“Activation Policy in Action”

A Street-Level Study of Social Assistance in the Swedish Welfare State
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Abstract


This dissertation investigates the street-level implementation practices of the municipal activation policies within the context of the Swedish welfare state. Work-related activation policies are currently developing in most western welfare states. Sweden is no exception and municipal activation policies were introduced in the 1990s in the municipal social services organizations. The Swedish form of activation policies target unemployed social assistance recipients and require them to participate in local activation measures in return for financial support. The purpose of the study is to highlight how street-level workers in the Swedish municipal social service system “produce” activation policy in their daily interactions with the social assistance recipients.

The study builds on approaches that perceive street-level implementation practices as embedded in politically and organizationally shaped contexts. The key theme in this study is that street-level workers develop various forms of informal coping strategies as responses to working conditions marked by ambiguous legislation, organizational pressures, limited resources, unlimited service demand, and little program accountability. The study adds to this exploration of the role played by the normative assumptions about unemployed social assistance clients and how these assumptions interact with political-institutional and organizational factors.

The research project is a multiple-case study that examines the street-level practices of activation policy in two Swedish municipal social service settings. The data collection consists of observations of the daily work operations in these two settings, interviews with local politicians and other key personnel, and analysis of formal policy and program documents. Findings from the study suggest that street-level implementation practices entail a number of informal practice strategies that remove activation policy delivery from formal policy intentions and program goals. Activation policy practice entails, for example, mass referrals instead of individual needs assessments and tailor-made solutions. Clients were sorted and categorized on the basis of moral perceptions about behavioral deficits instead of employment needs. Thus, the study demonstrates that normative assumptions about the policy’s target populations structure and form the practical delivery processes, and that social work principles and formal activation policy rhetoric – both of which emphasize individual needs assessments and tailor-made solutions – do not influence activation policy-as-practiced to any greater extent.

Keywords: Activation Policy, Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, Street-Level Implementation Practices, Social Assistance, Swedish Welfare State, Social Work
Preface

This dissertation was submitted to the faculty of the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago in candidacy for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 2008. Dissertation Committee: Sydney Hans (Chair), Tapio Salonen (Member), Jennifer Mosley (Member), Jeanne C. Marsh (Reactor) and Colleen Grogan (Reactor).
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Acknowledgements

Finally, it is time to end this journey. The “journey” metaphor is often used to describe the dissertation process, but I think it is particularly appropriate in this case since my dissertation experience has undeniably taken me on many travels. There have been numerous flights between the U.S. and Sweden, many train rides to my two research sites, and countless trips between my home in Stockholm and my workplace at Växjö University. And then there is my scholarly journey, which began ten years ago on a sunny September day at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration, a place that has a rich academic foundation and provided me with many intellectual challenges.

Most importantly, these journeys would not have been the same experience without all those who have been my “travel companions.” I am grateful that so many people have helped to make this journey pleasant, challenging, and interesting.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990s, many welfare states reformulated their welfare policies by introducing different forms of requirements for individual welfare recipients. The main component of these policy changes was mandatory participation in work-related programs in return for financial support. For instance, the 1996 welfare-to-work reform in the United States (U.S.) was designed to “end welfare as we know it” by moving welfare recipients into paid employment through intense work requirements and firm time limits on aid (Bane & Ellwood, 1994; Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997; Peck, 2001). Several European countries also developed welfare programs designed to move people into the formal labor market (Johansson, 2006; Hvinden et al., 2001; Lødemel & Trickey, 2000).

In Europe, these policy changes are often called “activation” policies (Hvinden et al., 2001; Lødemel & Trickey, 2000). This is broadly defined as “practical efforts to assist people to find or remain in paid employment and thus improve their prospects in the labour market” (Hvinden et al., 2001, p. 169). In general, activation policy measures can include job search activities, mandatory workfare schemes, vocational training, education programs, and practical work placements. Sweden is part of this welfare reform trend. Activation policy is also the term that is used in the Swedish welfare state context for this particular policy development and is the term that is used in this dissertation as well. The term municipal activation policy is also utilized in order to emphasize its location in the Swedish municipal social service system.

Many Swedish municipalities\(^1\) began to implement municipal activation policy programs for social assistance recipients during the 1990s, when Sweden experienced an economic recession, which resulted in both increased unemployment rates and a significantly larger need for social assistance support (Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004; Svenska Kommunförbundet, 1998).\(^2\) The Swedish activation policy development culminated in 1998, with a modification of the Social Service Act that gave municipalities the ability to require participation in municipal activation policy programs in return for social assistance benefits. In Sweden, social assistance is provided to individuals who cannot support themselves.

\(^1\) Sweden has 290 municipalities that are geographic areas with local self-government and political autonomy. Municipalities are responsible for the delivery of social assistance in Sweden and they are granted rather extensive freedom to determine both the organization of the social assistance administration and their policy implementation in regards to social assistance delivery and activation policy requirements. A detailed description on these issues will be given in chapter two.

\(^2\) The organization is re-named to Sveriges kommuner och landsting and the English name for this organization is “the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions”.

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through wage labor or other Swedish social protection schemes.³ The social assistance benefit system is funded and provided by the municipal social services system and is considered as the last-resort financial support system within the Swedish welfare state context.

Problem Statement

The European and the U.S. approaches to the work-related welfare reforms have some similarities. But European policies differ from their American counterparts because they often lack a clear definition of what welfare recipients are required to do and therefore have a wider range of possible activation measures. Where in the U.S., the 1996 welfare-to-work reform provided clear definitions of time limits, program activities, and performance measures, the Swedish activation policy reform has a much more flexible configuration with fewer formal directives about actual program content, target population, and other policy related requirements. Consequently, activation and welfare-to work policies in different welfare states vary in regards to policy targets, organizational arrangements, and implementation practices (see for example Gilbert & Van Voorhis, 2001; Handler, 2004; Lødemel & Trickey, 2000; Marston et al., 2005 for international comparisons of work-related activation policies). The ongoing work-related welfare reforms are also marked by rather ambiguous ideological and theoretical underpinnings, as well as vague and unclear policy goals. Thus, the policy rhetoric of both welfare and activation reforms often refer to conflicting motivations and expected outcomes, making it difficult to comprehend their ultimate, and desired, aims and objectives.

The public and political debates, in Sweden and elsewhere, have been occupied with questions about the purpose, the function, and effect of these emerging activation policy changes. One of the major questions that remains is to what extent should individuals be responsible for their own financial and social predicaments. In Sweden, politicians, the public at large, and welfare scholars have, in general, been debating social assistance caseload levels and social assistance eligibility rules. The discussions have also included serious concerns about activation policy requirements in relation to receiving social assistance. Part of this discussion is the issue of social assistance and its supposed erosion of individuals’ motivation to support themselves through regular work.

Although, activation policy is well under way in the Swedish welfare state today, these public and political debates continue, and many questions regarding activation policy and its functions are still unanswered. For example, is the goal of municipal activation policy to enhance individuals’ skills and education levels in order to increase their opportunities in the labor market? Or is the goal to reduce passivity and social assistance dependency by “activating” people through various program requirements?

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³ In term of last-resort financial benefit, the Swedish social assistance is the equivalent to “welfare” in the U.S. The Swedish term for social assistance is “socialbidrag” or “försörjningsstöd”.
These lingering questions indicate the importance of understanding how and why a social problem is constructed and how its solution is formulated in the policy-making processes (Nelson, 1984; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). But the social constructions of the problem’s cause generate rather diverse messages about preferred policy solutions and policy orientation. For instance, if unemployment and social assistance dependency is perceived as structural problems due to the lack of work opportunities or low education levels it encourages the development of policies that provide increased job opportunities and a greater access to training and education possibilities. On the other hand, if the social problem is perceived as rooted in the individuals themselves – owing to their personal and moral deficiencies, or the lack of a proper work ethic – policies oriented toward individual behavioral changes and increased individual responsibilities will develop. The social construction of unemployment and social assistance dependency is both ambiguous and contradictory in the Swedish welfare state context, and Swedish activation policy is thereby unclear about its actual policy function and direction. In fact, municipalities in Sweden are independent, relatively free to translate the content of the formal activation policy legislation and to develop and organize municipal activation programs in their own particular ways.

To date, municipal activation policy in Sweden remains a relatively unexplored policy area; only a handful of studies have examined this particular field. It is not well understood how the social construction of unemployment in relation to social assistance dependency is taking shape in the municipal social service context, and in the street-level policy implementation practice of activation policy. While a small body of literature has examined the formulation and development of Swedish activation policy (Johansson, 2001; Lindquist & Marklund, 1995; Lundin, 2008; Salonen, 2000; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004; Ulmestig, 2007) and have yield important knowledge about policy development and program arrangements, they are inadequate to understand the practical meaning of activation policies and how they function in their street-level forms.

Policy, when practiced, seldom takes the same shape as when it is formally proposed. It is therefore essential to understand the actions of the street-level workers who implement public policy (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980). It is argued that the informal street-level practices are the forces that shape policy outcomes, and ultimately create what policy targets receive. Furthermore, it is argued that street-level workers are important agents in the policy-making process, because of their discretionary practices, which are difficult to monitor (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky 1980). In the context of municipal activation policy in Sweden, it is important to know how municipal activation policy is produced on the ground in order to assess its implications for the citizens who are the targets of the policy.

Empirical evidence from street-level implementation studies of welfare-to-work and activation programs outside Sweden confirms that the street-level practices do diverge from the policies’ formal stipulations (Brodkin, 1997, 2006; Marston & McDonald, 2006; Wright, 2002). These studies claim that ambiguous organizational goals and vague policy objectives lead street-level staff to create administrative simplifications that are often at odds with the formal policy rhetoric. Such findings propose that it is important to examine the street-level practices of public policies in search of the factors influencing street-level workers’
practical actions. A small number of studies have scrutinized implementation practices of municipal activation policies and how they work in Sweden (Ekström, 2005; Jewell, 2007; Hedblom, 2003), but this limited amount of research is not sufficient to provide a necessary understanding of the street-level workings of this emerging activation policy reform. These studies have also had different analytical perspectives and reached somewhat contradictory conclusions, which makes additional research even more pertinent.

From an international perspective, Sweden is often put forward as an example of a welfare state that stresses the importance of social rights and has many generous and universal welfare policy programs (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Thus, another reason for examining street-level practices of Swedish activation policies is important is that both theory and empirical evidence suggest that activation policy might be different in Sweden due to the particular character of the Swedish welfare state (Jewell, 2007; Lipsky, 1980). On the surface, formal activation policy in Sweden is not very different from work-related policies elsewhere, but the political-institutional and organizational situation in the Swedish welfare state is rather different from many other countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990). An investigation of the Swedish activation policy reform provides an opportunity to examine the current development of activation policy requirements in a welfare context rather different from most other western welfare states. This fact makes the Swedish activation case interesting to scrutinize because it will shed light on how work-related welfare policies are produced in such a welfare state context.

Purpose of the Dissertation

This dissertation examines Sweden’s activation policy reform by focusing on policy implementation at the street-level within the municipal social service system. Whereas most other studies have explored the development of Swedish activation policy as written, this study illuminates activation policy as it is practiced via a careful study of day-to-day implementation practices in Osby municipality and Skärholmen city-district in Stockholm municipality.

A street-level research approach is used to clarify what is distinctive about street-level activation practices in these two municipal settings. This approach advances our understanding of the viability of activation policies as the means of providing social support for financially vulnerable citizens in Sweden. The study will contribute to the empirical literature on welfare-to-work and activation policies. These insights will be used to hone theoretical models that seek to explain street-level practices across different political-institutional boundaries and in different organizational contexts.

The dissertation is primarily informed by street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1980) but the study also pays attention to factors other that typical street-level bureaucracy theory include when analyzing implementation practices (Brodkin, 1986, 1987-88, 1990; Hasenfeld, 1983). The analytic framework (discussed in detail in chapter two) focuses in general on the interrelationship between the political-institutional context and various organizational factors and how these elements manifest themselves in street-level practice through informal
street-level work routines. Beyond the empirical contribution to activation policy research, the study affords an opportunity to refine and augment street-level implementation theories, which for the most part have been developed and applied with reference to the U.S. welfare policy experience.

The study pays careful attention to the specific arrangements of municipal activation policy in Sweden. These arrangements set the administrative boundaries for street-level practices and determine the conditions in which municipal activation policy is distributed. The Swedish activation case includes two key features. First, the municipal activation policy is neither universal nor mandatory. In general, unemployed social assistance recipients are required to participate in a municipal activation program in order to be eligible for social assistance support, but it is not clear how such requirements are operationalized in practice. Again, it is important to remember that an activation requirement is not firmly formulated in the policy legislation. In Sweden activation policy requirements are optional interventions that municipalities have the autonomy to decide whether they will require or not. In fact, the activation legislation is formed as a framework law, which provides municipalities, as well as the street-level staff, with significant discretion when interpreting the meaning of the formal legislation. Second, the organizational arrangement in Sweden is characterized by an organizational context with both professional social workers and unprofessional activation workers.

The trained social workers are responsible for determining the right to social assistance and whether social assistance recipients are required to participate in an activation policy program. The “activation workers” are working in the local activation programs and they are responsible for the practical implementation of the local activation policy intervention. These activation workers may not be licensed in social work, but they operate in a municipal social service context and the activation requirements are also closely linked to the social assistance claims. The municipal social services and its social assistance administration are considered to be the heart of the social work field in Sweden and activation policy is part of that field. Thus, examining the street-level practices of Swedish activation policy offers also an opportunity to understand how activation policy is produced in a social work context.

Research Approach

The dissertation illuminates Swedish activation policy through a case study of the day-to-day implementation practices in two municipal social service organizations. These two research sites were selected on the basis of their commitment to activation requirements in return for social assistance. The two research sites

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4 The job title for the social workers working within the municipal social services in Sweden is “socialsekreterare”.
5 The activation workers are “unprofessional” in the sense that they often lack formal social work training and formal social work credentials.
resemble each other in relation to the strong commitment to activation policy and their similar organization of the local activation programs, but they differ significantly in size, geographic location, and demographics. The first research site is Osby, which is located in the south of Sweden. Osby is a small-town municipality with a rather small proportion of unemployed social assistance recipients, a homogenous population in general, and rather low unemployment rates. The other research-site is Skärholmen city-district, which is located in an urban setting in Stockholm, the capitol of Sweden. Skärholmen is one of eighteen city-districts within Stockholm municipality and Skärholmen has a higher number of both social assistance recipients and unemployment levels, in addition to a much larger share of immigrant clients compared to Osby.

The study of the street-level implementation practices in these two municipal social service and activation organizations helps to distinguish systematic routines from idiosyncratic routines in street-level policy delivery of municipal activation policy in Sweden. The findings in this dissertation draw from an extensive period of field-work including observations of the daily work within these two municipal organizations, in addition to interviews with local politicians and key management personnel and ongoing informal conversations with social workers, activation worker, and occasionally with social assistance clients. Observations and interviews are supplemented with analysis of formal legislation, other kinds of formal policy documents, local program documents, and other policy related documentation.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is organized in the following way. Chapter two presents the theoretical foundation of the dissertation research and a literature review, including the theoretical and the empirical literature that has guided and informed the examination of street-level implementation practices of municipal activation policy in Sweden. The chapter develops the particular analytic framework that is utilized to examine the street-level implementation practices of the two research sites. Chapter three provides a presentation of the international development of work-related welfare and activation policies in general and a political history of activation policy in Sweden, as well as a description of the administrative arrangements of activation policy and its relation to the Swedish Social Service Act and the municipal social assistance system. Chapter four offers a description of the research methods that is employed in the study including a presentation of how the data collection and data analysis have been organized throughout the research process and a brief description of the two research sites. Chapters five through eight provide the empirical analysis of the street-level implementation practices of municipal activation policy in Osby and Skärholmen and their local activation programs.

More specifically, chapter five entails an analysis of the local political-institutional contexts. In this chapter the analysis is based on local policy documentation, in addition to presenting politicians’ and program managers’ expression of the aims and objectives of the local activation policy programs. Chapter
six examines the implementation practices related with the social assistance application and how social workers acted when determining social assistance eligibility in addition to their street-level practices when assessing clients’ need for activation policy. Chapter seven examines how the street-level implementation practices are shaped within the local activation programs and how activation workers are implementing activation policy in those particular contexts. Chapter eight concludes the empirical analysis focusing on street-level implementation practices with an emphasized client perspective and how their interactions with social workers and activation workers might form the street-level delivery of activation policy. The three last chapters in the empirical analysis highlights in particular how street-level workers “make” and “shape” activation policy through their daily routines.

Chapter nines entail the final discussion and synthesize the key findings from the previous chapters and their implication for street-level implementation theory and the practical delivery of municipal activation policy in Sweden. This chapter is also discussing the study’s research limitations as well as implications for, social work practice, and recommends future areas for additional research.
2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Policy implementation research involves a large number of different theoretical, empirical, and methodological perspectives in order to scrutinize the functioning of formal policy formulations (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003). This dissertation is mainly informed by the street-level bureaucracy literature, which seeks to understand how and why policy implementation practices take their particular shapes at the street-level (Lipsky, 1980). But the study will also explore a number of additional theoretical perspectives that might be of importance when examining the activation policy field in Sweden. The study attempts therefore to bridge and reconcile some political-institutional and organizational implementation perspectives in an attempt to find out what factors matter for street-level implementation practices of activation policy in the Swedish municipal social service system.

The chapter presents initially a brief history of policy implementation research and attends thereafter to street-level bureaucracy theory, which is developed from the policy implementation research tradition. Subsequently a discussion about political-institutional perspectives and their roles for understanding welfare policy delivery, in general, and work-related welfare policy, in particular, is presented. After the review of these theoretical perspectives, the chapter provides a review of the empirical research that has utilized different views and approaches to street-level implementation research and presents how these studies relate to the study of municipal activation policy in Sweden. Based on this literature review, the chapter develops an analytic framework that is utilized to examine the street-level implementation practices of activation policy in two municipal social service settings in Sweden.

History of Policy Implementation Research

Research on policy implementation studies how formal public policy is interpreted, modified and delivered in practice. Although interest in the relationship between the policy-making process and its administrative functions is almost as old as interest in democracy and politics (Weber, 1922; Wilson, 1887), it was not until the late 1960s and onwards that implementation research began to develop and form different theoretical models and perspectives including both “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches, in order to understand the variations of implementation. From either perspective, policy implementation research gives public policy a practical meaning (Hill, 1997) and helps define the relationships between the state and citizens.
Policy implementation research helps to explain how practices actually materialize citizens’ rights and to define the concrete obligations of citizens in relation to the state. For example, Scattschneider (1960) writes that through policy implementation some citizens take on a greater voice than do others. The target population for a policy is often a matter, not of law, but of practice. In other words, citizens, as policy targets, rarely experience public policies per se but instead experience their implementation practices. As Piven & Cloward (1979) pointed out when studying the example of U.S. welfare: “[p]eople on relief experience the shabby waiting rooms, the overseer or the caseworker, and the dole. They do not experience American social welfare policy” (Piven & Cloward, 1979, p. 20). What public officials do in their interactions with citizens, or “policy targets,” suggests that the implementation practices themselves form a complex relationship between state and citizen (Lipsky, 1980; Lundquist, 1998). It is the street-level practices of political decision-making that ostensibly determine “who gets what, how, and when” (Lasswell, 1936).

Top-Down Implementation Research

Classical examples of early policy implementation studies come from Bardach (1977), Derthick (1972), Mazmanian & Sabatier (1983), and Pressman & Wildavsky (1973). These studies were often based on what is called a top-down model, which looks at how political decisions and policy directives are delivered by implementing institutions. Their findings demonstrated that political decisions and policy directives were rarely implemented as intended. This came to be known as the “implementation failure” problem. The implementation process itself, therefore, came to be viewed as the administrative realm where political decisions and policy directives fall short (Hill, 1997; Rothstein, 2001).

Today, policy-making is recognized as a complex task and implementation failures are portrayed as rather normal aspects of the political decision-making process because that process entails many different stakeholders, such as politicians, policy-makers, administrative institutions, and the implementing street-level workers, all with diverse perspectives and different task responsibilities in the course of policy delivery (Sannerstedt, 2001).

Several scholars have argued that the top-down approach is not very helpful in understanding why public policy, as implemented, often diverges from its formal intentions (Elmore, 1978, 1979-80; Hull & Hjern, 1987; Lipsky, 1979; Palumbo & Calista, 1990). One of the major reasons they claim that a top-down approach is problematic is the underlying assumption that formal policy directives are clear and unambiguous. In reality these critics argue, both political decisions and formal policy are entrenched with contradictory foundations and conflicting implications in addition to vague and ambiguous goals. Such complexity and contradictions within the policy context make the idea of a straightforward implementation process, in which implementing entities are simply executing policy directives, unattainable and purely a visionary idea.
Bottom-Up Implementation Research

As a response to the normative assumptions about a hierarchical and straightforward policy-making process that is present in the top-down models and their limitation in adequately explaining implementation processes, a second wave of implementation research emerged in the late 1970s. Scholars in this wave reversed the top-down approach and argued that policy was, in fact, made through the day-to-day practices of street-level staff. The bottom-up models reverse the perspective of policy-making processes by viewing implementation as the stage in which policy actually was made through the street-level practices rather than formal policy directives and policy goals. Furthermore, the bottom-up research approach regularly scrutinizes the organizational contexts, in which the implementation practices are embedded, and thus, analyzes the implementation routines and the practical responses at the street-level in order to say something about the formal policy itself.

Researchers with a bottom-up perspective have demonstrated that the policy implementation process is structured within the complexities of the implementing organizations and that implementation practices structure formal policy directives on their own terms (Lipsky, 1980; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977; Prottas, 1979). In other words, they suggest that it is the systematic street-level work that manifests the practical meaning of public policy, which often is rather different from the official meaning of the policy. Such findings show that public policy has both “practical” implications through the street-level implementation responses in addition to its “official” meaning described in formal policy documents.

A consequence of such reasoning is that the street-level workers constitute the link between the state and the citizens in the implementation process, and citizenship is therefore structured through the street-level bureaucratic encounters between the street-workers and the citizens (Lipsky, 1980; Lundquist, 1998). This perspective is rather opposite from perspectives that claim that political decisions and formal policy is the major determinants for policy outcomes. This particular study has its analytic foundation in the bottom-up perspective and examines the street-level practice routines that are present when implementing municipal activation policy in order to comprehend the meaning of municipal activation policy itself.

Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory

Lipsky’s (1980) work on street-level bureaucracy theory made important research and theoretical contribution for both policy analysis and implementation theory. In his work, he endorses the importance of the organizational context and the work conditions that were common in public organizations in order to understand both policy itself and policy implementation processes.
Street-Level Bureaucrats
The street-level bureaucracy perspective asserts that it is the street-level workers within public organizations (e.g., welfare offices in the U.S. and municipal social services in Sweden) that ultimately decide what kind of services and benefits policy targets receive instead of formal policy. Lipsky refers to these street-level workers as “street-level bureaucrats.” Street-level bureaucrats are the public workers who have the face-to-face encounters with citizens when they deliver different sorts of public policy. Policemen, teachers, nurses, and social workers are regularly the professions referred to as typical street-level bureaucrats.

Although employed in different kinds of organizations and in different professions, these workers often operate under remarkably similar organizational conditions. According to Lipsky, public organizations are marked by conditions like unlimited demand for services while the resources are limited, responsibility for large caseloads, as well as unclear and vague formal legislation that often is contradictory to organizational objectives. Numerous studies have applied the street-level bureaucracy model in both different countries as well as different public policy contexts and these studies have identified organizational working conditions in line with Lipsky’s findings (Brodkin, 1997; Caswell, 2005; Ellis et al., 1999; Winter, 2001; Wright, 2002). A bottom-up street-level bureaucracy approach considers the complexities that most workers in public organizations experience operate and has demonstrated significant similarities in working conditions across a wide range of public organizations. Two key organizational factors are at the heart of street-level bureaucracy practice, discretion and informal coping behaviors.

The Role of Discretion
Discretion is the freedom that organizations and street-level bureaucrats are granted when they choose among a number of possible actions to take or not take when interacting with policy targets. Lipsky (1980) suggests that policy is actually made by street-level bureaucrats exercising discretion when performing their regular work duties. It is frequently noted that discretion is necessary in many policy implementation processes (Handler, 1986; Lipsky, 1980). The reason is that most public policies, and welfare policies in particular, target situations that regularly are both so heterogeneous and so case specific (e.g., clients’ individual and specific life situations) that it would be almost impossible to create policies with the ability to embrace all possible policy situations. Without some degree of discretion, policy would need to be so rigid and rule-bound that it would result in practices that would be inflexible and insensitive to individual differences and specific circumstances (Adler & Asquith, 1981; Titmuss, 1974). Thus, public policy is, in part, formulated and materialized through the street-level bureaucrats’ discretionary practices.

Discretion is also referred to as the “black box” of policy implementation as it is difficult to monitor what street-level bureaucrats are doing when interacting with citizens (Palumbo & Calista, 1990). In that way, the discretionary nature of street-level bureaucrats’ work makes it difficult to impose and require any form
of accountability over their actions when delivering public policy. It has also been demonstrated that discretion can make policy delivery problematic as it easily leads to arbitrary distribution, inequality, and decision fluctuation (Rothstein, 1994). Vinzant & Crothers (1998) argue that “Discretion is anything but simple. Discretion is constrained choices among competing alternatives; it may involve decisions about what to do, how to do it, or both … as such discretion is a neutral concept in that it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Instead, it is the context of its use that establishes its meaning and reasonableness” (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 40). Hence, it is in what way the street-level bureaucrats utilize discretion that the meaning of public policy is manifested.

Discretion can thereby signify both flexible and passable practices in addition to uncontrollable and arbitrary practices. Brodkin (1997) also suggests that “discretion is axiomatically neither good nor bad but contingent on contextual conditions” (Brodkin, 1997, p. 4), as discretion itself is shaped by different structural and contextual conditions.

The organizational context in which discretion is utilized is consequently important as it determines its contextual boundaries. Lipsky (1980) indicates that a professional context would likely differ from a non-professional context in the exercise of discretion since a professional context brings an internal peer overview and professional control over the street-level actions. This suggests that degree of discretion can be influenced by professional factors and thereby affect therefore the boundaries of the street-level bureaucratic freedom.

**Coping Behaviors – Informal Practice Strategies at the Street-Level**

The typical work conditions that characterize public organizations in combination with the significant degree of discretion that street-level bureaucrats utilize in these organizations create a context in which street-level bureaucrats develop different forms of practice simplifications and informal routine shortcuts (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky calls these informal practice strategies “coping behaviors” or “coping mechanisms”. According to Lipsky, they are doing so in order to manage the constraints and challenges they experience in their daily work. There are several examples of different types of coping behaviors depending on the specific organizational contexts and the particular work conditions in which the street-level work is taking place.

Lipsky describes, for example, that street-level bureaucrats modify the concept of their job and the clients in order to narrow the gap between available resources and assigned job objectives. These coping strategies attempt to limit service demand, maximize the utilization of resources, and obtain client compliance as a way for street-level workers to manage their complex and demanding work situations. One informal method to lower clients’ service demand is to limit information about services to which clients are ostensibly entitled. An informal strategy to maximize the utilization of available resources is to categorize and standardize clients to “fit” available services instead of assessing clients’ individual needs. To obtain clients’ compliance, street-level workers tend to use sanctions to control and monitor clients’ behaviors. Additional informal routine
strategies are to rationalize or provide ad hoc explanations about street-level decision-making in order to justify practical responses. In the end, street-level workers often disclaim their own accountability in policy delivery and separate the responsibility of formal decisions from the organization and pass it over to the clients. The above examples provide definitions of common and widespread coping behaviors in daily work of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980).

Several studies have examined welfare policy implementation in regards to coping behaviors. For example, Winter (2001) describe coping behaviors in the context of social assistance delivery in Denmark and found that social workers rationed limited service options by “creaming” practices when assigning clients to different services components. Assisting those clients that street-level worker finds most in need or most deserving for support is a form of positive discrimination or creaming (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Brodkin (2006) also demonstrated that welfare caseworkers in Chicago welfare offices developed numerous informal practice routines to cope with new managerial structures. For example, welfare workers informally redefined clients’ needs, and clients were categorized in terms of how much problem they would cause for the caseworker in the new administrative routines. Meyers et al. (1998) provide other examples of street-level coping behaviors in descriptions of how welfare caseworkers in California limited the information about welfare reform and work-related services in favor of eligibility determination tasks. Thus, street-level bureaucracy theory casts street-level workers as important agents in the policy-making process and seeks to explain street-level practice behavior by pointing to the role of typical working conditions and the discretionary nature of the work and how this particular context reinforces the development of informal coping strategies. Street-level bureaucracy theory links street-level implementation actions and institutional arrangements since Lipsky contends that street-level implementation practice is affected by the organizational contexts in which these practices are taking place.

Nevertheless, in many street-level bureaucracy studies the organizations seem to exist in a social political vacuum as the implementing institutions are portrayed as relatively closed systems, operating independently of larger political dynamics, and their practices having no direct relevance for formal political processes or institutions. On this matter, Lipsky (1980) briefly notes that, “agencies are embedded in a larger system that creates and fortifies working conditions” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 180). This suggests that different welfare state systems might create street-level practices that are different those in the U.S. Lipsky, however, does not systematically examine and relate organizational structures and their implications for street-level practice, to wider political-institutional processes in his own research. This dissertation attempts to fill this gap by examining the street-level bureaucratic implementation practices of municipal activation policy in the Swedish welfare state context.
Political-Institutional Perspective on Street-Level Implementation Practices

A subsequent generation of implementation researchers has addressed the limitation in Lipsky’s approach, seeking to understand street-level practice, “not only as an organizational phenomenon, but also as an extension of policy politics” (Brodkin & Kaufmann, 2000, p. 4). Brodkin’s work, in particular, includes political-institutional theory in order to analyze policy delivery (Brodkin, 1986, 1987-88, 1990). In general, political-institutional theory suggests that political history, bureaucratic structures, and policy feedback shape and limit public policy interventions (Robertson, 1993; Skocpol, 1985, 1992). This political-institutional perspective emphasizes the significance of political-institutional arrangements for policy formulation and implementation. In doing so, a political-institutional perspective also helps to understand how political-institutions factors structure the implications for public policies.

Brodkin (1986, 1987-88, 1990), however, has broadened political-institutional theory beyond its traditional research objects (e.g. legislation, elections, political parties) to encompass those organizations charged with policy implementation. Her approach bridges the street-level bureaucracy literatures and political-institutional literatures in a fruitful way by proposing that both organizational level structures and political-institutional level structures matter for street-level implementation practices since implementing organizations also are influenced by the political-institutional context in which they are embedded. This approach rightly recognizes how social political controversies play out in the practical delivery of public policy. Organizations that deliver services are therefore necessarily political, inevitably manifesting the political tensions and conflicts in their implementation practices. Hence, Brodkin’s approach contends that one cannot meaningfully distinguish between political and administrative practices, since street-level bureaucracies have essentially their own politics and implementation itself becomes a vehicle for social politics.

A number of studies have followed this approach (Brodkin, 1997, 2006; Lin, 2000; Meyers et al., 1998; Morgan, 2001; Sandfort, 1999, 2000). These studies have, for the most part, been applied on the welfare U.S. case; and although they find that the political-institutional environments in which they operate structure implementation practices, they do not explain practice variation in regards to different welfare state contexts.

Jewell (2007) offers one of very few comparative studies that examine street-level implementation practices with a political-institutional lens, and he provides an important finding that the political-institutional context matters for welfare policy implementation. Jewell analyzes the practices of welfare caseworkers in the U.S., Germany, and Sweden, measuring their abilities to consider and respond to clients’ individuals needs for financial and employment support. His findings demonstrate that Swedish social service caseworkers showed more professional responsiveness in the sense that they had more capacity to consider clients’ individual needs compared to their American and German counterparts. Jewell argues that the reason for this is that the Swedish workers operated in a
context that was characterized by larger organizational capacity compared to the American and German welfare organizations. Jewell links these capacities to the wider political-institutional context in which the examined welfare organizations were embedded.

Jewell’s findings are both important and instructive, but they do not really tell us how street-level workers adjust their responsiveness in regards to different local implementation contexts within each country. When high levels of local autonomy and decentralization are part of the political-institutional context it tends to prompt the development of locally specific street-level practice strategies and large variations (Handler, 1996).6

Although this kind of political-institutional perspective has broadened the approach to street-level bureaucracy theory, there continues to be a need to integrate street-level bureaucracy theory with additional theoretical perspectives in order develop a broader and more nuanced picture of the nature of street-level implementation practices. Meyer & Vorsanger (2003) suggest that there is a necessity for developing “more fully integrated theories of how these political, organizational, and individual factors channel street-level discretion into specific directions through policy design, organizational features, and professional norm and culture” (Meyer & Vorsanger, 2003, p.157). Another important aspect is to consider how these factors mediates between organizational structures, policy goals, and street-level behaviors (Jewell & Glaser, 2006).7

What Factors Shape Street-Level Welfare Implementation Practices?

Many street-level implementation studies on welfare policy implementation have utilized a variety of different theoretical, analytical, and methodological approaches. Each of these additional perspectives has offered significant insights about street-level practice behaviors and valuable knowledge about the multitude of factors that shape these practice behaviors. The section below will review a number these implementation studies and their attempts to explain what different factors that shape the street-level delivery processes. The insights and knowledge from this research literature review inform the study of the street-level implementation of Swedish activation policy and help to develop the analytic framework that is utilized in this dissertation. Among those factors that these studies highlight as important factors are: political preferences, management capacity,

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6 Large variations in social assistance delivery have been demonstrated several times in both Sweden (Byberg, 2001; Gustafsson et al., 1990; Hydén, 1996; Stranz, 2007) and elsewhere (Ricucci, 2002, 2005a).

7 Jewell & Glaser’s (2006) analytic framework entails factors such as authority, role expectations, workload, client contact, knowledge and expertise, and incentives. They suggest “[t]he factors we delineate represent significant conditions affecting worker behavior that can vary independently of one another and therefore, have distinguishable effects on the dynamics of worker-client behavior. The researcher does not know a priori which features will prove to be most important” (Jewell & Glaser, 2006, p. 341).
policy directives and organizational goals, organizational resources, work norms and practice cultures. Neither of these factors have the capacity alone to elucidate street-level practices as they mediate, interact, and compete with each other. Nonetheless, they can be useful supplementary factors in an analysis of the street-level practices of activation policy in the Swedish context.

**Political Preferences**

In the implementation literature it has been crucial to examine to what extent political officials and their political preferences determine and shape street-level practices. In this context, political preferences are regularly referred to as favorable choices that politicians are making in the policy-making process. Such choices are often related to ideological inclinations and political power. Several implementation studies have, in general, demonstrated that such political preferences do not significantly affect street-level practice behaviors (Byberg, 2002; Meyers et al., 1998; Stranz, 2007; Winter, 2001). While studies that examine political preferences in the U.S., through large, multi-state administrative datasets, indicate that political preferences and local party composition explained a rather large share of differences in implementation performance (Keiser, 1999; Keiser & Soss, 2000). But since such macro-level studies often rely on aggregated data they provide mainly indirect explanations of how political factors affect the behaviors at the street-level. In Denmark, Winter (2001) implies that politicians indirectly affected implementation delivery through the “power of the purse” as the street-level staff believed that politicians had the ability to provide staff capacity and allocate economic resources, which reduced street-level coping strategies. On the contrary, more direct examinations of street-level implementation practices demonstrate a more pessimistic view on how much political officials actually had an ability to control street-level work (Brodkin, 1997, 2006).

These studies provide different and even contradictory results, which normally suggest that welfare policy implementation is affected by an array of additional factors where political preference is one factor among many others. Consequently, policy implementation cannot simply be tied to political preference but it is still an important aspect as it interacts significantly with other factors that seem to have greater influence on street-level implementation practices.

**Management Capacity**

The role of management and their ability to set the boundaries for the workers’ discretionary practices has been the focus of several welfare policy implementation studies (Heinrich & Lynn, 2000; Riccucci, 2005b). The literature on public management has in general found mixed results, where some studies point to managers’ ability to control and monitor the actions of street-level staff (Heinrich & Lynn, 2000; Lynn et al. 2001), while other studies demonstrate that managers have rather limited capacity to control what street-level workers are doing (Brodkin, 1997; Schierenbeck, 2003). In fact, most studies that have examined the welfare policy reforms in the U.S. have found that managers only have modest effects on the behaviors of street-level staff (Brehm & Gates, 1997;
Brodkin, 2006; Meyers & Dillon, 1999; Riccucci, 2005b). Brehm & Gates (1997) suggest that street-level practices are shaped by the individual workers’ own preferences and choices. Other scholars argue that it is the alignment between management and street-level workers that influence how policies are executed on the ground (Riccucci et al., 2004). Sandfort (1999, 2000), for example, claims that the street-level workers were more likely to comply with new directives when management initiatives were consistent with the street-level workers’ own collective beliefs. She concludes that when managerial initiatives appeared inconsistent with the street-level work reality, street-level workers developed their own work objectives and definitions of practice success.

In another study of managers’ ability to influence the implementation of work-related welfare reforms, Riccucci (2005b) demonstrates that managers had the ability to create overall organizational contexts that allowed street-level staff to conduct their work according to the formal policy directives. This means that management was more important for impacting the organizational work environment and resource allocation and less important for the specific actions undertaken by the street-level workers.

**Organizational Resources**

In fact, it has been demonstrated that the availability of organizational resources influence street-level implementation practices in more significant ways. Actually, it is generally the lack of such resources that shapes what the street-level staff is doing in their daily work encounters. Welfare bureaucracies are often portrayed as constantly lacking adequate resources to perform the tasks they are set to do (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980). The lack of resources is therefore often used as one explanatory factor to explain street-level behavior. As Brodkin (1997) observes “[c]aseworkers, like other lower-level bureaucrats, do not do just what they want or just what they are told to want. They do what they can.” (Brodkin, 1997, p. 24). The question of what constitutes the ability to act (the “can”) must be approached through an appreciation of the worker interaction with the amount of organizational resources that the street-level workers have to their availability. Brodkin’s study revealed that it was neither formal rules nor personal beliefs that accounted for the differences in the production of work-related social services. Instead it was resources, channeled through informal coping strategies shaped how these street-level practices took place.

Meyers et al. (1998) also conclude that welfare workers in the U.S. failed in implementing the new welfare-to-work policy because they were, first, not given any additional resources to perform in line with new program objectives, and second, they were still responsible for administering welfare claims in the same manner as before. With neither sufficient resources nor organizational incentives to endorse the new policy objectives, the policy languished. On the contrary, Riccucci et al. (2004) found that when new welfare-to-work objectives in U.S. welfare reform were clearly signaled and adequate program resources were made available to promote new program goals street-level workers were more prepared to actually implement the reform as intended. The subjective perception of resource availability or the lack thereof was important for the street-level coping
behaviors of social workers in Denmark (Winter, 2001). In sum, resource allocation and organizational capacity are crucial factors in understanding street-level implementation practices as they clearly create some form of basic foundations for the policy delivery process. But to only rely on resource allocation and organizational capacity is limiting as street-level workers’ perception of resources and capacity also might influence street-level implementation strategies. A resource and capacity perspective also implies that there is some sort of definition or common understanding of what constitutes an adequate level of resources.

**Policy Objectives and Organizational Goals**

It has been shown previously that clear and comprehensive policy objectives and organizational goals are crucial for implementation success (Bardach, 1977; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Nevertheless, in the welfare policy context the nature of such goals and objectives seems to be vague, ambiguous, and contradictory (Lipsky, 1980; Meyer et al., 1998; Brodkin, 1997). Similarly, Lin (2000) indicates that *U.S. prison rehabilitation* programs were not implemented as intended due to contradictions in organizational goals and the formal policy objectives. She claims that the implementation failure of the prison rehabilitation programs was not caused by the street-level workers’ deliberate actions, but by the inconsistencies in organizational structures and unclear policy goals. In particular, she found that street-level decisions were closely linked with the organizational incentive structures, and street-level workers were more likely to select actions that were accepted and rewarded internally, within the organizations, rather than those goals formulated in the policy rhetoric. Lin refines the discussion of policy implementation by arguing that new policies are only likely to function as intended when the policy goals are congruent with organizational goal structures and internal logics.

**Normative Assumptions About Policy Targets**

In fact, it is suggested elsewhere that organizational practices, including implementation practices, are partially determined by *rules*, *norms*, and *values* emanating from the institutional environment in which they are embedded (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1992). Hasenfeld (2000) suggest that such rules, norms, and values signify moral systems among the public at large, and as such, these norms are institutionalized in policy implementing organizations. He also highlights that welfare policies are full of contradictory and ambiguous moral assumptions and he claims that such policy ambiguities are operationalized in program arrangements and at the practical implementation levels. For example, welfare policy is often based on normative assumptions about welfare recipients’ personal and behavioral deficits. In particular, these assumptions regularly entail a perception that welfare recipients lack work motivation and that increased requirements would make them comply with the work ethic that exist in the society at large. When the policy solutions to a social problem such as unemployment mainly are based on normative assumptions, the policy aimed at solving the problem tends to be inadequate at addressing the structural deficiencies that cause the problem.
in the first place (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007). With respect to policy implementation, organizations have significant power in how to internalize these assumptions and play thereby a crucial role in how street-level bureaucrats are able to translate these assumptions when delivering policy to the individual policy targets. For example, Hasenfeld (2000) describes the importance of moral functions in the delivery of welfare-to-work policies in the U.S. and argues that organizations need to change their moral assumptions about the policy targets in order to adjust to new policies and their (new) underlying meanings. Hasenfeld demonstrates that it is the shared moral values about clients’ needs for work related services that determine street-level actions in welfare organizations, indicating the importance of understanding the role of collective beliefs and norms. These norms can also create professional and collective belief systems about the policy targets and their particular needs. This in turn reinforces certain practice norms and ideas about how to implement particular welfare policies.

**Practice Norms and Collective Beliefs**

Studies that examine practice norms and collective beliefs as determinants for street-level implementation practices have a very particular image of street-level workers as human agents with their own practice motivations (Lurie, 2006). On this note, Riccucci concludes that the actions of street-level bureaucrats were more explained by “professional norms, work customs, and occupational cultures of the workers than by management factors” (Riccucci, 2005b, p. 115). It has also been demonstrated that managers and street-level staff interpret the concept of “culture” much more broadly compared to a scholarly definition. Lurie & Riccucci (2003) indicate that both street-level staff and managers consider changes in welfare office structures and processes as cultural and normative changes. But the authors claim that these considerations are rather superficial as it takes more to actually effect “beliefs, perceptions, and feelings” (Lurie & Riccucci, 2003, p. 653).

Similarly, Sandfort (1999), also studying the U.S. welfare reform, found that the street-level work was determined by collective beliefs, shared work norms, and a socialization process among the workers. As described above, Riccucci (2005b) also found that the street-level actions in relation to welfare reforms in the U.S. were mainly affected by work norms and practice cultures embedded in the organizational practice contexts.

Street-level workers’ personal beliefs and bias about clients and clients’ behaviors have also been used to understand implementation practices. Schierenbeck (2003) illustrates that it was, in part, street-level workers’ personal beliefs and attitudes about immigrant clients that determined what they did for their clients when implementing integration policies in Sweden and Israel. Especially, street-level workers’ ideology in terms of aversion towards policy target populations has been demonstrated to be an important factor determining street-level behaviors (Winter 2001). Brehm & Gates (1997) also found that street-level actions in the social services and the police force in the U.S. were mainly influenced by the individual workers’ own preferences. In this principal-agent perspective, the authors claim that street-level workers’ practices range from “work-
ing”, meaning that they followed rules and confirmed policy goals, to “shirking” or “sabotaging” meaning that they distorted policy efforts by not doing their job as intended. The different practice patterns were mainly a result of the individual workers’ preferences. In a similar vein, Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2003) have demonstrated that the street-level work with clients was formed by the staffs’ own moral judgments. They conclude, “street-level decisions and actions are guided less by rules, training, or procedures and more by beliefs and norms, especially beliefs and norms about what is fair” according to the workers’ own perceptions (Maynard-Musheno, 2003, p. 6).

However, explaining street-level implementation practices in terms of common belief systems and practice norms does not appreciate the fact that different “office cultures” and workers’ individual bias might develop as a response to the organizational contexts (Brodkin 1997). Another limitation with an exclusive focus on such office cultures and normative practice ideologies as perspectives to understand street-level practice is the risk for simply replacing one set of abstract policy statements with another set of abstractions in form of ideological value statements and professional terminology.

**Professional Social Work Principles**

The notion of some form of universal social work values and professional principles is another way of understanding how street-level workers in welfare and social work bureaucracies utilize their discretion, and thereby structure welfare policy implementation practices. Such a perspective assumes that especially social worker have a specific knowledge base or ethical standards that would influence client encounters.\(^8\) Lipsky (1980) suggests that professional social workers would respond differently to policy mandates since they have similar professional values and utilizes their specific social work skills when accomplishing their job tasks. Other scholars have pointed out that the role of the social work profession itself determines the choices of actions made by social workers (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). The theoretical assumption behind such reasoning is that trained social workers would be guided by shared professional principles such as “integrity,” “client self-determination,” “empowerment” and “holistic views” when working with clients and completing other street-level policy responsibilities (Gambrill, 1997; Hepworth et al., 1997). Much of the research on the social work role focuses on the relationship between the social worker and the client (Hydén, 1996; Rees, 1979). This research is generally occupied with understanding the clinical and therapeutic alliance in social work and not the bureaucratic encounters between social workers and clients within public welfare organizations. Although an application of universal social work principles as guides for street-level actions is contested, it is frequently noted that a stable and trusting

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\(^8\) In the U.S. the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics are the following: “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.” A similar code of ethics is also provided by the Swedish social work association (SSR).
relationship between the social worker and the client is valuable in order to develop a mutual understanding of the client’s needs and a shared strategy to address those needs (see for example Blennberger 1996 for a discussion about what values and principles that guides social work in Sweden). Even the implementation of municipal activation policy in Sweden contains such asking-helping structure, especially as activation policy is part of the municipal social service structure in Sweden. In Sweden this is the public organization system that has the ultimate responsibility to help and serve citizens in need.

But when welfare agencies aim to control and restrain the behavior of the clients it is imperative to understand how social work principles mediate and shape the interactions between the social worker and the clients. The practical meaning of this kind of abstract professional standards is difficult to measure and those who implement them can interpret them differently. In fact, prior research has demonstrated that social work principles do not significantly influence street-level social work practice (Brodkin, 1997; Egelund, 1996; Kjørstad, 2005).

It is also demonstrated in other studies that the practical implementation of work-related policies often is at odds with such social work values and tends to disappear in favor of other policy objectives and organizational goals (Hasenfeld, 2000a, 2000b). Handler & Hollingsworth (1971) noted several decades ago that social work practice in public welfare bureaucracies in the U.S. was far removed from most social work ideals. According to Brodkin (1997) welfare caseworkers operate in the shaky middle zone between social work principles and paternalistic practices and she contends “[i]n practice, the role of caseworkers in public welfare agencies have never been fully consistent with either principles of social work or of enforcement. Rather, caseworkers have fashioned their practice within the ambiguous middle ground between the two” (Brodkin, 1997, p. 28). Egelund (1996) also argues that social work practices in relation to child protection services was more politically determined rather than guided by professional knowledge and social work norms. She claims that the social workers did not utilize their professional discretionary judgments when diagnosing the families. Solutions were, instead, selected within “the narrow repertoire of legislative recommendations” and with focus on correct and efficient administration to show “that the work has been done in records and statistics on assistance and intervention delivered” (Egelund, 1996, p. 172). In Sweden it has also been found that neither professional values nor social workers’ individual characteristics determined their discretionary decision-making practices in relation to social assistance delivery (Stranz, 2007).

One limitation with the professional social work perspective is the de-professionalization that has occurred in many welfare systems during the last decades. There has been a shift from using trained social workers in favor of unprofessional caseworkers in many welfare bureaucracies. If social work values are important for policy practice outcome, this shift should then result in a change in practices as well. This fact is important since the current work-related activation reforms are profoundly incorporated in the welfare delivery systems, but at the same time have introduced a “new” group of welfare workers in Sweden and elsewhere. In Sweden, these new welfare workers are the so-called “activation workers” who now are regular parts of the local activation policy context
in many Swedish municipalities (Jewell, 2007; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004). Despite a trend toward de-professionalization, it is argued that the social work principle perspective is important for the analysis of the implementation of activation policy programs since many new welfare-to-work policies have created new forms of encounters between (social) workers and citizens (Jordan, 2000).

On this note, Hasenfeld & Weaver (1996) claim “professional treatment will be used when the staff are highly trained and when organizational ideology views participants as suffering from human capital and environmental deficits. Moral judgments will be used when staff lack professional training and when organizational ideologies view clients as morally deficient” (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996, p. 241). There are therefore reason to believe that social work principles cannot alone account for street-level practices, but together with those other factors discussed in this chapter, they might be of significant importance in order to explain street-level policy outcomes.

The Analysis of Municipal Activation Policy Implementation in Sweden

In this chapter, I have tried to elucidate both the benefits and the limitations of existing theoretical perspectives and empirical analytic models for implementation research. As the above literature review portrays, policy implementation research contains an array of multifaceted and contradictory perspectives and a number of factors are suggested to explain street-level practice behavior. This suggests that it is a priori difficult to predict what factors that will be most important for the understanding of different and specific implementation situation (Jewell & Glaser, 2006). There is no reason to believe that municipal activation policy practices in Sweden are an exception. It would therefore be beneficial to explore a number of factors when examining what factors that shapes Swedish activation policy practices.

However, the main theoretical perspective utilized in this dissertation is street-level bureaucracy theory, which seeks to analyze how street-level bureaucrats, through their informal coping strategies, structure policy implementation practices and thereby produce formal policy. The street-level bureaucracy perspective suggest that a street-level implementation analysis examines organizational work conditions in order to show how these typical conditions create informal coping strategies, which ultimately materialize public policy delivery. Yet, several scholars have demonstrated these factors are not completely adequate to determine the complete picture of street-level implementation practices, since they are pre-occupied with a rather isolated organizational analysis. This dissertation attempts therefore to reconcile the street-level bureaucracy approach with a wider perspective on what factors that shape the street-level implementation practices since these factors most likely interact with those organizational level factors that Lipsky (1980) suggests.

In order to advance street-level bureaucracy analysis, this study finds it pertinent to uncover how wider political-institutional factors also structure street-
level implementation practices. For example, a political-institutional perspective on street-level implementation practices would predict that dissimilar welfare states contexts (e.g. Sweden and the U.S.), by virtue of differences in political-institutional configurations, would differ in their street-level responses to citizens’ social needs (Brodkin, 1997, 2006; Jewell, 2007).

The analyses attention will also pay attention to how local politicians’ and managers’ expressed preferences signals local activation policy objectives. An exploration of politician’ and managers’ ability to develop local organizational contexts that allow the workers to perform their work as stated in the formal policy discourse will also supplement the core analysis.

Indeed, it has also been demonstrated that different sorts of institutionalized norms, values, and organizational ideologies also influence the actions of the street-level staff. The Swedish social services have a long history of being entrenched with moral assumptions about its target populations and stigmatizing practices is common in relation to individuals’ in need for social service support (Billquist, 1999; Jonsson, 2001; Starrin 2001; Starrin et al., 2003; Starrin & Jönsson, 2000, Thorén et al., 2006).9 Organizational theories that focus on how norms and cultures are institutionalized in organizations contend that implementation practices in bureaucratic organizations are influenced by such factors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1992). For example, a general perception about unemployed social assistance recipients in Sweden is that they lack work motivation and that they should face increased responsibilities in order to make them comply with the general work ethic. For that reason it is worth exploring how normative and moral factors among the public at large in Sweden might influence what street-level workers in the municipal social services are doing when implementing activation policy in Sweden. It would also be of great interest to examine how such normative factors interact with those organizational and political-institutional factors highlighted above.

Additionally, municipal activation policy reform has its roots in the municipal social service system in Sweden, which is considered to be a social work domain in the Swedish welfare state context. The Social Service Act, which is the legislative foundation for the municipal social services, stipulates, for example, that all social service interventions delivered according to the legislation should consider “integrity”, “clients’ self-determination”, “equality”, “enable clients’ resources” and, “individual assessments”.10 Such formal policy directives would suggest that professional social workers in the social services find such values important when implementing activation policy. Rhetorical statements about such similar principles exist in the activation policy rhetoric as well. But the current activation reform also involves a number of more unspecified and ambiguous policy statements such as “increased individual responsibility” and “mandatory requirements”. The dissertation will therefore try to disentangle how street-

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9 See also Machado-Borges (2007) for a review of studies examining citizens’ encounters with the public social service organization in Sweden.

10 The Social Service Act (2001:453), Chapter 1, Section 1 and Chapter 4, Section 1-5.
level workers make use of such policy statements when implementing activation policy on the ground.

In this study, two sets of street-level professions will be observed in their daily policy duties of delivering municipal activation policy. First, professional and trained social workers who determine clients’ rights to social assistance in the municipal social assistance system and refer unemployed social assistance recipients to local activation programs in return for social assistance. Second, activation workers who work in the local activation programs and provide the employment related services to the social assistance clients. These activation workers are, in general, untrained staff without formal social work credentials. An analytic question to investigate in this study is therefore to examine whether trained social workers and untrained activation program workers respond differently to the organizational and political-institutional context by relating their own actions to social work principles in different ways.

This dissertation will take seriously of the notion that the street-level workers respond, consciously and unconsciously to political-institutional, organizational, and professional structures. Thus, I suggest that a reconciliation of existing theories and perspectives would help to provide a more complete understanding of activation policy delivery in Sweden. The theoretical advancement suggested here would be rooted in street-level bureaucracy theory, but the study will recognize how local political preferences, management control, collective beliefs, practice norms, and professional social work principles and institutionalized normative and moral assumptions influence and structure street-level implementation practices in Swedish municipal social service organizations. In doing so, this study will enhance our understanding of Swedish activation policy in addition to how and why activation policy practices in Swedish municipalities take their particular shapes. The dissertation will address the following research questions:

- **How is activation policy implemented at the street-level in Swedish municipal social service organizations?**

- **Why do these street-level implementation practices take their particular shape?**

As reviewed in this chapter, a complex set of factors at different levels might influence the street-level implementation practices. This study builds on a theoretical perspective (Lipsky, 1980) that suggests that street-level workers develop various forms of informal practice strategies to manage the implementation process. It is also shown that these factors interact and mediate with each other and it is difficult to single out one or even a small set of the most influential and crucial factors. In the field of municipal activation policy within the Swedish municipal social services it is particularly difficult to focus on a certain set of factors since activation policy in Sweden is such unexplored policy area. Nevertheless, this study attempts to examine what factors that are most significant for the street-level implementation process and informal practice strategies in the Swedish ac-
tivation policy context. The analytic model for this study is illustrated in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Analytic Model of Street-Level Implementation Practices
3. Activation Policy

Background

This chapter provides an overview of the current activation policy trend that is taking place globally and how activation policy is organized within the Swedish welfare state. In particular, the chapter presents how municipal activation policy is related to the social assistance administration within the municipal social services in Sweden. The chapter offers an initial discussion of global activation policy development and a cross-national comparison of activation policy development in a number of different countries. The chapter also offers an analysis of different ideological underpinnings and normative interpretations behind the current activation policy trend. Thereafter, the chapter describes the political-institutional and the formal policy contexts of activation policy in Sweden and how it is related to the general welfare policy system in the country. The chapter also presents municipal activation policy’s organizational and administrative arrangements within the social assistance system in Swedish municipalities. In the end, the chapter illustrates the research implications of the analytic framework developed for this study (described in detail in chapter two) and what questions this raises for the examination of the street-level implementation of municipal activation policy in Sweden.

The Global Activation Policy Development

During the last decades of the twentieth century many western states began to redefine social citizenship by shifting social welfare responsibilities from the state to the individual (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007). Social safety protections became increasingly based on individuals' behaviors, choices, and attitudes (Handler, 2004; van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). At the same time, work-oriented welfare policies started to develop rapidly in most western countries with the goal of improving unemployed individuals’ opportunities to enter the labor market and, ultimately, make citizens self-sufficient through paid work (Giddens, 1998; Gilbert & Van Voorhis, 2001; Goul Andersen et al., 2002; Goul Andersen & Jensen, 2002). In general, these policies emphasize an “active” integration of unemployed citizens in contrast to “passive” income support systems. Although, programmatic requirements and administrative practices might differ from country to country, the general approach seems to be intensified work requirements and mandatory participation in various forms of activation policy measures. Similar policy approaches are called “welfare-to-work,” “workfare,”
“insertion”, and “activation” (Drøpping et al., 1999; Gilbert & Van Voorhis, 2001; van Berkel & Møller, 2002).

One major activation reforms was the “welfare-to-work” reform in the U.S., which began when President Clinton enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) in 1996. In Europe, the European Union (EU) has encouraged EU member countries to develop strategies that encourage people to work and to stay longer in the work force and reform traditional social welfare systems to make them more “active” (Hantrais, 2000; Jacobsson et al., 2001). One example of the European activation restructuring is “the New Deal Reform” in Britain, which was introduced by Prime Minister Blair in the mid 1990s. The New Labour Party wanted a radical change in the British public benefit system and implemented mandatory work-and-training programs for young people and the long-term unemployed (Giddens, 1998). Other European work-oriented activation schemes are the “Revenu minimum d’insertion” (RMI) in France, “Mini-Mex” in Belgium, and the “Active Line” in Denmark, “Hilfe zur Arbeit” in Germany, the “Youth Employment Act and the Jobseeker’s Employment Act” in the Netherlands, “Work & Rehabilitation Act” in Finland.

Most of these countries seem to have adopted very comparable policy reforms with similar program approaches and policy goals. Nevertheless, it is important to note a phrase like “policy goals” is problematic when analyzing policy reforms and should be referred to with caution since goals are complex and dependant on organizational factors (Meyers et al., 2001).

Although, these work-related policies are now widespread, underlying meanings and policy interpretations of the current activation reforms can be very dissimilar in different welfare state contexts. An understanding of these principal differences is important to recognize in order to gain knowledge about the normative assumptions that these policies are built upon.

**Different Activation Policy Models**

In mainstream political and policy debates, contemporary activation policy reforms are viewed as helpful in the transition from unemployment to paid employment, since it is considered that activation policy promotes work experience, improves job-skills, and offers job-related networks. While a very popular policy choice in the last ten to fifteen years, activation policy has drawn criticism too; a split that has appeared among welfare scholars. Proponents of the current activation trend argue that recipients of public support should be mandated to partici-

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11 The poverty rate in the U.S. has not declined significantly since the enactment of the PRWORA Act. In fact it has fluctuated between 13.7 percent in 1996, 11.3 percent in 2000, and 12.3 percent in 2006 (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

12 There is a vast international literature on the development, formulation, governance, and to some extent the implementation of the work-related activation policy development in. For example, Finn (2000, 2003); Giddens (1998); Handler (2004); Hvinden & Johansson (2007); Lødemel & Trickey (2001); McDonald & Marston, 2005; Peck (2001); Serrano Pascual & Magnusson (2007); van Berkel & Møller (2002).
pate in work-related activities in return for public support (Mead, 1986, 1997; Zäll, 2001) while those critical argue that activation policies are just another form of work enforcement with latent functions of disciplining and regulating poor people (Handler, 2004; van Berkel & Møller, 2002). Several social scientists have, in fact, claimed that the current activation trend has significant limitations in regards to its potentials to effectively reduce unemployment and increase social inclusion in mainstream society (Lind & Møller, 2006).

**Activation as Enabling versus Coercive Models**

The activation policy literature contains two contrasting normative assumptions about the meaning of the current activation policy development. Salonen (2000) writes “[i]n the enabling version the targeted measures stimulate a bottom-up perspective which gives the individual a voice and expands his or her civic potential. Individualization is regarded as a way to increase the individual’s self-determination and control over his or her own life (the concept of empowerment is also being increasingly used in the Swedish discussion). The coercive version is in contrast dominated by a top-down perspective in which the authorities and the political system determine the design of the measures. In this interpretation, the activated individual has extremely limited influences over his or her participation” (Salonen, 2000, p. 5).

These models can be distinguished even further and below is a schematic table of five different characteristics on which the two models differ. The primary differences in each model are portrayed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Enabling Model</th>
<th>Coercive Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation principle</td>
<td>Voluntary participation</td>
<td>Participation requirements with attendance control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection principle</td>
<td>Voluntary participation that is supplemented with assessments of individual needs</td>
<td>Mass selection of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope of negotiation</td>
<td>Individual and tailor-made program activities</td>
<td>Top-down decisions of required activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program components</td>
<td>Skills- and knowledge enhancement through education, training</td>
<td>Work enforcement and work first approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Ideology</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Paternalistic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Principal Activation Policy Models*

Although, these two policy models have self-sufficiency and employment as their main policy objectives, the methods to reach those goals are very different. The “enabling” model emphasizes measures that facilitate individuals becoming self-sufficient and attaining social inclusion. The “coercive” model focuses more on social disciplining to change an individual’s behavior, and includes decreased policy rights and work enforcement strategies (Mead, 1997).

Each of the policy models have fundamental normative assumptions and involve a number of tensions and contradictions about the cause for both unemployment and welfare dependency. Thus they differ in their perspectives on pol-
icy solutions. Each model is also limited in providing a complete portrayal of any country’s specific activation policy since most countries have developed policies and programs that entail elements from both models. These policy models should therefore be viewed as principal types, but an understanding of the models provides guidance for comprehending how social problems are defined and what type of policy follows.

In the agenda-setting and policy-making process literature it is argued that the definition of the (social) problem and the policy target population influences what sorts of policy solutions will be preferred (Kingdon, 1995; Nelson, 1984; Schattschneider, 1960; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Activation policy is no exception; it matters whether unemployment and welfare dependency are perceived as the individual’s lack of motivation or if it is a structural problem such as the lack of available work opportunities.

**Activation Policy as Work-First or Human Capital Strategies**

While a human capital strategy anticipates that unemployed people will improve their labor market opportunities and life chances in general with education and training activities rather than work enforcement strategies, a work-first strategy emphasizes that unemployed individuals should take any job as the first alternative in order to escape welfare dependency and to obtain important work experience. Rather critically, Handler & Hasenfeld (2007) describe the work-first strategy this way: “[it] assumes that there are sufficient jobs in the economy for current and potential welfare recipients, that any job is better than no job, that by taking a job and sticking with it the exrecipient will move up the economic ladder and escape poverty” (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007, p. 3).

Human capital proponents argue that the work-first strategy does not necessarily reduce economic difficulties or bring people in to the mainstream society as such strategies might force people to take unstable and low paying work, which in the long run, increases their economic and social marginalization. In fact, those who question the work-first strategy as an adequate activation policy approach (van Berkel & Møller, 2002, Goul Andersen & Jensen, 2002; Lødemel & Trickey, 2000) assert that mandatory work requirements increases social exclusion due to limitations of social rights and stigmatized and discretionary policy practices. In contrast, work-first proponents claim that welfare dependency in itself is negative and that a regular work will help welfare recipients to secure an income, find and become good role models, and thereby be better equipped to become part of the mainstream society (Giddens, 1998; Mead, 1986, 2005; Zäll, 2001).

These two perspectives are difficult to distinguish in existing policy solutions as most programs involve features of them both. The utilization of each perspective is dependent on the political-institutional context in which the activation policy is executed. This fact emphasizes activation policy as a rather vague and ambiguous policy phenomenon, which makes it difficult to determine what kind of policy solution that is employed in practice only by examining the formal policy goals. Since the relationship between formal policy and street-level practice is neither direct nor obvious an analysis of the street-level practices provides an
empirical strategy for identifying what activation policy models that are most applicable in the Swedish municipal social services.

The Swedish Welfare State

Sweden is part of the global activation policy trend, but also represents a different position in comparison with many other countries. Sweden has often served as an example of a welfare state that emphasizes the importance of social rights and citizenship (Esping-Andersson, 1990; Mishra, 1981; Titmuss, 1974). Sweden is also considered a significant example of a re-distributive welfare state, one stressing universal and comprehensive policies, such as national social insurance, health care, childcare, and generous family support policies. Social expenditures – both cash benefits and social services combined – constitute the highest proportion of GDP in comparison with other OECD countries (OECD 2008). Sweden has also had national and governmental “active labor market policies” for a long period of time, which has attempted to re-train and prepare people for the on-going changes on the regular labor market. In this welfare state context, the development of increased activation policy requirements indicates a shift toward decreasing social rights and increasing individual obligations and duties (Handler, 2004; Hvinden & Johansson, 2007; Johansson, 2001; Lindquist & Marklund, 1995). However, it is also worth noting that Sweden has a more equal wage structure (with few jobs like U.S. “minimum wage” levels) in addition to a well-developed childcare structure that makes it possible for parents to work full-time. This means, in general, that someone who is able to find a job, even an entry level, low-skilled job, would provide a decent standard of living.

A Dual Welfare Policy Structure in Sweden

Although Sweden has an impressive welfare state reputation, scholars have also indicated that it rests on a dual structure. Those with a stable relationship to the labor market experience high levels of social security, such as unemployment insurance and sickness benefits. Those without ties to the labor market must often rely on municipal social assistance in the case of financial difficulties (Marklund & Svalfors, 1987; Salonen, 1993). Lødemel (1997) demonstrates that countries with well-developed governmental social welfare systems, like Sweden, have means-tested social assistance programs at the municipal levels for those who do not qualify for the more comprehensive social protection schemes. Lødemel (1992) argues that “[s]ocial assistance in the Nordic social democratic regimes marginalized through the extension of social insurance. The target group is therefore limited to the very poorest of the able bodied. A strong emphasis on social control and treatment has resulted from that these people are in need of ‘something more’ than income maintenance only” (Lødemel, 1992, p. 17-18). Thus, the organization of the Swedish welfare state creates a fundamental divide between deserving and undeserving poor in the sense that the social assistance system sorts recipients through underlying principles of undeserving and deserving clients.
The emerging activation policy trend in Sweden seems to reinforce this duality by changing internal welfare policy boundaries, shifting the balance between the welfare state and the market economy through its emphasis on work enforcement strategies. The trend also increases individual responsibilities and mandatory requirements in addition to stricter means-testing and higher levels of surveillance (Lindquist & Marklund, 1995). Under such conditions, it is argued that when there are mandatory activation requirements established for last-resort financial benefits it constitutes an “offer you can’t refuse” (Lødemel & Trickey, 2000). This points to the importance of understanding if and when social assistance recipients can either utilize resistance in the forms of “exit” and “voice”, or if they need to be compliant in order to demonstrate their “loyalty” (Hirschman, 1970).

Although this duality is emphasized in the Nordic welfare states, many modern welfare states rest on such a dual structure. Comparative welfare policy and welfare state research examines generally the expenditures and level of support for the social insurance programs like social security and unemployment insurance (Esping-Andersen, 1990 1999). Studies in this vein rarely examine last-resort social assistance systems for the most marginalized populations. The main question in this study, however, is to understand how activation policy in Sweden is operationalized at the street-level in such dual welfare structure and what type of practices that renders on the ground.

**Four Important Features of the Swedish Welfare State**

Beside this dual structure, the Swedish welfare state rests on a number of fundamental features that are relevant to discussions of the political-institutional backgrounds of municipal activation policy. One such feature is the “full employment” strategy. Sweden exhibits extensive interventions in the market sector designed to redirect production and maintain full employment. Full employment has been an important political ambition in Sweden in order to ensure low unemployment rates and provide many with generous welfare policies.13 This means that Sweden has, comparatively, high labor force participation as well as low unemployment levels.14,15 The other feature is the “work-line”, which emphasizes both the importance of a strong work ethic and the fact that one should be able to be self-sufficient through regular employment (see Esser, 2006 for a detailed discussion about the work ethic and Junestav, 2004 for a detailed discussion

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13 The full employment goal is still important in Swedish economic politics but has since the economic recession in the 1990s been less emphasized. Instead, the goal to reduce inflation has been the prioritized since the 1990s (Lindwall, 2004).

14 For that reason, labor market participation in Sweden is one of the highest in the world (over 80 percent) and unemployment rates have been significantly low compared to many other OECD countries.

15 Before the crisis years in the 1990s, unemployment was as low as 2 percent in Sweden and peaked in 1993 at 10.4 percent. Although Sweden was hit hard during this time period, the economy has recovered and the unemployment rate began to decrease in the late 1990s and has been around 4 and 6 percent between 2000 and 2006 (Statistics Sweden, 2008).
about the work-line). These ideas are deeply engrained in Sweden as a nation and in traditional social democratic ideology, although they have also been emphasized by the center-right coalition that currently governs Sweden.

A third feature is Sweden’s system of active labor market policy programs. In the Swedish welfare state, active labor market policies have an important role in encouraging individuals to enter and re-enter the labor market (Esping-Andersen, 1990, Junestav, 2004). In fact, Sweden has had national and governmental active labor market policies since the late 1940s (Cochrane et al., 2001; Lindvert, 2004) and these policies focus both on a general development of the labor market and an improvement of the work force (Olofsson, 1996). Thus, this type of active labor market policy programs tend to emphasize re-training and skills-enhancement in case of unemployment instead of passive income benefits alone (Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2002).

A fourth feature of the Swedish welfare state context is the unemployment insurance system. Unemployment insurance is the most important financial benefit system in case of unemployment in Sweden. Although, it is administered by the trade unions it is subsidized by governmental public funds and a majority of Swedish workers, both blue and white collars are entitled to unemployment insurance.16 It is mainly those who do not fulfill the entitlement rules of the unemployment insurance system that need to apply for the social assistance offered by municipal social services. Thus, when qualifications rules are made more restricted or unemployment rates increases significantly more people are at risk for not being entitled unemployment insurance and thereby in need for social assistance (Salonen, 1997). The relationship between social assistance and municipal activation policy is that many unemployed social assistance recipients are increasingly being required to perform activation requirements in return for social assistance.

**Governmental Labor Market Policies and Municipal Activation Policy Programs**

The so-called active labor market policy system targets all job-ready citizens in Sweden that are in need of labor market support. The governmental labor market policy system provides a number of services ranging from job matching between unemployed individuals and job vacancies, training and education programs, employer subsidies, and different form of income support programs.17 One im-

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16 In 2006 550,000 people received unemployment insurance, which equals 6.1 percent of the population. The total spending on unemployment insurance in 2006 was 29.9 billion SEK. The unemployment insurance covers both employees and self-employed persons and consists of two parts: a general basic insurance (a base amount) and an insurance against income loss (an income-related benefit). It is paid by the unemployment insurance funds administered by labor unions but is subsidized by the national government. In order to be entitled unemployment insurance one must be a member of a labor union and fulfill a prior work history requirement (Inspektionen av Arbetslöshetsförsäkringen, IAF, 2007).

17 In 2006 an average of 140,000 individuals per month participated in various labor market programs administered through the national labor market policy system. This makes up to around one third of all unemployed, and approximately 3 percent of the total work force in Sweden. Around 13,000
important component of the governmental labor market policy system is the public Employment Services. There are 325 Employment Services in Sweden and they support both unemployed and working individuals with job vacancies postings and job-search support. All unemployed persons in Sweden are formally allowed to utilize the Employment Services, including social assistance recipients. Many municipalities are, in fact, requiring social assistance recipients to be registered at the Employment Services but it has been demonstrated that social assistance recipients are occasionally restricted from using the Employment Services (Ds 1999:54; Thorén, 2005). The governmental system and the Employment Services are based on national policies and legislations, it is granted governmental funding, and it is common with systematic program evaluations and follow-ups.

Parallel with the governmental labor market policy system, municipalities began to develop a wide range of local work-related activation programs for unemployed social assistance recipients in the 1990s. This development culminated with a re-formalization of the Social Service Act in 1998, which is the formal legislation for social assistance policy. The 1998 re-wording made it possible for municipalities to formally require participation in different kinds of activation measures in exchange for social assistance (Johansson, 2001). At the same time, the Supreme Administrative Court (the highest court in Sweden for social assistance appeals) and the National Board of Health and Welfare (the national authority that oversees and supervise the municipal social services) started to argue more strongly that unemployed social assistance recipients should be mandated to do something in return for social assistance (ibid), such as participate in either municipal activation programs or governmental labor market policy programs. The municipal activation system is totally decentralized and a much more scattered system compared to the governmental system. It is funded through the local municipal budgets and does not receive any governmental grants or other sources of national funding. Furthermore, the Social Service Act do not stipulate any specific program policies or other forms of program directives, which has resulted in a large variation in municipal activation policy approaches in Swedish municipalities (Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004).

It is claimed that a major difference between the governmental and the municipal systems is that participants in the governmental labor market policy system experience more rights-based support and less surveillance compared to those in the municipal activation systems. It is also argued that the governmental system provides more adequate training and education possibilities with higher quality (Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004; Ulmestig, 2007). In fact, Salonen & Ulmestig (2004) suggest that municipal activation policy functioning as a “second rate” program for those who do not qualify for unemployment insurance.

individuals participate in municipal activation policy programs per month (National Labour Market Board, 2007; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004).
The 1990s Economic Recession

In order to understand the development of municipal activation policy one must consider the economic crisis that hit Sweden in the 1990s. In the 1990s, the Swedish welfare state experienced its first real challenge since the economic recession in the 1930s. The 1990s crisis resulted in a spike of the unemployment rate. This put pressure on many traditional welfare principles and a number of welfare policies were made more restrictive (SOU 2000:3). Analysts have described the 1990s welfare transformations as a “flight from universalism,” with institutional changes and financial cutbacks in several welfare policy programs. Unemployment insurance and other social security programs implemented stricter entitlement conditions and lowered their benefit levels, as well as increasing reliance on means-testing for social assistance (Sunesson, et al. 1998). Salonen (2001) contends that the welfare changes in the 1990s entailed signs of a re-commodification in which political support was given to a renewed emphasis on paid work and work-first approaches (for a detailed discussion about commodifications see Esping-Andersen 1990). During these transitional years, Sweden moved toward more selective safety-nets, in which activation policy became a new policy alternative in the Swedish welfare state context.

Municipalities’ fiscal capacity was also hit hard by the 1990s recession. Tax revenues became significantly lower as the increase in unemployment resulted in fewer tax paying residents at the municipal level, a situation that affected municipal social assistance administrations in two major ways. First, municipalities had less money to spend on social assistance, and second, the need for social assistance grew significantly at the same time. Salonen (1997) demonstrates that since most welfare policy programs in Sweden require an a priori attachment to the labor market, the high unemployment rates in the 1990s resulted in many people being excluded from the unemployment insurance system and thereby

18 Despite the many welfare changes in the 1990s Sweden it is still a country with broad social welfare and labor market protections. Sweden spends around one third of its GDP on welfare policy measures. The majority of the money is used for old-age pensions, elder care, public childcare, and income protection transfers. Around 0.4 percent of the GDP is spent on social assistance benefits. A significant share of the working population is still covered by the unemployment insurance and the social security insurance systems. They cover income losses caused by unemployment, health related problems, parental leave, and disability. The governmental labor market policy system is providing a number of labor market policy programs, work subsidies, and job-search services for the unemployed. Sweden has also an affordable and well-established public childcare system in addition to and a parental leave insurance system for working families. Health care is universal and open for everybody to rather low costs. People with mental and physical disabilities are also entitled different sorts of economic support and rehabilitation services Olofsson (2007).

19 The new center-right government has since it was elected in 2006 made significant reductions and cut backs in both unemployment insurance and other social security protection systems in terms of lower benefit levels and stricter entitlement rules. Another significant change is that the new government also increased membership fees for the unemployment insurance, which has led to a large number of dropouts from the unemployment insurance funds, which means that less people are entitled unemployment insurance in case of unemployment. This fact can lead to an increased need for social assistance in case of increasing unemployment rates in an economic downturn.
forced to apply for municipal social assistance (Bergmark, 2000a; Salonen 1997).

At this time, the political debate became growingly occupied with the question of how municipalities could meet the rising demand for social assistance (SOU 2007:3; Svenska Kommunförbundet, 1998), and to what extent individuals should be responsible for their financial and social predicaments, and whether generous welfare policy schemes, in fact, reduced individuals’ motivation to support themselves through work.20 Other disputed issues in relation to these debates were the stringency of work requirements, the conditions for mandatory activation, benefit levels, and eligibility rules in general (Carlsson & Rojas, 2001; Kjöller, 2002, Jonasson, 1996).

In addition to the high influx of unemployed individuals to the municipal social assistance systems, municipalities also claimed that they were overwhelmed with social assistance recipients who did not receive adequate support from the Employment Services (Ds 1999:54; Ulmestig, 2007). This perception fueled the municipal activation policy development as local politicians and social assistance managers saw an increasing need for municipal activation measures in order to lower social assistance expenditures (Jonasson, 1996; Ulmestig, 2007). Since social assistance is a municipal responsibility without national subsidizes and distinct national regulations, the increased reliance of activation requirements as a social assistance condition helped the municipalities to monitor the client draft and thereby monitor social assistance expenditures more efficient. For politicians, program managers, as well as the general public, the major idea was that a municipal activation requirement was an adequate policy solution for many of the concerns with unemployment and welfare dependency. Thus, activation policy became a popular policy intervention at the municipal levels (Salonen, 2006). While some scholars in Sweden extolled the benefits of activation requirement measures, and pointed to the success of particular municipalities in implementing such policies (Zäll, 2001), other scholars were concerned that those without a prior work history on the regular labor market were being relegated to under-resourced and punitive municipal activation systems (Sunesson et al. 1998; Salonen & Ulmestig 2004; Ulmestig, 2007).

Municipal Decentralization and Activation Policy Variations

In addition to the 1990s financial crisis, a number of other factors influenced the development of the municipal activation policy. First, there was a general political preference that the government and the municipalities should serve different categories of the unemployed. Second, municipal activation programs already had started to exist at small scale in the municipalities (Ulmestig, 2007). Third, there was an increased wish for decentralization and a higher reliance on active measures at the local level (Bergmark, 2001). In governmental reports it was argued that municipalities have a better knowledge about the local employment

20 Compare with the discussions about welfare dependency in the U.S. See for example, Fraser & Gordon (1994), Mead (1997), and Murray (1984).
situation and are more flexible in regards to these local circumstances (SOU 1998:166; SOU 1999:97). Decisions about the organization of activation policy programs were thereby delegated to the discretion of the municipal social service organizations. Previous research on both social assistance and activation has demonstrated considerable variation both across, and within, municipalities with respect to policy interpretation and policy implementation (Billquist, 1999; Gustafsson et al., 1990; Hydén et al., 1995; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004; Stranz, 2007; Sunesson et al., 1998; Tengvald, 1997).

The significant level of variation across and within municipalities can be viewed as problematic given concerns over legal security and equal public treatment of citizens (Rothstein, 1994). The local character of activation policy increases the risk that citizens with similar needs might receive very different support or face radically different requirements, only because they are living in different municipalities or encounter different public officials. Such consequence is also part of the critical discussion about activation policy; those who express concerns with the decentralized character of activation policy are basing their arguments on the risk of a high variation of rights or obligations (Bergmark, 2001; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004). They claim that locally determined and administered social policies limit social rights compared to national and governmental policies. On the other hand, increased decentralization and local control can also provide improved democratic rights as well as making policy solutions adaptable to local circumstances (Bergmark, 2001).

The Legal and Administrative Foundation of Swedish Activation Policy

Activation policy in Sweden is not regulated through an individual legislation or policy document; instead municipal activation policy and activation requirements are indirectly regulated through the social assistance rules in the Social Service Act. Due to this legal construction, activation policy must be seen as a part of the municipal social assistance administration in Sweden. Social assistance is the equivalent of “welfare” provided by the PRWORA legislation in the U.S. It is a means-tested monthly benefit and all residents over 18-years old in a municipality have the right to apply for social assistance.21

These is no universal right to social assistance since social workers in the social services assess the claimants’ income and financial status in order to determine their eligibility for the benefit. Potential recipients are only eligible if they have used up their entitlements to other social protection schemes and no financial assets are allowed, including cars or personal savings. Thus, social assis-

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21 In 2006 392,500 people received social assistance in 219,000 households, which equals 4.3 percent of the population. The highest level was in 1996 when 8 percent of the population received social assistance. Since then, the level has been stable between 4 and 6 percent. In 2006 the total expenditure for social assistance that was 8.7 billion SEK, which equals 0.4 percent of the GDP (Statistics Sweden 2007; The National Board of Health and Social Welfare 2007).
Social Assistance is the last-resort economic support system in Sweden and it is entirely funded and provided by the 290 local municipalities in Sweden. There is no family dependency or female lone-parent rules like those in the PRWORA legislation. In fact, social assistance covers all household types in Sweden and single men without children are, actually, the largest group among the Swedish social assistance recipients. Other household types that receive social assistance and are over represented within their own household types are immigrants, young people, and single mothers (Fritzell et al., 2007).

Social Assistance and the Social Service Act

Social assistance is administered and delivered by the municipal social services, which is the public agency that also administers child protection services, family services, substance abuse support, and certain mental health services. A local "social service board" manages the municipal social services, and this board is constituted by local politicians that provide the oversight, sets local policy guidelines, and allocates the budget for the local social service agency. The national Social Service Act (Socialtjänstlagen 2001:453) regulates the municipal social services, including social assistance delivery and its related activation policy requirements. The Social Service Act stipulates that:

"Someone who cannot support for themselves or cannot find support elsewhere has the right to social assistance by the municipal Social Service Board for its livelihood. The individual shall be secured a reasonable standard of living and the support shall be given in a way that improves the individual’s possibilities to live an independent life."24

The monthly social assistance allowance includes food, rent, clothes, electricity etc. At the national level, the legislation requires that municipalities provide social assistance to a minimum amount through a national minimum norm.25

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22 Young people between 18 and 29 years are the most growing population dependant on social assistance in Sweden and in 2004, as many as 40 percent of all social assistance recipients were within this age group. Immigrants are another vulnerable group and in 42 percent among the social assistance households at least one person are born in a foreign country. Single mothers is not the largest group receiving social assistance, but as many as 20 percent of all single mother are in need to social assistance. In 2006, 43 percent of the social assistance recipients were unemployed as the main reason for their lack for financial resources and 32 percent received social assistance for more than ten months in 2006, which make them “long-term” social assistance recipients according to the Swedish welfare policy terminology (National Board of Health and Welfare 2007).

23 Variations in terms of the labeling of the social service board and the social service agency can occur, but a majority of all Swedish municipalities has a social service agency that is responsible for the social assistance administration.

24 The Social Service Act (SFS 2001:453), Chapter 4, Section, [My translation of the Social Service Act].

25 According to formal legislation (Socialtjänstförordningen) is 2008 national norm 3550 SEK/month (approximately $600/month) for a single adult plus the monthly cost for housing. The national norm is called “riksnorm” in Swedish.
Municipalities have the autonomy to decide about social assistance amounts above the national minimum norm. If an individual or a household has incomes below the national norm, they are entitled to social assistance. In addition to the national norm, most municipalities have local policy guidelines and more detailed directives for their social assistance provision including specification about what supplementary expenses (e.g. bus cards, health care expenses, extra clothing for children) that could be granted in that particular municipality. But beside these legal formulations, the Social Service Act allows for a great deal of local self-determination since the Social Service Act is constructed as a “framework law”, without any detailed specifications about how social assistance should be delivered in each municipality. This means that both the local municipality and the social workers who determine social assistance eligibility, are granted significant levels of discretion.

Every social assistance case is assessed and treated individually and claimants must re-apply every month. The application can be initiated through application forms or phone calls but claimants will also need to meet with a social workers in order to verify required documentation about income, housing situation, employment situation etc. before their application is formally decided upon. There are no national or standard application procedures or forms for social assistance since social assistance is a local and municipal administrative responsibility in Sweden. In order to be entitled to social assistance claimants can be required by the municipality to participate in different measures that could improve their possibilities to become self-sufficient. These measures could be mental health services, work rehabilitation, substance abuse treatment, as well as activation policy activities for unemployed claimants. Whether a social assistance claimant will be required to participate in a social service measure, including activation requirements, are in general assessed by professional social workers within the municipal social assistance administrations. Thus, there is not precise policy definition if and when a social assistance claimant is required since such requirements are based on the discretionary decisions of social workers.

**Activation Requirements at the Municipal Level**

Activation requirements are not mandatory for the municipalities and the Social Service Act only recommends that activation requirement can be imposed on unemployed social assistance recipients that are fit to work. Although the legislation is rather imprecise about the requirements, the 1998 re-wording of the Social Service Act made it clear that clients could be mandated to participate in various measures in order to improve their possibilities to become self-sufficient. The Social Service Act stipulates that;

> “The Social Service Board may require a person receiving livelihood support (social assistance, my comment) for a certain amount of time to take part in a municipal work experience or other local skill-enhancing activity to which he or she is referred by the Social Service Board, if it is not possible to provide partici-
Thus, the Social Service Act formulates that participation in local activation program could be required when it is not possible to find a suitable program placements within the governmental labor market policy system. Again, given its framework structure, the Social Service Act only briefly outlines under what conditions municipalities can require a mandatory activation requirement and what content they should entail:

"... work experience or skill-enhancing activities as aforesaid shall have the purpose of developing the possibilities for the individual to be self-supporting in the future. The activity shall strengthen the possibilities for the individual to enter the labor market or, where appropriate, further training. It shall be framed with reasonable consideration for personal preferences and aptitudes of the individual concerned. Before making a decision . . . the Social Service Board shall consult with the local Employment Services."  

Here the Social Service Act indicates that the activation requirement should be individually tailored in order to consider and improve each individual’s employment circumstances. The municipal social services should also consult with the local Employment Services about suitable programs before requiring participation in a local program.

In addition to the above legislative, a common and widespread “rule” in social assistance administration is that unemployed social assistance recipients should be registered at the Employment Services. Another regular prerequisite is that social assistance clients must show that they are “[at] the disposal of the labor market”, which means that they should be actively searching for jobs and accept reasonable job offers. There are no formal rules about the content or frequency about the job search activity, however, and such rules are therefore locally determined at the municipal level or at the discretion of the individual social workers. Municipalities also are allowed to sanction clients who do not fulfill administrative income level rules or local activation requirement rules by reducing or withdrawing the social assistance benefit. Also in relation to sanctions, there are no formal rules or directives about how and to what level the social assistance should be reduced or withdrawn. In sum, local activation requirements are an optional intervention that municipalities can both require and design to almost any form and size within this imprecise and rule scarce legislative context.

26 The Social Service Act (SFS 2001:453), Chapter 4, Section 4.
27 The Social Service Act (SFS 2001:453), Chapter 4, Section 4.
Specific Activation Policy Targets

Nevertheless, the Social Service Act formulates some specific rules for young people and people with particular needs for work-related support.28 These formal conditions focus on persons under the age of 25; persons older than 25 years, but with particular needs for competence and skills enhancing activities; or persons in education (i.e. students). The intention is that activation measures should particularly target these groups.29 Additional directives in the legislation for these specific groups indicate that municipalities have more responsibilities for young people in the sense that the activation requirement must follow an individual action plan. The activation requirement should also have a stronger emphasis on competence enhancing measures compared to activities for unemployed recipients in general. But since municipalities have a great deal of autonomy in interpreting the Social Service Act’s legislative content, the above conditions are not implemented in similar ways at the municipal level (Socialstyrelsen, 2005).30

There exist a wide array of interpretations, especially in terms of who has “special needs for competence and skills enhancing activities”. For example, the National Board of Health and Social Services reported that most municipalities make no distinctions between the specific target groups and other social assistance recipients. In fact, many municipalities required unemployed social assistance recipients to meet activation measures without making any references to the adequate legal statutory (National Board of Health and Social Services 2005).

Municipal Variation in Activation Policy Measures

In the only major mapping of municipal activation policy programs in Sweden, Salonen & Ulmestig (2004) demonstrate that some municipalities implemented activation programs directly through their social service agencies, while other municipalities developed separate “job centers”, which were separated from the social assistance administration. Many activation programs were arranged as time-limited projects, whereas others were permanent parts of the social service organizations. The programs included different types of measures, such as education, practical work placements, and job search activities, while others only provided one type of activation measure to all participants. A large financial variation between program types was also found and program or intervention cost per participant and month ranged from 1,000 SEK to 15,000 SEK (ibid). Other major findings were the large disparities and inconsistencies in target groups as well as in program goals, which highlights the discretionary character of municipal activation policy. Salonen & Ulmestig calculate that approximately 30,000 people and 12 percent of all social assistance recipients participate in approximately 800 programs per year (ibid).

28 The Social Service Act (SFS 2001:453), Chapter 4, Section 4 and 5.
29 This intention is described in the Government Bill (Prop. 1996/1997:124) that proposed the changes in the Social Service Act in 1998 and guides the formal legislation.
30 The English translation of Socialstyrelsen is the “National Board of Health and
Prior Research on Municipal Activation Policy

Only a handful of studies have empirically examined the municipal activation policy reform in Sweden and there is still a large need for additional knowledge production on this particular policy field. In regards to implementation, Hedblom (2004) has demonstrated in an empirical study that differentiation strategies and stereotypical client categorizations based on gender status were common in local activation implementation processes. Such practices produced activation measures that had prospects of re-integrating male clients to the regular labor market while marginalizing female clients.

It has also been empirically demonstrated that activation program objectives, as stated by program managers and program documents, seldom corresponded with the staffs’ statements about the program or how clients experienced the program (Ekström 2005). Ekström concludes that her findings seemed rather ambiguous in relation to the intentions and rules in the Social Service Act. A more positive picture about the implementation of social assistance and activation requirements has been provided by Jewell (2007), in so far that he claims that street-level staff involved in both social assistance administration and in activation programs responded accurately to clients’ personal needs and circumstances. He concludes that street-level staff in the Swedish social assistance and activation policy context had both program and professional resources to perform an individually oriented activation approach, especially in comparison with welfare workers in Germany and the U.S.

Whether activation programs are effective in terms of increased work participation and higher income levels is still rather unknown in Sweden. The small body of work examining such outcomes has found, in general, only modest effects in terms of employment levels or increased incomes (Giertz 2004; Hallsten et al. 2002; Milton 2006; Milton & Bergström 1998). Although incomplete, the above inquiries are valuable for the knowledge about municipal activation policy. But the limited research in this particular policy area demonstrates the need for further examinations, with different perspectives, of the development, the content, and the meaning of Swedish activation policy. This dissertation fills one gap by examining the implication of the street-level practices within the current activation policy trend.

Activation Policy and Social Work Practices

The municipal social services are, in general, staffed with professional and trained social workers in Sweden. The municipal social services are also the largest organizational arena in which “social work” is conducted in Sweden (Lundström & Sunesson, 2000; Bergmark & Lundström, 2007). The non-profit

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31 Ekström’s study was also conducted in Skärholmen city-district, but her fieldwork took place two years later than the fieldwork conducted for this study.

32 In the Swedish social services the professional social workers’ formal work title is “socialsekreterare”.

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sector is rather small, which can be explained by the municipalities’ predominant role in providing both social work and social services. In the Swedish context, social workers have a relatively high status and social work education has a long tradition in the country (Meeuwisse & Svärd, 2008). They have a dual role as both controllers and helpers and their work is performed within the administrative boundaries of the Social Service Act. Professional social workers are trained and guided by expertise, developed skill sets, work norms, and professional values. In its initial main paragraph, the Social Service Act also spells out that clients’ self-determination and individual preferences should be respected and taken into account within the social services, and those legal intentions apply to activation policy requirements as well.33

In regards to municipal activation policy, social workers conduct social assistance eligibility determinations and assess clients’ employment status in order to determine what kind of activation measure they need. It is generally social workers who refer the clients to the activation programs and determine what a client should be doing at the activation program. Occasionally, social workers are working directly in the local municipal activation programs but these programs are regularly staffed with non-professional staff without formal social work credentials.

In this dissertation, the activation program staff is referred to as “activation workers” and they are performing the daily work within the local activation programs. In Swedish terms, it is said that social workers are “exercising the public authority”, while the activation workers do not determine any formal decisions neither for the social assistance claim nor the activation requirement.34 The staff in the activation programs might not be professional social workers, but they are operating within the social assistance administration and act in close relationship with the social work. Such arrangement implies that activation policy practice should also be guided by regular social work principles (see Salonen 2006 for detailed discussions about activation policy and social work principles).

Thus, social assistance and its related activation policy seem to generate both “carrots” and “sticks” in the Swedish welfare state context. It claims to provide individualized and enabling support to clients with employment support needs but it restrains and judges through controlling components at the same time. This study’s operating theoretical foundations suggest that such contradictions and uncertainties are materialized in street-level practices, but it is an empirical question to examine how this policy duality shapes the street-level practices.

34 To “exercise public authority” is the formal term for this type of formal decision-making in Sweden and the Swedish term is “myndighetsutövning”.

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The Swedish Activation Policy Context and Implication for Research

As this chapter has shown, activation policy in Sweden is ambiguous both in terms of its underlying meaning and assumptions and the policy models used. First, the Social Service Act is a framework law, which produces a vast array of interpretations of “who can be required” and what clients are “required to do”. Second, the legislation is vague in terms of rights and obligations for both the individual and the municipality. Currently, the formal legislation opens up for a situation in which the activation requirement can entail both voluntary and enabling support measures as well as coercive and more disciplining activation measures. Third, few presidential and guiding legal cases in the Administrative Courts have advised how the legislation should be interpreted in terms of the scope and the content of the local activation requirement. In this ambiguous political-institutional context, municipal activation policy can take many possible shapes. For example, what types of clients are required? Under what circumstances are clients required to participate in activation requirements? What do clients have to do when activated? What kind of activation support do they receive? What happen if clients fail to fulfill the activation requirement? Ultimately, these questions are left to be answered by street-level workers’ discretionary implementation practices.
4. Research Methodology and Study Design

This chapter entails a presentation of the research methodology and the study design for the dissertation research. The research approach for this dissertation is a case study of multiple sites, a design that highlights how two different organizations translate activation policy into practice. Data for the project was collected through observations of the street-level workers’ daily work, including their interactions with clients and colleagues. This research method was utilized in order to achieve detailed and thorough understanding regarding activation policy as it is produced on the ground. The data collection approach also included interviews and conversations with key personnel in these organizations in addition to the analysis of policy documents and program manuals.

Case Study Design

According to Yin (1994), the case study approach is valuable when the research objective is to investigate “contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). For this study, street-level practices of municipal activation policy as a phenomenon is difficult to disentangle from their organizational context. Under such circumstances, it is more relevant to collect large amounts of data from a few cases because this provides a complex understanding of the phenomena (see also Esiasson et al., 2004, chapter 7). When multiple sources of evidence are utilized, it provides a more nuanced and broader knowledge of the phenomena (ibid).

Moreover, the case study approach is beneficial when a study is exploratory and when prior knowledge is relatively limited in the area being examined. A case study approach is therefore an appropriate research strategy for this particular study since municipal activation policy is a rather unexplored element within the area of the Swedish welfare state. A case study approach is also suitable when “a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin 1994, p. 9). This study seeks to understand the real and practical aspects of the implementation processes of the current activation development in Sweden. In other words, the current study attempts to understand how municipal activation policy is taking shape and why it takes that particular shape considering the political-institutional and organizational environments in which it is implemented.
Furthermore, the case study research approach seeks to expand and generalize about particular theoretical frameworks (i.e. analytic generalization). In that vein, this study attempts to develop and expand our theoretical understanding of how the political-institutional contexts and organizational conditions shape the street-level practical responses to activation policies. In this research area, several prior studies have successfully utilized a case study approach in order to improve our knowledge about both implementation practice theory and work-related welfare policies (see for example Brodkin, 1997; Jewell, 2007; Sandfort, 1999; Wright, 2002).

Multiple-Case Study Design
Case studies can either be single-case or multiple-case designs. Both approaches stem from the same methodological framework and can be equalized with the logic of “multiple experiments” (Yin, 1994). The most significant advantage to utilize more than one case is often that the results are viewed as more compelling and robust. The sites in a multiple case study must be carefully chosen and each case must be important in itself for the overall research objective and the specific research questions. The analytic inference from two independent cases is considered more compelling than from one single-case study because the two different cases are most likely different in particular aspects. If the research findings from two (or more) separate cases are similar, despite such contextual differences, the analytic conclusions are more rigorous than results from one single case (ibid). For that reason, this is a multiple-case study in which two municipal social service organizations were selected in order to achieve a comprehensive and robust understanding of municipal activation policy in Sweden as it is taking shape in different contextual settings.

A multiple-case study can follow a “replication” logic in which the cases are selected on the basis that they would predict similar or contrasting results according to prior propositions in theoretical frameworks. Such replication procedures are called “literal” and “theoretical” replications and they seek to develop theory rather than testing theory. The replication logic should not be mistaken with a sampling logic in which the research cases are meant to represent the larger pool from which statistical generalizations can be made (ibid). For this particular study the goal is to develop street-level implementation theory instead of testing a specific theory and follows thereby the replication logic. With that in mind, Osby municipality and Skärholmen city-district were selected due to strong and similar commitments to the municipal activation policy reform in Sweden, which would predict similar street-level implementation approaches. With this study design, the dissertation is not a “comparative” case study in which the research cases are compared with each other. Instead, both similar and different examples of street-level implementation practices will be used in order to improve our knowledge how the local activation policy contexts shape the street-level practices.
Sampling Strategy of Research Sites

An additional rationale for selecting more than one case is to increase the study’s external validity by examining two organizational settings that are located and structured differently (Huberman & Miles, 2000). This sampling strategy permits an analysis that distinguishes the unique aspects from the systemic aspects of the street-level practices in two particular activation contexts. The selected research sites in this study are chosen through purposeful sampling in order to obtain information that is important for the street-level practices of activation policy. Such a purposeful sampling method is suitable when the selected cases entail conditions that are of interests in regards to the research questions (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For this particular study, the two research sites have been selected because they both demonstrate similar approaches to activation policy and both research sites have developed comparable activation programs for unemployed social assistance recipients. Since neither Skärholmen’s nor Osby’s activation programs represent the “average” activation policy programs in Sweden, the multiple-case study strategy utilized here does not allow generalizations about Swedish activation programs in general. Instead, the selection of two research sites is justifiable in order to increase validity and to be able to make robust conclusions by clearly observing the practices of activation policy.

Furthermore, both research sites have received significant attention in mass media as well as an interest from other Swedish municipalities. They are often viewed as prototypical activation policy models in Sweden and politicians are regularly referring to these programs as “good” or “successful” examples of municipal activation policy. This situation makes the selected research sites valuable for gaining insights about the current activation trend in Sweden. One limitation with the case selection is that the sites might represent either unique or extreme activation models due to their strong activation commitment in comparison with many other municipalities in Sweden. But since these two particular programs often have served as role models in the Swedish activation debate, they are appropriate in this study in order to increase the understanding of activation policy within the Swedish welfare state context.

Multiple-case studies can also entail a number of embedded cases or analytic subunits in contrast to a holistic case study design (Yin, 1994). In organizational

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35 The major findings in Salonen & Ulmestig (2004) were that most activation programs provided a number of different kinds of activities, varied significantly in expenditures and resources, target very different populations, and had different goal orientations. These finding makes it difficult to talk about an “average” or a typical activation programs in the Swedish activation context. However, Salonen & Ulmestig found that 71 percent of all activation programs involved less than 24 participants, compared to Skärholmen who had over 200 clients on a daily basis. Osby were more equal to that finding with, in general, ten to fifteen social assistance recipients as program participants.

36 Other municipalities and organizations have visited them; they have figured in a number of newspaper articles and appeared in TV and radio programs. Managers for the programs in these municipalities are regularly invited as speakers at conferences. Other municipalities have tried to replicate their activation approaches based on information from study visits, conference presentations, and media.
case studies the subunits often constitute of different process units in which different programmatic locations or roles are common examples. In the two current research sites, four different subunits are identified and data collection and observations has taken place in all four subunits. The four subunits in this study are the following:

- the social assistance administration in Skärholmen
- the activation program in Skärholmen (Jobbcentrum)
- the social assistance administration in Osby
- the activation program in Osby (Källan)

Overview of Research Sites

It is suggested that selected cases should differ in certain conditions in order to confirm or disconfirm certain theoretical propositions or empirical research findings (Creswell, 1998). Although a strong engagement in activation policy and similarities in regards to their activation program approaches, Osby and Skärholmen represent two rather different types of research sites.

Osby is a small town municipality in the southern part of Sweden and Skärholmen city-district is part of Stockholm municipality, which is an urban big-city municipality. They also differ in relation to organizational size and structures, client demographics, plus local economic conditions. For example, Skärholmen city-district is a suburb in Stockholm city with 31,000 inhabitants and with such size Skärholmen, is actually larger than most municipalities in Sweden. In 2003, ten percent of the population received social assistance. The unemployment rate was 3.6 percent in 2002 and increased to 6 percent in 2003. Furthermore, Skärholmen has a rather heterogeneous demography with a large immigrant population, similar to many other urban areas in Sweden. Almost 50 percent of the population in Skärholmen has an immigrant background and the majority coming from Middle Eastern countries, Africa, the former Yugoslavia, or South America. As many as 40 percent of the social assistance recipients in Skärholmen had an immigrant background at the time for the study (Statistics Stockholm, 2004).

Osby represents a small-town municipality with a population of 12,600 inhabitants and a much more homogenous “Swedish,” or non-immigrant, population. In 2003, 8 percent of the population was born outside Sweden and only 2 percent of the entire municipality population received social assistance. The unemployment rate was 2.8 percent in 2002 and increased to 3.2 percent in 2003 (Osby municipality statistics 2004). This means that Osby had lower unemployment rates compared to Skärholmen. In general, Osby is a municipality without significant signs of social problems or other sorts of economic segregation.

37 Skärholmen is an independent city-district within Stockholm municipality. However, the term “municipality” will also be used when describing Skärholmen because, as a city-district, Skärholmen has the autonomy to independently organize its social assistance system and local activation program in similar ways as independent municipalities.
Skärholmen is regarded as a much more economically segregated and socially marginalized area.

Both research sites were strongly committed to their local activation policy approach and had similar activation programs. Each had a specific unit for the social assistance administration, which were staffed with social workers and both sites had a separate activation program that was staffed with activation workers. Due to its large size, the social assistance administration in Skärholmen was also staffed with a number administrative staff that supported the social workers with administrative routine tasks. This staff group is not included in the current study, as they did not actively participated in the formal administration of the routines related with the activation policy requirements. The theoretical framework used in this study helps to distinguish whether the contextual conditions presented above might influence the street-level practices of activation. The organizational and contextual similarities and differences in Osby and Skärholmen make it therefore interesting to analyze how and why these two organizational settings might differ or converge in their street-level responses to activation policy.

Data Collection Strategies and Data Analysis Approaches

The data collection strategy and analytic approach employed in this study can be further enhanced if multiple sources of data are collected from different kinds of sources: from field observations, interviews, and written documents. When such different kinds of evidence are collected it provides a broader and wide-ranging knowledge of the phenomena that is of interest (Yin, 1994). The current study entails therefore several data collection strategies, but with the main focus being on observations of the daily practices in the social assistance administration units and the local activation program units in Skärholmen and Osby. These field observations were supplemented with ongoing conversations with the street-level staff, formal interviews with local politicians and program managers, plus the analysis of formal legislation, local policy documents, and program manuals.

Field Observations

Field observations of the practices of the social assistance administration, with a focus on its relation to the local activation policy approach, seemed to be the most suitable research strategy since the purpose of this study was to understand the street-level implications of municipal activation policy. Because field observations provide an appropriate method to uncovering how people behave and operate within their natural and specific contexts, the observations and documentation of street-level workers’ practices and their interactions with clients were used to uncover actions that would have been difficult to recognize and understand through formal interviews (Burr, 1991). See (Billquist, 1999) for another observation study of the practical work in Swedish municipal social services.
Moreover, an observational data collection strategy is particularly suitable when the goal is to examine processes or structures that are complex and difficult to explain and comprehend (Esiasson et al., 2004). This is in line with the ongoing development of activation policy in Sweden, which is complex in its relation to other social protection schemes in Sweden as well as its relation to the municipal social assistance administration. Additionally, there are multifaceted and complex underlying assumptions in the activation policy itself. The theoretical framework in this study suggests that the observations should focus on the interactions between micro-level practices and the macro-level context (i.e. local political discourse, resource allocation, and organizational incentives and disincentives etc.). In order to capture this compound situation, the observations focused on the daily administrative practices of social assistance and activation routines including the interactions between street-level workers and clients and interactions between colleagues.

Field Work

The fieldwork took place between July 2002 and June 2003. More than 400 observation hours were completed, including 92 meetings between staff members and clients in addition to several observations of staff meetings, social service board meetings, and various other routine administrative activities. Client meetings were observed as they occurred during a regular working day without any manipulation of the content or the order of the meetings to suit the research strategy. Staff meetings, administrative meetings, and supervision sessions were also observed as they took place during regular working days. The observations of different kinds of formal meetings were augmented through observations of informal discussion and conversations between staff members, staff members and clients, and clients in hallways, lunchrooms, and other parts of the localities.

In order to check the interpretation of the observations and to clarify the meaning of the daily routines informal conversations with street-level workers occurred multiple times and with multiple staff members. Follow-up interviews with the staff were also conducted throughout the field work period as well as after the field work period in order to verify what happened during the observations and to validate interpretations of empirical research findings during the write-up period. In both research sites, a total of approximately 52 staff members on various organizational and hierarchical levels were part of this study. Among those, ten staff members were located in Osby municipality and the rest in Skärholmen city-district.

As a researcher, my ambition was to make my participation as unintrusive as possible. I was never active when observing client or staff meetings. During client meetings, I sat in the background and took notes, while observing the interaction between the worker and the client. The clients and the staff were always given an opportunity to decline my attendance, although I only received a handful of rejections during the fieldwork period. The same strategy was used when I observed administrative staff meetings. My participation might have influenced the work and the behavior of the street-level workers and the clients, but since I spent a considerable amount of time in each research-site, I argue that my par-
participation became a rather natural element. Street-level workers did not seem to behave “correct” or in other ways modify their actions during my presence. It was observed that they both argued with clients as well as demonstrated various conflicts with clients as well as other street-level workers. Therefore, I believe that my presence did not significantly influence neither workers’ nor clients’ behavior or that they behaved in overly positive manner due to my presence.

Data Analysis

In this type of qualitative observational analysis, control of validity involves a verification of the empirical support for the findings and whether a sound interpretation of the data has been made. Throughout the research process I have spent significant amount of time and followed the street-level work closely and repeatedly in order to secure my findings (Merriam, 1994). To minimize the risk for “observer bias” multiple data sources have been used to collect the information and to verify the findings through different types of data sources. This means that multiple observations were conducted in different settings, the study has been based in theory, and both data collection and data analysis have been conducted in a structured and systematic way (Creswell, 1998; Esiasson et al., 2004). The observations were supplemented with interviews and informal conversations in order to check the accuracy of the observations and the empirical interpretations.

The analysis was also complemented with examinations of written documents like the formal legislation, manuals, memos, directives, and case records. This means that I utilized a strategy in which a combination of a number of information and data sources were used in order to crosscheck alternative explanations and the precision of the collected data. This form of triangulation of data helped to validate the empirical research findings (Creswell, 1998; Esiasson et al., 2004). During observations and informal conversations, detailed field notes were taken to create a broad and thorough picture of the studied situations (Silverman, 2001).

Field Notes

The data material that was utilized for the empirical research analysis comes mainly from the field notes that were produced throughout the research process. In an observational case study that is conducted over time, certain behaviors and situations will reoccur multiple times and it is these repetitions that constitute the systematic patterns of policy implementation practices. The field notes were analyzed through a careful and repeated reading in order to elucidate systematic patterns and to separate them from idiosyncratic actions. The field notes were thereafter systematized and structured according to the different themes and concepts that have been developed in relation to the theoretical perspectives utilized in this study. The field note analysis focused on how street-level workers were utilizing their discretion to develop coping behaviors and routine shortcuts when implementing activation policy. Field notes have been sorted and categorized in relation to coping behaviors and routine shortcuts that are relevant for street-level
bureaucracy theory, such as creaming, controlling, sorting, and client categorizations (Lipsky, 1980). The analysis has also worked with concepts that grasp the normative assumptions that are embedded in street-level delivery of this kind of social policy schemes.

**Interviews**

In addition to the field observations and the informal conversations, twelve formal interviews were conducted with program managers and local politicians. These interviews were both semi-structured and open-ended and focused on questions regarding the political-institutional contexts in which the street-level practices of activation policy took place. Three interviews with local politicians were conducted (one in Skärholmen and two in Osby), plus nine interviews with program managers at different management levels. Managers both for the social assistance units and the activation programs were conducted. The selection of these respondents was made on the basis of their key roles in these organizations and at least one interview was conducted with key politicians and managers in the two research sites. In addition to the formal interviews, several informal conversations took place with all program managers throughout the fieldwork period.

The interviews were not recorded but I took detailed interview notes during all interviews. The interview notes were systematized using similar concepts and themes as the observational field notes. The interview notes were also closely read in order to uncover systematic patterns in political preferences and management strategies in relation to the local activation policy approach.

**Data Presentation**

The presentation of the research is based on excerpts and quotations from field and interview notes, and they are presented with as much authenticity as possible but I have translated them from Swedish to English. The excerpts are used as empirical examples of the typical and systematic elements of the practical work of activation (i.e. what street-level workers regularly were doing when interacted with clients). I also use examples from conversations and interviews in order to demonstrate how the staff viewed or described their street-level actions themselves. I have selected parts of the field notes that informal practice routines among social workers and activation workers. In some cases, the excerpts demonstrate an exceptional or idiosyncratic situation in order to illustrate an uncommon situation or reaction in the implementation practices. When such unusual or uncommon examples are used in the text it is clearly noted.

**Limitations of the Research Approach**

The research design in this study entails a number of limitations and shortcomings. One of the most important to note is that this particular study is not able to generalize the results to all activation program practices in Sweden. This is a consequence of the fact that cases were selected on the basis of their strong
commitment to activation policy reform, and it is consequently impossible to generalize the results to all municipal activation programs in Sweden. Instead the study offers detailed examples of the daily work within two principally important activation policy settings. The advantage with this selection strategy is that the study can illuminate the particular organizational conditions for two activation programs that many other municipal social services are copying. This approach can provide important knowledge for other local activation programs that are not as developed or committed to activation reforms as Skärholmen and Osby.

It is important to note that the observations and data collection to this study was conducted in 2002 and 2003. Organizations and their practices are not static and there is a possibility that the activation arrangements and the street-level practices in Skärholmen and Osby have taken other forms since the time for the study. This means that this study can only tell us something about the practical delivery of activation policy at the time for the study.

Another limitation is that the data in the field notes has not been coded or interpreted by a secondary coder or reader, which can lower the internal validity of the data analysis (Yin, 1994). Although, I have tried to minimize this limitation by triangulate the data collection with multiple sources of data and by verifying my interpretations with the staff throughout the research period. Clients’ responses were occasionally used as a method to crosscheck observational information about street-level workers’ behaviors.

Outside the scope of this particular study are the examinations of program outcomes and whether the clients find employment or if they became self-sufficient after program participation. Consequently, it is not a regular evaluation of the programs or a policy analysis and the study does not attempt to evaluate neither activation policy nor program outcomes of the specific activation programs.
5. Local Political-Institutional Activation Policy Contexts

This chapter constitutes the first empirical analysis of municipal activation policy in this dissertation. As such, it presents the local political-institutional context and how local political preferences and management capacity structure the organizational arrangements in the Skärholmen city-district and Osby municipality. These cases illustrate how street-level policy practices are structured by the political-institutional context in which they are embedded. In other words, the chapter illustrates how local politicians and management personnel perceive and interpret municipal activation policy, and how they produce particular organizational conditions wherein the street-level workers operate, and ultimately, deliver activation policy at the local level.

The local political-institutional analysis builds on interviews with local politicians, social service directors, and activation program managers in addition to the analysis of local social assistance manuals and activation policy program documents. The study is not designed as a comparison between Skärholmen and Osby, therefore empirical examples from both sites are presented and discussed simultaneously. But where examples from the two sites differ significantly they will be noted and discussed in more detail.

Initially, I will review the local organizational arrangements of social assistance delivery and the local activation programs in order to describe the organizational arrangements at two local activation programs, Jobbcentrum in Skärholmen, and Källan in Osby. Thereafter, I will present and analyze the empirical findings of what factors that influenced the local activation policy approaches the most. This section pays attention on how municipal activation policy was articulated in the local political-institutional context and how that the local activation arrangements was structured by four major factors.

Organizational Arrangements of Local Activation Programs

Municipalities in Sweden have the autonomy to decide how to organize local activation programs and they are free to determine time limits, financial reimbursement levels (above the national norm), and sanction procedures. Both Skärholmen and Osby implemented activation programs that were rather similar
in terms of firm activation requirements and with close links to the local social assistance administrations.

In both municipalities the right to social assistance was based on the clients’ participation and performance in the local activation programs and the programs were non-voluntary in the sense that unemployed social assistance clients were required to participate in order to be entitled to social assistance. There were no time limits and clients were mandated to participate in the activation program until they no longer applied for social assistance. The financial reimbursement for participating in the local activation programs was the same as the client’s social assistance benefit, and participation provided no additional benefits. There were no tax benefits or other financial benefits related to the activation requirement; it was a “work for your benefit” system. If not participating, or in other ways failing to fulfill various programmatic requirements, clients could lose their right to social assistance. There were no formal sanction rules. Sanctioning practices and sanctions in form of reductions, or a total loss of social assistance, were made on the basis of social workers’ discretionary judgments.

Program Descriptions

Jobbcentrum in Skärholmen city-district opened in 1998 with a focus on intensive job searching for unemployed social assistance recipients. At the time for the study, Jobbcentrum was located on the second floor in a small mall area close to the local subway station. Clients first enter a reception desk to sign in. In the main room, there were eight to ten tables, three phone booths, a coffee machine, billboards with job vacancies and other related ads. The room was also equipped with ten computers with Internet access. In an additional computer room, there were ten additional computers on which clients could write job applications. Behind the client spaces, the staff had their offices, a conference room, and a lunchroom. The facilities were rather light and pleasant, although often very crowded. In general, clients were required to attend the programs five days per week for three hours per day but social workers could decide about other schedules and requirements.

Jobbcentrum started as a small-scale local program for young people, but grew to include all unemployed social assistance recipients. It had a total caseload of 1000 clients and during the time for the fieldwork approximately 150-200 clients attended Jobbcentrum every day (sometimes as much as 250-300 clients per day). Participants’ age ranged from 18-65 years and both men and women attended the program. Jobbcentrum was a permanent part of Skärholmen city-district’s social assistance administration, but collaborated with three other city-

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38 For example, in the U.S. financial benefits under the PRWORA legislation reduced gradually when welfare recipients are working in order to increase the work incentives. Such policy construction is not utilized for social assistance in Sweden.

39 Many clients were on sick leave permission, participated in practical training outside the program or were absent or disappeared but were still registered as participants.
districts that referred social assistance clients to the program.\textsuperscript{40} The local Employment Services and the local Social Security Office\textsuperscript{41} were involved, having paid for a small number of program slots for individuals that participated in other, national labor market policy programs. Occasionally, but rarely, clients at Jobbcentrum were referred to training or education services provided by the local Employment Services, or to the rehabilitation services organized by the local Social Security Office. The program was also in contact with employers, recruiting companies, and other education and training programs, to which clients occasionally was referred.

Jobbcentrum had one head director, who also was the overall director for the entire social assistance administration, and one program manager, who was responsible for Jobbcentrum’s daily program operations. Jobbcentrum had 25 staff members including administrative staff. Most of the staff at Jobbcentrum was called “job coaches”. They were responsible for the daily activation activities and had the face-to-face encounters with program participants. Program participants were referred to Jobbcentrum from the social assistance administration unit. Below is a schematic figure on how the referral process took place for new social assistance applicants in Skärholmen city-district:

\begin{center}
\begin{figure}
\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Application} & \textbf{First Referral} & \textbf{Assessment} & \textbf{Activation} \\
\hline
Social assistance application to the social assistance in-take group: via a written application form or a phone call & If unemployed: clients are directly referred to Jobbcentrum to begin the following day & Around two weeks after the referral, a meeting with the social worker who determines the status of the application & Continue at Jobbcentrum under supervision of a job coach \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}
\end{figure}
\end{center}

\textit{Figure 2: Referral Process in Skärholmen}

Osby’s Källan also started in 1998, and it serviced five to ten unemployed social assistance clients on a daily basis. In addition, ten to twenty immigrant clients studied Swedish as part of the activation requirement. All unemployed social assistance recipients in Osby were required to attend Källan beginning 48 hours after their social assistance application had been approved. Källan was located in its own building in the local industry area and neighboring companies were car mechanics, carpentries and small factories. This building was not as modern as Jobbcentrum’s facilities but was less crowded for the clients. Källan

\textsuperscript{40} Hägersten, Älvsjö, and Liljeholmen city-districts were part of Jobbcentrum and social assistance recipients in those city-districts were referred to Jobbcentrum in the same way as social assistance clients in Skärholmen city-district.

\textsuperscript{41} The Social Security Office is the authority that is responsible for Swedish social insurance protection schemes in Sweden. Social insurance are national and governmental protection schemes and includes, for example, sick leave benefits, work rehabilitation programs, and family support benefits.
also had a reception desk, a classroom for language classes, a common lunch area in which both clients and staff could buy coffee and lunch. There were also a number of staff offices, a large computer lab area for computer classes plus a number of additional small rooms and common areas. Some rooms were equipped with one or two computers or just tables and chairs. Källan had also a large basement with a carpentry area and conference rooms, in which some program activities took place. Clients were normally required to attend the program during five days per week and eight hours per day and the main activity was various job search tasks. In addition to the job search activities, Källan occasionally offered, “personal development courses” including presentation techniques, interview skills, and self-assessments. Källan collaborated with the local Employment Services and the Social Security Offices, and some of Källan’s program components targeted other client populations. At Källan, the participants could also be referred from the local Employment Services or the Social Security Office and social assistance clients at Källan were often just a handful plus ten to fifteen immigrant clients who also were referred through the social assistance administration.

Beside job search activities, social assistance clients could be required to participate in internal job-training activities, such as carpentry, kitchen- and cleaning-duties, and a work rehabilitation program. But the requirement to attend the local activation program was always the most prioritized activity. Källan also had contact with local schools, employers, and social service organizations throughout the municipality. In sum, both Källan and Jobbcentrum had similar work-first approaches and a focus on independent job search, but Källan seemed to be more flexible and open for providing other types of services in comparison with Jobbcentrum.

The director for the social assistance administration was also the head of Källan, while a program manager was responsible for its daily program activities. Five people were working at Källan as “activation workers” and the social assistance unit was rather small, with only four social workers. The social workers referred the unemployed clients to Källan and the activation staff there took care of the daily activities. Below is a figure that illustrates the referral process for new social assistance applicants in Osby municipality:
Organization of Staff

The implementation literature has repeatedly illustrated the difficulty of providing services that entail both formal and rule-bound benefit administration together with individually targeted support measures (Carstens, 1998; Meyers et al., 1998; Simon, 1993). One way that has been used to overcome such complexity has been to separate “care” and “cash” provisions (Jewell 2007, p. 26). This was true for the social assistance and activation policy arrangements in Skärholmen and Osby where formal eligibility determination was organizationally separated from the local activation programs and made by professional social workers.

In both organizations, social workers conducted the formal assessments and determined whether or not clients were entitled social assistance and determined what a client should be doing at the activation program. The social workers had the formal decision-making responsibilities and the legal application of the Social Service Act. They had also the role as “helpers” as they were responsible for the care handling of clients. On the contrary, untrained activation workers were responsible for the daily work at the local activation programs and execute the employment services in the local activation programs. Activation staff processed both incoming clients and those who had been in the programs for extended periods of time. This type of organizational arrangements seems to be rather common among many Swedish municipalities when organizing activation programs (Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004); rather different from many other countries, where the trained professional social workers helps clients with the services intended to move from public benefits to regular work, whereas untrained caseworkers conduct rule-bound administrative income support practices (Jewell, 2007).

The activation program staff had generally neither formal social work training nor experience from other job-related services while only a handful of the staff in the two activation programs were trained social workers. Many members of the staff in both activation programs had experienced unemployment themselves prior to their employment at the local activation programs, and a number of the activation staff received, or had previously received, different kinds of employment support benefits. According to the program manager for Jobbcentrum, as many as 70 percent of the staff had been unemployed prior to working at Jobb-
centrum. It is difficult to know how the reliance of staff members that previously experienced unemployment themselves impacted the street-level delivery of activation services, but activation workers, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, felt regularly that they did not have enough (social work) skills to respond clients’ multifaceted needs.

Programs Activities

The primary activities at the two local activation programs were independent job search, in which Jobbcentrum’s clients searched for job vacancies through newspapers, billboard ads, and the Internet. At Jobbcentrum clients could reserve computers for fifteen minutes each time, which caused a significant waiting time and only a small share of the participants were able to utilize the computers each day. Clients had more flexible access to computers at Källan.

In addition to employment related activities, language education was also a program component at both Källan and Jobbcentrum. The role of language education might seem to be a minor organizational issue, but for many immigrant clients the access to language education was important as they lacked adequate Swedish skills and that often hold them back on the labor market. In Osby a contracted education organization offered Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) courses for almost all immigrant clients at Källan. At Jobbcentrum a small share of immigrant clients was offered internal language training and SFI was offered through a central organization within Stockholm municipality. My observations indicated that there was no automatic access to language education based on clients’ level of language skills. Instead, it was based on rather vague and varied forms of social workers’ discretionary judgments about who deserved to attend language education or not (such street-level practices will be discussed in more detail in chapter six and seven).

Political-Institutional Approaches to Activation Policy at the Local Level

In this section, I will begin present empirical findings of local political-institutional factors that shaped the local activation policy reforms. The research found that the development of the activation programs in Skärholmen and Osby was shaped by four main factors and taken together they formed the local political-institutional context in which each of the local programs was developed and implemented. First, these programs were created in a climate of politicians’ and managers’ economic concerns for rising social assistance costs and how they imposed cost-cutting goals on social assistance expenditures. Second, the local programs developed also as a response to normative and moral assumptions about unemployed social assistance recipients and what they should be required to do.

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42 Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
Third, politicians and managers also perceived activation requirements as the right means to address both the financial and the normative concerns and they presented the local activation programs as “success stories”. Fourth, politicians and mangers portrayed the activation programs as client-focused strategies improved clients’ employability and thereby lower both the social assistance costs and change client behaviors.

Taken together, these four factors created a local political-institutional foundation in which Jobbcentrum and Källan was embedded. The following section provides a number of empirical examples that highlights how the local political-institutional inclinations structured the local organizational environment in which the practical delivery of the local activation programs took place. For this particular chapter, the question is to discern in what way these political-institutional factors were made visible in the organizational context.

**Economic Aspects & Cost-Cutting Goals for Local Activation Policy**

In the 1990s most Swedish municipalities were experiencing an increase in social assistance expenditures owing to economic recession and high unemployment rates. A political consequence of this situation was a national political goal: to reduce Sweden’s total social assistance expenditure by half of its peak year in 1996 until year 2004.\(^{43}\) That goals spurred many municipalities to set local goals for reducing local social assistance costs.

The local politicians in the municipal social service boards and directors for the social assistance administrations in Skärholmen and Osby described rising caseloads and imperatives to cut assistance expenditures a great challenge. Implementation of local activation programs became a political answer to manage the situation. As the former political chairman of the social service board in Osby explained:

> During the 1990s, there were high costs for the elderly and for social assistance. And we frankly said, the social assistance costs must be reduced to ten million SEK and it was then Källan was created. Källan has given the social workers an instrument to work with and I believe that Källan is the reason why Osby has reduced the social assistance costs ... but it’s not only Källan that has reduced social assistance costs as structural factors are important too.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{43}\) The former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson presented this political goal in an article in Aftonbladet, 2001-03-14.

\(^{44}\) Interview with Ingmar Berntsson, former chairman for the social service board, Osby, 2003-04-29.
The social assistance manager in Skärholmen told a similar story:

In 1989 we had eight unemployed households that received social assistance and it was a very good labor market situation, but in the early 1990s we started to experience the economic crisis with accelerating unemployment rates and a lot of new immigrants and refugees. It lead to a large increase in social assistance applicants the social workers couldn’t offer anything for them, the social assistance budget was based on old figures, and we had nothing else than giving them passive income support. Then, we started to wish for a set-up in which we could control the “whole” social assistance and unemployment issue ... and in 1998 we hired Jobbcen-trum’s current program manager in order to work with the unemployed youth. When we did that, the young social assistance applicants just disappeared and did not apply for social assistance anymore and we decided to implement a program for all social assistance recipients.45

The above examples indicate that the local activation programs were viewed as important methods at the local level to deal with the rising social assistance expenditures.

Although shrinking, or at least maintaining, caseload levels was prioritized at the local political-institutional level there was no direct connection or formal system in which the social assistance costs and the activation requirements were linked or measured. Instead, it happened more indirectly through “budgetary planning meetings”, “social service board reviews”, and through statistical reporting in which deviating caseload figures were flagged. For example, social assistance managers were required to report social assistance caseloads numbers to the social service board on a regular basis.

This context where local managers, feeling pressured to reduce or, at the minimum, contain social assistance caseload numbers, created various incentives or control mechanisms at the practice level. One of the most obvious methods managers used was to monitor caseload levels. In Skärholmen, there were regular presentations of the caseload levels for all street-level staff members. One social assistance manager in Skärholmen told me that:

We have 900 social assistance cases now, compared to 1800 cases during the worst times in the 1990s. But the reduction is a little slower now and it’s not that easy to move people to work anymore ... and I need to monitor the social workers and remind them of what they should focus on or not ... we need to control why clients are getting money or if their needs can be met with other measures. But the numbers are still shrinking ... and that’s good.46

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45 Interview with social assistance director, Skärholmen, 2002-09-12.
46 Interview with social assistance manager, Skärholmen, 2002-11-06.
The political-institutional pressure to reduce or maintain caseloads numbers created an organizational situation in which this kind of pressure fosters specific street-level responses that might differ from other political-institutional objectives for the activation approach (see Luire, 2006 for an analysis of street-level implementation practices in relation to caseload decline). Despite a strong focus on the reduction of costs and caseloads, the social assistance director in Skärholmen explained, on the other hand, that it could be a problem if they reduced the caseloads too much since their social assistance budget was based on previous year’s needs and expenditures. Nevertheless, the main message from the local politicians in both research sites were that social assistance costs should be reduced and that the local activation programs are successful in doing that. The former chairman for the social service board in Osby expressed the common view that it was the local activation program that had been the cure to lower social assistance cost. For example:

*It is a political goal to reduce the social assistance costs and the activation programs provide social workers with a tool as it demonstrate for clients that they can’t just get social assistance without doing anything. I’m sure that the program has helped clients and that these new working methods have helped to reduce the costs with around 50 percent.*

This political commitment indicated a strong conviction that the activation programs were an adequate solution for the problem of high social assistance expenditures.

Most activation and social assistance studies in Sweden on expenditures show negative or mixed results on how activation programs’ actually lower social assistance costs in any greater sense (Hallsten et al., 2004; Milton, 2006; Giertz, 2004; 2007). Despite such empirical outcomes, the local politicians and program managers saw the reduction of social assistance costs as one of the main motivating factors for developing local activation programs.

**Normative and Moral Assumptions in Relation to Local Activation**

In addition to the economic factors that impelled the local activation development, the local political-institutional context was also entrenched with normative and moral assumptions about unemployed social assistance recipients and how the activation requirement could address these normative concerns.

The Swedish activation policy development is also shaped by such diverse ideas, as it is rather unclear in formal activation policy whether unemployment is

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47 Interview with social assistance director, Skärholmen, 2003-06-16.
48 Interview with Ingmar Berntsson, former chairman for the social service board, Osby, 2003-04-29.
caused by structural problems or personal deficits and lack of motivation. The local political-institutional context in Skärholmen and Osby seemed to use clients’ behavior and personal performances in order to explain difficulties in achieving self-sufficiency. In fact, all of the local politicians and program managers interviewed for this study emphasized the need for individual behavioral changes. Not surprisingly, the programs were built upon the need for individual responsibilities and mandatory activation program participation. On this matter one politician said the following:

“We did a reduction of the social assistance budget in the 1990s ... it was controversial but they [the social workers] managed as we also changed the social assistance work models ... we started to increase clients’ individual responsibility ... and since social assistance clients wants to sleep in the mornings and gets used with lazy days ... the regular labor market and a job starts to feel very remote for them... but we can help people to change such behaviors by increasing client requirements and responsibilities.”

These normative assumptions about client behavior played an important role in the local fondness for the local activation programs, although they were tempered by understandings that unemployment was tied to structural factors such as low education and human capital, labor market discrimination, and the lack of real jobs. Thus, as local politicians and program managers argued that it was the clients’ own behaviors that caused clients’ unemployment and that these behaviors ought to be altered in order to make them employable, the local political-institutional context was created; one driven by the logic that an activation requirement which forced clients to change their social assistance dependency patterns would ultimately result in reduced social assistance expenditures.

The political-institutional context that focused on behavior reinforced the importance of the work-line. In the Swedish welfare state context, the work-line can be understood in relation to three major perspectives. First, as a controlling and disciplining function; second, as a self-help function by making people “active”; and third, as a rights-based function in which people should have the “right” to regular employment. In the local political-institutional levels in Skärholmen and Osby, the major work-line perspective was rarely expressed. Local politicians remained ambiguous in their interpretation of the work-line and its normative function in local activation practice. Although, a somewhat stronger focus on the controlling and disciplining function was observed, and sometimes the self-help function was stressed in the sense that the activation measures should provide employment support measures. A general right to an employment was never expressed at this level; it was merely stated in various program documents.

As an illustration of this ambiguity, one politician explained that he did write a political proposal to the local municipal government stressing the importance

49 Interview with Kerstin Nordström, chairman for the social service board, Osby, 2003-04-29.
50 Proposal Bill at the municipal level (motion in Swedish).
of the work-line in relation to the local social assistance administration. The proposal requested that unemployed social assistance recipients ought to be “activated” and do what they can to support for themselves, instead of receiving passive income support. The politician described the proposed suggestion in the following way:

*As a social democrat I believe that people should support for themselves but we also need to support people in need. And a few years ago I wrote a political proposal to the municipal government in which I stressed the importance of the work-line in relation to our local social assistance system. I believe in the work-line and we need a social services that give people that extra push through the work-line but we should not be inflexible ... we need to offer both carrots and sticks.*

This particular politician represented the Social Democratic party, but all political parties in the municipality welcomed the work-line proposal. Although, activation policy is rather contradictory with its different aims and objectives, it is generally very popular across political party ideologies at the national level as well. One example of such national consensus was the 1998 legal change in the Social Service Act that increased municipalities’ possibilities to require activation measures. I suggest that this demonstrates the political consensus about activation policies in the Swedish municipal social service context.

**Local Activation Policy as Success Stories**

The strong local activation commitment could also be related to the views at the political-institutional level that activation was successful and provided desired outcomes. The political chairman in Skärholmen told me that she was convinced that the local activation program was a very positive element for social assistance recipients:

*We have agreed in a political coalition between social democrats and the left wing party that all unemployed social assistance recipients must actively search for jobs at Jobbcentrum ... and we are sure that many clients have found a job and become self-sufficient through the work at Jobbcentrum. Although, some clients have been angry about this requirement and they have expressed that they feel that they are forced to participate in the activities at Jobbcentrum ... but we are all part of a system in which each of us must DO something, a job or another activity, in order to support*  

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51 Interview with Ingmar Berntsson, former chairman for the social service board, Osby, 2003-04-29.
for ourselves. It’s nothing wrong with this requirement since we all are responsible for supporting ourselves, like all of us.  

The chairman recognized that some clients were disappointed with the stricter activation requirements but she argued strongly that the activation program had helped many clients to become self-sufficient. In general, both politicians and the program management expressed a large confidence in the activation programs’ asserted success and positive results in terms of both lower social assistance expenditures and re-employment levels. However, these claims are based primarily on personal assumptions or “qualified guesses” about their results and outcome effects. One program manager explained that they did not have statistical figures about program outcomes but he was sure that the program was successful, because:

*When I met old clients in the subway or in the streets I can see in the clients’ eyes that the program had been good for them. They are now looking proud and with a better self-esteem compared to when they entered the program.*

Such statements were not uncommon to hear among all levels of staff or politicians. And such statements might not be incorrect, or willfully misleading, but they must be viewed as assertions since none of the programs in this study had been formally evaluated. Salonen (2006) also discusses this kind of symbolic politics in which activation programs are out forward as measures that leads to positive outcomes in regards to employment and income despite the general lack of such evidence.

Social assistance expenditures had decreased since the peak in the 1990s in both research sites, but such findings could be related to a number of factors outside the activation program realm. In fact, most Swedish municipalities reduced social assistance expenditures during this time period, with or without local activation programs. It is still a significant lack of knowledge in this policy field in Sweden and there is very little empirical data on how many clients that have found employment or increased their income levels after participation in municipal activation measures (Giertz, 2007).

### Local Activation Requirements as Client Focused and Enabling Services

While the development of activation programs was explained through economic factors, moral assumptions about the clients’ behaviors, activation as a disciplin-

52 Interview with Margareta Johansson, political chairman, Skärholmen city-district, 2003-04-08.

53 Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.

54 See Schram & Soss (2001) for a discussion how welfare reform in the U.S. is portrayed in media as a one-sided success story, without considering standard evaluation standards and formal evidence.
ing strategy to carry on necessary behavioral changes, and strong belief in posi-
tive program outcomes, it was also true that local political-institutional rhetoric
did focus on the improvement of individual clients’ employment possibilities,
providing measures that could support such development. At Jobbcentrum, for
example, helping recipients to become “self-sufficient” meant helping them find
a job on the regular labor market, securing education, or transferring to a Swed-
ish social protection service better designed to meet their needs. According to
program documents, Jobbcentrum should:

Encourage an individual development and be a place where par-
ticipants should be given support to find their individual aim in life
and help participants to live an independent life. The activation
process should be enabling for every participant and services
should be tailor-made in order to improve clients to become self-
sufficient. 55

Thus, Jobbcentrum aimed in the official rhetoric to provide individually tar-
geted and flexible support to the unemployed social assistance recipients. In such
official program documents it was strongly emphasized that participants should
be provided with the support they where asking for.

In general, the aim with Källan was described in the following way:

The social workers are using Källan as a “competence and skills
enhancing activity” [the official term in the Social Service Act, my
comment]. The clients start with independent job search, clients
can try different jobs or practical training and we are really trying
to find regular jobs for the clients here. 56

The official program idea with Källan appeared to be that social assistance
clients were in need for both rights and requirements in order to become self-
sufficient and that clients’ own resources should be taken into account when de-
termining the components of the activation requirements. 57

In the official program rhetoric, such ambitions were often presented as indi-
vidual competence improvement, personal development, skills-enhancement, and
improved employment opportunities. Correspondingly, the following description
of the program purpose was found in a program document for Jobbcentrum in
Skärholmen:

• All unemployed social assistance recipients shall be offered a job or another
  work-related activity within 5 days.
• Provide clients with support that will improve their personal and individual
  power.

56 Interview with program manager, Källan, 2002-09-10.
57 Källan’s Annual Project Description, 2002-2003.
• Give all clients a respectful treatment.
• Help the clients to find strategies to increase their healthy attendance in the society and the work place.
• Give the clients the help they are asking for.\textsuperscript{58}

The first statement could be seen as an expression for as a right to an employment and the rest of the program statements entail objectives in which the local activation program should provide flexible and individual assessments with a strong focus on clients’ self-determination and their individual resources. In Skärholmen, such an approach should be secured at the implementation level, through a “solution focused working model” in which “the clients’ own ideas and solutions” should be considered when participating in the local activation program.\textsuperscript{59} Other program goals were stated as means to break the vicious cycle of hopelessness, reduce social isolation, and decrease deteriorating mental and physical health. On the contrary, the program document also stated that an additional goal with the activation requirement was to obstruct “black-market jobs” (i.e., impede illegal and no-taxable jobs on the informal labor market). The former statements demonstrate the enabling version of activation while the latter entail significant control functions.

The formal objectives with Osby’s activation program were similar to the objectives stated Jobbcentrum’s program manual. In program documents it was stated that Källan should make as many participants as possible self-supportive after program participation and that the program should provide the clients with different forms of individual competence improving services and support for a personal development.\textsuperscript{60}

Beside the statements in formal program documents, in the interviews local politicians also stressed the importance of individually tailored services and that activation requirements need to be flexible in order to address clients’ individual needs. A core function should be to enable clients, through an individual approach toward clients’ personal needs. The political chairman in Osby recognized the enabling function with the activation measure and she stressed the importance of an individual approach to all clients:

\textit{It’s Källan combined with the [Uppsala] model\textsuperscript{61}, which means that one should mobilize clients’ own recourses. I think that this...}

\textsuperscript{58} From “Jobbcentrum Sydväst Annual Program Report 2003” (my translation).
\textsuperscript{59} Solution focused brief therapy and solution-focused practice are rather common methods in social work practice. These solution-focused practices assume that people drawing on their own resources can achieve change and development. The approach is therefore radically competence-based, by talking and thinking in a way that invites people to be noticing of and naming of their resources and strengths. Solution focused practice is also future-focused. It generates detailed pictures of the preferred future or goal and they should motivate and inspire people to take the adequate actions to reach such goals. See for example De Shazer et al., (2007) for detailed descriptions about this approach.
\textsuperscript{60} From Källan’s Annual Program Plan 2002.
\textsuperscript{61} The Uppsala model is a social assistance and work requirement model developed in Uppsala municipality in the early 1990s (Rönmlund 1992). The model is characterized by strict work require-
method is in line with social work treatment methods as it focuses on the client.

... It must be meaningful for the individual to go to an activity like Källan but it’s also important to show them that life is not always happy and joyful. It shall not be fun all the time but it’s important that they also focus on improving the clients’ self-esteem.62

Such political ambitions were also demonstrated in Skärholmen as the political chairman spoke explicitly about the flexible and enabling purpose with activation policy:

It’s very important with flexible solutions that are individual for every client...to see the possibilities with each client and not focus on their problems...we need to support people based on their personal resources... and it’s important that we are clear with the client that social assistance is only temporary and that they must do what they can in order to become self-sufficient...but it’s also important to talk about what clients should do at Jobbcentrum and what type of support we can give them.63

The above examples highlight the complex purposes of local activation policy, which the literature on activation also confirms (van Berkel & Møller, 2002, Lødemel & Trickey, 2000; Salonen, 2000). The examples also demonstrate that the local political-institutional context entailed ideas that the local activation approach was part of a social work tradition, which emphasizes empowering and social integrating approaches when dealing with clients. My interpretation is that the local political-institutional contexts pushed for program practices that could provide services that facilitated individual-needs assessments and responsiveness to those needs once determined. But when the local political-institutional contexts were implanted with the economic concerns and the client behavior perspectives they created complex and ambiguous contexts in which local activation policy ultimately was to be delivered.

Summary

In this chapter the local political-institutional context was scrutinized with a focus on the role of the local political leadership and the politicians views and perceptions on activation policy. Although Skärholmen and Osby are rather differ-

62 Interview with Ingmar Berntsson, former chairman for the social service board, Osby, 2003-04-29.
63 Interview with Margareta Johansson, political chairman, Skärholmen city-district, 2003-04-08.
ent in terms of social-economic configuration, the above analysis demonstrates that they were remarkably similar in their broader political-institutional ideas on which their local activation approaches were built. Overall, the local political-institutional context in both Skärholmen and Osby was affected by the complex and multifold meanings and purposes of activation policy reforms and the local activation approaches were embedded in an array of multifaceted factors such as economic, normative, programs results, and service factors. It was revealed that the local activation requirements were seen as a way to lower local expenditures since it were expected that clients, hopefully, would find employment or withdraw the social assistance application as a result of the activation program. Especially it was expressed that the social assistance recipients were in need to find employment and become self-sufficient, and the local activation requirement gave an instrument to alter unwanted clients behaviors. “Blame the client” ideas were also expressed in which clients were viewed as in need for mandatory requirements in order to change their undesirable behaviors and lack of work motivation. A strong work ethic focus and different versions of the work-line were also articulated in addition to controlling and repressive functions of the local activation program. Finally, politicians and managers articulated that the activation requirements were adequate for providing tailor-made employment services to unemployed social assistance recipients. Such an approach was also expressed in local policy documents that stipulated that the local activation programs should imply individual assessments and considerations of clients’ specific employment needs.

Taken together, the local political-institutional context in Skärholmen and Osby can be portrayed as strong activation policy environments in which the local activation programs were seen as something both necessary and positive. Consequently, such strong messages formed a local organizational context in which program managers and the staff demonstrated that they stay committed to the local activation approach. Especially as it also was asserted that the activation program was “successful” and would lead to a number of desirable outcomes for both the municipality (lower social assistance costs) and the clients (employment and self-sufficiency). Such political-institutional norms and belief system filters eventually down to the street-level and shape what the street-level staff do when delivering the local interpretations of municipal activation policy. The political-institutional factors mentioned in this chapter cannot explain all street-level delivery practices but they can help us understand how they create different organizational incentives and disincentives, which in the end form the daily operations in Skärholmen and Osby.

In general, the findings in this chapter have demonstrated how politicians in the local social service boards and local directors and managers in the social service organizations interpret the meaning of activation policy and how that formed the local political-institutional contexts. The most prominent question for this dissertation is thereby to uncover how the local political-institutional contexts finally shape local activation policy in its street-level and materialized forms. The following chapter will therefore analyze and discuss the street-level strategies that social workers develop when determining social assistance eligi-
bility and how they perform activation referral practices when interacting with unemployed social assistance recipients.
6. Local Social Assistance Arrangements and Social Work Practices

This chapter presents an analysis of street-level practices in the social assistance organizations of Skärholmen and Osby, focusing on professional social workers who determine social assistance support and make referrals to the activations programs. (An analysis of a second domain, the local activation programs themselves and their street-level practices will be presented in chapter seven). Although not working directly with the activation efforts, the social workers in the social assistance administrations are important parts of the activation policy process since they link the right to social assistance to participation in the local activation programs. This chapter looks specifically at the informal practice routines social workers developed in response to the political-institutional contexts and organizational arrangements in which their practices were embedded (Lipsky, 1980). The chapter also explores how such practices are shaped by additional factors, such as institutionalized normative values about social assistance clients. Examples from the social assistance administrations in both Skärholmen and Osby will be presented.

Initially, the chapter describes the physical locations and the organizational role of professional social workers in the two social assistance administrations. Thereafter, I will present and discuss four major research findings that demonstrate what factors that were manifested in the social workers’ social assistance and activation practices. First, how the strong political-institutional focus on cost-cutting goals and caseload reductions shaped the overall organizational contexts in which social workers operated. Second, how limited organizational capacity impacted in what way social workers made the activation referrals. Three, how social workers generally discharged individual needs when they assessed clients’ need for activation and employments support. Four, how social workers sorted clients into different categories based on assumptions about clients’ moral worth or to control clients’ job motivation.
Description of the Local Social Assistance Administrations

The social assistance administrations of both Skärholmen and Osby were located in municipal “social service offices.”

In Skärholmen, the social service office and its social assistance administration was located on the fifth floor in a high rise building, which also hosted several other city-district services such as the general administration for the city-district and administration for child care services, old-age services, and transport and housing services etc. A reception desk was located on the first floor and served all the different city-district services. Clients registered at this reception desk and were sent up to the fifth floor where the social assistance administration was located.

The first “room” at the social assistance administration was a waiting room with a few of sofas, chairs, and small tables. Clients waited for their social worker in the waiting room and were thereafter taken by their social worker to a meeting room, which was equipped with an alarm. The waiting room and the meeting rooms were light and comfortable, although they could look messy by the end of a working day. The social workers’ offices were located behind locked doors at the rear of the waiting room; clients were seldom taken into a social worker’s office. Most meeting rooms were equipped with computers so that social workers could access clients’ case records during the meetings. The social service administration had also a lunchroom, a common area with sofas and chairs plus a few larger conference rooms.

The social assistance administration in Osby was located in the “municipality administration building” in the middle of the town center. The social assistance administration shared the floor with the “child and family social services,” and they had a common reception desk and waiting room. The waiting area was much smaller compared to Skärholmen and had only a small sitting space in which clients waited for their social workers. The social workers’ offices were located behind locked door, but in Osby clients met with the social workers in the social workers’ own offices. These offices had the same equipment as in Skärholmen: computers, phones, small sitting areas and tables. The social assistance administration in Osby had also a common area, a lunchroom, and some small conference rooms. In general, the social assistance administrations in both Skärholmen and Osby where in pretty good shape and the localities were rather light and looked both comfortable and nice. The staff was also equipped with the necessary administrative equipment at both research sites.

64 The Swedish term for the social service office is regularly “socialkontoret”.
65 Social service meeting rooms are regularly equipped with alarms in Sweden due to the risk of client being hostile and even attacking social workers. Such attacks have occasionally happened within the Swedish social services.
66 The Swedish term for this is regularly “kommunalkontoret” or “kommunalhuset”.

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The Role of Social Workers in the Social Assistance and Activation Process

Social workers in the local social assistance administration did not work directly in the local activation programs but they were responsible for the professional assessments about clients’ social situations and work-related measures and the income support transfers according to the Social Service Act. In fact, local activation policy became “materialized” and “real” in this particular organizational domain through social assistance eligibility assessments and the activation referral practices.

The first practical action in relation to activation policy is the clients’ application for social assistance, which is a locally administered application with no nationally stipulated application procedures. People can obtain an application form at the local social assistance administration, and the right to apply is based on residency in the municipality. In both Skärholmen and Osby, clients applied for social assistance either through phone calls to the social assistance administration or with written applications and all clients were dependent upon a social worker’s decision every month.

Unemployed social assistance applicants in Skärholmen were regularly required to attend the local activation program before meeting with the social worker who was responsible for the client’s social assistance case. In general, it was a social worker in the in-take unit instructing applicants that they were required to attend the local activation program. While clients needed to be present at the activation program the following day, it took one to two weeks before they met with the social worker and received a formal determination about their social assistance claim. In Osby, social assistance applicants met with their social worker before they were referred to the activation program. That meeting happened within a couple of days and the activation referral occurred some 48 hours later.

Local Dynamics in the Social Assistance Administrations

Practices at Skärholmen’s and Osby’s social assistance administrations were significantly shaped by the political-institutional factors described in the previous chapter. As a response to these factors, social workers developed various informal practice routine to cope with different sorts of political and organizational pressures when processing the social assistance claims and referring clients to activation programs. Under these circumstances, social assistance and local activation policy delivery endured a number of typical street-level bureaucracy features that will be described below.
Cost and Caseload Monitoring in the Local Social Assistance Practices

There was a political desire to reduce social assistance expenditures and caseload levels in both Skärholmen and Osby, as well as nationally, but how caseloads and expenditures were then monitored differed depending on the political-institutional and organizational context. In the U.S., different types of performance measures are common for controlling caseload levels and distributing funding to social service agencies. Agencies receive federal funding if they reach certain caseload goals and reimbursed on the basis of clients’ work retention rates at 30, 60 and 90 days (Brodkin 2006). Such formal performance measures are not used in the Swedish social assistance and activation contexts, however. This study reveals that caseload numbers were watched indirectly in the two research sites and that dynamic resulted in various informal practice strategies on the ground.

To illustrate how the cost-cutting and caseload pressures made an impact, one social worker explained:

… the social service board has set the goals with the social assistance administration and the activation program, but not on an individual case level basis or in relation to the unemployment rates … but they are clearly interested in the overall caseload numbers … and they are monitoring the management in regards to this too.67

Despite the political rhetoric about an employment focus in the social assistance administration, street-level staff believed that politicians were not particularly interested in whether or not clients were able to find employment. Instead, street-level staff felt that politicians and managers were more concerned with caseload levels and, ultimately, the costs for social assistance. The political dedication to reduce social assistance dependency influenced managerial decisions, which in turn affected social workers on the ground.

For example, one method for managers to address political concerns regarding caseloads and assistance expenditures was to inform the street-level staff about the caseload development on a regular basis. During staff meetings in Skärholm, for instance, the monthly caseload levels and the goal of reduction was often presented and discussed.68 Although lacking formal performance measure strategies, these meetings made the social workers pay attention to caseloads in their daily practices, helping then to form an organizational context that encouraged “quantity” over “quality”.

67 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2003-06-12.
68 Similar types of caseload reviews were observed several times during the fieldwork in both Skärholm and Osby and both municipalities had reduced the caseload numbers significantly. For example, the caseload level reduced from over 1800 cases during the peak in the 1990s and down to 900 cases in 2002 in Skärholm.
One social worker expressed her distress with the cost-cutting goals and how that affected her work:

*Adult people shall not be forced to take any low-wage job, because then we are part of creating segregation between people, and Jobbcentrum isn’t good for those clients with multiple barriers and in need for extra support … but we must REDUCE the social assistance cost to any price … and lower unemployment rates too … of course it’s not good to just provide passive income support as that’s make people inactive but I’m not sure this is the right way for everybody.*

Previous research have also demonstrated that such caseload pressure often lead street-level bureaucrats to develop informal practice strategies with the goal to “meet the numbers” rather than addressing client needs (Brodkin, 2006) and the findings here indicate that the social workers indeed tried to cope with the political goals of reducing social assistance costs and caseload levels through different assessment strategies to limit access to social assistance.

**Assessments Practices and Local Discretionary Boundaries**

Social workers in Sweden have professional status and rather significant discretion when assessing clients’ circumstances (Jewell 2007). Nevertheless, social workers’ ability to exercise their professional discretion can be shaped by institutional boundaries. In Osby and Skärholmen, social workers often felt scrutinized and controlled by both managers and colleagues when making professional and discretionary judgments in their daily practices. One social worker said:

*It’s uncomfortable that one must justify every decision about every small thing … it’s common that mangers ask … why did you pay that, was that necessary and so on…why shouldn’t that client go the [activation] program …*

Other social workers felt especially limited around issues that were related to the local activation requirements, which could be seen as a consequence of the strong local activation norm. The social assistance manager in Skärholmen explained her view on the activation requirements in the social assistance administration in this way:

*It’s different now … it’s not good to be dependent on social assistance and we should always have expectations on our clients. It’s always special circumstances that social workers advocate for, but*

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69 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2002-10-30.
70 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2003-06-12.
these “specials cases” should not be the rule it’s more equal for everybody if we refer all clients to the local programs then they don’t need to discuss or motivate their decisions with every single client.\textsuperscript{71}

The manager expressed that instead of advocacy for “special cases”, managers favored decisions that did not deviate from the local activation preference, and this cued the staff on how to behave when assessing the clients. These examples also demonstrates that, although social workers were granted significant discretion when meeting the clients, the management felt that staff should apply an “activation first” approach, through which clients were expected to participate in the activation program. Such organizational condition created street-level practices that stressed the activation requirement. As will be shown below, exemptions from the local activation policy were rather uncommon even when social workers made different professional assessment.

Street-Level Referral Practices to the Local Activation Programs

The initial step in the activation policy process began with clients’ social assistance applications and the first practical action coupled with activation policy was to assess clients’ individual employment circumstances and their need for an activation measure. If clients were regarded in need for an activation effort, the next step was to refer them to the local activation programs. At a first glance, these assessment and referral practices seem natural and straightforward, but the research uncovered that they were infused with informal street-level strategies that made the initial experience of activation policy rather automated and a form of rote-processing of the clients. In the section below, Skärholmen and Osby will be discussed separately as in-take and referrals to the local activation programs looked somewhat different in the two research sites.

The social services in Skärholmen had a special in-take group with experienced social workers that received all incoming client contacts, conducting initial assessments and sorting all new cases in to their relevant social service department (e.g., child protection, substance abuse, mental health, and social assistance). For social assistance applicants, social workers in the in-take group made decisions about the clients’ economic needs and whether the clients ought to perform an activation requirement. An in-take social worker described activation this way:

\begin{quote}
All unemployed clients are referred directly by us to Jobbcentrum ... we might do slightly different judgments and all clients should be given an individual assessment ... but, in general, all clients are
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{71} Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
referred to Jobbcentrum. It’s a signal from the management that we should send everybody and that we should “assess” clients’ needs through Jobbcentrum. Jobbcentrum can “assess” if a client is [at] the disposal of the labor market, but even for checking substance abuse and mental health problems and so on. They can do that at Jobbcentrum according to our manager ... but I’m not sure ... and Jobbcentrum isn’t good for everybody but both other social workers and the management are picking on us if we don’t refer the clients.72

Although, the social services in Skärholmen had a specialized in-take group with skilled and experienced social workers with the aim of doing professional and discretionary assessments regarding clients’ needs, they felt compelled to send all clients to the local activation program due to the pressures from the management. Consequently, the social workers’ informal response was to suggest that all clients start at Jobbcentrum without an individual assessment. Their own explanation for such practices was that the clients had to demonstrate that they were only eligible for social assistance support by complying with the activation rule. As one social worker said:

_I select all unemployed clients as long as they don’t have a doctor’s certificate or just can’t work ... I don’t do many exceptions ... for me, Jobbcentrum works as a control function to see if they are [at] the disposal of the labor market ... and thereby eligible for social assistance ... it’s the legal prerequisite_73

In other words, to be [at] “the disposal of the labor market” was the guiding condition for any further decisions about social assistance for the clients. It also illustrates that clients, already at this initial application stage, were compelled to demonstrate that they were “ready to work.” This does not contradict the Social Service Act since social assistance clients can be required to participate in a local activation programs. But social workers used the activation requirement as an “assessment tool” and not as an employment support measure at this stage of the social assistance application.

Osby did not have a separate in-take group; incoming clients contacted the social assistance social workers directly by phone or by submitting a written application. Despite this organizational difference, social workers in Osby described their referral processes in similar ways as their counterparts in Skärholmen. Hence, social workers referred clients to the activation programs even in situations when they were not convinced that it was very helpful for the clients.

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72 Group interview with the in-take group, Skärholmen 2003-04-10.
73 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2002-12-17.
Another social worker in Osby said the following about a client and her activation needs after referring the client to the local activation program:

*I think that this is client can search for jobs on her own ... but this is the local policy and she need to go there. My colleagues would start to question me if I’m doing too many exceptions.*

Social workers often admitted that they did not always agree with the local activation policy enforcement but the strong local activation commitment induced them to evade their professional judgments.

Such examples suggest that the street-level practices when referring clients to the local activation programs happened without much consideration about clients’ individual needs for the activation measure. In practice, most clients were referred to the two activation programs, and only clients with reasons such as verified health problems, clients on parental leave, or clients already working full-time were exempted from performing an activation requirement. Since exemptions from the activation requirement invited close scrutiny, and social workers then had to justify the exemptions to managers or colleagues, the most rational and efficient action for the social workers became to refer “all” clients to Jobbcentrum or Källan; a practice consistent with the managers’ interest in demonstrating to the local social service boards that the activation policy was considered and caseload contained since an activation referral increased the possibility that clients actually found employment or “disappeared” for other reasons.

It was therefore reasonable that most social workers would refer clients to the programs without careful professional assessments. This is not to say that clients would not benefit from the local activation requirements. The intention here is rather to highlight the informal street-level practices that social workers developed when organizational incentives favored “mass” referrals rather than “individually tailored” referrals. The research also uncovered that the current referral practices in both research sites sometimes were at odds with the activation programs’ own aims and objectives. But the task here is to explain the street-level practice rationale why social workers’ sent clients to the local activation programs that were not seen as the program targets among the activation workers.

### Street-Level Gate-Keeping Strategies

According to street-level bureaucracy theory, a common strategy is gate-keeping, which limits demand for valuable recourses and services (Lipsky 1980). This

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74 Conversation with social worker, Osby, 2002-12-09.
75 Conversation with social worker, Osby 2003-02-06.
was seen in Skärholmen and Osby, as activation referral became a strategy that restrained clients’ access to both social assistance benefits and precious activation support. For example, if clients refused to participate or failed in the activation program, their social assistance could easily be withheld or reduced, and if this happened, social workers’ individual caseloads, and the municipalities’ caseloads, were reduced. In such organizational contexts, an activation requirement in itself easily becomes a tool for limiting the demand for social assistance. The activation program manager in Skärholmen noted:

When we require clients to participate in an activation program many social assistance clients just disappear ... for example, in 1998, when we started with an activation requirement project for young people, they did not come back and applied for social assistance any longer ... it’s an interesting phenomena that clients disappear when you “offer” them a requirement ... it probably means that clients’ have own income alternatives other than social assistance.76

In this example, the “offer” of a requirement made potential cases “disappears.” Thus, the social workers had an incentive to re-interpret formal activation policy in order to utilize the activation referral as a gate-keeping strategy and control clients’ potential access to assistance. The same program manager in Skärholmen emphasized the previous statement several times:

We don’t want them to enter the system at all ... and the activation requirement make some people withdraw their social assistance application, or they just drop out after the first meeting at Jobbcentrum.77

Faced with clients who did not simply drop out of the program, there remained the use of sanctions, which could keep clients from obtaining social assistance or reduce the assistance they did receive. The social assistance director in Osby supported the above statements as well:

We use sanctions for clients who don’t fulfill the requirement, the whole family can lose the benefit if one parent don’t comply with the activation requirement ... it is a ‘gate-keeper’ and we have declined or reduced the social assistance several times for clients that don’t comply.78

The fundamental point is that gate-keeping strategies and a strong activation commitment seem to be related. For instance, Skärholmen, the city-district with

76 Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-12.
77 Interview with program managers, Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-31.
78 Conversation with the social assistance director, Osby, 2002-08-15.
strongest focus on activation requirements, was the city-district in Stockholm municipality that had most rejected social assistance claims.\textsuperscript{79} Program managers in Skärholmen argued that rejecting social assistance claims was functional as it could provide the social assistance administration with hints on how to interpret the Social Service Act in regards to activation through the Administrative courts’ principal decision if clients appealed the rejections to the court:

\textit{We don’t hesitate to reject clients’ social assistance claims and when we have rejected a claim we encourage the client to appeal as the court decisions gives us an idea whether we were right or wrong. We often claim that clients’ have not been to disposal to the labor market by not being enough active at Jobbcentrum ... social workers that I view more “professional” don’t mind to reject clients’ claims and they do not “serve” the clients too much either.} \textsuperscript{80}

\textit{... We have more rejections that other city-districts in Stockholm but that’s positive since it gives us legal recommendation and demonstrate that the “work-line” is strong in this city-district and that’s working since the caseload level is being reduced.} \textsuperscript{81}

It is known that recipients of public support seldom take the opportunity to appeal the social services decisions to court (Handler, 1986; Lens, 2007; Lens & Vorsanger, 2005), not to mention the fact that the welfare bureaucracies are generally better prepared than clients in a legal dispute.\textsuperscript{82} Therefore, it can be reasonably inferred that the rejections and social assistance reduction sanctions were latent strategies that effectively lowered the social assistance caseload. Evidence in the social assistance research literature suggests that increased requirements related to social assistance claims does increases the “cost” for the application process, and thus lowers the rate of entitled people applying for social assistance (Bergmark, 2000b).

In the minds of social workers, clients who did not apply for social assistance after an activation referral were de facto \textit{not in need} of social assistance.\textsuperscript{83} For example, one social worker explain her view this way:

\textit{If clients’ withdraw their social assistance application after the referral to Jobbcentrum and that means that have an alternative

\textsuperscript{80} Interview with social assistance manager, Skärholmen, 2002-11-06.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with social assistance director, Skärholmen, 2003-02-12.
\textsuperscript{82} In Skärholmen, the social assistance manager told me that denied social assistance 60-70 times per month but only in around 100 cases per year did clients appeal in court, 2002-11-06.
\textsuperscript{83} The street-level workers often argued that the reason that clients withdrew their social assistance application after the mandatory referral to the local activation programs was that they must have an informal “black-market” job or an alternative source of income, which would have made them ineligible for social assistance support.
source of income or that they already are working on a “black market” job. Which means that can be self-supportive without the social assistance benefit.\textsuperscript{84}

It was typical that social workers reasoned that if clients did not apply for social assistance it must mean that they were able to support for themselves. This was no doubt true in some, or even many, cases, but the social workers did not have any information on which they could support such a definitive conclusion. In other words, they did not, or could not, consider the “cost” of an assistance application. In the terminology of street-level bureaucracy theory, their definitive claim that all withdrawn applications mean “an alternative source of income” is a “post-hoc rationale”, which is a common street-level coping mechanism to legitimize this process (Lipsky, 1980).

Exemptions From the Local Activation Policy Norms

Some social workers were able to make assessments and exempt clients from the local activation rule. It did not occur frequently as social workers capable of making more individualized decisions had status and seniority, but the way social workers were able to deviate from the standard organizational norms was different in the two social assistance settings.

In Skärholmen, social workers explained that exemptions from the activation requirement required a rather sophisticated justification process in which the social worker would convince management about the legitimacy of their decision:

One can do exceptions, like give a client something extra or so ... or require something different from a client ... but then you need to have very strong arguments for the reasons and you must be able to justify such decisions ... but to walk that extra mile for a client is more difficult and entail extra work for me personally as a social worker ... it’s hard to do that.\textsuperscript{85}

This exemplifies that a social worker’s willingness to cope with management demands was paramount. “More experienced”\textsuperscript{86} social workers were more likely to make this type of individual assessment and push for exceptions. One social worker in Skärholmen told me:

I try to work individually with all clients, they are all so different in terms of age, education, health status and I try to not refer cli-

\textsuperscript{84} Interview with social assistance director, Skärholmen, 2002-09-12.
\textsuperscript{85} Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2003-06-12.
\textsuperscript{86} With “more experienced” I mean social workers that have been working within the social work field for several years and with a professional education in social work.
ents without meeting them first. I’d like to hear what goals they have in life and I don’t just send them to Jobbcentrum ... it’s already too many clients just sitting there in order to get social assistance ... they are sent there even if the clients themselves are negative ... not good for the clients ... 87

The major reason was that the older or more experienced social workers were better equipped to justify their decisions for managers. This finding is related to the professional norms and principles that are linked to the social work profession. A more experienced social work might be more familiar and secure in conducting social work in line with such practice norms. A “less experienced” social worker explained that she was not able to carry out exemptions in the same way as her more experienced colleague, even when she thought that the clients had similar needs and difficulties. As one younger social worker said about making a decision to except a client for the local activation requirement:

I’m not doing that, I’m more restrictive ... those who have worked for a long time has a better position to argue with the management ... and they listen more to them. 88

In Osby, social assistance and activation policy exemptions were less shaped by interaction with management than by pressures exerted by the social workers themselves. There, decisions were closely monitored in daily staff meetings, in which each decision was discussed and analyzed. 89 Every social assistance case was thus screened and during these meetings it was observed that individual social workers had to defend atypical decisions in front of colleagues.

A social worker in Osby described the interactions with her colleagues in relation to their local activation program in the following way:

It’s also good that we know each other’s cases and that clients receive an equal treatment from all of us ... but to question the activation program or our local working model, as a social worker, is very negative and difficult. I think that our activation model with Källan is strange sometimes but that’s hard for me to say to the others. 90

In this organizational context it was difficult for social workers to diverge from the local practice norms and the common informal street-level strategies.

87 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2002-10-31.
88 Interview with social worker, Skärholmen, 2003-06-12.
89 The social assistance administration in Osby used a modified form of the Uppsala model (Rönnlund 1992). The Uppsala model suggests that the social workers do not make any decisions without a “night’s sleep” and discussion with colleagues. All social assistance claims in Osby were discussed in the social work group before any decisions were made. The model is also characterized by strict work requirements for social assistance recipients.
90 Conversation with social worker, Osby, 2002-12-09.
This, decisions were influenced more by what colleagues accepted rather than clients’ own needs since colleagues had greater influence in shaping the collective beliefs at the local levels. On this note, Schierenbeck (2003) claims, “one can get the impression that the bureaucratic work for the most part is about the art of justifying one’s decisions” (Schierenbeck, 2003, p. 114) after examining social worker’s decision-making practices in relation to integration policy in Sweden. A claim that also seems to validate the findings in Skärholmen and Osby as the social workers pointed to the importance of being able to justify decisions when assigning social assistance clients to the local activation programs. In such context, most social workers had an incentive to refer most clients, as exemptions required further work.

Street-Level Sorting Patterns and Related Activation Recommendations

After the initial referral processes, clients continued to be dependant on social workers’ street-level actions since each social assistance application must be submitted every month for re-assessment. In this sorting process the social worker re-evaluated the clients’ need for financial support and their employment situation.

Simplifications of Street-Level Sorting Routines

In both municipalities, social workers submitted written forms to the activation programs; on these forms the social workers expressed the client’s employment status in term of their work motivation levels, as well as brief instructions for what the client was required to do at the activation program. The forms were locally constructed, as there was no national or formal method to assess clients’ activation needs in Sweden. Since the formal activation legislation in the Social Service Act does not provide any formal guidance about definitions of client categories. These assessments and sorting procedures were seldom conducted together with the clients and the clients had little possibilities to question or challenge social workers’ assessments. During my observations, I only saw social workers fill out these written forms as part of the administrative processes when referring clients to the local activation programs.

These local sorting processes were meant to cue the staff at the activation program about the clients’ employment needs but the observations revealed that social workers assessed most clients as in need for the program activity called “independent job-search”. This recommendation took place irrespective of the wide differences between the clients in terms of their different employment status and multifaceted needs for employment and social support.

Moreover, most clients were assigned to participate in independent job search when the social worker referred the clients to the activation programs. When social workers were asked why most clients were assigned to the job search activity, they admitted that this was the program component that always was avail-
able. They also claimed that they wanted to “save” more scarce resources, like training and education support, to clients who really deserved them. Social workers argued that an initial job search period was a test to check if the client was able to find a job quickly and thereby also withdraw the social assistance claim within a short period of time. As discussed above, this responds to both formal policy intentions as well as the overall ambition to reduce the caseloads.

This finding demonstrates that sorting practices often were present and did not really consider the differences in clients’ diverse employment needs. It also implies that the written assessment forms did not provide a precise portrait of the clients. Yet the forms told activation workers on how to respond to clients according to the different categories; providing information about which clients the activation staff had more or less incentive to support in their work.

**Sorting Practices Based on Moral Assumptions about Client Behaviors**

Furthermore, these categorical assessments and sorting practices was in general also based on the social workers’ own definitions and normative assumptions about clients’ work behaviors and willingness to support for themselves. For example, social workers in Skärholmen used a form on which they assigned clients into different activation categories based on how the social worker viewed clients’ motivation and capacity to work.91 The main goal with these forms was to indicate whether or not clients were prepared to take advantage of the activation program and possible job opportunities. On these forms clients could be typified as serious and willing to work and such classification created a direct link to job offers or other desirable employment support interventions. Clients could also be typified as lacking work motivation, which meant that the activation staff should be more suspicious and this indication increased the incentive to control such clients.

From a client’s perspective, the worst case scenario was to be assessed as “not motivated but with work capacity”, which meant that the social workers had assessed the client as encompassing the capacity to be working and become self-supportive but lacked work motivation or did not demonstrate that they were motivated to find a real job.92 From the social workers’ perspective such clients were “undeserving” and that made the social workers to assign them to specific activities that resemble workfare requirements and work test functions.93 In gen-

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91 On the written form clients were sorted into four different categories depending on their motivation and capacity to work. The form indicated with “similes”, category A = high capacity, high motivation, category B = high capacity, no motivation, category C= low capacity, high motivation, and category D = low capacity, low motivation.

92 See also Miller (1983) for a discussion about clients that are causing “trouble” in U.S. welfare administration.

93 Workfare is generally used in the literature as a work requirement that recipients of public supports need to accomplish in return for the benefit. The term “work-test” is in general associated with old poor laws and traditional work houses in the sense that able-bodied poor people needed to perform
eral, these activities entailed different kinds of work assignments such as park and street cleaning in the “park group” and taking care of dogs in the “dog park”. For example, clients were required to attend the “park group” in order to control whether they were working on the “black-market” and check if they can get up in the morning and follow normal working routines. One social assistance client was:

*Social workers can command social assistance recipients to participate in the “park group”. In one case we did so because we thought that the client wasn’t willing to do anything here at the activation program.*

In Osby, clients who were viewed as “unmotivated” and “uninterested” in finding a job were more often than others required to perform different sorts of internal work duties at Källan (e.g. carpentry, painting, laundry, kitchen chores). “Deserving” or “motivated” clients, on the other hand, were in general not required to fulfill such duties.

Ultimately, the sorting assessments could lead to detailed schedules of activities and work requirements that an “unmotivated” client must accomplish. For example, one client, who was viewed as particularly difficult, had a schedule that was broken down into minutes for each working day. This particular client was heavily monitored and viewed as exceptionally unmotivated and a “troublemaker”, but he was at the same time also considered as socially unstable and mentally ill. But under the current activation situation, it was more rational for the social worker to compel him to fulfill the activation requirement; addressing the client’s mental health problems would have been a much more difficult task. Based on the social workers’ discretionary decision, if the client failed to follow the extremely detailed schedule he was termed as “not” [at] the disposal of the labor market and could thereby lose the right for social assistance. Additionally, this strategy street-level strategy could thereby lead to a caseload reduction as it also gave the social worker a formal confirmation that the client was not doing what he was required to do in order to be entitled social assistance.

**Informal Street-Level Sorting Functions**

As demonstrated above, different institutional and organizational dynamics compelled social workers to classify clients’ work motivation and exert significant control over the “unmotivated” clients. Järvinen (2002) describes how social

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94 The “dog park” (“hunddagis” in Swedish) was a local activation project that was introduced as a practical work training project in Skärholmen city-district during the research period. Skärholmen has also the “park group” (“naturvårdsgruppen” in Swedish) to which clients was assigned at that worked with park and street cleaning duties in the city-district.

95 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-24.

96 Observation at Källan, 2002-11-26.
workers in Denmark also tried to investigate clients’ job motivation and desire to participate in activation measures as one of their key work tasks. It is suggested that such informal practice responses take place due to the ambiguities in the activation policy context, as well as social workers’ desire to adhere to normative standards of client deservingness. My observations indicate that such sorting practices were at work in both Skärholmen and Osby since clients were defined in terms of work attitudes and motivation to work, and not in terms of observable employment needs, such as language difficulties, little education and job experience, or physical and mental health related issues.

The formal rhetoric about activation policy makes the promise of tailor-made solutions and individually adapted activation services. The sorting practices observed in Skärholmen and Osby occasionally entailed individually targeted sorting assessments and individually tailored solutions, but only occasionally.

Summary

In the Swedish activation case, the formal legislation, which mainly stipulates the conditions for social assistance, is unclear when it comes to actual activation requirements and definitions of client categories in relation to activation interventions. Both municipalities and social workers are granted a great deal of discretion when it comes to interpreting the formal intentions of social assistance administration and its related activation requirements. Municipalities have committed in different degrees to the activation policy trend in Sweden, and in Skärholmen and Osby, the strong dedication to activation and the work-line was obvious – especially when social workers’ selected clients for the local activation programs. Social workers paid significant attention to the norms and values that politicians, managers, and the society at large expressed in regards to social assistance clients’ moral worth and deservingness. These norms and values were also important factors in shaping how the selecting and sorting practices took place on the ground in these two activation policy contexts.

Every municipality has also their own organizational incentives and disincentives that buttress or restrain certain street-level practice strategies that the street-level staff develop in order to manage their particular work situations. After the referral and sorting practices made by the social workers, clients participate in the local activation programs that the social workers referred them to. The local activation programs are embedded in the particular institutional and organizational contexts, which will affects to actions and work strategies that the activation workers develop. The following chapter will explore and analyze the street-level strategies that occur when clients actually are “activated” in Skärholmen’s and Osby’s own activation programs.
7. Activation Worker’s Daily Practice Routines

This chapter examines the second organizational domain in which municipal activation policy is delivered: the local activation programs. It shows the street-level practices and daily routines associated with the activation requirements implemented by the street-level activation workers at Jobbcentrum in Skärholmen and at Källan in Osby. In contrast to the social assistance administrations, which are staffed with social workers, the activation programs were staffed with activation workers. In their daily work, they were mainly responsible for assessing clients’ labor-market potentials, providing links to jobs, and determining whether or not individuals met their obligation to become “active.”

While the social workers played a crucial role in referring clients to the activation programs, the activation workers were the ones executing the practical functions of activation policy for the clients participating in the local programs. Thus, activation workers’ practices played a significant role in shaping the content of the local activation policy. The current analysis illuminates how these activation workers’ street-level actions were structured within the specific political-institutional and organizational settings in which they operate. It seeks to suggest the development of the informal practice strategies used by activation workers in response to the organizational conditions in which their daily routines were embedded. Examples will be presented from both Jobbcentrum in Skärholmen and Källan in Osby.

Initially, a brief introduction to the two local activation programs will be presented and thereafter will the major research findings and their empirical evidence be presented and discussed. These findings entail five factors that significantly shaped the activation workers’ street-level practices. First, the chapter will show how and why monitoring and control practices were regular parts of the local activation routines. Second, it will also highlight how in-take and assessments practices were structured within the local activation programs. Third, it will also demonstrate how the ongoing activation policy practices entailed a number of typical street-level strategies in response to program content, resource availability, and normative values about client behaviors. Four, it will also discuss street-level responses in relation to clients’ social needs and employment barriers. Fifth, finally the chapter illustrates how program and worker accountability was basically inexistent, a fact that made program liability and responsibility mainly symbolic.
Introduction to the Local Activations Programs

Both Jobbcentrum and Källan were staffed with activation workers, where the activation workers at Jobbcentrum were referred to as “job coaches”\(^\text{97}\). Most of the activation workers/job coaches did not have professional experience of social workers or formal social work education. As described in chapter five, a significant number of the activation program staff had previously experienced unemployment and some were hired through different kinds of employment subsidies.

During a regular working day, activation workers/job coaches were responsible for running client meetings, performing administrative tasks, job recruiting, making and maintaining employer contacts, and attending staff meetings. For the clients, the most common activity in both programs was the independent job search, in which clients were required to search for job vacancies and write application letters during a set number of hours every day. Neither program had many structured and predetermined activities and only occasionally did structured activities, like training in interview techniques, resume writing, and social skills activities, take place at the programs. The activation workers determined the frequency and occurrence of such activities informally and such initiatives were mainly based on their own desire and time availability.

Monitoring Attendance and Program Participation.

There were no time limits for the clients associated with program participation; participants were expected to attend in the programs as long as they received social assistance. Källan clients were, in general, required to participate between nine am to four pm, from Monday through Friday, while clients at Jobbcentrum were required to attend that program for three hours, five days per week. Clients’ attendance and performance were closely monitored at both programs. At Jobbcentrum, clients lined up every day at the reception desk, both entering and leaving the premises in order to register their attendance. The staff at Källan also kept close records of clients’ attendance since attendance was linked to the entitlement for social assistance in both Osby and Skärholmen.

The attendance control was also extended beyond the daily registration procedures, as it was part of the street-level practices. In addition to the attendance registration, the schedule at Jobbcentrum changed every two weeks between a morning and an afternoon session in order to monitor clients’ time allocation. Clients attended the morning session (8:30 am to 11:30 am) during one week and the afternoon session (12:00 pm to 3:00 pm) the following week. These practices was described in the following way:

\(^{97}\) The term “coaching” is currently a very popular term in Sweden and different kinds of “coaches” exist in a number of different areas. For example, job coaches, career coaches, personal coaches, and financial coaches. There is no formal definition of what a “coach” actually is doing or what theoretical or methodological grounds that informs the current “coaching” trend. For a critical review of the current “coaching” development see Nordin (2007) in Psykologtidningen, No 10, 2007.
In the beginning clients were required to participate in the programs eight hours per day, but that was too long. Now they attend Jobbcentrum for three hours per day, in the morning or in the afternoon. We switch from morning to afternoon every second week for all clients, as that makes it more difficult for them to work on the “black-market economy” and helps client to structure their days.98

The reason behind this schedule switch was not necessarily to increase clients’ employment opportunities but it compelled clients to follow a daily schedule and be punctual – two traits that were important as an employee, according to the staff. But the staff conceded that the schedule switch also made it difficult for clients to work on the “black-market economy,” which indicate that the schedule switch had an informal control function that rarely was disclosed in the formal activation policy or in the local politicians’ statements about the local activation purpose. Instead, such finding can be explain by the normative assumptions about social assistance recipients, assumptions that eventually filter down to street-level implementation practices (Hasenfeld, 2000). Although Källan did not monitor clients with schedule changes and computerized systems, the staff was concerned with clients’ behaviors and they argued that a daily program was important as many social assistance clients lacked regular routines. According to a social worker in Osby:

\[
\text{Källan is good for negative and lazy clients that are passive and not motivated to work ... the daily schedule forces them to do something and helps us to control and monitor their work motivation.}^{99}
\]

When reviewing case files in Osby the formal decision regarding the activation requirement was often based on statements like:

\[
\text{“... in order to prevent passivity the client is referred to skills-enhancing activity at Källan...”}^{100}
\]

It was argued in both Osby and Skärholmen that social assistance clients, especially young clients, needed to get up in the morning and to follow daily routines to become employable. The staff often admitted that many clients needed the mandatory attendance requirement in order to induce them to come as well as stay in the programs. Staffed claimed, for example:

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98 Conversation with job coach, Skärholmen, 2002-08-20.
99 Conversations with social worker, Osby, 2002-12-09.
100 Case file review in Osby, 2003-03-20.
The programs need to be mandatory and we need to monitor their time here as it creates a method and an incentive to leave passivity and marginalization by having a structured and “active” day.\footnote{101 Interview with program manager, Skärholmen, 2002-11-12.}

Hence, the street-level rationale for this kind of practices was that activation staff perceived that clients were in need for such monitoring practices, perceptions that mainly was expressed a collective beliefs among both the activation workers and the mangers. On the contrary, the same staff members claimed that activation was all about focusing on clients’ resources and that all clients are capable and resourceful individuals that could make appropriate decisions about their on needs and life in general. According to the program manager at Jobbcentrum:

...we believe that clients has resources themselves and that they can make sound decisions about their own lives ... we don’t see clients as victims here at the program ... we think that everybody wants to work and become self-supportive.\footnote{102 Conference talk given by Jobbcentrum’s program manager, 2004-05-27.}

With such a perspective it appeared rather paradoxical that clients, in practice, were strictly watched and controlled. It was also stressed, although rather convoluted, that the activation programs participation was voluntary. In Jobbcentrum’s information session to which all clients initially attended, Jobbcentrum was presented as an “offer” and as a “resource” and not as a requirement in order to be entitled social assistance.\footnote{103 Observation of client information meeting at Jobbcentrum, 2002-08-29.}

Indeed, such statements demonstrate that local activation policy rest on ambiguous and contradictory foundations and that the local staff presented the aim with programs in more than one way. The reasons for this are that the formal legislation as well as politicians and mangers express contradictory signals about the meaning and function of activation policy. A consequence of this ambiguous situation is, for example, that attendance control became one informal street-level tool to check work motivation and screening practices became a method to check clients’ eligibility to social assistance, rather than a method to improve clients’ possibilities to enter the labor market.

Assessment Practices in the Local Activation Programs

Although most clients were assigned independent job search tasks, clients received responses from the activation staff that were significantly influenced by the organizational context and the working conditions in which they conducted their daily activation routines. In fact, the activation staff was rather free in how
to allocate their time for administrative duties and time with clients. At Jobbcentrum, job coaches were in general responsible for 70-80 clients and they had regularly two to four scheduled client meetings per day and client meetings lasted for the most part no longer than 30 minutes. Additional time was divided between administrative duties and different types of staff and work meetings. At Källan, the activation staff had only a handful of social assistance clients per staff member and client meetings took place when it was requested either by the staff or the clients. In both programs, the activation staff where present in the program facilities and clients could approach the staff informally and without scheduled meetings, and when the staff was available and found it appropriate they tried to respond to such clients’ requests by taking with them on the spot or schedule a later meeting.

In-take Strategies

A significant share of the staffs’ time was committed to the interactions with clients in which the practical experience of activation policy was settled. One of these client interactions involved initial assessment routines, which in practice entailed a number of informal street-level strategies and responses. Jobbcentrum had a rather formalized in-take procedure for new clients. These in-take meetings were nominally about determining what Jobbcentrum could do for clients in order to help them to escape social assistance and become self-sufficient. There the job coaches utilized these standardized questions in this process:

- What is your planning for the future?
- What can Jobbcentrum do for you?
- How are you going to support for yourself in the next six months?

The questions was asked rather casually during clients’ initial meeting at Jobbcentrum and clients tended to answer them rather vaguely as it was difficult for many clients to have a clear and definite answer on how to plan and support for themselves in the future. These questions were also often used to exemplify for a greater audience how Jobbcentrums’ activation approach focused on clients’ resources and employability. Job coaches told me that through these questions they wished to determine the clients’ individual employment goals. Nothing is remarkable about such assessment, but there were a number of informal street-level strategies at work here. For example, through observation it was apparent that the questions were asked in a way that suggested that clients’ had to find their own solutions for their troublesome situation.

For example, one in-take meeting consisted of the following exchange between a job coach and a client:

Most of Källan’s clients was referred to the program by the local Employment Services and the Social Security Office and practices in relation to these client groups is not part of this study.

It was rather common that clients entered the program several times as their need for social assistance fluctuated, but under such circumstances they did not undergo the in-take process every time.
Job coach: What’s your planning for the future?
Client: I need help to find an education because I’d want to study now... and I have been abroad and worked for a while...
Job coach: Do you want to work at McDonald’s?
Client: Only as the last alternative, it’s “slavery” with very little income?
Job coach: A cleaning job though?
Client: It’s better than McDonald’s.
Job coach: Ok, you need to start here [at Jobbcentrum] tomorrow at 12:15 pm and it’s an information meeting at 1:00 pm. You should be searching for jobs here, and it’s an attendance requirement for all social assistance recipients. Your social worker wants to know what you are doing here ... and I like it when clients say that they want to get out of here ... but we are here to help you too. But you should search for jobs, search for jobs, and search for jobs when you are here. And for that, we have computers, phones, copy machines etc available for you.

The client expressed a desire for education but the job coach responded only with questions about employment. Although, this exemplifies a specific situation, this job coach’s response was rather typical when clients tried to express a specific need or individual desire. In this case, as in many others, no effort was made by the job coach to follow up the client’s interest in pursuing an education. Since the general aim of Jobbcentrum was, ultimately, to reduce the social assistance caseload the job coaches had few reasons to respond to issues outside the job search boundary. This example demonstrates how the job coach cues the client – that they like clients that showed that they really want to leave the program for a job – and how, therefore, the client should behave to obtain the job coaches’ support.

Education might have been a useful strategy for this client to improve her chances on the labor market, but since the practice norm was to limit access to education it was rational for the job coach to avoid the clients’ request for education. This type of action can be interpreted as a strategy to uncover that the program had little responsibility or resources to provide any other support than independent job search. Thus, the question about the programs own role also seemed to be rather superficial since most clients conducted independent job search and the program did not offer much other program activities. Under such circumstances, a question about clients’ own needs appeared to be rather symbolic. A practice strategy rather paradoxical since formal activation rhetoric is all about individual needs and tailor-made solutions.

The activation staff at Källan did not conduct their own in-take meetings; a social worker was often present, unless the client had been in the program before. In that meeting they discussed what the client needed to do when participat-

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106 Intake-meeting at Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-24.
ing in the activation program; it was much more informal than Jobbcentrum’s in-
take procedure. But similarly, there was a strong emphasis on the clients show-
ing the motivation to work and become self-sufficient. Below is an example of
such meeting:

Client: This driving course is a really good chance for me to de-
velop personally and eventually get a job.
Social worker: But what will it really give you ... and the social
services cannot pay social assistance for you for that long ... what
else can you do ... do you have any other plans for the future?
Activation worker: The goal here at Källan is to find a job, but it is
not clear how that will happen. We have some other alternatives
too ... like other education programs but they need to be accepted
and paid by the Employment Services.\textsuperscript{107}

In this meeting the client’s question about a driving course opens the door for
different activation alternatives, like education and training opportunities.\textsuperscript{108} But
it is decided that the client, at least initially, was required to conduct a job search
at the program and at the end of the meeting, they all agreed that the client shall
continue at Källan and they signed a written planning form.

The procedure of signing different sorts of agreements and plans were an im-
portant part of the activation routines in both Skärholmen and Osby, though they
did not have any significance in terms of rights or obligations, other than the cli-
ent’s obligations to participate in these programs. The signing procedures were
mainly symbolic and provided an image of clients having a voice in this kind of
agreement (see Johansson 2006 for a detailed discussion how the increased use
of individual action plans (IAP) shapes the role of citizenship).

Assessment for Employment

The in-take meeting at Jobbcentrum also involved an assessment in which cli-
ents’ job interests were disclosed and categorized. This assessment procedure
also involved a written form with a number of pre-determined job areas. Accord-
ing to the activation staff, the form was used as a “mapping tool” to match cli-
ents to suitable jobs. The job areas on the form were in sectors such as care
work, retail, cleaning, warehouse, and in the restaurant business, low-skilled ser-
vice positions. More substantial employment was difficult for the job coaches to
find – even for job areas that were on the form – as many clients lacked neces-
sary language skills and work experience to even be considered by employers in
such low-skilled service jobs. One job coach said the following to me:

\textsuperscript{107}Observation tripart-meeting with client, social worker, and activation staff, Källan, 2002-09-30.
\textsuperscript{108}This client was a young man, 18 years, with dyslexia and he wanted to take a special driving li-
cense course for people with dyslexia. He thought that having a driving license should improve his
chances to become self-sufficient.
Most of our clients want to work, but it’s really hard for them to find jobs. It’s unrealistic that all of our clients will find jobs. Which employer wants, for example, someone who has been on sick-leave for a long period of time? Many of our immigrant clients aren’t even considered by the employers, even if many of them have good educations and real professional skills from their home countries ... it’s really hard when the economy is slow and unemployment rates high.109

Not surprisingly, clients tried to demonstrate their job motivation by checking almost all job areas boxes on this form. One client who did so said the following about her actions:

I checked all the boxes on the job area form, because you want to show that you are active and motivated to search for all kind of jobs. If not, they might think that you are lazy or unwilling to work and you might loose your social assistance.110

This client was afraid that she could lose her social assistance if she did not check each and every job area box even though she did not have requisite experience or the necessary skills for many of the job areas. In practice, however, the forms were signaling to clients the need to show interest in each pre-determined job area or risk looking non-compliant with the rule of being [at] “the disposal of the labor market”. But when clients checked all the job boxes, instead of one or two, it made the already difficult task of the job coaches even harder. On the other hand, when clients’ expressed a specific job interest job coaches also found it problematic. This problem was stated by a job coach in this way:

... it’s very hard when clients have very specific job desires, like car mechanics, as that makes it very difficult for us to give them a ‘job opening’ to apply for ... but it is also hard when clients have too broad job wishes. It’s best when clients are moderate in their desired job alternatives and want jobs that are easier for us to obtain ... although there is no certainty that they will get those jobs either.111

With limited resources, a common street-level strategy is to redefine the view of the client (Lipsky, 1980). The use of the form helped job coaches to simplify in-take practice routines in addition to signal an important street-level message about showing job motivation to the clients. Such informal street-level strategies were developed as a way to both achieve client compliance and to simplify the difficult task to find job vacancies for the clients. But these practices did not real-

111 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
ly congregate with the formal activation policy objective, which point to the importance of responding to clients’ individual employment needs.

When clients tried to express specific jobs interests they needed to convince their job coaches that their suggestions were viable. For instance, a client who had recently finished a computer-training program through a labor market policy measure delivered by the Employment Services tries to communicate her interest in using this training to find computer jobs. Her job coach, however, encourages her to look for jobs in other areas. The following conversation took place in an in-take session at Jobbcentrum:

Client: Will I get any help here? I just don’t want to be here and just be sitting.
Job coach: There are many here every day that are searching for jobs.
Client: ... I want a job that I like and that’s good for me.
Job coach: Have you checked for outdoors jobs, cemetery and park work?
Client: I can look at such jobs too, I’m flexible but I can also think of computer work, but I know it’s hard in these jobs right now.
Job coach: Yes, it’s hard to find a computer job. [The job coach starts to ask the client about other type of jobs].
Client: Do you know anything about job at the amusement park?
Job coach: ... would you be interested in a cleaning job?
Client: I’ve been cleaning but it’s long time ago.
Job coach: A cleaning company has a recruiting session here on Friday. Are you interested?
Client: I think that I can clean a couple of hours every day ... but what about my computer training ... \(^{112}\)

This client wanted help to find a job in line with her computer skills that she was recently trained for, but the job coach left the client’s suggestion without response and tried to motivate the client into park and house cleaning jobs instead. In the end of the meeting, the job coach suggested the client come to a recruiting session offered by a cleaning company, something the job coach effortlessly could put forward as support since they had open slots at this recruiting session. With the work first approach and the limited availability of jobs, there was little incentive for job coaches to follow up on clients’ own suggestions when they did not have the means to respond to such requests. Given the program goal to reduce the social assistance caseload, a fast movement into the labor market was the most effective method to reach such goal. But such policy objective also gave job coaches little reason address clients’ own employment interests, especially if located in job areas that might required more assistance from the job coach.

\(^{112}\) Observation, client meeting, Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-10.
These examples demonstrate the rather complex relationship between formal policy objectives and informal street-level practices. While the forms helped job coaches to simplify in-take practice routines and signal to the clients the importance of work motivation, non-responsiveness and ignoring clients’ stated and specific desires for work ensured that clients were not left waiting for employment that was too particular. These were common practices on the part of the activation workers even though they did not bring the clients closer to the program’s stated goals of employment and self-sufficiency. Such informal street-level strategies were developed to achieve client compliance while not aligning with the stated activation policy objectives, which continually employed the rhetoric of responding to clients’ individual employment needs.

Local Program Activities

After the initial assessment routines clients began to participate in the local activation programs. Most clients were involved in independent job search at both Jobbcentrum and Källan, which meant that clients searched for jobs on their own. This program structure implied that the daily program routines were dependent on clients’ own abilities and resources to be active while required to participate in the activation program. Much of the responsibility for the activation was thereby left to the clients themselves, which significantly shaped the practical experience of municipal activation policy.

“Passive” Activation Measures

The first impression when entering Jobbcentrum was of clients sitting around the tables in the main assembly room, drinking coffee, chatting, reading newspapers, while some clients were working on the computers. When the staff at Jobbcentrum was asked why so many clients were not actively looking for work:

... it’s up to the clients to help themselves ... they must ask for our support.113

Or:

... sitting here is a function in itself ... they see other clients that eventually got a job or practical training ... they also see that we see them and we can’t monitor them if they are sitting at home.114

When questioned about this strategy Jobbcentrum’s program manager answered:

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113 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
114 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-14.
... the staff should not activate them because it’s up to the clients themselves to find a job. If it’s boring to be here it would motivate them to find a job faster so that they can leave.115

Another explanation was:

*We don’t want structured services or activities here because we want clients to ask for help themselves.*116

A staff member at Källan said:

*It shouldn’t be fun at Källan ... because clients want to stay then.*117

These statements are rather remarkable as they clearly indicate that the programs are not responsible for providing the clients with support. Both formal activation policy and local political statements about the programs emphasized “active” employment support to replace the previous “passive” social assistance administration.

Källan did provide some structured activities in addition to the job search component. Clients sometimes studied for driving licenses, completed homework (in case of participating in education), and practiced using computers. But Källan had a strong focus on clients’ own motivation to activate themselves. According to a client who was rather upset about participating at Källan:

... *it’s just a requirement to be at Källan ... what you are doing here is meaningless ... it’s not skills-enhancing ... I don’t know that job search help I receive, they only gave me a booklet about job search and I can write my own application letters without being required to be here.*118

At both sites, it was common that clients felt that the activation programs did not provide any useful or skill-enhancing activities for them. Sometimes the referring social workers themselves were critical towards the activation program. One social worker explained her view this way:

*I don’t think Källan is skills-enhancing for this client ... he don’t really need what they provide at the program, but these are the rules and I don’t question what they are doing there ...*119

Another social worker said:

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115 Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2002-07-01.
116 Interview with social assistance director and program manager, Skärholmen, 2003-06-16.
119 Conversation with social worker, Osby2003-03-20.
... clients are required to be there between 8 am to 4 pm without results, that’s the wrong signals from the society too. 120

These statements are also noteworthy as the staff recognizes the lack of “active” support that both formal activation policy and local political statements stress. But as shown earlier, the staff tended to emphasize the passive approach in the implementation practices, a consequence that is shaped by both the collective beliefs about testing clients work motivation and the lack of resources to do something else.

Changing the Concept of the Local Activation Policy

The examples above demonstrate the passive character of the local activation program. The passive activation construction did serve an additional purpose, effectively removing from consideration those elements of the activation process that did not, or could not, correspond with the formal policy ambitions. Municipal activation policy was formally portrayed as an active and dynamic method to reach self-sufficiency and employability (see for example the discussion about different activation perspectives in chapter three and the local politicians’ statements about the local programs in chapter five). But when an active form of employment support was not possible, the above observation suggests that the “active” part of the policy became, in effect, having the clients coming to the program. In an organizational context in which the activation workers sought primarily to combat what was seen as an increasing social assistance dependency and unemployment, the activation requirement as an “active” measure was mainly symbolic. Their activation requirements did this, symbolically, while the real struggles to find jobs for a client population with real employment barriers remained. I suggest that these street-level practices are the result of the normative assumptions about social assistance behavioral deficits and limited resources to address the real unemployment problems.

From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, such approach can be understood in the light of the limited control over job vacancies and additional employment support. But to fully understand the passive program concept and why the staff did not activate the clients in these programs, one must recognize how formal policy and organizational conditions shaped these implementation practices. For example, there was no formal requirement that the municipal activation program should entail specific components. At the local level, the main goal was instead to reduce social assistance caseloads with a secondary goal of making social assistance recipients independent of the support. Reducing unemployment was also an ambition, but such a goal is much more complex and difficult to control for the municipal social services because it is rooted in facts such as current job availability.

120 Conversation with social worker, Osby, 2003-01-22.
In addition to these factors, the obvious lack of “active” program components can also be understood in relation to normative values in the society at large. One major concern in both public and political debates in Sweden has been to what extent social assistance recipients should be required to do “something” in return for the benefits. Indeed, a mandatory activation program requirement attended to such concerns even if the program content is rather “inactive” and without much program activities.

Such an overall context fostered street-level practices that changed the concept of “active” activation into a “passive” form, and both program managers as well as the street-level staff argued, rather effortlessly, that their programs should not provide activities to the clients. My interpretation is that such responses can be explained by a number of different factors. First, although it does not explain the full picture of these local activation program approaches, it is relevant to show that municipalities were not provided with much additional resources or funding to arrange program activities. Second, thus, the street-level approach in both municipalities was to let the clients help themselves and ask for support instead of providing support to them upfront. Third, if clients failed to get the staff’s attention, the staff argued that the clients were not interested or motivated enough to merit their attention.

These practical responses were rational, as they allowed the activation staff to manage the high demand for their support and moved the responsibility for the activation requirement from the staff over to the clients. The burden of the activation requirement was thereby also moved to the clients and they were to blame instead of the policy or the program. Thus, the activation programs themselves, although rather passive and without much program activities, formed a symbolic function in the sense that both the municipalities as well as the street-level staff could demonstrate that they actually required “something” from social assistance recipients. A function that was important considering the strong political and public demands for increased responsibilities and obligations for social assistance recipients.

**Activation Practices and Local Activation Resources**

Although clients were required to search for jobs while attending the local programs, the facilities were not really capable of adequately supporting such job search activities. When clients searched for jobs they were mainly using computers at both Jobbcentrum and Källan. With the limited number of clients at Källan (again, five to ten social assistance clients), the access to computers was generally unproblematic. But at Jobbcentrum, with its significantly higher number of clients, computer access was rather limited. For example, Jobbcentrum had around ten computers with Internet access that clients could reserve for fifteen minutes each time. But with as many as than 150-200 clients attending Jobbcentrum each day, the waiting time was considerable and clients could seldom access the computers for more than one time slot per day – this system meant that clients had, at the most, fifteen minutes to look for jobs. Many clients found this problematic and one common complaint was about the limited number of computers, especially as they were required to search for jobs when participat-
The program manager and the staff recognized the limited access to computers and explained that they were trying to increase the number of computers.

Beside the job search resources, both programs offered vocational training, education programs, and practical training placements. Practical training placements were often in the form of a short-time placement period at the municipal childcare or old-age services, or in local restaurants and grocery stores. Clients could be offered education programs, especially programs targeting particular jobs in areas in need of skilled workers (e.g. bus drivers, parking guards, truck drivers, construction workers, care workers).

Another example of such employment support was the recruiting sessions, in which employers could come directly to the program. The staff saw these as very valuable and the clients were encouraged to participate. If not, they could be at risk of being viewed as unmotivated and not willing to work and thereby to entitled social assistance. However, it was not clear how many clients had actually found jobs through these sessions. During the time for this study, July 2002 to June 2003, only one company arranged a recruiting session at Jobbcentrum. It was a cleaning company and a handful of clients participated in the session and were interviewed by the company. When a job coach was questioned about the recruiting session several weeks after it took place, I was told:

... it’s terrible, none of the interviewed clients have heard anything from the cleaning company. Our clients shouldn’t be treated like that they should at least have contacted them ... even if they didn’t get the job. I don’t think any clients from us got a job out of that recruiting session, it’s too bad.

Despite the fact that no client from Jobbcentrum was hired through this session, such recruiting sessions were still talked about as one of the programs most helpful resources.

No such recruiting session took place at Källan, but they tried to build a pool of employers who could provide both practical training placements and possible employment opportunities for their clients. This effort largely failed, as many local companies were not interested in Källan’s social assistance clients. It was a rather slow economy in the area and many of the clients lacked the necessary

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121 More computers was one of the most important suggestion that clients proposed as an improvement at Jobbcentrum during a focus group meeting with clients, 2002-12-05.

122 For example, Stockholm Matching was one employment project in Stockholm municipality that focused on short-term education and vocational programs in job areas that were in need for skilled workers. They provided courses for unemployed individuals in the entire municipalities but it was rather difficult to qualify for these courses, as they required rather high qualifications in terms of language skills and basic education.

123 Recruiting sessions was often used as an example of how the program collaborated with employers. But this was the only recruiting session at Jobbcentrum that took place during the time for the fieldwork. It took place 2003-03-14.

124 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-04-09.
skills that the employers requested. The program manager at Källan described the situation this way:

It’s difficult to find jobs and practical training slots right now due to structural problems and a slow economy in the area. Our idea about a practical training pool has not been successful and most local employers are telling us that they want to wait until the economy has improved before they hire someone or offer practical training slots ...\(^{125}\)

This demonstrates that the activation staff was rather limited in what they could offer for their clients beside independent job search.

For some clients, who were assessed as “job ready” and close to the labor market, the independent job search component was the right instrument to find employment. For this client group, the activation programs offered useful tools like job opening listings, computers, phones, and printers. On the other hand, many clients in this particular client group often perceived the activation requirement rather useless since they were capable of searching for jobs on their own, or at the Employment Services, which is the main job search program in Sweden. As one client mentioned:

\textit{I don’t understand the meaning of the program for me ... I know I need to find a job but this is meaningless, it’s not skills-enhancing at all and I can search for jobs on my own.}\(^{126}\)

In fact, neither Jobbcentrum nor Källan did offer much that was different from than the Employment Services, which also had computers for job search, the largest national job vacancy bank, and a developed system for matching the unemployed with employers. When asked about the Employment Services’ role in the activation process, both activation workers and managers they said that these programs created “lock-in” effects and that clients’ stayed in the program rather than finding jobs. Skärholmen’s social assistance manager told me the following:

\textit{Many of the Employment Service’s labor market policy measures function as a filter for the participant ... they actually create obstacles for people to find jobs and create “lock-in” effects for our clients ... and clients don’t find jobs as fast as they actually could ...} \(^{127}\)

Furthermore, the staff also argued that social assistance clients did not get adequate support there and that the local program was better to provide individu-

\(^{125}\) Conversation with program manager, Källan, 2003-02-28.
\(^{126}\) Client conversation, Osby, 2003-01-22.
\(^{127}\) Interview with social assistance director, Skärholmen, 2002-07-01.
ally tailored services to the clients. Jobbcentrum’s program manager claimed the following:

_The Employment Services has the wrong goals and Jobbcentrum is better at giving clients individual services ...and social assistance clients don’t get sufficient support at the Employment Services, they are often categorized as “not job-ready” there._128129

These statements indicate that staff the activation staff advocated for their own program in favor of the Employment Services’ programs. In fact, when Swedish municipalities began to implement their own local activation programs it was often claimed by municipal representatives that the Employment Services did not provide adequate support to social assistance recipients (Ulmestig, 2007). Such claims might partially be true, but studies that have examined participation in the Employment Services’ labor market policy programs indicate that social assistance clients’ participate in such programs at the same rates and in same programs as other unemployed individuals in Sweden (Löfbom, 2007). The claims that social assistance recipients were undesirable in the Employment Services’ programs were basically built on myths, and functioned symbolically to legitimate the existence of the local activation programs. Hence, municipalities had an incentive to closely monitor the social assistance clients as they receive a benefit that was a municipal responsibility and they wanted to make sure that they participated in their own programs.

**Street-Level Strategies in Relation to Education and Training Resources.**

In the formal activation policy, skills and competence upgrading are often cited as the means to make unemployed individuals more attractive on the labor market. The Social Service Act and its related Government Bill 1996/97:124130 clearly state that social assistance clients should be allowed to participate in both education and practical training when it is suitable for them. There are no formal restrictions for programs provided by the Employment Services.131 (It is also declared that unemployment and labor market policy measures are a national governmental responsibility and the increased municipal involvement in this area is not uncontroversial (Lundin, 2008; Ulmestig, 2007). But since the Social Service

128 Conversation with program manager and job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
129 Compare with Mäkitalo’s (2002) finding about the use of “category 14” for those clients found “not job-ready” according to the Employment Service’s policy terminology.
130 Proposition (Government Bill) 1996/97:124.
131 The Social Service Act stipulates in Chapter 4, Section 4 that: “[w]ork experience or skill-enhancing activity as aforesaid shall have the purpose of developing the possibilities for the individual to be self-supporting in the future. The activity shall strengthen the possibilities for the individual to enter the labor market or, where appropriate, further training. It shall be framed with reasonable consideration for personal preferences and aptitudes of the individual concerned. Before making a decision … the Social Welfare Committee shall consult the County Labour Board.”
Act also allows municipalities to organize their activation programs with significant freedom, they can choose to encourage education or skills-enhancing measures, or not. However, the Employment Services offers different labor market policy programs, including skills-enhancing and education for all unemployed individuals in Sweden.

My research revealed that access to labor market measures delivered by the Employment Services was seldom the first option for the social assistance clients in Skärholmen and Osby. Speaking about education and practical training support, a job coach at Jobbcentrum explained why clients were again steered away from Employment Services:

... we do not offer or encourage clients to participate in education and training as the first alternatives for the clients ... clients shall find a job initially ... it’s only later on that we suggest training and education and other programs that is the responsibility of the Employment Services. 133

Occasionally different types of employment support were provided to the clients. But the circumstances that prompted a recommendation of education and training was often whether or not those services were readily available rather than on a client’s particular needs for them. For example, one client with poor Swedish skills expressed her interest in a practical training placement within the municipal childcare sector, or at a food service company. She wanted to improve her language skills as well as her chances to get a job in those areas. The job coach responded the client positively and promised to explore available slots. After the meeting the job coach explained:

... it's free labor for the childcare system and they even accept clients with very little language skills ... sometimes it actually leads to a regular job but that is not very common. 134

If a work-first focus was not always standard, exceptions were made when education and training slots were available and easy to offer. In another situation, a client had arranged a practical training placement on her own, but the client was not allowed to take advantage of the placement. The placement was as an editor, the profession in which the client was trained for. This client was very upset when meeting her job coach since her social worker had withdrawn her social assistance by arguing that it was an unaccepted practical placement. That situation led to the following conversation between the job coach and the client:

Job coach: What can Jobbcentrum do for you?

133 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-25.
134 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-10-09.
Client: I’m only here because I’m required by my social worker. I can search for jobs on my own, at the Employment Services, or through the Internet.

Job coach: Do you have an education?

Client: I’m an editor by training but I’ve also studied marketing and I did the economy program at the gymnasium.

Job coach: What are your job interests?

Client: I’d like to work as an editor if possible but I’m also open for other jobs, like economy assistant. I’ve worked like such before.

Job coach: How long have you been working?

Client: I worked for three months but I was then able to find a practical placement within my profession and I missed an appointment here at Jobbcentrum because I was at my placement. My social worker has rejected my social assistance because she thought I was unserious … but I want to support for myself … and I don’t think I should be punished for finding a practical placement on my own...

Job coach: Talk with your social worker about the money and the rules around the placement… so what are you going to do now … I don’t think there are many job openings within your own field right now…?

Client: I can do anything, cleaning, retail or sales but I want to at least try within my own profession first, but I was forced to stop the practical placement due to my social worker.

Job coach: The first goal must to support for your self.

Client: But you can’t be so rigid … I had a very good placement …

Job coach: But you are not allowed to do a practical placement while you receive social assistance … so what can we do for you now? All social assistance clients must come here and all clients don’t have the same possibilities like you … I hope that you will only be here for one week or so … [the job coach tells the client about the schedule, information meetings and how the computer system works]

Client: [Sighing and resigning] Do I only have around 30 minutes on the computers to write a job application …

In the former example, with the childcare placement, the placement was made available, as it did not require much effort for the job coach. From a street-level bureaucracy perspective one could say that in effect, the activation worker developed practice routines that limited the mismatch between their own work capacity and potential demands for services (Lipsky, 1980; Brodkin, 1997). In the latter example, although the client had made the placement arrangement herself, the client was viewed as “unserious” and that made the social worker to reject

135 In-take meeting, Jobbcentrum 2003-01-30.
the clients’ placement even if it was in the client’s own professional field. This street-level response is harder to explain as a result of limited resources as there was an existing placement available. Instead, this practice strategy can be understood by recognizing how normative assumptions about clients and their moral worth and deservingness is institutionalized in street-level practice. The latter placement was not accepted as a response to resource capacity, but as a response to the client’s assumed “unseriousness.” But in either event, the best needs of the client were not the basis for their placement or lack of placement.

The fact that both practical training and education possibilities often were restricted in Skärholmen and Osby, despite access to such support, is again partially explained by the role of the local organizational conditions and the dominant desire to reduce social assistance dependency through a fast attachment to the labor market. By limiting information about education and other types of employment support while pushing clients toward the most accessible jobs, activation workers privileged seeing a client in any job over a longer-term investment that might eventually lead to placing a client in a more substantial position. It is possible that this made the position of the activation workers more rewarding since it kept their own job goals attainable in regards to both maintaining case-load levels and to stay committed to activation norms and values. Thus, such practices could also be understood in the light of the strong norms and values in the overall political-institutional context and society at large that social assistance clients ought to be required to do “something” to show that they where deserving and motivated to be self-supportive. This “something” is not necessarily meaning the generosity of being provided with education and training opportunities, while collecting public support.

Even if clients would benefit from an education program, one reason for the staffs’ explanations could be that social assistance clients regularly received social assistance support while participating in these programs. That meant that education program participation did not lower the social assistance caseload as much a job would do, and that the analysis of such programs “lock-in” effect and limited value emerges as a symbolic post-hoc rationalization.

Street-Level Strategies in Response to Limited Activation Resource

One street-level strategy in Skärholmen and Osby involved prioritizing among clients when providing available activation services. My observations revealed that the activation workers devoted themselves to either those clients most easy to help and less time consuming (e.g., compliant clients who did what they were told to do) or to those who could be placed in a job rather quickly (and thereby reduce both the case and workloads). One job coach described the strategy this way:

... I select a handful of clients, to which I can provide more help. I pick a handful of clients mostly those that are close to the labor market to which I give extra assistance with job applications. These will probably leave Jobbcentrum fairly quickly. I also pick a
few ‘long-timers’ to which I try to find a suitable job or activity for but that’s much more difficult.\textsuperscript{136}

This practice is consistent with “creaming”, a coping mechanism used to portion limited resources in order to make the work situation manageable (Lipsky, 1980). Job coaches said that they wanted more time for the individual clients but the workload forced them to “cream” by focusing on certain clients. Such informal strategy resulted in activation becoming a policy in which certain clients were helped more than others. These practices were depending significantly on the activation workers’ discretion of who they judged as in need for activation support. In another example, a job coach told how she had to pick a limited number of clients to a vocational training course:

Right now it’s best for us to select women for this course, it seems like women have better chances to be selected for the initial course interviews … the slots are very few too and this means that I must pick clients that has the largest chance to be accepted … although some clients are in greater need for this kind of courses … through my comments to the course providers I’ve the power to approve, or not approve, clients’ application letters to these courses … if I want someone “off” my caseload I can recommend them for the courses.\textsuperscript{137}

Street-Level Strategies in Response to Client Behavior

At Källan, such creaming practices were not as evident because of the smaller client group, but even there some clients still received more attention than others. The selection process there was not formed as much by time and resources, but was based on how motivated and willing the staff was to work with certain clients. Selection was often based on an identification of “good” and “bad” clients\textsuperscript{138}, in which the good clients were given more attention in relation to support. Such normative identifications occurred in both Skärholmen and Osby. For example, one client asked for help with the registration at the Employment Services and the job coach made an exception and helped the client with the registration procedure. The job coach explained afterwards that she normally did not do so because it was too time consuming. But that she was willing to support this client because she thought that the client was serious, enthusiastic and “nice to work with”. This demonstrates that resource factors interact with normative factors and can both emphasizing and weakening informal practice strategies. The job coach also said:

\textsuperscript{136} Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-06-16.
\textsuperscript{137} Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-14.
\textsuperscript{138} Informal categories like “good” and “bad” could easily be replaced with categories like “serious”, “unserious, “motivated”, and “unmotivated”.
In this example, the job coach found the client pleasant and serious, while she actually has time available, which increased the probability for providing the client with support not regularly provided to clients. “Bad” clients could also be given significant attention, but then in terms of increased monitoring and various control functions. Although complex and difficult to disentangle, the research disclosed four main factors that determined how support was provided to the clients in the local activation programs. First, when staff had the time to help clients. Second, when the staff had available service to provide to the clients. Third, when clients were considered serious and motivated they were more likely to receive positive support, while clients categorized in negative terms were selected for control measures. Fourth, when clients were job ready and rather close to the labor market they were also able to obtain more services.

Street-Level Responses to Social Needs and Employment Barriers

The municipal social services are the organizational entity responsible for responding to individuals’ social needs in Sweden and the Social Service Act reinforces both social work principles and an individual client perspective. But street-level responses to social needs in relation to local activation practices are neither uncomplicated nor without problems. Because clients spent the most time at the activation programs, it was the activation workers who had the regular contact with the clients. It was therefore observed that clients regularly disclosed personal and social matters such as mental health problems, substance abuse, and complex family problems to the activation program staff, and not to the social workers. An activation worker at Källan said:

Some clients will always circle in and out [from the program] ... they might have an education but they have often also personal problems or low social skills ... these clients have often additional social problems and we [the staff] would need more counseling skills to help such clients when we work here.140

According to one job coach at Jobbcentrum:

Jobbcentrum is not good for clients with many employment barriers and social problems ... it’s not good to be here day after day

139 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-04-09.
140 Interview with activation worker, Källan, 2003-03-21.
without finding a job. Many clients have serious social problems or immigrants with other barriers to enter the labor market ... one must solve those problems first before we focus on employment.\textsuperscript{141}

When this happened, the activation staff in both Osby and Skärholmen acknowledged that it was difficult to deal with such problems while focusing on the primary task of helping clients secure employment. Activation workers at Källan admitted several times that many clients had personal difficulties, but they did not have the right skills or the resources to address these difficulties. Consequently, identification of clients’ personal problems was problematic for both the job coaches at Jobbcentrum and the activation workers at Källan. The activation staff felt that they did not have the professional skills to deal with such matters. They were hired to motivate clients to work. Even the program manager confirmed Jobbcentrum’s limitations in working with clients who experienced multiple barriers and that they wanted to focus on “employable” clients:

\textit{We want to work with the easiest clients ... if one wants to reduce the social assistance costs, we must work with the clients close to the labor market first ... then we can’t work with clients that has multiple problems, but I understand that the social workers are sending them here to get them of their own table.}\textsuperscript{142}

In Osby, such confessions occurred as well. One social worker declared that:

\textit{Källan is not meaningful for some clients ... it’s actually humiliating for some clients ... it’s bad for clients that have real barriers to work ... but we refer these clients too to the program. We can only do exceptions if we can verify their problems with a doctor’s certificate.}\textsuperscript{143}

In order to understand why even social assistance clients with multiple employment barriers were referred to the local activation programs, one must remember that the social workers felt pressured to refer most clients to the programs. But by doing so, they also created a problem for the activation staff, as they wanted to work with those clients that were standing closest to the regular labor market. This contradictory situation demonstrates two different street-level incentive structures that were in operation simultaneously, and that created tensions between the social workers and the activation staff.

Instead of addressing clients’ complex and difficult life situations, the street-level response in the activation programs was to avoid clients’ social difficulties and other employment barriers. When activation workers recognized clients’ problems and personal work limitations, they felt inadequate to help the clients

\textsuperscript{141} Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-30.
\textsuperscript{142} Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-30.
\textsuperscript{143} Interview with social worker, Osby, 2002-12-09.
with these matters because they lacked the resources and competence to deal with such difficulties. When questioned about the situation, they sometimes shifted from admitting that they were ill-equipped to help the clients with their problems to rationalizing that inability by saying that it was simply better to focus on clients’ resources.

Program managers who believed that the staff should not acknowledge social problems for fear that they encourage barriers to work and self-sufficiency echoed the latter strategy. As one program manager explained:

We don’t feel sorry for clients here, it’s about changing their attitudes to work and it shouldn’t be a reward to have social problems and receive social assistance at the same time. And don’t we all have problems and obstacles and we are still working ...  

Another program manager said the following about the relationship between clients’ social problems and their obligation to work:

Social problems and unemployment ... that’s part of life, they must deal with it and everybody has a duty to work and support for oneself even if you have certain problems.

In such organizational context, it sounds that the activation staff was just carrying out the activation policy just as intended and that they should only focus on employment related services. But the management responses was rather removed from both the intentions in the Social Service Act, which formally stipulates the forms for activation policy, and the local political statements about an individual client focus. Nonetheless, it was clear that the staff had a very limited ability to address effectively problems that not were related to the conditions of employment. To manage their own work duties in such an environment, the staff solicited employment related information from the clients and strictly avoided discussion of more complex individual matters. But since the activation programs are closely related with the social service domain, such street-level approach is rather problematic. In fact, one job coach was concerned about the social workers’ ability to provide social work support to clients with the current work-first mentality:

My impression is that the social workers are just eligibility workers these days ... they do not do social work any longer and they don’t have time to listen to clients’ personal and social problems ... the Social Service Act stipulate that they should provide support for all kinds of difficulties, language, children, family ... but they

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144 Interview with program manager, Jobbcentrum, 2002-08-20.
145 Interview with social assistance director and program manager, Skärholmen, 2003-06-16.
While the activation workers claimed that they were hired to work with employment issues and not with social work support, the work and employment focus was so strongly emphasized even in the social assistance domain, it was only occasionally that social workers could provide additional social work support to clients.

Program Accountability in Street-Level Activation Practices

Program accountability is difficult to monitor and control when discretion is a regular part of a policy’s practical implementation arrangements (Lipsky, 1980). In other countries, discretion is frequently constrained by different sorts of performance measures. These types of formal accountability measures do not exist in the Swedish activation context (although, as noted in chapter five and six there were local political pressures to reduce social assistance caseloads). It is already demonstrated both management and street-level staff had incentives to view activation as largely a matter of “self-activation.” Since it was up to the clients to activate themselves, the staff often had a passive role in the sense that they were not really required to perform any specific program tasks except meeting with the clients. But if activation workers were dissatisfied with the clients’ actions, they could report them to the social worker who possibly could reject their social assistance claim. Hence, clients were monitored and controlled throughout the activation process, but activation workers, or social workers, were rarely held accountable for their actions.

The Job Guarantee

However, one program component at Jobbcentrum that appeared to impose some kind of accountability on both the program and the job coaches. It was the so-called “Job Guarantee”, which was said to mean that clients should be in a job within the first five days at Jobbcentrum. In Osby, it was also claimed that Källan provided clients’ with an “occupation” with 48 hours after the social assistance application. With such objectives, it could be interpreted as a programmatic or a staff level failure if clients were not placed in a job within these timeframes. The Job Guarantee in Skärholmen was also a program component that politicians, in both Stockholm municipality and nationally, often referred to

146 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-08-29.
147 For example, in Osby the politicians reduced the social assistance budget markedly from one year to another.
148 The term “occupation” (sysselsättning, my translation) is in Swedish synonymous with “a job” in the sense that it provides an perception that clients are given real employment opportunities.
when promoting municipal activation policy programs. But the observations disclosed that the Job Guarantee was mainly symbolic and meant in reality that clients were given the opportunity to apply for jobs, not offered a real job. The meaning of the Job Guarantee became even more superficial, as the opportunity to apply for jobs consisted of providing clients with printed copies of job openings that were posted in the Employment Services’ job bank and job advertisement in newspapers. The practical experience was that job coaches provided clients with “job offers”, without control of the quality of the offer or if the job was realistic for the client. The same job advertisement was also given to more than one client.

Generally, job coaches and social workers also used the Job Guarantee of disclaiming their own accountability when clients did not find employment. More significantly, job coaches sometimes categorized clients as uncooperative with the local activation policy if they failed to follow through on advertisements for the jobs in-line with the Job Guarantee. Thus, this program component did not ensure any program or worker accountability and did clearly not guarantee a job. Källan did not have anything similar to the Job Guarantee, but the accountability of the program was seldom related to any programmatic outcomes or workers’ performances.

When both program and worker performance (e.g. how well they are able to find jobs for their clients) is difficult to control in addition to few resources that would improve clients’ employment possibilities, a common street-level strategy it to disclaiming accountability. Accordingly, this kind of program component and related street-level practices can be understood in relation to the fact that there was no formal strategy to control the accountability of neither the workers’ nor the programs’ performance. In the end, the activation success was filtered down to the clients’ own capacities to find employment and escape social assistance.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated that activation workers in Skärholmen and Osby were greatly influenced by the organizational context of the municipal activation policy and its ambiguous and normative objectives. It has shown how some of the activation workers’ informal street-level routines were performed in order to control clients’ job motivation and to keep clients committed to the strong activation approach and the local idea of the work-line. Within this organizational context, the study has also demonstrated the street-level use of inconsistent needs assessments and somewhat arbitrary enforcement strategies for access to activation support. It is important to highlight that the activation requirement has a

number of important advantages and values for unemployed social assistance recipients, but the analysis in this chapter point also to the informal and latent functions of this street-level practice strategies, and these strategies were often rather contradictory or not completely in line with neither local political ideas about an individual client focus nor the formal activation legislation and policy discourse about tailor-made activation interventions. Many street-level practices seen here were merely symbolic and responded basically to norms and values about clients’ deservingness and moral worth or tied to what resources the staff had access to.

However, the activation process is a complex structure with several different aspects for the organizations, the street-level staff, and ultimately, the clients. Although with focus on the street-level practices, the next chapter will provide an analysis and a more detailed discussion about the tri-part relationship between the social workers, the activation workers, and the clients and how their street-level interactions shape the content of local activation requirements.
The previous chapters have shown how municipal activation policy in Osby and Skärholmen was, to a large degree, formed by the street-level routines of social workers and activation workers operating in significantly complex political-institutional and organizational contexts. Although this study examines the street-level workers’ implementation practices of municipal activation policy, a careful consideration of clients’ street-level practice experience would, however, enhance the overall understanding of the practical implication of the activation policy delivery process. There is, obviously, a complex relationship between social workers, activation workers, and clients within which the specific and practical meanings of activation policy were discussed, negotiated, and delivered. But more importantly, by exploring the street-level implementation with an emphasized focus on practical implication for the clients, we can better comprehend the social workers and activation workers’ street-level practice strategies in activation policy implementation. Such an analytic approach might seem distant from the street-level practice analysis applied in this study, but a more highlighted client perspective will illustrate the policy’s target population ability form and shape this policy experience. This is pertinent since the clients’ actual policy experiences add up to policy-as-practiced (a more detailed description of this term was presented in chapter one).

In this chapter, empirical examples from both the social assistance administrations and the local activation programs in Skärholmen and Osby will be presented and discussed. From a more explicit client perspective, the research found five major factors that structured street-level implementation practices in relation to client experiences. First, the chapter demonstrate how clients tried to negotiate activation content with the staff. The research found that client attempts were often ineffective and the staff responses inconsistent and variable. Second, it also shows how clients were categorized and labelled according to normative values. This was a regular practice within the activation process and entailed complex strategies, as clients were crudely placed into categories “serious” and “unserious”. Third, the chapter presents how coercive features of the activation requirements were concealed and it are discussed how clients’ responded to that situation. Fourth, the chapter illustrates how clients responded to sanction practices, which were often seemed to be arbitrary and meant to make clients compliant. Fifth, the chapter explores finally how clients’ employment needs were defined
in terms of a social or activation worker’s views on a client’s personal deficiencies. These findings can be tied to what factors that structure the street-level implementation practices in these two organizational contexts.

Client Negotiation Processes

A core feature of bureaucratic encounters between the clients and the staff is the clients’ ability to both articulate and pursue claims for support and services. The nature of such client claims structure and determine the role of clients as citizens and how much voice they have in the encounters with public officials (Soss, 1999, 2002). Soss (1999) writes “[i]n welfare application encounters, citizens exercise their social rights and make their most pressing climes on government. If they are successful, they enter an unusually direct and durable relationship with the state” (Soss, 1999, p. 50). Ultimately it sets the boundaries of individuals’ the rights and obligations within the welfare state. Beside tax paying and voting in elections, citizens’ encounters with workers in public bureaucracies are probably the most prominent expressions of citizenship rights and obligations (Hasenfeld 1985). In other words, the interactions between clients and activation workers and/or social workers in the municipal social services determine the shape and form of citizenship rights in relation to income support and work requirements.

When clients found the activation requirement problematic or challenging and they often tried to negotiate the policy mandates. The Social Service Act stipulates that clients have this right, and that such a right was part of a client’s integrity and self-determination.150 Local politicians and program documents believed that local activation approach should be flexible and accommodate clients’ individual needs and requests. In the 2001 Statement of Purpose document for Skärholmen city-districts social assistance administration the following goals was stated:

- The right to social assistance shall improve the individual’s economic safety and independence.
- The assessment shall be made with respect to the applicant’s integrity.
- The applicant shall be given a possibility to actively participate in the assessment and planning processes.
- The assessment shall be made with attention to rule of law and administrative accuracy.151

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150 The Social Service Act (2001:453) Chapter 1, Section 1 and Chapter 4, Section 1-5.
151 From “the 2001 Statement of Purpose document for Skärholmen’s Social Assistance Administration” (my translation). In Swedish this document is called ”Verksamhetsplan för enheten Bistånd och Arbete” (Skärholmens stadsdelsförvaltning 2001).
Similar statements were found in policy documents in Osby as well. The above examples indicate rather extensive room for client involvement in the social assistance and activation policy processes. But the research found that client efforts and abilities to negotiate activation policy were limited. For example, one young social assistance client questioned the activation requirement and tried to gain an exemption from the municipal activation program by referring to the support she was given from the Employment Services. The following conversation took place at the social assistance office in Osby:

Client: ...Källan isn’t good, it’s a terrible place ... and how can that place help me at all ... do I really need to go there ...
Social worker: Källan is a requirement in Osby and you must go there in order to receive social assistance, it’s the local policy ... and it’s a skills-enhancing activity ...
Client: I don’t think it’s skills-enhancing for me, what would I be doing there ... and I’m already searching for jobs at the Employment Services.\textsuperscript{152}

We see in this example that the client was very upset that she was required to participate in the municipal activation program instead of continuing her job search at Employment Services. In the end of the meeting, the client was informed that she would not be eligible for social assistance if she refused to participate in the municipal activation program. Such a client had few formal options to challenge such decisions; the social workers had, in turn, few incentives to let the clients actively participate in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{153} This example illustrates that clients experienced the activation referral as an informal strategy to manage them and to limit their attempts at self-determination. It also demonstrates the street-level application of power and the materialized form of the unequal relationship that is related with the activation policy requirements (Carstens, 1998; Järvinen, 2002).

Lødemel & Trickey (2000) have pointed to this particular relationship by describing the current activation policy reform through the phrase “an offer you can’t refuse”. Midré (1995) has also described activation policy’s power character by asserting, “workfare in itself has ideological power, precisely because it is an imprecise and ambiguous concept. It may entail rights and obligations, force and care, exclusion and inclusion (Midré, 1995, p. 203). As described chapter three, the Swedish activation policy context exhibits vague and imprecise policy formulations as both legislation and other policy documents are ambiguous in their statements about activation policy’s aims and objectives. Such policy context makes street-level workers’ actions even more powerful as it is difficult to

\textsuperscript{152} Observation client meeting, Osby, 2003-02-10.
\textsuperscript{153} Clients have always a formal option to fail a complaint and appeal the social assistance decision in court. However, that appeal is formally constructed as an appeal about the social assistance benefit and clients have no legal option to complain about the activation requirement per se.
claim that they deviate from formal policy objectives when interacting with clients.

Street-Level Labeling and Categorization Strategies

What is also significant about the above example of the client who could not negotiate her way into a position of self-determination, is that after her failed negotiation, the client was categorized, by the social worker, as having a bad attitude; and that it was for this reason that the client needed to be referred to the municipal program rather than being allowed to utilize the Employment Services. The social worker here relied on, or created, an assumption about the client’s attitudes in order to enforce the activation requirement. The client, as a result, was left with her particular need unacknowledged and associated with what the social worker saw as problem behavior. Placing clients in such categories is a common street-level strategy in public policy implementation and associated administrative routines and people-processing practices (Hasenfeld, 1983). In general, policy might imply formal categories, but it is rather common that such practices entail a single street-level bureaucrat using discretion to shape the distribution of services and the perceptions of clients through the power of categorizing (Lipsky, 1980).

One common act for street-level workers is to sort clients into various groups and categorical stereotypes, sorting practices often based on the worker’s personal or moral views of “behavior” instead of an appraisal of formal policy categories or actual “need”. It has previously been demonstrated that work-related policy implementation frequently entails such normative categorization practices (Brodkin, 1997; Hasenfeld, 1985; Meyers et al., 1998). Street-level practices based on normative assumptions and behavioral ideals are especially prevalent when the policy rests on ambiguous policy underpinnings regarding job motivation, dependency cultures, and self-sufficiency, which is the case for the Social Service Act and its activation requirements. The implications of this kind of labeling and categorization practices create particular implications of activation policy as they regularly link client status and service provision.

Serious and Unserious Clients

Clients repeatedly experienced different sorting practices in the social assistance administrations and local activation processes in Osby and Skärholmen. They were formally referred to the activation programs in the basis of their status as unemployed when they applied for social assistance, but clients were also informally grouped on the basis of workers’ judgments about their level of motivation to find a job and become self-sufficient. After almost every observed client meeting, the staff explained to me whether he or she thought that the client was a “serious” or a “good” client. Social workers and activation workers frequently made comments like, “this is serious client”, “he is serious and motivated to find a
job”, “I know if it is good client, then I can trust the”, and “good and serious cli-
ents, they do not want to cheat us”.154

Clients came to recognize that a “good” client meant showing and stating that
they were motivated and willing to work. They by articulated the wish to leave
social assistance, and followed both formal and local rules. This client category
was more often viewed as deserving; therefore they received, more often, posi-
tive responses from the staff. For instance, one client deemed “serious” received
from a social worker who normally did eligibility determinations a significant
amount of hands-on job application writing support. After the client meeting, the
social worker explained her actions in the following way to me:

...this is a “good” client because she is motivated to find a job and
if I want give her some extra support so that she will find a job
quickly and become self-sufficient ... Jobbcentrum has too many
clients now and they do not have enough time to help all of them
... but this client is worth spend some extra time with ... she really
wants to find a job ... but I can’t do this with everybody ... but this
is a “serious” client that have had a difficult time behind her.155

Since she was judged to be a “good” client she received more support from
the social worker.

As suggested in the section on negotia-
tion, clients deemed “unserious” were
typically those who tried to challenge the activation requirement. They could do
so by being unorganized with required paper documentation and verifications,
expressed little job goals or ideas on how to find a job, and those who did not au-
tomatically agree to the suggested activation plans. For instance, in an in-take
meeting at Jobbcentrum, a client tried to discuss the necessity of her attendance
at the program:

Client: I don’t want to spoil my time here at Jobbcentrum when I
can find jobs easier by other means ... can’t we call my social
worker now and ask if I really have to be here ...
Job coach: No I don’t have the time to help you and on Monday
next week ... I don’t have the time to help you then either.156

Here, the client asked the job coach to contact her social worker in order to
discuss what she was required to do but the request was not taken into account.
After the meeting, the job coach told me that this was a very “difficult” client
and she had no interest in discussing this case with the social worker as the client
had asked her to do. The job coach referred to the local rules that is was the so-

154 These examples are taken from several conversations with both social workers and activation
workers in Skärholmen and Osby.
155 Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2003-02-20.
156 Observation of an in-take meeting, Jobbcentrum, 2003-01-30.
her business”. Hence, the job coach had no incentives to neither to contact the social worker nor advise the client on how to contact the social worker herself, although job coaches and social workers normally discussed common client cases. This finding demonstrates the fact, that when clients were labeled as negative, hostile, difficult, unserious, and bad their practice experience of activation policy was rather different from those viewed as good and serious clients. “Difficult” clients were also at greater risk of being required to demonstrate their job motivation through different kinds of requirements, or even after greater surveillance of their activation performances. One common test that clients were put to was the “the park group” or “the dog park.” These were two program components claimed to provide clients with work experience opportunities, but they was by letting clients practice in these two work settings. One social worker explained:

*When I’m not sure, or I’d like to control their motivation it’s important to provide the client with a job or a placement offer ... I’m often using the park group [or the dog park] to check clients’ intentions and willingness to work ... it also gives the clients a work reference to present to employers when applying for jobs, but they are really about controlling job motivation, or occasionally drug abuse or mental health problems ...* \(^{157}\)

In another case, a young man showed up at the social service office in Osby and a social worker met him to discuss his case. The client said that he did not want to go there and that he could look for jobs elsewhere. As a response, the social worker became very suspicious toward the client, and afterwards, the social worker told me that:

*This client was very unpleasant ... I didn’t like his attitude toward Källan and I will make him go there just because of that ... I’m not sure about his real motivation to find a job and become self-supportive ... and I’m questioning whether he will come here with the required documents ... I know who his parents are ... they are politically active in the municipality and I’ll make him go at Källan just because of that.* \(^{158}\)

These examples suggest that when clients were viewed “unserious” it often spurred the stringency in the activation requirements and the staff increased the degree of activation requirement. Similar findings have also been found in the Danish activation case in which different activation requirements in themselves were used as informal methods to check job motivation, and consequently, clients’ deservingness (Carstens, 1998).

Such practices, however, were not completely straightforward for the staff. In one client meeting, the client is frustrated and tells the job coach that:

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\(^{157}\) Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-24.

\(^{158}\) Observation at the social service administration, Osby, 2003-02-10.
I’ve been here at Jobbcentrum for more than one year now ... I don’t want to sit here and drink coffee any longer. Some of my friends have found jobs, I’d like to work too, but I need help to write application letters.159

According to job coach, this was a “difficult” client according to his very limited language skills and several health problems and not according to behavioral factors. The job coach recognized that the client would benefit from an education, but the job coach did not believe that the social worker would approve such intervention. After the meeting, the one job coach also told me following about the case:

In this case, I don’t collaborate that much with his social worker ... so I don’t know what she wants that this client is doing ... they are just referring this type of difficult cases on us ... they are too busy to really recognize clients’ true problem and needs ... and here at Jobbcentrum, we can only put more pressure on this kind of clients ... but this is actually a rehabilitation case, but he seems to be unmotivated and then it’s easy to forget the real person and their real problems, but instead, we have a focus on controlling them, to see if they can take a job and control how much they really want to work ...160

This example demonstrates that the job coach recognized that the client had needs that required different kinds of support and additional resources, but the local activation commitment made him prioritize the work-first approach in addition to fact that the social worker did not seem to be able to attend to such needs.

Tensions in the Local Activation Process

As the previous examples show, clients often had to deal with tension in their relationship with staff; whether it was because they were upset and frustrated themselves, the staff person was argumentative, or situations in which social workers and activation workers disagreed on certain aspect of a case. In a sense, all of this was to be expected since clients spent most of their time at the activation programs (also described in chapter seven). But activation staff, for their part, admitted that they wanted to be viewed as “nice” and not part of the mandatory requirement process in order to keep a friendly atmosphere at the activation programs. From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, the activation staff had an incentive, therefore, to conceal the coercive elements of the activation requirements.

159 Observation client meeting, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-23.
160 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-23.
Local Organizational Arrangements and Bureaucratic Responsibilities

In part to limit the tensions with frustrated clients, there was an organizational divide of the formal responsibilities of social workers and activation workers. Clients were told that the social workers were responsible for all formal decisions and activation workers, whom they saw on a daily basis, would merely execute the activation requirements and related services. At the first information meeting, clients were informed through a power point presentation that:

**WHY ARE YOU HERE?** (Statement in Power Point presentation)
... You should not feel that you are forced to go here ... participation here is a resource for those how are looking for jobs and receive social assistance ... the goal is to be self-sufficient and to say “goodbye” to your social worker ... (Commentary from job coach)

**JOBBCENTRUM IS AN OFFER!** (Statement in Power Point presentation)
... It’s not the staff at Jobbcentrum that decides that you are required to be here, it’s the Stockholm Municipality that has decided that and it’s your social worker that is taking care of all formal decisions. (Commentary from job coach)

Thus, activation workers presented the activation requirement as an offer and concealed, rather successfully, the mandatory feature of the activation process, which, from a street-level bureaucracy perspective, was important for the activation staff. Clients were thereby encouraged to see activation workers as somehow removed from the formal decision-making. Clients were frequently referred to the social workers whenever they had questions regarding requirements, entitlements, and administration practices, although the activation staff was well informed about the local policy rules. But the right to social assistance was based on the clients’ performance at the activation program. Most clients could see that their first point of inquiry, negotiation, and tension would be with the activation worker who monitored their performance and attitude on a daily basis. The claim of an organizational divide displaced this overt power held by activation workers, and tried to keep activation workers appearing neutral in an unequal bureaucratic relationship, and this may have only added to client frustrations and tensions within the program. Especially, when they found out that the activation staff reported their program performance to the social workers on a regular basis.

In one case, a client, whose social assistance had been withdrawn after her job coach had reported her as “inactive”, was very upset and told me the following:

*The social worker told me that the job coach had called her to say that I wasn’t active enough at Jobbcentrum and that he was disap-

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161 Observation at information meeting for clients, Jobbcentrum, 2002-08-29.
pointed with my job search activity, how can that be true, I just spoke with my job coach and he said that I was going good ... why did he do so, he’s “my” job coach and supposed to support me ...

When it became apparent that the job coach had, in fact, reported her performance and thereby becoming a real factor in the decision-making process, the client felt she was not taken seriously and that they “gone behind her back”.

Thus, the organizational arrangement to separate the “exercise of public authority” between the social workers and the activation workers was mainly symbolic since the activation requirement indirectly determined the right to social assistance and activation staff reported clients’ activation performance to the social workers. Similar administrative arrangements have been demonstrated elsewhere. Carstens (1998) claims that there is an underlying conflict between clients’ interest and organizations’ interest within the activation policy context and masked issues that demonstrate the asymmetric relationships in the activation policy process in Denmark.

In the current study, it was also observed that this was a rather fragile arrangement, and that it could lead to other conflicts that influenced the clients’ experience of activation. On a number of occasions, it was observed that activation workers and social workers disagreed about certain client-related issues. It was very obvious when activation staffs’ formal part of the eligibility determination process were at risk of being disclosed. In fact, the job coach who was involved in the example with the clients who had been reported “inactive” was upset because her role as something other than “neutral” had been revealed:

*The client came to me and was angry and she told me that the social worker had rejected her social assistance application this month because I’d reported her as “inactive” ... this is not how it should be because if something happens with frustrated clients it will be here at Jobbcentrum ... since they are here every day and not at the social assistance office ... where the actual decisions are taken ... now I’ll never say that a client is inactive anymore, just ask social workers what they want me to do if clients are here too long. I’ll now let them check the computerized attendance system and not tell them anything verbally ... I cannot be the “police” for the social workers, if they are TELLING the clients that I reported them ...*

Although, tensions were often shifted away from the activation program in which clients participated on a daily basis, this example illustrates that clients experienced program practices confusing and unfair, where the promise of a system that separated decision-making was in fact not the case. Consequently, the

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162 Conversation with client, Jobbcentrum, 2003-03-10.
conflicts or dilemmas of the activation policy and the social assistance administra-
tion were in reality closely related, and affected the practical experience of policy significantly.

Street-Level Sanction Practices

Clients’ practical experience of activation policy was also influenced of how sanctioning possibilities was used in practice in the relationship between the two staff groups and the clients. In this context, clients who were sanctioned could have their social assistance amount reduced, or have their claims rejected outright if they failed to fulfill the activation rules. Sanctioning practice is a formal and adequate strategy when clients do not act in accordance with the formal and local rules and thereby perform their given role in the administrative process. But in policy practice, sanctioning or threats of sanctions can be used as an informal street-level strategy. For example, sanction practices can be used to make clients compliant or to make the work itself more straightforward for the street-level staff. This study demonstrates that sanctions or the threats of sanctions were used routinely in several informal and latent ways in the activation processes in Osby and Skärholmen.

Arbitrary Sanctioning Practices

As with many other street-level practices, sanctioning takes place under an array of circumstances, which can make their application seem arbitrary. Clients cannot get a transparent perspective of the practical consequences of certain behaviors. For example, it was observed that sanctioning practices could be used to control clients’ motivation to work or to verify whether clients’ had alternative solutions to become financially independent, make clients comply with the rules, and to make them collaborate with the staff. A social worker told me that she threatened to reject the social assistance application in one case in order to change the client’s attitude:

When I threatened the client with a sanction it made the client to change her attitude ... and the client do now understand what the activation requirement is about and she is now searching for jobs more actively ... ¹⁶⁴

This client was a risk of being cut off from her social assistance benefit if the clients did not become more active at the local activation program. Another client lost his social assistance benefit when his job coach reported him as inactive in the job search process. The job coach explained the situation this way:

¹⁶⁴ Conversation with social worker, Skärholmen, 2002-10-31.
He was sanctioned because he didn’t apply for any jobs ... he was just talking and was drinking coffee at Jobbcentrum. He hasn’t applied for social assistance again, so we assume that he must have another source of income and being self-sufficient now.165

This client was cut off due to inactivity, which could be interpreted as in line with local rules and the Social Service Act if it was clearly demonstrated that the client did not do want he could in order to become self-supportive.166 If so, these were formally correct actions as the activation requirement was part of the formal social assistance entitlements, but these examples demonstrate two additional points. The first example indicates the point that it helped the social worker to make the client compliant with the rules rather effortlessly. The second point speaks to fact that neither formal nor local activation policy requirements has clearly defined the term “active,” so that the actual level of participation the client must meet remains elusive and open to the discretion of the activation worker, increasing the discretionary feature of the use of sanctioning practices.

This particular example was inconsistent and contradictory, as many clients observably have been sitting “inactive” at Jobbcentrum for significant periods of time. In fact, job coaches called this kind of clients for “long-timers” and on this note one job coach explained that:

*Just sitting here has a function too since it is a form of “social” practice ... they get out of their houses, they see people other here, they are talking with each other, and eventually they see that other clients finds an employment and disappear ... and in every “sitting group” there’s always someone who is more motivated than the others ...*167

For the clients, sanctioning practices as a consequence of inactivity were therefore rather unpredictable and confusing. Social workers were ambiguous about the terms of the activity requirements and how they responded to the activation workers performance reports, leaving the clients without a definitive standard or expectation. One social worker explained how she utilized the sanctioning option when working with clients in activation programs:

*Sanctions are my only method to control what the client really wants and is motivated for. I often reject the social assistance application but I’m willing to change my decisions if the clients show motivation to find a job.*168

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165 Conversation with job coach, Jobbcentrum, 2002-09-23.
166 The Social Service Act only stipulates this rather open and flexible policy requirement.
If the possibility of being sanctioned made clients compliant and led them to behave in ways that reduced the risk of losing their social assistance, it also made some clients pretend that they were looking for jobs in order to look “active” even though there were no more job vacancies to apply for. One client explained her strategy at Jobbcentrum:

*I’m looking for jobs all the time while I’m here because I can otherwise be judged as inactive and reported to my social worker. Even if the job search don’t take as long time every day ... I pretend that I’m looking for jobs even if I can’t find any new job vacancies that day.*

Ekström (2005) describes one example in which a completely illiterate client pretended that she was looking at the job vacancy ads on the bulletin board with job vacancies every day although she could not read at all (Ekström, 2005, p. 88). Such clients who had very little knowledge about how to search and apply for jobs were likely to be reported as inactive.

The street-level practice functions with sanctioning illustrate that the risk being sanctioned shaped the practice experience significantly for the clients in addition to shaping the boundaries for the relationship between the staff and the clients. The requirement of being “active” was significant since the staff also argued that sitting unoccupied was a function in itself, as it made clients motivated to find a job. This exemplifies the contradictory nature of the street-level practices of activation policy when legislation is ambiguous and street-level staff is granted wide discretion. In an organizational context in which the street-level staff had significant freedom to reject or reduce the social assistance benefit, it formed a client context in which they often agreed with the activation requirement and clients tended to avoid conflicts with the staff.

Local Client Reviews

The activation process and clients’ individual situations were often discussed in different kinds of meeting in which all three parts was present. These meetings often gave the clients a voice and a possibility to negotiate the activation requirement with both of the involved official staff representatives. Although the risk for an unequal power relationship in these meeting between the social workers, the activation workers, and the clients, clients often found them helpful as it gave them a option to openly discuss their own case. These tri-part meeting were often referred to as a regular part of the activation process, but the research observed that they took place rather infrequently, often due to the staffs’ time constraints. One job coach explained the situation:

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Tri-part meetings are supposed to be a regular part of the activation process but the use of them vary significantly from case to case and which social workers one is collaborating with. Sometimes the cases are just “going-on”, and we have then rarely have time for tri-part meetings and certain social workers have no control or ideas what’s going on with the clients here … 170

These tri-part review sessions indicated a positive part of the activation process, one that happened rather irregularly. In one meeting, the following verbal exchange took place:

Social worker: It was a long-time since I saw you ... I barely recognized you. I’m wondering why we are seeing you ... how can I help you? What is important for YOU to talk about?
Client: ... It’s you that have called to this meeting ... 171

This example demonstrate that, although the social worker is responsible for planning of the clients’ activities at Jobbcentrum, this social worker barely recognized the client and did not know what to talk about.

Client Review Sessions
In addition to tri-part meetings, social workers and activation staff in Skärholmen met regularly to review their joint clients in order to discuss, sort, and negotiate what type of bureaucratic response individual clients deserved. In Osby, social workers met on a daily basis to discuss the current client cases. Review sessions were described to me as meetings in which clients’ employment needs were assessed and related to appropriate activation response. Observations of these review sessions found that it was often a strategy to manifest moral assumptions about the clients and their own behaviors. For example, a job coach and a social worker discussed one client case in the following way:

Job coach: It’s impossible to work with her ... I offered her to apply for the retail course but she declined ... we should set up a three-part meeting to check her intentions.
Social worker: She should be sanctioned if she refuses to go ...
Job coach: Yes, that’s a clear signal for her ... but you must do it because we have no money to threat with. 172

The client was viewed as “strange” and “mysterious” and the staff was therefore discussing if they should sanction the client or if they should try to talk with the client in a so-called tri-part meeting including the job coach, the social work-
er, and the client. The above example also exemplifies how the threat of a sanction could be used and how the job coach wanted the social worker to execute the threat, as the job coach did not have control over the financial means to do it.

It was also observed that beside brief discussions about clients’ employment needs, clients’ personal deficiencies and behaviors were often the focal point of the reviews rather than their work experience, language barriers, and limited education. In another review case example, the following conversation took place:

*Job coach:* This is a “strange” client, he’s coming every day and brings his own computer

*Social worker:* Yes, he’s odd, let him sit there for some time, because I don’t know what to do with him.

*Job coach:* Many of our clients are very strange, but this one is exceptionally bizarre.

In these review sessions, it was also observed that the staff frequently did not recognize the clients or their status in the activation program. In fact, they were often clueless of who the clients actually were, and comments such as “I don’t know this clients”, “who is this”, “is this my client”, I haven’t seen this client for a long time, “is this person still receiving social assistance” was heard several times.

When one client case that was reviewed in Osby, the social workers reached a conclusion that they should reject the client’s social assistance claim. Noteworthy, they did so without any verification that the client had failed to comply with the formal social assistance or activation rules. The following conversation took place between two social workers when they discussed how they formally could legitimize a social assistance rejection:

*Social worker 1:* If we refuse to give him social assistance, we must justify the decision ... not only because of the social workers is on vacation ...

*Social worker 2:* ... but wasn’t this client asked to turn in some additional documents too ...and his attendance at Källan in not so good.

*Social worker 1:* ... and we can then refuse social assistance if we “bend” the decision as an activation referral according to Social Service Act ... as there is no definite rule on how we should interpret the paragraph about activation requirement.

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173 Observation of client review session, Skärholmen, 2003-03-12.
174 Observation of client review session, Skärholmen, 2003-03-12.
175 These examples are taken from several client review sessions with social workers and activation workers in Skärholmen.
176 Observation social work meeting, Osby, 2003-02-27.
In other words, once the social workers made their own decision they sought a way of “bending” it to fit the legal framework for denial. This example indicates that when the legislation is unclear and without more precise rules and directives, such street-level practices are possible and come to determine the practice experience of activation, and ultimately, the conditions under which clients received social assistance and activation support.

**Program Participation Outcomes**

Knowledge about program outcomes and effects are almost unknown in the Swedish activation policy context. Neither Skärholmen nor Osby was systematically evaluating their activation program in terms of programmatic outputs and it was little knowledge whether the clients find jobs as a result of the programs or how long time clients actually spent in the programs. Both settings were measuring programs’ results through indirect correlations with the reduction in social assistance caseloads. Such a correlation is rather complex and unclear (Bergmark, 2000), especially since most municipalities, with or without activation programs, reduced their caseloads since the peak in 1996 and the early years of 2000s.¹⁷⁷ Such information, or lack thereof, creates a specific institutional context as it relates to the rhetoric about activation as “success stories”. A systematic examination of the programs’ results was nearly impossible due to the significant lack of program data that would allow such analysis. Nevertheless, in order to get a sense about clients’ program attendance duration, an analysis of existing programmatic information and attendance registration statistics was made (Thorén, 2005).

Between September 1998 and May 2003, Jobbcentrum served over 2,900¹⁷⁸ individuals according to the attendance registration data. The influx of new clients varies between 20 and 120 clients per month, suggesting that the flow of clients was rather inconsistent. Most clients attended Jobbcentrum for one program period, but some clients attended Jobbcentrum up to four times. On average, clients stayed in the program for 258 days (median 162) in the program. This result indicates that a smaller number of clients attended the program for very long period of times, while a larger number of clients spent shorter periods of time in the program. At the time for this analysis in May 2003, 770 clients (26.1 percent) had been in the program for more than one year.

¹⁷⁷ For example, when comparing with Kista, a city-district similar to Skärholmen in terms of size, demographic situation, and unemployment rates, but without a program like Jobbcentrum, between 1998 and 2003 the reduction of social assistance clients was 50.6 percent in Kista and 47.4 percent in Skärholmen, reduction of social assistance clients in regards to population was 53.5 percent in Kista and 49 percent in Skärholmen, and reduction in social assistance household was 49.1 percent in Kista and 41.8 percent in Skärholmen (Statistics Stockholm, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ This number includes in general social assistance clients from Skärholmen city-district but also a small share of clients from other city-districts as well as participants referred from the local Employment Services.
Clients that started the program before year 2000 had relatively long periods in the program and the average length in program was 439 days (median 373). This finding suggests that program attendance duration correlates with the general employment situation, and since the unemployment rate was lower in the early 2000s compared to the late 1990s, program duration tended to be shorter during these years. The table below demonstrates program duration at Jobbcentrum between 1998 and 2002:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start in Program (Year)</th>
<th>Program Attendance Duration (Days)</th>
<th>Percent of Clients Still in Program (Censored, May 2003)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Program Attendance Duration at Jobbcentrum

The analysis also show that the average program attendance duration was 8.5 months during the entire observation period and finding an employment was the fastest way to leave the program, but this exit option was only certain for 18 percent of the clients. The majority of clients (55.7 percent) who left Jobbcentrum were just “de-registered” without information about the reason for their exit.

Between January 2002 and July 2004 Källan served 88 social assistance clients. These individuals started 108 times in the program, which indicate that several clients started more than once at Källan as well. Källan’s clients stayed in the program for 49 days on average but the maximum number of participation days was over 350 days. This finding demonstrates that most of Källan’s clients had significantly shorter program spells compared to Jobbcentrum’s clients. The table below demonstrates program duration at Källan between 1998 and 2003:

179 The analysis was made with a Kaplan-Meier survival analysis. Year 2003 is excluded since the observation window ends in May 2003. 19.4 percent of the clients from 2002 and 71.6 percent of the clients from 2003 were still participating in the program when the analysis was conducted.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Days (Mean)</th>
<th>Number of Days (Max)</th>
<th>Number of days (Min)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7 months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Program Attendance Duration at Källan

72 percent of the clients participated in Källan’s activation program at one time, 20 percent started in the program twice, and 8 percent of the clients attended Källan for three times or more. Källan’s program data indicate that the exit factor “work” fluctuated between 10 percent in 1998, up to 37 percent in 2002, and down to 11 percent in 2004. These results suggest that clients’ ability to find employment after Källan is much dependent on the employment situation as the variation follows the general unemployment rates. Another significant exit factor from Källan is “absenteeism” (unaccepted non-attendance or failure to comply with program rules), which has varied between 10 percent and 24 percent between 1998 and 2004. This means that a number of clients must leave the program due to an inability to fulfill the activation requirement. It was also found that approximately 21 percent of the clients left the program for an employment, but the majority of the clients transferred to other type of public support systems when de-registered from Källan.

The statistical analysis of both Jobbcentrum and Källan was curtailed due to the lack of systematic program and client data but the above analysis offers an indication about programmatic “results”. However, the lack of output data is interesting in itself as it highlights the limited understanding about municipal activation programs and their actual value to provide clients with employment. This finding is especially intriguing considering the importance to portray activation program approaches as success stories with many positive outputs as described in chapter five.

Summary

Throughout this study, we have seen the prevalence of street-level practices and informal strategies that are highly informal, inconsistent, and often contradictory. Overall, for clients, these practices have implicitly signaled incentives to conform to expected behaviors in order to ultimately be eligible for their social assistance support. Although the precise relationship between the street-level staff’s practices and what clients’ finally received as support in the local activation programs cannot be stated with certainty, the observations suggest some
general client focused outcomes and practical implications as a result of these street-level activation policy practices.

As a result of the research in Skärholmen and Osby, four major informal client “types” could be identified as an effect of the social workers’ and the activation workers’ street-level. In the end, these client types formed the practical experience of municipal activation policy in these two research settings; ultimately they became the materialized form of activation policy-as-practiced.

First, if clients were found motivated and willing to work and had an observable work capacity, they were regularly provided multiple job search supports, accessible job openings, practical training placements, and education programs as they would, most likely, move into a regular job. These clients were more often than other left to do job search alone and they were not monitored as closely as most other clients. Second, clients who were perceived as motivated and willing to work but without real work capacity was offered various job search support. Clients in this informal client category were occasionally assigned to practical training placement or education programs, in particular when such support was available and when clients in the former, more prioritized category, had been provided such support. Third, another typical client group was those viewed as unserious clients. According to the staff, these clients had work capacity, such as adequate language skills and competence in how to apply for jobs. But the staff found them uninterested in finding a regular job, and their willingness to work was therefore tested by requiring various forms of requirements. These offers were often in tedious internal tasks such as cleaning duties or the internal work projects such as the “park group” or the “dog park”. These clients were rarely offered attractive practical training slots or education support services, although the staff identified such needs. Fourth, group was those who were perceived as both lacking work motivation and capacity. According to program documents in Skärholmen, this group of clients should be offered a wide range of services in order to both build motivation and improve employability capacity. But as the research in this study has shown, clients’ access to such services was often based on the staffs’ prioritize. In practice, this meant that many clients in this category were restricted to this kind of services.

This chapter also demonstrates that program attendance was often neither the very short intervention as promised nor an intervention that provided clients with significant employment option exits. Indeed, some clients spent rather significant time periods and multiple time periods in the programs, especially in Skärholmen’s activation program, without securing stable and appropriate employment.
9. Final Discussion

The principal objectives of this dissertation are to identify and analyze the different factors that structure and shape street-level implementation practices of municipal activation policy in the Swedish welfare state. The study yields empirically sound findings to show that under the current activation policy reform, political-institutional, organizational, and normative factors affected social workers’ and activation workers’ street-level work when delivering social assistance and municipal activation policy. This study contributes to the street-level implementation literature by showing the origin of and the reasons for some of these street-level practices.

Most previous research has examined either activation policy development or activation program outcomes (Johansson, 2001; Giertz, 2004; Milton, 2006; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004), and most implementation studies have analyzed street-level practices in organizations outside the Swedish social assistance and activation domains (the exception is Jewell, 2007) (Brodkin, 1997, 2006; Lurie, 2006; Meyers et al., 1998). Past research has thus fallen short in analyzing informal activation policy strategies in the context of the Swedish welfare state. This dissertation provides a comprehensive portrait of street-level practice strategies and thereby provides a significant source for understanding how and why activation policy was implemented in this particular welfare state setting. The street-level practices uncovered in this study also have implications for the understanding of how municipal social service organizations in Sweden both interpret and deliver activation policy to its target populations. This chapter will synthesize the key findings and discuss what was learned about the street-level practices surrounding activation policies. The chapter will also discuss the limitations of the study and its implications for social work and future research.

Summary of Key Findings

As discussed in chapter two, street-level bureaucracy theory suggests that organizational working conditions such as bureaucratic discretion, resource availability, and organizational incentives and disincentives structure street-level implementation practices (Lipsky, 1980). Additionally, it has been argued that these organizational level factors are not shaping street-level practices alone since they are embedded in a political-institutional context (Brodkin, 1997). It has also been proposed that organizational practices are shaped by normative and moral assumptions in the surrounding society (Hasenfeld, 1992, 2000a), and that street-level implementation strategies could be better understood by exploring how such norms and values interacted with the political-institutional and organization
factors. Each of these premises was relevant to the findings that emerged in this study of activation policy implementation in Sweden.

Lipsky (1980) suggests that when a policy is unclear and ambiguous significant street-level bureaucratic discretion greatly influences policy implementation practices. In the Swedish activation policy context, the formal policy is both vague and contradictory on the issue of activation. The law is unclear about under what conditions municipalities can require clients to participate in local activation policy activities and what activities should be provided under the rubric of activation policy. This creates a context with a wide range of possible street-level interpretations of activation policy.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the street-level staff in Skärholmen and Osby applied a number of typical informal coping strategies in order to manage the local work situations, which were marked by high workloads and wide gaps between client needs and available services. These street-level practices entailed strategies that decreased the clients’ demand for social assistance and activation support. The staff simplified and routinized several administrative procedures (e.g. referral and assessments tasks) by sorting clients into rough categories, they utilized different forms of gate-keeping strategies to limit the access to social assistance and activation support, and they used creaming strategies when selecting clients to valuable service slots. Other common strategies were to control and monitor client participation and program performance, they modified the concept of activation policy by making it a “passive” intervention, and they disclaimed their own responsibility by rationalizing program failures as the clients’ own lack of work motivation. Although, these results suggest a rather strong support for street-level bureaucracy theory, there were also a number of practice strategies that does not seem to correspond with Lipsky’s theoretical assertions. In general, these practice strategies seemed to be more understandable through perspectives that appreciate how normative and value-based factors also shape street-level practice responses.

Taken together, I find that the informal street-level strategies observed in Skärholmen and Osby were rather removed from the formal rhetorical and legislative statements about individual, client-focused interventions with focus on skills and competence improvements. The table below summarized the most significant findings in terms of local contextual factors and local street-level practice strategies:
Factors Shaping the Local Political-Institutional Contexts

- Economic concerns and cost-cutting goals in order to reduce social assistance expenditures.
- Moral assumptions about unemployed social assistance recipients.
- Activation policy portrayed as success stories, despite limited evidence.
- Activation presented as client focused and enabling strategies in order to improve labor market possibilities.
- Rather vague and unclear messages about aims and objectives for the local activation programs.

Typical Street-Level Practices in the Social Assistance Administrations

- Local practice norms common – “this is the way it’s done here” – even when social workers felt it was against their professional judgment.
- Mass referrals since exemptions created more work and required significant justification.
- Little individual assessment of clients’ need for activation requirements.
- Gate-keeping strategies to keep clients away from social assistance.
- Use of the activation requirements as a way to “test”: 1) eligibility 2) work motivation.
- Sorting clients on the basis of moral deservingness and not employment needs.

Typical Street-Level Practices in the Activation Programs

- Activation as a control function to monitor work motivation.
- Activation support based on available resources, time availability, or clients’ perceived deservingness.
- Little program accountability; the programs had little responsibility to provide substantial employment support.
- If clients failed to find employment, passing over the responsibility to the clients as not motivated enough.
- Passive activation in which it generally was up to the clients to help themselves.
- Sanctions practices to change clients’ behaviors and a gate-keeping function to control the demand of support.

Typical Practice Experiences for Clients

- Clients’ negotiation attempts that were ineffective and the staff responses that were inconsistent and variable.
- Normative categorizations in which clients were labelled in terms of “serious” and “unserious”.
- Coercive nature of the activation requirements was often concealed.
- Sanctions that seemed to be arbitrary and meant to compel client compliance.

Table 4: Summary of Key Findings in Skärholmen and Osby

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Street-Level Implementation Literature

Correspondingly, this dissertation tries to comprehend the interrelationship between political-institutional, organizational, and normative factors, and how
these factors interacted at the street-level, and ultimately how they are manifested in the delivery processes of municipal activation policy. Besides improving understanding about activation policy per se, the study attempts also to relate the research findings to the street-level implementation literature and thereby enhance our theoretical understanding of street-level implementation practices. In the section below, I will discuss a number of theoretical themes that were found for street-level implementation strategies in the Swedish activation policy context. First, the chapter addresses how local political preferences influence and control street-level practices. Second, the chapter discusses manager’s capacity to steer social workers’ and activation workers’ street-level actions. Third, it also highlights in what way the access to resources structured the services that was provided under the rubric of activation policy. Fourth, it is also demonstrated how normative assumptions created symbolic practices of activation policy and various forms of gate-keeping strategies. Fifth, the chapter presents the features of the collective beliefs and the organizational goals that were present in the implementation practices in the two research settings. Sixth, the chapter concludes if and how practice norms and social work principles formed the practical implementation of activation policy in Sweden.

Local Political Preferences

The role of politicians in implementation has previously been explained in two ways – some scholars demonstrate that politicians have limited control over how policy actually is implemented (Riccucci, 2005), while others suggest that politicians and their preferences have a substantive impact on the policy delivery process (Heindrich & Lynn, 2000). This study finds that local politicians played a crucial role through the creation of the overall local activation context and what policy objectives that were of major importance at the street-levels. While politicians expressed the importance of individual assessments and tailor-made solutions for clients, as well as the need for access to education and training, they placed a greater emphasis on reducing social assistance costs. Work-first activation approaches were offered as the best methods to reach such goals in the politicians’ talk about activation.

In the end, the talk of policies designed to foster client-services built around case-by-case adjustments and individual assessments appeared to be merely symbolic and rhetorical. The emphasis on reducing social assistance costs, however, was real. In effect, it resulted in close monitoring of caseload levels and actual social assistance budgets reductions. Program managers were clearly affected by these cost-cutting goals and social assistance budget reductions as it created organizational contexts that stressed cost and caseload concerns over the stated objective to tend to individual employment needs. This is clearly in line with Winter (2001) who implies that politicians indirectly have the capacity to affect street-level behavior through the workers’ perception of financial appropriations of resources. In this study, the social assistance reduction goals made street-level staff to use the activation requirement as a strategy to limit social assistance claims. These politicians had an important role in creating the organizational context in which activation requirements was operationalized.
The Role of the Local Managers

The role of management and program managers’ influence on the street-level workers’ actions was significant but complex in this context. It entailed an emphasis on normative ideas and the use of symbolic signals. In total, managers helped to create a work environment that shaped selective street-level actions. They sent a strong message that all clients should be “activated”. They also helped re-enforce the collective perception that unemployed social assistance clients were better off not participating in education or training measure as a first alternative, and that the program’s passivity was a value in itself. What is more difficult to explain, however, is why managers seemed unable or unwilling to consider the other policy objectives that were stresses in the Social Service Act and by local politicians. Occasionally, when the staff had been very restrictive in assessing clients’ needs, or made severely critical assessments about a client’s deservingness, managers did intervene on the client’s behalf. It seemed to be only in those rare moments that they could appreciate that one of their most important responsibilities within the social services was to support vulnerable people through individualized assessment and care.

Managers were more likely to be creating a picture about program success that legitimized their local operations. This was particularly evident in Skärholmen. They presented their “model” and explained how they moved social assistance clients from dependency to jobs and self-sufficiency. I argue that these presentations did not always resemble the practical work that I observed in practice. The practice reality was much more complex and difficult than the portraits presented at these occasions. The primary reason for this was that street-level staff was constrained by the combination of limited resources and the collective belief about what they should be doing for their clients.

The overall interpretation of how much management affected implementation practices in Skärholmen and Osby is that they helped to shape the collective beliefs among the staff. The staff learned how they should perceive both the clients themselves and their need for support. The staff had significant discretion, but that discretion was in end curtailed by the atmosphere of the organization and the emphasis of the management. In the wake of both strong legislative mandates and management directives the staff members were strongly affected by the normative foundations on which their practices operated.

Organizational Resource Availability

The organizational contexts in which street-level bureaucrats operate are generally marked by limited resources (Lipsky 1980), leaving the street-level workers to bend public policy in order to do what is practically feasible. Limited resources were one important factor in affecting street-level practices in Skärholmen and Osby. It was found that employment support was generally rationed through two different street-level processes in order to manage the situation with inadequate resources. First, activation support was provided to the clients on the basis of availability, or second, as a result of the staffs’ perception of clients’ deservingness.
The former process is much in line with street-level bureaucracy theory, which highlights the importance of resource allocation (Lipsky, 1980). The latter process is better tied to normative assumptions about social assistance clients’ moral status and perceived deservingness (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991; Hasenfeld, 1992).

Street-level implementation theory suggests that informal gate-keeping strategies are often used in order to manage high demands for services and resources (Brodkin 1997; Lipsky 1980). This study found sanctioning to be one such gate-keeping strategy in Skärholmen and Osby. Besides adequate administrative tools when clients do not fulfill formal rules, I found sanctioning strategies were also used in order to change clients’ behavior and to make clients comply with the local activation rules. Informally, such strategies also steered clients away from the social assistance system, and thereby reducing the demand for support. In this case, social assistance levels ought to be controlled by politicians and managers and the activation requirement became, indirectly, a mechanism for limiting the need for social assistance. The study uncovered that the activation requirement in itself became a method to discourage clients to apply for social assistance by introducing an additional obligation that clients had to comply with in order to be entitled to social assistance. This finding demonstrates also that there is no universal right for social assistance in Sweden, which reinforces Lødemel’s (1992) assertion that the dual structure of the Swedish welfare state in which those in need for support from the last-resort safety-nets experience significant amounts of obligations and requirements in order to be “entitled”.

Moreover, in the welfare policy literature social assistance recipients are regularly defined as “involuntary” since they have no other means to support for themselves (Lødemel & Trickey, 2000). Because complaints were risky, social assistance clients were restricted in holding the municipalities accountable for the content or quality of the services they received. If clients tried to reject or negotiate the content of the activation requirement, they were at risk of being considered uncooperative or unmotivated, which administratively gave the staff the formal right to cut them from of the social assistance. It was therefore almost impossible for clients to challenge that activation requirement without jeopardizing their financial safety-net.

For clients with alternative income sources, the lack of possibilities to complain poses no direct problem, but those in vulnerable situations may not feel that they can handle such requirements. If a client with mental health problems, with low social skills, or with limited work experience decides to withdraw a social assistance application because they are mandated to attend an activation program it is more problematic.

Although difficult to measure whether this gate-keeping function has led to any significant reductions of the social assistance caseloads, one suspect that the sanctioning practices utilized in Skärholmen and Osby have probably contributed, in part, to the social assistance decline. This finding also supports Lipsky’s notion that informal gate-keeping strategies are common in this type of street-level bureaucracies and that the activation policy requirement gave the street-level staff an additional gate-keeping technique.
It was also apparent that the access to practical training and education opportunities was limited and that the local activation programs could not control the access to real employment opportunities. Such working conditions spurred street-level coping behaviors like rationing and creaming (Lipsky, 1980). The staff tended to select clients for training and education because the client was either in a position to take the best advantage of the available support, or because the client had achieved a high (normative) status. These creaming and rationing practices are problematic in a welfare delivery context because they indicate that the staff does not consider client-needs first. Normative categorizations that bypassed education and training were used at the street-level despite the fact that the Social Service Act stipulates that unemployed social assistance clients should be provided with competence and skills enhancement services as part of the municipal activation requirements.

For those with rather strong ties to the labor market and with few employment barriers, the job listings, the computers, the phones, and the printers were useful in their job search. But many clients in this particular group were, in fact, capable of searching for jobs at the public Employment Services. Among both managers and street-level workers there were negative perceptions about the Employment Services, and clients were often restricted to the local activation programs. This was particularly evident in Skärholmen, and considering the resource scarcity there, such responses were rather unexpected – it would be more reasonable from a street-level bureaucracy perspective that the staff utilized service options available at the Employment Services and reduce the demand for their own limited resources. I believe that these behaviors can be explained by the strong activation commitment that was signaled as the local policy norm. If clients participated in the municipal activation program rather than the Employment Services, the staff was able to better monitor the clients, and thereby to monitor the local social assistance caseloads. This practice is in direct opposition to the Social Service Act, which stipulates that social assistance administrations should collaborate with the Employment Services, especially when addressing clients’ need for employment support.

The reluctance to allow clients to participate in education and training programs, both internal and through outside resources, could further be explained by the work-first and work enforcement strategies that flourished at the local street-levels. Regular employment is an important policy goal, but a fast labor-market-attachment approach increases the potential risk for placing clients in unstable job situations, possibly leading to new social assistance spells (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2008; Milton, 2006). According to much research, social assistance clients with little work experience and few educational credentials need human capital improvement in order to be competitive on the regular labor market (Giertz, 2007).

Although inconsistent, previous studies have demonstrated that human capital support can be beneficial to this kind of client population in the long term (ibid). It is true that employment support resources were rather limited in the two local activation programs. A finding that affected the street-level staffs’ responses to clients’ education needs in accordance with theoretical propositions (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980), but what was more surprising was that client’s access to
education and training was restricted even when it was available due to normative values.

**Normative Assumptions and Symbolic Activation Policy Practices**

Work-related practices generally entail normative assumptions that serve to determine clients’ deservingness (Hasenfeld, 1992). For example, the research here found the local activation context to be an institutional context in which it was up to the clients to “help themselves”. Thus, it also created programs that were mainly “passive” in their characters and the “active” part of the activation requirements was mainly symbolic.

Moreover, the practices of normative categorization was also seen in the labeling of clients as good/serious/motivated or bad/unserious/unmotivated, which indicates how institutionalized norms and moral assumptions were embedded in the local activation policy context. Consequently, the staff’s informal sorting and labeling practices became a street-level routine that in effect determined eligibility for social assistance rather than a method to provide unemployed clients with employment services according to their needs. The social assistance administration process in Sweden entails both control and monitoring routines in order to determine eligibility for social assistance. The study found that informal control and monitoring strategies were also used to read clients’ work motivation and test their drive to become self-supporting. This finding highlights the normative underpinnings of both social assistance administration and activation policy delivery. Thus, the informal practices to screen clients’ work motivation can be explained by an institutionalized expectation that social assistance recipients are idle and not truly willing to become self-sufficient.

In the Swedish welfare context, this normative idea also has a central function through the so-called work-line, which stresses a strong work ethic and creates a complex normative system around work, unemployment, and financial support. I argue that the role of the work-line, as a tool for stressing work ethic norms, is accentuated in the mandatory activation requirements and the activation policy delivery practices. Ultimately, this norm system creates a habitual suspicion of those who cannot find unemployment, a suspicion that is even worse for those individuals who do not qualify for unemployment insurance and must rely on social assistance for their financial safety.

**Program Commitment and Local Organizational Goals**

Moreover, Sandfort (1999) and Lin (2000) found that policy reforms were more successful when they were in line with collective beliefs and shared organizational goals. As demonstrated in this study, there was a strong commitment both among politicians, program managers, and the staff to the caseload reduction goal, and the research indicates that the staff shared a common belief that the activation requirement was a prioritized intervention for unemployed social assistance recipients in order to make them independent of social assistance support. This belief system created strong practice norms that the staff should be commit-
ted to the local activation programs, and especially the social workers found it difficult to diverge from these beliefs and norms, even when their professional judgment told them otherwise. Ultimately, this means the professional knowledge base, which has integrity, self-determination, and individual needs as its foundation, had limited influence in structuring the practical delivery of activation policy.

Instead, the study found that activation referrals were highly routinized with little attention to clients’ needs, social workers referring almost all clients to the local activation programs. This mass selection principle was often explained away; “this is the local rule” was a common comment. But it was evident that exemptions imposed more work for the social workers. Given this incentive, mass referral practices were both reasonable and expected, according to street-level bureaucracy theory (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980).

I argue that these particular practices are questionable since they are rather remote from formal activation policy stipulations and social work principles. There are two issues that must be addressed given these findings. First, mass referrals tend to reduce the possibility of recognizing the diverse needs of clients. The second and related issue is that the Social Service Act actually requires individual assessments prior to assigning program measures and client interventions. Exemptions from this mass referral route were made occasionally but these exemptions were seldom the result of the clients’ different needs. Instead they were made as a consequence of the social worker’s organizational status and capability to argue for a deviating decision. Despite an institutional context with trained social workers with the responsibility to conduct individual assessments based on a professional judgments and skills, the study demonstrate that social workers’ professional standing was not utilized in full when assessing clients’ needs in the local activation referral process. This finding suggests that a professional knowledge base and social work norms were bypassed in favor of the institutional incentives to conduct mass referrals. This finding corresponds to earlier implementation studies, which also indicates that professional principles have little capacity to influence street-level practice behaviors (Brodkin, 1997). But the finding is opposite to Lipsky’s claim that a professional street-level bureaucracy would behave differently compared to an unprofessional bureaucracy.

**Practice Norms and Social Work Principles**

The activation programs also experienced a demand for social work and individual counseling services and skills. The street-level strategy to manage this situation was to claim that clients’ social needs were outside the scope of the activation workers’ responsibilities. But since social work resources were readily available why did clients’ social needs not receive the necessary attention? Should not the social workers have tended to the client needs that the activation workers had difficulties addressing? Curiously, the social workers with the professional social work skills for just that kind of need are tended instead to focus on the social assistance eligibility determination processes. It appears that social workers had greater incentives to prioritize social assistance administration instead above client support. The research in Skärholmen and Osby demonstrate...
that social workers were rather pressured to focus on activation policy referrals instead of providing social work support. At the same time, the staff in the local activation programs identified the needs for such support, but they did not have the professional resources to address such needs. The street-level solutions became to avoid issue that could call for more social and personal support. This finding corresponds to the importance of organizational incentives and disincentives in forming and distorting policy outcomes (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980).

Thus, it is shown that clients’ social problems were not addressed by any of the staff groups, neither the social workers nor the activation workers, a street-level strategy that is understandable when considering the strong focus on labor-market attachment, but questionable in terms of the responsibility to support vulnerable and marginalized populations with social support. This finding is notable since the municipal social services in Sweden are the entities with the responsibility to serve the most marginalized populations in the Swedish welfare system. Instead, street-level strategies meant that individualized social work support disappeared in favor of disciplining and paternalistic measures. In general, I conclude that the street-level activation practices in Skärholmen and Osby were somewhat removed from norms and ideas that normally are linked to social work practices and social work ethos in Sweden.

It is also worth noting the relationship between the social workers and the activation workers and their internal relationship when delivering activation policy. In general, their street-level interactions suggested a delicate balance. Internally among the staff, social workers were often termed the “bad guys” as they had the power over the money and the social assistance case. On the other hand, activation workers were referred to as the “good guys” as they “offered” service and support to the clients. I argue that this arrangement was rather symbolic since the social assistance benefit was also determined by the activation worker’s reports on client performance. Here it is important to highlight that both social workers and activation workers clearly wanted to help and support their clients and often, but not always, argued that the activation requirement and the work first approach constituted the best path for clients to escape social assistance. This finding is much in line with the ideas about activation policy as mainly symbolic in the sense that practices seldom provides the support that the activation discourse entails (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2006; Salonen, 2006). This study has demonstrated the complex and multifaceted context in which municipal activation policy is implemented in Sweden. The figure below synthesizes the research findings and illustrates how the many different factors influenced street-level implementation practices of municipal activation policy in Sweden:

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180 The major professional social work association in Sweden (SSR) has developed a number professional work code for social work practice. This ethical code entails principles that should guide social work practice and stresses approaches that are based in concepts like integrity, democracy, empowerment, and self-determination.
One of the major lessons from this study is that municipal activation policy is primarily made by practices within political-institutional, organizational, and normative contexts. Thinking about activation policy, therefore, needs to account for the degree to which policy plans will be altered and structured by these contexts. Policy as written and planned will encounter the altering effects of institutionalized beliefs and practices norms.

These factors include normative ideas about the target populations and the associated street-level practices and the character of work enforcement and disci-
plining rather than support that focuses on skills improvement and human capital building. I suggest that one of the major reasons for this situation is that activation policy is embedded in the particularities of the Swedish social assistance tradition. The social assistance system is filled with normative assumptions about the lack of work ethic and behavioral deficiencies among those who are dependent on social assistance. When it is perceived that individual deficiencies, instead of structural factors, are causing the need for financial support it generally leads to policy solutions that put the pressure on the individual (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991, 2007).

It is pertinent that municipal activation policy is considered in terms of its real and practical content instead of formal policy rhetoric alone, which is normally the case in regular policy analysis. But it is a challenge to examine policy-as-practiced since that content is negotiated and executed through the daily interactions between the street-level staff and the clients. But policy makers can account for the context in which street-level workers operate. This study has shown that the capacity to deliver high-quality support depends in part to their access to useful services, such as training and education opportunities. But it is also found that normative assumptions about social assistance recipients and perceptions of their needs are even more important in forming activation policy practices. In Skärholmen and Osby, their activation policy approaches seem to take the shape of a “coercive” activation model in which social assistance recipients are in need of paternalistic interventions in order to reach social inclusion.

Furthermore, municipal activation policy reform in Sweden must extend its analysis to focus on the relation between the Swedish social assistance system and the Swedish welfare state. While U.S. welfare policy reform signaled large changes and reformulation of welfare policy practices, Swedish activation policy reform was part of a more subtle policy transformation with minor legislative changes that effect activation policy.

In the activation policy reform to date, work-related policies in Sweden that were traditionally governmental and national responsibilities are now, more or less, and for certain client groups, under the auspices of the municipal social services; a turn away from more universal policy measures to ward targeted and selective measures for those dependent on social assistance (Johansson, 2000; Salonen & Ulmestig, 2004; Ulmestig, 2007). Jewell (2007) claims “many activation programs [in Sweden] have built a substantial response repertoire, tailored to the more challenging needs of large numbers of the unemployed on welfare” (Jewell, 2007, p. 195). In Jewell’s comparison of the street-level activation practices in Sweden, the U.S., and Germany, on the surface Sweden can come out looking both resourceful and responsive towards client needs. But internally, within its own welfare state context, Sweden’s activation policy trend signifies an increase in individual obligations and a restriction in access to public support. Given the current activation trend, policy reform requires a new understanding of the process and its stakes. This study has made a contribution to this policy area, but more research is needed to understand fully the implications of the activation policy growth. Additionally, this study demonstrates that activation policy, as practiced, involves use of more coercive measures meant to change clients’ be-
behaviors rather than a focus on structural difficulties or enabling resources allowing clients to improve their human capital assets.

**Implications for Social Work in Sweden**

Gaining a better understanding of the practical delivery of municipal activation policy is important in relation to social work in general and social work practices in particular. This study illustrates the ways municipal activation policy takes shape in a social work context, as well as how social work principles determine and affect street-level activation delivery. Professional social workers are central in the formation of the activation policy process – and because of its place in the municipal social service system – municipal activation policy is organizationally located in the heart of social work practice in Sweden.

Social workers in the municipal social services have significant bureaucratic and professional discretion when assessing clients’ needs and assigning possible support measures. They would be well served to see their actions’ connection to the institutional context and the organizational pressures therein. The results in this study indicate that the importance of social work training and professional social work principles emphasizing individual attention, tailor-made measures, self-determination, and integrity is limited when implementing the activation policy reform in Sweden. This is because social workers were more attuned to the local political and organizational demands about caseload reductions and to stay committed to the local activation approaches.

Some social workers recognized that the strong activation policy commitment was not always conducive to conducting social work according to the professional principles described above. I suggest that it is possible that the social workers in this context would serve their clients better if they could operate closer to these professional social work principles. These principles are not beyond the reach of the formal activation policy goals. In fact, they are included in the Social Service Act, which stipulates that all measures that are provided through the act should be based in clients’ individual situation; provide services according to their own needs, and in line with clients’ own preferences.

It is important to recall, again, that the activation requirement is neither inadequate nor negative in itself. Activation and employment support could be both valuable and beneficial, especially for those clients that have the capacity to make proper use of such support services. It is only when activation policy takes the form of informal and automatic eligibility tests without adequate consideration of the clients’ individual differences and needs that it removes itself from professional social work principles, which must be re-asserted within the discretionary nature of social work practice. A major challenge for social work practice is to recognize and understand the deeper meaning of increased activation requirements and how vulnerable client groups experience the street-level practices associated with such policy reforms. Knowing more about municipal activation policy is crucial for both social work organizations and the social work profession since activation policy delivery takes such central role in the municipal social services in Sweden.
Limitations of the Study and Ideas for Future Research

Although this study is important for gaining an understanding of the street-level practices involved in municipal activation policy delivery, there are several theoretical and methodological limitations that need to be addressed. Most important is the case study design, which provides in-depth knowledge from a small number of cases but is limited in providing results that can be generalized to all municipalities in Sweden. This means that the results offered in this study should be considered within carefulness when applied to other municipal activation settings. The research settings also have apparent limitations; the most significant one is that they represent rather extreme activation policy settings. During the time of the fieldwork (July 2002 to June 2003), Skärholmen and Osby expressed a strong activation policy commitment in comparison with other municipalities in Sweden. This strong activation approach might suggest a limitation in the findings’ applicability, but it was a rational case selection when the study was conducted since it provided an opportunity to observe clearly those crucial activation policy practices. Since this study was one of the very first examinations of municipal activation policy, the range of different activation policy approaches was almost unknown and that circumstance provided the rationale for selecting Skärholmen and Osby as the research sites.

Now that our knowledge about activation policy is broader, I propose that future research select sites that represent a wider selection of different municipal activation approaches in order to gain more generalizable results. It would be beneficial to more systematically select research sites that differ in their activation policy commitment and their street-level practices in order to more precisely account for what factors that determine the shape of these practices.

While our understanding of activation policy is growing, knowledge about both municipal activation policy and its implementation practices is still limited. A more systematic examination about the street-level practice determinants would, possibly, provide more precise portrayals of what shaped the street-level workers’ actions. Winter (2001), for example, has conducted quantitative studies in order to examine social workers’ informal coping behaviors in Danish social services; such an approach would supplement the in-depth and qualitative research approach utilized in this dissertation.

A replication of this study would also be valuable in order to refine the results that were found now. The U.S. welfare reform, for example, has been examined in a number of street-level implementation studies in which all have provided significant, but different, contributions to the understanding of structure of implementation strategies in welfare policy delivery.

In regards to activation policy per se there remains the need for still additional research. This growing policy area in nearly unexamined in Sweden and the need for future research range from quantitative outcome studies that measure the effects of these programs to client focused studies that can grasp how the target populations actually experience activation policy reforms. Although outside the scope of this study, knowing more about the effects in term of increased labor
market participation and income levels is very important. Especially as this activation policy approach seems to be here to stay and many municipalities develop different kinds of local activation measures with little knowledge whether they actually are improving the life of disadvantage people. Now when there is an improved understanding of what municipalities are doing as activation policy, it is easier to design and conduct outcome studies in more adequate ways. It is equally important to understand how the participants in local activation programs perceive the support they are provided through this emerging policy area.

The findings from this study are limited to a certain point in time and to only two research settings and generalizations to other parts of the country should therefore be made with caution. Given appropriate consideration to these limitations, however, I believe that the findings of this exploratory implementation study do offer important insights about the implementation of the current activation policy transformations in the complex bureaucratic systems of the Swedish municipal social services. Finally, the study has enhanced our understanding of the street-level implementation practices of activation policy reform in the Swedish welfare state context and demonstrated that social work and activation policy is closely related in the delivery of municipal activation requirements.
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