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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

De-gendering parents: Gender inclusion and standardised language in screen-level bureaucracy

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Abstract
Swedish welfare organisations have a long history of promoting gender equality and inclusivity, involving implementation of more gender-inclusive language (e.g., non-gendered terminology). This study analysed the use of non/gendered expressions at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, as state policy is realised in conjunction with personalised service in textual interaction in screen-level bureaucracy. We drew on conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis to analyse 378 email interactions between clients and social insurance officers, focusing on gendered institutional terminology and gendered person references. The findings suggest that social insurance officers avoided a heteronormative language, in line with Swedish official public language policy, but that a gender-neutral language may come at the cost of formality, standardisation, and de-personalisation. The study brings new knowledge on the ways in which street-level bureaucrats manage responsiveness and standardisation in digital text-based interaction with clients.

KEYWORDS
digital interaction, frontline work, gender equality, heteronormativity, inclusive language, parental leave, street-level bureaucracy

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates the use of gendered terminology in written digital communication between clients and professionals in the Swedish public sector. The Swedish welfare state encompasses a range of equality-promoting institutions, and while guidelines are strict regarding impartiality, the government also instructs welfare agencies to actively 'promote' gender equality (e.g., Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2020). This has been particularly manifest—and debated—in the area of family policy, including various parental benefits. For example, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) has since the 1970s run campaigns aiming 'to persuade men to use their right to parental leave' (Klinth, 2008, p. 21). The policy change that in 1974 granted men and women equal rights to parental benefits entailed a shift in the official terminology so that maternity leave and maternity benefit became *parental* leave and *parental* benefit, also including fathers (see Proposition, 1973:47). Responsive to this shift, the SSIA's written information in brochures and instructions has employed a gender-inclusive language, and is increasingly highlighting inclusion

Abbreviations: CA, conversation analysis; MCA, membership categorisation analysis; SSIA, Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

beyond a heterosexual or cis-gender nuclear family (Lind Palicki, 2010).[1] This aligns with research that has emphasised how welfare organisations' inclusive treatment is important for lesbian, gay, and transgender parents' service-seeking (e.g., Chapman et al., 2012).

To date, however, little is known about the extent to which these shifts have affected client encounters, that is, if parents are addressed in a gender-inclusive way when interacting with welfare professionals at the SSIA. Although the language in brochures and websites is important for promoting particular values, research on street-level bureaucracy has highlighted institutional encounters as central for the realisation of policy (e.g., Bruhn & Ekström, 2017; Caswell, 2020; Ellis, 2011; Lipsky, 1980/2010; Prior & Barnes, 2011; Rice, 2013). While published information is carefully designed and pre-evaluated, clients actively seek personalised instructions and advice beyond such standardised channels. In contrast to published texts aimed at parents, the writings of SSIA staff to clients contacting them (e.g., via email) has received marginal attention, disregarding the impact that frontline workers' flexible interpretation and application of regulations in interaction with clients might have on their understanding and use of parental leave. In direct contacts with clients, frontline workers must design their information to fit the specific recipient, the prior knowledge that they display, and the language they use, while at the same time adhering to official terminology, policies of accessible language, and an inclusive approach regarding gender and sexuality.

The current study brings new knowledge on the discretion of state welfare frontline workers to—by means of explanation—interpret, apply, and negotiate rules and regulations in text-based interaction with clients as they ‘realise’ policies related to both gender equality and ‘plain language’, while striving to be responsive to clients' individual situations in a screen-level bureaucracy (cf., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). Specifically, we draw on conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to investigate gendered language practices in information-seeking and information-providing emails on the topic of parental leave, asking: (a) how do parents and social insurance officers use gendered terms? and (b) to what extent are social insurance officers responsive to non/gendered information disclosed by parents? By such means, the study contributes to ongoing debates in social work research on standardisation, particularly in relation to digitalisation.

Street- and screen-level bureaucracy

Social interaction with clients is part of everyday work for street-level bureaucrats, who Lipsky (1980/2010) defines as ‘public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work’ (p. 3), making agencies in which they work *street-level bureaucracies*. The level of discretion is here central, that is, professionals' exercise of authority, autonomy, and judgement, while having established service ideals, laws, and policies to follow. Frontline workers' central task of interacting with clients includes the dilemma of following, interpreting, and applying these established ideals, laws, and policies while simultaneously being *responsive* to clients, thus having a mediating role between them and the organisation (Lipsky, 1980/2010). Responsiveness involves taking the client's specific situation and needs into account. The mass processing of clients (seen in large, centralised organisations such as the SSIA) constrains responsiveness of individual cases, leading to standardised and routinised tasks and service delivery. This is a reason for why responsiveness can be seen as a burden for street-level bureaucrats. However, Lipsky (1980/2010) observes that ‘routines provide a legitimate excuse for not dealing flexibly, since fairness in a limited sense demands equal treatment’ (p. 101). That is, routinisation and unresponsiveness can lead to an equal treatment in that this reduces flexibility in service-delivery and treatment of individual clients.

As part of digitalisation, public service organisations' interactions with clients have increasingly moved online (Breit et al., 2021; Mishna et al., 2012; Mishna et al., 2014). This is often seen as a way to provide cost-effective service (Garrett, 2005) in line with the public sector's increased standardisation, routinisation, and result orientation, influenced by new public management (cf., Hood, 1991). This can be described as a gradual shift from street-level bureaucracy as it is traditionally understood to what has been termed *screen-level bureaucracy* (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). The screen-level bureaucracy is characterised by low discretion and partial human interference with individual cases in centralised, large-scale organisations. This type of bureaucracy incorporates

[1]The development towards a more inclusive terminology relates to language planning in two areas. First, the language of public welfare has over time become more informal as part of a ‘plain language’ policy (Mårtensson, 1988), For example, removal of titles has meant that gender and marital status are less emphasised. Secondly, feminist language planning has encouraged a gender-inclusive language. A case in point is the use of the gender-neutral third-person pronoun ‘hen’, which was introduced to facilitate a more inclusive address (Milles, 2011). The SSIA's communicative guidelines suggest that ‘hen’ is a good alternative to ‘he’ and ‘she’ when not referring to a particular person or when the person's gender is unknown, but specify that ‘hen’ should *not* be used in individual contacts with clients unless the client explicitly asks for it (SSIA, personal communication, 20 January 2022).

features such as the computer, the internet, and digital systems in public services, highlighting frontline workers' need of digital tools to carry out their work. Client contacts and casework are here conducted digitally, that is, in electronic systems and through digitised communication. Additionally, screen-level bureaucracy is associated with increased routinisation, as administrative tasks and documentation depend on electronic procedures and are restricted by software designs, suggesting the creation of a 'digital rigidity' in screen-level work that subsequently decreases responsiveness (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002).

Although digital encounters can facilitate communicative contact on the client's terms (Löfberg & Aspán, 2011), information and communication technologies can be experienced as impersonal (Ryan & Garrett, 2018), which does not align with the argument that public service delivery can and should be improved by 'nurturing stable personal relationships and constructive communication' (Bartels, 2013, p. 473) on the street-level. Textual communication introduces a range of difficulties for professionals writing to clients (as compared to spoken interaction). As Breit et al. (2021) argue, textual interaction with clients can blur the lines between formal and informal language. Additionally, the permanency of text—as it is logged in digital systems on both the organisation's and the client's side—may raise concerns about messages from professionals being used as 'evidence' for a particular claim, or to ground complaints against the service (Breit et al., 2021). Counsellors describe being conscious of this and adapting their language to reduce ambiguity in written messages to clients (Breit et al., 2021). Other linguistic aspects concern difficulties interpreting textual messages in the absence of audio-visual cues (Mearns et al., 2015), and whether or not to adopt styles typical of digital settings, such as the use of more informal words, exclamation points, or emojis (Breit et al., 2021).

Lipsky's (1980/2010) original theorisation highlights the way frontline workers have to find ways to make policy work despite limitations of time, resources, or information. In a textual environment, these limitations may be particularly salient. The ways affordances available in textual interaction with clients are put to use, and the ways limitations are handled, can thus be seen as part of the street-level (or 'screen-level') bureaucratic work. Paradoxically, despite street-level researchers' emphasis on encounters, *actual* interaction between frontline staff and clients is rarely examined in detail (Bartels, 2013). We therefore draw on work by Caswell (2020) who argues that CA of naturally occurring interaction 'makes it possible to pay specific attention to in situ language exchanges, often excluded from [street-level bureaucracy] research' (p. 25).

Street-level research has also devoted little attention to public encounters in relation to gender (see, e.g., Chang & Brewer, 2022, for a review), which is surprising as 'discretion provides opportunity to intervene on behalf of clients as well as to discriminate among them' (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. 23). Although Swedish social insurance regulations provide little leeway for insurance officers' decision-making at the SSIA (Thunman et al., 2020), the unavoidable discretion linked to variations in language use—how to explain, what words to use, etc.—is bound up with notions of gender equality and inclusivity and can serve to either promote or discourage such ideals. To address this and to contribute to street-level research, we apply a gender perspective to screen-level encounters, which will be outlined in the next section.

Interaction, language, and gender

The study draws on theory and previous findings from CA and MCA, which share an ethnomethodological core in emphasising the tacit, taken-for-granted practices by which participants organise their everyday circumstances (Sacks, 1992). This approach makes it possible to establish what local specificities in the coordination of action that distinguish different institutional and/or mediated settings (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). It can thus provide a detailed account of how frontline workers and clients collaboratively produce policy from below (cf., Bruhn & Ekström, 2017; Caswell, 2020; Ekström et al., 2013; Monteiro, 2016) and how interactional practices of responsiveness are put to action (Thunman et al., 2020). CA highlights how talk and text is designed 'in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the (…) coparticipants' (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 727). This entails building on available information about what the interlocutor knows and who they are, including their category memberships, for example, based on gender, sexuality, or age (Flinkfeldt et al., 2022). This is central in frontline interaction, where there is often an epistemic asymmetry regarding regulations and routines, so that frontline staff may need to adjust their language to facilitate the client's understanding and participation.

This perspective involves an understanding of gender as socially and interactionally accomplished: something a person *does*, rather than *has* or *is* (Speer & Stokoe, 2011). The ethnomethodological conceptualisation of 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) has been adopted across the field of gender research, but West and Zimmerman (2009) point to CA as particularly useful for revealing taken-for-granted aspects of inequality as produced through language in everyday life (see also

Kitzinger, 2009). Rather than linking certain interactional patterns to men or women, this approach investigates how gender is occasioned in interaction as a vehicle for action, as gender is 'made relevant' in specific ways by participants themselves for 'the doing of some activity', for example, in asking or answering a question (Sacks, 1992, p. 597; Stokoe, 2006, 2012). This may involve the fine-tuned use of gendered terms or categories, such as 'girl', 'woman', or 'lady' (Stokoe, 2010).

CA and MCA understand gendered reference terms, that are used to refer to either things or persons, as 'not just, indeed not primarily, about giving and receiving information but about navigating social relations' (Stivers et al., 2007, p. 19). Referring to someone involves selecting 'from a variety of lexical and gestural possibilities' (Enfield, 2012, p. 433), but is normatively structured to be as simple and recognisable as possible. For example, when referring to a person that the other knows, the name is preferred over a lengthier explanation of who the person is (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). When referring to someone, interactants may also draw on available categorial incumbencies (e.g., in referring to 'that woman'). People can, however, be categorised in an indefinite number of ways and incumbency does not necessarily entail relevance. Since there are usually multiple competing categorial relations that can be invoked when referring to someone, the choice may also be strategic: 'my spouse', 'my wife', 'my partner', and 'the love of my life' are not mutually exclusive, but have slightly differing connotations, and where one term is more conventional other choices can be heard as marked (Stivers et al., 2007). Some references will therefore be more suitable in bureaucratic encounters, whereas others might be deemed too 'private' in orientation.

When someone uses a category to refer to a third party, for example, 'my wife', this makes available a range of inferences about them, and—by association—about the speaker. As Stivers et al. (2007) argue, 'by using a marked referring expression speakers perform actions relative to the culture in which they operate' (p. 18) and it is thus 'the departure from the unmarked form that conveys that the speaker is doing something special with the action' (p. 18). In line with this, Kitzinger's (2005a) work on the mundane reproduction of heteronormativity in interaction has highlighted the taken-for-granted assumptions tacitly built into the language of institutional encounters. In her research on the use of family-related reference terms in after-hours medical calls in the UK, she identified a prevailing assumption of the nuclear family as heterosexual and argued that this may contribute to the negative experiences of institutional encounters reported by gay and lesbian people.

A gender-neutral language may entail not mentioning or relating to gender at all, or not having a gender-specific language. This does not have to be intentional, which is in contrast to, for example, gender-*sensitivity*, which considers societal and cultural aspects in relation to understanding gender-based exclusion and discrimination. Since talk itself cannot be presumed to reflect inner states such as intentions or strategies (te Molder & Potter, 2005), our focus in this study is on what participants *do* in the interaction, and we have used the term gender-neutral to describe language that is not gendered.

METHODS

We used CA in conjunction with MCA to study naturally occurring email interaction between parents and social insurance officers at the SSIA. In this section, we describe the institutional context for this interaction, the data collection, and our analytic procedure.

Institutional context

The SSIA is a Swedish government agency that administers various social insurance benefits. The parental benefit is a right for parents (or individuals who are married to or live with parents) who are at home taking care of small children instead of working, seeking work, or studying. The benefit can be used flexibly for 480 days per child, split equally between the parents. Of these, 150 can be transferred to the other parent, while the remaining 90 days are reserved for each parent. The complex flexibility entails that parents need considerable knowledge of the regulations. Thus, many parents turn to the SSIA to ask questions and/or seek confirmation that they have planned or applied the rules correctly.

The Swedish welfare state has overall embraced digitalisation, arguing that digital services should be the primary mode of communication with citizens (SOU, 2015:66), and aiming to be the leading country in the world on digitalisation by 2025, including public administration and welfare organisations (Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2011). One objective is to enhance citizens' possibilities to claim their rights and fulfil obligations by improving transparency and openness while increasing efficiency (SOU, 2015:66). Swedish public authorities use a range of digital channels for communicating with the public, email being the most common (Swedish National Audit Office, 2021). While recent (and still relatively rare) forms of digital interaction include chatbots, mobile text messaging, and video meetings, email has been used in the Swedish welfare sector for several decades (Svensson & Larsson, 2017). However, surprisingly little research has been conducted on how email exchanges with clients are organised (cf., Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, 2021).

The SSIA has digitised services to a high degree, in line with a general shift from physical meetings to communicating with clients by letter, email, and phone calls. This means that the conditions for building relationships with clients are different than in organisations that meet with clients face to face (Hollertz et al., 2017). To contextualise, the agency received over 10,000 emails regarding parental benefits alone in 2021 (SSIA, personal communication, 25 August 2022).[2] Services for parents have been at the forefront of digitalisation and 76% of all parents in Sweden use the SSIA's digital self-service tools (Internetstiftelsen, 2019). However, a recent audit has indicated that younger people may be less prepared to use digital services than typically assumed, and that complex regulations (which signify parental benefits) may increase the need for personalised service (Swedish National Audit Office, 2021).

Data

We collected 500 email exchanges about parental leave, sent from parents to the SSIA, and the subsequent replies. After clearing data from duplicates, 378 email exchanges—covering a period of approximately 2 months—were included in the analysis. The sample size was considered sufficient to 'prove the regularities of practices' (Robinson, 2007, p. 68). The emails were general inquiries to the SSIA customer service regarding parental benefits used during parental leave. Clients can send such emails using a form on the SSIA website and are technically restricted from replying to the response they get. The analysed emails were thus not threaded but constituted paired questions and answers, with no possibility of a 'third turn'. It was therefore not possible to examine client reactions to the SSIA responses, such as, for example, resistance.

The analysed emails were mostly in Swedish, but nine were in English. Most emails in our dataset—63% of the client inquiries and 71% of the SSIA responses—were written by women. The emails constituted public documents according to Swedish law. On the web form used to email the SSIA, the clients were informed about this and the fact that protection of personal data could not be guaranteed. Clients were encouraged to instead use the telephone customer service for questions that related to personal or sensitive matters. Telephone calls provide possibilities to, for example, adapt the service, ask follow-up questions, and provide fine-tuned responses to clients (Thunman et al., 2020). For anonymity reasons, personal details such as names, email addresses, or social security numbers were removed by insurance officers before the research team was given access. The officers instead provided information about the clients' and the insurance officers' gender (where this could be discerned, otherwise they were asked to note this), based on the information provided in the email itself. This strategy aligned with the member's perspective approach taken in this study as data contained the same information that the officers had access to when the interactions took place.

Insurance officers working with customer service emails at the time of data collection were given oral and written informed about the study, and were given the opportunity to ask questions and opt out if they wished. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2019-01727) and data have been stored securely. In the quoted excerpts in this article, any information that might be used to identify a person has been replaced. Excerpts in Swedish have been translated into English, keeping spelling mistakes, etc. as far as possible, and using bold type to single out expressions of particular relevance to the analysis.

Analytic procedure

Although conversation analysts' core object of study is conversation, a subfield of 'digital CA' has emerged in recent years (Giles et al., 2015; Paulus et al., 2016). It has been argued that as people increasingly interact online, 'it seems logical to adapt the methods of our research accordingly' (Giles et al., 2015, p. 46). Emails constitute asynchronous interaction (Danby et al., 2009), to which CA findings on talk-in interaction cannot be directly applied, but where a CA methodology can nevertheless be used to understand how participants coordinate their actions with the specific resources that the digital environment provides (Meredith & Potter, 2014). For example, although textual exchanges are not technically equivalent of 'turns' in a conversation (cf., Garcia & Baker Jacobs, 1999), they share important features as they, too, are designed in the moment for the recipient in question. When using textual data, there is often no need for further transcription, and since the texts are produced by the original author 'the researcher is already closer to the data than with the transcript of an audio or video recording' (Giles et al., 2015, p. 47). However, temporal aspects of production and reception are often lost.

[2]These statistics refer to emails sent via a form on the SSIA website. See *Data* for more information.

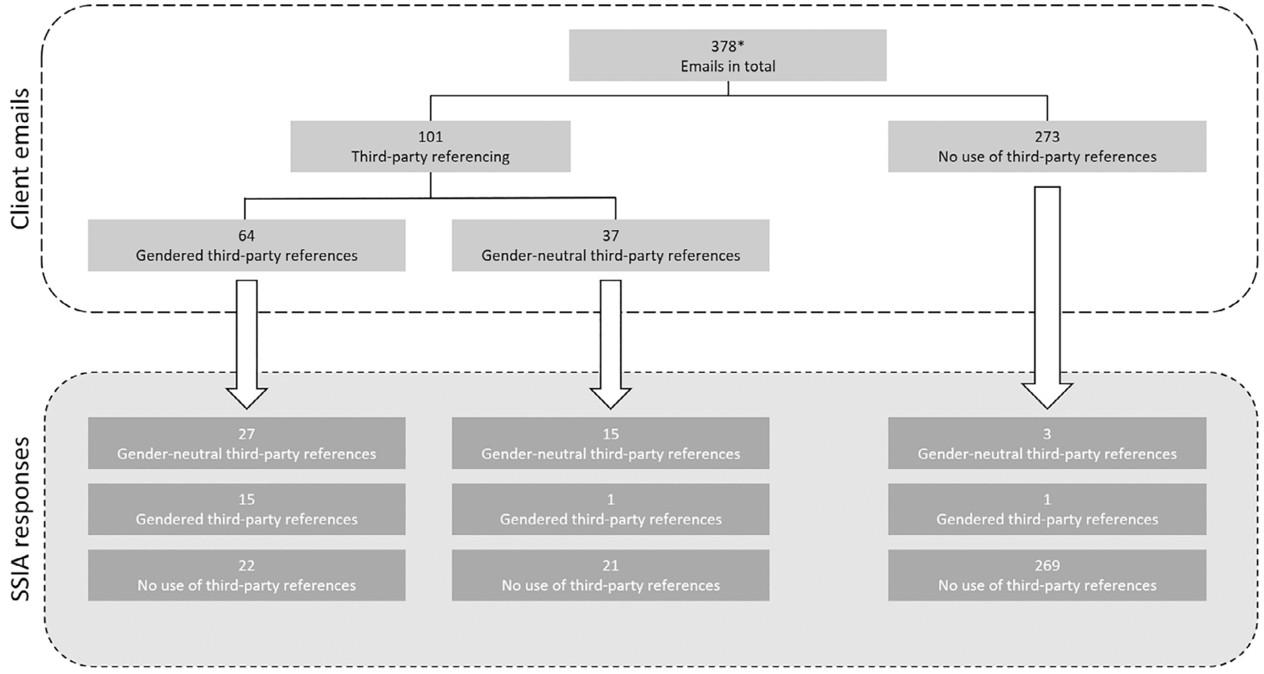

FIGURE 1 Use of gendered and non-gendered person references in the examined emails.
*Three email exchanges were incomplete and in one email exchange it was unclear whether the client referred to oneself or a third party. These four email exchanges were included in the total but excluded in the categorisation of third-party references.

TABLE 1 Use of a gendered parental benefit terminology in the examined emails

	Client emails	SSIA responses
Total number of emails in database	378	378
Use of a social insurance term where colloquially gendered forms existed...	315	227
...which contained gendered elements	16 (5%)	7 (3%)
...which contained no gendered elements	299 (95%)	220 (97%)

Abbreviation: SSIA, Swedish Social Insurance Agency.

The analysis was conducted in a step-wise manner. We started by identifying and compiling instances in which gendered terms were used, in order to provide an overview of how frequent certain practices were and whether there were differences between the client emails and the SSIA emails. We found that gendered terms were used for referring to third parties (e.g., 'she', 'my wife') (see also Figure 1), parental benefit terms (e.g., 'paternity leave') (see also Table 1) and, in a few cases, for referring to oneself (e.g., 'me as the dad') or for making second-person references (e.g., 'you're the dad'). We then drew on CA and MCA to investigate in what situations the SSIA used a gendered terminology and the ways in which this relied on the clients' occasioning of gender in their inquiries, examining how parents and insurance officers oriented to the non/gendered third-party references, for example, how categorisations were made and resisted in both the inquiring email and the reply (cf., Stokoe, 2012).

ANALYSIS

The analysis will be described in two subsections. In the first, we establish the relevance of gendered language in the studied setting and investigate the extent to which parents and insurance officers, respectively, used gendered social insurance terms such as 'maternity leave' over non-gendered terms (e.g., 'parental leave'). In the second subsection, we examine references to non-present parties with parenting responsibilities for the child in question, for example, mentionings of 'the father', 'my wife', or 'my partner'. Here, we investigate to what extent such references were gendered, how gendered terms made cis- and heteronormativity available, and how insurance officers' gendering practices were responsive to the information parents disclosed in their emails about the gender of the person they referred to.

A non-gendered social insurance terminology

While the examined data showed a clear tendency to rely on the official, non-gendered terminology for parental benefits, the transition from the older, gendered terms was nevertheless a live matter. Both insurance officers and clients overwhelmingly used current institutional terminology—as we would expect—but sometimes they chose colloquial, gendered terms. Out of the 315 client emails that used parental benefit terms, 16 deviated from the institutional terminology to use a gendered form (see Table 1). These included gendered variations for 'parental leave', 'parental benefit', 'parenting days', '10-days', and 'pregnancy certificate'. In the responses from the SSIA, only seven emails included gendered terms and all these related to pregnancy certificates, which until recently were called 'maternity certificates'.[3]

It was clear from the examined emails that the SSIA had not only changed their official terminology in written guidelines and brochures (which are pre-examined to ensure that phrasing is correct, inclusive, and accessible), but that social insurance officers consistently used these terms in their direct, written interaction with clients. Since some clients used colloquial (gendered) terms, insurance officers on occasion encountered these and had to choose whether or not to go along with the client's phrasing. There were seven instances where the insurance officer used a gendered terminology in their responses, but in none of these did they adopt the gendered terminology of the client. However, they also never made explicit that the client was using bureaucratically incorrect terms. Instead, the officers in their answers explained the regulations applicable to the client using the correct institutional terminology, and thus displayed understanding of what the client meant by the colloquial terms and at the same time made available the terms that the client would need to understand and use when applying for the benefit in the self-service system (what conversation analysts have termed embedded correction; Jefferson, 1987).

The following (abbreviated) example from our data shows what this looked like in practice. The inquiry related to 'SGI', which is the abbreviated term used for the income on which parental benefits in Sweden are calculated. The client described a hypothetical scenario, asking if he could use paternity leave on weekdays if he worked weekends:

Excerpt 1 (IDA366)

Client (man):	If I am on full-time **paternity leave**[4] but work in a shop where we work weekends. Can I take out Monday–Friday and work my usual weekends.
SSIA:	If you are asking in relation to protecting your sickness benefit qualifying income then it is enough that you use **parental benefit** so that you have a total of five days with full-time employment, regardless and it then is parental benefit or work. Since **you state that you are on full parental leave** you have the right to take out parental benefit. Monday to Friday even the weeks that you work weekend if you want. I here attach information.

In the excerpt, the client specified that he was asking about 'paternity leave', thus using a gendered term, whereas the insurance officer responded using the (institutionally correct and gender-neutral) terms 'parental leave' and 'parental allowance'. The insurance officer reformulated the client's given information in an explicit way ('you state that you are on full parental leave'), thus reducing responsiveness by overtly replacing the colloquial, gendered terminology (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010). The example also shows how clients in our data used the colloquial phrasing in a straight-forward way, treating it as suitable for interacting with the insurance officers.

In sum, our data showed that despite the changed official language to achieve gender-neutrality in this policy area, a gendered terminology was still sometimes used in encounters between professionals and clients. While the insurance officers overwhelmingly chose non-gendered terms, clients using colloquial, gendered terms displayed a presumption that these were bureaucratically valid and officers correspondingly had no problem understanding what the parents meant. By using the legally correct, gender-neutral terminology instead of the terms used by the parents themselves, the insurance officers in

[3]On the SSIA's website, they acknowledge the previous term. In information to certifying healthcare staff, they write: 'When a patient is pregnant they [hen] shall receive a certificate of pregnancy (sometimes called maternity certificate)' (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2021). Note how this is done in otherwise gender-neutral phrasing, for example, using the non-gendered reference 'patient' and the pronoun 'hen', thus not assuming that the person giving birth is a woman or mother. To the best of our knowledge, SSIA has in official statements referred to the gender-neutral version ('certificate of pregnancy') together with the gendered version ('maternity certificate') since 2016.

[4]Translation of the Swedish term 'pappaledighet' (directly translated to 'dad leave'), which is more informal than the English translation 'paternity leave'.

these instances relevantly answered their questions while providing the parents with the institutionally 'correct' words. This, however, might relate more to the importance of using the correct institutional terminology, than to gender per se, although these two aspects overlapped in the instances we examined. The SSIA can, in this sense, be seen as performing pedagogical work that facilitates societal change in this area. To further investigate how gender is occasioned in this setting, we now move on to examine the use of person references.

Insurance officers' (non-)gendering and degendering practices in references to third parties

In this section, we investigate what terms clients and insurance officers used to refer to the child's 'other parent'. In line with what we saw in the previous section, and contrastive to Kitzinger's (2005a) findings of heteronormativity in institutional encounters, our analysis showed that the gender-neutral category terms of reference used in legal texts, brochures, and on the website (cf., Lind Palicki, 2010) had largely been adopted by insurance officers in their encounters with clients, so that their language worked to avoid displaying heteronormative and cis-gender assumptions. As displayed in Figure 1, our corpus included 101 emails where the client referred to another parent, and of these, 64 used a gendered person reference (e.g., husband, mother, girlfriend) whereas 37 used non-gendered terms (e.g., partner, parent). Here, of course, there is no 'institutionally correct' terminology, but parents can choose from a range of terms which are not mutually exclusive. The parents thereby had the option of whether to disclose the person's gender or not (and in most cases, this also involved whether to disclose being in a heterosexual relationship or not). We also noted that there was no use at all of the gender-neutral pronoun 'hen' (neither by clients, nor insurance officers). While this is in line with the SSIA guidelines, it shows how interaction with clients (also where such interaction is textual) lags behind terminological shifts visible in published texts (see, e.g., footnote 3, which shows a text from the SSIA website where this pronoun *is* used).

Where gender has not been disclosed by the parent, an insurance officer's use of a gendered reference term might display heteronormative or cis-gender assumptions (cf., Kitzinger, 2005a). This is so regardless of whether the insurance officer 'knows' the gender of the person referred to (e.g., if they have access to the person's file) or not, since the parent cannot know whether the insurance officer is selecting a particular term based on case-specific knowledge, or prejudice. Choosing a gendered reference term where the client has not given one may therefore be risky. In our data, however, insurance officers were careful not to do this: only in two instances was the third-party gendered, despite the client having used a gender-neutral term or having mentioned no third party at all. This meant that insurance officers overwhelmingly avoided displaying heteronormative or cis-gender assumptions by means of reference term selection. Excerpt 2 shows one of these instances. The client's inquiry stated a problem regarding '10 days' for childbirth, which is a benefit for the parent not giving birth that allows both parents to stay home together during the first 2 weeks following birth. Although the client did not mention another parent, the existence of one was thus implied in the inquiry.

Excerpt 2 (IDA352)

Client (man):	Hi, I'm trying to apply for ten days for childbirth, for my second child who was born on January 12. Can't see her social security number, only my first child's. (...)
SSIA:	Hi Niklas, Thanks for your email. Have tried to reach you by phone since the Social Insurance Agency needs to register a connection between you and the child if you're not married to the **other parent**. Would therefore like to ask you to call (...) If you are registered on the same address it's enough if you call, if you're not **the mom** might need to confirm that you're **the dad** of the child for the registration to be made.

In this example, the insurance officer started by using a gender-neutral terminology, referring to the person giving birth as 'the other parent' (which, as we will see, was the default reference used by the SSIA). Subsequently, however, they referred to the person giving birth as 'the mom' and the client as 'the dad', thus displaying an assumption that a person giving birth was by definition a woman (and excluding same-sex and trans-parents). This example thus illustrates one of the problems that a gender-neutral language in this setting worked to avoid. The fact that there were only two instances in our corpus where insurance officers imposed a gendered terminology in this way can be taken to indicate that the official, gender-neutral terms used in regulations and guidelines to denote parents have been successfully implemented also in insurance officers' direct, textual interaction with clients.

Interestingly, however, insurance officers tended to avoid gendered reference terms *also* in cases where the client had previously used such a term, and where continued use might therefore be warranted (cf., Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). Only in 15 of the 64 email exchanges where gender had been brought into play by the client did the insurance officer go along with the gendered language (e.g., using the reference 'dad' in a reply to a client that used 'dad' in their inquiry). One way in which gendering was avoided was to use the indexical, plural 'you' ('ni' in Swedish), thus addressing both parents:

Excerpt 3 (IDA365)

Client (woman):	(...) Can my **husband** be on p-leave [f-ledig] with our son and I on p-leave [f-ledig] with our daughter during the mid-term break (...)
SSIA:	Yes, **you** can use parental leave for one child each during the same time period. (...)

Using a less specific reference term that can only be understood in relation to the client's own references was thus a way in which insurance officers could escape categorial references altogether, avoiding gendering while also avoiding replacing the client's terms. This is also in line with conversational norms as the response is designed with the parent's question in mind (cf., Sacks, 1992), making it responsive as the insurance officer displayed that information about the parent's individual situation had been taken into account (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010).

Most of the insurance officers' replies to emails that featured gendered person references, however, answered the client's inquiry by employing a *different* category term, replacing the client's reference with a less specific, gender-neutral one, in contrast to how person references typically and normatively work (cf., Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). In Excerpts 4 and 5, the client asked a question about transferring parental leave days to their partner, choosing reference terms (husband/wife) that included information about gender as well as relationship status (that the relationship was heterosexual, and that they were married). It should be noted that orienting to marriage in itself does not imply a heterosexual relationship, since Sweden has allowed same-sex marriage since 2009 (but see Kitzinger, 2005b, for a contrastive analysis).

Excerpt 4 (IDA7)

Client (woman):	Hi, Wanted to check if I can transfer my days to **my husband** that will otherwise disappear when Lucas turns four years old? BW, Anna.
SSIA:	Hi Anna. Thank you for your email. You[5] have the right to transfer days to **the other parent**, with the exception of your reserved days (...)

Excerpt 5 (IDA79)

Client (man):	Hi! I want to give some days to **my wife**, how can I do that?
SSIA:	Hi, Thank you for your email. You[6] have to transfer days with parental benefit to **the other parent** on our website Försäkringskassan.se. (...)

Based on the reference terms used by the clients in the excerpts above, the insurance officers had a range of relevant options that could display responsiveness to the information presented in the question (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010). They could choose to use the same reference terms as the clients ('to *your husband*'; 'to *your wife*'), thus orienting to the relationship between the parents, or they could draw on the clients' information about the other parent's gender and refer to them as 'the father' in the first excerpt, and 'the mother' in the second. The latter would orient to the relationship between the child and the third party, rather than the relationship between the parents, which is also the case with the chosen term 'the other parent'. In choosing this term, the social insurance officers make a different membership category relevant to the question than the category parents make relevant (cf., Sacks, 1992). The implication of this shift is that the insurance officer's information only is valid if the clients' partners, in both cases, are also the 'other parent' of the children in question. Meanwhile the shift to a child/parent-focused reference ignores the gendered information provided by the client, instead using a broader, more inclusive term than 'mother' or 'father'. This also allows for the possibility that if the third party is not, in fact, the child's other parent, that parent might not be a man, in Excerpt 4, or a woman, in Excerpt 5. The reference term that the insurance officers in these examples used is thus maximally inclusive in the sense that it allows for a range of family constellations (including separated parents, same-sex parents, and trans-parents).

In the following excerpt, the client used a non-gendered reference term, but subsequently referred to their partner as 'he'. Here, the insurance officer was given the information that this soon-to-be mother was having a baby with a man who she was also living with ('cohabitee' is in the Swedish context used for a live in-partner, but not typically for a flatmate). 'Your cohabitee', 'the father', or 'he' were therefore all available

[5]'You' [*Du*] is here being used as a second-person pronoun.

[6]'You' is here being used as a second-person pronoun. The original language of the excerpt is English.

terms that the insurance officer could use to be responsive to the client's situation (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010) (where the first is non-gendered, and the other two gendered), but like in the two prior excerpts, the insurance officer chose 'the other parent', which is non-gendered and maximally inclusive:

Excerpt 6 (IDA136)

Client (woman): Hi Me and **my cohabitee** [sambo] are having a baby in February and are now trying to understand how to proceed with the parental benefit. Hope you can answer these questions:
- my employer has submitted my work income. Is **my cohabitee** also doing this in order to get their[7] money for their 10 days? How will **he** then go about this? How does **he** do this as we could not find anything about this on **his** page! (...)

SSIA: (...) **The other parent** could either ask their employer to submit information or one registers that on the application, (...)

In addition to the 'default' reference 'the other parent', insurance officers refrained from using 'mother' to signify parents who were pregnant or giving birth. In Excerpt 7, a man presented his problem with processing his parental benefit in relation to what his 'wife' could do in the self-service system. The client thus used a term that presented him as being in a heterosexual marriage. Like in the previous examples, the insurance officer's reply nevertheless used a non-gendered terminology:

Excerpt 7 (IDA299)

Client (man): Hello! Me and **my wife** are having a child sort of now and I am not able to register in your system. An error message appears that I am not connected to any child. **My wife** is though.
What do I do? John

SSIA: Hi John! Thank you for your email. The **parent who is pregnant** can in advance apply for parental benefit and have the income (SGI) decided upon. You who are **the other parent** have to wait until after the child is born.

[7]'their' [*sina*] is here being used as a third-person possessive pronoun in front of a plural noun, which is always gender-neutral in Swedish and is not to be confused with the use of 'their' as a non-binary singular possessive determiner or as a plural possessive determiner in English.

In addition to selecting a term that centred on the third party's relationship to the child (rather than to the client), the insurance officer here *also* avoided referring to her in gendered terms (e.g., 'mother'), choosing the non-gendered 'parent who is pregnant', which is inclusive of same-sex and trans-parents. The insurance officer's subsequent 'other parent' reference was here instead used to refer to John (who was specifically addressed as 'you'), which also avoided categorising him as the 'father', again using a non-gendered reference term.

The final excerpt is similar, in that the client in his email provided the insurance officer with the information that he was the father of the child and in a relationship with the mother. Like in the previous excerpt, the insurance officer answered the questions using terms that denoted their relationship to the child, but avoided the gendered terms 'mother' or 'father':

Excerpt 8 (IDA297)

Client (man): Two questions. In the Expecting a child guide it was recommended that I apply for parental benefit during week 31–40 but when I try to do that it looks like the child must have a personal identification number. How does this work? (...) About ten-days. I'm **not married to the mother** but we live together and have already been at the municipality's family unit and reported that **I am the father**. (...)

SSIA: Hi Peter, Thank you for your email. About your two questions; The recommendation in the Expecting a child guide to apply for parental benefit during week 31–40 is for **the pregnant one**. It is often at that time that the pregnancy certificate arrives to the Social Insurance Agency. **The other parent** needs to wait to apply for parental benefit until the child has been born/received a personal identification number and the **parent** has been registered as a legal guardian. (...)

Like in the previous excerpt, the insurance officer referred to 'the pregnant one', rather than the 'mother', thus selecting a more inclusive term. This meant that the father, in this case, became the 'other' parent. The excerpt also illustrates the importance of how published information and guidelines are phrased, since the client's inquiry related to the fact that it was not clear that the written description did not apply to him, but only to 'the pregnant one' (cf., Lind Palicki, 2010).

In sum, the analysis in this section has shown how insurance officers overwhelmingly used non-gendered terms when referring to parents in email interaction with clients. Where the clients themselves did not use gendered person references, insurance officers also (with few exceptions) refrained from such gendering, thus avoiding display of heteronormative assumptions and selecting terms that were inclusive of, for instance, same-sex and trans-parents. Even in instances where clients themselves chose gendered category terms to refer to the other parent, the insurance officers in most examined interactions avoided a correspondingly gendered terminology. This routinised way of using person references results in a lower degree of responsiveness than if conversational norms would have been followed, leading, ultimately, to standardised screen-level encounters in which parents are de-gendered (cf., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Sacks & Schegloff, 1979).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Language policy and use in the welfare state are live matters linked to gendered norms and ideals of inclusion and equality. This study set out to investigate how parents and social insurance officers use gendered terms in written digital interaction and to what extent social insurance officers are responsive to non/gendered information disclosed by parents. The results show that the SSIA's insurance terminology in their email exchanges with clients is overwhelmingly gender-neutral, and more so than the clients' written language. We have also found that insurance officers with few exceptions use person references that are child/parent-focused and gender-neutral, that is, that do not display heteronormative, binary, or transphobic assumptions, *also* in instances where parents themselves orient to gender. What happens on the 'street-level' (or 'screen-level') is therefore largely aligned with policy (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010) and the official terminology in regulations, guidelines, and written information published on the website and in brochures. This can be seen as exemplifying how 'the pedagogical state' implements policy on an organisational level to manage and shape the expectations of members of society (see, e.g., Gambles, 2010, for a discussion relating to parenting). The state can in this sense 'take lead' in adopting a more inclusive language and by using it in frontline interaction, the clients might also 'learn' to use it (similarly to how clients are steered towards using digital tools).

Although non-gendered terminology works to include different groups of parents and families, indiscriminate use may not be unproblematic. Using gender-neutral references in response to questions where clients themselves make gender relevant can be seen as failing to design a responsive reply for that particular client (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010), and using a broader reference term than the client uses diverges from the preferred structure for subsequent references, as conceptualised by conversation analysts (cf., Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). The gender-neutral terminology, as it is used by insurance officers in these emails, might in this way be understood as 'pre-designed' rather than 'recipient designed', contributing to a less personalised address (cf., Sacks et al., 1974). In this sense, de-gendering practices may work against ideals of a client-centred approach (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010), which is paradoxical since such a practice is typically seen as key for respecting individuality and promoting empowerment (e.g., Hansen & Natland, 2017; Khoronzhevych & Fadyl, 2022). In light of the contemporary discourse relating to the right to decide how one would like to be addressed in terms of pronouns, moreover, it might be seen as problematic that the insurance officers use standardised references rather than the terms that the clients have chosen for describing themselves and their family.

Answering questions in a way that employs a 'neutral' terminology also means that the insurance officers in most of the instances we have examined describe regulations in general terms. Parts of the same reply could thus be relevantly used to answer different questions. Using such standardised and routinised explanations of rules and regulations can be a way to manage workload pressure and organisational expectations (cf., Lipsky, 1980/2010). However, it typically entails that clients themselves must interpret and apply the rules to their situation, which was often the reason for emailing in the first place. It is possible that the tendency for general descriptions relates to technical restrictions, limiting the studied emails to one question and one answer only. Where such technological restrictions are used, the purpose of personal email customer service (as compared to telephone or more flexible forms of textual interaction) can thus be questioned.

Relatedly, an important question for future research is how these results compare with spoken frontline encounters between clients and the Social Insurance Agency. It is possible that written terminology differs from that used in talk (e.g., the possibility to read through and correct the language might provide for less prejudiced expressions). Textual interaction also poses linguistic demands on clients, which may, for example, be particularly evident in the case of non-Swedish speakers or when not having Swedish as a first language. A limitation of this study is therefore the lack of possibility to analyse such aspects of the interaction as we do not have any background information about the clients.

Textual exchanges are also subject to other forms of control and transparency, which may impact both form and content (cf., Breit et al., 2021), for example, in relation to the handling of personal information. In a 'screen-level' bureaucracy (cf., Bovens & Zouridis, 2002), there is thus a risk that interactions will become increasingly standardised and impersonal. Given the move towards automatised textual customer service (ranging from copy/pasted messages to chatbots) in both private organisations and—increasingly—public welfare organisations, facilitating a better understanding of the affordances, problems, and effects associated with different modes of interaction is crucial.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to ethical reasons.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr. 2019-01727).

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

Social insurance officers at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency were given oral and written information about the study and were given the opportunity to opt out. Parents were informed that their emails constituted public documents.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

Only original material has been used.

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