

# Narratives of Governing: Rationalization, Responsibility and Resistance in Social Work

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# Abstract

For many years, Sweden has had a reputation for having a comprehensive and women friendly welfare state. However, as in many other European countries during the past few decades, the organization and governing of welfare has undergone profound changes. Through interviews with social workers and the application of theories of governmentality, this thesis analyzes the expressions and consequences of such current organization and governing.

One result is that the introduction of meticulous documentation practices of social workers contact with clients, regulate their interaction and constitute a control over both client and social worker. Another result is that the current organization fragments labor and awards more authority to managers, which functions to produce loyalty to the organization and management, rather than clients. This is expressed in demands not to voice protest, as it is said to create a bad mood. It is also expressed in demands to spend as little as possible on clients; short duration of treatment, preference for outpatient treatment and by making it difficult to receive financial support. This austerity is legitimized through the intermeshing of different ideals; budget awareness, evidence that supports short and outpatient treatment and that clients in order to change their course of life should to be allowed or coerced into taking individual responsibility.

Another important finding is that the current governing and organization of social work produce distance and detachment, and thus discourage caring subjects. This is a complex process in which an assemblage of different techniques and rationalities undermines the cultivation of a relationship between social worker and client. 1) The ideal of evidence-based practice favors rigid methods over a flexible and holistic approach. 2) Ideals of rationality, closely connected to notions of masculinity and professionalism, value objectivity and devalue and deter the surfacing of emotions. 3) Meticulous practices of documentation reduce the amount of time available to meet clients. 4) Ideals and particular methods designed to promote individual responsibility in clients legitimize social workers distancing themselves from clients' dependency and needs. 5) A division of labor, in either assessment or treatment, reduces time spent with clients for those who work with assessment and ultimately engage in the rationing of resources. 6) Standardized digital templates, installed to aid in assessments, regulate and proceduralize interactions with the client. 7) Austerity, heavy workloads, individualized responsibility and stress further accentuate

distance, as detachment becomes a means to cope with arduous working conditions.

The transformation of social work described above produces alienation and a fragmentation of social workers' collective subjects. Simultaneously, an ethos of caring makes some social workers work extra hard to provide for clients, which ultimately covers for flaws in the system. Although such an ethos of caring allows for the further exploitation of social workers, it is also understood as a means of resistance, which in turn also forms the basis for organized resistance.

### **Keywords**

Welfare, neoliberalism, new public management, social work, governing, governmentality, gender, de-professionalization, alienation, Sweden.

# Enkel sammanfattning på svenska

Sverige har ett internationellt rykte för att ha en omfattande och kvinnovänlig välfärd. Även om riktigheten i en sådan uppfattning sedan länge ifrågasatts har på senare år, likt i många andra Europeiska länder, det svenska välfärdssystemet genomgått en omfattande förändring i avseende på dess räckvidd, men också dess organisering och styrning. Fokus för denna studie är just denna organisering och styrning, och mer specifikt, hur detta påverkar ett av välfärdens kanske mest centrala område: socialt arbete. Genom att intervjua socialarbetare undersöks i denna studie uttryck för och konsekvenser av en sådan förändring, bland annat genom att undersöka hur könsbundna föreställningar och förväntningar är sammanflätade med det sociala arbetets organisering och styrning.

I studien konstateras att socialarbetare erfar att deras arbete genomgått omfattande förändringar, vilket kopplas ihop med både organiseringen och styrningen av det sociala arbetet. Detta uttrycks både i de ideal som kringgärdar arbetet men också i dominerande arbetssätt. En sådan förändring är införandet av omfattande dokumentationsprocedurer av socialarbetarens arbete och kontakt med klienter, vilket medför att kontakten med klienterna blir ytligare. Dokumentationsprocedurerna utgör också en sorts kontroll av både klienterna och socialarbetarna själva. En annan förändring som konstateras är att nya organisationsmodeller och en förändrad ledarskapskultur skapar förväntningar på socialarbetarna att vara lojala med organisationen och ledningen snarare än klienterna. Bland annat uttrycks detta genom förväntningar att inte protestera och skapa dålig stämning på arbetsplatsen, men också genom uttalade krav att spendera så lite resurser som möjligt på klienterna; korta behandlingstider, öppenvårdsalternativ och orimligt hårda krav för att få ekonomiskt bistånd. Detta legitimeras genom sammanväxningen av flera olika ideal; budgetmedvetenhet, att klienter inte mår bra av långa institutionsvistelser, men också att klienterna ska tillåtas eller bör tvingas att klara att sig själva.

Ett av studiens huvudresultat är att den nuvarande organiseringen och styrningen av socialt arbete skapar avstånd och likgiltighet. Genom flera sammankopplade ideal och arbetssätt styrs dagens socialarbetare till att bry sig mindre om de klienter de möter. På så sätt undermineras förutsättningarna för framväxten av en djup relation mellan socialarbetare och klient; 1) Idealet och kravet att socialarbetare ska arbeta utifrån evidens, det vill säga metoder och förhållningssätt som i speciellt utformade utvärderingsmodeller visat sig ha effekt, gör att väl strukturerade och rigida metoder ges företräde. Denna instrumentalisering underminerar ett

flexibelt, relationsorienterat och helhetsfokuserat sätt att arbeta. Dessutom gör evidensidealets fokus på enskilda individer och avgränsade utvärderingstider att mer samhällsinriktat kritiskt och långsiktigt inriktat arbete undermineras. 2) Ett rationalitetsideal, tätt sammanbundet med föreställningar om professionalitet och maskulinitet, värderar objektivitet och förmågan att frikoppla socialarbetarens egna känslor från sitt arbete. Detta maskuliniserade professionsideal innebär att empati och solidaritet med klienten undergrävs. 3) Omfattande krav på olika former av dokumentation av det sociala arbetet gör att tiden som socialarbetaren har till sitt förfogande för att besöka och att ha möten med klienten blir knapp. 4) Ett allmänt samhällsideal kring individuellt ansvar och en särskild arbetsmetod (motiverande samtal) som många socialarbetare förväntas lära sig, framhäver klientens eget ansvar för och vilja till förändring. Detta legitimerar ett avståndstagande från klientens behov av hjälp och stöd enligt logiken ”du måste klara detta själv”. 5) En vanligt förekommande uppdelning av socialarbetarnas arbetsuppgifter i en så kallad beställarutförarmodell gör att vissa socialsekreterare arbetar med hjälp och stöd, medan andra arbetar med bedömningar av klienters behov. De senare, som också har inflytande över resurstilldelning, blir med en sådan organisering av arbetet alltmer frikopplade från den stödjande och hjälpande verksamheten och kontakten med klienten. 6) Standardiserade digitala bedömningsinstrument, skapade för att på ett likvärdigt sätt bedöma klienters behov och dokumentera det sociala arbetet, reglerar och instrumentaliserar kontakten med klienter. 7) Tunga arbetsbördor, individualiserat ansvar och stress, bidrar ytterligare till att skapa avstånd och likgiltighet eftersom det för vissa utgör ett sätt att genomleva en ohållbar arbetssituation. En allmän åtstramning av socialtjänstens resurstilldelning förstås som en viktig orsak till behovet av att skapa ovan distansmekanismer. Men distansen hänger också ihop med en tendens till ett återupplivande av en tidigare dominerande förståelse av marginalisering och sociala problem; där människors nöd ses som ett utslag av dålig karaktär och ett resultat av dåliga individuella val.

De förändringar av det sociala arbetets premisser som beskrivits ovan gör att socialarbetarna alltmer görs främmande inför sitt arbete – de *alieneras*. Detta främmandegörande uttrycks genom att inte kunna identifiera sig med arbetet självt, sina kollegor eller med sig själv. Ett sådant främmandegörande underminerar, eller fragmentiserar, både relationen till klienten, men också en känsla av gemenskap med andra socialarbetare. En gemenskap som kan utgöra ett ”vi” och ligga till grund för att ställa krav, protestera och göra motstånd mot avhumaniserande ideal och reformer. På så vis är främmandegörandet inte bara en konsekvens av dagens organisering och styrning, utan också något som fyller en viktig funktion för

en sådan styrning och organisering, och genomförandet av en allmän åtstramning i socialpolitiken. Samtidigt som dagens organisering och styrning av socialt arbete är främmandegörande, slår vissa socialarbetare knut på sig själva och arbetar extra hårt för att täcka upp för systemets brister och krympande resurser, för att trots det svåra läget ändå försöka ge det stöd som de upplever att klienten behöver. Ett sådant historiskt förankrat femininiserat omsorgsideal, dvs känslor av ansvar och empati inför behovande och en ilska inför oförrätter, utgör därmed på samma gång grund för en fördjupad exploatering av socialarbetarna, och ett vardagligt motstånd mot rådande system. I ett läge när flera upplever att kollegialiteten som grund för motstånd på arbetsplatserna underminerats, utgör ett sådant omsorgsideal samtidigt också grunden för *organiserat* motstånd utanför arbetsplatsen, bortom chefernas insyn, kontroll och härskartekniker. Medan nuvarande styrningssystem underminerar ett visst sorts motstånd, uppstår samtidigt grunden för nya.



# Translation of social work terminology

Assessment – Utredning

Case file – Journal

Case notes – Journalanteckningar

Child benefit – Barnbidrag

Child protective services – Barnavårdsarbete

Commit – Omhänderta

Disability (assistance) – LSS (Lag om stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade.)

Financial support – Försörjningsstöd, Ekonomiskt bistånd

Decision – Beslut (tex om en insats)

Housing subsidy – Bostadsbidrag

In custody (of the social services) – Placering

Institutional treatment – Behandlingshem

Law of social services/Social Services Act – Socialtjänstlagen

Outpatient treatment – Öppenvård

Placement – Placering

Report – Anmälan, orosanmälan

Rule of law – Rättsäkerhet

Social welfare committee – Socialnämnden

Social worker (in the social services) – Socialarbetare (Socialsekreterare)

Substance abuse – Alkohol- eller narkotikamissbruk

Treatment, measure – Insats

Treatment centre – Behandlingshem



# Acronyms and abbreviations

ASI	Addiction Severity Index
BBIC	Children's needs in focus (Barns behov i centrum)
EBP	Evidence-based practice
FIA	Pre-requisites for work (Förutsättningar inför arbete)
LSS	Law on support for disabled people (Lag om stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade)
MI	Motivational Interviewing
NPM	New Public Management
RCT	Randomized control trial
RBS	Result based governing



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# 1. Introduction

Those of us who've been around a while and know how we used to work, we keep getting into conflicts with the social workers of this new dawn. [...] Today, if I allow myself to categorize, you may divide social workers into occupational professionals and organizational professionals. And it's the organizational professionals who are rewarded. Because they follow rules, guidelines and never go outside the box [...] you do your documentation and you shut up.

Olivia, social worker

During 2011 and 2012, several different networks of critical social workers were formed. KAOSA (Kritiska Organiserade Socialarbetare) – *Critical Organized Social Workers*, SFSA (Socialarbetare för social aktion) – *Social Workers for Social Action* and NBVT (Nu bryter vi tystnaden) – *Breaking the Silence*. The latter may serve as an illustrative example. Founded in Stockholm, this group voiced protest over the disintegration of the social security system, and the deteriorating situation for clients that they were witnessing. They also pointed to a problematic organization of social work, lack of resources and untenable working conditions. Moreover, in the summer of 2012, hundreds of social workers gathered in the city of Gothenburg to hand over a manifesto to local politicians, *Calling for Social Welfare*, protesting against the heavy workloads and recurring budget cuts that they were experiencing, claiming that under current circumstances they could not deliver qualitative help, nor ensure their clients' legal rights (Akademikerförbundet SSR 2012). In addition, between 2012 and 2015, there were media reports of similar protests in cities like Malmö, Norrköping, Västerås, Uppsala and Sundsvall.<sup>1</sup> As social workers' protests emerge, so do reports of stress, work-related illness and massive employee turnover; in academic publications (Blomberg et al 2015, Lindquist 2010, Blomberg-Kroll et al. 2009, Tham & Meagher 2009), various reports (AFA 2015, Vision 2013,) and media (SR 2013, Flamman 2012). How can these protests and alarming reports be understood?

The Nordic and Scandinavian countries, and perhaps Sweden in particular, have an international reputation for being a specific kind of welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). In regards to Sweden, such a term refers among other things to tax policies that aim for income redistribution and a substantial public sector to deliver a comprehensive and universal welfare (Andersson 2009, Wennemo 2014, Thullberg & Östberg 1994). The Swedish Welfare state is also described as women friendly through its policies

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by Tidningen Vision 2012, SVT 2014, Skånska dagbladet 2015, Rättvisepartiet Offensiv 2015.

designed to enable economic independence and to combine family life and working life through paid parental leave, public care for children and the elderly (Gunnarsson 2013, Bergman & Hobson 2002, Björnberg 2002, Sainsbury 1996, Hernes 1987). In fact, the government has claimed that Sweden is the most gender-equal nation in the world (Regeringen 2000) and recently dubbed itself the world's first feminist government (Regeringen 2016). It might even be argued that support for the Swedish "way" is so widespread and stable among Swedes that it may be regarded as part of the national identity (Svallfors 2011), encompassing a strong belief in a quintessentially modern and benevolent state (Andersson 2009). Such a vision of a peaceful utopia of equality has been strongly contested. Research has highlighted that the welfare is in fact not universal, as it excludes through processes of racialization (SOU 2006:37). Others have questioned the "women friendliness" as it exploits feminized labor in the public sector, and favors men in managerial positions (SOU 1998:6). Yet others have pointed to the inability for the welfare state to provide decent living standards or produce economic redistribution for large segments of society (SOU 2001:79, see also Lindberg 1999). Such results, and their recent intensification, have been connected to an abandonment of the understanding that welfare is productive and spurs economic growth, in favor of viewing it as leeching and hampering self-animacy (Andersson 2003). Despite such problematizations of the benevolent Welfare state, it seems that such perceptions are still thriving, perhaps in particular outside Sweden (Svenska institutet 2012). For example, in 2005 the British Labour Party Congress arranged a seminar entitled "Can we do a Sweden?" boasting a third-way combination of economic growth and welfare (The Guardian 2005, Labour Party 2005). Similarly, in the US Democratic Presidential Debate in October 2015, candidate Bernie Sanders argued that one should look to Scandinavian countries, among them Sweden, to "learn from what they have accomplished for their working people" (New York Times 2015).

As notions of the benevolence of the Swedish Welfare state has been challenged, like many other European countries, Sweden has undergone profound changes concerning the *organization and governing* of welfare during the past couple of decades. Such changes include the deregulation of state-controlled markets and the disposal of public corporations, as well as a privatization and decentralization of public services designed to increase competition, user choice, individual agency, customer satisfaction and cost-effectiveness (Högborg & Sundin 2014, Lennqvist Lindén 2010, Hall 2012, Heffernan 2006, Liedman 2012). Such developments are often referred loosely as neoliberalism or, specifically in terms of the organization and governing of public services: new public management (NPM). Several researchers have claimed that, among advanced capitalist nations, Sweden

ranks at the absolute top in both the speed and reach with which such reforms have been deployed (Ahlbäck Öberg & Widmalm 2016:12, Heritage Foundation 2012, Privatization Barometer 2016, Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

As will be discussed in the next chapter, there is a growing interest among scholars to examine what this transformation in the organization and governing of the welfare state has meant for its users; clients, patients, students, citizens etc. To some degree, attention has also been drawn to the consequences of these changes for employees in welfare provision. My desire to engage in such a discussion has been fueled by growing protests, illustrated in the opening paragraphs, of what I will argue is a particularly interesting and pivotal welfare-state profession: social workers.

Scholars who study the emergence of organized social work argue for its constitutive relation to the developments of capitalism in 19th century Europe. Capitalism spurred waged labor, industrialization and urbanization. Many people left their rural agricultural lives to become waged laborers in industrial production and became increasingly vulnerable to the unstable need for labor as well as to the changes in environment and the fragmentation of human relations that capitalism brought with it. This produced insecurity and poverty and, ultimately, social and political unrest. The ruling classes often understood these changes in circumstances and ways of living as a decay of morality and virtue, and declared that the disenfranchised needed handling, either out of pity or out of fear of insurrection, which further aided in the expansion of the social services (Edebalk 2003:355, Qvarsell 1993, Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:30–31, Penketh 2000, Lundgren 2003). Although I assume this to be true in regard to Sweden as well, the expansion of welfare and social work was also stimulated by the social democratic construction of the project of The People's Home, and consequently marked by values of justice and solidarity (Gustafsson 1995). In addition, it was women who came to occupy a large number of the positions in the public sector of the welfare state, and this applies in particular to social work (Pettersson 2001, Kullberg 2011). This may be understood in relation to several factors. Care work has a long history of being “women's work”, which connects to a hegemonic understanding of women as being by nature inclined to caring and characterized as more emotional and compassionate than men (see for instance Connell 1995). Moreover, the availability of labor and pressure from women's movements to enhance women's economic independency adds further to understanding the employment of women in public care work (SOU 2014:28, Kulawik 2008, Sainsbury 1999). It may thus be assumed that, while being a technique to undermine insurrection, social work in Sweden has also been marked by norms of justice and solidarity, hopes for

women's economic independence and expectations of a feminized ethos of care. Thus, the later developments in Swedish social work may also be seen in relation to capitalism, but as an effort to establish a politically progressive yet reformist welfare state with the aim of cushioning some of the atrocities of capitalism and simultaneously caring for and managing unwanted behavior (Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:62–63, Qvarsell 1993, Nilsson 2006:242). Therefore, social work, with its dual functions of help and ensuring submission, may as such be understood as a central element of social policy and the constitution of a capitalist welfare state, in particular its Swedish version (Skau 2007, Herz & Johansson 2011, Herz 2012, Denvall & Vinnerljung 2006, Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:66–67).<sup>2</sup>

Social work has a long and diverse history with roots in the charity work of churches, philanthropy and socialism. Sweden, however, does not have as strong a tradition of charity work as seen in other European countries. Rather, as argued above, social work has strong connections to the expansion of the welfare state, through municipal social work (Qvarsell 1993). Contemporary social work is still largely exercised or administrated by women within the realms of the municipal social services and comprises individual problem solving as well as efforts to accomplish structural change concerning problems such as poverty, substance abuse, violence against women, neglect or abuse of children and support for the elderly and people with disabilities. The municipal social services are publically financed and the municipal political majority decides the annual budget. The social services are formally governed through the legal framework of the Social Services Act (*Socialtjänstlagen*: SFS 2001:453) and the municipal authorities of the social welfare committee (usually named *Socialnämnden*). The social welfare committee also rules in particular cases, albeit with a considerable degree of professional autonomy for social workers. Audit procedures and the establishment of guidelines are carried out by central government, i.e. The National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*), the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (*IVO*) and in some specific aspects the regional government body of the County Administrative Board (*Länsstyrelsen*). In practice, citizens may ask for support from the social services, but the interaction may also be initiated by the social services. Typically, a social services officer meets with the client and, in dialogue with the client, assesses his or her needs. From such an assessment, it is decided what measures should be commenced, for example to offer financial support, job training or some form of treatment. The social services may also initiate

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<sup>2</sup> This section is not intended to give an historical overview of the developments of the welfare state, rather to serve as a brief contextualization that illustrate some of its inherent tensions and conflicts.

forced care for substance abusers (SFS 1988:870<sup>3</sup>) or children deemed in need of care (SFS 1990:52<sup>4</sup>) as well as matters regarding the removal of children from the custody of their parents.

From the above introduction, it should be evident that I do not expect social workers to be ill-willed agents of repression, or oppressed victims of a neoliberal welfare state transformation. Nor do I expect them to be strategic agents who heroically contest and resist such a transformation (Gleeson & Knights 2006:279). Rather, because social workers are in the position both of being subjected to power and of exercising power, and because their profession is marked by discourses and expectations of equality, femininity and care, their understanding and response to power is particularly interesting from the perspective of political science and gender studies. Some professions or segments of the labor force may in fact hold key positions in regards to the operations of power in a society, argues sociologist Beverly Silver (2003). Her longitudinal global study of worker/capital conflicts highlights how workers' struggles in certain industrial sectors are related to certain responses from capital, in order for capital to avoid vulnerability. Such changes include shifts in the process of production or the relocation of production. From such an understanding, it may be hypothesized that some professions in a welfare state and their actions are key to the analysis when attempting to understand the shifting nature of the governing and organization of a welfare state. Are social workers in fact such a key profession? Can it be assumed that in order to effectively perform a welfare state makeover, the social work profession and its role, functions and bargaining power must somehow be "handled"?

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<sup>3</sup> Lag om vård av missbrukare i vissa fall – LVM.

<sup>4</sup> Lag med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga – LVU.

## **Aim and research questions**

Starting with problems voiced by social workers, the aim of this thesis is to critically analyze the governing and organization of contemporary Swedish social work, with an emphasis on dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working. This will be achieved primarily by analyzing the narratives of social workers. I will address the following research questions:

1. How is the *work* of social workers organized and what are the dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working?
2. What political rationalities and governing techniques operate in such dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working?
3. What are the consequences for the working conditions and the wellbeing of social workers and, indirectly, clients?
4. How does gender operate in connection with the organization and governing of social work?

## **Outline of the thesis**

This thesis consists of two main sections; the first includes the introduction and the analytical and methodological framework. The second part consists of six analytical chapters and a concluding discussion. Following the introduction already presented, is my analytical framework (Chapter 2), where I discuss the ongoing academic discussions that constitute the backdrop against which I situate this thesis and the theoretical perspectives that I will use. Following this is a chapter (3) on methodology, in which my way of working is presented, together with a description of the material that has been analyzed. Following that are six distinctively separate yet interconnected analytical chapters which deal with the dominant ideals and prescribed ways of conducting social work (Chapters 4–9). There is a logic to the order of these six chapters. The first two emphasize dominant ideals and the following three emphasize dominant practice (although these are not mutually exclusive), while the sixth and last analytical chapter (Chapter 9) is a hybrid, a semifinal discussion, reaching a new level of abstraction, whilst also introducing new material and themes of analysis as well as new theoretical contributions. Although there is a logic to their order, the analytical chapters (all but the last) may very well be read in a different order. A concluding discussion completes the thesis (Chapter 10).

## 2. Analytical framework

In order to analyze the problem at hand, I need a theoretical foundation and cues from how other researchers deliberate on these matters. This will set me into a mode and a mood of thinking towards a direction in which to look, and will help develop my analysis further. It will help me to understand and interpret the social workers' experiences, perspectives and actions and their reactions to certain questions, topics and events in relation to governing. In this chapter, I will thus describe the perspectives and theoretical tools I have chosen in order for you as a reader to better understand my interpretations and analysis. I will touch upon ongoing academic discussions and will argue for the advantages of using the chosen theory. In addition, I will come back to these discussions and theoretical approaches and add to them in the analytical chapters (4-9) by introducing supplementary research and theory. The discussions that constitute this chapter will revolve around six themes: 1) The political rationality of neoliberalism, 2) Theories of governmentality, 3) Gender and governing, 4) Resistance as diagnostic of power, 5) Public management reform and 6) Welfare state transformation.

### The political rationality of neoliberalism

Because it is important to understand the underlying logics or mentalities in an analysis of governing, in this section I will discuss the term *political rationality* and use neoliberalism as an example of such a rationality. Neoliberalism is a widely used term in the social sciences. As with many other concepts, there is no unity about what it means; in fact, it is hotly debated (Collier 2012, Wacquant 2012a, Hilgers 2011, Brenner et al. 2010). Although the term neoliberalism has been used in different ways (Fahlgren et al. 2016:12, Harvey 2005:19, Larner 2000:6, Blomgren 1997), I argue for using it to denote a relatively coherent political rationality (Miller & Rose 2008:211, Brown 2006, Larner 2000). From such an understanding, the emergence of a neoliberal political rationality alters the foundations of “the political” altogether (Mouffe 2005), as it alters “how activities or artefacts come to be objects of dissensus and contestation” (Barry 2001:6, see also Walters 2012:5). Political scientist Wendy Brown understands a neoliberal political rationality as both originating from and creating a specific political culture and political *subject* (Brown 2006, 2003, 2015). In a similar vein, social work scholar Paul Michael Garrett argues that we should understand neoliberalism as a project that installs a new common sense, or even a new human soul (Garrett 2010:343, see also Sugarman 2015:114, Bauman 1999,

Žižek 2008). Thinking with Foucault, Brown argues that a political rationality “is a specific form of normative political reason organizing the political sphere, governance practices and citizenship” which “governs the sayable, the intelligible, and the truth criteria of these domains” (Brown 2006:693) and thus neoliberalism involves a “specific and consequential organization of the social, the subject and the state” (ibid.). Such a political rationality relies:

upon and utilize a range of technologies that install and support the civilizing project by shaping and governing the capacities, competences and wills of subjects, yet are outside the formal control of the ‘public powers’. (Miller & Rose 2008:214)

In sum, neoliberalism is a political rationality that organizes the way in which we think and act and thus transforms the relations between the state, the market, and citizens (Cahill 2011:479); it is “a new organization of the social” (Brown 2005:37). The principal trait of a neoliberal political rationality is that of markets. This means that market principles are envisioned to rule in all matters of governing, not only in the economic domain, but also in the political and social. Brown argues:

The state itself must construct and construe itself in market terms, as well as develop policies and promulgate a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life. (Brown 2006:694).

Instead of trying to establish whether Sweden is still the welfare utopia that some historical narratives have it to be, Larsson et al. (2012) argue that we should understand the neoliberal transformation as something that has altogether changed the relation between the state and individuals. Rather than the traditional ideal of the Swedish welfare state: to produce freedom from family and markets for individuals, *through* the state, current neoliberal regimes set out to free individuals *from* the state, through market mechanisms and individual choices (Larsson et al. 2012:263–264). Such marketization includes the introduction of market mechanisms into public administration and welfare provision; for example, the privatization of education and open enrolment, choice of care provider and public procurement and client–contractor organizational models in the social services. It also includes that citizens are imagined and constructed as entrepreneurial individuals and consumers. Such subjects are expected to take care of themselves through active and responsible choices (Miller & Rose 2008:202, Brown 2006), driven by a desire to invest in themselves in ways that enhance the competitive value of the self (Brown 2015:32–33). Emphasizing the gendered aspects of neoliberal subjects, Lynch et al. (2012:83) argue for an understanding of the ideal neoliberal subject as “a

self-sufficient, rational and competitive, economic *man*” (Lynch et al. 2012:83, italics in original), and when attempting to situate such a subject in relation to work the authors argue that he is formed around “a calculating, entrepreneurial, detached self” (Lynch et al. 2012:83). Others argue however that neoliberal governing shapes feminine workers subjects as simultaneously compliant and high performing (Evans 2004, Blom 2011). Such accounts highlights how a neoliberal rationality makes use of gendered discourse and expectations to produce ideal self-governing subjects.

Neoliberalism is thus a “political rationality that seeks to govern not through command and control operations but through the calculative choices of formally free actors” (Nikolas Rose, as summarized by Collier & Ong 2005:13). The fact that such a creation demands *political* action illustrates that a neoliberal political rationality does not imagine the idea of the market as a natural state; it must in fact be actively produced and nurtured. In accordance with this, a neoliberal political rationality seems to produce an understanding of market mechanisms as being, not natural, but necessary, and as political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1992) envisioned it, the only viable option for a governing mode (Peck & Tickell 2002, Brown 2006). Because of this, the deliberate political action required to install such a scheme is masked under the guise of “no alternative” and is seen as the only rational and thus apolitical way (Wennerhag 2006:211). The rationality of neoliberalism can thus be said to frame the relationship between knowledge and governing through the notion of solving “technical” problems that are devoid of politics and ideology (Ong 2006:3).

If a state and its citizens are understood principally in terms of economically rational actors, the regulatory relations suggested by a neoliberal rationality are fashioned in the same manner. Values such as quality or equality are undermined in favor of values such as entrepreneurialism, self-sufficiency, productivity, efficiency and profitability (Brown 2015:10, 2006:694, 2003, Dean 2010, Johansson 1997). In fact “democratic principles and the rule of law are neither guides nor serious constraints but rather tools or obstacles” to a neoliberal (i.e. marketized) approach to governing (Brown 2006:695). Because a neoliberal political rationality devalues all normative claims other than those of markets, within the hegemony of neoliberal individual financialized subjects, there is little room for collective political subjects (Brown 2015:79). Without the articulation of group conflicts, politics becomes a question of administration, a technocracy, with the effect that questions of collective privileges and power tend to disappear (Rönblom 2011a). This leads to the blaming of people who are subordinated in society (Mouffe 2005, Brown 2003). Furthermore, the effects of neoliberal *policy* also enhance the blaming and punishing of disenfranchised subjects.

Sociologist Loïc Wacquant highlights the increased penalization and differentiation in governing found in neoliberal states: “uplifting and ‘liberating’ at the top...[and] castigatory and restrictive at the bottom” (Wacquant 2012a:73). He argues that this stems from a need to handle the social and political unrest that *follows* from neoliberal economic policies and welfare disintegration, and is presented as a way to restore (a sense of) order (Wacquant 2004). Such unrest is thus caused by increased differences in the distribution of wealth, by unemployment, poverty and insecurity (Brown 2015:30). Although the further subordination of the disenfranchised in neoliberal regimes is a consequence of a neoliberal political rationality where values other than those that comply with markets are rejected (ibid), individual predicaments that arise from such policies are rather understood as being the result of a mismanaged life (Brown 2003, Mouffe 2005). Understanding the inherent anti-liberal rationality embedded in neoliberalism and some of its policy consequences may thus help to explain the shift towards authoritarianism and nationalism, because of the anxieties it creates in the working and middle classes (Harvey 2005:81) and the disguise of class conflict which undermines “the political” (Mouffe 2005). This allows a theoretical understanding of scholarly work that illustrates a shift in Swedish public discourse and social policy towards viewing the poor as unworthy or themselves responsible for their predicament (Julunen & Harder 2004, Salonen 2006, Tham 2009, see also Brown 2015, Garrett 2010, Wacquant 2012a, 2004, Fraser & Gordon 1994, Bauman 1999:104–105, 113–115). Ultimately, a neoliberal political rationality may thus be understood as challenging or undermining values like equality, democracy, care and dependency (Brown 2006:696, Fraser & Gordon 1994, Miller & Rose 2008).

Although this description assumes a neoliberal political rationality to be relatively coherent, governing *in practice* assumes differing forms in different contexts (Larner 2000, Miller & Rose 2008:200). This is partly due to the fact that “neoliberalism does not enter into an unoccupied space. It has to engage with [...] preexisting identities in complex ways” (Apple 2014:920). In order to understand the practical and local manifestations of neoliberalism, anthropologists Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong use the term neoliberal assemblages to describe its bringing together with other elements (Collier & Ong 2005:12). For the study of governing, political scientist William Walters argues in favor of considering “practices of government as hybrids or coagulations of different logics” (2012:73). Analyzing governing from such an understanding does not entail the notion of society or of rigid structures, as an entity. Rather, an analysis of governing assemblages focus on connections made up of institutional arrangements such as mechanisms of economic coordination or institutions and regulations of citizenship,

technical interventions and forms of knowledge (Collier & Ong 2005:12). Thus, Wendy Larner advocates that:

Only by theorizing neo-liberalism as a multi-vocal and contradictory phenomenon can we make visible the contestations and struggles that we are currently engaged in. (Larner 2000:21)

From the discussion above it is evident that, although neoliberalism constitutes a relatively coherent political rationality, in practice governing may be expressed in varying ways. To further tease out the appropriate analytical tools for an analysis of how governing is manifested and contested in social work I will now proceed on to the next section, which will explore theories of governmentality.

## **Theories of governmentality**

As I intend to study the practice and effects of the governing of social work, in this section I want to discuss different aspects and traits of certain forms of governing. When philosopher Michel Foucault introduces the term governmentality, he spoke of three principal techniques of governing: sovereignty, discipline and governmental management (Foucault 2007a:107). Emanating from the power exerted by the ruler over a territory, such as a king, *sovereign* power refers to the ability to govern that territory directly through force, law and immediate threat (Foucault 2007a, 1977). Due to the changing needs of power, sovereignty gradually diminished throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in favor of *discipline* (Foucault 1977). While sovereign power refers to the exercise of “direct” power under the regime of an authority, discipline refers to institutional arrangements such as schools, factories, prisons etc., which allow for the simultaneous regulation of space, time and activity, aided by extensive systems of surveillance. Dividing people geographically, minutely organizing their time, and closely overseeing, educating and correcting their actions will allow for the simultaneous production of values and valuables, keeping them docile and undermining resistance (Foucault 1977, 1984:61).

In what I believe was an attempt to grasp the grandeur and complexity of contemporary forms of power, and the tendency for different techniques of power to develop and gain prominence in different contexts, Foucault introduced the term governmentality. Foucault uses this term in different ways, from amongst which I want to highlight a couple of things of relevance to my study. Firstly, coining the term governmentality is an attempt to name

the process of the increasing dominance of a particular type of power – government – that has brought with it the development of a series of particular governmental devices (appareils) and knowledges (savoirs) (2007a:108). Government should not be understood to refer merely to the formal institutions of the state, rather to the *practice* of exerting power – governing, a wide range of techniques aimed at a wide variety of objects, far exceeding the formal juridical-administrative institutions (Foucault 1984:64, Agamben 1998:5, Walters 2012:2). Foucault says:

What enabled sovereignty to achieve its aim of obedience to the laws, was the law itself; law and sovereignty were absolutely united. Here, on the contrary, it is not a matter of imposing a law on men, but of the disposition of things, that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, or, of as far as possible employing laws as tactics; arranging things so that this or that end may be achieved through a certain number of means. (Foucault 2007a:99)

Rather than imposing *the law* on individuals, governmentality-type governing makes use of and assembles a *whole array of “things”* to optimize governing. This leads to the second aspect: governmentality is a term that tries to grasp the whole array of such “things”: “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power” (Foucault 2007a:108). Therefore, I understand governmentality as both a particular *manner* of exerting power and the total *arrangements* that such power has at its disposal. Foucault does not speak of the replacement of one kind of society to the benefit of another, but rather of a triangular combination of “sovereignty, discipline and governmental management” (Foucault 2007a:107) but, as mentioned above, he argues that this “governmentality” type of power has gained a dominant position compared to other forms of power in the “West” (2007a:108–109).

What does it mean to study power from such a perspective? In my opinion, and of relevance to this thesis, analyzing power using a governmentality framework means the study of *how* and through what *means* power is exercised, with all of its variations, complexity, connections, contingency and messiness. A governmentality perspective has proven successful to analyze *shifts* in the rationalities and techniques of governing (Walters 2012:3) and if one assumes that such rationalities and techniques have shifted under a period chiefly referred to as neoliberal, it may constitute a useful perspective for that reason. Indeed, a governmentality perspective has been used by many scholars to study neoliberal societies (Walters 2012:10). An important result from such studies is the conclusion that governing is increasingly deployed through self-regulation (Rose 1996, Dean 2010). Such conclusions

are further supported by the claim that contemporary societies are so complex that they cannot be governed from a singular center, through a focus merely on sovereign and disciplinary techniques. Therefore there is a need to develop governing with the ability to solve the problems that may arise in a future it is not entirely possible to anticipate, through the “cooperation” of the subjects of governing (Foucault 2007a, Barry 2001:12). If governmentality-type power in general may be understood as “an attempt to shape rationally human conduct” (Dean 2010:18), in a neoliberal context it means to produce subjects (or “citizens”) who suit the aims and needs of governments and their policies.

The regulation of conduct becomes a matter of each individual’s desire to govern their own conduct freely in the service of the maximization of a version of their happiness and fulfilment that they take to be their own. (Miller & Rose 2008:215)

In many ways, this form of governing is not understood as such by the subjects who are governed, which clearly differs from both sovereignty and discipline (Foucault 2007a:105). Rather, it is largely achieved through an alignment of what benefits the exercise of power with what we believe to be true about ourselves; who we are and strive to be. The truths (or knowledges) by which we abide are thus intimately connected with power (Dean 2010).

This is not to suggest that the ‘making up’ of the modern citizen as an active agent in his or her governing is in some ways an ‘invention’ of recent political regimes: the conditions for this shift in our ‘relation to ourselves’ are complex, and have no single origin or cause. (Miller & Rose 2008:215)

To make it clear, the self-governing that may be identified with a governmentality perspective is not an entirely deliberate scheme imposed by the authorities, nor is it something that has suddenly developed during the last few decades of neoliberalism. Rather, it is something that Foucault refers to as a gradual *process* of governmentalization (Foucault 2007a:108–109), an increased awareness of the need for and usefulness of tactics to govern in the best way possible, for as many as possible. However, it may be argued that such techniques of shaping the subjects of humans in beneficial ways for the sake of governing are of particular significance in, and intimately connected with, a contemporary neoliberal political rationality. It is both a manner of governing and part of the arrangements that such an exercise of power has at its disposal. Who we believe we are and what we want, the “I” in ourselves, arguably constitutes our subject. If one understands subjects in a Foucauldian way, as not emanating from a ‘true’ inner self, but rather as a political product within discourse, a neoliberal ‘free’ and individualized

subject is not the emancipated version of an original and true *a priori* subject (Mansfield 2000:54–55, Hall 1997:55). Rather, “The individual is an effect of power” (Foucault 1980:98) and, consequently, the freedom on which neoliberal strategies of governing depend must be regarded as assembled by complex, yet chaotic, provisional and conditional strategies and techniques of regulation (Miller & Rose 2008:216). This is a claim that may be summarized as “political power does not just act on political subjects, but constructs them in particular ways” (Larner 2000:19).

Thus, an important aspect of a neoliberal type of governing is that the individual has come to replace the state as the center of attention and action (Miller & Rose 2008:213, Dahlstedt 2006). The purpose of this is to produce “free” and responsible individual subjects who act in ways that are preferred by the interests of power, not because they are forced to, but because they want to. Thus, a governmentality perspective allows for an analysis of the interplay between state regulation and self-regulation, or, phrased differently, “between the technologies of the self and the technologies of governing a people” (Walters 2012:13). Such strategies of government “encourage people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being” (Larner 2000:13) and thus citizens are enabled and obliged to make active and autonomous choices. Consequently, welfare agencies are governed less from above than through techniques that shape the subject of organizations, such as budget responsibility and different kinds of calculative practices (Larner 2000, Miller & Rose 2008:213). Describing the practice of government as the ability to optimize problem solving, Aihwa Ong argues that we should understand neoliberal technologies of governing as something that “centers on the capacity and potential of individuals and the population as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes” (Ong 2006:6). However, sociologist Nikolas Rose understands such freedom to govern oneself as an expression of coercion rather than freedom. Through a continuous transformation of subjects, who used to be full of obligations, duties and dependencies, into free individuals, with rights and choices:

modern individuals are not merely ‘free to choose’, but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make. Their choices are, in their turn, seen as realizations of the attributes of the choosing person – expressions of personality – and reflect back upon the person who has made them. As these mechanisms of regulation through desire, consumption and the market – civilization through identification – come to extend their sway over larger and larger sectors of the population, earlier bureaucratic and governmental mechanisms of self-formation and self-regulation become less salient and can begin to be dismantled and refocused upon

marginalized individuals who through ill will, incompetence or misfortune are outside these webs for 'consuming civility'. (Rose 1999:87)

As argued previously, a neoliberal political rationality undermines values such as quality, equality, solidarity and dependency in favor of market values such as productivity, efficiency and profitability. The quote above from Rose sheds light on the tendencies of neoliberal regimes to employ different techniques of governing over those subjects who do not live up to the model of the neoliberal self-governing entrepreneurial self. In terms of governing, techniques of self-government are thus adjoined to coercive governing techniques (sovereignty and discipline) both as threats and as practices directed at those who refuse or simply cannot govern themselves in ways suitable to power (Fahlgren et al. 2011, Dean & Henman 2004:488). Such an understanding also highlights the importance of looking beyond techniques of self-governing and also paying attention to other ways of governing, in varied neoliberal contexts. Political scientist Andrew Barry argues that:

The social world should not be imagined and acted on as if it were a system of networks and flows, which can be grasped and managed as a whole. This is a typically modern political fantasy. The specificities and inconsistencies of the social demand careful attention. (Barry 2001:16)

To summarize, I understand governing in such a way that it may be analyzed in terms of both the *rationalities* and *techniques* through which it is deployed. As discussed in the previous section, I understand a rationality as a normative political reason, embedded in a discourse that frames the sayable and intelligible (Brown 2006). By the term *technique*, I refer to specific ways of acting and to certain devices that allow or mediate the exercise of power (Walters 2012:62). I understand governmentality as a particular type of power that is constituted by certain devices and knowledges far exceeding the formal juridical-administrative institutions, such as institutions, procedures, reflections, calculations and tactics. In terms of governing in a neoliberal political rationality, I regard self-governing as a central element. I will now turn to one of the "things" suggested by the discussion above to be of particular importance for both the governing of others and the governing of the self: knowledge.

## ***Knowledge and truth***

In this section, I will discuss how the production of knowledge is intertwined with the exercise of power. Attention to knowledge and power in this thesis is motivated by the overwhelming presence and overt manifestations of knowledge production in the history of social work as well as conflicts over knowledge production in contemporary social work. In relation to the emergence of social work, the prominence of knowledge production has been convincingly argued for, in terms of the development of methods in statistics and the social sciences for collecting information as ways of providing knowledge; to monitor, categorize and govern both “paupers” and populations (Lundgren 2003, Penketh 2000, Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:63). Conflicts around the contemporary ideal of evidence-based practice (EBP), to employ only methods deemed scientifically to “work”, and conflicts around the numerous and exhaustive systems of documentation found in Swedish social work are current examples that further warrant an analysis of knowledge and power (Chapters 4 and 6).

Questions regarding the relation between knowledge and power have been philosophized and debated for quite some time. The sixteenth-century British philosopher Francis Bacon claimed that “knowledge is power” (“Names Ipsa Scientia Potestas Est”) (Bacon 1597). Such a view of knowledge has been questioned within many different strands of thought and by many scholars. According to Foucault, knowledge cannot be reduced to something that simply gives power, nor is knowledge something that may be produced outside of power relations.

We should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. [...] We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (Foucault 1977:27)

As the gradual process of governmentalization proceeded, the primary goal of government became to govern the population itself (2007a:105–109). “It is impossible to govern a state without knowing its population” (Foucault 1984:65). The means to achieve such a goal was “economic knowledge”, the knowledge of how to handle and best dispose of “things”, largely enabled by the production of statistics and categorizations of normality and deviance (Foucault 2007a). Through power/knowledge, individuals internalize certain

discourses, which enables the governing of the behaviors of populations *from a distance* (as opposed to coercive forms of governing, which generally need closer monitoring). Thus, governing through knowledge or, phrased differently, discourses that populations take to be true, is a more efficient form of social control and will be likely to generate less resistance than sovereign or disciplinary power. From a governmentality perspective, knowledge enables the governing of others and of the self, which is essential in order both to provide for the needs of the population and to effectively deploy self-control over their conduct (Miller 2001, Rose 1996, Dean 2010). In order to deploy such a scheme, there is a need for the alignment of the aspirations and beliefs of the governed subjects and that which lies in the interests of the reproduction of power. Discourses have to be produced that allow for individuals to assess and examine their own attitudes, potential and conduct (Binkley 2014) (think of discourses on morals, rights, safety, risk or pleasure; dietary and exercise regimens, driving, alcohol, property or individual rights, waged labor, consumption etc.) The key here is the notion of truth. Rose writes:

'modern' regimes [...] for the conduct of conduct [are] drawn to rationalize themselves according to a value of truth. [...] [as] a positive programme [...] based upon knowledge. (Rose 1999:24)

Foucault argues that power and truth are linked in a circular relation. Systems of power produce truth but also use it to their own ends, thereby extending the reach of power (Foucault 1984:74).

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true. (ibid:73)

Such an understanding of knowledge, power and regimes of truth thus implies the importance of analyzing "how effects of truth are produced within discourse" (Foucault 1984:60). If power produces all sorts of knowledge about the lives of humans, which attains the status of truth, then that knowledge also works to further reinforce power (Mansfield 2000:53). In sum, I believe that knowledge is not separate from power, knowledge is needed to govern effectively but power also produces knowledge which reinforces various techniques of governing; knowledge enables self-governing and knowledge understood as truths is important for the legitimization of power and social order.

## Gender and governing

It has been argued that, although the works of Foucault can be useful in the project of deconstructing oppressive notions of normative femininity, his work “overlooks the differential impact on men’s and women’s lives of the general disciplining procedures” (Soper 1993:39).<sup>5</sup> Several researchers have also pointed out the absence of normative claims in governmentality approaches (Fraser 1989, Grimshaw 1993, Hartsock 1990, Soper 1993:39, Wacquant 2012a:68). Parts of such critiques center their argument on the need to include gender in an analysis of governmentality; that is to say, on investigating how expectations that arise from the gendering of subjects are internalized and aligned with the needs of governing or used to legitimize subordination and privilege (Brown et al. 2006, Larner 2000). Scholars who analyze the significance of gender in neoliberal rationalities illustrate how the deployment and continuance of neoliberal reform is aided by gendered constructions and expectations of compliance and self-regulation (Fahlgren et al. 2016, Fahlgren et al. 2011, Duggan 2003). Bearing this in mind, it seems crucial to highlight how gendered discourses may be important tools in the exercise of power in social work. Such gendered discourses and expectations are often constructed through a binary opposition between femininity and masculinity (and other binaries too, see note 7). This means that such a discourse not only allows for the subordination and exploitation of women, it simultaneously creates privileges for men. Attention to such multi-vocal assemblages of power is something that I believe will further help my analysis. Thus, this section serves as a short introduction to some of the various works of feminist thinkers that I use as analytical tools in the analysis to come. Because I make use of several different strands of feminist thought, they will be further elaborated upon in connection with the particular part of the analysis in which they are applied. In the analysis, such theories will also be discussed in connection with various additional feminist scholarly work to further develop the analysis. Consequently, I will now give a brief introduction and discuss a selection of the various works that appear throughout this thesis.

Several feminist scholars have come to challenge the view of knowledge and truth as being real, fixed and neutral<sup>6</sup> (see Doucet & Mauthner 2007 for an overview). “Anyone producing knowledge occupies a relational and historical site in the social world which is likely to shape and set limits to the

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<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Foucault has been criticized both for his narrow focus in discussions on racism (Golder 2013:59), his lack of interest in racism altogether (Gilroy 2000:44) and for viewing colonialism as ‘outside’ Europe (Walters 2012:69).

<sup>6</sup> Such claims have also been challenged by thinkers from other strands of thought, such as Marxism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.

knowledge formulations produced,” claims economist Maureen Cain (1993:88). Similarly, one can argue in the spirit of philosopher Donna Haraway (1988) that from *where* knowledge is produced is of great importance. The notion that the position from which knowledge is produced both enables and disables the ability to see is an important epistemological claim made specifically by standpoint feminists during the 1980s (Doucet & Mauthner 2007). The claim centers on the critique of canonical male-centered knowledge production that does not account for women’s experience and thus participates in the privileging of men and the subordination of women (Haraway 1988).<sup>7</sup> Scholars have thus drawn attention to how the masculine gaze is privileged because it is understood to be rational and neutral whereas, according to the same logic, women are understood to be irrational and subjective (Haraway 1988, 1997, Lynch et al. 2012, Johansson 1997). For example, in an analysis of critiques of qualitative academic research, the author found a strong association between, on the one hand, white masculinity and access to objective truth and, on the other, racialized femininity as subjective (Swan 2010). I am aware of the critique of such privilege and subordination in discourses and expectations surrounding knowledge and gender, and I will try to be particularly attentive to how gender shapes the social workers’ narratives and the context of knowledge production in social work.

Feminist research has also drawn attention to the complexity of work in relation to gender and governing, one aspect of which being that waged labor may simultaneously exploit women, provide economic autonomy and build community with other workers (see for instance Mulinari 2011). Others have highlighted how a neoliberal audit culture creates feminine worker subjects as simultaneously both compliant and high performing (Evans 2004, Blom 2011). One example through which such a contradictory scheme is deployed is the expansion of flexible working conditions, which has proven to produce suffering, in particular for women (Sjöstedt Landén 2012). An enduring discourse on suitability for certain kinds of work has generated expectations that women are better at enduring monotonous and tedious work, and have

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<sup>7</sup> Parallel to this claim, however, a critique was formulated by Black feminists against such a monolithic feminism formulated from the taken-for-granted but unarticulated position of a *White middle-class* woman (Davis 1981, Lorde 1984, Crenshaw 1991). As suggested by such strands of thought, it means something qualitatively different to lead a life as a woman in different social positions with differing material conditions, and thus reality is not universally connected to gender (ibid.). From this point of view, it is argued that taking as a standpoint a universal women (or human) experience will favor privileged perspectives and ultimately obscure different experiences and living conditions in a sexist, racist and capitalist society (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005:55). With such a point of departure, social categories or axes of power are not seen as ever existing in a “pure” form and thus a simple analysis of power between (for example) men and women should be abandoned. Initially, I had the ambition for such an intersectional approach. However, as I was doing the interviews I found little to build such an analysis on, and instead I became aware of other aspects that relates to governing which I ultimately chose to pursue in my analysis.

also gotten less rewards for it (see for instance Scott 1982:140, Wikander 2009). Connected to this are norms surrounding work that is regarded as demanding high skills, which associates men with professionalism (Eriksson and Eriksson 2002, Funck 2009) and efficiency (Johansson 1997). Moreover, especially racialized women are expected to be particularly suited for care-work through a dominant discourse on femininity and cultures of care (Gavanas 2006, Kvist & Peterson 2010, Johansson 2000, Lindgren 1999). This is not limited to paid labor. For example, when such expectations collide with the current downsizing of welfare, women take great(er) responsibility for filling the care void, both in private and professional life (Brodin 2005, 2006).

Closely connected to both work and governing are issues pertaining to emotions. If the dominant discourse on masculinity constructs men as neutral and rational, as a contrast, women are expected to be subjective and emotional (see for instance Ahmed 2004b, Nussbaum 2001). Through such a claim, I wish to direct attention to scholars who are trying to understand emotion in relation to changing techniques of governing (Newman 2012, Pykett 2011). For instance, following neoliberal reforms, female social workers in Finland experienced contradictory expectations of being both emotional and simultaneously efficient performers (Husso & Hirvonen 2012:29). However, emotions may be thought of in contradictory yet complementary ways, as gendered tools of both governing and resistance (D'aost 2014). Such explorations will be developed in the analytical chapters (primarily Chapters 5 and 9), but for now it will suffice to contend that emotions may be highly political and not wasteful biological and irrational sentiments within an apolitical individual. Philosopher Naomi Scheman (1980) argues that emotions always appear in context. Because of this, emotions have political implications, as any emotion will be preceded by political considerations, rather than expressed in a 'true', untainted form. Using anger as the example, Scheman argues that such emotions carry great potency as the basis of collective political subjects. The language at our disposal to name and understand emotions is produced within discourses of power; thus, emotions are often portrayed in ways that try to align them with the interests of power. One of those ways, says Scheman, is to construct us as individuals and consequently to portray our emotions as individual. Therefore, emotions are something for which we are expected to take individual responsibility as they primarily concern our individual selves. Scheman argues that the interests of the reproduction of power actively impede the feeling of anger among women as meaning anything of significance. As I understand it, such emotions are framed as individual and irrational and as expressions of insecurity, rather than as powerful motivations for collective political subjects. Attention to emotions as

potential judgements (Nussbaum 2001), a basis for collective subjects, power and resistance (Scheman 1980, Ahmed 2004b, 2010) and as something that individuals may be required to “properly” manage (Hughes 2010, Pykett 2011, Morrison 2007), may thus help me to further analyze governing techniques and resistance in social work.

## **Resistance as a diagnostic of power**

If one assumes that governing has changed in scope and techniques with the gradual expansion of a neoliberal political rationality, it is an interesting task to investigate the understanding of and the *responses to* such techniques in social work. Although several theorists argue that resistance has been undermined under neoliberalism, from Foucault (2002:104) we can assume that resistance is always present wherever power is being exercised. Still, Foucault also suggested that resistance is harder to form under governmentality-focused regimes, where the techniques of governing are successively changed from overtly coercive to more subtle and insidious (Foucault 1984:61). I assume that a governmentality style of governing in part weakens the ability to formulate resistance because the reproduction of dominant power relations becomes embedded in the beliefs and aspirations of the governed (Davis and Bansel 2010). Assuming also that a neoliberal political rationality is currently hegemonic, the ability to articulate conflicts and formulate alternatives will be undermined or will take on other forms (Wennerhag 2006, Mouffe 2005). Based upon such expectations, an examination of alternative expressions of resistance can be a powerful tool for *understanding* governing. This suggests that particular attention must be paid to expressions that may not fit an archetypical understanding of resistance. Consequently, by resistance I do not exclusively mean that which directly challenges or attempts to overthrow power, but also everyday micro-resistance, or counter-conduct, something that can be seen as an attempt to cope with or influence the situation in which one plays a direct part (Death 2010). Such an understanding of resistance means that an analysis may also include expressions that may at first glance not seem to be resistance. Philosopher Aleksander Motturi (2007) argues that choosing to be silent in a situation where the “dialogue” has been so thoroughly staged that no utterance can be interpreted as anything other than a reaffirmation of the dominant discourse, is something that may be understood as a form of resistance. He gives the example of an anti-Muslim manifestation that coincided with an EU meeting in Copenhagen, where a man was walking the streets for five days carrying a cross on his back claiming that the city was only for Christians. The demonstrators who were present to protest against

the EU meeting, many of Muslim origin, chose not to directly address this manifestation and instead to respond with silence. This, argues Motturi, was a way to resist the discursive traps that had been laid out. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2001) argues against understanding resistance as necessarily performed “in the face of power,” claiming that this is as a particularly “Western” or Eurocentric way of understanding resistance. Through ethnographic research on the women’s grassroots piety movement in the mosques of Cairo, she reveals how women in Islam, through the act of veiling, can create an ethic of piety, and that this is a kind of resistance that builds on a different formation of agency than that which is commonly understood in secular-liberal contexts.

Although it is claimed that power generates resistance, one can understand this relation from the reverse angle; where there is resistance, power is exerted. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) argues precisely this, and suggests that analyzing resistance can be used as a diagnostic of power. Starting from the notion that contestation and protest over what is perceived as inequality and oppression are fundamental not only for achieving change but also for democracy altogether (Rosanvallon 2008), and that current modes of governing may undermine this, I want to direct specific attention to multiple and alternate expressions of resistance. Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that there is a tendency in scholarly work to romanticize everyday micro resistance and to decouple it from power. Rather than viewing resistance separately, as hopes of revolution or as flaws in the workings of power, I want to analyze it in relation to power, as Foucault advocates, resistance can be used:

as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used (1982:208-209).

Abu-Lughod draws on ethnographic research to argue that the rich and sometimes contradictory forms of resistance she has found allow for an understanding of how “intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together” (1990:42), and that: “If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels” (ibid:53). Abu-Lughod argues that looking at resistance without the romanticized idea that it is a confirmation of the failure of power, allows for an understanding of the complex and interwoven workings of historically changing power. Understanding resistance in such a way means being attentive not only to its overt manifestations but also to such things as frustration, sadness or anger as these may be signs of conflict, both internal and external, arising from the experience of the exercise of power (Scheman 1980). It also means that a

particular act or expression may be understood as simultaneously both resistance and compliance.

From this relatively abstract discussion, I will now return to the concrete matters of public administration and welfare provision. As argued in the introduction, the welfare state has undergone a gradual transformation following neoliberally oriented public management reform. In the following section, I will discuss some general traits of such reform and some of its consequences.

## **Public management reform**

In this section and the following (Welfare state transformation), I will discuss how other researchers have discussed and contributed to the field of study in which I situate this thesis. Following the economic turmoil of the 1970s (Harvey 2005:12), from the late 1980s onwards, government central planning and governing increasingly came to be questioned; it was claimed to be costly, ineffective and to hinder people's initiative. This led to reforms through which the state gradually removed itself as the obvious center of politics and the direct controller of citizens from above (Dahlstedt 2006). Political scientist Magnus Dahlstedt (2006) argues that the exercise of power has shifted from the government's collective responsibility for welfare through a policy of redistribution and publically financed centralized welfare institutions, to a decentralized, partly privatized system that emphasizes individual responsibility. In this section, I want to discuss the terms "new public management" (NPM) and "new managerialism" (NM), umbrella terms that are often used to label such reforms. Some people use these terms interchangeably (Ahlbäck Öberg & Widmalm 2016:11), others regard NM as a *trait* of NPM (Shanks et al. 2015:1872). In the following I will however treat them as diverse (yet connected) phenomena and highlight their differences.

### ***New public management: Marketization, competition and performance***

It has been argued for a long time now that new styles of management have been widely implemented in the public sector during the last couple of decades in many advanced capitalist nations. The specific definitions differ (Arensmeier & Lennqvist Linden 2014) and so do the local manifestations (Liljegren & Parding 2010:271), but a popular understanding of NPM focuses

on effectiveness and efficiency through the marketization of public services (Högberg & Sundin 2014, Heffernan 2006, Liedman 2012). Such a technique entails the de-regulation of previously state-controlled markets, in order to enhance competition from private enterprises. It also entails the stimulation of internal competition, by the decentralization of responsibility, budgets and performance (Högberg & Sundin 2014). The focus on performance and results alludes to the idea that professionals are better governed by transparency and accountability, i.e. appeals to their rationality and individualized responsibility, rewards or avoiding shame, rather than by professional ideals and loyalty to ethics, peers, citizens, clients or patients. In line with a neoliberal political rationality, this entails the abandonment of traditional public-sector input values such as representation, equality or welfare. Such input values are replaced by output values such as cost-effectiveness and customer satisfaction (Lennqvist Lindén 2010).

Sociologist Peter Miller (2001) has called for a thorough examination of how certain management techniques shape social and economic relations. Miller focuses on “calculative practices”, a term that describes procedures of management accounting, where management does not act directly upon its targets, but rather upon the targeted actions and the “free” will to act in a certain way. Through such an analysis, Miller illuminates the link between, on the one hand, a project to render the economy visible and measurable and on the other, between calculation and responsibility. By individualizing and quantifying each performance in relation to standardized goals, calculative practices can be said to encourage individuals to see themselves as rational and calculating and “by calculating and recording the costs of an activity, one alters the way in which it is thought about and made amenable to intervention” (Miller 2001:393).

### ***New managerialism and auditing: distrust in professions***

Social work scholar Steve Rogowski (2011) argues that neo-liberal ideology makes the normative assumption that the market is superior to the state. Because of this, welfare institutions need to be managed in ways similar to private corporations.

Neither markets nor the mixed economy run themselves because they require agents to make them work, and over recent decades the preferred form of agency is management rather than professionals or administrators. (Rogowski 2011:159)

Rogowski argues further that such shifts in management strategies have transformed how welfare organizations work, one shift being that what social

workers do and the way in which they do it is closely controlled by managers. Thus power is removed from the hands of professionals and given to managers and other non-practicing professionals who do not necessarily know much about the professions which they manage (Davies 2003). In a discussion that attempts to understand such an expanded external control of professionals, economic historian Ylva Hasselberg and historian Niklas Stenlås (2010) begin with the utopian image of a diminishing influence from the powerful professional class (as sketched by Haug in 1973), postulating that citizens in the future would become emancipated from the rule of an “expert elite”. Through a neo-Weberian lens, professionals were portrayed as greedy and driven by self-interest, rather than altruistic motifs (Hasselberg & Stenlås 2010, Brante 2005). Hasselberg & Stenlås argue that this imagery has now merged with a neoliberal discourse of mistrust and morphed into a contemporary project of controlling the previously relatively autonomous professions. Professionals have become targets of suspicion and thus the need for new management strategies arises (Hasselberg & Stenlås 2010:1, see also Garrett 2010:351). Similarly, social work scholar Peter Sommerfeld (2005) argues in relation to evidence-based practice in social work that the current political-administrative system implies that professionals cannot be trusted and thus rigorous external controls of different kinds are deployed as a solution. Instead of professional autonomy, new managerialism gives managers more autonomy.

The basic idea of new managerialism is that organizational performance can be improved by allocating extensive autonomy to agency managers, as opposed to professionals. (Ahlbäck Öberg & Bringselius 2015:500)

Related to the mistrust of professionals found in new managerialism is the technique of auditing. Michael Power (1997) argues that there has been a massive increase in the technology of auditing in the US and the UK since the 1980s. The auditing procedure relies on the idea of generating self-regulation, just like the management accounting found in Miller’s examples above, with the difference lying in their technique and scope. Auditing procedures are found in accounting, but are not necessarily connected to costs. Rather, auditing engages in the control of *quality* whereby the formalizing of quality into performance produces an authoritative gaze on the conduct of individuals and organizations which is potentially always present. Powers argues that auditing imposes new values on all kinds of organizations and activities, and that this has dysfunctional consequences. Similar claims have been made with reference to Sweden: that an audit society has evolved during the last few decades to monitor and control public administration (Ahlbäck Öberg 2010). A significant effect resulting from auditing and accountability principles, according to political scientist Jessica

Lindvert (2006), is a higher level of assurance of the rule of law, albeit at the expense of an ability to deploy flexible and decisive solutions to problems, because an audit culture generates rigidity, fear of failure, apathy and a decreased ambition for cooperation. She concludes that auditing makes it more important to do things “the right way” than to “do the right thing”. From the discussions above I conclude that public management reform associated to neoliberalism constitute a seemingly contradictory mix of governing techniques and rationalities. On the one hand, such reforms try to shape self-governing subjects through competition and strive for performance. On the other, they also include elements of coercive governing, such as external control and the re-distribution of power, from professionals to managers.

## **Welfare state transformation**

Over the past thirty-something years, the Swedish welfare state has been gradually but radically reorganized and transformed in ways that are very familiar to other advanced capitalist nations. Many scholars connect such transformations to the public management reforms discussed above – new public management and new managerialism – and highlight problematic aspects of such reforms (Arensmeier & Lennqvist Linden 2014, Nygren et al. 2009:503, Bergmark & Lundström 2006:109, Stilhoff Sörensen 2015, Bringselius 2015, Garrett 2005:534, 2010:343, Morago 2006:464, Gray & McDonald 2006). Such problematic aspects or effects are manifested in different ways, and in this section, I will discuss some selected areas of inquiry that constitute attempts to understand and analyze such changes and their subsequent effects.

Writing about the consequences of the increasing privatization of welfare provision, economist Laura Hartmann concludes from several studies that the proportion of private contracts, as well as of those employed in private welfare enterprises, rose significantly in Sweden from the beginning of the 1990s to the end of the 2000s (Hartmann 2011:258). Advocates of NPM claim that it will improve public services and empower its “users”, all at a lower cost (Heffernan 2006). Hartmann, however, concludes that there is not enough evidence to support any claims for improvements following from such a shift; neither in the quality of the welfare provision, nor in any reduction of their total cost (ibid:262). This is true, in particular for the social services, says Hartmann, where such research efforts have been particularly slim (ibid:264). Petersen & Hjelmar (2013) come to similar conclusions in their systematic review of research on Swedish and Danish

privatized welfare provision. They have reviewed research concerning home care for the elderly, childcare provision, and the operation of nursing homes and cannot find evidence to support claims either of improved quality or reductions in costs. On a macro-level, Pollitt & Bouckaert (2011:139) analyze the effects of “public management reform” in OECD countries, which has a wider scope than mere privatization. They conclude that the social expenditure as a percentage of GDP, an admittedly rough measure of the size and scope of the welfare state, had in fact *risen*, and not declined, from 1980-2005 in many OECD countries. The increase in such expenditure in Sweden between 1980 and 2005 is rather insignificant, and the trend is rather that of stability. Although the authors do not make any grand claims from such numbers, the reforms initiated do not seem to have had such a powerful effect in terms of decreased expenditure as some may have expected. The authors do conclude that when it comes to hard numbers to determine the “final outcome” of performance-oriented management, such data are hard to produce for several reasons (ibid:214–215, see also Hood & Dixon 2015). However, to those in favor of such reforms, NPM “has not needed results to fuel its onward march” (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011:159). They also conclude that it is even more difficult to assess the side effects of the endeavor to increase productivity and efficiency, things like stress or reduced commitment among those employed in the public sector workforce (ibid:158). Christopher Hood & Ruth Dixon (2015), who meticulously studied several separate studies of British NPM reforms, conclude that complaints and judicial challenges in public-service provision had risen during the 30 years, and so had the costs to deliver it. From the results of a comprehensive survey, social work scholar Ulla Johansson concludes that a majority of public-service employees in Sweden report an increasing burden of administration and a faster pace of work. A large proportion have also experienced an expansion of economic and bureaucratic control of their work and say that this affects their work in negative ways. Teachers and workers in health care experienced the lowest levels of autonomy (Johansson 2015:191). In a book that synthesizes a large body of research on administration in the police, education and health care, economists Anders Forsell & Anders Ivarsson Westerberg (2014) conclude that administrative work (understood as knowledge production, ibid:43) in relation to organizing and governing work has vastly increased. This is often done at the cost of core activities and the authors thereby draw attention to the fact that increased administration following from new public management reforms must not be understood as an effectivization of the work itself, but rather as serving other purposes.

In sum, the studies referred to above illustrate several effects of management reforms in the public (welfare) sector. For one, the administration has increased and most likely so have the costs and burden of work, following at least partly from this administrative expansion. The administrative work and the resources it demands seem also to have had negative effects on the core activities and one may thus conclude that the reforms in question are not only more expensive, they also deliver less. Pursuing other explanations for the durability of such reforms, the matter of control seems to be an interesting area in which to dig deeper. Turning now to research that has attempted to study particular aspects and areas of welfare services, my hope is that it may provide more clues for probing deeper into those queries opened up by the “macro-level” research referred to above.

### ***Health care***

Gender scholar Rebecca Selberg (2012) has studied the relationship between femininity and care work within the context of a neoliberal transformation of the Swedish welfare state. Interviewing nurses at a hospital in Sweden, Selberg concludes that the reforms brought about under New Public Management have resulted in an immense intensification and differentiation of work. While some nurses are ‘promoted’ and given increased responsibility to manage clinics, others experience new forms of subordination along the lines of gender and class. Eva Bejerot et al. (2011) have investigated perceptions of NPM reorganization among physicians. A growing number of physicians expressed the opinion that the reorganization had hampered effectiveness. Due to an increase in administrative work, there was less time to meet with patients. Many of the younger physicians expressed sadness and doubt over their career choices, whilst some of the older ones had chosen to switch to part-time work in order to endure their last years before retirement.

Economic historian Helen Brodin (2005, 2006) has analyzed the marketization and customer orientation of municipal elderly care in Sweden. She concludes that the de-institutionalization of elder care (i.e. organizing welfare to encourage elders to live at home for as long as possible) and the decreasing resources push families into taking increased responsibility for the care of their elders. This is particularly burdensome for women, especially those of working-class and/or immigrant backgrounds, and is intimately connected with discourses and expectations of femininity and immigrant cultures of care. Social work scholar Katarina Andersson and sociologist Elin Kvist (2015) analyze the neoliberal discursive turn in Swedish eldercare policy, which emphasizes efficiency through

marketization and competition. The authors conclude that, although claiming to center on the persons in need of care and their individual choices, such policies of competition decenter the staff, leading to great risk of creating both precarious work situations for eldercare workers and unequal care for the elders. From a survey of Swedish, Danish, Finnish and Norwegian eldercare workers' experiences of working conditions, social work scholar Gun-Britt Trydegård (2012) concludes that NPM reforms have radically altered their working conditions. The care workers experienced a deterioration of their already arduous working conditions and felt that they could not deliver good-quality care. One out of three were considering quitting their jobs because of this. Some 60 elderly care workers in the municipality of Malmö voiced criticisms of the deterioration in working conditions and quality of care that were understood to have followed from new management reforms. With higher and higher demands on the number of visits per day, the quality of each visit deteriorates whilst stress-related illness among the workers increases. In contrast to previous praxis, all activities now have to be approved by managers and the work is minutely measured and controlled. In order to provide elders with the care they need, many resort to a kind of civil disobedience whereby they (give) care regardless of approval (Sydsvenskan 2015). Some municipalities have introduced a highly criticized system to improve the monitoring of elderly care workers. By the use of GPS technology, the workers log in and out with each visit, thus producing information on their whereabouts (Sydsvenskan 2005, SR 2014).

Göran Dahlgren (2008) has examined the major market reforms deployed in the Swedish health sector. He analyzes the effects of the transfer of hospital ownership and management, from public to commercial, and the so-called free choice models under which patients are offered the opportunity to choose their care provider. He concludes that such market reforms will gradually improve the quality and access to care in high-income areas, whilst gradually reducing them in low-income areas, despite the greater need for good health services in the latter areas. Such geographic inequality in access to care is not only produced and reinforced by market forces but is likely to become even harder for future politicians to challenge due to the increased power given to such market forces. Dennis Beach (2009) argues that privatization has thus transformed care from being a socially productive and useful labor to a sheer profit-making activity in the interests of private capital, albeit under the guise of free choice and individual responsibility. In sum, the above discussion illustrates transformations in health care that generate more administration for workers, perceptions of lowered effectiveness, more arduous working conditions and increased control from management. Such transformations result in greater inequality in access to

care and coerced responsibility for families. Furthermore, it instills workers with sadness and the desire to quit but also inspires disobedience and resistance.

### ***Education***

Political scientist Sara Carlbaum (2012) highlights the discourse of shifting demands from a globalized labor market in educational policy, expressed in neoliberal tropes of flexibility and individual responsibility for lifelong learning, while Knud Jensen and Stephen Walker (2007) highlight serious and detrimental effects of marketization and other forms of restructuring of education across Europe. It is described as a process that undermines the teaching profession and any serious attempts to use education to improve equality among students. A loss of status and increasing stress are common concerns among the alienated teachers (Jensen & Walker 2007). Houtsonen et al. (2010) connect contemporary educational reforms with neoliberal ideology and show results that connect the current transformation to Swedish teachers' experience of increasing demands for documentation and a loss of professional autonomy in favor of increased control and accountability. Mitchell Young (2015) has interviewed Swedish researchers to examine their decision-making logic and finds a high degree of competition and fragmentation. Young argues that a system which produces such a logic undermines groundbreaking research (see also Beach 2013 concerning competition). In sum, these studies reveal management reforms in education that are designed to produce norms of flexibility, competition and individualism, which undermine professional autonomy, groundbreaking research and equality whilst simultaneously producing stress and alienation.

### ***Social work***

In an analysis of income equality, poverty and the emergence of charity initiatives, social work scholar Jessica Jönsson (2015) connects such developments with reforms in the regulation of the welfare state, such as privatization and managerialism. She concludes that public service reforms have increased socioeconomic inequality, discrimination and social problems in Sweden. Patricia Lynn Froggett (1996) argued back in the 1990s that new public sector managerialism profoundly changes the culture of social work organizations. Rather than a reflexive and interpretative approach in client-centered work, social workers under managerialism will be pushed towards employing a rigid and detached instrumental approach

and use of knowledge. Similarly, Steve Rogowski (2012) argues that managerialism in the UK has transformed social work from being based on relationships between humans, to bureaucratic procedures of exercising control and the rationing of resources. Managerialism should thus be understood not as neutral, but rather as highly rationalized, ideological and gendered:

The phallus emerges as prime signifier in preference to the generative power of the womb. Sight is preferred over in-sight, theoretical knowledge which is external to the subject over emotional experience and the ability to respond to the other. [...] Knowledge arises from the external vantage point of the self-contained monadic observer and its purpose becomes that of domination and control rather than understanding. (Froggett 1996:125)

Likewise, almost two decades later, Harlow et al. (2013) argue that social work has undergone substantial changes following on from managerialism. From their work in both the UK and Sweden, they conclude that such changes are expressed in the increased focus on economic performance among managers and the reorientation of loyalty from a collective to an individualized organizational loyalty, and the subsequent de-professionalization of social workers. In a focus-group study with Swedish social work managers, Shanks et al. (2015) found experiences of an increase in administrative work and budget responsibility, and in-service training by private management consultants on leadership skills, which the authors attribute to the impact of managerialism on Swedish social work. Social work scholar Stefan Wiklund (2011) has tried to understand the gradual shift from institutional treatment to outpatient treatment in Swedish addiction treatment and concludes that, because there is nothing to suggest that such an approach works better, it should be understood as an attempt to reduce costs. Following from public management reform, from the 1990s onwards there has been a radical increase in commercial forms of treatment. From privatization and managerialism there follow economic incitements to ensure cost reductions and profit, which may prove to be harmful ways of organizing the treatment of humans. On top of this, the costs for care had increased between 2000 and 2008. In an analysis of the effects from budget governing in the social services, the authors conclude that the budget goals was given priority over both rules and regulations, and quality (Astwik & Melin 2014).

In sum, research on neoliberal reforms in relation to social work point to increases in poverty and social problems and that the public management reforms embedded in such a neoliberal revamping of the welfare state have transformed social work in several ways. Through managerialism, with the

increased mandate given to managers, the professional autonomy of social workers has been undermined. It has altered both the loyalty and the relationship between social worker and client, tending towards a culture of rigid bureaucratic procedures of exercising control and rationing resources. It seems also to have altered treatment procedures, not in order to improve quality but rather for reasons of austerity or profit.

## **Concluding remarks**

What can be said of this overview of enquiries into public management reform and welfare state transformation? How can these insights blend with theories of governmentality and inform the analysis to come? Well, there is little to suggest that the reforms instigated in a context of neoliberalism have delivered what was promised: increased quality of public services at a lower cost, although these may have been the official reasons following from the economic turmoil of the 1970s (Harvey 2005:12). Rather, such reforms seem to have had the opposite effect. An important aspect here seems to be the increasing amount of administration, which also produces heavy workloads, stress and alienation, and a sense of de-professionalization and increased management control. At the same time, workers are expected to compete in cultures of performance, drawing upon their individual stamina and flexibility. For the welfare state users, neoliberal reform produces poverty, inequality and social problems whilst simultaneously undermining the clients' opportunities to gain access to welfare services. In contrast to claims of user empowerment, users are themselves caught up in the competition for resources, both directly through the grants procedures, and indirectly due to the austerity or profit-oriented welfare organizations. The question of whether the reforms have delivered what was promised appears to have been answered in the negative; thus, other questions regarding the functions of the current governing of welfare regimes need to be raised.

In sum, the key points in the literature on the logic and effects of public management reform highlight ideals of the rational conduct of individuals, and a profound suspicion of professionals. Such contradictions help to raise questions that are important to pursue. What they have in common are expectations of responsibility and fidelity to the organization, in a contradictory mix of governing techniques that utilize both freedom and control. Not only are the effects of such reforms dubious, but their deeply political nature is rationalized under the guise of technical, apolitical solutions (Harlow et al. 2013:538), implemented without due process or consent from the electorate (Ahlbäck Öberg 2010). By viewing such reforms

as potentially problematic and dangerous “technologies of governing” (Miller 2001), it is possible to go beyond an analysis of the “actual” intentions or effectiveness and the supposedly unintended malfunctions of such technologies and instead in the spirit of Miller analyze the ways in which such procedures function, and how they modify the capacities of agents, power relations and welfare provision (Miller 2001:379).

Suggested by the discussions above, the functions of knowledge production, gender, and the relationships between social worker(s), clients and management in relation to power, are possible directions in which to further pursue an analysis of the neoliberal transformations of the welfare state. Thus, these discussions serve as important starting points for my analysis of narratives of governing in social work. Before I get to that, however, I will make some comments on methodology.



### **3. Research methodology and material**

In this chapter I will describe my methodological points of departure, the research process and the material analyzed in the making of this thesis, as well as discussing the choices I have made in connection with this. To begin with, I will explain my choices of how to approach the problem at hand through conducting interviews with social workers about their experience and understanding of their current working conditions and conflicts in relation to governing. I will describe and justify the research design, and explain how I chose what material to analyze, how it was gathered and how it was analyzed.

#### **Studying governing through social workers' accounts**

How can one describe the actual process of analysis? I mean describe how it *actually* went down? This is a challenging, yet interesting task. Because although some researchers subscribe to a certain well-defined method, I doubt it is controversial to claim that many do not exactly follow a specific protocol and that some of the methodological choices and techniques as well as the analytical perspectives are hidden from the reader in the finished text. Because I do not subscribe to a particular labeled method, let me instead in plain writing try to demonstrate and explain how my work was done. As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, the research problem at hand was triggered and formulated mainly in relation to the numerous protests voiced by social workers and the emergence of networks of resistance in various places in Sweden as a reaction to current political trends. Such critical voices claimed current governing regimes to render a dysfunctional organization and insufficient resources to conduct social work in a way they believed to be of best use to the clients of social work. At the same time, however, being skeptical and critical about the conduct of all kinds of authorities, I harbored the assumption that social workers (explicitly protesting or not) did have something to say about current political trends, but also that the practices of governing social work in relation to clients should itself be critically scrutinized.

How could I best study this? Although the study of governing and protest may be conducted in many different ways, I have chosen to do so principally through the narratives of “insiders”; namely, currently practicing social workers. Obviously, and perhaps especially appealing to political scientists, governing can just as easily be studied from the “outside”, from the

perspective of formal governing mechanisms and institutions, rules and regulations or with a focus on the deconstruction of party politics, policy or the rhetoric of media debates. I have, however, chosen an analytical framework that includes considerable input from governmentality theory, where “government” refers to the *practice* of governing, which understands power and governing as multifaceted and wider in scope than (but not excluding) the formal governmental institutions and the formal rules that they employ (as argued in Chapter 2). When attempting to study governing, argues Foucault, one should not focus on the formal rules and regulations, but on the norms regulating the conduct of people. The law, however, is used to conceal power and justify the norms by giving society and social relations an aura of justice (Foucault 2002, 2007a:99, Brown 2006:695). This is a major reason for choosing to interview social workers in order to analyze governing, rather than examining policy, laws and regulations. If one focuses on policy, there is a risk of missing the messiness, conflicts and resistance connected to governing in a particular site or field,<sup>8</sup> which may result in the production of generalized and sanitized accounts of neoliberal regimes (Larner 2000:14). For all of the above reasons, I have chosen to study the governing of social work in local contexts. Because I begin in part from the discontent of social workers, it seems suitable to approach the problem at hand from their perspective, rather than, say, from the perspective of clients, managers or the formal institutions that govern social work. It is my assumption and hope that social workers, who themselves are in immediate and everyday contact with the micro-processes of the workings of power, are valuable sources of information; or, better yet, that they may aid in an analysis of the issues at hand.

Whether it is problematic or fruitful to have prior knowledge of the arena in which to conduct an academic study, could of course be argued either way. In order to elicit trust and to gain admission into the field of social work, it may be beneficial to have some previous experience of the field. This is likely to enable and ease initial contacts as well as generating a sense of shared identity or community. The same goes for understanding beforehand something of how social work “works”. However, I was an outsider to social work prior to this project, and when I conducted my first interviews I had limited knowledge of such things; the jargon, the practicalities of social work and what (informal) techniques of governing were used. In retrospect, I think that being an outsider to social work made it easier to ask so-called dumb or naïve questions. Such an approach enabled me to exoticize social work in an ethnographic manner that sometimes proved quite revealing

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<sup>8</sup> Referring to a field, I mean social-work practices in broad terms, and although the main focus is on the work of municipal social services, a social-work field also refers to institutions such as treatment facilities and NGOs.

(Ehn & Klein 1994:79). It enabled me to question taken-for-granted ways of thinking and working, to shift the focus and reformulate the themes of inquiry in better accordance with what my interviewees said was “going on” in Swedish social work at the time.

My study is motivated by an intellectual and political *interest* in this particular problem and, since I believe that the individual researcher matters, i.e. the individual leaves their mark on the research, the task at hand is not to fill a void with content, but to critically and systematically approach an issue that seems urgent, from my particular theoretical and political perspectives, desires and choices. Therefore, the discussion on previous research (in Chapter 2) is not an attempt to find blind spots in what is seen as a cumulative body of knowledge and research. I do not believe in a general accumulation of knowledge, devoid of subjects, politics and power and I do not believe that research could or should be conducted with the intention of remaining objective and distant from the research. Although I would argue that the interest in studying (in particular neoliberal) governing techniques and their consequences for Swedish social work has been slim, in my opinion that is not a central reason for me to study it. Engaging in a discussion with previous research is rather a way of developing my analysis further. For that reason I have also integrated previous research into the analytical chapters (Chapters 4 to 9) for reasons that I will further explain below.

The choices above meant that, at the onset of my first interviews, I had a set of tentative questions that had been primarily generated through theory and political considerations. Of these, many actually proved to be either beside the point or of limited relevance. The social workers spoke of different things than I had expected. At first, this realization filled me with worries and doubts. Why were their stories so full of words and yet had so little to say to me? I believe that a partial reason for this was that my unfettered critical stance towards social workers and social work practices had blinded me. It was as though, although I was open-minded about their problems, I had a secret wish to unveil the repressive elements of social work in relation to clients. The social workers stories’ did not initially offer much ammunition for such a task; it is likely that interviewing clients would have been a better choice for that. After some additional interviewing and some thorough listening to the first handful of recorded interviews, I began to notice other things.<sup>9</sup> Patterns, conflicts and contradictions emerged and some of the things I had discarded as futile now seemed to be important accounts of

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<sup>9</sup> I listened whilst walking to and from work, without the ability to take notes, which I believe enables a closer and more careful listening, without jumping to early conclusions.

things I had not anticipated. I grew more and more interested in the social workers' narratives, as they told me of the governing techniques to which *they* were implicitly and explicitly subjected and in some instances seemed to have internalized.

The first insight of this kind was the recurring talk about the burden of documentation (see Chapter 6). The interviewees spoke about standards of excessive documentation of their work that seemed to induce stress and cause difficulties in managing what was referred to as the “actual” social work, meaning in general meeting and working closely with the client. It also seemed to create a sense of being monitored and losing control over their work. I had not anticipated that matters of documentation would be interesting, for instance, the demands that they write thorough investigations and recurring follow-ups on each client and add confirmation of all communication and actions undertaken (case notes), often under strict time schedules. Once I had acquired an interest in this, I re-read the narratives and tried to engage complimentary theory to further probe into the question. In the following interviews, if the topic of documentation did not arise spontaneously, I began to ask specific questions about it; if and how it affected their work, whether they had opinions about its scope, function and possible unexpected or unforeseen consequences. For instance, the discovery that many did not have any obvious response to my question about the reasons for this excessive documentation, why they spent something like half of their working time on it, strengthened my wish for further analysis.

## **An open and unfinished research design**

I write the above to illustrate how almost all of the themes (i.e. chapters) of this thesis were generated. In short, they grew out of the interviews and my ability to associate what was said with other “things” (for instance, theory or empirically oriented research), and I then analyzed them further with complimentary theory, interwoven into the analytical chapters. The story of how the themes were generated serves to illustrate my preferred way of doing research. As sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman (2002:253) has argued, when analyzing interviews with an inductive approach, one should refrain from beginning with a well-defined research question and instead allow for its gradual emergence and growth. Listening to stories, she argues, will allow for new questions to arise and subsequent adjustments in the initial research questions to be made. Having also been inspired by traditions in ethnographic research, I have chosen to also engage an open and unfinished approach to the *design* of the study and I allowed for it to

change during the research (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). An example of this is the fundamental changes that I made to the interview guide, another is the different material I have gathered and analyzed (or chosen not to), which is described further below.

Concerning the process of deciding what questions to ask the interviewees, I started from an interview guide with a handful of overarching themes<sup>10</sup> and some 50 sub-questions. As it turned out, I rarely followed the manual during the interviews; often it was enough to ask the opening question: “Can you tell me a bit about what it is that you do?” That got the interview started and allowed for topics and questions to emerge spontaneously and the discussion to go back and forth. Towards the end of the interview, I used the manual to make sure I had not missed any particular questions that I *wanted* to ask. I emphasize wanted because I often left out questions that did not seem meaningful to ask at that particular interview. If after a few interviews a question did not seem to generate anything of particular interest at all, it was excluded from the manual altogether. On several occasions I added new questions to the manual, on topics that had emerged spontaneously in previous interviews or about things that seemed possibly to be of interest, things I had read in the academic literature or picked up in the news.<sup>11</sup>

As you will see, I do not engage in any lengthy discussions on the meanings and uses of analytical concepts, although terms that I use frequently are for the most part given an explanation. The reason for this is that I do not want to confine my study within borders since I believe this may hamper my ability to make fruitful associations during my analysis. This is similar to Heidegger’s understanding and use of concepts, as *formal indications*. Concepts as formal indications are understood as concepts that remain open, that are designed not so much to give answers as to raise questions, questions that develop the thinking of the thinker who asks them (Milchman & Rosenberg 2010:62).

## **Dismantling boundaries**

Some researchers choose to physically and intellectually separate theory from the material they wish to analyze, both during the analytical process and in the written presentation of their work. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze

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<sup>10</sup> Why are you a social worker, what is it like to work at this particular workplace, how much influence do you have over how you carry out your work and how do you see your future in social work?

<sup>11</sup> This is not to be confused with grounded theory, which also builds themes from “scratch”, but without the close aid and guidance of theory.

calls such an approach totalizing and his argument suggests that such an approach may be less productive:

From the moment a theory moves into its proper domain, it begins to encounter obstacles [...] No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall. (Foucault & Deleuze 1972:206)

Deleuze calls instead for an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice as more fragmentary and partial, that practice should be “a set of relays from one theoretical point to another,” and theory “a relay from one practice to another” (Foucault & Deleuze 1972:205). Rather than working in the “totalizing” way illustrated above, in my analysis I have tried to relay between: 1) the material I have gathered, 2) the analytical framework in Chapter 2, 3) additional theory and 4) empirically oriented research, trying to engage in what post-colonial theorist Trinh, Minh-ha calls “theory in the making” (Trinh 2013). To relay in this sense means something like engaging a fresh set of horses when the current set is reaching exhaustion (as the ancient meaning of the word has it). It is also grounded in a belief that new elements may occur in the midst of the analytical process, which enable an influx of new thoughts. This way of working with the analysis constitutes an attempt to reach further in my thinking and to produce a wide-ranging and complex analysis rather than to remain with one thought, trying to fix on something isolated, limited and specific. In that sense, disconnecting theory from practice is dangerous, and is something I have tried to avoid. The risk in such an endeavor, drawing upon philosopher and author Hélène Cixous, is to mistake theory for the centrality of the text, to mistake the “spare wheel for the bird” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:4). Listening to and reading the transcribed interviews and then relaying to theory gave me associations with all sorts of things. Sometimes these were things I had previously read about, sometimes they were things I had written in the analytical framework, sometimes personal experiences. Being able to relay and *associate* with other “things” when reading or listening to the interviews and being able to abstract them to a “meta-level” (related to the methodology of Karl Marx, see Månson 1993:97), is I believe a good description of how I feel that my inquiry has been carried out. This kind of association and abstraction generated both tiny thoughts and new grand themes that eventually turned into chapters, and one by one the initial themes were either seriously reworked or discarded altogether. This way of working rests upon the belief that observation at a superficial level is not enough to critique dominant truths or to understand deep-seated structures in society and within social work. The capacity to form associations and abstractions in relay is needed to probe beyond the surface.

But what about boundaries between disciplines? The discipline in which this thesis was produced, political science, constitutes a knowledge domain which enables the production of knowledge about things like government authorities, politics, ideologies and power. Political science has traditions that include something like a common language and suggested ways of doing research. This means that I do not have to invent everything from scratch but can instead lean on established practices and the work of others before me. However, when I enter and enroll into this discipline and utilize the tools provided, I also subject myself to rules and boundaries. I enter a discipline that opens up possibilities to produce knowledge but at the same time limits my ability to produce (other) knowledge (Foucault 2002). The word “discipline” itself has multiple meanings that may help to illustrate my point. In its general and contemporary usage, it may mean either a field of study or to uphold order. These meanings may seem far apart and without connection but according to the Online Etymology Dictionary<sup>12</sup> (2016) the word discipline originates from the Old French word *descepline* (11th century), meaning physical punishment and teaching, which may very well be the same action. According to Webster’s online dictionary (2016a), it also means “training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character.” Thus, the training to become a political scientist can be seen as a process of discipline, of molding and the correction of (un)wanted behavior. To enroll as I have done as a *disciple* of political science, a word that, through biblical borrowing from the Latin *discipulus*, means student or follower, is both etymologically and in its practical sense simultaneously enabling and productive, as well as molding, corrective and thus delimiting and inhibitory. It allows for some things to be said and impedes others.<sup>13</sup> What can be done about this? Political scientist Charlotte Fridolfsson argues in her *Antimanifest for good political science* (2010) that good political science cannot be derived from its own discipline and that the outside which defines political science is in itself part of the political, meaning as I understand it that what counts as political science and what does not is in itself a political question and an exercise of power. Rather, she argues, good political science should allow for unbridled inspiration from other disciplines. As you will be aware when reading my thesis, I move between and take inspiration from different disciplines, I try to break the boundaries between the disciplines themselves in order to break free from the disciplining elements of the discipline of political science, by including works from disciplines such as social work, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy and gender studies (which in itself is arguably an

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<sup>12</sup> The Online Etymology Dictionary is a synthesis of 15 etymological dictionaries and some 60 additional sources regarding etymology. To my knowledge, it is the only online dictionary of etymology in English.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, during the period of my PhD training, there has been a reorganization of the mandatory courses, emphasizing methodology at the expense of theoretical or other courses.

interdisciplinary discipline). It is my hope that this has made it possible to reach further in my analysis. To illustrate this, I have labeled the various disciplines of the scholars referred to in the text, the first time they are mentioned.<sup>14</sup> “Despite all our desperate, eternal attempts to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak” Argues Trinh, Minh-ha (Trinh 1989b:94). Turning the confinements of borders, boundaries and categories, and their inevitable leakage, into intellectual challenges, one may understand such a location where endings pass into beginnings (Trinh 2011). As such, the highlighting of boundaries (from outside and from within) should not be seen as the production of straw men or an attempt to uphold intellectual restrictions. Rather, it can be understood as enhancing beginnings.

Feminist research provides a tradition of problematizing and questioning *methodology* as something separate from theory, as well as demonstrating numerous endeavors to develop new and experimental ways of documenting and representing (Doucet & Mauthner 2007, Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002, Ackerly & True 2010). In similar ways, such a critique has also been formulated by post-structuralists, who argue that we should not uphold strict boundaries between theory and methodology (Edenheim 2010, Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). In such a fashion, trying to get away from or move outside of the binary thinking of beginnings and ends, stimuli and response, cause and effect, philosophers Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (1987) developed a style of working which they call rhizomatic. As opposed to binary thinking, which can be imagined as consisting of tree and root, a rhizomatic stem can rise up from anywhere, although it is still somehow connected to the plant: “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:7). The purpose of such an endeavor is to create a space for thought that allows for the pragmatic connection of disparate elements and entities. To me, it constitutes an attempt to go where my thinking, my research and my reading take me, not towards a location that was already in view at the beginning (Brown 2015); it is a nomadic way of working. The nomadic and rhizomatic struggle of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), is stated to be allowing for the reading of the plateaus (which do resemble chapters) in any order. In some ways, this can also be said about the analytical chapters in this thesis. The first five analytical chapters, although connected underground, could be read in any order. The last and sixth chapter (9) I believe should be read last,

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<sup>14</sup> Some are more difficult than others to categorize and I have thus refrained from categorizing some of the ambiguous ones. Sorry for any mis-categorizations on my part!

because the analysis in that chapter builds further on a synthesis of the previous five.

But why engage in such a way of working? I argue that one of the important gains from working in a nomadic and rhizomatic fashion is to be able to get at the “messiness” of life; social relations, power and the political. This is connected to suggestions from the introduction and analytical framework; that governing in practice is expressed in various complex, connected and contingent ways. As described by political scientists Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes in their book *Governance Stories* (2006), in order to understand changes in the British core executive and public sector the authors engage in a decentered ethnographic study of the contingencies, varieties and volatility of political life. This is achieved through collecting and analyzing historical narratives and narratives about the beliefs and practices of permanent secretaries and ministers of the EU (ibid:109). But it is not only about comprehending the mess. Engaging a rhizomatic methodology, philosopher Rosie Braidotti (1994, 2002) argues for the importance of a nomadic research process in order to find what was seemingly not there the first time:

Going between different discursive fields, passing through diverse spheres of intellectual discourse. Theory today happens ‘in transit’, moving on, passing through, creating connections where there seemed to be ‘nothing else to see’. (Braidotti 2002:173–174).

In her ethnographic study of the exploitation of natural and human resources in Indonesia, anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) argues for the importance of avoiding the singular road of research. In also engaging with the sidetracks and byways (in her case of global capitalism) and allowing for the fragmented, for inconsistencies and contradictions, a more complex and comprehensive understanding may be reached. Sidetracks and byways are a personal favorite of mine, as you will become acutely aware.

## **Critique as a methodological tool**

In 1848, philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (Marx & Engels 197n[1888]:21). As argued in Chapters 1 and 2, what is held to be true in a society is inseparable from power, as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (falsely, but still excellently) supposedly phrased it: “All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.”

As philosopher Antonio Gramsci argues, when knowledge reaches the state of a given truth, a hegemonic status, seemingly beyond the reach of questioning, it is a sign that the perspective and knowledge of the dominant groups in society have become internalized (Strinati 1995:165f, Winter Jørgensen & Phillips 2000:39–40). If dominant ideas are indeed the truth of power, derived from a perspective from above (although often dressed in a neutral garb), a key mission in research about governing and governmentality seems to be critiquing those things that are held to be truths as well as the premises upon which they are founded. Deploying the will to critique may thus be a suitable way of working to question or deconstruct such hegemonic truths. This entails being critical towards everything, especially those things that many people, including oneself, hold as reasonable. “My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (Fanon 1970:165). It should be noted that being critical does not mean being *against* something undesirable (like violence or starvation), it is “not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are” (Foucault 1988:155), but rather of being aware “that everything is dangerous” (Foucault 1984:343) and questioning dominant ideas that seem benevolent, sound and rational (Rider 2011:33). Thus:

pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept, rest. (Foucault 1988:155)

In this perhaps older sense of the word, critique is a form of analysis, an analytical method (Månson 1993:75). Foucault argues, in an eloquently materialistic manner, that the “birth” of the desire to be critical was a reaction against the explosion of new techniques and the expanded scope of governing in Western Europe, which he traces back roughly to the 16th century (2007b:44). Foucault argues that this desire for critique expressed the will not to be governed or not to be governed *just as much*. Not wanting to be governed also implies not accepting authoritative knowledge as true or at least not accepting something as true *just because* it was proclaimed by an authority (ibid:46) and, according to Foucault, critique may be seen as the art of voluntary insubordination (ibid:47).

Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power and question power on its discourses of truth. (Foucault 2007b:47)

Complicating things a bit, Foucault argues that, due to an emerging positivistic science (roughly during the 19th and 20th centuries), resting among other things upon the critique of research results, and the gradual intermeshing of power with the nation-state:

A fabric of tight relationships is woven between them such that science is going to play an increasingly determinant part in the developments of productive forces and, such that, in addition, state-type powers are going to be increasingly exercised through refined techniques [...] [and that these] excesses of power [and] governmentalization [will be] all the more impossible to evade as it is reasonably justified. (Foucault 2007b:51)

The fact that the current authorities of governing are themselves interwoven with a critically produced knowledge, makes the truths they rest upon all the more difficult to criticize. The themes that constitute the analytical chapters in this thesis gradually crystallized throughout the research process. The urge to critique grew out of those things that the interviewees talked about as dominant ways of working and the truths upon which they rest. This is not to say that the social workers' accounts are representative of Swedish social work in general, but the recurring references to things that seemed reasonable and benevolent, made me, if not suspicious, at least very curious. It is precisely at the moment when there seems to be no apparent reason to question something that it most needs to be questioned, argue ethnologists Billy Ehn and Barbro Klein (Ehn & Klein 1994:67). Coming to my aid I also had the critiques, doubts and frustrations of some of the interviewees. I found the truths irritating and I could not leave them, or the prescribed ways of doing social work, alone, like an itchy rash on the skin (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:10). Truths like the self-evident advantages of scientific guidance (Chapter 4), the importance of maintaining a professional distance from the client (Chapter 5), the guarantee of client rights through meticulous documentation (Chapter 6), the ability to help clients through motivational interviewing (Chapter 7) and the benefits to social workers of the decentralization of responsibility (Chapter 8).

## **Stories, narratives, discourse**

As illustrated above, employing a methodology of critique rests upon certain theoretical assumptions about power, knowledge and hard-to-question truths – i.e., dominant discourses. This anchoring of my methodology by critiquing truths makes it clear that it bears similarities to a Foucauldian kind of discourse analysis (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2000). Following from theories of poststructuralism, discourse analysis regards language as not merely a mediator used to describe reality, but rather as constitutive of such a reality. A discourse, a group of statements, is seen as a way of talking about something which constitutes an established cognitive frame of understanding. In that sense, discourse regulates what can be said and

understood and thus discourse has serious effects. Power over the formulation of discourse is thus seen as central to the exercise of power (Hall 2001:76) and the questioning and deconstruction of such truths is at the center of such attention. Relating the social workers' narratives to dominant discourses will enable me to perform an analysis of the functions of such discourses of truths, in relation to governing, but will perhaps not be the best way to constitute the social workers as political subjects. Because of this, I have chosen to engage in an analysis that considers the interviews not merely as discourse but also as expressions of experience. In that sense, my methodology also bears similarities to both thematic analysis and narrative analysis, in which the stories of social workers' experiences and their perspectives are the focus (Ritchie et al. 2014:270–271, Patterson & Monroe 1998:316, Johansson 2005). These aspects include an interest in what the social workers perceive as problems and conflicts, and how they understand and handle such issues, in their own right. I believe that such narratives have something to say, both about that particular individual, her ideals and experiences, and also about contemporary social work. I do not, however, see a straight line between experience and sharing in an interview. The activity of narrating an experience is not merely a case of recounting what happened. It also includes a process of naming, comprehending and interpreting an event, and this also relates to previous experiences (Ricoeur 1980). This also takes place in part within the actual interview; the narrative materializes in the dialogue between the social worker and myself (Ehn & Klein 1994:79, Johansson 2005:46, 130) and is situated within and not disconnected from the surrounding political context. Part of this context is of course my presence in the interview and I am aware that every utterance is made with an awareness of the context of the interview. Following literature scholar and author Roland Barthes, narratives are not innocent truths, because "speech is always tactical" (Barthes 1985:4). In the analytical chapters, I make a general distinction between stories and narratives. I use the term stories to highlight specific aspects of an utterance, such as experience, whereas narratives refer to common and structured speech. The word interview itself allows an understanding that entails all of the above aspects. "Inter" means among/between/in the midst of and "view" means to see or inspect. Thus to inter-view, I understand as being *to see (the) in-between* or, in French: *entre-voir*, to "glimpse" (the in-between-ness) (Trinh 2013, Derrida 1995:90). To interview in this sense opens up the possibility to glimpse in-between or the in-betweens of individuals, discourse and experience. Trinh Minh-ha (2013), like Barthes, also calls for a critical approach to the format of the "interview" as shaped by political and cultural positioning, the "politics of the interview" but argues simultaneously that conversations and interviews are important tools for constructing knowledge, identity and public memory.

## A tentative relation to words

Having said that critique is a major tool used in this thesis, I want to say something about the potential risks of critique.<sup>15</sup> Ewe Kosowsky Sedgwick argues that a critical stance is an edict in some academic circles (2011:238) and that this in itself undermines the ability to be critical and hampers the production of critical knowledge because it prevents surprises, and “seeing the unexpected” (Jönsson & Rådström 2013:140). One way to avoid this is to employ a playful, testing and unfinished way of doing research. Philosopher and literary scholar H el ene Cixous argues in favor of seeing with the aid of unfinished, unstoppable *poetic writing*, rather than the perfectly formulated and easily transmitted (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:4), and poet Athena Farrokhzad says that “poetry enables an associative thinking that allows me to sense that which is true, outside of the conventional linguistic forms of truth” (2014:30.56). Literary scholar Maria J onsson and history of arts scholar Anna R adstr om (2013:132) argue for *ambivalence and insecurity* as productive writings of resistance in current neoliberal, self-governed universities. In talking to Zygmunt Bauman, they argue that we need to work against the essence of modernity: the desire to define, classify, control and exclude or erase that which does not fit, a modernity in which knowledge without certainty has no value (J onsson & R adstr om 2013:138). Similarly, Cixous acknowledges the injustice of hierarchization, that “everything is already ordered-classed according to a scale which gives primacy to one element over the other” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber 1997:11) and, in trying to avoid writing in a way that closes itself into conceptualization, she writes poetry/philosophical reflexion in a “process of shaking all this up” (ibid.). J onsson & R adstr om argue that these hierarchies need to be challenged through an open and “unfinished” text, not perfectly formulated, written with a playful approach (the playfulness refers to Naomi Scheman, see J onsson & R adstr om 2013:140) and that such an approach is better suited to harboring exciting and surprising knowledge (J onsson & R adstr om 2013:132, 140). Similarly, writer Margerite Duras (2014:22) argues that an ordered way of writing is a distortion and thus suggestions to write in an “objective” manner ruins writing. One way in which I have tried to follow this approach is by raising (new) questions instead of giving answers (Milchman & Rosenberg 2010:62). Thus, I am trying not to fix the meaning or origin, allowing for nearsightedness, in which it is necessary to get close in order to see (like H el ene Cixous), and association and abstraction (like Karl

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<sup>15</sup> From a different perspective, critical research is sometimes accused of being ideological. But to engage a perspective in the middle, the commonsensically objective or hegemonic, somewhere in between outspoken ideologies, is in itself a specific perspective, albeit not outspoken. Post-colonial philosopher Edward Said argues that such a liberal take on knowledge production aids in the disguise of the intimate relations between politics, power and knowledge production (Said 1997:75).

Marx) and playfulness, ambivalence and insecurity (as argued by Maria Jönsson and Anna Rådström). Such an approach also carries an awareness of the entrapment of inscription, the dangerous process of writing down speech or thoughts, with the imminent risk of losing the spontaneous, the “song” and the body (Barthes 1985:5). As argued by sociologist Johan Asplund, the epistemic consequences of playing with words may be grand (Asplund 2002, my translation). One particular aspect of such playfulness is engaging in the continental philosophical tradition of etymological exercise (see, for example, Derrida & Prenowitz 1996), in which the origins of words are used as a way to build theory. To begin at the beginning then, in a playful manner, let us address the etymology of etymology. The term is a composition of the words “etymos” and “logia”, where etymos has the ancient meaning “true, real, actual,” and “logia” or “logy”, which to most connotes the “science of” (as, for instance, in socio-logy), actually originates from the Greek –logia, (root of “legein”) “to speak” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). This may lead to the conclusion that etymology, etymologically speaking, is “the science of truth,” or even to “speak the truth.” Although such a suggestion should (not) be understood literally, throughout the thesis, I will engage such etymological analysis in order to bring into the equation an added aspect of understanding, a kind of etymology as epistemology.

So, phrased in one (long) sentence, my working methodology can be described as asking critical questions about politically intriguing things that hold a dominant position as true or sound, engaging a “free” modus of association and abstraction with other things, and further relating this thought exercise with the analytical framework, complimentary theory and empirical works of others, all in a tentative, unfinished and playful manner.

## **Interviewing social workers**

I conducted 24 interviews between 20012 and 2015, each approximately 90 minutes long. I contacted the first half of my interviewees mostly through personal connections, a friend or a friend of a friend; on one occasion it was through e-mailing the management of a municipality (head of research and development – FOU) and in another by e-mailing the union SSR. Sometimes I asked the interviewee to suggest others to be interviewed, which on some occasions proved successful.

After I had completed roughly half of the interviews, in the spring of 2014, I learned of a network of social workers who were coming together to voice

protest about the rapid and devastating developments in social work. I contacted them to ask permission to attend one of their meetings. They were enthusiastic about my line of inquiry and interest and gave me access to their next meeting. Once at the location I was introduced to the 15 or so social workers who were present and asked to briefly explain my area of research and my interest in their network. One of the topics for the day was sharing experiences, which proved highly valuable to me. Many spoke of management prioritization that was on the verge of breaking the law and others spoke of management repression due to their involvement in the network. To my surprise and delight, after the meeting ended I was able to schedule ten interviews. This encounter gave me new insights, one of which was the repression targeted at those who do not quietly accept the decisions of management, who do not stay in line and keep their mouths shut. It also made me aware of some of the silences in the first half of the interviews.

Prior to each interview, I sent an e-mail explaining briefly what the project was about, the ethical codes of conduct by which I abide, anonymity etc.<sup>16</sup> I asked where they would prefer to meet and suggested their workplace or perhaps a café. I assumed that meeting on their own “turf” would be most comfortable and convenient for them and I thought that I would get a better sense of the spatial context if I was to meet them at their workplace. All but one of the first twelve interviewees chose to meet at their workplace. One chose to meet in her home due to long-term sick leave, which she ultimately told me was work related. Out of the remaining twelve interviewees, ten were members of the network of critical social workers. A majority of these ten preferred to meet *outside* of their workplace, mostly in cafés and one at their home. In contrast to the previous interviewees, the network members communicated through private e-mail and private phone. After becoming aware of this tendency, I revealed my observation to some of the remaining interviewees and was told that they feared management repression and therefore chose to communicate through private channels and to keep their participation in my study a secret. One of them (referred to as “Maude”) told me about an interview she had scheduled with a journalist at Swedish Public Radio (P1), who was ultimately denied entry to the premises by management.<sup>17</sup> It also struck me that among the interviewees in the network

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<sup>16</sup> At the actual interview, I handed over similar information in written form and made it clear that they could terminate their participation at any time.

<sup>17</sup> In retrospect, I have noticed that the interviews had a tendency to become longer the more interviews I conducted. Towards the end they often had a duration of 2 hours or more. This might imply that as time passed my knowledge of social work expanded and my project became more focused (which at the onset was quite “open”). Such developments likely encouraged both myself and the interviewees, resulting in more detailed and lengthy discussions. And of course it should not be forgotten that the latter interviews were conducted with people who had chosen to participate in a network of critical social workers. This too probably affected the “passion” in the interviews.

there were several who, prior to making a delicate statement, asked for reconfirmation of their anonymity.

All interviews were recorded, and I have given the interviewees fictional names in alphabetical sequence, in the order in which they were conducted, beginning with the first interview with “Anna” and ending with the last and 24th interview with “Åsa” (Q and X were excluded for lack of suitable names). Throughout the analytical chapters, I thus refer to the interviewees by their (fictional) first name. This will allow the reader to know whether the interview took place at the beginning, in the middle or towards the end of the study and implicitly whether he or she was a member of the network or not.<sup>18</sup> Municipalities, locations and other possibly identifiable details have been changed into made-up cities, streets etc. The recorded files are kept locked away at the university, without any accompanying data to identify the interviewees.

I carefully and repeatedly listened to the first eleven interviews (as suggested by Riessman 2002:253, while walking to and from work) and after all of the interviews were completed, they were then transcribed, although not by me,<sup>19</sup> and then systematically and thematically coded using the Nvivo-software, a computer program that facilitates the ordering and handling of large amounts of qualitative data.<sup>20</sup> A complementary word search was conducted to further identify relevant material for each theme. For instance, when writing Chapter 5, which deals with emotions, an additional word search was made for keywords such as: angry, upset, pissed off, sad, sorrow, crying. This provided valuable additional material that the initial coding had not yielded.

Some descriptive aspects of the interviews: out of the 24 interviewees, 20 were employed<sup>21</sup> by the municipal social services, three by an NGO and one in a private treatment facility. Eighteen of the 24 had the formal title of social workers in the social services,<sup>22</sup> one was a case manager and the remaining five worked primarily with some kind of counseling, without the authority associated with working in the social services. The social workers

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<sup>18</sup> However, two interviews at the very end are not with such members.

<sup>19</sup> Everything that was uttered was transcribed, word for word. This includes hesitations, half words, mispronunciations, laughter and crying.

<sup>20</sup> Such software has nothing to do with the actual analysis but it allows for easy handling, providing things like the easy creation of folders (nodes), allowing one to drag and drop excerpts directly from the transcribed interviews (with automatic tagging of each interview) into one or several folders, and to merge or subhierarchize folders with their content intact.

<sup>21</sup> 23 were currently working, one was on long-term sick leave (and two others had been prior to the interview).

<sup>22</sup> In Swedish: socialsekreterare.

employed in the municipal social services worked in several different and sometimes overlapping areas: with children and youth (six), substance abuse (seven), financial support (four), housing (two), disability (one) and domestic violence (one). They worked in six different municipalities, ranging from south to north, in both small and large cities. 21 are women and three are men with an age range from the early 30s to early 60s. Naturally they also had various experiences of social work, ranging from two to about 40 years. This biographical description illustrates that my interviewees work in different settings and locations and undertake differing tasks. It also shows that most are female and have the formal role and authority of social workers in the social services.

The advantages of conducting interviews in different locations and different contextual surroundings are several. Firstly, there were reasons of convenience. Asking around in my personal networks, which are dispersed around the country, connected me to social workers from several different locations. If I had focused on a single municipality there is a high probability that it would have been harder to find as many as 24 interviewees, either because only large organizations have that many people employed in one office or due to the probability that several would refuse to participate in my study. Secondly, the variety of municipalities is likely to increase the ability to guarantee the anonymity of each interviewee. If all the interviews had been conducted in the same location, it is likely that adding the details of each interview together would enable the distinguishing of a pattern that would reveal the office in question. Thirdly, interviewing in different locations is likely to increase the contextual variation. I believe that finding different expressions and understandings of social work governing is more important than focusing on particular aspects of it and, although it is not my aim to draw general conclusions, conducting interviews in different settings with social workers of differing specialisms, age and experience may increase the chances of avoiding conclusions drawn from exceptional circumstances in a particular local setting.

## **Additional material**

Apart from the interviews, which constitute the major focus of the analysis, I gathered some additional material, including diaries. In the initial interviews, after the conversation was finished, I asked the interviewee if they would consider keeping a work-related diary for a week containing “reflections about the working day.” I wanted to learn more about their personal thoughts “in solitude” regarding their working life, reflections that

may have been triggered by our conversation. Some agreed and expressed enthusiasm for the task; some did not, most of the latter referring to heavy workloads. I received diaries from four of the initial eight interviewees, but eventually, shame about having to ask even more of these social workers, just about all of whom had told me how stressful their life was, due to heavy workloads and emotionally strenuous tasks, made me cease this request. I also got the impression that the interviews themselves were of much greater value to my study than the entries in these four diaries. These entries do appear in occasional places in this thesis. At the end of each of the initial interviews, I also asked the interviewee to construct a timeline, on paper, onto which they would enter significant occasions in their working life, perhaps breakthroughs, breakdowns or epiphanies. This proved to be of limited value, so I stopped after the fifth interview. Maybe it was the linear compulsion that limited this exercise – the bonds of linear time? Would anything have changed if I had suggested a circle? In any case, this material is not included. At the outset of the study I also took some photos of the social services office; entrance, front desk, meeting rooms etc., and wrote some field notes to accompany the analysis. After some initial entries and snapshots, this too felt like a waste of time, so I stopped. It might be obvious by now that I had the ambition to fashion my study in an ethnographic manner. It did not really work out as I had hoped for, but I am convinced that the interviews are so full of rich and thick qualitative data, that the omission of some of the material is fully manageable and does not hurt the study.

Towards the latter part of my study, it was suggested that I complement my material for analysis by either conducting more interviews (I had done eleven at the time) or analyzing social services assessments.<sup>23</sup> I decided to do both, which, as it turned out, was not the best choice. Apart from conducting an additional thirteen interviews, I requested a total of 100 assessments from the social services divisions of “children and youth” and “financial support” in two districts of a city, which differed in socioeconomic and racial composition. However, the process of obtaining this material, including the procedure to gain approval from the Ethics Board of the university, was time consuming, as were the practical matters of retrieving the actual files, including the elaborate process of anonymization that had to be performed at the offices of the social services. This unfortunately prevented me from doing a full-scale analysis of this voluminous and ample material and I have instead focused on the interviews. However, in the process of obtaining and anonymizing the investigations, I did tease out some overarching tendencies, and these are included in occasional parts of the analysis. It is my intention

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<sup>23</sup> Thank you Stefan Sjöström and Malin Rönnblom.

to conduct a more thorough and in-depth study of this material in the near future. In addition to the above, I have also included some newspaper articles as well as narratives from the website of a network of social workers who work to share the structural problems that they have encountered, due either to increasing inequality or increasing workloads and a deteriorating work environment. The narratives in question focus on situations in which social workers believe they cannot do their job properly because of faulty (interpretation of) rules and regulations, organizational structure or lack of resources. An advantage of mixing different material in a study is that it allows the opportunity of getting important input from different sources; triangulation, some would call it. It also connects with my ethnographic ambition of having an open research design allowing for different material to enter and exit the study as I go along, in the playful and testing approach that I desire.

## **Something about translation**

I analyzed the interviews in their original language, Swedish, and then translated the quotes into English after the analysis was completed and the text was written. Interestingly, during the actual translation, some exciting things appeared which I had not noticed when reading the original quotes in Swedish. Thus, the translation process itself and the reading of the conversations in another language provided added value as it enabled a reading from a somewhat different “perspective”.

I have attempted to translate in a way that conveys what I understand to be the meaning of the quote, rather than a “true” word-by-word translation. “Do you translate by eye or by ear?” asks the narrator of the film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* by Trinh Minh-ha (1989a), highlighting this choice. My answer would be that I try to choose listening over reading, that I translate by ear and I have thus in some instances edited the quotes slightly to ease the understanding and the readability. On occasions where something has been omitted, as in edited out, it is marked with [...]. In the quotes, I have chosen to use abbreviated forms of words, contractions, such as “I don’t” rather than the more formal “I do not”, because I believe that such a form of transcription conveys a conversational tone. At the beginning of this thesis, there is a list of frequently used social work terminology and their original Swedish wording, to ease the understanding of the Swedish context to a Swedish reader. The (difficulty of the) translation of certain terms or words that appear only once or twice are explained in footnotes at the bottom of the page in question.



## 4. Evidence-based practice: the Government of Truth

I want to open this analytically oriented latter part of this thesis with a critical inquiry into the philosophy of evidence, some of its functions and effects in practice and its potential as a governing technique. In my second interview, in a discussion with Beatrice about trends and changes over time in social work, I am told that “nowadays there is a lot of talk about evidence and about making social work evidence based.” Because I find the popularity of particular protocols to be an important area of inquiry, and because I learned that EBP is presented as a neutral aid in decision making, I wanted to learn more about what this concept means to social workers and how it may be understood in relation to governing. In a discussion on MI, interviewee Denise says that the introduction of an evidence philosophy in social work is necessary:

**Denise:** I mean, social work clearly lacks evidence.

**Marcus:** Okay.

**Denise:** Many don't have the education, I mean people who work as psychiatric aides<sup>24</sup> have, like, no evidence in what they are doing.

**Marcus:** What do you mean by evidence?

**Denise:** Well, that it's been proven, that what you do has an effect.

I interpret claims that social work often lacks evidence, such as Denise's above, as an embracing of more scientifically grounded methods in social work, or a demand for such. It also suggests that one needs a specific kind of education and specific working methods to improve the situation for a client. However, in contrast to such an embrace of an evidence ideal, when I ask interviewee Paula about her associations with the term evidence, she instantly replies that it's a “piece-of-shit term” and argues strongly against it because universal solutions are detrimental to complex work such as social work. These three opening quotes are chosen to illustrate both the overwhelming presence of an evidence discourse in social work and the differing views on it. Because of the implicit connections between knowledge and power (see my analytical framework in Chapter 2 for an extended discussion), I believe that the conflict over such a discourse in social work is an important area of inquiry. If there exists a conflict over what knowledge *is* and how it should be used, this certainly stimulates my curiosity. Also, it has come to my attention that such a discourse is strong in other areas, for example, in education (Shahjahan 2010), politics (Lundström & Shanks

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<sup>24</sup> In Swedish: mentalskötare

2013:111) management (Learmonth & Harding 2006) and policy implementation (Bergmark & Lundström 2006).

As argued in Chapter 2, a core principle of NPM is a result- or performance-oriented style of governing. Evidence-based ideals with their focus on evident results seem to have a lot in common with such ideals surrounding NPM (Bergmark & Lundström 2006:100, 108–109). Some argue that the implementation of such ideals was facilitated because NPM, with its demand for quantified goals and results, was already the norm in public services alongside the trend towards patient and client choice in care providers (Svanevie 2011:176, see also Ponnert & Svensson 2015:4). Another interpretation centers on EBP *replacing* NPM as governing principles (Johansson et al. 2015), while many others argue that the evidence ideals should rather be seen as an integral part of neoliberal governing (Gray & McDonald 2006:7–8, Clarke 2004, Webb 2001). Regardless of exactly how one understands the connections between evidence ideals, neoliberalism and NPM, the presence of a strong evidence discourse in social work warrants an analysis that places it in a wider context (Ponnert & Svensson 2015:3). Also, because of the proliferation of practices of knowledge production in social work in general (see Chapters 2 and 6). As such, the following discussion on evidence also serves as an important point of departure for the coming analysis because it lays the foundations for ontological, epistemological and political discussions and argumentation connected to knowledge, power and social work. However, to begin, let us look at some general defining aspects of the terms evidence and evidence-based practice – EBP.

## **Definitions of evidence**

What are the terms evidence or evidence based taken to mean? There exists no direct consensus over this and the term(s) have taken on different meanings in different contexts (Herz & Johansson 2011). In a widespread narrative of the birth of evidence-based medicine, medical doctor David Sackett and his colleagues are credited with having tried to solve the problem of doctors not using the best-known scientific knowledge in their work because, it is said, they were too bound by authority and the context of which they were a part. Dr. Sackett and his crew wanted medical doctors to personally engage in a “critical appraisal” of available research on the effects of each substance or procedure before exposing a patient to it (Bergmark et al. 2011:12). However, social work scholar Kajsa Svanevie (2011), who has studied the implementation processes of evidence-based ideals in several countries, among them Sweden, argues that the concept has evolved over

time. One of the more influential interpretations focuses primarily on particular kinds of research results (Svanevie 2011:189–190, see also Topor 2010). This “instrumental” interpretation of evidence is connected to an epistemological positivist philosophy that elevates particular kinds of quantitative research produced under strict schemes about a well-defined object of study (Bohlin 2011). The gold standard to *produce* such evidence is to conduct an RCT study (randomized control [clinical] trial). The target population in such a study is randomly divided into two groups, one of which will be exposed to the stimulus while the other, the control group, will receive no intervention (placebo). Participants do not know which group they belong to (and preferably the staff in contact with the subjects do not know either). To determine whether or not this particular method works, or what method has the greatest effect, the results of the two groups are then compared with each other. If done properly, such an RCT study reveals the proper effect of the stimulus examined (Machin & Fayers 2010). Sometimes, however, the same stimulus generates differing or inconclusive results in different studies; therefore, to conclude with certainty whether a method really works or not, or how well it works, a systematic overview in the form of a meta study may be conducted, analyzing the total effect of all available RCT studies (Machin & Fayers 2010:318).

While RCT studies have been developed in medicine, when this practice is transferred to social work (or other less clinical environments) it is difficult to keep the subjects of the intervention unaware of which group they belong to because of the nature of interventions in social work (and, of course, the same goes for staff). It is easier to distribute a pill than, say, to commence a counseling method without giving away group affiliation. Attempts have been made to solve this problem using various techniques, such as by creating a quasi-control group by assigning half of the enrolled population to a waiting list, receiving the “classical”, so-called baseline treatment, and the other half being exposed to the intervention to be tested. It may also be done through partial implementation in some localities, thus enabling comparison with other units, such as municipalities.

According to those arguing for EBP, social work should be grounded in methods that have been proven to work in such studies. This has proven difficult in reality and it is still hard to say what it means to do proper evidence-based social work. Social work should also preferably be carried out in a manner that will allow for future “proper” evaluation, meaning a rigid setup, often based on a manual, strict fidelity to whichever method is used, and thorough documentation of the subjects of intervention, the treatment process etc.

Although some argue that patient focus was an original characteristic of evidence-based work (for instance, Topor 2010:76), the implementation of evidence-based ideals into practice enhanced the integration of the *client's or patient's own will and wishes* into the decision-making process (Morago 2006, Bergmark & Lundström 2006:107). Although the term “evidence” itself probably connotes the specific scientific standard and the research methods of RCT to most people, what is today known as EBP – evidence-based practice – is officially a trinity of agents. In sum, EBP prescribes a way of working and making decisions which includes: 1) the best available scientific knowledge, 2) professional expertise and 3) the client's will (or in some definitions their experience) (Lundström & Shanks 2013:110, ÖK 2010, Oscarsson 2009). Although not the focus of this study, the transformation of ideals and concepts illustrated above is intriguing and may be connected to the research field of “travelling concepts”, which focuses on the transformation of concepts over time and space. The inherent assumptions of such research is however important as it suggest that concepts and theories are dynamic and dependent on context (Carbin & Edenheim 2013). This implies that the transformation of the evidence ideal could be understood in terms of the political context. Arguing that science is “a socially embedded activity” (Gould 1981), and thus should be analyzed in the context of power, dominant ontological, epistemological and political claims, I would argue that claims of neutral truths, although they have been contested for decades (see Chapter 2), may have serious effects and demand further analysis.

In the official discourse of the National Board of Health and Welfare, social work scholars Anders Bergmark and Tommy Lundström (2006:107) trace the emerging emphasis on patient will in Swedish social work policy to the turn of the century (see also Morago 2006:462). Looking back to definitions from the medical field and comparing them with the current use of the term EBP, Denvall and Johansson (2012:29) claim that the formerly rigorous definition has been “softened”, and that contemporary uses of the term are far wider in scope (this is similar to conclusions drawn by Bergmark & Lundström 2006:108). In situating the transformation of the evidence concept, the growing emphasis on the will of the patient or client – also called service users – in the evidence ideal is intriguing because it may be connected to the context of growing client- or patient-centered policies in neoliberal governing through customer will and choice. Given the rise of the focus on the client/patient in care practices, expressed for instance in the Swedish legislation on choice of care provider – LOV (SFS 2008:962) – or the reform that enabled a patient to actively choose a particular family physician (SOU 2008:37), the integration of client or patient will into the evidence ideal fits well into a neoliberal governing context. In fact, Denvall

and Johansson (2012:38) argue for the seemingly obvious connections between EBP and a market logic, albeit under the guise of patient will or user empowerment.

## **Implementation of evidence ideals in Swedish social work**

By order of the government, the Center for Evaluation of Social Work (CUS)<sup>25</sup> was constituted within the National Board of Health and Welfare in 1992 order to supply social workers with scientifically grounded knowledge. The order was a continuation of the government's efforts to strengthen social research and to provide scientifically grounded knowledge for practical social work. (Socialstyrelsen 2013:9, my translation)

At the government level, serious efforts have been made over the course of recent decades to implement decision making founded on EBP (Denvall & Johansson 2012), “a program to create a scientific assurance of professional work” (Bergmark et al. 2011:11). Svanevie (2011), who studied the implementation of EBP in social work, argues that an international debate was staged to construct the idea of a crisis in social work. Through articles in the media, conferences, various reports and through lobbyism to include EBP in social work codes of conduct and education curricula, a problem representation was established within which EBP was framed and delivered as a solution (Svanevie 2011:183–186). Similar to Denise in the opening quotes, in a 1999 newspaper article the General Director of The National Board of Health and Welfare claimed that Swedish social work is riddled with flaws and is carried out on whims or intuition<sup>26</sup> and that it therefore requires restructuring along the lines of systematic scientific evidence (DN 1999).

Social work scholar Andreas Liljegren and human work science scholar Karolina Parding (2010) argue that the evidence-based ideal is a governing philosophy that in social work practice means a thorough documentation of the working process, with the aid of standardized manuals, which is believed to enable social workers to make “scientifically grounded decisions” with regard to their clients. One of the main targets of such a governing strategy is to standardize social work, which is expected to deliver the same (but not necessarily better) treatment regardless of location (ibid:282, Greenhalgh et al. 2014, Lundström & Shanks 2013:111), and from such a wish, the Swedish

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<sup>25</sup> In Swedish: Centrum för utvärdering av socialt arbete

<sup>26</sup> The original Swedish wording was “I de allra flesta [kommunerna] är dokumentationen och kunskapen mycket bristfälliga. Arbetet bedrivs helt enkelt på känn.”

government has attempted to establish the ideal of EBP in social work (Bergmark & Lundström 2006). Ever since the 1990s, when a research and policy center was established within the structures of the National Board of Health and Welfare, known as the CUS and later the IMS, great efforts have been made to implement EBP in social work, and such efforts continue today. One effect of this standardization is arguably that the training of social work practitioners has undergone a regimentation process whereby methods that have been given a scientific stamp of approval are emphasized. One of the interviewees, Ylva, comments on the efforts of such a standardization in relation to the considered-to-be-evidence-based method of Motivational Interviewing and says that maybe it is not direct coercion, but that they are all *supposed* to employ it, “it’s supposed to be a part of our way of working.” Such a comment illustrates that, although undergoing the prescribed training might formally be considered voluntary, the expectation that people will learn to employ methods that have been centrally approved plays out like an internalized edict. The opening quotes also illustrate that such a “coerced” implementation of EBP is not applauded by all; in fact, the launch of EBP has been highly controversial (Svanevie 2011, Denvall & Johansson 2012:28, Morago 2006). Somewhat contrasting with such an understanding, survey studies have been used to support the claim that “most” social workers welcome EBP, especially the inexperienced (Lundström & Shanks 2013:118) and that resistance tends to decrease over time (Bergmark et al. 2011:151). In the government inquiry established to expand engagement with EBP in the social services, entitled *Evidence-based practice in the social services – for the good of the client* (SOU 2008:18), it is also claimed that social work managers mostly display positive attitudes towards the further implementation of EBP (see also Lundström & Shanks 2013:116). On the other hand, and contrary to such claims, my interviewees raised several objections, expressing skepticism and limited enthusiasm towards EBP. Most of these objections revolve around social work being too complex to be evaluated using EBP standards and social work practice being too complex to be forced into a particular, rigid way of doing things. One of the interviewees, Maude, argues:

**Maude:** These manual-based programs that have been researched, I’m a bit skeptical towards them, that it’s assumed that they’re good just because there is evidence that it works, in general.

**Marcus:** Why are you skeptical towards that?

**Maude:** I mean, I always have to make an individual assessment, whether it’s suitable in this particular case.

Working in accordance with evidence-based standardized programs, according to Maude, does not always allow for individualized assessment

and support. This claim also suggests that scientifically approved ways of working may be too rigid to apply to actual social work. Concerning the evaluation process, another interviewee, Julia, says:

I'm in favor of evidence-based methods; I mean, of course you shouldn't continue using methods that you can tell are not working. At the same time, it's really hard to know what works and what doesn't. Because, like, *when* is it supposed to work? When do you reap what you have sown? I mean, for example this outpatient activity that we have here, when, when do you evaluate that? I mean in what phase, how much time should pass in order to know whether it works or not?

Highlighting the difficulty of assessing what works in long-term social work processes (because of limited evaluation time frames) and the difficulty in only subscribing to certain approved methods, makes for difficulties in giving clients individual support; in other words, it makes it hard to deliver to clients “what they need”. This suggests that Julia favors the ideas behind EBP, but believes that they are hard to abide by in reality. Similarly, yet more philosophically, Karolin, another interviewee, argues that it is difficult to base issues that concern humans and human emotions on evidence. Like Julia above, Ylva says that social work is a process and, if you want to know what works, you have to wait ten or twenty years. But the logic of EBP makes it virtually impossible to have an evaluation period (Julia also exemplifies with ten years) that catches the complex social processes of which clients are a part. In addition, if change takes longer than the defined follow-up period, effects are likely to be missed.

Lisa, another interviewee, brings up yet another problem with using evidence-based methods in practice, pointing to the numerous dropouts from treatment of adolescents undergoing aggression replacement training (ART) because of its particular and rigid set up. ART takes the form of education and resembles the teacher-student relation in a classroom, a milieu not well suited for change, she says, especially with adolescents. In addition, because the evidence relies on rigidity, on exactly following the manual, Lisa says this makes it hard to integrate such standards into everyday social work. Maude also criticizes the rigidity and “doing things the prescribed way” because it may hinder the relation of trust with the client:

Just because there is evidence that something might be beneficial, I don't want to use it in all my cases. Those in favor argue for the importance of using it in all of the cases due to the risk of missing something. Because there are questions about sexual assault and all sorts of things. And that's like a discussion around all kinds of things in society I believe; do you ask women if they have been subjected to violence and things like that. I have a feeling that in our grueling situation, where we might have time for only a

handful of meetings with each of our clients, I'd rather be trusted to ask such questions when it's appropriate. And I believe that there are other things that aren't researched enough, but that I still might think work really well, and also practice, and then perhaps that should be allowed too.

Because of limited resources, such as time spent with clients, Maude favors the cultivation of a trustful relationship over always engaging approved evidence-based methods and asking the specified questions. She also argues that there are things that work but have not been or cannot be approved according to the standards of EBP. The comment about trust seems to suggest that she has a sense that the trust to make an informed decision on what is appropriate at the time is lacking. Interviewee Vera argues in a similar way, that blind trust in research is dangerous and might hurt the relationship with the client, despite positive results, because people are different and "I don't want people to explode just because I'm supposed to stay true to the protocol."

Interestingly, cultivating a relationship, as Maude and Vera argue to be of a certain importance, is in fact claimed to be the "actual" reason behind the therapeutic effect following from counseling-type treatment, not the specific method itself (Topor 2010:73). This is referred to as the Dodo-bird verdict. The Dodo-bird verdict highlights that when interventions are measured against baseline, the traditional way of working or a so-called waiting list (wanting to but *waiting* to take part in an intervention), significant effects are often found for the intervention tested. However, when different interventions that are *expected* to yield positive results are compared with each other, no one intervention seems to work better than the others. Critics of the evidence ideal suggest that what produces an effect is not the specificities of how an intervention is carried out; rather, it is the participation itself in what is expected to work, i.e. the contact with social workers or the so-called therapeutic alliance that is working (Bergmark & Lundström 2011a).

Another interviewee, Nora, says she "gets tired just by hearing the word" when I ask her about the term evidence, arguing passionately that "when working with humans you should not experiment like you might do with matter!" highlighting the ethical problem of control groups in evaluating social work, i.e. not giving the best known treatment to all:

You can't treat humans like that. The control group, when you're supposed to say, "No they aren't getting any care because we are controlling the spontaneous recovery" [...] It sounds fancy, "evidence based" doesn't it? But I don't have much sympathy for it.

Nora suggests that the philosophy of evidence may have a theoretical logic, it sounds good, but it may cause suffering when applied to humans. Academics, particularly social work scholars, have also expressed differing views from advocates of evidence ideals, such as the Swedish government, when it comes to the value of EBP. Social work scholars Verner Denvall and Bo Vinnerljung, similar to interviewees Vera and Nora above, have issued a warning against “blind faith in scientific research” (2006:20) and express criticism of the “scientification” of governing. Just like the social workers cited above, a common critique within academia revolves around the complexity of social work, where rigid methods are deemed inappropriate because social work requires an intuitive and flexible approach following from the interaction with a specific client (Morago 2006:470). Such critical voices, from both practitioners and social work scholars, in part contradict the claims made by the government about EBP being welcomed by most. Trying to further understand the resistance towards EBP, scholars also put forward the argument that it can hardly be claimed to have been initiated or developed by the profession or social work academics, rather that the government’s determination to install such a regimen should be regarded as a top-down project (Lundström & Shanks 2013:110, Denvall & Johansson 2012:33, Liljegren & Parding 2010:282, Bergmark & Lundström 2006:109). Instead of the “critical appraisal” that Sackett prescribed, what seems to be demanded from each social worker is in fact blind faith, an uncritical acceptance of the methods that are deemed, by the authorities, to work according to evidence (Bergmark et al. 2011:17). Seemingly a break from traditional professional autonomy, such a top-down governing project is likely to stir up resistance because it undermines social work grounded in professional practical expertise and may be interpreted as an expression of distrust (Hasselberg 2012, Hasselberg & Stenlås 2010).

## **Intellectual deprivation**

“That it has a scientifically proven effect” is a short version of the philosophy of evidence. Although one can hardly dispute that an effect is something to strive for when choosing, say, an approach to help a client, such an apparently uncomplicated standard in fact relies upon and hides several assumptions about knowledge, knowledge production and power, and it is important to address these and analyze them further.

The term evidence is not used to describe just any type of knowledge but rather a very specific kind. As mentioned before, it relies upon a positivistic philosophy of science within which the quantifiable has a superior value

(Gray & McDonald 2006:7–8, Ferguson 2008, Bergmark & Lundström 2006:109) and, as pointed out above, the gold standard is represented by RCT studies and meta studies of such RCT research. This is, however, only *one* of many possible ways of producing knowledge. With such an approach you may, for instance, be able to say something about *what* might work, but nothing about *how* it works (Morago 2006); thus, the chosen approach limits the kind of questions that can be asked. You might be able to claim that a particular counseling method reduces anxiety, but be unable to say anything about the reasons behind why it works or the roots of the anxiety. Thus, subscribing only to evidence standards obviously “limits the sorts of phenomena that can be studied” (Gray & McDonald 2006:14) as well as what aspects of social problems can be addressed. Nora highlights an aspect of this when commenting on a treatment considered to be “evidence based because the clients remained in treatment,” not because they were sober – it was in fact a program of substitution treatment (Metadon, Subutex etc.) – but merely because they did not drop out. This was not the result of a robust long-term functioning method but rather, says Nora, “They kept coming because they wanted their drugs.” Although such a result may be favorable when compared to relapse, it does not address the root problem; it just keeps them “afloat”. This may be connected to gender studies scholar Kerstin Sandell’s study, in which interviewees kept taking anti-depressive drugs because they were not presented with any viable alternatives, yet wanted to continue to function (Sandell 2016).

It should be noted, however, that the evidence ideal in research and the claim of being able to distinguish *what* works is also being disputed, even from within the communities in favor of evidence ideals. For one thing, it is claimed that when researchers evaluate methods they have themselves helped to develop and thus have an economic or other interest, or strongly believe in these methods, they tend to find a greater effect. When this tendency is adjusted for in meta studies, a substantial part of the effect disappears, in some cases all of it (Luborsky et al. 1999). Although arguing in favor of evidence-based medicine, Trisha Greenhalgh et al. (2014) in their British Medical Journal article *Evidence based medicine: a movement in crisis?* claim that economic interests, primarily in the pharmaceutical industry, set the research agenda of what problems to research as well as favoring affirmative results of drug effectiveness by selectively publishing positive results.<sup>27</sup> Given that the meta studies gathering all available RCT studies aim to “definitively” reveal what methods work and with how strong an effect, the selective publication of positive studies will over-value the

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<sup>27</sup> In an overview of research publications from pharmaceutical studies on anti-depressive drugs, it was revealed that 37 out of 38 positive results were published, but only 14 out of 36 negative findings.

method or procedure in question. It should also be mentioned that many of the methods that are branded as evidence based are in fact related to commercial products (Lundström & Shanks 2013:120, 123), meaning that it is in the interests of the corporations that deliver the methods to highlight their scientifically “proven” effect.

Greenhalgh et al. (2014) also illustrate how the one-sided trust in evidence-based medicine, rather than also drawing upon professional knowledge built upon clinical experience (also called tacit knowledge), has helped to produce national standardized guidelines for detection and diagnosis, to such an extent that the guidelines are becoming a burden rather than an aid to professionals. Furthermore, in template-driven work, that is, work in accordance with top-down implemented standardized checkups targeting specific afflictions, there is an inherent risk of missing serious non-related symptoms and illnesses not focused upon in the specific template, argue the authors, because it narrows the vision and may lead to a loss of awareness of the bigger picture. Johan Åhlin (2015) has studied staff perceptions of guidelines for care at residential homes for elders. He has concluded that there is a common opinion that guidelines lack practical use, complicate care and steal time from the care of residents. It can thus be argued that such regimentation not only causes the loss of professional autonomy in favor of (limited) evidence, but also works to delimit the professional view, a kind of stultification of the profession.

In addition to the delimiting consequences pointed out by Greenhalgh et al. above, another aspect of the “stultification effect” of evidence ideals is addressed by critics of EBP. By only accepting one specific kind of knowledge as being of value in social work and also in the other arenas where it has become prescribed, other kinds of knowledge are ultimately devalued, such as knowledge based on qualitative methods or that which is grounded in constructivist or postmodern theory (Gray & McDonald 2006:17). Furthermore, it disavows and excludes practical knowledge grounded in experience of working in a profession, so-called tacit knowledge (Longhofer & Floersh 2012). And it is not farfetched to assume that such ideals render explicitly critical and normative knowledge obsolete, which means a clear break with the tradition of value-based social work (Ferguson 2008), claimed to be at its peak in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s (Herz & Johansson 2011). Such a perspective is expressed, for instance, in the long-standing view of substance abuse and addiction in Sweden as a social, rather than an individual problem (Bergmark 2012). With such a standardization and narrow definition of science, which excludes other forms of knowledge, it can be argued that EBP ideals undermines and narrows science (Ferguson 2008). This is a kind of epistemological impoverishment which in practice,

argues education researcher Riyad Ahmed Shajahan (2011), also creates a climate of limited tolerance for diverse bodies and knowledge forms, creating a “monoculture of the mind” in which “alternative ways of knowing are displaced or subjugated” (Shajahan 2011:192). Taking this point further, it can be argued that dominant knowledge always runs the risk of being “flawed” precisely because of its dominance. If one agrees that knowledge production is intimately connected with the exercise of power (as discussed in Chapter 2), I would argue that knowledge emanating from privileged positions will often be found to be taken for granted. Such knowledge will then be harder to criticize, and if we assume that critique is a way to enhance knowledge production, dominant knowledge is more likely to be banal, simplistic and of a lower “quality”. Philosopher Petra Green (2014) argues for the flip side of this, that such “ignorance” may silence other more “accurate” knowledge, that the influence of:

hegemonic interpretations and worldviews [...] can hinder a positive epistemic process; they can stop more constructive and accurate accounts from being fully developed, by overshadowing these accounts, and even making them appear unreasonable. (Green 2014:9)

Central aspects of the philosophy of truth expressed in the ideals of EBP are very much in line with general epistemological ideals about positivistic research. As such it is not new, and the battles over ontological and epistemological perspectives on knowledge production are familiar to most academics. However, because prescriptive science is integrated into the governing of professions, the appropriation of the word “scientific” to mean a very particular kind of positivist evident truth,<sup>28</sup> leads to evidence becoming like a powerful edict and governing technique, rather than a critical appraisal.

The government and the so-called movement that favors the ideals of EBP together reproduce a discourse of evidence to mean some kind of untainted and unquestionable truth, something that by definition has no context and no perspective. Etymologically, the word evidence has to do with vision, in the way that inferences may be drawn from the *appearance* of something. “Evident” is the past participle stem of the noun “videre”, meaning “to see” (Online etymological dictionary 2016). In that sense, the term evidence seems, both historically and in an everyday semantic understanding within the movement of EBP, to connote the ability to clearly *see* proof. In other words,

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<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, in the 17th and 18th centuries the term “scientific” connoted philosophical rather than positivist knowledge (Online Etymological Dictionary 2016). Although this does not imply any original or lost sense of the term, it does point to the powerful effects of epistemological claims and labeling by elites, since “scientific” has gradually come to mean a very specific kind of knowledge.

evidence is associated with an apparent and unquestionable truth, without necessarily engaging in the act of looking. To see without a perspective. But how can you see if there is no one to do the looking? And there is nowhere to stand from which to look? The critique of such a philosophy of science has taken on many forms over the years (see Chapter 2). Donna Haraway's (1988) critique of seeing without looking is worth a special mention here. She argues against the fixation on the sense of vision in science and wants instead to emphasize the limitations of human perception. The scientific vision is "used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere", to "claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (1988:581), in what Haraway labels the God trick. Thus, the evidence ideal in current social work favors a seemingly neutral and de-contextualized controlling gaze without eyes, perspective or body.

## **Functions and limitations in social work**

In social work, there are very limited possibilities to work strictly in accordance with the gold standard of EBP. There just are not many methods available that have been given the stamp of approval (Lundström & Shanks 2013:110, Bergmark & Lundström 2011b:171) and those few that are available are aimed at very specific problems and situations, in stark contrast to the reality of the multifaceted problems facing social workers. This of course limits the social work toolbox and makes it virtually impossible to work according to prescribed EBP standards. But, as might be expected from a thorough recasting of the ideals and management of public administration and services, there seem to be other less anticipated effects that can be associated with EBP in social work (Liljegren & Parding 2010:271). For one thing, social services managers now often claim that they work according to EBP standards; however, this claim does not really stand up to scrutiny. In a survey, managers who responded affirmatively to using evidence-based working were asked to report what kind of EBP methods were used. Yet, even with an "extremely generous" interpretation, a *majority* of the managers listed methods not associated with EBP (Lundström & Shanks 2013:119). Under a strict interpretation, none of the methods listed by the managers deserve to be called evidence based according to Lundström & Shanks (2013:120). This illustrates the confusion surrounding EBP, the expectations of working according to such standards and the impossibility of doing the right thing.

Vera claims that her working conditions are so tight that there is no time to reflect or get up to speed with new research, despite management expectations and their claims to be working in an evidence-based manner. The National Board of Health and Welfare, the principal government body of Swedish social work that has worked so hard to implement EBP, has concluded that, although serious efforts have been made, there is no “evidence” that the social services have begun working according to such standards, although many municipalities claim to do so (Bergmark et al. 2011:153). There seems to be a profound conflict here. Social workers are expected to work in accordance with evidence ideals, but they cannot do so because even at best there are few approved methods available, and they do not allow for easy integration into social work practice. On top of all this, the numerous problems inherent in such standards, as pointed out by both social workers and scholars, should in sum make it no surprise that social workers do not always work according to protocol. I ask whether the concept of evidence is something often talked about and interviewee Simon says:

Yes. That's what's talked about now. A lot about evidence, and I believe that's the problem. You think you can measure, like, construct variables somehow in this chaotic world. But what is it that's supposed to be measured? I don't get it. Because that's where I..., it's what these studies..., what treatments work? It's the relationship, OK?

Pointing to the importance of the relationship between social worker and client, Simon questions the whole idea of measuring the soft and chaotic world of social work because in the end it is the relationship that works.

In a discussion with interviewee Felicia on the question of resources, an alternative function of EBP in social work surfaces – the reduction of costs. Although this is intertwined with a discussion of harmful institutionalization, it is interesting to see how one legitimizes the other.

**Marcus:** OK, so what's the situation with resources? Is it, like, is it a constant struggle with limited resources or do you feel that you have decent liberty to give people what you believe they need?

**Felicia:** I believe the latter, that we have the ability to give people what they eventually conclude that they want, in general it's like that. But we are trying, more, I mean we are working towards becoming more aware of costs, and a lot of that is about reducing the duration of the institutional treatment, because that's what costs the most, treatment centers, like twenty-four/seven, [...] around two thousand a day, those are the most expensive. And we are trying to work in accordance with what has been shown to, like, work according to resear-, I mean evidence-based methods, and that we, we know from research that it doesn't help to remain in treatment centers year in, year out. Instead we're trying to think, like, okay, a short period at a treatment center and then back to

the home environment, but with outpatient treatment, I mean during the day, in some way.

**Marcus:** Is that what you call being cost aware, that you try to switch to outpatient treatment as quickly as possible?

**Felicia:** Exactly, to reduce the time spent at these ‘around the clock’ treatment centers.

**Marcus:** Does that mean that you have to sacrifice some of the results, or does it work just as well?

**Felicia:** No, most often we don’t, that’s our experience, rather, when people remain for a long time it’s usually because they have nowhere to live and it makes it worse not knowing where they can go [...]. But also that, I think previously there wasn’t really an awareness that it doesn’t really help to remain month in, month out at a treatment center but, like, now it’s, like, more: okay, remedy the acute need at the treatment center and get as much as possible from that and then continue working because it’s still at home you’re supposed to be.

Felicia works with clients with substance abuse issues. She does not express an explicit frustration over the lack of resources as many others have done. At the same time she tells me about current attempts to increase social workers’ cost awareness, primarily to reduce the time clients spend in institutions because, as she says, they are the most expensive, “around two thousand”, and thus expressing precisely the sought-after cost-awareness she has just told me about. A reduction in the time spent in treatment is not undesirable but, as she argues, rather welcomed because a long stay “doesn’t help”. Stefan Wiklund (2011:117), who has studied different forms of treatment over time, has concluded that the radical shift from institutional treatment to outpatient treatment should be understood as a consequence of attempts to slash costs, not because it works better. Interestingly, Felicia does not respond to my question from her own perspective, but says rather that she is able to provide for “people what they *eventually conclude* that they want.” Associating with the client’s will aspect of EBP, she suggests that when a client meets a cost-aware social worker perhaps he or she will *eventually conclude* that he or she wants a short-term institutional treatment. Beatrice also connects evidence in research with cost awareness and the “preference” for care outside of costly institutions. However, this style of working leaves her with a sense of insufficiency:

A part of my frustration when I’ve been working at, with assessments, is that you, like, never have time to do anything properly. And also you feel that you never do *anything* at all. And there is very, I mean, that’s grounded in research and of course economics, that you shouldn’t put people in institutions, instead you’re supposed to use outpatient treatment as much as possible.

The topic of discussion that brought this up was Beatrice trying to explain the reasons for her work-related depression. She had only been working for a couple of years but had already been on sick leave on and off during those years. It seems as though part of such a quandary stems from doubts about what to do but also from not having the time or resources to do anything that she believes matters at all. On the same topic, but using the opposite argument, interviewee Ulrika, who has worked with addiction treatment for several decades, is upset over how the standard length of time spent at treatment centers is being slashed, down to a single month. She argues that the first couple of months are required just to sober up, sleep and become properly nourished. To commence any kind of “real” treatment earlier than three months after being admitted is useless, because the clients are simply not fit enough to receive any such treatment. Ulrika also connects the change to costs, arguing that it is a direct consequence of slashed care budgets.

Although some of the above social workers are hesitant about understanding the reduction in the time spent at treatment facilities only in terms of financial austerity, it is a connection that is still made, almost in passing, as though the reduced time in institutions has the unintended spin-off effect of saving money. However, the connection between EBP and cost-awareness is also made elsewhere. In a pamphlet on EBP from The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, the idea that the purpose of EBP is to save money is strongly refuted and, instead, cost-effectiveness is referred to as a myth (Socialstyrelsen 2012:16). In contrast to such claims, studies on standardization procedures stemming from EBP in social work (Garrett 2005:534, Nygren et al. 2009:503) and in medicine (Greenhalgh et al. 2014) tell the opposite story. In fact, it has been argued that cost effectiveness is a central logic and selling point of evidence-based medicine (Greenhalgh et al. 2014), as well as social work (Morago 2006:464). Bergmark and Lundström (2006:109) claim that EBP in Sweden was initially associated with reductions in costs but that this has gradually been toned down, favoring instead its value for clients.

In addition to simply responding to strong ideals of empowerment or choice, the integration of client will (or responsibility depending on perspective) into EBP that was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter may be seen as serving as a legitimizing factor in the EBP governing of social work. This is also expressed by Felicia, above, when she talks about her ability to give clients what they *eventually conclude* they want. Rather than justifying decision-making on the basis of cost effectiveness, which would probably run counter to social work ideals, by calling upon the ideal of client will, social workers may feel good about making the right decision *for the client*, rather than for reasons of fiscal austerity (Liljegren & Parding 2010:284). As such,

top-down EBP governing schemes and austerity goals are rationalized under the guise of empowerment and neutral science. As I became aware of the numerous attempts to implement EBP, in one of the last interviews I ask Ylva how she understands the pressure to implement an evidence-based way of thinking in the social services and she responds:

**Ylva:** It's because, I think it's also from research, that they want to arrange it so that it can be properly researched and develop new methods.

**Marcus:** So, like, for future purposes rather than the here and now?

**Ylva:** Yes, and then it might also have to do with efficiency, because if you work within the framework of a specified method, you have a very limited, it might limit the timeframe in which you meet people too. 'We are going to meet exactly five times, we are going to work exactly with this, nothing else,' a bit like CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) has become in psychiatry [...] that you're not supposed to have too long of a contact, that's also a way of improving efficiency, to reduce the cost for personnel and the time spent with clients and patients.

When working in accordance with EBP, the prescribed methods are to be carried out in line with strict guidelines, with limited scope and time. This, argues Ylva above, limits the time spent with each client and will work to improve efficiency and save money.

Another effect or function of EBP standards in social work proposed by critics is that of individualization (Herz & Johansson 2011).<sup>29</sup> Because of the scientific standards of evidence, the measurement of individual responses to stimuli in a well-defined and controlled environment necessitates a focus on the *individual* end result. This tendency may also be connected to what is referred to as the medicalization of social problems. Psychologist Alain Topor (2010:69) argues that the process of medicalization means that what is perceived as deviant behavior is increasingly defined according to a medical understanding and, as a result, human behavior is isolated from the surrounding social context. When I ask about trends over time when it comes to treatments and social work methods, Nora, who has been a social worker for 40 years, mainly working with clients struggling with substance abuse, responds:

When I started, the Twelve Step treatment was very popular, or Minnesota which is another word for it. Another was Socioenvironmental Therapy.<sup>30</sup> CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, was third. [...] But now it's medicalization: Antabuse for alcoholics and Subutex for drug addicts. And that's all there is [...] so there has been a huge

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<sup>29</sup> Thanks to Alexander Björk, Department of Social Work, Stockholm University for pointing this out to me.

<sup>30</sup> In Swedish: Miljöterapi.

change, a shift towards viewing addiction as a purely medical issue. And although I'm not all negative, it has to be more controlled. And on top of that, the medical treatment has to be combined with psychosocial treatment. Medicine on its own is not enough.

The excerpt above illustrates what Nora perceives as a shift in substance abuse treatment policy; roughly described: from parley to pills. Although the preference for certain therapeutic models may always be expressed in trends, the tendency towards medical treatment rather than psychosocial measures could be analyzed in the context of dominant political ideologies and logics. Philosopher Nancy Fraser (2003:166) argues that we need to understand the shift from extensive and time-consuming psychotherapy to an instant pharmaceutical fix in the light of a broader shift in governing techniques, from discipline to self-regulation and for reasons of austerity. The individualization discussed earlier that seems to stem from the application of EBP may be connected to this. Rather than having clients undergo extensive counseling activities, they are given drugs to keep them “sticking to the program”. Similarly, Rose (2006) argues that from the mid-1980s there is a tendency among psychiatrists and subsequently lay people to *understand* mental illness as expressions of neurochemical deficiencies and imbalances (see also Sandell 2016, Svenaeus 2013 for similar conclusions). Because of the now dominant understanding of the self as primarily a biological self, the advertising of pharmaceutical corporations and easy access to abundant medication makes knowledge about self-regulation, the individual improvement of the self, available to large segments of society. As such, according to Rose (2006), the biologization of the self and the medicalization of social problems can be understood as techniques of self-surveillance.

The individualization of social problems, of which EBP is arguably a constitutive factor, may also be illustrated by the de-contextualization of social problems that has arguably been witnessed in the rise of “happiness treatment”. Social work scholar Iain Ferguson (2008:125–126) argues that, when it comes to reducing anxiety, there is support for the idea that many people find therapeutic methods such as CBT to be helpful, in the way in which they help to challenge negative beliefs and aim to reframe thought patterns. However, argues Ferguson, given the individual setup and its limited time frame, such a method lends itself more easily to evidence-based evaluative methods, which is not the same as saying that such a method works better than others. To understand the preference for CBT, one can also turn to Sam Binkley (2011), who argues that the popularity of CBT should be understood in the light of a “happiness discourse”. This discourse revolves around the idea that happiness or illness is the result of individual cognitive attitudes. As such, the happiness discourse helps to shape individual vigorous subjects suitable for a contemporary political order

within which an ongoing process of self-improvement and self-control is central (See also Ahmed 2010 for similar conclusions).

Because of the dominant interpretation and practical implementation of evidence-based ideals, preventive social work measures or social work that targets groups, combinations of problems, emotional/relational aspects or long-term effects on individuals will be likely to have a hard time claiming to be scientific or to receive funding, and will ultimately be disavowed. Alain Topor (2010) highlights the well-researched connection between both unemployment and insufficient income and recovery from mental illness. Pointing to the possible connection between general social and labor-market policy and social problems, such as (limited) access to public housing, segregation, unemployment, long-term sick leave, homelessness etc., Topor illustrates the possible effects of the narrow definitions of knowledge in current evidence-guided knowledge production. In a systematic review of available knowledge from the IMS, a branch of the National Board of Health and Welfare, on measures to combat certain expressions of mental illness, only RCT studies were regarded as proper knowledge and all other research was thus excluded from the review. As a result, research on the social effects of things like the above-mentioned, socio-political policies and measures were excluded. Assuming there is a strong connection between inequality and mental illness, an evidence-based method of evaluation “systematically ignores the entire question of social inequality” argues Ferguson (2008:126), and runs great risk of a de-contextualization and de-politicization of social problems (see also Herz & Johansson 2011).

An illustrative example of the effects in terms of the loss of context may be found in the works of Kerstin Sandell (2016). She interviewed (mostly) women diagnosed with depression on anti-depressive medication (SSRI). Although many of the respondents speak of friends and colleagues being stressed and depressed as a consequence of their living conditions (mostly work), the respondents themselves do not connect their own situation with the surrounding context; rather, they search for explanations within themselves, like ‘natural’ biological defects (‘I’ve always been the melancholic type’). In contrast, the ones who do *not* hold a job connect their depression to their living situation; the loss of community and a precarious financial situation. Sandell argues that we should understand this in the light of a contemporary neoliberal political rationality of responsibility: self-sufficiency, self-fulfillment and responsibility for being happy. Depression thus embodies the opposite of this self-mastery and in light of the current lean (or austerity-ridden, depending on perspective) public organizations, which are not able to provide care in forms other than medication (which connects to the medicalization of social problems), taking medication is not a

solution, it is rather a way not to rock the boat, an attempt to continue to function. Sandell concludes:

It is as if the empirical material is crying out about increasing inequality, increasing stress in working life and increasing illness, although it is not articulated, almost as if I am watching a movie where someone is screaming, but the sound is turned off so I cannot hear anything. It is as if it is pointless to make these connections when nothing will change anyhow. [...] The loss of hope that change is possible, that another world is possible, as Mouffe writes about, is almost palpable. (Sandell 2016:101, my translation)

Although evidence for the medical benefits of SSRI pharmaceuticals is slim at best, the evidence-based gloss portrays these effects as scientifically grounded. The extensive use of medication seems to indicate a willingness to accept the process of turning problems in society into medical problems and to treat them as permanent, indefinitely (Sandell 2016), shifting the focus from political to personal.

## **The Government of Truth**

With the discourse of traditional social work being based on whims or intuition (DN 1999), as noted above by the General Director of The National Board of Health and Welfare, EBP is pitted against an unprofessional and randomly practiced social work. It is of course impossible to argue in favor of continuing to work like that, and the use of such a straw man as the supposed opponent to good social work makes it more reasonable to embrace EBP. What is silenced, however, is value-based social work, because if social work is to be governed by the untainted truth of evidence, it has to be disconnected from all overtly critical and political values (Ferguson 2008). Guidance by values may not necessarily be beneficial to the recipients of social work. Remember, for instance, the morality embedded in distinguishing the deserving from the undeserving (see Chapter 2), but to expunge explicit values from social work would mean a clear break with much of its roots, especially the tradition of radical or critical social work, which connects individual problems with issues of structural inequality and oppression (Ferguson 2008). Aside from how ridiculous the claims for the neutrality of EBP and “proper science” (Bergmark et al. 2011:12) may feel to some, arguably there are dangers residing in it. Social work scholars Mel Gray and Catherine McDonald (2006:17) contend that, despite claims to be neutral advice, EBP should in fact be seen as “intensely political in intent” because of its stripping away of social work’s value base. The direct and indirect de-politicization in such demands may also be seen as a technique of

governing (Ferguson 2008), whereby some values are replaced with others, under the rationalization of neutrality. Ferguson (2008) argues that the scheme of EBP may be highly but covertly political in yet another sense. When governments wish to base policy on “evidence” there is an apparent risk that researchers, in search of money and merit, will adjust research to fit government policy. In an example of the evaluation of a costly and highly political crime reduction program in Great Britain, it became obvious that the poor results were reformulated and presented by the government as a success. “The data had, apparently, been passed to other academic researchers for ‘reevaluation’, and they had been able to reach rather different conclusions” (Ferguson 2008:53). The interlacing of research and policy raises questions about the proclaimed neutrality of research because “political pressures may tempt them to ‘pretend it works’” and “what we may be witnessing is not so much ‘evidence-based policy’ as ‘policy-based evidence’” (Ferguson 2008:53). Politicians are of course free to suggest whatever they want, but when they sugarcoat their message with EBP, the intensely political nature of such a transformation of social policy may be rationalized under the guise of being mere neutral truths.

As stated in the opening of this chapter, many argue that the ideals of the evidence-based movement can be traced back to medical science and can be further connected to a neoliberal logic and neoliberal styles of management, such as NPM. Although acknowledging such NPM connections and neoliberal demands for “accountability” in contemporary western societies, Shajahan (2011) traces something else in the evidence-based movement; namely, a colonial legacy and an overt wish for increased control.<sup>31</sup> Shajahan illustrates the historical colonial as well as current administrations’ project of the systematization of nature and humans as a means to rationalize and control its objects. Post-colonial theory may in this sense help us to further understand the connection between knowledge production and the exercise of power in social work. Also, as Laura Penketh (2000) has argued, the project of naming and categorizing “clients” has been an important practice in social work for a long time. This is a practice that was developed at least in part to differentiate the “normal” from the “deviant” and the “worthy” from the “unworthy”, a tool to aid in the management of social and political unrest (Sawyer 2012, Fahlgren 1999, Mattsson 2005).

In reference to the works of Edward Said, Shajahan argues that the colonized were seen as irrational, a discourse that was developed largely to consolidate power. Thinking with Vandana Shiva, the author argues that European

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<sup>31</sup> Although Shajahan focuses on contemporary education, I argue that many of the connections are relevant to the evidence-based movement in general.

colonizers were infused with ideas of rationality and control, between a rational self and a conquering self, and that the obsession with mapping, classifying and quantifying – being in control of nature and humans – has connotations of a Baconian “masculinist epistemology of science” (Shajahan 2011:188). As illustrated earlier, a discourse of working against irrationality is central among the proponents of EBP, and subsequently EBP is offered as the rationalist approach, legitimizing a control apparatus through classifying, quantifying and standardization protocols. Simon sighs when I bring up the topic of evidence and says “I don’t understand how they’re thinking.” When I ask him to elaborate, he responds:

**Simon:**...I think it’s like, the people in charge now have the illusion of having control over life, if I’m allowing myself to get a bit philosophical. I mean it’s an illusion that it’s possible to capture through documentation, I mean it’s the slightly rigid personalities I believe are at work here. Because it’s not like, I mean it’s as if they can’t stand not to have control in a way. I mean it’s, it might sound spaced out but I can’t...

**Marcus:** What is it that’s supposed to be controlled?

**Simon:** Well, I don’t really know, these are just my fantasies.

**Marcus:** No, I think it’s really exciting. What is it that’s supposed to be controlled?

**Simon:** I think there’s a wish to have control over the process and that means to have control over the employees; they want to be able to measure all the time. Because everything can be measured these days. Damn it! What is it that’s measured? How do you measure life?

Simon questions the ideal of evidence and raises the understanding that such an ideal reflects a wish to increase control over social work processes and social workers through different kinds of measurement techniques. Shajahan argues similarly that, throughout the colonial world, certainty was to be found in numbers and thus surveys and statistical knowledge as such constituted important parts of colonial mentality and techniques of government, producing a kind of “quantificatory episteme”. Shajahan argues further that the current evidence movement relies on similar positivist epistemological assumptions and works in similar ways as its colonial ancestors when it comes to governing. From a narrow definition of science, randomness or ideological guidance is pitted against the ideal of evidence, which is merely supposed to aid in making well-informed decisions where the “production of evidence is [...] considered to be a natural process” (Shajahan 2011:186). It can thus be argued that EBP constitutes a governing technique but is portrayed as rational, commonsensical and apolitical.

In a discussion on hierarchies of values in the profession of social work, Karolin, who works in a social work NGO, mentions evidence as a legitimizing practice for donors:

**Karolin:** But like hierarchies, I'm thinking, like, positivist thinking and the like. Yeah something like that.

**Marcus:** Okay.

**Karolin:** Which is outranking, well, the more soft and...

**Marcus:** What are you thinking of when you say positivist thinking?

**Karolin:** I'm thinking of natural science and, I mean medical doctors, I'm thinking about research that's evidence based, things that you mentioned, that which is talked about nowadays, how we can succeed in getting our funders, for example, or the ones who donate money, to believe in what we do if we don't have evidence-based practice.

Sensing that natural sciences are valued more highly in the eyes of donors, such ideals will have priority over “softer” values (like the “psyche of mankind”), not because it is wanted by Karolin and her colleagues but because of others prioritizing in such a way. Like Karolin above, Bergmark & Lundström (2006:109) also claim that legitimization is an important function of EBP, although they characterize legitimization through arguments of effectiveness, cost-awareness and an inherent value for clients. According to them, EBP has become a buzzword, a term with increasingly loose boundaries, whereby more and more of social work is labeled as being in accordance with EBP standards. They argue that this is similar to other “chameleon organizational trends often found in public administration” and as such, a danger of EBP lies in its “inherent ability to deliver what is promised” (Bergmark & Lundström 2006:110). This is similar to Ferguson’s (2008) argument regarding the problematic interface between evidence-oriented researchers and policy makers, where a gloss of evidence lends an aura of neutrality to the implementation of social policy – “policy-based evidence”. In other words, EBP is an ideal that may lend itself to current trends and needs of governing, irrespective of whether or not it meets “actual” standards or other ideals such as the needs of clients. In a similar way, social work scholar Alexander Björk has argued that the method of Motivational Interviewing (MI), developed in the 1980s and considered to be evidence based, has become increasingly fuzzy and boundless during the time in which its popularity has increased (Björk 2013:2–6). Björk thus points to a functional flexibility rather than the rigidity commonly associated with evidence-based methods. EBP can hence be seen as the kind of term that may be adapted to current trends in governing (Bergmark et al. 2011:152) and such research techniques can be viewed as in themselves shaped in order to cater to the needs of the ruling power (Shajahan 2011:191). Indeed, analyzing the impacts of neoliberal reforms, social work

scholars Chandler et al. (2015) conclude that EBP in Sweden “can be described as more of a tool that should govern performance instead [...] of being used to support social workers” (ibid:115).

## **Concluding remarks**

The discourse concerning social work’s lack of rationality, failure and substandard results reminds us of its colonial predecessors. Thus, the evidence-based movement can be argued to constitute a top-down project of taming, civilizing and saving: the social workers, the profession, clients and money, through the gathering of immense amounts of quantified information and the regimentation of practice in order to both control and provide legitimacy to the administration. Referring to Stephen Ball, Shajahan (2011:191) argues that such technologies “require individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators, and evaluations” and require them “to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation” (Ball 2003:215). As Karolin argues, she feels an obligation to *the donors* to engage in EBP, not because she believes it will help her clients better. As such, the evidence movement can be seen as a form of civilizing mission that relies on surveillance and control, ultimately leading to the objectification and dehumanization of the subject and conducting research in such a standardized way shapes “the subjects of knowledge and function as tools of governmentality” (Shajahan 2011:191).

In light of the embrace of an evidence ideal in social work illustrated above in both the government’s persistent attempts to implement such an ideal and the arguments of some social workers for its importance, one may ponder on the confessional functions inherent in such a scheme. Speaking of ideals of evidence-based education, Shajahan argues that “Science has replaced the pillar of religion” (2011:195). Although religion certainly played an important role in the emergence of social work, and continues to do so in some of the voluntary social work to the present day, it is interesting to contemplate secularization not only in the realm of (evidence-based) social work, but also in Swedish society in general. Considering also how political ideologies are fading or even being suppressed under neoliberalism (Mouffe 2005), the demise of both Western Christianity and political ideology could be viewed simultaneously and understood as related to the (re)emergence of the positivist ideals found in the evidence-based movement. The belief at the center of this movement relies on a common ontological and epistemological philosophy, a wish to see the evident and naked truth, and to perfect the

defiant subjects and deficiencies of social work. Interestingly, proponents of EBP are sometimes referred to as a “movement”. Although not explicitly understood in terms of a *social* movement, it is still an awkward “random” connection with the popular understanding of a movement as groups of people with a common identity and political agenda (Ahrne & Papakostas 2006). Not only can an evidence *movement* be understood as exactly that: people who share a political agenda and collective identity, it may also be understood in the old sense of “to affect with emotion” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016), which is particularly prone to develop in an environment marked by norms of individualism and secularization, leaving an emotional void that spurs a search for new meanings and faiths. The efforts to replace religion and ideology with science may be understood as a longstanding historical endeavor that always tried to appeal to a demystified and rational subject. However, the contemporary EBP movement arguably has the traits of a confession, despite its explicit anti-religious ideals; a gospel of evidence or an “evangelical rhetoric of salvation” (Murray et al. 2008:276). In a similar way, philosopher Fredrik Svenaeus (2013) tries to understand the way in which, instead of philosophy, people today tend to look to medical science to find answers to difficult existential questions such as suffering. He argues that contemporary obsessions with such things as psychiatric diagnosis should be understood in the light of a neoliberal post-political and post-religious society.

Anthropologist Jean-Paul Dumont (1978) has made interesting self-reflections regarding his research on a group of indigenous people that deserves mentioning here. Long after his field research was finished, he realized that after his failure to get to know the “indians”, to get close to them and understand them (because they were rather uninterested in his endeavors), in his disappointment he became obsessed with collecting quantitative data about them. Dumont sees in his own ambition to count, measure and categorize, a way to master both the object of study and his own agonizing sense of insufficiency. “Uncertainty and contingency are at the core of social work practice” argue Gray and McDonald (2006:12) and the discomfort of not grasping the world fully connects with the fragmentation of identity as well as the discomfort of not knowing how to best handle or help the client (see also Ponnert & Svensson 2015:7). As interviewee Åsa argues, when trying to understand the popularity of EBP, the more we know the more we realize that we cannot know for sure. But with EBP comes an offer to simply to “know” the truth, “what works” and through standardized manual-based assessment and treatment to know precisely what to do, which may relieve both a professional and an existential agony and this may help us to understand the social workers who do embrace the ideals of EBP. But at the same time as the EBP protocol may

instill existential and political comfort to some, it enables control of knowledge production, produces superficial knowledge, individualizes social problems, facilitates the slashing of budgets, undermines professional autonomy as well as critical social work(ers), and thus risks perpetuating rather than halting inequality.

## 5. Professional engagement: emotions at work

From my second interview onwards, spontaneous narrations occurred about “being professional” and what qualities constitute “the profession” of social work. These did not attract my interest at first, but looking back after the eighth interview, I realized that almost all the interviewees had used the phrase professional in some way. Because it thus appeared to be of significance to the interviewees and because it seemed as though “being professional” meant different and sometimes contradictory things, from the ninth interview onwards, if the topic did not arise spontaneously, I started asking about it. When I looked closer, what became clear was that although “being professional” means different things, it often has to do with the conduct of the social worker in relation to emotions. In this chapter, I will analyze narratives of professionalism and emotions. I begin by a discussion on ideals and expectations surrounding professions and emotions, proceed then to analyze narratives of their connection after which I will discuss emotions as the object of governing and as a potential source for resistance.

During the 20th century, the labor market in advanced capitalist nations underwent a structural transformation characterized by diminishing agricultural and industrial production and an increase in the production of services and knowledge. During this transformation, a society based on expert knowledge has emerged, where so-called professionals have come to inhabit key positions in society, argues sociologist Anthony Giddens (1996). Whether the work of professionals constitutes something qualitatively different from other kinds of work and thus analytically deserves a label of its own is much debated and is not the focus here, but from such a perspective, social work may be considered a profession (Brante 2005, Brante et al 2015).<sup>32</sup> Regardless, the discussion of the emergence of a professional “class” harbors a discourse of “anormativity”, a philosophy that denies guidance by moral values and elevates instead technical and rational principles (Gouldner 1979). The work of sociologists Kristina Eriksson and Maria Eriksson (2002) illustrates what this might mean in practice. Through interviews with social workers and medical doctors around the concept of professionalism, they found that being “professional” connotes qualities such as neutrality, objectivity and being able to distance oneself from clients.

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<sup>32</sup> Social workers have formal higher education, professional associations and national and international codes of conduct, aspects that are often put forth in arguing for such a label (Brante 2005).

The *idea* that so-called professionals are rational “knowledge workers” and ground their authority on their work being based on scientific knowledge (Hasselberg & Stenlås 2010, Brante 2005), opens up important queries about what kind of, and whose, knowledge should guide social work. In addition, the fact that the social workers I spoke to often connect “to be professional” with stories about emotions makes me curious about the possible connections or conflicts between knowledge and emotion in social work. Another commonly accepted feature of professions, that their members share a sense of common identity, is worth considering when attempting to understand how social workers relate to and negotiate expectations about emotions and knowledge from professional peers, clients and governments. Thus, the purpose of engaging in an analysis of emotions in relation to being professional is not to argue for what it means to be professional or what characterizes the profession of social work,<sup>33</sup> but rather to try to understand the social workers’ narratives in relation to a discourse of professionalism and the connection with emotions, i.e. dominant understandings and expectations that shape the ideals and conduct of social work.

As I argued in the introduction and analytical framework (Chapters 1 and 2), social work has undergone fundamental changes over the last few decades. Of interest here is the fact that many of these changes have to do with ideals and practices of rationality; the standardization of assessment and treatment procedures, increasing demands for transparency and thorough documentation (Chapter 6) and, as illustrated in the previous chapter (4), attempts to firmly base social work practice in a specific kind of knowledge: “evidence”. This bears a resemblance to the technical and anormative ideal of professions as described by Gouldner (1979), above. At the same time, and seemingly in conflict with such a development, it has been argued both by scholars and by several of my interviewees referred to in this chapter (see also the previous chapter on EBP) that a “true” relationship, which is founded on emotional and physical proximity between social worker and client, is pivotal in social work. This is believed to establish trust, which is considered to be significant to the social worker’s ability to address users’ needs (Bergmark & Lundström 2011a, Topor 2010:73, Pettersson 2001).

It seems that the role of emotion constitutes a central concern in the organization of human behavior and for the “capacity to *handle* both one’s own and clients’ emotions effectively” (Morrison 2007:245, my emphasis). The management of emotions is not merely a question for social work. In

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<sup>33</sup> Questions that may be connected to the research field of professions, where the aim for example is to analyze different aspects of professionalization in public and private work such as the emergence, defining traits, transformation or governing of professions (see for example Svensson 2011, Brante 2005).

fact, in research about differing kinds of care work, the growing importance of “emotion management skills” has been discussed, suggesting that emotions may be an asset, although they have to be properly managed and controlled (Bolton 2000). In an interview study with Finnish social and healthcare workers, the authors analyze the gendered effects of neoliberal reforms of public-sector care work. They conclude that “women in particular face contradictory expectations of being intensely involved in emotion work on the one hand and in the efficient performance of tasks on the other” (Husso & Hirvonen 2012:29), something which creates conflicts and suffering (*ibid.*). An even more general trend pointed out by scholars is that of an increasing interest in the self-control of emotions, one expression being the growing industry of self-help books directed at a general audience, presented as “guides to take control over your emotions and ways of acting” (Berg 2011:103, my translation, see also McGee 2005, Ahmed 2010). Asking critical questions about the ideal of an apolitical rationality in the discourse of the professional and the significance of (control of) emotions in overtly feminized care work may reveal both potential conflicts in social work ideals and practice and not-so-anormative aspects of being professional.

Whilst thought and reason are identified with the masculine and Western subject, emotions and bodies are associated with femininity and racial others. This projection of emotion onto the bodies of others not only works to exclude others from the realms of thought and rationality, but also works to conceal the emotional and embodied aspects of thought and reason. (Ahmed 2004b:170)

As English scholar Sara Ahmed argues in the quote above, the widespread and longstanding dichotomy between rationality and emotion blocks emotions as an important aspect of norms and reason and has analogous connotations to gender (see also Jaggar 1989, Pykett 2011, Berg 2011, Nussbaum 2001). Considering that a very large majority of social workers are women (in Sweden about 85 per cent according to SCB 2013), and taking into account the contemporary trend towards standardization, thorough documentation, self-management and “scientification” in social work, gendered notions of the professional and emotional social worker need to be scrutinized. My primary interest here lies in how emotions create a professional identity, and how they may be used as a tool in social work and in the governing of social work.

## Emotions, engagement and proximity

In a discussion about what it means to be professional, interviewee Julia says “we are very personal, I mean we use ourselves as tools in our work.” This is similar to the opinion of another interviewee, Ylva, who says that one aspect of being professional for her is to bring in the self, that working with oneself is part of working in relation to other people. Interviewee Ivan says that being professional for him is about:

That I dare, I think I can, *like* the people I meet, for *real*, the relation is for real. It's not private relations, but they are still real, and that I allow for that and that I'm still professional.

Julia, Ylva and Ivan thus argue, not for the elimination of the self, but rather for its significance, enabling them to take a liking for the client and to establish genuine relations (for similar conclusions, see Gerdes & Segal 2011). Interviewee Paula illustrates what bringing in the self may mean in practice:

I have no problem being personal. Those who see me here know that I have personal experiences. [...] but there is nothing in my life that I have to be ashamed of, even if I haven't done all the right things, you know. But I think, in order to get, one has to give hope. And I can afford to give that part of myself, that's nothing that, do you understand? There is no, I'm not the one who carries the shame of previously having been battered.

Arguing that, in order to receive what I interpret as trust and engagement from the client, the social worker has to give from her “true” self, Paula also argues that personal experience of hardship is nothing to be ashamed of, the shame is not carried or attached to her and does not come from “within” her. Rather, it may be understood as productive as it can be important for connecting to clients (see also Koivunen 2010:20–22). Paula, like Julia, Ylva and Ivan above, thus suggests that a personal approach is important in social work. Paula also acknowledges that acts of giving and receiving are reciprocal. In order to get, you have to give, or, phrased differently: gifts do not come without expense (Hochschild 2012, Mauss 1954). Paula has to subject herself to the empathy of the client in order to win the client's trust. Such an understanding is interesting because it sheds light on some of the possible costs and rewards that may come from “doing good”. I interpret Paula's comment as part of a broader analysis of mutual relations of dependency and returns that I believe are central in social work.

Vera, another interviewee, has an elaborate response connected to the importance of respect and dealing with emotions:

**Marcus:** I'm curious about what you think of when I say "professional". What is that?

**Vera:** Well to me professional is partly how you treat people; it's respectful, but it's also being able to bring up issues that are sensitive, being able to explain why you've made the assessment that you did. To be professional in social work, to me, is a lot about, and that takes time, to have as much time as to be able to meet, and that this may lead to some kind of change. A work for change. And that's what I believe is the most tragic, that you're not, that you have very little time for that.

In order to engage in a respectful way and to be able to deal with difficulties, which Vera argues is to be professional, there is a need to meet the clients. Meeting clients in person is thus an important aspect of being professional, but there is not enough time for that, argues Vera. It might seem a modest request to actually meet with the client in person but, in fact, the capacity to spend time on such meetings seems to be deteriorating according to many of my interviewees (see specifically the following chapter on documentation). Lack of time to meet the client is also the topic of a blogpost on the website of a critical network of social workers:

During the last year, I have met with a client once a week. Another client I have met once every other week. A third client I have met once a month. The time devoted to these people is taken from other tasks, often administrative, which I then do not have the time to do, so the lump of stress in my stomach keeps growing. But if I were to deprioritize the client work in favor of the administrative work, I would no longer be a social worker, but in fact an administrator. So I hide my social work and keep it a secret. Because if the manager learns of my prioritization I will most likely be forced to re-prioritize and I don't want that. I already feel guilty about my remaining twenty-five clients to whom I hardly devote any time at all... (Nu bryter vi tystnaden 2015a, my translation)

Requirements from management to prioritize administrative tasks, and thus disengage with clients, collides with the personal ideals of the social worker quoted above and creates an agonizing sense of insufficiency and stress. It seems there is a desire to meet the client as often as possible and that time spent with clients determines whether you are a 'true' social worker or not. "I would not be a social worker" if I obeyed management orders, suggests that being a professional social worker demands a refusal of the corrupted aims of current management. Clandestine meetings with clients is thus the chosen strategy. In order to remedy the guilt of not meeting the client, time has to be "stolen" from the employer, which in turn also produces guilt. It is an impossible mission to not feel guilty, and therefore "the lump of stress in my

stomach keeps growing,” as the author of the quote above writes. The social worker may thus be argued to reveal a self-imposed responsibility for the welfare of the clients, by having to take time, in order to then give it (Derrida 1992). In a discussion on standardized questionnaires with Ylva, the question of time in relation to emotions comes up:

**Marcus:** What is the purpose of all these questions?

**Ylva:** Supposedly, the purpose is to have a proper basis for giving the clients the help and support they need. And I’m thinking like this, if you ask such intrusive or intimate questions, I think you should also have the resources to meet the needs that arise from it. And I’m thinking we’re not really aligned in regards to that.

**Marcus:** So if somebody reveals that they have a lot of problems with something, it’s like “Ok?” You can’t really handle it?

**Ylva:** No, ‘cause we don’t have the time. So I’m going to have to question the pursuit of this knowledge. And I also believe that it should be based upon, that social work is built upon establishing a relation with a person, and that questions should gradually evolve from cultivating this relation.

Ylva says that the official purpose of asking numerous and sometimes delicate questions is to better address the client’s needs. However, because of insufficient resources, there is not enough time to handle any sensitive issues that may surface. She also points out that delicate matters should be handled after a trusting relationship has been established. Phrased differently: there is no time for intimacy, to build the necessary relationship, and, in addition, intimacy requires time. As such, the standardized questionnaires may seem like an aid to engaging properly – to asking the correct questions – but it may also work to surface emotions that then have to be ignored, and may in fact cause harm. Therefore, the quest to get straight to the point may in fact lead to a too hasty and awkward personal approach. Due to lack of time to handle it and lack of time for a cultivated relationship to develop, it becomes a forced and instrumental, fake and possibly harmful exercise. As such, efficiency (understood as a reduction in the time required to perform a task), and intimacy seem to be in direct opposition.

## **Rationality, detachment and distance**

The above quotes illustrate beliefs in the importance of engagement. In contrast to such expressions, and more in line with the findings of Eriksson and Eriksson (2002) referred in the introduction to this chapter, some of my interviewees state that being professional is about detachment and distance.

For example, in response to my question on what being professional means, interviewee Nora replies:

You have to be able to keep a certain work distance. You're not friends. You can be nice and you can have nice conversations but you don't get too personal.

The reason for this need for distance is not explained, but Nora refers to not being friends. Instead of giving a reason, she points to the obvious, which in fact may be more interesting than the non-disclosed reason itself. Why is such a distinction of not being friends important to make? The relationship cultivated within the framework of the social services can hardly be expected to result in friendship. Can "not being friends" be interpreted in other ways than the obvious? That not being a friend means not being an ally? Does she mention this in order to highlight the fact that she cannot rule in favor of the client just because she is nice to them? Looking back on her ten years of social work, interviewee Christina reflects on her engagement with clients:

Your senses are blunted. In one of the earlier families that I worked with, all of a sudden I hugged a mother in her kitchen, which would be completely unthinkable for me to do today. It was like, I was sitting in her home and she was upset and desperate over something. And I'm like, I did it as an act of compassion,<sup>34</sup> when it's really, she was a bit shocked about it I think, because, like, I'm a social worker!

The quote above illustrates the risk of emotional detachment following from the experience of contemporary social work. When she started working some ten years ago, Christina was more emotional, "hugging a mother" and calling it a "humane" act, but says she would never do the same thing today, referring the obvious, that she works in the social services. As such, the pronunciation of the difference between a client and a social worker reinforces the boundaries between them, and makes distance seem natural or to be expected. However, long experience is not necessarily a factor leading to detachment, as will be discussed further on in this chapter. It may also work in the opposite way, which may illustrate that experience in itself is not the sole factor to consider. It may also be a political question. Interviewee Denise argues that emotional expressions are problematic for doing the job properly:

You strive in a way to have a similar take on things as your colleagues, but many times you're triggered by the emotional stuff, when it gets too close to you. And what that does to people, and then comes the interpretations [...] the professional is lost in the subjective opinion.

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<sup>34</sup> Literally: 'a humane action' (In Swedish: mänsklig handling).

Being subjective, in the words of Denise, above, seems to be the opposite of being professional. And it is the “emotional stuff” that is open to subjective interpretations. I understand Denise to be making the point that emotions interfere and block consensus among social workers about proper social work conduct. To be professional, according to this view, is to manage or suppress emotions and avoid subjectivity. Interestingly, she refers to “a similar take” on social work, which may be connected to the ideal advocated by the government that current social work should be the same regardless of location (Socialstyrelsen 2002, see also Chapters 4 and 6). This take on emotions is very much in line with the Western philosophical tradition mentioned previously, and in this particular instance emotions, often connected to femininity, are viewed as a problem, something for “reason” or rationality (connected to masculinity) to discipline and take control over (Bränström Öhman, Jönsson & Svensson 2011:12). Philosopher Alison Jaggar writes:

The myth of dispassionate investigation has functioned historically to undermine the epistemic authority of women as well as other social groups associated culturally with emotions. (Jaggar 1989:151)

The work of Eriksson and Eriksson (2002) mentioned above may help me to further understand the inherent assumptions connecting gender and emotions. Their interviewees argued that being “professional” means demonstrating neutrality and detachment. For instance, in the case of working with men’s violence against women, being professional to some social workers meant being neutral regardless of the clients’ relations of power towards one another, meaning not taking sides with the women being abused by their male partners. The authors find extensive narratives of the benefits of a mixed-gender workforce because this is seen as more neutral than one dominated by women; thus, it can be said that the presence of men symbolizes neutrality, and of course the opposite goes for a female-dominated workforce. In Eriksson and Eriksson’s (2002) interviews, being professional in practice, for one of their interviewees, means “being able to separate matters of concern” and conducting work in a “very well structured” way, which was a way to guard against the solidarity she felt with the abused woman. Although empathy may be allowed in small doses without becoming unprofessional, the need to balance suggests that empathy stands in opposition to a professional approach, or is a threat to it. Much like the argument earlier in this chapter, the authors connect their findings to traditional and hegemonic masculinity as associated with rationality, de-personification and being able to distance oneself. Speaking about gender preference in relation to colleagues, Denise says:

**Denise:** I believe I work better with men than women. I have worked a lot with women before, I don't know why, but it just works better.

**Marcus:** Yes, what's the, why can it be different, why can it be easier, or how shall I put it, better?

**Denise:** I don't know but, that he, I mean, as a *man* or what he, that he brings out another side, that women might not do. How do you *think*, in what way, why?

**Marcus:** What could that be?

**Denise:** I mean, as a *woman*, or like, but I believe, as a woman you identify like 'Mm, is that how you *feel*? Okay, aha, really, yeah, that must be terrible for you' and, like, that just gets you going. Where *he* is like 'why do you *think* it's like that?' And then you're like 'that's why, right!' and you're all like (snap-sounds), starting to think like, in more structured ways. I think *women* are more like 'Yeah I really know how you *feel*!'

Claiming that women are more into understanding (the predicament of) the client "that must be terrible for you!" Denise explains why she prefers men and works better with them: because of the particular way they think, that men are more structured. Although there is some initial hesitation in the dialogue, pointing perhaps to the delicacy of the topic, the words emphasized above illustrate inherent but eventually explicit connections: *he thinks* and *she feels*. The structured, male way of working is favored by Denise, and the female working style not only lacks such structure, it also carries the weight of getting caught up in tending to the emotional status of the client, which seems to be perceived as hampering rather than aiding social work practice.

The discourse expressed in the quotes above resembles the conclusions of Elaine Swan (2010), who examined the audit procedures and reactions of an equality and diversity research project at a UK university. The project, which was carried out primarily through qualitative methods, was critiqued by senior white men, who kept asking for quantitative data. Swan finds in the critique of the project a strong association between masculinity, detachment and an implied access to objective truth. From this, Swan argues that contemporary neoliberal audit legitimates a hyper-rational masculinity that classifies racialized minorities and women as emotional and subjective. Similarly, in a review of research analyzing gendered notions of professions, economist Elin Funck (2009) concluded that traits that are considered masculine often constitute a professional norm. The author argues that such assumptions about professions aids in excluding women from such positions and blocks the agency of women in such professions. I talk with Vera about the professional norm of masculinity, and about the discourse of the need for more men in social work that I had heard of, and she says:

**Vera:** It isn't all good either if you only meet women all the time.

**Marcus:** What's not good about it?

**Vera:** No, it becomes sort of like, a bit sticky. [...]

**Marcus:** What do you mean by sticky? That sounds really interesting to me.

**Vera:** Well, or how, I mean, men add something else I think.

**Marcus:** What is that?

**Vera:** The way to think, the way to talk, and yeah.

**Marcus:** What is it in the way men think that you, as you said earlier, that differs from women, in your opinion?

**Vera:** Well, I can't put it into words, not like this.

**Marcus:** It's just a hunch?

**Vera:** Yes.

**Marcus:** But if women are sticky, what are men like?

**Vera:** A bit more, there are men who are also like, 'it's not all black and white' and more like this, relational, the analytical dwelling and the like.

**Marcus:** Is that the stickiness you mean?

**Vera:** If I think about, yes, it's too much. And, like, you talk and, men can be more direct.

That women are seen as “sticky,”<sup>35</sup> she says, meaning talking excessively, tending to relations and a “dwelling” analysis. Men on the other hand are seen as not sticky, or as its opposite, and as more direct. Such an understanding also connects with the discussion above, inasmuch as directness, embodied by men, constitutes qualities that stand in opposition to the prior understanding that elevates emotions, relations and proximity. This ideal of rationality, detachment and distance may, however, be more suitable from a management point of view, than those tending to “talking” and to cultivating relations, embodied by women, because it corresponds well with the professional, anormative ideal and requires less commitment to each client.

The primary or “face value” meaning of sticky, however, has to do with the sensory experience of touching a surface. As such, sticky means something like slimy, gooey or icky, like glue or marmalade. Although the semantic similarity may be random, the same figurative speech in the quote above about a female-dominated workforce being “sticky”, is used as an analytical term by Sara Ahmed (2004b) to describe a process of expulsion through the creation of metaphorical figures. Through the expulsion of anything unwanted, the expelled object becomes charged with negative emotional connotations, such as disgust, which naturalizes the expulsion. Through the symbolic charging of an object with disgust, and a repetition of such symbolic signs through language, symbols become sticky because they “stick” to an object; the symbol will cling to the object and their connection

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<sup>35</sup> In Swedish: kletiga.

will endure. The emotionally charged and normalized expulsion becomes common sense or “the truth” of this object and as such will aid in the disguising of ideology. A sense of (sensory) disgust towards objects or subjects may in itself hide ideological assumptions (Ahmed 2004b). Vera above, expresses a feeling that, when women congregate without men, they tend to overemphasize talking (gabble?) and the dissection and analysis of relations, and she frames this in opposition to men and the way they think and speak, perceiving them as more direct. Such a metaphor is in fact a good example of what Ahmed illustrates with her term “sticky”, and in this instance may be understood as women, who have been expelled from professional arenas throughout history, being symbolically charged with negative connotations, rendering them unsuitable for such tasks. Such connotations may include women as constantly babbling, being hypersensitive and lacking the (male) ability to be rational and direct or to “act”, i.e. suggesting that women are also passive. With such emotion-inducing symbolism, the qualities of women and men become true through “gut feeling” emotions and this rationalizes (hides) the ideological assumptions – sexism – behind the expulsion. Referring to a discourse on the need for more men in the social services, Simon says:

**Simon:** I can feel so much more related to women than men. Although my friends are both women and men, you know, but...

**Marcus:** What do you mean by related?

**Simon:** Like, in a way that I have this omnipotent caring inside me, so to speak, which is, yeah, not all positive. It is positive, but not only positive.

**Marcus:** What’s negative?

**Simon:** But like this omnipotence, that I’m going to save the world, is a bit pathetic. I realize that.

**Marcus:** Okay, why?

**Simon:** Nobody can save the world. I can save me and you from a situation, but at the same time, that thing about responsibility. It’s a philosophical question, I mean, where do you draw the line for the responsibility for another human being? It’s like, in the beginning I took so much responsibility, it’s crazy. And then I took over, and that’s a bit like I’m seeing the other as small, you know?

**Marcus:** Mhm.

**Simon:** So the thing about giving responsibility, to step back, that, and to say “that’s your responsibility.” That can be done in a fascist manner, “I don’t give a shit about you.” But it can also be done with respect, that you, “you know what? You can do a lot more than you...”

Following the traditional idea that women are more caring, Simon says that he identifies more with women than with men because of his “omnipotent caring” traits. Although this identification initially seemed to highlight vital

aspects of hegemonic femininity, such as caring and saving the world, the conversation quickly switches to the “not so positive” aspects of such traits. The omnipotent version of caring, to Simon in his self-critical cynicism, means taking over, and thus constituting the Other as insignificant. This kind of caring is also seen as a naïve way of trying to save the (others of the) world. In such a form, caring becomes (demands for) submission, which resonates with the critiques referred to elsewhere in this thesis, from Michel Foucault (summarized by Grimshaw 1993:56), Franz Fanon (1970:154–156) and Barbara Cruikshank (1999) around ideas of empowerment without struggle or top-down emancipation, which often embodies demands for subjection and are considered to always be potentially dangerous. It is also interesting that Simon acknowledges the potential drawbacks of “giving” responsibility, pointing as he says to fascist elements in the ideology of not caring, a kind of contempt for the weak (Eco 1995): “I don’t give a shit about you.” I believe that this self-reflexive perspective expressed by Simon is a trait to be proud of, but I still have to wonder about the hesitation towards emotional engagement embedded in this story. While Simon admits that caring is important, he simultaneously distances himself from such a claim, highlighting the tension between care and gendered notions of professionalism. I would also argue that the loss of faith in the project of “saving the world”, as Simon phrases it, could be seen as a form of cynicism arising from the loss of faith in the idea that another world is possible (Mouffe 2005, Sandell 2016). The quote from Simon thus illustrates the difficulty, especially for a public-service employee, to merge or balance between the ambivalences of care, emancipation and subjugation (see also Olivius 2014).

## Managing emotions

Touching upon being professional, interviewee Rosa tells me about a recent discussion at her workplace about conduct towards clients:

**Rosa:** We started talking about the personal approach to clients, where some are quite unconcerned<sup>36</sup> so they can keep this distance that they believe is required in order to be professional.

**Marcus:** I can relate to that.

**Rosa:** While others, including myself, don’t have any problems with holding a client’s hand if he or she is crying. Or giving them a hug once in a while.

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<sup>36</sup> In Swedish: svala.

The quotes and discussion above illustrate an apparent divide among social workers, between on the one hand the ones arguing primarily for engagement and on the other those favoring detachment, to hug or not to hug, as well as their gendered attachment. This conflict is also expressed explicitly by Simon, who in a tone of dismay, says that, unlike himself, some of his colleagues “are very distanced” and “almost mechanical”. The significance of emotions in the social work/client relationship should be evident by now, as well as the lack of consensus on its role and place. However, emotions are also a topic of concern in relation to the social workers themselves and in relation to management, and this aspect may help me to take the analysis a bit further. In a discussion on values in social work, interviewee Tina refers to the commonplace practice of providing counseling for social workers.<sup>37</sup> Although it is not molded in a standardized form, there is a kind of counseling offered to many social workers, something that constitutes a long-standing tradition of discussing and trying to understand and cope with the strong emotions that emerge in everyday social work (Höjer, Beijer & Wissö 2007).

**Tina:** The counseling is strictly about legal aspects.

**Marcus:** You mean the counseling you’re getting, is about...

**Tina:** Yes, legal matters.

**Marcus:** Okay, I was under the assumption that counseling was like a kind of, to relieve the socially burdening aspects of being a social worker, sort of. Isn’t that what it’s meant to be?

**Tina:** Yes that what it’s supposed to be. And I believe that’s what is has been, and then we had a period of no counseling at all and now it’s with a juridical consultant. Or on legal matters.

[...]

**Marcus:** But did you have counseling at the other places as well?

**Tina:** Mhm, at financial support I did and then our deputy manager was present.

**Marcus:** Why?

**Tina:** To monitor, I suppose. Because our counselor, she was quite troubled, because she had a plan about, like, how to do the counseling and what it was okay to discuss. So when we wanted to talk about something [else], she always had to ask her [the deputy manager], and if she wasn’t there she had to, well, what could she say, is this okay or not?

**Marcus:** So the manager had decided what was okay to talk about during counseling?

**Tina:** In principal yes, and she was present most of the time, which of course made it impossible to talk about...

**Marcus:** But how did that feel?

**Tina:** You felt constrained, like, monitored.

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<sup>37</sup> In Swedish: handledning.

Although counseling for social workers has a long tradition of attempting to cope with stress and emotional strain, in the above story it seems that this forum is undergoing changes. It appears as though such emotionally oriented and politically sensitive forums needs to be controlled, either by a management presence or by formally regulating what may be discussed, or by replacing the trained counselor (often a psychologist) with a juridical consultant. Is it because managers are afraid of protest? Because they fear a rising resistance? Simon adds to the narrative, that although in his case the topics of discussion were not regulated, the counseling *method* was:

**Simon:** Then they decided that we couldn't express any opinion regarding the counseling we have, which means that we now have counseling, which makes me consider to, like, call the Taxpayers' Association. Because I think money should be spent, I mean this is worthless, it's not counseling, this is...

**Marcus:** Then what is it?

**Simon:** A debating society<sup>38</sup> and she is a behavioral, she uses CBT and behavioral analysis. And that is, can be good, but to us, it's not good. I mean we're in situations where we have anxiety and there are those kinds of processes. It's not pleasant to take children from their parents. What is it that sticks? And so on. We have chosen counselors ourselves and then we have psychotherapists, who are good, who, like, interview us and make sure we feel confident about all of it. [...] But this is absolutely nothing, and she just made the decision, we were not allowed to take part in it.

In the quote above, Simon explains that management changed the counselors, and the method of counseling, without discussing it with the social workers. The change from deliberating with psychotherapists to counselors engaging cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), as I understand it, is viewed by Simon as a turn towards superficiality and to discussing futile matters, to making counseling into a *pro forma* activity, to avoid dwelling on the past and on "what sticks", as Simon puts it.<sup>39</sup> I have been told that one of the benefits of CBT is its cost-effectiveness: predefined, short terms of engagement, a focus on the here and now and decent results. Although some clinical studies seem to support such claims (Vos et al. 2005, Watkins et al. 2014), the results are not all conclusive (Egger et al. 2015). But in the light of a popular understanding of its cost-effectiveness, it seems a logical move by management to use (short-term) CBT if a primary concern is to remain on the surface and develop strategies for coping. Apart from the question of the preferred counselor and counseling method, it seems that the mere fact that Simon and his colleagues were not consulted on such a delicate and personal

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<sup>38</sup> In Swedish: Diskussionsklubb.

<sup>39</sup> See previous discussion referring to Sara Ahmed, about the stickiness of emotions.

matter, is perceived as infantilizing and offensive and as undermining them as individuals as well as professional social worker subjects.

A study of the status of social work counseling by Höjer, Beijer & Wissö (2007) is worth mentioning here. After analyzing interviews and surveys with social workers about counseling in a large Swedish municipality, the authors conclude that counseling is offered to a majority, some three quarters<sup>40</sup> (Höjer, Beijer & Wissö 2007:47) and that it is much appreciated and intensely defended (ibid:103). At the same time, however, many express concern for its future, fearing a reduction or disappearance, often connected with the slashing of costs, and some reported its recent termination (ibid:85–86). Concerning the topics of discussion, most social workers agree that management should refrain from interfering, such as voicing opinions over what is talked about (ibid:90). Because of critical discussions on management conduct, in some instances the counseling had already been terminated. In others, management had changed its form, from external to internal counseling, motivated by a desire to save money but this change was also assumed to delimit the space for critical discussions, because external counseling uses counselors who are not directly employed by the organization and have no formal ties with it, whereas internal counseling uses staff who are already employed, such as low-level managers (ibid:96–97). In light of this, attempts to control the counseling as described in the narratives above seems logical from a management point of view if a primary concern is to subdue conflict and muffle protest and resistance.

## The power of emotions

If counseling has in some instances lost the function of discussing difficult situations, stress, anxiety and management conduct (as discussed above by Tina and Simon), for others it still seems to be a forum for emotional and critical discussion. Interviewee Olivia says:

**Olivia:** Like yesterday, for example, when a colleague told me that during coffee breaks we are upholding a façade. “Everything is great, we’re all happy here!”

**Marcus:** What do you talk about?

**Olivia:** We eat sweets, and then in counseling, people cry. All for the sake of a good atmosphere.

**Marcus:** But why do you want to uphold that?

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<sup>40</sup> Although not methodologically comparable, in a more recent survey (data collected 2013) 61 per cent say they are offered external, professional counseling (Vision 2013:12).

**Olivia:** Because, I mean, there's a system of repression, if you sit and whine during coffee and say that you have too much to do, you induce a bad atmosphere. It's not supporting an increased wage.

**Marcus:** Says who?

**Olivia:** Managers. And, like, managers have an amplifying effect. It's enough, it's an unspoken understanding, if the manager says it once, to someone. It spreads rapidly and then it's ingrained in the walls: This is what the culture is like here! We have fake smiles. It's scary. It's actually scary, how a culture of silence can develop like that, how a culture of fear can spread. And how, also, demands for loyalty, I've heard now from several social workers that it's written into the wage criteria.

Putting on a happy façade to hide from peers that one is sad or upset is intriguing. It makes sense, however, when “negative” emotions are viewed as a problem from a management perspective. Counseling then becomes a sanctuary within which such sentiments are allowed to be expressed. It also makes sense if one considers assumptions about the transmission of happiness. Sara Ahmed argues in her book *The promise of happiness* that there is a tendency expressed in happiness psychology that:

individuals must become happier for others: positive psychology describes this project as not so much a right as responsibility. We have a responsibility for our own happiness insofar as promoting our own happiness is what enables us to increase other people's happiness. (Ahmed 2010:9)

Although feeling happy may be a desirable state of mind, internalized expectations that one should feel and express happiness may become coerced and the absence of happiness something that has to be combatted because it may spread as a plague of unhappiness through the organization. Being in a state of happiness suggests a positive take on the present and the future, understanding problems as temporary, manageable and non-systemic (Ahmed 2010:9). Producing happiness both through “culture” (i.e. expectations) and (an institutional narrative on) monetary rewards may work to gloss over malfunctions in the system and make problems appear unconnected and smaller in scope (see also Binkley 2011). Hiding unhappiness, as expressed in the quote from Olivia above, becomes self-imposed through internalized expectations and fear and may work as a tool to disguise pressing problems and block the formation of protest and resistance.

In such a context, feeling bad and expressing sadness could invoke what Sara Ahmed calls “the creativity of bad feeling” or, when it comes to depression, a modern-day plague that haunts politicians and policy makers, it may in fact be understood as acts of resistance. Historian of ideas Edda Manga (2014)

argues that a depressed human being is a failing autonomous liberal subject and thus that:

Depression embodies resistance against the subject construction of the high-performing, economically driven individual within the framework of a capitalist economy of pleasure. (Manga 2014, my translation)

Talking about the issue of displaying emotions and the reactions from management, Ylva tells me about *becoming* the problem when voicing problems in formal gatherings:

**Ylva:** Over the past years it's been, I've voiced my opinion about the current working conditions at staff meetings.<sup>41</sup> And then I've been [told] afterwards, that I create unrest among my colleagues [...]. And I think that's what hurts the most, to me at least, to somehow be blamed for hurting my co-workers. Because the purpose of speaking up about these matters is for things to get better. For me, my co-workers and for the clients. [...] I believe I'm loyal to our operation, because I really want things to improve. But that's been turned against [me] as if I'm disloyal to the operation and that I'm hurting my co-workers. I have never had anyone tell me that I've hurt them, it's a lot like, they come into my office after a meeting and pat me on my back. And I think that's pretty tough, because I'd wish there were more who spoke up in the meetings, or at least agreed with me. And [instead] they come in [afterwards] and cry and tell me how difficult it is to cope. [...] There's a lot of talk during coffee breaks and lunch and in the hallway and [...] then it's all silence in the meetings. So it's really a culture of silence.

**Marcus:** What do you think is the reason for that?

**Ylva:** In part I think it's because people are afraid and in part it's because of this other thing, which I think plays a really significant role, this thing with individual salaries, and that it's more and more about your individual performance. And that's about being loyal to the manager. And to our operation. That's upwards loyalty. That's what I'm thinking. And I was told that I couldn't have more of a raise because I wasn't loyal to the operation.

Rather than taking the critique seriously, managers perceive the protest over current working conditions as creating unrest and as an expression of disloyalty to the organization. Because her colleagues are afraid to openly criticize management, they hide their troubles and concerns and cry in secrecy behind closed doors. Therefore, Ylva is alone in her public expression of concern; for the organization, for herself, her colleagues and the clients. What management seeks is employees who are loyal to the manager and the organization and these expectations are *explicitly* expressed when negotiating for increased wages. This story connects to others who have

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<sup>41</sup> In Swedish: "arbetsmöten och APT".

written about anger and becoming the problem when voicing protest. Writing about black feminists in white feminist arenas, Sara Ahmed (2010) eloquently illustrates how some bodies are turned into the problem when they raise problematic matters:

Reasonable thoughtful arguments are dismissed as anger (which of course empties anger of its own reason), which makes you angry, such that your response becomes read as the confirmation of evidence that you are not only angry but unreasonable [...] Your anger is a judgement that something is wrong. But in being heard as angry, your speech is read as motivated by anger. [...] You become angry at the injustice of being heard as motivated by anger, which makes it harder to separate yourself from the object of your anger. You become entangled with what you are angry about because you are angry about how they have entangled you in your anger. In becoming angry about the entanglement, you confirm their commitment to your anger as the truth “behind” your speech... [...] To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies “go along with it”. To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort to others. [...] Do you go along with it? [...] Power speaks here in this moment of hesitation. (Ahmed 2010:68)

It seems as though maintaining a façade is expected, even required, by management in order to avoid creating a disturbance. This makes Ylva’s colleagues hide their sorrow and anger due to their fear of management repression and it makes Ylva feel awkward, both because her colleagues remain silent and because of management claims that she is hurting her colleagues by her protest. The management logic seems to be that emotions as judgments of something being wrong are potentially dangerous and thus have to be managed and hidden. By creating a connection between protest and a sense of awkwardness, the management may force a self-imposed silencing.

As the excerpts above aim to show, there is no consensus about the place of emotions in social work, nor about the relation between being professional and being emotional; in fact, there seems to be a conflict, but it certainly seems that emotions are very much present and play a central part in social work, in many ways. In one of the last interviews, I convey to Ylva the different views of being a professional that I have encountered so far and mention that one of them is being able to be detached. She responds:

who in the heck was it that told me, I think it was an intern who spoke about being distanced. My jaw just dropped. She hadn’t even, she hadn’t finished her social work education and really emphasized the matter of being distanced. [...] I mean distance can be positive in that you don’t bring in your own personal problems and, like, project

things [onto the client]. But then again we all have projections and that's why I think counseling is so important, to address what's happening to myself. Because that's also an aspect of being professional, to be able to recognize signs of distress. If I'm starting to feel resentment towards someone, or start to feel bad or something, it's a sign of me projecting, that there is something going on. It might as well be a sign, of me being so fucking upset over the fact that this individual can't receive the help he or she needs. It's precisely those signs I have to be attuned to and turn up.

The penultimate sentence in the above quote, that anger: "might as well be a sign, of me being so fucking upset over the fact that this individual can't receive the help he or she needs" suggests that emotions may also be a normative interpretation of encounters of injustice. Ylva argues that she needs to be attuned to and "turn up" such sentiments. In this view, emotions cannot be dismissed as merely a biological, "wasteful" reaction, without any connection to reason or rationale (or something that blocks reason), but are in fact seen as a form of knowledge. In line with such reasoning, philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that we should view emotions as a form of judgment, "as intelligent responses to the perception of value" (Nussbaum 2001:1) or, as in the quote above by Ahmed (2010:68), that "anger is a judgement that something is wrong." Assuming that emotions are not the opposite of reason, and that morality is not exclusively something to be handled with a detached intellect, we have to "consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning" (ibid).

Interestingly from an etymological point of view, "stupidity", that classical term for un-knowing, used to mean "lack of feeling or emotion" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). This is seemingly in opposition to current dominant understandings of the term, in which such a lack of feeling or emotion rather connotes (rational) reasoning. In this "forgotten" or subjugated understanding, emotion may be seen as a powerful analytical tool or as a "means of theorizing the social" (Clough & Halley 2007, as interpreted by Koivunen 2010:18). Connecting further to etymological meanings, the Latin meaning of emotions (*emovere*) also includes "to agitate" and in Old French *emouvoir* means to "stir up" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016), which indicates an inherent potential for resistance and change. Athena Farrokhzad (2014) argues that "truth resides in sorrow and hatred" and Sara Ahmed (2011) refers to Audre Lorde when describing anger and feeling bad as potentially creative.

However, happiness does not have to stand in opposition to either anger or "the political". Philosopher Alain Badiou (2015) argues that we need to understand "real" happiness as more than a state in which one is able to avoid being unhappy, as being merely satisfied. Rather, real happiness is

equated with enthusiasm and something he calls political happiness, which may very well be both strenuous and exhausting (ibid.). From such an understanding, I believe that being angry is not at all the opposite of being happy, but is rather something that may in fact convey a political happiness whereby individuals are suffused with a belief that they can resist the workings of power and not just subjugate themselves to it (Badiou 2015). Although the social workers I spoke to are frustrated, tired and angry, particularly those who engage in the network of critical social workers, many convey to me a radiance and spirit that hovers between anger and enthusiasm. They display a conviction that they are “right” and thus that, according to revolutionary reasoning, they will eventually be absolved by histories not yet written.

One may thus ask: are certain emotional responses to conflicts in social work something that should be taken very seriously? Julia argues in fact that there is a conflict between dominant notions of being professional and true commitment in social work, of being human:

Sometimes I'm thinking about, like about, this thing about professionalism. And that there is, I suppose, a conflict in social work. Like, if you have a homeless adolescent, and, like, I live in a three room apartment, and I'm thinking, what am I, I mean, if I'm not, I could take this youngster back to my place to stay for a week, rather than living in that damn fleabag shelter, and they would probably be a lot better off from that, in the long run, although I feel that this would be completely unprofessional of me. So sometimes I believe, like, that such things are opposed to each other [...] What really makes a difference for people? Is it that I'm really well structured and professional or is it that I'm very much human?

Julia's empathic reaction when witnessing the struggles of a homeless teenager is to invite him or her to her own home. The teenager would probably benefit more from such a response, but it would be unprofessional, says Julia. Again, distance and structure are expressed as properly professional, although Julia's gut feeling tells her that proximity and creativity would be a better response from a humane and long-term point of view.

The conflict between distance and proximity may thus be interpreted as not primarily an inherent and insoluble conflict in social work (Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:73–74) but rather as highly political. Thus, it seems pertinent to recall the insights of the settlement movement in early British social work (at the end of the 19th century), in which social workers chose to live in community houses together with the impoverished they wanted to help. Because of their proximity to the clients, it became apparent to these social

workers that the reasons for poverty were not to be found in flaws in their individual moral character, as the dominant, charity-oriented social work had it, but rather in structural aspects of society (Pettersson 2001). Proximity may thus work to give access to knowledge that is closer to and in solidarity with the disenfranchised. And, of course, the same goes for the opposite perspective; ideals of distance may help to obscure the context of which an individual is part, and make it easier to ignore, dehumanize and subsequently blame him or her for their own predicament (Julunen & Harder 2004, Brown 2015, Garrett 2010, Wacquant 2012a, 2004, Bauman 1999).

This argument suggests potent critical and subversive sentiments embedded in proximity and emotional engagement, which from a management point of view need to be suppressed through the harness of professional rationality and distance. If social workers congregate and engage with clients, extend their knowledge, empathize and identify with the needs of the client, it may threaten (their loyalty to) the organization, their budget awareness and the hard-line social work of conditionality and sanctions for non-compliance (see following chapter). In fact, Ylva shared an experience with me relating to resistance, proximity and engagement. During her participation in an enduring protest action against a military base in a NATO country, the soldiers posted to guard the facility were replaced with fresh ones on a weekly basis. The obvious reason for their short service, according to Ylva, was in order to prevent the soldiers from cultivating a relationship and becoming “friendly” with the protesters, which would impede their ability to do their job properly, i.e. to be able to use brute force.

## **Management and emotions**

Some argue that skills regarding the management of emotions, such as the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), particularly in social work “has become one of the new management ‘buzz’ terms” (Morrison 2007:245). It may be found in particular in managerial discourse (leadership, human resource management etc.) and is expressed as the demand for a higher degree of emotional reflexivity (Hughes 2010). Sociologist Jason Hughes (2010) argues that within such managerialist discourse indeed lies the prospect of a greater emotional freedom, but also new modalities of emotional control. This may be exemplified by the expectations for emotional ‘honesty’ in the workplace at the right times, something which appeals to an increasingly self-reflexive and self-governing subject (ibid:51). Highlighting the emergence of an awareness of emotional aspects in

strategies of governmentality, geographer Jessica Pykett suggests that within the intellectual culture of policy makers, which used to be dominated by political science and economics, there now exists “a suite of popular psychology, popular business and popular neuro-science texts which are highly influential” (Pykett 2011:221). Pykett argues that this may be a sign of governments’ attempts to

Explicitly coerce people into behaving in certain ways through the manipulation of emotional registers of behavior and by affective means. (Pykett 2011:222)

The management of emotions as described by Pykett (2011) not only contains governing strategies in themselves, but also serves to actively subordinate emotions in relation to reason:

If indeed such work, as it appears to, rests on the strategic subordination of the emotional brain to the more reasonable and reflexive mind, then it should surely be subjected to scrutiny from feminist perspectives. (Pykett 2011:222)

Even though the subordination of emotion in favor of rationality and reason constitutes a long-standing tradition in Western philosophy, the active blockage of emotions such as pity, empathy and solidarity in contemporary social work may illustrate the management desire to subjugate such emotions and give prominence to detached and rational ideals.

Although emotional sentiments such as anger or frustration may be considered a sound reaction to experiences of or knowledge about injustice and may serve as a potential source of resistance, “too much of it” may also create a need for more distance, simply to endure work. This may then function as an opposite force. Ylva says in reference to delivering refusals to clients:

My colleague actually said yesterday [...] Damn it, now I’ve started doing this too. I’m also starting to send letters instead of calling. She was so miserable and she was like both..., she felt she had to draw that line because she’s, she can’t take it anymore.

Speaking as Ylva does about heavy caseloads and their consequences for the delivery of a rejected claim, her story illustrates the limits of emotional strain as a potential subversive force. As the shame connected to the refusal to acknowledge clients’ needs may increase with decreasing resources and a hardline approach to social work, there might be limits to the revolutionary potential of emotional strain. As such, there is a risk that it may instead lead to an increased distance. Feelings of inadequacy may themselves create a

need for distance simply to endure. On the blog of a critical network of social workers, a social worker posted the following story:

Social workers have too many cases and the protocol is too inflexible, which makes it impossible to do social work. In the units of financial support in Hilltown, clients are notified of important information through the mail even in cases where it becomes obvious the individual cannot read or write in Swedish, or at all. Sometimes this is because the social worker does not have information about the individual's difficulties since the social worker does not have the time to really familiarize themselves with the situation of that individual. [...] but even in cases where this is known, in some cases the clients are still notified through the mail with the justification that the client should take responsibility for his or her situation and use his or her individual network to decipher its content. It may concern highly significant information such as offers of housing, important meetings etc. [...] To send information by mail in the ways mentioned above is not only disrespectful, it is also a violation of the individual's integrity, which one has the right to maintain. To require that an individual turns to his or her personal networks for help may not even be possible because there might just not exist any such network, but primarily it is up to each individual whether he or she wants to share that he or she is receiving support from the social services. Such support should not be conditioned on telling their friends about it. (Nu bryter vi tystnaden 2015b, my translation)

Pointing to the heavy caseloads and the increasingly standardized manner in which social work is being shaped, both stories above highlight that important communication nowadays may be delivered through the mail. This change is also highlighted by interviewee Åsa, who explains that although information is sent to clients (through the mail) about incomplete applications for economic support, clients repeatedly call or show up in person wondering why they did not receive any money this month. Sending mail rather than speaking in person or on the phone seems to be a channel of communication that has been developed to save time, although it also prevents both a deeper relationship and getting the correct information across. On top of that, mail is also used with clients who have an insufficient proficiency in the written language, suggesting that they have an individual responsibility to use their personal networks to decipher messages from the social services. This narrative connects with several of the aspects of emotion and control, as well as others that have been discussed here (and will be discussed in upcoming chapters). Apart from the potential shame in revealing your predicament to others and further impeding a client in having their needs met (thus ensuring his or her legal rights), the change from verbal to formal written communication may be an expression of several things. *The rule of law* (if a written document exists, the event becomes "true", and may be retrospectively controlled), *lack of time* (it is likely that reaching a client in person or on the phone will take more time), an *ideal of*

*detachment* (it prevents the development of a personal relationship, because this is not valued as being professional) and an *incitement of individual responsibility* (the idea of empowerment through the transfer of responsibility from social services to the client is framed in a logic that “handouts”, i.e. giving support without *quid pro quo*, are crippling the agency of the client). A turn of events that at first sight may seem a mere banal detail, altering the mode of communication from speech to writing, may in fact be connected to general trends in ideals and practices of governing social work and may in itself serve important functions in transforming the subjects of social work and saving money at the cost of the wellbeing of clients.

In a discussion with interviewee Anna on the kind of person who is suited to be a social worker, the topic of creating distance to endure arises:

I believe you genuinely have to care about other people. Genuinely have to care. I find it difficult if you, I think, unfortunately, that eventually you end up in a situation where you can't take it anymore, because, I understand it completely. All the time they have too much, looking at social workers. And eventually you have to create some kind of distance because you can't carry it all. But I think this creation of distance which becomes necessary also gets in between [...] it becomes necessary to create some kind of distance, in order to survive yourself. But that creation of distance also creates a distance that can become too vast sometimes.

Although Anna emphasizes the need to “genuinely care”, she says that having too much to do within a limited amount of time creates the need to *actively produce* distance in order to endure and survive. The risk, according to Anna, is that this distance becomes too great. As such, the limited resources, heavy workloads and stress may in themselves, like a downward spiral, work in favor of a management drive for detachment from clients, along with the embracing of budget awareness and fiscal austerity, simply because current working conditions may require detachment and distance simply in order to endure. On the other hand, the words of interviewee Emma, with the aid of Sara Ahmed's ideas above (anger and frustration as potentially creative), might be interpreted as meaning that strenuous working conditions may lead to problems coming to the surface:

If you're under stress, you have a lower tolerance for, and you can't really, well, uphold a nice façade. And that may inflict upon meetings or phone conversations with clients as well.

Stress makes it difficult to “uphold a nice façade” says Emma. A propos a façade, it is there to prevent the spectator from seeing the reality behind it.

“Not being nice” may then work to the surface and highlight profound problems in current social work, and as such a refusal to be nice (the “creativity of feeling bad”) harbors a radical potential. The question is: to what extent does management become subjected to any of the potentially radical “unpleasant” behavior? If it is mainly directed at clients and colleagues, it seems to harbor limited potential and will rather work to create disunity. That current working conditions, heavy workloads and lack of time may run the risk of creating a distance between colleagues is also deliberated upon by Olivia:

What I mourn is the collegiality. That’s something I can’t endure anymore [...] and those fabulous, hilarious parties we used to have. And when you wrote songs to people who turned 50. Now it’s like, shit, there’s a retirement coming up, how can I squeeze that in, you know? It’s at that level. I mean it’s a brutalization of working life that’s unprecedented.

Looking back on some two decades of social work, Olivia mourns the loss of collegiality, which has been replaced by what I understand as a state of individuality and minding your own business, in part because there is no time to spend on cultivating personal relations between colleagues and in part because a neoliberal political rationality undermines collective subjects (Brown 2015). Olivia has a similar story about being a mentor for the newly employed. Because of stress and high employee turnover, Olivia has ceased to engage in that. There is not enough time and most of them will not stay here anyway, Olivia says. Similar results have been observed by psychologists Wanja Astvik & Marika Melin (2013:67–68) in their interviews with social workers, specifically highlighting an unwillingness to engage with new employees because they probably will not be around for long. Rather than looking back, Emma, who has occupied a position in social work for a mere three years, looks forward and says that she doubts she will remain in the social services in the future because working under current conditions (referring to standardized documentational procedures and stress) will transform her personality.

**Marcus:** Do you think you will be working here in ten years?

**Emma:** No, not in ten years.

**Marcus:** Why not?

**Emma:** I don’t think you can stand working like this, under these circumstances, that long, without becoming an unsympathetic person.

I interpret what Emma is saying as meaning that she would rather quit than remain within the profession under current conditions for fear of becoming an unsympathetic person, as though she is afraid of her future alienated self.

In fact, a majority of the social workers I interviewed doubt that they will remain in their current position in the future. Some want to find other tasks within social work but outside the formalities of the social services, and many express a wish to simply quit (for similar conclusions, see Blomberg-Kroll et al. 2009, Tham 2008, Lindquist 2010). Some are searching for social work occupations at other locations in the hopes of finding a slightly better working environment, says Olivia. In other instances, such as at Simon's workplace, social workers are resigning without having another job to go to. The choice of labor market insecurity over remaining in place illustrates that some workplaces are unbearable, especially considering that the turnover of employment used to be very slow some years ago, says Simon about his particular place of work, as do several others.

The perception of management indifference to the frustration and protest voiced by social workers over their current working conditions creates feelings of hopelessness, argues Astvik and Melin (2013). As a result, some of the social workers they interviewed resorted to a general disengagement from workplace-related discussions and cultivating relations with new co-workers, which resonates with my interpretations above. In Astvik and Melins' study, to some extent these social workers blamed themselves for not protesting *loudly enough* and for not working even harder to compensate for shrinking resources. While some became disengaged and others resigned, only a very few continued to voice protest (ibid:67–69). Ignoring a collective struggle, in combination with heavy workloads and feelings of insufficiency and self-blame, can in this sense be beneficial from a management perspective. Social workers may eventually give up the fight, either by disengagement or simply by resigning. Refusing to accept current conditions and quitting may in that sense be seen as giving up, but as Emma says above, facing the fear that remaining will transform her into something unwanted, to quit may also be seen as a way to resist, to simply refuse to stay in place. The issue of management and emotions in relation to being professional also arises in a discussion with Simon:

**Marcus:** What does it mean to be 'professional'? This is also a term that I have a hard time getting to grips with.

**Simon:** Yes exactly, yes I agree, I agree with you on that, like what does it mean to be professional? Because some social workers say, I know a social worker who called from Midtown, a young one, and she wanted to help this young guy in a way she felt was questionable, or she wanted, she *wanted* to, but maybe it wasn't all professional because she really empathized with him.<sup>42</sup> And she, but she also felt that, she wanted to do what, what she wanted to do, she felt it was the right thing to do, you know? But she

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<sup>42</sup> In Swedish: "hade väldigt mycket känsla".

hesitated, she didn't really know if it was professional. And then she was pressured by her employer, I could tell, what is reasonable to give? Or should she put her foot down with the client and use more of a your-actions-have-consequences style of pedagogy? It's in such instances that social services works in disciplining ways. "You haven't done this, you can't have financial support." "You haven't reported to the unemployment office the mandatory ten times, only nine: no financial support." It's a bit like, that's how it is.

**Marcus:** So to her, being professional is to be what?

**Simon:** Exactly, what? I don't know how to describe it, but it's like, sometimes I think it's about being loyal to a culture.

Simon tells the story of a colleague who wanted to help a client because it felt right, but had doubts about whether it was professional or not, relating to the narrative of management's hard-line expectations that social workers avoid soft-heartedness towards clients. As such, the quote above illustrates expectations of suppressing certain emotional judgements such as empathy, solidarity and a sense of doing what feels right, which may be a manifestation of a culture of loyalty to the organization rather than to the client. This bears some resemblance to Ylva's story about being professional, when she refers to expectations in the formal education of social workers:

What is a professional social worker according to you, I asked. "One who is to be able to keep a distance." It was absolutely shocking [...] and supposedly, such talk was really common at the school of social work. I was really surprised [...] and as I'm thinking, it's this thing about not getting too close [...] to prevent the formation of a "we", rather to keep it like us and them.

Learning to keep a distance right at the beginning, during formal social work education, is a technique to prevent the formation of a collective subject, "a 'we'", says Ylva. Although maintaining distinct boundaries between social worker and client may have benevolent functions, it nevertheless seems to be of interest from a management point of view in the sense that such boundaries, in combination with the elevation of a detached rationality, may function as a way to suppress identification and loyalty to the client and to follow the management/organizational protocol.

It is worth pointing out that viewing detachment as merely a *lack* of emotions is arguably an oversimplification and possibly the disguise of ideology. Rather, it can be contended that emotional detachment *is* an expression of emotions, because to be indifferent is also an emotional state and thus not the same as having no emotions (Ahmed 2004b). If one assumes that a detached rationality is an ideal advocated by a management pursuing austerity ideals in contemporary social work it is not difficult to see

possible conflicts with the ideal of engagement, which is highly cherished by some. By evoking the self-management of emotions through the elevation of a rationalist detached ideal, in conjunction with the ideals of an evidence-based, anormative standardized and individually oriented social work, the possibilities for carrying out a critical, structurally oriented and empathic social work seem to be slim. If this constitutes a transformation, it seems to go hand in hand with general austerity schemes in public services: “improved effectiveness”, cost awareness and increasing demands for responsibility from clients. Similar to the transformation of the concept of evidence elaborated upon in the previous chapter, what can be witnessed in the narratives on emotions in relation to what it means to be professional is a transformation of, or a political conflict over, the concept of what it means to be professional in social work. Thus, it can be argued that the concept of being professional is coming to signify values that make professionals control themselves or express themselves in a manner suitable to the needs of management. For instance, by making the management of emotions or budget responsibility into a professional trait or following the protocol of the organization in other ways, rather than what lies in the interests of the client (Liljegren & Parding 2010:281). Such expectations surface in the response from interviewee Maude:

**Marcus:** Yes, to be professional, what does that mean, to you I mean? Because that is something I hear a lot of talk about. You mentioned it earlier.

**Maude:** Well I suppose I see it as being, I mean, to like see the individual and what he or she needs help with, and not to be loyal to my organization. Rather to be loyal to what I believe is the foundation of social work and what I believe is good for the client.

I interpret Maud’s explicit statement that being professional is *not* about being loyal to the organization, but rather to the client, as the expression of a perceived expectation to do precisely that, and also as a refusal to embrace such ideals (demands for loyalty to the organization are further analyzed in Chapter 8). In that sense, analyzing resistance may be a way to detect and diagnose the exercise of power (Abu-Lughod 1990), which I elaborated upon in the analytical framework (Chapter 2). The refusal to accept that being professional has to do with loyalty to the organization may in that sense be interpreted as a belief that such an ideal is part of a governing technique because of a refusal to do precisely that. I ask Tina about the most pressing problems in her current work situation:

**Marcus:** But like, out of all, how shall I put it, all the problems that you’ve told me a bit about, what would you say is the biggest, like, the hardest?

**Tina:** My biggest problem is the invoices [...] because that takes a lot of time if done properly, because then we’re supposed to, since it’s not related to the social work. It’s

like a financial thing, somebody who is an economist ought to do that. Not us. But the logic is that we are the ones to, or it's expressed that we're supposed to develop a relation to the numbers.

Arguing against social workers dealing with economics, such as producing invoices, Tina tells me that management has expressed a demand for social workers to develop a relation with “the numbers”. As trivial as such a comment may be, I believe that management's ability to utter such a wish without being laughed at outright is a sign of precisely what has been discussed above. A wish to direct solidarity away from clients, and instead towards “the numbers”, the budget and the (management of the) organization. For such a wish to be understood and related to, there has to exist a discursive frame within which it may seem reasonable. If not, the appeal to develop a *relation with numbers* would appear absurd.

As far as management and their emotional traits and relations go, Simon says:

**Simon:** I'm not paranoid, I think that, this is what they think. And it's the people who think in crazy ways who are in power in a way, it's, you know, I've always claimed that, from the manager of the social services<sup>43</sup> upwards what is demanded are psychopaths, I mean, or that's how it is. The higher up you get, the more psychopathic traits you will have. [...]

**Marcus:** Which particular traits do you attribute to the management psychos?

**Simon:** That you're rather, you're rather cold.

Simon argues that a typical and “ideal” trait of top social work managers is being cold, because it takes a psychopath to be able to make the kind of uncomfortable decisions “required” at the top. This is in line with research highlighting that some psychopathic traits are highly valued in management positions (Boddy et al. 2015, Lipman-Blumen 2004, Tunbrå 2007, see also Paulsen 2015:120). While such managers may be seen as “organizational stars” by top management, because of their cold-blooded willingness to deliver what is expected in modern business, their ultra-rational, financially orientated and emotionally detached state from other employees, leads to workers below experiencing intimidation, coercion and bullying (Boddy et al. 2015:530). Thus, the cultivation of human relationships seems less important; as Tina said, a relation should rather be cultivated with “the numbers”. Steve Rogowski (2012) argues that the gradual shift towards managerialism in social work has transformed it from being based on relationships between humans, to a bureaucracy focusing on the rationing of

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<sup>43</sup> In Swedish: socialchef.

resources and the exercise of control. Interestingly, the disclaimer from Simon about not being paranoid may illustrate that voicing criticism of the ideal of detachment may run the risk of being perceived as the rantings of a madman. I would argue that such a disclaimer has something important to say about the sense of a totalizing and monolithically oppressive system under which voicing criticism is difficult and potentially harmful. Continuing on the topic of management and emotions, the following quote is from a discussion with Ylva about her relationship with her new manager.

**Marcus:** Do you like your manager, do you hate your manager?

**Ylva:** No, I don't think I hate anyone.

**Marcus:** Are you angry with your manager?

**Ylva:** Well, sometimes I become sad when, because I think she's a bit insensitive. But I believe that sometimes I want to try to make her understand what my work entails. Sometimes I try to describe a bit about some of the clients and their situation, their needs, stuff like that. And I doubt that she really understands.

**Marcus:** Hasn't she worked as a social worker herself?

**Ylva:** I don't know actually. But this thing about, she's very, to stick with the mission, you're not supposed to go outside of the mission.

In an attempt to make her new manager understand the predicaments and needs of her clients, she sometimes tells their individual stories, although the manager seems more eager to declare that sticking with the formal mission is what is important. Ylva understands this to be a consequence of being insensitive. This can also be understood as a consequence of a transformation of the skills required in municipal management. According to political scientist Ann-Sofie Lennqvist Lindén (2010), an increasing number of those in municipal management lack the specific knowledge of the professions they are managing.

Referring to the previous discussion on psychopathic traits among managers, Simon tells me about a particular manager and says:

She's acted in ways that are..., she scares people. Two colleagues told me that during the interview, the job interview, they were both about to start crying because she was so damn creepy. I mean she's like, I don't even waste energy being angry at her, she has a handicap, that's it, end of story. But she delivers, she's well structured, you know and she "wears the pants."<sup>44</sup>

Although acting in ways that induce fear in subordinates, according to Simon, being well structured and "delivering" is prioritized by management

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<sup>44</sup> In Swedish: pekar med hela handen.

(for similar conclusions, see Boddy et al. 2015, Lipman-Blumen 2004). In this particular case, when Simon and some of his colleagues voiced protest about the recently installed management and their insensitive approach, they were met with anger (screaming even) and claims that they had an attitude problem. Simon continues by telling me about a situation in which a colleague was about to formally retire but expressed a wish to continue in temporary employment. At the time of formal retirement however, she voiced criticism of the state of things.

And then she voices criticism, she has never like, she has never refused to do it or anything, it's just an opinion. But then this person [the manager] concludes that she's not loyal to the mission. You can't continue. And she enters into a state of shock, I was working that day and I went through the roof. Ever since I've been at war and now apparently I'm being summoned to be disciplined.

Voicing criticism resulted in termination because, in the eyes of the same manager referred to in the quote above, it was perceived as disloyalty, and so was the subsequent criticism from Simon. At the time of the interview he had been summoned to an individual meeting with both his closest manager and the top management and, facing that, expressed both anger and fear. The disclaimer of paranoia (in the previous quote) makes sense. Continuing on the topic of personal traits suitable for management, I will turn to Rosa, who tells me about a colleague with aspirations to reach management:

There was this one person working in financial support who was incredibly cold, I'd say. Really cold person. She was, most people had difficulties working with her. And clients also complained. Once I was in a meeting where she demanded to see the medical records [...] but this client said, "Why? What does that have to do with my right to financial support?" [...] You've got to have some privacy, or I mean that's confidential information [...] I mean, I'm pretty sure she's a careerist, whose goals are like to become a manager and advance through the ranks [...] I noted how she was ingratiating herself with the managers and tried to be boss over certain colleagues and things like that.

This quote illustrates how Rosa expects the bonds of loyalty in social work to be; towards clients and fellow social workers. As her careerist colleague seemed to direct her loyalty towards her career, she sided with the ideals expected by management, thus breaking with the collective identity of social workers. Being cold and demanding documentation from a client that was not called for was, as I interpret it, a way to control the client. These are traits that do not fit into the story of being engaged with clients, and seemingly positioned this woman as in opposition to Rosa. As Rosa has it, this particular colleague was aspiring to a management position and thus Rosa makes the connection between cold heartedness and expected

management traits. As well as voicing her critical opinion, this also produces a benevolent social worker subject who stands in solidarity with the client.

## **Concluding remarks**

From the analysis above, I conclude that there exists an ideal of detachment and rationality in social work, both among social workers and in management. This ideal is not hegemonic, something that is illustrated in the narratives of conflict over the role and place of emotions; rather, it functions to inhibit social workers from becoming too “friendly” and loyal to clients and it also muffles protest. It can thus be contended that this ideal works to “execute” at the hands of power, with limited need to feel or witness the suffering it produces. This is achieved through physical and emotional distance and, because of the reduced amount of time for interactions, a face with whom to argue or do battle disappears. Under such circumstances, (a detached) neutrality becomes violence. Back in 1969, philosopher Hanna Arendt wrote about a dystopian future (and the attraction of violence) in to the context of the dehumanizing effects of an emerging, faceless administrative exercise of power:

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (Arendt 1969)

Perhaps there is something in the Arendtian dystopian figure. If ideals of hyper-rationality, anormativity, emotional detachment and budget awareness are gaining momentum in contemporary social services, albeit with reference to neutral evidence, professionalism, and – as we will see in the next two chapters – the rule of law and individual responsibility, it may be meaningful to speak of the social services as a faceless tyrant.

The question arises as to whether this is an unintended perversion of the system or in fact an inherent function enabling its implementation, further spread and continuation. In 1983, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) described the commodification of emotions in service work, labeling it emotional labor. By interviewing and observing flight attendants during their training, the author was able to describe the increasing market competition and the need for the corporation Delta Airlines to offer a competitive product. This was done not by competing with such elements as

price, physical comfort or availability, selling points already drained in a saturated market, but through the offer of a supposedly genuine personal service. Hochschild found that the attendants were taught and expected to display genuine affection towards customers and that different strategies were employed to handle and endure such emotionally strenuous tasks. What became clear to Hochschild was that the attendants who were not able to separate their personal selves from their professional selves, i.e. “go into robot”, ran a severe risk of becoming emotionally exhausted and depressed from their emotional labor. To some extent, this bears a resemblance to the stories of social work told above. Several of my interviewees displayed an ideal of engaging their true self to create genuine relations. At the same time, they explained how such proximity, in combination with stress, runs the risk of them getting too close and having to witness the suffering, which creates feelings of inadequacy and depression. What is intriguing, however, is that there seems to be a (re)emerging and competing ideal; that of distance and detachment. This is seen by some as a strategy to endure and is described by others as a cold-hearted ideal demanded by management and in formal social work training, and also related to a traditional and general anormative ideal of professions. As such, the informal encouragement from management to disengage may be seen as something more than simply a caring strategy for the social workers to endure. It may be seen in opposition or as a mirror to the Delta Airlines management strategies. While the airline’s call for the display of genuine affection was introduced to earn money, social work management demands the opposite. To keep a distance, in order not to get “too close” and begin identifying with the client, may also be seen as a way to save money in social work. If combined, stress and detachment may enable a shift in loyalty, towards caring for the organization and its budget, rather than clients. Such techniques may be further strengthened by neoconservative ideals of demanding subjugation from clients and punishing the poor (Salonen 2006, Brown 2015, Bauman 1999, Wacquant 2004).



## 6. Papers and archives: functions of documentation

Even during the first few interviews, during which the frame and focus of this thesis were still a relatively open question, I learned that the social workers had grievances with documentation. As I continued to ask about it, it became more and more evident that the interviewees were experiencing a far-reaching and exhausting scheme of documentation, albeit with differing expressions. From an understanding that knowledge production is intimately connected with the exercise of power, these practices thus seem to constitute or be connected to governing techniques in social work in several ways. In this chapter, I will analyze the social workers' narratives of these practices and try to understand how they work and with what governing functions. I begin by inquiring into the manifestation of such practices, then proceed onto how documentation is handled and ultimately try to tease out the reasons for such a scheme and its inherent functions.

### Drowning in paperwork

The word documentation itself refers to many kinds of things. In general, it means a vast amount of administration or “paperwork”. Things mentioned by the interviewees include the standardized templates for documentation found in assessment manuals like BBIC or ASI,<sup>45</sup> tools put in place to aid in the assessment of clients' needs. Many also speak of other forms of documentation; both the continuous entries – case notes – and the finished formal assessment product. Yet, another kind of documentation I am told about is auditing templates whereby the performance of the social work is evaluated. Just about all of the interviewees have something to say about the burdensome amount of paperwork and those who have worked for some years speak of a general increase over time. This of course makes me curious and awakens my desire to probe deeper. For example, I ask one of the interviewees, Christina, if she can spot any major changes in the almost ten years she has worked in the social services and her instant reply is that “the paperwork” has increased. Nora, another interviewee, says that the “administrative tasks” have grown over the top, gradually at first and during the last ten-year period, like a watershed, it has gone completely off the chart. Interviewee Gabriel, who has worked for more than two decades in

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<sup>45</sup> BBIC is a template to assess the needs of children and ASI (Addiction Severity Index) is used for clients with substance abuse.

social work, says that in the early 2000s the “demands for documentation” increased and says that now “the paperwork” has “taken over”. Another interviewee, Ulrika, in the quote below phrases it in a similar way, the “demands for documentation” have exploded over the last few years, and she also has an explanation for this:

Earlier, we wrote case notes and decisions, and that’s about it. Now this New Public Management has entered the scene, which means an infinite amount of paper.

In fact, Nora says that the contemporary ideal, in contrast to when she started working, seems to be to produce as much documentation as possible. There are, of course, several other reports from social workers of such an increase in documentation and administrative tasks (Shanks et al. 2015, Rogowski 2012), as well as in other areas of public service (Bejerot 2011, Houtsonen et al. 2010, Johansson 2015, Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg 2014). One of the interviewees, Helene, who has worked for over two decades, explains what the demand to produce copious case notes means in practice:

As soon as I receive a document or talk to someone, it’s supposed to, everything that’s been said in a case has to be documented.

Similar to the words of Helene above, when asked to narrate what an ordinary day looks like, another interviewee, Emma, gets into the consequences of the demands for “documentation”:

**Emma:** And then when I have a free moment, I use it to document. Either the ongoing case notes, for example, “now I have to enter that this woman called me and told me this.” And then I have to put down that I called the hospital to pass on what she told me.

**Marcus:** Right.

**Emma:** So every little thing I do causes more documentation. So it really would have been easier if I hadn’t done all that much, because then I wouldn’t have to document as much.

**Marcus:** No, right.

**Emma:** And also, I’d have more time to document too.

Every action has to be documented, Emma says, and her sarcasm over the absurdities of having to document every single action is salient in her response (and may be understood as an audit procedure, see Ponnert & Svensson 2015:3). It is almost as though the practice of documentation takes over or blocks the “actual” work and, because every action requires documentation, the expectation of providing documentation seems almost to have a paralyzing effect. It even makes her consider doing less in order not to

have to document as much. Perhaps she is being ironic, but such irony still bears witness to her perception of the demands. In the interview with Ulrika, who works with clients struggling with substance abuse, I try to get to grips with what the specific demands are and try to sum it up by asking whether there are *other* documentational tasks she has to engage in, on top of the outpatient documentation, lists of indicators, the ASI questionnaire and the six-month follow up, and she says:

**Ulrika:** Believe me, that's enough.

**Marcus:** Yeah, yeah, I get it.

**Ulrika:** Mm, it's documenting and it's writing decisions and it's treatments and everything, there's no end to it.

**Marcus:** Okay, do you make continuous case notes too?

**Ulrika:** Yes, case notes are supposed to be written on every little event.

Although she says that the list I had just recounted certainly is enough, she still adds to it the documentation, the writing-up of the decision (concerning treatment) and, of course, as referred to by Emma and Helene above, the continuous case notes on every little event that have to be entered in the system. She later tells me that an ASI interview<sup>46</sup> may take forty minutes under ideal circumstances, if the client has good communication skills and is highly concentrated, but under less than ideal circumstances that it may take several meetings (which due to cognitive exhaustion are no longer than 45 minutes), up to seven separate occasions:

At the same time, the clock is ticking, and you have hopes for a speedy course and it's so..., but it's like driving a round peg into a square hole. It doesn't work.

Not only does documentation claim a huge amount of working time, but having to document in all sorts of forms and record their every move also creates stress, as hinted by Ulrika, above. This is a topic that comes up several times in connection to documentation. For instance, when I ask Emma about her working conditions she responds:

We're under a lot of strain, or, it's, we have a lot to do, always, and we have very few periods of recuperation in this job and we have a burden of documentation that is absurd.

We're under a lot of strain she says, and specifically mentions the burden of documentation. It seems that, although many things may be a source of stress, in the interviews, practices of documentation often come up. In

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<sup>46</sup> A standardized assessment template for alcohol or substance addiction.

relation to this, Emma later writes in her diary about a meeting out of town regarding a client, that lasts an hour, but claims most of the day. The feelings that she recalls are mixed:

It feels good to get out of the office for a while but both my colleague and I are a bit stressed over not having the time to document what we are supposed to. We try to work on the train on the way back, but I cannot get much done.

Getting out of the office is an ambivalent experience for Emma. Although pleasant in itself, it creates a documentation deficit. She attempts to make up for lost time, to handle the documentation deficit that arises from not being in the office, on the road. Documenting on the train is not ideal and the sense of disappointment or failure is explicit. In this case, it seems as though the burden of documentation constitutes a force that ties the social worker to her office and prevents her from approaching clients outside of the social services office. However, some people can find joy in documenting, although not under the current regime. Helene says:

I can find joy in writing and documenting and writing down an assessment, but it's always, even though I've worked for a long time, with a sense of inner stress and anxiety that I have to hurry and write it. "Damn! I have to do it!"

Helene is one of the few who speaks of joy in connection with documentation and the assessment process, but even though she likes documenting and has plenty of experience, the stress caused by the documentation never goes away. One can assume that lack of experience makes it even worse because long experience is likely to have improved one's general social worker skills and may also have allowed for the creation of strategies for handling the tasks more easily and faster. Interviewee Vera looks back at what social work used to be all about and says that, in the specific field of financial support, the ambition to change conditions for the client has been lost:

**Vera:** It used to be a lot easier [...] it was more of a relational situation. But today I know that, many who work with financial support, they can't, they barely have time to meet. They meet [the client] once or twice and then a lot of time passes and then, there's no, the social work to create change, is lost. It's ended up in the documents. [...] I like social work, I think it's really joyous, but now we have really lousy conditions to do it in. And it's not our documents that help people [...] [rather,] that takes time away from meeting people. They looked into it, when I was working at the child protective services, about four years ago. Ten hours a week was spent on [...] meeting with kids and parents.

**Marcus:** And 30 was on?

**Vera:** Administration and internal meetings.

It is not the documents that help people, says Vera, it is the relations. Still, the time available to spend on meeting clients is decreasing, mostly because the burden of administration, such as documentation, is increasing and seems to be prioritized over client meetings. In a similar way, Tina, another interviewee, who works with disability assistance, says that the time allocated to meet clients constitutes something like 15 to 20 per cent and that this makes it hard to develop any kind of relationship with the client. Not only is social work lost to the documentational procedures because of a change in focus whereby the documentation seems to be prioritized, but also because there just is not enough time to actually meet with the clients (see also Chapter 4 for additional comments on this matter) when following administrative procedures. The time for what is sometimes referred to as the “actual” social work is reduced to a quarter of the overall working time. This finding is similar to the conclusions of political scientist Patrik Hall. He claims that the current management bureaucracy requires more and more administrative work, which prevents the “actual” job from being done (Hall 2012). An entry in Emma’s diary also gives a hint that the documentation is prioritized, it *has* to be done, but that such demands mean forgetting or putting other important things on hold.

I am documenting all afternoon with my door shut, but still fail to get to the most important part: the application to get a client committed. I also discover that I had a deadline yesterday regarding a statement to the police.

## **Coping and counter-conduct**

How do they handle this burden? Because excessive documentation steals time from client meetings, referred to as the “actual” social work, it creates feelings of inadequacy and stress, and subsequently the social workers are forced to find ways to handle management requirements of documentation whilst still doing the actual work. Several say that, in order to get by, you have to prioritize. For instance, when talking about the ASI process (a specific documentational template), Gabriel tells me about the need to “sift”, in order “not to drown” in paper. On the topic of limited time frames, interviewee Rosa says:

What are all these interviews supposed to amount to? It's supposed to amount to an assessment, where I describe my appraisal in words [...] the idea is, from initial contact to the finished assessment, two months [...] and in practice it is reasonable, like, we are able to do the interviews and commence treatment, but to actually write this final assessment, this document, it should ideally be finished before you start treatment, but that's hardly ever the case.

In reality, it is impossible to abide by the formal rules according to Rosa's narrative. Still they are expected to do it. What kind of emotional state do such arrangements induce? Emma, like Rosa above, sometimes has to produce the formal documentation after all the work has been done, frequently after the official due date. But by documenting in retrospect, she can leave out the non-essential stuff.

You always make detours and argue after the fact. Because an assessment, supposed to be finished in June, which led to this particular action (treatment etc.), and it's not ready until now [September] and then I know a bunch of stuff now, but I still have to pretend that I'm in June and, like, write 'June' how it was like then. And approve it, but lots of stuff may have happened after that. I mean you do so many things in the documentational system after the fact, that are, like, well exactly that, appraisals after the fact. It's not, it might have turned out differently if you had done it on time, you know.

I believe there is a sense of shame in the narratives above. There are formal demands on when to finish certain tasks, like the assessment, but due to insufficient resources and unreasonable demands, these can hardly ever be accomplished. Part of such shame is also connected to the actual outcome of the assessment. Emma says that even though the retrospective documentation is a way to manage the unreasonably excessive documentation, she is open to the idea that the investigation would have looked different had it been done continuously and on time, and also suggests that perhaps different conclusions may have been drawn, suggesting that the *pro forma* documentation actually can alter the outcome of the social work. Helene also handles the documentation at a later stage in the process in order to get the client work going:

It wouldn't be okay to halt the whole process just because I didn't have time to write. But it's an unfinished task that eats away at you. Because, honestly, you've moved on already.

Although such an arrangement prevents the client treatment from being halted, when telling me about this way of working, Helene hints at both the stress it creates and the lack of meaning of retrospective documentation.

Another way to handle the burden of documentation is to re-use old documents. I ask Ulrika if it is possible to use something that was written before and she says that if you are good with computers you can “cut” from old documents and “paste” it into another and refers to the fact that previous assessment usually contains information that is still relevant. On this topic, Emma says:

**Emma:** It feels a bit pointless to sit there and jot it all down, to no purpose.

**Marcus:** Is it possible to use copy-paste?

**Emma:** Often you can, but there is a danger in that if you use it too much, then what’s the point, if you’re not making a new assessment, whether there is a need to initiate something new?

Like Ulrika, Emma says she can use the copy-paste prompt or recycle old documents, but like Helene she points to the meaninglessness of this kind of documentation as well as the dangers of not doing a fresh assessment. In reference to another practice of documentation, the demand to engage in so-called lists of indicators,<sup>47</sup> Ulrika explains that during the initial phase of an assessment she is forced to take actions that allow for things like the measurement of the duration of the investigation, whether the client was offered outpatient treatment and also an evaluation of the outcome. And this is just the first step. An additional three or four lists of indicators have to be filled out during the course of the assessment. She tells me that recently there was a slight change in these lists:

**Ulrika:** A month or two ago it was addressed in a meeting, that there was a box or two missing towards the end of the list of indicator template. So a couple of them were to be added.

**Marcus:** What did they discover was missing?

**Ulrika:** I don’t remember, I’ve stopped listening to that because I think it’s of no use. To me, the important thing is that the individual is offered adequate care, that he gets a chance to go through with it, and then these lists, how they look, well that’s not important.

**Marcus:** No, but you do them anyway?

**Ulrika:** Yes, I have to.

**Marcus:** Ok, what happens otherwise?

**Ulrika:** They make a hell of a fuss.

Ulrika does not even remember what the changes involved, because she has stopped bothering about it, but she still does what is demanded to avoid a fuss. These various tactics of handling the burden of different kinds of

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<sup>47</sup> In Swedish: indikatorlistor.

documentation mentioned in the above quotes, which clearly run counter to the management ideal way of documenting, can be seen as a form of counter-conduct. They do what they have to, but with limited conviction and enthusiasm, in their own ways. This may in some instances lead to a kind of mechanization or desensitization, insofar as the documentation is not completed in order to be of actual use, but rather as something that just has to be done. In some cases, this is because they feel that it is not important, they prioritize their intellectual engagement in other things such as client meetings, but in other cases it might lead to an indifference to what other social workers may perceive as important. A risk of such a blasé take on documentation is articulated by interviewee Paula, who refers to the practice of copy-pasting in formal decisions from financial support:

**Paula:** They don't even bother to write new decisions. Sometimes they're so goddamn sloppy in the decisions from financial support that they haven't even changed the dates.

**Marcus:** They re-use the same thing?

**Paula:** Yes, as a standard. Then they control bank account statements minutely and question all kinds of expenditure.

Paula compares this to the demands made on clients when applying for financial support, to produce infallible financial records, and the zealous scrutiny thereof, while the social workers themselves entertain a sloppy copy-paste procedure that testifies to their indifference. From this it may be argued that the counter-conduct (Death 2010) that arises from these absurd demands of documentation might indeed be interpreted as strategies of resistance that may help to undermine the current system. But it can also be argued that such acts may also work to create a milieu of indifference that may prove harmful to clients. Speaking of ways to cope, let us turn to another interviewee, Felicia, who actually enjoys writing:

I want to try it out, working without all the formalities. To not have to, I mean, because there are very high demands for documentation, that we do it all correctly, decisions, I mean everything, is like supposed to be done in a particular way, and I enjoy writing, I find it joyous. But it can also be a burden because there is a lot of administration that we have to do ourselves.

Felicia is speaking of trying out a different job and, as such, opting out is another way of handling the burden of documentation, to get away from the excessive documentation and administration and the standardized way of working in the social services. When pondering the future Vera, says she would like to escape the aspects of social work that entail exercising authority, as social workers in the social services. This is not because she does not like it per se but because the current conditions do not support

good social work and because the management shows no understanding of their situation because they cannot comprehend the immense stress that the demands of documentation creates. Rather, she wants to work in “direct” contact with adult clients, as this entails relational work rather than being all about documentation. Thus, dreaming of a better place or simply quitting (see Chapter 9 for further narratives on this topic) also seems to be a way of handling the burden of documentation or refusing to witness the further demise of social work.

## **Evident rationalities**

With the amount of frustration surrounding documentation, I have to ask: why this obsession with it? What is its purpose? One reason given is that it makes it easier to take over another social worker’s client. If the social work process is poorly documented, a new social worker has to acquire some of the information over again. Such an explanation is offered, for instance, in the guidelines on financial support in the municipality of Stockholm (Stockholms stad 2014:31). This sounds reasonable considering the increasing rotation of employees found in contemporary social work, at least when it comes to the assessment and the case notes (but not the other self-evaluative parts). However, this answer is only given by a handful, and it is hard to see that such a purpose can by itself explain the immense increase in such procedures over the last few years. Besides, it seems that the immense rotation of employees is happening simultaneously with the increased demands for documentation, and thus is unlikely to be a response to such developments. Another answer given by some concerns the rule of law. Emma says:

Because we have a responsibility, I mean, when meeting people, to try to achieve some kind of change. But at the same time we have a responsibility in regards to the rule of law, to handle applications, to investigate reports of neglect and abuse. I work with children and adolescents, so there is plenty in our mission which is regulated by law, which means we have to document a lot. I mean, all that we’ve done has to be documented.

The ideal of the rule of law generally means that laws are applied equally to all, and applied in this way the rule of law constitutes protection from abuse by the authorities. With such logic, documenting every move is thought to provide transparency and, ultimately, to protect clients. Such a reason seems more logical given the extent of neglect and abuse discovered in recent government inquiries (SOU 2011:61), but it can hardly be the sole reason

given the resources it demands from an already austerity-stricken social work. Another purpose of thorough documentation that has been mentioned concerns the client. Felicia mentions several reasons, where one is to provide information to the client, enabling them to understand what motivated the initial contact and the decisions of social services in the case of that particular client. Discussing different reasons for documentation, Nora mentions:

**Nora:** If the client wants to see his or her file, but I'm surprised that people don't ask for it more often, I'd want to know what was written about me [...]

**Marcus:** Is it almost never that they do?

**Nora:** No, and that surprises me.

In the quote above, Nora, like Felicia, connects thorough documentation with the hypothetical wish of the client to see the formal assessment of themselves, although out of the eighteen social workers interviewed who are working in the social services, none can recall a client ever asking to see his or her "files". Again, given the resources that such a service would demand, it is unlikely that this would be a main contributor to the deployment of such a grand scheme. Gabriel also connects documentation with the rule of law, but interestingly adds that documentation is also a way for the social services to handle pressure applied by the supervision of government authorities:

**Marcus:** I've been thinking, like, what's the purpose of all this documentation?

**Gabriel:** I suppose it's the rule of law, and pressure from the authorities, principally The National Board of Health and Welfare. I think that to clients they're not, they aren't even there, you can sit there and walk them through the papers, but they don't read them. They don't care.

**Marcus:** Okay, and by rule of law you mean what?

**Gabriel:** Well if you, which is very, very seldom, want to look back or [check] whether we have disfavored anyone, it's all supposed to be documented, entered in the case files, and plans and such things. But it's also a bit about, I have a sense that it's for protecting yourself too. As a municipality, you're scared stiff to get reprimanded by the National Board of Health and Welfare. That's why you do all this documentation.

The rule of law is seen here in the traditional sense of protecting individuals from the authorities, but interestingly also as a way for the municipal authorities to protect themselves, as Gabriel puts it, from the control of the central government authority, The National Board of Health and Welfare, which has a responsibility to monitor the conduct of the municipal social services. Vera also reasons in a similar way, "documenting to cover your back," which describes practices that may be referred to as an audit culture (as argued in Chapter 2). But if such a scheme is deployed centrally from the

government, to monitor the social services, and the documentation is carried out by the social workers with the purpose of *protecting* the social services from scrutiny, with limited enthusiasm and techniques to circumvent the correct documentation procedures, it hardly serves its purpose. Rather, the *pro forma* documentation, whereby the process of assessment is “sanitized” when written down, sometimes in retrospect, may in fact serve as a better defense against criticisms of neglect and abuse since the process is documented in a meticulous but *pro forma* manner. The constant documentation may of course also affect how the social work is carried out, it may bring about a way of working that tries to avoid flaws or unconventional ways of working, in order not to be criticized. Simon, another interviewee, in regards to avoiding incomplete documentation, says:

I always say that the day I come to work with a mindset of avoiding mistakes, I might as well stay at home. It's a creative job, it's without control. I mean, if I come to work focused on not making mistakes, I won't do anything. I won't challenge, I won't test new stuff, then it's just, and as a matter of fact, that's what's about to happen, to work defensively. We're afraid to make mistakes, afraid to be criticized.

Simon objects to the idea that thorough documentation will improve social work because, if the work is done in relation to what will end up in the files, it will result in a defensive social work. Contradicting himself somewhat, he also says that this is what is about to happen, or is something that has already happened. On the same topic, I ask Gabriel:

**Marcus:** So it doesn't affect the actual social work? The treatment isn't improved from all the documentation? Or?

**Gabriel:** No, not in my opinion.

Gabriel also rejects the possibility that the excessive documentation could be a way to produce better social work for the clients. He also rejects the suggestion that thorough documentation should be understood as a service to clients, enabling them to access information about their interactions with social services.

From the narratives above, it may be questioned whether the primary functions of the copious documentation seen in social work are to assure the rule of law for the clients, to provide the client with information or to improve the actual social work. Although the rule of law might be an official reason for the meticulous documentation, the pressure it creates through an increased workload does not offer ideal conditions, since it becomes a *pro forma* activity. Gabriel says:

I mean, many of the documents are already written, you have templates. It's a name and some additional personal information [that you fill out], but you have templates for everything.

If the demand for documentation leads to circumvention of the formal rules, through the use of readymade documents, copy-paste and documenting in retrospect, these demands have already altered the ways in which social work is done. What should be evident by now is that the purpose of the growing amounts of documentation is not very clear, either to me or to the social workers to whom I spoke. This confusion is expressed by Ulrika when she tells me about the particular time frame for a follow-up interview in the ASI template:

**Ulrika:** Oh yes, and you have to do a follow-up every six months, which isn't really done either. From lack of time and such.

**Marcus:** Do you do them later or not at all?

**Ulrika:** A bit of both I would say. Because we've started to look at it together with a method developer that we have here, like, when the hell are we supposed to do these? Because six months after the initial basic ASI, then he's likely in some kind of treatment, am I really supposed to go there and mess with that and ask questions like "did you drink more or less in the last few weeks?"

**Marcus:** But why is it six months?

**Ulrika:** That remains unclear.

The sarcasm is evident in Ulrika's last response, that the particular six-month timeframe is a mystery, and she doesn't seem too eager to find out. As she said in a previous quote, she has stopped caring about "these things". Again, the purpose of the whole documentational scheme seems to be somewhat of an enigma. Ulrika also explains that, with such a rigid timeframe of six months, the protocol often collides with circumstances in individual cases and that sometimes the follow-up is done later or not at all. Maude tells me:

**Maude:** In financial support I know that you sometimes initiate a Workplan or whatever it might be called, but barely anything was written in it, you were supposed to initiate a plan just because.

**Marcus:** Because you're supposed to?

**Maude:** Every client had to have one.

**Marcus:** Right, documentation for the sake of documentation.

**Maude:** Or because of the rules.

In sum, many of the interviewees seemed not to have given the question of purpose much thought and display a “testing” approach in their responses. When considering the multiple reasons given by these social workers, the most obvious conclusion is that the reasons seem not be very clear to them and do not seem all that reasonable from my perspective. It is puzzling to note that, even though many are critical of it, most have not really thought about the reasons at all, they simply do it. Such results are in line with sociologist Roland Paulsen’s study on obedience and bureaucratic procedures in the Public Employment Service (Paulsen 2015). Sometimes to comply with protocol is reason enough to comply with protocol. You do what you are told because that is what you have been told to do. I do assume, however, that in following protocol they also avoid trouble and conflict. Even though a general notion of the rule of law comes up in several of the answers, it is presented without conviction or certainty and is also sometimes connected to other purposes such as a general transparency and as a technique to avoid external critique. Another particular reason that Christina told me about is that documentational practices act as a *standardization* of social work “forcing everyone to do exactly like this and this and this.” As illustrated in Chapter 4, on evidence-based practice (something that will be discussed again later), there are several specific “conceptual” documentational instruments for assessment mentioned in the interviews, as well as other guidelines and templates, all having the explicit purpose of working and documenting in a standardized manner. According to official sources, this is motivated by a wish to engage only in scientifically proven ways of working and to reduce or eradicate the differences found in different locations and between different social workers. Standardization, it is believed, will deliver the *same* social work regardless of location (Socialstyrelsen 2002), although according to the excerpts above, and as argued in Chapter 4, it will not necessarily be *better*, either from a social worker’s or from a client’s perspective. Rather, the standardization process runs the risk of forcing both social workers and clients into a prefabricated mold, with a bad fit and without context. Let us however leave the consequences of standardization aside for now and instead look a bit more closely at the central argument put forth in these interviews; namely, that excessive and copious documentation will ensure the rule of law and ultimately prevent neglect and abuse.

## The non-performativity of documentation

A recent Swedish government inquiry (SOU) examined the neglect of children in custody and in some kind of placement. The inquiry was initiated in 2006<sup>48</sup> with the aim of scrutinizing serious instances of abuse and neglect of children in the institutions of social services and in foster care (Dir. 2006:75). In its final publication (SOU 2011:61) it claims to have shown “that the mistakes within social work have been repeated through decades” (SOU 2011:61, p. 303) and “concludes that knowledge of the existence of neglect and what to do to handle and correct it, is already known and has been known for many years” (SOU 2011:61, p 291), adding that “it is not the lack of critique or auditing that has prevented the improvement of children’s safety in social care” (SOU 2011:61, p 291). Nevertheless, the main suggestion about what measures ought to be deployed still concerns monitoring and supervision, one of the points being to regularly acquire information by interviewing the children themselves. Because then “the authorities will, to a greater extent know the living conditions of children in custody or in some form of placement in the social services” (SOU 2011:61, p 304). And this is suggested while simultaneously stating that the inquiry has met with social workers who “did not dare to report neglect or insufficient resources to management out of fear of reprisals or being perceived as difficult and bothersome and because it could impact negatively upon their careers” (SOU 2011:61, p. 301). The inquiry also claims that it has met with social workers who have “reported alarming deficiencies but were met by an uninterested management which argued that funds were insufficient and that municipal budget stability was the top priority” (SOU 2011:61, p. 301). It seems as though the conclusions and the suggested measures are inconsistent. If the conditions were already known, for decades even, why primarily suggest measures designed to gather more information? Why the faith in documentation?

Later, I read the news regarding eight separate instances of detainees dying while in custody during the years 2012–2013. The news headline reads “Lack of documentation in detention centers” (SVT Text 2013) and I turn to political scientist Carol Bacchis’ (2009) policy analysis question “What’s the problem represented to be?” in order to understand what was puzzling about this headline. In this instance, the problem with neglect, abuse and death in custody is not represented to be death itself, but that it was not documented thoroughly enough. And hence the focus is not on (preventing) deaths, but on documenting them more thoroughly. Social-work scholar Tommy

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<sup>48</sup> Formally there has been more than one inquiry, but they are closely related and I treat them as parts of the same inquiry for pedagogical reasons.

Lundström argues that the growth of instruments for the assessment of risk and need creates a preoccupation with that particular part of the process in social work and thus diverts both attention and the allocation of resources from the (development of) actual treatment (Lundström 2011b). Turning back to the aforementioned inquiry on neglect in the social services; despite knowing that the abuse has been known about for years, the focus of the suggested measures is on *knowing* the abuse through more documentation, not on the abuse itself. Even though documenting abuse and learning from it may help in deploying measures to limit the problem of abuse in the future, (even though the inquiry seems hesitant about drawing such a conclusion given that it claims the abuse has already *been* known), it seems as though the documentation itself is regarded as the proper response, as a performative action. Sara Ahmed (2004a) has pointed out that current neoliberal policies to fix problems can be seen as performative actions in themselves. She gives a personal example regarding her participation in the production of a race-equality policy at the university where she was employed. Producing such a policy is mandatory by law in the UK and, although her intention in participating was to try to influence the policy towards taking action in a critical anti-racist direction, her bitter conclusion regarding the document itself was that the university:

was praised for its policy, and the Vice-Chancellor was able to congratulate the university on its performance: we did well. *A document that documented the racism of the university became usable as a measure of good performance.* (Ahmed 2004a:9, Italics in original)

My point in using Ahmed's line of argument is to demonstrate the analogy with documenting neglect and abuse in social work. In itself, documentation can hardly be seen as performative because it does not tackle or prevent abuse. Yet meticulous documentation seems to be a popular response to a variety of problems, not only in social work. In fact Ahmed can see:

a broader shift towards what we could call a politics of declaration, in which institutions as well as individuals 'admit' to forms of bad practice, and in which the 'admission' itself becomes seen as good practice. (Ahmed 2004a:11)

So, in light of the above I ask again, why this obsession with documentation? It is deployed with the aim of ensuring the rule of law and preventing abuse and neglect, but it may have such effects only indirectly at best. But can it serve other functions? Simon speaks about rigorous documentation and mentions the recent case of a young girl in the municipality of Karlskrona who was killed by her foster parent(s):

They keep talking about where the fax went [...] “The fax, the fax, the fax!” [...] and the purpose is also to find a scapegoat. They don’t want to acknowledge [...] that there are several people involved and that it’s like a process.

Perhaps focusing on something other than the actual abuse, in this case a critical fax, but still representing it as “doing something”, is a way to avoid a discussion about the fundamental problems of (abuse in) custodial settings and foster care? Focusing on the fax and who “missed it” also avoids acknowledging the fact that social work will always include risks. Sticking with this argument, I suggest that documentational practices can function as an alibi or even a diversionary maneuver. Keeping in mind the debate in social work about the tension between repression and emancipation in the social worker/client relationship (Denvall & Vinnerljung 2006, Skau 2007, Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006, Herz 2012), perhaps the preoccupation with documentation serves to enable social workers to engage in cognitive suppression of malign power and express a wish for the exercise of *benign* power? If so, this may in fact make it even more difficult to criticize malpractices in social work because, if meticulous documentation is seen as the general solution to repression and abuse and since such practices have already been massively deployed, albeit with limited enthusiasm and in a sanitized manner, it may be regarded as a declaration of an always-present monitoring and scrutiny. Such a promise of constant monitoring through excessive documentation may then serve to undermine other warrants of scrutiny and critique. Indeed, Ahmed points to the inherent dangers in such a practice:

It reminds us that the transformation of ‘the critical’ into a property, as something we have or do, allows ‘the critical’ to become a performance indicator, or a measure of value. (Ahmed 2004a:10)

The critical stops being an activity and becomes instead an empty assurance. It is as though the scrutiny and critique have become reified as constituted themselves into documents; critique has turned into a property as Ahmed says, but not just any kind of property. Has it even turned into a valuable good? It could also be argued that such a practice may serve as a protective veil over power because, if declarations of constant monitoring have been made, and insufficient monitoring is seen as the general problem, rather than the neglect and abuse itself, what then can possibly be the point of keeping a discussion about problems of neglect alive? The risk is that the deployments of power will be harder to detect and criticize from either an internal or an external standpoint. Documenting social work may therefore serve as a way to de-politicize and legitimize the exercise of (malign) power,

demonstrating the intermeshing of power and knowledge. Directing focus away from (other) problems is the topic of the following story from Simon:

Half an hour at the latest work meeting was about the performance goals, that the personnel survey from last autumn revealed 25–30 per cent trust in the manager. Not that good. Then the goal was to be set at 90 per cent. I mean, what the hell kind of a dialogue is that? Seriously? But then one of them said “isn’t it more reasonable to set the goal at 60 per cent?” You see? In those situations, you just feel like leaving the room. What kind of conversation is that, whether we should set the goal of trust at 60 per cent? It’s just, it’s completely, rather than to say, “now we have to do something to improve the relationship, the trust in the manager,” to talk about it. But no, we’re setting target numbers. It makes you wonder what kind of environment you’re in when that happens. It’s the emperor’s [new clothes], I mean it’s, nobody dares to say, “but what the hell is this?”

The practice of documenting and measuring trust in management through transforming that trust into a number is a common practice in Swedish working life (it is done regularly at my own institution, for instance). In this case, Simon, who is so disturbed that he struggles to find words, regards a discussion on the target level of trust as a way to hide what is common knowledge, referring to the emperor’s new clothes. The discussion seems to function to divert attention from the actual problem, the lack of trust. Instead of discussing the problem, the numbers are turned into the central issue.

Almost as though it were a farce, some months after the news flash about undocumented deaths in detainment centers discussed above, a similar story appears on the news-ticker. The headline reads: “Critique over plunge from balcony”. During a client meeting in which the Swedish municipality of Stenungsund denied space at a home for elders to a woman and her husband, the 84-year-old woman plunged to her death from a balcony. The recently established government audit authority, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), voices a critique of these events. The critique, however, is focused on deficient documentation of the application procedure and the fact that the municipality did not have a documented human rights policy<sup>49</sup> (GP 2014).

Most of the social workers I spoke to argue either explicitly or implicitly in ways that make me assume that they consider “actual” social work to be productive and the administrative work of documenting and measuring to be

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<sup>49</sup> The requested policy was on “värdegrundsarbete”. The concept of “värdegrund” is difficult to translate. Literally it means “foundation of values”, but I believe that “human rights” gives a better association and works better in translation.

non-productive. But it seems as though documenting and measuring social work is (becoming) prioritized over the “actual” social work itself (see also Hall 2012). As illustrated in this chapter, when management “helps” social workers to prioritize, they are forced to choose paperwork over meeting clients. Thus, what has been or perhaps should be considered “productive” has switched places with the “re-productive”. Strangely enough, it seems as though the financial scrutiny and austerity schemes in social work never affect the administrative work of documenting and measuring, only the so-called actual social work. To speak in the lingo of the auto industry’s management tool, LEAN,<sup>50</sup> is actual social work turning into waste?

## The performance of documentation

Considering that the official reasons for the various documentational procedures are vague and, as I have argued in the previous section, that they do not really perform what they present themselves as doing, no doubt something is likely to happen from introducing such a scheme. Instead of viewing documentation as only non-performative, it may also be seen as productive, although performing *different* functions from those formally claimed, and not necessarily less effective or less important. One such possible function concerns what the act of measuring or documenting may do to the (social) work itself. Former social minister Göran Hägglund stated at an event concerning “the elderly”<sup>51</sup> that “What is not measured will not be done,” which is just about the same as the so-called Balanced Scorecard philosophy, a management strategy which focuses on performance: What gets measured gets done. Speaking about documenting social work and what does not get documented, interviewee Olivia says:

**Olivia:** Treatment, in social work, then you’re obliged to document. Well because, you’re always hunting for results. That’s what’s being weighed and measured. But all the people I meet, who do not have any treatment, that’s made invisible, the social work in the social services.

**Marcus:** Exactly, that it’s not considered or categorized as a form of treatment. Meaning that what is not documented.

**Olivia:** Yes, exactly.

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<sup>50</sup> LEAN is a management production strategy originally developed by Toyota Motor Company, and now embraced by several public authorities (although it is not dominant in social work, see SKL 2011). Key components in the LEAN strategy are to work from the perspective of the customer who consumes a product or service, and to eliminate wasted resources, meaning whatever a customer is not willing to pay for, such as idle time in the production process (Womack & Jones 1991, Womack et al. 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Äldreriksdagen March 25th 2014 at the venue Älvsjömässan.

**Marcus:** If it's not documented, it doesn't exist, sort of?

**Olivia:** Yes, sort of. All of it under the pretense of the rule of law. That's how they hammer it into us.

As argued by several people in the chapter on EBP (Chapter 4), the relationship between social worker and client is important, more important than the actual content of the treatment. However, because social work is more than just the actual treatment, the focus on documenting the treatment makes the other, perhaps equally important, social work invisible. Perhaps it will also undermine the desire to do such things as just talking? (See Rogowski 2012). Rosa talks in similar ways about the difficulty of evaluating social work:

**Rosa:** I think it's really hard to evaluate social work. Really difficult. Like I believe I did some really good supportive motivational work about ten days ago, when a client had a relapse [...] And then I did some really great motivational work over the phone. By text messages. How do you evaluate that? Nobody comes and looks at that, or nobody even knows that I, what I do.

**Marcus:** No, because you don't document it.

**Rosa:** Yes I do, I enter into the case notes that I've sent text messages to encourage him to, but nobody reviews the case notes like that, it's [only] in the ASI template and the RBS (result-based governing template) [...] so then it's not visible. And then it doesn't count.

Following the meticulous documentation procedures, the text messages are documented, but this work is rendered invisible because it is only in the templates of ASI and RBS that an evaluation is done. And as such it does not count. It is as though the event has not happened if it is not documented and, as such, the social worker gets no recognition for her work. As Philip Auslander argues:

The act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such. Documentation does not simply generate images and statements that describe an autonomous performance: it produces an event as a performance. (Auslander 2006:5)

Auslander is talking about performing arts and the documentation of an artistic performance. However, it seems that the same reasoning is applicable when it comes to documenting social work, that the documentation of an event is constitutive of that event both in the eyes of management and to some extent also to the social worker her- or himself. It becomes factual when documented, and "The space of the document [...] thus becomes the only space in which the performance occurs" (Auslander 2006:2). What might be the consequences of such a practice? Will the

documentation and measurement itself direct attention away from the in-betweens of social work? Will social workers gradually cease to engage in anything that is not documented? That is the consequence according to Olivia:

I'm thinking like this, as Tapio Salonen says, 25–30 per cent of the total budget for financial support is claimed for [...] administering this shit. [...] The Social Affairs Inspectors<sup>52</sup> who reviewed my city came to the conclusion that social workers at financial support never reached article number two, which is the social work.

## Client monitors

Although some of the consequences of the excessive documentation *may* be unintended, as in the examples above where the swelling of administration will block the actual social work, some of its other consequences can rarely be seen as unintended or innocent. This I believe is the case in the social work field of financial support where, in order to get money, clients have to produce all kinds of documented proof of their predicament, activity and whereabouts.<sup>53</sup> Maude tells me that within financial support there is an insanely detailed administration around requesting proof such as receipts, in order for clients to be granted support “It’s all control, control, control and money, money money. It’s disgusting.” But she says that it was not always like this:

The older ones describe how it worked in the ‘80s. Then [financial support] was like the nexus of social work, that’s where you met people who didn’t have any other contacts, to engage them and, like, motivate them to perhaps receive other kinds of measures or treatment. So that’s really sad.

Another interviewee, Åsa, says that the time available for doing social work has decreased due to administration and controlling the clients and similarly Nora says that the contemporary way of working is not about helping people, it is about exercising control:

If you work at financial support, there’s no end to the control of people. You’re a controller and it’s not a focus on, I mean, if you work with financial support I believe helping people to find a better source of income should be the focus. Financial support

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<sup>52</sup> In Swedish: socialinspektörerna.

<sup>53</sup> There are several accounts of this, although only four of the interviewees are or have been employed to perform such tasks. Others have had numerous contacts with colleagues at financial support in their client work and some of the narratives are derived from their interactions with clients and their recounting of experiences.

was never intended to be long-term funding, more of a temporary aid in emergencies. Then that should be the focus, not controlling people down to every last detail, as it is now.

It seems as though the transformation that is being narrated constitutes two parallel processes. On the one hand, there are material limitations to conducting proper social work within financial support, such as a lack of time. On the other hand, the stories of control also suggest that there are ideological reasons behind it, the overt demands for control, which also undermine any “actual” social work.

What does this look like in practice? Paula tells me that there are several criteria to be met in order to be applicable for support. You have to apply for jobs and housing, to engage in work-like activities or language courses, and this constitutes a control that she thinks is absurd. In regards to the daily and mandatory work application activity, Olivia says that several of her clients have been engaged in such an activity, two hours a day, for years. Although she has not met a single person who claimed it was of any use, if they do not show up, their support is denied (similar conclusions on the uselessness of such activities are drawn in Milton 2006, Salonen 2006). Maude says that you have to file an application each month and in every application you must enclose documented proof of an apartment lease, and a receipt for last month’s rent so that the social services are able to ascertain, before granting next month’s support, that the previous rent was paid. You also have to produce receipts for medicines, and anything out of the ordinary for which you might apply. She continues:

Then you have to enclose, for instance, your reports of this activity that we have decided you should attend, like a job application activity,<sup>54</sup> or something like that, and if you have been ill you’re supposed to submit a certification of that and blah, blah, blah. If you’re homeless you’re supposed to submit lists to prove that you have searched for apartments on housing websites. It’s extreme.

It seems that in order to prove yourself eligible, or worthy of financial support, you have to produce documented proof of all sorts of things. The list is long and it is obvious that such demands require a lot from the clients. Producing these documents does not in itself help to solve their predicaments, but it is rather something that takes time and effort, thus possibly hampering any process of change for the better. Nora recounts some examples of what happens to the clients when such a standard is applied:

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<sup>54</sup> In Swedish: Jobbtorg.

I certainly have some horrible examples from, reality, so to speak. Like this young woman, her parents lived in another part of Sweden and they sent her money for a train ticket to come visit. Then the social services considered this an income and it was hence deducted from her financial support. And another, it was a young couple who got married and their relatives collected money to buy a trip for their honeymoon. The couple were told by the social services to ask for the cash instead to use for their daily support. Or an unemployed 50-year-old, about to turn 50 and his friends had collected money to give him because they knew he had financial troubles, and I think they collected a couple of thousand crowns. Unfortunately, they deposited the money in his bank account, with the result that the birthday present ended up being that he did not have to apply for financial support that month. He had to live off that money, it was considered an income. I mean, this is a kind of petty greed that, when I think about it, makes me sick.

These examples seem to illustrate that the overall goal is to make sure that no client receives “too much” or acquires financial support on false or casual grounds. Only as a secondary consideration, or perhaps not at all, comes the ambition to improve the client’s situation. Thinking of it makes Nora feel sick, which may be connected to the argument in the chapter on emotions, that sensations of distress may be a kind of judgment. In the particular city where Olivia works, new guidelines for financial support have recently been adopted. In this document, a full one hundred pages long, it is stated among other things that the social worker should request to see the client’s passport to make sure that they have not been abroad.

You only have the right to financial support if you are at home and at the disposal of the labor market. [...] You’re supposed to inspect every page [in the passport], make copies, but it doesn’t end there, some people may have a passport from their home land [...] that should also be requested.

It seems there is no end to the kind of documents that need to be produced or controlled. This control is hard to handle for many clients. To be able to keep track of all purchases and produce documents to prove your activities and whereabouts can be difficult for anyone, and especially for clients of social work. Olivia tells me that the only thing that counts are attestations, written proof, but that the social services make requests for documents that are impossible to produce or do not even exist. She explains:

“You have to check in at the housing office.” “Yes, but I have no [computer], I can’t.” “Then you have to go down to the [public computers at the] civic offices, they can help you.” Imagine it yourself, trying to do something difficult, it’s a true uphill struggle, and on top of that you’re supposed to ask a stranger “I’m supposed to report to...” and in order to check in at the housing office, you need an e-mail address. Why on earth should

you have an e-mail address when you don't even have access to a computer, not to mention having the guts to enter a public library and, like, acquire a library card to be able to sign up for [a computer for] 15 minutes. It's like, I become so upset. Then you haven't understood it. A majority of people can handle this, but a lot can't. But it's like we pretend. If they can't handle it, that's not our responsibility, it's an adult. [...] If you are separated, you're a man, and have a huge conflict with your ex-wife, but you have visiting rights. Then the legal guardian, where the children are formally living, has to write a testimonial "I hereby testify that my children see their father Thursday to Sunday." If not, you won't get extra food money for your kids. I meet quite a lot of those, who can't produce such a testimonial and that is not in the best interests of the child.

Olivia is upset because someone, somewhere, has decided to make demands that are difficult for clients to meet. So difficult that it becomes an obstacle in their lives, almost like a punishment, to subject themselves to disciplining activities in order to be eligible for aid. She tries to explain to me the things that those who make the rules seem to be unaware of. Towards the latter part of the quote, however, she seems to suggest that it might even be a deliberate choice, that "we pretend". Paula, who works with housing support, tells me that every month there are families who come to her and say: "we were not granted financial support this month because there was a document we did not enclose" and gives another example of a bureaucratic procedure that works to the disadvantage of clients.

**Paula:** She had been living on [the money from] two child benefits and one housing subsidy. She was about four thousand below the standard norm of income, and had been ever since she got to Hilltown a year ago. Because she had not filled out that damned application correctly, she had not ticked the box: 'May 2014'. So she had not formally applied for the standard norm of income, only for the rent and a bus pass. She didn't tick the box so she was considered not to have applied.

**Marcus:** And nobody wondered why?

**Paula:** You know, then they won't have to pay, because the client always has an individual responsibility.

Because producing all the necessary documents is difficult, even impossible for some, and because the application forms are themselves complicated, sometimes a small formality will allow the social services to deny support. It seems from what Paula says that bureaucratic formalities and the trope of individual responsibility are used as a way to deny support and save money. Tina argues in a similar way, that the rigorous control is not an assessment of the clients' needs, but rather a process to produce evidence that makes it possible to deny their request. Paula describes what social work at the division of financial support looks like and also describes hunting for reasons to deny benefits through rigid rules:

**Paula:** You sit there and scrutinize the bank account history for three months back, and question it. That's what the time is used for at financial support. And you call employers or the people at SFI (Swedish language instruction for adult immigrants) and like: "She hasn't been there in four days, then she hasn't fulfilled her obligation." But those four days she was at home taking care of her sick children, unaware that she was supposed to call the Social Insurance Agency or the case worker or the daycare center.

**Marcus:** And that isn't taken into account?

**Paula:** Oh no, it's a rejection [on the application], you haven't fulfilled your duties.

Maude argues that financial support has two missions, to assess the need for financial support and to help people to take care of themselves, financially. And the only thing they do now is to assess the need for financial support. "They are barely doing any social work, I mean to improve the situation for the individual." Tina tells me that the biggest problem she experienced when working at financial support was that she saw what needed to be done, but there was no time to do it. I then ask: "what *did* you do with your work time?" and she replies: "Make demands. So I can come to a decision." In many of these accounts, there is an air of incomprehension. How can they/we treat the clients like this? Some express sadness while others also try to provide an answer. Nora says:

It's some kind of, I believe, very ugly principle, where you are supposed to presuppose that the clients are lazy, work-shy, they don't want to work, they just want to loiter [...] and on top of that they are dishonest [...] they can if they want to and most likely they have some additional source of income. Therefore, they have to show their bank account history, I think it's gone over the top completely.

According to Nora, what makes such a scheme possible, similar to what has been described in numerous quotes above, is the belief that the clients are not really worthy of help, that many clients have only themselves to blame for their predicaments (Brown 2015, Wacquant 2004, Bauman 1999). This is founded on a belief that the clients are lazy and dishonest. Thus, they have to prove their worthiness for financial support. Olivia argues in a similar way; as if grown human beings do not want to work, do not want to get in line for a housing lease. Why else are we controlling everything they do? She also argues that this certainly is not designed to emancipate human capacity and says that with this system of control "We are so far away from the founding principles of the law of the social services." Vera argues in a similar way:

The view of our citizens who are in need of support has changed [...] like in financial support, it's like the wrong focus. It's not from the law of the social services, that the individual should be in focus, instead you're just following, the budget and you're supposed to fill in all these forms, which is considered a lot more important. Your application can be denied if you haven't submitted all the proper forms [...] and it's like as a social worker you're supposed to question that, almost like everyone is bluffing. That's how it feels.

From these narratives, it seems as though there exists a culture of mistrust, in particular within the financial support branch of social work. Such a culture seems to aid in austerity schemes as it allows for the dehumanization of clients. It is a culture that has the function of controlling people and denying necessary aid to as many as possible. Tina tells me of a puzzling procedure connected to short-term employment:

Many have clients who are on short-term employment, for like three months, through the mandatory job application activity. This doesn't turn into anything further, the employers exploit this because it's cheap labor. Then they come back to financial support but now they're not supposed to meet the same social worker, instead they switch to a different one. So they'll have to start all over, all the time. To make it more difficult, I guess. To discourage people from applying, at least that's my experience.

The prescribed way to appoint a social worker following a period of short-term employment is specifically *not* to appoint the same person as before. Tina believes the reason is to make it more difficult for the clients, and ultimately to discourage them from applying altogether. This may also have to do with the social workers themselves and not only the client, in terms of the question of proximity to the clients addressed in Chapter 5 regarding emotions and relationships in social work. The more distant and less engaged you get, the easier it will be to “not care” about the predicaments of the client and to deny applications for financial support or treatment. As such, the prescribed way of working has the function of getting in between the client and social worker, to prevent empathy and solidarity from turning into “leniency”. I have gathered 100 assessments from two social services offices in the two areas of children and financial support (see methodology chapter for a description of this). In the process of anonymizing the assessments, I became aware that several different social workers had made entries into the case notes of a single client. I asked the social worker who had helped me to gain access to the files about this and she said that it is common, mostly because of the massive rotation and turnover of employees and because of the merging of smaller offices into one very large one. As a result, several different social workers handle the contact with each client. But back in the days when both the organization and the workforce were

smaller, there was only one social worker who had contact with any specific client. According to Grell et al. (2013:229), the turn towards specialization within social work and organizing it into specific subcategories of social problems, also increases the number of social workers engaged with each client. In the files, I also noticed that, in the assessments of children, their surnames were always spelled out, up to 25 or 50 times in the same assessment. However, the assessments of the adults at financial support almost never gave a name. Sometimes they were addressed by a first-name abbreviation but usually they were either indirectly described like “Has worked at restaurant but...” or by the etiquette of “Applicant” or simply “App”. I would argue that this may be a technique to create distance and dehumanization, in collaboration with a culture of mistrust, a fashion that makes it easier not to care and to deny the financial needs of the client.

What I believe is evident from the excerpts above is that the demand to produce all sorts of documentation, in particular in financial support, is a general technique designed to exercise control over the clients. Let us, however, look a bit more closely at *one* of these practices, the mandatory and daily job application activity which is a condition for being granted financial support, briefly mentioned above. In examining two such programs, the most acclaimed municipal programs for long-term unemployed clients in social services, social work scholar Tapio Salonen (2006) struggles to understand its popularity. Because neither the Uppsala Model, nor the Skärholmen Model can be argued to reduce unemployment more effectively than the general programs, and subsequently Salonen examines other explanations. He finds first of all a vast reduction in the total costs of social welfare where the programs are deployed: not because more clients were finding employment, rather it was the opposite. Non-compliance means risking losing funding, which may in fact help to explain the reduction in costs because of the strict enforcement of the rules. A “threat-effect” is another explanation that has been suggested for the reduced costs, meaning that clients by their “own” choice will drop out (and lose funding) because the content of the program is experienced as dehumanizing or poorly targeted to the client’s needs. But are there other reasons than cutting costs? Salonen does find what he calls moral reasons for its implementation and popularity because the program entails overt elements of control and conditionality. Initially, a thorough “investigation” of the client’s situation is carried out, then the client has to prove their eligibility for funding by displaying active job-seeking behavior eight hours a day, and they also have to show up for several checkup meetings with social workers. Salonen connects this seemingly new style of governing to an ideological and moral turn in social policies and argues that its popularity has to be connected to its *legitimizing* effect. The mere fact that it entails more control,

conditionality and requirements of compliance, gives both politicians and social workers the appearance of potent handling of pressing problems. Salonen thus sees these moral incentives as crucial in understanding the popularity of these programs, because it is cheaper and because they offer a style of governing that connects to classical, recently deemed obsolete,<sup>55</sup> logics of handling “paupers”. Such repressive techniques differ from many of the techniques of governing previously examined in this thesis, because this kind of control is not exercised through the “free” subjects of governmentality, but rather through a direct and open force (MacCannell & MacCannell 1993:205). This may also be understood in the light of the works of Wendy Brown. She argues that the contemporary neoliberal financialized subject is expected to cater for their own future through investments in their human capital. Those who do not, those who do not take individual responsibility and contribute to economic growth, are considered lazy and dependent (2015:211–212, see also Fraser & Gordon 1994).

As argued above, these meticulous processes of producing and keeping files in social work enables the exercise of power, but in relation to the clients this exercise may also be labeled a punitive measure (Lorenz 2005) or even a form of violence (MacCannell & MacCannell 1993:213). Violence in an administrative form is defined by Dean MacCannell and Juliet Flower MacCannell (1993:213) as the:

zealous and sadistic execution of office in such a way that it destroys life chances [...] of those who come in contact with the organization [...] it is not an abuse of the *rules* [...] Rather, it is a heartless, soul-killing over-application of rules and regulations [...] Everyone is involved in the ‘process’ together so no one is responsible for it.

Without pointing fingers or claiming that social workers engaged in this meticulous control are sadistic, the point I am trying to make is rather that, when following the social work guidelines described above, whilst immersed in a culture of mistrust towards the clients, the effects upon the clients may be labeled heartless or even sadistic, although no one individual is or feels responsible for it. This is also similar to Hanna Arendt’s (1969) comment about the dehumanizing effects of a growing faceless administrative exercise of power (quoted in the chapter on emotions): “the rule by Nobody is not no-rule,” it is rather a “form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act.” The effects may be labeled a form of violence in another way as well. Slavoj Žižek (2008) makes distinctions and connections between different kinds of violence that are worth considering here. Subjective violence basically means deliberate individual actions of

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<sup>55</sup> Following a critique formulated in the 1960s (Kullberg 2011).

physical violence aimed at doing harm. Symbolic violence is manifested in language, discourse and representations of reality such as stereotypes, stigma or discrimination. *Systemic* violence, however, relates to the distribution of material, symbolic and discursive resources such as economic inequality and a refusal of the rights of citizenship: “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek 2008:1). Žižek urges us to take a step back and avoid the decoy of the visible, horrific and fascinating “subjective” violence perpetrated by a recognizable agent, and look at the symbolic and systemic violence as well, along with their interconnectedness to each other and to subjective violence. By the use of such a distinction, the techniques or schemes of control deployed (particularly) in the financial support section of social services may be seen as a combination of symbolic violence – they’re lazy, they don’t want to work, they have money hidden etc. – and systemic violence, as their serfdom is perpetuated and their rights as citizens, according to the laws that regulate the social services, are in practice denied. Although the general official task of social work is to support and aid people, according to their own needs (as stipulated by the law and in accordance with some kind of ethos of social work), what these examples and my analysis reveal is that people in severe predicaments who ask for help are sometimes met with violence.

## **Social workers on track**

As described in this chapter, social workers are engaged in excessive and meticulous systems of documentation or, to phrase it differently, in different forms of knowledge production. This includes activities such as making assessments of the clients’ needs using standardized and digitalized templates (including mandatory follow-ups), making copious and continuous case notes (also digitalized), filling in lists of indicators at several stages of the assessment process (also digitalized) and entering values into the RBS (result-based governing system, also digitalized). The principal reasons given so far for this meticulous production of knowledge are to ensure the rule of law and to ensure that local differences are ironed out through standardization (although this probably excludes documentation such as lists of indicators and RBS). Another is to provide the client with information, a third is to ease the transition of a case between one social worker and another, and a fourth is to cover the back of the social services if scrutinized by government authorities. The fifth, elaborated upon in the previous section, is simply to control the clients. However, this abundance of knowledge production may also function in yet another way: to control the

social workers (Liljegren & Parding 2010:284). This is the topic in some of the narratives. Olivia connects the desire for control to NPM:

It's in this financialized culture, which has, somehow, taken over public services. I mean, new public management, you think you have control if things are documented and evaluated.

Olivia, who has pondered these matters, believes it is the logic of economy, expressed as NPM, which entails a belief that public services may be controlled if they are documented and evaluated. Similarly, Simon understands the production of knowledge in EBP (see Chapter 4) as a system of control over social workers. Nora says we are in a crazy “documentation hysteria” and when I ask her what she thinks is the purpose of the increased demands on documentation she says it is because “the management wants to control and monitor us.” The digitalized archival system where the files and documents are produced and stored allows for management to control the progression of each case, without telling the social worker. It is impossible to know whether they do check or not unless the managers bring it up themselves. Vera, who has had her fair share of conflicts with her manager, tells me:

**Vera:** She uses techniques of domination [...] she went into the system and checked everything that I'd done [...] or had not done, I should say [...] she didn't give me the time I needed to work on my backlog [...] and also, I was supposed to, because I was a union representative, I was supposed to have a day off for the union work. But I have as many cases as someone who works full time [...].

**Marcus:** So she logged into some kind of...

**Vera:** Into the system and checked my case notes and if I, on which cases I was behind.

**Marcus:** And what was the purpose of that?

**Vera:** To clamp down on me. Domination techniques, that's what they do.

Vera had been on sick leave for stress-related illness, and when she returned to work, the backlog was huge. However, it seems that the management had limited understanding of her workload or, as Vera understands it, did not really care. Instead of getting extra time for the backlog and the union work, she was scrutinized by her manager, suggesting she was lazy, an approach that Vera perceives as a technique of domination. Maude tells me a similar story from her former workplace, where the supervisor “controlled exactly what I had done when I worked at home.” Nora said that the documentation procedures are a way for management to control her, so I ask her how this is manifested:

**Nora:** Well, they go into the system and check [...] in the case files, how you've written, if you've written. And if you're behind in the case you can get into trouble for it. [...] I remember once when I had a fight with my manager, we had gotten a report<sup>56</sup> on a Friday, a late Friday afternoon, and I [...] I found that it was no emergency, it can wait until next week. Come Monday morning, the manager was on my back: "why didn't you [...] do this, why haven't you initiated an assessment?" and blah, blah, blah [...]

**Marcus:** So they, like, check on you in the system?

**Nora:** Yes, in a very, in my opinion, very offensive way really. And, like, look for mistakes. Like this other time when I had initiated an assessment and like "But you haven't written the assessment!" and I said "No, I did open a file, but of course it's not finished yet, because it's not finished." I do actually have to see the client a couple of times before I can finish an assessment. [...] Things like that you know, that they, are like, really hunting you.

In the excerpts above, Nora, Vera, Olivia and Maude convey a discomfoting feeling of being monitored by the management through the digitalized documentational systems. I interpret their stories as a discomfort with the actual monitoring, but also due to not being able to know if or when the management checks up on them. Another interesting practice is that of having two social workers assigned to each case. Vera tells me why:

**Vera:** We do it differently all the time. Every individual does in their own way. You, know, that's how it is.

**Marcus:** I was under the impression that it was rather fixed, what you're supposed to fill in?

**Vera:** Yes of course, that's right, but we all have different eyes, we write uneven amounts of text, see different things. That's how it is. And that's the reason they want there to be two of us, because it's more in accordance with the rule of law.

**Marcus:** Why is that more in accordance with the rule of law?

**Vera:** Because it's four eyes that see what you have, get different, you see different things and you can discuss it and stuff like that.

**Marcus:** So you do the assessment and then some colleague glances through it quickly, or?

**Vera:** No, you have meetings together. But there is always one principal social worker who deals with the paperwork, and then you go over it together. Then both of us have been part of, met the parents, met with the kids, met others around them.

The argument that social workers do things differently, all the time, surprised me since I had previously heard plenty of stories about the standardization of social work. Even though she agrees with this, Vera points out that "we all have different eyes," suggesting that all individuals have

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<sup>56</sup> In Swedish: anmälan.

differences in perspective. So in order to achieve “the rule of law” *four eyes are watching* each case. Maybe it is a semantic triviality, but to me it seems as though the engagement of two social workers’ *eyes* works as a control gaze, that the social workers are induced to monitor each other. Certainly there is a chance that the practice of always having two social workers assigned to each case may improve social work, or at least prevent bad work. Taking instead a critical stance, one may see in such a practice yet another expression of the desire to monitor social workers. Although managers may monitor work through the archives, management control does not reach as easily into the interactions with clients (see Chapter 4, on emotions). The eyes of management cannot and would not have the time to glance into every meeting room. The four eyes practice may thus be seen as a technique of monitoring through “peer review”. Although the solidarity between social workers should be considered in such an assumption, there is reason to believe that the presence of a peer may work to prevent people going outside of the protocol and thus work to boost self-regulation. On the topic of monitoring, I ask Maude whether there are certain techniques of surveillance and control at her workplace. She replies:

**Maude:** Yes, the e-mail. I mean, I’m not sure whether they could snoop into my e-mails. And chat, there is a chat system within this municipality, the whole city, connected to the e-mail software.

**Marcus:** Chats with citizens or?

**Maude:** No, between employees.

**Marcus:** Okay.

**Maude:** It’s logged, and you have to actively change the settings in order for it not to be saved in a file in the e-mail software.

**Marcus:** Okay. Does it feel like you are aware of that, like next time [you chat]?

**Maude:** I’ve begun to be, a bit, yes.

The possibility that management may check e-mails and chat conversations in the computer archives makes Maude think twice before writing anything that she would not want management to know about. In this sense, these various systems of collecting information (or knowledge production), these digitalized archives of human interaction, both makes workers vulnerable to management repression and produces a kind of self-control, making sure to keep up with the pace and thinking twice before engaging in critique or clandestine activities (see also Paulsen 2015:44–45).

As I argued at the end of the previous section, these excerpts, regarding both clients and social workers, suggest that the acts of documentation constitute governing techniques. The production of all sorts of information, “documents” and the retention of files in social work enables the exercise of

power. As understood by Foucault (see analytical framework), this technique enables the exercise of power whilst *gathering* the data and through the use of the accumulated archives in the digitalized vaults because, through the files, there is always the possibility to check up on your work. In fact, Jacques Derrida (Derrida & Prenowitz 1996) has made interesting points about the duality in the term “archive” since etymologically it means both commencement (as in beginning, origin) and commandment (as in rule). An archive is simultaneously a physical location for historical records and files, and the house of the commander, from the Greek *archeion*. Thus, within the practice of both producing and having access to archives, lies an opportunity for power. In the interview with Christina, she makes a connection between “benevolent” forms of evaluation and control that is worth pursuing. Christina talks about the increasing documentation and I ask:

**Marcus:** Why has it become like that?

**Christina:** It’s some, partly like some kind of structuring of what we’re actually doing, in the social services I mean.

**Marcus:** Was there a need for that, do you think?

**Christina:** It, I believe there is a need for that. But it’s also some kind of Big Brother Society thing, I believe. I mean, all sorts of things, cameras in public places, I think it’s a general, like, if you force everyone to do exactly like this and this and this. And BBIC has helped in that, with rather complicated templates, not always that pedagogical. But we have always been obliged to write case files and, like, do everything meticulously. Although it hasn’t always been done.

**Marcus:** But does it feel like some kind of, way to control you, to demand this documentation and these routines and everything?

**Christina:** Yes, it’s partly that, but also an attempt to structure to see what the treatment amounts to. Does it improve the situation for the children or what are we doing?

**Marcus:** Didn’t you know before?

**Christina:** We still don’t know.

**Marcus:** No.

**Christina:** There’s so little research on that, on, there exists research on some treatments, but it’s really difficult to tell what does what. But that’s what we’re doing now, also, in this project, trying to find a way, we have something called RBS, which is result-based governing, where we enter all the children and adolescents subjected to violence, in like a document. We follow those cases to see, like, what happens during the process. So there is that need too, which is interesting and good, like. So it’s like two sides of the coin in a way.

**Marcus:** Mm, right. The control is also productive, in a way.

**Christina:** Yes, in a way.

The dual purpose of documentation that Christina speaks of – control of social workers and an improved standard of social work – is an interesting reflection. I see a connection with the works of Foucault (1990, 2003) regarding the dual function of surveillance governing techniques, hence my closing comment in the above quote about control also being productive. First of all, Foucault argues that power ought not to be viewed as only prohibitory and limiting in its effects. Power also contains the possibility of producing value, both material and discursive; put simply, power is (also) productive (1990). And of course introducing practices of transparency and accountability to enhance efficiency is a function that lies at the very heart of NPM logic. When trying to understand the birth of the prison (2003), the evolution of a different and seemingly more humane punishment, Foucault traces its origin not to a change in ideals but to the increased need for disciplinary techniques, required due to, among other things, increasing urbanization, larger accumulations of wealth that needed improved protection (2003:87–88) and a general social and political unrest (2003:67). In short, changing material circumstances led to changing needs for power. A spatial setting shaped within a certain enclosed space is an important technology for developing disciplinary techniques because a confined space where people are kept, rather than people who are widely dispersed, enables better monitoring and opens up opportunities for the correction of behavior. Improved monitoring also creates a sense of *being* monitored. The close monitoring thus enables both the reduction of idle-time and the undermining of mischief. Foucault argues that the structure of settings such as factories, schools, military camps, hospitals, prisons etc. as enclosed physical entities, enabled close monitoring and, in capitalist production, the reduction of idle-time, which had the effect of both increasing profit through higher efficiency *and* undermining (the maneuver for) resistance. Christina describes the increased documentation in social work in similar terms, as a monitoring technique to improve the control over *and* the quality of social work. The pursuit of increased knowledge and control can thus be seen as a way to master the production of social work in the sense of acquiring complete knowledge of something *and* to reduce the workers to subjugation. Foucault speaks of a relationship between the supervisor and the worker, a teacher who monitors the students, a guard who monitors inmates etc., but now, the social worker not only documents and monitors the client, but indirectly also her- or himself. The narrative in this chapter suggests that it is the social worker who is forced to monitor and master *her own* production, through being compelled to minutely document her every move, communication and thought.

## Concluding remarks

One important aspect of the exercise of power through practices of documentation lies in the element of uncertainty. As I argued above, Nora, Vera, Olivia and Maude express a sense of unease about being monitored through the digitalized documental systems, of not knowing *if* or *when* they are being monitored. There is no physical presence of the power overseeing them and no limitation to the present time. Seeing the face of your adversary, although not pleasant in itself, may at least give a sense of predictability and an awareness of when and how to engage in practices of concealment and resistance. In that sense, this particular system of surveillance is perhaps even more efficient than the Panopticon prison envisioned by Jeremy Bentham (Foucault 2003). Because the possible monitoring is extended into the future – managers or auditing authorities (and hypothetically also clients) can check your actions retrospectively – the knowledge that one might be monitored at any time, will likely, at least in some, induce an effective discipline through self-control. As such, knowledge of the potency of the system and the cunning of management is evidently intertwined with the exercise of power because, in this instance, ignorance (i.e. not knowing about the potency of the digitalized archive) would induce less of a self-imposed harness on the social worker subject. One can thus conclude that knowledge *of* power may work as an instrument of submission to that very same power. This is not surprising in itself when thinking about a sovereign style of power (knowledge of the absolute power of a tyrant instills fear and submission), but is perhaps more of a surprise to those who argue that knowledge *is* power and those who expect the techniques of self-governing to be closer to freedom than sovereign techniques.

In light of this, it makes even more sense that social workers engage in the kinds of resistance to documentation that have been discussed in this chapter. Using resistance as a diagnosis of power (see analytical framework), it is interesting to ponder the documentation without enthusiasm, to voice protest over its meaninglessness, to use copy-paste, recycle old documents, document retrospectively, engage in critical discussions outside of the social services channels of communication (phone, chat, mail) and meet clients outside of the formal system, in secrecy. The fact that they do not comply exactly with what they are told to do can be interpreted as an expression of insubordination, a critique and an unwillingness to be governed “just as much” or in such a particular way, and thus as a form of resistance against the de-professionalization and tedium of the techniques of governing to which they are subjected (Foucault 2007b:46–47, see also the discussion about critique in the chapter on methodology). Although such insubordinate procedures may make slightly better use of time, and may slightly alter the

system, it can still be argued that a subjugating mechanism also/still resides in the activity itself, because it keeps the social worker preoccupied with documenting their selves and monitoring their selves at every step they take, although not as much as they are supposed to and not precisely in the prescribed way.

“To master”, as mentioned earlier (see analytical framework), has the dual etymological meaning of acquiring complete knowledge of something *and* reduce to subjugation (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). In this case, one can play with the phrase “mastery of the self”, in the sense of acquiring knowledge of one’s own work in order to improve it and also in the sense of reducing oneself to subjugation. This is the case not just because the knowledge gathered may be read by the client, a fellow social worker, management or by the government authority, the National Board of Health and Welfare, but also because it is written and read by the social worker her- or himself, creating a desire to produce accurate documentation and thus to perfect her own documentation/conduct/subjugation. The mere act of writing something down makes it visible and controllable because someone’s eyes *may* gaze upon the words, even though it may only be my own. The multi-functional governing techniques employed in the pursuit of mastery through excessive documentation in social work illustrates the close connections between knowledge and power and directs attention to the powerful effects of documentational procedures in social work. Extending my etymological exercise further, it is interesting to note that the word “documentation” itself stems from the Latin verb *docere*, meaning to teach, the same stem as the word “docile” meaning both “easily taught” and “submissive” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). Thus, etymologically, documentation and submission share a history. So, in the history of words (knowledge, documentation, docile, to master, archive etc.) as well as in contemporary practices of documentation, there is an opportunity to consider the direct connections between the production and storage of knowledge and the potency and exercise of power. Such connections are manifested in the assemblage of different governing techniques; sovereign-style power in the direct control over clients, discipline in the social workers’ meticulous gathering of information in rigid templates (keeping them busy and productive) and the self-surveillance of social workers’ own work through the documentation of their clients.



## 7. Motivational interviewing: a will to change

Many of the social workers I have spoken to tell me that they have or are about to receive training in the methodology of motivational interviewing (MI). They also tell me that engaging in education is not like a smorgasbord where you simply pick according to your preference. Rather, they are more or less commanded to school themselves to know MI and expected to work in accordance with what they have been taught. Because of my interest in dominant ways of working and because of the friction that appeared in some of the stories about MI that were told to me, I wanted to learn more and began to specifically ask about MI if the topic did not arise spontaneously. Especially interesting was what appeared to be a strong focus on the potency of individual agency and an understanding of individual responsibility. In this chapter I will analyze the social workers' narratives about this method and try to understand its rationale and popularity, how it works and with what functions. I begin this chapter by querying the proliferation and central logic of MI, then I proceed onto a critical examination of its contemporary popularity and finally I try to tease out some of the possible functions and effects of such a scheme. First, however, some short remarks to situate MI within a contemporary social work ideal of clients' will.

Sociologist Mats Börjesson and social work scholar Eva Palmblad have analyzed discourses in the social services and find the emergence of a *norm of consensus* between social worker and client. By examining social work assessments and case notes from the 1980s and 90s, the authors argue that an increased strive for consensus is expressed in the search for *unity* both in the assessment of needs and treatment and also around practical arrangements such as deciding together when to meet, how to get in contact or how often a parent should visit a child in some form of placement (Börjesson & Palmblad 2008). In connection with this, the authors also examine the tendency towards letting the client's will guide the social work process. Catchphrases as well as practices of social work express a desire to display choice, participation and empowerment for the clients. Although consensus and the eliciting of the client's will might imply an absence of coercion, the relations of power are not dismantled or made equal by the expansion of choice and the authors therefore ask critical questions regarding the client's room for maneuver within such a milieu. Pointing to developments over time, the authors illustrate the emergence of new strategies deployed by social workers to govern clients; through empowerment and individual responsibility (Börjesson & Palmblad 2008).

The results and arguments of the authors above seem in some ways to contradict what I have argued for in Chapter 6; namely, that the techniques of power found in the excessive demands for documentation applied to clients, specifically in financial support, are a direct way of demanding submission (or sovereign-style governing) and controlling the clients, and as such are quite the opposite of the consensus style of governing argued for by Börjesson and Palmblad. There is, of course, the possibility that political rationalities and governing techniques are not uniform, but rather assembled in different ways in different settings. Nevertheless, because of the extensive narratives of MI and the centrality of self-governing and conflict avoidance in MI, I will now examine this alternative path.

### **Releasing willing subjects**

Some have argued that social work concerning behavior change has traditionally focused on direct persuasion (Wahab 2005, Börjesson & Palmblad 2008, Kullberg 2011). From such an understanding, the effectiveness of getting the desired outcome through telling clients what to do, and how to do it, is being questioned and Motivational Interviewing is being proposed as an alternative and more effective method (Wahab 2005). Although I do not ask about it specifically, the method of MI comes up in several of the interviews. I ask interviewee Felicia what MI is all about and she responds:

It's about, partly to lure out and explore the client's will to change, and that it's, like, client focused. Not focused on me as an advisor or an expert. Instead to tone that down and, like, accentuate the client's own will and capability.

Denise, another interviewee, puts it like this:

MI is about inciting "change talk" in the individual. When the "change talk" is achieved, certain parts of the brain are activated...it has been observed. That doesn't happen if you give direct advice. [...] to give space for another person and let him or her lead, but still be the leader of the conversation, but still to, well you have to remove yourself really.

I ask Felicia how common MI is, if it is something that everyone uses:

**Felicia:** Yes, that's something that everyone does these days, it really is. It's like really common. Just about everyone that I know, who works in the social services, has received basic MI training.

**Marcus:** Is it something sort of new?

**Felicia:** No, it's not new, it started, or it originates from the '80s or '90s, I think.

Denise tells me that at her office they all have MI as a foundation, as a common platform and Ylva, an interviewee who works in a different municipality, tells me a similar story, that they are all expected to learn MI, although this is not the kind of training she would prefer.

**Ylva:** I think that the kind of courses I'm interested in aren't always the ones we can get through work. Then we have those that we're all supposed to go to, like MI, that's been a general training that we're all supposed to go to.

**Marcus:** Supposed to?

**Ylva:** Yeah, that's right, it's...part of it.

**Marcus:** But there's no, it's not something you can choose not to, so to speak?

**Ylva:** You can say that you don't want to, but I think that wouldn't be seen as..., because it's supposed to be a part of our way of working, MI.

Similarly, another interviewee, Tina, tells me that she and her colleagues are about to receive training but that the reasons are yet to be revealed: "So far, all they've said is that it will be launched." She also expresses confusion because such an approach is moving away from the ideal of engaging training only for the specific needs of each division or function of the social services.

It seems from the excerpts above that MI is a popular, if not standard, way of working and that a central element of MI is to accentuate the will<sup>57</sup> of the client to initiate change. However, it is interesting to ponder the popularity of MI. Of course, if something is considered "to work" (according to evidence, see Chapter 4) it is not surprising that the method quickly becomes widespread. But *who* considers MI to work? Tina does not know and does not understand the reasons for having such training. Another interviewee, Paula, tells me it is popular because it is easy for everyone to understand, but interviewee Vera tells me of the difficulties of working according to MI, although management wants it regardless:

**Vera:** It's really difficult to use. Like, so you constantly feel that you're not doing what you're supposed to and that it may become a criterion, or like an issue in the annual negotiation for wages.

**Marcus:** What do you mean by not doing what you're supposed to? That you don't attend them [the courses]?

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<sup>57</sup> The word "will" has many meanings and uses. Many of those meanings has to do with both agency and wishes, such as to have a will of one's own or to have a strong desire, or determination to do something (Webster's online dictionary 2016b). This is reflected in the many expressions constructed on "will"; ill-willed, strong-willed, willful, fire at will, the will to live, and a will, as in someone's last wishes. The analysis in this chapter, on a patient's or client's will, reflects this duality and may be understood as an intended ambiguity both in terms of what "their wishes are" but also in connection to their agency or subject.

**Vera:** That we don't, we *have* done the training, but we haven't been able to work according to it. That means we're not doing what we're supposed to. [...] we're supposed to work according to a method that is good but isn't really suitable for this field. [...]

**Marcus:** Why are you supposed to work with it then? It sounds really weird.

**Vera:** Well, you, it's somebody a bit higher up who declared, has seen, had the opinion that this sounds really positive and then it's a lot about allowing for people to influence their situation. That's like, the central point, "you can if you want to, anything that you want" [...] but that's not the case with all people. They need a lot more support and help [...] it's more suitable for well-functioning people.

The philosophy of "you can if you want to" is expressed as a possibility to "have influence", although not everyone is fit to do so according to Vera. Even though MI does not fit the demands of working with clients according to Vera (much like Tina and Ylva), she nevertheless senses an obligation to work according to such a method, something that someone higher up in the hierarchy has decided. Because working according to the prescribed methods may be relevant in the negotiations for an increased salary, the presence of MI is ensured not only through an ideal of equality and overt regimentation through massive training but also indirectly through financial incentives. The regimentation of MI in some ways means standardizing the social worker's approach to clients because the opportunities for individualized solutions are decreased. To some, this means engaging in a way of working that is not optimized for the clients, an approach that may work for highly functional people, but not for (all of) the clients of social work. Although treating everyone as your equal may be a matter of equality, it may prove harmful to clients. Speaking about the dangers of EBP and the regimentation of social work, Vera tells me that all employees at the social services where she works were supposed to enroll in MI training:

We are supposed to work according to it. It's just that, it's more about the relations in treatment, which we don't have, not in that way. Either we make assessments or give support to the foster family.

Vera points out the limitations of MI; because it is a method designed to initiate changes in behavior, deploying it in the assessment of the needs of a child or in the support of foster families is odd, she says. In the interview with Rosa, who works with substance abuse, I reveal my curiosity about MI and its popularity:

**Marcus:** I'm curious as to the reasons, why MI is so...

**Rosa:** Well, they say that it's researched. That it works, which I believe is a sympathetic approach.

**Marcus:** In what way?

**Rosa:** That you, that it's the client who can decide the pace and the progress of things. Because we know that coercion works pretty badly. That we know. You might try to force me into doing something I don't want to, sure you can, on a superficial level, but there is no anchorage, inside myself.

Rosa says the reason for its popularity is that it works, according to research. Perhaps, she argues, you can get the desired actions by employing force, but deep inside the self there will be no anchorage or true "fidelity" to the program. This suggests that MI targets the subject of the client, rather than his or her actions. If this is indeed a key component of MI, its popularity may be understood through its alignment with neoliberal governing strategies of shaping self-activated subjects (as argued in Chapter 2). The following comes up in an account over what Denise did the previous day at work:

**Denise:** She's goes to the outpatient addiction treatment to take her Antabuse,<sup>58</sup> she's engaged in the Twelve Step treatment,<sup>59</sup> and there is a measure of control, and she thinks that, since the social services does regular check-ups if she, they get reports, and that's not such a great control measure.

**Marcus:** Why not?

**Denise:** Because it's a control which, she feels as if she's under surveillance, in a way that's not good for her.

Denise is referring to a client with a long history of addiction and homelessness and says that control is an obstacle to her rehabilitation because of the sense of being under surveillance. Similarly, Rosa (above) argued against coercion and instead says one should let the client decide the progress of things. Thus, it seems that both Rosa and Denise claim that external control or force does not work in handling addictions, in line with the logic of MI. Breaking an addiction is thus a process in which the client has to (take) control (over) him- or herself. If MI may thus be understood as a method to teach self-control, it resonates with the political contextualization of other expressions of self-control. Sociologist Micki McGee (2005) has studied the growing industry of so-called self-help books and TV shows produced during the last decades of the twentieth century. McGee connects the proliferation of such productions to material circumstances such as increased insecurity in the labor market and a disintegration of the welfare state. Engagement with practices of self-help can thus be seen as a reaction to anxiety, as a way for individuals to manage future risks of unemployment and poverty, through a lifelong project of self-improvement and employability. However, the self-help culture has another

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<sup>58</sup> A drug used to treat alcoholism; the active ingredient is Disulfiram.

<sup>59</sup> A.k.a. Minnesota.

function within the project of disassembling the welfare state and stimulating self-animation, argues McGee. The constant control and improvement of the self shifts a considerable amount of the responsibility and costs of producing “employable” labor away from government and private enterprise onto the individual.

When I interview Helene, who has worked for well over two decades in the social services, I ask whether she can identify any trends or major changes over this period of time, and MI comes up:

**Helene:** Ever since I went to the School of Social Work it's been like “respect the client.” [...] It doesn't matter how much I want something, if the person isn't there and has a will, you never reach the goal. Maybe that's something that, in part it has to do with all the years, with experience, but also I think that it's more openly now that you definitely can't do anything if the client doesn't want to, and with that we have the arrival of MI.

**Marcus:** Right, Motivational Interviewing.

**Helene:** Exactly. And we're supposed to work in accordance with that. And we've had education in that its, in the municipality of Backwater the catchphrase is, hm, I ought to know this by now. But it's something like respect for the citizens, that they can make choices that are beneficial to them.

Helene connects the philosophy of the School of Social work to the philosophy of MI and the official catchphrase of the municipality in which she works. They all blend in to one. Individual choices and the will of the client are common traits, but there also seems to exist a kind of inherent coercion because whether or not to engage in this philosophy is not up for debate. They are all supposed to work with MI in her municipality. Similar arguments are made by Paula, who embraces the philosophy of MI. She claims that she now has a label for what she has already been doing for the past 20 years, only now she “has it on paper.” However, she claims that many of her colleagues have got the philosophy of MI wrong:

**Paula:** I can tell you that there aren't many among my colleagues who work according to MI. They might [think they do, but], I mean not the way I see MI and my way of working. Because then I wouldn't end up in these conflicts that I do [...]

**Marcus:** What do these conflicts involve?

**Paula:** It has to do with ethics,<sup>60</sup> and such. Individual responsibility, which is a watchword in financial support. It's the responsibility of the individual, yes, that I can buy, but if you don't even have the tools, if you, how do you, I mean what should I be responsible for? If I know nothing about the Swedish social security system, if I know

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<sup>60</sup> In Swedish: människosyn.

nothing about the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. If I'm in an acute crisis for some reason, or carry old traumas within. Everyone has to be given the time and opportunity to integrate. But my opinion is that this isn't the case. Not within financial support or the law, that we're saying that we work in accordance with the Social Services Act. But it's interpreted from a perspective of financial austerity. We have no addicts in Hilltown. Oh no. [...] it's amusing statistics.

**Marcus:** Do you mean that you're barely sending anyone to treatment centers or?

**Paula:** Not in all of this town. In the newspaper six months ago, a social worker reported that five of her clients had died because they were not given treatment.

**Marcus:** That sounds really, to me that sounds like a, something really strange.

**Paula:** Yes.

**Marcus:** What, or like, where do they end up instead?

**Paula:** Now we're back to the individual responsibility. If you don't show up to the meetings, you don't want to. And if you can't engage in the outpatient treatment of this city, then you apparently don't want any help, because you have an individual responsibility.

According to Paula, the focus on the individual will in MI has been distorted to fit the needs of municipal austerity. Individual responsibility is deployed in ways that do not assist in helping clients; rather, it is a way to ignore them. Likewise, Simon argues that responsibility can be given in different ways. It can be done with respect for the inherent potential in every individual, but also in a "fascist way, 'I don't give a shit about you'." Similar results have been found in a study on coping strategies among social workers working with children. Due to heavy workloads and stress, one coping strategy identified was to transfer responsibilities from the social services (and the individual social worker) to the parents (Astwik & Melin 2013:66). Tina, who works with disability support, is about to receive MI training. When I ask if there is a particular reason for the management to initiate this, she says she does not know. We do agree that it is a bit odd because the method of MI was developed to motivate substance abusers and not in relation to disability support. I ask:

**Marcus:** Can it be about taking care of themselves? To be motivated for that?

**Tina:** (laughs) Maybe.

**Marcus:** Because I'm always skeptical.

**Tina:** Maybe, or motivate their relatives to...

**Marcus:** Be more responsible?

**Tina:** Yes, that's actually my feeling, somebody has to, I mean if you downsize the support, it has to presuppose that people are getting support they don't need. That has to be the point of departure. And if it isn't, and thus is supposed to be done anyhow, that responsibility has to be placed on someone, because the individual can't handle it her- or himself. So then I suppose it has to be relatives, if they have any.

Even though she laughs at my paranoid analysis, she quickly becomes serious and develops the analysis to be about motivating relatives to be responsible, something that has been highlighted in previous research (Brodin 2005, 2006). Responsibility for caring for relatives will likely appeal to the “free” will of feminized subjects of care, and thus will make use of dominant understandings of gender to exploit the free labor of relatives.

I also talk about MI with Karolin, an interviewee who works in an NGO. She claims that “everyone” in social work has undergone such training and says that, to her, it constitutes an important philosophical reminder:

**Karolin:** To me it’s a kind of repetition of what I do every day [...] I need some of that sometimes to, like, fill up and wake myself up, to stay sharp, to ask myself new questions, in my head. So it’s good to, like, fill up with something fresh, so I don’t get all rusty.

**Marcus:** What is it that you don’t want to forget?

**Karolin:** Not to get ahead of the visitor and think that I have some kind of answer or suggestions of what he or she should do. Rather, to wait, to use time as a tool, we’re not in a hurry. As long as you feel safe and feel that you’ve come up with the solution yourself. I’m no expert on your life.

**Marcus:** Is that better?

**Karolin:** Yes, in my opinion it is. That’s like my philosophy. I think it’s our ideology, its written in the ideology statements out there in the hallway, I made them but I don’t remember, like we’re not experts on anybody else’s life or something like that. Which I really like, because we’re not.

Like others, Karolin says that MI is widespread in social work and describes its logic in similar terms to some of the previous quotes: to get the client to come up with solutions to their own problems. However, the claim to “not get ahead” and to use “time as a tool” is interesting. Karolin works in an NGO and does not complain about the workload, in stark contrast to the narratives of the social workers employed in the social services. Presumably, this is why Karolin can claim that there is no rush, and perhaps because of this she has a somewhat different interpretation of MI than the social workers in the social services. She does not mention the word responsibility. In fact, during the entire ninety minute interview she does not mention the word at all in regard to clients. So it seems that MI may be understood differently depending on context. What is also interesting in this discussion, towards the end of the above quote, is whose “ideology” is MI really? Is it my philosophy or our ideology, or are they one and the same? This connects also to Helene’s story above, and suggests that there is not always a clear boundary between personal ideals, the ideals advocated by management, scientific evidence and the municipal slogan. Ideals are thus affected by the

environment in which one works and may be expressed in a desire to identify with dominant ideals and to merge them with ideals that are sometimes in conflict (Liljegren & Parding 2010).

## **The tale of a horse**

I continue to talk about MI with Karolin, and a story about domesticating a horse comes up:

**Karolin:** You know what? There is, when you're at the MI training, like the first thing you see is a film. Have you? No, well it's a film about a very well-known horse trainer in the United States. And this horse trainer grew up on a ranch, witnessing his father beating these animals into obedience, with a whip. So when he grew up he felt there was something wrong with this, it's not fair to the animals. Like "I believe I can come up with another method to get the animals to do what I want without, like, beating them, without forcing them." So then you're shown how this man, old today, really successfully [...] gets a horse, that nobody ever sat on or tried to ride and has no bad experience of humans either, to accept him; he takes out a saddle, puts it on and gets a rider to sit on it without the horse panicking in any way or trying to bite and kick and so on. Only by communicating with the horse in a very particular way, that he's learned through, like, you can't look the horse in the eye because that is instinctively like I want to attack you, things like that, which you don't know when you haven't dealt with horses, what do I know? [...]

**Marcus:** But is this guy the inventor of MI?

**Karolin:** No, but on the MI training it's a film that's screened, like the first film relating to how MI works. And he says, we're not like horses, we're more complicated, he says, this instructor who's a psychologist and a social worker. His name is Steve Wicks and he's from England. But I think, to me, it was like really nice to see a film about how the horse, like, without being coerced or beaten, wants to cooperate. I think it's more about, we're primed to, like, set to cooperate. And if you can just lure that out, this cooperation in another person, when you're disarmed you can get pretty far together. But when you start to scare someone, we enter lockdown and become very non-creative and just defensive. And I'm thinking that we are like horses in that sense.

**Marcus:** That's really fascinating actually, that example, or that entire story. Because I build my theoretical framework rather heavily on Foucault.

**Karolin:** Ok.

**Marcus:** And there it's, like, he describes three governing techniques: authoritarian power, disciplinary power and self-governing.

**Karolin:** Right.

**Marcus:** And it's a lot about self-governing that we've been talking about now, to not, like, beat the horse into obeying, it's more effective and more humane to...

**Karolin:** Much, much more effective.

**Marcus:** Yes, to get them to go along with it out of their own will, so...

**Karolin:** For better and for worse. I mean if I may take a, or how...?

**Marcus:** Yes, please do carry on.

**Karolin:** Because I'm thinking that, really it's against the nature of the horse to allow anyone to put on a saddle, to strap it on, to sit on its back and, like, use it to..., for different things. To go hiking and so on. It wants to run free in the mountains or something like that, what do I know? So there is, and it's the same with humans, like, that there is something about what you just spoke of, about this self-regul, to govern ourselves in a direction, where the ultimate, I think, degradation is when we, like, believe that we want this degradation.

Karolin speaks of the practice of getting someone to do what you want, i.e. exercising power, and relates it to eliciting an inherited desire for cooperation in humans (and horses, apparently). This, she argues, is a better tool for achieving the desired outcome than through coercion. A similar argument was presented by Felicia (above), who says that MI is about finding ways to “lure out” and accentuate the client’s own will. Furthermore the use of war or conflict metaphors in Karolin’s story is interesting; that you can get pretty far in eliciting cooperation “when the client is disarmed,” but if you scare the client (i.e. if you do not use MI) you get a defensive and non-creative client. This suggests that MI is a method for handling or dismantling the conflicts that can arise in the social worker/client relationship. When I suggest that the logic of inducing cooperation rather than using brute force can be thought of as merely a different technique for the exercise of power, she catches on to my line of thinking. Although she is still speaking of horses, the turn from seeing self-governing as completely “natural” to the ultimate form of degradation, is certainly interesting and may suggest an opening for a problematization of the logic and consequences of the self-disciplining of bodies, something that has been highlighted by feminist scholars (see, for example, Bordo 1985, 1993, Bartky 1990). The ideals of beauty and self-control are something that Karolin connects to when she continues to talk about self-governing subjects:

**Karolin:** Exciting, really. And in my view it's, like, Britney Spears is the person who believes the most, that she's doing what she wants.

**Marcus:** Okay.

**Karolin:** I just imagined her right now, this image of women, you think you're the strong woman who, but like you'll do anything to be seen and heard, at the expense of yourself and your own life. [...] To me, it's very much a sign of our times that we think we want all these things but then the question is, where did that come from? Who made us believe that we wanted that?

Connecting to the life of artist Britney Spears, Karolin associates with self-imposed ideals of individual strength and, as I interpret it, brings in herself. “You think you’re the strong woman” doing anything to “be seen and heard,” and she also questions the idea of free will in all of this: “you think you want all these things.” By drawing attention to norms of physical normality and deviance, philosopher Susan Bordo (1993) highlights how power operates through shaping desire and will to conform to such norms. Similarly, philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) argues that the self-awareness embedded in individualism makes women (feel) visible and thus norms regarding feminine bodies work to discipline women through self-surveillance. From such theoretical insights, it is interesting again to note Karolin’s complete switch from the freedom of one’s own will to the imposed self-regulation embedded in the ability for power to shape the wills of subjects and the fact that Karolin makes direct connections to herself, rather than to clients. Just like Bartky (1990), Karolin highlights how feminine subjects are shaped to want to be seen and heard and thus that self-discipline can be simultaneously coercion and expressions of free will.

Later, I discovered that the inventor of MI, clinical psychologist William Miller,<sup>61</sup> actually had written an article about the similarities between MI and “horse whispering”, a non-violent technique for managing and domesticating horses (Miller 2000). In a discussion on the parallels in the *methods* used, Miller states:

Particularly telling is the way in which one responds to movements away from the desired direction of change in both methods. Rather than entering into an argument or confrontation, one simply moves with the “resistance” rather than opposing it, allows it to subside, and then nudges the change process forward again. (Miller 2000:288)

I find it particularly telling that the method seeks to nullify resistance by embracing it, in order to produce the desired behavior because of its connotations with neoliberalism and a political rationality that undermines conflict and resistance (Mouffe 2005). It is also interesting to note that MI is portrayed as an *alternative* to violence and coercion, an alternative to “confinement and the infliction of a sufficient level of suffering” (Miller 2000:291), almost as though there are no other options than either confinement/suffering or MI. Such a binary representation also implicitly charges MI with the opposite values to confinement and suffering, such as freedom and joy. Presented with only these options pitted against each other, the choice seems easy. Although I’m not critical of the aim of the method, when formulated to help people out of substance abuse, I cannot

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<sup>61</sup> Together with Stephen Rollnick.

avoid seeing some interesting and possibly problematic aspects of MI. Under the headings “Background and basic philosophy” and “Parallels in technique and style” (Miller 2000:289–290) the horse whispering is compared to MI in tables to illustrate their similarities. Miller uses a number of quotes to describe MI and I have chosen a few that I believe illustrate its central logic, which in turn shows substantial similarities to a neoliberal political rationality. From Miller’s quotes, I have attempted to summarize the logic in each phrase, written in capital letters in parenthesis:

1. Respects the individual’s personal autonomy, choice, and responsibility for change (INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY)
2. Provides a menu of options from which to choose (ELICITS AND LIMITS ACTION THROUGH FREEDOM OF CHOICE)
3. Highly individualized: the therapist attends to subtle cues, both verbal and nonverbal, about what is happening with the person (INDIVIDUAL RATHER THAN CONTEXTUAL FOCUS)
4. The therapist avoids getting into arguments with the person, especially those in which the therapist takes the “good” side arguing for change (AVOIDS CONFLICT/SEEKS CONSENSUS)
5. The work is a collaborative partnership of person and therapist (LEVELS POWER RELATIONS/EMPOWERMENT)
6. When the person resists change, the therapist rolls with the resistance rather than opposing it (DISMANTLES THE IMPULSE TO RESIST)
7. Replicable: new therapists can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries (STANDARDIZED/EASILY LEARNED/COST-EFFECTIVE)

Let us now turn back to the interviews to see what else the interviewees say about MI. Denise, like others before her, claims that MI is not a new method and seeks to understand its popularity:

**Marcus:** Is this a new method?

**Denise:** No, it’s been around for a long time. It’s just that in Sweden it’s become more or less...people have started using it more, it’s been more open, people can access it more easily now...And there’s a driving force in it, which isn’t “I’m the doctor, you’re the patient,” you know...It’s like we are...an equal level. [...] Also MI is, you know, a lot like, here and now, we give each other what we have during this moment, these 45 minutes.

According to Denise, the method of MI levels the power asymmetry inherent in the doctor-patient relationship (and I assume social worker and client) as, in my interpretation, it is not built upon merely the knowledge and choices of authority. This may be connected to dominant ideals of patient participation in the provision of welfare, generally expressed through

legislation about patient choice in care provider – LOV (SFS 2008:962) and specifically in evidence-based practice (EBP, see Chapter 4). It may also be associated to item no. 7 on the above list: “New therapists can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries,” as Denise argues that the access to MI has improved. Denise’s argument about MI enabling patients to be on an equal level and, in her previous quote, that MI enables the removal of the social worker’s self, giving space to the client, is also similar to item no. 5 in Miller’s description, that the “work is a collaborative partnership of person and therapist.” This attempt may be understood in light of the ongoing problematizing of the power relations between social worker and client (see for instance Skau 2007, Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006:66–67, Herz & Johansson 2011, Herz 2012, Denvall & Vinnerljung 2006). Although such a goal is admirable, I would argue that expecting a particular counseling method to deliver equality is a lot to hope for and talking as Denise does about “the here and now” seems to suggest that equality can be attained by momentarily forgetting the world outside. This is similar to item no. 3 in Miller’s description: “Highly individualized: the therapist attends to subtle cues, both verbal and nonverbal, about what is happening with the person.” Rather than working actively to acknowledge such problems as unequal power relations, a desire for de-contextualization runs the risk of individualizing the problems of the client and may ultimately disguise both the unequal relationship between social worker and client and societal structures of inequality. Speaking of power, when I ask Felicia about what is most challenging in her work, she responds:

**Felicia:** It can be problematic when someone is like against, like resists and really demonstrates that they really don’t want to be here. Like they’re saying: ‘you can’t help me, ever since I was a kid all you’ve ever done is to curb me.’

**Marcus:** What do you do then to gain their trust? Do you have any particular strategies?

**Felicia:** Yes, there we have MI again, which is a good tool to try to summarize what they’re saying to show that you’re listening to them [...] how do you want it to be in order for it to feel good? So they can participate in the decision-making, because I hear a lot that people have a negative attitude towards the social services because it’s been a lot like, a controlling authority in their lives, which has taken over, decided and called the shots. [...] Also, I have the advantage, I believe, that the people I meet are adults. I mean, you can put a lot of responsibility onto them. “It’s up to you too” [...] So then you can, like, calm them down.

I interpret Felicia’s story above as meaning that there are ideal wills and techniques to produce them. This suggests, as already hinted, that the notion of the client’s own will is something that needs to be problematized. In her book *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed (2014) writes a history of the complexity

and multiplicity of will. By invoking the term willful, both in the sense of voluntary and knowingly obstinate, Ahmed rejects the idea of a singular understanding of will; what it is, does or feels like and that a will is something that may be had, resulting in either refusal or willing action. Ahmed instead argues that wills are *socially acceptable* to a varying degree, sometimes *coerced*, sometimes *not acted upon* or evolved because they are *easier to handle* than direct conflict; yet, at other times, the will can be *ambiguous*. In this way, Ahmed draws attention to the way in which the will is made to coincide or collide in sites of governing and thus should be regarded as neither simply good, nor simply bad; neither simply purposeful, nor simply disruptive. Following this argument, in the above quote by Felicia, expressions of resistance are understood as merely a demonstration of displeasure at being present, which closes off both the value of the client's experience *and* the expression thereof, as well as any possibility that the resistance might have some merit, for instance, as a legitimate critique of how things are done. Although apparently challenging to Felicia, her approach to resistance delegitimizes the political subject of (the) client's (will). To face this challenge, Felicia has MI, a tool that is apparently suited to handling such resistance. By *showing* that you are listening, which is not necessarily the same as taking the words into consideration, by inviting the willful client to *participate* in the decision making, although not necessarily allowing them to influence it, and by shifting the *responsibility* from the social worker to the client, the relation becomes less conflict-laden, or "calmer" as Felicia puts it. This is similar to the earlier horse-related comment from Karolin, that if you can induce the *cooperation* inherent in humans by *disarming* them, preventing the deployment of a defense, you can get pretty far *together*. These accounts may be further connected to the logic of item no. 6 in Miller's description: "When the person resists change, the therapist rolls with the resistance rather than opposing it."

Denise continues to speak of the splendor of MI and the key to its success when she reflects on the reasons for the results she has achieved, which are much appreciated and envied by colleagues in other divisions of the social services:

I have given them time, I have given them back their responsibility, I have given them what they want. That's what I have given them. I haven't been controlling whatsoever, I have been..., like, human.

In her role as case manager, Denise has "given them what they want," which in her mind constitutes time in combination with giving clients their own responsibility, resembling item no. 1 in Miller's description: "Respects the individual's personal autonomy, choice, and responsibility for change". She

even asserts that she has exercised no control whatsoever, stating rather that she has been “human”, pitting *overt* control against humanitarianism. I will come back to the items on Miller’s list, but first I want to return to the issue of horses. The narrative on horse breaking in Karolin’s story about the educational film and the academic article on horse breaking by the inventor of MI made me curious about the symbolism embedded in the horse-human analogy. Phrased differently: What’s up with all the horses?

According to several popular understandings, horses have diverse meanings, yet frequently occupy an elevated position in myths and symbols. Historically, in Greco-Roman culture, horses supposedly symbolized power and domination, in Native American tribes both power and freedom and in Celtic culture horses were associated with war. In addition, the Bible conveys symbolic connections between horses and war, honor and glory (Farmer 2006, Symbol dictionary.net 2015, Nationalencyklopedin 2014, Whats-your-sign.com 2015). In a contemporary popular sense, the horse may symbolize the powerful urges and desires in man, a force that has to be tamed (Nationalencyklopedin 2014), in sum:

Strength, power and freedom, but also in his unfailing loyalty, a sign of man’s taming of the wild nature. (Thelander 2001)

In his case study of 1909, “Little Hans”, Sigmund Freud gave an oedipal interpretation of a little boy’s phobia of horses, claiming the horse was symbolic of the father. Freud suggested that the boy feared that the horse (father) would punish him for his incestuous desires towards his mother, and bite (castrate) him (McLeod, 2008), and that the boy, as most boys supposedly do as they grow older and realize that the father is too powerful to compete with, starts to identify instead *with* the father (horse) (McLeod 2008, Solares 2014). It seems that horses, in various contexts, are seen as signs of power and psychoanalytically as symbols of desire and power relations. Speaking of the symbolized fear of objects prior to encounter (the example being bears), Sara Ahmed (2004b) describes the effects of emotion in creating boundaries and shaping subjects:

The attribution of feeling to an object [...] is an effect of the encounter, which moves the subject away from the object. Emotions involve such affective forms of reorientation. (Ahmed 2004b:8)

Bearing this in mind, tales of domesticating horses as an analogy to therapeutic counseling with humans are perplexing and deserve critical inquiry. Is it possible that the horse-human analogy in the tales of MI perform certain functions related to power relations in social work? One

possibility is that, if a discussion on a certain counseling method is partly reframed into tales about horses, it might be easier to speak of some of its specific traits. For one thing, speaking of a horse as an object to tame might make it less uncomfortable than speaking of “taming” humans, while at the same time the tales of enabling the taming of a (powerful) horse may illustrate the effectiveness of the method. The horse both constitutes and symbolizes a potent(ially), powerful and willful subject, whose actions can never be fully anticipated. But with certain cultivated techniques, “whispering” as it is called, the horse will be easily subjugated, it will not bite, kick or turn away and thus the taming procedure is both efficient and proceeds with minimal risk of man-horse conflict.

In fact, the refined techniques being used in both MI and horse whispering, illustrated by the absence of brute force and the ability to produce a subject that complies willingly with his or her domination, also point to similar developments elsewhere. Educational researchers Bronwyn Davies and Peter Bansel (2010) analyze the faithful compliance achieved through a culture of *audit procedure* in universities, a widespread technique of governing in several public agencies and arenas (see analytical framework and Chapter 6):

Like a well-trained pony, the free individual responds willingly to the smallest of signs telling it where it should run and how it should leap. Compliance can be normalized and so taken for granted as the everyday practices of work as usual, that the dressage is barely visible. It can even become morally correct and desirable. (Davies & Bansel 2010:9)

The audit culture is arguably part of a larger scheme of self-governing techniques, in Foucauldian terminology: governmentality, a governing technique where the desires and aspirations of subjects (are shaped to) coincide with government ambition and reproduction (see analytical framework, Chapter 2). Where unequal relations of power exist, conflicts often follow (Mouffe 2005). MI is a technique designed specifically to suppress and avoid conflicts and to perfect conduct (Miller 1983), and as such it bears similarities to the logic of governmentality. MI seems to offer an individualization and de-contextualization of social problems through: 1) a “leveling” of power relations (remember the counseling session being portrayed as “a joint venture”), 2) handing over responsibility to the client, 3) an offer of “choices” and 4) directly embracing resistance, “rolling with it”, thus avoiding conflict. Of course, the effectiveness of such refined techniques of governing also minimizes the necessity to use brute force, and because of the potential empathy with a battered and “innocent” animal, the “softer touch” of MI/horse whispering lends an aura of gentility and kindness to the method.

What I am suggesting by my analysis of these horse tales is that, through the use of symbolism, the awareness of power is both illuminated and obscured, both naturalized and diverted, or, in the words of Ahmed, reoriented, from humans to horses, from domination to kindness, from obedience to free will and then back again. Perhaps the management of humans and horses is not such an odd combination after all. In literature, acts of governing are frequently expressed in horse symbolism, “where the leader rides the city or populace” (Ferber 1999:95). It might also be worth mentioning that the word “management” has its etymological roots in Italian word “maneggiare”<sup>62</sup>, meaning “to handle”, especially in the sense of “to control a horse” (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). In fact, in its earliest English sense, the word “manage” referred only to the handling of horses (Ferber 1999). So what may be seen as a gentle, easily taught and effective (and therefore cheap) counseling method, may in fact be seen as an ingenious technique for governing human conduct, but also for enabling the avoidance of conflict, the evasion of responsibility and financial austerity. With power comes responsibility, as in the case of the traditional patron, who was morally and socially obliged to cater for his minions, or the bio-politics of the “benevolent” patriarchal welfare state. With MI, and the neoliberal political rationality that it seemingly relies upon, such responsibilities are renounced through a reformulation and camouflaging of unequal power relations into a project of self-reliance and empowerment.

The idea of empowerment deserves special attention here because it holds an important place in the rationality of MI. A common idea behind the concept of empowerment is that subordinated and powerless people have internalized a dominant image of themselves, as useless, dangerous or invisible, and that part of the continuation of their oppression is rooted in this negative self-image. Empowerment is a strategy to break free from these mental shackles and take control of one’s life (Yuval Davis 1994). By analyzing historical cases of projects that set out to be empowering, political scientist Barbara Cruikshank (1999) questions participatory projects as a cure for inequality and argues that their function is to subjugate rather than emancipate. In her book *The Will to Empower* (ibid.) Cruikshank illustrates how power works through the subjectivity of the people targeted in the projects and thus how these participants are made into self-governing citizens. These *technologies of citizenship* make use of participatory ideals and seem on the surface merely to enable citizens as agents pursuing their own interests and, as such, do not appear to be governmental techniques. But, argues Cruikshank, the overall governmental effects of the techniques developed in these kinds of autonomous and responsible citizen-creating

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<sup>62</sup> Derived from the Latin noun “manus”, meaning hand.

projects, enormously extend the reach of formal governmental authorities, and as such are all the more deceitful. Social work scholar Tabitha Wright Nielsen (2009) has examined EU-financed social projects that target unemployed immigrant women in Sweden. Wright Nielsen's study shows that the empowerment ambitions expressed in the projects takes the form of trying to liberate the women from their "deviant" immigrant culture, encouraging them to become more "Swedish". Wright Nielsen argues that, instead of empowering the women, through gendered and racialized expectations, the projects rather aid in the perpetuation of their subordination in society. As illustrated by the examples above, top-down projects that aim for empowerment may not always deliver the portrayed outcome. William Walters (2012:51) concludes from the works of Cruikshank that methods that were initially developed amongst feminist oppositional movements to improve self-esteem eventually became obligatory activities among welfare agencies such as social workers and employment counselors as parts of dispersed forms of governing.

The alleged dominance of MI in social work is intriguing. Why is it that so many social workers fairly recently seem to have been subject to such training? (This might connect to item no. 7 in Miller's description: "Replicable: new therapists can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries.") And what does this standardization do to social work? The ideas at the heart of MI, to elicit the client's will and individual responsibility, becomes all the more interesting since it comes out as a practice to either remove power from relationships in social work or to shift the power relations, in a way that empowers the clients. Apropos empowerment, interviewee Ivan says:

You work to make this person really want to be here [...] but sometimes you just want to tear down the world, because nobody should have to live like this, but at the same time you're supposed to relate all this to some kind of empowerment: "but right now this person chooses to live like this."

Ivan expresses frustration over working to get the client to truly want to "be there" because of the difficulty of letting clients decide what is good for them, when the client's will does not match the will of the social worker. This illustrates the active work towards eliciting a particular kind of will, rather than just any will, and could arguably be seen as the opposite of empowerment (Wright Nielsen 2009, Cruikshank 1999). Although Ivan sometimes seems to harbor a desire for revolution when witnessing the predicaments of clients, in accordance with (corrupted?) ideals of empowerment he tries instead to tell himself: "right now, this person chooses to live like this," which may suggest that the client's predicament is a

result of an active individual choice (Brown 2015, Wacquant 2012a, 2004). Such a logic may serve not only to subjugate clients, but also to subjugate the social workers who witness such suffering.

## **Harnessing willful subjects**

There are other elements than those discussed above in the complex rationality by which self-governing is naturalized or legitimized. Besides the overt claims that MI is effective as a method because “it works”, and shifts the relations of power, the argument seems also to be linked to economic effectiveness, like item no. 7 on Miller’s list: “Replicable: new therapists can learn to use the method effectively, and have done so in many countries.” Below are extracts from the interview with Felicia that, in different ways, concern responsibility and effectiveness.

**Marcus:** Can you give an example of an instance where the client had an opinion and you’re like: “Hold it now!”

**Felicia:** Yesterday actually, there was an old guy who, well now, we’ve known each other for two years, so I suppose it’s okay for me to be the way I am with him. I was like: “come on, I know that’s bullshit.” But at the same time, because he wanted to stay home and take “time off” from rehab, where he is right now. And I didn’t agree that he should, because a week ago he drank when he stayed home. So we were arguing over this but eventually I felt like, why should I sit here and, like, he’s a grown man, he’s twice as old as I am, and he can choose for himself really. There is no force involved. But still I feel, No, because I know what might happen since it happened a week ago. So then I can feel a bit like, it’s not so professional, instead he should be held responsible for his own actions. And at the same time I have to explain to him that we’re paying for this, you can’t just go home and do what you want; in that case you’ll have to declare that you don’t want the treatment any more. And, like, leave.

My question concerns instances of not being professional and Felicia brings up MI and the difficulty of always letting the client be part of the decision making. Although the topic concerns being unprofessional, Felicia takes time to justify her behavior to me. Firstly, she establishes the fact that we are talking about a grown man, twice as old as Felicia, which I interpret as justifying her tendency to regard him as a particularly responsible client, and as something that levels power relations: old man/young woman, social worker/client. Felicia also points out that nobody is forcing him to engage in treatment and that he may choose for himself whether he wants to or not. Although MI is generally portrayed as a method to *motivate* clients to commence treatment, in Felicia’s story MI seems to encourage her to stop

trying to motivate the client. At the same time, and rather contradictorily, it seems to be in accordance with MI to try to make the client more responsible, which in this case means to discontinue treatment. It is hard to know what it is she is telling me about her behavior that is not professional and not in line with MI. But towards the end of the quote Felicia argues that if the old man in question cannot take responsibility for his own actions and decisions (meaning not to drink), he should (be responsible and) quit treatment because “we’re paying for this.” In sum, we give him responsibility, and if he cannot be responsible, he has to be responsible and quit. This makes me think about the work of Wendy Brown (2015:83–84), who argues that the austerity politics which has followed upon the global financial crises encourages contemporary (highly financialized) subjects to be responsible, both in making individual investments in their human capital and in making sacrifices not only for their own gain but for the benefit of the national economy.

I cannot really tell what it is in Felicia’s story that she understands as being in opposition to the logic of MI, but it might be the fact that she actively *tells him* to be responsible, rather than teasing out his own will to be responsible. Regardless, this story again draws attention to the fact that the client’s will – pivotal in MI – is not *any* will, but a sought-after will, a particular will that is defined by the social worker, or perhaps by the dominant logic of social work. In line with Ahmed’s (2014) theorizing about will, above, to even talk about the client’s own will if only a particular will is acknowledged as such, is puzzling. The different narratives on MI presented here also illustrate that it is used in several different settings to handle different issues, not only in matters of substance abuse motivation. Why is it that MI has been so widely introduced into various settings far from addiction treatment? Is the aspect of individual responsibility and the client’s own will particularly appealing to contemporary welfare regimes? Is it the ability to shape cooperative self-activated subjects that explains the success of MI? In fact, when I interviewed employees at the National Board of Migration, I was told that they too use MI in their contact with refugees. This was done not in order to elicit the refugees’ will to change something about their lives but rather to make them feel as though they were part of the asylum process and thus better prepare them for a possible un-appealable final rejection. If they are part of the process, it is assumed that this will make them docile and dull their impulse to resist. Such a scheme was deployed because it was understood to ease a possible future eviction from the country.

Although in some respects it is claimed to help avoid conflicts, sometimes the aspiration to elicit a specific will results in conflict. Karolin, a proponent of MI as a founding philosophy in her work, adds to this narrative as she writes in her diary:

Tuesday: Fantastic and simultaneously really tough/chaotic open evening meeting to plan coming events. One of the participants “got stuck” in one of the issues and became a bit aggressive (in his/her own little way). My task to elicit participation in the decision-making amongst the visitors is difficult whilst at the same time being able to uphold some kind of boundaries/have the last word. (Phew!)

The aspiration to find the *right* will and at the same time not openly displaying this aspiration, as “having the last word”, conflicts with letting the clients decide (like item no. 4 in Miller’s list: “The therapist avoids getting into arguments with the person, especially those in which the therapist takes the ‘good’ side arguing for change”). By highlighting this discrepancy, Karolin exposes an inherent conflict in the rationality of MI, between any will and the sought-after will. Ylva, on the other hand, argues against this avoidance and says that being indifferent or consciously suppressing conflict and emotions seems to be an important trait of MI.

**Ylva:** What I feel is creepy with MI, is that it’s so manipulative.

**Marcus:** In what way?

**Ylva:** That you manipulate people by a method, instead of perhaps being straightforward saying that “now I’m really angry or really upset when you do that,” which I believe is, like, more fair and respectful. And this, rolling with the resistance and changing the topic, there’s a manipulation in that which makes me feel awkward.

The avoidance of conflict through detachment rather than overtly expressing emotions feels uncomfortable to Ylva, because of the manipulative element in such an approach. Being straightforward and expressing your emotions, rather than suppressing them, is more fair and respectful according to her. The ideal of detachment and the manipulation of emotions as a tool of governing analyzed in Chapter 5, seems to resonate with ideals expressed in MI.

It is not difficult to find paradoxes in the stories of MI, between the client’s ‘own’ will and the wish for direct control when the client’s will does not match the will of the social worker, and between opposing interests such as motivation and individual responsibility and also between financial limitations and the needs of clients. Neither is it difficult to question the idea of liberating the client by inducing a certain will. I suggest this paradox to Ylva after her claim that MI is a manipulative method (above):

**Marcus:** It's interesting to hear you say that because of the insistence in MI of the guidance of the client's own will.

**Ylva:** Sure but it's, I mean, your own will is always constructed in relation to other people and the society you live in. You're always influenced by the group you associate with, the society in which you live, the people you talk to. Everything affects your own will, doesn't it?

## **Concluding remarks**

Connecting an individual to the surroundings in which he or she lives, Ylva reveals the illusion of a "true" free will, untainted by others, as a pre-existing subject. This is similar to a Foucauldian understanding of subjects (Foucault 1980:98, Mansfield 2000:54–55, Hall 1997:55). Although the idea of free will is quite dominant in social work discourse, both in regards to EBP and MI, it is interesting to note how quickly and effectively Ylva can deconstruct its logic. It is also interesting that Ylva (and Karolin) are alone in such questioning and deconstruction, although the topic of MI and its popularity were discussed in just about all of the 24 interviews I conducted. On the other hand, it seems that MI is assumed to be an effective technique to create more manageable or motivated clients, and this is not undesirable as such, especially if it leads to less suffering from things like substance abuse. But because of the critique of "empowering from above" (such as for instance Wright Nielsen 2009, Cruikshank 1999, Dahlstedt 2006), as well as the trope of individual responsibility (Wacquant 2010, Börjesson & Palmblad 2008), I think it needs to be pointed out that there is a risk of portraying the logic of MI as merely a kind of empowerment. Rather, it should also be seen as a governing technique and to some extent a strategy to save money because of the evasion of responsibility it allows. Portraying MI as a project of liberation may run the risk of hiding both the indirect force exercised through manipulation of the subject and a kind of de-politicization of social work through the suppression and disguising of conflict and a philosophy of austerity. Phrased differently, the liberatory philosophy of MI may be understood as a rationalization of indifference and austerity, even as it is portrayed as empowerment. In regard to empowerment from above, psychoanalyst and philosopher Franz Fanon (1970) has written about such aspects of liberation concerning the abolition of slavery on French soil, a decision that was not born out of struggle:

The upheaval reached the Negroes from without. The black man was acted upon. Values that had not been created by his actions, values that had not been born of the systolic tide of his blood, danced in a hued whirl round him. The upheaval did not make a

difference in the Negro. He went from one way of life to another, but not from one life to another. (Fanon 1970:156)

Liberation that is not born out of struggle is never liberating according to such a perspective. It does not render the subject a new life, merely a different one. As artist Immortal Technique argues: “Peace and freedom can never be given, That’s historically forbidden, cause only collision is the recipe, Changing the course of destiny, so I’m strapped with weaponry” (2011). Although this is not argued merely in its instrumental sense – nobody will give you power without struggle, history suggests – but also from a psychoanalytical perspective, liberation is also connected to the will to *make oneself recognized*:

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave. But the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*. (Fanon 1970:154, italics in original)

The essence of this may be summed up as: power cannot be given, it must be taken. And as such the inherent liberatory philosophy of MI, to lure out the free will, is both a phantasy (because there are no such things as free/independent/untainted/pre-existing/individual subjects), a historical “error” (freedom is always born out of struggle), and possibly a cognitive *re-shackling* as liberation from the top replaces one kind of mental shackles with another. What I also come to think about when listening to the social workers’ narratives of MI and the characteristics of MI according to the founding father, is the analogy with claims of neoliberalism as a political rationality (see Chapter 2). That is to say, the exercise of power through:

- The trope of individual responsibility
- An emphasis on choice
- Empowerment through liberation of the will
- The individualization of social problems (by moral and medical rather than structural explanations)
- An undermining of alternatives and resistance through consensus seeking and conflict avoidance

In short, the use of self-regulation as a way to handle problems more effectively and more cheaply is done through the internalization of ideals and the shaping of aspirations in both the clients and the social workers, and *framing this as a neutral and apolitical exercise* (Ong 2006:3). Bearing that in mind, viewing MI as a method to give the clients what they want and to level power relations by enhancing the client's own will whilst emphasizing individual responsibility, may rather obscure than illuminate the exercise of power through an induced self-regulation and may in fact undermine, rather than enable, resistance in the realm of social work and in relation to social issues in society in general.

Furthermore, the analysis above suggests that stimulation to produce self-governing, responsible clients is, although not dominant, a frequently occurring practice in social work. This contradicts claims by social theorists such as Loïc Wacquant, who claims that neoliberal governing regimes work as “uplifting and ‘liberating’ at the top...[and] castigatory and restrictive at the bottom” (Wacquant 2012a:73, see also Collier 2012:191 for a similar argument). Consequently, the widespread use of MI in Swedish social services can be seen as a practice that acts in opposition to such claims, because MI is not repressive yet it is still directed towards those “at the bottom”. However, the neoliberal trope of individual responsibility can be connected to the increased interest in this technique, because it goes to the heart of being responsible for one's own wellbeing. Although the method of MI has been around since the 1980s (Miller 1983), several of the interviewees said that it was not until decades later that it reached such a popular status in social work. As such, the emergence of MI in social work, its increased popularity and the current efforts towards mass education in the technique may be connected to the growing importance of a neoliberal political rationality in Sweden. Two additional arguments may help to support such an assertion. Because of the weak evidence in support of its effectiveness, social work scholar Alexander Björk (2013) has analyzed the method of MI in an attempt to understand its popularity. Björk states that during the early '90s MI gained massive popularity even though no evidence was presented to support its splendor. Despite this, MI:

is now widely regarded as an efficacious intervention, though not more efficacious than other active interventions. (Björk 2013:6)

Instead of effectiveness, Björk finds that “MI is a particularly elusive intervention” in that it has “no distinct boundaries and [...] can acquire different local identities” (2013:2). This connects with the above discussion illustrating the different understandings of MI among my interviewees and the different problems it is purported to solve. Felicia, Denise, Rosa and

Helene are in favor of the method whereas Ylva, Tina and Vera argue against it. Paula likes it but thinks others misuse it and Karolin likes it too, but seems to have a different understanding of how to do it in practice. However, they are all supposed to work according to it. The different understandings are likely to have an influence on how or even if it is used in everyday social work. The fuzziness of MI is intriguing because, as the interviews show, it lends itself to other contemporary philosophies, and blends with them (as illustrated in the quotes of Helene, Karolin and Paula). The fuzziness is also intriguing as the methodological demands of evidence-oriented analysis and the meta-analysis evaluation of any intervention require specific and stable definitions of an intervention, argues Björk (2013). Such results also run counter to my assumption that there would be rigid and standardized ways of applying MI in practice, although its philosophy may still be regarded as an expression of standardization. Is there something about the lack of distinct boundaries that may help to explain its popularity? Is the central philosophy of individual responsibility particularly adaptable to current welfare regimes? If so, MI may be regarded as a flexible vessel within which current hegemonic political rationalities can be launched into and deployed within social work.



## 8. Organization matters: fragmentation of labor, money and relations

In the previous four chapters, I have discussed and analyzed matters concerning dominant *ideals* and *ways of working* and how they may be understood in relation to governing and the wellbeing of social workers and clients. In this chapter, I want to draw attention to how the ways in which social work is *organized* also may be connected to governing and have effects in terms of working conditions, the exercise of power and practices of resistance.

### Division of labor

Who does what and under what conditions is arguably a crucial aspect of the organization of work. A particular transformation in the way social work is organized concerns the division of labor. One of the interviewees, Rosa says:

To me, a seasoned social worker, who has always loved this job [...] I think the balance between client contact and documentation has been good before, I believe that the documented assessment, the final product of an assessment, is of importance to the client [...] that it's a really good basis for recurring contact [...]. But for the last, in recent years, I'm not sure when it started really, but with this particular urge for documentation, this evaluation hysteria, it's like the contact with clients is decreasing and the administration increases. And that's really frustrating, [...] we're heading in the wrong direction, and I'm starting to look for positions on the other side [...] the treatment side, so to speak. And I never really wanted to work with treatment in that way.

The passage from love to frustration is how Rosa describes the latest transformation in social work. In the love scene, the balance between “actual” work and administration is good and the assessment is of real use. In the scene of frustration, as the administration increases, client contact is becoming increasingly reserved for those who work with treatment. This experience of reorganization is often the result of the introduction of the client–contractor model, which is now widespread in different welfare regimes (Jacobsson 2002, Johansson 2003, Gleeson & Knights 2006, Ranson 2003). In the client–contractor model, the social worker employed by municipal social services rarely engages in any of the counseling or “treatment”. Instead, he or she assesses the client's needs and initiates

treatment to be carried out by others. One of the interviewees, Ulrika, tells me a story of precisely such a transformation. A couple of years ago there was a reorganization at her workplace in which social workers were divided, to engage in either assessment or treatment. Although this had some benefits for the general quality of the assessments, she felt that she ended up on the wrong side of the fence:

I was a bit pissed off when I was at the last staff appraisal,<sup>63</sup> because I reminded my manager that I too have an interest in working with treatment, and that I believe I've officially declared that I've done my share of assessment now. So now I want to engage in treatment. Then I was met with such arrogance, like "you work with assessment now."

Frustration and anger are responses to the separation of assessment and treatment and the sense that there is no turning back. Below is a story posted by a social worker on the website of a network of critical social workers:

The social services is divided into "client" and "contractor". The clients are the social workers who make the assessments and the contractors in my field of work can be case managers, addiction therapists, shelters, halfway houses or treatment centers. During the assessment phase, a trusting relationship is hopefully developed between social worker and client. Sometimes no other measures are needed than motivational counseling, something a social worker knows more than enough to carry out. A thorough work for change, however, demands continuous contact, something which a social worker does not have the time for, but very much wants. Why should the social services employ university-educated social workers when the ambition is no higher than something a high-school accounting graduate might as well "assess" with standardized interviews and then "pass along" to a contractor?

The story above illustrates the downside of the division of labor and consequently the limitations on the time she has to meet with clients. Rosa, who has worked for a long time in the social services, currently with substance abuse, sums up the developments:

I'm becoming more or less an administrative clerk. The idea is to make quick assessments, approve some kind of treatment. We're not supposed to engage with clients. That's the idea. That's how it has developed.

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<sup>63</sup> In Swedish: medarbetarsamtal.

Of course, the division of labor plays an important role in increasing productivity and profit in diverse areas of production. Repeatedly performing the same tasks will reduce the necessary time required for each task and, as Ulrika said, will probably improve the assessments. But, as work becomes increasingly specialized, it will probably also be repetitive and therefore less of a generalist skill is required to carry it out, as pointed out by the narrator of the above excerpt. Karl Marx (1963) highlighted such a degeneration of skills stemming from the increased division of labor, and also to a spiritual and physical degeneration and lack of enthusiasm for the work. He labelled it alienation. The frustration and anger articulated above may very well be understood as such alienation. As well as boosting production and profit, the increasing division of labor harbors the potential for other effects as well. Social work scholar Tommy Lundström has studied a social work reform in Australia involving a division of labor between assessment and treatment similar to those described in the narratives above. After the division and standardization of the assessment phase, the authorities felt there was no need for social workers to handle the assessment, they were actually perceived as making too much fuss, and the work of assessment was instead given to less qualified, non social workers (Lundström 2011), in line with the perceptions of over-qualification by interviewees Rosa above, and Tina, below. From such an understanding, it may be argued that, as well as saving money, an increased division of labor may also ease the governing of social workers. Hiring less educated people, who might have less of a calling for social work and the wellbeing of clients, and who may possibly also be alienated from their work and colleagues, may make them easier to manage. Social work scholar Karen Healy (2009:402, 410) has drawn attention to a shift from counseling-type work to risk management following the introduction of NPM in Australian social work and argues that this may hamper both a holistic and a critical approach in social work. Other research on organizational matters in Sweden also suggests that the client–contractor model increases competition for resources within the organization (Jacobsson 2002), which may in itself undermine both collegiality and a client-centered perspective.

On top of this, as illustrated in Chapter 6 (on documentation), another effect of the increasing burden of documentation is that the time available to meet clients is slashed. From the narratives above and in Chapter 6 it seems as though the paperwork is becoming more important than interacting with clients. Together with an increased division of labor, or specialization, the prioritization of paperwork over meeting with clients increases the distance between the social worker in the social services and the client. Tina, who has only worked for a couple of years as a social worker, although both in financial support and now with disability assistance (LSS), questions why

contemporary social work education is so complex and thorough when most of the actual work is quite simple:

All of the education is based on working with the client. We take courses in things like social psychiatry, social work, sociology, to understand both the macro and micro levels. And then you're, like, as I am now, handling invoices, make contracts, you're so far away from contact with [the client], it doesn't feel like such a long university education is necessary to do that job. It's a lot of administration, like true paper processing sometimes. I figure a year would be enough.

Tina's conclusions seem to coincide with those above, that following on from public management reform, working in the social services does not require such a comprehensive education (Healy 2009:410, Lundström 2011). In addition to the division of assessment and treatment, there are narratives about another kind of division of labor, that of specialization. Specialization entails a division of the employees into working only with specific client groups or, more accurately, with certain different social problems (Lundström & Sunesson 2006). This is an organizational model that began to be implemented during the 1980s and is now the model most frequently applied in Sweden (Grell et al. 2013:230, 235). Despite this tendency, a more generalist (or integrational) approach is favored in textbooks and education (Herz & Johansson 2011, Lorenz 2005), and by clients (Blom et al. 2009). Ylva, one of the interviewees, also argues against this specialization, not for reasons of anti-austerity or alienation, but because of how it may affect the quality of social work:

I'm thinking about this holistic view, that I meet a person and realize that we are complex, perhaps I meet someone who lacks a source of income, and then it turns out that this person may have other needs for support as well. Perhaps they live in an abusive relationship, have some kind of disability that needs to be assessed or something like that. To be able to work with the whole spectrum of the problem. But now it's so divided and then it may be a field that's not part of my unit, rather like the unit of social psychiatry or disability support or substance abuse, in that case you have to engage other people too, you have to cooperate.

Having a specialized organization may improve the handling of a particular problem but, because many clients have complex issues, there is a risk of the opposite happening. In addition, due to more administration and the fact that several different social workers meet with each client, specialization may hamper the important relationship between the client and the social worker (Grell et al. 2013:229). It should also be added that another interviewee, Olivia, mentions a practice at a former employer where a local reorganization of the assessment phase handed over responsibility to the

*client* to make a written self-assessment, in the shape of a standardized form, in order to apply for financial support. According to Tina, on the rare occasions when social workers do meet clients (referring to the unit of financial support) it is primarily about controlling them:

The house calls were more about [...] controlling, to check if the person lives there, because that's what you do when it's a sub-lease. And, like, checking, asking for papers and suchlike to build a case for dismissal. So it's not, you don't look at what the needs are, what does this person need help with?

Even though visits to the client's home have probably always included an element of inspection and control, in this case not even the social worker herself can see the house call as anything other than a measure of control. There are also other examples of the reorganization of tasks in social work. When Ylva worked with financial support there was a reorganization with the purpose of giving social workers the "full picture" of each client. This meant in practice that, as well as the assessment of the clients' needs, they were also required to carry out the administrative aspects of payment, which had previously been done by administrative staff. In the narratives above, it seems as though the social workers' ability to carry out the complex social work they aspire to and to make assessments based on the needs of the client is decreased in favor of standardized and instrumental administrative systems based on economic principles (similar conclusions are drawn by Sjöström 2006:286). Evidence-based methods, rigid documentational practices and the standardization of the logic of MI can all be interpreted as a break with both the traditional approach of clinical assessment based on experience in social work and the reliance upon the professionalism and creativity of the skilled social worker (see also Paulsen 2015:45–47). A similar interpretation can be applied to the increased division of labor, both the specialization into different problems and the division between assessment and the treatment.

Some argue that this increased division of labor constitutes a professionalization of social work (Eriksson 1995) but, from a Marxist perspective and from the perspective of the social workers I interviewed, it could also be argued that, as the division as labor increases and the comprehensive generalist knowledge is gradually lost, the social worker loses sight of social work's end "product" and becomes distanced or alienated from both the profession of social work and the client (Marx 1963). As such, an increased division of labor may be seen as a *de*-professionalization. Similar developments to those illustrated here seem to have been observed in other studies as well. Social work researchers studying Sweden and the UK argue that they have witnessed both a fragmentation of social work into specialized

teams and an increasingly instrumental role played by social workers; they label this transformation a loss of professional autonomy or de-professionalization (Harlow et al. 2013:540). Professional autonomy concerns the ability and mandate for an individual in the profession of social work (or other professions) as well as the professional collective itself, to evaluate, develop and discipline their work (Linnéuniversitet 2013, see also Chapter 5 on emotions and being a professional). So it seems that, through having standardized and de-professionalized social workers, the field is now more open to engage other available and possibly cheaper labor to carry out significant parts of current social work, as is argued to have happened in Australia (Lundström 2011). In fact, it has been claimed that this is an intentional aspect of streamlining the social services, enabling the development of a more flexible and compliant labor force (Garrett 2008).

## **Budget governing**

Apart from the division of labor, a popular strand in the contemporary governing of public institutions concerns the use of economic instruments to attain the desired behavior out of an organization (see discussion in Chapter 2). In short, this technique is centered on budgetary targets. Bearing in mind the expected financial needs for the coming fiscal year, performance is measured by how well the bottom-line result corresponds to these expectations. In a way, the correspondence between expectations and outcome is what matters and, some would argue, not the results of the actual work (Schröder 2014). Narratives of such budget awareness are analyzed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and suggest that budgetary austerity is a goal that sometimes trickles down, merging with other ideals and becoming internalized in the minds of the social workers. When talking about the mandate to make decisions regarding treatment vis-à-vis her superiors, interviewee Felicia says:

And then she said, “but hold it now,” like, “how did you reason here?” like “no, this is too extensive” or “it costs too much” so in that case you might have to back off a bit. [...] Yes, we know more, so she trusts our appraisal on most of the cases. However, she might question it from, like, cost and that we should think about not having, oh, what is it she says..., LEON, I think: lowest effective level of care.<sup>64</sup> It’s something she learned on some kind of course, and it’s pretty good to think like that. I don’t know the complete philosophy behind it, but, but, that we should not take care of, I mean, care for people more than they need.

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<sup>64</sup> In Swedish: lägsta effektiva omhändertagandenivå.

I read this story related by Felicia as a bit confusing. First she says that her manager sometimes makes them back off and revise their assessments, to give cheaper treatment. Then she says that the manager has trust in her and her colleagues, and that her manager's cost-awareness is reasonable. I interpret this paradox as a joint production between a discourse on the negative effects of long-term institutionalization and an awareness of the limited financial resources or even individual responsibility of the municipal budget of the social services. It seems that Felicia has made the management's economic argument of LEON (lowest effective level of care) at least partly into her own, rather than focusing primarily on the needs of the client, by connecting cost awareness to a discourse on the harm of excessive institutionalization. It is not hard to understand this connection because a critique of institutionalization gained prominence during the 1990s in Sweden and was presented by debaters and politicians as an either/or for the "liberation" of primarily long-term psychiatric patients. This debate was followed by reforms to enable individuals with severe mental illness to live "at home" and to enable their entry into the workforce (SOU 1992:73), producing a gradual de-institutionalization of psychiatric care under which many in-patients have become out-patients (SOU 2006:100). It seems that the trend towards a de-institutionalization of social work and the development of clients' individual responsibility cannot be disconnected from the logic of economic effectiveness, spurred on by political decisions to decrease the financial resources. On the topic of budgets, interviewee Nora reveals how the term "positive results" may mean different things depending on context:

If I, as a social worker, talk about positive results, that means being able to help clients get better. In my case, it means staying sober and off drugs, maybe even improved housing, and feeling better. That's a positive result to me. But when you read the meeting documents then it's all about the budget. The budget is in balance, then it's like "who cares what happens to the clients?"

The opposing perspectives of social worker and management are illustrated by Nora's story. Caring for clients versus caring for a budget in balance. In a similar vein, interviewee Vera says that what creates the most stress for her is the limitations on her ability to do a good job, because now it is all about balancing the budget. This is the overriding target. In a discussion on the misuse of flexible working hours to keep costs down, Olivia says that the managers protect the budget because if they don't, they are out headfirst. Another interviewee, Beatrice, tells me:

**Beatrice:** I read, and it says explicitly [in the report] that, because in the city I worked in, the social services had a huge budget deficit, “we have no money” and so on, and then it says explicitly that no new commitment of care for children may be initiated until another is finished, so that money may be released. And then you have, it’s completely sick! I mean then you can’t claim to work in the best interests of the child or from individual assessments, when we’re told not to start a new one before a present one is terminated.

**Marcus:** It’s some kind of zero sum game.

**Beatrice:** It’s breaking the law! I mean, it’s against the law, that means we’re not following the law, and the fact that this is written explicitly into the working plan, to me it’s completely... [sighs in frustration].

Referring to a report in which the management specifically stated that no new treatments could be commenced in the children’s protection services until another treatment had been finished, Beatrice gives an example of what budget governing may lead to in practice. Merely recalling it and telling me the story rouses her and she expresses outrage over such an austere perspective. In a similar fashion, Tina tells me about internal documents intended to produce awareness of budget limitations:

All the time new guidelines are issued, we get mails like “now you have to do this” and “think about this.” [...] Once I was so upset; a mail that was sent out, just like that, was like “now we have to save money, we have to consider reducing treatments and other measures, I hope you can condone this” [...] but come on, there has to be like [...] how do we prioritize? [...] I mean, it’s being discussed like, to save money, that we are too generous with housing. So now, the manager who’s above our manager is going to sit in on the case reporting,<sup>65</sup> and that’s perceived by the personnel as if they’re not trusted.

How am I supposed to choose? The decision between two evils is no real decision. Social workers are given the discretion to decide, but not the resources that they need. In this way, management avoids making uncomfortable decisions, such dirty business is pushed down the chain of command. At the same time, the managers are becoming more closely involved in overseeing the suggested measures regarding the needs and treatment of clients. The general guidelines without priorities and the mere monitoring may in that sense produce the desired budget awareness without anyone having to say it aloud and possibly be held accountable for it. It may also be assumed from the narratives above that such a scheme makes the social workers want to deprive themselves of the discretionary power they may sense that they have in accordance with a “not in my name” kind of logic. This suggests that welfare workers’ influence cannot be understood

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<sup>65</sup> In Swedish: ärendedragning.

primarily as a question of discretion, but rather as complex relations of power.

One of the interviewees, Emma, writes in her diary about something that may be connected with the decentralized budgets and the separate responsibilities for each of the divisions of social work within the same municipality:

I found out that the colleague I was supposed to make the house call with had to commit the child since the mother turns out to be homeless because of a denial from another division of the social services of her application for housing. We were a bit upset over this and discussed what it is we're really doing.

Decentralized budgets and budget governing may thus produce not only cost-awareness but also competing agendas. Emma, Tina, Beatrice, Vera and Nora are baffled, stressed, upset and outraged over how balancing the budget is given priority over human lives. Recalling the argument from Chapter 5 on emotions, such stories may very well be understood as affective judgements. Gabriel, an interviewee who works with substance abuse, tells me what the decentralized budget responsibility has led to in practice and compares his current post to a neighboring municipality where he used to work:

Here it's more results, unit governing, every unit, every manager has, which I can understand, has a responsibility for their budget. But that leads to financial austerity. And that affects the job, it sure does. [...] We belong, organization-wise, to financial support. But there are still a lot of discussions about who is supposed to pay. We have two managers with their separate little budgets. But in the final account it's still the same budget [...] So it becomes unwieldy because you can't get those things to work, quite simple matters really. We deal with treatment, treatment facilities and such. Then maybe these people need a place to stay during the assessment. Then it's financial support who's supposed to take care of that, to approve it. If they don't, or if things don't work out, and they have no housing for a week or so before treatment, they abscond. They have a relapse and they're gone.

Pointing to the effects on the wellbeing of clients, Gabriel says that in the gap that arises due to decentralized budget conflicts, some clients abscond from their intended treatment. Again, it seems that concern about the budget overshadows the purpose of social work. Remember also how Tina was expected to cultivate a relation to money (or "the numbers", see Chapter 5). Similarly, interviewee Simon tells me that sometimes, when battered women in acute crisis are placed at special facilities for battered women, in a matter of hours the social services relocate them to social services apartments

because it is cheaper, but with lower quality and security. The attention to budget that is being narrated here creates internal conflicts says Tina:

Maybe I made the judgement to approve, but I'm forced to go along the lines of the manager and deny. It's not anchored, it's not founded in yourself, but it emanates from you, something which is the opinion of someone else. That becomes a conflict like, inside of you.

In opposition to her assessment, her manager may force a denial. But still it is Tina who has to represent the decision, as it emanates from her body and her name is on the final decision. The unease that such an internal conflict creates is almost palpable. She has to carry the burden of responsibility towards the client although it goes against her judgement, yet another example of how the sense of discomfort may be political (Scheman 1980). Olivia gives me an overarching picture of this kind of financial system of governing when she says that several professions have been hijacked by such economic systems where work is divided into measurable entities and connected to a certain amount of money. Professions that used to be autonomous have been degraded to contractors whose actions are minutely controlled. She then tells me what this means in reality for the welfare of the people:

It's a disaster, you know, I'm all beat, I have six grandchildren and a mother who lives in a nursing home, so I can see for myself. And I, the typical middle-aged woman in her midlife, working my ass off to cover for what society lacks in terms of care. Last fall I had to flex out and leave early once a week to pick up my grandchild, who was eighteen months old at the time, because he was at such a disastrous daycare center, but which naturally had elegant visions and target declarations.

The narratives above highlight some serious effects of budget governing, but they are not unique. In a recent study of Swedish municipal governing of the social services, the authors concluded that the number one priority was not rules and regulations for the social services, nor ideals regarding the quality of the services provided, but the budget goals (Astwik & Melin 2014, see also Herz et al. 2013, Schröder 2014). Paired with increasing demands for austerity and efficiency, this budgetary governing forces social workers to constantly consider how to give less aid to fewer people and always choose the cheapest treatment. Despite this, the politicians are seldom held responsible (Astwik & Melin 2014). As illustrated eloquently by Olivia above, the gendered expectations on women to care for people makes women take responsibility where the welfare no longer delivers, both in their private and professional lives, ultimately exploiting and exhausting them (see also Brodin 2005, 2006).

## Flexibility and self-governing

Perhaps in contrast to the numerous narratives of standardization, de-professionalization, austerity strangulation, the dehumanization of clients, stress and heavy workloads, I have encountered narratives of social work being profoundly free. Gabriel, for instance, says it is free work with a lot of individual responsibility, something which he “actually likes”. There are also accounts of the collegial distribution of cases, which means that there is a certain flexibility and individual consideration of the dispersion of the workload and not a simple handing out of new cases by management. All of the interviewees have flexible working hours and such flexibility allows you, within certain boundaries, to choose when your workday starts and ends and in what order to deal with different tasks, albeit with the demand that you get things done. Flexible working time is highly cherished. Ylva says:

**Ylva:** It’s great because we can come in later in the morning, me and the other one [colleague doing similar things], so that’s good. To have this time to just sit and write, in peace and tranquility. Since it’s other people here all the time, it’s mail, it’s the phone.

**Marcus:** So you have flextime?

**Ylva:** Yes.

**Marcus:** And that means that you choose to come in later and stay longer in the afternoon?

**Ylva:** Yes, that’s better for me. We, me and the other coach, can actually, we’re allowed to flex until ten o’ clock.

Ylva speaks of working outside the normal working hours as a normal state and, as I understand it, as a privilege, although I get the sense that she cannot do the job properly if she does not work later than her colleagues. The demands of her work tasks forces her to take responsibility and work outside the normal nine to five, although she expresses this as a privilege. What room does that leave for a social life or family? She told me later that working in the social services almost demands for people “not to have a life”. Tina says similarly that she prefers flexible working hours over rigid ones because it enables her to plan her own work. When I ask about what a random workday looks like, Emma starts talking about the burden of documentation. I ask to what extent she can control when to carry out the documentation and she responds:

**Emma:** Quite a lot. I mean when and how, I can decide a lot for myself. But some things are like, acute things I can’t control, if a child is...

**Marcus:** No, of course not.

**Emma:** ...is abused in some way. But I can still decide when to have meetings, when to write and such things. And we have flexible working hours too, so I can decide to come in a bit later and go home a bit later.

**Marcus:** Do you think that's good?

**Emma:** Yes and no. I think it's good to be allowed a bit of flexibility in your working time, but I also believe it's being used in the wrong way. Or rather that it makes it invisible that people work a lot of overtime.

**Marcus:** Why do they do that?

**Emma:** Because there is no end to the work and there are always things you ought to have done. So even those who have quite a demanding life outside of work, who have kids and a family and such, they too work overtime and have plenty of hours accumulated in the flex. I don't think there is one single person who has minus in their flex. So to the employer it's a real benefit, that people work overtime and do their normal work in time which should have been formal overtime [...]

**Marcus:** Do you too have a lot of accumulated flex?

**Emma:** Yes I do, I have about 60 hours.

Emma describes both positive and negative aspects of having a flexible organization of labor. Apart from the positive aspects mentioned before, like the sense of freedom, Emma also emphasizes the misuse of the flexible working hours system by the employer as well as its effect on private life. As can be seen in the quotation above, I get no direct response to my question about why people work more than the regular 40 hours a week; instead Emma says that there are always "things that you ought to have done," illustrating how the workers take responsibility for getting the job done, often meaning that they work overtime without being duly compensated. Interviewee Vera speaks of the standardized template of BBIC and not having enough time:

We have the worst, working in the social services and in particular with children, and perhaps financial support too. If you don't have the time to collect it all, because sometimes it can be real detective work, some families have moved around. In order to get a comprehensive picture it takes time. And there is time, if you work until nine, ten at night. On the flex of course, and occasionally overtime.

The ones who are hardest to reach are those working with the exercise of public authority. Those who work with children and adolescents or in financial support. Because they are completely squeezed dry, I mean they're so tired it's, you know, over there we're not talking no eight-hour working day, oh no! There it's working overtime like crazy, for free and all. You know this basic knowledge, about union collective agreements, no, they have no knowledge. Their managers can say "add it on the flex." "Okay, sweet, I can add it on the flex!" (Olivia)

Not having enough time comes up again in the previous quote from Vera (as it has done in several of the previous chapters), in this instance related to the collection of information, but because they have flexible working hours, they can work extra hours and conduct the investigatory work at night, although with no additional compensation. And in the latter quote, Olivia describes the misuse of flexible working hours by management, because many social workers do not know of their legal rights to be paid extra for working overtime. Although in some instances it has to do with ignorance of legal rights, it often seems as though the sense of responsibility for the work being done is internalized and that this may be used as a tool by the employer to extract the most out of the workforce. As pointed out by Emma in the quote above, many social workers have a constant surplus in their flexible worktime account. It has been pointed out in other areas of work, predominantly in the production of goods, that having flexible working hours that are set *by the employer* allows the employer to adjust the workforce to the ups and downs in production and the shifting need for labor. This decreases the cost of “idle” labor and ultimately increases profits (SOU 1996:145, s 152). In a social work setting, however, this is regulated without a formal demand from above; rather, some social workers take it upon themselves to regulate the need for labor, and work extra hours when there is a need for it without getting the extra pay that overtime usually renders. Instead, they can take time off during periods when the demand for labor is lower. However, because there are limits to the resources, in terms of employed social workers, and usually plenty to do, the self-regulating workforce seems to optimize the use of themselves. Emma writes in her diary about working overtime:

I start Monday by going over the things I need to prioritize this week. I realize that I have several important things that I will not have the time to do. I send an email to my supervisor in which I explain the situation: several decisions that need to be taken care of quickly but too little “writing time” in my schedule since we have a lot of scheduled meetings this week. I feel good about having told my supervisor this, but get the reply that all these things are important. No answer on what to do first. The supervisor refers me to the unit manager, if something is important enough to motivate me to ask for overtime. I don’t feel comfortable asking my unit manager, but I decide not to work late.

When Emma e-mails her supervisor to say that there is too much to do this particular week, she gets no guidance on prioritizing; instead, she is told to contact the unit manager *if* there are urgent tasks that *require* working overtime, which would mean mandatory overtime and higher payment. Emma, however, is not comfortable asking the division manager about this and, it seems, no formal overtime will be paid. Even so, she feels good about voicing this issue and decides, somewhat willfully, not to take responsibility

and work overtime this particular week. It seems many social workers have a surplus in their working hours and I ask Olivia if they ever have time to regulate this. She responds:

That depends on how cold-hearted you are, I would say. If you can ignore that, okay, these families won't be able to pay their rent on time because I'm going to get a haircut and I'll take it on the flex. It's like you have a lot of responsibility, but you have no mandate.

Whether you can regulate the surplus depends on your cold-heartedness, says Olivia, and it thus seems there is no actual idle-time when the accumulated hours may be used to take time off. She thus points again to an inherent risk of flexible working hours, the self-regulation or internalized responsibility for the wellbeing of the clients but without the mandate required to make the preferred decisions. Later, Olivia also refers to gendered aspects of flexible working hours. A lot of overtime is found in the private business sector, a sector predominantly occupied by men. Many of these employments have, instead of paid overtime, higher salaries as compensation, but "the women in the public sector, they work overtime for free, because it is considered flextime and not overtime." On the other hand, Vera emphasizes management's unwillingness to allow for the regulation of surplus working hours by taking time off:

**Vera:** I had worked several years without having a long vacation, and this particular year, a friend of mine who I hadn't seen for a really long time, who lives in Spain, invited me to visit. So I went there for a week and there were holidays so I took time off to recuperate. And I was, like, we may have 50 hours in the flex, some in Hilltown have 100. [...] and I had my 50 and then you have to use it otherwise they steal my actual overtime.

**Marcus:** Is it once a year that they,

**Vera:** Twice a year. So I did, because we were going down to Smalltown to celebrate the high-school graduation. But then instead, just because I tried to take care of myself and recuperate, I had it shoved down my throat, "you've been gone too much." And that was three weeks of vacation I had planned for, it's two years ago now, *three weeks!* So she comes in to me and like, "You can't, because you applied for vacation in September too," which was two weeks. So I had to give up one of those weeks, so I had only two weeks of consecutive vacation, and it's stipulated by law, you have the right to four weeks.

Highlighting the fact that she had been working a lot and that she had not had much time off the previous few summers, Vera said that when she eventually attempted to use her flextime for an extended vacation, her manager denied her request. Although frustration over such a denial is not unexpected, it sounds as though Vera's frustration is accentuated because

she is always willing to work a lot, including at inconvenient hours, and to be “responsible”. In an earlier quote she told me that she works late to get things done and also that it is not possible to “have a life” outside of her job. She gives everything to her job and, it seems, subsequently feels unappreciated or even betrayed by the management when her application (to exercise her “right” to freedom) is denied, because there is no reciprocal responsibility. One might also add that institutionalizing flexible time in the place of formal overtime makes it possible to save money not only on the hourly wage, but also by making it possible to “steal [the] actual overtime” twice a year. Having a workload that does not allow for regulating the flextime on a regular basis will ultimately save money for the employer because longer periods of time off can be denied and because twice a year the accumulated flextime above 50 hours is eliminated. Olivia, who has worked for a long time in the social services, explains what this over-use of flexible working hours may mean to inexperienced social workers:

If you’re new to this, and the manager says, “Okay, because you’re new, you get 70 cases, the others have 90. I’m giving you a soft start.” And you still can’t make it. Then what do you think? As a rookie? [...] you don’t argue much because you think that, okay, this is what the job is like, yes. These are the terms and all the others can live up to it. It’s do or die. Then you’re not arguing when the manager says: “Go home, there’s no chance of overtime, go home and learn to prioritize better.”

Educational researcher Marika Hanson (2004) aims to problematize the taken-for-granted idea of flexible work as benevolent and liberating, and argues that previous research points in differing directions, both towards increased productivity, learning and a sense of freedom *and* an increase in workloads, less time for learning and increased stress (Hanson 2004:16). Through interviews and surveys with white-collar workers<sup>66</sup> working under flexible conditions, she concludes that their work demands a constant cognitive presence in the form of organizing and planning their work, which places high demands on the individual ability to self-regulate. She strives to understand the management need for self-regulated employees (taking inspiration from the work of sociologist John Garrick) through the governing of the subject’s emotions and cognition. Through an increased space for maneuver and personal responsibility, a kind of seductive empowerment is granted to employees, which is meant to appeal to their individual loyalty and shape the employees’ will to improve and increase production, for example, by not wanting to limit the workload and not wanting to keep work and private life separated (Hanson 2004:160). Thus, if flexibility and

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<sup>66</sup> Clerks/officers at the government authority “Swedish Energy Agency” and freelance journalists.

responsibility are understood as central aspects of discretion, such an understanding needs to be problematized.

Flexible working hours, no doubt, have their origins in management strategies to optimize the use of resources; be it machines or humans. A Swedish government inquiry conducted in the 1990s, which explores possible legislation on flexibility in working life, argues that increased flexibility in working hours, from a management perspective, ought to enable the most rational and cost-effective organization of production (SOU 1996:145, p.152). It is also pointed out that women who, for a variety of reasons, work part-time or choose not to participate in paid labor because of inconvenient working hours, may choose to work (more) with the augmentation of flexible working hours (SOU 1996:145, p. 166). Although paid labor can be considered to have emancipatory effects for women because it may bring increased economic independence, a constant quest for new ways to optimize working hours may have less beneficial effects as well. As illustrated in the narratives here, such a way of organizing work will affect the quality of work as well as the wellbeing of social workers.

Flexible working hours are not the only way to optimize the extraction of labor from social workers. Vera says that, due to lack of time, she and her colleagues discuss work matters during their lunch break:

When we have lunch together [...] we have agreed not to talk about the job [...] but sometimes we do anyway [...] we discuss our cases to manage our workloads [...] and we don't have coffee breaks that often.

Even though they have agreed not to, and are not forced into it by management, they work during breaks. Yet another way to extract free labor is revealed by Rosa:

**Rosa:** After a while, this pile of assessments, the “assessments-to-be-written pile” is so tall that I have to save days in my calendar. Or as I do, and don't be shocked now, I HOB instead of VAB.<sup>67</sup> Those are the only times I have the time to write. I take work with me when, instead of VAB, I work from home.

**Marcus:** But wait a minute, what is HOB?

**Rosa:** VAB means caring for a child who's ill. HOB means you work from home with a sick kid. [...] because if the child has a fever there's nothing else to do but to watch a film and sleep. Which depends of course on what kind of kid you have, but I have a calm and easy kid so it's always worked for me. [...] so that's how I do it, and that's about peace of mind and service to the clients. I'm not really thinking about my employer, but it's a

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<sup>67</sup> Vård av barn. Term used by the Social Insurance Agency meaning Care for a child (who is ill).

win-win situation. Of course, the employer would say no to working from home when my kid is ill, so then I would VAB instead and nothing gets done. Which is a loss for the employer and for me too unfortunately because that increases my stress.

**Marcus:** Is there anything, do you have other strategies to handle that? I mean, the discrepancy between demands and reality?

**Rosa:** Yes; to work late on my flextime. Because formal overtime we..., it's not..., we're really bad at asking for overtime. But I know, it's because I already know the answer.

**Marcus:** What is the answer?

**Rosa:** "Let's make an appointment, sit down and go through your cases and I'll help you prioritize." Then she prioritizes other things than I do, so I'm not comfortable with that.

**Marcus:** What does she prioritize that you don't want?

**Rosa:** RBS, such things, that she can help with. "Now we have to schedule days for it, it's so important!" [...]

**Marcus:** So to get out of that, you use the flex instead?

**Rosa:** Yes, work for free, for some flextime.

With a constant backlog of formal assessments to write, the need for extra time arises. But asking her supervisor for paid overtime will always result in being blamed for failing to prioritize effectively and ultimately enforced "help" in prioritizing activities she would not choose herself, such as filling in the RBS (result-based governing). So, because she has a young child, sick days will eventually come up, and this is where she finds the time to work on her backlog. Doing this instead of "only" caring for her child will release some of the stress that accumulates as the pile of assessments builds up. In addition, this will be a service both to the clients and the employer. Moreover, like Emma, Vera and Ylva above, Rosa too works late on flextime to manage her workload. Similarly, Vera tells me that she uses some of her accumulated flexible working time when she herself is ill.

**Vera:** You're really not supposed to use the flex when you're ill. You're not.

**Marcus:** No, because that would mean a circumvention of the whole idea of the waiting day.<sup>68</sup>

**Vera:** Exactly [...] But in our unit we have said that it's OK, so. And many of my colleagues, including myself, think it's rather good, to avoid those damned waiting days. But at the same time I don't want it to be like that. If you're ill you're ill and it should be possible to measure that, to get it right.

Vera reveals that at her workplace it is officially sanctioned to use flextime during the initial waiting day of illness, which she sees as beneficial, but at the same time it helps to disguise the actual levels of illness. All of the

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<sup>68</sup> The one-day qualifying period before sick-leave benefits are payable, in Swedish: *karensdag*.

examples above: working flexible (unpaid) overtime, use flextime during illness, working while caring for sick children and working during breaks are documented in other studies focusing on social workers. In an interview study with social workers, authors Wanja Astvik and Marika Melin also document the strategies mentioned (2013:64). The authors regard these practices as individual compensatory strategies to balance the discrepancy between demands and resources at hand, but it could also be argued that they work in beneficial ways for management as the internalized responsibility conceals the flaws in the system and the lack of resources in social services (Selberg 2013). From the outside it may look as though the employer is safeguarding rules and regulations, but in reality the social workers have to bend and sometimes break the rules in order to get by.

The concept of flexibility is interesting in itself because it harbors both beneficial and exploitative aspects. It is also interesting because of the numerous ways in which it may be expressed. Yet another function of flexibility concerns the physical work environment and Felicia tells me how angry she is about the flexible *office milieu* that was recently established at her workplace.

**Felicia:** What makes me angry is our working environment. We are sitting in an open, flexible, a flexible office milieu [...] And I'm not keen on it. I have calmed down, or calmed down, I've had to let go of much of my anger around it, because I can't, I can't stand walking around being angry all the time. But really, it's really tough sometimes.

**Marcus:** What is tough?

**Felicia:** That you're interrupted, disturbed. You look up like this, visual impressions all the time [...] you're interrupted 40 times a day, you can't finish what you've started, it demands, like, the energy you need for the job is eaten up by the attempts to like, reconnect, "what was I was doing?"

Supposedly in an attempt to save money (as described by Felicia's colleague Helene), several of the municipal services were relocated to a joint site and a flexible office was established. In addition to the problems that arise from noise and interruptions, such a milieu also makes her feel anonymous:

You have no permanent spot. So you have a locker for your personal stuff, an archive where you collect a box of your stuff, a cupboard for computers and perhaps you put your lunchbox in another, in the fridge. It's like that, and you have the postbox at another location. So you walk around trying to gather everything and like, "where should I sit today?" [...] Nobody would notice if I quit and didn't come back. Because there's no stuff here that shows I exist.

I believe that Felicia conveys a sense of a depersonalized semi-automatic factory setting in the story of her working environment. Not only is it organized in a way that interrupts thinking and dulls the intellect, it also gives a sense of anonymity. The flexible office landscape may then work in ways that are beneficial to management, not just in terms of saving money on the reduced cost for office space, but also in creating the sense of being replaceable, a cog in the machine. Such a sense may work to discipline social workers. Rosa also suggests other potentially disciplinary effects of a flexible working milieu:

**Marcus:** How do you register your working hours?

**Rosa:** In an excel-sheet. We all have to turn one in at the end the month.

**Marcus:** Ok, so you have no punch clock to check your arrival?

**Rosa:** No.

**Marcus:** And you don't log into the system so that may be compared to your working hours?

**Rosa:** No, but it's incredibly controlled, now that we're sitting in an open-plan office everyone can see what we're doing.

**Marcus:** Okay, so it's some kind of social control rather than electronic?

**Rosa:** Exactly. The manager is sitting there too.

It may be worth noting that Paul Michael Garrett (2005:545), who has examined social work in the UK, has predicted the growth of what he calls portable offices, made possible through the developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Although portable offices per se do not seem to be in a stage of rapid growth in the offices of those I interviewed, there are some examples above that indicate forms of flexibility working in different ways, both to create a sense of freedom and to control and extract more labor from the workforce. I therefore believe that multiple forms of flexibility in working life are worth paying attention to, sometimes with and sometimes without the aid of ICTs, and we shall see more examples in the coming section. However, before turning to such issues, I would like to make a couple of additional observations on flexibility. Sociologist Richard Sennett argues that flexible working conditions are for the most part considered a privilege (his analysis mainly focuses on the United States), not least because in practice (at the time of his study) it is reserved for the white middle class (Sennett 1999:83). The fact that it is reserved for the relatively privileged may be both a sign of differentiated governing techniques and the works of a seductive effect of privileging. From the interviews above it should also, as Sennett points out, in its practical use, be considered a technique by which to effectivize the subjugation of labor (ibid:67). Ethnologist Angelika Sjöstedt Landén (2012) draws attention to the growing domination of flexible working conditions and the negative effects these may produce in terms of

health and gender inequalities (ibid:252). She argues that, because traditional monitoring techniques are replaced with auditing techniques under flexible working conditions, such as measuring and comparing performance, individuals and organizations are driven to display their usefulness and ambition in order to present themselves as valuable, loyal and belonging (ibid). Her study of the process of relocating a government agency reveals that such an audit culture places:

a heavy responsibility on the staff to provide proper efficiency for the government institution, particularly on those who identified more closely with the position of ambitious young girls. Consequently, ambitious young girls could also become positioned as responsible when this promise was seen to fail. (Sjöstedt Landén 2012:261)

Philosopher Paulo Virno (2004) argues that contemporary working conditions and emotional aspects of labor produce a worker subject who is expected to do more than just work during the traditionally fixed and duly compensated hours of work. In addition, work increasingly incorporates qualities connected to the self, such as creativity and engagement, and thus workers are expected to be performing all the time. By exploiting more than just your ability to perform certain tasks, contemporary working regimes also try to exploit the worker's subjective self. And not only does waged labor enable profitmaking from the surplus value of that labor, but in Virno's understanding you also work more hours than officially paid for. Ylva, who praised her flexible working hours above, says later that:

I always had a need for solitude, but it's grown and grown. Now I can't handle loads of people anymore, I think it's a consequence of work and being worn down. I can feel incredibly abject very often, and I can feel so tired, on the edge of what I can endure. [...] To organize (in the network) is the most important thing to me. Because that's about feeling a bit better, from meeting people in a similar situation and from putting into words and calling out our reality together and doing something to create change. That gives me strength. But then, that means, I don't have the energy to meet people when I get home from work. So privately I withdraw a lot, because work takes a lot of energy, it takes it all.

The current conditions and organization of work exploit Ylva in ways that border on the unendurable. Withdrawing from social contacts outside of work becomes a necessity to enable her to cope with life. Sociologists Kristina Abiala and Göran Ahrne (2005) draw similar conclusions from interviewing service workers. To endure, some simply resorted to solitude in their leisure time. Towards the latter part of the quote above, Ylva expresses something that may relate to Sara Ahmed's (2011) understanding of the

creativity of bad feeling as Ylva has chosen to organize resistance to current systems of social work governing. The enthusiasm conveyed in her story about political organization “that gives me strength” can be associated with Alian Badiou’s concept of political happiness, which is not to be confused with the currently popular happiness discourse of being content and accepting our “fate” (Ahmed 2010, Binkley 2011). In sum, the current social work regime creates suffering, but also resistance. Analyzing such resistance, it becomes evident that it is both a way of understanding the reasons for suffering and a strategy to endure it.

## **Distribution of labor**

From the interviews I conducted, I gather that, for social workers in the social services, working with individual cases (i.e. assessments) claims the bulk of their working time. After realizing that the distribution of cases was conducted differently in different social service offices, I grew interested in the different styles of labor distribution and their inherent functions and effects. I ask Helene how the distribution of cases is carried out at her work place:

**Helene:** The one who has room takes it [...] And if it’s me who’s up, to take a case, I usually declare that I have room [to take an additional case], or the manager asks: “do you have room?” That’s one way, but I’ve also worked [...] in the child protective services, for example, it was such a deadlock, those meetings once a week when new cases, maybe five or six, were to be distributed.

**Marcus:** What do you mean by deadlock?

**Helene:** That no one had room, but the cases had to be distributed.

**Marcus:** What happened then? Did the manager just throw it in front of you?

**Helene:** Yes, sometimes the manager had to say, and then we had to give it another round to distribute the case.

The above is an example of one of the ways to distribute labor that I have encountered. A kind of collegial or self-induced distribution. From Helene’s reasoning, this is a style of organizing that is appreciated by management because she says that her working group is considered “easily managed” by her supervisor:

**Helene:** She says it’s a really easy group, a really nice group, an easy group, to manage, because we take so much responsibility and everything. I’m one of the ones with the longest experience, and we have those who are fairly new to the game, but it doesn’t matter, it’s the same style for all of us, we’re open and respectful and such things.

**Marcus:** What does it mean to take a lot of responsibility? Responsibility for what?

**Helene:** Well, you take a lot of responsibility, to make it good for the third person. So nobody takes a case that they don't do.

Helene (above) says that she and her colleagues in the working group all take responsibility for “doing good” for the clients and that they do not take on a case without getting the work done. She contrasts this with a group she used to work in, where this “lust” to engage in self-regulation of the workload was not quite as widespread. Even so, the supervisor of this previous group did not necessarily demand that a particular social worker engage a case, but rather handed it over to the social workers themselves to regulate the distribution of labor, to give it another “round”. Rosa tells me of a similar system:

**Rosa:** It's done once a week in a little group meeting, where we gather the four of us and the manager is like: “Who can take new cases?”

**Marcus:** Okay, so it's a bit like, it's not the manager who says “here are your three new ones,” it's a bit more...

**Rosa:** No, we try also, a bit, according to our interests.

**Marcus:** Do conflicts arise around that or?

**Rosa:** No, there's never any conflicts [...] but you have to try to come up with an excuse to get out of it. Which you wish you always could.

Through the principle of “who has an opening?”, new cases are distributed at a meeting once a week. Although it does not result in open conflicts, there seems to be a tendency (at least from Rosa) to try to come up with reasons to avoid new cases because of already-heavy workloads. Tina works at a place with a similar system and I ask whether there is ever a bad atmosphere with this kind of distribution of labor:

**Tina:** Yes, sometimes it's just sitting there, for a while, until someone [...] and people are like: “no, I have so much, can you?”, “I have so much on my hands.” You wait for someone else to take on some more. [...] and there's always someone who's discontented, it's not fair or it's perceived as not fair.

**Marcus:** Do you think that some people are trying to, like, evade their work or are a bit lazy and don't take on their share?

**Tina:** I don't know. I try not to think like that [...] but sure, I'm sure it's like that, that some do more than others; that I believe. I know a colleague who quit, she was often ill for some reason, in the reception group, she was almost never there, or came in late, so then she had to do less. And wanted to leave early and stuff like that.

An appeal to colleagues to empathize with your burden of work is one way to avoid being assigned new cases, says Tina above. Because they all claim to

have a lot to do there is a waiting game in the hope that somebody will step up to accept another case. This system of distribution leads to discontent and a sense of injustice. When I ask whether she believes any of her colleagues are lazy and actively try to avoid work, she says she tries not to think like that, but still gives an example. It seems that a self-regulated distribution of labor, particularly in times of austerity, may create conflict among colleagues. Similarly, interviewee Maude, who has worked in this manner before, has fears about what will happen when such a system is re-installed at her current workplace:

We're just about to try, again, a bit more of a communal distribution of cases [...] where you can, declare your preference like, "I think this an interesting problem" or "I have experience of this." But my experience tells me that this usually doesn't work that well because there's almost never anyone who can offer to take on a new case because everyone feels they have too much. So even if we want to distribute cases together like that, in the end we're all sitting there, in silence.

The system of self-regulation in the distribution of labor is not a particularly good one, argues Maude, referring to the heavy workloads and a similar waiting game as in the quote above by Tina. Nevertheless, they are going to reinstall such a system at her workplace. A quite different system is used at Nora's workplace:

**Nora:** The managers are up to date on how many clients you have, so when a new case comes in, it's distributed to those social workers who have the fewest cases. Which I think is a rather reasonable system.

**Marcus:** So it's the manager that decides who will take the case?

**Nora:** Yes but...

**Marcus:** It's not, a round, like, who has time?

**Nora,** No, no, you know how many there are and I think, the problem is not that, but rather that we have too many.

Having the managers keeping track of individual workloads and distributing new cases on the basis of this is a reasonable system, says Nora. Although this is a good system, she points out that they all have too many cases. Ulrika, on the other hand, who works under a similar system, tells me that she accidentally discovered that for a long time she had been carrying considerably more cases than her colleagues, and that it was never clarified why this was the case. Ylva tells me of her previous experience of the distribution of cases at financial support:

**Ylva:** Yes, then it's the managers who distribute, and you're supposed to have about 50 cases.

**Marcus:** So you're not sitting as a group to have them go around?

**Ylva:** No [...] but at the end of the 1980s, then we had every week, we were sitting in the group and the manager had cases and checked who had the chance, so it was out in the open how many each of us had, and an idea to have a fair distribution [...]

**Marcus:** Do you prefer that?

**Ylva:** Absolutely, because then everyone has the possibility to, like, "no, that's enough!" Now [...] it's in your mailbox, new cases, Monday morning. And then it's up to me if I can't handle it, to take them to the manager, and it becomes a thing between me and my manager. This thing about individualization, which I tried to bring up, is that we can't be given that responsibility and also it disunites our working group even more. Because that means that if I give it back to the manager, it's handed out to someone else [...] that I think is the paradox, I'm always expected to be the one who draws the line, I'm always expected to take responsibility for my working situation. But every time I draw that line, they're not exactly cheering, or giving me a higher salary. So it's like damned if you do, damned if you don't.

**Marcus:** What happens then?

**Ylva:** It varies. Sometimes you're met with understanding and then they give it to someone else, which still isn't fair to my colleague. And also it's a temporary solution. I stand by my point that the heavy workload is made into an individual problem. As if it's me who can't handle it, as if I'm more sensitive to stress. Or that I can't prioritize. Or that I'm not quick enough.

In contrast to some of the previous commentators, Ylva, who has tried both systems, argues that the "open" and self-regulated distribution of cases is preferable because then the workloads cannot be hidden (although it may have been different three decades ago "in the 1980s"). Coming in on Monday morning to find new cases in your postbox does not allow the opportunity to voice a protest in plenum. Rather, if one was to not accept new cases (with the "postbox" system) they would be assigned to a colleague without being publicly displayed. It is this kind of individualization of problems that lies at the heart of her indignation because it places the blame for insufficient resources on the individual (who cannot deliver or cope with stress). This individualization also divides the workers' collective, making them even more vulnerable. Rosa also prefers the self-regulated distribution model, but she acknowledges a potential risk:

**Rosa:** The downside of choosing is that it appears voluntary. That we're like: "I'd love to have another one!" Sure, that might be the impression. But we're sitting, I think we're sitting in silence for quite some time before anyone is like: "I can take it."

**Marcus:** Who breaks the..., how shall I put it...?

**Rosa:** But, I mean, it's also about solidarity, if the manager has three cases and we're four social workers and one has just started with us, recently employed, then it's like, of course us three experienced who've worked for a time will take one each. It's like...

**Marcus.** Yes, that sounds obvious.

**Rosa:** Like, I know that "Alan" has as much as I do, if not more. Like, so I can't, I can't be that disloyal and demand that he takes two out of three, the other colleague one and I take none. That's impossible. It's like you're breaking apart.

The risk with a self-regulated distribution of labor is that taking on new cases may appear to be an act of free will, says Rosa. Although waiting in silence for as long as possible to accept a case seems to be a "passive" act of resistance, solidarity with her colleagues eventually makes her force herself to accept a new case. This apparent conflict between resisting unacceptable working conditions and solidarity with colleagues or clients is the topic of the next section. What may be said about these different systems of distribution of labor is that they seem to give rise to different problems. Individual distribution hides the workloads from colleagues and undermines resistance, making it easier to blame the individual social worker. Communal distribution reveals heavy workloads and makes joint efforts to protest possible. However, due to internalized ideals of responsibility, accepting new cases on top of already heavy workloads may also run the risk of appearing to be acts of free will. What is evident is that the problem lies in the amount of work – heavy workloads – and not primarily in the system of labor distribution. This also suggests that re-organizing will not solve fundamental problems, such as lack of resources.

## **Solidarity and self-governing**

As evident in the above three sections, an important resource for the governing of social workers is tapping into their will and desire to do good, to do the right thing. This may make them put up with insufficient resources and a dysfunctional organization and find self-destructive ways to handle and cope with the situation. This becomes strikingly evident in the following quote, in which I discuss the high rotation of employees and its consequences with Vera, who has herself been on long-term sick leave for work-related stress:

If you work with kids, it becomes a, I mean I have a conflict with myself. I feel...phew! [...] [cries] that it's so many different social workers, some kids have, in one year, like, 50 different social workers. [...] Or maybe not in one year, but a few years, and maybe someone quits [...] and then it's like, someone else comes along with their agenda and

their way of thinking, who hasn't been around from the start. [...] I'm thinking like, this is what makes me endure [...] these meetings we have when we see the kids, or visit them, that makes you endure this a bit longer. So they won't have to [meet a new social worker], then you try to get it to work.

At first sight, it seems unbelievable that anyone would endure such horrible working conditions as those that have been described to me in the numerous narratives quoted in this thesis, but when the sense of empathy, in this particular case with the client, is revealed it becomes understandable. Such expressions of empathy or solidarity surface in several of the interviews as well as in other studies (Kullberg 2011:67). At the same time, the conflict of thinking of one's own health in relation to others becomes evident and so does the ability or inability to disconnect oneself from emotions at work (see Chapter 5). Ylva tells me of another aspect related to enduring atrocious working conditions.

"I save myself." It's not that simple. I can be really pissed at comments like "so, change jobs, do something else!" What kind of reality are people living in, to say such things? The labor market does not look like that anymore, for me to just switch my line of work and do something else if I'm about to be worn out. "Go to mindfulness," always this individual, and also, it's a conflict of solidarity, as soon as we are witnessing these injustices and the consequences thereof, how people are suffering [...] but why is it so obvious that I should only worry about myself?

The suggestion to engage in "mindfulness" to cope with strenuous working conditions that was made to Ylva is both a narrow-minded individual response and at the same time impossible, because it does not consider her solidarity with the clients. Individualization suggests that you save yourself whilst, simultaneously, solidarity enables the continuing exploitation of social workers. Highlighting the inherent conflict or the double functions of waged labor, particularly for women, gender studies scholar Paula Mulinari (2011:229) argues with the help of sociologist Woukko Knocke that waged labor works to exploit women and reproduce structural inequality. However, it also provides a means for economic independence and autonomy, and builds community and solidarity with other workers who share the same situation. The particular issue of solidarity between workers in service work, which is the focus of her study, may differ somewhat from that of social work, but the "trap of solidarity" that is articulated in the interviews in Mulinari's study may be connected to the situation described in the narratives of social workers in this chapter. In a situation of being more or less constantly understaffed, with heavy workloads, the service workers in Mulinari's study "cover" for each other in different ways and this is interpreted as acts of solidarity. This is seen in the everyday actions of

helping each other to finish on time or to work extra-long hours or to work on a day off because someone is absent due to, for instance, temporary illness and a temp has not been hired. Although it is a community of solidarity, it also entraps the workers because it “forces” them to work more, which in turn helps to hide and normalize a chronic lack of resources. Due to the reference to empathy or solidarity, but also to shame and guilt, the workers do more than they signed up for. It can be added that many contemporary management strategies explicitly express the wish to establish a spirit of team-work and a non-hierarchical organization of labor (Mulinari & Selberg 2011:7), and that this might be part of the trap of solidarity as well. It should be remembered that, from the quote from Ylva above, one can also draw the conclusion that some people will choose to stay put because of limited choices in the labor market rather than solely due to the “trap of solidarity”. So it may seem that experienced women in the social services stay there because of solidarity with clients and colleagues, but another factor might also be the effect of labor market insecurity.

A widespread narrative among the social workers I spoke to suggests that they chosen their line of work for idealistic reasons (see Kullberg 2011:67 for similar conclusions). Regarding work in such a way is in fact not all that common (see Paulsen 2015:170), but suggests that they are there for a reason that goes beyond their wage. Another study , however, suggests that only about a quarter of social workers regard their current work as a “calling”, which is considerably lower than for professions like priests, medical doctors and teachers (Brante et al. 2015:54). Nonetheless, from such narratives I conclude that ideals and expectations of altruism can be used by the employer. If I (am supposed to) work for the good of the clients, how can I refuse to accept the heavy workloads if it would result in neglect? Secondly, I assume that such expectations are gendered, considering traditional ideals of nurturing and caring mothers and the emergence of social work as a practice of the “do good” work of bourgeois women and churches (Meeuwisse & Swärd 2006). Nevertheless, from the narratives of the younger social workers in particular in this study I assume that this is a scheme that will not hold for eternity. Beatrice says that social workers in child protective services are so young because hardly anyone can endure it for a long time. Having worked for only a little more than a year she says, “You can’t accept being ‘burnt out’ after a year’s work, as I am.” Similarly, Tina, who has worked a mere couple of years, has already begun to consider other options because:

I can see a negative tendency and it feels like you can't do anything to change it. It's a gigantic system that, it doesn't matter what you think or what you say. And more and more it's being transferred down onto yourself, like when I worked at financial support, then I openly expressed what I saw as the problems, and then I was often ill, at home like with a fever and such, stressed from the workload. Then I was sent to some, like company healthcare to check, it was suggested that there was something wrong with me, that I couldn't handle my work.

## **Divide and conquer – demanding loyalty to the organization**

In the sections above, on flexibility and the distribution of labor, there are recurring comments and analysis from social workers about the individualization of social work organization. I talk to Olivia about what a culture of stress and insufficient resources does to the relationships between colleagues and she responds:

I'd say there is a big difference today from what it was like to work in the social services before. We had fun, it was dynamic, we had hilarious parties. That doesn't exist today. We are forcibly commanded to attend some team-building activity, but we have nothing to talk about.

“We have nothing to talk about” says Olivia about the artificial social events that she and her colleagues are commanded to attend, and compares these to past experiences of joyful gatherings between peers, both at work and at parties. Ylva also speaks of a cultural shift and of silences, although in relation to formal meetings.

**Ylva:** There's a lot of talking during coffee breaks and during lunch and in the hallway and [...] I try to voice that at meetings. Because I think it's really important to discuss our work situation in meetings [...], [during coffee breaks] there is a lot of talk and then it's all quiet in the meetings [...]. I'm used to social workers voicing their opinion and [...] [if you] look back in time, we've had a lot of heated discussion, not always super nice, but still, things have been discussed. And now it's so fucking quiet.

**Marcus:** What's the reason for that, do you think?

**Ylva:** Partly it's because people are afraid, partly because, and this I think matters a lot, which is the individual wage negotiation. That it's a lot more about your individual performance. And about being loyal to the top. That's my take on it, and I was told when I had my last meeting to negotiate salary, that they wouldn't raise it because I hadn't been loyal to our operation.

**Marcus:** Oh, really?

**Ylva:** Yes, and then I called in the union, centrally. Yes, it was really unpleasant. And I think that it's, I come from another culture. '70s, '80s, I mean, I come from a culture when we discussed things and questioned, and criticized things and organized, and it was an open and permissive atmosphere. Now it's some kind of culture of obedience. And this individualism, that you, like, become friends with the manager in a way. You're supposed to go to the manager when you have a rough time at work, "come talk to me!" And that's good, I guess, that you can talk to your manager but it also disunites, and inhibits us from seeing that it's a collective problem.

Ylva compares the present situation with the workplace culture of the '70s and '80s, when there was more room for critique and for organized resistance among colleagues. However, with the individualization of working life, manifested in the focus on individual performance and individual negotiation for wages rather than collective ones, the sense of collegial loyalty has been lost in favor of loyalty to the manager because of fear and economic incentives. That individual wage negotiation can produce internal conflicts has also been found in other research (Nilsson & Ryman 2005).

Instead of resistance, a culture of silence and submission is established which divides and disunites the social workers' collective. Maude also speak of fragmentation:

Many of us feel bad, we're stressed [...], and the atmosphere in the groups deteriorates, and we also have a high personnel turnover. Then it's easy to start guarding your own because we all have so much to do, so you're, like, well it all divides us and people lose the energy to engage in trying to improve things or engage with the union, because the only thing that you're occupied with is your cases and keeping your head above water.

It is not only demands for loyalty to management and economic incentives that can foster individualization and the disuniting of social workers, so can a state of crisis. Ylva, Olivia and Maude all seem to be witnessing the breakdown of a collective social worker political subject, although Maude relates this to heavy workloads and stress, rather than individualization and fear. It seems that in such a state of crisis, the solidarity examined in the previous section still works in relation to clients, but not as strongly when it comes to colleagues. The disintegration of political subjects is the topic of Wendy Brown's book *Undoing the demos: neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Brown argues that, under neoliberalism, citizens no longer constitute a collective; rather, they are individuals who either contribute to or leech from the economy. When political subjects are revamped into financialized subjects in a neoliberal democracy, there is no place for citizens to unite into demos (Brown 2015:110).

Maude argues that heavy workloads and stress will create a bad atmosphere within the group of social workers *and* prevent their discontent from turning into resistance, because they do not have *time* to protest and resist. This helps to divide the social workers' collective into separate and manageable units. As argued by political scientist Malin Rönblom (2011b), being critical takes time and this is something that social workers repeatedly say they do not have. As argued in Chapter 6, on documentation, keeping social workers busy may be seen as both a technique of increased production and simultaneously as a technique to keep them docile, to prevent protest and action, as similarly argued by artist Immortal Technique (2003) "Dreaming about revolution, looking at my machete, but the workload is too heavy." From their interviews with social workers, Wanja Astvik and Marika Melin (2013:68) find that voicing protest may work to protect their integrity, *against* stress and self-blame, but that protesting is in fact rare. Vera also speaks of the fragmentation and division of the social worker subject in relation to her manager:

Sometimes when I entered her room I was afraid, what's going to happen now? Am I going to be [yelled at]? Like that, [...] her strategy makes the group disintegrate. So [all] guard their own. [...] When she has individual [meetings] she's like angling for, [things] to use against us and that make us insecure.

The difference between Maude's story and those of Ylva and Vera is that Ylva and, in particular, Vera understand the disintegration of the social workers' collective as a deliberate management technique. Such a technique makes the social workers afraid, mindful of watching their own back and generates slander and conflict between them, which is used individually to subjugate them (i.e. as a kind of sovereign power). Speaking about overarching changes in social work, I ask Olivia whether she thinks that such a shift will affect the social work itself:

**Olivia:** It affects social work enormously. I'm just thinking, those of us who've been around a while and know how we used to work, we keep getting into conflicts with the social workers of this new dawn. We've found theoretical concepts for this, how shall I put it, from the top to the bottom of the system, the ideological superstructure, and that is new public management. It's like it's leading its own life and somehow transforming the entire organization. And this is quite a deliberate strategy, researchers who have written about this call it governmentality.

**Marcus:** That's the theoretical perspective I have.

**Olivia:** Yes, right. And today, if I allow myself to categorize, you may divide social workers into occupational professionals and organizational professionals. And it's the organizational professionals who are rewarded. Because they follow rules, guidelines and never go outside the box [...] you do your documentation and you shut up.

They call it governmentality and it is a conscious strategy that transforms the ideological superstructure and the whole organization. Such a scheme promotes so-called organizational professionals who abide by rules and guidelines, never think outside the box, tend to their documentation and keep their mouths shut, says Olivia. I believe this is a powerful statement and I can understand the point she is making, which is one of the reasons I chose it to set the scene in the introduction and something I will come back to in my concluding discussion. According to Harlow et al. (2013), a system such as this, which Olivia offers an analysis of, pressures social workers to “reorient collective professional loyalty in favor of individual organizational commitment” (ibid:538) through fiscal austerity, transparency, audit and performance management, as well as evidence-based policy and practice. To this, we may add that stress and fear also seem to work in favor of such a superstructure. Loyalty is the topic of a story from Simon, who tells me that a colleague of his was about to formally retire, although she was supposed to continue as a temporary worker. But after she voiced criticism to her manager over the eviction of a group of migrants, the manager chose to discontinue her employment because of alleged disloyalty. Apropos the relation with her manager, Ylva says:

I think everyone has a need to be liked by their manager. Not that you're friends, but appreciated in some way. I think everyone does. So that's also a way of controlling people. And this thing about loyalty to the operation and that we're told to be mindful of how we act on social media. Such things have been told to me.

Ylva argue that humans have a universal desire to be liked and appreciated by, as I understand it, our superiors, which in her example is the manager at work. Relations of power are known to create desires and such desires make demands for loyalty easier to enforce and may be used as a technique of social control (Foucault 1980). But how does that relate to any particularity of contemporary power relations and governing in social work? Maybe in no particular way at all. Maybe such a relationship may be equally effective (or ineffective) throughout time. Or it may be understood to be becoming stronger as a collective social worker subject seems to be disintegrating and “strong” managers demand loyalty and individual devotion in line with ideals of new managerialism (see Chapter 2).

Managers and social control can be said to be the topic of the next quote as well. When I ask what participation in a critical network of social workers means to her, Vera tells me:

**Vera:** It feels really good, it feels like you're doing something sensible but at the same time I'm scared stiff.

**Marcus:** Of?

**Vera:** Repression, of course. There are people in the steering group who've had a taste of that, from their employer.

**Marcus:** In what form?

**Vera:** That you're a problem, you're disloyal.

**Marcus:** Does your manager know you're part of this network?

**Vera:** Oh no, I haven't said a thing.

Participating in the network and doing something useful feels great (think of Badiou's understanding of political happiness discussed in Chapter 5), but at the same time instills her with fear. She is afraid of facing accusations of disloyalty and similar repression as her network fellows have experienced. One example of such repression is narrated by Maude, who tells me that because she had voiced criticism in the media and had written an internal memo to local politicians regarding the problems at her workplace, she was denied a permanent position.

Perhaps it may surprise someone to learn that "ordinary people" voicing protest over current conditions in working life are afraid because they may be, or already are, subjected to various forms of repression by their public-service employer. But if we analyze governing or the exercise of power through resistance it becomes clear that such activism poses a threat to power. Why otherwise bother with things like denying Ylva an increase in her salary, denying Maude the job she had a right to according to labor legislation and why bother to fire Simon's colleague? Apart from these direct and perhaps more coercive reactions from management, there is of course also that diffuse but uncomfortable sense of being hampered and seen as inconvenient, as a problem (Ahmed 2010:68, see Chapter 5). Like Vera, who felt a discomfiting sense of mistrust from her manager, whom she also feared. Like Ulrika, who sensed an unjustified uneven workload which was never explained. Like Tina, who was sent to the doctor during her period of most vocal protesting. Like Maude, who suspected her employer of monitoring her electronic communications, or like Ylva, who was accused of hurting her colleagues by her protests, and Simon, who was both scared and angry, awaiting his managers' disciplining. Perhaps these latter forms of refined techniques of governing are more effective at creating a general unease and awkwardness, undermining resistance and fostering compliance, because it attacks or molds the workers subjects rather than using open coercion. It becomes a superstructure, or a culture of fear or silence as some of the interviewees phrased it, which provides an excellent foundation for effective management and the extraction of labor, where in practice

solidarity to the client to many people means loyalty to the organization and its management. As Olivia said: “they call it governmentality.” This may be understood as a state in which solidarity to colleagues and the desire to resist are undermined, where only a few brave souls refuse the matrices of power and try to evade its scope, while continuing to do their job. It thus makes sense, or rather it may be used to understand the techniques of power, that social workers who were engaged in some form of resistance, in particular those in the network, chose not to communicate with me through channels of communication owned by their employers (cell-phone and e-mail), and chose to meet me in locales away from their workplace.

## **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have argued that the influence over how to carry out social work is lost because of the profound standardization described in particular in Chapters 4 and 6 and in some respects also in organizational matters like specialization. At the same time, the analysis suggests that social workers experience flexible working conditions and that they have a lot of responsibility. Is there a contradiction between standardization and flexibility? The answer is perhaps yes if one understands this in terms of discretion, and as discretion lying along a continuum of a lot or a little room for maneuver. But if one instead understands it like Olivia, in relation to norms, shame and self-governing: “you have a lot of responsibilities but you have no mandate,” it is arguably a different matter and in fact is similar to Ylva’s reasoning:

It’s important to distinguish between responsibility and power. Because you can have a hell of a lot of responsibility, but that does not mean you have power. As is often said about women “women have the power in the household.” No, she has a hell of a lot of responsibility but seldom power in the form of, like, resources, time, money. So I believe it’s really important to understand the difference.

Olivia and Ylva emphasize significant differences between responsibility and power and the importance of not mixing them up. Ylva also adds to this a gendered analysis; women often have vast and far-reaching responsibilities but not necessarily power in the form of resources. This certainly seems to hold true in social work because, as work has become standardized, the responsibility has not decreased, but rather the opposite. This is something that may be witnessed in the self-governing and culture (or trap) of solidarity with colleagues and clients. On top of this, it can be argued that the budgetary governing in the municipalities has trickled down to some extent

to the individual social worker, manifesting in an awareness of budget that may collide with an ideal of looking after the best interests of the client. This testifies to the reality that the ability to act is not determined by a lot or a little formal discretion, but rather by norms surrounding conduct and the intricate relations of power enmeshed in the dominant ideals and practices of social work. Social workers are thus given the formal discretion to decide over various matters. But when workloads are heavy and resources scarce, social workers are left having to make impossible decisions. Management avoids such uncomfortable decisions by pushing them down the hierarchy and the social workers are left with “belabored selves” (McGee 2005) and the smoking gun in their hand.

The expectation that they will endure heavy workloads, bend over backwards to arrange work in efficient ways and display loyalty to the organization rather than clients or peers (or family and friends for that matter) embody something very similar to what Lynch et al. (2012) define as new managerialism. A working culture “that valorizes long work hours, strong competitiveness, intense organizational dedication, while assuming a lack of ongoing care commitments” (Lynch et al. 2012:41). However, in this chapter it has become evident that there exists a fierce discontent with the current organization of social work, and such a culture of new public management and new managerialism. The ways in which resistance to this is formulated and acted out are interesting to consider. From a traditional male-centered working environment, for instance the auto industry, resistance may be understood in different ways than in care work, and refusals to “do your best” will have very different consequences for cars or clients. For instance, the social workers cited in this study resist by mourning and protesting over the diminishing amounts of time left to see clients that have followed from the transformations they experience, and some prioritize seeing clients over other tasks. Others voice protest in “constructive” ways, aiming directly at organizing work to make the best out of the situation. Ultimately, however, many will have to make sacrifices; their health, leisure time, spending time with friends and family, in order to follow their political and ethical convictions. Thus, the example of working overtime on “the flex” must be considered as a complex and multifaceted practice. Baines et al. argue that:

The hours of unpaid overtime expected of and generally provided by the predominantly female workforce are simultaneously a form of exploitation, a way for management to extend the capacity of cash-strapped agencies and a way that workers consciously resist an agenda in which care and social justice are increasingly under threat. (Baines et al. 2015:462)

Even though such forms of resistance do not directly help to overthrow the current system, they are acts of compassion founded on emotional judgement (Nussbaum 2001, Ahmed 2010), something that may be understood as a kind of everyday activism (Mahmood 2001, Death 2010). Such an understanding of resistance also allows for other conclusions regarding how power is exercised in a social-work setting (Abu-Lughod 1990). If resistance is exercised in part through internalized ideals in ways that are beneficial to the exercise of power, i.e. that the social workers work harder and harder to *protest* austerity, enabling their further *exploitation*, which simultaneously *covers* the flaws of the system (see Selberg 2013 for similar conclusions in regards to nursing), it may tell us that the ingenuity of self-governing techniques of power are working at full force. It also tells us that power and resistance, as Foucault (2002:105) (in)famously claimed, are in fact joined together in ways that are difficult to fathom without thorough and theoretically grounded critical analysis. This is something that we must keep asking questioning about (Pande 2010). However, it may also be contended that resistance to the kind of partly internalized ideals and practices that we have seen in this study requires reflection and a theoretical apparatus. This is something that I find to be particularly true for the people engaged in the network of critical social workers, which suggests that interpreting encounters of injustice and organizing protest and resistance have beneficial effects for analyzing power and developing strategies of resistance. Thus, knowledge may also produce resistance.

As illustrated in the last section of this chapter, the transformation of the social work regime has effects that lead to the disintegration of a social workers' collective (Brown 2015). Through strong individualization and the fragmentation of work, management divides and conquers the collective subject of social workers through self-imposed responsibility and fear, which alienates them from one and another, to some extent from their clients and from social work itself. This illustrates the possibility of both fragmentation and self-regulation as techniques for management to not only optimize "performance" and reduce the cost of labor, but also to disunite the social workers and decentralize conflicts, pushing them down the hierarchy and thus escaping the reach of critique that could be aimed at the top. Although some choose to resist, it comes at a cost; in health problems, becoming the "problem" (Ahmed 2010:68) or simply getting a taste of management's sovereign-style repression.



## 9. Men and machines: mechanizing social work

In this last chapter, I want to rewind and review and highlight some possible connections between the discussions in the forgoing analytical chapters concerning knowledge production, gendered ideals, organization and governing. With the help of additional theory and analytical material, I want to employ an analysis that elevates these discussions to another level of abstraction. One particular issue that will be discussed and further analyzed is the practice of excessive formalized documentation witnessed in social work (see Chapter 6) and its possible effects and functions for the governing and wellbeing of social workers and clients. In particular, I will analyze the specific and formalized practices of assessing the needs and evaluating the progress of clients in the social services in Sweden that are carried out through a *standardized digital interface*. Such practices include BBIC, ASI and FIA, templates that deal with the assessment and follow-up of progression for children, clients struggling with substance abuse and those seeking financial support, the three largest sectors in municipal social work. I will argue that we can view such a standardized and digitalized way of interaction as a form of masculinized machine of control, which has the potential to further shift power relations and working conditions in social work. I begin, however, with a short recap of the results from previous chapters that deal with issues of standardization.

### Standardizing social work

From the narratives in the previous chapters, it is apparent that the way in which social work is organized and carried out has changed radically over the last couple of decades. One of the most obvious aspects of this is the different forms of standardization. Chapter 4, which deals with evidence-based practice (EBP), suggests a strong norm in social work to only engage methods that have been given a scientific stamp of approval through some kind of control-group study. This way of determining how to perform social work obviously limits the different ways in which social work may be carried out. Arguably, one consequence arising from this is that the “creativity” of social work is undermined, an approach that was valued by several of my interviewees, who used it to handle relations and solve complex problems. Another consequence arises from the fact that there are not very many approved methods available, which leaves social workers in an impossible

position. I understand such experiences as illustrating a shift from a therapeutic to a standardized scientific or rationalized way of handling clients.

Similar tendencies towards standardization are illustrated in Chapter 6 on documentation. Here it is not primarily a standardization of methods that is evident, but rather how the contact and communication between social services and the client are carried out and documented. Several standardized and digitalized templates for assessments are widespread in the Swedish social services, as we shall see in this chapter, in particular BBIC in children's protective services and ASI for use with substance abuse. These templates define beforehand what aspects of a client's life should be investigated and the form and manner in which this is to be reported. Although some of my interviewees do argue for a need to carry out the assessment in a more structured fashion, many complain about how time consuming these tasks are, the impossible time frames that are defined for carrying out the task at hand and that the standardized interaction is rigid and boring.

In Chapter 7, a specific and evidence-based counseling method is analyzed – motivational interviewing (MI). The interviews with social workers suggest that this method is widespread in social work and in particular in the social services. Although MI was developed to motivate substance abusers (originally alcoholics) to change their course of life, the method – or rather, philosophy – is implemented in all kinds of social work settings through comprehensive MI training. I argue that this regimentation does not only concern a particular way of working, but may also be seen as the standardization of a political rationality that shapes subjects in ways that enable the transfer of responsibility from the social services to the client or his or her family. This is done under the rationale of eliciting the “free” will of the client, as a kind of empowerment project.

In Chapter 8, there are also stories of standardization, in this case concerning how work is organized within the social services. In particular, two aspects of such standardization are worth mentioning here. Firstly, a division of social workers into handling either assessment or treatment has become common, according to the narratives of social workers as well as research on this matter. This separation of tasks according to NPM standards, often referred to as a client–contractor model, means among other things that those who work with assessment are left with more administration and documentation and less contact with the clients. To some, it also means the loss of what used to be the creative and exciting aspects of social work. Secondly, we have the regimentation of the

organization of social work into specialized functions aimed at particular social problems, rather than the holistic approach that was dominant from the 1960s up until the beginning of the 1980s (Grell et al. 2013:230).

All of the above are signs of a far-reaching standardization and rationalization of social work. That in itself is of course extremely interesting because such schemes of standardization mean a loss of professional autonomy, something that will be discussed later in this chapter. However, let us now turn to the specifics of one aspect of such standardizations, that of the digital assessment templates.

## **Background and proliferation of a standardized digital interface**

Two of the areas of social work that have witnessed the emergence and subsequent domination of standardized computer software to assess and follow up the needs of clients are the *Addiction Severity Index* (ASI) and *Barns behov i centrum* (BBIC) (In English: Children's needs in focus). These instruments deal with substance abuse and children in the social protective services, respectively. In addition, during the last couple of years, a similar instrument has emerged for financial support – *Förutsättningar inför arbete* (FIA) (In English: Pre-requisites for work), although this has not been around as long or been as widely adopted as BBIC and ASI. To contextualize my discussion, I will give a short background to the emergence of one of these, namely BBIC.

Some form of documentation for children in the custody of the social services has always been a task for social workers. However, over the last decade the manner in which this is carried out has been formalized in a specific and standardized documentation practice named BBIC. In the shape of an interactive computer software, BBIC comprises a set of specified spheres of life, corresponding questions, the ticking of boxes and gathering of specific information to guide social workers' interactions with children and the documentation thereof. BBIC has been developed quite recently in Sweden but its emergence can be traced to the United Kingdom. During the 1980s, the British social services were increasingly criticized over their care of children. One problem identified in the UK was the lack of documentation and evaluation of the situation for children who had been removed from the custody of their parents. Demands were made in the UK for development of instruments to make better evaluations. To meet this need, the Looking after Children System (LACS) was developed and launched nationwide in the UK

during the 1990s (Socialstyrelsen 2002). According to the government agency, The National Board of Health and Welfare, there was an analogous debate in Sweden during the '90s, and building on the British LACS, a similar system was developed in Sweden and tested at the turn of the century. By introducing a standardized procedure of thorough information gathering and proper documentation of it, the government claims it will deliver better, or at least identical, treatment regardless of location, similar to the reasoning behind the rule of law. By asking the client specified questions, the official aim is to be able to assess how well the outcome for the child corresponds to goals defined beforehand and to make sure that the child's wishes have been heard (Socialstyrelsen 2002). BBIC is now widespread in the Swedish social services (Herz 2012), covering something like 80 per cent of all municipalities (Ponnert & Svensson 2015:7).

## **Narratives of digital templates**

The child's needs in focus, right, that's a system of documentation or assessment, which has been constructed by the National Board of Health and Welfare, with the aim to, like, assure that there's some kind of national uniformity in the assessments of the child's protective services. It's a thick wad of documents, support documents, so it's both for the formal, how to write the assessments, and then there are support documents for interviewing kids of different ages, what to assess and what to look for and, like, their needs.

Describing the purpose of BBIC, interviewee Beatrice (above) explains that BBIC is a guide to both the interaction itself and how to document it and she also talks about the extensiveness and high level of detail in this template. Similarly, Maude refers to the extensive collection of information that is demanded from the BBIC template and case notes and emphasizes how much time it requires. Although the BBIC is used in the form of interactive computer software, the whole 350-page document measures an impressive 2.5 cm (1 inch) thick if printed on *both* sides. The concept is oriented around a triangle, of which the following themes each represent one side: "The child's needs", "Parents' ability" and "family and environment". Each of these core themes involves between 6 and 7 sub-themes, 20 altogether. Every subtheme includes a number of questions. Even though it is explicitly stated that no more than "what is motivated by the circumstances in the case" has to be investigated, there are well over 300 questions to be answered if it is done thoroughly. Maude says that in BBIC it can be difficult to distinguish between the areas in which to collect and enter the information: "I mean, what's the difference [between] 'family', 'social

relations' and 'development of emotional behavior'?" Just like any other attempt at categorization, there is a tendency of overlap between categories, no matter how well they are defined. Apart from (or despite) its vast scope, there are limits to its usefulness says interviewee Anna:

It's used in many municipalities in Sweden. It's like a working material, with documentation and, like, [assessing] different needs. And we work according to that, let's say it indicates that we should work with the area of health. That could mean sleep and food routines, and then we were given that task and supposed to work with that and nothing else. But, like I said, when we visited, it turned out to be a lot more and about completely different things.

Although an important purpose of BBIC is to better target the client's needs through asking a lot of questions in the initial phase, Anna says that it does not suffice; other kinds of knowledge, such as what may be acquired from visits, gives a better understanding of the problems. Christina, another interviewee, thinks that BBIC is problematic because it is complicated and not very pedagogical. Although it is mandatory to use in many municipalities, say some of my interviewees, apparently there are differing views on the usefulness of this system. Nora, an interviewee who works with ASI (a similar template for addiction) tells me that not only does the initial assessment take a lot of time, if contact with a client is initiated again in the future (which is often the case due to the nature of substance abuse and relapse), you have to do a new assessment each time, sometimes every third month. Both Rosa and Nora question the usefulness of this. Not only are the questions defined beforehand, Nora says that the follow-ups:

often feel rather pointless. To conclude after a follow-up that: "yes, it didn't work out, you had a relapse." Okay, but we knew that already, then you don't need a questionnaire.

**Rosa:** The follow up interviews feels more and more meaningless actually. [...] Let's say the client is doing okay for two or three months and then has a relapse, all right, and then when this person has gotten out of the relapse and comes back [...] after a month, we both know this. Why should we do another interview and like "what happened?" when it's already known, and it's already been assessed?

**Marcus:** Do you still do it?

**Rosa:** Yes, we're really pressured by the employer. It's a must. But it feels really tough.

Rosa and Nora criticize both the rigidity of the template itself and the timing of the follow-up. Rosa says it feels pointless but that she is forced to do it even though it does not help in her assessment. Interviewee Anna says:

Of course you can sit there and tick boxes because some things have to be filled in. [...] but I believe that experience says a whole lot more. I believe that good old observations can say a lot more.

Comparing the different styles of assessment, Anna favors traditional observation (sometimes referred to as clinical assessment) because it gives a more comprehensive picture. Similarly, Rosa highlights the risk of “missing the big picture” when being forced to work in a very specific way “to do things right, rather than doing the right thing” (see also Chapter 4 and Greenhalgh et al. 2014 for similar conclusions).

Apart from the question of its usefulness, there is something about the interaction with the client which is altered when using a standardized digital template for the assessment. One of the interviewees, Tina, comments on her particular digitalized system in disability support (for care planning) and says that everything is relocated to the web and, thus, the meetings with clients disappear. Interviewee Maude tells me that some people do the BBIC interview on paper and afterwards enter the values and answers into the computer, whilst others, more swift and technical, enter the information directly into the computer. If done on paper, it is easier to make additional notes in the margins and to be “present” in the meeting, but such a way of working takes more time, says Maude. On the other hand, if entered directly into the computer it takes less time, but will undermine the ability of the social worker to enter information that does not fit the template. Having a computer on your lap, at which some of your attention is naturally directed, may also in itself hamper the relationship-building with the client. In addition, the conversation is likely to focus on filling in the numbers on the template rather than on the client’s experiences (Martinell Barfoed & Jacobsson 2012). Although several interviewees have issues with standardized digital templates, not everyone questions their usefulness. Beatrice captures the conflict between the advocates and opponents of BBIC and says that there is resistance towards the massive implementation of BBIC.

It has, like, exploded. From early 2000 when they started implementing it in a few municipalities as test sites, until today when I believe almost all municipalities have implemented it. And, like, when I started working four years ago, that municipality had just begun to slowly use it and it’s been, there’s strong resistance from many social workers because they feel, it’s rather...I think, primarily those who’ve worked a long

time felt that it was burdensome because there's more that has to be documented, is the experience at first, and it's a lot of ready-made documents and templates. [...] I think it was quite a brave move by that manager to hire me, I know that a lot of the people in the working group had a different opinion because I was young and inexperienced and hadn't worked with this before. But I can understand how the manager was thinking, because she wanted someone who knows BBIC and believes in BBIC and understands it and wants to work with it. Many of the older and more seasoned staff are still, as I said, rather skeptical.

Too many forms to fill in, too repetitious and too time-consuming, are the arguments put forth by Beatrice to explain the resistance towards BBIC, which is similar to other studies (Nygren et al. 2009:499). Although Beatrice was young and inexperienced, she was hired in part due to being an advocate of BBIC. It seems as though Beatrice understands this move as a management strategy to undermine the resistance of her fellow social workers. Rosa also articulates the opinion that the more experienced social workers from the older generation tend to end up in conflicts with the younger ones around new ideals and practices of social work.

Even though there are instructions to ask only the questions "motivated by the circumstances in the case," Beatrice tells me about the difficulties of knowing what to prioritize and what to leave out.

Even though one purpose of BBIC is to not assess things that don't have to be assessed, I think it was, or still is, a problem in the implementation phase, that when you look at BBIC it feels so vast, when you look at all these areas of needs to potentially be assessed. The challenge lies in limiting it. Like, okay, we've gotten a report that this boy skips school too much, okay then we may not have to look into whether his mother beats him, or should we? Because we might learn that he doesn't go to school because his mother beats him. We don't know, we may not have to request his case files from the child health care center,<sup>69</sup> or it's revealed in a meeting that he has indeed been abused, and then the next step may be to request his case [from the child health care center]. So I suppose that's the challenge, to limit it.

Officially, it can still be claimed that the meticulous documentation now implemented is a way to ensure the rule of law, a guarantor against neglect and will produce a higher quality social work, but the stories related here seem to undermine such a promise. On the contrary, it can be argued that, through *standardized* templates, the potential information gathered is vast but superficial and does not take individual aspects into account. Other research has highlighted the fact that the immense amounts of information

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<sup>69</sup> In Swedish: Barnavårdcentralen.

gathered through BBIC do not necessarily make for better decisions; rather, an abundance of knowledge may increase uncertainty (Ponnert & Svensson 2015:7). Olivia says:

I have met social workers at financial support who say “what? Individual needs assessment? No, that’s been removed from the guidelines.”

The promise of complete documentation, the hope that knowing everything will prevent neglect, is hard to realize in reality because it is simply impossible to know everything and in reality such an attempt demands a lot of time, which creates conflict with meeting their clients, the so-called “actual” work. To keep up with this burdensome system there are several ways to *formally* do the job, although it is often regarded as pointless and stressful and therefore done with limited enthusiasm and depth. As illustrated in Chapter 6, on documentation, in order to manage the burden of documentation, social workers engage in different techniques of coping; documenting in retrospect, with a willfully limited enthusiasm using the copy-paste prompt and re-using old inquiries. Therefore, it seems that such templates as those discussed here do not give the support necessary for the assessment; rather, they may alter the assessment in harmful ways and they also take more time. Because documentation is prioritized by management, the time for meeting clients is slashed. Although it is of course a good idea to create ways of working to minimize the possibility of missing important issues, there seems to also exist a risk of social workers not thinking “creatively” for themselves. And, above all, there is something about the standardization and digitalization of the client/social worker interaction that transforms the profession as well as the relationship with the client. But with these transformations, there also comes the question of responsibility, this contemporary trope that insinuates itself into all spheres of life. With the responsibility for knowing everything through documentation, it seems as though accountability for the wellbeing of children in custody or some form of placement is being *decentralized*, from management level, down to the individual social worker. At the same time, the decisions on *how* to assess the needs of children and their development is *centralized* to government level through the standardization and formalization of the client contact; i.e. what aspects of life to examine, what questions to ask, and when and how to do a follow-up interview and how to file the information gathered. However, the promise of knowing everything, institutionalized in rules and regulations around assessment and evaluation, what interviewee Maude labels “governing by rules” according to her creates a “loyalty to the organization rather than to the client.”

## **Undermining the profession and seizing control over knowledge production?**

Economic historian Ylva Hasselberg and historian Niklas Stenlås (2010) argue that knowledge is increasingly valued as an important asset in contemporary society. Because of this, there are important gains to be made from more control over the production of knowledge. By centralizing control over knowledge, the need for a particular “professional” knowledge is undermined and, in this way, professionals will be easier to monitor and control (see also Frogett 1996). The authors argue that this monitoring is done through generic techniques derived from economics, such as standardization, documentation and auditing, formulated in a doctrine of rationalistic individualism (ibid.). As argued in Chapter 8 (section Division of labor), this standardization may be analyzed in terms of its inherent functions, rather than merely the formal reasons given out. Tina says:

**Tina:** It feels like anyone can take the liberty of practicing social work, it's not a protected..., I don't know...

**Marcus:** Not a protected profession?

**Tina:** No [...], I mean, come on, anyone gives themselves the liberty to override and introduce all kinds of new things.

The sense that anyone can question how social work is practiced, and introduce changes, illustrates Tina's experience that social work is no longer an acknowledged profession. My interpretation is that her experience has a lot to do with the standardization of social work that she spoke about earlier and that I have argued for in this and previous chapters; a standardization that in particular shifts the relations of power in terms of the production and ownership of knowledge (Lundström 2011). One example presented in this chapter, the seemingly inescapable implementation of standardized digital interfaces, seems to challenge traditional clinical assessment and as such undermines the professional autonomy of social work (Nygren et al. 2009:504). Such a standardization of social work has been criticized elsewhere, both because the so-called evidence for its effectiveness is not all that strong (Lundström 2011, Ferguson 2008) and because such an instrumental approach undermines the creativity of social work:

Through a slow but far-reaching process, more and more of social work has come to resemble a clinical operation [...] [which] has undermined creative social work. This means that social workers [...] must follow guidelines and models that other “experts” have produced. (Herz et al. 2013, my translation)

## Mechanization and the death of craftsmanship?

Some of the social workers I spoke to see themselves in other occupations in the future and this is often connected with the burden of documentation and sometimes directly with the digital templates. Gabriel, who works with ASI, wants to leave:

because this is a bit, like standardized, you work according to routines, which isn't that exciting, rather it's the contact with the clients who, that sort of gives the job its positive touch.

As pointed out before, the interaction with clients is cherished and many complain about recent developments in social work that reduce client contact. To Gabriel it has gone so far that he considers leaving social work altogether and he connects his wish to leave directly with the standardization of social work that he has experienced. Beatrice and Emma, interviewees who both work with BBIC, argue in a similar way, referring to the boredom of documentation. Emma even says that she will not remain in the social services because she thinks working there for a long time will transform her personality. It will convert her into an unsympathetic person and because of this she wants to find an occupation that “has less documentation”. Rosa, who works with ASI, says:

No, I doubt that I'll still be here in a year's time. I'm looking for other jobs right now, so no, I won't remain here. But it's a painful divorce for me, because I see myself as a social worker, that's what I really want to do. But not if I can't meet clients, I picture myself that we're behind a glass window in the near future and handing out ASI forms “Yes, what's your name?” “Well my name is Kalle, I think I might want treatment, because I drink too much,” and then “Here's an ASI template, go home, fill it out and come back tomorrow.” That would be really efficient, but it's inhumane, and also really boring work. I don't want to work like that.

Although it is painful to leave, the development towards seeing less and less of clients means that Rosa does not want to remain in the social services. She pictures a dystopian future in which ASI plays a central role. It is interesting how she pits the concepts of efficiency and being humane against each other. Rosa's original wording in Swedish is “effektiv”, a word that may harbor meanings of both effective and efficient. Hence, there is no such linguistic difference in the Swedish language between the two.<sup>70</sup> In this instance, I interpret the meaning Rosa is trying to convey as efficient, as in capable of

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<sup>70</sup> Thanks to Niklas Eklund, Dept. of Political Science, Umeå University, for pointing out this linguistic difference.

producing the desired results without wasting materials, time, or energy, rather than effective in the sense of successfully producing a desired or intended result. Thus, the attempts to make public services efficient may, as Rosa argues, stand in direct opposition to humanitarian goals.

While there are accounts to suggest that the interviewees like being social workers, some still want to leave because of the transformations the profession has undergone, and such comments illustrate the consequences of the forced detachment from clients and the tediousness of the standardized, documentation-centered social work of today. Apart from those quoted in this chapter, in the previous chapters interviewees Felicia, Vera and Tina also told me of their plans to quit. Comments referring to too much administration and paperwork, excessive documentation, a standardization of the work and decreasing contact with clients, constitute the main concerns and reasons for not wanting to remain in the social services. As highlighted in several of the previous chapters, heavy workloads are also mentioned. Becoming unsympathetic, disloyal to the clients and depressed are some of the ultimate consequences of this. How can these stories be understood?

Philosopher Karl Marx argued in the middle of the 19th century that the hunt for profit in capitalist production would ultimately lead to the death of craftsmanship. Through increased specialization, automation and an increased division of labor, craftsmanship would cease to exist in industrial production. In *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels write:

The lower strata of the Middle class [...] sink gradually into the proletariat [...] because their specialised skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. (Marx & Engels 197n[1888]:13)

Different accounts taken together suggest that the social workers I interviewed chose their occupation for idealistic reasons. They want to do something good for people in need and they display a sense of pride in their work; findings which are similar to the results of other studies (Kullberg 2011:67). However, many see a conflict between their ideals, what they were taught at the School of Social Work, and the demands of the actual work in social services (see also Lorenz 2005). If I view the standardized documentation practices as forced upon them, it makes sense to refer to what Marx wrote in *Capital*: “In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him” (Marx 2007a[1867]:461). And in *Grundrisse*, (2015[1857]:614), he wrote:

It is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it [...]. The worker's activity [...] is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. (Marx 2005:614)

The transformation of current welfare regimes is bringing fundamental changes to the way in which “social work is constituted and practiced,” argue social work scholars John Wallace and Bob Pease (Wallace & Pease 2011:133, see also Morrison 2007). Such transformations may be argued to resemble the changes to the ways in which work was organized following the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution about which Marx spoke. But what of the machines? New questions arise from old ones: Can the digitalized assessment procedures be seen as “sociotechnical assemblages”? Or, stated differently: can artefacts have agency? (de la Bellacasa 2010:86).

The documentation practices and the standardization of social work, manifested among other things in the mandatory use of a digitalized interface (be it BBIC, ASI, FIA or something similar), seems not to be a tool to aid social workers, but rather a machine that makes use of the social worker. A machine in the sense of a technical artifact animated by a source of power and also in the wider 16th century French meaning of machine: as a contrivance or an ingenious device (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). This kind of ingenious device seems to shift the control over social work, seizing important aspects of knowledge production, undermining the professional autonomy and creativity of the social worker, inhibiting the relationships between social worker and clients and ultimately devaluing the sense of joy and pride in the work. Regarding a digitalized interface in social work, interviewee Olivia says:

**Olivia:** I’m trying to initiate work training<sup>71</sup> for my client, who has publically protected employment,<sup>72</sup> but I can’t approve two measures from the Public Employment Service in the digital system. And then it won’t happen.

**Marcus:** Okay, you can only check one box?

**Olivia:** Exactly.

**Marcus:** Is there no way around it?

**Olivia:** At this one place, they have managed to do it, through a manual operation. But that means you’re outside the system. You do something creative, you do something outside the box. That’s not rewarded, rather, it’s a threat.

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<sup>71</sup> In Swedish: Arbetsmarknadsutbildning.

<sup>72</sup> In Swedish: Offentligt skyddat arbete (OSA).

The quote from Olivia illustrates how the use of machinery, as opposed to tools, may shift the agency in social work. Although she says that the system can be circumvented in this particular instance, it is complicated and strongly discouraged by management. As early as 1967, Morton Teicher, Dean of Wurzweiler School of Social Work in New York, warned of the dehumanizing effects that computers might have on social work, saying that computers “will eliminate individual worth, human freedom, and responsibility” (as summarized by Petrucci, Kirk & Reid 2004:86). Teicher argues that social casework requires the creative skills as of an artist and that these machines “require clear and structured information that is simply not available for most social work situations” because “people are too complex to convert to numbers” (ibid:86). Olivia says that:

The danger with computers is not *that* they think, but rather when we *adapt* to the ways in which computers think, and that’s where we are right now.

Olivia’s conclusion is similar to that of social-work scholar Bob Sapey: “the nature of the assessment is being changed to fit the parameters of the technology” (Sapey 1997:806). Social-work scholar Nigel Parton (2008) points out that social work is becoming more and more centered on the collection of information and that the ICT systems used to manage this change the kind of knowledge that is produced (see also Martinell Barfoed & Jacobsson 2012). The information produced in traditional narrative-centered assessments differs from the digitalized database kind of information, where the latter is produced more quickly and with less time for critical reflection (Parton 2008:254–264).

As highlighted throughout this thesis, social workers claim that the time available to meet clients has decreased due in part to increasing demands for documentation, changes in the organization of work and austerity measures. On top of this, in Chapter 5 on emotions I argued that there seems to exist an ideal of detachment in the discourse of being professional. Such processes of detachment may increase the distance from the client and subsequently decrease the interaction. This may in turn limit the sense of solidarity and may accentuate the distance that lack of time produces in itself. What functions can be assumed to be embedded in such detachment procedures? If we recall the insights of the settlement movement in early British social work (at the end of the 19th century), it might help to make sense of such procedures of detachment. The settlement movement consisted of social workers who chose to live together with the impoverished people they wanted to help in community houses. Because of their proximity to the clients, it became apparent to the social workers that the reasons for poverty were not to be found in flaws in their individual morals, as the dominant

discourse of charity-oriented social workers had it. Rather, the cause was understood to be structural aspects of society (Pettersson 2001). In light of this, the contemporary digital “machines” of information management may be seen as a technique to increase the distance in the social worker/client relationship, both in the detached (objective) manner in which the documentation is performed and in the absence of social workers in “the field”. Through such a de-personalization of their relationship, by opening up the opportunity to dehumanize the clients, it makes it easier not to care and also to explain their situation as a result of flaws in their character (see Chapter 2). Rather than focusing on the surrounding atrocious milieus and structures of inequality generated by the prevailing system, the trope of individual responsibility that is accentuated by contemporary political reforms increasingly becomes a logical and legitimate response. Examples are the responsibility favored in the forced workfare models of Uppsala or Skärholmen, in motivational interviewing and in self-help literature. Thus, the hostile machines of documentation enable the rationalization, individualization, moralization and de-politicization of social problems and the further deprivation and blaming of the clients.

The one-sided and tedious work of traditional industrial production is a physical as well as an intellectual strain. It can be argued that contemporary social work shows similarities to that of the factory. Filling in standardized documentational forms under time pressure is not only mind-numbing, but the stress and the agonizing sense of insufficiency displayed in the narratives above that are created by such demands can indeed be regarded as a physical experience as well. I ask Tina why she decided to leave her position in financial support:

I had a permanent position [...] [but] I resigned because I couldn't take it, because it was, I couldn't, like, *represent* that kind of work. And when I was [...] sent to the company health care, and met some kind of therapist, and then a doctor who did some tests to see what was wrong with me. Then she [the therapist] told me it's not the first time. Many have come here and told us, like, told the exact same story about the working situation.

Arguing that she could not stand working at financial support because she refused to *represent* such work, she decided to quit. Interestingly, such working conditions seemed also to have somatic effects, both upon Tina and upon others sharing her experience of poor working conditions. However, management suggested that the somatic expressions were a result of individual rather than structural problems (see also Sandell 2016 for similar results). Olivia says:

I used to think that being a social worker...I mean it was fun, an exciting job, and every time I managed to go outside “the box”, to bend the rules a little bit to make something possible for a particular individual, then I felt I was a good social worker. [...] That’s not something we had to hide or even tried to hide. Social work has always been difficult, complex, at times it has been working against the wind. But nowadays, you’re in the goddamn eye of the storm! [...] You get blocked everywhere, because everybody is sticking to the protocol. That’s what’s being rewarded. That’s what constitutes social work. You keep telling people “No, I’m sorry but it doesn’t work that way, you have to solve that yourself.” How you will solve it, we don’t care. That it’s impossible?...I mean we put them in catch 22s even. It’s been a long time now since I was proud of social work.

Like Tina above, Olivia is no longer proud of social work because of the profound changes it has undergone. From flexibility to rigidity, from helping to ignoring. Ylva Hasselberg argues that de-professionalization undermines the profound *meaning* of the work as well as the personal engagement (Hasselberg 2012:172) and it can thus be argued that the excessive documentation, the standardization and the automation of social work renders social workers *alienated* from their work. Many say they want to seek other occupations, some experience depression, and if you look at the statistics relating to termination of employment, many will quit (Tham 2008, Lindquist 2010, see also Astvik & Melin 2013). As argued by Karl Marx, in all work the worker divests a part of her spirit into the product, she puts a part of her soul in the product of her work, but because of the mechanization of social work, the product no longer belongs to her and she thus becomes alienated from her own labor and to some extent also her colleagues, as seen in previous chapters.

At first glance it is hard to understand that alienation itself may be a primary function of such schemes of mechanization. Unhappy workers are not likely to optimize their performance. But if one considers the emotional detachment that is produced by such a rationalization and mechanization, it may be seen as a way to disconnect social workers from their clients and thus allow for budget awareness to take hold. Alienation saves money.

It might also be argued that the standardization and digitalization harbors disciplinary effects. My grandmother used to comment on my childhood mischief by claiming that “Idle hands are the Devil’s workshop.” When the social worker is forced to engage in the excessive collection of information in a rigid and repetitive manner, such as that required by the software of assessment, it can be seen as rather a straightforward way of keeping them structured and busy, to prevent idleness from turning into creativity and mischief, a technique of power to keep them docile (Rönblom 2011b). At

the same time, the knowledge produced has self-monitoring effects (see Chapter 6) and, incidentally, “docile” etymologically means both easily taught and submissive (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). Understood as a standardization and mechanization of social work, such technical artefacts may be seen as more than merely a mechanical tool of governing, devoid of life, and instead as an object that comes into existence and begins to confront the social worker as a hostile and autonomous power. Marx argues that:

The externalization [*Entäußerung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien. (Marx, 1975 [1844]:324, italics in original)

## **Proletarianization and the re-ordering of hierarchies?**

Changes in the tasks and working conditions of white-collar occupations similar to those narrated here have been discussed for centuries (Wacquant 2012b). Some argue that this should be described as a *proletarianization* of the middle class (Wacquant 2012b). In contemporary Sweden, it is sometimes claimed that this has happened to public-sector occupations (Broady 2011, Bejerot et al. 2011, Isaksson 2004), a sector predominantly populated by women. Political scientist Margreth Nordgren, who has studied the work of medical doctors, argues that proletarianization means losing professional autonomy:

that the “freedom” to *independently perform the profession* and to choose the employer has deteriorated drastically [...] [which] means that rewards, benefits and economic status deteriorate accordingly. (Nordgren 2000:91, my translation, my italics)

The theoretical distinction between social classes is made by some advocates solely on the basis of their structural position within the process of production. However, sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2012b) argues (slightly differently from Nordgren’s definition above) that classes do not exist merely in relation to the means of production but also in symbolic and ideological ways that are connected to struggles over privilege and belonging; such privileges as influence over the organization of work and the monopolization of skills. This struggle in itself is part of the process of constituting social classes and such “cultural” circumstances are more fluid than the relation to the means of production. From such an argument it follows that social work

may, at least to some extent, be claimed to have undergone a proletarianization in the Marxist sense (as used by Nordgren), but even more so it has undergone something that might be called a rationalization or “Taylorization” (Wacquant 2012b). This means that social workers’ influence over the organization of their work and their professional monopolization of knowledge is under siege (Garrett 2005) and subjected to scientific management techniques to improve efficiency. As argued by social work scholar Paul Michael Garrett (2005), the transformation of social work can be labeled Taylorization because it is increasingly structured and governed by policy makers who are far removed from everyday human encounters and that:

This is reflected in the emerging software architecture and in the greater use of centrally devised e-assessment templates. (Garrett 2005:545)

If one assumes that new techniques of governing develop because new needs to exercise power have arisen (Foucault 1977), what are the reasons for the developments discussed here?

## **Gender, management and machines**

Historian Ulla Wikander has sketched a general historical narrative of gender and work in Sweden which may help us to understand the changes in social work discussed here. Perhaps contrary to popular belief, a substantial proportion of women were employed at the beginning of the industrial era, although they rarely did the same work as men and usually had male supervisors. An important reason for the industries of the time to hire female employees was that they could be paid less but also because women could be given the most monotonous tasks. Generally women were thought of as swift and enduring and were deemed suitable for such tedious work (Wikander 2009, Scott 1982:140).

In my attempt to connect the governing practices discussed above with contemporary logics of gender, I call upon Judy Wajcman (Wajcman 1991, as summarized by Mellström 2002:462), who argues that one of the dominant forms of masculinity “is based on a professional calculative rationality of the technical specialist.” With this claim Wajcman highlights the gendered notions and expectations that are entangled in governing procedures of calculation and technical devices (see also Lynch et al. 2012:83). However, thinking with Mary Evans, the picture becomes more complex and complete, because “the audit culture needs [...] a good girl who is compliant, obedient,

completing all of her documentation and trying to hit all of her targets” (Evans 2004, as summarized by Swan 2010:489, see also Blom 2011). Comparing Wikander’s and Wajcman’s claims that, from a management perspective, women may be seen as cheap, docile, performing well and suitable for monotonous tasks, brings gendered expectations to the forefront and connects governing functions in working life, that have transformed and traveled over centuries.

In a history of the particular profession of social work, social work scholar Karin Kullberg (2011) notes that it has always been occupied by women. Although men have occupied some positions for quite some time – a particularly high proportion is found in management – what we are witnessing now is a steady decline in the number of men in the social services. This can be observed in the workforce as well as in the graduates from the School of Social Work.<sup>73</sup> Especially significant are developments at the top managerial levels, where men have left the field in large numbers. “The proportion of male directors fell from 97 per cent in 1969 to 37 per cent in 2007” (Kullberg 2011:67, see also Lundström & Shanks 2013:114<sup>74</sup>). Kullberg’s study indicates that men leave or decide not to pursue top managerial positions because such positions are no longer deemed interesting or are no longer associated with status and power. Kullberg argues that the managerial role has changed due to new organizational models in the public sector, and that the work of managers is increasingly about “budget, finance and lack of resources” (Kullberg 2011:67, see also Shanks et al. 2015:1883 for similar conclusions), something that I suggest might be connected to the proletarianization or devaluation of social work discussed in the previous section. Instead, men advance sideways or leave social work altogether (Kullberg 2011).

Of course, this leads to more women in management positions, or, stated differently: to an absence of men overseeing social work; instead, women are increasingly engaged in supervising and controlling the (female) social workers. Interestingly, many scholars argue simultaneously for a dominant discourse on the importance of more men in the social services (Fahlgren 2013, Kullberg 2011). This is something that my interviewees also mention, although some do so with skepticism. Olivia says:

I’ve been in the public sector since 1976. And there has always been talk about a deficit of men, which really annoyed me since I’ve also been an active feminist, active in

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<sup>73</sup> Male graduates have dropped from 17 per cent in the 1990s to 11 per cent in the first decade of the 21st century (Kullberg 2011).

<sup>74</sup> The study by Lundström and Shanks, with data retrieved in 2010, reports an even lower number, 14 per cent. Although these numbers are probably not directly comparable, they suggest a similar development.

women's organizations and arranged workshops and things like that. So it's really been bugging me, like hell actually, that in all matters of recruitment in the public sector, that we've had special invitations for men to, like favored men [...] and at the same time we've had this dominant social order where women have been completely excluded. Have they asked for us in male-dominated environments? Hell no!

According to Olivia, who has long experience of social work, the demand for more men is nothing new, it constitutes a recurring discourse in social work. Interviewee Ylva says:

In professions where women are the majority [...], as soon as men enter, it's some kind of elevation of these men, which I find really annoying.

As argued in Chapter 5 on emotions, being professional is often associated with neutrality and objectivity, traits which, in turn, are often connected with masculinity (Eriksson & Eriksson 2002, Funck 2009). In Chapter 5, I also tried to illustrate how emotions are managed through spatial and cognitive distance between social worker and client, self-accentuated by stress. Economist Ulla Johansson argued some 20 years ago that, since the beginning of the 1980s, an economic discourse of rationality and masculinity had begun to colonize the public sector. This, she argued, is expressed in the striving for efficiency and austerity rather than values such as care, wellbeing or welfare, a shift that ultimately threatens the ethos of caring (Johansson 1997, for a similar reasoning, see Ponnert & Svensson 2015:7). Although empathy and care are traits that are expected of the feminized social worker, they need careful handling since they may create too much solidarity with the disenfranchised, rather than the employing organization.

The discourse on the benefits of a mixed-gender workforce in social work (i.e. including more men) suggests that the presence of men increases neutrality and detachment. Connecting also with Wikander's history of women at work above, highlighting the fact that men have traditionally been engaged in supervising the work of women, one can ask overarching questions regarding the developments in social work discussed in this chapter. Is there a possible connection between the constant "lack" of men in social work, and their gradual disappearance, particularly in managerial positions, and the practices of standardization and digitalization – "machines of documentation" – to control the feminized and "proletarianized" labor force? Historian Joan Scott (1982) has argued that the introduction of machinery into the work of women did in fact have revolutionary effects, although perhaps not in the expected ways. The machines increased production, but did little to emancipate women from the exploitation of either domestic or waged labor; rather, the mechanization

served to reinforce the subordinate position and poor conditions of women's work.

Similarly to the conclusions of Eriksson and Eriksson above (2002), and as referred to in Chapter 5, an analysis of the audit procedures at a UK university found a strong association between masculinity, detachment and an implied access to objective truth, which casts women as emotional and subjective (Swan 2010). Are the machines of documentation stand-ins for the absent rational (white) men? Talking to STS and gender-studies scholar Ulf Mellström, it would be safe to say that there exists a profound association between machines, technology and gender in that "technology in general more often symbolizes masculinity than it symbolizes femininity" (Mellström 2002:461). Talking to Marx, one can add that machines were introduced into production in order to increase production and profits (2007a) and not to reduce the laboring effort of the worker (Raunig 2005, Scott 1982). Inviting ideas from Foucault (1977), mechanized production in a factory setting also enables an improved control over the workers. However, because labor in the information- and knowledge-dependent society of today is increasingly produced outside of such confined settings, by the mind, within the individual, it is harder to control, compared with traditional industrial labor that could easily be monitored in an enclosed spatial setting. Those who possess knowledge – professionals – have thus become targets of suspicion and the need for new management strategies arises: "The control of the mind has become the most important governing strategy" (Hasselberg & Stenlås 2010:1). Is the hostile force that turns against women in fact a mechanical man? A machine to control the practices of social work and processes of knowledge production as well as a way to keep social workers busy and docile and impose detachment? As argued in Chapter 5, the very definitions of masculinity and whiteness:

are constructed as negations of what women and non-whites symbolise. It is after all, women and non-whites who represent the negative side of the binaries of nature/culture, body/mind, affectivity/rationality, subjectivity/objectivity and particularity/universality. (Puar 2004:142)

## **Concluding remarks**

With reference to evidence, professionalism and the rule of law, ideals of rationality, anormativity and emotional detachment are promoted in order to produce a rationalized subject with a dehumanized logic. Although not explicit, some interviewees express aspects of the above as their own ideal

whilst others claim it to be an ideal advocated by management and coldhearted colleagues in order to save money or please those higher up in the hierarchy. “The rise of the machines” in social work can thus be seen as a way to handle gendered expectations of female social workers as not being rational enough, objective enough, not sufficiently emotionally detached (Haraway 1997), for producing and managing in line with the accountable and evidence-based cost-effective social work production. With the increased desire for control over the production of knowledge and of emotionally detached cost-awareness, the flight of men from social work in general and from managerial positions in particular, the management need for improved mechanisms of control seems to grow. With this seems to come a devaluation of the social workers’ knowledge, expressed in a standardization and division of labor, as Marx and Engels (197n[1888]:13) wrote: rendering their knowledge worthless. Thus, one may in that sense speak of a proletarianization of social work, in terms of the forms of privilege and belonging to a profession (influence over the organization of work and the monopolization of skills). Or, as Hasselberg and Stenlås (2010) argue, that knowledge production is deemed more important to control in the contemporary “information age”. From a perspective of alienation, social-work scholars Iain Ferguson & Michael Lavalette (2004) sum up the effects of neoliberal managerialism on social work. They argue that social workers now have:

less freedom and control over their contact and work with clients; they are subject to speed-up, bureaucratic control and regulation; their work activities increasingly confront them and their clients as a set of ‘alien’ practices (and one consequence of this is that violence against social workers is increasing); and all this limits the scope for social workers to stand shoulder to shoulder with their clients in the face of their oppression—the system increasingly places barriers between the social worker and the client. (Ferguson & Lavalette 2004:304)

It is not only this alienation that prevents social workers from standing shoulder to shoulder with their clients, as Ferguson and Lavalette argue, so do the machines themselves. Please consider that the computer software installed to manage social work is a digital *interface*, an electronic piece of machinery that is interposed between social worker and client, something which ultimately changes their relationship (Kreuger & Stretch 1999:19). *Inter* etymologically means between, and *face* means a human face or facial expression (Online Etymology Dictionary 2016). Thus, the interface may be seen as a mechanism that comes in between the faces of social worker and client, making it harder to express and cultivate interpersonal relations. Instead, we see the development of distance and detachment. Following from that, the machine-as-man can be thought of as an embodiment of the

masculinized professional; accountable, rational and detached, installed to execute (or when it comes to managers, to oversee) the rationalized, devalued, proletarianized and feminized “all too emotional” and idealistic social work. These concluding remarks bring us back to the title of this thesis and the term *rationalization*, a term that has several meanings relevant to the following concluding discussion of this thesis; on governing social work.

## 10. Concluding discussion

The Swedish welfare state has undergone a radical transformation over the past couple of decades, and in the in-depth interviews with social workers, I have encountered several manifestations of this transformation. Let the record show that my intention has not been to construct a narrative of paradise lost, desiring a utopian Swedish welfare state of the past. Rather, I have been able to draw conclusion in regards to current political rationalities and governing techniques embedded in dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working and the harm that it produces. I have also been able to draw conclusions as to how such governing is related to gender and to the ways in which social workers respond to such governing. The quote with which I opened this thesis directs attention to some of the contemporary problems connected to the governing and organizing of social work. From the analytical work in this thesis, I have now gained a deeper understanding of what interviewee Olivia was talking about when she explained that:

Those of us who've been around a while and know how we used to work, we keep getting into conflicts with the social workers of this new dawn. [...] Today, if I allow myself to categorize, you may divide social workers into occupational professionals and organizational professionals. And it's the organizational professionals who are rewarded. Because they follow rules, guidelines and never go outside the box [...] you do your documentation and you shut up.

Through a historical narrative captured in a couple of sentences, Olivia explains *her* experience of a transformation of social work. As I interpret it, the social work regime of today works to produce a subject who rigidly follow the rules with blind faith as opposed to employing a more autonomous and creative approach, which would allow for flexibility and critical discussion. The rigid working procedures and the demands for compliance that Olivia draws attention to constitute a common theme throughout this thesis, and find several different expressions. From the perspective of public management reform, such a standardization of social work may in fact be labeled rationalization, understood as a specific style of management of organizations to increase efficiency; hence, the term referred to in the title. It may in particular be connected to semi-authoritarian ideals of new managerialism, a cult of faith in leaders, under which *organizational* professionalism is favored (Evetts 2006, Ahlbäck Öberg & Bringselius 2015). Consequently, Olivia's story highlights how public management reform not only changes governing and organization but also produces a different kind of social worker subject. The rationalization expressed as governing (organization, ideals, monetary rewards etc.) molds (new) social workers

into being loyal to the organization rather than the profession. From Olivia's account, loyalty is expressed as instrumental obedience, docility (as in both easily trained and submissive) and lack of a critical stance. As Olivia has herself experienced, this managerialist rationalization also disunites the social workers collective subject, which will further facilitate their management.

As suggested in the closing sentences of the previous chapter (9), however, the term rationalization has several meanings. As well as the conscious management of organizations to increase efficiency explained above, there is also the meaning of making something conformable to reason, as opposed to emotion. The analysis in this thesis suggests that the question of proximity and distance, a question which has long been deliberated in social work, may also be understood as a question of loyalty. Subsequently, loyalty to the organization is understood as standing in opposition to loyalty to clients. For this to be properly effected, an ideal of detachment has to be encouraged among social workers. This too may be connected to public management reform and ideals of the rational and calculating professional. Such reform also makes use of the gendered binary of emotion and reason. The current ideal of professional and rational public service workers is attached to masculine ideals of distance and detachment. In opposition to a feminized ethos of care, social workers are expected to properly manage their emotions in relation to clients in ways that facilitate the control of themselves, their clients and the rationing of resources. However, the increasing administration and workloads and the decreasing resources simultaneously make efficient use of such feminized ethos of care as many social workers put in extra hours to try to provide for their clients. Such practices may thus be seen as simultaneously an expression of empathy and exploitation, or in fact compliance and resistance, because they work both to help clients under conditions of dehumanization and austerity and to maximize the extraction of labor from the social workers whilst allowing them to cover (for) the flaws of the system.

A third meaning of rationalization which can be deciphered out of the quote by Olivia above is that of giving an explanation that obscures the true motive of an action. The transformation of social work has occurred under the pretense of the rule of law, effectiveness in measures and efficiency in the management of resources. However, there is not much to suggest that things like marketization and the growth of an administrative apparatus following from public management reform has either improved quality (effectiveness) or reduced costs (efficiency). Because such promises fall short, I believe we should look elsewhere for explanations. The motifs of the transformative grand scheme narrated in this thesis may thus be understood as a

rationalization because they allow for a justification of the transformation, both in individual social workers and in public discourse, which hides an overall individualized and dehumanized entrepreneurial neoliberal project of increased differentiation in the distribution of wealth.

If these opening remarks constitute aggregated conclusions derived from high flight, let us come back to the aim and research questions posed in the introduction, and get closer to the ground. The aim of this thesis has been to critically analyze the governing and organization of contemporary Swedish social work and some of its gendered aspects, with an emphasis on the potential effects inherent in the currently dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working.

The first question concerns how social work is organized and governed and what the dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working are. The second focuses on the political rationalities and governing techniques that operate in such dominant ideals and prescribed ways of working and the third question concerns the functions and effects that such schemes may have on the working conditions and wellbeing of social workers. The fourth question asks how gender operates in connection with the organization and governing of social work. In the following, I will discuss what conclusion that I have drawn from each chapter. After this, I will rise in the levels of abstraction and discuss the conclusions that I draw from analyzing conclusions from different chapters taken together.

## **Evidence-based practice: the Government of Truth**

From Chapter 4, I conclude that EBP formally aims at encouraging social workers to use scientifically approved methods. However, it also constitutes a top-down project that aims to standardize social work and reduce the space for flexibility, creativity and intuition. It is a process of rationalization understood as the scientific management of organizations to increase effectiveness (what ‘works’) and to impose a regimentation to provide identical treatment regardless of location. Critics claim that one of the purposes of the governing through EBP is to save money, for example by boosting outpatient treatment, but this is not officially admitted. Rather, it is rationalized (in the second meaning, of obscuring the true motive of an action) by connecting it to the neoliberal political rationality of choice and giving clients what they want. Furthermore, EBP is rationalized as the ultimate form of apolitical guidance, which constitutes an outspoken break from value-based critical social work. However, the powerful norm of

engaging only in EBP is not apolitical; rather, it is something that I understand as an obvious governing through central government edicts. On top of that, some of the evidence-based methods are commercial products, which are not apolitical either, but rather a potentially harmful driving force of social policy. But, as the political rationality of markets has it, competition and corporate interests are expected to increase effectiveness and efficiency. Although this study does not ask such questions, from the stories of the social workers, there is little to suggest that EBP has delivered improved effectiveness or efficiency. Rather it has produced other dangerous and harmful effects.

As discussed in Chapter 2, because power and truth are linked in a circular relationship, power *produces* truth and *uses* truths to extend its reach (Foucault 1984:74). By rationalizing themselves in relation to truths, modern regimes rationalize their exercise of power (Rose 1999:24) while simultaneously, truths enables individuals to govern themselves (Rose 2007). From this analysis, I conclude that EBP demands blind faith in the methods that are approved through particular kinds of knowledge production favored by central government and as such this semi-sovereign style demand for compliance delimits a professional autonomous view and undermines a critical approach to knowledge, power and social work. I connect such techniques with the political rationality of new managerialism, whereby mistrust of professionals' leads to a favoring of authoritarian, leadership-centered management techniques. This brings my attention to Foucault, who concluded that, in ancient times, truth was intimately connected to edicts. What the one(s) in power (i.e. the sovereign) declared to be the truth *was* the truth. The confession of certain knowledge was not voluntary, and whom it was making claims to tell the truth was decisive. The value of a statement was thus judged by its proclaimer and not by its content (Foucault 2002, 2003). Apart from producing epistemic ignorance, EBP hierarchization and overt control of knowledge individualizes social problems, whilst at the same time undermining the importance of cultivating an individual relationship between social worker and client. Because the favored approach to evaluating methods and treatments demands standardized individual stimuli, social policy that targets structurally produced problems will be disavowed, as will more flexible approaches to social work because of the demands for fidelity to a particular method. The irony of the ideals embedded in EBP, of patient will and choice, is that EBP will standardize social work and ignore individual needs and context. Although EBP is produced within a neoliberal political rationality of both reason and individualism, it produces a setting in which a reflexive approach, and individual assessment and treatment, are undermined.

## **Professional engagement: emotions at work**

Through my analysis in Chapter 5, I conclude that there exists a conflict in the understanding of the role of emotions as well as how emotions should be handled. Ideals regarding emotions are closely connected to gendered notions of being professional; hence, emotions may be seen as an asset, but something that needs to be properly managed. Because masculine traits are associated with norms of professionalism, a neoliberal rationality of mistrust produces a rationalized (conformable to reason, as the opposite of emotional) social worker subject who understands femininity and women as (too) emotional and subjective. Such ideals constitute the basis for governing techniques that produce loyalty to the organization rather than the client and become “true” through gut feeling (Ahmed 2004b). Such a hyper-rational subject is rationalized (i.e. it obscures the true motive of an action) in terms of the neutral professional and thus hides the ideological assumptions behind it. In addition, expectations of both a detached self and of the responsibility for the happiness of others (Ahmed 2010), makes social workers hide their unhappiness (or alienation), which disguises problems and blocks the formation of collective resistance (Scheman 1980).

However, emotions are not merely the objects of governing or an insidious tool for governing, emotions also harbor a radical potential. From the analysis, I conclude that emotions may be a normative interpretation of encounters with injustice (Nussbaum 2001, Ahmed 2004b). Both the qualities given above, a tool for governing and for resistance, enable a deeper understanding of social workers’ narratives of the expectations they encounter; to hide their sadness and frustration in order not to create an uncomfortable working environment and in order not be themselves understood as the problem. In the thinking of Sara Ahmed, they are obliged to take responsibility for their own and for others’ happiness (Ahmed 2010). From such an understanding, it also makes sense to encounter narratives suggesting that traditional social work counseling has been transformed and controlled, reducing the space available for critical discussion to muffle protest and resistance. The professional ideal of masculine distance and detachment, advocated by management, is understood as a political rationality designed to dehumanize and blame clients for their predicaments and redirect loyalty from the client to the organization. Ultimately, it is a way to produce legitimacy and to save money.

## Papers and archives: functions of documentation

In Chapter 6, the analysis allows me to conclude that social workers are required to engage in vast amounts of administrative work, most of which constitutes different forms of knowledge production, such as in the documentation of the assessment process. Such practices of documentation affect the way in which social work is thought about and carried out. As the demands for documentation increase, the interaction with clients is reduced and formalized. There are several suggested reasons for such developments, although none convincingly explains the installation of such a far-reaching and costly scheme. The reasons given by social workers are: to ensure the rule of law, to iron out local differences, to provide the client with information, to ease the transition of a case between social workers and to cover the social services if scrutinized by government authorities. Some also argue that practices of thorough documentation have been introduced to control the clients, in particular in the area of financial support, because the production of documents works as a kind of surveillance of clients. Such practices should be understood in the context of emerging rationalities of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility, a logic that allows an understanding of individual predicaments as being the result of personal mismanagement and bad choices rather than structures of inequality. I thus understand the rigorous control of clients not as a benevolent, structured assessment of their needs, but rather as a rationalization to produce knowledge that enables a denial of their requests and needs.

I conclude, however, that this abundance of information also has another important function: to govern the social workers. Recently installed documentation procedures require that social workers document everything that concerns their work with clients. During the course of such a thorough documentation, social workers also document their own conduct. The fact that every action undertaken is kept on file, in the digital archives of the social services, is something that I interpret as grounds for self-governing as it *may* easily be accessed and scrutinized in the future. In addition, the mere fact of documenting your own conduct will create a self-awareness of such conduct. I also argue that such documentation is a form of discipline as it keeps social workers structured, busy and under a, possibly always present, outside/inside gaze. Such an exercise keeps them docile (as in both easily trained and subjugated), inhibiting them from engaging in anything outside of the protocol.

I also conclude that documentation is both performative and non-performative. It is non-performative insofar as it is suggested that documentation will prevent neglect and abuse, although such promises are

not likely to be met, because mere knowledge has not been enough to prevent neglect and abuse in the past. On top of that, the rigid demands for contemporary forms of documentation are likely to generate sanitized accounts, further undermining the possibility of using documentation as a means of scrutiny to detect neglect and abuse. Social workers' individual responsibility for thorough documentation does, however, allow for the decentralization of responsibility and for management claims to be undertaking risk management.

Documentation is also linked to performance, as the act of documentation itself constitutes the event. If an event is not documented, it has not happened. As the current governing regime of welfare delivery is becoming more and more focused on performance, what cannot or will not be measured will receive less attention and will not be rewarded. Such a regime will ultimately transform social work practice, leading to efforts being focused on what will eventually be measured.

As documentation and administration takes more and more time, slashing the time for client interaction, the productive or "actual" social work gradually becomes devalued. However, there are several accounts suggesting that management prioritizes documentation over meeting clients. The austerity schemes and the consequent financial scrutiny of social work does not affect the work of documenting and measuring, only the so-called actual social work, and I thus conclude that documentation is becoming the product and "actual" social work is becoming waste. This leads me to conclude that the re-productive work has come to outweigh the productive work, a kind of reverse rationalization of social work (as in the management of organizations to increase efficiency), which further strengthens the conclusion that documentation is highly valued as a practice that enables the self-governing and disciplining of social workers while subjecting clients to sovereign-style governing.

## **Motivational interviewing: a will to change**

Developed in the 1980s, motivational interviewing (MI) is a method that has gained prominence during the last decade in Sweden. It is now something that most social workers are expected to learn and, ultimately, practice. MI is a counselling method originally developed to motivate alcoholics to change their course of life; it has proven effective in evidence studies, but despite evidence-based demands for rigidity and fidelity to the original protocol, MI in practice is fuzzy and used in a wide variety of settings. The method relies

on the assumption that people cannot be persuaded or forced to change; rather, change has to develop out of free will. From my analysis, I conclude that MI builds on the illusion of a “true” free will untainted by context and thus fits well within a neoliberal rationality of free will, choice and individual responsibility. I thus regard the massive deployment of MI in social work as a technique to produce self-regulating and responsible subjects, under the rationality of empowerment (Cruikshank 1999). However, empowerment is always born out of struggle (Fanon 1970) and not by subjection to hegemonic therapeutic protocols. Consequently, because MI is portrayed as a way to give clients what they want, although it actively produces a certain will, I understand it as a governing technique that disguises the exercise of power and may in fact undermine, rather than highlight, conflict and necessary struggle.

Because MI deliberately “forgets” the context, it also aids in individualizing problems, and because it produces manageable and self-animating subjects through the trope of individual responsibility, it may also be understood as a rationalization of indifference and austerity in order to displace responsibility onto clients or their kin.

### **Organization matters: dispersion of money, labor and power**

In Chapter 8, my analysis centers on the organization of social work and how such matters are connected to governing. The narratives of social workers allow me to conclude that the division of labor plays an important role in governing social workers as well as in their wellbeing. Recent developments in many municipalities have created a division of workers into either so-called clients or contractors in accordance with contemporary organizing models whereby assessment and treatment are separated and carried out by different social workers. Many municipalities also organize their work into specialized functions that target different problems. From both of these developments follow demands for specific knowledge suitable to the specific tasks each social worker is expected to carry out. Simultaneously, such specialization renders a holistic or integrated approach less useful and consequently qualities such as an overall understanding of social problems, creativity and a flexible approach to social work are undermined. In line with developments that follow from the increased division of labor and specialization in industrial production identified by Marx (see Chapter 9), interviewees in this chapter narrate that such a way of organizing work undermines an overarching understanding of clients and their predicaments

and reduces the need for a comprehensive and creative education for social workers. On top of this, those who work with assessment of the clients' needs are left with less time to meet them during the clients' engagement with the social services. Such a way of organizing social work thus undermines the conditions for developing a meaningful relationship between social worker and client. Furthermore, the use of budget governing, a management technique designed to elicit specific behaviors from members of an organization, shifts responsibility for financial prudence. This technique works to create a decentralized responsibility for budgets and competition between branches within the same municipality or social services division. Such a marketized organizational principle shifts loyalty and instills a cost-awareness among social workers that may conflict with assessing and providing for the clients' needs. Budget governing also works to create problematic conflicts over scarce resources within the same municipality.

While the division of labor and specialization discussed above may be described as a regimentation of the acceptable ways in which to work, flexible working conditions, in particular flexible working hours, are an expression of a parallel aspect of organizing and governing work. In light of the heavy workloads and limited resources, flexible working hours lead to social workers becoming responsible for the shifting demands of labor without being rewarded for overtime. This is possible because flexible working hours are understood as a privilege and because they give social workers a sense of freedom, although some question the benevolence of this system as it decentralizes responsibility and creates stress in an environment of strenuous working conditions and resource scarcity. Alongside the allusion to freedom and privilege, such a scheme also works through gendered expectations, an ethos of care and a devotion to the wellbeing of clients. While management prioritizes administrative work, the caring social worker bends over backwards to give as much time and devotion as possible to the client. Although this is a scheme that ultimately exploits and exhausts social workers as they cover for the flaws in the system, I also understand it as resistance against the detached and dehumanizing austerity practices advocated by management.

The interviews suggest that several combined aspects of organization and working conditions produce an individualization of work and commitment. There is the increased prevalence of individual negotiations for wages (as opposed to collective bargaining), which creates vulnerability and is understood by some as a technique to discipline social workers into further exploitation and loyalty. There are also the high levels of stress and the tendency to mind one's own business that produces silence due simply to a lack of time and energy to protest. In addition, among the interviewees there

were also general narratives about the individualization of responsibilities and performance, which diverts attention from the parties responsible: the public management system and the organizers of work. Furthermore, the relationship with management becomes individualized, whereby “to be friends” with the manager becomes an important coping tactic; to avoid being bullied and to gain rewards. The experience of work-related stress, which is regarded as a deficiency within the individual, implying her inability to prioritize or to cope with stress, further magnifies such developments. I conclude that these combined processes of individualization narrated by the interviewees, accentuate social workers’ vulnerability and disunite a collective social worker subject. This is in fact to be expected from activities that are organized according to a neoliberal, marketized rationality of competition and performance (Brown 2015:110). Thus I conclude that the schemes governing social work, arranged through strategies of organization, may be seen as forms of that classical strategy divide and conquer, through the fragmentation of work, responsibility and collective subjects, allowing ultimately for domination. To some, this means the loss of the sense of collegiality and, rather than resisting, one “guards” her or his own work. To others, the frustration turns into willful resistance, albeit by ill-willed managers and peers, described as “the one who always complains” and creates a bad mood, to the detriment of colleagues. This is further example of how social workers are governed through the production of an ideal subject, a subject who is rational, detached and content, rather than sad, angry and critical. Such controlling and disuniting processes of individualization are termed a “culture of silence” or “culture of loyalty” by the interviewees and this is something that I conclude to be an extremely potent and problematic technique of governing.

## **Men and machines: mechanizing social work**

In the 9th and final chapter, I made an attempt to review some of the points that I had made in previous chapters and analyze them in combination. I did this with the aid of additional theory and narratives about tools of assessment (BBIC and ASI) and displeasure with work. By viewing these tools, these standardized digitalized templates, as machines rather than tools, I analyzed them through a Marxist understanding of the transformations of work that grew out of the introduction of machines into capitalist production. Unlike tools, which aid the worker in her or his endeavor, machines dictate the ways in which work may be done and thus confront the worker like an autonomous and alien force. Consequently, working in such an environment renders (social) workers alienated, towards

the client, the working process itself, her or his colleagues and, ultimately, themselves (Marx 2007b). This understanding arose from social workers' narratives displaying a sense of alienation from social work and in some cases from clients (although in reference to colleagues rather than themselves). There were also accounts of alienation from colleagues (see in particular Chapter 8) and from the social worker's own self: I want to quit because I fear I will "become an unsympathetic person". In addition to the alienation, in such a process of proletarianization (or de-professionalization), the need for general skills, the creative "handicraft" aspect of social work, is gradually devalued and undermined (Marx & Engels 197n[1888]:13). This is due to the simple fact that standardized work does not require the same wit. Subsequently, the social worker can more easily be replaced. The employee turnover, itself preventing the developing of a relation, is further accelerated by precisely such alienation, due to people either seeking employment elsewhere, going on work-related sick leave or simply resigning.

The governing effect of such mechanized work as that described above is exponential. First of all, a de-professionalized and weakened workforce has less leverage to bargain with and thus mechanization will ease rationalizations of the workforce, in terms of both the need for labor and rewarding it. As Karl Marx (2007a) concluded, the mechanization of work did little to emancipate workers and rather aided in their further exploitation and subordination, which in modern times, according to Joan Scott (1982), is especially true for women. Furthermore, the masculinized archetypes of rationality, control and detachment that are augmented through professional ideals (Chapter 5), evidence-based practice (Chapter 4) and the apparatuses of knowledge production (Chapter 6), may be harder to instill into social workers than other public servants because of their empathy and (expectations of) commitment to caring for clients. Resistance to such a scheme is also likely to be founded in attempts to safeguard the professional status of social work. Narratives about the place of emotions in such a profession strengthen such assumptions as there is an ongoing battle over the role and ideal approach of a social worker. Furthermore, narratives about the need for (more) men in social work and their recent flight from the profession (in particular from management positions, see Kullberg 2011:67), require the aid of machinery to harness the feminized social worker. From the mechanization of social work, it follows that the time for so-called actual work, i.e., meeting the clients, will be undermined because of the increased demands for, and prioritization of documentation. In addition, the client meetings that do occur will be shaped by the standardized questions, boxes and numbers in the digital template. They will not generate the deep relationship, or therapeutic alliance as some call it, which is argued to be of great importance to the performance of real social work. As such, I

understand the digital interface to be a hostile force that insinuates itself in-between the faces of social worker and client. Ultimately, I thus conclude that the installation of machines in social work should in fact be understood as a way to take outside control over knowledge production and the whole operation.

## **Distance and detachment: transformers of social work**

An overall conclusion from the discussions above is that several connected forces are working in alliance to accentuate the processes of distancing and ultimately detachment. The evidence ideal that values the instrumental use of particular and rigid methods undermines the value of the social worker/client relationship itself, although this relationship is found to be the “actual” driving force behind successful social work (Chapter 4). Ideals that surface from the narratives about emotions and professions also illustrate the elevation of a rational and detached approach, producing distance between social worker and client (Chapter 5). Added to this are the colossal documentation practices that claim such a huge amount of work that the time available to meet clients and develop a relationship is reduced. The preoccupation with administration rather than “actual work” also keeps social workers tied to their office and away from face-to-face fieldwork in the milieus of the clients (Chapter 6). Furthermore, the processes of developing the client’s desire to take individual responsibility provides a legitimization for social workers to distance themselves from clients’ dependency and need for help (Chapter 7). The organization of social work, and the extensive division of labor, means that those who work with assessments and have influence over the distribution of resources engage in less contact with clients, which also undermines the development of a relationship (Chapter 8). The standardized digital templates for assessment, installed to organize interactions with clients (such as BBIC, ASI and FIA) regulate and proceduralize the relationship with the client. A digital interface is, so to speak, coming in between their faces, something that undermines the development and depth of their relationship (Chapter 9). One aspect that is of importance in understanding the installation of such apparatuses of distance and their further effect is the growth of political rationalities that demand subjugation from clients. These rationalities punish poverty and the mismanagement of life in accordance with the trope of individual responsibility and supposed flaws in character (Wacquant 2004, Salonen 2006, Brown 2015, Bauman 1999). The insights of the British settlement movement shed further light on the function of such a scheme. The proximity that arose from social workers living together with the

impoverished in community houses allowed for a deeper understanding of their predicaments, and thus moral explanations were ultimately undermined in favor of structural explanations (Pettersson 2001). This also highlights the importance of both standpoint and perspective, not only in social work, but also in research and politics.

I believe that it is of utmost importance to highlight the abysmal consequences of such intrusive technologies of distance. Such a scheme produces distance and detachment that undermines the cultivation of a deep relationship with and understanding of the client and his or her predicament. The function of such a transformation is the creation of rational indifference, rationalized under the guise of evidence, professionalism, the rule of law, individual responsibility and equal treatment. This allows, and is further accentuated by, the logic of austerity. As social workers spend less and less time with clients, and handle them in a rationalized manner, the cost of employing social workers may be reduced and simultaneously the need for creativity will be undermined. The same goes for the distribution of resources. As distance increases, so does the likelihood of the smooth and gradual installation of austerity. Moreover, the rationalization of social work will also affect knowledge production. As time spent with clients is slashed and proceduralized, the basis for comprehending the complexity of social problems and cultivating critique will be undermined. A logical consequence of this is not only a loss of understanding, an epistemic ignorance, but also that the education required to carry out social work will become dumbed down (Lundström 2011, Healy 2009). Therefore, social work arrangements that cultivate distance rather than engagement will undermine deeper knowledge and empathy and will breed ignorance, indifference and suffering (Scheman 1980). Paradoxically, such processes of distance may also be a way for social workers to cope with strenuous working conditions and having to witness the suffering produced by detachment and austerity, which further amplifies distance and detachment. As sociologist John Holloway (2002:72) argues, with cues from both Foucault and Marx, “power is not possessed by any particular person or institution. Power lies rather in the fragmentation of social relations”.

### **“A lot of responsibility but no mandate”**

The title of this section, a quote from interviewee Olivia on current governing schemes in social work, sums up a general conclusion drawn from the analysis in this thesis. It describes complex circumstances of simultaneous decentralization and centralization. Expressions of centralization are found

in the attempts to standardize social work through the top-down project of EBP and in the standardization of the interaction between social workers and clients. This is manifested in the massive deployment of templates to guide how the assessment is carried out and documented; what aspects of life to examine, what questions to ask, and when and how to do a follow-up. Expressions of standardization are also found in the organizing of social work into handling either assessment or treatment.

At the same time, however, from the analysis in this thesis I also conclude that social work contains elements of decentralization or increased individual responsibility. This is expressed in the flexibility of working time, where social workers are left to decide what hours to work, when to work late and when to take time off. There is also a decentralization of financial responsibility through budget governing and the encouragement of cost awareness. Hand in hand with this, however, comes the reality that austerity ideals are decoupled from the mandate to decide about resources or instructions on how to prioritize. Consequently, social workers are given the individual responsibility to execute austerity without the mandate to provide what they believe is needed and legally sanctioned. In addition, scarce resources and heavy workloads are left to the individual social worker to handle, by working (or not working) harder and harder and taking responsibility for the wellbeing of the clients. Such narratives draw attention to how the decentralization of responsibilities in the social services may be problematic rather than liberating and also how centralization is not the opposite of decentralization. In fact, interviewee Ylva argues eloquently for the importance: “to distinguish between responsibility and power. Because you can have a hell of a lot of responsibility, which does not mean that you have power.” She also adds to the equation that responsibility is often laid upon women, without the accompanying necessary resources. She thus draws attention to the way in which responsibility may be decoupled from power and the reality that a lot of responsibility is not necessarily liberating, but may in fact be subjugating, as she argues, for women in particular.

The ways of organizing and governing social workers described in this section, to overwhelm them with responsibility whilst simultaneously generating a possibly seductive sense of responsibility as freedom, has particularly potent functions for the smooth exercise of power and the exploitation of labor. As responsibility is pushed down the hierarchy, power in the form of control over resources and deciding how to do social work is moved up the hierarchy. Under such a scheme, conflicts will also move or new ones arise: between colleagues over distribution of work (you sit there and “wait for someone else to take on some more”) and between social worker and client over scarce resources (“be responsible for his own actions

[...] because we pay for this” treatment). And also between units within the social services (one unit denies a client’s application for housing and another unit then has to commit the child) and within the social workers’ individual selves: the decision is “not founded in yourself, but it emanates from you”.

## **The assemblage of power**

As illustrated in this concluding discussion, the organization and governing of social work has transformed it in several harmful ways. This affects work procedures, working conditions and relations between social workers, as well as between clients and managers. The analysis also illustrates the pervasiveness and perversion of power. It is simultaneously the workings of tiny everyday micro-processes and a giant intricate machinery; with all its nuts, bolts, levers, pulleys, belts and beams and its body of bones, muscles, fat and blood vessels, out to the tiny capillaries. Power is not perfect or always the result of ill-willed agents, but it often serves functions that reproduce itself, albeit undergoing a gradual adaptation and metamorphosis that keeps the machine running.

Using Foucault’s three principle forms of power: sovereignty, discipline and governmental management (or governmentality) has been important to understand how power operates differently and produces the subjection of social workers in several different, yet connected ways. For example, in Chapters 6 and 8 I found expressions of sovereign power, in Chapters 6 and 9, discipline and in Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 the analysis suggests expressions of self-governing (or governmentality-type governing). This leads to three simple but important conclusions. Firstly, different techniques of power overlap, intersect and reinforce each other. Secondly, practices of documentation and administration (Chapter 6) are connected to *all* three forms of governing; sovereign-style power in the direct control over clients, discipline in the social workers’ meticulous and structured gathering of information and their subsequent self-surveillance of their own conduct. This confirms that knowledge production is in fact profoundly connected to the exercise of power (Foucault 1977, 1984, 2007a). Thirdly, self-governing is the dominant technique of power, but I also conclude that the operations of power directed at affluent people in advanced capitalist nations are not all about self-governing, just as sovereign power and discipline are not reserved for the disenfranchised, as some theorists suggest. Describing a differentiated governing, I conclude from the analysis in this thesis that both Stephen Collier and Loïc Wacquant share a troublesome and simplistic understanding of governing. “Expanded freedom and liberalization for

certain people” (Collier 2012:191) and “Uplifting and ‘liberating’ at the top” (Wacquant 2012a:73). Not only does my analysis suggest otherwise in regards to differentiation, but it seems that in their view governing through choice and free will is somewhat unproblematic, and in essence liberating. In a way, this is understandable as governmentality-type power can be seen as non-coercive and a more democratic way of governing. However, such a conclusion would have to presuppose that liberty is the *absence of force or prohibition*. Such a liberal understanding of power (often associated with Adam Smith) fails to acknowledge that power can be performed in deceitful ways, and that “liberty” can be manipulated without force.

In contrast to such an understanding, my analysis shows that self-governing is not essentially liberating because it produces suffering. For example, the trap of solidarity (Mulinari 2011), and (expectations of) a feminized ethos of care, means that social workers take upon themselves the responsibility for covering for limited resources and heavy workloads. Such expressions of governing through the “free” will of social workers ultimately exploits and breaks them. Such an exercise of power is not visible in the same way as sovereign or disciplinary power as it is often internalized through hegemonic norms; it blends more easily with progressive discourses (such as empowerment – cost-awareness – outpatient-treatment, see Chapter 4), personal convictions and desires. In addition, because such power cannot as easily be ascribed to a person or an institution, there is little incitement to resist when there is no one there to direct the resistance against and no one there to argue with. Resisting governmentality-type self-governing power would, at least in part, mean turning against yourself. Thus, at least some of the exercise of power, and the conflicts that arise from it, takes place inside the social workers selves, which helps to explain the frustration that surfaced in the interviews.

The conclusions above may seem contradictory. On the one hand, there is rigidity and control and, on the other, individualization, flexibility and self-regulation. Thus, I cannot completely discard that twofaced beast that Loïc Wacquant speaks of to describe the differentiated governing of neoliberal regimes, displaying different faces towards different groups of people; “uplifting and ‘liberating’ at the top...[and] castigatory and restrictive at the bottom” (Wacquant 2012a:73). We just have to adjust the figure of speech to illustrate these two faces of the beast as simultaneously confronting *the same* individual. Wacquant’s assumption, that people at the bottom are governed through repressive techniques and people at the top through self-regulation, thus conveys a simplistic understanding of the exercise of power.

The double nature of current welfare regimes shape self-governing subjects through competition and performance and simultaneously exerts external control and re-distributes power from professionals to managers. As interviewee Ylva explained the culture of silence at her work: It is both “about your individual performance and about being loyal to the top.” Thus, the conclusions above are in fact not contradictory at all. The governmental functions inherent in the mechanisms of capitalism that willingly have been installed to organize welfare, work precisely in accordance with the schizophrenic logic of capitalism as understood by Deleuze and Guattari (1987): “It seeks to control its labour force in order to extract maximum productivity from it, while at the same time enhancing the production of new and creative ideas” (as interpreted by Davies 2011:iii). Thus, through the inspiration of Bronwyn Davies, I connect the narratives above and claim that a major ruse of neoliberalism is that it works to convince “individuals they are free (that is, that their lives are directed by their own will), and at the same time it shapes them to be whatever capitalism wants” (Davies 2011:iii).

Connecting back to the introduction and the constitutive intermeshing of social work and capitalism, I would argue this to be true also today, not only as social work still deals with consequences of capitalism, but also because the dominant political rationality of neoliberalism constitutes a political common sense where fundamental mechanisms of capitalist economy is understood not as something merely to be handled, but as favorable principles in the organization and governing of the welfare state. I thus have to side with interviewee Simon, who claimed that neoliberalism is the contemporary garb of capitalism. In fact, I would argue from my analysis that neoliberalism is the *rationalization* of capitalism in all three meanings of the word discussed in this concluding chapter. It is the *scientific management* of capitalism (extraction of labor and increased profit through a mixture of political rationalities and governing techniques), the *blocking of the emotions* it produces (the suffering and anger) by appealing to reason, and *the disguise of its ideology*, by appealing to unquestionable truths, a free will and a lack of viable alternatives.

My analysis has demonstrated some expressions of such “attempts” to rationalize or disguise the ideology behind neoliberal reforms. Perhaps the most important that the current regime of social work produces is the individualization of responsibility (Chapters 7 and 8) and of social problems (Chapter 4). Although the overall regimentation of social work may function as a way to undermine social workers creativity and critique, my analysis has also shown that it nevertheless produces resistance. For instance, my analysis of the marketized public management reforms targeting social work shows that such reform is not apolitical but rather highly political. However,

several of the interviewees can see through such claims and engage in a politically motivated and conscious struggle against it.

## **Reading resistance**

The stories that have been so generously shared with me for the writing of this thesis bear witness to the multiple ways in which social workers resist the current governing regimes as they refuse to stand by and quietly witness the atrocious living conditions, the demise of public welfare and the sacrifice of human life they produce. One way of resisting is to engage in the prescribed ways of working, such as the all the documentation that is required from them, in a disinterested and *pro forma* manner (Chapter 6). Another expression is to simply quit or convey a strong conviction to do so in the near future. These expressions may be connected to the understanding of resistance as a kind of counter-conduct (Death 2010) and the critique as the will to not be governed precisely in the prescribed manner or not precisely as much (Foucault 2007b).

The sorrow, frustration and anger conveyed in the interviews is something I also understand as a form of resistance. It is founded on social workers' experience of witnessing the demise of the welfare state and a sense that they are the ones left to "try to keep it together". Such emotional responses to current regimes thus have a revolutionary potential (Ahmed 2011). This also draws attention to how current regimes try to regulate emotion, not only to produce detachment and save money, but also to dull the impulse to resist. I would thus conclude that attention to emotions is an important analytical approach, in particular in combination with a gendered governmentality approach. It provides some of the glue necessary to connect and understand the assemblage (Collier & Ong 2005:12) of a whole array of "things" to optimize governing (Foucault 2007a:108).

In connection with this, I also conclude that it is possible to understand the caring feminized subject in multiple ways (Mahmood 2001). Current governing regimes produce a complex subject; an ethos of care makes social workers work harder to cover for heavy workloads and lack of resources, and to fight a regime that tries to blame clients for their predicaments whilst rationalizing a system that tries to give as little as possible. I understand this as a simultaneous form of exploitation and resistance.

The analysis in this thesis and this concluding discussion has mainly focused on governing and the exercise of power, which may give the impression of a

totalizing system. Nevertheless, the stories that have helped build this analysis stem to a considerable extent from social workers' *critique*. Such critique is expressed in a refusal to (fully) comply with the prescribed ways of working and a refusal to fully embrace the dominant ideals of contemporary social work. It is also expressed in the ways in which some have chosen to collectively engage in a network to fight the current governing regime, and in those accounts, alongside a general fatigue, I have gotten a sense that the struggle gives meaning and instills strength (Badiou 2015). It is important to remember and highlight that such accounts have been pivotal to my understanding of how the intricately assembled machinery of governing works, and they also illustrate that such machinery is neither flawless nor will it go unchallenged.

### **Some final words**

In regards to methodological issues (Chapter 3), I find that my choice to deploy an open-ended research design and analysis has proven itself fruitful. Weaving together social workers' narratives with theory from different disciplines in my analysis has allowed for a modus of "free" rhizomatic association, paying close attention to the messiness and entanglements of power (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Furthermore, my choice to engage in a nomadic pursuit of both analytical highways, byways and sidetracks has allowed the analysis to partly animate itself and has enabled me to pay close attention to both the details and the entirety of power in the regulation of human life (Braidotti 1994, 2002, Tsing 2005). A testing approach (Jönsson & Rådström 2013) that keeps raising questions, rather than providing answers (Milchman & Rosenberg 2010:62), has allowed several small bits and pieces to eventually constitute the sense of a whole. Thus I believe that the conclusions you have read above are well argued and firmly founded on a thorough analysis of the assemblages of power in social workers' narratives.

In the introduction, I hypothesized on social work being of particular importance for deploying a welfare state makeover. I argue that my analysis has shown this in fact to be the case. If a profound transformation of the welfare state is to be deployed, the subjects of social workers have to be transformed accordingly. Otherwise, there is a risk that they will succeed too well in catching those who fall through the cracks, those who cannot manage under a neoliberal regime that produces precarity according to schedule. Succeeding too well will run counter to both targets of austerity and the moralism that demands individual responsibility and subsequently blame those who cannot live up to such expectations. Through the deployment of

various schemes, that produces detachment and financial prudence, social workers have to be schooled and subjectively shaped not to care as much. Thus, this analysis goes beyond social work, and consequently has something to tell us about Swedish society in general. And it is not pretty.

Perhaps these conclusions convey a loss of hope, and that may not be entirely a misread, but I do want to believe that something better is worth hoping for; otherwise, I would have to accept the arrival of philosopher Herbert Marcuse's dystopian state in his saying that the triumph of the system comes when the alternative is unthinkable. Although generally I do not invest much hope in the ability of parliamentary politics to bring about true justice and equality, I am nevertheless cautiously hopeful that the current government has concluded that contemporary systems of public management leave a great deal to be desired and has suggested inquiring into alternatives (Regeringen 2014). My hope is that this thesis may provide some insights into the negative effects of the prolongation of this gargantuan machine. It is also my hope that this thesis will provide some suggestions for directions in which to further pursue alternatives and some to avoid, in future endeavors to find alternative principles for governing a future welfare state.

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