Creating Sellable Citizens

A Study of How Job Seekers Are Socialized as Labor Market Actors

Daniel Karlsson

Master’s Thesis in Sociology, 30 credits
Uppsala University, Department of Sociology
Supervisor: Michael Allvin
Examiner: Marcus Persson
Autumn 2017
Abstract

On the flexible and insecure labor markets of today, it is increasingly considered an individual responsibility to find work and to become employable. With the purpose of understanding how individuals are socialized to the rapidly transforming labor markets, this thesis examines job seeking as an often neglected site for the reproduction of labor market subjectivities. Taking as a case the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen, AF) and their recently developed ‘webinars’ - a digital medium through which they offer coaching and advice to job seekers - this thesis examines how the AF through this medium reproduce expectations, norms and ideals on job seekers. Utilizing a Foucauldian governmentality perspective and critical theories of consumerism and employability, 17 webinars and interview data with two AF officers have been analyzed. The results show that the AF socializes job seekers into marketization discourses with strong normative claims of which personal characteristics and qualities that are desirable on the labor market. The unemployed are recommended to act as ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’, to market and sell themselves in all contexts of life, to network, to work on their appearance and emotions so that they can convey a professional impression, and to engage in private activities that might enhance their employability and market value. The analysis shows that these ideals not only teach job seekers how to find work, but also socialize them into becoming adaptive workers accustomed to the precarious and boundaryless working life of today. This is shown to have both empowering elements (as job seekers are encouraged to take control over their own employability and employment) and totalizing elements (that require job seekers to subject their personality, identity and private life to the demands of becoming ‘sellable’).

Keywords: unemployment, job seeking, employability, governmentality, subjectivity, consumption
Acknowledgments

First of all, I am very grateful to my supervisor Michael Allvin for his invaluable guidance and support, and for showing an interest and curiosity that has made me think of the thesis in new ways. I am also very grateful to the respondents at the Public Employment Service for taking the time to tell me of their work. Thank you Johannes for reading and commenting on the thesis, and for all exciting and inspirational discussions that in different ways have found their way into the text. Last but not least, thank you Julia for proofreading the thesis and for all of your encouragement and support that has been so needed during the writing period.
## Contents

1. **INTRODUCTION**
   - 1.1 PURPOSE  
   - 1.2 DISPOSITION

2. **WELFARE AND WORK IN TRANSFORMATION**
   - 2.1 FROM FORDISM TO POST-FORDISM: A HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION
   - 2.2 RESEARCH ON EMPLOYABILITY
   - 2.3 JOB SEEKING ADVICE AND CAREER COACHING
   - 2.4 THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE AND ARBETSLINJEN
   - 2.5 THE PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE
   - 2.6 DISCUSSION OF THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH

3. **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**
   - 3.1 GOVERNMENTALITY AND TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF
     - 3.1.1 POWER, DISCOURSE AND SUBJECTIVITY
     - 3.1.2 NEOLIBERAL GOVERNING AND ENTERPRISE CULTURE
   - 3.2 CONSUMER SOCIETY, FREE TIME AND THE COMMODIFIED SELF
   - 3.3 THE IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY OF EMPLOYABILITY
   - 3.4 DISCUSSION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4. **METHODOLOGY**
   - 4.1 A GOVERNMENTALITY APPROACH
   - 4.2 THE MATERIAL AND THE SETTING
     - 4.2.1 THE SETTING: THE PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICE
     - 4.2.2 WEBINARS
     - 4.2.3 INTERVIEW
     - 4.2.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS
   - 4.3 THE ANALYTICAL PROCESS
     - 4.3.1 DATA GATHERING AND TRANSCRIPTION
     - 4.3.2 CODING, THEMATIZATION AND ANALYSIS
     - 4.3.3 REFLEXIVITY, RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY
1 Introduction

The government is abandoning the ‘work line’ [arbetslinjen] for the ‘benefit line’ [bidragslinjen], which makes it less profitable to work. This is dangerous, both for the individual, the jobs and the welfare. Every krona that is paid in benefits is a krona that instead could have gone to more teachers, more police officers and more hands within the health care. The way into society goes through the job. A job is not just about getting a wage. It is about being able to stand on one’s own legs. To get to know each other and the language. Feel proudness when one contributes to society. Feel freedom and possibilities to influence one’s daily existence (Kinberg Batra, 2017; my translation).

In this quote from a recent debate article entitled *Those that come to Sweden shall make themselves employable*¹, Anna Kinberg Batra - who at the time was the leader of the ‘Alliance’ of conservative-liberal opposition parties - describes several attributes of the ideological figure ‘arbetslinjen’ that has been much prominent in political debates during the last couple of decades, championed by political parties from both the left and the right. As the quote illustrates, arbetslinjen could be described as a kind of ‘work ethic’ that constructs wage labor as the centre of a decent and moral life and as a source of well-being, welfare, independence, community and freedom. Unemployment on the other hand is mainly considered as wage labor’s negative opposite, as a passivizing and segregating form of social exclusion and as a lack of opportunities to live a good and worthy life: to live on welfare benefits - and especially to do so voluntarily - is through the lens of arbetslinjen seen as being amoral, irresponsible and even dangerous for both oneself and society at large (see Davidsson, 2010). The concept is therefore often connected to demands on creating strong economic incentives to work, in order to make it economically profitable to work over living on welfare benefits and to discourage unemployment and passivity (Paulsen, 2010:54).

This thesis is not so much about arbetslinjen in itself - a topic on which there already is much written - as it is about how the unemployed are socialized in accordance with the ideas it contains. As we see in the quote above, arbetslinjen requires the unemployed to *feel* certain things in relation to work and to *understand themselves* and their responsibilities in relation to its ideological imperatives of how they should act on the labor market. The success of arbetslinjen as an ideology is thus not only dependent on incentives and restrictive kinds of welfare policy, but ideally also requires the thoughts, actions and subjectivity of the unemployed to be shaped so that they identify with these ideas and consider them as sensible and natural.

¹ A rough translation of its original title, *Den som kommer till Sverige ska göra sig anställningsbar*. 
Questions of how the unemployed are socialized as labor market actors have however largely been neglected in previous studies on unemployment. Cole (2007) argues that much research on unemployment - although important and with good intentions - in itself often tend to reproduce and naturalize the work ethic, by implicitly or explicitly constructing wage labor as the centre of a “normal”, good life. While such research has made the often negative social, psychological and economic consequences of unemployment visible (e.g. Dooley et al., 1996; Thomas et al., 2005; Jahoda, 2014), Cole reasons that it also has marginalized the understanding of how the unemployed are made to understand themselves and their situation like this. This thesis attempts to shed light on this process, and to examine how dominating ideologies of work and unemployment are reproduced today.

In order to understand how the unemployed are socialized as labor market actors, this thesis focuses on one specific aspect of unemployment - job seeking. Job seeking constitute the daily activities the unemployed engage in when they are looking for work, and is therefore as lately has been argued (Fogde, 2010; Van Oort, 2013; Boland, 2016) an important site for understanding how the unemployed are socialized into certain normative subjectivities and ways of being. Focusing on job seeking further highlights the fact that unemployment, far from being the state of passive idleness it is sometimes criticized for being, actually constitutes a time of active training and work for finding a job (see Sharone, 2007): finding work is today after all often framed as a personal task, which requires job seekers to acquire the right skills, competences and attitudes in order to become employable (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). Current demands on the unemployed to become successful, employable job seekers are however still diffuse and opaque, and more research is needed to trace out what is expected of job seekers today, how these expectations might impact on their subjectivity and everyday life, and how this in turn reproduces current ideological paradigms of work and unemployment. To address these questions, this thesis takes guidance and coaching to job seekers by the Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen, AF) - an authority that Thedvall (2004:135) has described as a tool of the state “for cultural engineering, influencing the construction of citizens” - as a case of labor market socialization.
1.1 Purpose

This thesis starts from the observation that job seeking is a neglected but important area of research for understanding how expectations, ideals and subjectivities related to work and unemployment are reproduced on the flexible and insecure labor markets of today. Using the Public Employment Service (AF) as a setting, the purpose of the thesis is to understand how the AF socializes job seekers as labor market actors. Of special interest is to further understand the theoretical process of ‘subjectification’ through which the unemployed are encouraged to act, identify with and internalize the expectations on them - in other words, how they are socialized into becoming worker-citizens of a certain kind. This purpose can be specified in three research questions:

- Which norms and ideals of how job seekers are supposed to act and understand themselves in order to become employable are (re)produced by the AF?
- How are job seekers made to internalize, identify with and act according to the expectations on them?
- Which implications might the identified ideals have for the subjectivity and everyday life of job seekers?

1.2 Disposition

In the next section the purpose of the thesis is historically contextualized and situated in relation to changes of the welfare state and the labor market during the last decades. Previous studies on job seeking and employability are also surveyed, to give a sense of the field and to locate the thesis within ongoing scholarly debates. In the section after that the theoretical framework is presented, which builds upon Foucauldian governmentality theory and critical theories of consumer society and employability. The following methodological section presents the research process and the material of the study. My own position as a researcher is also problematized and the importance of reflexivity is highlighted. After that, the presentation and analysis of the results follow. This analysis continuous in the concluding discussion, where the results are compiled, valued and further scrutinized theoretically. I do there also present the main conclusions of the thesis, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study, and present some propositions for future research and practice.
2 Welfare and Work in Transformation

This chapter has a twofold purpose: to give a historical background to the problems of the thesis by relating them to changes of the welfare state and the labor market during the last decades, and to place the research problems within ongoing scholarly debates on job seeking practices, employability and the responsibilization of the unemployed. Since these themes have been addressed from many different angles, in countless publications and over several disciplinary fields, this exposition of previous research can only be representative of a fraction of all the studies on these topics. The research presented below has been selected in an attempt to both give a sense of what has already been examined, and to provide a coherent historical narrative that makes it possible to understand the later sections of the thesis. Larger global shifts on the labor market are addressed in the first sections, before the focus is narrowed down to the Swedish welfare state and the Public Employment Service (AF).

2.1 From Fordism to Post-Fordism: A Historical Contextualization

Contemporary understandings of unemployment and job seeking must be framed against the extensive transformations of the welfare state and working life that has taken place during the last decades, in Sweden and in the Western world at large. In an international perspective this is sometimes discussed as a transition from ‘Fordism’ to ‘post-Fordism’. While these terms are contested (e.g. Jessop, 1992; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008), Fordism is often framed as an era from the 30’s up to the early 70’s of steady increases in growth and standards of living in the Western world.2 Harvey (1990:ch8) describes Fordism as characterized by Keynesian economics, rationally organized industrial workplaces with strict divisions of labor, stable systems of collective bargaining, strong welfare states and strategies for full employment. In the 70’s and 80’s, Fordism was however in many countries challenged by economic crisis, stagnated growth and mass-unemployment. Due to technological developments, increased automation in the industries and the rise of new global competitive sectors and markets, many businesses faced challenges to restructure their organization in new flexible ways in order to remain competitive and productive (see Harvey, 1990:142pp; Allvin et al., 2006:31). These

---

2 The name Fordism refers to Henry Ford, whose rational organizing of his factories in the early 20th century provided a model for industrial labor processes during this era.
changes disrupted previously stable arrangements on the labor market and gave rise to what has become known as the post-Fordist era⁴.

In the current post-Fordist era, *flexibility* has become a keyword “with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (Harvey, 1990:147). The term flexibility do crucially not only refer to changes in organizations and markets, but also to the new demands placed on individuals to be adaptable and to take responsibility for their own career and employment (Grey, 1994; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). As temporary, short-term and part-time employment contracts have become much more common, workers are no longer expected to stay at the same job all their life, but are with the words of Rose rather “required to engage in a ceaseless work of training and retraining, skilling and reskilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking” (1999:161). While the new flexible jobs are highly varied and unequally distributed with respect to one’s position on the labor market (Allvin, 2004:39; Isacson, 2012:178), the changes towards a more insecure and precarious labor market where individuals are required “to plan their career within a wider context of economic change, job insecurity, decreased wages and conditions, and erosion of social safety nets” (Dyer & Humphries, 2002:3) are well documented. Sennett (2000, 2007) writes that the new flexible and provisional work life has eroded the possibilities of creating trust, loyalty and a coherent identity in relation to the workplace, as it has become difficult to take pride in having a certain kind of job and getting really good at it.

Older ideals of strong welfare states have also gradually disintegrated in many Western countries since the Fordist days, in favor of neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility and initiative, where the free market rather than the state is believed to be a guarantor of wealth (Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2006). In what sometimes is described as a transition from ‘welfare states’ to ‘workfare states’, many Western states did in the 80’s and 90’s attempt to get people off welfare by increasing the incentives to work and by implementing ‘active’ labor market policies aimed at making the labor force more flexible and adaptable to the demands of corporations (Finn, 2000; Clarke, 2005). With slogans such as “no rights without responsibilities” and “any job is better than no job”, welfare dependence was framed as having demoralizing and destructive consequences (Greer, 2016:163). The neoliberal turn also caused the labor movement and the unions to lose influence and legitimacy (Harvey, 2006).

³ The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism could be compared with other sociological attempts of characterizing the present, modern era (as for instance post-modern society, post-industrial society (Bell), late modernity (Giddens), liquid modernity (Bauman), risk society (Beck) or network society (Castells)). I here find post-Fordism the most useful concept for understanding transformations in industrialism and patterns of economic production and consumption, whereas postmodernism is an essential complementary concept for understanding the interrelated ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’ (to speak with Jameson, 1991).
Responsibilities have in this process been redistributed from the state to the unemployed citizen, who increasingly is required to be active in continuous job seeking, education or participation in training programs in order to receive welfare allowance (Olofsson, 2015:59). Further, the unemployed are now often talked of as “job seekers” in social policy, a rhetorical shift that locates the reasons of unemployment within the individual and make it a question of personal responsibility to become employable and find a job (see Rose, 1999:254; Fogde, 2009; Boland & Griffin, 2015; Boland, 2016).

In times of uncertainty, unemployment is an always-present risk for the people that no longer can expect secure long-term employment or strong social safety nets to fall back on (Standing, 2013:72). Sennett (2007:63) and Bauman (1998:96) both argue that this has created widespread anxiety among large groups, that fear to become superfluous in the insecure and unpredictable future. Bauman (ibid.) writes that goals of full employment today even are directly incompatible with the goals of corporations to maximize profits and growth, as capital expands through technological innovations and rationalizations that replace human labor power and make it redundant. Some authors (e.g. Grover, 2003; Harvey, 2005:59; Greer, 2016) have argued that these processes have “re-commodified” the labor force by creating what Marx (2015:558) called a reserve army of labor, a large surplus of unemployed and vulnerable workers willing to take almost any job, which gives employers an advantageous position to press down wages and working conditions. Harvey (2010:58) even argues that such a reserve army that is “accessible, socialized, disciplined, and of the requisite qualities (i.e. flexible, docile, manipulable and skilled when necessary)” is a crucial condition for the expansion of capital. Whether this is the case or not, it is at least reasonable to consider these changes as a restructured power balance on the labor market, where risks and responsibilities have been redistributed from the state and from corporations to the individual (see Beck, 2000:3; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:4). We will next turn to a key concept for understanding these changes - employability.

### 2.2 Research on Employability

Employability is a key concept of the activating labor market policies discussed above. McQuaid & Lindsay (2005) show in their historical overview that the concept dates back more than a hundred years, but that it began to receive the meanings attached to it today in the 1980’s in the UK. Individuals were then responsibilized to get a job by adapting to the labor market’s demands, while the state rather than guaranteeing employment to everyone should
enable citizens to make themselves employable (see also Finn, 2000). Since then employability-based policies has spread to most Western countries, and has in both national and transnational contexts been characterized as a positive way of empowering the unemployed to take control over their lives and employment (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004; Clarke, 2005). Employability became a pillar in both the employment policy of the EU and the OECD in the 1990’s, where it still is emphasized as a solution to both meet the flexible demands of corporations and to increase national prosperity and growth.

The concept employability is often framed against a new ‘knowledge economy’ associated with post-Fordism, where the continuous development of the knowledge and skills of individuals through lifelong learning, training and enterprise are seen as crucial for the growth and prosperity of both individuals, organizations and nations (Brown et al., 2003; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Sparrhoff, 2012; Haasler, 2013). Employability has therefore not only been well researched in relation to the labor market but also in relation to education, since goals of promoting graduate employability have become common staples for schools and universities (e.g. Harvey, 2001; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Baker & Henson, 2010; Berglund, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013; McCowan, 2015; Sparrhoff & Fejes, 2016). The “field” of employability studies is thus wide and diverse, with studies not only examining different groups and contexts but also doing so from fundamentally different disciplinary, theoretical and ideological horizons and interests (see Guilbert et al., 2016).

Employability is often understood as an individual’s capacity to develop and sustain the qualities, skills, knowledge and attributes needed to get and keep a job (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005:199). There is however no definite “list” on the attributes considered necessary for employability, which makes the meaning of the concept diffuse and contested (Sparrhoff & Fejes, 2016:31). Cremin (2010:134) argues that employability never can be adequately defined, since the concept always is relational to the shifting demands of specific employers. Employability has in a similar vein been described as a “floating signifier” by Garsten & Jacobsson (2013:826) and a “planetspeak discourse” by Fejes (2010:90) that is ever changing and ever transforming, meaning different things at different times, locations and contexts. Employability can for instance be enhanced through life-long learning and competence development (Fejes & Nicoll, 2008), but as Smith (2010) shows it might also entail activities such as networking, self-work and unpaid labor as ways of gaining experience. Cremin (2007) has for instance studied how gap years in this way have become commodified and instrumentalized, valued primarily for how they boost one’s employability. “Soft skills” such as personality, social competence and self-confidence have also been pointed out as important for
employability (Renuga & Ezhilan, 2014; Potgieter, 2012), and as illustrated by both Fogde (2010:77) and Elraz (2013:813), employability might also require job seekers to actively hide attributes such as shyness, low self-confidence, sexuality or functional variations. No doubt there are also many other factors yet to be researched that also have an impact on employability, since discourses of employability are transformative and constantly demands new things of workers (Costea et al., 2012; Frayne, 2015:76).

Forrier & Sels (2003:105) distinguish four types of research on employability: research that 1) measure individual characteristics, abilities and attitudes of job seekers, 2) scrutinize the wider context for enhancing employability within organizations 3) examine how employability affects the relation between individual and labor market, and 4) evaluate employability enhancing activities and to which degree individuals take part in them. Common for this research is that it often take the positive effects of increased employability for granted, and consequently examine which skills that are crucial in order to be employable, how these can be improved and measured, how employability training can be implemented in various contexts, and which actors that should take responsibility for helping the individual to become employable (e.g. Harvey, 2001; Bridgstock, 2009; van der Heijden, 2011; Collet et al., 2015; Renuga & Ezhilan, 2014). While the individual often is framed as being responsible for her own employability (see Finn, 2000; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005), some researchers and management scholars have argued that the improvement of employability should be a shared responsibility between the employer and the employee (e.g. Byron, 1995; Ellig, 1998; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Haasler, 2013; Veld et al., 2015). These ideas have however been criticized as unrealistic by other researchers, arguing that employers have little to gain by making their employees more attractive to their competitors (Baruch, 2001; Pruijt, 2013).

The anthology by Garsten & Jacobsson (2004) has been influential for the examination of employability discourses in a variety of contexts from a critical perspective. They write (2004:2) that a global discourse such as that on employability always must be translated and operationalized in concrete local practices and policies. They argue that employability discourses have a productive effect, in that they produce and shape subjects of specific kinds, and encourage more research on how this is done in different contexts at the interference of state and individual (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013:847). Although theoretically inspirational, Garsten & Jacobsson (2004) mainly studied employability in relation to various workplaces and business sectors rather than in relation to unemployment and job seeking as such. Other Swedish studies of employability have also largely focused either on other empirical contexts than unemployment, or on groups especially far from the labor market (e.g. Fejes, 2010;
Berglund, 2013; Diedrich & Styhre, 2013; Vesterberg, 2013). There is thus a need for research on how employability discourses impacts on the unemployed in Sweden.

Many studies have examined how discourses of employability impact on specific groups. Chertkovskaya et al. (2013:706) write that by “celebrating individual initiative and development”, discourses of employability risks to ignore or even reinforce social and structural divisions that make some groups more customized to ideals of employability than others. Employability could with Korteweg’s (2003:470) expression be characterized as a form of “one-size-fits-all” approach to welfare, were clients with different needs and backgrounds all are subjected to the same fixed programs and requirements modeled on an idealized subject. In relation to the “welfare to work” programs of New Labour in Great Britain, Peck & Theodore (2000:729) frames employability as a “supply-side fundamentalism”, where all problems in the labor market are located within the individuals seeking work. By putting more emphasis on individual responsibility than on structural problems in the labor market, the authors frame employability-based supply side solutions as unrealistic and possibly damaging in the long run, as they create an even more insecure and temporary labor market (Peck & Theodore, 2000:747p). Several studies confirm this by showing how employability-based solutions to unemployment disfavors for example women (Andersson 2003; Korteweg, 2003; Fogde, 2010), ethnic minorities (see Vesterberg, 2013; Diedrich & Styhre, 2013) and the functionally disabled (see Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013; Elraz, 2013), groups that face various structural barriers when attempting to become employable.

2.3 Job Seeking Advice and Career Coaching

Practices such as coaching and self-help literature have been noted to play an increasingly important role in shaping how people come to understand and work on themselves in contemporary consumer societies (see Rimke, 2000; Salecl, 2016), and some studies have also started examining these practices in relation to job seeking and employability. Fogde (2009) did in her dissertation study career coaching by a Swedish union directed to soon-to-graduate university students. She found that the students were encouraged to work on and construct themselves as flexible professionals, and to market and sell themselves as products to possible employers. Some students - especially women - had difficulties living up to these ideals (2009:48p). Although Fogde studied discourses on employability and job seeking in relation to students rather than the unemployed in general, her study is useful as it focuses on the demands that discourses of employability imposes on the individual in her everyday life. In
another study of students, Vesterberg (2015) points out how “CV-experts” and advice on how to behave at a job interview have become staples of the career centers of universities, that socialize students into contemporary norms of how they shall act, adapt to, present and understand themselves in professional situations.

Andersson (2003:64) did in part of her dissertation on unemployment study self-help literature for job seekers, which she found encouraged them to view themselves as products and to sell not only their skills but also themselves and their personalities. Similar to the results of Fogde’s study, Andersson (2003:62) further found that the literature conveyed masculine ideals modeled on a male, initiative taking subject. Other studies of job seeking websites and career- and self-help literature have shown how job seekers through these sites are encouraged to create their own personal brand (Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Brooks & Anumud, 2016), to use the CV as an individualizing device for self-presentation (Krejsler, 2007) and to view job seeking as a theatrical stage where they can endlessly re-invent and enact themselves as professionals suited for any and every job (Boland, 2016). What is similar for these studies is that they show how advice of this kind is important for regulating the actions of individuals looking for a job, and for steering them towards a certain kind of self-understanding and subjectivity. Since these studies mostly have focused on commercial settings where market related discourses are likely to be prominent, there is however also a need for research that examines these discourses in relation to the job seeking practices and policies of states.

Career centers and job intermediaries of various kinds are here also important actors for shaping how the unemployed come to understand themselves and their situation. In his study of an American state-sponsored support organization for white-collar workers, Sharone (2007) did for instance find that the inability to find a job was framed as a personal deficiency and individual shortcoming. The unemployed were socialized into viewing their job seeking as work in itself and in trying to do the “right” activities to empower themselves to be in control over their job seeking, which ultimately lead to self-blame and feelings of defeat for those failing to do so. Few of the job seekers did however openly criticize these individualistic premises, since that was accused by both the staff of the organization and other job seekers as negative thinking and “self-sabotage” (Sharone, 2007:414p). Other studies of similar contexts have also shown that job seekers tend to accept and reproduce ideals of an individual responsibility to become employable and to find a job, and that this in turn often generates anxiety, self-doubt and self-blame in them when failing to do so (Korteweg, 2003; Van Oort, 2013; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Boland & Griffin, 2015).
2.4 The Swedish Welfare State and Arbetslinjen

For understanding the specific setting of this study, the specificities of the Swedish welfare state must be outlined. Swedish labor market relations are often discussed in terms of a ‘Swedish model’, which from the late 1930’s onwards has emphasized mutual recognition between capital and labor as the main parties to compromise and negotiate on the labor market. This model must be understood in relation to the hegemony of the Social Democratic party during the 20th century. It is often traced back to the so-called Saltsjöbaden agreement in 1938 between the trade union LO and the employer organization SAF, which set up rules of negotiation between the parties (Magnusson & Ottosson, 2012:13). The model, which proved especially successful between the 50’s and the 70’s in generating high levels of growth, productive industries, high wages, strong welfare and low unemployment, has always entailed a balance act between economic and social-political ambitions. One central idea has been to promote solidaristic wage policies, which has meant that ineffective businesses unable to meet the wage claims could be taken out of business and their labor power reallocated to more productive sectors, thus ensuring high national productivity and growth. For those losing their jobs in such reallocations, this has however required a strong welfare state to fall back on and an active labor market which provides training and possibilities to quickly find new employment, elements which long has been staples of the Swedish model (Nycander, 2002:136, 403; Magnusson & Ottosson, 2012).

The self-image of Sweden is perhaps still similar to how Esping-Andersen typified it in his influential work (1990), as a “social democratic welfare state” that priorities strong welfare for all in need over the interests of the market. That would however be to ignore that the Swedish welfare state also has undergone many of the changes outlined in the previous sections. While the institutional arrangements of the Swedish model still remain relatively intact, the unions have during the last decades lost much of their influence and legitimacy, which has disrupted the previous balance between capital and labor (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:283; Allvin, 2004:36; Lindvert, 2011:32). Since joining the EU in 1995, Sweden has had to approach and implement its liberal active employment policy with employability, adaptability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities as its four pillars (Faurbæk, 2004; Jacobsson, 2004). The economic crisis and subsequent high levels of unemployment in the 90’s further prompted a change of the Swedish political and social landscape in the direction of other Western countries. The growing group of long-term unemployed was then framed as a “problematic” group that needed to be activated and responsibilized to apply for jobs and to
become employable on their own, through new active labor market policies (Peralta Prieto, 2006:61; Salonen, 2009:68; Olofsson, 2015:60). Although an active labor market long has been part of the Swedish model, the character of it changed as up-skilling and training programs were replaced by increased conditionality for receiving benefits (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013:829; Petersson, 2009).

The new activating workfare policies appeared along a simultaneous strengthening of the ideological concept ‘arbetslinjen’, which has a long history and has taken several different shapes throughout the years (Junestav, 2004). Arbetslinjen has long had strong connections with the Swedish model and the project of the social democratic welfare state, which has built on the idea that everyone must work according to their abilities in order to contribute to the common welfare (Salonen, 2009:66). Since the late 90’s arbetslinjen has however been strengthened by the drawing of a clearer separating line between the employed and the unemployed, where the later has been further stigmatized as living of the labor of others (Piipola, 2016:259). Davidsson (2010) shows that unemployment in the Swedish political debate today often is directly related to discourses of social exclusion, passivity, amorality and dependence, to which work is framed as the only remedy. Arbetslinjen could in this sense be understood as a work ethic which stresses that it is illegitimate to live on welfare benefits, and that work is not only a right but also a responsibility which requires individuals to make themselves employable and to take any job that is available (Paulsen, 2010:54p; Lindvert, 2011:31). In this form, arbetslinjen is today perhaps most strongly associated with the conservative government 2006-2014 that stressed the importance of privileging work of any sort over living on welfare benefits, and that it always must be profitable to work over not working. This has legitimized requirements on activation, increased control over job seekers, and lowered welfare benefits as ways of disciplining and motivating as many as possible to enter the labor market (Lindvert, 2011:31; Seing, 2011:85). This has also affected the work of the AF - the setting for this study - which we will finally turn to in the next section.

2.5 The Public Employment Service

The organization of the AF has changed many times over the years, in relation to wider shifts in the economy and the welfare state. Their first municipal offices were opened already in the early 1900’s to deal with the “unemployment issue” and by means of government subsidies match workers with employers (Olofsson, 2002:204; Fogde, 2009:14). The state took over the responsibility for the AF from the municipalities in 1940, and the organization was especially
during the ‘golden years’ of the Swedish model an important actor in providing training to the labor force so they could quickly find new employment if they lost their jobs (Thedvall, 2004:135). During the 50’s the AF worked with educating and developing the competences of selected groups of workers to the needs of the companies, also in times of low unemployment. In the 60’s the principle of full employment was extended into including the right to work with something of one’s own choosing, which resulted in a stronger emphasis on the preferences of the workers (Lindvert, 2006:42). This did however change in the 80’s, when there was what has been described as a radical shift in the AF’s organization (Ahrne et al., 1985) and the needs and preferences of the unemployed were deprioritized for attempts to meet the demands of employers as quickly as possible. This continued in the face of the mass unemployment of the early 90’s, when more emphasis was put on controlling the work capacities of the unemployed and to activate them to take more responsibility for themselves (Peralta Prieto, 2006:46, Salonen, 2009:70).

The previously so central role of the AF on the Swedish labor market has since the late 90’s been questioned, as they now have become one among many other actors on a new market for the intermediation of jobs. Since 2007 they contract so-called “complementary actors” such as private intermediaries of jobs, staffing agencies and private job coaches, that now take over the responsibility for the matching and coaching of job seekers far from the labor market (Lindvert, 2011:37). Although one of the AF’s main tasks still is to “match” job seekers with employers, their matching services have lately been shown to be very ineffective. One report by Svenskt Näringsliv show that only one out of ten find their job through the AF, and in those cases not necessarily even with the help of an officer; the administrative officers on average intermediates less than one job per month (Sahlén & Eklöf, 2013). This could partly be related to technological innovations such as computer services, job databases and online job adverts that have enabled an individualizing shift where job seekers increasingly are encouraged and responsibilized to search for jobs themselves rather than with the help of an officer (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:285; Peralta Prieto, 2011:68). Nonetheless, the existence of the AF is today questioned from several directions: the conservative-liberal political parties have recently argued that the AF should be closed down and their intermediary responsibilities moved entirely to private actors (SvD, 2017), and among the Swedish citizens the AF is the least popular public authority (Wilhelmsron, 2017).

With less focus on job intermediation, the AF’s task of controlling the activity of job seekers has instead been accentuated (Paulsen, 2015). When someone first register at the AF today, they meet an officer with whom they construct an individual action plan, an agreement
which details what is expected of the individual in terms of applying for jobs. This provides the foundation against which the AF control the activity of the job seeker, who must leave an activity report once a month of how they have followed the plan. Deviations from the agreement are reported to the unemployment insurance fund (‘arbetslöshetskassan’) and might result in withdrawn benefits (Walter, 2011). Besides increased control, there has also been a shift in the AF’s work from giving vocational training and labor market education, towards individual coaching practices and job seeking training (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013:829). Some have therefore argued that the AF no longer should be understood as an organization primarily working with direct intermediation of jobs, but rather as an organization that through its double functions of control and support “learn” the unemployed to act as responsible job seekers that actively search for employment on their own – while certain “risk groups” especially far from the labor market (such as newly arrived immigrants and the long term unemployed) do receive more directed support, large groups of job seekers have become increasingly responsibilized to deal with their situation themselves (Peralta Prieto, 2011; Walter, 2011). The AF’s coaching practices and advice to job seekers do however not seem to have been much studied in themselves, which is one knowledge gap this thesis attempts to fill.

2.6 Discussion of the Previous Research

The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism has resulted in a more insecure and precarious labor market, which requires more of the individual in terms of initiative, flexibility and adaptability. The increased demands on job seekers to take responsibility for their own career and employability rather than relying on support from the welfare state can be understood in the light of these changes. For understanding contemporary job seeking practices, employability is thus a central concept. Much research on employability do however take the positive effects of increased employability for granted, and consequently examine how the employability of certain groups can be increased, rather than questioning what discourses of employability actually mean in themselves and for the subjects exposed to them. There is thus, I would argue, a need for more research that critically engages questions of 1) what current discourses of job seeking and employability actually require of the individuals exposed to them, 2) how individuals are made to internalize and identify with these discourses, and 3) the implications of these discourses for their subjectivity and sense of self. The theoretical framework presented in the next chapter has been constructed with these questions in mind.
3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework presented in this chapter utilizes a Foucauldian governmentality perspective as a basis from which to understand contemporary job seeking practices. In the first section a number of central concepts and assumptions of this tradition are presented, which provide the theoretical foundation for the thesis. These perspectives are then complemented with theoretical concepts and arguments of consumer society and employability from theorists largely inspired by Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This combination provides a versatile arsenal of critical concepts that make it possible to approach the material from several different angles. The concluding summary provides a problematizing discussion of how the different theoretical traditions are compatible with each other, and how they can be combined for addressing the research questions.

3.1 Foucault, Governmentality and Technologies of the Self

The concept governmentality was initially used in the late works and lectures of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (e.g. 1988, 2010, 2014), but has after his death been developed into a more coherent analytical perspective by among others Nikolas Rose, Mitchell Dean and Peter Miller. Governmentality is thus not so much a “theory” as it is an analytical perspective broadly interested in the many ways in which power is exercised in modern societies. As the term implies, the perspective is concerned with different forms of governing, which refers to the power and control one can exercise over the body, soul, actions and thoughts of both oneself and others (Foucault, 2010:126).

Foucault (2010:115) initially used the concept governmentality to describe the genesis of the modern state and how it made the “population” a target for regulation and control. It is however not only states that govern, as the concept also is closely tied to how we are made to govern, discipline and work on ourselves as individuals. As a perspective, governmentality does in Dean’s words seek “to analyze those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals or groups” and “to connect questions of government, politics and administration to the spaces of bodies, lives, selves and persons” (2010:20).

---

4 The French word gouverner [to govern] has historically had many different meanings and significations, which makes it difficult to translate without losing some of its intended implications and nuances. For a discussion of the concept’s history and many meanings, see lecture V in Foucault (2010).
Governing operates through what within this tradition are called technologies of government. ‘Technologies’ should here not only be understood in the contemporary everyday sense of the word (e.g. as technological devices such as computers or cellphones), but in a broader sense also as mentalities, programs, documents, mechanisms, techniques and practices in which aspirations to govern the actions of specific groups or individuals are inscribed (see Rose, 1999:52). Foucault at one point used the concept governmentality to describe the “contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (Foucault, 1988:19), which implies a reciprocal connection between how we are governed by others and how we are made to govern ourselves. This connection is crucial to have in mind in the following, as the perspective is not only interested in how we are governed “from above” - by for instance states or corporations - but also in how we are made to perceive, discipline and work on ourselves as subjects. Foucault (1988) calls the practices through which knowledge is produced of how we are to govern ourselves and our conduct for technologies of the self. He discusses philosophical texts from ancient Greece and Christian principles from the fourth and fifth century as examples, and analyzes how they in various ways encouraged the subject to be concerned with, to know, and to care for itself. Self help-literature and job coaching has by other writers been framed as contemporary expressions of such technologies of the self, that shape how job seekers experience both themselves and their situation (e.g. Rimke, 2000; Fogde, 2009).

3.1.1 Power, Discourse and Subjectivity

Power and knowledge are strongly connected in Foucault’s writings. Contrary to many theories of power, Foucault do not only understood power to be repressive or prohibiting but also as being productive in the sense that the exercise of power produces for instance knowledge, truth, discourse, subjectivity and desire (Foucault, 1980:119). The power exercised when governing the unemployed is for instance productive in the sense that it produces normative knowledge and truth claims of both a “right” way and a “wrong” way to be unemployed, which opens different identity- and subject positions for unemployed individuals that must attempt to act in accordance with these normative ideals if they seek legitimacy and acceptance (see especially Dean, 1995). By producing knowledge of certain individuals, groups or areas of social life, of what is normal and abnormal, desirable and condemnable, power practices affects how we understand and relate to ourselves and the world around us: power both normalizes and excludes (Foucault, 1980).
A key concept here is discourse, a contested term with many different meanings (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) that today often refer to a social constructivist understanding of how language not simply reflects a social reality that is “out there” objectively, but how it in some sense also creates and reproduces social reality (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002:18; Bergström & Boréus, 2005:305). A discourse can be defined as a formation of linguistic statements and claims of truth regarding a specific topic, which set up rules for what can be said and thought about the topic at a specific point in time, and that excludes other things by rendering them “unspeakable” or “unthinkable” (Foucault, 1972:53, 133). If a strong work ethic is established discursively, it might for instance be almost impossible to think that any “normal” people would voluntarily choose unemployment. Miller & Rose write that the governing of specific populations only is possible “through discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with its own limits and characteristics” (2008:31), meaning that there always is a discursive component to how we are governed that set up rules and goals for how this can be done. Discourses (of for example unemployment) must however as Garsten & Jacobsson (2004:13) argues also be translated into concrete technologies, practices, documents, devices or programs (such as job seeking advice) in order to be presentable and communicable. Discourses are thus not abstract, independent and free-floating, but closely tied to social practices and material technologies.

Another central concept already mentioned is subjectivity. A similar concept would be identity, but a main difference is that subjectivity here is understood as being a result of being exposed to discourses and power practices. According to Foucault, discourses make up subjects in certain ways that make them seem self-evident and natural (see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000:1128). One is a subject both for oneself and for others: as Foucault writes, “[t]here are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (1982:781). With this he suggests that individuals are turned into self-governing subjects with an identity and sense of self in relation to discourses and power/knowledge practices that they must picture and understand themselves in relation to. Expanding on this reasoning, Knights & Willmott (1989:550) argues that discourses and power practices simultaneously exposes the individual to processes of subjectification and objectification, where the individual both is turned into a subject with a specific identity and sense of self, and into an object of knowledge, to be classified, shaped, treated or cured by power institutions. To be in an institutionalized position where one produce knowledge and discourse is thus also to exercise power, as it means that one not only takes
part in deciding what for instance is “normal”, “criminal” or “mental illness”, but also in creating subjects that “are” abnormal, criminal or mentally ill - or that at least must negotiate their identity in relation to these categorizations (e.g. Foucault, 2003).

One common criticism against Foucauldian research is that it leaves little room for resistance, as discourse is understood to have an over-determining effect on subjectivity (see for instance Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000:1145). The subject is then only conceived as a passive “docile body” that different power instances can freely mould and shape as they like (passages in Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 2003) could for instance be read like this). This criticism is worth taking seriously, and the tendency to overstate the influence of discourse and to downplay the agency of the subject certainly also is visible in influential attempts of translating Foucault to organizational research (such as Knights & Willmott, 1989). Following Bergström & Knights (2006:370), I find it useful to avoid this problem by understanding subjectivity as the effect of the interaction between organizational discourse and human agency, rather than the determinant of one of the two. Bergström & Knights (2006:354p) frames this interaction as a process of subjectification, where a subject position (as a “job seeker”, for instance) within the discourse is negotiated. The process of subjectification can be understood as a form of socialization, where the individual is exposed to and encouraged to internalize discourses and normative ideals and identities (Bergström & Knights, 2006:356). If the subjectification is totally successful (which it very seldom, if ever, is), the individual not only totally accepts her prescribed subject position within the discourse, but also believe this to be the result of individual choice and free will; this needs however not be the case, as the individual to varying degrees always can resist the discourse or even refuse a subject position within it altogether. Further, even when accepting a subject position, individuals must be expected to do so differently: some with enthusiasm, others with insecurity or (self-)doubt, still others with cynicism or irony.

3.1.2 Neoliberal Governing and Enterprise Culture

While modern Western societies in many ways are more democratic and free than they were in earlier ages, they have also come with new forms of repression and domination. The governmentality theorists hold the so-called neoliberal form of governing to be dominating in Western societies today (see Foucault, 2014; Rose, 1999). Foucault traces this mode of governing back to the early neoliberal thinkers of the Chicago School and the German Ordoliberals, that he argues had attempted to redefine the very nature and purpose of the state in
accordance with a market oriented logic which favors economic competition and growth as the fundamental principles of society, and which inscribes values of competition, entrepreneurship and risk taking into the very lives and subjectivities of people (Foucault, 2014:120). While often connected to a strong belief in free markets, free trade, maximized economic competition, deregulation and privatization, neoliberalism should here thus not only be understood as a static political ideology or a set of economic policies: it is rather, as Wendy Brown (2005:38) writes, a political rationality and a form of governing which aims at both restructuring society and producing subjects according to rational-economic principles. Neoliberalism do thus not only contain an economic-political analysis, but also

a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action (Brown, 2005:39p; emphasis in original).

In *Powers of Freedom*, Rose (1999:62) convincingly makes the case that neoliberal government steers people through their freedom. This is not as paradoxical as it first might sound - as Foucault himself wrote in *The Subject and Power* (1982:790), to govern means to steer the actions of others, which in the first place requires subjects that are free to choose and act in different ways. Power is in this sense not opposed to freedom, but requires and presupposes it. Rose (1999:68p) argues that in modern neoliberal societies, individuals are made to understand themselves as free subjects with personal responsibilities to work on and improve themselves in relation to the market: individuals are thus “not merely ‘free to choose, but obliged to be free,’ to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make” (Rose, 1999:87). By making individuals use their freedom to act and choose in certain ways rather than others, the “free subject” could according to Rose be conceived as the main technical instrument through which governmental objectives and purposes are achieved today.

Foucault (2014:138pp) writes that the enterprise or the company is constructed as the most basic component of neoliberal societies, and that also the individual has to be made up as an enterprise: he therefore argues (2014:195p) that the ideal neoliberal subject is the entrepreneur or the enterprising self, the *homo economicus* understanding herself in economic terms - that “invests” in her own “human capital” - and that makes active calculative choices on the market to improve her own economic interests. Moral, responsible action is for the enterpris-
ing self equated with economic, rational action (Brown, 2005:42). This enterprising subjectivity is not only constructed in relation to work, but constitutes a specific attitude to life in general; it extends continuous self-work, self-maximization and self-management into all spheres of life (Bröckling, 2016:35). As Rose puts it, for the enterprising self “life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self” (Rose, 1999:161), an ideal that we through a range of different institutions all are encouraged to strive towards today.

Miller & Rose (2008:26) point out the importance of what they characterize as a governing at a distance for realizing neoliberal and enterprising subjectivities today, where power is not exercised directly through the state but rather through expertise with claims on possessing the truth on various specialized subjects, truth claims that people then have to govern themselves and their dreams, wants and desires in relation to. The unemployed have for instance today in many contexts - not the least through state policies - been responsibilized to consume expert advice on how to find work (see Dean, 2010:188). The contemporary abundance of coaching and self-help practices must be understood in relation to this. Renata Salecl (2016) has captured the paradoxical character of coaching: although it often is a response to widespread feelings of anxiety and insecurity in society, these feelings are through the coaching related to the individual herself and her lacking self-confidence or initiative rather than to larger social problems. The highest goal for the coach is according to Salecl (2016:39) to motivate and re-integrate their clients into their expected roles as producers and consumers, thus reproducing established market relations.

Paul Du Gay relates the construction of contemporary subjectivities to the rise of an enterprise culture, which has restructured many institutions and activities in line with commercial enterprises and where “certain enterprising qualities - such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals - are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such” (1996:56). Du Gay here points at the centrality of consumption for the enterprise culture, as all spheres of life are reimagined as consumer relations. He writes that “[t]hrough the discourse of enterprise, the relations between 'production' and 'consumption', between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the corporation, and crucially between work and non-work based identities, are progressively blurred” (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992:624). These arguments will next be combined with Marxist oriented perspectives on commodification and consumer culture, that in a more explicit manner show how consumer relations are directly related to the functioning of contemporary capitalism and the flexible and insecure labor markets of today.
3.2 Consumer Society, Free Time and the Commodified Self

Social and cultural theorists have long pointed at the increased importance of consumer relations for how society is structured and for how we relate to each other and ourselves (e.g. Debord, 1987 [1967]; Marcuse, 2002 [1964]), some even arguing that we have entered a new consumer society (e.g. Baudrillard, 2010 [1970]; Bauman, 2008). A consumer society should however not be banally understood as if consumption at some point in time became much more important than production. Following Zygmunt Bauman (2008:18), I would rather like to understand it as a society where relations between people are taking the form of relations between consumers and their objects of desire. Consumer society does according to Bauman not only denote that everyone today must act as consumers in a wide variety of contexts, but that the consumers also must turn themselves into products (Bauman, 2008:67). Bauman (2008:73) writes that it today has become an individual responsibility for everyone to continuously create, market and sell themselves as products (not only on the labor market, but also at for instance dating sites where love has become commodified), by differentiating and distinguishing themselves from others so their market value can rise above the value of their competitors. Bauman (2008:19) therefore argues that no one can become a subject in a consumer society without first becoming an object; you must first understand yourself as a commodity with an exchange value before you can develop a legitimate subjectivity.

Bauman’s argument can be contextualized against the critique of commodification (the process where things previously not sold are turned into products defined by their exchange value) that goes back at least to Karl Marx. Capitalism’s commodification of labor is the crucial element in Marx’s economic analysis in Capital (2015[1867]) of how surplus value is generated, and already in his early philosophical writings he points out the fact that the worker has to sell his (sic!) labor as a commodity as the source of alienation (Marx, 1995[1844]:63). From an essentialistic perspective where free creative work is conceived as what makes us human, Marx (1995:66) laments that alienated labor turns the worker’s free time, the time of pure animalistic reproduction, into the only time when the worker can be truly human. A hundred years later, these thoughts were expanded on by the Frankfurt philosophers Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1997[1944]:137). They analyze how the free time of workers also is infiltrated by the profit motive and the “culture industry”, which they argue provides standardized, thoughtless entertainment products as a way of getting workers to cope with and readapt to the mechanized and alienating work process. They understand such entertainment products to have an ideological
function, as the consumption of them not only allows workers to recover new energy to put back into work, but also seduces them into conformity and make them accept the exploitation at work (1997:144). Adorno & Horkheimer proclaims, in what many today perceive as an elitist tone, that “[a]musement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work” (1997:137). Adorno expands upon these thoughts in a later text, *Free time*:

If we suppose with Marx that in bourgeois society labour power has become a commodity in which labour is consequently reified, then the expression ‘hobby’ amounts to a paradox: that human condition which sees itself as the opposite of reification, the oasis of unmediated life within a completely mediated total system, has itself been reified just like the rigid distinction between labour and free time. The latter is a continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life (Adorno, 1991:189).

Adorno was early in questioning how “free” our free time actually is; he saw that free time is not a clearly separated, distinct sphere from work and instrumental reason, but that it is shaped and guided by the very forces which it is defined in opposition to.\(^5\) This tendency has become even stronger in today’s flexible working life, where the boundaries between work and leisure for many workers have been blurred (e.g. Hochschild, 1997; Berardi, 2009). Bauman discuss this as a shift from *work ethics* to *consumer esthetics* (1998:39). He argues that the Protestant work ethic described by Max Weber (1978), where work was viewed as a “calling” that provides a sense of purpose and proudness to the worker, has become outdated. The ideal today is rather to view work as any other commodity and to judge it based on the satisfaction and pleasure it brings to the individual; the successful elite can today act as consumers on the labor market, by choosing work based on its “esthetic” qualities, if it is interesting and fulfilling or not. The majority that cannot act as actively choosing consumers on the labor market, but instead have to face an insecure and precarious work life, are therefore according to Bauman today first and foremost labeled as “insufficient consumers”, unable to exercise their freedom of choice in the ways expected of them (1998:55pp).

We see the similarities between Bauman’s argument and the theories of an enterprise culture discussed earlier, where the ideal neoliberal subject behaves as a “free” actor on the market by choosing between different lifestyles, products and commodities in order to realize herself. Critical management scholars have also in line with the enterprise culture theorists shown that many corporations today increasingly demand the whole personality of workers, by encouraging them to *be* their work and to choose it as part of their lifestyle: employees are

---

\(^5\) This critique is still relevant, perhaps more so than ever, but it is important - especially when utilizing a social constructivist perspective such as governmentality - to avoid the essentialist basis in these marxist theories where the subject is always more ‘truly herself’ outside of work.
today encouraged to just “be themselves” at work, which at the same time bind them even tighter to the organizational identity and requires them to internalize values of flexibility and potentiality into their very self (see for instance Fleming, 2014; Costea et al. 2012). As Peter Fleming (2014:96pp) argues, free time is thus today not only utilized as a reproductive zone of labor (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer), but workers are also asked to take their work home and to bring their free time, their interests and their personality back into work as productive resources that in various ways might benefit the employer. This points at changes in today’s working life, where work and free time no longer can be adequately separated.

Another aspect of this is that the very emotional life of workers in some sectors has become commodified, which Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003) illustrates in her influential study on emotional labor among flight attendants. The studied flight attendants were told that their smile was their biggest asset (2003:4). They were however not only encouraged to smile and pleasantly greet their customers through what Hochschild refer to as surface acting, were we work on how we outwardly appear to others (similar to the sort of acting and impression management studied by Erving Goffman, 2004), but also through deep acting where the display of emotions comes as a natural result of the direct work on one’s actual feelings and emotions (Hochschild, 2003:35). This was for instance achieved by encouraging the flight attendants to act as if the cabin was their living room, so that their service would seem authentic and genuine (2003:120). While emotional work certainly is prevalent in all sorts of social situations, emotional labor is directly related to capitalism and the profit motive, as it turns the worker’s emotions into a commodity valued only for the surplus generated. This has according to Hochschild (2003:7) possibly alienating consequences, as the worker “doing” emotional labor risks to become estranged from parts of her self and emotional life.

To summarize what has been said in this section, the presented theories hold that society has become more structured around consumer relations that have found their way into the most intimate and private parts of life, erasing the boundaries between both work and free time and between the economic sphere and other spheres of life. Today, everything has the possibility of being commodified. These changes has not only meant that people increasingly have to act as consumers, but also that they must understand themselves as commodities that have to be marketed and sold. These considerations will in the next section finally be more explicitly connected to the topical questions of the thesis, as some critical perspective on discourses of employability there will be presented and discussed.
3.3 The Ideological Fantasy of Employability

To become employable does according to Colin Cremin (2010, 2011) not mean to acquire certain definite skills, attributes or education; employability is not a definite state to reach but rather a continuous, never-ending process of “becoming”, of (re)transforming oneself in relation to the wants of specific employers. Cremin (2010:137) use the concept reflexive exploitation to describe this process, through which the individual wishing to become employable continuously must reflect on herself as a commodity that must interest the employer. Combining Marxism with the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, Cremin writes that job seekers due to the insecurity of labor have to picture and seek the approval of a non-existent “generalized boss” that they try to appeal to by working on themselves in ways this boss-in-the-abstract might desire of them:

Developing the qualities that only a particular employer wants is not an option for anyone who does not want to be dependent on that one employer for ongoing employment. The subject cannot do anything other than desire what employers in the abstract desire. The boss of all bosses, the boss of it all, is a spectral presence haunting our lives. His demands are both pervasive and insatiable (Cremin, 2011:44).

The individual’s personal desires are thus according to Cremin conflated with the employer’s desires in discourses of employability, as subjects in a dialectical process must realize themselves and overcome their “lack” of employability by becoming more like what the employer desires and wants them to be. Cremin writes that employability “connects the lifestyle, the identity, the politics, and the passions of the subject as assets for competitive advantage” (2010:137), which implies that in order to become employable job seekers are not only required to write down their past work experiences in a CV, but also to continuously utilize their free time in strategic ways to further enhance their value and competitive position on the market. Understanding employability like this provides a direct link between employability and wider discussions of enterprise culture and commodification, and also directly connects the discourse of employability to the functionality of capitalism.

---

6 To briefly contextualize, in Lacanian theory a certain “lack” in the subject, an incompleteness and a feeling of missing something fundamental - what Lacan calls the objet petit a, the unattainable object cause of desire - is seen as being constitutive of the subject as such; the subject is always divided, always attempting to overcome its lack and find closure (see Žižek, 2008:204). It is against this background that Cremin in relation to employability writes: “The subject comes to desire the desire of the employer in the pursuit of (lost) objects that (in)directly constitute employability. The objet petit a of capital, profitability, conjoins with the objet petit a of subjectivity, desire for the thing that is lost or lacking, here employability. Thus subjective desire and the objective needs of capital enter into a dialectical synthesis” (2010:146).
Bogdan Costea with colleagues (2012) use the concept potentiality to frame discourses of employability, arguing that such discourses pictures the individual as having an unlimited potential of becoming something more and better than what she already is (2012:26). They argue that employability is directly linked to individualistic discourses of self-realization through work, and that it has become something of an ethical imperative that we must work on ourselves and improve our employability in order to realize our true potential: “Work is represented as a process of freeing up, liberating and mobilizing the subject’s inner qualities always ready to be actualized” (2012:31). Costea et al. therefore argues that discourses of employability deny human limits, as the individual always is framed as being insufficient with room for self-improvement. Such discourses do according to the authors represents a dangerous form of individualism, which might create anxiety and guilt in the subject as she is forced to constantly be preoccupied with working on herself in order to reach a never attainable ‘full potential’ (2012:33-34).

Advancing similar arguments, Peter Bloom (2013) frames employability as an ideological fantasy of self-mastery and self-fulfillment, closely tied to capitalism’s need of generating profit and surplus value. Building on Lacan, Bloom writes that employability can be considered an ideological fantasy that “present a false illusion of self-determination in which the employee, rather than the employer, is in charge” (2013:788). Employability is in Bloom’s argument a supply-side solution to unemployment that promises that the unemployed can take control over their employment through self-mastery and self-improvement. It is however not in the individual job seeker’s power to decide to be employable; it is always the employer – the demand side of labor - that actually decides who is employable and who is not (Bloom, 2013:788). This illusion do however steer the life of the job seeker even if she is skeptical of employability as a solution to her unemployment; we can as the title of Cremin’s article (2010) suggests due to the insecurity of labor never be “employable enough”, and we must therefore constantly work on our employability in order to avoid unemployment.

Without any intentions to dwell too much on the psychoanalytical subtexts of Bloom’s argument, his reasoning can be nuanced by Žižek’s (2008:45) insistence that subjects from a Lacanian perspective always unconsciously structure social reality around ideological fantasies that they use to fill out inconsistencies in their social order. In clear opposition to the traditional Marxist understanding of ideology as a distorting false consciousness which makes subjects unable to see their “true” interests (originating from The German Ideology, Marx & Engels, 2000[1846]), ideology do according to Žižek not primarily work through our thoughts but through our actions. For an ideological fantasy to be successful it is not necessary that we
believe it to be “true”, as long as we act as if it were true: in relation to ideological influence, Žižek claims that “people know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know [...] even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them” (2008:30). Translating these considerations to employability, the promise that we can take control over our employability is an individualistic fantasy of self-mastery that – especially as an answer to widespread unemployment – might seem ridiculous in its total neglect of structural circumstances on the labor market. As the labor market is structured, it is nonetheless a fantasy we must live by if we want employment (Bloom, 2013:795). To call it a fantasy is thus not to deny that employability (and especially the lack of it) has consequences that for the individual are very real, and it is precisely for this reason that its ideological influence can be assumed to be so great.

3.4 Discussion and Operationalization of the Theoretical Framework

Although the presented theoretical perspectives diverge on a number of important issues (including their view on discourse and the subject), I believe it is both possible and desirable to combine different critical perspectives without necessarily having an ambition to make a synthesis of them (see Alvesson & Deetz, 2000:121). To avoid insoluble clashes between different theoretical traditions, I have however chosen to utilize governmentality as the base of the theoretical framework which not only provides analytical concepts, but also wider epistemological and ontological assumptions of how power operates and of how discourse shapes subjectivity. These assumptions make it possible to examine the AF’s knowledge production of how one is to seek work as a “productive” activity through which they, so to speak, “create” job-seeking subjects. The perspectives on enterprise culture, consumer society and employability do on the other hand provide more of a toolbox of analytical concepts and arguments (the “superstructure” of the framework, if one so likes) that will enable a deeper understanding of what the advice given by the AF actually mean in relation to wider social, cultural and political contexts. What is most important for the framework is that the perspectives can be used with the same critical ambition to illuminate how ideologies operate and to question and de-naturalize common sense-assumptions of how things “really are”.

Where governmentality according to Dean (2010:39p) often premiers “how-questions” (“how we are governed”, or “how power operates” in a specific context), the other perspectives will allow me to venture beyond the “how” by illuminating other aspects of these practices. The point is not to “test” the theories, but to use them as adaptable, analytical tools with
which to further trace out both the theoretical and empirical complexities of subjectivation processes on the labor market. For relating these considerations to the research questions, this means that they can be specified more theoretically:

- **Which norms and ideals of how job seekers are supposed to act and understand themselves in order to become employable are (re)produced by the AF?** - This entails a focus on the discourses and knowledge produced by the AF of what is required by job seekers to become employable. The insistence that knowledge and discourses are productive is here essential, since this means that such knowledge have an impact both on individuals, practices and wider social norms and ideals. The perspectives on employability will further allow me to make sense of the identified discourses.

- **How are the unemployed made to internalize, identify with and act according to the expectations on them?** - This requires an examination of the governing of job seekers, with special focus on the technologies (the techniques, practices, programs etc.) utilized by the AF to steer the actions and self-understanding of the job seekers. The arguments of neoliberal governing will here be important for understanding how governing operates today and which sort of technologies that are commonly utilized.

- **Which implications might the identified ideals have for the subjectivity and everyday life of job seekers?** - This question requires the complexities of the subjectification process, where subject- and identity positions are negotiated to the unemployed, to be scrutinized. The perspectives on neoliberalism, enterprise culture, consumer society and employability are here also essential, for being able to relate these processes to a wider social and cultural context, and for understanding which consequences the job seeking ideals might have for the everyday life of the job seekers.
4 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach and the analytical procedure of the thesis. The setting of the study and the empirical material is also thoroughly presented, and reflexivity and transparency are highlighted as partial solutions to some of the difficulties that this study has faced.

4.1 A Governmentality Approach

This study takes its methodological departure from the governmentality tradition, which as shown before has a social constructivist basis and a critical ambition to examine how the social world and the individuals, groups and practices within it are made up and governed through power-knowledge relations and discursive practices. One major point with doing so is to de-naturalize practices and assumptions that often are taken for granted, in order to make the ideologies, interests and ideas (the mentalities) they build on visible (see Miller & Rose, 2008:31). Although governmentality studies tend to be of a qualitative character, the perspective is open for different kinds of empirical material as long as it can illuminate how knowledge and truth of certain areas of social life is produced and legitimated, and how this give rise to certain practices, power relations and subjectivities (Dean, 2010:33). Since the focus of this study has been the knowledge and truth claims that the AF produce of job seeking and the process where they socialize individuals in relation to them, a close qualitative reading of the data has been necessary in order to understand and make visible how it works and which ideals that are produced through it.

Governmentality is closely related to discourse analysis, as both perspectives take interest in how social reality is shaped through language (Miller & Rose, 2008:29pp). The material has for this reason largely been approached as text (in a broad, post-structuralistic sense) that not describe reality as it objectively is, but that rather shapes and creates social reality by producing normative and political truth claims and categorizations of it (see Bergström & Borèus, 2005:326; Bolander & Fejes, 2009:85); these truth claims have been the focus of my analysis, and the de-naturalization of them my purpose. Governing is however not only discursive and textual, as thoughts and words also must be materialized and operationalized into concrete forms and devices that can be directed to the people to be governed (what in the theoretical chapter was referred to as technologies). These material technologies are in
themselves very important to study, and this is something I have attempted to do as well. I have here taken much inspiration from Garsten & Jacobsson:

In our view, discourse, as a system of thought and meaning, is expressed in the language used but also finds material expression in social practice. Discourse presents a perspective from which reality can be described, phenomena classified, positions taken and actions justified. As such it is closely intertwined with specific social practices (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:12p).

Taking my cue from their argument that larger discourses always must be translated into local contexts, practices and technologies, I have attempted to “study the global discourse and local practices of employability in connection with each other” (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:2, emphasis in original). I have avoided restricting myself to one of the more specific forms of discourse analysis (such as ‘critical discourse analysis’ or ‘discourse psychology’ - see Winther Jørgensen & Phillips (2002) for an overview) and instead utilize a broad approach, where I have taken interest in both how language and discourse shape social reality but also in how concrete practices in turn shape discourse (cf. Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004:274). The focus has therefore not only been what is being said, but also how it is being communicated and addressed to the audience – as we will see, the material has been approached both as discursive text and as a concrete, technological medium.

4.2 The Material and the Setting

The setting of the study is the Public Employment Service (AF), and the analyzed material consist of seventeen of their ‘webinars’ - mixed lectures and seminars broadcasted over the internet - and an interview with two of their officers (from which information also is utilized below, when further describing the setting and the material). Because of their centrality on the Swedish labor market, the AF has been a suitable organization for addressing the research questions. Other cases were also considered, but none of them appeared to have the same influence in shaping norms and ideals of unemployment as the AF do, due to their mission of both controlling and supporting the unemployed when they seek work (Walter, 2011). The fact that they are a state authority has further made them interesting to study, since much previous research on job seeking has focused on private and commercial settings where it is reasonable to believe that somewhat different norms and ideals are reproduced. While the background to and the historical transformations of the AF are discussed in the chapter on previous
research, their organization and their mission are described in more detail in the next section. After that, the material is presented and discussed.

4.2.1 The Setting: The Public Employment Service

The AF is a public authority whose mission and objectives are decided by the government and parliament, and stated in laws and regulations (SFS 2000:628; SFS, 2007:515; SFS 2007:1030). More specific instructions and tasks are also specified in yearly regulation letters by the government (AF, 2017g). The main objectives of the organization are currently to make it easier for job seekers and employers to find each other, to give priority to supporting people far from the labor market, and to help newly arrived immigrants find employment as quickly as possible (AF, 2017b). These missions also include the task of “matching” employers with employees, a service which lately has been shown to be very ineffective (Sahlén & Eklöf, 2013). The AF is lead by an executive board of which all members, including the director general, are chosen by the government. The director general leads the work of the organization based on the directives and guidelines of the executive board. The organization has about 14400 employees and 280 offices over the country (AF, 2017a 2017e). Its operative intermediation activity is split in three national regions - north, central and south - that in turn are divided in ten smaller geographical market regions, where the local employment offices are organized. Beside the three national regions, the AF has three staffs and seven divisions that develop guidelines, strategies and policies and are responsible for the governance, management and development of the organization (AF, 2017d).

One of the AF’s divisions, Digital Services, is responsible for the webinars that have been chosen as material. Digital Services is a relatively new division within the AF, which opened in the beginning of 2015 with about 20 employees and with the task of developing online platforms and services for the organization. The division has since then rapidly grown and do at present have around 130 employees, seven of which work with the webinars. The personnel includes technicians and producers of digital content, as well as workers with experience from the daily intermediation activities of the AF that are responsible for planning and presenting the content of the digital platforms. Beside the webinars, Digital Services are also responsible for other forms of digital content of the AF, such as their job seeking podcast, their social media pages and various forms of advice uploaded on their website.
4.2.2 Webinars

The webinars can be described as mixed video lectures and coaching seminars that are broadcasted live over the internet, through which viewers are offered advice on specific topics related to job seeking. The webinars are streamed through the platform Bambuser.com, where they are also viewable afterwards until a new webinar on the same topic is broadcasted. No registration is needed to view them, and they are public to see for everyone having access to an electronic device with an internet connection. If accessed on a computer, there is also a chat window next to the video, where the audience can discuss with each other and ask questions. When attending a webinar, one sees and hears a “lecturer” of the AF talk about the topic at hand. The visuals are simple but effective, either focusing on the lecturer looking straight into a static camera in front of a blue background, or diminishing the lecturer to the bottom right corner while instead focusing on PowerPoint slides (as in the screenshot below). There are usually a couple of officers from the AF’s customer service active in the chat, and every webinar also contains two question breaks in the scripted lecture, where a second officer behind the camera read questions aloud to the lecturer, that answers them in real time.

![Screenshot from a webinar on the job interview (2016m). To the left is the video lecture, to the right the chat.](image)

The first webinars were developed and broadcasted in March 2015, with the goal of translating physical job coaching meetings to a digital context. Since then the service has developed in several new directions, with webinars on new topics being developed regularly. One respondent from the AF told me that the organization “increasingly only offer [job coaching and job seeking advice] over the internet”, and that this shift in organization towards digital services will only continue to grow in importance in the coming years, with digitalization even
being “a question of survival” for the AF. Developing the webinars has partly been a way to rationalize the work of the AF, by making it possible to reach many people with comparatively small resources: as one respondent told me, instead of reaching 10-15 participants as with a physical seminar, the webinars allow them to with just a few persons, a camera and an internet connection reach a live audience of several hundred viewers. This rationalization has further allowed them to produce webinars on a wide variety of topics and to “give unified information of high quality to persons that participate from all over the country”. Accessibility and efficiency are thus two advantages of the webinars, which allow the AF to make a wider amount of job seeking advice available both in time and space to everyone interested.

Every webinar is centered on a specific topic. Titles such as CV, Personal marketing and The job interview are quite self-explanatory, while the specific content of others such as Boost your job seeking, Find the hidden jobs and Stick out with your application documents are somewhat harder to guess just from the titles. The webinars mix tips and advice of how to seek work with information about the AF and the viewer’s rights and responsibilities in relation to them. The division Digital Services do according to the respondents have a relative autonomy in their planning of the webinars, without any directives of what to include in them. They do however receive much feedback from different directions that they try to incorporate when planning the webinars, in order to keep them relevant and attractive to the audience:

We get much input on the content, both from those that have participated at the webinars and also from other employment officers that request different themes [...]. So that is something which allows us to continuously develop the webinar so it feels up-to-date, it’s not just what we think is interesting but rather those that seek work, what do they want? That’s what we want to give them (interview).

The targeted audience for the webinars is according to the respondents job seekers in general (although there are also a few webinars directed to employers). The audience consists of both men and women of different ages, and the AF work much with making the webinars accessible and relevant to as large groups as possible: there are for instance a few webinars in both easy Swedish and other languages, as well as with sign language interpretation. Webinars on for instance how to apply for jobs at different ages or how to become established on the Swedish labor market further indicates that the AF want to reach out to large groups of unemployed and not just the youth. Although Digital Services with their 130 employees still remain a marginal division within the AF, the webinars have a wide reach and have at the time of writing been viewed more than 190 000 times in total (Bambuser, 2017).
Data Selection

There are a number of reasons for why the webinars have been chosen as material. As we just saw, the AF increasingly only offers job coaching through digital platforms, and in this context the webinar is their most complex service: since they consist of both audio, video and communication with the audience, a webinar is much richer on information than for instance a podcast episode or written advice on a website. The chat has made it possible to study the interaction between the AF and the viewers, something that had been impossible with more static forms of job seeking advice or interview data. Being a new and under-examined medium, the webinars have further provided a good opportunity to enhance the understanding of how digitalization in a wider context might impact on the relation between state and citizen. As states more and more adapt their activities and operations to the digital era and physical coaching seminars are replaced by digital ones, there is a subsequent need for social science to examine these new digital practices (see Fogde, 2009:46).

Seventeen webinars in total, each one hour long, have been selected and analyzed. These have had a live audience ranging from 115 to 446 viewers, with several hundred more also viewing each webinar after the initial live broadcast. To include webinars on as many topics related to job seeking as possible, most of the webinars on job seeking available up until the middle of March 2017 - when I started to transcribe and analyze the material - were selected. At that point I had detected a certain saturation in the topics discussed, and therefore started processing the collected data (cf. Bryman, 2011:216). Some of the webinars have after a while been replaced by newer versions on the same topic, but in those cases I have not transcribed the new versions, since this would have resulted in too much data to handle and the different broadcasts often follow similar scripts. It should however be said that the webinar is a constantly evolving medium, and the ones I have studied are therefore only representative for themselves and not necessarily for later or earlier webinars on the same topic. Generalizations of that kind have however never been the intended purpose of the study.

One disadvantage with examining webinars and other similar digital services is that they cannot be used to draw conclusions of how any actual, real individuals react to the discourses produced through them (even though some reactions are visible in the chat). While I certainly could have interviewed job seekers instead of examining the webinars, this had only resulted in a small sample of people telling me how they experience their situation; such studies can certainly be useful for understanding how social actors interpret their situation, but not

---

7 A full list of the webinars analyzed can be found in the references section.
necessarily for illuminating how larger discourses and ideologies operate and are reproduced. The webinars could also have been complemented with such interviews, but that idea was for several reasons rejected. The webinars have in themselves provided large amounts of data to analyze, and the complementation with interviews would take the focus away from the webinar as an in itself interesting form of communication between state and citizen. The webinars have for similar reasons (time, space and focus) not been complemented with data from for instance podcast episodes or brochures, as this would result in a non-manageable amount of data for a project of this size. In order to contextualize my understanding of the webinars, two officers of the AF have however been interviewed.

4.2.3 Interview

In order to get close to the production of the data, two officers from Digital Services with good insight into the different steps of the planning and production of the webinars have been interviewed. Asking questions of how, why and for whom the webinars have been produced has allowed me to contextualize and nuance my own understanding of the data. This has also been a way to increase the validity of the study, by securing that I understand the official purpose of the data in the same way as the AF do (cf. Hancké, 2009:90). I contacted Digital Services through e-mail, describing the purpose of the study and asking them if someone informed on the various aspects of the webinars would like to participate. One officer replied that s/he along with a colleague would be happy to participate. The interview took place at their office, where I was also shown their recording studio. This gave me a better understanding of the technological/material foundation of the webinars and the work behind them. During the interview I utilized a semi-structured question guide, built around certain themes - the background to the webinars, the purpose and targeted audience for them, their content, how they relate to the AF’s wider tasks and mission, and their technical form. The interview was conversational, as the order of the questions was not entirely followed and I asked follow-up questions when needed (Widerberg, 2002:99). Although the interview situation always is constructed and the researcher always is part of directing and shaping the data (Holstein et al., 1995:113), I tried to ask open and non-leading questions that would allow the interviewees to express their own opinions. The interview took approximately 40 minutes and was recorded and transcribed directly afterwards.
4.2.4 Ethical Considerations

The webinars are public for everyone to see and the information in them do not represent the opinions of any specific individuals but rather the AF as a state authority. Analyzing them and their content has therefore not entailed any major ethical problems. In order to not bring any attention to the lecturers of the webinars as individuals, I have not referred to their name or any other characteristics related to them when writing the analysis. Otherwise, it is mainly the chat that has posed some ethical dilemmas. Viewers do themselves pick usernames for the chat: some use what seem to be their real names, while others use nicknames or words that make them impossible to identify. While this means that there is a possibility to be anonymous for those that would like to, it would still be irresponsible to write out the full name of the participants in the analysis without their consent. In a compromise between anonymity and transparency, I have - since the webinars are public and the written comments not are of a confidential character - tried to keep the original usernames from the chat when possible, but to change them if they disclose any full, real name.

Regarding the interview, the respondents were both when I first contacted them by e-mail and at the beginning of the interview in line with the ethical principles of Vetenskapsrådet (2002) informed of the purpose of the study, that I would not reveal their names in the thesis, that participation was completely voluntary, that I would be the only one with access to the data, and that I would like to record the interview. Since both the AF and the division they work at are named throughout the thesis, complete anonymity was not something that could be promised. Since the interview data is of official character and is used sparingly in the presentation of the results, I do however in dialogue with Vetenskapsrådets (2002:12) discussion of the principle of confidentiality not see any major ethical dilemmas with disclosing the setting, as this has been necessary for placing the study in its right context. I have however for this reason been careful to not disclose any personal information of the respondents, such as their name, gender, age or position within the AF.

4.3 The Analytical Process

The analytical process of the study is discussed in more detail below. I describe how the data has been collected, processed and transcribed, how the data subsequently was coded, thematized and analyzed, and how the quality of the analysis has been secured by the utilization of reflexivity and transparency.
4.3.1 Data Gathering and Transcription

After selecting the material, I began to familiarize myself with the webinars by viewing them and writing down themes and discourses that were prevalent. The accessibility of the webinars was in this sense a blessing, that has allowed me to continuously consult the material throughout the project in order to develop a deeper understanding of it and to expand both my theoretical and empirical arguments in relation to each other (see Bryman, 2011:523pp). Before processing the data more systematically, the webinars were recorded on a computer so that I could go back to them in case they were removed from the website. They were then viewed through once again and transcribed word for word in Swedish. Parts that obviously lacked relevance for the study were not transcribed but marked with [...] in the transcription. I regularly paused during transcription to survey the writings in the chat - in case something that could be related to my research question was written, this was noted in the transcription, as well as if something of interest happened in video.

4.3.2 Coding, Thematization and Analysis

Transcribing the webinars resulted in about 200 pages of text. These were continuously printed out, read through and coded with an open coding procedure, where everything of interest was coded either with a summarizing word or sentence or with a fitting theoretical concept. The coding thus moved back and forth between deductive and inductive reasoning, between generating new codes and themes out of the data and constructing the wider theoretical framework in relation to them (see Flick, 2002:ch15). Being a form of ‘natural’ empirical material that has been produced independently of me as a researcher (Fogde, 2009:69), the webinars touch upon many different topics of which not all have been of direct interest for my thesis. I did therefore selectively code only what was deemed of interest rather than, say, code every sentence or paragraph. When coding, I did with the research questions in mind search for certain things: which discourses and ideals of unemployment, job seeking and employability that were prevalent; how these overlapped and interacted with each other; what was being said and what was not being said about the topics at hand; which technologies that were used to address the viewers; how identities and subject positions were negotiated; and how agency, duties and responsibilities were distributed. I read through the transcriptions several times, both to find new things of interest and to refine previous codes.

After the coding process, the codes and the quotes corresponding to them were collected and thematized in a separate document. I did here search for recurring patterns and shapes in
the data in order to grasp how different codes related to each other, so that they could be grouped together under larger themes (Hjerm, Lindgren & Nilsson, 2014:63p). The themes were then structured in relation to the research questions, which provided the basic structure for the presentation of the results. When compiling the results, the quotes that best represented the themes I wanted to highlight were included and analyzed. Since the transcriptions were in Swedish I had to translate the quotes into English, which provided some dilemmas. I always attempted to stay as close to the original transcripts as possible, but in a few cases - when colloquial speech or grammatical inconsistencies were present in the original transcript - I have prioritized to convey the meaning of the original quote to the reader, rather than to give a perhaps slightly more faithful but incomplete translation of the sentence in its entirety.

4.3.3 Reflexivity, Reliability and Validity

With a theoretical basis in social constructivism, it must be problematized that I as a researcher also is part of a scientific production of knowledge that cannot be considered neutral or objective (see the discussion in Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002:21). Certain theoretical, ideological and normative preconceptions and interests have shaped this thesis in everything from the questions asked, to the theories chosen and the things I have noticed and found interesting in the data. This is arguably an unavoidable result of a social science that is multi-paradigmatic, non-dogmatic and where the social scientists themselves are part of the social world they study. Already Max Weber (2012:241) recognized that there can be no completely objective social science independent of the researcher, who always must choose certain problems rather than others and approach them from his or her own cultural horizon. He reasoned that researchers should attempt to be value-neutral in their scientific work, which is an laudable ideal to strive towards but nonetheless an ideal I think might be difficult to fully realize in practice. Stating that there cannot be any completely neutral, aperspectival and apolitical social science is however not to relativize science, but rather to acknowledge that I as a producer of knowledge have strong responsibilities (see Harding, 1992).

The concepts validity and reliability are often used in this context. These concepts do however derive from more quantitative or positivistic research traditions that hold it possible to produce “objective” generalizable results, and I would therefore argue that they cannot be directly implemented in a study rooted in social constructivism without certain problems (see Bergström & Borèus, 2005:352). Assuring high quality and trustworthiness is however obviously just as important here as within any other research tradition. To do this I have strived
towards being as reflexive as possible, to be as open with and vary of my own position as I can, to reconsider what I thought I knew when needed, and to be transparent with my presuppositions and arguments throughout (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000:127).

Reflexivity and transparency have been especially important when presenting and analyzing the results. Although I have tried to let the data speak for itself, a purely inductive research approach is impossible. As a researcher I do not collect data that is “out there” waiting for me to objectively present it, but I am on the contrary at every step part of choosing, constructing and interpreting the data in certain ways rather than others (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000:127). By presenting many quotes from the data, I have tried to ground my interpretations in concrete examples that make my line of thought visible to the reader (see Bergström & Boréus, 2005:354). This has also required me to reflexively confront myself and my selections: “Why did I chose this quote and not another? Is it representative of the material? Are there any other quotes I could have chosen instead? Do I need to complement it with another quote that nuances the data as a whole?” Still, the chosen quotes only represent a fraction of the 200 pages of transcriptions, and it goes without saying that other researchers would find other quotes and themes more interesting. While this illustrates how hard it is to speak of reliability and replicability in this sort of study, I have tried to stay as faithful as I can to the original meaning of the quotes by, when needed, explaining their context to the reader. When judging if a quote has been worth presenting in the results, I have both considered to which extent it is representative of wider thematic patterns in the data, and to which extent it is possible for the reader to understand it outside of its original context.
5 Results

This presentation of the empirical results is structured based on the larger thematic patterns found in the data, with focus on three main themes: advice for enhancing employability, strategies for creating a professional self and technologies for governing job seekers. The first section scrutinizes the characteristics, attitudes and routines that are constructed as ideal for job seekers and the activities they are encouraged to engage in to become employable. The second section examines how the viewers are encouraged to negotiate the ‘subject position’ as professional, enterprising and self-regulating workers by balancing conflicting demands of both being themselves and being professional. The third section examines the ‘technologies’ used to influence the viewers to internalize the expectations on them and to accept their prescribed subject positions. As will become apparent, these themes are strongly interrelated and do in practice often overlap.

5.1 Advice for Enhancing Employability

We are an authority with a very large mission. To intermediate jobs is a very important part, but then we do many other things as well. By being able to offer webinars we show that we are an expert authority on giving advice to people that seek work. It is also a way to reach out in a unified way, with professional, inspirational and confidence inspiring information that allows people that seek work to advance in their job seeking (interview).

In this quote, one of the respondents speaks of the purpose of the webinars in relation to the wider mission of the AF. We see that the webinars should not primarily be understood as a service related to the AF’s task of intermediating jobs, but rather as part of the supportive and coaching stratum of their services through which they as an “expert authority” offer support and advice on how the unemployed can turn themselves into successful, employable job seekers. This section focuses on what job seekers are encouraged to do in order to become employable, in relation to four identified themes: the viewers are encouraged to actively apply for jobs, to market and sell themselves as products, to expand social capital through networking and to engage in personality- and self-work.
5.1.1 The Importance of Being Active

To become a successful job seeker, one must according to the advice in the webinars first of all adapt to certain routines and have a certain attitude towards one’s situation. To actively apply for jobs is here framed as the most essential task, a task which is not talked of as a choice but as a personal responsibility: unemployment is described as a kind of work in its own right, which obliges individuals to be active in continuous job seeking. In the webinar Boost your job seeking, the viewers are for instance informed that “[i]f you normally work 40 hours a week, an ordinary work week, then that is the time you shall also spend on your job seeking”. It is also said that “I think that many of you that watch today agree that job seeking really can be like a full time job. Considering all the time you do put down on your job seeking, I will today give you some simple advice on how to be more effective” (2016h). With a normative matter-of-factness, the lecturer states that the viewers do put very much time on their job seeking, which normalizes this assumption and make those that do not do so appear as deviant. Equating job seeking with an occupation in this way encourages the viewers to adapt a certain mentality, where they understand it as their duty as responsible citizens to independently seek work during the days in order to “earn” their welfare provisions. Passivity is simultaneously constructed as something to carefully avoid: perhaps for this reason, the viewers are never explicitly referred to as unemployed - with all the passive connotations that word carries - but are instead consequently referred to as job seekers “looking for new challenges”.

To help the job seekers stay active, the AF recommend them different activities to try out when seeking work. Apart from (re)writing the CV and personal letter and answering job vacancies, they are also recommended to market themselves, to network and to work on their self-presentation. They are also advised to contact and send in spontaneous applications to different employers (2016n) and to look for “hidden jobs” (2016i) where there has not been any job advert published by surveying social media or using their network. It is emphasized that the important thing is not to do all these activities at once, but to always stay active and choose to do something. To not be overwhelmed by all activities, the viewers are told that they must plan and structure their time. The lecturers do for instance give suggestions on different ways of writing a job-seeking schedule, so that the job seekers can find a way of organizing their time that suits them personally. Not only job seeking activities but also leisure breaks are ideally to be scheduled, both to increase one’s efficiency and to avoid passivity.

---

8 The “viewers”, the “job seekers” and the “attendants” are used interchangeably to refer to the audience of the webinars.
Scheduling here works as a kind of self-discipline which pressures the individual to prioritize tasks deemed useful instead of wasting time on non-productive activities. Speaking of her own experiences of having a job-seeking schedule, the lecturer at one point says that

I realized that it made me more effective. I actually did more tasks, because I didn’t need to think, “shall I prioritize this, or this or this”, but instead I just did the next task on the schedule. Furthermore, I could drop my job seeking when the job-seeking day was over. I could take time off with a good conscience (2016h).

Similar to what Andersson (2003:47) found in her study of self-help books for the unemployed, free time is here framed as something which must be earned through active and dutiful work before it can be appreciated without anxiety and bad conscience. This creates a clear demarcation between work and leisure where both are characterized as important, but it also constructs a hierarchy between the two spheres where work (and job seeking) must be prioritized. The viewers must adopt this attitude towards their job seeking, which is further exemplified in this quote: “It is important to rest, because you need [the energy] to keep looking for a job. You need to rest to be alert when you actually are to search for a job, so you must take time off with a good conscience” (2016n). Free time is here instrumentalized and framed as a means for the job seeker to cope and to replenish energy to seek work at full force the next day. I would argue this has a twofold result: it reproduces the work ethic where hard work is placed at the centre of a meaningful life, but it also attempts to help the job seekers adapt to the flexible and competitive work life of today where boundaries between work and leisure often are blurry and diffuse. The viewers must here find their own strategy for achieving a balance between work and leisure: they must certainly stay active and avoid passivity, but in a time where it is so easy to take work home it is also important to not work too much and to forget taking time off. How this balance is achieved is however not a concern for the AF, as long as the viewers find a way of dealing with these demands that allow them to avoid the pitfalls of either getting burned-out or sinking into idleness.

5.1.2 Self-marketing

One of the most fundamental aspects of the advice of the webinars are the injunctions to become a self-marketing individual that promotes and sells herself and her professional qualities and assets in all kinds of situations. The viewers are frequently encouraged to perceive themselves as products for sale that needs to be appropriately “branded” and “marketed” in order
to convey a professional, selling image to the “buyer” (the employer). The CV and the personal letter, the job interview, recruitment meetings and so on are all first and foremost framed as suitable arenas for self-marketing, and much time is therefore spent on training the viewers in how to effectively market themselves in these contexts. This section focuses on how the job seekers are told to both objectify and brand themselves as products, and to use the internet and social media for marketing purposes.

**Personal Branding and Objectification**

While the advice on self-marketing goes through most of the webinars, it is most explicit in a webinar on personal marketing (2016d) where the job seeker’s personal brand - the professional image she wishes to be associated with - is framed as a cornerstone of her employability. The job seekers are there recommended to market themselves and their personal brand just as companies market their products:

> When I think of marketing, I think of how companies advertise their products. And when someone mentions coffee, I think of a certain coffee brand. If the company has done really well with their marketing, it is their coffee brand that I think of. And that’s how you shall think when it comes to your personal marketing as well. When someone mentions a certain quality or a certain line of business, it is you that they think of. You are ‘top of mind’ (2016d).

‘Top of mind’ (which is said in English also in the original) is a concept from marketing for measuring and ranking which brands that consumers first think of in relation to certain types of products and industries, which anchors the webinar within certain types of discourses closely aligned with the enterprise- and consumer culture. The viewers are recommended to think over which qualities they want to be associated with and to develop a strategy for how they can market and promote these in relation to themselves and their personal brand:

> Ask yourself the question: If I were a product, what would I contain? It might be a little uncomfortable to view yourself as a product, because we are humans, not products. But play with the thought: “If I were a product, what would I contain? If I have a personal brand, what core values does it have?” Because brands are associated with certain values, and some brands are associated with slogans. “What would my slogan be!” (2016d).

Since the importance of immaterial brands for neoliberal capitalism is well known since before (e.g. Klein, 2001; Arvidsson, 2006), it is perhaps not surprising that discourses of personal branding also have found their way into job seeking. It is nonetheless striking how
explicit these discourses are in this advice from a state authority, as the viewers many times literally are asked to think of themselves as products. In the quote above the AF show that they know it might be uncomfortable and strange to view oneself as a product, but that this is a demand on today’s competitive labor market that workers must try to face up to. The AF’s role during this process is to help and, so to speak, “hold the hand” of the job seeker while she attempts to find an individual marketing strategy that works. The first step is to overcome one’s skepticism and to objectify oneself in relation to the economic discourses and jargon prominent on the labor market: in order to develop a personal brand, one must first conceive oneself as a product with certain slogans and qualities. The viewers are advised to market themselves and their personal brand all the time, in both professional and private contexts:

When do I use personal branding? The simple answer is all the time. I say here that you must market your professional self, but it is important to remember that everything we say and do, regardless of if it is in a professional or private context, it forms a whole. What you do in private will still affect the image people get of you. You never know who can help you forward in your job seeking. [...] You must be able to stand for everything you say and do (2016d; my emphasis).

The “professional self” the job seekers are told to market is here both separated and inter-meshed with their private self, making the boundaries between work and leisure somewhat diffuse. The branding and marketing of oneself is ideally to extend into every sphere and aspect of life, making the job seekers think through everything they say and do in relation to how it will affect their professional image. These discourses are presented as ideals to strive for with quite some normative force behind them: while the viewers are told to find an individual marketing strategy that works for them personally, they are at the same time often reminded that the more they manage to adapt themselves to these ideals, the easier they will find employment. These ideals reaches further than physical settings, and do as we see next also require the job seekers to consciously think through their whole online presence and to mould it in relation to the professional image the wish to convey to others.

Constructing a Sellable Online Persona

With the internet being an ever-growing presence in both our private and professional lives, the viewers are many times recommended to market themselves through social networks. LinkedIn is here strongly recommended, since it is a professional site with networking and self-marketing as its purpose. More interesting is how also less “professional” social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are discussed in terms of how they can be used for marketing
purposes. The AF gives many tips on how this can be done, so the viewers can find a way that suits them personally. Viewers wishing to go “all in” are shown pictures where people have turned their Facebook profile into a professional online CV and portfolio, and they are also told that they can create their own professional “page” - in the same way that companies and organizations do - where they can market themselves by writing updates on who they are in professional contexts (2016k, 2016l). More “discrete” ways of self-marketing are also suggested for those wanting to keep Facebook as a private social media. Since more and more employers search for employees on Facebook, all viewers are for instance recommended to have a profile picture that “mirrors [their] professional self” (2016k) and to “[p]lay with the profile picture [in order to] show a more professional side without letting it take over the account” (2016k). An example is shown of a person working as a baker that is dressed in a chef’s hat in her profile picture, which apparently allows her to market her “professional self” and her “private self” at the same time. The viewers are recommended to think of how they can achieve something similar with their picture. They are also told they can market themselves by writing a “selling” presentation:

On Facebook you can write an introduction. [...] Use this to present yourself. In this example [a picture of a Facebook profile] it is written: “With engagement, creativity, self-distance and humor I stick out, both privately and at work”. So this is a way of summarizing yourself and introducing yourself to persons that perhaps do not know you so well. This is a good way of getting out information about you, without having to be active and posting stuff all the time (2016k).

This advice represent different suggestions on how to use social media, that the viewers then must relate to themselves and their preferences. Regardless of how they choose to do this, it is argued that the increasing popularity of these channels places new demands on individuals to keep a respectable and representative online persona. This not only entails presenting and accentuating professional attributes on social media, but also to hide attributes that might damage the professional image. Since there always is a possibility that an employer will search your name on Facebook, it is recommended to not have any publicly uploaded pictures from vacations or other contexts that do not represent who you are professionally, or to “check in” at places that you do not wish to be associated with (2016d). All viewers are encouraged to search for themselves on Google to see which results they get:

---

9 To check in is a function on Facebook where you can “tag” yourself and your friends at public places that you visit, such as cities, restaurants, cinemas or nightclubs.
Consider if it [what comes up when searching for your name] is representative of who you are. If it is then it can remain, but if it isn’t then you must remove it. If it is a picture someone has uploaded of you, ask that person to take the picture down. If you do not know the person, then you can start to upload things about yourself, you can post things on social media. If you have a LinkedIn profile for example, it comes very high among the search results, so perhaps you should become more active on LinkedIn [...] The more relevant information you upload about yourself, the higher those results will come in the search, and the lower the old results will come (2016k).

These quotes point at a general diffusion of the boundaries between professional and private internet use, with the attendants being encouraged to think of their total online presence in professional and career-related terms - if something connected to you online does not represent your “professional self”, it has to disappear. Private internet use is thus subjected to the overarching goal of appearing as professional and employable, which means that the job seekers must carefully think through how everything they write and post online will impact on their professional image. To avoid social media altogether is further not framed as a viable option, since others will create an online image for you if you do not do so yourself: the viewers are instead encouraged to actively take control over their own online persona, and to mould it into a professional resource that will benefit their career.

5.1.3 Expanding Social Capital Through Networking

With contacts and social skills being just as important as formal merits and competences on the labor market today, the job seekers are in a number of webinars encouraged to engage in networking. Networking is described as a complementary job seeking activity through which you by “getting to know people that can help you forward in your career” (2016j) might have an easier time finding a job. It is said that it can be just as important to seek new contacts as to apply for jobs, but the job seekers are also warned that networking “is not always a quick fix [...] View networking as a lifelong investment in your professional life that might bear fruit further ahead, if not at once” (2016j). Networking is thus talked of in professional and enterprising terms, as a long time investment in oneself and one’s career. This socializes the viewers into today’s precarious labor markets, where lifelong employment is but a word from a distant age and where everyone therefore must think and plan forward, not just for their next job but also the job after that. A large professional network does here become an important resource - social capital - for being able to navigate between occupations more easily.

A couple of webinars give practical advice on how to network. First the viewers are told to chart their network by writing down every private and professional contact they have, and to
contact them to see if they can provide a job opportunity. The next step is to increase the network, which for instance can be done by “tak[ing] contact with your contact’s contacts”, “start with some leisure activity” through which you might meet new people that can help you find a job, or “invite your neighbours and ask them what they work with” (2016j). Networking is here intimately connected with self-marketing, as the job seekers must utilize the opportunities when they meet new people to make a good, professional impression on them. The viewers are for instance urged to create their own “elevator pitch” (2016d) - a short presentation of who they are professionally, what they want to accomplish, and what they can contribute in a professional context - that they can use when meeting new people in all different sorts of contexts. The viewers are here further recommended to

create an experience [...]. What do you want this person [that you meet] to feel afterwards? Do you want it to feel ‘this person [the job seeker] is so full of life, it is so lovely to meet this person!’ or ‘this person really can contribute with these things to our company’? Create an experience so the employer remember you afterwards” (2016d).

As we see, networking is here framed as an opportunity to market yourself, your personal brand and the professional qualities you want to be associated with. This is as we saw in the previous section also something the viewers are recommended to do on social networks like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, where they further are advised to make new contacts, to expand their network and to actively comment what others write in order to not “just collect all these contacts without actually having any contact with them” (2016i). They are also recommended to write status updates and private messages to their contacts on these sites: “Let them know that you are looking for a job and how you want to be helped” (2016l), the lecturer advises the viewers in one webinar, reminding them that job opportunities might require some social initiative. It is continually emphasized that it is important to seek new contacts everywhere and to chart how these can help you forward, because helpful contacts can appear even where they are not expected:

You can absolutely network with employers and other people in your trade, please do, but do not only do that because one never knows where an opportunity or a contact may appear. Do you know what your neighbours work with? Do you know what your friends do these days? Perhaps you don’t usually talk about jobs, but this person might have an entry point or contact that can help you (2016j).
Networking discourses are as we see inherently instrumental, as social relations mainly are valued in terms of how they can improve one’s career and professional life. Also private contacts and leisure activities are to be chosen and valued based on if they might provide useful career opportunities. What the quotes above ultimately attests to is thus an injunction to further professionalize one’s private life, by introducing career-related discourses in contexts where they previously have been absent and by turning social relations into professional relations. Social capital and large professional networks are however resources very unevenly distributed in society, which points to the stratifying effects of these individualistic discourses. That a state authority so explicitly promote networking to the unemployed can thus be seen as a sign of wider shifts in responsibilities between state and citizen, that goes hand in hand with the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state which makes people more dependent on themselves and those around them.

5.1.4 Self-work and Impression Management

To convey the professional and sellable image needed to be employable, the job seekers are told that they must work on and improve themselves in a number of ways to make a professional impression on the employer. What Goffman (2004) calls impression management, where we work on our self-presentation in order to steer other’s impressions of us, is thus crucial when seeking work. This section describes on how the job seekers are recommended to work on their appearance and body language, but also their emotions, attitudes and personality in relation to how they want to be perceived by the employer.

**Appearance and Body Language**

In a webinar about body language (2016c), it is based on a scientific study argued that the vast majority pay more attention to how one looks than to the words one say, and that body language and appearance therefore is crucial for the first impression we make on others:

If I say, “I’m so tired today”, 55 % will look at my body language. [...] If I look alert when I say I’m tired, 55 % won’t believe me but instead look at my body language and think: “perhaps she isn’t so tired”. 38 % will listen to my voice. How does she sound when she says she’s tired? Does she sound alert, then perhaps she isn’t so tired? And only 7 % will listen to my words. “She said she’s tired, then she’s tired” (2016c).

The scientific discourse is here used to lend these numbers an aura of objectivity and to construct an unquestionable need for all job seekers to work on their body language. The
impressions we make on others are here related to what the AF call a person’s *inner attributes* (personal qualities and characteristics related to “who a person really is”) and *outer attributes* (besides body language they also mention other visual signifiers such as clothing, voice, hairstyle, piercings, tattoos, smell, handshake and overall appearance) (2016c, 2016d). It is argued that it is important to know one’s inner attributes, because they can be strengthened by outer attributes:

> You must think about which personal qualities you have, and how you can strengthen them with your body language. Perhaps I think of myself as a very glad and positive person. In that case I can’t for example just sit with my arms crossed at an interview and say, “yeah I’m very glad and positive”, but all of your body language must express that “I am glad, I am positive, I am a very open person”. And if you say that “I’m trustworthy”, then you must really have eye contact and say with emphasis that “I am a person you can trust” (2016c).

In order to convey who they are, the viewers must be self-reflexive and consider which qualities they have and how these can be strengthened outwardly, since it ultimately is with the outer attributes you shape the employer’s first impression of you. Consciously shaping and working on one’s outer attributes like this is interestingly conceived as strengthening one’s “true” qualities rather than putting up a performance or facade. The advice from the AF here takes the shape of guidance on what makes a good impression on employers and what does not, guidance that the job seekers then must regulate themselves in relation to based on how they want to be perceived. Much time of the webinars is therefore spent on advising the viewers how to behave and look in various contexts, with the job interview being the most important. The viewers are for instance advised to stand and sit straight, to have a firm handshake, to keep eye contact (although without staring) when talking to the employer, and to talk slow and steadily. It is said that it is important to practice on these things, since your body language reveal much of your personality and attitude.

**Personality Work and Emotional Labor**

If the demand to work on one’s body language and appearance could be related to Hochschild’s (2003:35) concept *surface acting*, her complementary concept *deep acting* is useful for understanding how the job seekers also more thoroughly are encouraged to work on their attitudes, emotions and personality to make a good impression on the employer. When speaking of how to behave at the job interview, the viewers are for instance advised that “[i]t is important that you do not feel forced or stressed, so try to keep a moderate tempo. Express
your good sides, you shall sell yourself [...] tell them of your passion or what you want to do in the future, about what drives you forward” (2016m). We see that the job seekers must appear as relaxed and calm in order to make a good impression, and that they also must have the right attitude and personality by appearing as passionate and ambitious. The viewers are further told that “[i]f you stand with a shrunken stance, then you might signal that you are insecure, that you are lazy, that you are nervous” (2016c), which shows that it is not only important to express desired attributes such as self-confidence and professionalism, but also to not express what is deemed as undesired, “bad” attributes. These statements are both normative (since they prescribe which sorts of attributes, qualities and personality traits that are desirable and which are not) and individualizing (in the sense that undesired attributes are framed as personal problems that can be overcome by training and hard work). In order to make a good impression, the viewers are told to work on their personality, emotions and feelings and to practice on displaying desired attributes, such as self-confidence:

An important key to success is self-confidence, and an important key to self-confidence is preparation. [...] Prepare yourself as much as possible, because then your self-confidence will grow, and if you have a good self-confidence it will lead to success (2016c).

The success or failure in finding a job is here directly linked to the self-confidence of the job seeker. While this makes the insecure job seeker herself to blame if she cannot find a job, the point with these statements is not mainly to accuse job seekers but to encourage them to train, work on and improve themselves so that they in their own way can become what the labor market wishes them to be. The AF here takes on a therapeutic, supportive role, where they give the viewers empowering advice on how they can work on themselves to achieve qualities and personality traits that they currently lack. In the quote below the viewers are for instance advised that they with some training can “fool their brain” that they have certain attributes:

Walk with your back straight, have a proud posture, back with your shoulders. What’s good with this is that the brain is good at fooling itself. If you think that you have this self-confidence, if you pull your shoulders back and you go inside and just “I can do this!”, then your whole brain will start thinking that you actually have a self-confidence at place, [more so] than if you are slouching and insecure (2016c).

Shyness is below framed as an undesirable trait and obstacle, ill fitted as it is with the competitive labor market (cf. Elraz, 2013), that similarly can be overcome through practice and
hard self-work. In a webinar on body language, a viewer asking what to do with her shyness is
told that she should spend her free time in certain ways to train away her shyness:

Then I think you must practice at different situations. [...] Perhaps you should engage yourself in
something at your free time where you meet new people that you can practice these things at? Much is
about that you need to believe in yourself. Think that you are an interesting person and that you want
others to know that as well. Practice with different persons [...] and take small steps so you can
become less shy (2016c).

An even stronger example of how the viewers are told to work on their emotions and person-
ality is an anecdote the lecturer at one point tells the viewers of a personal acquaintance of
hers. This person perceived herself as being glad and positive, but one day she “found out that
her colleagues did not perceive her like that, and that when she sat at her computer or walked
in the corridor with a neutral facial expression she looked very angry and grumpy” (2016d).
This made her sad to hear, but she did not let it get her down. Instead she used it to her ad-
vantage, by actively working on herself in order to appear as positive and glad:

When she sat at her computer, she sat there with a little smile. And when she walked in the corridor,
she walked with a smile. She greeted everyone, and when people walked past her room she looked
up and said “hi”, and so on. So she really worked with this. At first it was really hard, since it felt
like a [unnatural] glued smile, but it became more and more natural for her (2016d).

The crack between the self-perception and the impressions of others forced this person to
work on her emotional expressions, even though this meant she had to act in ways that felt
unnatural to her. In a form of “reversed” emotional labor (cf. Hochschild, 2003), the job seek-
ers are here told that by working on their body language and outward appearance they can
also affect their actual feelings; just smile and keep at it, and soon that “glued”, labored smile
will feel like it is genuine and natural. This sort of advice is worth taking very seriously, espe-
cially when it comes from a public authority: while here framed as a success story of a person
who took control over her self-presentation, this sort of emotional manipulation where one’s
emotional life is subjected to the demands of appearing as professional might, as Hochschild
(2003:7) argues, have destructive and harmful consequences that at worst could alienate the
subject from her emotional life.
5.2 Strategies for Creating a Professional Self

The sections above examined some of the things that job seekers are encouraged to do in order to become employable. This section will more in depth discuss the ‘professional self’ that the job seekers are told to create and market to the employer. As has been shown, the AF informs the viewers of what the labor market currently requires of them, but also tells them that they need to find their own way of adapting to these requirements in order to become professional workers: it is this complex process that here is examined. I will focus on what the subject position as an enterprising, self-marketing individual entails and how viewers are told to find, create and negotiate it. Some of the obstacles and contradictions in this process will also be highlighted. I first focus on the injunction to be enterprising, before discussing how the viewers are advised to balance the conflicting demands of expressing individuality and performing professionality when constructing themselves as professionals.

5.2.1 The Injunction to be Enterprising

The previously discussed ideals of understanding job seeking as a kind of work and of selling and marketing oneself as a product is connected to wider enterprising discourses through which job seekers are encouraged to think of their whole life situation and identity in market-related terms. Concepts and jargon from economic contexts are often used to socialize the viewers into certain ways of viewing themselves and their situation: we have for instance already seen that the viewers many times are told that they must find, market and sell their “professional self” when seeking work. The viewers are in this process told to think of themselves as their own PR-agents, responsible for their own brand and trademark:

We talked earlier of how companies market their products. What they have that we don’t are PR persons, advertising agencies and the like. [...] It would be really nice if I could go to an interview and have this PR-person say all these fantastic things about me, but I don’t. I am responsible for my own trademark, and I am responsible for the marketing of myself (2016d; my emphasis).

In the webinar The 10 best tips (2016n), the viewers are also given the advice that they must consider themselves as their own boss or “project leader” when unemployed. The lecturer informs the audience that “[w]hen we work we often have a boss or project leader that give us an agenda or a schedule to follow. But when you are seeking work you have no boss, and therefore you need to become your own project leader”. She then goes on to speak of how being one’s own project leader makes one more “structured” and “goal oriented”, “so that one
actually starts doing things and not just spend so much time thinking on ‘what do I need to do’” (2016n). The viewers are in true entrepreneurial fashion told that they can take control over their employment by becoming their own boss. Unemployment is here not framed as being very different from working, but rather as a time to prepare for wage labor by internalizing an entrepreneurial spirit and attitude and by fostering the qualities that later also are valued at the labor market, such as being self-responsible, active, a good leader, goal oriented and structured. In the webinar *Find the hidden jobs*, the viewers are in line with this encouraged to think of how they can *create jobs for themselves* by inventing services that employers have not considered before but that they might find useful:

 [...] *create your own service*. This is a super hidden job, it is so hidden that the employer don’t even know that they have this need. To create your own service isn’t very easy, and perhaps you can’t even create a service for a certain company. But [...] if you really know an employer or a company, then you can think “why don’t they offer this? Why don’t they have this product or service?” And perhaps you can be the one that help them with this, you might have certain competences and qualities that allow you to complement their business (2016i; my emphasis).

A lack of available jobs is here presented as an obstacle to be overcome by each and every individual by being entrepreneurial, creative and initiative-taking. Rather than framing unemployment in relation to for instance a structural lack of demand of certain types of professions, it is framed in relation to an individual responsibility to seek work and entrepreneurial opportunities everywhere. These recommendations to be enterprising are as we see not restricted to the entrepreneurs and careerists but are also directed to the unemployed in general, some of which can be expected to stand very far from the labor market and to have trouble conceiving themselves and behaving in the ways expected of them. Of course, the AF recognize this: the advice they present is not totalizing and deterministic demands to be slavishly followed by every viewer, but guidelines and recommendations for how the job seekers can find a way of adapting a more professional identity and self-presentation. This is however not a simple process: it requires a constant balance act between on the one hand acting out a professional self in ways which are expected by the employer, and on the other hand to do this in ways which still signify who one “really is”. These interrelated and sometimes conflicting demands when creating an ‘enterprising self’ (Foucault, 2014) will next be discussed in terms of *expressing individuality* and *performing professionalism*, two interrelated categories that together describe the dialectical process of creating a professional, enterprising self.
5.2.2 Expressing Individuality

When seeking work and marketing oneself, it is said that it is crucial to distinguish yourself from other job seekers by expressing *who you are*. Since the labor market is so competitive and the employer receives so many applications from interested job seekers, this is especially important when it comes to the application documents (the CV and the personal letter): the viewers are told that “[i]t is said that it only takes a few seconds for employers to decide if she or he is to read further” (2016a) and that “[s]ometimes you compete with several hundreds, perhaps thousands of persons, so you really must have that little extra which sticks out” (2016f). A number of webinars therefore train the job seekers in how they can write more interesting application documents, which headlines they shall use and which sort of experiences and competences that are good to emphasize about oneself. The esthetic and creative qualities of the application documents are much discussed. The viewers are told that colored headings, pictures and layout can be used to draw attention to the documents, and that a “video CV” might be good for catching the attention of the employer and for showing a more creative side of yourself - examples are mentioned of people that have “performed” their CV in rap and dance videos, and the viewers are encouraged to think if they have any talents themselves that they can utilize in a similar fashion. The application documents must feel original without being “too much”; they must be both readable and creative, original without losing their aura of professionalism. Having a photo of oneself might make the application more personal, but in that case it is crucial that it is “a professional portrait where you look representative, glad and pleasant” (2016a) and not a photo from for instance a vacation or a party. While important to express “who you are”, there are strong norms of who you actually are allowed to be in this context.

The CV and the personal letter are in several webinars described as “your ticket to a job interview” (2016a; 2016e), which suggests that as long as you have well-written application documents there is nothing stopping you from getting called to an interview and, eventually, finding a job. This idealized understanding of the application documents, which focuses on their form rather than their actual content, fetishizes and attaches almost magical properties to them by ignoring the specific needs and capacities of the job seekers behind the documents. Nevertheless, it is through these documents that job seekers primarily are encouraged to sell and promote themselves. These documents could in this sense be understood as *individualizing technologies* (Krejsler, 2007) through which job seekers can express and market their individuality and uniqueness as individuals:
When employers read your documents they shall feel “wow, we really must meet this person!” The CV and the personal letter are like a trailer for you, they shall give a small taste of who you are and make one want to know more. If you go to the cinema, there are usually short versions you can see before, trailers of the films that are to tempt you to choose this specific film. It is the same way with your application documents and you. You shall be called to an interview because your documents are so interesting (2016f).

The parable used here is very expressive: think of yourself as a film that you try to seduce the employer into buying through your own personal “trailer” (your application documents). These discourses are highly commodifying, once again equating the job seeker with a product. Just as the latest Hollywood blockbuster, the job seeker must appear as a “safe bet” in which the employer can invest time and money with minimal risks, at the same time as there must be something “extra” that distinguishes the job seeker from the competition. While the viewers are told to primarily focus on who they are professionally when writing their application documents, they are for instance also encouraged to relate who they are in private to a professional context: it is said that if you for instance “are engaged in some sport where you have been an instructor, which means that you are very pedagogical, you are good at engaging people, then that is worth mentioning” (2016a). The viewers are told to “think outside the box”, in order to find creative ways of utilizing their personality, interests and passions as that “little extra” that might make them more attractive to the employer:

Perhaps there is something that wasn’t requested [in the job advert] that you also have? So you can say that besides what you asked for I also have this experience from when I worked abroad or when I volunteered, or because I have been active in this association I have this competence. There are several things you can emphasize as an extra strength besides what has been requested (2016m).

The attendants are encouraged to think over what they like to do during their free time and if they have any experiences from outside of work (from for instance volunteering) that they can utilize to give a personal but still professional impression that might distinguish them from other applicants. Although not said so explicitly, the implicit message is that it might be good to engage oneself in leisure activities or organizations that can spice up the CV (cf. Cremin, 2007). It is also emphasized that the job seekers must show personal interest in the jobs they are applying for, by expressing why they really want to work there:
… show interest in the job. [...] Write a sentence about this. “I am really interested to work with you because I have always looked up to you”, or “I was really impressed when you released this product, it has really changed the market and I look forward to work where there is this drive and ambition” [...] Or is it the company in itself, that you like their engagement in a specific question? Or is it their staff policy? Perhaps they give their employees really great privileges and want them to develop and feel at home? (2016a).

Comments like these socializes the viewers into thinking of work as something they should have a personal investment in, as something which is fulfilling, interesting or promote values and ideologies they sympathize with - the workers are in short, to reconnect with Bauman’s (2008) discussion of the consumer esthetic, encouraged to think of work as commodities that they choose based on the pleasures they provide. This do on the other hand require them to not only offer their skills but also their interests and passions as resources for the company. To have the necessary competence is not enough to get employed if you only want the job for accessing a wage; today’s labor market also require workers to show that they are engaged and have a genuine desire to work with and contribute to the success of the employer. Self-realization through work is thus not only an ideal for each and every individual today, but in turn also something the employer seeks and values in their employees, as this signifies the ambition, drive and enterprising personality they can benefit from.

5.2.3 Performing Professionality

While often stressed that the job seekers must distinguish themselves from others by showing who they “really are” and why they are suited for the job, there are as we saw in the previous section also some rules for how to be oneself in this context: the job seekers must show who they are professionally. This is not as straightforward as it may sound, but do on the contrary point to a complicated and often contradictory process, where one must negotiate a personal way of being professional in relation to the demands of specific employers. While the professional self in the following quote for instance is described as who you are at work, there are also some ambiguities in how it is described:

When you are to be yourself in this situation [the job interview], it is your professional self that you shall display. You must show who you are as an employee, as a colleague. How are you to work with, how do you deal with your tasks? What are your talents and personal qualities? When marketing yourself in a job seeking context, this is what you must show (2016d; my emphasis).
We here see how “being yourself” and “being professional” are both separated and conflated: your professional self is certainly “you”, but it is also in typical postmodern fashion framed as one of several selves you have. The ontological status of the professional self is further ambiguous because the job seekers both are told that it is something they have within themselves that can be actualized, and that it is something they must continuously create and perform anew. In the quote below, the professional self is for instance presented as an inherent potentiality within the job seeker (cf. Costea et al., 2012), which needs to be discovered, liberated and brought to the surface from within:

Just because you start thinking about your outer attributes, about your posture and handshake, about your clothes and your voice, that doesn’t mean that we must all act in the same way. It doesn’t mean that we shall talk in the same way, and it doesn’t mean that we are supposed to wear the same clothes.

It is about you finding your own professional self (2016d; my emphasis).

Finding the professional self is however more complex than realizing “who you are” at work, since professionalism also must be performed and staged in a constant balance act of using established professional tropes in a way which seems genuine and honest. One example that illustrates this tension is when the participants after the webinar on personal marketing are sent a link to a list (AF, 2017f) of personal qualities that they can use when marketing themselves. The list contains words like ambitious, creative, diplomatic, disciplined, economic, effective, exceptional, flexible, independent, innovative, loyal, motivated, positive, professional, quality minded, service minded, stress resistant, self-going, smart and humble, among many others. These words that describe precisely the sort of enterprising and professional qualities that Du Gay (1996:56) argues today are promoted as “human virtues” are to be used to describe who the job seekers are, but it is also stated that they are only inspirational words that ultimately must be rewritten and related to personal examples. Since everyone use these words in these contexts, they are empty signifiers and clichés that in themselves do not have any real substantial meaning: it is up to the job seeker to give them meaning by finding a way of relating herself to them.

Creating a professional self do however not only mean to become who you want to be professionally: it is also, perhaps more than anything, about showing that you are who the employer wants you to be. In the webinar on how to make the application documents stick out, it is for instance strongly emphasized that every document must be personalized, directed and tailored to the wants of specific employers. Standardized CV’s and applications are not
enough, but on the contrary “[i]t is very important to adapt your application to every job that you apply for” (2016f). In order to distinguish themselves, the job seekers are told to “[f]ocus on what the employer wants. Pick out the experiences that are most important for the employer to read of and describe them well” (2016f). The AF do themselves acknowledge that “it is sometimes hard to know exactly what it is the employer appreciates and what they don’t” (2016g), and therefore give some practical advice on how one’s self-presentation can be adapted to the wants of the employer:

 [...] write your letter based on what the job advert asks for. It might seem obvious, but really try to mirror the advert. But do not just copy it, you must of course find your own words and write it in a way that is you (2016a, my emphasis).

Do [the employer] have a website, are they on social media, are there any articles about them? Look around and read so you know a bit more about the employer. Perhaps they have some catchwords or core values that they work for? Or [you can] read about the products and services they offer, and then connect yourself to these things so the employer can see that you fit in with them (2016a).

The tension between authenticity and performance is once again made visible, as the job seekers are given the difficult task of simultaneously mirroring the job advert/the employer and expressing who they “really are” as persons. We see that the individual seeking employability must find a way to, as Cremin puts it, “become the mirror-double of the employer” (2010:137); at one point the viewers are even told that they during the job interview can mirror the employer’s body language in order to show that they “speak the same language”. Viewers are encouraged to first practice at a friend or acquaintance until they get so good and discrete at doing this so no one notices:

When the person sits down, watch how the person sits, how it has its hands, feet, posture and everything. And after a minute or so, you start to copy this and sit in roughly the same way. When the person perhaps moves its arms and continues talking, you do the same thing after a little while. [...] When you mirror someone’s body language, you can’t of course mirror every single thing the person does, so mirror one thing of two or one of three instead, so you show the person that “we speak the same language” and “we understand each other” (2016c).

The recommendation to mirror and imitate the job advert or the employer, their values and even their body language is here strangely not conceived as false or dishonest, but as a genuine way of expressing who you are professionally and why you are suited for the job. It is
once again compelling to understand these quotes through Goffman’s (2004) dramaturgical theory and conceive job seeking as one large theatrical stage where job seekers are required to put on different masks in their attempts to manage the impressions of the employer. There is certainly some value to this understanding - impression management appears as perhaps the most crucial skill for a job seeker. But where the self for Goffman (2004:218) is a performative product of this acting out of social meetings rather than something that we always have deep within us, the self has a much more ambiguous character in the advice of the AF as it seem to have both essentialistic and performative components at the same time. It is ultimately up to the job seekers to balance these demands, in order to find a way to be themselves that will also appeal to the employer.

5.3 Technologies for Governing Job Seekers

The previous sections have scrutinized the activities that job seekers are recommended to engage in to become employable, and how the job seekers are encouraged to find their own way of relating to these recommendations when they construct and market themselves as professionals. In this section the technologies of governing that are used to steer and socialize the viewers to their ascribed subject positions will be further addressed. It will be discussed how the AF individualize responsibility, how they encourage self-reflection, how they empower the viewers, how the chat of the webinars is utilized for group discipline and peer pressure, and how the AF reflect criticism back at the skeptical viewers.

5.3.1 Individualization of Responsibility

One commonly used technique in the webinars is to individualize the responsibility of finding work and of become employable. This responsibilization is apparent in all the recommended activities that already have been discussed, as they position the individual as personally responsible for her employment and employability. There are however also many less apparent aspects of this responsibilization that has not already been discussed. Although the lecturers have an institutionalized position as experts which allow them to produce knowledge and truth of job seeking, the authority of their position is often deliberately under-emphasized, in order to accentuate the agency of the viewers:
Take help by each other. I am of course here to give you of all my knowledge and advice, but all of you together turn this into a group discussion and a group activity, and we all get so much wiser if we help each other, so please continue to do so (2016a).

I really hope that you take the chance to influence the content of today’s webinar. Ask the questions you have [in the chat], what do you want to know about structure, efficiency and about motivating yourself? You have every chance to influence the content today, so do so (2016h).

Downplaying the authority of the advice is here a way of shifting responsibilities from the AF to the individual: the AF is not there to find work for you, but to offer support, advice and suggestions that hopefully might help you with this in some way - the viewers might however also need to seek help elsewhere, by for instance asking contacts or other job seekers for advice. The injunction to “influence the content of today’s webinar” is similarly an individualizing statement which obliges the viewers to take their responsibility as unemployed citizens to not only attend the webinar, but also to affect it in ways which might help them forward in their job seeking. How much they actually can influence the content of the webinar can of course be questioned, since the large majority of a given lecture is scripted beforehand. Nonetheless, such individualizing statements contribute to the construction of every job seeker as personally responsible for seeking the help they need to change their situation.

The responsibilization of the unemployed is partly tied to the AF’s control mission. In a webinar directed to newly registered job seekers at the AF, the viewers are told that “one task [we] have is to control that you actively apply for jobs, and we need to notify the unemployment insurance fund [the “a-kassa”] if you don’t” (2017c). The viewers are informed that they must leave an activity report every month, so the AF can “secure that you actually apply for jobs and that you are active in the different ways we have decided are appropriate for you” (2017c). The activity report should here in itself be understood as a responsibilizing technology of activation, that is used to make the job seekers do the activities expected of them. The role of the AF on the other hand is here best captured by the lecturer that at one point says that “we always try to support you to be active” (2017c). This illustrates how the AF’s role in this context, rather than matching job seekers with employers, is to help the job seekers “help themselves” (Walter, 2011:53).

Perhaps more effective than disciplinary control mechanisms such as activity reports is how the AF appeal to the free will of the job seekers, with a casual and personal tone rather than with the strict and disciplinary tone that could be expected from a public authority. This
betrays an interesting duality in the character of the webinars. When discussing how they want the viewers to experience the webinars, the respondents said:

We think it’s really important that our webinars feel engaging, modern and inspiring. We do not want it to appear as if we at the AF tell you have to seek a job, as if the state is to inform you, but instead to have a tone that is easy-going, engaged and informing (interview; my emphasis).

… and then it is the personal tone. That is something we can reach many more with than if we had a bureaucratic tone of a public authority, I think (interview).

These statements stand in stark contrast to the understanding of the AF as a control body that has to report inactivity to the a-kassa - the personal tone is here instead framed as a way of reaching more people and to address them in a manner that might inspire and motivate them. The respondents want the webinars to feel conversational and modern rather than rigid and bureaucratic, so that the viewers will actively participate in them. For a similar reason, the webinars are free to attend for those that would like to. Although persons registered at the AF are recommended to report their webinar attendance, participation is entirely voluntary:

Me: I’ve understood that job seekers can write in their activity report that they have participated at a webinar. How important is this when you control their activity [...]?
Respondent 1: It is something we encourage and request them to do [...]. But it is voluntary to participate at the webinar, and that means that it won’t happen anything if [the activity report] doesn’t say that you’ve participated at webinars. [...] 
Respondent 2: There are no demands from our side whatsoever. And I think that is something people appreciate, that there are no requirements but that it is more like a service that we offer and that one can take part of if one like (interview).

As we see, the webinar is a somewhat paradoxical medium: although produced by a public authority that control the activity of the job seekers, the webinars have the character of a product that the unemployed can freely choose to consume if they want to. The attempts of making the webinars feel non-bureaucratic does however not change the fact that the AF is an authority and that the webinars officially represent them in this role. There is thus a certain dissonance between how the respondents want the participants to experience the webinars, and what the webinars actually are. My argument here is that by addressing viewers casually and by letting them attend the webinars of their own free will, the understanding of job seeking as a personal responsibility is further naturalized. Salecl (2016:39) has written that
coaching must appear as self-chosen help from a friendly “do-gooder” rather than as orders from an imposing authority if it is to be effective. In her argument we have a key to understand how the personalized advice of the webinars might work as a responsibilizing technology, through which viewers are further socialized into individualistic job seeking discourses.

5.3.2 Self-reflection

Closely tied to the individualization of responsibility is the encouragement to know oneself and one’s personal needs and qualities, both for negotiating which advice from the webinars that might be useful and for knowing how to present and market oneself to the employer. We have already seen that this is important when constructing a professional self. It is also ultimately up to each and every individual to adapt the advice in the webinars to their own situation - the advice is not presented as some foolproof guide on how to get a job, but as general advice that everyone must judge, adapt and make sense of based on who they are as persons. This is often emphasized with comments such as these:

Regardless of how you seek work, my advice is that you choose to do it in several different ways. [...] think of how you can market yourself, and perhaps you can seek work through social media? And of course, work with your CV and personal letter. [...] you can’t do all these things at once if you aren’t very effective, so as I said in the beginning, choose some things that you feel are right for me. “This seems like fun”, or “this could be a way into this profession”. Adapt from who you are (2017c; my emphasis).

Consider what works best for you. With all this advice I give you today, always think “how can I applicate this on my job seeking?” (2016a).

Adapting the advice to “who you are” presupposes knowledge of the self that can only be gained through self-reflection. Self-reflexiveness is defined as key when it comes to expressing individuality and to sell oneself, which requires the subject to know both her individual strengths, weaknesses and areas for self-improvement. The viewers are for this reason recommended different methods and techniques for getting to know themselves, such as asking themselves what they want out of employment or writing down lists with personal objectives for their career to realize:

What is actually important for you? That is the first thing you must think about, because if you shall seek work in an effective manner you need to know “what is important for me? What goals do I have? Where am I headed?” What is important can vary incredibly much depending on who you are (2016h).
...write down a list of the things that are important for you. When I applied for jobs I did like this, and it ended with that I’m now standing here, having checked off every part of the list. It’s really cool when it happens (2016h).

Through this encouragement to be self-reflexive, both the possibility and inability to find employment are located within the subject herself. In the second quote the lecturer tells the viewers of her own “success story”, where her self-awareness, goal-orientation and planning helped her achieve a successful and happy career. Her success is in this way individualized and separated from structural understandings of the labor market. Encouraging the viewers to self-reflect in relation to the job seeking discourses is a form of socialization that ideally makes the job seekers identify with these discourses and to picture themselves and their interests, needs and desires as part of them. This should however, I would argue, not necessarily be understood as a process where job seekers find out who they really are and what they really want from work, but rather as a performative process where they have to construct themselves, their interests and their dreams in relation to the labor market – it is part of the production of professional, enterprising citizens.

5.3.3 Empowerment

One technique commonly used to help the viewers become active job seekers is to empower them - or at least, to tell them how they might empower themselves. They are for instance often told how they can find new energy and how they can stay positive, so that negative feelings do not stop them from being active even if their situation might seem hopeless. In the following quote, the viewers are for instance told of a method for how they can channel their frustration into something productive:

If you wake up [on a rough day] and feel that this just isn’t fun, then the 5/55 method might be something for your. The 5/55 method means that you get 5 minutes to complain and release all this frustration. [...] Shall you go out in the forest and scream, or shall you write down how you feel or talk to someone and tell them everything? Find a way that suits you. When you have released all irritation and frustration, then it’s time for 55 forward-looking minutes. So, 5 minutes for ventilating frustration, and 55 minutes to actually find solutions to this frustration and working yourself forward (2016h).

Instead of carrying frustration and irritation around, the viewers must find a way to let it go so they can go on seeking work. Frustration and anger related to unemployment is thus
constructed as individual problems that require individual self-help solutions, such as learning the right techniques and methods. While acknowledged that it might be tiresome and difficult to seek work, it is argued that the individual must surpass these feelings and do something constructive about them herself. The AF here takes on a therapeutic role, by telling the viewers of methods they can use to empower themselves. Other examples of this is how the viewers are recommended to utilize positive thinking, in order to strengthen their self-confidence and to avoid having unreasonable expectations on themselves:

...think that “I’m good enough. I’m fine exactly as I am and I’ve done the best I can”. Sometimes I really want to do the best I can, everything must be perfect, but if every part of your job seeking must be perfect then it will require incredibly much energy and time. So think about what’s good enough (2016h).

Try to find things that make you psyched up and positive. Surround yourself with such things and think that you have much to contribute, we all have. You have competence and personal qualities that can benefit an employer, colleagues and a specific post. It’s just about finding the right one (2016n).

Although the job seekers often are pictured as in need of constant self-improvement, they are in the first quote told that they also must know their own limits and that everything cannot be perfect. Instead of giving up when things feel difficult, they must allow themselves to just be “good enough”. In the second quote they are recommended to be optimistic, to surround themselves by things they like and through positive thinking remind themselves that they have competence and qualities that some employer, somewhere out there, will one day appreciate. Interestingly, they are thus told to relate their self-worth to future employment prospects: their presently latent value as individuals lies in the value they one day will bring to an employer’s business. Contemporary expressions of the work ethic and ‘arbetslinjen’ are thus reproduced, where work is constructed as the centre of a meaningful life, and where one’s worth as an individual lies in how much one contributes to the economy.

The participants are further empowered through the chat, which gives the viewers an opportunity to discuss with each other and to share their experiences at the same time as they listen to the lecturer. Many viewers express that they are glad for the opportunity to get in contact with other job seekers and to find out that they are not alone in a situation that seem to entail much frustration and anxiety. The webinars certainly seem to counter some of the everyday difficulties of being unemployed by giving the job seekers a place to discuss with each
other anonymously, behind the securing veil of the computer screen. The chat is thus not only about asking questions, but also about creating an empowering context for the viewers. This is something the respondents consider important:

We have seen examples of several persons that express in the chat after they have participated that they’ve felt alone in their job seeking, but that they here suddenly found a whole new network. It’s not only about getting tips and advice, but also the feeling of being part of something [...] It is these functions that make us continue, that we create large communities where people feel engaged (interview).

The webinars are here described as “communities” where the participants become “part of something”. This sort of empowerment certainly might have positive effects like increasing the self-confidence of the unemployed and for creating feelings of solidarity between them. It might however also have the effect of further making them accept their ascribed subject positions and responsibilities as natural and given: this is why empowerment must be understood as a positive, governmental technology, that influence job seekers to act in certain ways because they have something to benefit from it in terms of being strengthened in themselves and in their situation. Empowerment is thus a possibly very effective therapeutic technology for making the unemployed govern themselves as job seekers, and for aiding them in becoming active citizens that through their own agency are to overcome passivity and welfare dependence (see Dean, 2010:82).

5.3.4 Group Discipline and Peer Pressure

The previous section exemplified how viewers might be empowered through the chat. The chat is however not only empowering, but do due to the group dynamic and peer pressure enabled through it also have more strictly disciplinary functions. Since the majority of the chat comments by viewers implicitly accept the job seeking advice\textsuperscript{10}, certain unspoken rules of what one can write in the chat are established: the chat shall be used to seek inspiration, information and support so one can advance in one’s job seeking, not to question the ideals of job seeking as such. It is also this sort of dialogue that is encouraged by the lecturers. When viewers see how other viewers write and behave in the chat, they have to adapt themselves to this if they are to fit in with the conversation climate. It therefore becomes difficult to be

\textsuperscript{10} This is of course not enough to say anything about how the audience at large actually perceive the webinar. At their website (AF, 2017c) it is claimed that more than 99% of the participants are content with the webinars, but there aren’t any details of how this data has been assembled.
oppositional or critical to the practices recommended, since it is easier to not voice criticism or skepticism at all, or to adapt an attitude similar to that of the other users.

When critical comments that put the implicit rules of the chat into question occasionally are written, the wider group dynamic might work to oppose these comments and to discipline the skeptical job seeker back into the established order. During a webinar on how job seekers can stay active during the Christmas holiday (2016b), it is for example discussed how one can get a competitive advantage by sending in spontaneous applications to employers and using social media to search for jobs. In relation to this advice, the user ‘sober’ writes: “Is it only social media that you of the AF talk about OR do you do anything yourselves to help a job seeker find a job?”, implicating that the advice lacks value and relevance and that it doesn’t really help the unemployed. Sober continues to write and demand response when the question is not answered. Although these comments are never addressed in the question breaks by the lecturer, they are after a while answered in the chat:

sober: Answer my question above as well!
sober: So many questions, but are there any answers?
sober: Do the AF not dare to answer my question?
Arbetsförmedlare Lena: Our job is to give tips and advice in your job seeking. Remember to be concrete in the meeting with your AF officer so that we can meet your expectations in the best way possible.
sober: @AF Lena Now that wasn’t really an answer to my question!
Liza: @sober exactly what was it that wasn’t clear in the AF’s answer?

The officer Arbetsförmedlare Lena mirrors the criticism back at sober by insinuating that s/he has not been concrete enough in the meeting with the AF. Although Lena’s comment is the only response sober receives from the AF, the interesting thing here is how Liza - another presumed job seeker - continues to question sober’s critical tone. When the lecturer later talks of how job seekers can create their own original envelopes in which to send their applications to employers in order to showcase creativity, sober retorts:

sober: “Creative envelopes”, come on! Are you for real???” [this comment is deleted shortly afterwards, presumably by a moderating AF officer].
sober: @AF What a JOKE! Apps and social media!
Gunnel: sober, welcome to reality!!
Madde: @sober, maybe you should work a bit on your attitude… it will probably not go very well to find a job otherwise… just a tip
While sober’s comments are non-constructive and rude, they make visible how the AF easily can ignore critical and infuriated comments in this context. If a frustrated job seeker would question something face-to-face in the context of a physical seminar, the officer would more or less be forced to engage in an actual dialogue with the person.\footnote{It can of course, the other way around, be argued that these comments perhaps would not have been made at all in a physical setting, as it is easier to ventilate one’s rage anonymously behind a computer screen.} This is not the case with the webinars, as the AF officers can freely choose which questions to answer and which to ignore, with the critical comments soon being lost in the constant flow of information in the chat. Even more interesting in the excerpts above is however how other viewers take it on themselves to argue against and dismiss sober. These viewers not only accept their prescribed subject position, but also actively defend it against critical commentators questioning the rationality behind the things they do. When Madde tells sober to “work a bit on your attitude”, she reproduces discourses of individual responsibility and self-help where every job seeker is her own worst enemy. Similar to Sharone’s (2007) finding that negative job seekers were criticized by other job seekers for “self-sabotage” in their attempts to find a job, Madde reproduces the individualistic understandings of job seeking where the right attitude and positive thinking is crucial for finding work. Such statements possibly affect critical job seekers differently when they come from other job seekers in the form of peer pressure, rather than from the authority they are critical of. Criticizing an authority for promoting ineffective or meaningless activities is one thing, but if everyone else exposed to these practices seem to accept them and even defend them, one is instead forced into a dialogue with oneself: why am I the only one skeptical? Is it really my attitude that is the problem? This naturalizes these discourses and renders them unquestionable and undebatable.

5.3.5 Reflection of Criticism

While discussion in the chat is encouraged, all comments are as we saw in the previous section not desirable. The job seekers are free to contribute with their knowledge, thoughts and experiences, but they are not expected to question the presented ideals of job seeking in themselves. When critical comments occasionally are written, one way the AF deal with them is as we saw in the previous section to simply ignore them by leaving them unaddressed. Another common technique is to reflect the criticism back against the job seeker. In a webinar on how to stick out with one’s application documents, the following discussion between a viewer and an officer takes place:
Marie: I understand that it’s good to have application documents that stick out, but I must still question this. Why is everything related to job seeking only about appearance all the time?

Arbetsförmedlare Annica: @Marie, the important thing is of course that you include your experience and qualifications. To stick out is more about getting the employer to notice your application.

Marie: I understand that, but it is always the surface that comes first when discussing job seeking.

Arbetsförmedlare Annica: @Marie it is possible to stick out with text as well, to choose different fonts and sizes and also how you choose to formulate yourself (2016f).

We see here that Marie’s questions of the superficial focus on appearance are not directly answered: in the first answer the criticism of superficiality is instead toned down and in the second reflected back at Marie, as if her skepticism was just a case of her not knowing all the different ways in which she can individualize her application documents even more. In this way the criticism is neutralized and even absorbed back into the wider individualistic job seeking discourse, where doubts and skepticism are understood as individual problems that must be corrected through self-work, rather than as symptoms of wider social problems.

The same technique is used in a webinar on how to apply for jobs at different ages, where the user Karin writes that “I think this incitement to sell yourself all the time is sick. Everyone are not natural sellers and do not have the energy to be ‘at it’ all the time” (2017b). Several users soon write supportive, agreeing comments, but no officer addresses them in the chat. These comments are however mentioned at the end of the last question break, when the officer behind the camera reads from the chat: “lastly, many seem to experience a stress that were not there before that they must always ‘sell themselves’, and that is obviously a problem when you are not used to think in that way”. The lecturer nods in agreement and says “mm, exactly” before concluding the webinar. These critical considerations do not receive any more response than that it is deemed problematic to not be “selling”. Certainly, it is here not the expectations on job seekers in themselves that are deemed problematic - these are not problematized in the slightest - but rather the inability of the job seekers to adapt to them. The skepticism is thus reflected back at the job seekers, that are left with a choice: to accept their prescribed subject positions as selling, enterprising individuals and do the best of it, or refuse it and take the consequences in terms of insufficient employability and prolonged unemployment.
6 Concluding Discussion

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how job seekers are socialized as labor market actors, by exploring which ideals and discourses of job seeking and employability that are produced through the webinars by the Public Employment Service (AF), how these ideals can be thought to shape the everyday life and subjectivity of the unemployed individuals exposed to them, and through which technologies the viewers are subjected to them. The results show that the AF reproduce expectations on job seekers to be active, to engage in self-work (such as managing their body language and emotions), and to constantly network, sell and market themselves in all spheres of life. The viewers are here positioned as professional, ‘enterprising selves’ (Foucault, 2014:195p) that must construct, regulate and sell themselves in relation to the ever-shifting demands of the labor market. The job seekers are socialized into these ideals and subject positions through a variety of technologies: the AF responsibilize the viewers, they encourage self-reflection, they empower the viewers, they utilize the group dynamic in the chat as a disciplinary factor, and they reflect criticism back at the viewers in order to disarm it and relate it to deficiencies within the individuals themselves. These governing technologies all play a part in the wider subjectification process, where the viewers have to negotiate the subject position as independent and self-steering citizens that are personally responsible for their (un)employment.

While the results do not say anything about how any “real” individuals ultimately react to and negotiate the identified discourses and technologies, the results can be used to further understand the theoretical complexities and tensions of the subjectification process. This is what is attempted in the following discussion, where the implications of the results are explicated in relation to previous research and wider theoretical arguments. First, I discuss how the webinars work as a governmental ‘technology of the self’. Then I discuss how the webinars not only teach job seekers how to find work, but how they also in a wider sense discipline them as labor market actors. After that, the complex process of creating a professional, sellable self is scrutinized. This process is then directly connected to the discourse of employability, and what I call its colonizing effects. Finally, some implications of the results for future research and practice are presented.
6.1 The Webinar as a Technology of Government

The webinars have in this thesis been studied as a form of ‘governing’ through which normative knowledge, discourses and subject positions are produced, that the unemployed are socialized in accordance with through the utilization of certain subjectifying technologies. The webinars can here first of all be said to work as what Miller & Rose (2008:26) call a ‘governing at a distance’, where experts produce advice and knowledge that affect what people think is normal and desirable in relation to (in this case) work and unemployment. That the advice is produced by an expert authority on job seeking lends it credibility, legitimacy and the character of objective ‘knowledge’. What is interesting here is however that the job seekers registered at the AF are not “forced” to attend the webinars and take part of this knowledge, but that the webinars rather have the character of a commodity that they can freely choose to consume if they want to. The effect of this is that job seekers not primarily are addressed as subjects of the state, but rather as free market actors and consumers, which locate the webinars within the wider self-help paradigms that have been shown to be so prominent in contemporary consumer societies (e.g. Rimke, 2000). This reproduces individualistic discourses where the unemployed are made personally responsible for their employment: job seekers are here not only responsibilized to find a job, but also to seek and consume help and advice that might help them with this.

While the nature of the technologies that have been identified varies, they all attempt to make the viewers consider the presented job seeking discourses as self-evident and to picture themselves, their identity and their responsibilities as a natural part of them. Understanding the webinars as what Foucault (1988) calls a ‘technology of the self’ is useful for understanding how this might impact on their subjectivity. The webinars do (just as other forms of self-help) essentially turn the subject herself and her freedom and identity into instruments through which power is exercised: by shaping how job seekers think of themselves and their responsibilities, and by encouraging them to engage in different forms of self-governing, self-work and self-reflection in order to find work, discipline and surveillance are instead of coming “from above” largely internalized and directed towards the self. The power to overcome unemployment is through this process located within the individual and her ambitions and desires, but so are also the problems currently stopping her from doing so. The reason these technologies can be thought to be so influential is because they do not only force people to do things, but that they rather appeal to their free will and uniqueness as individuals. We must here remember Foucault’s insistence that power is not only negative and repressive but also
positive and productive, as it produces desirable and normative subjectivities and ways of being. As he states in a well-cited passage:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (Foucault, 1980:119).

Although the promise of employment remains the strongest reason for following the advice in the webinars, promises of boosted self-confidence, self-knowledge and even of self-realization further testifies to their subjectifying influence. The webinars shape what is considered as normal, ethical and acceptable in relation to unemployment: following them is a way to gain acceptance, legitimacy and self-esteem, which are strong reasons for a stigmatized group such as the unemployed to do their best to identify with them (cf. with recent studies that show that job seekers tend to reproduce discourses of their own individual responsibility, Sharone, 2007; Van Oort, 2015; Boland & Griffin, 2015). If participants by following the advice in the webinars feel empowered and strengthened (which response in the chat proves that many do), this attests that the discourses have real influence. This positive and therapeutic function of power, so often lost in studies conceiving power only as negative and repressive, is crucial for understanding not only how the webinars work, but also how ideologies are reproduced today and how people come to accept subjectivities ascribed to them by power institutions.

6.2 Job Seeking as Labor Market Discipline

The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism has, as we saw in the chapter on previous research, entailed extensive transformations of both labor market and welfare state. The weakening of the welfare state has been accompanied by a strengthened work ethic (in Sweden in the form of arbetslinjen) and new activating workfare policies, through which living on welfare benefits has been increasingly stigmatized. The webinars must partly be understood as an answer to these transformations, as they attest both to a redistribution of responsibilities between state and citizen and to the new role of the state in individualistic, neoliberal societies: if the state once was perceived as having a responsibility to guarantee full employment, it here rather works as a socializing agent that help individuals step into their expected roles on the insecure labor market, as self-responsible market actors and consumer-citizens.
One important conclusion to be drawn from the results is that the webinars are part of a wider labor market disciplination, through which the unemployed are drilled into internalizing dominating expressions of the work ethic and to construct themselves as the kind of workers currently desired on the labor market. We have seen that qualities valued at the flexible and competitive labor market, such as activity, initiative, creativity, adaptability and self-responsibility, here also are promoted as solutions to unemployment. By further addressing the unemployed as active, self-responsible job seekers, the AF reframes unemployment from being a passivizing absence of work (cf. Jahoda, 2014) to instead be an activating preparation for work, during which individuals can acquire abilities, credentials, attitudes and routines that later also are demanded by employers (Rose, 1999:162). The concepts ‘job seeking’ and ‘unemployment’ do thus not only denote a difference between activity and passivity, but also a different attitude towards work in general: where the unemployed by definition is without a job, the job seeker is not so much without employment as she temporarily is “between jobs”, which cements wage labor as the unquestioned norm and makes life without wage labor almost impossible to imagine. Addressing the job seekers like this further prepares and socializes them to the precarious labor market, where temporary and part-time employment contracts have become much more common and the individual therefore must expect to have many different jobs throughout her career.

The webinars signify the same larger shift within the AF, away from vocational training and matching and towards individualized job coaching services, that also has been noted in other contexts (see Peralta Prieto, 2011; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2013:829). While it here would be easy to criticize the AF and this sort of service for not directly helping the unemployed find work (a criticism that currently is popular in both public, political and academic contexts: e.g. Sahlén & Eklöf, 2013; Weman, 2013; Paulsen, 2015; SvD, 2017; Wilhelmson, 2017), it is important to recognize that this sort of service do not exist in a vacuum. The AF is a public authority whose work is shaped and steered by political decisions, social policy and changes on the labor market, and their services are thus symptoms of wider social and political circumstances. While one can of course question if this sort of service actually get more people employed or just different people, services of this kind do regardless in combination with both other forms of similar advice and other more strictly disciplinary practices on the labor market (such as increased control and monitoring, individual activity reports, conditional and sanctioned welfare provisions and lowered allowances) have an important governmental function in steering people to act in relation to hegemonic visions of work.
The webinars do in this context further illustrate that the Swedish welfare state hardly can be defined by its attempts to “decommodify” its citizens by reducing their dependence on the market any longer, as proposed by Esping-Andersen in his influential work (1990). The results rather point to a recommodification of labor, where the unemployed are made increasingly dependent on adapting themselves to the ever-shifting demands of the labor market (cf. Harvey, 2005:59; Greer, 2016). As Garsten (2011:252) writes, this indicates that the Swedish labor market has become more of a market in the true sense of the word, where individuals that no longer can rely on unconditional support from the state instead must view themselves as commodities. The strong emphasis on employability training - in the webinars and elsewhere - is after all more than anything a training in how to make oneself sellable and attractive on the market, something which as has been shown require workers to mould their very identity and sense of self in relation to market related discourses. This process, which is full of complexities and ambiguities, will be further discussed in the next sections.

6.3 The Ambiguities of Constructing a Sellable and Enterprising Self

The webinars are as we have seen not only used to share tips and advice on how to get a job, but also to distribute and negotiate subject positions. The subject position that is negotiated to the job seekers is very similar to the position of the ‘enterprising self’, discussed by Foucault (2014:195p) and Rose (1999:161) as the ideal neoliberal subject - the AF often use the similar expression ‘professional self’ to describe how job seekers must understand themselves. Job seeking is here explicitly likened to a full-time job which requires individuals to structure and plan their week as their own ‘project leader’, to set up goals for themselves, to actively apply for jobs and to do various activities that might fight off passivity and enhance their employability and social and human capital. The viewers are also advised to understand themselves as products that must be branded, marketed and sold; if there are no available jobs, they are told to create needs for themselves within the employer’s business, just as marketers in a consumer society must create new wants and needs in the consumers (cf. Miller & Rose, 1997; Baudrillard, 1998). For the entrepreneurial job seekers that further manage to change identity, network and appearance in relation to the ever-shifting demands of the labor market, then supposedly “only the sky is the limit” of their approaching success.

Rather than telling the viewers exactly how they shall be, act, think and look, the AF informs them of presently prevailing ideals and expectations that the viewers themselves must negotiate in order to find their own way of being professional. The viewers are thus not only
encouraged to be ‘entrepreneurial selves’ (i.e. subjects that are entrepreneurial) but also to be ‘entrepreneurs of the self’, subjects that consciously create and distinguish *themselves* just like they would create and market a company or a product (cf. Rose, 1999:142). One ambiguity in this process is the sometimes conflicting demands on both ‘expressing individuality’ and ‘performing professionalism’. These demands point at a somewhat ambivalent understanding of the self, where the self both have essentialistic and performative components. These demands are however never presented as conflicting: the viewers are on the contrary encouraged to both find and express their true self and to model their self-presentation on the wants and needs of specific employers through constant impression management (Goffman, 2004). This requires them to simultaneously understand themselves as *subjects* (that engage in self-reflection and that distinguish themselves from others by enlisting their personality, interests, passions and dreams) and as *objects* (by relating to themselves as commodities and by viewing themselves from the evaluating eyes of the Other/the employer). Through this dialectic between subjectification and objectification, the viewers must find a way to convincingly express “themselves” while still signifying the enterprising aura of professionalism that the employer seeks and values.

The encouragement to be self-reflexive, to express individuality and to let one’s interests, passions and personality shine through when seeking work is one possibly strong factor for making job seekers identify with their ascribed subject positions, since it requires them to picture themselves and their wants, needs and interests in relation to the needs of the labor market. Just as the professionality they must express is standardized and built around certain clichéd attributes and qualities, the individuality they must express is in this sense also conditioned by the demands to be personal in certain ways - the webinars present strongly normative conceptions of *how* one is supposed to be and which sorts of attributes one shall emphasize and conceal when marketing oneself. It is for instance not advisable that a person perceiving herself as shy, anti-social or without any concrete ambitions in relation to her career actually market herself like that; she must instead either tone down, conceal or train away these characteristics. The webinars thus establish ideals and norms of what kind of personalities and personal qualities that are good and which are not, which in turn creates expectations on individuals to live up to these ideals.

---

12 It could be argued that this dialectic always is essential for creating an identity and sense of self; it was central already in the social psychological classics by Sigmund Freud (in his distinction between id/ego/superego) and George H. Mead (in his distinction between “I” and “me”), where the self essentially develops as a compromise between biological drives and instincts and the social and cultural norms and expectations of (generalized) others.
Adorno & Horkheimer have in relation to the culture industry called the process where small, distinguishing details are used to make otherwise mass-produced and standardized products stick out for ‘pseudo-individualization’. They argue that such individualized details often are used to signify what a product “really is” to consumers, like in the case of “the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality” (1997:154). Such details are however also consciously manufactured just as the rest of the product, which they argue means that in these cases “[t]he peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural” (ibid.). A similar process is at work here, since the (pseudo-)individuality that job seekers must express is to be carefully constructed with the sole purpose of selling and distinguishing themselves. This possibly has strong implications for their subjectivity, since they convincingly must act out their self-presentation in relation to the personalized bits they use to market themselves and their uniqueness. The person marketing herself as glad and positive must for instance, as we have seen, ideally uphold this image in all situations to not risk to damage her personal brand and professional reputation. The demands on constantly expressing these selling attributes, not only in professional but also in certain private contexts, risk to alienate her from her actual feelings, as it requires her to set up a performance act and work on both her appearance and actual emotions in order to live up to the professional image she has created of herself (cf. Hochschild, 2003:7). This further risks to damage the complexity of the rest of her self-identity, which in reality never can be neatly reduced to a few selling attributes.

The mix of the personal with the professional when self-marketing do also result in, as Costea et al. (2012) argues, that “being yourself” is equated with being professional, active, adaptable or the other enterprising qualities chosen to market yourself. This conflation of the personal with the professional serves to further naturalize the work ethic and of strengthening the consumer esthetic (Bauman, 1998), where work is not only constructed as a necessary activity in order to assess a wage but also as an area of identity, self-expression and self-fulfillment. This is of course, if we follow Foucault, the whole point with producing and promoting enterprising subjectivities, as neoliberal capitalism to be most effective requires entrepreneurial citizens that understand and regulate themselves and their lives in relation to principles of the free, competitive market. Discourses of employability are here, as we will see in the next section, a central tool for further erasing the perceived boundaries between work and leisure, and for socializing people into enterprising, neoliberal subjectivities.
6.4 The Colonizing Demands of Employability

Since much previous research has not adequately addressed how discourses of employability might shape the subjectivity and everyday life of the individuals exposed to them, this thesis has addressed an important gap in our understanding of these discourses. The results show that the employability of the job seekers in the webinars is connected to an appropriate professional image, a personal brand, the right personality and attitude, their body language, clothes, voice and handshake, the appropriate application documents, the necessary contacts and network, a professional and presentable online persona, and much more - everything the presumed employer might desire and value. While job seeking often is framed as a full time job, the demands to become employable thus extends further than the 40-hour work week and pours down into every aspect of life, where “everything you say and do” (webinar, 2016d) might impact on your chances of finding work. Since activities outside of work in turn are to be valued in terms of how they can contribute to one’s employability and career, the employability discourses blur the boundaries between work and leisure and places wage labor at the centre of our lives.

The webinars could here be read as an attempt by the AF to help the unemployed adapt to the demands of today’s flexible and competitive work life, by empowering them to take control over their situation: these are the productive and “positive” effects of governing that I have tried to explicate, which motivate individuals to adapt to certain practices, identities and ways of being not only because they are forced to, but because it is functional and helps them negotiate and deal with the demands and circumstances they face every day. It is however worth to also consider the demands to become employable from a more critical perspective, by pondering their wider consequences for the subject in her everyday life. The instrumentalizing demands to become employable represent what Adorno likely would have criticized as a “continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life” (1991:189) that turns our free time into a reinforcing appendage to the work process. While important to avoid idealized and romanticized understandings of a “pure” free time, devoid of power relations and exploitation, there is still value to this sort of critique. The branding and marketing of oneself is after all here pictured as something to ideally work with all the time, in both professional and private contexts: emotions, body language, contacts and leisure activities are to be chosen and thought of based on how they can give the subject advantages in terms of employability and a professional self-image; volunteering or joining an organization is recommended for spicing up the CV, for meeting new contacts or for working on one’s self-confidence or shyness;
Taking time off is important to find new energy for continued job seeking; even the Christmas weekend has its own webinar, where it is said that contacting employers instead of taking time off is a good idea for getting a competitive advantage over other job seekers. While the viewers are not expected to do all of these things at once, the message (both implicit and explicit) is nonetheless that the more you adapt to these ideals, the more successful will your career be. Frayne captures the inherent danger in these instrumentalizing discourses:

Work has increasingly spilled its demands into our homes, drawing upon our emotions and personalities to an extent never before seen or tolerated. As the ethic of hard work tightens its grip once again, employability becomes the motivating force of our ambitions, interactions and education system. A side effect of this is that we, as a society, may be losing our grip on the criteria that judge an activity to be worthwhile and meaningful, even if it does not contribute to employability or the needs of the economy. Those activities and relationships that cannot be defended in terms of an economic contribution are being devalued and neglected (Frayne, 2015:6).

Building upon this reasoning, there is what could be called a colonizing tendency in the discourse of employability, where the whole life ideally is to be subjected to the demands of appearing as sellable and employable to the employer. The advice of the webinars is instrumentalizing, since it encourages job seekers to choose and value activities and relations as means to employability, rather than as ends in themselves. Cremin (2010:137) has argued that employability discourses requires subjects to engage in what he calls reflexive exploitation, where they must think of themselves as commodities and mould their self-presentation, interests and passions in relation to what the employer might desire. The totalizing power of this colonizing and self-exploitative process lies in the fact that you can never know exactly what the employer seeks and requires: the wants of the employer, the desires of what Cremin calls the "generalized boss", are always elusive and transformative. This means that those seeking employment - which most people due to the precarious labor market today have to do several times during their career - can never be content with what they already are, but that they on the contrary always must be ready to seek out new venues for self-improvement.

In order to further grasp the influence of employability discourses over the subject, it is useful to understand them as ideological fantasies of self-mastery (cf. Costea et al., 2012; Bloom, 2013). As argued by Žižek (2008:45), fantasy is something we use to fill out inconsistencies or dissonances in our social order. If the “reality” of an insecure labor market where there are no quick-fixes to unemployment and where one can never be sure to find the desired job is discomforting, the fantasy of being able to take control over one’s career and
employability through self-mastery might offer some comfort (Bloom, 2013:787). This is one argument for why these discourses might be so influential, and certainly explains why they fit so well with the individualistic and competitive climate associated with neoliberal capitalism. If these explanations actually are realistic as solutions to unemployment is beside the point: by reducing complex questions to simple answers, such ideological fantasies still serve to make a complex social reality comprehensible for the subject. Fantasies of having an unlimited potential that must be actualized do however, as Costea et al. (2012) point out, mean that one is never good enough. Since we can never know exactly what the employer desires, we always have to continue with the Sisyphean attempts of becoming employable, of reaching that never attainable full potential that supposedly beckons from the depths of ourselves. This is the backside of the empowering discourses of employability.

6.5 Prospects for future research and practice

The temporary and insecure work life of today constantly places new requirements on workers to be flexible, adaptable and to subject themselves, their lives and their personality to the ever-shifting demands of the market. One argument of this thesis is that it in this context is important to examine the activities and ideals connected to job seeking if we want to understand how individuals are socialized to the rapidly changing labor markets of today. Since much previous research on job seeking discourses has focused on static texts, such as policy documents, self-help books and websites by private actors (Andersson, 2003; Krejsler, 2007; Vesterberg, 2015; Boland, 2016; Brooks & Anumudu, 2016), the webinars have as a digital and interactive medium developed by a public institution been an interesting case for understanding how the Swedish state develops new methods for governing unemployment. However, these results can of course not be generalized as being representative of Swedish job seeking ideals in general or of other practices of the AF, and future research will thus have to examine other contexts and practices through which the unemployed are socialized into adapting to current labor market conditions. As the results of this study indicate, it could in this context be fruitful to examine how new digital mediums are used by both states and private actors to govern individuals differently than what previously has been possible.

In order to understand how the everyday life and subjectivity of job seekers ultimately are affected by discourses such as the ones identified in the webinars, future research must with other methods take the interaction between job seekers and governing authorities as their focus. This research could address many important questions: how do job seekers negotiate
these discourses in different contexts? How is their sense of self affected by the demands to become “sellable” and enterprising? Do demands on retaining employability affect how they for instance use the internet and how they choose which leisure activities to engage in? Future research should also address how different groups react to the expectations on them. While there has not been much room to address intersectional issues in this thesis, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and other social categorizations do certainly all affect one’s chances of becoming employable. It would for instance be interesting for future research to focus on ethnicity and class, now when large groups of immigrants and refugees have arrived in Sweden - considering the nature of contemporary job seeking ideals, it is highly plausible that individuals from different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds have very different opportunities to live up to the demands on becoming employable (see Vesterberg, 2013). Employability discourses do after all present a very individualistic notion of what it takes to find a job, which risks to conceal and reproduce structural inequalities and segregation both on the labor market and in society at large (Peck & Theodore, 2000; Clarke, 2005).

Finally, it is important to have a critical and lively discussion in both academic, political and public contexts of what here has been framed as the colonizing effects of employability discourses. For the unemployed, many of which today find themselves in a situation where they are unable to meet society’s expectations on them, unconditioned welfare provisions could for instance be a way of once again de-commodifying them as citizens and to de-stigmatize their situation, by showing that the citizenry right to a good life is more than a conditioned payoff for selling one’s labor. In a larger context, the instrumentalizing demands to structure our lives with the goal of becoming and staying employable can only be understood as a symptom of a social situation where “the market is the final judge” (Bröckling, 2016:36) and where wage labor itself is considered the centre of our lives and attention. This means that if these policies are to be challenged, then there is also a need to denaturalize and decenter the discourses and ideologies which make up wage labor as the cornerstone of the decent life and as the source of our passions and desires, and to envision counter-hegemonic alternatives, as lately has been done in a growing body of research (e.g. Soper, 2008; Paulsen, 2010; Weeks, 2011; Fleming 2014; Frayne, 2015). Scrutinizing norms and ideals around job seeking has in this thesis been one way of contributing to this discussion of the place which wage labor occupies in our lives - a discussion that no doubt will continue to grow in importance, as increased automation and technological rationalizations will continue to make the foundations of the prevailing work ethic unsteady.
7 References


Berardi, F. (2009). The soul at work: from alienation to autonomy. Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, CA.


Empirical Material
Webinars (seen at www.bambuser.com/channel/Arbetsfömedlingen+Sverige).

Boosta ditt jobsökande (2016h). 2016-12-06. Recorded at 2016-12-21.