

Austerity as Bureaucratic Violence: Understanding the Impact of (Neoliberal) Austerity on Disabled People in Sweden

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Abstract

Drawing on a framework offered by Bauman and literature from disability studies and other sociological areas, this article argues that the experience of austerity for disabled people in Sweden is one of bureaucratic violence, shaped by disablism. The article aims to broaden the sociological conceptualisation of bureaucratic violence to include disablism within its purview. It utilises fieldwork data from interviews with disabled people in Sweden to explore how welfare bureaucracy isolates and dehumanises disabled people. It also examines how Swedish welfare bureaucracies obscure the impact of austerity on this population. Due to the convergence of neoliberalism and austerity in Sweden, the exploration of bureaucratic violence opens up important questions regarding the Social Darwinist elements in neoliberal theory. Ultimately, bureaucratic violence is a useful concept for sociologists for two reasons: it sheds austerity of its technocratic veneer and connects lived experiences of welfare reform to the lethal consequences of austerity.

Keywords

austerity, bureaucracy, bureaucratic violence, disability, neoliberalism, Social Darwinism, Sweden

Introduction

The state's capacity for violence has been a long-standing interest of sociologists. Weber (2009b) argued that the state has monopoly on legitimate violence and Bourdieu (1998) highlighted that the state uses force to maintain domination. These accounts primarily

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focus on military or police force, although they are not the only tools in the state's arsenal. Subtler forms of control were explored by Arendt (1969) and Bauman (1989) who looked at how bureaucracy can enact state violence. The preoccupation with bureaucracy within sociology is well known in classic sociology with Selznick (1943) and Weber (2009a) being prominent examples. This type of engagement has been less common in contemporary sociology, despite the increasing bureaucratisation of everyday life (Graeber, 2015). This, however, is changing. Interest in bureaucracy and its violence has been rejuvenated due to scholarship looking at states' treatment of refugees (Abdelhady et al., 2020), the impact of austerity (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), the violent outcomes of bureaucracy (Graeber, 2015) and can sometimes be referred to via concepts such as slow violence (Mayblin et al., 2020; Nixon, 2013). Sociological attention to bureaucratic violence is important as the technocratic veneer of bureaucracy obscures the structural and material violence that is enacted (Milne and Mahanty, 2019: 141) and contributes to its mundane appearance (Cooper and Whyte, 2017).

While scholarship has thus far focused significantly on refugees and asylum seekers (Abdelhady et al., 2020; Mayblin et al., 2020), this article will focus on disabled people in Sweden to explore how the concept of bureaucratic violence can be expanded by including the impact of neoliberal austerity. This contribution is not intended to refute existing scholarship, but to offer a complementary perspective of how dehumanisation and bureaucratic violence extends to other groups, although shaped by different forms of oppression. This article contributes to the concept of bureaucratic violence by demonstrating how disablism impacts the experience of bureaucratic violence and how bureaucratic structures can shape subjectivities and augment structural oppressions. The data underlying this article came from fieldwork research carried out in 2015–2016. As will become clear, the prompt to conceptualise the impact of austerity as bureaucratic violence emerged from the participants' own stories. Ultimately, due to the convergence of austerity and neoliberalism in Sweden, it becomes essential to engage with the Social Darwinist elements embedded within neoliberal theory when discussing bureaucratic violence against disabled people.

The Welfare State's Bureaucratic Violence

Bureaucracy is 'a permanent structure with a system of rational rules' (Weber, 2009c: 245) that also requires the bifurcation of interests, delegation of functions, control over conditions and the actions of officials (Selznick, 1943: 51). Traditional bureaucratic literature focused on bureaucracy as an ideal type, but there is an urgent need to re-engage with bureaucracy with a focus towards its impact. Abdelhady et al. (2020: 5) note that 'Northern European welfare state bureaucracies maintain a level of discipline and control over the daily lives of their welfare clients that reproduces axes of exclusion and inclusion through mundane everyday interactions.' This is well documented within disability studies, where welfare states can not only serve as 'barriers to doing' but also 'barriers to being' (Thomas, 1999: 60), and the welfare system more broadly can be a source of psycho-emotional disablism (Reeve, 2004: 84). Reeve (2002: 500) argues that self-certification has meant that 'rather than being under the gaze of the interviewer, the claimant is required to critically gaze upon their own body

and report in detail how it fails to meet the “norm”, thereby forcing the claimant to internalise disablist oppression.

Recognising the damage bureaucracy can do, Nixon (2013: 2) argues that ‘we need [. . .] to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive’. This slow violence enacted in everyday settings has physical and mental effects, although they may appear harmless (Mayblin et al., 2020: 114). In fact, a distinguishing feature of bureaucratic violence is its seemingly non-violent nature. Cooper and Whyte (2017) denote the violence of austerity as:

a bureaucratised form of violence that is implemented in routine and mundane ways. It is therefore [. . .] very different to those events we normally consider to be ‘violent’. [. . .] routine administration practices are not always understood as violent; but they are.

While slow violence may even have broader application, through for example Mayblin et al.’s (2020: 114) ‘slow violence of poverty’, the concern in this article is on the bureaucratic aspect of welfare violence as it is ‘not merely an outcome of abstract structures [. . .] but is administered through processes of decision-making, paperwork, knowledge production, inaction, and exclusion’ (Eldridge and Reinke, 2018: 95). Therefore, I will use the term bureaucratic violence rather than slow violence. To analyse the bureaucratic nature of this violence, this article will utilise the framework of Bauman (1989), where he outlines six elements of bureaucratic violence:

1. ‘The delegitimation of all but inner-organizational rules as the source and guarantee of propriety’ (Bauman, 1989: 22).
2. Invisibility of victims.
3. Depersonalisation of target group(s).
4. Distantiation of target group(s).
5. The removal of improvisation and spontaneity.
6. Specialists are left undisturbed.

As will become apparent, many elements overlap within the context of this article, but they encompass slightly different facets. The first criterion indicates that frameworks for ethical consideration become isolated to organisational guidelines, meaning that the utilisation of ethical perspectives outside the organisation is discouraged. The second criterion involves making the targeting of particular groups less evident, to avoid the enactor having a crisis of conscience (Bauman, 1989: 26). The third criterion focuses on how the target group(s) become a “depersonalized”, abstract and alien entity beyond human empathy’ (Bauman, 1989: 76). The fourth criterion comes into play when ‘the objects at which bureaucratic operation is aimed can, and are, reduced to a set of quantitative measures’ (Bauman, 1989: 102). This involves changing the focus of the assessment: it is not people that are being measured but something more abstract, such as time. This is inextricably tied to the rationalising tendency within modernity as it seeks to hide the humanity of the target group(s) behind technical terms and their humanity is best ‘not perceived and not remembered’ (Bauman, 1989: 103). The fifth criterion centres the bureaucrat and

the bureaucratic process, where spontaneity or discretion is removed and decisions are streamlined. The final criterion relies on the same streamlining principles, enabling the ‘specialists’ to be ‘free to proceed with their task’ (Bauman, 1989: 74). Due to the focus on disabled people in this article, the last two criteria are outwith the scope of this article. The criteria outlined by Bauman are not dissimilar to Canning’s (2020: 210) accounts of migrant experiences of bureaucratic violence, which focus on ‘spatial isolation, destitution, detention, informal confinement, and social control’.

Welfare Retrenchment in Neoliberal Sweden

Despite the fact that Sweden has long been regarded as the epitome of a social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1996), Sweden has followed a neoliberal trajectory (Baccaro and Howell, 2011) with rising levels of inequality (Copeland et al., 2015: 8; OECD, 2015) and the welfare state following the wider European re-commodification trend (Svalfors, 2007: 6). There have also been considerable marketisation and privatisation, which has received little academic attention (Hartmann, 2011: 265). Policy changes have been rampant (SOU 2010:04), the impact of which has not been equally distributed among the population. Hussain et al. (2012: 137) show that the lower- and upper-income brackets have been the most affected; people at low-income levels have experienced the most negative impact while upper-income brackets have financially benefitted.

The Bureaucratisation of Austerity in Swedish Disability Policy

Drawing on the definition of austerity as a ‘form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness, which is (supposedly) best achieved by cutting the state’s budget, debts, and deficits’ (Blyth, 2013: 12), Swedish austerity appear somewhat distinct. While other countries such as the UK (Bramall, 2013) or France (Leruth, 2017) experienced austerity following the 2008 financial crash, austerity has been a consistent feature of Swedish disability provision since the 1980s, albeit with renewed intensity since 2005 (Norberg, 2019) – mimicking Sweden’s neoliberal trajectory. Following political mobilisation from disability organisations around deinstitutionalisation and political concerns that the institutionalisation of disabled people was too expensive (Barron et al., 2000: 38), a new legislative framework offering certain impairment groups the right to welfare support was introduced in 1994, called The Act Concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (LSS).¹ A year after its implementation, the government began investigations into curbing costs of the reform, demonstrating that, contrary to intentions, LSS did not alleviate cost concerns (Altermark, 2017: 108). Further, discourses around welfare fraud have been rampant (Lundström, 2013), despite the debate being based on highly dubious methodology (Altermark and Nilsson, 2020) whenever attempts at evidence of fraud have been made.

Identifying disabled people in Swedish policy is very complex due to the English term disability not having a Swedish equivalent (Traustadottir, 2009: 13–14) and those not covered by LSS being denoted as ill (Johnson, 2010). This is due to the welfare state’s conflation of disability and illness in its conceptualisation of workability² (SOU

2008:66). Therefore, discussing Swedish disability policy will appear opaque as soon as it moved beyond LSS provision. Considering that the second criterion of bureaucratic violence offered by Bauman (1989) is the invisibility of target groups, this is noteworthy. Further, the medicalised understanding of disability has been criticised by disability scholars for naturalising social arrangements and treating them as an inevitable by-product of impairments (Thomas, 2004). Barnes and Mercer (2003: 20) highlight that while understandings of other oppressed groups have moved away from medicalised constructions, this has not been the case for disabled people. The categorisation of many disabled people as ill is important and will be addressed later in the article. Swedish austerity is similar to British and Australian austerity in that it ‘involves moves towards stricter eligibility criteria, greater expectation of workless disabled people to make efforts to (re)enter paid employment and, through such processes, a redrawing of the “disability category”’ (Grover and Soldatic, 2013: 216), but because of the ambiguity of disability within the Swedish welfare state, it is not as apparent.

It is not just in identifying disabled people where there are difficulties. Ambiguity extends to eligibility criteria, where ‘target groups are defined, the definitions raise questions of interpretation, and thereby also contain possibilities of implicit exclusions which are hard to botton [*sic*] down’ (Christensen et al., 2014: 29). Personal assistance, one of the services provided by LSS, has particularly been affected by this ambiguity. The eligibility of personal assistance is determined by hours of needing support for basic needs. However, following reinterpretations by the Social Insurance Agency which were solidified by court rulings, the definition of basic needs shifted to needs of a ‘personal and integrity-sensitive nature’ (ISF, 2014: 31), meaning that personal assistance becomes centred on personal hygiene needs and other sensitive needs, excluding any needs outwith this definition. This has led to court rulings declaring, for example, that breathing no longer constitutes a basic need (Bråstedt and Hansson, 2018), which remained until November 2019 (Regeringen, 2019). At the time of the fieldwork, reminders around personal hygiene or cooking food were not viewed as integrity-sensitive needs, nor was putting on any additional layers of clothing beyond the first layer (ISF, 2014). These kinds of interpretations move away from the human needs that the legislation was intended to address and perfectly fits with the depersonalisation and distantiation elements that Bauman (1989) identified.

The role of bureaucracy in Swedish austerity is essential. Not only does higher medicalisation necessitate more frequent engagement with healthcare bureaucracy and greater pressure on medical professionals of writing certificates to the satisfaction of LSS bureaucrats, it is particularly stark in the case of personal assistance. The redefinition of basic needs to integrity-sensitive needs emerged from 2005 bureaucratic praxis rather than from explicit policy changes. This altered bureaucratic praxis was taken up as evidence in a court case in 2007 and with a ruling in the Social Insurance Agency’s favour it became the new norm (STIL, 2014: 5–6), forgoing political decision making entirely (Assistanskoll, 2018; Grill, 2018). The lack of political debate is notable considering the consequences of these austerity measures. These reinterpretations and higher medicalisation of eligibility criteria have significantly lowered eligibility (ISF, 2014), with calls to

further narrow LSS eligibility (Betänkande 2014/15:SoU8). A government report (ISF, 2014: 11) even offered that the ‘ambition regarding participation should be balanced against the increasing cost’, suggesting that the intention of ensuring that disabled people have a right to live like others, the main aim of the LSS legislation (STIL, 2015), should be tempered due to cost concerns.

Methods

The empirical research was carried out in 2015–2016 over several months and consisted of primarily semi-structured qualitative interviews in addition to analysis of government budgets and policy papers. The fieldwork was shaped by two significant political events: the humanitarian crisis in Syria and a Swedish political crisis. With the arrival of refugees, a government minister suggested that severe cuts in disability provisions would be necessary (Grundberg Wolodarski and Nordenskiöld, 2015). Simultaneously, a government budget was at risk of not passing, prompting a political crisis where a cross-party agreement was reached to limit the influence of the Swedish Democrats, a party with roots in white supremacist movements (Aftonbladet, 2015). During interviews, participants would frequently refer to these events.

The research project focused on understanding the impact of austerity on disabled people and three participant groups were interviewed either via telephone, email, video conferencing or face-to-face. The diversity of interviewing mediums was employed to enable the participation of disabled people and recruitment was done through snowballing. The recruitment criteria for disabled people were people who self-identified as a disabled person, and have had or currently have some sort of disability welfare support. The study was open to both people who did not consider themselves impacted by austerity and to those who did. In situations where a participant’s impairment effects made interviewing not possible, a parent or someone supporting them was interviewed. In one case, the disabled person had passed away at the time of the interview and the parents of that disabled person were interviewed instead. The methodology was inspired by emancipatory research methods (Barnes, 2003; Oliver, 1992) and feminist epistemologies. While there are arguably limits to how well the ideals of emancipatory research methods can be realised (Goodley and Moore, 2000), reflexivity was continuously employed (Bourdieu, 2004a: 95; Guillemin and Gulliam, 2004) alongside attempts to address power imbalances as well as including as many voices as possible within the research (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 119).

In total, 24 disabled people, eight caseworkers and eight representatives of disability organisations were interviewed. Due to its remit, this article will only focus on the interviews with disabled people. The interviews were between 45 minutes and four hours. The interviews were transcribed and anonymised with the participants being able to choose their own pseudonym. The interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis (Green et al., 2007) and the transcriptions were done in Swedish and the coding done in English. Translation was delayed for as long as possible to ensure as much loyalty to the participants’ words as possible (Temple and Young, 2004). The research did not set out to study bureaucratic violence, but it became an interest which arose from the accounts offered by the research participants.

Findings

Even participants who would consider themselves as spared from the consequences of austerity had been impacted by the austerity measures. BJ was one of those participants who regarded herself as 'spared', but during her interview, she not only shared that the financial support she received was consistently being lowered, but that the constant paperwork required by the Social Insurance Agency gave her significant anxiety:

It does not matter – excuse me – but it does not make a fucking difference when one has contact with them – the hell starts with paper management and forms and filling them in and motivations and that was not good enough and it will– you know [. . .] I am terrified of them. Every time I get a letter from there [Social Insurance Agency], I get a lump in my stomach. Bugger. Now they have found some hell again.

The distrust and stress around the Social Insurance Agency was prevalent among all of the disabled research participants.

The Ritualised Violation of Integrity

While bureaucracy has often been a feature of the welfare experience (Sarat, 1990), the permeance of bureaucracy in disabled people's lives is significantly different to non-disabled people. Significant parts of the welfare system are dedicated to catching potential fraudsters by using seemingly objective measures, despite these failing to measure subjective experiences such as pain (Stone, 1984). There is also a long-standing history of bureaucratic and medical invasions into disabled people's bodies via measures such as forced sterilisation (Spektorowski and Mizrachi, 2004). The invasiveness of bureaucracy becomes even more embedded into the welfare system through the application process, and especially with measures such as the redefinition of integrity-sensitive needs. Emilia shared her experience of having to go to a reassessment of her personal assistance:

I got so badly affected because I think that they are invading my life. My mum had to account for everything. 'Yes but how long does that take?', 'how long does it take for you to go to the bathroom?' [. . .] and so on all the time! [. . .] Sure, they wanted to check and things like that before, but it wasn't as thoroughly as now. [. . .] It is like that – if you need help you need to account for every little thing you do in your life, and I have two [non-disabled] siblings and I asked as a joke to my siblings like this 'but how long does it take for you la la la and how often do you do that?' and he was all like 'Stop it!' and that's when I said that this was how the Social Insurance Agency behaves. 'Do they do that, really?' 'Yes, they are terrible.'

What Emilia's account illuminates with the example of her brother is how non-disabled people are not forced to offer such intimate details of their lives, like how long it takes them to wipe their bum after going to the bathroom. It also indicates how low awareness is among non-disabled people regarding the behaviour of welfare institutions towards disabled people following these new austerity measures. Despite the fact that her brother belongs to the same family, he was unaware of how invasive assessments had become.

Relating this to the criteria offered by Bauman (1989), this is yet another example of the invisibility of the target group.

(Re)assessments are also contexts where disabled people have little power if they feel that the assessment is inappropriate. During the time of the fieldwork, there were newspaper stories of caseworkers coming to people's homes, asking to watch disabled people shower so they could confirm the accuracy of the time stated in their application (Pettersson, 2015). The redefinition of integrity-sensitive needs following Sweden's austerity measures effectively means the ritualised violation of integrity, even in situations where caseworkers do not ask to watch applicants shower, as Emilia's account makes clear.

Powerlessness in the face of welfare bureaucracy was something shared by virtually all disabled participants. A male representative of a disability organisation even noted that, as a disabled person, he often felt 'more questioned and sometimes it was easier [in the disability movement] to affect society than it is to influence one's own life'. Hanna also noted that 'one must on, like, seven lines summarise one's entire life and they want to know all the details, but you have seven lines to do it'. Despite the welfare state demanding more detailed information, forms and applications processes were not amended to accommodate this fact, providing another barrier. If disabled people reject the premise of (re)assessments, their claims could be rejected. This was the case in another scandal during the fieldwork, where applicants were invited to stay overnight at a hospital where their every movement would be secretly recorded into material which would be used in their assessment without their consent (Sydsvenskan, 2015). Participants who had refused the invitation had their application rejected, with insufficient evidence cited as the reason.

The Psycho-Emotional Disablism of Bureaucratic Violence

The degree of engagement with welfare bureaucracies, however, was not homogenous, even discounting variations in impairment effects. For example, BJ decided to limit the invasiveness of the Social Insurance Agency by using inheritance money to opt out of welfare support. Many participants spoke about how they avoided applying for services because the assessments were either too invasive or time-consuming.

Not everyone, however, has access to income outside the welfare system. One such participant was Julia, who due to her impairment effects had never had paid employment and she did not come from an affluent family. She estimated that during a year she would have to contact over 200 separate individuals, sometimes more than once, to have daily activities working adequately. Julia shared how these interactions with highly bureaucratized systems had impacted her sense of self:

At the same time like – yeah, 'but see yourself as a person'! Yes, but there is *no one* who asks me questions about all of me. Why should I see myself as a person? When I feel like a ball that is thrown around and never received. [. . .] Even when I have drawn myself at the psychiatrist's, I've drawn myself in various parts. 'No but where are you?' Yes but this is how I am because you ask me like this. Why should I see *myself* as one, when *no one else* – other than my nearest and dearest – see me as one?

The reluctance of bureaucratic systems to recognise her as a person and the necessity of continuous engagement with these structures had eroded Julia's sense of self to the point where she had separated herself into various 'selves', which she would utilise in whatever welfare context where it was needed. This fragmentation of self demonstrates the dehumanisation embedded in the bureaucratic system. Dehumanisation is something that Bauman (1989) sees as an essential component of bureaucratic violence, and allusions to disabled people not being seen as human was frequently occurring in interviews. This would even extend beyond the confines of welfare bureaucracy, as Hanna argued that people

treat you as if you are an alien [. . .] and people don't really think you are a human, that it isn't possible to speak to you and so on. [. . .] no one would get strange if someone came in on a pair of crutches. That is like not such a big deal, but a wheelchair, then fuck it is like a UFO has landed.

This type of stigma cannot be divorced from relationships of power (Tyler, 2018) and depictions of disabled people as not-really-human are a frequent disablist motif. The way that disabled people have to defend their humanity and highlight their equal worth to non-disabled people is a form of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 1999). The state's ability to (re)produce stigma has frequently been attributed to libertarian welfare states where welfare services become an option of last resort (Esping-Andersen, 1996), but it is clear that this is also the case in neoliberal Sweden, as almost every disabled participant spoke of opting to not apply for welfare services unless they had no other option.

The Violence of Welfare Support

The fact that dehumanisation and experiences of disablism extend beyond the confines of welfare bureaucracy cannot be understated, as it also impacts the experience of the welfare support itself. Despite the fact that these are now situations where the experienced disablism is beyond the formal remit of bureaucracy, the complexity and precarity of the bureaucratic system have lingering consequences. This was particularly evident in situations where welfare services were not working.

Katja had a contact person who would frequently bully her and never take Katja's preferences into consideration regarding what activities they would do together. This is contrary to the purpose of the contact person service, which is to assist the service user in their chosen activities. This was one of many examples, according to Katja, of 'very cruel people who are supposed to help me with my day'. When she had complained in the past, she had lost access to the contact service because the municipality did not have enough people who wanted to work as contact people.

When speaking to Li's parents, they spoke about how some of Li's personal assistants would often steal things from her. When asked if they had ever filed a police report about it, the parents said no:

We did nothing about anything. It was a surprise [. . .] and there are some things that you just have to let pass because you cannot deal with them. It is not possible to handle. You just can't fire people – it is not possible. You have to swallow quite a bit. You have to.

It was not because of parental neglect that these instances were not addressed. They spoke at length of how difficult it would be to gather proof, how there were little to no safeguards to implement, and employment legislation made firing suspected offenders virtually impossible. Additionally, Li's parents often had to take on the majority of the caring and supporting of Li due to personal assistants frequently not having the medical awareness to help with Li's complex support needs. The thefts were simply risks to be endured due to the absence of alternatives. The services could feel precarious even when acquired because of the complexity of the bureaucratic system. The risk of losing support even for a week could have devastating consequences when, as problematic as the service might be, it could make the difference in whether or not they would be able to get out of bed.

The Violence of the Bureaucratic Process

The problem with the accretive violence of bureaucracy is that one does not for example want to equate it to the brutal violence of colonial regimes (Abdelhady et al., 2020: 15). The philosophical delineations of these two types of violence and subsequent consequences are beyond the scope of this article. In the absence of clearer differentiations regarding violence, it is important to highlight that characterising disabled people's experiences of the Swedish welfare system as violence is not far removed from their own accounts. The prompt to understand austerity as bureaucratic violence in this research derived from the recurring, violent imagery that participants invoked in their interviews.

Helena and her parents come from a working-class background and Helena's parents had no prior experience of the Swedish welfare system before having Helena. Describing their struggles of finding support for Helena as a continuous battle, Helena's father said 'before we got help [at the psychiatrist's], we were about to go under ourselves as parents. We had to fight ourselves bloody.' The literal expression he used cannot be appropriately translated to English, but it recalls images of someone banging their head against the wall with blood pouring down their forehead.

Johanna also used violent expressions when crediting a nurse at her job for being instrumental in helping her get welfare support, by saying that 'thankfully, the company nurse at my job, she's one of those people who likes to argue, so she phoned up and argued'. Issues of translation again obscure this fact but the verb that she used for argue (*bråka*) is also synonymous with fight. Therefore, her story conjures a similarly violent imagery as Helena's parents. These seemingly small details reveal that it is not lost on participants that violence can be enacted through bureaucratic means. The violence of bureaucracy is not abstract, but an immediate presence in their lives.

Occasionally participants would highlight how the consequences of bureaucracy caused physiological or psychological effects akin to those caused by physical violence. Jungfru Gunnela talked about her experience at a work capability assessment:

the work capability assessment was even more stressful. I got suicidal thoughts because of it. The problems with my back and my problems with my pelvis got worse because of the stress. My muscles froze. I struggled to breathe. [. . .] I just cried. I was completely done.

She described feeling like a prisoner, subjected to proceedings beyond her control. Once the assessment had been carried out, she found out that despite the agency's insistence to the contrary, the assessment had not been necessary for her welfare application. Ultimately, the emotional turmoil she had experienced had been for nought.

It was not just in forcing participants to go through assessments where threats were implicit or explicit. Sunetra, the only woman of colour among the participants, had been forcibly allocated welfare services following the birth of her child. Sunetra shared that 'I was not allowed to leave the maternity ward before everything was arranged because they threatened that "if you do not do this, you do not get to have your [child]"'. She ended up having welfare providers coming to her home several times a week, and when she applied to see the paperwork underlying her welfare decision, her application was rejected because the decision had been classified, leaving her without recourse. When she asked why the decision had been classified, a welfare professional reportedly told her that it had been done to prevent her from challenging the decision.

Classifying this forced allocation of services experienced by Sunetra as a form of violence is important as it draws on the legacies of eugenics, racism, disablism and medicalisation, where medical and welfare professionals position themselves as the experts over the subject occupying their attention. Robbing disabled women of the chance to be mothers is long-standing practice through measures such as forced sterilisation (Spektorowski and Mizrahi, 2004) and inaccessible sexual and reproductive education (Wiseman and Ferrie, 2020). Despite the bureaucratic process framing the situation as her accepting proposed services being offered, due to them being a prerequisite for Sunetra retaining custody of her child, her consent was coerced.

What if the Pen is a Sword? Reflections on Bureaucratic Violence

This article sought to contribute to conceptualisations of austerity as a form of bureaucratic violence and how bureaucratic violence is shaped by disablism. While the article has predominantly focused on how the welfare state exerts violence against disabled people, it is important to note that the dehumanising discourse present in the Swedish welfare state and society was not unchallenged. The participants overwhelmingly resisted constructions of themselves as costs by reframing themselves as investments. While there are more details surrounding these elsewhere (Norberg, 2019), investment discourses are not unproblematic. Mr Kint, for example, discussed the municipality's decision that an accessible bike was too costly:

If this aid enables me to for example go cycling every day, is it not better for the societal economy compared to if I get a really expensive [. . .] vespa or whatever it is where I'm sitting still and don't move?

In investment discourses, participants would talk about something that would have a positive impact on their lives, forgo the impact it would have on their lives as a worthy return on an expenditure (which is what differentiates a cost from an investment) and instead relate it to how it would result in more tax revenue for the state or make them

more productive. Non-disabled ideals remain unchallenged and the impact on their own lives remains secondary. It may enable individual claims to human worth, but the broader dehumanisation of disabled people remains.

Further, there has been literature on the temporal aspects of neoliberal workfare (e.g. Soldatic, 2019) but temporal elements were not often mentioned in this research. Where time was discussed, it was articulated as a barrier to completing the required paperwork. A rare example comes from Anna, who set a notification on her phone every year to start gathering the necessary certificates for her reassessment before receiving a notification from the Social Insurance Agency. She had to do this as there would not otherwise be adequate time to complete the paperwork. Therefore, priority in this article is given to the bureaucratic process itself rather than the temporal aspects of austerity.

The Usefulness of Bauman and the Resurgence of Social Darwinism in Contemporary Times

The usefulness of Bauman's (1989) framework is significant. Already several instances of the invisibility of target groups, distantiation and depersonalisation have been identified. It is also clear that the importance of the bureaucratic guidelines as the sole barometer for ethical reflection is relevant in the Swedish case, especially in the move towards integrity-sensitive needs. This shift has necessitated the breaking up of everyday tasks into Kafka-esque interpretations that bear little logic outside a welfare bureaucratic context. How breathing was for a long time not constituting a basic need in Sweden is a notable example. The bracketing off of various activities further amplifies depersonalisation; caseworkers are not denying people support, merely calculating the hours of qualifying need.

The holistic impact of austerity for disabled people further signals the relevance of Bauman's criteria. With the withdrawal of support, it is not the case that someone forcibly locks you in your room, but you would simply not be able to get out of bed. Sweden may have moved away from formal institutionalisation, but there is a risk that with continuing austerity, we are moving towards a neoliberal institutionalisation, where disabled people are simply trapped in their homes due to insufficient support. This would be a form of distantiation, which might not occur within the confines of welfare bureaucratic institutions, but it is nevertheless enabled and produced by them.

The obscure way in which these austerity measures have been implemented in Sweden with the absence of any political debate is concerning. The invisibility of disabled people is not only created through the austerity measures themselves but amplified through conflating illness and disability, as mentioned earlier. The general understanding of disabled people as a marginalised group facing social oppression in Sweden is relatively recent when compared to other countries, such as the UK (UPIAS, 1976). The main way in which disability and impairments are understood in Sweden is in relation to the individualising medical model (Söder, 2013). While Swedish disability theory contains some social constructionist elements, it is considerably weaker in comparison to, for example, the British social model of disability (Tøssebro, 2004: 3–4). Swedish disability theory may recognise social constructionist elements, but it is clear that disability welfare policy

is becoming increasingly medicalised, and by regarding disabled people as ill, the state all too readily invokes connotations of a cure.

The maintenance of non-disabled norms, the connotations of cures within medicalised discourse, and Sweden's historical policy of forcibly sterilising marginalised populations (Spektorowski and Mizrachi, 2004) prompts uncomfortable questions regarding contemporary neoliberalism. The most pressing issue is the Social Darwinist element embedded within neoliberal theory and the role it can play in bureaucracies. If bureaucracies are pushed for a justification for their behaviour, they can 'always appeal to a banal utilitarian ethic like social Darwinism' (Hughes, 2002: 576). In neoliberal theory, Social Darwinist elements are applied to markets (Bourdieu, 2004b: 42; Tienken, 2013: 305), but the move from characterising markets as unproductive/burdens to describing human beings as burdens is not as far as might be supposed. This is clear in the case of Swedish austerity. Due to the intimate and significant support needs disabled people have, participants were aware that discourses of disability-related benefits being costly reflected the societal worth placed on disabled people in Sweden. Jungfru Gunnela expressed it most succinctly when she sarcastically noted that 'it is fun that we [disabled people] cost too much money, when it is common that we have difficulties managing financially'. Investigating disablism in Sweden in relation to bureaucratic violence illuminates the way in which bureaucratic structures can not only shape subjectivities, but also transmit and augment structural forms of oppressions under the guise of technocratic adjustments. Therefore, despite bureaucracy's claim at rationality (Weber, 2009a), state bureaucracies have never been exempt from wider relationships of power (Bourdieu, 1998). Bureaucratic violence as a concept highlights this fact.

While all of these participants had been impacted by austerity, it is important to note that there are many more unexplored stories of Sweden's austerity. Crudely put, this is evident in that most participants were still alive (Stuckler and Basu, 2013; Watkins et al., 2017) as deaths can also be attributed to Swedish austerity (Westerberg, 2016). Further, the support needs that disabled people have with daily tasks (such as showering, getting out of bed or moving around one's accommodation) mean that they become a difficult population to contact for research if support gets completely withdrawn. The invisibility of disabled people within the Swedish welfare state, coupled with the Swedish state barely recognising disablism as a form of social oppression and the consequences of austerity, obscures the political project of disability-focused austerity.

Conclusion

This article has applied the concept of bureaucratic violence to understand disabled people's experiences of austerity in Sweden. Utilising this perspective to understand the impact of austerity is important for two reasons. First, bureaucratic violence helps connect the lived experiences of austerity to the theoretical literature. Second, it helps shift the attention away from street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) towards the ideological choices and agendas that dominate bureaucratic practices. This is important because austerity is a political choice (Blyth, 2013) and the concept helps us reveal the underlying ideologies which inform decisions that bureaucracy is enacted to conceal. This shift in

perspective necessitates further interrogations of neoliberalism and, at least in the Swedish case, its disablist foundations.

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Notes

1. LSS: *Lagen om stöd och service till vissa funktionshindrade* (The Act Concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments). A legislative framework giving some disabled people access to disability-related welfare support and services.
2. Swedish terms have been translated by the author with a focus on retaining the original meaning.

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