

Bureaucratic autonomy revisited: informal aspects of agency autonomy in Sweden

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1. The autonomy of Swedish central government agencies.

How autonomous are Swedish governmental agencies really? While agencification has been on the research agenda in most modern industrialised nations since the mid-1990s (cf. Rhodes, 1997; Laegreid & Christensen 2001), the discussion has to a lesser extent been on the Swedish research agenda. The normal story-line is that Sweden (together with Finland) has had a long history of ‘relatively independent administrative agencies’ (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2000:78), compared to other states. Rather than becoming another example of a global policy diffusion of agencification, Sweden has by some observers been perceived as a role model for rolling out autonomous and independent special-purpose non-departmental organisations across the world; in particular the British ‘Next Steps Agencies’ (cf. Wettenhall, 2005). However, while the literature on bureaucratic autonomy in parliamentary democracies is rich on survey studies on the received autonomy among actors within the administration (in terms of policy, financial, structural, staff and legal dimensions (Christensen, 2001; Egeberg and Trondal, 2009; Verhoest et al. 2004; Yesiklkagit and v. Thiel, 2008)), this is to a lesser extent covered in the Swedish discussion.

Swedish governmental agencies are, unlike many other European governments, independently managed under performance management, and hold a considerable high level of autonomy, which is constitutionally enshrined, vis-à-vis the Government. This administrative model, which dates back to the formation of the Swedish central governmental organisation in the 17th century, provides the government agencies with pretty much free scope to complete the Governments general aims within the limits of some overarching instructions, a negotiated

budget from the Cabinet, and with politically appointed General Directors¹. However, that does not mean that the agencies are left completely without steering and control from ‘above’.

As Jacobson describes it, in an earlier study from the 1980s, the relationships between officials in the agencies and the parental ministerial departments were characterised by ‘extensive informal exchanges’ in which the agencies, for example, despite their formal power to act at discretion in fact were trying to ‘catch signals’ and achieve guidance ‘from above’ (Jacobson, 1984). However, this study, together with another recent study (Molander et al. 2002); still gravitate to a (top-down) principal-agent point of view in terms of autonomy.

In this article we will generate some hypotheses on *variations in the perceived autonomy* in Swedish agencies among both managers and lower rank officers. Our data is based on two studies. First, we will present findings from a survey conducted among the staff and managers in 36 central government agencies in Sweden (n=1,190). They represent a mix of various public sector functions and our selection includes both new as well as well-established agencies. Second, we are going to present more qualitative data from in-depth case studies on four agencies based on 20 interviews with current and retired general directors (DGs) and other managers, as well as documentary sources mainly derived from the agencies’ archives. The remainder of the article is organised into the following main sections. The next section, section 2, reviews the discussion on agencies and autonomy with a special contextual focus on its relevance for the Swedish case. Here we also present our five dimensions for the empirical analysis. Section 3 provides about our empirical data. Section 4 presents the empirical analyses. The final section, section 5, offers discussion and concluding comments.

¹ Despite some popular myths about the origin of the Swedish autonomous agencies, the intention behind the 17th century reforms was actually to provide the King and his Council with strong instruments to intervene and control the so-called ‘Cardinal Colleges’ (Dahlgren, 1960).

2. Agencies and autonomy

If we study the overall literature on agencification and autonomy, we can identify a couple of basic premises concerning the concepts. There is much evidence that the original research agenda for many was triggered by the UK Conservative Government's 'Next Step agencies' in the 1990s, and that this also outside Britain became the analytical point of departure for discussing 'an international wave of agencification' (Pollitt, 2003: 6-7, quoted in Wettenhall, 2005: 619). Without encapsulating the full scope of literature in this field, there is a number of joint attributes that signifies the research agenda. Although this literature has been highly successful in presenting more elaborated concepts and more systemised taxonomies on agencification and the relative autonomy of European agencies, we sense that there are issues where the empirical evidence may be difficult to fit into *ex ante* assumptions. To begin with the concepts of agency and autonomy we can easily conclude that here is (mildly speaking) no consensus on how to perceive and conceptualise neither 'agency' nor 'autonomous'. Beginning with agency, there is some vagueness and ambiguity attached to the use of the concept. Thynne, however, is making an ambitious attempt to define it by putting proximity to some of the similar and parent organisations. He writes:

They are all public law, non-ministerial organisations which relate to ministers or the government as agents to a principal. Their roles usually include the provisions of services, the regulation of social and economic affairs and/or the facilitation of various kinds of socio-economic activity, with most, if not all, of their finances being appropriated from state revenue (Thynne, 2004:96).

Still, he does acknowledge that this definition entails overlaps with other forms of public organisations. Similar, how to understand 'autonomy' is an equally contested issue (Olsen, 2009:441). Most writers adhere to credence that the conceptualisation has to go beyond the pure formal and legalistic definitions as the concept of autonomy is multidimensional, and that the formal status of an agency is not linked to actual autonomy "in any straightforward way" (Lægreid et al. 2005:7), and "there is no one-factor explanation for variance in agency

autonomy” (Ibid:28). Yet, studies on the structural and formal autonomy still seem to dominate the empirical studies, (cf. Pollit & Bouckaert, 2004; Peters and Pierre, 2004). One of the more comprehensive attempts to encapsulate the various concepts of autonomy comes from Verhoest et al. (2004). Based on a distinction between a) *autonomy as the level of decision-making competences of the agency* and b) *autonomy as the exemption of constraints on the actual use of decision-making competencies of the agency*, they present a list of dimensions of autonomy which includes managerial, policy, structural, financial, legal and interventional indicators (Ibid.). These theoretical approaches not only holds the capacity to point at the potential sphere of discretion that an agency may hold, but also that an agency may be constrained in many different subtle ways (e.g. through financial means or through the active composition of managerial boards). However, this way of putting different forms of agency autonomy into a system also entails a number of drawbacks when it comes to our Swedish case. First, regarding the Swedish agencies we can also as already mentioned above, on the pure structural and legal dimensions, conclude that the more formal aspects of autonomous agencies are of less interest as this already is in place through constitutional statutory regulation, although the legal institutional aspects of the status of Swedish agencies still has been subject to analysis (cf. Wockelberg, 2003). Second, the less formal dimensions of autonomy are always subject to how the people inside the organisation *perceive* the level of autonomy. And when we say people ‘inside the organisation’ we do not automatically limit ourselves to the views of the top-management of the organisation (which usually is the respondent group, cf. Yesiklkagit and v. Thiel, 2008), but also include the regular staff of middle-ranking officials such as analysts, policy advisers, task officers etc. Third, in terms of the distinctions between various dimensions of autonomy presented by Verhoest et al. above, we find it difficult to empirically follow the distinction between managerial and policy dimensions of autonomy which an imaginative example may illustrate. By cutting away an office (or a section) in an

agency, the parental department does not only demonstrate a managerial decision, it may also send a signal that a certain policy task no longer shall be maintained. And this is not only a theoretical problem; as demonstrated by others before us (cf. Marsh et al. 2000), the vast majority of public managers are involved in both functions and can usually not separate managerial tasks (such as managing staff and resources) from policy tasks (such as implementing government policies, advising decision-makers etc). In their daily functions they are involved in both. Fourth, we have found that autonomy not solely relates to the parental ministerial department, but also the relationship to external actors such as e.g. the EU and organised interests. As already described by others (cf. Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006) is the role of EU as both regulator and norm-setter well-known, whereas the influence of organised interests, trade associations etc is less investigated in Sweden unless one include older and general assumptions about corporatist structures in Sweden.

We will in this paper generate some hypotheses for explaining variations in mainly the de facto dimensions of the autonomy of Swedish central government agencies. In our search for possible dimensions we have been influenced by a pilot interview-study in 2008, in which a number of promising (and sometimes unexpected) aspects came up during interviews with mainly former (and retired) senior civil servants and General Directors from various Swedish governmental agencies. The dimensions discussed are as follows:

- a) The composition of staff. Some of the respondents discussed how changes in the composition of staff, in particular the educational background, had affected the autonomy of the agency. So for example, when the dominance of policy staff with a certain university degree was replaced by a new cluster of staff with a different educational background, this affected the autonomy.

- b) The ‘know-how’ role of the agency. Some of our respondents pointed out that the personal expertise and knowledge the individual agency benefitted from affected the level of perceived autonomy vis-à-vis in particular the parental department.
- c) The overall leadership role and managerial strategy. A bit unsurprisingly, several of the GDs discussed the importance of the individual leadership styles and managerial ambitions for the autonomy of the agency. Changes in the perceived autonomy could thus be explained by managerial strategies towards that very agency either from the parental ministry or new managers of the agency².
- d) The importance of ‘political signals and hints’. This dimension refers to what we already have briefly mentioned above; to what extent various political signs and hints from the Cabinet affect the de facto autonomy? Several of the former GDs during our pilot interviews discussed the often subtle signals from the responsible Ministers, and how paramount the ‘dialogue’ meetings between the parental department and the individual agency were.
- e) The influence of ‘other actors’. A number of our respondents emphasised the importance of the surrounding environment of the single agency, and in particular the various actors who were stakeholders within a certain policy field. While there naturally is some form of control/autonomy relationship with the parental ministerial department, we have also sought to find out both what other actors that may influence the autonomy of the agency, as well as if there are certain institutional relationships.

Naturally, these five dimensions are not completely absent in the existing body of literature. For example, the assumption that the interface with external actors is imperative for autonomy is something already mentioned in the 1984 Jacobsson study mentioned above, in the American studies on US agencies (Carpenter, 2000), and is also the main premise in the whole or-

² We naturally disregarded statements where the respondent mainly put forward the assertions about their own individual role (which, perhaps not surprisingly, was something we came across several times).

organisational behaviour tradition of contingency theory (cf. Burns & Stalker, 1961). Still, we have found our inductive approach more fruitful as it does entail dimensions previously not mentioned in the literature.

3. Methods and Data

Our study is based on an inductive analytical strategy in which we have included a number of research methods and data. Although a not completely linear process, we started off with the already mentioned interviews of key senior civil servants which provided us with possible explanations to variations in the de facto autonomy of Swedish government agencies. Parallel to these indications we selected four specific agencies for more detailed studies. These four agencies had in common that they had undergone reforms and changes over the years with a chief aim of getting to grips with the de facto autonomy. The four agencies are the Swedish Customs (*Tullverket*, 2,200 employees), the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*, 1000 employees), the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (*Naturvårdsverket*, 520 employees), and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth (*Tillväxtverket*, before 2009 *Nutek*, 340 employees). The Swedish Customs is primarily a delivery agency, and their primary task is policy implementation, even though they also have regulatory responsibilities. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is, at present, a policy oriented agency with advisory tasks vis-à-vis the Government, and also to ensure that environmental policy decisions are implemented. The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth promotes business development and sustainable, competitive business and industry throughout Sweden. Their main task is to transfer funding (including the EU funds), promote regional networks and to initiate and prepare new business and trade policies. The National Board of Health and Welfare is primarily a regulatory and control agency. The agency supervises the regional counties and the municipalities (which are the real service delivery actors in social regulation, health care and social- and health benefits in Sweden).

In addition to the selected case studies, we also carried out a general survey with respondents from a number of agencies. This survey was posted to 2,118 respondents in 36 agencies (among them three universities and one research institute, which are also defined as state agencies in Sweden). The response rate was 56,2 per cent. Some of the chosen agencies are large-scale delivery agencies with thousands of employed, for example Sweden Public Employment Service with almost nine thousand employed, while others are small policy advisory entities with less than a hundred members of staff (for example the Swedish Agency for Public Management). In the large agencies we sent the surveys to personnel in the head office. The recipients of the surveys were chosen by random from lists given to us by the agencies. Since these lists also contained the first names of the respondents we were able to take gender into consideration.

The construction of the autonomy variable, and the selection of the agencies into either high or low autonomy agencies, was done by the help of the respondents' answers. We identified two key questions regarding their view on the autonomy of their own agency. The first question concerned what the respondent, in their own opinion, considered regarding "to what extent governmental priorities were at the forefront of the work of the agency". Our second question concerned whether the respondents thought: "the government primarily set the frames for the agency and then it is up to the agency to fill these frames with content" or not. The result of this exercise provided us with fourteen agencies in the category of low autonomy agencies and eighteen agencies in the group of high autonomy agencies. Since the universities and the research institute have been granted a specific status regarding autonomy they are put in a separate category, and are not analysed further in this paper.

4. Analyses

4.1 Composition of staff

A general trend concerning the composition of staff in Swedish agencies have been the academisation of the civil service. Looking at the levels of education among the staff of the Swedish civil service the increase of personnel with a university degree is apparent. As late as 1990 the majority of staff employed in Swedish civil service (including the universities) lacked a university degree. Table 1 below shows the educational level among state employed in percentage over a period of almost twenty years.

	1990	2001	2007
Compulsory school	15,4%	7,3%	4,9%
Secondary school	36,6%	30,2%	27,7%
Unfinished university studies	1,5%	7,3%	9,1%
University degree	46,5%	55,2%	58,3%

Table 1: Academisation of the civil service

Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB). In our (limited) survey from 2010 the number of respondents with a university degree is 64,1 percent

In terms of changes in the educational background, we may conclude that the biggest increase in terms of actual numbers, as well as proportionately in the period is the amount of graduates with a social science degree – from 16,6 percent in 1990 to 20,3 percent in 2007.³

Due to measurement problems, the importance of the composition of staff has by and large been neglected in studies regarding agency autonomy. While factors such as the educational background of the staff probably represent a major impetus for organisational change, it is difficult to establish causal links. However, we can at least in our survey conclude that the agency staffs themselves believe that the staff itself is an important factor of change.

³ In the social science category of Statistics Sweden they include the subject areas of social science, economy, psychology and behavioral science.

Factors of change	
New managers with new ideas	67%
New demands from politicians	54%
New personnel with fresh ideas	53%
New regulation	39%
New technical solutions	37%
Changed demands from other actors (such as the Industry)	30%
New personnel with high or specific academic competence	29%
Changed demands from citizens	24%

Table 2: Factors of change

Note: The percentage above is the amount of respondents in each category judging whether the factor is of importance.

When identifying what differentiates *high* autonomy from *low* autonomy agencies it also seems like the composition of staff is essential. This can also be witnessed if we in detail study the number of professionals in the agency meaning (university) educated specialists such as physicians, engineers, biologists, meteorologists etc with science and technology degrees. These professionals' job description usually entail hands on tasks with subjects within their own area of expertise, rather than with managerial, administrative, or more policy advisory tasks. Low autonomy agencies consist to a somewhat larger extent of personnel implementing law in specific matters. The table below shows that the proportion of professionals is larger in high autonomy agencies.

	Low autonomy agencies	High autonomy agencies
Manager	12,1 %	11,3 %
Administrator	9,0 %	8,3 %
Task officer	30,1 %	25,2 %
Analyst	26,1 %	27,3 %
Professional	7,2 %	13,4 %

Table 3: Employment categories in high and low autonomy agencies

Note: The respondents categorised themselves in a given number of categories and some respondents did not fit any of the given alternatives. Thereby the percentage in high and low agencies respectively does not add up to one hundred percent.

But the most significant difference between low and high autonomy agencies becomes clear when you study the composition of staff in terms of the educational background. This will be

further described in the next section. Agencies with a high proportion of staff with an educational background in natural science, medicine or technology are more likely to perceive that they hold a high level of autonomy, whereas agencies with a high proportion of social scientists are more likely to score low on perceived de facto autonomy. Since autonomy in our survey primarily is defined as autonomy from the government, it is likely that more social scientists work within agencies that are seen as more politically relevant.

In our qualitative case studies, the DGs and other civil service managers preoccupation with the educational background of the employed is apparent. Specifically, they have a tendency to emphasise this factor in our interviews. At the Swedish Customs, the academic competence of the staff was very low in the 1980s. However, major external changes within the agency during the 1990s (new ICTs, Sweden's entry to the EU, staff redundancies, organisational centralisation and the implementation of process management systems) all have had changes in the composition of staff as important background reasons and/or side-effects. Moreover, similar problems of the composition of staff were mentioned at interviews with former managers within the National Board of Health and Welfare. Our respondent group of former managers of the agency express that the staff back in the 1970s and 1980s were academic careerists without any significant expert knowledge in health care or social work. Moreover, they also described them as politically leftist which at least one of the former managers related to a governmental decision in the early 1970s to employ unemployed graduates specifically within the area of social work. During the 1990s the main recruitment strategy has been to employ staff with a strong professional background (primarily medicine). The strategy has been viewed as important for not only increasing the legitimacy of the agency, but also to enhance the discretion of the agency in relation to, for example, other important political actors such as The Swedish Association of Counties (the employers' organisation for the counties).

Another example can be found in the Swedish Customs where demands for change (even cut-backs) have been seen as a window of opportunity for laying off people with wrong competence:

We had employed a new financial controller who immediately spotted that we were facing a deficit of 50 million for the forthcoming year. It looked like the whole organisation was going down the drain! So in that light we decided to lay off some people. We tried to figure out how many we were going to make redundant and also tried to think who we should get rid of. My view was that we should be bold and seriously consider who were doing something good for the organisation and who were just mucking up. Lots of people addressed the political parties and the Government and plead for additional spending. With some help from the Job Security Foundation [*Trygghetsstiftelsen*] we managed to lay off 100 selectively chosen members of staff where our initial aim was 80. When we finally were about to finish off the process with the trade union, the Ministry suddenly called me and said that they had managed to raise some extra money to new projects and assignments. All the sudden the deficit was gone! I had to ask them to keep quiet as we didn't want the money. It would just mess up things.... [former DG from the National Board of Health and Welfare]

It is obvious that the composition of staff is viewed by agency managers as an extremely important factor for the performance of the agency, but also for the legitimacy within the policy area; both in relation to the Government, but also to other actors of importance within their regulatory field. This is also related to the loyalty of the staff. As indicated in the quotation above, as well as elsewhere in our material, individual members of the staff with informal links to the political level has been perceived as a major problem (the importance of such informal links are also emphasized in the earlier study by Jacobsson 1984). Consequently, there has been a clear academisation of Swedish agencies as well as an increase in academic professionals, and we can detect how this affects the level of perceived autonomy even though direct causal links are hard, if not impossible, to establish. We will now continue to the issue of what specific academic expertise is of importance to the autonomy strategies of the agencies.

4.2 The strategy of building policy relevant expertise

An indication of the importance of specific expertise, and a distinct result from our survey, is that agencies with a high proportion of staff from the natural sciences and technology are perceived as more autonomous than agencies dominated by, for instance, social scientists. This is shown in the table below which describes the composition of educational background within

low and high autonomy agencies respectively. Staff with a degree in social sciences and law is more likely to work in an agency with perceived low autonomy, while graduates from natural science, technology and medicine are more likely to work in agencies with a perceived high level of agency autonomy.

	Low autonomy agencies	High autonomy agencies
Science, technology, medicine	17,5 %	35,5 %
Economy	20,4 %	20,6 %
Social sciences, humanities	36,4 %	24,5 %
Law	12,4 %	5,2 %

Table 4: Educational background in high and low autonomy agencies

There are also very strong indications in our qualitative data that Swedish agencies, at least since the early 1990s, have tried to establish an autonomous position by developing exclusive know-how in their distinct policy field. This can be connected to certain recruitment strategies (see above) as well as the government demand (not necessarily embraced by the agencies themselves) of delegating, and outsourcing, of more operative tasks to other actors; the latter leading to strategies of acquiring new competence when the older is delegated to subordinated actors. Such strategies seem to have been embraced, or even introduced, by the government. Hence, official documents from three of our agencies: the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, and the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth – echo the same views from the early 1990s and onwards, i.e. that the agency is to become a ‘knowledge agency’ meaning an authority based on know-how, armed with evaluation skills, and the ability of diffusing knowledge to other actors. Once again, this has been the result of a wide-spread delegation of operative tasks to other actors (mainly regional), something which in turn derives from government strategies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, for instance, it was the main public administration and modernisation agency of the government, The Public Management Agency, which in a report in 1988 firstly stated that the agency should be reinvented as a

knowledge agency. Consequently, this strategy of know-how is closely related to the delegation of operative tasks. Conversely, the Swedish Customs witnessed no such delegation, instead a wave of centralisation was implemented in the 1990s, and no voices were raised about revamping the Customs into a knowledge agency (although the managers also within this agency considered the recruitment of more university educated staff as an important strategy).

The National Board of Health and Welfare is an interesting case of the know-how strategy as a factor of affecting the perceived autonomy vis-à-vis both the government as well as other actors. The Board, which was established as a national regulatory agency of health care and social work in 1968, witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the 1970s, but was subject to severe cutbacks in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Between 1980 and 1993 the central agency had its staff reduced from 1,300 to fewer than 400. These reductions were not implemented through straight-forward lay-offs but came about through delegations to newly created agencies, directly to the welfare service deliveries (i.e. the regional counties), and especially to newly created regional supervisory units within the agency. According to former managers a 'depressive mood' permeated the headquarters in the early 1990s. One former manager even informed us that he feared that the agency eventually would be shut down (since its primary task – supervision – had been delegated to regional units). However, new tasks came to rescue the agency whereas: '...evaluation and performance management became a way of rebuilding the agency' (Former head of the information unit). Especially, quality management in health care and social work was pushed forward by the DG, with accompanying new regulation. At present, the total work force of the agency is close to 1,000 again, with a subsequent lack of office space (which has been solved by expanding into a couple of neighbouring buildings). The agency is thus not autonomous from the government, its survival rests on the its relevance for the parental ministry, but the building of know how still remains a strategy for mak-

ing the government equally dependent upon the agency. The risk of this strategy is that the body of know-how in the agency all the sudden is viewed as not policy relevant anymore.

A safer road of the know-how strategy, which we at least have witnessed indications of, is that certain agencies builds know-how within policy areas which the politicians do not really understand, but to which they attach high symbolic value. The fact that agencies with a high level of perceived high autonomy usually employ far more science and technology graduates is a reason for this speculation. An example of this is The Board of Technological Development which in 1991 was merged into the Agency for Industrial and Technological Development (what was later to become the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth, one of our cases), only to later be separated again in 2001, and reinvented as the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems (VINNOVA). During the time of merge (1991-2001), the old agency remained intact as a separate entity within the new organisation until the politicians decided to split the agency again. A former DG has a straightforward explanation to this capacity of survival:

Technological research and development it is not a subject of political division. You can remain quite cool because everybody wants to invest in technological research and development. We [the Board] maintained very good contacts with the government, we never faced any problems, there were no arguments, and we received our money (former DG for The Board of Technological Development and the Agency for Industrial and Technological Development).

The building of know-how should thus, ideally, be related to policy relevant areas which the decision-makers basically do not fully understand, i.e. technology, sciences and medicine. Our case is perhaps also an extreme one as the Agency's objectives of research and development all the sudden tied in with the increasingly policy relevant 'innovation system' concept in the early 2000s.

4.3 The role of leadership and management style

Our respondents in the survey of the agencies clearly consider the internal management to be something which over the years has become increasingly important. The table below shows the responses to the sentence: Management has in my agency become increasingly...

	Total	Managers	Staff	Employed ≥15 yrs	Employed ≤15 yrs	Employed ≥ 1year
Much more important	18%	32%	16%	25%	15%	9,6%
More important	47%	52%	46%	49%	46%	42%
Neither more or less	21%	13%	22%	18%	20%	17%
Less important	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	0%
Much less important	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
No opinion	14%	1%	15%	7%	16%	29%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of respondents	1190	145	1045	315	875	157

Table 5: The importance of management

The tendency is clearly that the number of years in services of the agency affects the perceived notion of an increasing importance of management. For instance, 74 percent of the respondents with more than 15 years of employment agrees with the statement that management have become more or much more important (compared to only 52,3 percent by those employed less than a year.) It is reasonable to expect that longer experience from an organisation affects the chances of judging changes. Equally, the directors or managers in the agencies that have been in leading positions for more than seven years also belong to a group with a higher capacity of judging the organisational status. This group is not shown in the table above, but out of this group of 73 directors and managers, 89 per cent state that management have become more or much more important. The increasing importance of managerial issues is a general perception among all the respondents (despite our choice of rather disparate categories of agencies). This may indicate that according to the staff the perceived autonomy *within* the organisations is decreasing, i.e. that the agency is subject to organisational centralisation.

In our survey, 63 per cent of the respondents concurred with the statement that ‘the power of the agency is centralised’, while only 21 per cent of the respondents agreed that ‘power over the agency is decentralised’. It is the managers rather than the politicians who mainly are seen as responsible for the centralisation schemes within the agency, while decentralisation is more seen as dependent upon operative tasks. Among those who believed that the power of the agency was centralised, 53 per cent responded that centralisation is the result of managerial aims, while 33 per cent responded that centralisation was a historical tradition within the agency and only 29 per cent claimed that centralisation was the effect of political aims.⁴ Among those who thought that the power of the agency was decentralised 56 per cent responded that the operative tasks demanded decentralisation, while 44 per cent responded that decentralisation was the effect of managerial aims. Of course it is important to be cautious with this data, since we did not define what we meant by ‘power’, ‘centralisation’ and ‘decentralisation’ in the survey. Still, it is safe to say that most of the staff within Swedish agencies views managers as the main actors when it comes to organisational relations of authority, and that more agency employees, perhaps not surprisingly, view managers as involved in the initiatives with the aim of centralising the activities of the organisations rather than decentralisation measures. In summary, there seems to be a management and centralisation trend within Swedish agencies, at least as perceived by staff, pushed by the internal management of agencies themselves. Maybe the traditionally autonomous Swedish agencies to an increasing extent are becoming autonomous *for the managers*?

Not surprisingly, in our case studies, calls for increased management control have continuously been raised during the entire NPM era; backed up by more or less consistent managerial concepts. However, these calls did not originate in the managerial level of the agencies, but derived in the circles around the Government who wished to strengthen the control of the

⁴ The respondents had the opportunity to fill in more than one factor of importance.

agencies, in particular over agencies with obvious internal problems. A situation not unknown in one of our investigated agency which is illustrated by a quote from a former State Secretary in the Ministry of Social Affairs regarding the background to a government imposed organisational change of the National Board of Health and Welfare in the late 1980s:

The agency wasn't really working. The staff kept working on old crap where the last date of policy relevance had expired long time ago. The tasks which ended on the desks weren't processed - they simply piled up. And nobody had evaluated that pile for a long time, it was an extreme mess.

Consequently, increased managerial control has been viewed as an instrument for enlarged government control. Especially, the recruitment of Director Generals (DGs) to the agencies has been seen as a particularly important way of governing in Sweden (cf. Molander 2006). In a historical perspective, it is interesting to see that DGs previously often were internally recruited (for instance, in 1925 45 per cent of all the DGs were internally recruited). Of course, it is quite probable that internally recruited DGs will act as representatives of their own agency, rather than acting as the proxy of the Government. This recruitment pattern has diminished (even if no updated figures exist (Ds 2003:7)). However, we can conclude that the current typical successful candidate is someone with a background in the Government Office which does not necessarily mean an increase in political appointments. Many DGs are non-party political former officials from the Government Office, which although having a close proximity to the political level are not party political (Ibid).

The question who, or what, the DGs actually represent – the government or the agency? – is complex. Although no systematic studies have been carried out, the recruitment of new DGs seem to have become handled more strategically by the Government during our period of study (interview with the DG for the Swedish Agency for Government Employers). The DG, as well as the deputy DG, is usually employed with an informal instruction (“*nedskick*”) from

the parental ministry. All the former DGs we have interviewed, from the 1990s and onwards, have related to such instructions, such as this former deputy DG at the Swedish Customs:

They had just adopted the necessary changes following the entry to the EU when I arrived, and the informal instruction was to getting the rather demolished organisation back on its feet again. But I had also been given a second mission: to improve the relationship with the Swedish industry which at the time was in a virtual state of war with the Customs.

The Swedish Customs also introduced a coherent process management model in order to modernise the agency and centralise control inspired by BPR (Business process reengineering). It also was a move to cool down the hostile relations to the Swedish Industry as companies were given an active role in the core processes of the unified agency (most prominently in the process “Effective Trade”). But more than anything else, the process management system was introduced in order to shape a unified agency out of what was before a highly fragmented organisation, consisting of regionally independent agencies.

An example of more ‘soft’ models of management which have been introduced in order to centralise control has been *project management* in the early 1990s. In both the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Board of Health and Welfare, new DGs recruited from the Government Office, introduced an ambitious project organisation in order to bring about changes in two agencies believed to be ingrained with old habits. According to former DGs of these agencies, project management was a technique, albeit time-limited, particularly apt to “shake” the organisation, and especially the different unit managers, since the project leaders sorted directly under the DG. This use of project management is also well-researched in the organisation literature (cf. Courpasson 2006).

In summary, there seems to be a pattern, or at least a perceived trend, of increased centralisation and management control in Swedish agencies. Having said this, how this pattern affects the agency autonomy is a complex issue since it is closely related to who the managers repre-

sent – the (members of the staff of the) agency or the principal (i.e. the Government Office)? According to our data it seems like formalised management tools and centralised control originally derives from the government’s restructuring efforts in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and is quite closely linked to managerial recruitment strategies. Because of the administrative tradition, strategies for managing the agencies are probably of special interest in Sweden. On the other hand, such strategies, even if they emanate from the Government Office, do not necessarily have a relation to political ambitions of control, and thus not to the *political* autonomy of the agencies. As some recent literature has claimed, the strategies may rather be directed towards the *organisational* autonomy of the agencies, developed by the government bureaucracy, and maybe specifically by the Ministry of Finance (Sundström 2006). In other words, the strategies concern organisational governability rather than political governability. It is even likely that there is a constant conflict within the Government Office itself between the political side, which may prefer more informal and *ad hoc* modes of governing, and the bureaucratic side which rather emphasise formalised control and management systems (Ullström 2011).

4.4 Political signals and trends

Even if firmer control and centralisation, including DG recruitment strategies may be considered as mainly a managerial intrusion of agency autonomy, this does not imply that there are no examples of straight-forward interventions of the political autonomy of Swedish agencies. In fact, many recently created agencies in Sweden have been conceived as highly ‘political creatures’ (cf Rothstein, 2005) which is familiar to the international debate regarding the politicisation of public administration (cf Peters, 1998). Our autonomy variable is built upon the respondents’ answers regarding influence of politics over agency autonomy, and can thus not be used for measuring political influence. However, what we can say something about is that there are strong differences between agencies, indicating that agencies dealing with highly

debated issues in the public such as schools or health care are seen as much more politicised than agencies dealing with, for example, patents or the weather. It is of course also a matter of interpretation what the respondents actually means by political influence. One question in our survey, however, shows an interesting pattern. It is considered to be more sensitive with personal contacts with the Government Office in low autonomy agencies than in high autonomy agencies:

	European Union		Lobbyists		Organised interests ⁵		The Government Office	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
High autonomy agencies	64,4 %	25,6 %	30,9 %	69,1%	75,1%	24,9%	54,1%	45,8%
Low autonomy agencies	56,9 %	43,1 %	19,8%	80,1%	69,7%	30,3%	36,3%	63,7%

Table 6: Management attitudes towards direct, individual contacts with actors outside the agency in high and low autonomy agencies as perceived by the respondents.

Note: The percentage is the amount of respondents in each category judging the agencies' approval of individual and direct contacts with external actors.

Somehow surprisingly, it is apparently being seen as more controversial to have individual contacts with the Government Office than with organised interests (it is also apparent that 'lobbyists' is a term with highly negative connotations in Sweden). This is particularly apparent in low autonomy agencies. This is maybe a counter-argument to the claim in the preceding section that the management of the agency should be perceived as a delegate of the government, since there are strong indications in our cases, as well as in Jacobsson's (1984) earlier study, that informal contacts with the agencies are appreciated by the political side of the parental departments, but as already stated, direct contacts with the ministerial departments have been regarded as a great problem among some managers:

The relation towards the ministry has changed. This agency is very close to politics. It is not an agency which may work for itself in its own little corner. When I first came to the agency many of the staff had direct and

⁵ The Swedish term used here is *intresseorganisationer*, which is something between organized interests and NGO:s.

personal contacts with officials in the ministry. I didn't approve. Of course, you must exchange information, but this reduced my capacity of making decisions. I could decide "Now we've been working with sexual mutilations for three years, I think that is enough." Then somebody called the ministry and said "She is going to terminate the programme - it is insane!" Consequently it became an issue in the Parliament, and subsequently bounced back to me as a Governmental instruction (former DG of the Board of Health and Welfare).

Apparently, the sensitivity towards direct contacts with the Government is a part of the organising ambitions of the managers, in this specific case the ambition to reform the agency towards an expert agency which speaks a unison voice, and with less party-political undertones. Sometimes, however, the political pressures can become too strong as is shown in the case of The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. The modern history of this agency may conveniently be divided into two parts: the Valfrid Paulsson period (he was DG 1967-91) and the post-Valfrid Paulsson period. Valfrid Paulsson as DG was in charge of a massive organisational growth during the 1970s with a staff increase from about 60 to 600. But what really signified Paulsson's management style was the creation of a strong natural scientific and technological body of expertise. Paulsson was a public manager of the 'old school' who wanted to control all the activities within the agency, something which according to the respondents functioned well at the beginning, but not particularly well at the end of his period. His managerial style was to sort out (often small technical) problems, and not to launch lofty, visionary plans for the future. Ideological convictions, not uncommon in environmentalist policy circles, were banned from the agency: "I remember when I employed people; I used to put aside those who wanted to devote their life to environmental protection (laugh)" (deputy DG under Paulsson).

Paulsson's strategy was thus to create unique know-how combined with a 'Weberian' ethos of neutral civil servants. This system of governing, however, became increasingly questioned

during the 1980s. Governmental ambitions of restructuring the agency from above were contravened by cosmetic organisational internal changes. The overall ambitions of the Swedish government during the late 1980s to rationalise, hive off operative issues and reduce spending were, here as elsewhere, impossible to counter in the long run. However, the crucial factor of changing the agency was in this case ultimately political: the emergence of a public environmental opinion and the parliamentary entry of the Green Party in the 1988 elections:

What the success of the Green Party meant was a sudden seriousness regarding environmental politics among all parties. It was clearly obvious in the 'seal election' of 1988⁶, it had an extreme importance and it is probably still of importance (former DG of the agency, Valfrid Paulsson's successor).

The very same year, the Public Management Agency produced a highly critical report towards the agency, followed by an investigation committee, headed by the future DG. What the government now demanded was a more policy relevant and politically engaged environmental agency, something Paulsson had fought against during his entire career:

Well, Valfrid did not like the change. In his opinion matters became politicised which did not have to be politicised. /.../ I do not know why Birgitta (Birgitta Dahl, former Minister of Environment) wanted me to become DG at that point, but she probably thought that it was time that the government acquired some sort of control over the agency, something which turned out to be rather difficult. But that is a different question (Ibid).

This case shows the limit of the know-how strategy when it clashes with strong party-political aims. The expert strategy has to be related to policy relevance. But it also shows an indication of the fact that the political side of the government is not always satisfied with formal methods of steering, especially not when under pressure of a strong, political opinion. Recently,

⁶ The sudden death of seals at the west coast of Sweden in the summer leading up to the general election is believed to have affected both the debate and the result of the election.

the Environmental Protection Agency has been conceived as an agency which stands very close to its parental department, especially in EU affairs. However, this policy relevance may be at the expense of being relevant to other actors further down the steering chain, such as environmental courts, the county administrative boards (*Länsstyrelserna*) and the municipalities (at least, this is strongly indicated in SOU 2008:62).

4.5 External support

An indication of the importance of external support is the results presented in table 6 above. Interest organisations are actually seen as the actors which the management (according to the perceptions of the respondents) is most positive towards regarding direct contacts. In high autonomy agencies such contacts are viewed more positively which may be an indication that such actors provide important support. Naturally, Swedish agencies' capacity of governing relies on other actors' resources, and the close bond to non-state organisations has often been conceived as a hallmark of Swedish public administration. This is also indicated in our survey where 76 per cent strongly agree, or agree, that it is important that the agency receives high legitimacy from the industry, and 80% strongly agree, or agree, that the agency to a significant degree is influenced by demands and expectations from external interests. Moreover, 87% strongly agree or agree that external views of the agency have become more important.

It is obvious that agencies with operations that are useful for other actors than the government or, in general terms, are considered to be more socially legitimate, potentially has a stronger position in terms of gaining autonomy. As stated in the introduction specific investigations of autonomy often restrict themselves to the specific government-agency relation. What such studies neglect are the resources, such as legitimacy, that some agencies may gain from other actors. An extreme variant is of course Selznick's (1949) well-known notion of regulatory capture. A more modest variant is that relevance to external interests (or public administration

interest on other levels, for instance municipalities) may be a guarantee of survival in complex policy fields subjected to continuous change.

One of the agencies demonstrates this particularly well. The above-mentioned ‘Agency for Industrial and Technological Development’, first founded in 1991 on the basis of the three previously existing agencies, and then later split up again. While the governmental strategy towards this complex policy area of industrial growth, infrastructure, regional development and innovation at face-value seems to have been organisationally quite radical with major organisational mergers and separations, our data in fact indicates long-term stability of the policy area. The recipients of these agencies’ resources (i.e. the receivers of the funding transferred by the agencies) seem to grant for the stability. An internal report from the Agency for Industrial and Technological Development mentions this explicitly:

Great changes have been implemented within the Agency for Industrial and Technological Development since 1991: don’t forget about that. But at the same time consultancy reports show that the personnel crouch in times of changes, and when the winds of change have blown over, they rise and continue as nothing has happened (Strategic plan for the Agency for Industrial and Technological Development 2000).

The Board of Technological Development, and its later successor VINNOVA, delivered and deliver substantial resources to applied technological research with an innovative potential. These two agencies have in most cases hold a substantial discretion in terms of sponsoring various research and development projects and VINNOVA is at present the second largest national research council in Sweden in terms of funding resources. The political turmoil behind the foundation of VINNOVA clearly shows the interest-based nature of its operations. A parliamentary investigation committee (“Research 2000”) proposed in the 1990s that all applied research should be centralised into one general research council which, among other things, inevitably would have caused the close-down of a number of sectoral research units (Eklund 2007). While the traditional old universities embraced the proposal, it mobilised a

critical response from diverse organised interests such as e.g. trade unions, employers' organizations, sectoral research units, many faculties and schools of engineering, and most coherently spelled out by the influential organisation The Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences (IVA). Consequently, the Ministry of Industry and Trade downplayed the conclusions of the report, and instead carried out two internal investigations which, among other things, led to the construction of VINNOVA. When studying the debate around the foundation of this agency, it becomes clear that there is a concurrence between those critical voices towards policy proposal of the abovementioned report and those groups of actors who later on benefitted from the new agencies funding structures (Persson 2008). These beneficiaries, together with the abovementioned fact that there is a strong political consensus regarding the need for investments in research and technology, has been the foundation for the stability of the policy sector, despite radical organisational reforms within the policy area, and very likely also the de facto autonomy of the agency.

The main beneficiaries of the earlier Agency for Industrial and Technological Development and the contemporary Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth are predominantly public actors (e.g. local governments and regions), and SMEs. The regional interests have also had success in airing their concerns vis-à-vis the Parliament, as indicated in this quote from a former DG:

The agency was too much of a general store with a highly diversified assortment. I wouldn't say it was chaotic, but after all the aim was to create more coherent policies. I finally understood that things would remain intact. In our dialogue with the politicians [i.e. the Social Democrats], they agreed that the agency should act in a more structured and coherent way, but also said that they had to take into account the parliamentary situation and the need for support from not only the Green and the Leftist parties, but also the factions within the 'big party' [the Social Democrats] who had their own distinct policy agendas for the North, for metropolitan areas, for small business, for big businesses etc. [...] In negotiating organisations such as the ministries and the parliament there is a constant production of questions, plans, ideas and possibilities which needs to be accommodated. And this ends up in the Agency as the Government Office can't handle it. So the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth became the receiving authority for all these issues which was spitted out of the negotiating machinery. /.../ It was very common that the regional benches of the parliament agreed that something which we tried to get rid of had to remain intact (former DG for the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth).

As witnessed in this quote, as well as in other assertions from former managers, the managerial level itself sometimes regard the complexity of the organisation, as well as shifting political trends and some of the receivers of funding through programs, as problems. Equally, this managerial view is probably not representative for the organisation at large (the quoted DG only stayed on his post for 18 months). For the organisation at large it is probably a factor of survival, including obtaining substantial stability, and to be both policy relevant and remain vital for both public and private actors. Some of the other cases in our data set have lacked such 'external friends'. The Swedish Customs is clearly such an example. Here, the possibilities for government of demanding substantial changes are much greater which we also witnessed above in the case of the Swedish Customs.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we have inductively chosen a couple of dimensions for studying variations in the perceived de facto autonomy of Swedish agencies. We have deliberately excluded the whole formal-institutional discussion, and only focused on informal aspects of autonomy. Naturally, we do not make any claim to have covered all relevant aspects of de facto autonomy here. For example, there is all reason to believe that the chief task and mission of the agency has an impact on the perceived de facto autonomy. That is, that an agency with, for example primarily regulatory tasks may experience a different form of autonomy than, let say, an agency with predominantly policy advice tasks. That being said, we still believe it is possible to generate a few preliminary hypotheses on the basis of our five dimensions and our empirical data.

First, we suggest that the building of hard (scientific) know-how within the agencies enhances the level of perceived agency autonomy. The old cliché of 'knowledge is power' is not completely beyond scope in our empirical data. This strength in autonomy is even more enhanced

if the policy field concerns an area where the politicians lack personal knowledge to make qualified judgements, but where there are significant symbolic values at stake. Equally, agencies populated by staff with social science university degrees are seemingly considered to be less autonomous.

Second, internal managerial issues are immensely important for the perceived sense of de facto autonomy (including both managerial and policy autonomy). However, the individual leadership role, and management style is not unambiguous. While much of the autonomy discussion rests on an assumption that it is the desire for autonomy (rather than e.g. large budgets, power etc) that is the main motive for the individual public manager in an agency (cf. Groenleer, 2009), we can just as well (at least potentially) envisage that in a Swedish context the manager can just have as motive to strive for *less* autonomy vis-à-vis a ministerial parental department in order to promote his/her career.

Third, there is all reason to believe that an agency who works in the shadow of topical and controversial policy issues with day-to-day regulation of policy, are more likely to remain autonomous than those agencies that are handling 'hot' policy issues. This can also be linked to what we already have mentioned above that agencies inhabited by staff with social science and law backgrounds, and working on policy advice seem to be less de facto autonomous. It can also be linked to the findings by Yesilkagit & Christensen that political factors are of less importance in the institutional design of regulatory agencies ((Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2009).

Fourth, agencies which are sturdily planted in an environment of strong organised interests or other strong policy actors, are considered not only to be more autonomous than those agencies

that lack ‘friends’, they are also more likely to remain stable. This also resembles what Carpenter has called ‘coalitions of esteem’ (Carpenter, 2000).

Although this study does not present any causal results, it does show that informal aspects of autonomy is of great importance, at least if we are to believe the written and oral material from our cases. The customary narrative of the Swedish autonomous agencies is subject to discussion in this paper, and it is proposed that informal aspects of management and autonomy are all the more important in this context. In situations of far-reaching formal autonomy, it is likely that informal methods of governing will be developed. Significant variations may be found, though, and the drawback with the method used here is that it is hard to establish robust results.

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Appendix

Agencies included in the survey

NAME OF AGENCY
The Swedish Public Employment Service
The Swedish Work Environment Authority
Blekinge Technical University
Swedish Companies Registration Office
Swedish Board for Study Support
The Swedish National Financial Management Authority
The Swedish Board of Fisheries
The Swedish National Institute of Public Health
University West
Swedish National Agency for Higher Education
Swedish Competition Agency
National Food Administration
University of Lund
The Medical Products Agency
The County Administrative Board of Skåne
The County Administrative Board of Västra Götaland
The County Administrative Board of Norrland
The County Administrative Board of Västerbotten
The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
Swedish Patent and Registration Office
The Swedish National Heritage Board
The National Police Board
The Swedish National Audit Office
Statistics Sweden
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
Swedish Tax Agency
Swedish Forest Agency
The Swedish National Agency for Education
Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute
The National Board of Health and Welfare
Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute
The Swedish Agency for Public Management
The Swedish Radiation Safety Authority
The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth
The Swedish Customs