Politics of Makeover: Initiating Organisational Change and Positioning the Unemployed in a Swedish Reality TV Series

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Accepted: 2 March 2021 / Published online: 30 March 2021
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Abstract

This article reports on a reality TV series, *Sweden's best employment service*, broadcast on Swedish public service television in 2018. The purpose was to investigate ongoing political transformations in the Swedish welfare model. The series focuses not only on unemployment, the unemployed and their life situation but more specifically on the organisation of the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) as reflected at a local PES office. Informed by a cultural studies approach to the politics of popular culture, the aim of this article is to examine how the makeover is staged in the series. The article focuses on how the unemployed are positioned in the series in a setting of organisational change initiated at the local PES office. The analysis provides insights into how the makeover is staged and initiated in reality TV and illustrates how the unemployed are positioned as willing and able to work and to actively seek opportunities. The unemployed are not the primary target for the makeover in the series. The makeover is primarily directed at the organisation of the PES and its managers. Consequently, unemployment is presented in the series as not only a concern for the individual citizen but also for society.

Nine o'clock on channel six
Get the beer and get the chips
Death is live upon the screen
It's reality TV!
Tankard, *R.T.V.*, 1994

Keywords Makeover · Subject position · Unemployed · Unemployment · Reality TV

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Introduction

We can learn a great deal about the society we live in by analysing contemporary popular culture. Existing norms and ideals and social problems of various sorts are mediated in popular culture (Oulette & Hay, 2008). Hence, popular culture, such as reality TV, can reveal certain conceptions about society, for instance, making ongoing political changes visible in work and unemployment. This article focuses on a reality TV series, *Sweden's best employment service*, broadcast on Swedish public service television in 2018. The purpose of the study was to investigate ongoing political transformations in the Swedish welfare model. The series focuses on the organisation of the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) as reflected at a local PES office. Informed by a cultural studies approach to the politics of popular culture, the aim of this article is to investigate how the makeover was staged in the series. We focus on how the unemployed are positioned in the series in a setting of organisational change initiated at a local PES office.

The study contributes with knowledge on the formation of contemporary norms concerning work and unemployment, with Sweden as a point of departure. Such knowledge is of great importance in relation to previous research on reality TV, which has mainly focused on the conditions of Anglo-American countries and has reflected the neo-liberal rationale of such TV productions. Although the analysis illustrates how the series illustrated a strong work ethic, and how the unemployed are positioned as in need of a makeover, there are several dimensions in the staged makeover that should be noted. The unemployed were positioned as willing and able to work and to actively seek opportunities. The unemployed were not the primary target for the makeover in the series. The makeover primarily focused on the organisation of the PES and its managers. Consequently, unemployment is represented in the series as a concern for the both individual and society.

The article is structured as follows: first, we situate our study in relation to previous research on norms pertaining to work and unemployment in labour market policy and popular culture. Then, we present the analytical framework for the analysis in the article. Thereafter, we present the empirical material analysed and discuss issues of sampling and how the analysis was conducted. The results of our study are presented last. We focus on how organisational change was initiated in the series. Within the framework of these changes, we examine how the unemployed were positioned. Finally, we present the main conclusions of our study and discuss these in relation to previous research and contemporary political changes.

Makeover of the Swedish Welfare Model

As found in previous research, there has been a profound makeover of the Swedish welfare model in recent decades (Larsson et al., 2012; Ålund et al., 2017; Swärd, 2017). Through these transformations, the Swedish welfare model has gradually been influenced by neo-liberal rationalities similar to many other countries throughout the world (cf. Harvey, 2007; Dean, 2007). The Swedish model,

developed in the post-war period, had an international reputation as a successful 'middle course' between capitalism and socialism. The model was based on the pillars of centralism and universalism, social intervention and consensus (Rothstein, 1998). However, several principles underpinning the traditional Swedish model have been challenged since the late 1980s. The centralised welfare state was seen as an obstacle to individual freedom and active responsibility (Boréus, 1994; Dahlstedt, 2009). In recent decades, the Swedish welfare model has undergone a radical transformation, and this is visible in a range of different policy areas, not least in the area of labour market policy (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). Swedish welfare policy has been characterised by a shift from equality to freedom of choice, from redistribution to activation, from collective rights to individual responsibilities as the main political ideals (Larsson et al., 2012). In line with this shift, a particular conception of what it means to be a good and proper citizen has emerged, with a strong focus on active citizenship (Dahlstedt, 2009). However, due to the established organisation of the traditional Swedish welfare model, these changes have taken a specific form in Sweden, as compared with the neo-liberal transformations that have taken place in many other western countries. The changes of the Swedish welfare system have not resulted in the disappearance of the responsibility of the state for the welfare of its citizens, instead, the state has taken the role as a provider of opportunities, an enabler, for instance, by procuring a range of welfare services from various providers.

A high employment rate was one of the pillars of the Swedish model (Esping-Andersen, 1990). A strong work ethic prevailed in the model, and citizens were urged to contribute to society through work. However, such norms for the importance of work as a contribution to society predate the Swedish model. The work ethic has a long history in Sweden, as in other protestant countries (Weber, 2012/1905; Salonen, 1994). However, the meaning and content of this ethic has shifted over time. The problem of unemployment has always been central to Swedish labour market policy, although it has gained particular interest in times of economic crises (Junestav, 2004; Ulmestig, 2007). In the post-war period, labour market policies were aimed at creating economic growth and low inflation. One important part of the Swedish welfare model has been centralised negotiations between employer organisations and trade unions, aimed at establishing a consensus between them (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Work was, in this context, understood as a concern for society and a fundamental social right for its citizens (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004).

In the aftermath of the economic crises of the early 1990s, a rapid increase in unemployment became a prioritised political concern. In line with the general makeover of the Swedish welfare model initiated in the 1990s, there was also a shift in policy discourse on work and unemployment. Welfare benefits were conditioned in a variety of ways to make it more profitable to work than to be unemployed (Larsson, 2015; Peralta Prieto, 2006). In the 1990s and early 2000s, *activation* became the main principle in Swedish labour market policy (Dahlstedt & Vesterberg, 2019). In line with this principle, there was a strong emphasis on the individual's *duty* to work at the expense of work as a *social right* (Hornemann Møller & Johansson, 2009). According to such discourse,

work is primarily understood as a concern for the unemployed individual, who is seen as having the duty to become employable. In this context, the individual's characteristics, potential, motivation and will to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances on the labour market have become more and more important in Swedish labour market policy, as in many other countries (Fogde, 2009; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). Nevertheless, the ideal of the working citizen as a pillar of society remains strong in Swedish labour market policy. The role of the trade unions has been seriously challenged in recent decades, especially in terms of a decline in members, but this role has not at all become obsolete. From an international perspective, Swedish trade unions maintain a strong bargaining position in the Swedish labour market (Jørgensen, 2003; Kjellberg, 2019).

The PES has played an important role in Swedish labour market policy in identifying job opportunities and matching unemployed individuals with employers' demands and needs. Historically, public employment services have played a double role, to support and to control the unemployed (Garsten et al., 2011). However, the PES has been the target of recurring debate in politics and in the media. As a result, the PES was re-organised in recent decades. Hence, the general makeover of Swedish labour market policy—and welfare policy in general—has also affected the organisation of the PES. During the 1990s, the role of the PES changed from offering work placement and education to primarily controlling the unemployed to ensure that they seek an adequate number of jobs and to give advice on how the unemployed can strengthen their employability (Garsten et al., 2011; Paulson, 2015). The way in which the PES defines employability has become more and more influenced by the view of employers where demands on the workforce are high and reasons for unemployment are primarily understood as individual deficiencies among the unemployed (Jacobsson & Seing, 2013).

A recurring debate in recent decades has concerned the alleged inefficiency of the PES and its inability to carry out its mission. In the wake of this debate, the state monopoly on employment services was abandoned in 1993. Since then, a market for employment services with a plethora of private actors, such as job coaches, has emerged (Garsten et al., 2011; Larsson, 2015). Further, such debates had a great impact also on the organisation of the PES in 2018–2019, which resulted in drastic cutbacks to create better opportunities for private actors in the job-seeking and matching business (cf. Dagens industri, 2019).

Television and the Politics of Makeover

Public service television has a long and strong tradition in Sweden as in several other countries. Television was introduced in 1956 as a public service monopoly similar to regulated public service radio in Sweden. Although a second public service TV channel was introduced as early as 1969 to stimulate competition and increase viewers' freedom of choice (Hadenius et al., 2008), it was not until the early 1990s that competition between Swedish public service television (SVT) and other Swedish-language channels was introduced in the wake of ongoing political change at the time (Engblom & Wormbs, 2007). However, as argued by

Norbäck (2011, p. 62), ‘SVT as the public service TV provider (still)... has a strong position as the legitimate provider of not only news but also all other sorts of programming’. According to current directives, the mission of SVT is to serve the public good by representing the country as a whole, offering a broad and diverse supply of programmes for the population in its entirety, in the name of neutrality and objectivity (The Swedish Press & Broadcasting Authority, 2020). Thus, in line with the established tradition of the Swedish welfare model, the role of public service can be described as a means of not only entertaining but, first and foremost, educating and serving the residents of the country.

The supply of programmes has for a long time contained both SVT’s own productions and productions bought from national and international commercial actors (Thorslund, 2018). The particular programme investigated in this article was produced by a commercial actor and can be characterised as *reality TV*. This genre has become widespread internationally and domestically during the last two decades (Monson et al., 2016; Ross, 2009; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014; Eriksson, 2017; Danielsson, 2018). A wide range of studies focus on such productions in the context of different countries, not least the USA and UK (Andrejevic, 2004; Higgins et al., 2012; Oulette & Hay, 2008; Palmer, 2008; Redden, 2017). This research repeatedly focuses on makeover in reality TV productions. The outline is usually that the viewer follows a directed makeover that most often targets an individual, where basically every aspect of the individual’s life can be a target for change—from the exterior to the interior, from lifestyle to eating habits, exercise, economy and interior design. Such a makeover is most often performed with the assistance of various ‘experts’ (Taylor, 2002). The genre mixes entertainment with documentary. The makeover follows a manuscript where those who participate in the production are assigned predetermined roles. At the same time, the makeover appears to be authentic as a result of the documentary-like means of representing reality. Recurring sequences in which participants film themselves or are filmed alone in front of the camera are an example of this (cf. Aslama & Pantti, 2006). In such acts of *confession* (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014), the participants are given the opportunity to, in their own words and seemingly undirected, talk about their problems, their need to change and to evaluate their progress.

These types of TV productions articulate specific ideals, appearances and ways of thinking and acting in relation to various deficiencies, shortcomings and deviations. The makeover is staged towards something presented as desirable (Monson et al., 2016). In this sense, Bratich (2007, s. 6–7) argues that reality TV productions are ‘less about representing reality than intervening in it; less mediating and more involving’. Several scholars have argued that such makeovers help (re) produce contemporary political ideals (Andrejevic, 2004; Redden, 2017). Among these, Oulette and Hay (2008: 4) note that reality TV productions have a recurring focus on individual responsibility and self-help, which are ‘the quintessential technology of advanced or “neo” liberal citizenship’. In such productions, the viewer is served a broad repertoire of tools that can be used to transform themselves and in this way deal with various challenges in their everyday life. This approach is in line with a broader contemporary political rationality, for instance, by providing concrete tips and guidance on how to find a new partner, manage

one's private economy, raise one's children, style one's home, lose weight or dress properly (Hearn, 2008; Oulette & Hay, 2008; Monson et al., 2016). Such transformation can target the individual but may also have a wider target. For instance, in a study of the British TV production *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, the leading expert Gordon Ramsay is 'dramatized as more than a master chef transforming a kitchen or restaurant, but someone who, practising a form of "tough love", leads people to a better life' (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 515). Thus, through a range of disciplinary and/or supportive interventions, experts contribute to the shaping and guiding of participants—individuals and organisations—in a direction seen as desirable in some respect.

A particular moral in reality TV productions tells us that success in life is primarily the result of our own efforts and hard work (Redden, 2017). The opposite of such norms for individual responsibility and hard work is, either explicitly or implicitly, idleness and irresponsibility (Monson et al., 2016). In this regard, parallels can be drawn to international research on stereotypical notions of the unemployed in media settings outside the specific genre of reality TV, which have found that the unemployed are repeatedly depicted as lacking work ethic and a willingness to work. According to such stereotypes, the poor and the unemployed are most often seen as not worthy of the support of the welfare state (cf. Bullock et al., 2001; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Kelly, 2010). However, such results may not necessarily apply to all countries as different welfare models can have an impact on how the media portray the poor and unemployed. For instance, there seems to be a stronger tradition of stereotypical images of the poor and unemployed in the media and in public opinion in the UK and the USA, as described by Larsen (2013), than in the welfare models developed in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark. Against this background, we argue for the importance of investigating media discourse on unemployment and ways of fighting unemployment in a Swedish context.

Analytical Approach and Empirical Material

The article departs from a research tradition that views popular culture as a site for cultural and political struggles (cf. Hall, 1988; Ryan & Kellner, 1988; Street et al., 2013). In this tradition, popular culture is understood as a barometer of the present. This means that we can learn about society by analysing popular culture. Popular culture illustrates current norms and ideals and ongoing transformations in society (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987). Norms and ideals are established and normalised, spread and communicated through popular culture. Kellner (1995: 1) points out that 'media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and its deepest values: it defines what is good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil'. Thus, scrutinising what is broadcast on TV is an important challenge for researchers on contemporary politics and political change.

Referring to Hall (1997b: 259), we approach popular culture as a site where a constant politics of representation is carried out, a struggle 'to represent someone or something in a certain way'. Subjects come into being as part of this ongoing struggle over meaning by being positioned in discourse. The analytical focus of the article

is on the main subject positions in a TV series. *Subject position* in this context refers to the specific position that a subject takes in discourse (cf. Hall, 1997a). A subject position does not have any inherent or pre-given meaning or value. Instead, each subject position is discursively constructed, categorised, ascribed meaning, value, and authority in specific contexts. 'Subject positions are relational categories that obtain their situational meaning in relation to other possible subject positions and discourses' (Törrönen, 2001: 216). Subjects are thus positioned in relation to other subjects both in time and space. The relations between various subject positions are always hierarchical in some way or another. Subjects are often positioned in the form of binary oppositions, more or less mutually exclusive, such as friend and enemy, perpetrator and victim, winners and losers, with one position superior to the other (Hall, 1997a). Certain claims to truth about the authenticity of these subjects are made when subjects are positioned in discourse. Such claims are not the least made by means of documentary-like acts of confession in popular culture and particularly in reality TV. In such scenes, subjects are positioned as true selves in their seemingly natural environment, filming themselves while speaking the truth about themselves (Aslama & Pantti, 2006).

With this approach as a point of departure, we analyse a specific TV series in the genre of reality TV, *Sweden's best employment service*, broadcast in 2018. In the series, the viewer follows PES managers and employees and a few of the unemployed individuals listed at an employment office in the northern town of Örnsköldsvik, Sweden, guided by experts in initiating change in the organisation. The series contains five 1-h episodes. Each episode has a particular theme that focuses on specific challenges in the work carried out in the office: *management, matching, establishment, time and change*. The particular reality represented by the TV production follows a manuscript that creates a specific dramaturgy. Each episode starts with an introduction that provides a glimpse into the theme of that particular episode. After the introduction, there is a short summary of the previous episode. In this way, the individual episodes with their specific themes create a coherent dramaturgy with a beginning and an end. As in other reality TV productions, makeover is an important part of the dramaturgy. Both the employment office as an organisation—its managers and staff—and the unemployed are urged to change.

The analysis was conducted as follows: We conducted a mapping of all the episodes in the series, watched in one session. In this way, a coherent understanding of the series as a whole with its dramaturgy and main narrative was obtained. At this stage, we took notes about key sequences, events, and actors, consisting of 15 pages. These notes were then interpreted guided by the analytical approach outlined. Based on this interpretation, we chose key sequences that were transcribed verbatim. In the next step, we conducted an in-depth analysis of these selected sequences with a focus on the positioning of the main participants and how change that targeted individuals and the organisation was initiated in the series. As the main narrative was produced with several layers of sound and images, we analysed the selected sequences with regard to speech and moving images and other discursive elements such as sound effects, music, information texts and voiceover (cf. Eriksson, 2017).

In the following, the results of the analysis are presented accordingly: first we focus on how organisational change was initiated in the series by scrutinising two

main subject positions: the management of the local PES office and the experts called in to initiate change. Then, we focus on how the need for organisational change was presented in the series and how such change was actually initiated. Within the framework of these changes, we then examined how the unemployed were positioned in the series by casting light on two key values ascribed to the unemployed in the series, the *will to work* and to actively *seek opportunities*. However, we will begin with how organisational change was motivated by framing the problems at the PES office in specific ways.

Framing the Problems of the Local PES Office

Like other reality TV productions, the series followed a directed dramaturgy based on makeover. Consequently, the series not only described but actively intervened in reality with the purpose of initiating change, a makeover (cf. Bratich, 2007). As will be illustrated in the following, the primary target for interventions aimed at transformation was the organisation of the employment office in Ornskoldsvik and its managers. In line with the dramaturgy found in other productions in the same genre, the series showed a contrast between before and after, which created a dramatic effect. This dramaturgy was particularly evident in the first and the last episodes where the narrative of transformation was initiated and ended (Bratich, 2007; Taylor, 2002). Between the first and the last episodes, the viewer followed a dramatised journey from a problematic state, *before*, to a stage *after* the makeover, portrayed as desirable (cf. Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014).

The dramaturgy of makeover was set in the first episode of the series, particularly in the initial sequence. In this sequence, the viewer was shown a range of brief scenes where some of the unemployed in the series took part in news from radio and TV that portrayed the PES as an organisation in deep crisis.

Strong criticism of the Swedish Public Employment Service after new numbers show how few of the unemployed actually get a job.

It is a very dysfunctional agency.

It is an agency with huge challenges, and they need to reach better results.

The unemployed feel forced to seek jobs for which they are not qualified, or else they risk losing their benefits.

With these quotes, the PES was repeatedly described as an organisation in deep crises. These quotes in all appear as a singular, undisputed truth about the current problems faced by the organisation of the PES in Sweden. The main subject positions in the series were constructed in relation to each other in line with this dominant representation of the problems at the PES. Among these, two positions were of particular importance when it comes to investigating the organisational change initiated in the series: the managers (positioned as constituting the main problem to be solved) and the experts (positioned as providing the solutions to the problems).

In the first episode, the organisation is represented as containing two subject positions: the managers and the PES officers. The managers are positioned as incapable

of dealing with the great challenges of providing employment for the unemployed they face. At the same time, the managers are presented as both willing and susceptible to necessary change. However, they are positioned as unable to make change happen by themselves. Consequently, they are positioned as in great need of external support. In relation to the managers, the PES officers are positioned as stressed, worn-out, and frustrated, i.e. as victims of the dysfunctional leadership of the organisation.

In order to provide proper solutions and to initiate necessary changes, three *experts* are called in: Stefan, positioned as a researcher in psychology and a management consultant; Linda, positioned as an expert in the integration of newly arrived migrants; and Nicklas, positioned as an industry strategist from the central office of the PES. The mission of the experts is, first, to identify the problems and, then, to suggest and provide solutions. Finally, the experts evaluate how these solutions were carried out. The prime target for the solutions is the managers of the PES, who were intended to be transformed from being part of the *problem* to becoming part of the *solution*, i.e. to initiate a makeover of the PES organisation. As explicitly stated in the first episode, the aim of the interventions was to transform the employment office in Ornskoldsvik, making it the best employment office in Sweden. This mission was primarily illustrated when the experts were introduced in a sequence in which they met the managers and the PES officers for the first time.

Hello and welcome to this day, when we will become the best public employment office in Sweden. For this task, I have chosen three of the best experts in the country...

In this sequence, the three experts were positioned as authorities in their respective areas and their ways to identify problems and provide solutions were to guide the managers and officers in order for successful change to be possible.

Initiating Organisational Makeover

How then is such organisational change staged in the series? In order to identify problems in the organisation, the experts initially held a meeting with the managers at the office and then handed out a survey to the PES officers. This was followed by a workshop with the staff at the office. The results of these efforts were distressing for the experts, which confirmed the initial problem representation of the PES as an organisation in deep crisis. As one of the PES officers tellingly reported in the survey: 'You feel like a low-budget airline, you overbook and hope that no one shows up'. According to findings from the survey, such results appeared to be symptoms of a more profound problem, namely the lack of leadership in the organisation. On the basis of this finding, the experts identified the need for improvement in leadership and management in response to the 'laissez-faire leadership' of the current management.

This diagnosis of the problem was presented at a meeting between the experts and the managers, where the head of office admitted having failed in his mission: 'It is a failure'. At the meeting, relations between the attending participants were hierarchical; the experts were positioned as teachers and the managers as pupils. At the end of

the meeting, the managers were given an assignment by the experts: to gather the PES officers and jointly discuss how to proceed to improve the leadership of the organisation. As the expert, Stefan summarised the assignment: 'You are to present this to me at the next meeting'. The assignment was received with great enthusiasm by the head of office: 'Very exciting to get such homework [...] if one doesn't know what to change, one cannot improve'. This diagnosis as presented to the managers forms the basis for the organisational changes to come.

The main role of the experts in initiating these changes was presented as supporting management in exercising more appropriate leadership. One significant organisational problem identified was the repeated failure to achieve the goal of providing jobs for the unemployed by matching them with the needs of employers. This problem was presented throughout the series, particularly in a specific sequence with an employer who states that employers usually do not cooperate with the PES but, instead, choose to seek labour through other channels. This rationale was supported by one of the PES officers who states that the PES continuously fails to match supply with demand in the labour market. On the basis of this framing of the organisational problem, management was assigned the mission to develop a new strategy for matching based on more 'offensive relations with employers'.

Another significant organisational problem identified by the experts was the lack of personal relations with the unemployed, who were to be seen and approached as human beings instead of as case files. To come to terms with this specific problem, one of the experts actively initiated a pilot project at the PES office, where more time and resources were provided for personal meetings between PES officers and the unemployed. This particular pilot project was one example of how the experts initiated change in the organisation by actively intervening and providing managers and officers with concrete advice on their everyday work. Another example was how the expert Nicklas followed one of the managers out in the field to build better employer relations, for example, by providing the following advice: 'We've been through this, this is what I'm good at, and this is where I want to be'. Such interventions seemed to have had some effect, which will be discussed in the following section.

Measuring and Assessing Change—the Verdict

The effects of the interventions during the series were primarily illustrated in the following sequence where one of the PES officers, in an act of confession, reflected on the importance of personal relations with the unemployed: 'We at PES often just see a name, a case, not a person'. In this self-critical statement, the officer actively makes use of the kind of argument initiated by the experts in their interventions in the everyday work of the organisation.

One of the crucial means of initiating change in the series was continuous measuring of the interventions in order for the experts to ensure that the developments represented were aligned with the initial goals and expectations. The main impression of the experts in the first episodes was cautiously hopeful. The management of the PES appeared to have taken the feedback provided seriously as they seemed to have started working on their way of conducting leadership in the organisation,

especially through more strategic planning and by being more present in the workplace. Later on, there were several signs of difficulties and failures in initiating organisational change successfully. These signs were summarised in the final verdict made by the experts in the last episode. In their verdict, the experts concluded that the organisational changes initiated in the previous episodes had not met their expectations. For instance, leadership had not improved according to plan. The officers had not been provided the resources necessary to develop personal relations with the unemployed. On the contrary, each officer had been assigned a larger number of clients to work with during the time represented in the series. The head of office summarised the results: 'Organisational change is difficult'.

The experts gave their verdict in the dramatised finale. Had the PES office in Ornskoldsvik become the best office in Sweden after all the interventions during the series? Dramatically directed to create anticipation about the upcoming verdict, the experts stood on a stage with the PES officers as the audience and presented the following verdict:

Good day to you all. How nice to see you, again. It has been half a year since we launched this project and met the whole group like this [dramatic music; long pause; zoom in on nervous officers scratching their faces and rolling their thumbs]. Our joint assessment is that you have... *not* quite reached the goal with this project [Zoom in on PES officers once more].

This highly dramatised sequence ended in an anti-climax, as the expectations built up during the series—that the PES office in Ornskoldsvik would become the best office in Sweden—were *not* fulfilled. Directly after the verdict had been announced, there was another sequence in which the head of office reflected on the outcomes of the experts' interventions during the series:

We are *not* Sweden's best public employment office yet. But what Stefan, Nicklas, and Linda have done is to plant the seeds needed to take the next step in our development. To see the competences of the newly arrived. Reflect upon: how do we lead this organisation in an effective way? And, lastly, the employer strategy that we now have started to create, to get it working, so that we can see the needs of the employers in another way. That is what I have learned.

In this sequence at the very end of the last episode, the head of office wrapped up the narrative of the series as a whole, and made a retrospective reflection over the organisational changes initiated and staged in the series. In the sequence, the head of office, who was responsible for implementing the changes initiated by the experts, described and assessed the transformations made during the series in his own words. In this act of confession, he explicitly described the changes orchestrated and represented in the series as a process of learning for himself and for the entire organisation. This representation was metaphorically illustrated by the head of office who characterised the interventions by the experts as *seeds* that had been planted. Even though the goal of becoming the best PES office in Sweden had *not* been achieved, he articulated hope that these seeds planted in the organisation could,

in time, generate real and lasting change, even after the series had ended (cf. Bratich, 2007).

Positioning the Unemployed

The viewer follows a number of unemployed individuals listed at the office within the context of the organisational shortcomings of the PES and the organisational changes initiated at the PES office in Ornskoldsvik. These unemployed persons were positioned in certain ways; everyone had a particular history, a relation to the labour market and to the local PES office. These participants included a mother on sick leave, a youth in transition from school to work, an older man living in the countryside and a single migrant mother. Some of them had had many jobs, some were long-term unemployed, while others did not have any previous work experience. The positioning of the unemployed was not one-dimensional. On the one hand, they were positioned as victims of the organisational shortcomings of the PES. On the other hand, they were positioned as resources with potential for change. We will focus on three of the unemployed in the series: Anders, Ella and Maria. Even though a range of different conditions, expectations and hopes were presented among these three participants, they were all positioned as potential resources particularly because they wanted to make a contribution to society through productive labour. In the following, we will specifically focus on how the unemployed were positioned with two main desires: *to work* and *to actively seek opportunities*.

The Will to Work

The unemployed were, first and foremost, positioned as determined to find work. Such positioning is based on the conception of work as of great importance for the individual and for society by creating wealth, freedom, participation in society and providing life with meaning. Conversely, unemployment is represented in negative terms for the individual and society due to the poverty, dependence and lack of meaning caused by unemployment. On the basis of such conceptions of (un)employment, the unemployed are repeatedly positioned as living a life without meaning, full of shame and feelings of not being needed, and consequently, they articulate a strong will to work.

Let us illustrate how such positioning of the unemployed appeared in the series by focusing on two sequences from the first episode. In these sequences, Anders and Maria were presented for the first time. Both sequences were built on several layers of meaning. Anders was a long-term unemployed man living in a house with his girlfriend in the remote countryside outside Ornskoldsvik. In this sequence, the subject position of Anders was ascribed values that were in opposition to the ideals related to work in contemporary Sweden, i.e. distress and lack of meaningfulness. In the episode, Anders chops wood, accompanied by melancholic piano music, while his girlfriend stands in front of their house watching him. This scenery was mixed with interviews where Anders confessed his feelings about being unemployed:

Self-esteem? Well, it is zero. It is way down. It is like you are not good enough for anything when you don't get a job [long pause]. You just want to draw your blanket over your head and never wake up again, sometimes. [Text on the screen: ANDERS 61 YEARS OLD, listed 2005]. So, it is horrible.

Anders looks away from the camera. In Anders' confession, work is expressed as more or less necessary for a meaningful life. He articulates a strong will to work and much frustration with not having the opportunity to work. This dual positioning of Anders as willing to work, but not having a job, is tellingly illustrated in his usage of the metaphors 'draw your blanket over your head' and 'never wake up again'.

In the next sequence, Anders sits on the stairs in front of his house watching a tractor on the field and continues to reflect on his current position and his hopes for the future:

I want to have something to do. I don't have any other dreams right now. One does not dare to dream. About the future. One can hope that it will be solved.

This sequence once more builds on several layers of sounds, moving images and text. One layer consisted of imagery where Anders was presented in everyday life, in his home environment, which positioned Anders as a well-established character of the older male living in the Swedish countryside. Anders was positioned as both idle and active in his everyday life. Chopping wood filled his day with meaning. In contrast, some of the clips in this scene show Anders sitting idle in front of his house. A melancholic atmosphere was built in combination with a specific choice of music. In sum, the subject position of Anders clearly illustrated the necessity of having a job. Another layer of meaning that additionally strengthened this positioning was when Anders confessed his difficulties in terms of lack of self-esteem as a result of years of unemployment.

Anders was repeatedly positioned through the problems caused by his lack of employment, especially in terms of idleness and lack of meaning, which wore on his self-esteem. Another unemployed person followed in the series was Maria, and she was also positioned as having a strong desire to work. However, as a subject, Maria is ascribed slightly other meanings, as compared with Anders.

Maria is filming herself when the viewer sees her for the first time. The scene appears to be an authentic one from her everyday life where she positions herself as a subject. This act of confession was also built on several layers of meaning, especially as the sequence was accompanied by melancholic music, which reinforced the impression of a sad existence. Maria talked to the camera about some of the negative effects of unemployment for her and her family, and how these effects made her feel. In this confession, Maria was positioned as the main person responsible for the family and its economy. This tellingly took place when Maria sat at the kitchen table drawing up a monthly budget:

On Friday, I will have my car inspected, and I hope it will pass. It has never done so before. I always have to re-inspect it. I cannot take that extra cost right now. I mean, I have bills for 21 747 [Swedish crowns] in some fucking

way, and we have an income of 17 850 [Swedish crowns], so we are missing a lot. About 4 000 [Swedish crowns].

In this sequence, Maria was positioned by means of the economic hardships caused by her unemployment, and specifically, the difficulties of owning and paying for a car. The family could not afford the cost of getting the car inspected, as they had more expenses than income. To deal with this situation, Maria and her boyfriend Chris saw themselves forced to mobilise their social networks:

We often lend money from my mom, so usually we can pay the bills, somehow. Luckily. So, I am very happy that I have my mom. But I have asked her for money for so many years now, so I don't want to do that anymore, I can't take it! So, now Chris will have to ask for money. To me, it feels so wrong that she pays our bills, but if we didn't have her, we would have lived on the streets, I guess.

Maria is positioned in this sequence as economically dependent on other people's benevolence, specifically her mother. This positioning was done in yet another act of confession, where Maria filmed herself talking to the camera as if the viewer sat in front of her. Maria positioned herself as both grateful for having the potential to lend money and ashamed over having to lend money and thus being dependent on her mother to provide for her family. At the same time, Maria positioned herself as having a strong desire to work as a means of becoming independent from benevolent others.

When the subjects of Anders and Maria were positioned as unemployed, they were ascribed specific meanings and values—namely meaningfulness and independence. These meanings and values illustrate a strong desire to work. This desire was represented in relation to some of the hardships of unemployment, i.e. the lack of meaning and economic dependency. When Anders described his self-esteem as being 'zero', he simultaneously articulated a strong desire to work, where work is expressed as desirable for the individual and society. Similarly, when Maria confessed her shame about being dependent on her mother, self-sufficiency and independence were expressed as important virtues of work.

The Will to Actively Seek Opportunities

Another value ascribed to the subject position of the unemployed in the series was the *will to seek opportunities*. Actively seeking opportunities was repeatedly represented as a precondition for the unemployed to realise their dreams and find a job. It was presented as of great importance to identify and mobilise contacts that could be useful in a search for jobs.

One of the unemployed followed in the series was Ella. She had just graduated from high school when she was introduced. In this sequence, Ella films herself reflecting on her future and the opportunities facing her in the present:

What don't you do to graduate? It's the first day of a whole new life. The so-called adult life. I want to be an architect. [...] I want to study industrial

design. Eh, and also construction design. I mean, since I was a kid, I have always wanted a job that generated a great deal of money. But I have also wanted to make a living by being creative, paint, make sculptures, and such. I have also thought about starting my own business, with animals. Kind of, making environmentally friendly products. I mean, there is so much to do. This is the plan I have for today. It doesn't have to be the plan I have tomorrow.

Ella positioned herself as embracing the present as providing a wide range of possibilities for the future. There was a need to identify and to seize the opportunities of the present in order for the future to be possible. This positioning of Ella as actively seeking opportunities was further illustrated in a later sequence in the same episode, where she was filmed while putting sticky notes on a wall. She had written various jobs she might want to work with in the future on the notes: author, artist, designer, baker, criminologist, nurse, interior decorator, work with social media, mathematician, musician, tattoo artist, broker and actor. Ella commented on the variety of potential future occupations in the following sequence:

I mean, I have so many dreams. And it's positive that I have so much to choose between. I mean, I can just, if one thing doesn't work out, there is always another thing I can do. What is negative is that I become kind of confused. I find it very hard to sit down and focus on one thing.

As illustrated in these two sequences, Ella positioned herself as having the desire to identify different paths for her future working life. She was positioned as active and open to almost any available alternative. At the same time, Ella's open-minded approach to the future positioned her as somehow aimless in her job seeking and thus in need of focus and guidance. Ella's description appeared as a positive one, 'a lot to choose from', at the same time as all the opportunities created confusion and difficulty in making the right choices.

Like Ella, Anders was also positioned as actively seeking opportunities as a means of finding a job. However, he was positioned as not approaching his future working life in the same way as Ella approached the future, as a smorgasbord of opportunities. In this positioning, Ella had her dreams ahead of her while Anders carried with him a collection of previous working experiences. While Ella was positioned as active in her job-seeking by visualising her future plans, Anders was positioned as active by making use of his previous working life experiences and relations to various employers. In the second episode, the viewer follows Anders while he calls previous employers asking for job opportunities. He also reflects on his wide range of job experience:

Well, I have been working with different things. Restaurant. Kindergarten. School. Plastic industry. With glass fibre. Worked a little as a carpenter. Repairing chainsaws. Been in the concrete industry. Tire company. Warehousing. I have worked with that. I have been in the restaurant business. I have been in the elevator business. For half a year, I worked in a cemetery. A janitor. And, I can't figure out any more right now.

In this sequence, Anders positions himself as a resource for the labour market, with long and broad job experience. The positioning of Anders and Ella illustrates how the subject position of the unemployed in the series was ascribed the will to identify and act upon opportunities in the present. While Ella was positioned as future oriented with a range of different paths into the labour market, Anders was positioned as primarily past oriented with previous employer contacts and working-life experience. In both cases, the unemployed were positioned as active and willing to take on the future by seizing the opportunities of the present. Thus, the unemployed were positioned as possible resources for themselves and for society.

Concluding Reflections

This article explored how a makeover was staged in the reality TV series *Sweden's best employment service*, broadcast on Swedish Public Service TV. We specifically analysed how the unemployed were positioned in the series in a setting of organisational change initiated at a local PES office. The series is an example of a TV production that has gained great attention in recent decades, *reality TV*. The dramaturgy of the series followed a standardised format for this genre in which a makeover is represented and initiated and where participants undergo processes of change on screen (cf. Oulette & Hay, 2008; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2014; Monson et al., 2016).

We illustrated how the makeover not only targeted the unemployed but also the organisation of a PES primarily in the form of its management. This makeover was framed within a broader dramaturgy in which the PES was characterised as an organisation in deep crisis and in desperate need of organisational change. In this dramaturgy, the management of the PES was positioned as part of the organisational problems and as responsible for dealing with the problems. As management was positioned as unable to initiate and drive change in the organisation, they were in need of the guidance and support of external expertise. Guidance and support were provided by three experts called in to initiate and drive change in the organisation.

In this setting of organisational shortcomings and change, the viewer followed a number of unemployed individuals enlisted at a PES office. These unemployed subjects were positioned as victims of the organisational shortcomings represented by the PES office. However, they were primarily positioned as potential resources, with wills which could be of great importance for finding a job and making change happen, namely, the *will to work* and the *will to actively seek opportunities*. The unemployed in the series were not primarily positioned as problematic and solely responsible for their own lack of employment. Instead, unemployment was primarily presented as a mismatch between employers and potential employees, and the organisation of the PES, rather than the unemployed individual, was positioned as both problem and solution.

These results provide new insights into the politics of makeover staged and initiated in reality TV. A strong focus in previous research has been on the ways in which reality TV has reproduced, mobilised and actively initiated neoliberal values and ways of being as a citizen in the present (Andrejevic, 2004; Hearn, 2008; Oulette & Hay, 2008; Monson et al., 2016; Redden, 2017). While we have

been able to identify ways of positioning the unemployed individual that can be identified in neoliberal policy discourse, we also noted nuances in the makeover staged, which are important to highlight. Positioning the state as a problem and as an obstacle to realising individual freedom is a well-documented feature of neoliberal policy (Harvey, 2007). The same can be said about the positioning of the individual as a solution to societal problems, such as unemployment (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004).

However, we identified how these two positions were created in a slightly different way in this specific TV series. The organisation of PES and its management were presented as the main problem in the series, and not the individual. Consequently, the individual was not to blame for the problems of unemployment but rather the PES and the national government. Employment and unemployment are presented as a concern not only for the individual citizen (a private good) but also for society (a public good).

Such positioning of the unemployed as both willing and able to work and to actively seek opportunities differs from research into the neo-liberal rationale reflected in a wide range of reality TV productions (Oulette & Hay, 2008; Redden, 2017) and in stereotypical images of the unemployed as lazy and unworthy poor (Bullock et al., 2001; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Kelly, 2010). The present study contributes with a focus on the Swedish context in comparison with previous research, which has mainly focused on the USA and UK contexts and commercial media.

To understand the specific representation of the problem of unemployment documented in this article, and the positioning of the unemployed following from it, we need to place it into a wider setting of ongoing policy changes taking place in Sweden of today. This particular setting provides a different way of approaching the issue of how TV can be used as a means of understanding ongoing societal and political changes. With its specific tradition of welfare policy and public service, with its mission of serving the public good, Sweden may provide new insights into how the genre of reality TV not only represents but also directs and intervenes in reality.

Funding Open access funding provided by Linköping University.

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