



## Article

# Deemed as 'Distant': Categorizing Unemployment in Sweden's Evolving Welfare Landscape

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**Abstract:** Over the past 30 years, Swedish labor market politics has swayed towards stronger workfare tendencies, emphasizing activation requirements for unemployed individuals to access welfare benefits. This process aligns with broader neoliberal reforms, fostering an individualistic view of unemployment characterized by personal responsibility for employability. In 2023, the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) published a report addressing the needs of and solutions for long-term unemployed individuals 'distant from the labor market' (Sw. personer långt från arbetsmarknaden), marking the first formal use of this term as the main adhesive category in a political document. This paper examines the construction of the subject position 'distant from the labor market', investigating how it delineates and differentiates subgroups within the unemployed population, how this subgroup is understood in relation to other actors, and how discursive frameworks imbue this category with various meanings. Lastly, the paper discusses the categorization in relation to the current developments in the Swedish welfare system, arguing that the formalization of this category should be understood in relation to parallel political processes, such as proposals for a duty of activity for the unemployed, suggesting how this points to a way forward defined by neoliberal tendencies and welfare conditionality.

**Keywords:** labor market policy; activation; neoliberalism; unemployment; Sweden; welfare

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, following the transformation of the Swedish labor market policy beginning in the early 1990s (Berglund 2024), the political sphere has continued to negotiate the limits of the welfare system as it pertains to the unemployed. This includes reforming the unemployment insurance system (Prop. 2023/2024:128 2024) and charting a growing segment of jobseekers who are not entitled to insurance (Alsén 2021). In this context, the category and the perceived problematic of people 'distant from the labor market' have become a focus of the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES) (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023), marking the incorporation of a term formerly confined to political rhetoric into formal policy discourse. In this article, I consider policy an instrument of governance in order to explore the ascription of individuals to particular subject positions with discursively constituted attributes (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Foucault 1991). Thus, I will explore how the establishment of the category 'people distant from the labor market' implies the creation of a certain group of people; the category and the people placed in that category emerge together (cf. Hacking 1986). This is a discursive process that not only represents but also normalizes the existing policies while paving the way for new policies (cf. Rose

2010, p. 28)—in this case, proposals to introduce a duty of activity for the unemployed who are not entitled to unemployment insurance but receive social assistance (S 2022:E 2022)—a continuation of the late 1990s changes in the Social Services Act, which allowed for municipalities to demand participation in some sort of intervention in exchange for social assistance (Prop. 1996/1997:124 1997).

‘Conditionality’ has always been a feature of the welfare state in modern capitalist societies, in particular with regard to the duty of being at the disposal of the labor market in order to access resources that are part of the welfare system (Esping-Andersen 1990; Jessop 2002a; Junestav 2004). However, conditionality has taken on different forms in different contexts and is often moderated. Thus, while austerity and activation policies may be seen to have increased the salience of conditionality in the Swedish labor market policy, the idea of a welfare system where citizens are not at risk of losing all forms of livelihood has persisted as a national ideal (Blomqvist and Palme 2020; Dahlstedt 2009; Hartman 2011). Indeed, historically, Sweden has been considered a blueprint of the universal welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990), a view which has been debated ever since, especially with the introduction of market-oriented policy logics, such as New Public Management, in the public sector (Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019; Marklund and Svallfors 1987). Categorizing states in terms of a typology of welfare regimes, or a clear-cut periodization of regime change, inevitably disregards complexities and contradictory tendencies at different levels of a single state. However, scholars have argued that it is still possible to address general changes by zooming in on certain discursive and material trends in the area of labor market policy (cf. e.g., Brodtkin and Marston 2013). Therefore, this paper explores the introduction of people ‘distant from the labor market’ in formal policy discourse as a continuation of the ‘neoliberal policy adjustments’ in Scandinavia during the late 20th century (Jessop 2002b, p. 457), which spurred a development towards ‘workfare’ in the Swedish labor market policy (Broström 2015; Giritli Nygren et al. 2015; Junestav 2011; cf. Peck 2001).

Throughout the history of the Swedish welfare state, unemployment has been managed in different ways, although the state has, to a varying extent, always used the unemployed population as an ‘industrial reserve army’, thus also governing the employed population (Broström 2015; Junestav 2004). Developments currently underway in labor market policy, such as the duty of activity for unemployed recipients of social assistance, point to possible changes in the management of the unemployed. Here, the PES’s official delineation of a lower-rung of the unemployed, which could become subject to specific interventions aimed at activating the group and making it conform to prevailing market logics in the public sector (e.g., Hartman 2011), appears as an important stepping stone. Dividing the unemployed into those ‘close’ or ‘distant’ from the labor market and differentiating the latter into stagnant versus potentially ‘active’ segments may, thus, be explored in terms of creating the discursive conditions for developments towards workfare and punitive forms of conditional welfare (see e.g., Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018) and in terms of the evolution of the neoliberal welfare state’s modes of governance (Dean 2010).

Following the theoretical tradition of critical policy analysis (e.g., Shore and Wright 1997), the analysis in this article will, thus, explore how the delineation and differentiation of a lower-rung of the unemployed population can be understood as part of the ongoing struggle over access to welfare assistance. Against this background, the aim of this paper is to critically discuss how the subject position of people ‘distant from the labor market’ is constructed in a report (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) from the Swedish PES, how the usage of this term re/produces and negotiates certain discourses and subject positions, and how this can be understood in relation to expanding workfare tendencies in the Swedish welfare state. In the subsequent section, I provide an overview of research on unemployment, labor market policy, and the welfare state. Then follows a description of the analytical

framework used in exploring the PES document. Section four contains the analysis, and the results are summarized and discussed in the fifth, concluding section.

## 2. Unemployment and the Welfare State

The delineation and differentiation of the category of people ‘distant from the labor market’ not only relates to changes in the Swedish labor market policy but also to broader international trends in welfare state restructuring. This section charts these trends, starting with international perspectives on workfare and neoliberal governance before focusing on the Swedish context. The current trends in welfare state restructuring are marked by a turn towards conditionality characterized by workfare, where individuals are compelled to participate in work-related interventions under the threat of punitive sanctions (cf. Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018; Dwyer et al. 2023; Peck 2001). Such interventions often relate to participation in the labor market and the correction of perceived ‘problematic’ behavior (Marston 2008). This has been discussed in terms of a changed role of the state, in which the state prioritizes the correction and control of the individual and the promotion of active citizens who strive to increase their employability, rather than the state dealing with unemployment as a systemic problem (e.g., Dean 2010; Rose 2010). Although such welfare strategies take on different forms in different places, similar trends, where the active citizen subject is expected to work to earn their right to welfare benefits, have been observed in large parts of the world (Brodkin and Marston 2013; Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Heidenreich and Rice 2016; Peck 2001). Thus, workfare logics have been referred to as a practice of ‘re-commodification’ where the value of individuals is based on their economic contribution to the market (Greer 2016; cf. Brodtkin 2013), reflecting a wider neoliberal discourse where people are interpellated as individuals whose agency is confined to using their freedom of choice in market contexts (Brown 2015). Considering the welfare system as an ‘active force in the ordering of social relations’ (Esping-Andersen 1990, p. 23), and in the context of what scholars have referred to as a ‘neoliberal turn’ (Jessop 2002a) in which states promote a market-oriented and responsabilized citizen subject, welfare state restructuring and changing labor market policy should be seen as an important part of the development of contemporary power structures with severe effects in the daily lives of citizens (Dean 2010).

Sweden was long viewed as the prototype of the social–democratic welfare state and its attendant universalism (Esping-Andersen 1990). That said, critics have often argued that the Swedish welfare state was never truly universal or characterized by a clear-cut process of de-commodification. Instead, it reflected a certain dialectic of de-commodification and commodification—particularly regarding the commodification of labor, especially women’s labor—that is present in all modern capitalist welfare states (Greve 2018; Jessop 2002a; Marklund and Svallfors 1987). However, starting in the 1990s, economic crisis, rising unemployment, austerity, and EU membership caused a shift in labor market policy towards activation and workfare, and an internal restructuring of the welfare state influenced by New Public Management (NPM) (Bengtsson 2014; Sunesson et al. 1998), which is often considered to continue into the present day. Hence, while unemployment has always been seen as a problem for an encompassing welfare system dependent on tax revenue from wage labor, and while there are continuities in the management of unemployment through various activation policies stretching much further than the last 30 years (Broström 2015; Junestav 2004), the 1990s still appear as a turn towards an activation policy based on workfare and a focus on punitive measures in managing and incentivizing the unemployed.

This trajectory of policy changes runs parallel to changes in the Swedish system of unemployment insurance, commonly seen as a version of the Ghent system, in which unions have a major administrative role. Again, the 1990s marked a turning point as union

membership declined with the decline in employment (Kjellberg 2009; Lindellee and Berglund 2022). The threshold for qualifying for unemployment insurance was raised and more people were referred to welfare benefits such as social assistance (Fredriksson 2022; Panican and Ulmestig 2017). Parts of the unemployed population, thus, increasingly derived their income from social benefits, administered by the municipalities, creating a parallel system for the provision of financial support. The management of unemployment in Sweden, thus, became institutionally divided between a national level, operating in accordance with a reformed Ghent system, and a municipal level, which financially supports a segment of the unemployed through social assistance, where municipalities adapt national labor market policy into local implementations. This bifurcation means that different demands are placed on the unemployed depending in praxis on the kind of income received (Panican and Ulmestig 2017, 2019). As the analysis in this article will make clear, the PES report (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) can be seen to consolidate this bifurcation through the delineation and differentiation of the category of people 'distant from the labor market', while at the same time creating the discursive conditions for using social assistance as a mechanism of activation along punitive workfare lines.

Trends towards workfare and the decline in union density continued at the beginning of the new millennium with the 'new work strategy', which was launched by the center-right government in 2006 and included the introduction of private actors in the implementation of labor market policy, assuming some of the functions previously performed by the PES (Bengtsson and Jacobsson 2018; Kjellberg 2009; Lundin 2011). These strategies, initially promoted by the center-right governments, have since the early 2010s also been advocated by the Social Democratic Party (Lundin 2011; see also Ryner 2018). The new political consensus resulted in reduced funding of the PES and solidified the position of private actors in the welfare system, which became especially clear in the 2019 reformation of the PES, which aimed to increase the role of local and private actors and expand the quasi-market in labor market policy (Nord and Bengtsson 2022). This involved not only non- and for-profit companies, but also municipalities who gained a larger responsibility for activating unemployed residents because of the closing and downsizing of local PES offices, as well as changes in regulation which allowed for the municipalities to be reimbursed from the PES for such activation activities (Ds 2021:27 2017, p. 12; Prop. 2021/2022:216 2022; see also SKR 2022; SOU 2020:41 2020). Though criticized (e.g., Bennmarker et al. 2021; Egebark et al. 2024; Uddbäck 2024), the salience of external actors in what used to be core PES activities, including labor exchange services, the new mode of organization, increasingly renders the PES a monitoring agency. These changes are part of the strategic governance mechanisms put forward by the NPM framework, with market logics of measurability and hierarchal authority built on fixed rules replacing professional autonomy, ethics, and knowledge (Gilbert 2002; Larsson et al. 2012; Svensson 2016). Moreover, the new mode of organizing, where core services are relinquished to private actors, aligns with the trend in which municipalities assume responsibility for activating the unemployed who receive social assistance.

In this sense, there are both continuities and discontinuities in the way that welfare in general, and labor market policy in particular, in Sweden is currently developing, and while some occurrences in these processes have been heavily researched (e.g., Blomqvist and Palme 2020; Brauer 2024; Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019; Ottosson 2022; Skyrman et al. 2023), less attention has been given to the importance of language and the discursive categorizations used to legitimize such policy changes (see e.g., Marston 2008). Similarly to how the categorization of young adults and adolescents Not in Employment, Education, or Training have been used to critically discuss how the question of (un)employment is a major issue for the contemporary welfare state (Boland and Griffin 2023), this paper argues that the formal policy integration of the category of people 'distant from the labor

market' needs to be critically discussed in relation to international trends in welfare restructuring, as well as to the national specificities of Sweden. This article, thus, contributes to previous research on labor market policy and processes of welfare transformation by examining the delineation and differentiation of a subgroup within the unemployed population.

### 3. Analytical Framework

Drawing on perspectives from Carol Bacchi (e.g., Bacchi 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016), this paper regards policy as a discursive practice. Although policy as text might present itself as neutral, the fact that it has been formulated as a solution to a perceived problem makes it inherently political. In this sense, this article considers the document in focus (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) a policy document, as it is written with the purpose of discussing a perceived problem and suggesting solutions, which is similar to how Bacchi (2009, pp. ix–xi) describes the function of the public policies which are the focus of her method of analysis. By assuming that there is a problem in need of solving, policy text not only reproduces the idea of the perceived problem but also reproduces and reinforces the specific categorizations named in the text. This means that policy in this framework is not formulated to solve an already existing problem, but rather that policy is one actor in the construction of that 'problem' as part of a certain social reality. Therefore, as policy analysts, Bacchi (2009) urges us to examine how problems and solutions are discursively framed, as well as how they relate to other political processes, by considering things such as fundamental premises and value judgments inherent in the formulations of policy rather than simply accepting the problem narratives in policy as a neutral fact. For the case of this paper, I am inspired by these perspectives from Bacchi (2009) who more explicitly asks what the problem is represented to be (WPR) in specific policy texts. Through a framework built on a number of questions, the WPR approach guides the researcher to not only focus on the 'problem', but also on what discourses and assumptions the problem figuration relies on to get constructed as coherent. While the structure of the WPR questions has most definitely been useful in various research fields, according to Bacchi (2009, p. 101) a WPR *approach* is not dependent on strictly following this schema but could just as well be integrated into the research design and thus be adjusted to the specific 'problem' and point of analysis.

Therefore, and inspired by others, I have worked with the WPR questions to operationalize an analytical framework apt for this context (cf. Nyhlén et al. 2018), where the focus lies on the construction and establishment of a category within a political sphere and how this categorization is an active force that can be understood within larger political processes. I, thus, use it here to be able to understand how 'people distant from the labor market' get constructed as an adhesive group, separate from other unemployed people, in a formal policy setting, not as only a discursive construction but as a part of the current political processes in the labor market arena as the transition from rhetorical usage to formal recognition enables targeted management strategies, i.e., a duty of activity (S 2022:E 2022). For the analytical work, this meant an abductive approach where I moved between theory and the empirical material in a dialectical process of letting the two influence each other to be able to understand what the problem was represented to be, and how this can be seen in light of the current workfare tendencies in the Swedish welfare state (Broström 2015; Peck 2001). Furthermore, this is read against a background of what Wendy Brown (2015) has called neoliberal rationality, where an economic mindset is inserted into hitherto non-economic realms of life. Within this rationality, freedom of choice is essential, but with it comes the expectation to make the right choices, not least in accordance with what is deemed economically logical. This further interacts with the logic of the market where personal attributes should be enhanced to maximize the value of the

individual to increase one's competitiveness. The same is true for the state, which must 'govern for the market, rather than because of the market.' (Foucault 2008, p. 121). In this sense, neoliberal rationalities are here understood as 'new forms of political-economic governance premised on the extension of market relationships' (Larner 2000, p. 5), i.e., a demand on the individual, responsabilized subject to act in an economical sense. The approach allowed me to iteratively refine the analysis as new insights from the empirical material informed the theoretical framework. For example, the explicit focus on collaboration with external actors pointed to the importance of decentralized governance. This observation added to the theoretical understanding of how neoliberal rationalities operate through local governance structures, where welfare policy is imbued with market logics.

The analytical framework is built on three parts, with the first and second exploring the construction of the subject position through looking at which attributes get connected to the category, how it gets positioned in relation to other actors, and what kind of terms are used to legitimize this construction. These parts aim to understand how the definition of the subject position of being 'distant from the labor market' in relation to other actors, as well as the internal relations of responsibility between these actors, points to a separation of this group within the unemployed population which sequentially could be part of constructing certain reforms as more urgent for just that group. This part, thus, closely relates to Bacchi's questions (2009) one (what's the problem represented to be?) and two (what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?). The third part of the analysis also uses Bacchi's second question, as well as questions four (what is left unproblematic in this problem representation?) and five (what effects are produced by this representation of the problem?). This is carried out in order to see how the construction of the category contains a differentiation of distance, and how this, in turn, can be understood as a part of the current negotiations over the limits of the Swedish welfare state. In practice, this meant looking for how the construction of subject positions was being carried out with implicit or explicit references to other phenomena, what was being assumed, called upon, or left out. In order to develop this analysis and how the discursive construction of a category relates to more general perspectives on welfare and governance, this is discussed against an understanding of how neoliberal modes of governance are a part of welfare tendencies in labor market policy. Although the dialectical approach was used in the analysis as a whole, the first and second parts of the analysis, thus, stay a bit closer to the empirical material while the third part zooms out to understand what was found within wider discursive frames, and it is in this context that the construction of a 'problematic' subject position is analyzed.

### *Empirical Material*

In order to consider how subject positions, and specifically the category of being 'distant from the labor market', is discursively produced, this paper focuses on how the term is constructed in a national report from the Swedish PES (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) produced in response to a governmental order to 'analyze and present the needs of the long-term unemployed people who are particularly distant from the labor market' (Regeringsbeslut A2022/00331 2022). The governmental order presents a background of how the demand for labor has increased after the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the general unemployment, therefore, has decreased. However, the order explains that this is not the case for people who are long-term unemployed and who are also distant from the labor market. Therefore, the governmental order instructs the PES to conduct an analysis of what needs this group has, as well as the present solutions to this, with a particular focus on what can be performed in collaboration with local municipalities or NGOs (Regeringsbeslut A2022/00331 2022).

Although the term 'distant from the labor market' has been used in Swedish media since the late 1990s, this report and the preceding governmental order marks the first time it is used as the main adhesive category for a constructed group with various 'risky' attributes in a formal policy document rather than in political rhetorics or in policy documents pointing out subgroups within this constructed group. This distinction makes it a key document for studying how this category, which creates a division within the unemployed population, is constructed and institutionalized within formal policy, and was chosen as the empirical material because of this. The report is, in this sense, a document that postulates that there exists a group of unemployed people who are 'distant from the labor market', and the integration of this subject position within the governing sphere can, hence, be seen as an establishing step in the process of institutionalizing and normalizing this category. This study is limited to one report, which restricts the scope of the analysis. While this report is significant, future research could include other policy documents or focus on policy implementation at the local level following current trends in labor market policy, which could provide another understanding of how these discourses function in practice.

The report (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) is structured into ten chapters, spanning 110 pages. It begins with a summary of the content of the report which by and large confirms what is written in the governmental order, and mainly describes the need for interventions that will produce the desired effects of moving people closer to the labor market. An introduction, chapter one, consisting of reflections upon the governmental order follows this, as well as a definition of the target group of the document which is further developed in chapter two. Chapters three, four, five, seven, and eight discuss the cases of various labor market interventions such as activation programs, subsidized labor, or educational training. The sixth chapter focuses on the collaboration between the PES and other public (i.e., regional coordination associations and municipalities) and private (i.e., companies and NGOs) actors regarding, e.g., needs on local labor markets and adult education. In chapter nine, some final suggestions for 'increasing the transition to work or education' (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023, p. 75) are discussed, and the report ends with a concluding discussion in chapter ten. The report is written in Swedish, and all translations are mine.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. *Constructing a Second Tier of the Unemployed*

In this part of the paper, I turn to the report (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023) to explore how people 'distant from the labor market' are constructed as a delineated group within the unemployed population. For as much as unemployment, in general, is considered a problem in contemporary society, this report specifically focuses on people categorized as 'distant'. Despite being used in the political sphere, the term has not had an official definition, leading the PES to interpret their task as defining who is considered 'distant from the labor market' (p. 14). Accordingly, the PES also states that the document has to define the group statistically by departing from the goals of the governmental order (p. 13). While the specified definition explicitly relates to the duration of unemployment, being described as unemployed people aged 25 to 65, who were registered at the PES in November 2022 and who had been registered for five years or longer (p. 13), preceding the definition of the target group is a statement of how:

The composition of the unemployed has also changed over the last 15 years. An increasing number of those registered with [the PES] are distant from the labor market and are assessed to belong to the group with weak competitive ability (p. 12).

Specifically, weak competitive abilities are defined as being born in a non-European country, not having a high school education, having a disability that results in reduced work ability, and/or being unemployed and 55 years or older. These attributes, variously described as 'risky' attributes or background characteristics of low competitiveness, are subsequently used as the basis for the statistics in chapter 2 (pp. 18–27), named Description of the Target Group. Though the defining feature is firstly made in temporal terms, the categorization of people 'distant from the labor market' is, thus, a fundamental part of the document constructed in relation to these individual background characteristics of low competitiveness, and it is, hence, in practice those that seem to determine 'distance' rather than the time for which one has been unemployed. Although the change in the composition of the unemployed population is a material fact, the demarcation of people with various 'risky' attributes as an adhesive category constructs this group as a coherent whole which is a particularly 'problematic' part of the unemployed population.

The division of individual attributes as more or less 'risky' or 'competitive' further points to an idea of the subject in question as more or less employable on a labor market that works as just a market; an economic rationality that is in line with how Wendy Brown (2015) discusses how neoliberal reason urges both individuals and states to adjust themselves in a manner which maximizes their value—here, on the labor market. Highlighting these attributes as 'risky' and of low competitiveness, thus, closely follows a pattern of constructing unemployed subjects as more or less employable, with people categorized as 'distant' deemed more unmarketable than the other people who are unemployed. Within this interpretation of the statistics presented in the document lies a fundamental idea of what the 'problem' with unemployment is. By reading the statistical presentation with the presumption that the common denominator for people 'distant from the labor market' is their individual lack of 'competitiveness', of employability, the PES in this document reproduces a specific idea of what causes and defines unemployment. The assumption here is that the inability to participate as a competitive actor in the labor market is a key factor in the societal issue of unemployment, that people who are positioned as 'distant' do not have the competitive abilities necessary to act on this market, and that they are, thus, the 'problem' in need of adjusting themselves according to the current (labor) market logics (cf. Fejes 2010) for the PES to come to terms with the changed composition of the unemployed (p. 12).

Talking about attributes such as age or origin in terms of competitiveness and risk works in accordance with the language of the market and deems these attributes as of less value in this market (cf. Rose 1999). Although people with these attributes, or similar lived experiences, have existed long before they were positioned as people 'distant from the labor market', these experiences do not become tied together as this specific, problematic group until policies start to govern how these people should behave (cf. Foucault 1979)—here, through the work of activating labor market incentives. The construction of this subject category contains certain conceptions of who needs to take responsibility for solving the perceived problem produced in the report. With the problem figuration being centered around an idea of the individual 'distant' person as problematic but transformable, managing the target group's self-enhancement becomes the logical foci of this document. This identification of the document's target group, thus, follows the ideas inherent in neoliberal rationality in general and activating labor market politics in particular about the individualized, active citizen-subject who takes action to enhance themselves and their attributes with 'low competitiveness' (cf. Dean 1995). In this process of constructing a group as having or perhaps rather, being (cf. Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Fejes 2010) a problem, the individual person gets objectified as 'distant', lacking the aspiration and/or skill to become a contributing and employable citizen. This creates a space where the most reasonable solutions are, therefore, aimed at just individual self-improvement. Indeed, formulating

the individual person, with certain characteristics or attributes, as a problem naturalizes the position of being 'distant from the labor market' and disables the report from discussing structural inequalities that might be present in the labor market system, and might be a reason for the recent changes in the composition of the unemployed, although previous research has shown that it is, e.g., ageism rather than age that is a factor for long-term unemployment (see also Jessop 2002b; Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich 2016). The construction of this second tier of the unemployed can, hence, be seen as a strategy of tying together several 'problematic' groups, a construction that is needed to continue the reproduction of the labor market as natural (for similar discussions, see Bengtsson 2012; Davidsson 2010). If the 'distant' people would not be constructed as their own 'problematic' reason for unemployment, something else would need to take the blame, and another explanation of the general 'problem' of unemployment would be necessary.

Ultimately, the problem figurations reproduced in the report not only work within a framework of governing the individual unemployed person positioned as 'distant from the labor market' through the recommended solutions, but also rely on the assumption that having the ability to participate as a competitive actor in the labor market is fundamental; an ability that those positioned as 'distant' are seen to lack, which is understood as the main reason for the question of unemployment (cf. Fejes 2010). Though this can differ in practice, e.g., in the daily work of civil servants (cf. van Berkel et al. 2017), the report's focus on individual attributes, as well as activation measures aimed at increasing the person's employability, points to how the text constructs the problem of 'distance' as a problem based in the individual person. The next part of this paper will explore how such constructions are further developed in relation to other subject positions in this document.

#### 4.2. Subject Positions: Facilitators, External Actors, and 'Distant' People

While people 'distant from the labor market' are the main focus of this document, this category is defined in relation to other actors within the welfare system. Having weak competitive abilities in the labor market and thus having certain needs is consistently framed as something that demands more, and other, resources from the welfare system than what the PES, with the current budget and duties, has to offer:

Jobseekers in the intended target group for [strengthened intervention efforts] are assessed to be relatively distant from the labor market and it may thus be justified that they receive more *resource-intensive efforts* (p. 78, emphasis added).

In conjunction with the budget cuts in the budget bill for 2019, major changes took place [at the PES], which have also affected the authority's ability and capacity to meet jobseekers [...]. Through the reform, the PES has partly been given a different mission where the work linked to suppliers of preparatory and matching efforts has taken up more and more time and resources. This at the same time as [the PES's] own work to support and help jobseekers has had to take a back seat (p. 57).

Dealing with these 'resource-intensive' efforts is framed as challenging for the PES. As a result of the changes implemented in the 2019 reformation, other actors, such as municipalities and non- and for-profit actors, are framed as better equipped to conduct such efforts in collaboration with the PES within a quasi-public arena. This shows not only a redistribution of responsibility in labor market policy but points to a neoliberal turn in labor market policy, where the state withdraws from the direct implementation of welfare, transferring essential services to be handled by private and quasi-public actors (Lidén et al. 2019; Nord and Bengtsson 2022). Consequently, this transformed division of labor establishes external actors as important within the labor market arena, taking the

responsibility to act in collaboration with the PES. These actors are, thus, constructed as having a 'street-level' position, while the PES takes on a 'facilitating' role. This collaboration reproduces a narrative that emphasizes the importance of private actors working on a welfare market in accordance with neoliberal rationalities and a neoliberal turn in which the state governs the market (Brown 2015; Foucault 2008). The budget cuts and changes in the mission of the PES, in themselves effects of austerity measures with neoliberal reasoning (Bengtsson and Berglund 2012; Nord and Bengtsson 2022), enable the report to emphasize the role of private, 'street-level' actors working on a quasi-public welfare market with the perceived 'problem' of people deemed as 'distant'. External actors are, thus, constructed as not merely filling a gap but as critical actors in a quasi-market that benefits from the state's withdrawal. The construction of people deemed 'distant' as a second tier of the unemployed is enabled through this assigning of responsibility to 'street-level' actors, but this categorization also works to legitimize the 'facilitating' role of the PES as well as external 'street-level' actors working within the quasi-public arena. In effect, the establishment of people 'distant from the labor market' not only transfers responsibility but also reinforces the labor market's quasi-public system through neoliberal policy adjustments (Jessop 2002b).

Through quotes such as those above, it further becomes clear how the PES has a particular role among the actors in the labor market. It is, e.g., the PES that registers and administrates the 'distant' people while interventions conducted by 'independent providers' are common (p. 34), and the PES is expected to keep developing this kind of 'collaboration with municipalities and other actors' (p. 67). Furthermore, in reference to the changes in the regulations regarding public procurements for the PES, it is stated how '[external] providers have more freedom to design the content of the interventions they offer to participants' (p. 35), highlighting the transformation of who is responsible for the implementation of labor market policy. In this sense, the PES continues to construct the 'facilitating' position for itself, where collaboration with other actors is necessary to achieve the aims of labor market policies (cf. Nord and Bengtsson 2022). However, collaboration as one of the particular foci in the document (e.g., p. 3) not only regards a division of labor between 'distant' people, 'street-level' and 'facilitating' actors, but is also constructed as beneficial for parts of the private sector:

When [the PES] and the municipalities work together, a larger toolbox is also created for employers in sectors with a skills shortage, while at the same time enabling employment for job seekers who are distant from the labor market (p. 65).

Faced with limitations for employment in certain sectors, the PES, thus, positions itself as facilitating labor market policies aimed at people 'distant from the labor market' as well as 'street-level' actors, but also with an aim to meet the needs of the market. At the same time, constructing the needs of the target group of the document as too resource-intensive and, partially, no longer the main duty of the PES, thereby assigning the 'street-level' responsibility to external actors, there is a separation of people 'distant from the labor market' from the perceived normality of Swedish labor market politics, where the PES is the main actor, to a side part where other actors are constructed as more suitable to conduct this work, thus, a policy consolidation of the bifurcation between the national and local level already existing in practice (Panican and Ulmestig 2017, 2019). In this way, the labor market system as precisely a market system, where the general welfare system is largely outsourced to a new quasi-market of private actors (Hartman 2011; Lidén et al. 2019), is here constructed as both natural and necessary to come to terms with the needs of people positioned as 'distant'. The construction of people 'distant from the labor market' becomes important to legitimize the delineation of them within the unemployed population, but also the growing market of external actors within the welfare system, which in turn are constructed as an important part of conducting labor market policy. The PES

here 'facilitates' in accordance with neoliberal rationality, in which the state must govern for the market (Foucault 2008). In this sense, the subject position is constituted in the report in direct relation to the 'facilitating' role of the PES and the 'street-level' role of external actors, both of which depend on the continuous existence of 'distant' people to legitimize their functions within the labor market system.

#### 4.3. Differentiating Distance

Turning back to the report's construction of the category of people 'distant from the labor market', we previously noted how this group is delineated as a distinct, adhesive category within the broader unemployed population. However, the report also differentiates subgroups within this category. While it defines 'distance' explicitly in temporal terms (p. 13), the report rather uses individual attributes, e.g., origin, education, dis/ability, and age (p. 12), to discuss how the category is constructed and how there are certain overlaps between these attributes. Such attributes are, furthermore, used for statistical analysis and framed as 'weak', 'low', or 'risky' competitive abilities within the 'target group' (p. 18–27). The report, thus, sets out from the assumption that these individual attributes all contribute to weak competitive abilities in those deemed as 'distant'. These attributes are then used to compare statistical differences, offer potential explanations for the observed variations, and thereby construct explicit and implicit subgroups, differentiating the group according to the aggregated analysis of competitiveness-reducing, risky attributes. In this sense, the report constructs 'distance' as a specific type of unemployment arising due to these individual attributes.

In conducting the statistical analyses on how individual attributes interact, the report points to how various levels of competitiveness are the results of various interacting, 'risky' attributes. For example, in a comparison between those born in Sweden and those born outside of Europe<sup>1</sup>, the report describes how in both groups, 'The group that is perhaps the furthest from the labor market [...] are those with a combination of all three attributes, i.e., no more than pre-secondary education, disability and 55 years or older' (pp. 23–4). This combination of attributes is further described as being about the same size among those domestically born and those born outside of Europe. In using the 'risky' attributes of low competitiveness in this sense, the report, thus, points out how there are in fact variations in distance in the group of people 'distant from the labor market'—that distance might differ. Moreover, the report states that the lower proportion of a registered disability among those who are born outside of Europe (p. 26) is not possible to explain with certainty, but continues to suggest a number of explanations where the first seem to hint at the possibility that the labor market might be affected by structural inequalities: 'It could be the case that the very long registration times of those born in Sweden are largely explained precisely by the fact that they have a disability, while those born outside Europe run a relatively high risk of becoming long-term unemployed even if they do not have a disability' (p. 26). This is, however, not discussed further. Instead, the following explanations suggest that underreporting, language issues, or underdiagnosing of unemployed individuals born outside of Europe (pp. 26–27) might be the other reasons for the lower proportion of registered disability among those born outside of Europe (p. 26). The chapter as a whole ends by stating that it might also be the case that the incidence of disabilities actually is lower in people born outside of Europe, and positioned as 'distant from the labor market', pointing to how being born outside of Europe seems to be the main 'problem', a risk factor, in itself (cf. Bacchi 2009; Pieper and Mohammadi 2014). Rather than considering the possibility that the labor market operates according to certain structural logics or demands certain attributes from an applicant, such as having lived in Sweden for a longer period, the report discusses this in individual temporal terms. However, this changes slightly in the following paragraph (p. 21), where the report states that 'it takes

time to establish oneself on the Swedish labor market' and that the 'decline in the proportion of non-European born people after five years of registration' could 'possibly be partially explained by job opportunities increasing with time in Sweden'. Thus, while there are brief acknowledgments of structural logics, these are hedged with words such as 'possibly' and 'partially', reinforcing the focus on individual explanations. This is also assisted by the subsequent discussion on the combined integration and labor market policy which should 'continuously focus on accelerating the transition to work or regular education' for people immigrating to Sweden (p. 2p). In this sense, the individual attributes are framed as risky and of low competitiveness and so, as the reason for unemployment in this group, confirming the inherent problem figuration existing in the very term 'people distant from the labor market'—that it is the people who are distant and therefore, the 'problem'.

Furthermore, the discussion on how various attributes interact points to variations in how 'distant' a person is, enabling the differentiation of the group into subgroups based on the aggregated, measurable analysis of the individual's level of risky attributes of low competitiveness. While the individual attributes described above are used to analyze the target group are important, the report also states how

It is likely that within the target group there are unemployed people with very little chances of moving into work or training, regardless of the interventions they receive (p. 81).

Through statements such as this, which are followed by either a suggestion of new labor market programs (e.g., p. 81) or simply another paragraph regarding something else (e.g., p. 75), the report construct subgroups of varying levels of distance, reinforcing the idea that some people positioned as 'distant' are seen as stagnant in the 'distant' position (cf. Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich 2016), while others, thus, can potentially become active citizen subjects through activating themselves to enhance their competitive abilities (Dean 2010; Rose 2010). Following this, the report suggests there exist such subgroups—potentially active or stagnant—based on the analysis of combinations of risky attributes, thereby also suggesting that it might be possible to analyze the level of riskiness in an individual person deemed as 'distant' based on their individual, eventual combination of attributes such as origin, education, dis/ability, and age. This is further reinforced in the short discussion on Prepare and Match (Sw: Rusta och matcha, p. 56), a program where procured external, 'street-level' actors conduct the intervention. Here, the report states that access to this service is, to a high extent, based on results from 'profilings' carried out with the statistical assessment tool, which in turn assesses the individual person's distance to the labor market based on just such risky attributes discussed here.

Against the background of the report's analysis of subgroups based on levels of distance, the report postulates a range of interventions provided by the range of 'street-level' actors in the organizational landscape charted in Section 4.2. Such interventions include, for example, (p. 76) procured services (e.g., occupational education and Swedish training), subsidized employment and internships with private actors, and deepened mappings of 'competences, abilities and ambitions' (p. 77). These interventions are described as variously relevant for various people, based, again, on the individual risky attributes described above. It is, e.g., stated how domestic-born people in the target group do not primarily need regular education (p. 53), but, with the addition of an age over 55 and a disability, need other types of interventions (p. 75), while introductory jobs are mainly reserved for those born outside of Europe (pp. 72–73), a group who are also described as in a general need of educational interventions (p. 54). Concurrently, these interventions are described as necessary to 'accelerate the transition to work' (p. 22), reinforcing the idea that labor market entry is primarily an individual responsibility. While the proposed measures may indeed be beneficial, they are presented as individual solutions rather than

addressing the broader structural inequalities that may affect these groups, such as discrimination towards non-European migrants or inaccessible work environments (cf. Laliberte Rudman and Aldrich 2016). This points to how the report suggests that the plethora of interventions, managed in collaboration with a plethora of actors, aimed at increasing 'distant' people's competitiveness in regard to individual attributes, should be sufficient solutions for the 'problem' with unemployed people 'distant from the labor market'.

This becomes particularly important to recognize when at the same time noting how the report describes how 'It is not uncommon that individuals in the target group also receive social assistance' (p. 28), as well as recalling the current proposal on a duty of activity for unemployed people who receive social assistance, with sanctions imposed if the duty is not complied with (S 2022:E 2022). In this context, the delineation and differentiation of people 'distant from the labor market', as well as the proposed interventions in collaboration with external actors, point to an assumption that those who are unemployed and not active enough to enhance their employability do not deserve to take part in welfare benefits; hence, welfare and socioeconomic security are framed as rewards for active participation. This, in turn, means a digression from the previous national ideal of individuals not being at risk of losing all types of livelihoods, as social assistance is the 'last-resort' financial benefit available in the Swedish welfare system (Thorén 2008, p. 43). Thus, by delineating and differentiating the category of people 'distant from the labor market', the report takes part in setting the discursive conditions for a turn towards stronger workfare tendencies, with punitive elements reminiscent of welfare conditionality, in the Swedish labor market policy.

## 5. Discussion

This paper has shown how the subject position of people 'distant from the labor market' is constructed in a report from the Swedish PES, which aims to 'analyze and present the needs of the long-term unemployed people who are particularly distant from the labor market' (Arbetsförmedlingen 2023). First, in delineating certain unemployed people as a second tier of the unemployed population, the PES in this report takes part in reinforcing a category formerly confined to political rhetorics into formal policy. Further, the PES does so by defining just that category in relation to individual attributes, discussed in terms of risk and low competitiveness. Second, by positioning this group as too 'resource-intensive' and in need of more, and other, resources than what the PES with the current budget can offer, the PES points to the importance of other private and public actors in the welfare system. Considering the 2019 reformation of the PES, which emphasized the PES as a facilitating rather than a street-level agency, and collaboration between public and private actors in labor market policy (Nord and Bengtsson 2022), this points to a problem figuration in which there are, third, subgroups of 'distant' unemployed people, where some could be potentially active subjects who make active choices on a quasi-market to enhance their employability and thereby solve the 'problem' of unemployment, while some are seen as stagnant. Ultimately, the report's analysis of the problem with 'distant' people's unemployment, as well as the differentiating of various levels of 'distance', is understood as a neoliberal policy adjustment that could be used to determine 'distance' by quantifying individual attributes and so make the categorization more efficient and measurable, in line with the ideals of NPM (cf. Jessop 2002b).

In relation to the current developments reminiscent of workfare in the Swedish welfare system (e.g., Berglund 2024; Dahlstedt and Neergaard 2019), proposals of a duty of activity for unemployed individuals who receive social assistance (S 2022:E 2022) illustrate the growing emphasis on welfare conditionality and workfare tendencies. In this sense, it further becomes clear how discursive processes such as this are connected to political processes, affecting citizens' lives. The use of aggregated individual attributes to determine

levels of 'distance' in this sense constructs the discursive conditions for introducing measures that frame unemployment increasingly as a behavioral issue requiring targeted interventions (Dwyer et al. 2023; Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018; see also Bengtsson and Jacobsson 2018). Such a discursive process has institutional effects, influencing the governing of the unemployed population on both national and municipal levels, and individual attributes are so used as a tool to assist in shaping who gets which support and what obligations they face. The construction of people 'distant from the labor market' with 'risky' individual attributes, thus, actively shapes the various positions of unemployed people within the welfare system. In presenting a complex network of actors available for 'distant' people to choose from, the report, thus, suggests how people could decrease their 'distance' if they make the right choices on this quasi-market. This highlights how the formal policy integration of people 'distant from the labor market' is tied to neoliberal workfare rationalities, where individual responsibility and market-oriented logics are emphasized in the governance of welfare recipients, as well as how this might have severe effects for parts of the unemployed population who might risk all sorts of livelihood if they are deemed 'distant' enough and do not make the right active choices to enhance their employability. In the analysis of how people 'distant from the labor market' are constructed and used in this report, the current changes in the logics of labor market policy emerge where market-oriented and individualized ideals of responsibility are emphasized. Such a change reshapes not only the conditions under which unemployed people access welfare but also defines who is considered deserving of welfare and under what conditions. In this sense, the development can be understood as a way towards a greater emphasis on workfare and disciplining. In the broader context of the transformations of the Swedish welfare state (cf. e.g., Berglund 2024), this raises questions about how welfare policies relating to unemployment and social citizenship might be renegotiated in the near future.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Other countries of origin are not mentioned.

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