisation handling different allowances and benefits, when it comes to discretion and work routines, making the comparison of discretionary practice difficult.

Due to a palpable trend of centralisation in Sweden, the SSIA became one single centralised authority in 2005. The senior management are based in the head office (Stockholm), and there are many local offices spread out regionally, where SLBs handle the different benefits and allowances. Being an official in SSIA means to be in contact and communication with the applicant (client), and to investigate and assess the need for, and right to, them obtaining the benefit(s) that apply. Interaction with applicants is nowadays mostly by (letter and) phone conversations. Face-to-face meetings are rare.

76% of SSIA's 13,800 employees today are women. The group of officials studied here is even more heavily female dominated. The SSIA's standard of recruitment involves people with some sort of academic degree, however, the type of degree and level are not specified, and exceptions are often made if earlier work experiences is valued as compensatory enough. Recruitment is handled at the local office level.

There were very many social workers then. Some occupational therapists and social science but mostly social workers. Now when recruiting, we do not now have a very big staff turnover here, but we have got a few more resources, and when recruiting I try to get staff with competence in jurisprudence (First-line Manager).

Two things should be noticed here. Such a statement about creating a balance between competences in work teams requires an existing professional dialogue in those teams, otherwise, differences in discretionary practices may increase. The statement is also a sign of an ongoing trend in later years towards stricter rule application, something which probably increases with more judicial competence.

Sickness compensation – some short facts

In this article, we will focus on officials investigating applications for sickness compensation (SC). This is financial compensation for people permanently unable to work because of either illness or injury. The number of people getting sickness compensation has declined considerably during the last 15 years. In 2003 the number of approved SC per 1000 insured was 18, today it is 1 – 1.5 (FK 2017). This may be because political forces have perceived the costs and number of citizens receiving this allowance as too high. Nearly 80% of the applications were denied in 2017, whereas in 2014 it was 53%.

Institutional preconditions for officials investigating sickness compensation

Primarily because of political level changes, it has become more difficult to obtain sickness compensation (sickness pension) in recent years. Rules are now expected to be applied in a very strict manner. First, the individual's *work ability* must be defined as permanently reduced due to the illness, i.e. fully or to a certain degree, and assessed in relation to all kinds of "possible" jobs, including jobs specially adjusted for the individual. Labour market conditions are not relevant. A person is qualified for sickness compensation if they are not able to perform ten hours of work a week under optimal circumstances.²

The *medical certificate* here sets a definite framework for the official's discretion. It must support the approval of SC. It contains two parts – the medical diagnosis, and an activity assessment, i.e. what the applicant is able to perform. SSIA's internal investigations confirms that there are great variations when it comes to the standard of medical certificates. It is not easy to assess activity abilities, and there can be several reasons behind a poorly written certificate (Bruhn, Thunman and Ekström 2017). A poorly written certificate leaves the official with options, e.g. to reject the application, or demand additional evidence. A somewhat vague certificate leaves room for the investigator to use their initiative, however, such as gathering extra information from different actors in order to obtain "the full picture". The limits on such initiatives are unclear, which means that informal discretionary practices can develop around how much and how detailed information to collect.

Further information to be collected include histories of sick leave, rehabilitative efforts and tests of work abilities, such as those through health care and the employment agency. In order to obtain a full picture information must also be collected about different allowances received (e.g., unemployment and social security benefits), and further social living conditions, leisure activities and engagements. An application can be rejected if difficulties in attending the

² For a more thorough description of sickness compensation, see Bruhn et al. 2017.

labour market can be related to a problematic family situation, a drug problem, or demanding leisure activities. In particularly difficult cases, the official may turn to SSIA's specialists and/or a medical advisor for help in making a decision. Finally, a special decision-maker makes the formal decision. When it is time to present a proposal to the decision maker the official informs the applicant of the upcoming proposal (by letter and phone). The applicant can appeal the final decision to a specialised unit in the SSIA.

This investigation process is strictly controlled via an extensive number of rules and instructions, strict time frames, and the specific steps for decision-making noted above. The spirit of these rules is that even the slightest doubt—"perhaps this person could be tested for....." – means that an application is turned down. In the following, an official expresses her ambivalence in relation to the frameworks guiding her job.

No, but there is some discretion, but there is also a non-discretion and I think that this is the reason why, I knew many colleagues who have quit because of that, you work so much with customers (authority language for client, our remark)//.....to be torn between the authority and all the frameworks, and *I see how bad this person feels but I can't grant this because this isn't...* here it points to that all possible options haven't been tested, and I know many that have quit who maybe have felt this was the biggest problem (Respondent 3)

As mentioned, work ability, or what sort of activity an individual is able to perform, is assessed in relation to all "possible" jobs. This is a strict activity assessment. It is not up to the investigator to assess the applicant's likelihood of obtaining such a job in the labour market. Work disability must also be permanent in order to receive SC. Follow-up assessments are scheduled every third year. Our respondents all experienced the concept of work (dis-)ability in itself as vague and hard to manage.

.. every person is unique, and depending on what kind of diagnosis the person has, and depending on what kind of jobs that have been tested, and what kind of job the person has—it always become an individualised assessment, and it is very hard to get it right each time. (Respondent 1)

The investigator has room to act, however, in certain parts of the work process, and not least in relation to information gathering in interaction with the applicant, which facts shall be presented and how they should be presented in the final proposal.

Results and analysis

Discretionary practice in interaction with clients

Direct communication with the applicant via telephone is at the core of the investigation. The extensive "investigation call" is especially important. Several shorter calls may also be held on the initiative of the official or the applicant, e.g. for extra information, clearing out eventual misunderstandings etc. Finally, there are calls about the upcoming proposal, and the final decision.

In the following we will highlight some vital dimensions of discretionary practices. First, we will discuss two aspects of role-performances in the main investigation call: how officials introduce and frame this call, and how they react to and follow-up answers. We thus reveal what kind of *relationship* officials are trying to establish with the applicant. A third aspect is

‘footing’, i.e. how officials display their discretion – how they position themselves in interaction with applicants. This aspect is also one that can be expected to appear mostly in relation to discussions about the direction in which the investigation is heading. A fourth aspect that is first and foremost salient in the context of upcoming proposals and final decisions is offers of assistance, i.e. to help with alternative solutions in case of a rejected application. Orientations towards *caring* may be especially visible here.

The investigation call

In communication with clients, situations are created that make it relevant for the professional to show empathy. Clients display feelings when talking about troubles and personal experiences related to the agenda of the conversation. Empathy is essentially the way that professionals claim, or display, an understanding and apprehension of a client’s experiences and emotions (Stommel and Molder 2018; Kupetz 2014). Empathy says a lot about what kind of *relationship* the official is striving for with the client, and it is associated with a *caring* attitude. The opposite, keeping a distance, not displaying consideration, or even signalling disaffiliation, relativising the client’s feelings etc. can be seen as associated with *indifferent* or *enforcer* modes.

Here we have made an in-depth analysis of six investigation calls from Office A, and 10 from Office B. Normally, these calls are held when an official has read the application with its attached documents. The questions to ask and the type of information to collect is described in detail in the authority’s instructions, although not as a standardised manual. The investigator judges if, how and when to ask about things. Some of the officials uses a rather distant approach in relation to the manual. They strictly follow the order in written instructions often signalling this by expressions such as *here comes a question about*, and sometimes reinforcing it by repeating answers while writing them down. When the client impugns a question, the justification given for it may be ‘*No this is a standard question.*’ The official steps out of the role as acting subject: *It is not me asking these questions – it is the authority.* The other approach tries to establish closeness: *It is your personal contact at the authority calling.* These officials are quite flexible in using instructions. They does not seem to bother about leaving unnecessary questions out. They make many efforts to show their understanding of the other’s situation, aiming at mutual affiliation and trust, creating a sense of striving for the applicant’s best outcome (Kupetz 2014). Elements of both approaches can sometimes be found in the recordings of one and the same official, and sometimes even in the same call (Ekström, Bruhn and Thunman 2019). However, it is possible to discern towards which the official is generally “leaning”. This in turn is a strong indication of the official’s approach. As mentioned, we focus on two central aspects/activities/ of the calls, two critical parts where these two types of approaches often become particularly visible: the introduction and framing of the call, and how answers are followed up in dialogue.

Introducing the investigation call

The introduction to the call tells us much about what kind of relationship the official is seeking to create. The first excerpt here is an example of a distant approach:

Example 1:

(O=Official, C=Client)

6 O hello I'm calling about
7 this investigation interview
(the official obtains consent for the recording)
31 O yes uh so we need to talk a bit about
32 your situation at home your surroundings
33 social conditions and - and
34 things like that during this talk
33 sociala conditions and and
34 the like here at this call
11104089 Office B

The official is already indicating in lines 6 and 7 that this call is obligatory. Even if the official tries to play down the seriousness of the call somewhat – “*talk a little about*” (31) the signal is obvious that this is a formal call following a specific format and content (line 32 and further). This creates a distance, and reminds the applicant that this is a part of an official investigation. At the same time, the official takes on the role of mediator of the institutional agenda. Example 2 illustrates a very different way to introduce the call. Here the institutional status of the call is downplayed, and the official’s discretion comes to the fore (note: “..I usually do...”):

Example 2:

5 O so what I usually
6 do is to make initial
7 contact to see how things are
8 going and introduce myself and if
9 there is anything else that you
10 want to mention and sometimes
11 I have some questions and so on as well
21109094 Office A

An informal conversational style is set already from the start. The call is presented as a result of the official’s own initiative. The impression is reinforced by phrases such as, “to see how things are” (7), “sometimes I have some questions” (10-11). The call is not about “some questions” though, it is a full investigation call.

The introductory contact is vital for establishing trust in the relationship. Choosing a personal *caring* style like this may enhance the applicant’s feelings of being seen as a subject and not a case.

Reacting to and following up answers

Those applying for SC are normally people in difficult life situations. The investigation is crucial for their living conditions, and therefore, they want indications that the official really understands and is empathetic to their situation. Such expectations are also reinforced by how the call is announced, i.e. as an invitation to the applicant to talk about their problems (Ekström et al. 2019). In the following excerpt, the applicant talks about her serious problems with fibromyalgia. She has described at length how she had become more and more isolated walking around in her home, scared of meeting other people. The official takes an *indifferent* stand, not giving any sign of empathetic understanding:

Example 3³

338 C (...) it was you know the first thing (0.5) that popped
339 into my head now when I got worse,
340 not that feeling of shutting myself in
341 O no
342 C so I have been really working [on
343 O [m:
344 (1.0)
345 O yes
346 (1.0)
347 O so let's see, do you have any sidelines?
348 C you mean do I do other work
349 O yes, if you have some form of avocation
350 this can include political appointments
351 or [something similar
352 C [no no no nothing like that
11101087 Office B

Meeting this sensitive information without any expressions of understanding or empathy but an abrupt change of subject rather reveals a distanced and “manual-bounded” approach. The official moves to “next question” prioritising a fictive manual (345) “yes...so let's see”, and then “do you have any sidelines”. The applicant becomes confused. The change is very abrupt. In contrast, the following shows a more empathetic approach:

Example 4

After a long dialogue about the applicant's difficulties sitting down, move and taking care of everyday business due to bodily pain:

78 O Let's hope this uh (.)
79 eczema calms down at least
80 a bit if- if the financial situation calms down
81 so maybe that affects it a bit
82 I don't know it's like that
83 sometimes it's triggered by stress
DM670014 Office A

The examples in this section come from two critical parts of the main investigation call. Together the examples so far clearly demonstrate two types of approaches to this occupational role. Already at this stage we see a clear difference in the two offices, in how the officials carry out their investigation calls. Office B calls involve a more distant approach, bounded to the formal goals of information gathering. Questions are asked even when they are obviously unnecessary. Probably because of this “formal approach”, the calls here normally are longer

³ Transcription symbols:

[the beginning of overlaps
(3.0)	pause in seconds
(.)	micropause
wo::rd	stretching of the sound
.h	inbreath
hh	outbreath
=	marks two 'latched' turns
word-	a hyphen after a word indicates self-interruption

than those from Office A. Generally, the latter are more attuned to the situation, held in a more personalised manner. They are more flexible and empathetic regarding when to ask specific things, leaving out unnecessary or inappropriate questions. It is also noteworthy that the officials at Office A for regularly uses the applicant's *first name* in the calls to create a personal feel, something very rare at Office B. We must remember that the instructions for investigation calls are not in the form of a strict manual, and that the official has discretion in choosing how to collect the different facts that are described as important.

Footing – stating ones position

Footing is central to agency, how the official positions themselves as the responsible actor (author) of some actions and the mediator (animator) of other actions (cf. Goffman, 1981). This includes the enactment of professional expertise, and/or claims to authority. Officials use footing to invoke and display their discretionary practices, how “far” they are able and ready to go. This in turn indicates their loyalties: to the rule system versus caring for the applicant. Of particular interest here is how officials display their power to affect approval or denial, i.e. the main outcome of the investigation, and being aware of how epithets such as “I”, “we”, and “the authority” are used. Does the professionals display agency and their own responsibility or do they withdraw, i.e. talk on behalf of the authority (as a mediator)?⁴

Here we will illustrate footing first concerning official reactions when being criticised for their assessments and steps in the process, and second examples of how officials communicate an upcoming decision, whether positive or negative.

Footing in the ongoing process

Officials typically refer to discretionary limits when an applicant raises critique criticism. The applicant may feel mistreated, misunderstood, or that they are not being listened to etc., and therefore react by questioning the official. Overall, it is common to declare a position strictly entrenched by rules in these cases (*indifferent, enforcement* modes). The official refers to what “we” are allowed to take into account, often adding rules and political decisions that regulate SSIA's jurisdiction. The excerpt below follows a long discussion about the applicant's contact with her doctor.

Example 5

200 C yes but will you ever uh listen to
201 the patient themselves or what?
202 O yes we do that as well but we
203 mainly look at the medical documentation
204 .h uh where you know where it must be
205 medically proven the problems that you have
206 and what you can and cannot do (.)
207 but I record everything that you
208 tell me I write it down and add it
209 to the case file so I am absolutely listening
210 to you as well, it's really important too
11506057 Office B

⁴ For a more developed analysis of this, see Ekström et al. 2019.

It is common to refer to the need to have every move covered by a medical certificate (line 206-209), however, there seem to be some possible openings even here. In line 202-203 there is an opening: “but we mainly...” regarding the strictness of rules. From line 210 there comes a hint (not a promise) that the applicant’s view can actually be taken into account. At the same time this is also a technique for justifying the steps of the process.

Other interesting, but less common examples of footing (a few similar examples from Office A) are cases where the official describes the result they are trying to achieve at an early stage. The following is from the beginning of an investigation call:

Example 6

06 O .hh uh and I had a couple of uh
 07 questions that I just wanted to run
 08 by you because I wanted to try to go
 09 .hh towards an approval so that you will get your sickness compensation,
 10 hh uh although I’m not the one
 11 making the decision that is
 12 .hh anoth[er official so=
 13 C [m
 14 O =hh I’m the one who writes it all up
 15 and then someone else makes the decision
 DM 670009 Office A

Note here that the official both presents the standpoint as her own (8-10) and signals her potential achieve it. Maybe she thinks that this case is an obvious one. At the same time, she safeguards herself by talking about the limits of her discretion (11-15).

Communicating upcoming or final decisions

In cases with a positive outcome for the applicant, the officials’ typically display agency and declare their own influence (Ekström et al. 2019). An investigation leaning towards approval is often communicated by the official in first person singular – “I”.

Example 7

21 O yes uh so I
 22 have submitted a proposal to
 23 grant you sickness compensation
 11807072 Office B

In cases of rejection however, the tone becomes more impersonal, *indifferent*, e.g. “the authority has decided”. Sometimes “we the authority” is used, which is more *enforcement-like*. Statements indicating that the role of the official is restricted to investigating, and not taking decisions, are however most common.

Example 8

48 O uh so I am sending it out again
 49 because right now
 50 Försäkringskassan⁵ .hh e: (.) re-
 51 re- uh is considering rejecting your
 52 application for sickness compensation

⁵ SSIA

Not all cases are as neutral as this one. Referring to the authority may be a way of expressing empathy with the applicant, indicating a different opinion – “I’m not behind this”, however, the official’s “true” standpoint is not what is most important here, it is that it allows such an interpretation from the applicant. It is a general phenomenon in our data. Not using the “I-form” is a practice used to distance oneself and one’s own responsibility for a decision. Directing dissatisfaction with the authority away from “the messenger”, is an example of how discretion is shaped in the situation. In some contexts it also indicates more enduring moral dispositions. In the same call as Example 8, and after a long discussion where the official reveals empathetic understanding of the applicant’s medical and social problems:

Example 9

264 O .hh I know that (“n”) but unfortunately
 265 Försäkringskassan cannot consider
 266 social or financial
 267 or other similar circumstances
 268 when we: make our assessments
 269 .hh because that would make it very individual

DM670008 Office A

The official here reveals a *caring* attitude expressing empathy and understanding in line 264 by addressing the applicant with his forename, and “unfortunately SSIA cannot consider...”. There are also several examples of officials indicating a critical stand towards regulation, often expressed as a way of almost apologising themselves “it’s very hard to make an application come through”. A few go even further: In the following, and after an applicant has described her severe problems connected to a personal tragedy, the official makes an open critique about rigid rules that do not leave much room to consider individual conditions.

Example 10

393 C no cause I can’t deal with it
 394 I [am telling you like it is Anna
 395 O [m:
 396 O yes yes and I- I am not denying that in any way
 397 C m:
 398 O but the thing about- about sickness allowance is
 399 that(.) it is a rigid (.) regulatory framework
 400 .h all rehabilitation measures must
 401 have been exhausted (continues)

21510120 Office A

After stressing her insight about the applicant’s situation in an empathetic mode (395-396) she criticises (398 and further) the system, distancing herself as someone that is forced to represent it. Such openness is not common in our recordings. Expressions of critique are more often embedded in expressions of empathy and an understanding of the applicant’s situation.

Suggestions and alternative solutions in case of applications rejected

When an application is rejected the official may try to help with finding alternative solutions in two main ways, either by giving advice about how to get support from other welfare actors, or by offering alternatives within their own discretion (Thunman, Bruhn and Ekström 2020).

This signals the existing scope of discretion and the official's professional approach. How "far" can the professional go, or do they want to go? In relation to Zacka's (2017) extremes offering advice and assistance "outside" of organisational role-expectations is a sign of a *caring* attitude.

In "our" calls, advice about alternative solutions is found in several types of situations. The most illustrative examples are found in the context of applications that were denied. One type here concerns suggestions in direct connection with the application, such as adding information, or the right to appeal a negative decision. Another type is when officials offer to help with alternative actions, information, and further contacts either within the SSIA or towards other actors.

The following example contains advice for the applicant in order to avoid the risk of having the application rejected.

Example 11

272 o yes I think it's important that it is handled
273 correctly for you so I think you should
274 contact your doctor who gave you the assessment
275 and tell him that he .hh he doesn't need to submit
276 a new assessment but that he sends
277 in some form of .hh certificate that- that uh
278 clarifies the things that he has
279 written in- in in assessment so to speak
DM670012B Office A

The medical certificate in this case is obviously poor. To make things easier the official is flexible enough to settle for a written clearance (279). A more formal way to handle this would be to advise the applicant to obtain a new medical certificate. In such cases, this also requires a new application. It is important to remember that a poorly written certificate de facto leaves officials with more options, i.e. a wider discretion to encourage a decision by adding complementary information. In the following case the applicant, after being informed about an upcoming denial, expresses confusion about how to obtain an investigation of her work ability. The official here offers to help with information about how this can be done.

Example 12

205 C no I just want one of those
206 investigations done but there's no-one who (.) uh
207 O yes, tell you what I can- I can ask around a bit
208 at the office and see if anyone knows who
209 to contact
11704038 Office B

When an official decides that an applicant's case is not really relevant for the SSIA they may offer help in turning to other actors. To offer such help seems quite common when it comes to introducing applicants to the employment agency, or initiating an investigation about medical conditions and the prerequisites for attending the labour market (Examples 13a+b).

Example 13a

162 O this [is called=

163 C [.hh hhh
 164 O =applying for re- coordination of
 165 rehabilitation measures you you
 166 have this option as [well but
 167 C [m
 168 O .hh I can send you [one of those=
 169 C [yes
 170 O =forms and you can think about
 171 [this but I figure you can=
 172 C [yes
 173 O =[go to the public employment service and=
 174 C [yes
 175 O =schedule a meeting yourself and bring them along
 DM670015 Office A

Note the *caring* approach in line 162 “this is called..” – signalling understanding to an applicant who is having difficulties orientating himself. Further, line 168, “I can send you...and you can think about....”. After this the official helps the applicant to understand what further specifics are needed concerning the details that will be expected in the certificate. However, a point is reached where she sets a limit for how much advice she is able to give, safeguarding her discretion (502). It becomes a delicate balance between an *indifferent* processing of rules and personalised service, *caring* where she leans towards the latter.

Example 13b

501 C is there anything else that is needed in this?
 502 O no: I mean I can't sit here and tell you specifically
 503 what we need but u:h but- but- and the thing
 504 is that when we get it I- I will
 505 notify the decision-maker
 506 .hh and we'll look at it together if
 507 it could change the decision
 DM670015 Office A

These examples also illustrate the fact that discretion is often quite narrow at this stage of a case. In most cases here, officials have little to offer. Most applicants have been in contact with different actors in the SSIA for a long time. They have been receiving sickness cash benefit and in that role have been subject to different measures, or they have had other kinds of allowances and support from other authorities working with rehabilitation towards re-entry into the labour market (e.g. the employment office, work therapists, medical examinations). Many applicants (clients) in this field of welfare security are at risk of experiencing their situation as being bounced between different institutions. One option for the official when the application is turned down (if they think that this applicant really should get SC) is to recommend a new improved application, offering the applicant very direct information about what has to be done in order for it to be accepted. At an earlier investigation stage, Officials have more options to take the initiative in earlier stages of an investigation, collecting more information, developing arguments for reaching the ends that they assess as the best, out of professional conviction.

And, then, I used almost a whole day writing down reasons why this person should have sickness compensation because I felt that 'this will not be accepted by the decision maker if I don't really motivate it'. It went through because I used an awful lot of time on it. And, the

reason for doing this was that I did talk very much with this client and really discovered something that could not be seen in all the papers, so to speak (Respondent 3).

How then do they reflect upon their possibilities? What are their views on, and expectations of their role?

Moral dispositions and conceptions of the occupational role

Nuances in how “our” officials act in phone conversations with applicants can be seen as imprints of how they understand and continuously negotiate their occupational role. Such negotiations are based on their knowledge, experience and enduring moral dispositions (Zacka 2017). In order to grasp these we interviewed seven of the officials whose phone calls we studied. We have here highlighted different aspects and patterns, and asked them to explain how to act in different specific situations. The interviews also contain fundamental issues about beliefs and loyalties. How do officials use their discretion to develop a practice in accordance with their beliefs about how to perform their role? The following quotes reveal the existence of discretion, but also that it is a process of gaining experience in how to use it.

R: It's more about my own development, to learn about these types of cases, learning the job, seeing your own possibilities in a different way I think.

I: Once you've got into it, learnt it.

R: Before I may have made it too easy for myself, well easy..., but I thought 'yeah yeah this was a clear decision in this case', but hmm 'if I view this, and this, and this, and look a little upon that and that' so suddenly I had support for something else (Respondent 2, Office A).

I think it differs more between those with longer work experience and us new ones because we have been taught very much according to the medical...if it does not appear in the medical certificate it is not medically proven, then you stop there (Respondent 6, Office B).

Both quotations indicate a process of personal development. A novice on the job sticks to formalities and regulation. With time and experience, their relationship with the rules becomes more flexible. They learn how to use it more in association with their moral beliefs, which in turn also develop after experience, gained from different client cases. It was also quite common in the interviews for respondents to refer to former education and work experiences.

We have demonstrated above relatively big differences between different officials in their approaches in phone interactions. We have evaluated these differences in relation to Zacka's (2017) three concepts *enforcement*, *indifference* and *caregiving*. We have not seen any case of what Zacka calls pathology, i.e. anyone official consequently ending up in one of these positions. However, we have revealed different approaches to balance between them in different situations, indicating general differences in fundamental approach to the occupational role. Roughly we can distinguish two types of approaches in the calls, one distanced and formalistic towards the applicant, and one signalling empathy, understanding, and proximity. The first of these leaned towards enforcement and indifference, underpinning judicial security, i.e. striving towards treating all applicants the same way and strictly in accordance with regulation. The latter leans towards caregiving underpinning the uniqueness every client's situation. These two types also clearly differ in what kind of relationship they are trying to establish with the applicant. A connection between practice in interaction and

profound values and perceptions about how to perform in this occupational role becomes clear in the interviews. We mean that they represent two ideal-typical approaches. We will call them the “formalistic” and the “empathetic”. Several actions and utterances in our data, and not least in the situated activity of phone calls, falls somewhere in between these types, highlighting that reality is more complicated than ideal-types. Nevertheless, a pattern and division between the two is possible to discern.

Formalistic disposition

A number of the officials in our study obviously orientate towards *indifference* and *enforcement* at the expense of *caregiving*. Their main moral code is the correct application of rules, in order to uphold judicial security. Remaining free from bias in assessments means being free from aspects of the applicant’s situation that are assessed as irrelevant in relation to regulations. They should not be affected by emotions such as sympathy with an applicant’s difficult situation. To be indifferent, however, keeping a distance and not being emotionally affected, can be hard.

Yes, in some cases it feels hard, absolutely. At the same time, one cannot put any personal values in it, you have to follow, it must be same rules for all, otherwise it does not become judicially secure (Respondent 7, Office B).

To uphold ‘same for all’ may require control measures. Asking questions about applicants’ social situations may here be about enforcement, and controlling whether applicants use abilities in their free time that could also be used in work. Officials with a more empathetic disposition may instead ask questions to gain support for an applicant’s request when the medical certificate is imperfect. The formalist’s moral approach to the work role is to be a cog in a system of strict and general rule application. The following quote is a clear example of how the respondent wants to reduce her agency and responsibility.

R: I would say it’s controlled, but I don’t know maybe because, I haven’t worked in another authority, hopefully it is like this in all authorities.

I: Hopefully?

R: Yes hopefully.

I: Yeah, yeah, you mean to safeguard judicial security.

R: That is positive, yes, because sometimes it can be so damn hard to feel that the responsibility is mine. But if I follow the rules exactly in the process I know that it will be just right. So that’s an advantage I think, it is rather how to assess and value different facts that is difficult sometimes (Respondent 6, Office B).

The officials we attributed to a formalistic disposition all referred to judicial security. A professional does not become affected by personal aspects when handling cases.

There are guidelines, and administrative law. To be clear about what is public and what is confidential, to be transparent in relation to the insured, about what one does, what is happening, to document everything so nothing can be done in secret. I mean this is in a way more about following criteria, and laws and regulation than being sympathetic. It is positive with sympathy in many ways, but it also becomes arbitrary if one lacks sympathy for another person, because it is like that, you feel sympathy for some persons and less for others. But to direct yourself in one or the other way is unprofessional, to follow the clear existing rules is to be professional (Respondent 4, Office B).

Emphatic disposition

Several of the officials interviewed revealed a stronger leaning towards *caregiving*. In quite a different way than those referred to above, they express empathy with individuals in problematic situations, stressing the need to establish trust in the relationship.

....and how you look at your mission of course. What kind of role you have: If I think that I'm going to administrate cases that is what I'm gonna do. On the other hand if I think that I shall help people through this tricky regulative system and out on the other side, try to give a sensible explanation to why their application was denied making them understand....(Respondent 2, Office A).

It becomes important to take time with the applicant. People need to talk about their problems with an empathetic listener.

I: So, it is a strong curative element in the call then?

R: Yes it may be. Some calls can be an hour long when one only had in mind to phone and tell, communicate a decision or whatever. (Respondent 1, Office A).

But I think that my most important goal in being professional is to make the applicant understand and be somewhat satisfied when the call has ended and I hang up the phone (Respondent 3, Office A).

As we have seen in the conversations, advice and other types of offers sometimes have a role here, even if it sometimes means stepping out of the formal role and suggesting they turn to other welfare institutions, and how this can be done.

Yes, but this is also about trust in sickness compensation, it is about us increasing the applicant's trust, and because of that we make many calls. We must stimulate the applicant to participate in the investigation, phone and ask them to help 'can you talk to your doctor?', 'can you request that document from your employer?', so they feel involved. Because there are many who feel that they are overrun and just get a decision in their hand, and that's what we should try to avoid then too (Respondent 5, Office B).

These officials all seem to be aware of the duality of their role. They all highlight their obligations to the applicants, i.e. the right as a citizen to be treated fairly in relation to social insurance. Treating someone with fairness means considering the applicant's personal situation, not just to applying rules in a general way.

Yes, all the time (about keeping balance, our remark). After all, this is what we talked about (during the training period, our remark), that double mission. You have to be dedicated to both the organisation and the applicant and then you have to....you may do as best you can. We have to follow the laws, at the same time treat the applicant with respect. Well, that's the most important thing. It may be a denial, but if I explain why and maybe even phone and forewarn about it I think the applicant still knows that he or she has been heard, then I can still think that you meet the other bit as well. Unfortunately, I cannot break the law to give the applicant money. That would also be wrong. You have to try to keep the balance as well as possible (Respondent 1, Office A).

Two types of moral dispositions - why?

We have found two ideal-typical dispositions among the officials. We hold that one or the other mainly guides them. The *formalist* correspond primarily to an ideal of judicial security. To be professional instils asymmetry, formality and distance from the client. It implies the importance of efficiently applying rules and regulation in the same way despite differences in unique circumstances surrounding each individual client. The *empathetic* orientation, on the other hand, seems to correspond more to cherished ideals among professions of care and social work, ideals and ethics of loyalty to the client and the client's well-being, taking the picture of the client's entire situation into consideration (Trevithick 2003).

What might explain such differences among officials? Three interesting possible explanations is indicated in our material, however overlapping strongly. The first is the clear difference between the officials interviewed in Offices A and B. This gives an indication of differences between local group cultures. In a previous study Hollertz et al. (2018) describes how the SSIA follows a transparency ideal in service production and thus incorporates the team/group level as an effective tool of control and normative governance of the officials. Horizontal, collegial control is enhanced by transparency of production at all organisational levels. All measures taken by an official are open for colleagues to see, and the group continuously discusses how to handle cases in team meetings. In this way transparency between peers becomes an effective rectifying tool, stimulating an organisational professionalism in handling authority means and goals (Evetts 2011). The authors studied officials handling sickness cash benefit, i.e. not the same group as we have studied. This transparency becomes salient also in our study. However, group control does not seem to be as developed, at least not in the two offices we have studied. In Office A respondents (including local management) confirmed that type cases are normally not discussed in team meetings. If someone wants to get advice they turn to a trusted colleague. In Office B, however, all respondents except one were employed as officials one year ago. They have a beginners' team for gaining support as novices. This brings us to the second possible explanation. Scholars have pointed to the existence of a stronger connection to an ethics of care among experienced officials compared to novices (Stensöta 2010). This is confirmed here. It seems plausible that experience in work, together with a more familiar understanding of the regulative system and the organisational conditions allows a more flexible approach, considering more individual aspects. However, there is also a third pattern: differences may stem from differences in educational and professional backgrounds. The three respondents from Office A have academic degrees in social work. In Office B officials also have academic degrees but from very different disciplines, and none from social work. This means that there are differences in the professional ideals and knowledge with which they were socialised before entering their job positions. This may lead to relatively big differences in moral dispositions and role-expectations.

The analysis here rests on a relatively small number of interviews, and as mentioned, the three possible explanations we discerned overlap strongly. Therefore, we cannot draw any general conclusions about causes behind the two ideal types discerned in our data. The results here indicate the need for future systematic studies. We will discuss these possible explanations at length and in relation to different sociological theories in a forthcoming article.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown how differences in discretionary practices among frontline staff can be understood via a multi-level analysis using authentic data from interactions between frontline staff and clients, in combination with qualitative interviews and different sorts of written documentation (Bruhn and Ekström 2017).

Differences in discretionary practices between frontline staff can partly be understood on the basis of differences in situational conditions (Ekström et al. 2019). Interaction is a social order in itself, and certain situations trigger certain ways of acting, regardless of the official's

experiences and background. An example of this observed in this study is when officials' display agency and responsibility (e.g. "I") when communicating positive decisions, while using an authoritative voice when communicating negative outcomes.

Officials may also develop significantly different discretionary practices in similar situations. Such heterogeneities must be understood in relation to their moral dispositions and convictions about how to perform their occupational role. To explore these heterogeneities has been a focus in this article. We have seen important differences between officials in how they handle regulatory frameworks and instructions in individual cases, developing their own discretionary practice. We have shown how individual officials differ in what kind of relationships they try to establish with applicants, and how they in practice balance between enforcement, indifference, and caring. Moreover, we have shown how they orient and argue quite differently regarding different aspects of their work practice in the interviews when discussing how to handle aspects of individual cases. By combining data analysis in this way, we were able to discern two ideal typical ways of balancing this occupational role – the formalistic and the empathetic.

Further, our analysis reveals that important differences in discretionary practices develop in spite of a highly regulated and controlled work process. If an authority such as the one we have studied, and for that sake the political level above it, wants to create a higher degree of similarity in handling cases one may expect that it will increase control and detailed regulation even further. However, this may be at risk of becoming a blind alley. In later years, the SSIA has been heavily criticized in media and public debate for inhuman treatment of applicants of different social insurances. An even stronger standardisation in case handling leading to less room for officials to look at the wholeness and the uniqueness of the applicant's personal circumstances may jeopardize the authority's reputation even more. It may also increase an already high staff turnover because of increased feelings of de-qualification.

An alternative would be to create better conditions for specific professional know how to develop, open up for more of a professional logic of governance (Freidson 2001). In this case we discern two important moves to be taken in combination. First, to have (some sort of) academic degree as a rule for the recruitment of officials is deceptive. The key question here is to decide what kind of professional competence that is needed for performing in this occupational role. The socialisation into values about professionalism, and how to handle types of dilemmas such as those here discussed is different when it concerns, for instance, students of political science, law, and social work. The second move is to create better conditions for a critical discourse to develop at team level about what it means to act professionally in different cases. Such arenas can help to integrate novices and stimulate the growth of a unified professional approach about how to balance the dilemmas discussed here (Foldy and Buckley 2009; Thoman, van Engen, and Tummers 2018). However, this will demand fewer elements of managerial control via performance measures, standardisation and regulative detail. Quite the opposite it demands increased trust, discretion and autonomy for officials and teams.

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