The Roots Grow Deep: Strong yet Changeable Social Norms and Working Life

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Social Norms and Working Life

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To Marie!

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy
All play and no work makes Jack a mere toy

Maria Edgeworth

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ABSTRACT

The overarching aim of this thesis was to explore social norms in relation to work and its influence on individuals' actions and mindsets. This has been done through four empirical studies which investigated the work norm from three different perspectives: 1) the work norm in practice, through the actions of individuals on sick leave during their rehabilitation process and in relation to the system and the actors within the system, as well as managers actions within their organisations; 2) exploring perceptions of the work norm in terms of socialisation to working life and structural changes; 3) a comparative exploration of the work norm between different contexts.

The specific research questions were:

1. How do individuals' various experiences influence their values and perceptions of themselves and their actions in relation to work?
2. How do individuals' actions serve to reinforce or challenge the existing normative structures?
3. Are there differences, and if so, how are they expressed, in the work norm between different societal and cultural contexts?

This thesis was exploratory in nature and aimed at gaining a rich, in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, values and actions by adopting an inductive, qualitative approach. The data collection consisted of a combination of semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews. The material was analysed through qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis.

Study I focused on experiences of being on long-term sick leave, how the participants manage the societal norms and values, and how these influence their perspective on themselves throughout the rehabilitation process.

Study II was concerned with first-line managers' actions and attitudes towards employees with repeated short-term sickness absence. Of particular interest was how social and organisational factors in the workplace influenced and shaped the managers' actions.

Studies III and IV focused on young adults' experiences of work, the role of work in their lives and their work values. The third study was mainly interested in the young adults' expectations about work and their lived

experiences of working. The fourth study's main interest was how today's young adults perceive the role of work in their lives and what they value about work. To capture how the social and cultural context may shape work centrality and work values, data from Sweden and the Netherlands were compared.

The results of this thesis show that the work norm is strong, and that work plays a central role in the lives of the participants in these studies. The structure individuals find themselves in shape their views on work and the thesis displays a nuanced perspective of different expressions of the work norm. Its influence differs depending on one's life situation, whether you are at the start of your working career, in the centre of it or currently outside of the labour market. The results highlight the importance of achieving balance and accommodating one's concerns within the natural, practical and social orders of reality. Ignoring one of these orders might result in a lack of wellbeing in another.

This thesis shows how the structural conditions which influence people's possibilities to live up to the work norm differs depending on resources and social position. Even though the work norm is strong and people generally express a desire to work, it is not always practically reasonable to demand it, especially if it means too great of a sacrifice in other parts of the individual's life. The results point to a difficulty in challenging the work norm as an individual, while organising with others around shared opposing values could be a start of bringing about a change.

SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING

Det övergripande syftet med avhandlingen var att utforska sociala normer, förstådda som kulturella och icke-materiella strukturer, i relation till arbete och dess påverkan på individers handlingar och tankesätt. Detta har gjorts genom fyra empiriska studier som har undersökt arbetsnormen ur tre perspektiv: 1) arbetsnormen i praktiken, genom sjukskrivnas ageranden under deras rehabiliteringsprocess i relation till sjukskrivningssystemet och dess aktörer, samt chefers handlingar gentemot sjukskrivna inom sina organisationer, 2) utforska uppfattningar av arbetsnormen i termer av socialisering till arbetslivet och strukturella förändringar, 3) utforska arbetsnormen i ett jämförande perspektiv i olika kontexter.

De centrala forskningsfrågorna var hur individers erfarenheter påverkar deras värderingar, uppfattningar om sig själva och deras agerande i relation till arbete; hur individers handlingar antingen förstärker eller utmanar de normativa strukturerna; och hur arbetsnormen tar sig uttryck mellan olika kulturella och samhälleliga kontexter.

Avhandlingen har haft en explorativ ansats och syftade till att få en djupgående förståelse för deltagarnas erfarenheter, värderingar och deras agerande genom kvalitativa intervjuer. Datainsamlingen bestod av en kombination av enskilda intervjuer och gruppintervjuer. Materialet analyserades genom kvalitativ innehållsanalys och tematisk analys.

Delstudie ett var en longitudinell intervjustudie med ett narrativt förhållningssätt. Elva långtidssjukskrivna deltagare följdes under ett års tid genom telefonintervjuer var tredje till fjärde månad. Efter en inledande analys av materialet genomfördes en avslutande personlig intervju. Totalt genomfördes 38 intervjuer som analyserades med hjälp av kvalitativ innehållsanalys. Studien syftade till att undersöka upplevelsen av att vara långtidssjukskriven och hur deltagarna hanterade samhälleliga normer och värderingar. En central fråga var hur dessa normer påverkade deras uppfattning om sig själva under rehabiliteringsprocessen.

Resultaten tyder på att arbetsetik och samhälleliga normer påverkar både individers syn på sig själva och sjukskrivnings- och rehabiliteringsprocessen. Det kan uppstå känslor av skam och skapa en inre konflikt över att försöka anpassa sina personliga värderingar till den starka arbetsnormen och inte kunna leva upp till den. Normen kan skapa orealistiska förväntningar, vilket i vissa fall kan hindra återgång till arbetet.

Delstudie två fokuserade på chefers attityder och agerande mot anställda med upprepad korttidsfrånvaro. Studien fokuserade särskilt på hur

sociala och organisatoriska faktorer på arbetsplatsen påverkade och formade chefernas agerande. Nitton intervjuer med chefer från femton olika kommunala arbetsplatser genomfördes och analyserades med hjälp av tematisk analys. Studien visar att chefernas agerande påverkas av förhållandena på arbetsplatsen och rådande sociala normer. Det ligger ett stort ansvar på cheferna att hantera sjukskrivnings- och rehabiliteringsprocesser, samtidigt som de har begränsade möjligheter att förändra villkoren och förhållandena på arbetsplatsen. Detta gör att deras agerande blir inriktat på individuella insatser. Studien tyder på att kontrollerande strategier inte uppnår målet med att minska antalet sjukskrivningar och att stöttande handlingar tillsammans med organisationsförändringar bör vara i fokus.

Delstudie tre och fyra fokuserade på unga vuxnas erfarenheter av arbete, vilket värde de lade på arbete och dess roll i deras liv. I den tredje delstudien låg det huvudsakliga intresset på deltagarnas förväntningar på och upplevelser av arbete. Datainsamlingen bestod av fyra gruppintervjuer med totalt tolv deltagare. Resultaten visar att de unga vuxna i studien upplever en obalans mellan sina rättigheter och sina skyldigheter på arbetsplatsen, där skyldigheterna står i fokus. De värdesätter personlig utveckling och önskar stöd och engagemang från sina chefer. Det framkommer även att deras främsta motivation för att arbeta är att göra gott för andra och bidra till samhället, medan lönen beskrivs som mindre viktig.

Samma material användes i delstudie fyra där även femton individuella intervjuer med deltagare från en liknande studie genomförd i Nederländerna inkluderades. Studien hade ett jämförande perspektiv och fokuserade på hur unga vuxna ser på arbetets roll i deras liv. Av särskilt intresse var att se hur olika sociala och kulturella kontexter kan påverka arbetets centralitet och arbetsvärderingar. Resultatet visar att arbete har en central roll och värderas högt av de unga vuxna i studien. Tre skillnader framkom mellan de svenska deltagarna och de nederländska. Den första skillnaden handlar om balansen mellan arbete och fritid, där de nederländska deltagarna hade ett större fokus på att själva ta ansvar för att uppnå denna balans. De svenska deltagarna uttrycker att arbete är en skyldighet mot samhället och att man som individ måste bidra till välfärdssamhället. Detta var inte synligt bland de nederländska deltagarna och utgör den andra skillnaden. Den tredje skillnaden belyser kollektivistiska respektive individualistiska arbetsvärderingar, där deltagarna i Nederländerna fokuserade mer på tillfredsställelsen de själva fick ifrån arbete. Svenskarna fokuserade i stället på hur deras arbete kan bidra till att förbättra samhället och värdet av att hjälpa de som har det sämre ställt. Dessa skillnader tyder på att den sociala och kulturella kontexten påverkar hur man ser på arbete och ens arbetsvärderingar.

Resultaten från avhandlingen visar att arbetsnormen är stark och att arbete har en central roll i deltagarnas liv. Den struktur vi befinner oss i

formar vår syn på arbete, och avhandlingen erbjuder ett nyanserade perspektiv på hur arbetsnormen tar sig uttryck i olika kontexter. Dess inflytande skiljer sig åt beroende på vår livssituation, och om personen befinner sig i början av sin karriär, i en central position på sin arbetsplats, eller om personen för tillfället befinner sig utanför arbetsmarknaden. Resultaten lyfter fram vikten av att uppnå balans och att tillgodose våra behov, det vill säga de engagemang vi bryr oss om, inom verklighetens tre ordningar: 1) den naturliga, 2) den praktiska, och 3) den sociala ordningen. Ignorerar man ett behov i en av dessa ordningar kan det leda till minskat välbefinnande i en annan.

Avhandlingen visar att de strukturella förutsättningarna för människor att leva upp till arbetsnormen skiljer sig åt beroende på vilka resurser vi har att tillgå och vår sociala position. Även om arbetsnormen är stark och de flesta uttrycker en önskan om att arbeta, är det inte alltid rimligt att kräva det i praktiken. Detta gäller särskilt om det innebär allt för stora uppoffringar i andra delar av våra liv. Resultaten pekar på en svårighet för den enskilda individen att utmana arbetsnormen. Om liknande värderingar delas med andra i sin omgivning kan det vara en början på att åstadkomma en förändring.

LIST OF PAPERS

- I. Moldvik, I., Ståhl, C. & Müssener, U. (2020) Work ethics and societal norms influence sick leave and return to work: tales of transformation. *Disability and Rehabilitation*. 43:21, 3031-3040.
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- II. Norvell Gustavsson, I., Müssener, U. & Ståhl, C. (2021) Acting the part: how social and organizational factors shape managers' action towards employees with repeated short-term sickness absences. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*. 14:6, 634-649
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- III. Norvell Gustavsson, I., Müssener, U. & Ståhl, C. What about us? Young adults' work values and expectations on employment.
(submitted)
- IV. Norvell Gustavsson, I., Arends, I., Veldman, K., Müssener, U., Bültmann, U. & Ståhl, C. Young adults' work centrality and work values: A comparative study between Sweden and the Netherlands.
(submitted)

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for being you, for everything!

INTRODUCTION

“Work gives you meaning and purpose and life is empty without it”

- Stephen Hawking

“Indeed, I have always been of the opinion that hard work is simply the refuge of people who have nothing to do”

- Oscar Wilde

“All paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind”

- Aristotle

Obviously, there are different ways to think about and view work, which may be related to norms regarding work. It has been suggested that work offers meaning to life in terms of social recognition, social contribution and self-fulfillment (Sage, 2018). However, for some, the importance of work has increased to the point where one might be willing to sacrifice one's health and well-being in order to live up to the norm of the hard-working citizen. For example, in Japan there is the problem with *Karoshi*, an extremely high work ethic which causes people to work themselves to death (Flores, 2017). In Sweden, exhaustion or burnout caused by long periods of stress, often related to work, has become one of the biggest challenges for employers and the healthcare system (ISM, 2022). This raises questions about how work and rehabilitation is organised and how young individuals relate to the work ethic.

This thesis focuses on our relationship to work and what possible consequences it might entail. It draws upon the concepts of structure and agency, which are seen as interrelated, where the structure precedes agency, in turn shaping actions through reflexivity. The actions of the individual then either reshape or maintain the current structure (Persson, 2017). The structure is made up by formal and informal institutions, that is the formal rules and laws as well as the norms, beliefs and values within a society. The empirical data in this thesis has been derived from individuals on sick leave, managers, and young adults in Sweden and The Netherlands. The groups studied can be seen to differ in relation to the work norm. This provides a nuanced empirical material, allowing the work norm, that can be both elusive and prominent, to be noticed and captured.

In this first chapter we will look into what work is and how it has been viewed throughout history, as well as gaining a better understanding of norms and how work can be viewed in the Swedish context.

What is work?

There have been many attempts to define the concept of work; however, this is not an easy task and a simple definition does not exist. Jan Ch Karlsson (1986) investigated the concept of work in his thesis and points out that most work-life researchers have stepped away from the complexity of the concept and simply accepted that work is equivalent to paid work. This narrow approach has been criticised for not accommodating other activities into the concept. Arguing for a broader approach is mainly undertaken in order to give status and importance to other activities, such as housework. Karlsson discusses work from an ontological perspective, whereby humans create themselves and the world around them through work. He proposes that work is ‘doings in the sphere of necessity’, for example, an individual works to the extent that his/her doing has its basis in external necessity, to which he/she must submit in order to secure his/her existence. This means that a given activity might be considered work or not work, depending on whether it is executed as a necessary condition for existence or not (Karlsson, 1986). Even though agreeing that the concept of work is often taken for granted, Furåker (1991) is reluctant to agree to Karlsson’s ‘sphere of necessity’ and believes that the problem lies in the definition of necessity. He believes that more creative forms of activity need to be included in the definition of work. Even though the two authors have some divergent opinions, they both argue for the need for several definitions of work. Perhaps it is not possible to agree on a single definition, and perhaps it is not necessary to have an overall definition of work. It is of greater importance to clarify what we view as work within each context. With that said, in this thesis, ‘work’ is considered equivalent to paid work, unless otherwise stated.

Work has gone through some quite dramatic changes, from being viewed as stupefying and a distraction from what was important in Ancient Greece, to being considered a virtue in contemporary times (Paulsen, 2017). Today, work has acquired an important position in our society. Not only is it a means for individuals to gain access to necessities such as food and housing, but it also offers meaning to life in terms of social contribution, social recognition and self-fulfilment (Sage, 2018; Weeks, 2011). Furthermore, we gain status through work and, apart from the interactions with our families, it is a primary way by which we interact socially with others. We raise our children to become working citizens, our schools prepare us for working life and welfare policies are all directed at making people

capable of work (Weeks, 2011). Frayne (2015) also addresses the work society, which he claims to be centred around work. We need to consider not only the actual time spent at work, but also the time spent on preparing for work, training for work and also worrying about work. Sage (2018) challenges the view of work as automatically good for an individual's health and wellbeing, by claiming that it is not the absence of work per se that causes the decline in wellbeing when a person is not working, but rather the loss of identity, respect and status associated with work in today's society. From this perspective, the positive associations between wellbeing and work are explained by social status, contributions to society and the self-worth that work provides. This is maintained through the ideal of the work ethic, whereby working is seen as a moral way of life and for many represents a central part of their identity.

Value of work

Not surprisingly, given that there is no single definition of work and the various ways of looking at work, there are several concepts and measures used for exploring the meaning and value of work. This section describes some of these concepts. The value of work in a general sense refers to the valuation of work and is often captured in concepts such as work centrality, work ethics and employment commitment (Conen & Beer, 2018). These concepts are then sometimes used interchangeably (see for example Isaksson et al., 2004). Another aspect of the value of work refers to the value that individuals derive from their work, such as work values and job outcomes (Conen & Beer, 2018). According to Miller et al. (2002), all work-related values and attitudes should, at least to some extent, be related to the work ethic. In the following section, definitions of these various concepts will be presented. However, first I would like to acknowledge that the focus of this thesis is the work norm, which is viewed as a social norm (see next section) and highly influenced by the concept of the work ethic.

The concept of the work ethic lacks an accepted universal definition but can be understood as a commitment to the value and importance of hard work. Most modern formulations of the work ethic stem from Weber's construct of the Protestant work ethic (Miller et al., 2002). It refers to the belief that work is morally good and is centred around the importance of work. No matter what incentives one has to work, the work ethic precedes these attitudes with the general belief that one should work (Conen & Beer, 2018). In line with secularisation, the work ethic has become increasingly integrated into the economic (capitalist) system (Paulsen, 2017). The foundation of the work ethic was hard work and avoidance of leisure (Miller et al., 2002). According to Miller et al. (2002) the work ethic is the characteristic most valued by employers and is rated higher than both intelligence and enthusiasm. However, there are some who believe that the work ethic,

as well as work centrality, is declining in several countries, while others disagree.

The meaning of work can be viewed from both a psychological and a sociological perspective, with the former viewing it as rooted within the individual's subjective interpretations of work experiences. Much of the existing literature has focused on the psychological perspective, whereas the sociological perspective, whereby individuals ascribe meaning to work in ways that reflect cultural and social values, has been less well explored in the literature (Rosso et al., 2010). Work centrality and work values are concepts within the broader frame of meaning of work. Work centrality has been defined as the degree of "general importance that working has in one's life at any given time" (MOW International Research Team, 1987 p.81). This concept has been studied in both absolute and relative terms. In absolute terms, it concerns how important work is in one's life. In relative terms, it concerns the importance of work in relation to other aspects of life, such as family, friends and leisure.

The MOW International Research Team (1987) conducted a large cross-country comparison study on the meaning that people attach to work in eight industrialised countries. This resulted in a first theoretical model for the meaning of work. It has been considered the most rigorous empirical research ever undertaken to understand the meaning of working, both between and within countries (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021). This theoretical model integrates the psychological and sociological perspective and addresses several aspects related to the meaning of work. The MOW model suggests that the meaning of work should be defined in terms of the general degree of importance and value of working in one's life i.e., work centrality. It includes normative beliefs about working and expectations attached to the role of working, as well as valued work outcomes and the work goals that individuals seek and prefer in their working lives, i.e., work values (MOW International Research Team, 1987). Nord et al. (1990) defined work values as "the end states people desire and feel they ought to be able to realize through working" (p.21). Work values are commonly classified as intrinsic or extrinsic work orientations. An intrinsic work orientation refers to the idea that the main goal of work can be found in the work itself and the joy and satisfaction one gains from performing it (Conen & Beer, 2018), such as self-realisation and personal development (Gallie, 2019). A desire to do good for others and to contribute to society are other examples of intrinsic work values (Kalleberg & Marsden, 2019). An extrinsic work orientation refers to goals outside of oneself, such as obtaining money and security (Conen & Beer, 2018). Work values are influenced by social norms, interaction with others and work experiences (Rosso et al., 2010).

It has been suggested that the millennial generation have fundamental different views of work from those of previous generations (Smola &

Sutton, 2002; Twenge et al., 2010). The claim of an alleged decrease in work centrality has particularly been concerned with the millennial generation's arrival on the labour market. Popular literature often portrays the Millennials as lacking in work ethics, lazy, obsessed with fame and having a sense of entitlement (Bjarnason & Håkansson, 2020). Several studies have been conducted to investigate possible generational differences in work centrality and work ethics. However, there is no consensus in previous research regarding the alleged decrease in work centrality. For example, Twenge and Campbell (2012) found a consistent decline in work centrality and the work ethic over generations. Smola and Sutton (2002) found that the younger generations had significantly different work values than the older generations. Twenge et al. (2010) reported that Millennials exhibited lower scores on work centrality compared to older generations, and concluded that the younger generation valued leisure time to a larger extent and placed a greater emphasis on extrinsic work rewards. They found that intrinsic work values had declined over the generations, suggesting intrinsic values to be less important to younger generations. However, not all research supports this claim of a decrease in work centrality. Deal et al. (2010) report results that indicate modest differences at most. This is supported by Zabel et al. (2017) and Costanza et al. (2012).

Studies investigating the values of work have mainly been of a quantitative nature and based on large surveys. The results obtained from these types of studies can sometimes appear quite puzzling, with a country perhaps exhibiting a low work ethic while at the same time showing a high employment commitment (Conen & Beer, 2018). Conen and Beer (2018) conclude that there is a need for a more in-depth understanding of these aspects in order to get a more holistic picture. A qualitative approach offers the opportunity to contextualise and explain the underlying beliefs and assumptions, and provides more nuanced information than data derived from survey studies (Choy, 2014).

Social norms

Most of us are probably quite familiar with the term social norms. I would also guess that most of us have quite different conceptions of what a social norm is. This is not too surprising, considering that the concept of social norms spans several different disciplines and has been of interest since the days of Aristotle. Since the concept is used in diverse academic fields, such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, political science, marketing and health sciences, there is little consensus about what a social norm actually is. Despite the differences, there are common features in how these disciplines understand norms. Social norms are commonly understood as the unwritten rules shared by members of a group or society (Legros &

Cislaghi, 2019). Social norms are typically defined as “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide or constrain social behaviours without the force of law” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998 p. 152). Social norms are present in all societies and can be viewed as the informal understanding of how to behave in certain situations and the social pressure to act in a certain way or to engage in or refrain from specific behaviours (Dempsey et al., 2018).

Some researchers view social norms as individual constructs, which are understood as beliefs or emotions. Others see it as collective constructs, understood as conditions or features of structures or social groups (Legros & Cislaghi, 2019). Cialdini et.al (1991) distinguish between descriptive norms and injunctive norms, where the former inform us about what is typically done, and the latter what is typically approved or disapproved of. In the collective construct, external forces affect individuals’ actions, for example, institutional rules within a society.

Archer (2000) views norms as culturally emergent properties, derived from previous chains of interaction. They are pre-existent for the individuals in the present context and have relative autonomy and exercise causal efficacy over the individuals in the present context. Thus, norms are not created by the individuals, rather they are confronted by them and may be transformed by them. Different norms exist depending on situations, such as work norms, family norms and norms in professional circumstances. Becker (1963) defines deviance as breaking the social rules made up by members of society. All societies consist of several different social groups with their own set of rules, hence an individual can belong to several groups at once. Consequently, one could break the rules of one group while not breaking the rules in another group. Although there are also some rules which are generally agreed upon by all members of society, such as the work norm. Because of this, the influence of the work norm is very strong, and although some individuals choose not to participate in working life, most of the population in developed countries is influenced by the work norm (Frayne, 2015). One could also assume that individuals who are not able to participate in working life, such as individuals on sick leave or with disabilities, are also influenced by the work norm. Perhaps it is even more challenging for those who do not have the option of making an active choice of working or not. These individuals can be viewed as standing outside of the norm or as being on the outskirts of it. The work norm can be viewed as both descriptive and injunctive since most people are engaged in work and, through socialisation, it is also what most people believe ought to be done. Another way of looking at it is through Archer’s perspective (2000), where our identity is created in relation to our contact with the natural and practical order, that is, our contact with the outside world. It is also created in relation to the social order, where social relations and cultural structures

shape our social identity. Thus, our contact with norms comes after we have begun to form a personal identity, as part of the development of a social identity. In this thesis, norms are viewed as expressions of cultural structures and the results of interactions, that has an impact on individuals.

Socialisation

Socialisation has a strong conceptual linkage to the concept of social norms (Legros & Cislighi, 2019). The process of socialisation involves how we as human beings are shaped into members of a group or society when we learn and acquire the skills to behave in a certain way, a way that is acceptable to other members of that group. This is done by means of an internalisation of social pressures (May & Bauman, 2019). It is often assumed that socialisation occurs primarily during childhood, but in fact it is an ongoing process throughout our lifetime as we enter new social settings (Grusec & Hastings, 2015). Socialisation is a reflexive process where our personal identity is subjected to the outside world, that is through structural and cultural powers. Through reflexivity individuals can develop and relate to various situations that may occur. In the interaction with others a socially related competence develops (Archer, 2000; Archer, 2003). Thus, interacting with others and reflecting upon these interactions teaches us how to behave in ways that are socially acceptable. Everyone we meet has the potential to influence the socialisation process; however, the cashier at the local grocery store probably does not have a huge impact in shaping us as members of society. Those with the most influence over the process is family, friends, teachers and managers at work. During childhood parents are especially prominent (Grusec & Hastings, 2015). These influential groups are called 'significant others' (Mead & Morris, 1972) and they are viewed as normative reference groups by setting the norms of our conduct. Groups to which we do not belong can also have an impact on our socialisation process, as comparative reference groups. For some reason they are beyond our reach, thus we are not seen by them, and they are not able to evaluate our actions by either praising or rejecting them. We might assign significance to these groups based on the desire to become a member of them. This could, for instance, be the 'cool kids' at school or someone who has gained a position in society that we desire. Today's mass media, along with social media, has increased our exposure to the lives of other people, with whom we do not have a relationship. In that sense, the role of comparative reference groups in shaping ourselves has become more prominent (May & Bauman, 2019).

In the process of socialisation towards becoming working citizens, parents have been seen to have the largest influence. By talking about their working days at home, they teach their children the basic requirements for work, the positive and negative aspects of work and pass on advice about

work. Friends, teachers and experiences of working, by taking on a part-time job for example, also have an impact, although not to the same extent (Levine & Hoffner, 2006). Thus, signalling that work is an activity that one should engage in to be become accepted by other members of society. It has also been suggested that Scandinavian children's books socialise children to display negative attitudes to those who do not comply with the cultural norms (Tian & Guang, 2017). This illustrates that not only do we get taught from a young age by the people close to us that work is an important part of life, but also that it is not desirable to deviate from the prevailing norms. We are socialised into work through literature and media, as well as political systems, which will be further developed in the following section.

Culture and social institutions

So far, we have covered how we are socialised through significant others. How is it that they have the ability to pass on these normative codes of conduct? Here, culture and social institutions come into play. Culture is the shared implicit and explicit abstract notions and beliefs about what is considered to be right, good or desirable among a group of individuals who share a common history. These norms, notions, beliefs and values show the individual the appropriate and acceptable ways of behaving (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2008). A country's culture is not only influenced by historical events, but also by its political regimes and religious beliefs (Conen & Beer, 2018). Societal institutions can be understood as laws, formal rules and conventions that give structure to social interactions within a population (Davidson & Kelly, 2020). Formal institutions include the legal, political, economic and educational systems (Parboteeah & Cullen, 2008), and are characterised by explicit, written and publicly accessible laws, policies and regulations. In contrast, informal institutions can be viewed as norms, for example, unwritten rules, customs and traditions that guide a community's social interactions (Davidson & Kelly, 2020). According to Schwartz (2007), societal institutions use cultural values in order to function, by incorporating highly valued aspects into, for example, their political and legal systems. Parboteeah and Cullen (2008) found strong support for the importance of national culture and social institutions in determining work centrality. Their results suggest that social institutions, that is both the social institutions we create in society in terms of the welfare system as well as the cultural normative orders, shape work centrality and work values through incentives, coercion and normative constraints.

The Swedish context

Most of the studies in this thesis are set in Sweden. In this section, the incorporation of norms and values about work within the social institutions is described. Sweden is often described as a universal or social democratic

welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi & Palme, 1998), characterised by fairly generous unemployment insurance and a comprehensive and active labour-market policy (Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012). ‘The work principle’ is a cornerstone of Swedish labour market policy (Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012) and is characterised by a strong work norm, and the idea that one should do the right thing to be allowed to receive financial compensation from the state. Labour-market policy in Sweden has moved towards activation, which aims to counteract passivisation by increasing the incentives to work. Individuals who are not currently employed have to participate in approved labour-market policy programmes to be able to receive benefits. To do nothing is not an option, so if you are not able to work, you need to learn how to do so (Mathias, 2017).

‘The work principle’ has developed over the years, and has been interpreted differently, from an original disciplinary focus, to the right of the individual to work, and concerning the individual’s obligations when absent from the labour market. Since the late 1990s, there has been an increased emphasis on the individual’s own responsibility, while the responsibility and role of the welfare state has been toned down (Nord, 2018). Svallfors (2011) found that the Swedish population in general strongly supports the welfare state and is positive about public spending on healthcare, family care and sickness and unemployment benefits. This indicates trust in the system, both regarding the performance of the welfare system and a feeling of being protected in case of losing the ability to provide for oneself. Furthermore, it might create incentives for individuals to contribute to the welfare system, as they realise that they might find themselves needing it further down the road. A strong welfare state, such as that of Sweden, has been found to be related to a high employment commitment (Esser, 2005). This is supported by Hult (2004), who found the employment commitment in Sweden to be high, and explains this by the socialisation of the adult population to employment as well as the enforcement of work by social and labour-market policies.

The welfare system and its various policies are formal institutions which shape our views about work. A labour-market policy that promotes activation emphasises the importance of not being idle. An active labor market policy creates a shift towards the individual’s own responsibility to find themselves a job, positioning the employability and work ethics of the individual as central (Nord, 2018). This might amplify feelings of stigmatisation among those outside the labour market by suggesting that it is the individual who is lacking features that are desirable to employers. It is not only labour-market policies that have changed, but the social insurance system has also been subject to several changes which have led to a less generous system, not least for those on long-term sickness absence (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020).

In Sweden an employee is entitled to sick pay from the employer for the first 14 days (80% salary), thereafter, one is entitled to sickness benefits at normal level (slightly below 80% salary) for a maximum of 364 days, which may be prolonged indefinitely on a lower level. During this time, one's work ability is assessed in relation to work at the same employer until day 180. From day 181 one is assessed in relation to the labour market at large, hence towards all possible jobs currently existing. The shift towards individual responsibility has also become visible within the sickness insurance system. With the aim of reducing the number of individuals on sick leave, it has become increasingly difficult to qualify for sickness benefits and individuals are given a greater responsibility for one's own work ability (Ståhl & Seing, 2018). The majority of the workforce in Sweden are permanently employed, and the sickness insurance system was designed for such employment arrangements. Among young adults part-time employment and flexible contracts are more common (SCB, 2020b; SCB, 2020a; Akademikernas a-kassa, 2020), which has proven to be troublesome in terms of entitlements to sickness benefits for those with more flexible contracts. There are difficulties assessing whether or not the employer has a responsibility for sick pay, and assessing if the individual is in fact in an employment relationship (ISF, 2021), leaving these individuals vulnerable in case of sickness absence. Although the majority of the studies in this thesis are set in Sweden, there is an element of comparison, hence some contextual differences with the Netherlands needs to be addressed. Internationally the Netherlands stands out with a high frequency of flexible and part-time contracts (Bolhaar et al., 2018), and the population is protected by a minimum wage support for all adults. Regarding their sickness insurance system, the employers have a far-reaching responsibility, with employer-paid sickness absence benefits up to 2 years, minimally 70% of the salary, which is often raised to 100% during the first year (Mittag et al., 2018).

It is likely that changes within formal institutions have an impact on societal norms, e.g., the informal institutions. As previously mentioned, informal and formal institutions influence each other. This point will be elaborated in the theoretical framework, below. A discourse that celebrates hard workers and a system that punishes those who are not able to participate in the labour market is very likely to affect the work norm and the ways in which individuals who do not fit into the societal norm of work are viewed by the rest of society.

General aim

The aim of this thesis is to explore social norms, in relation to work and its influence on individuals' actions and mindsets from a critical realist perspective. This is done through: 1) investigating the work norm in practice, through the actions of individuals on sick leave during their rehabilitation process and in relation to the system and the actors within the system, as well as managers actions within their organisations; 2) exploring perceptions of the work norm in terms of socialisation to working life and structural changes; 3) a comparative exploration of the work norm between different contexts.

Research questions

1. How do individuals' various experiences influence their values and perceptions of themselves and their actions in relation to work?
2. How do individuals' actions serve to reinforce or challenge the existing normative structures?
3. Are there differences, and if so, how are they expressed, in the work norm between different societal and cultural contexts?

Specific aims

Study I: Aims to explore how people on sick leave manage societal norms and values related to work and how these influence their perspective on themselves throughout the rehabilitation process.

Study II: Aims to understand the social and organisational factors in the workplace that shape managers' actions and attitudes towards employees with repeated short-term sickness absence.

Study III: Aims to explore the work values of young adults by focusing on their lived experiences of work and their expectations of employment.

Study IV: Aims to investigate how today's young adults perceive the role of work in their lives and what they value about work. To capture how the social and cultural context may shape work centrality and work values, the study compares data from two countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the theoretical approach of the thesis, drawing on Margaret Archer's theory of reflexivity and the morphogenetic approach. The concepts of structure and agency are central for this thesis. These have been subject to an ongoing debate within the social sciences in terms of the extent to which individuals' actions are determined by social structures (structuralism) or if structures are in fact determined by the individuals who constitute structure (individualism). Others postulate that they are equally dependent on one another and thus not able to be separated (Archer, 1995). A critical realist approach, however, seeks to incorporate the various strengths of the previous perspectives. By acknowledging how structures influence and shape individuals while at the same time making use of the individualism perspective, by focusing on the individuals' agential powers and how these contribute to variations and change in society (Archer, 1995).

Analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach

Archer developed a metatheory, *analytical dualism*. It refers to structure and agency as interrelated but separate strata, and thus analytically separable. Analytical dualism is a method for investigating the interplay between them and is the starting point for the morphogenetic approach. This approach constitutes a framework for an overarching investigation of social phenomena and their change or re-creation (Archer, 1995).

Structures are relatively stable over time and precede agency. Actions from previous agents have shaped the context that current agents face. Agents have the ability to either change or re-create the structure through intentions, emotions, reflexivity and the power of action. The morphogenetic approach entails an analysis in time cycles. The morphogenetic sequence can be seen in Figure 1, T represents the temporal order.

Figure 1. The morphogenetic sequence. Archer (1995) p. 67

T1 represents the structure before the agents enter it. Their properties consist of the relations between roles, positions and institutions to which interest and resources are tied, and which limits, enables and motivates agents to act in different ways.

T2-T3 analyses interactions of agents in different structural positions. Their interests are shaped by the structural relationship. However, since agents are reflexive and creative, they can act in unpredictable ways and their actions are not given.

In T4, the effects of the interactions are analysed. These effects can be either changes in the social structure or a re-creation of current structures. After T4, a new cycle starts with T1 (Archer, 1995). The structure presented in the introduction, regarding both institutional structure and norms in the Swedish context, represent the T1 of the thesis. The qualitative studies constituting this thesis have explored the experiences, values and actions of individuals at various points during their working lives, where the gathering of empirical data illustrates T2-T3. This will be discussed further in the method chapter. The thesis concludes with a discussion of whether the actions described have any effect on T4.

Theory of reflexivity

Margaret Archer's (2003) theory seeks to build a bridge between structure and agency, with reflexivity seen as the mediating link. All agents subjectively attempt to establish their own way of living under objective circumstances that are not of their choosing. This is achieved through reflexive *internal deliberations*. Each individual possesses a personal identity which is defined by their individual concerns, what they care about the most and hope to realize or achieve in society. The pursuit of this social project generally entails an encounter with social powers, which can either enable or constrain, and the agents' internal conversations will mediate the receptions of these structural and cultural influences. In other words, our personal powers are exercised through internal dialogue and are causally responsible for shaping our concerns, defining projects, interpreting circumstances, and determining our practices. The internal conversations or reflexive deliberations represent the subjective element which interacts with the causal powers of objective social forms.

The structural and cultural power, including norms, does not exert causal powers in relation to human beings, rather the causal power relates to our emergent powers to form social objectives. As agents, we determine our own concerns and to be able to answer our question of how best to realise these concerns, we examine the social context in which we live. This mediating process is finalised by an internal conversation in which we consult our projects, that are defined to realise our concerns; and strategically

adjust them into those practices which we conclude internally will enable us to do what we care about most in society. This process follows the trajectory:

CONCERNS → PROJECTS → PRACTICES.

The agential intentions should not be seen as uniform, static or passive. Instead, our reflexive deliberations establish our unique personal identities through our concerns, indicating our heterogeneity as people, rather than having common end goals. Also, since we modify our own goals in terms of their contextual feasibility, our subjectivity should be viewed as dynamic rather than static. We adapt our projects to the practices that we believe have a better chance of realisation, indicating that we are reactive rather than passive.

The process of mediation between structure and agency must be considered as entailing three stages, which capture the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity:

- i) structural and cultural properties objectively shape the situations which agents confront involuntarily, and possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to
- ii) agents' own configuration of concerns, as subjectively defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality – natural, practical and social (described below)
- iii) courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents, who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances.

This interplay between objectivity and subjectivity Archer (1995) calls *double morphogenesis*, and is considered as the central implication of employing analytical dualism. As a consequence of the interactions at T2-T3 the structure and agents can both be re-shaped. It is also important to note that structure is not fixed to distinctions at micro-macro level, rather structures exist at different levels, from the structure of thought within the individual to organisations and political orders.

Within the critical realism perspective, individuals face reality in the form of three natural orders: natural, practical and social. What this entails are interactions with various structures that might affect the individual in different ways. The natural order deals with the physical, bodily and biological basic abilities. Within this domain we strive for physical wellbeing and to feel as good as possible. The practical order deals with practical actions. In this domain we strive to achieve our practical goals to the best extent as possible. The social order constitutes of social conditions, norms and the structures we face through social interactions with others, both individuals, groups and society at large. Here we strive for social recognition, belonging and being valued (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2000).

An individual does not only have one specific project, and because of this there is a need to recognise the totality of individuals' different projects. Our lives are built up of various different blocks, such as work, family, leisure, health, religion and so forth. This indicates that, even if an individual has a dominant or ultimate concern, it is not the only concern the person has. We have concerns in all of the three domains of natural reality – natural, practical and social, which correspond to generic concerns about our well-being, performative competence and social self-worth (Archer, 2003). All three need to be taken into account; even if we consider one more important than the others, the two latter cannot be totally ignored. For example, even if work (practical domain) is the ultimate concern, one's physical well-being (natural domain) cannot be ignored, because ignoring well-being results in a lack of ability to perform one's work. Hence, the various concerns need to be prioritised and accommodated. We need to establish several different practices which are compatible with each other and consistent with the prioritisation we have given them.

Benefits, costs and emotions

Our involuntary placement in society exerts an influence on us, such as the prevailing norms within our society. Growing up in a society with a strong work norm, where work is highly valued and engaging in paid work is seen as morally appropriate will probably affect our future actions. Parental influence is also a factor that will influence us. However, our involuntary placement is not deterministic. Through internal deliberations, we can form our own concerns and shape our actions appropriately in order to realise our concerns and reshape our placement within the situational environment. Within each practice it is possible to choose different courses of action, which are associated with *opportunity costs*. These can be either rewards or costs and are supplied by society; however, it is the individual who has to find them good and worthy of pursuing (Archer, 2003). We are exposed to the opinions of others and the prevailing norms within our context. Although there might be several different routes to take and different priorities to set, these are associated with rewards or costs. For instance, in a context where work is highly valued and seen as a moral way of life, not engaging in work may result in others looking upon you as lazy or as not fulfilling your social obligations to society. Furthermore, not having work can lead to negative emotions such as feelings of inadequacy and shame.

According to Archer (2004), emotions are commentaries on our concerns and tell us how much we care about them and how we are doing in relation to them. Our emotions can be linked to the three natural orders. In the previous example, inadequacy is related to achievement, i.e., the practical order, whereas shame is related to sociality and the desire for self-worth. Returning to the example, individuals have a choice: they can

comply with the current norm within society and engage in work, thus reaping the benefits associated with following the norm, or they can challenge the work norm, with all the possible costs this might entail. Some might be willing to pay that price because their main concern is of such great value to them that the potential benefit to be gained will outweigh the negative costs. For others, the costs will be deemed too high and instead they will 'fall in line' with the prevailing norms. The individual must weigh these pros and cons against one another; however, this is done within one's involuntary placement e.g., the situational environment. Our actions are voluntary and are an expression of activity rather than passivity.

Agents' concerns, the costs and/or benefits associated with different courses of action, and emotional responses to such actions, serve as important analytical tools to understand why certain choices are made, within the context in which agents find themselves.

Types of agents

So far, we have dealt with agents' internal deliberations and how they weigh costs and benefits against one another to explain different courses of action. We will now deal with some different types of agents. In the morphogenetic approach, agents are agents of something, i.e., of a socio-cultural system into which they are born (Archer, 1995). In other terms, they are collectives who share the same life chances. We talk about them in terms of their actions, but do not claim to explain everything about them as human beings.

Agents are distinguished as *corporate agents* or *primary agents*. Corporate agents can be seen as strategic agents, who interact with others and act together. This includes social movements and interest groups. Corporate agents are active agents with reasons for trying to achieve certain outcomes. In contrast, primary agents lack a say in structural modelling, nor do they express an interest or organise for strategic pursuits. They can be viewed as passive since they simply respond to happenings that are not of their making. However, they can form themselves into social movements and eventually become corporate agents, and also have some control over their lives (Archer, 1995). There are also *passive agents* who, for some reason, have no active control over their lives and can make no difference to the play of objective circumstances upon them (Archer, 2003).

Role theory

Agents represent a group or collective, whereas actors and human beings exist in the singular. In that perspective personal identity is related to the natural and practical order, whereas the social identity is related to the social order (Archer, 1995). As previously mentioned, personal identity is

shaped by one's internal deliberations and in forming the individual's ultimate concerns, whereas the agent is made up of the social and cultural position inherited at birth, and serves as a foundation for actions. The actor, on the other hand, is the independent individual who develops a social identity, which coincides with their choice of role in society (Wennerström, 2017). Thus, a role is always played by an individual, with a personal identity which has developed in its unique way through the individual's experiences, meaning that all roles comes with an interpretation of that specific role (Archer, 1995). To understand societal changes, there is a need to observe collective actions, since individuals can rarely make sufficient impact to change society by themselves. However, to understand individual actions, there is a need to look at them as actors. Here, role theory serves as a way to understand both the individual actions in one's own life, and also the adoption of a role in order to interact with others and possibly mobilise their activity.

When viewing human interaction, Goffman (1959) uses a theatrical metaphor, where individuals are viewed as actors on a stage, acting out a role. This role can be either chosen or assigned to them. The performances are socialised, shaped and adapted to fit into the expectations and understandings of the society in which they are presented. By controlling the impressions others gain from them, the actors try to convey a certain image of themselves. The goal of impression control is to present oneself not merely in a favourable light, but also in a manner that is in line with the rules and norms that are applicable to the situation at hand, as well as the current role (Goffman, 1959)

In this thesis, the structure constitutes the stage, and the roles of the actors can be conceptualised as structurally defined. Not only do the roles fulfil specific functions within the structure, but they also serve as vehicles for individuals' social identities through which they become actors (Archer, 1995). Metaphors are useful tools for understanding the world, and role theory is useful for conceptualising the interplay between actors within a structure.

Making use of the theories

The studies in this thesis have been framed by their own theoretical perspective, where the theories were used as analytical tools to structure and make sense of the material. Not all theories used in the studies are applied to the extended analysis of the thesis, they are however relatable to the framework above. The psychological contract (used in Study III) has been defined as "an individual's belief, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms and conditions of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organization" (Rousseau, 1995 p.9). Rousseau (1995) argue that *social* contracts refer to broad conceptions of rights and obligations within a

society. According to Guest (1998) the psychological contract resides in the individual as well as the organization, and both parties will be influenced by wider societal norms including expectations and obligations. In other words, the psychological and the social contract are influenced by the structure an individual finds oneself in and are involved in shaping one's concerns, projects and practices.

The findings from the studies have been related to the broader theoretical framework outlined above to explore how the participants are influenced by the structure they find themselves in and how it affects their actions and the choices they make regarding work. During the analysis reflexivity is applied to T2-T3 where the deliberations of an individual's priorities and concerns are weighed against potential benefits and costs. Role theory is applied both to the structure, where the structure constitutes the stage, but also to T2-T3 where the internal deliberations can result in choosing to act out, and interpret, a certain role that is structurally defined. The chosen action can either reinforce or challenge the current structure, in this case the work norm.

METHODS

This thesis is exploratory in nature and does not seek to make empirical generalisations, but rather to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, values and actions. Thus, an abductive, qualitative approach was adopted. The design of the studies can be connected to the morphogenetic approach. The participants' contexts are seen as T1 – i.e., their structural conditions – and is analytically separated from T2 – T3 – which is each point of data collection – and the outcome – which is T4. Each study can thus be seen as a morphogenetic cycle, where each data collection describes social interactions between T2 and T3. The data collection in Study II-IV can be seen as gaining an insight at a specific point, whereas for Study I, which is a longitudinal study with multiple interviews conducted overtime can be seen as following the process between T2 and T3.

In the following section, an overview of the participants and the data collection is presented for each study. This is followed by a description of the analysis processes. A summary of each study's methodological approach can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of each study's methodological approach

	Study I	Study II	Study III	Study IV
Study design	Longitudinal qualitative interview study	Qualitative interview study	Qualitative interview study	Comparative qualitative interview study
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Group interviews	Group interviews Individual interviews
Time frame	2017 – 2018	2018 – 2019	2019 – 2020	2019 – 2020
Empirical source	Individuals on sick leave	Managers	Young adults	Young adults
Data analysis	Qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) through a narrative approach	Thematic analysis following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2006)	Qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) with a psychological contract approach	Qualitative content analysis following the steps of Elo and Kyngäs (2008)

Study I

The focus of the first study was experiences of being on long-term sick leave, how the participants manage the societal norms and values, and how these influence their perspective on themselves throughout the rehabilitation process. It was a longitudinal interview study with a narrative approach.

Participants and data collection

Eleven individuals on long-term sick leave participated in the study. Adults aged between 18 and 65 years who had been on sick leave for at least 28 days and were able to communicate in Swedish was included in the study. They were recruited by a combination of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling by contacting healthcare professionals and employers, and asking them to identify individuals on sick leave among their patient and employees. However, this approach only generated a small number of participants. The high workload of the healthcare professionals and employers did not allow them to prioritise the identifying of potential participants. Therefore, the researchers contacted their professional networks of healthcare professionals and employers to identify further participants. The healthcare professionals and employers were informed about the study's purpose and in turn they informed potential participants and provided them with contact information for the researchers. Both the length of the sick leave and the reasons for it varied between participants.

This study was carried out in two phases, with the first phase being conducted between January 2017 and October 2018. It consisted of semi-structured telephone interviews every three to four months. An interview guide was used, which focused on the individuals' contact with the various stakeholders involved in their sick leave and rehabilitation process. The participants were followed over a 12-month period and were interviewed on two to four occasions. In some cases, there were difficulties in finding a suitable time for a follow-up interview, which resulted in only two interviews. After this first phase, an initial analysis was conducted (further explained in the analysis section) in order to develop a new interview guide for the next phase of data collection. The second phase consisted of a final face-to-face interview during December 2018. A semi-structured interview guide was also used for this phase, which now focused on aspects related to transformations in identity, abilities and values. In total, 38 interviews were conducted.

Study II

The focus of the second study was first-line managers' actions and attitudes towards employees with repeated short-term sickness absence. We were

especially interested in exploring how social and organisational factors in the workplace influenced and shaped their actions.

Participants and data collection

The participants in this study were purposefully recruited through HELIX, which is an interdisciplinary research centre at Linköpings university, conducting interactive research through a partnership approach. It involves the university working in collaboration with companies, the public sector and labour-market organisations. This study was carried out as part of a project focusing on employers' sick-leave and return-to-work practices and involved three municipalities in south-east Sweden. Representatives from these municipalities had expressed interest in participating in the study. They were asked to identify workplaces that could be included and provided the researchers with a list of people to interview. The list consisted of 19 managers from 15 different workplaces across the three municipalities, representing care and social services, education departments and service and technology departments. Everyone on the list was included in the study. Fourteen of the participants were female and five were male. The amount of time they had been managers varied between 1.5 years and 18 years, with an average of eight years. Most of the workplaces had approximately 35 - 40 employees, although some stood out with 75 - 80 employees.

The data collection consisted of semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted between August 2018 and May 2019 at the participants' workplaces. The interview guide focused on local practices of systematic work environmental work, management of sick leave and the rehabilitation process, processes for preventing sickness absence, managers' knowledge about prevention and rehabilitation, and actions taken to prevent sickness absence and facilitate the return-to-work process. The interviews ranged between 40 minutes and 1 hour and 35 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription bureau.

Studies III and IV

Studies III and IV focused on young adults' experiences of work, the role of work in their lives and their work values. The third study had a psychological contract perspective and was mainly interested in the young adults' expectations about work and their lived experiences of working. Study IV investigated how today's young adults perceive the role of work in their lives and what they value in work. Furthermore, we were interested in capturing how the social and cultural context may shape work centrality and work values.

Participants and data collection

Study III was a qualitative interview study consisting of four group interviews with a total of 12 individuals aged 18 – 30 years, who primarily worked in municipal social services or education. Apart from being aged between 18 and 30 years, the inclusion criteria were having experience of working, and to be able to communicate in Swedish. Participants were recruited through a strategic purposeful sampling strategy combined with snowball sampling by using social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, as well as contacting the researchers' pre-existing networks. Most participants were recruited from Facebook or personal contacts. The advert on LinkedIn did not generate any participants, while Twitter generated just one. Interested participants were asked if they had colleagues and/or friends who might also like to participate.

The data collection was carried out between April 2019 and May 2020. The first two group interviews were conducted face-to-face, while the last two were conducted digitally using the video conference tool Zoom, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Two researchers participated in each interview, one as a moderator and the other as an observer. An interview guide was constructed beforehand, exploring questions related to the participants' motivations for participating in working life; rights and obligations related to work and social security; values, attitudes and expectations related to working life; and work-life balance. The interviews ranged from 1 hour and 10 minutes to 1 hour and 37 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription bureau.

The same material was used in **Study IV** which also included a similar material from the Netherlands. The Dutch participants were purposively selected to differ in educational background, type of work, age, sex and residential area in the Netherlands. The inclusion criteria were being aged between 18 and 35 years, indicating work as primary life activity and being able to communicate in Dutch. The researchers in the Netherlands recruited participants through LinkedIn, the researchers' networks and by directly contacting young adults working in shops and companies in the city centre where one of the researchers worked. The Dutch researchers conducted one-on-one interviews between October 2019 and July 2020. A total of 15 interviews were conducted. The researchers in the Netherlands used an interview guide covering topics similar to the Swedish interview guide. Similar to the Swedish study, there was a combination of face-to-face interviews and digital interviews, with the first nine interviews being face-to-face and the following six conducted through an online video-conferencing program (FaceTime, Skype, or Microsoft Teams) of the participants' choice, due to Covid-19. In-depth, open interviews were conducted. As a first question, participants were asked to describe their working life up until the point of the interview. To gain a deeper understanding of the

participants' working life experiences, clarifying questions were asked. Subsequently, questions were asked about the value of work, the role of work in participants' lives, their work-life balance and how work affects how they feel. All the interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 47 minutes and 2 hours and 5 minutes. The audio files were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription bureau.

The Dutch research team carried out the planning and collection of data in the Netherlands. The analysis process (see next paragraph) was discussed among the whole research group.

Analysis

The results of the four studies were synthesised through the theoretical framework outlined above. The goal of this thesis was to obtain in-depth knowledge about the participants' experiences, values and actions in relation to their working lives. To achieve this from a critical realism perspective, an inductive approach is appropriate (Gillberg, 2017). However, when the goal is to explore and explain the actions and experiences of the participants, as in this thesis, it is useful not only to consider the empirical findings but also to relate them to what is already known, e.g., established theories. An abductive analysis approach was therefore adopted (Gillberg, 2017). The starting point was the empirical material and the analysis process moved back and forth between data and theory throughout the process. This could be described as an iterative process between the empirical findings and concepts derived from the theoretical framework.

In Study I, the analysis was conducted in two phases. The aim of the first phase of the analysis was to inform the second phase of data collection and was used to develop the interview guide for the second phase. In the first phase, the telephone interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which focused on both the manifest and latent content. An inductive approach as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was used. The analysis was performed in several steps. First, the material was read through several times to gain an understanding of the whole. After this, meaning units were abstracted from the text and labelled with codes. The codes were then compared to one another in terms of similarities and differences. The next step was to divide the codes into categories and sub-categories where needed. The categories were reviewed and discussed among the co-authors. Thereafter, the material was reviewed to identify areas that needed further exploration in the final interviews.

The second phase of the analysis had a narrative approach, which involves a dual layer of interpretation. First, the participants interpret their own stories through the narrative. Then the construction of narratives is interpreted by the researcher. To be able to interpret the participants'

stories there is a need to analyse these as a whole, where not just the actual event is considered but also the participants' feelings, thoughts and values (Riessman, 1993). All interviews were read through several times to identify the meaning and the feel of the story. After the core of the narrative was identified, an iterative process followed through an adaptation of Srivastava and Hopwood's (2009) framework. By asking the questions: "What is the material telling us?", and "What do we want to know?" the analysis process moved back and forth between data and theory and was influenced by both empirical findings and the concepts derived from the theoretical framework. In the second phase of the analysis, all 38 interviews were included.

In Study II, thematic analysis was used and followed the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interviews were read repeatedly to deepen the understanding of the content and to search for meaning and patterns. Initial thoughts and ideas were noted, which then generated a list of interesting areas to explore. Thereafter, the data was labelled with codes and organised into meaningful groups. The list of codes was then used to search for themes, by sorting the different codes into potential themes. This involved consideration of the codes and how they could be combined to form overarching themes. The potential themes were then reviewed. First, the texts assigned to the extracted codes for each theme were read through to consider whether they appeared to form a coherent pattern. If not, the themes were revised. Thereafter, the entire data set was read again to make sure the themes worked for the entire body of material. This step provided an opportunity to discover additional codes potentially missed at the earlier coding stage. The last step consisted of defining and naming the themes.

In Studies III and IV a qualitative content analysis was conducted which consisted of several steps (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). First, the material was read through several times to gain an understanding of the whole. After this, meaning units were abstracted from the text and labelled with codes. The second step was to compare the codes to one another in terms of similarities and differences. The next step was to divide the codes into categories and sub-categories where needed. Both studies consisted of a two-phased analysis process where the first phase had an inductive, exploratory approach. Followed by a deductive second phase, where an unconstrained categorisation matrix, where different categories are created within its bound, following the principle of inductive analysis, was developed based on the concepts derived from the respective theoretical framework. The material was then reviewed and coded for correspondence with the concepts and thereafter revised and discussed among the co-authors to reach consensus. In Study IV, the Swedish research team analysed the Swedish material, and the Dutch research team analysed the results from the Netherlands. The results from both research groups were then summarized in

English and discussed among the whole team. The English summaries were analysed, comparing the Swedish and the Dutch results.

Methodological considerations

There are both strengths and limitations that need to be addressed when interpreting the findings. First, the empirical material has been derived from different groups of participants, which resulted in a rich material with the opportunity to explore the work norm from different perspectives. With that said, the overall sample are quite homogenous, with an overrepresentation of women. The Swedish labour market is quite different for women and men. Women mainly work in occupations involving contact with other people, such as education, nursing and care, whereas, men work in occupations involving machines such as construction and manufacturing (SWEA, 2020). Since these occupations are quite different the work experiences are likely to differ as well, and may have an impact on how they view work and the values they attach to them. The same reasoning can be applied to the participant's socioeconomic position. In Study I the participants came from various backgrounds, some were highly educated, whereas some had lower educational level. Study II-IV lacks this diversity and the majority have a high educational level. This might also affect one's view of work. It would be reasonable to assume that individuals with a high educational level have different experiences compared to someone with a lower education level, which could have affected the results.

The trustworthiness of qualitative research depends on four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility can be understood as whether the findings represent a credible conceptualisation of the material. This has been ensured by adopting well-established research methods and methods of analysis. The use of both individual and group interviews can be seen as a form of triangulation, as can the wide range of the studied groups, which provided a rich picture of different attitudes and beliefs. The participants were given the opportunity to tell their own stories and were all interested in participating and sharing their beliefs. The research processes and findings were continuously discussed together with supervisors and co-authors. These aspects relate to both the credibility and the conformability of the studies, i.e., how well the studies' findings are supported by the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Transferability refers to whether the results can be transferred to other contexts, which is often a difficulty within qualitative research, due to the relatively small number of participants. The participants in these studies come from different backgrounds and are at different stages of their working lives. They provided thick descriptions of their experiences, attitudes and beliefs regarding work, which was the aim of the studies. Contextual details are provided to help the reader determine

the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts. Dependability is closely related to credibility and is somewhat ensured by demonstrating credibility (Shenton, 2004), to further ensure dependability, the aim has been to provide detailed information about the research process in each of the studies.

Ethical considerations

The material analysed in this thesis is based on information given by participants in individual and group interviews. All participants were informed about the purpose of the studies and gave verbal and written consent to participate. Participants were informed that their answers would be treated confidentially, and that they would not be identified in articles or reports. Hence, the studies have followed the ethical principles of social science (Patton, 2015). In addition to these basic ethical principles, there were some other considerations to be made. Certain topics may be considered sensitive to participants, and some shared details about difficult situations in their lives. Other than ensuring that all information would remain confidential, the role of the interviewer and the setting needed to be considered. The interviews of a more sensitive character, such as those with individuals on sick leave, took place at a location chosen by the participant and the interviewer strove to maintain an understanding and supportive front, without exceeding boundaries or giving advice. All interviews are shaped, to some extent, by the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, hence it was important that the participants were allowed to form their own stories without too much guidance.

The studies (I - IV) received ethical permission from the regional ethics board at Linköping University, registration numbers: 2015/2205-31, 2017/427-31, 2018/471-31, as well as from the local ethical committee at the University Medical Center Groningen, registration number 2019/303 for the Dutch part of Study IV.

My role in the research team

Study I-III were conducted by a research team consisting of myself and my supervisors, in Study IV a research team from the Netherlands were also involved. Study I and III were ongoing as I joined the team. When joining these studies, the aim and the interview guides were revised by me, in collaboration with the supervisors. I was responsible for the remainder of the data collection, as well as the analysis process and the manuscript drafts. Both of which were discussed and commented on by the supervisors. In Study II, I was involved from the beginning and developed an interview guide, planning and performing the data collection, as well as being responsible for the analysis and producing the manuscript. Discussions with the supervisors were continuous throughout the research process. My main

supervisor established contact with the research team in the Netherlands for Study IV, afterwhich I was responsible for the theoretical perspective, development of the analysis and producing the manuscript together with the Dutch researchers, who had conducted a similar study in the Netherlands.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDIES

In this chapter, the main findings of each study will be presented. After this, the findings will be related to each other, and the broader theoretical framework outlined above.

Study I: Tales of transformation

The aim of this study was to explore how individuals on sick leave manage societal norms and values related to work, and how these influence their perspective on themselves throughout the rehabilitation process.

The results are mainly focused not only on the transformations of themselves and their self-image, but also how their perception of work and its value transforms. Several of the participants expressed a strong work ethic and a desire to fit into society's mould of the hard-working citizen. Becoming sick-listed challenged these participants' views of work and could lead to feelings of inadequacy, forcing them to change their behaviour and re-evaluate the role of work in their lives. Their priorities changed from work towards themselves or their families. However, this is not unproblematic. The participants emphasised the struggle involved in changing their perceptions and maintaining them against such a predominant norm as the work ethic. Several participants expressed shame for not being able to live up to the norm and they often experienced conflict between their desire to change their priorities and to fit into the societal norm. The participants experienced an expectation from others that they would return to work as soon as possible.

The results highlight the importance of support from at least one of the stakeholders involved in the sick leave and return-to-work process, independent of which stakeholders are involved. Support from family and friends appears to be important in terms of practical aspects and emotional support. However, stakeholder support seems to be of greater importance. The participants' responses to support from stakeholders, as well as different interventions, varied a great deal. This indicates the difficulties of a generalised return-to-work process and highlights the need for an individual process and collaborative actions from the stakeholders involved in the process.

Socio-economic factors are related to the level of support available, and it appears that individuals in white-collar professions have better conditions for making the necessary adjustments when returning to work. Financial worries were expressed by several of the participants. Being on sick

leave means a reduced income, and for individuals with less well-paid jobs, this could mean more financial stress and result in a premature return to work. This in turn may lead to a relapse into sick leave and affect one's self-image negatively.

This study shows that the strong work norm can create unrealistic goals and expectations, which may result in constraining the return-to-work process. It highlights the need for stakeholders involved in the process to not only support the return-to-work process, but also acknowledge and help individuals to manage their self-image. Treatment and support, even where not leading to a return to work, should be viewed as meaningful and legitimate contributions.

Study II: Acting the part

The aim of the second study was to understand the social and organisational factors in the workplace that shape managers' actions and attitudes towards workers with repeated short-term sickness absence.

This study is framed by a theoretical metaphor found in role theory (Goffman, 1959). It views human interactions as performances, where individuals are viewed as actors on a stage who inhabit different roles. It identified three stages of the managers' actions and attitudes towards employees with repeated short-term sickness absence, and these are represented as acts in a play. The acts depict the managers' role within each act and how the social setting and organisational factors shape their attitudes and actions. For an overview of the characteristics of each act, see Table 2. The acts can be viewed as the different steps and courses of action the managers take to handle repeated short-term sickness absence. They are described as typical trajectories, although individual managers might also act in ways that did not correspond to these.

Table 2. Overview of the characteristics of each act

Act 1 – Commitment	Act 2 – Concern	Act 3 – Control
Supportive, committed and enthusiastic.	Characterised as expressing concern.	Characterised by an increasingly controlling attitude.
Repeated short-term sickness absence is not addressed as a problem.	Acknowledges short-term sickness absence as a problem and the need to take action.	Being supportive and expressing concern did not achieve the desired results, which prompts managers to change their line of action and take on a different role.
Struggles related to large groups of employees and being present at the workplace are raised.	Formalised policies and routines to manage sickness absence.	Frustration at not achieving results through their actions to help the employee.
Demanding work situation and a need to prioritise, sickness absence is subordinated to daily operations and development issues.	The concerned front is accompanied by a hint of suspicion.	A lack of mandate limits the courses of actions available for the managers.
Struggling with balancing the demands of the organization with the desire to do good for the employees.	Frustration for not knowing how to help the employees.	

The results indicate that managers view repeated short-term sickness absence as a problem stemming from personal reasons. Several managers spoke of the ‘Mondays-and-Fridays-illness’, which indicates systematic and illegitimate sickness absence and suggests that the managers think the employee is not really sick, they just cannot be bothered to come to work. The management focus is on individual actions, such as counselling, to come to terms with the sickness absence. Managers lack the mandate to make changes in the workplace or major organisational changes, leaving this as their only available option. Their actions depict an increasingly controlling attitude, whereby the sick leave is ultimately seen as an individual problem best managed by using repressive tactics.

Social norms, along with the conditions in the workplace, influence how the managers view employees with repeated short-term sickness absence and what actions they take. Senior management places great responsibility on the managers without providing them with enough decision-making latitude to handle the sick leave and rehabilitation process. This only leaves them with the option of focusing on individual actions. The results of this study indicate that controlling strategies do not result in the desired outcomes, e.g., reducing short-term sickness absence, and that managers should focus on supportive actions along with organisational change.

Study III: What about us?

The third study's aim was to explore the work values of young adults and their expectations of employment. This was investigated through a psychological contract perspective.

Four main categories emerged: 1) *Forming the psychological contract*, which entails how expectations and preconceived notions help to shape the psychological contract; 2) *Reciprocity*, which addresses issues related to the employees' perceived rights and obligations in relation to how the employer manages these issues; 3) *Social norms and the work ethic*; and 4) *Social norms and life situation*, which entails how social norms influence the psychological contract and how participants experience their work situation.

Forming the psychological contract

The participants' previous experiences shaped their perceptions. Higher education and society's general understanding of a certain occupation are examples of aspects that can influence an individual's view of a profession. The values that an employee holds may be one of the reasons why they apply for a certain work, and they expect that these values will be shared by the organisation. These preconceptions may be interpreted as a promise from the organisation and can result in disappointment in cases where other values are regarded more highly by the organisation.

Reciprocity

The results indicate that there was an imbalance between what the participants felt was expected of them to deliver to the organisation and what they received in return. The focus on the participants' obligations was strong, and they described obligations to the organisation, their colleagues and to laws and regulations. Although all the participants felt that they had a lot more obligations than rights, this was especially apparent among participants with less secure employment. They described their rights as less than those of permanent workers, while in order to retain the job they had a lot of obligations. The participants described their experiences of employers not being aware of their rights as employees, making it even harder for them to know their own rights. This suggests that the participants had formed a psychological contract that diverged from the organisations' values. The employees mainly formed a relational contract and emphasised the importance of emotional involvement and personal support, while the organisation had a transactional approach focusing on monetisable exchange.

Social norms and the work ethic

Several of the participants expressed a strong work ethic, and said that they had been taught from a young age to be involved in paid work and contribute to society. The results also highlight that this work ethic can be linked to the value one places on work. Some stated that their motivation and driving force to work was to help and do good for others, while others highlighted personal growth and development. Even though sharing different motivations to work, they all viewed income level as subordinated to other factors. Some participants said that they valued leisure time more than work and were willing to compromise both salary level and working conditions in order to get more time off work and to engage in activities they viewed as meaningful, such as creative writing or relationships with friends and family. In contrast to this, one participant worked a lot of overtime and stated that the reason for doing so was not motivated by financial benefits, rather it was linked to motivations to work and the work ethic.

The results suggest that the work ethic is linked to both personal aspects and the desire to contribute to society, pay taxes and contribute to the welfare state. This was also expressed in dual directions, whereby one feels an obligation to work hard and perform well, so that one will not be perceived as a burden on society.

Social context and life situation

The results indicate that social context influence people's views of work and the formulation of the psychological contract. Participants who valued other aspects of life more highly than work described being surrounded by people who shared their beliefs and values about work, which strengthened them to pursue their hopes and dreams outside of work. Several participants described a work situation that was not optimal for them, but they felt it was manageable at this point in their personal lives. However, if their personal situations were to change, they would perhaps change their job. None of the young adults had children but some stated that it would not be possible for them to remain in their current jobs if they were to start a family. Although the lack of focus on relational aspects on the organisations' part could be viewed as a breach of the psychological contract, this does not seem to have resulted in the employees choosing to leave the workplace.

Study IV: Young adults' work centrality and work values

The aim of the fourth study was to investigate how today's young adults perceive the role of work in their lives and what they value about work. To capture how the social and cultural context may shape work centrality and

work values, data from Sweden and the Netherlands were compared, because these are two countries with various social and cultural differences.

The results indicate that work is highly valued and plays a central role in the lives of the young adults in the study, in both Sweden and the Netherlands. Three differences stand out in relation to work centrality and work values between the two countries: 1) the focus on shaping one's own work-life balance in the Dutch sample; 2) the Swedish young adults' expression of feeling obliged to work in order to contribute to society; and 3) the more individualistic versus collectivist work values presented by the Dutch and Swedish participants, respectively.

Work-life balance

Both the Swedish and Dutch participants struggled to achieve a good work-life balance, although the Dutch participants talked more actively about taking ownership over their work-life balance. Part-time work and flexible contracts are common in the Netherlands and may offer the opportunity to focus on non-work-related aspects of life. In Sweden, on the other hand, the majority of the workforce works full time, which can result in focusing less on aspects of life outside of work.

Obligation to work

The Swedish participants emphasised the obligation to work as a means of contributing to society and supporting the welfare state. They said that a motivation to work is wanting to contribute to society. Not doing so was viewed as egoistic and, in some cases, created internal conflict about whether or not to pursue dreams and ambitions outside of work. Furthermore, they viewed not engaging in work, when able to do so, as parasitical on society and living off other people's efforts. Some of the participants challenged the work norm and wanted to pursue other ambitions outside of work. By doing so, they experienced challenges within themselves, for example feeling egoistic for chasing their dreams, as well as being questioned by other members of society for making different choices. The Dutch participants, on the other hand, did not explicitly address the obligation to work. They described the importance of working in terms of its impact on their own lives, such as being able to develop and sustain themselves.

Individualistic versus collective work values

The reasons why work was found important were more individualistically framed among the Dutch participants than the Swedish sample. Participants from both countries stated that they valued helping others and improving society. However, the Dutch participants also stressed the personal

accomplishment of contributing, for example by improving company processes, while the Swedish participants described the value of contributing in terms of strengthening the welfare state and helping others who were less fortunate. Another noticeable difference was the commonly shared value of developing oneself through work among the Dutch participants, which was less prominent among the Swedish participants. The Dutch participants also gave more details about what satisfaction the various work values gave them, such as the joy they gain from learning something new or working with others, receiving appreciation and gaining a feeling of self-worth through work. The results suggest that there is a stronger collective thinking about working life among the young adults in Sweden than the young adults in the Netherlands.

ANALYSIS

Here, the concepts derived from the theoretical framework are related to the results of the studies, thereafter the results are discussed in relation to previous research.

The work norm in practice

The structures into which an individual is born play a role in forming their concerns and priorities. Individuals shape their own concerns and priorities and try to achieve them, but this is not done in a vacuum and the societal structure plays a crucial role in shaping our concerns. Generally, we aim for goals that are obtainable for us, that we believe we have the possibility to achieve. Conversely, we will not aim to achieve goals that are deemed unattainable. This serves as an example of how the things that are important to us are already influenced by the structure we are born into, and can also be reinforced by the actions of other people in our vicinity and our community. Every action an individual takes either recreates or changes the structure of their context. Hence, it is likely that the individuals participating in these studies will have experienced structural changes during their lifetime. Their combined experiences and actions make up the structure of the current morphogenetic cycle.

In Study I, we can see an example of how upbringing and the structure in which the participants find themselves shape their views on work. Several of the participants described a strong work ethic, shaped by their upbringing and the fact that society values hard-working citizens, in accordance with the socialisation process. In Study III, the strong work ethic and the importance of work in one's life is addressed by the young adults in the study. Although, some of the participants talked about their upbringing and obtaining values from their families, others emphasised the role of society and described a societal obligation to work. Not engaging in paid work would be frowned upon by other members of society and they would be seen as parasitising on other people's hard work. There was not only an obligation to provide for themselves, but they also saw it as an obligation to contribute to the welfare state. This serves as an example of how parents and the rest of society socialise young adults into working citizens. The fear of being excluded or being frowned upon illustrates how strong the work norm is and the cost associated with not maintaining the norm. However, some of the participants did not value work to the same extent and found other aspects of life, outside of work, to be more important to them. What

these individuals have in common is an upbringing during which they were told that it is important to engage in work which they find enjoyable and to do something they want to do. Furthermore, these participants all had a strong sense of security, either from parental support or from financial savings, which made it possible for them to explore their goals and dreams outside of work.

Individual and social conditions

Socioeconomics and security are aspects of how the structures influence an individual's concerns and priorities. Financial security can be related to both the natural and the practical order of reality (Archer, 2000; Archer, 1995), where not being able to uphold certain living conditions, such as food, housing or other aspects relating to physical and/or mental health, threatens the concerns within these orders. Those with financial security are able to make different choices than individuals without that security. Again, this is apparent among the individuals on sick leave in Study I. Having a family that needed to be provided for left them with little option but to return to work, even if their current work was not beneficial for their health and wellbeing. In some cases, their options were limited from the beginning, which prevented them from pursuing other career paths, since perhaps they felt them to be unattainable. Earlier life choices also affected their options in the current situation. This illustrates the interaction between the work norm and an individual's possibilities to live up to the norm. The norm applies to all; however, living conditions and economic conditions make it more or less reasonable to assume that they will be able to meet this norm. Nevertheless, failing may still be perceived as shameful, since the norm does not take this into consideration. Turning again to Study III, some of the participants described how their background and upbringing had provided them with the security to expand their horizons and explore the different options available to them. This was possible because they knew that they always had something, or someone, to fall back on, if they failed to achieve their goals.

As described earlier, individuals go through several morphogenetic cycles during their lifetime, and come into contact with structures at different levels (Archer, 1995), the individual's context and the structures one encounters, such as formal institutional structures (e.g., the educational system), or informal cultural structures, such as norms. Through the double morphogenesis, the structures and agents both may change through the interactions. Educating oneself and choosing a career path can be seen as an example of an action that changes an individual's social position and the structures that they are subordinated to. Changing jobs or becoming sick listed are other examples of a distinctive change in the life of the individual; however, in these cases the social structures remain unchanged.

The background of the managers in Study II was not discussed during the interviews. What we do know, however, is that the managers had all made some decisions that had led them to that point in life and towards taking on the social role of manager. The workplace is the current structure, containing rules and regulations that guide actions, as well as norms about how to act when occupying certain roles, such as that of a manager. It became clear that the managers' view of a good employee was of someone who prioritises the job and has a strong level of work ethic. Again, an example of structural levels, here the organisational (meso) level, with its own internal norms which mirrors and operationalises societal norms in various ways. Employees on sick leave, and especially those with repeated short-term sickness absence were viewed as lazy. There was a suspicion that they were not really sick, they just could not be bothered to come into work. One manager even said that he knew that it was not acceptable to view them as such, but both he and several of the other managers expressed a negative attitude towards these employees. Based on some of the managers' statements regarding their employees' work ethics, one might gain the impression that the work ethic is declining. However, this is not supported by the stories of the participants in the other studies.

When exploring the work norm of individuals at various stages during their working life, it becomes evident that it has an impact on how individuals view and value work, as well as influencing the choices they make regarding work. In the studies the work norm has been explored from different viewpoints. The investigated groups in the material can be seen as expressing nuances of the norm. The managers can be viewed as being in the centre of it, where the rules and regulations in the workplace can be seen as characteristics of the work norm. Thus, their actions can be seen as maintaining and reinforcing the norm. The individuals on sick leave, on the other hand, are on the outskirts of the work norm, and in some cases, expressed a desire to move past and challenge it. The young adults in Study III and IV, although already having entered the labour market, can be seen as still being socialised into the norm, where some accepted the work norm, while others questioned it.

The individual conditions illustrates the morphogenetic cycles within both the structural domain and the cultural domain (Archer, 1995), where norms are an example of the latter. These two domains can be in line with each other, which the results show to a large extent, and hence reinforce each other. An example of this is the sickness insurance system, where the structure of the system reinforces the prevailing norms in society. The structural conditions of the individual, however, clearly show that the cultural domain – i.e., norms – applies to everyone, but different individuals have different possibilities to live up to them. A lack of opportunity to live

up to the norm creates dilemmas and the need to consider opportunity costs, which someone with different resources may never have to face.

Prioritising

Reflexivity is viewed as the mediating link between structure and agency (Archer, 2003). Personal identity is defined by an individual's ultimate concerns, what we care about most in society and hope to achieve. Here, prioritisation plays a crucial role, the individual prioritises their concerns and accommodates others in accordance with their ultimate concern. It might sound like an easy thing to do: simply identify what you care about most in life and act in accordance with what you wish to achieve. However, as the results of the studies in this thesis show, it is not quite that simple. This is especially noticeable among the individuals on sick leave (Study I), almost all of whom stated that their family was their main concern and priority. Despite this, they struggled to maintain this priority against the pressure from society to engage in and commit to work. This shows that, although an individual's concerns and priorities shape their actions, it is very hard to resist the opinions of others and the prevailing norms in society. This is especially apparent in the example of Joan, a sick-listed individual who had very little energy due to her illness. She did not have the strength to care for her family while also working, and on bad days she could not do either. She was conflicted between caring for her family, which she stated to be her main concern, and the desire to fit into the role of a hard-working citizen. Whichever option she chose to prioritise, it caused a decline in her wellbeing. This illustrates that even if we have a main concern, we must pay attention to all three orders of reality and prioritise to establish several practices that are compatible with the others. In this example, she was faced with a dilemma; normally, life worked well in these different roles, but at this point her concerns collided and she was forced to choose which was most important. Dilemmas are important in order to understand why someone chooses to challenge the norms (or not). Furthermore, the results show that it is during these times that the norms become visible to the individual, after having lived in accordance with them in a rather non-reflective manner.

An example of a participant who was managing, at least to a great extent, to accommodate her priorities and concerns is Patti. After she returned to work, she noticed that she could no longer perform like she used to. Although experiencing a great deal of sadness about her lack of ability, she tried to adjust her expectations and find other ways of contributing to her workplace. Several of the participants had made active choices, changing their action to match their concerns, while others were forced to change their concerns due to their illness. An example is Harry, a previously sick-listed individual who realised that his strive for perfection and desire to

excel, were in fact harmful to his health. His main concern used to be work, but after reflecting on his life he realised that this had played a part in causing his illness. In order to regain his health and wellbeing, he made the choice to put his wellbeing at the top of his priority list. Again, this was not an easy task and it required constant monitoring on his part not to slip back into his old ways. What these participants have in common is their role as the active agents, who make deliberate choices and take action in accordance with these choices and revise their priorities and concerns. However, among the participants in this study, there are also individuals that could be viewed as passive agents. They did not take deliberate actions, rather they experienced that things merely happened to them and they were not able to affect these events in any way. An example of this is Sarah, who was disappointed with her employer but instead of taking action, took a step back and distanced herself from the situation. Corporate agents, that is collective agents, have a greater power of influence and are, because of this, able to influence a change (Archer, 1995). An individual on sick leave is quite often alone against authorities and has a weak position to resist a norm, based on the situation they are in. Even though there are examples of collective movements to change the sickness insurance system and perhaps mediate the effect of the work norm, it has proven difficult to do so since the work norm finds its way in through the expectations of others, thus reinforcing the work norm. What is evident is that, although an individual's concerns and priorities shape their actions, they are not oblivious to other people's or society's opinions. Even if a person has decided that their family is their number one concern, if one is constantly fed with messages about the importance of work, career advancement and being a 'good' citizen, they may not be able to make that prioritisation due to structural and cultural powers.

Opportunity costs

Although there might be several different routes to take and different priorities to make, a person's context narrows the possibilities and limits the options that are available. Taking a different route may result in substantial costs for the individual. For instance, in a context where work is highly valued and seen as a morally good way of life, not engaging in work may result in others looking at you as lazy or as not fulfilling your social obligations to society. This can lead to others viewing such an individual as a social outcast, who lives off other people's work.

Furthermore, it can lead to negative emotions, such as feelings of inadequacy and shame. Thus, individuals have a choice: either comply with the current norm within society and engage in work, which might even result in work becoming the main concern of that individual, or challenge the norm with all the possible costs this might entail. Some might be willing to

pay that price because their main concern is of such great value to them that the potential benefits they might gain will outweigh the negative costs. For others, the costs will be deemed too high and instead they will 'fall in line' with the prevailing norms. In these studies, the young adults and the individuals on sick leave have different starting points. The latter are older and have more established lives, with families to provide for, and consequently have more to lose. For the young adults, transgressing the norms does not entail the same costs as for the other group. Possibly they might even long for freedom and try to transgress the norm without losing as much. This serves as an example of how normative structures, life situations and material conditions interact with each other.

This reasoning about costs and benefits is also applicable within the workplace context. In Study II, the managers faced with the problem of absent employees discussed their working conditions and the difficulties of prioritising among them. Not only did they have several different guidelines to adhere to, but they were also faced with the expectations of both their employees and higher management. The managers needed to identify their main concerns and act in accordance with these. However, these managers' options were limited. The rules and guidelines of the workplace governed what actions were available to them, and not following these may come with substantial costs for the manager. If a manager's ultimate concern is the desire to do good for their employees and the regulations do not permit the action the manager feels is best for the employee, then s/he is faced with weighing up the potential costs and benefits of each action. Acting according to the regulations may come with positive reinforcement from senior management, which in turn may lead to various rewards later on, such as a salary increase or a promotion. Praise from senior management may also lead to positive emotions such as pride and confidence in one's capability.

On the other hand, there might also be costs associated with adhering to the regulations. For managers who have their employees' best interests at heart, knowing that the action they have taken is not what is best for the employee can cause feelings of guilt. The employee might also react with anger or sadness towards the manager. Conversely, choosing to ignore the regulations may result in reprimands from senior management. If one consistently 'misbehaves', it could eventually lead to dismissal, while the benefits are associated with appreciation from the employee. However, it is also possible that not all managers see their employees' needs as their main priority or that they would benefit from a more accommodating attitude. Alternatively, they view the current guidelines as a part of helping employees with repeated short-term sickness absence to 'get their act together', and thereby helping them. It is possible that there is a selection to managerial positions, ensuring that those with the right attitude end up as

managers. Another possibility is a form of socialisation that makes it important to comply with organisational norms, or a combination of both. All of these aspects need to be taken into account in a manager's deliberations about his/her priorities and what actions to take. Some might feel that the costs of ignoring the regulations are too high and the benefits of following them are desirable, and thus choose to act according to the regulations. Others may be willing to disregard the benefits and take on the costs. A third option is choosing to change jobs, to avoid being put in a situation where you must choose.

As previously mentioned, the organisational guidelines and regulations can be seen as a manifestation of the work norm in society, and these in turn influence the actions of the managers. In this study, it is apparent that the managers acted in accordance with the guidelines and their views of the absent employees were adjusted to justify their chosen actions. Viewing the employee as lacking in work ethics, and suspecting that they might not really be sick, justified the increased focus on adhering to guidelines and regulations. It is also possible that some of the managers perceived the guidelines in a positive manner and believed them to be appropriate to adhere to. Hence, they may have expressed concern simply because it was expected of them as managers. It is important to note that these managers' actions do not necessarily reflect their personal identities. The managers become actors; that is, an individual with a personal identity that has developed from his/hers previous experiences within the natural and practical orders of reality. They then take on the social identity which coincides with their choice of manager role (Wennerström, 2017; Archer, 2003). The roles the managers play are interpretations of how they view that role in the light of social interactions and the internalisation of the organisational norms. Individuals often adopt different roles in different situations and do not act in the same way with friends and family as they do towards colleagues, subordinates or superiors (Goffman, 1959, Mead & Morris, 1972). Actors aim to present a certain image of themselves, which in this case might be that of a competent or caring leader. Controlling the impressions of others is not only done to present oneself in a favourable light, but also to present oneself in a manner that complies with the norms and rules of the current context and the role currently being adopted.

Contextual differences

In Study IV, some differences were observed in the work norm between young adults in Sweden and in the Netherlands. An explanation for this may be found in the structural differences between the two countries. The largest differences can be found in the structure of the labor market. In Sweden the majority of the workforce works full-time and are permanently

employed, whereas in the Netherlands a great percentage works part-time and have flexible contracts. To challenge those traditions and norms may result in a feeling of not fitting in and belonging, which threatens concerns within the social order (Archer, 2000; Archer, 1995) and the strive for social recognition. The Swedish participants expressed a strong obligation to work, and several of the participants emphasised the importance of contributing to the welfare state and expressed a desire not to be a burden on society or a parasite on other people's hard work. The participant with the most negative view of the work norm said that it would not be possible to stop working while still being able to do so, because the rest of society would not accept it. The fear of being viewed as someone who takes advantage of the system was also evident among the sick-listed individuals in Study I, who said that they would never try to cheat the system in order to receive sickness benefits, while also believing that it is quite common for individuals to try to do just that. This is not only an example of the desire for social recognition and to belong, but it also illustrates the strength of the work norm in Sweden, as well as emphasising the obligation to work. Among the young adults in the Netherlands, work appeared to have a central position as well. However, they did not express themselves in terms of an obligation to work. Neither did they talk about contributing to the state through work. Instead, the focus was on the importance of work for their own lives and to develop themselves.

In the Netherlands, the reason why work was found important was more individualistically framed than in Sweden. Even though, both the Dutch participants and the Swedish participants expressed that they valued helping others and improving society, the Dutch participants emphasized personal accomplishments of contributing and personal satisfaction which they gained by working, such as the joy of learning new skills or gaining a feeling of self-worth through work. The Swedish participants, on the other hand, expressed themselves in terms of helping those less fortunate and strengthening of the welfare state. Both Sweden and the Netherlands are characterized as individualistic countries, but in Sweden there appears to be a more collective thinking towards the public spheres, such as employers and public institutions, while displaying individualistic mentalities in the private sphere (Tian & Guang, 2017). From a critical realist perspective, it appears that the young adults in the Netherlands have larger concerns within the practical order, while the Swedish young adults' concerns are related to the social order (Archer, 2000; Archer, 1995). Although the focus here has been based on national contexts, it is important to note that there may be sub-contexts within countries, where the work norm is experienced and expressed differently by people with different conditions, such as class or occupational sectors.

DISCUSSION

Values of work

Previous studies have found work to be of high relative importance, compared to other areas of life, outranked only by family (Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Kuchinke et al., 2011; MOW International Research Team, 1987). The findings of the studies in this thesis support this. Interestingly, even though several participants claimed to prioritise their family over work, their actions tell a different story. Their actions were oriented towards their work, and it was not uncommon for the family to be set aside, to some extent, due to work-related responsibilities. Because individuals not only have one concern, difficulties can arise in dovetailing these concerns (Archer, 2003), which can explain why someone set aside that what they claim to be their ultimate concern. Those who stated their family as their main concern while prioritising work, undoubtedly still cares very much about their family. A reason for this prioritisation in practice might be explained by economical concerns. It is possible one might feel obligated to work to be able to provide for one's family, not because valuing work more highly than family. Another explanation might be the strong desire to fit into the role of the hard-working citizen, causing one to set aside the main priority in favor of being accepted by society.

It has been debated whether or not the work ethic has declined over the last decades, among both millennials (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2012; Deal et al., 2010, Costanza et al., 2012; Zabel et al., 2017) and the overall workforce. However, the results are inconclusive (Miller et al., 2002; Conen & Beer, 2018). Although the focus of this thesis was not to measure the level of the work ethic or how it has changed over time, the findings suggest a strong work ethic overall. There was a general sense that one should work, and this view was present even among those who were sceptical about the status and importance that work has gained in our society.

Obligation to work

The Swedish participants believed that they had an obligation to contribute to the welfare state and that others would not accept the idea that they did not participate in paid work if they were able to do so. This strong focus on obligation was not present among the Dutch participants, and this might be explained by contextual differences between the two countries.

As previously mentioned, ‘the work principle’ is a key feature of Swedish labour-market policy and promotes activation (Bengtsson & Berglund, 2012; Nord, 2018). The discourse promoting the individual’s own responsibility to provide themselves with a job and celebrating a strong work ethic may be a reason for the strong focus on obligation among the Swedish participants. Furthermore, Sweden has long been known for its fairly generous welfare system, even though there have recently been changes to the system resulting in it becoming less generous (Blomqvist & Palme, 2020). The Swedish participants appeared to display a trust in the welfare system, which is in line with the research by Svallfors (2011), indicating a general trust in the welfare system among Swedish citizens.

Labour-market policy in the Netherlands is also focused on stimulating social participation (Lub & Uytterlinde, 2012), although it is mainly directed at vulnerable groups and those inactive in the labour market, and might not have spread to young adults in general. In the Netherlands there is a high percentage of part-time and flexible contracts, compared to Sweden where the majority are in full-time employment. The right to work part-time in the Netherlands is regulated by law (Bolhaar et al., 2018), this may also have an impact on the importance attached to work. This is an example of how the pre-existing structure influence an individual’s actions, due to the limitations and enablements that are tied to the structure (Archer, 1995). The Dutch participants also appeared to be more actively involved in creating a good work–life balance. Although struggling to achieve this, they saw it as their responsibility to ensure it. This may be explained by the high percentage of part-time contracts. It can offer the possibility to focus on non-work-related aspects in life, because it is facilitated through the legislation and also through the visible examples of friends and family who works part-time.

Security

It is clear that the level of security an individual has in life has an impact on how their choices are influenced. Those with a strong sense of security are able to explore and, in some cases, pursue aspirations and dreams outside of work due to the sense of security they experience from their personal situation; for example, supportive parents or financial capital. This is in line with Alfonsson’s (2020) finding that individuals in precarious employment who had a sense of security in other aspects in life experienced better conditions for dealing with the negative aspects of that type of employment. According to Kalleberg and Marsden (2013), those most vulnerable to insecurity, because of their economic situation and employability, place more importance on income and security. The findings of this thesis suggest that the participants were motivated mainly by intrinsic factors. However, an insecure financial situation may result in extrinsic factors becoming more

important in order to be able to provide for one's family or be able to afford basic necessities.

The state of the work norm

So, how is the work norm doing? Based on the findings of these studies, it is thriving, even among those who are sceptical about it. Frayne (2015) interviewed individuals who had stepped away from the work norm and found that these individuals were highly influenced by it, in terms of shame and stigmatisation. This relates to the findings of this thesis, where the individuals who were unable to work described the fear of being viewed as lazy and the feeling of shame for not living up to the role of the hard-working citizen. Those skeptical towards the work norm expressed that other would not accept that they would stop working while able to do so.

It has been claimed that work provides us not only with the basic necessities of life, such as housing and food, but also with status, social recognition, social contributions and self-fulfilment (Weeks, 2011; Sage, 2018). Furthermore, it has been suggested to provide structure and meaning (Jahoda, 1981), not only to the individual, whose work can also be meaningful for companies or for society at large (Paulsen, 2017). If work has the opportunity to provide all of these things to people, the question is whether the work norm can be considered a bad thing? For many, where work does provide individuals with these positive aspects, it may not have any negative effects at all. But, as we have seen, it is also associated with stigma, social pressure and stress on those struggling to live up to it (Frayne, 2015; Sage, 2018; Weeks, 2011) and the general value of work has been questioned by several authors (see for example Gorz, 2001; Paulsen, 2017; Graeber, 2018).

In this thesis, the negative aspects of the work norm are especially apparent among the individuals on sick leave in Study I. This is partly because they have been denied the opportunity to work, and not being able to live up to the norm causes them distress. However, most of the participants in the other studies do not appear to have reflected upon the influence of the work norm; rather, it appears to be constantly present and inevitable. Despite this, they describe sacrificing other aspects of life in favour of work. For example, in Study III the participants compromised their social life and some said that they were unable to start a family while remaining in their current job. Others described goals in life, outside of work, that they would like to pursue but felt that they were unable to do so. This was due both to the financial aspect of not working, and to concerns about not being accepted by other members of society if they were not to contribute to the welfare state when able to do so.

The findings indicate that the work norm is very strong and it influenced the actions of most of the participants towards reinforcing the current work norm. Although some participants, especially among the young Swedish adults, said that they valued other aspects more highly than work, they had not fully challenged the work norm. This could indicate that although their ultimate concerns may be something other than work, the benefits of challenging the work norm were not higher than the cost that might be associated with doing so. What became apparent among these participants was that they shared these views with close friends, which could be seen as a starting point towards breaking free by surrounding oneself with people who share the same values. A single individual rarely has the means to make significant changes on their own (Archer, 1995), indicating that it is more suitable to speak in terms of individuals challenging or reinforcing the work norm, which, given sufficient collective mobilisation, in a longer term may lead to structural change.

Conclusion

Based on the findings from this thesis it is evident that most of the participants in the studies have not reflected about how they are influenced by the work norm. Rather they go about their daily lives where they have been taught that work should have a prominent position. In fact, work could become so important that many sacrifice their other priorities in order to fulfil their obligations, whether it be to society, their employer or to provide for their families. Reflecting about one's current situation appears to be triggered by finding oneself in a different social position, for example when becoming sick listed. This means being subordinated to other structures, in this case the welfare system. In this process one might also lose one's corporate agency as a participant within a work community. Instead, becoming a primary agent in the disorganised group of sick-listed individuals, and thereby gaining a new set of social roles to relate to. Being referred to these roles can be either accepted or fought off by the individual. The results show that the work norm is very strong and even when expressing a desire to challenge the norm and pursue other goals it is difficult to do so, since the norm still affects you through the expectations and opinions of others and the desire to fit in.

This thesis contributes with a nuanced perspective on the work norm, although the same norm, its influence differs depending on one's life situation, whether you are at the start of your working career, in the centre or currently outside of the labour market. It highlights the importance of viewing structure and agency as interdependent, and that agents have the ability to make changes in both their own lives and the structure that they find themselves in. The results points to a difficulty in challenging the work

norm as a single individual, while sharing the same values with others in one's vicinity may be a start of bringing about a change. What these results show, is that although norms are strong and their roots grow deep, because of decades of socialisation towards work, they are changeable.

This thesis shows how the structural conditions for people to live up to the work norm are very different depending on our resources and our social position. Even though the work norm is strong, and one might express a desire to work, it is not always practically reasonable to demand it, especially if it means too great of a sacrifice in other parts of the individuals life. The results highlight the importance of achieving balance and accommodating one's concerns within the three orders of reality: natural, practical and social. Ignoring one might result in a lack of wellbeing in another. The results can be used by both healthcare professionals, caseworkers, for example at, the Social Insurance Agency, the Public Employment Services and Social Services and by employers, managers, HR-professionals, and policy makers in order to acknowledge, support and help individuals to obtain and maintain that balance, even if that would entail not being in full-time employment.

Medical science is a broad research field for studying causes of ill-health and disease, as well as the individuals' need and opportunity to achieve and maintain a high level of health. This includes public health issues, health promotion and prevention. This thesis contributes to the field of medical science by an increased understanding of how the work norm affects individuals' health and wellbeing. It illustrates how an excessive focus on work can create stress and unrealistic goals in relation to work. The importance of achieving a good work-life balance is well known; this thesis contributes to the understanding of how individuals are influenced by society's view on work and the choices they make regarding work in relation to the resources they have available.

Future research

This thesis has revealed interesting findings regarding how social norms related to work influence people's perceptions of themselves, as well as how they view work in relation to other aspects of life. However, based on the limitations addressed in the methodological considerations, there are some aspects that would benefit from further research. Firstly, the sample is quite homogeneous, with an overrepresentation of women, which indicates the need to further investigate potential differences between men and women. This also applies to socioeconomic situation; while the individuals on sick leave had various backgrounds, the other studies lack this diversity.

The findings suggest that several of the participants had changed their concerns and priorities through internal deliberations and many said that they valued other aspects of life more highly than work. Despite this, their actions mainly served to uphold the normative structures of work as an important part of life. To understand this, there is a need to explore the general desire to change these normative structures, what opportunities one has to do so and perceived obstacles. There are difficulties associated with the generalisability of qualitative research, due to the constraints of conducting a large number of interviews and analysing such an extensive body of material. Thus, a mixed method approach would be beneficial for exploring general attitudes towards the work norm, combined with gaining an in-depth understanding of what this actually means to the individuals through interviews.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic there have been great changes in the labour market over a short period of time, as many people lost their jobs or were forced to work from home. In Sweden, many companies had the possibility to reduce their employees' working hours, while the employees received compensation from the state. So instead of working a full 40-hour week, many only worked a few hours a week, with very little loss of wage. It is possible that people's attitudes towards work and other aspects of life have gone through changes due to their experiences during the pandemic, which makes it an interesting area to investigate further.

Another aspect that would be of interest to investigate further is whether work-critical movements pose a real challenge to the work norm. This includes the discussion of basic income. This discussion has intensified in recent years, although it has not gained as much attention in Sweden compared to other countries (Fagerlind Ståhl & Ståhl, 2021). Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) was founded in 1986, with the mission to inform and educate the wider public about arguments and proposals for and problems concerning basic income (BIEN, 2022). The Swedish equivalent was founded in 2019. In USA, there has been an increase of people choosing to leave the labour market, mainly due to poor working conditions. (Yttergren, 2022). In online discussion forums, individuals being a part of the 'anti-work movement' are questioning the purpose of work and aims to change poor working conditions for the better and reduce inequalities in the labour market (O'Connor, 2022). Challenging the work norm or seeking alternative options to paid work, such as basic income, is not a novel thought. It has however gained increased attention, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be of interest to explore how these types of movements affect the position of the work norm, and if and how these collectives have the ability to change the current structures. That is, if they manage to become corporate agents who gathers enough resources to influence structure.

In countries without a tradition of strong trade union, the ‘anti-work movement’s’ role can be seen as functioning, at least to some extent, similar to the role trade unions have traditionally played. Trade unions’ main interest is to organise workers in order to improve working conditions, whereas ‘anti-work’ movements stem from questioning the centrality of work. Despite these differences in interests, both trade unions and work-critical movements can be seen as different types of organised voices that in various ways try to promote interests related to work. Compared to many other countries the degree of union affiliation is high in Sweden; however, the proportion of union members has decreased (Kjellberg, 2020). The legitimacy and bargaining power of the trade unions has been undermined over the last decades with this decline in membership. This raises interesting questions about whether a lack of confidence in the unions bargaining power would lead individuals to seek out other types of movements in order to try to change aspects within the labour market. Is it possible that a social collective movement could obtain sufficient bargaining power to be able to negotiate changes regarding a general organisation of work? It would be interesting to investigate individuals’ expectations on their own ability to bring about change regarding both work, and society in general, and how they perceive the bargaining power of trade unions and other types of social movements. Is there a belief about the collective power?

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