

# Practising empty talk

## *Compliance and resistance to normative control among caseworkers in the Swedish Public Employment Service*

### **Abstract**

This article draws on theories of normative control and critical management studies to investigate caseworkers' strategies in correspondence to a new leadership philosophy in the Swedish Public Employment Service called self-leadership. Based on 43 interviews and observations at two local offices, we find that managerial models are arbitrary and cause uncertainty at the local level as caseworkers both comply and resist managerial talk of self-leadership. Based on a distinction between types of and grounds for strategic responses, we identify four subject positions defined as "personal embracement", "personal detachment", "professional recognition" and "professional dismissal". The study shows that newly employed comply through practices of personal embracement, while senior employees resist based on professional dismissal. The article concludes that caseworkers are not docile bodies, who adjust to managerial talk, but derive their identity, engagement and esteem linked to a shared-work identity as organisational professionals. This demonstrates the relevance of closing the gap between street-level bureaucracy and critical management studies to further explore the tension between governing "employees" or "professionals" in contemporary public welfare governance.

*Keywords:* Caseworkers, normative control, public employment service, critical management studies

TODAY WE SEE a new tide of managerial models to govern caseworkers in public welfare agencies. Whereas previous models of new public management sought to steer agencies and caseworkers through financial control models, performance evaluations, and a focus on production units (e.g. Christensen & Læg Reid 2007; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017), contemporary public sector reforms stress to greater extent organisational visions, values, and trust in welfare professionals (Innovationsrådet 2013; Ekonomistyrningsverket 2014; Tillitsdelegationen 2018; Bringselius 2020). Public welfare agencies hence follow trends from the private sector of turning employees into an "organizational man" (e.g. Whyte 2002[1956]) and embedding individuals into organisational cultures. It appears that the management of public agencies increasingly try to control public employees by setting organisational norms concerning how they should behave alongside their roles as professionals or caseworkers.

While this form of governing employees has largely been observed within private

companies, research on public welfare governance has mainly drawn on theories of street-level bureaucrats (e.g. Lipsky 2010[1980]; Brodtkin 2011; Evans 2011) or organisational professionals (e.g. van Berkel, van der Aa & van Gestel 2010; Evetts 2011) to capture caseworker governance. We find extensive studies that investigate caseworkers as the last step in a chain of political implementation, linked to discussions on caseworker discretion (Schütze & Johansson 2020). At the same time, we also find extensive studies that examine how normative governance affects employees in private companies and especially in knowledge-intensive firms (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman 2004, see also Miller & Rose 2008) through the control of their emotions, values, beliefs, and identities in order to steer work behaviour in a desirable direction (e.g. Etzioni 1961; van Maanen & Kunda 1989; Willmott 1993; Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Kunda 2006[1992]). However, we find less research on how such modes of governance take place within public welfare agencies.

This article aims to bridge this gap by investigating how modes of normative control affect caseworkers in a Swedish public welfare agency. The main purpose is to investigate the types of strategic responses that local caseworkers express to modes of normative control and how their responses relate to caseworkers' self-identification as either "employees" or "professionals" as two potentially competing subject positions within a public welfare agency. Our interest in local responses takes its cue from debates within critical management research on the abyss between "surface" and "substance" in contemporary organisational governance (Hallonsten 2022). Some suggest that setting organisational visions, norms and values serves as a function of impression management to external stakeholders, or "empty talk" (Alvesson 2013; Alvesson & Gabriel 2016) and "bullshit" (Spicer 2017). Our interest, however, mainly lies in how "empty talk" is practised within organisations and given meaning at the local level by caseworkers.

We hence follow the recent turn into studies of public welfare governance that take inspiration from management studies to understand contemporary public reforms (e.g. Hall 2012; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017) and even more so studies that make use of theories on normative control or critical management (e.g. Jacobsson & Hollertz 2021; Jacobsson 2022). We empirically explore a leadership programme within the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen) (hereafter PES) called self-leadership, which sought to control all employees in a similar fashion and hence challenged established caseworker identities as organisational professionals (e.g. Evetts 2011). While the governance of PES caseworkers has previously been investigated (see, for instance, Paulsen 2015, 2018; Peralta 2015), some have also studied normative control such as trust- and value-based governance and its significance for the caseworkers' role, daily work, and interactions with clients in the PES and other agencies (e.g. Holmgren Caicedo, Mårtensson Hansson & Tamm Hallström 2015; Fransson & Qvist 2018; Jacobsson & Hollertz 2021).

The article proceeds as follows. After the introduction, we present perspectives on normative control and particularly discussions on strategies of compliance and resistance. Thereafter follows a description of the method and data used for the analysis.

We then present the key characteristics of the leadership model of self-leadership as implemented in the PES, followed by an analysis of strategies of compliance and resistance. We continue with a discussion on how the results align with a personal and professional identification, followed by a concluding remark.

## **Normative control and strategic responses**

Kunda defined normative control as the “attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions” (Kunda 2006[1992]:11). A cornerstone in theories of normative control is hence the sacrifice of the employee’s self to construct “an organizational man” (Whyte 2002[1956]), i.e., a subject that conforms to the values of the organisation. The term thus refers to the soft, subtle, and sometimes indirect forms of control that organisations enact as they promote organisational norms, visions, and ideals as guiding principles for both the organisation and its employees.

A cornerstone in theories of normative control concerns embedding employees into the organisation, often linked to notions like organisational culture or organisational identity. An organisational culture marks differences between the organisation and outsiders (Maravelias 2003, 2007; Alvesson & Kärreman 2004). There are many examples of workplaces that have sought to govern their employees by transforming their workplace from just an ordinary place to work into a “world of its own” (e.g. Maravelias 2003). Embedding an employee into the organisation could hence be linked to the construction of a “we-feeling” and the promotion of common organisational identities (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman 2004).

Theories of normative control moreover stress the significance of mobilising narratives and storytelling (Boje 1995; Weick 1995; Brown 2006) to control employees and promote self-identification with the organisation. Previous research on the use of narratives and storytelling is quite extensive and has been conducted since the early 1980s (see, e.g. Wilkins 1984; Weick & Browning 1986), but it has also proven significant to capture contemporary public sector reform (Jacobsson 2022). Such mobilising narratives tend to draw on the constitution of what is considered a good public agency and the values it should represent (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman 2004).

These organisational (or managerial) tools aim, to large extent, to make employees feel a sense of belonging to the organisation and morally committed to the work they carry out, as well as ensure that they internalise organisational visions and norms (Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Alvesson & Kärreman 2004:425; Kunda 2006[1992]). Techniques of normative control therefore aim to promote emotional identification with organisational goals and culture by, for instance, showing passion for the work they perform, feeling a strong sense of loyalty to the organisation, and acting in the organisation’s best interests (Kunda 2006[1992]:11). Terms like “living the vision” or “embracing the values” are commonly used to refer to the kind of internalisation of organisational values that employees are expected to accept and, even more so, consider their own (see, e.g. Willmott 1993; Fleming & Sturdy 2009, 2011).

While this short review points to how normative control could take place within organisations, notions like “surface”, “bullshit” or “empty talk” (e.g. Alvesson 2013; Gioia, Hamilton & Patvardhan 2014; Alvesson & Gabriel 2016) signal a gap between what organisations say they do and what they actually do (Hallonsten 2022). Central management models follow trends and fashions that come and go in cycles (Spicer 2017). Organisations embrace particular management models because they are fashionable. This allows them to achieve internal and external legitimacy for their operations (Abrahamsson 1991). Studies emphasise that using appropriate “management speak” has become more important than efforts and resources focusing on substance (Spicer 2017).

This critical turn has spurred interest into how empty talk is practised within organisations and the tensions and conflicts it might give rise to. It aligns with the assumption that managerial domination can never be total within an organisation as employees are not passive receivers of normative control (e.g. Fleming & Spicer 2003; Kunda 2006[1992]; Müller 2017). Similar to theories of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 2010[1980]; Brodtkin 2011), employees have a degree of “discretion” in correspondence to given norms. They act upon models (e.g. Maravelias 2007) and tend to benefit from their ambiguity. Alcadipani, Hassard and Islam (2018), for instance, show that Lean included elements of empowerment *and* domination as it was implemented into organisational settings.

To analyse types of caseworkers’ responses to normative control, we make an analytical distinction between strategies of compliance and resistance (see, for instance, Alcadipani, Hassard & Islam 2018; Husted 2021). To further clarify different types of compliance, we distinguish between conformist and cynical modes. The conformist type suggests a full embracement of the proposed model, it being aligned with personal and professional values or at least a recognised pathway for professional development. In contrast, cynical compliance implies acceptance and action in line with the organisational discourses and models, yet to greater extent includes a level of distance and self-differentiation since the discourses might be considered irrelevant or misplaced for work practices. The notion of “silent acquiescence” is an illustration of cynical compliance (Hallonsten 2022), including a certain degree of embracement, without the kind of internalisation that conformist compliance suggests. Instead, employees abide without actually buying into organisational norms. Cynical compliance accordingly suggests a degree of distant abidance, in terms of accepting the model at play, without “caring the least for what it says” (ibid.:5). For instance, in a study on employer branding, Müller (2017) found that employees partly accepted and partly complied with organisational models, but they also side-stepped them in order to mark their individual autonomy.

While compliance illustrates what Kunda referred to as “the seductiveness of increased involvement”, researchers also study employees’ “desire and need to maintain personal autonomy” (Kunda 2006[1992]:215). Fraher and Gabriel (2016:38) similarly argue that “[t]heories of workplace resistance have long been the flipside of theories of organizational control”. Resistance generally refers to the practice of distancing

or expressions of direct/indirect criticism. Scholars have correspondingly found that employees engage in a practice of avoidance, dismissals, and open resistance in order to protect their “autonomy” and self-governance against their employers’ ambitions of normative control. Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) point to subtle forms of resistance, for instance, making fun of management through humoristic notes or sarcasm. Fleming and Spicer (2003) found cynicism as a defence mechanism to protect their authentic selves or “back-stages selves” (see also Paulsen 2018). The motives for such practices might differ yet tend to coincide with the felt abyss (Hallonsten 2022) between organisational models and their perceived relevance in correspondence to daily work, for instance, linked to “disappointment and frustration” (Alvesson 2013:10) or feelings of “disturbance and deep loathing” (Spicer 2017:12–13).

Although social scientists have a fascination for the study of resistance, Kärreman and Alvesson (2004) argue that that compliance is far more common. This could reflect the risks and resources needed to engage in resistance and that it might be more beneficial to follow the flow and be sucked into the organisational culture rather than express criticism due to a felt conviction or professional ethos. Loyalty thus seems to be more common than voice (Hirschmann 1970).

These two types of strategic responses form the main analytical tool for investigating how caseworkers respond to central models of normative control within a public welfare agency. In line with Bardon, Josserand, Sferrazzo and Clegg (2022) we, however, argue that practices ought to be analysed in connection to different subjective positions. While normative control points to the investigation of employees within an organisation, our interest in caseworkers assumes that public employees are not merely employees (e.g. Du Gay 2017; Fred & Mukhtar-Landgren 2022) and that caseworkers in the PES need to be studied in correspondence to their role as an organisational professional within that agency, tied to mutually shared norms, values and forms of identification (e.g. Evetts 2011).

## Methods

### Case selection

The Swedish PES is a well-chosen case to capture public governance and caseworker responses. It is one of the largest and most profiled public agencies in the Swedish welfare state governed by annual letters of regulation from the government. It has the overall national responsibility to implement labour market policies and contribute to a functioning labour market, working especially with those job seekers who are far from the labour market (SFS 2007:1030; Arbetsförmedlingen 2019a). During our study period, the number of employees was approximately 14,550, but the number has decreased significantly in recent years to roughly 11,000 (Arbetsförmedlingen 2018, see also Arbetsförmedlingen 2022).

We particularly study caseworkers who provide advice and support and make decisions concerning a series of unemployment-related benefits, e.g., activity grants and unemployment benefits, although some of these benefits are paid by other agencies. They hence have

a dual role of both controlling and supporting the clients (Walter 2015) and are affected by demands and expectations from different and often conflicting actors/interests such as politicians, jobseekers and employers, which can give rise to goal conflicts in daily work (Peralta 2015). Their work is often organised in connection with particular labour market measures and client groups, e.g., jobseekers with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, new arrivals and immigrants, and those with supported employment. Many caseworkers have a university degree, especially among new employees and younger caseworkers due to increased educational requirements in recent years. Nevertheless, caseworkers in the PES cannot be defined as professionals but more as organisational professionals with a shared work identity (e.g. Jacobsson, Wallinder & Seing 2020).

### **Data collection and analytical strategy**

This article is part of a larger research project comparing the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the PES where extensive data on the two agencies have been collected. The article draws on studies of two local PES offices in two different regions in Sweden, with data mainly collected throughout 2017. The offices were sampled to gain variation in terms of geographic location, levels of unemployment and levels of sick leave. We gained access to local offices in the following way. Contact was made by e-mail with two managers at regional levels of the PES (at various points in time), with information about the study and requests for participation. These managers suggested we contact the managers of local offices who had expressed an interest in participating in the study. In total, two local offices/local managers showed interest in participating, and these became the cases for data collection. We held initial information meetings with local managers to provide information about the research project and planning data collection. In one of the local offices, we presented the research project at a meeting with the entire staff. The project has been solely funded by the granting body and is not part of an evaluation of the agency. In total, 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including interviews with caseworkers (including “specialists” working with jobseekers with disabilities) ( $n = 37$ ) and local management ( $n = 6$ ). The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours, took place in separate rooms at the workplace, were audio-recorded (except for one caseworker who did not want to be recorded where detailed notes were taken instead) and transcribed verbatim. We made minor corrections in the transcripts to improve readability. The interview guide for caseworkers and managers contained questions regarding experiences of their work situation, professional role, organisational changes, governance, and management control.

We conducted observations at the workplaces to capture social norms and behaviour and determine how caseworkers respond (e.g., as reflected in jargon and jokes) to different forms of management control. We “shadowed” or “went along” (Czarniawska 2007) with individual caseworkers in their daily work but did not observe direct client interactions for confidentiality reasons. Inspired by meeting ethnography (Sandler & Thedvall 2017), where meetings are understood as key technologies for governance, observations were carried out in different forms of organisational gatherings such as staff meetings, section meetings, team meetings, staff training sessions, workshops, multi-stakeholder cooperation meetings, and results dialogues. We took field notes on the contents of the meetings and

the discussions and negotiations among participants. The researcher had a passive role and sat on the side taking notes. Observations took place in lunchrooms, office spaces, and reception areas where the focus was on social interactions and discussions among the employees. Through observations we thus gained access to both formal and informal backstage settings. The fieldnotes were written on a computer or by hand during the observations and sometimes afterwards.

Interviews and observations have been analysed as follows. We have conducted a thematic coding of both interviews and observation notes (Braun & Clarke 2006). In a first step we coded the data in correspondence with a broad category of responses to self-leadership as a leadership philosophy also including statements relating to previous forms of leadership models within the agency. This included coding statements from local managers and caseworkers. The second step implied coding in correspondence with the concepts of compliance and resistance as two types of strategic responses. This thematic coding procedure has been complemented with additional inductive coding to identify variation within each broad category, which proved significant as it illustrated the differentiation of strategies based on professional or personal grounds.

### **Self-leadership – a mobilising narrative**

The PES is an agency that has been under pressure to reform for a long time and is often criticised in public media and by politicians. It has also been subject to extensive changes in governance and management control (Jacobsson, Wallinder & Seing 2020; Wallinder & Seing 2022). In 2014, the organisational programme of the “Renewal journey” was introduced by the top-management of PES, aimed to “create a more efficient employment agency that contributes to increased customer and societal benefit” (Arbetsförmedlingen 2019b:4). The Renewal journey conveyed a message that the agency had to change but that it “requires time” and “committed and participating employees” (Arbetsförmedlingen 2017:14). In contrast to previous governance models which relied on detailed caseworker control and strong centralised auditing within the PES (Paulsen 2015; 2018).

The agency developed a new vision to “make Sweden richer by making people and businesses grow”, which is still in place (Arbetsförmedlingen 2022b), and introduced self-leadership as its new management philosophy (Statskontoret 2016; Larsson 2019). These activities coincided with frequent reports on the public’s low trust in the agency (Medieakademin 2022) and hence follows patterns of public agency branding, impression management or window dressing to gain public legitimacy (e.g. Gioia, Hamilton & Patvardhan 2014).

Self-leadership was a model proposed by the consultancy firm that assisted the agency in its reform activities and relied on the idea of a world in rapid change, which required the ability of individuals to lead themselves irrespective of being a manager or employee. It is a term that has resonance in the management literature, where it is defined as “[...] the process of influencing oneself to establish the self-direction and self-motivation needed to perform” (Neck & Manz 1992:682). In internal communication material, the director general explained that self-leadership was a central part in reforming the agency



and its internal culture: “[...] which means that each of us needs to deepen and curiously develop our own leadership – self-leadership” (Arbetsförmedlingen 2015:3). Through this governance technique, employees were expected to take increased responsibility for their actions, their personal development, and the development of the organisation as a whole. The self-leadership programme replaced previous policies for managers and employees as both categories were now subjected to the same norms.

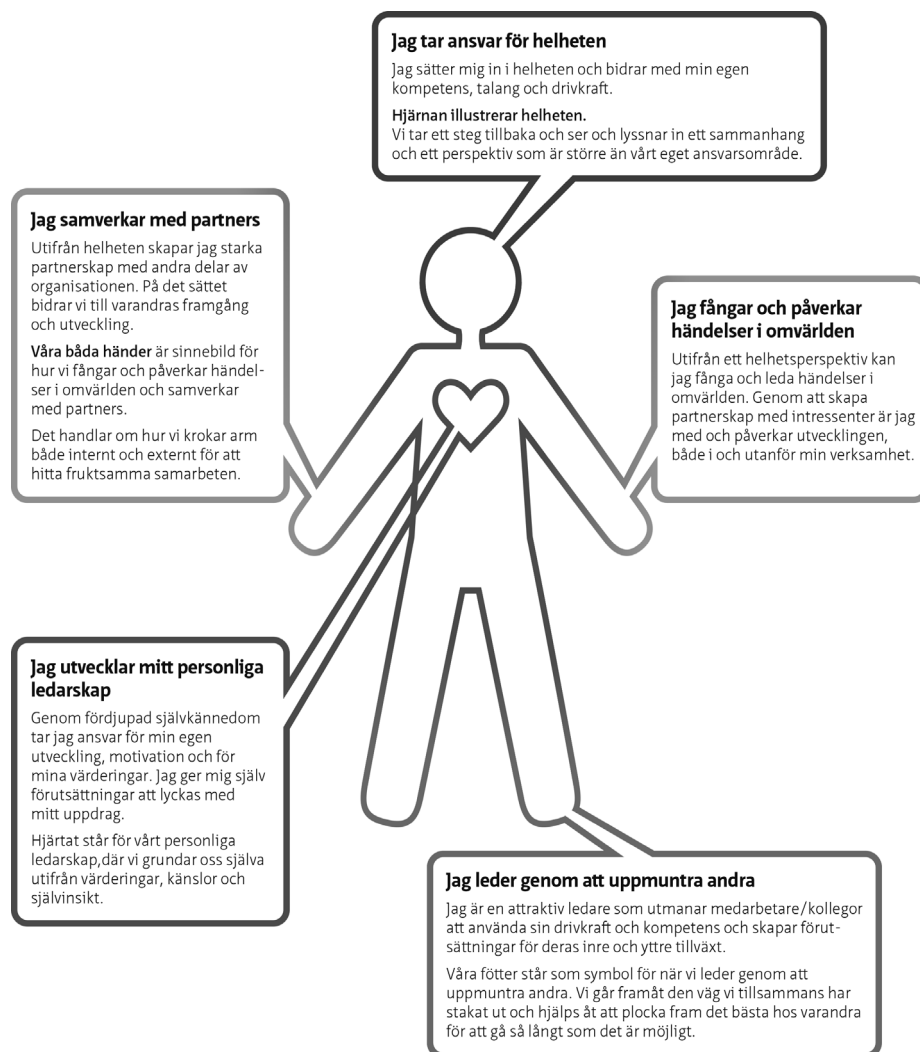


Figure 1. Self-leadership model: The five dimensions of self-leadership

Source: Arbetsförmedlingen 2016.



The new leadership programme implied a wide range of training activities on the part of central and local managers. We find the agency's practices of visualising the model particularly interesting (see Figure 1). To promote self-leadership, the agency developed a model of a person, which, for instance, was found in internal documents for salary-setting conversations and internal communication (Arbetsförmedlingen 2016). The image formed part of the agency's attempt to live the leadership philosophy. For each part of the human body, there was one element of the leadership philosophy to live up to. For instance, the *heart* represented an ideal to develop self-leadership through "self-awareness" and "values". The *brain* symbolised the urge to take "responsibility for the whole". The *feet* symbolised that one was "leading by encouraging others". Interaction and cooperation with others were part of the person's *hands* and stressed how employees should "collaborate with partners" or be responsive to what took place in the surrounding environment.

Living self-leadership was something expressed by the present director general who in an interview with a trade union journal for PES employees stated that: "The vision and value base are connected. By living the value base, by permitting it to permeate all our activities, we come closer to the vision – which means we really deliver the societal benefit [*samhällsnytta*] that is needed" (Nordebo 2015). Self-leadership was in that respect an ambitious tool to reform the agency, encourage employees to take responsibility and, by the ideal of living self-leadership, reduce the boundaries between being professional and personal within the organisation. Although the model as such had no apparent connection to this particular agency or the conditions of acting as a caseworker within it, central management nevertheless sought to bolster it as a new mobilising narrative, potentially as a means to legitimise it, despite its superfluous content.

## Strategies of compliance

The new leadership philosophy implied a different role for local managers, both with regard to themselves and their relations to caseworkers at their workplace, and almost all our interviewees expressed a high degree of conformative compliance with the new management philosophy as they largely embraced the new model and started to internalise it into their daily practices and encounters with caseworkers. Local managers took part in training events carried out by central HR together with the management consultancy firm, and in our interviews, they started to consider themselves as change-leaders rather than ordinary managers or bureaucrats.

Despite such strong support, they expressed uncertainty what the model actually stood for, or how to put it into practice. Its vagueness created ambivalence and offered room for interpretation. Most of the managers suggested that self-leadership was something more than just being a manager, as they should now also promote change. Some interpreted the notion as being a coach to employees and that they should now "have a coaching approach [...] but not steer in detail" (local manager). While some considered the model as new, others considered it as in line with previous

assumptions of local discretion and self-governance within the agency. By that, they felt a regained sense of trust. Although not completely sure of what the model actually implied, they nonetheless expressed it “felt real” and that they “finally felt at home” in the organisation.

Although the model offered some vagueness, it had extensive implications for how local managers engaged with caseworkers. During observations, we found the self-leader model centrally posted on office noticeboards and distributed in internal communications. Local managers emphasised that employees now should have an entrepreneurial and positive attitude, something they associated with being a self-leader. This was, for instance, materialised in recruitment processes as managers focused on personal qualities and, at least as it appeared through our data collection, less on their skills and credentials. Being a self-leader implied having “personal qualities, energies we talk about, flexibility is very important, that you are quite unafraid of new things” (local manager). Other managers talked about being change-oriented as a person and having the ability to adapt to new norms. As one local manager emphasised it: “If you are not a change-minded person you do not fit here” (local manager). This suggests that unless you fit these qualifications, there was an exit option available.

The five dimensions (see Figure 1 above) of the leadership model were implemented into, for instance, salary-setting practices (Arbetsförmedlingen 2016), and caseworkers had to assess themselves on how well they acted in accordance with the dimensions and express how they lived up to the ideal of being a self-leader. Newly appointed staff members who did not fulfil the expectations to be flexible, reflexive, and change-oriented sometimes ran the risk of not receiving a permanent contract. Some managers suggested that caseworkers who had been hired previously had trouble finding their place because they could only to a limited extent act as self-leaders.

Those who were hired when there was control and when there were “sticks” have a little harder time getting into the renewal journey with self-leadership; they want to be controlled. (local manager)

One local manager expressed that she did not want caseworkers who used “belts and suspenders, but that they rather should be willing to act more freely” (local manager).

As for local managers, self-leadership caused some confusion among local caseworkers concerning what it meant. Most informants expressed a general support for reforming the agency as such but uncertainty about what self-leadership stood for. Some followed a conformist approach and embraced the new ideal and internalised self-leadership as a goal toward which they steered their practices. These caseworkers often talked about central management in positive terms. Among these we find an interesting fit between how caseworkers expressed ideas about themselves as persons and the qualities associated with the concept of self-leadership. Some express that “it fits me well, everything” (caseworker). Many thought of themselves as taking the initiative, being flexible, and being interested in doing new things, not necessarily in their professional role, but in their personal self-identification. We moreover find that

newly recruited caseworkers appeared to be more inclined to engage in such practices of appreciation, as several embraced self-leadership as a general model and had no problems placing themselves within such an organisational culture.

I think that many, at least the younger ones, those who have worked in other jobs, it is their own planning and their own responsibility. The whole work is built on self-leadership; otherwise, nothing will be done. (caseworker)

The model also caused divides between groups of caseworkers as supporters of the model considered their colleagues as not compliant enough. They expressed being tired of those who criticised the self-leadership model and thought that they should “consider leaving”, once again suggesting that if you do not comply there is an exit option. In their view, it was self-evident that “there has to be a self-leadership, who else are you otherwise. Hello! What is the alternative?” (caseworker).

Many of the interviewees, however, expressed greater distance to self-leadership, as a form of cynical compliance. Those who had been employed within the agency for a longer period of time were especially prone to consider self-leadership a good fit with the classic caseworker model as it allowed for extensive degree of discretion. Self-identification was not a problem since “I have always had my own self-leadership, [...] it is nothing strange for me” (caseworker). Although they hence found the model relevant, they nonetheless kept a degree of individual autonomy. Acting in accordance with the norm of self-leadership was just a different expression of well-established ideals in the agency of what it meant to be a caseworker. This was reflected in some sceptical comments on the model’s novelty, as caseworkers have “always worked like this... now we get it hammered into our heads to work in a new way. Aha, but we have always done like this” (caseworker). They could therefore neither see the difference nor meaning of self-leadership.

It [self-leadership] is just one way for the management to confirm “we want you to lead your own work and take responsibility, etc., and to take responsibility for the whole”. The renewal journey is a way to open up instead of how it was several years ago when we were steered in detail with follow-up, by counting sticks [*räkna pinnar*] concerning what we achieved. (caseworker)

It was less relevant for them whether this represented self-leadership. What mattered more was hence the reinvigoration of classic caseworker ideals.

## Strategies of resistance

Resistance was less observed among managers. They nonetheless expressed a general uncertainty and reluctance to the newly implemented leadership model. Some did not really see the significance of the model, and thus declined its value as a mobilising narrative or the relevance of embracing or internalising it. When discussing the model

in interviews, they expressed a mix between “aha-feelings” and “what on earth is this”. While the model made sense, it carried a kind of emptiness with extensive translation requirements into local settings.

Well, it's a mix, I think, of aha and being on the verge of silliness sometimes. [...]. When you are in the middle of them [management courses on self-leadership] you think it's good, it sounds good, this is what I should think about, and this makes me perhaps reflect in a different way that I have not done before, to have a broad perspective. Then the question is how much do I have with me when I'm in everyday life? (local manager)

Others had more open reluctance, and often in correspondence to a general “lack of numbers” as a tool for them as local managers to govern caseworkers. Instead of having quantified targets to follow, they were instead supposed to use self-leadership. This caused uncertainty, yet without any form of resistance, most likely indicating the “high cost” of resistance for local managers, as addressed above.

Local caseworkers to greater extent engaged in resistance activities. This was particularly evident among caseworkers who had been employed for a longer period. The model was largely considered as “something from central management”, or as one model among many: “today it is self-leadership and tomorrow something else” (caseworker). Instead of considering this as a reinvigoration of caseworker discretion, they thought of it as meaningless, arguing that there were as many interpretations of the model as there were employees. One caseworker expressed that she thought of self-leadership as a term with quotation marks. She expressed that at her workplace they had talked about self-leadership for more than a year, but they still did not understand what it stood for.

We find ample examples of subtle resistance tied to these responses, often linked to sarcasm and making fun of the model. The fairy tale of the emperor's new clothes was frequently used to capture the new model as being out of tune with their daily work.

There was quite some nagging going on for a while, about self-leadership. God, we didn't talk about anything else. Then it was a little fun, it was such a thing, I didn't attend any meetings, we have too many meetings, it's boring. But, then I didn't attend [a meeting] and one of the managers came; “You were not there.” “No,” I said, “I took on my self-leadership, thought about it, and concluded that I didn't need to be there.” (caseworker)

Humorous expressions also concerned the Renewal journey, as one caseworker expressed, “We are in the Renewal journey, and we are supposed to buy tickets” as a kind of sarcastic comment on the general reform process of the agency. These served a function to create a distance to the model and central governance and similarly to mark a common caseworker identity as an alternative mode of self-identification. We found that this took place both frontstage at meetings, and also backstage by the coffee machine.

While these forms were the most frequent, some caseworkers also engaged in more confrontational forms of resistance. Some critically suggested that the agency had never had as many managers as now, despite the fact that everyone now should act as a self-leader. Others openly confronted managers at local office meetings. For them the vagueness of the model constituted a means for managers to step down from their responsibilities of providing leadership, instead expecting others to be self-leaders and take responsibility. Caseworkers talked about managers being away from the workplace, taking part in “manager days”, “leadership courses” and “inspiration lectures”.

Although these responses indicate some acceptance, other caseworkers directly challenged whether central management had a right to formulate norms for the agency. For them, self-leadership came in conflict with already established norms on the role of a caseworker. Some caseworkers expressed strong emotional and personal identification with their professional role and working at the PES, arguing that they were the true and authentic interpreters of what should be considered the values of the agency. Other caseworkers considered themselves as the face of the entire agency. Strong criticism was directed to both the PES management and the policy makers.

He [the director general] doesn't represent the Public Employment Agency because I'm at least as much the Agency as he is. [...] Well, if not even more. Did he ever get any person into employment? [...] Do you understand? I meet employers. I wipe away tears. (caseworker)

Sometimes I want to call Ylva [the Swedish Minister of Employment at the time of the study] and say, “Come and work with me in DS [direct service]”, or Löfven [Swedish Prime Minister at the time of the study] too, to experience what this is all about, the handicraft we're doing, how people feel who come in here [...]. (caseworker)

While humoristic notes and sarcasm hence constituted one type, these later forms signalled a more confrontational form of resistance. Self-leadership appears to have caused extensive disappointment and frustration, or even loathing, which in turn provoked the expression of an alternative and, in the view of these caseworkers, more authentic and legitimate model.

## Discussion

Critical management theories and theories of normative control point to the symbolic and legitimating function that managerial ideas have for organisations. The Renewal journey and the self-leadership model are reflections thereof, as mobilising narratives that aim to improve external legitimacy and invoke trust among employees. At first sight, these appear as forms of “empty talk” (Alvesson 2013; Alvesson & Gabriel 2016) or management “bullshit” (Spicer 2017), as something allowed to pass since it lacks any real substance and stays on the “surface” (Hallonsten 2022)

and hence is disconnected from ordinary organisational practices (e.g. Christensen, Kärreman & Rasche 2019).

Despite or perhaps because the model could fit into almost any kind of organisation, it caused strong reactions within the organisation. Some local caseworkers (and all local managers) complied with the self-leadership model in terms of either a conformist or a cynical mode of compliance, while other local caseworkers (but none of the local managers) engaged in subtle or open forms of resistance. While this has been observed previously, our key contribution lies in connecting types of strategic responses to subject positions within a public welfare agency. We argue that it is possible to identify four ideal-typical subject positions with regard to forms of norm internalisation based on type of strategy (compliance or resistance) and grounds for response (individual or professional), summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Modes of norm internalisation

Ground for response	Type of response	
	<i>Individual</i>	<i>Professional</i>
	<i>Compliance</i>	<i>Resistance</i>
	Personal embracement	Personal detachment
	Professional recognition	Professional dismissal

Practices of compliance seem to depend on the degree to which caseworkers find a grain of self-identification in the proposed model. Personal embracement refers to caseworkers identifying themselves personally with self-leadership, indicating that there are no clear boundaries between how they see themselves and the norm of self-leadership that the organisation promotes. This position suggests a form of personal internalisation of organisational norms as an indication of the fit between organisational and personal ideals. This position does not necessarily mean a strong identification with the role of a caseworker, but rather with being part of the organisation.

While compliance based on personal embracement is based on statements referring to “how I am”, we find a clear difference regarding compliance based on what we term professional recognition. This form assumes self-leadership as similar to classic caseworker ideals, as a welfare professional with extensive discretion. It refers to a form of self-identification of “how we always have worked”. The distinction between the personal and professional thus indicates two forms of norm internalisation, which despite differences, consider self-leadership a legitimate form of caseworker governance.

Expressions of resistance have been easy to find and we observe a difference between resistance as personal detachment or professional dismissal to illustrate different subject positions. The first refers to a personal detachment from organisational norms and ideals, as individuals made fun of the model and the managers. We find ample examples of practices of individually distancing oneself from the norm, e.g., through avoidance, humour, sarcasm, and so on. Such acts of detachment do not appear linked

to a professional role, but an expression of caseworkers' relations to local and central management. A different type of resistance can be found among those who completely disagree with self-leadership and central management imposing norms on them as local caseworkers. They expressed a profound conflict over who has the right to exercise normative control over what it meant to be a caseworker, as a form of professional dismissal.

Despite differences, there is an element of congruence across acts of compliance or resistance. Caseworkers acting upon self-leadership based on personal grounds tend to act in response to the model as such. Those who respond based on professional grounds appear to act in connection to conflicting ideals on the caseworker role. Expressions of professional recognition might certainly be captured as a form of compliance, but also as an accidental fit because caseworkers refer to an already established caseworker ideal. This might explain findings in other studies suggesting that newly employed caseworkers tend, to a greater extent, to be rule-followers compared to more senior caseworkers. Newly recruited and younger caseworkers thus tend to show a more positive attitude towards on-going changes and steering from central PES management (Assadi & Lundin 2018). Senior caseworkers much more often tend to take a questioning or critical stance, i.e., with increasing job tenure compliance to policy and management directives (new working tools) compared to the above decreases (*ibid.*; see also LaFrance & Day 2013). This suggests that there is a years-at-the-office factor at play. People who have been long in the organisation tend to engage more on professional grounds and through strategies of resistance. This might reflect that they have a solid status in the organisation (and at their local workplaces) allowing them to act in conflict with managers or management ideals and/or that they have been properly socialised into a work identity that the (current) management model does not fit well with.

While our study shows the significance of the concepts of compliance or resistance, we also observed exit strategies (Hirschmann 1970), but mainly indirectly. Those strongly supporting the model (mainly local managers but also caseworkers engaged on the basis of personal embracement) questioned others, suggesting that they should leave if they did not comply with the model. This indicates the peer pressure involved in normative governance. It causes divides between groups of supporters and non-supporters.

## Conclusion

This article shows that public employees are not passive respondents to managerial models, but that they actively engage with and respond management talk. We show, however, the arbitrariness of managerial models and point to dual modes of responses at the local level, namely compliance or resistance. These reflect different subject positions within the organisation, as those inclined to resist tend to have worked for a long time and hence are already socialised into a particular caseworker identity within the organisation compared to newcomers who appear to be more inclined to embrace the model, primarily on personal grounds. Although our study has largely observed strategies of compliance and resistance, these appear connected to exit pressures, which



hence invite further investigations into how normative control relates and affects those who stay compared to those who leave.

Our findings therefore support the continued exploration of critical management theories to capture changes in public welfare governance, yet it also finds that these have some shortcoming as public employees are not only employees but also organisational professionals. Caseworkers are in that respect not docile bodies that easily adjust to a common culture of work; rather, they derive their identity, engagement and esteem as linked to a shared work identity. This suggests that although models of normative control seek to embed and internalise the public employee as an organisational man, such efforts will most likely fall short or at least encounter continued resistance at the local level due to alternative and competing modes of identification. This demonstrates the relevance of closing the gap between street-level bureaucracy and critical management studies to further explore the tension between governing “employees” or “professionals” in contemporary public welfare governance.

## Acknowledgement

This research was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond in the project “Audit culture and the caseworker: A study of the Swedish Public Employment Service and the Swedish Social Insurance Agency” (grant SGO14-1192). We would like to thank the participating staff at the PES for letting us take part in their daily work and for generously participating in the interviews. We also want to thank colleagues in the abovementioned project and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments.

## References

- Abrahamson, E. (1991) “Managerial fads and fashion: The diffusion and rejection of innovations”, *Academy of Management Review* 16 (3):586–612. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258919>
- Alcadipani, R., J. Hassard & G. Islam (2018) “I shot the sheriff”: Irony, sarcasm and the changing nature of workplace resistance”, *Journal of Management Studies* 55 (8):1452–1487. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12356>
- Alvesson, M. (2013) *The triumph of emptiness: Consumption, higher education, and work organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199660940.001.0001>
- Alvesson, M., & Y. Gabriel (2016) “Grandiosity in contemporary management and education”, *Management Learning* 47 (4):464–473. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507615618321>
- Alvesson, M., & D. Kärreman (2004) “Interfaces of control: Technocratic and socio-ideological control in a global management consultancy firm”, *Accounting, Organizations & Society* 29 (3–4):423–444. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0361-3682\(03\)00034-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0361-3682(03)00034-5)
- Alvesson, M., & H. Willmott (2002) “Identity regulation as organizational control:

- Producing the appropriate individual”, *Journal of Management Studies* 39 (5):619–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00305>
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2015) “Arbetsförmedlingen 2021: Inriktning och innehåll i myndighetens förnyelseresa”. Diarienummer: Af-2015/268 710.
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2016) “Lönesamtal”. Internal document, created 4 October 2016.
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2017) “Arbetsförmedlingens förnyelseresa”. Internal document. PowerPoint presentation.
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2018) “Arbetsförmedlingens årsredovisning 2017”, <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.3e623d4f16735f3976eaf1/arsredovisning2017.pdf> (Accessed 26 November 2022).
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2019a) “Vårt uppdrag” [“Our mission”], <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/om-oss/var-verksamhet/vart-uppdrag> (Accessed 20 August 2019).
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2019b) “Verksamhetsplan 2019”, <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.306dde6d1690b54594a6348/verksamhetsplan-2019.pdf> (Accessed 30 September 2022).
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2022a) “Arbetsförmedlingens årsredovisning 2021”, <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.3f29801717d5618f8dfe49c/1645543313901/arbetsformedlingens-arsredovisning-2021.pdf> (Accessed 30 November 2022).
- Arbetsförmedlingen (2022b) ”Vi erbjuder”, <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/om-oss/jobba-hos-oss/vi-erbjuder> (Accessed 30 November 2022).
- Assadi, A. & M. Lundin (2018) “Street-level bureaucrats, rule-following and tenure: How assessment tools are used at the front line of the public sector”, *Public Administration* 96 (1):154–170. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12386>
- Bardon, T., E. Josserand, R. Sferrazzo & S. Clegg (2022) “Tensions between (post) bureaucratic and neo-normative demands: Investigating employees’ subjective positions at EurAirport”, *British Journal of Management*. Published online. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12574>
- Boje, D.M. (1995) “Stories of the storytelling organization: A postmodern analysis of Disney as ‘Tamara-land’”, *Academy of Management Journal* 38 (4):997–1035. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256618>
- Braun, V. & V. Clarke (2006) “Using thematic analysis in psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2):77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Bringselius, L. (2020) *Tillit: En ledningsfilosofi för framtidens offentliga sektor*. Second edition. Helsingborg: Komlitt Förlag AB.
- Brodkin, E.Z. (2011) “Policy work: Street-level organizations under new managerialism”, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21 (suppl. 2):253–277. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq093>
- Brown, A.D. (2006) “A narrative approach to collective identities”, *Journal of Management Studies* 43 (4):731–753. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00609.x>
- Christensen, L.T., D. Kärreman & A. Rasche (2019) “Bullshit and organization studies”, *Organization Studies* 40 (10):1587–1600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840618820072>
- Christensen, T. & P. Lægred (Eds.) (2007) *Transcending new public manage-*

- ment: The transformation of public sector reform*. Aldershot: Ashgate. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315235790>
- Czarniawska, B. (2007) *Shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies*. Malmö: Liber.
- du Gay, P. (2017) "Introduction: Office as a vocation", *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 4 (2):156–165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2017.1301067>
- Ekonomistyrningsverket (2014) *Idéskrift. Effektivare verksamhet genom ett ökat kundfokus. Erfarenheter från systemsynsprojektet*. ESV 2014:54. Stockholm: Ekonomistyrningsverket.
- Etzioni, A. (1961) *A comparative analysis of complex organizations: On power, involvement, and their correlates*. New York: The Free Press.
- Evans, T. (2011) "Professionals, managers and discretion: Critiquing street-level bureaucracy", *British Journal of Social Work* 41 (2):274–266. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq074>
- Evetts, J. (2011) "A new professionalism? Challenges and opportunities", *Current Sociology* 59 (4):406–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392111402585>
- Fraher, A.L & Y. Gabriel (2016) "Meeting and resisting the corporate body snatchers: The US piloting profession in times of downsizing and restructuring", *Tamara – Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry* 14 (1):35–51.
- Fransson, M. & J. Quist (2018) *Fri som en fågel: En studie av återprofessionalisering inom Försäkringskassan*. Karlstad: Service Research Center, Karlstad University.
- Fred, M. & D. Mukhtar-Landgren (2022) "Productive resistance in public sector innovation – introducing social impact bonds in Swedish local government", *Public Management Review*. Published online. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2123027>
- Fleming, P. & A. Spicer (2003) "Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance", *Organization* 10 (1):157–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508403010001376>
- Fleming, P. & A. Sturdy (2009) "'Just be yourself!': Towards neo-normative control in organisations?", *Employee Relations* 31 (6):569–583. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450910991730>
- Fleming, P., & A. Sturdy (2011) "'Being yourself' in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control", *Human Relations* 64 (2):177–200. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425450910991730>
- Gioia, D., A.L. Hamilton & S.D. Patvardhan (2014) "Image is everything: Reflections on the dominance of image in modern organizational life", *Research in Organizational Behavior* 34:129–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2014.01.001>
- Hall, P. (2012) *Managementbyråkrati: Organisationspolitisk makt i svensk offentlig förvaltning*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Hallonsten, O. (2022) "The 'yawning abyss' between surface and substance: Organizational life as 'pseudo-reality'", *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 38 (2):101210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2022.101210>
- Hirschmann, A.O. (1970) *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Holmgren Caicedo, M., M. Mårtensson & K. Tamm Hallström (2015) *När handläggaren blev teammedlem: Om autonomi, lärande och styrning i Försäkringskassan*. ISF-rapport 2015:13. Stockholm: Inspektionen för Socialförsäkringen.
- Husted, E. (2021) "Alternative organization and neo-normative control: Notes on a British town council", *Culture and Organization* 27 (2):132–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2020.1775595>
- Innovationsrådet (2013) *Att tänka nytt för att göra nytta: Om perspektivskiften i offentlig verksamhet: Slutbetänkande*. SOU 2013:40. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.
- Jacobsson, K. (2022) "The storying of experience: Shaping caseworker subjectivity at social insurance agencies", 33–51 in C. Hansen Lofstrand & K. Jacobsson (Eds.) *Transforming subjectivities: Studies in human malleability in contemporary times*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003146681-3>
- Jacobsson, K. & K. Hollertz (2021) "Commitment and control: Teamwork as management tool in a welfare state bureaucracy", *Sociologisk Forskning* 58 (3):243–265. <https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.58.22890>
- Jacobsson, K., Y. Wallinder & I. Seing (2020) "Street-level bureaucrats under new managerialism: A comparative study of agency cultures and caseworker role identities in two welfare state bureaucracies", *Journal of Professions and Organization* 7 (3):313–333. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpol/joaa015>
- Kunda, G. (2006[1992]) *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Kärreman, D. & M. Alvesson (2004) "Cages in tandem: Management control, social identity, and identification in a knowledge-intensive firm", *Organization* 11 (1):149–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508404039662>
- LaFrance, S. & J. Day (2013) "The role of experience in prioritizing adherence to SOPs in police agencies", *Public Organization Review* 13 (1):37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-012-0192-9>
- Larsson, J.K. (2019) "Intern styrning och organisering på Arbetsförmedlingen: Arbetsförmedlingen analys 2019:4", <https://arbetsformedlingen.se/download/18.4fb667a1169bfd2c0a6ff83/1558359470493/Intern+styrning+och+organisering+på+Arbetsförmedlingen.pdf> (Accessed 26 November 2022).
- Lipsky, M. (2010[1980]) *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Maravelias, C. (2003) "Post-bureaucracy – Control through professional freedom", *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 16 (5):547–566. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09534810310494937>
- Maravelias, C. (2007) "Freedom at work in the age of post-bureaucratic organization", *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 7 (4):555–574.
- Medieakademin (2022) "Förtroendebarmetern 2022". [https://medieakademin.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Presentation\\_fortroendebarmetern2022.pdf](https://medieakademin.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Presentation_fortroendebarmetern2022.pdf) (Accessed 25 November 2022)
- Miller, P. & N. Rose (2008) *Governing the present*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Müller, M. (2017) “Brand-centred control: A study of internal branding and normative control”, *Organization Studies* 8 (7):895–915. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616663238>
- Neck, C.P. & C.C. Manz (1992) “Thought self-leadership: The influence of self-talk and mental imagery on performance”, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 13 (7):681–699. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030130705>
- Nordebo, P. (2015) “Ny vision för Arbetsförmedlingen”, *Publikt*, 18 May 2015. <http://www.publikt.se/artikel/ny-vision-arbetsformedlingen-17770> (Accessed 28 November 2022)
- Paulsen, R. (2015) “Lydnadsmodus på Arbetsförmedlingen – En kontextualisering av funktionell dumhet”, *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv* 21 (2):42–57.
- Paulsen, R. (2018) “In the mood for obedience: Despair, cynicism, and seduction among employment service employees”, *Culture and Organization* 24 (5):365–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2016.1186673>
- Peralta, J. (2015) “Public employment officers as brokers and therapists”, 53–64 in C. Garsten, J. Lindvert & R. Thedvall (Eds.) *Makeshift work in a changing labour market: The Swedish model in the post-financial crisis era*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783479740.00010>
- Pollitt, C. & G. Bouckaert (2017) *Public management reform: A comparative analysis – into the age of austerity*. Fourth edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sandler, J. & R. Thedvall (Eds.) (2017) *Meeting ethnography: Meetings as key technologies of contemporary governance, development, and resistance*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315559407>
- Schütze, C. & H. Johansson (2020) “The importance of discretion for welfare services to minorities: Examining workload and anti-immigration attitudes”, *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 79 (4):426–443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12410>
- SFS 2007:1030. *Förordning med instruktion för Arbetsförmedlingen [Regulation with instructions for the Public Employment Service]*. Stockholm: Ministry of Employment.
- Spicer, A. (2017) *Business bullshit*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315692494>
- Statskontoret (2016) *Analys av Arbetsförmedlingens interna styrning och utvecklingsarbete*. Report 2016:5. Stockholm: Statskontoret.
- Tillitsdelegationen (2018) *Med tillit växer handlingsutrymmet: Tillitsbaserad styrning och ledning av välfärdssektorn: Huvudbetänkande av Tillitsdelegationen*. SOU 2018:47. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.
- van Berkel, R., P. van der Aa & N. van Gestel (2010) “Professionals without a profession? Redesigning case management in Dutch local welfare agencies”, *European Journal of Social Work* 13 (4):447–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691451003603455>
- van Maanen, J. & G. Kunda (1989) “Real feelings: Emotional expression and organizational culture”, 43–103 in B.M. Staw & L.L. Cummings (Eds.) *Research in organizational behaviour, volume 11*. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Wallinder, Y. & I. Seing (2022) “When the client becomes her own caseworker:

- Dislocation of responsibility through digital self-support in the Swedish Public Employment Service”, *Sozialer Fortschritt* 71 (6–7):405–423. <https://doi.org/10.3790/sfo.71.6-7.405v2>
- Walter, L. (2015) “The dual role of the Public Employment Service: To support and control”, 41–52 in C. Garsten, J. Lindvert & R. Thedvall (Eds.) *Makeshift work in a changing labour market: The Swedish model in the post-financial crisis era*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783479740.00009>
- Weick, Karl (1995) *Sensemaking in organizations*. London: Sage.
- Weick, K.E. & L.D. Browning (1986) “Argument and narration in organizational communication”, *Journal of Management* 12 (2):243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920638601200207>
- Whyte, W.H. (2002[1956]) *The organization man*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Willmott, H. (1993) “Strength is ignorance; slavery is freedom: Managing culture in modern organizations”, *Journal of Management Studies* 30 (4):515–552. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1993.tb00315.x>
- Wilkins, A.L. (1984) “The creation of company cultures: The role of stories and human resource systems”, *Human Resource Management* 23 (1):41–60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.3930230105>

## Authors

*Håkan Johansson* is Professor of Social Work, Lund University. He has published extensively in the field of citizenship, comparative social policy and activation in the Nordic countries. He has furthermore conducted research on welfare state change and civil society and currently runs projects on civil society elites.

*Ida Seing* is an Associate Professor in Sociology, Linköping University. She conducts research on the welfare system in relation to sick leave, unemployment, and disability. Particular focus is paid to welfare-state bureaucracies’ implementation of activation policies as well as the inclusion and exclusion of people in the labour market.

## Corresponding author

Håkan Johansson  
School of Social Work, Lund University  
Box 23, 221 00 Lund, Sweden  
[hakan.johansson@soch.lu.se](mailto:hakan.johansson@soch.lu.se)