Organizational governance of activation policy: Transparency as an organizational ideal in a Swedish welfare agency

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Abstract The Swedish Social Insurance Agency *Försäkringskassan* – SSIA) and its frontline staff have a key role in the implementation of activation policy. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at local of ces, this article investigates how the transparency ideal, as an integral part of the organizational governance of the activation policy, is negotiated and enacted in the everyday life of a welfare bureaucracy. The analysis shows the central role that the transparency ideal plays in the alignment of frontline staff with the normative regime of the agency. While the transparency ideal is central to the internal organizational life of the SSIA, the analysis shows how transparency is much less salient in relation to clients and other relations with the outside world.

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Introduction

The audit culture has penetrated the public sector in many countries in the Western world Power, 1997), where the ideal of transparency is a key component to enable the inspection and follow-up of activities and performances e.g. Strathern, 2000; Garsten and Lindh de Montoya, 2008; Albu and Flyverbom, 2016). Transparency is a fundamental condition for all organizations that permits to live up to expectations about accountability and legitimacy in relation to their surroundings. However, transparency is particularly critical for public authorities, as they must not only live up to organizational ef ciency and goal-attainment but also follow the rule of law and requirements on equal treatment. As Flyverbom 2015) has noted, despite the widespread belief in transparency as an organizational ideal, we know relatively little about how transparency is practiced in various speci c contexts. Meanwhile, organizational governance with its inherent focus on audit and transparency) must be understood in relation to the goals the organization is expected to achieve. In a Swedish sickness insurance policy context, there has been a strong focus on reducing the number of people receiving sick leave bene ts. In line with this development, strong requirements on activation have been implemented in the sickness insurance programme.

In the implementation of this activation policy, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency *Försäkringskassan* – SSIA), one of the the largest welfare bureaucracies in Sweden, and its frontline staff have a key role. This article investigates how the transparency ideal, as an integral part of the organizational governance of activation policy, is negotiated and enacted in the everyday life of a welfare bureaucracy, the SSIA. The focus is placed on how the organizational ideal of transparency, as an inherent component of audit culture and key in the organizational mediation of activation policy, plays out in everyday practice in this agency. To achieve this end, we take a wide view of governance, investigating the role that transparency plays at frontline level in terms of the organizational culture and management practices, spatial-temporal governance, the organization of teamwork and case-management, along with performance targets and follow-up practices.

Previous research and positioning of the study

The audit culture has penetrated the public sector in many countries in the past decades as part and parcel of New Public Management NPM), such as

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management by objectives and performance. This also pertains to Sweden e.g. Hasselbladh et al., 2008; Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016). With this type of governance, organizations tend to become preoccupied with performance management in two ways: rst, with how to manage the organization to achieve the targets, goals, standards, or elements of performance that are expected or demanded; and second, with how to manage the presentation of the organization s performance in ways that testify to its achievements and effectiveness e.g. Power, 1997; Shore and Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000; Hood and Heald, 2006; Clarke, 2005). Technologies of transparency are, in this context, key to achieving visibility and, thus, accountability e.g. Strathern 2000). The quest for transparency and performance display has led Ball 2003) to speak of a "performativity culture" that characterizes the daily work in the public sector; the productive worker is an entrepreneurial self who strives to excel in organizational attainment.

The audit culture, including transparency norms, has proved to have huge implications for welfare bureaucracies and casework e.g. Lauri, 2016). A key aspect of audit logic is a strong belief in standardization and achieving comparability and control. Consequently, studies have found increased standardization of client assessments Bejerot and Hasselbladh, 2011; Caswell, Marston and Elm Larsen, 2010; Bovens and Zouridis, 2002; White, Hall and Peckover, 2009; Brodkin and Larsen, 2013). Concern with formal accountability readily replaces professional judgment. This has been discussed as organizational professionalism replacing occupational professionalism Evetts, 2011), or as the emergence of "professionals without profession" van Berkel, van der Aa and van Gestel, 2010). Others have preferred to speak of "deprofessionalization" Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016). In their studies of the SSIA, Hetzler 2009) and Björnberg 2012) have consequently found increased standardization of work capacity assessment in which medical certi cates from medical doctors are increasingly questioned and disquali ed. SSIA caseworkers who work with sickness insurance become primarily "rational programme administrators" van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012) testing bene t eligibility in standardized ways and according to the agency s own system logic.

However, studies have found that frontline staff have defended discretionary power and professional values also under NPM e.g. Evans, 2011; Brodkin, 2011; Evetts, 2011; Jessen and Tufte, 2014). Nevertheless, thus far, most of these studies have focused on social work which typically is characterized by a strong professional culture) rather than state agencies, such as the Public Employment Service see however Lindvert, 2006; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2016), and the SSIA where caseworkers lack a common educational and professional identity.

Our analysis underscores the role that transparency plays in forming a distinct organizational culture and normativity at SSIA, and in particular the role of "horizontal transparency". Interestingly, horizontal transparency has not been given much attention in previous research. In an often-quoted typology, Heald 2006)

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distinguishes between "upwards and downwards transparency" and "inwards and outwards transparency" in organizations. We suggest that it is by horizontal, social governance – in teams and in the informal interactions and negotiations between caseworkers – that transparency, as a way to align staff with the normative regime of the agency, gets its social power and becomes performative.

In a research overview, Albu and Flyverbom 2016) distinguish between studies that see transparency as an informational matter about visibilizing information) and studies that see transparency as something more fundamental, ordering social relationships in organizations. The former approach they label a "veri cation approach" and the latter a "performativity approach". That transparency is performative means that it accomplishes things, for instance, produces social relationships and/or a normativity that mobilizes actors in a particular way Albu and Flyverbom, 2016, p. 10). This article presents such a study. The performativity approach entails seeing transparency as a social process that involves subjects implementing transparency, socio-material transparency practices, and a concrete socio-spatial context where the transparency ideal is put into practice Albu and Flyverbom, 2016).

Method and data

We draw inspiration from institutional ethnography Smith, 2005), which has a point of departure in people s everyday experiences. The aim is to understand the institutions and institutional relations in which caseworkers are embedded. The focus is on real persons and their actual activities in order to grasp how they are coordinated, that is their social organization Smith, 2005 p. 70). We, thus, investigate the role that the transparency ideal plays in the coordination of actions in the SSIA.

The analysis is based primarily on ethnographic observations of the daily work in ve local SSIA of ces located in two Swedish regions. We observed team meetings, staff training, leadership/management training, co-worker meetings, quality control, as well as interaction in lunch rooms. We also "shadowed" individual caseworkers in their daily work excluding direct client interaction for con dentiality reasons). In addition, the analysis draws on 38 interviews with staff in those local of ces: caseworkers administering sickness insurance, their local managers, as well as local specialists in medical insurance. The empirical data was gathered in of ces that complied with or exceeded) the organizational goals in relation to granted sickness bene ts. This was the case in four out of the ve of ces.

Seventeen interviews were conducted at the head of ce in Stockholm and one group interview was conducted with higher of cials at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs to obtain background information on organizational governance in the SSIA. We also draw on organizational documents obtained from the SSIA website. Data collection took place during 2015–2017.

Background: Activation policies and the Swedish Social Insurance Agency

As mentioned, organizational governance and control must be understood in relation to the goals the organization is expected to achieve. A critical task of sickness insurance policy in most Western welfare states in recent decades has been to reduce the economic burden on society due to sick leave. This is to be done by stimulating and enforcing labour market participation. Activation policies have gained strong support, and activities that prevent the "benefit-trap" are favoured by international organizations (see for example, OECD, 2010) as well as national governments (Eichhorst and Konle-Seidl, 2008; Lødemel and Trickey, 2001). Policies focus on "early return to work", as work is generally considered to be good for health and wellbeing (e.g. Seing, 2014).

In line with general policy orientation, Swedish sickness insurance has become more restrictive; eligibility criteria have been restrained, and the possibilities of being granted a permanent disability pension have been limited. Since the early 2000s, the so-called "work strategy" has been strengthened with demands on an early return to work or otherwise readjustment to a new job in the labour market (Björnberg, 2012; Hetzler, 2009; Seing, 2014). In the context of activation policies, various attempts to steer and control the administration of sickness insurance have been introduced. During the last two decades, the SSIA has undergone several organizational changes and has initiated extensive internal "development work" (e.g. ISF, 2016). In 2008, the centre-right government (in office at the time) introduced the "rehabilitation chain", which is a legislated working method that caseworkers are required to apply. This working method consists of a fixed time schedule for assessing individuals' work ability and right to sickness benefits. A controversial element of this reform (which was given much attention in public debate and media) was the introduction of a time limit on the length of benefits (regardless if the person had recovered from illness or not). Initially, this time limit was set to 365 days, and, later, it was extended up to 915 days, depending on the severity and prognosis of the health condition.

In response to public criticism of the agency, in 2011, the centre-right government commissioned the SSIA to increase citizens' trust in social insurance and the agency. Extensive internal organizational development work was initiated with the aim to move away from the detailed steering of caseworkers. Under the influence of Lean,[1] the SSIA introduced teamwork in 2012 where caseworkers were organized into self-managed teams with a joint mission and

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1. Lean is a management model based on Toyota's production system, which in recent years has spread to the public sector in Sweden and in other countries. Lean aims to make the work process more effective and reduce "unnecessary" activities and resources (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990).

the responsibility to plan and manage their own production Holmgren Caicedo et al., 2015). A key element of this teamwork and Lean) at SSIA is visual governance where goals, results, and work performance of the caseworkers are visualized for all team members as well as management. Visualization is expected to contribute to feedback on caseworkers work performance, which is aimed to make the work process more ef cient.

In 2016, the controversial end point in Swedish sickness insurance was abolished by the centre-left government that took of ce in 2014), but the overall orientation toward activation was maintained. In 2016, the centre-left government introduced a numerical target for the sickness absence rate in Sweden; it was stated that "the sickness bene t rate may not exceed 9.0 days per individual and per year in 2020". Further, it was stressed that the number of newly granted disability pensions "shall not exceed 18,000 per year during the period 2016–2020" Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016).

In 2015, a new Director-General was appointed, and since 2016–2017 a shift and return) to stricter management by objectives and results within the agency has been apparent. The SSIA must, to a greater extent, contribute to reducing the Swedish sickness absence rate by making sick leave periods fewer and shorter ISF, 2016). There is an emphasis on creating increased "quality" in the handling of sick-leave cases by the correct application of the law, which ensures rule of law principles. The caseworkers are prompted to "make things right from the start" in case management and "increase the quality of the investigations" to ensure that "the right person receives the right compensation" SSIA, 2016, p. 2).

The SSIA has about 14,000 employees, and it is responsible for administrating the public social insurance system – in other words, it is responsible for administering sickness insurance for the Swedish population; e.g. insurance and bene ts to families with children and to people with disabilities and illnesses. The focus in this study is solely on the administration of sickness insurance with around 4,000 employees), divided into 55 local insurance of ces. "Support functions" such as insurance medical advisers doctors) and insurance experts also work in the local of ces where caseworkers handle sick leave cases.

The caseworkers are formally responsible for decisions regarding individuals right to sickness bene ts, for setting up a rehabilitation plan, and for cooperating with other stakeholders, such as health care, employers, and the Public Employment Service. Caseworkers assessments of individuals right to sickness bene ts are based on sickness certi cates issued by physicians.

The cases are registered in an electronic case management system, known as ÄHS. The caseworkers documentation and journal entries, as well as incoming and outgoing communications, are recorded in the system. When a new document, such as a medical certi cate, comes to the agency, it is scanned centrally and then is made visible to the caseworker. The cases that come to the

team are distributed among the staff, and a personal caseworker is appointed. The personal caseworker investigates and makes decisions on the case based on the guidelines and administrative support established by the SSIA head of ce. An investigation and the resulting decision-making can formally be understood as a formal and highly regulated process where only the personal caseworker and if necessary also superiors) has insight into and the possibility to influence the case. As we will see, however, in practice, the case management process is characterized by collective negotiation processes in which the ideal of transparency is at work in various ways.

Analysis: Transparency in the everyday life of caseworkers   External closure versus internal openness

Non-transparent practices and external self-containment

Transparency cannot be understood solely in terms of what is made visible, but also what is made invisible and hidden in the organization in question Garsten and Montoya, 2008). The starting point of the analysis is, thus, what is made invisible by the SSIA, especially in relation to the outside world; the agency s external environment. This self-containment in relation to the outside world stands in sharp contrast to the ideals of internal openness and transparency within the organization.

External self-containment is manifested in the tools for communication with citizens as well as the limited physical contact between caseworkers and clients. The SSIA web page is a main strategy for communication with and providing information to citizens. Information about the services available can be found on the web page, and clients can also register their case by logging on to personal accounts. In many ways, the web page is the most noticeable facade of the organization to the outside world, and the SSIA works in a strategic way to direct clients to digital solutions on the web page when they look for information and are in need of services. Rules and regulations, application forms, general information on the areas of responsibility of the agency, can be found on the web page. However, only selected parts of the organization are made visible through the web page. Information about the inner life of the agency remains, to a large extent, hidden. For instance, there is no information about the location of local of ces, no information on or contact details about local management or caseworkers, and no direct phone numbers or email addresses are available to the public. The central aspects of work within the agency, such as rules and regulations in relation to casework, professional support documents available for caseworkers in their work, areas for caseworker specialization, remain hidden