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Local variations in integration policies: experiences from the perspectives of immigrants in Sweden

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Abstract: This study examines variations in the perception of local integration policy among Swedish immigrants by focusing on community size as an influential determinant for how such policies are experienced. The experiences concern immigrants' relations to two core actors of Swedish integration policy: the public employment service (PES) and the municipalities. The empirical material consists of 28 narrative interviews, and a comparative strategy is applied to categorise participants based on whether they reside in a large or small municipality. While immigrants residing in small municipalities have more of a positive experience of the municipality and a negative view of the PES, interviewed immigrants residing in large municipalities have positive views of the PES and more ambiguous experiences with the municipality.

Keywords: local integration policy; immigrants; Sweden; municipality; public employment service; PES; population size; migration; immigrant perception; local government; immigrant experiences.

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1 Introduction

Since the beginning of modern social science, a community's population size has represented an important variable in the analysis of societies (Dahl and Tufte, 1973). Its importance has also diffused to the field of migration studies, in which contemporary researchers have shown *inter alia* how community size will affect efforts for integrating immigrants into host societies. How such an effect functions has been contested and differs due to the perspective on integration, and it can be broadly separated into different fields. In terms of critical studies, scale and multiscalar have been used as concepts to analyse intersections of how relations of social, economic, and political aspects can be utilised to analyse immigrant inclusion (Çağlar and Schiller, 2018). However, researchers do not agree on what constitutes such linkages. Waters and Jiménez (2005) have theorised that migrants and native-born residents interact more frequently in smaller communities, which could facilitate integration. Empirical research has mainly examined these aspects from the viewpoint of labour market integration. However, findings from studies in Sweden are ambiguous. While some scholars have shown the positive effects of residing in more populated areas with good access to jobs (Åslund et al., 2010), others have downplayed the effect of population size (Andersson, 2016) or shown that the outcome is more successful for immigrants residing in the metropolitan Stockholm area and its opposite, small rural cities (Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020).

In another tradition, research examining the role played by local public institutions in enhancing integration and whether this differs due to population size is neither extensive nor consistent. In his comparison of Danish municipalities' integration policies, Jørgensen (2012) presented size as a variable in administrative capacity but did not conclude that it plays a vital role. Others, however, have shown how varying institutional capacities between large and small communities influence integration policies (Huang and Liu, 2018; Sichling and Roth, 2017; see also Paquet, 2019). Unfortunately, research targeting the importance of community size for successful integration of immigrants rarely involves the perspective of immigrants themselves, which could provide us with clues on the role played by local contexts.

To overcome such gaps in previous research, we adhere to two pleas in the literature. First, we address the importance of using a bottom-up perspective by directing attention to the sub-national level. Hence, we agree with the critique of 'methodological nationalism' and thereby play our part in reaching a more nuanced understanding of migrant life (Ellis and Almgren, 2009; Wimmer and Schiller, 2003). Second, we draw on material that reflects the integration process as it is perceived by those actually involved (Gravelle et al., 2013). This methodological strategy has proven to be well suited to addressing how immigrant experiences are embedded in local experiences and could be of particular value for policy makers (Teixeira and Li, 2009). Thus, the *study's purpose is to examine variations in the perception of local integration policy among immigrants related to the size of the host municipality*. We consequently use the term immigrant

throughout the paper but emphasise that the informants have mainly reached Sweden as refugees or relatives of refugees. A few other examples in the material do also exist, e.g., informants reaching Sweden due to marrying a Swedish resident or as a relative to other immigrant groups than refugees. This refrains us from referring to all informants as having a refugee background. We admit that the studied group is not fully homogeneous on their motives for reaching Sweden and acknowledge that refugees generally face greater challenges than other groups of immigrants, because of their general lack of resources and often traumatic experiences (Bevelander, 2011). As argued, municipality size is assumed to influence local institutional conditions but we are uncertain on how. This study directs attention to how municipality size, embedded in the same national setting, influences immigrants' perceptions of policies. For this purpose, we utilise two strategies.

First, by local integration policy, we mean the working methods and local policies exploited by actors carrying the responsibility within the field. Even though we acknowledge that a multitude of actors are present within the integration nexus, this study focuses on two public actors, the public employment service (PES) and local governments, whose functions we expect differ between large and small communities. As we present in more detail below, these different actors have had various responsibility in the policy area of integration over the studied years and can therefore not be expected to have acted identically. This selection of actors is indeed of particular interest, as they represent the two different administrative levels in play: national and local. Prior studies have indicated that how immigrants experience public institutions differs between urban and rural areas (Stenbacka, 2016) and that complicated integration regimes with several involved stakeholders are considered complex and overly bureaucratic (Brännström et al., 2016; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). We look into perceptions of integration policy regarding the labour market, as this is the overwhelming ambition of the current integration regime in Sweden (Lidén et al., 2015; The Swedish Government, 2009).

Second, the potential experiences of such policies are addressed by using a comparative perspective in which not only individual experiences are compared but also primarily to what extent such experiences diverge because of their embeddedness in different local settings (Martiniello, 2013). This approach is applied by examining the experiences and descriptions of immigrants who reside in communities in which the preconditions are significantly different due to population size.

Our empirical endeavour focuses on the case of Sweden and utilises the material from a unique collection of in-depth interviews with 28 immigrants. International scholars have often highlighted Sweden as a predecessor in migration policy. In the 1960s, Swedish policy had already evolved from 'non-policy' to a regulated form of policy, which, in 1975, was followed by a specific integration policy with multicultural trademarks (Borevi, 2012). Comparative studies of systems of local governments have commonly described Swedish municipalities as significantly autonomous and equipped with high capacity (Loughlin et al., 2012).

2 The Swedish case and immigrants embedded in different local settings

The Swedish municipalities belong to a certain type of local governments that have several common trademarks that are characterised by their far-reaching autonomy. They have the right to tax their citizens, they are multifunctional and they can engage in policy

areas that are not exclusively related to any other administrative levels (Hansen, 2014). Furthermore, they are a key provider of welfare services since the municipal sector accounts for a substantial share of total public expenditure (Lidström, 2011). The 290 municipalities are the smallest units of government and as a decentralised unitary state, local self-government is protected in the Swedish constitution (Lidström, 2011). Compared to other countries, the sub-national level in Sweden is not only financially strong but also usually made up of well-populated municipalities. However, there is a considerable variation in population size that often divides sparsely populated municipalities in rural areas and municipalities in urban areas which created interesting variations in how policies are carried out. When it comes to integration policy the Swedish integration regime was exposed to movements of centralisation in 2010.

As a result, the main responsibility for the sector was shifted upwards from municipalities to the PES (Lidén et al., 2015). The aim of this ‘establishment reform’ was in line with activation ambitions and was designed to enable immigrants to more quickly establish themselves in society (Qvist, 2016) but also to place a greater responsibility on individuals themselves. In terms of the organisation of this area it meant centralisation of authority and coordination roles became functions of the PES, which was also given the task of creating a plan for each immigrant’s establishment (Lidén et al., 2015). This enforced centralisation is not without corresponding tendencies originating from the local level. Even though the establishment reform has led to centralisation of the formal integration policies, municipalities are still involved and considered both formal and informal core actors within this policy field (The Swedish Government, 2009). More specifically, municipalities’ formal responsibilities include organising language training, civic education, and housing, and informally, municipalities are often large employers, offer internships, and convene or participate in networks within this field.

Even though the current system is centralised, prominent arguments emphasise why differences in local working methods and policies are still likely to occur. Theoretical views that explain the existence of diverging policy choices at national and local levels originate from the characterisation of the policy issue as contested as well as from pragmatic approaches’ tendency to formulate the field as a complex issue. In addition, a varying political context exists among local societies that makes situations unique (Polzer, 2011; Scholten, 2013; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Furthermore, some empirical arguments corroborate these theoretical findings. Although research on this topic in the Swedish case is still quite scant, the existing examples refer to significant variations in work methods, and policy remains local and is often organised within the frame of municipal initiatives (Brännström et al., 2018; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2022; Qvist and Tovatt, 2014). Since theorists have argued that variations in local preconditions drive explanations of potential differences (Ellis and Almgren, 2009) but have not specified what constitutes such variations, we draw on the most obvious cleavage in the Swedish municipality sector—the one regarding population size.

3 Previous research and theoretical expectations

For about a decade, a local turn has been seen in studies interested in the influence of institutional settings within the migration nexus (Caponio et al., 2018; Caponio and Borkert, 2010; Filomeno, 2017; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2022). The predominant reason for this is a growing notion that the integration of immigrants takes place in local societies.

As previously argued, transforming national policy to local circumstances means that local contextual concerns need to be considered. Local arenas are characterised by a multitude of involved actors, thus making policymaking complex (Lahav and Guiraudon, 2006), and this means the local level is not only a level of analysis but also an arena in which intersections and power relations of such actors are shown (Çağlar and Schiller, 2018). Quantitative studies have added to this approach by displaying how local labour market integration also differs between municipalities. Andersson (2016) and Ruist (2018) noticed significant sub-national differences in Sweden regarding immigrants' occupational status, but they did not assess the potential effects of institutions. Although Åslund et al. (2010) did not provide an example of a specific policy measurement, they noticed that immigrants' placement in denser and larger labour markets will have a positive influence on their chances of gaining employment.

Explicit examination of the link between communities' population sizes and how immigrants in such contexts experience integration policies has not been a frequent field of study. However, some prior examples can guide us. First, the field examining integration regimes through differences between the national and local levels will be reviewed. Second, research that has particularly examined the relationship within and between involved actors in this policy fields are advantageous for the study. Finally, we will discuss how immigrants themselves have experienced integration policies.

Considering the first theme, transforming national policy to local circumstances means that local contextual concerns need to be considered (Filomeno, 2017), often brought forward under the paradigm of multilevel governance (Caponio and Jones-Correa, 2018). Zapata-Barrero and Barker (2014) emphasised that, within this policy area, central governments are assumed to open up for local autonomy. Hence, this transformation cannot be expected to be uniform. Dekker et al. (2015) therefore formulated different theoretical expectations concerning how such processes can occur. Such assumptions build upon a logic that draws from whether congruence or incongruence in policies are found between the national and local levels or across local communities.

From the second perspective, which stresses the governance and relationship between and within involved actors, comparative studies have demonstrated important differences between communities. Campomori and Caponio (2017) revealed significant differences in regional integration policies and their governance among Italian regions. Although size was not considered in the analysis, differences in regional capacities among administrations appear to be a decisive factor. In studies of the recent phenomena of American 'welcoming cities', a more encompassing perspective on local integration policies has been used. The association of such local governments deviates from previous policies that focus on law enforcement and legal status to represent the ambitions of local government responses to offer a warmer receptivity and incorporate immigrants socially and economically. Among other aspects, Huang and Liu (2018) demonstrated how larger local governments have greater institutional capacity to pursue an open policy. Prior studies from Scandinavia have revealed variations in both how policies are designed (Jørgensen, 2012) and how local actors experience government agencies as inflexible (Lidén et al., 2015). Paquet (2015) referred to how the role of public officials is vital to understanding policy making. Empirical examples from the local level in Canada demonstrate that such officials have taken a progressive role in this matter and that it has led to the political arena engaging in more meaningful activity.

In terms of a bottom-up perspective, recent qualitative studies have yielded similar results, although in different contexts, and have referred to an overly bureaucratic process for immigrants in Scandinavian countries (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Bygnes, 2019). Similar contributions have shown parallel tendencies, such as immigrants perceiving different actors as fused together and hard to distinguish (Brännström et al., 2018). Other studies utilising experiences from groups who are actually targeted by these policies have enabled comparisons among different communities. Scholars have shown how institutional resources differ between large and small communities (Sichling and Roth, 2017) and how rural and sparsely populated communities embrace immigrants because they counterbalance an otherwise troublesome demographic development (Cvetkovic, 2009). Conversely, studies have also shown that isolation and limited interaction can function as a barrier for integration in rural societies (Kristjánsdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2019).

Taken together, these three strands of research underpin this study. We synthesise the contribution of previous research through a few steps following a vertical hierarchy. *At a policy regime level*, of particular interest to this study is the challenge of achieving successful governance across different administrative levels (Zapata-Barrero and Barker, 2014). The Swedish case, embedded within a multilevel setting, can theoretically be expected to enable local discretion (Jørgensen, 2012; Poppelaars and Scholten, 2008). At the same time, institutional tensions between local actors (i.e., municipalities and government actors, primarily the PES) can affect the efficiency of performed policy (Lidén et al., 2015; Qvist, 2016). *At a community level*, local differences among integration policies are salient internationally (e.g., Campomori and Caponio, 2017; Schammann et al., 2021; Schmidtke and Zaslove, 2014). Size could be an important determinant of such variations affecting institutional capacities among administrations (Campomori and Caponio, 2017; Huang and Liu, 2018; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015) or conditions in the labour market (Åslund et al., 2010). Ultimately, such conditions can also shape the varying behaviour among public officials (Paquet, 2015). *At the immigrant level*, how integration policies are embedded within contexts of multilevel governance, local governance, and local institutional conditions is expected to affect how they are perceived. Previous studies have shown how Swedish policies are bureaucratic regarding the involvement of many actors that are difficult to distinguish between (Brännström et al., 2018; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). Explicit analysis of community size's importance in relation to such perceptions would constitute a novel contribution. The empirical material will be analysed with the assistance of these theoretical lenses.

4 Method, material, and analytical strategy

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of the interviews conducted. The empirical material underlying our analysis was gathered as part of the "Migration to work" research project (see Brännström et al., 2016). The research project began in 2015 and aimed to explore migrants' narratives of reception, institutional support, and working-life experiences in the county of Västernorrland in Sweden. Twenty-eight immigrants were interviewed. The participants were approached partly through recommendations from various municipalities in the county and partly through private networks and non-profit associations in line with a snowball sampling approach (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). All participants had permanent residency and had been

residents of Sweden for a minimum of 2.5 years and up to 18 years. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, which required language adjustments and reflections about meanings and connotations for the informants and researcher. When the informants were selected, diverse backgrounds, ages, and genders were considered to collect varied life stories (Carling, 2012).

4.1 Details about the study interviews

Interviews were conducted between November 2015 and May 2016 in private interview rooms at locations easily accessed by the informants. They were carried out by three members of the research team (of which two were the authors of this text). Two of the researchers were senior researchers with vast experience in interview studies. To facilitate coordination during the interview phase, the three researchers had intensive communication with each other. One aspect that was thoroughly discussed before conducting the interviews and in the analysis of the material was the subordinate position that informants had in relation to the researchers. In addition to ensuring that these conditions were accounted for during the work, several measurements were taken to minimise their consequences. The first measurement was to only include immigrants with residence permits so that the respondents would not believe that the answers in the study would have any effect on the possibility of their staying in Sweden. A second measurement was to ensure that a large proportion of the respondents had stayed in the country for a long time; 13 of the 28 participants had stayed in Sweden between 6 and 18 years. A third measurement was to only include adult participants. We also made clear that we were interested in their personal opinions on integration work and that there were no right or wrong answers.

Before the meeting, informants were told about the project and their right to decline participation and withdraw from the project at any time during or after interviews. Interviews ranged from approximately 20 to 80 minutes and were tape-recorded and transcribed¹. Although the aim of these interviews was to talk about topics of particular concern to each informant, the interviews followed a semi-structured guide to enable the informant to tell their own story related to specific theory generated themes. See the Appendix for the interview guide.

The first phase of the interview focused on the informant's background. The informant was asked to describe themselves. Normally, this included the informant's migration history (Carling, 2012). The next phase focused on how the informant experienced their living conditions in Sweden. Thereafter, questions about the labour market and education were raised. These included questions about experiences trying to get a job and the informant's perspective on the opportunities for education in Sweden. Thereafter, experiences with public actors, including both the PES and municipality, were discussed. Finally, the interviews involved viewpoints on the local community the informant was living in.

4.2 Description of municipalities selected and their division

To examine whether population size was experienced as important, municipalities in one Swedish county, Västernorrland, were selected. Västernorrland is an average county, both in terms of geographical size and the fact that it comprises urban areas as well as large areas in the countryside, thus making it something of a 'Sweden in miniature'. It consists

of seven municipalities. While Sundsvall and Örnsköldsvik are quite large municipalities from a Swedish perspective (97,000 and 55,000 citizens, respectively), the other five are significantly smaller, with Härnösand having the largest population (25,000 citizens) and Ånge the smallest (fewer than 10,000 citizens). These figures can be compared with the national average of slightly over 30,000 inhabitants. Even though these municipalities differ substantially from each other in terms of local capacity, they are obliged to provide similar provisions of welfare services. Our selection of cases was also motivated by the fact that, at the time, the PES had local offices in all municipalities in the county, something that was not the case for all counties in Sweden. Hence, irrespective of where in the county an individual was residing, local support could be found close by, either from the municipal services or the PES. The scope of this support could vary due to local resources and needs, but we see no reason whether such variations could be expected between municipalities and the PES. Rather, it would depend on the size of the municipalities.

In line with our assumption, we have classified Sundsvall and Örnsköldsvik as large municipalities and Ånge, Timrå, Härnösand, Kramfors, and Sollefteå as small ones. To assess the assumptions of municipal size, the material has been divided according to each informant's residence location. Some background information is displayed in Table 1. Of the 28 informants, 17 were residing in the two municipalities classified as large municipalities, while the remaining 11 lived in the smaller ones². These proportions are a good reflection of the general distribution of inhabitants within the county of Västernorrland. Similar to the general distribution of immigrants in Sweden, there is also a bias in this material of more men than women, but the proportion does not vary between the two types of municipalities. Informants from the larger municipalities were, in general, somewhat younger and had been in Sweden for a shorter time than those residing in the smaller municipalities. Furthermore, the proportion with a higher education level in each group was almost identical. Finally, we witness no variation in informants' motives for migration between the two groups. The few informants not having background as refugees or relatives to refugees are represented in both large and small municipalities without any specific tendency.

Table 1 Informants' background characteristics, divided by type of municipality

| | | <i>Large municipalities</i> | <i>Small municipalities</i> |
|---|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Proportion of informants residing in... | | 61 % | 39 % |
| | ... of which are male | 53 % | 55 % |
| | Average age (approximately) | 33 | 39 |
| | Average years residing in Sweden | 6.3 | 7.5 |
| | Proportion with higher education (high school or above) | 35 % | 36 % |

The analysis includes two important analytical steps. First, it involved interpreting the meaning of phrases in which the terms were included (Schreier and Flick, 2014), for example, by considering whether the efforts of local integration policies were supportive or if there were any barriers obstructing the possibility of getting a job. Hence, this involved relating the descriptions given to positive or negative experiences with specific

weight given to their migrant experiences (Carling, 2012). Second, the complete transcripts were screened to identify certain passages that could be meaningful to the purpose of the study. The material was condensed to summarise the general ideas or notions that were brought up without risking meanings being vanished. To exemplify such analyses, quotes are used in the following discussion to emphasise how the qualitative interpretation was conducted.

5 Analyses of how local working methods and policies were visible in the interviews

We now turn to our analysis of the empirical material to assess how potential variations in integration policy are experienced from an immigrant perspective.

5.1 Experiences of local working methods and policies in small municipalities

In all 11 interviews with informants living in smaller municipalities, viewpoints on the PES were discussed. A clear majority of the informants expressed general criticism about the agency, while some sharpened their disapproval further by stating that the agency either does not or cannot manage to facilitate getting a job. Informant 3 said, “I had a lot of friends arguing that the public employment service cannot help me”. As this stance originates from an informant not having a refugee background the informants already stronger resources in form of networks could motivate the standpoint. Nonetheless it is verified by others, since another informant stressed that the PES failed to provide information about the possibility of assisting immigrants: “I believe that those at the public employment service were lacking information about these programmes” (informant 15). In the end, this informant received the first employment at the local municipality.

A common theme among interviewees was instead that one’s own networks are factors that help secure a job. Although the PES could assist in such activities, a more essential feature was that such networks do not arise through the agency but rather, that municipalities were the public actor offering help. A more critical perspective suggested that the PES is not only unable to act but also takes inappropriate actions. One informant referred to attending a course organised by the PES: “They made it bad for us ... You do not get any job after that”. Informant 8 said in reference to how the competence taught in the course was not what was needed in the labour market. Hence, the value of this PES activity appeared to be very limited. Even more strikingly, an informant 4 had the opportunity to compare experiences of the PES from both a small and a large municipality. The first local office was deemed as not providing the right support while the latter offered suitable help and activities. The perspectives conveyed via interviews with informants from smaller municipalities indicated that PES, the actor whose mission it is to enhance immigrants’ chances of employment, was regarded as unable to provide such possibilities.

In interviews with informants living in smaller municipalities, discussions about the municipality were apparent, and in general, almost all views communicated were positive. Several of these informants referred to how the local municipality represented their first encounter with the Swedish labour market:

‘When I came to Sweden, I instantly got a job at the municipality ... For three years, I was employed within a project working as a resident guide and helped the newly arrived. I told them, for example, about the society, garbage sorting, and all the rules that are applied in the housing area.’ (Informant 5)

Another informant 15 reveals a similar path, a one in which employment at the municipality was an important step to get established at the labour market.

Another evident theme that arose from interviews is that, when referring to actors from the public sector in smaller municipalities, an association was often made with the municipal organisation. This was even noticed when questions were raised explicitly about the role of the PES. Two informants (7, 9) showed such a line of argument, while the latter, in particular, expressed this explicitly in the dialogue:

Interviewer: do you feel that you have been helped by the PES, for example?

Informant 9: The municipality is the one helping... public officials at the municipality.

In addition to these aspects, the salient role that these small municipalities played as providers of not only one but several pieces of the integration puzzle was revealed. For example, informants who referred to their employment with the municipality also described how they and their families had obtained apartments through the municipality.

Nonetheless, a few examples exist of how local integration work by the municipality was portrayed in more ambiguous ways. One informant mentioned that the municipality had given some bad advice, and another interviewee compared working for two different municipalities and concluded that it is better to be employed in a larger neighbouring municipality since that particular job enables more influence over the job’s duties.

5.2 Experiences of local working methods and policies in large municipalities

The interviews of those 17 residing in the two larger municipalities were, in general, quite encouraging regarding the PES, as a clear majority of these informants referred to the PES using positive words. They included descriptions of how the agency has been helpful in mediating employment possibilities and has been the one actor to offer support in terms of facilitating labour market establishment. How they structure the establishment programme for immigrants in need of help was positively depicted. Several informants expanded on this and expressed their perceptions as follows: ‘The public employment service helped me apply for an internship, and then, I talked with the manager and he said that they would hire me for a new start job [subsidised by the government]’ (informant 12). Another recurrent theme in the interviews was the positive description of relations with employment officers. A number of informants positively depicted getting help from the agency through courses, internships, subsidised jobs, and job exhibitions. One description can be condensed as, ‘They tried to find something that would suit me’ (Informant 11), while another informant described the relation with the officers as, ‘Yes, she is really helpful, she helps me so much’ (informant 6).

In general, such experiences were presented as positive. Still there were some nuances that should be added to this statement. About one third of the informants were not as satisfied. Some stated that there were experiences of a lack of support, several changes in employment officers, and questions regarding how private actors, contracted by the PES to handle activities for immigrants, fulfilled their role. Although not necessarily a verdict of the role filled by the PES, informants expressed that the end of

the establishment period altered the support given, which also meant that they would be assigned to other employment officers.

The accounts of informants residing in larger municipalities provide a mixed picture regarding the role of municipalities. While some of the informants referred to help they received from their local municipality, others were more reluctant to support this idea. There are even examples of informants arguing that no contact with the municipality has existed whatsoever. However, patterns of such varying perceptions were hard to identify. For example, a man who had only been in Sweden for a couple of years talked greatly about how helpful the municipality had been. He described how local public officials, at an early stage, made efforts to help him secure employment within the municipality sector: “This is how I experienced the job-searching process. The municipality – they organise jobs for newly arrived immigrants. I am one of those” (Informant 18).’ The fact that he is well educated and from a wealthy background could have had some influence, although only hints of this were given. Parallel to this, others were much more hesitant regarding the role that the larger municipality filled in terms of facilitating labour market integration. References were made to how the municipality was not experienced as helpful at all (informants 22, 26), while another informant 25 referred to how to support was sought among other actors when receiving none from the municipality.

Another prominent theme in interviews with informants living in the two larger cities was that the distinction between the municipality and other public agencies is not always clear. This seemed to be a somewhat common feature, irrespective of whether an informant’s general impression was positive or not. As one informant said: “Yes we get some support from the public employment service and the municipality ... There are some good people employed within the municipality, the public employment service, and within the school as well” (informant 11). This statement indicates how the public can be experienced as a unified body as well as the importance of good coordination between the actors making the contact with the public work seamless for the immigrant.

5.3 Analysing experiences of local integration policies among different municipalities

Based on the qualitative interpretation of the material and the theoretical synthesis provided, three points can be made. First, perceptions of how public actors have been helpful differ based on the division made between small and large municipalities. Theoretical assumptions that integration policies are, to a large extent, played out in the local political arena are visible within this material (Jørgensen, 2012; Poppelaars and Scholten, 2008; Schmidtke and Zaslove, 2014). Hence, by invoking assumptions from both a policy regime level and a community level, the findings could imply that policy incongruences exist between municipalities (Dekker et al., 2015). Second, on the individual level, this study demonstrates how policies are experienced differently between those in small and large municipalities. Looking at all of the material, it is hard to draw any conclusion that policies enforced by either a small or a large municipality are better than other policies. In accordance with previous literature (Sichling and Roth, 2017), we can conclude that they differ and that the institutional support considered by immigrants varies. Third, on the level of immigrants, views on how such experiences varied between small and large municipalities formed an evident pattern. In small municipalities, the PES’s role was dominantly described by informants as not helpful. In comparison, the work done by the local municipality was described by a clear majority as

positive. In the two large municipalities, the perceptions imply an opposing perspective, as most of the informants characterised the PES as an actor that enhances the possibilities for becoming established in Sweden. The role of the municipality was illustrated more ambiguously, without resulting in any obvious pattern.

Far more nuance could be given to the last point made above. Although references to the PES were as common among informants living in large cities as in small ones, a striking difference was seen in how it was portrayed. In interviews with those living in smaller municipalities, positive connotations of the PES were difficult to find. Analysing such perceptions without accounting for the preconditions that employment officers face when operating in a small labour market is misleading, though (Åslund et al., 2010). Still, this outcome also raises questions about different institutional capacities (Sichling and Roth, 2017) that public officials face when reviewing their means (Paquet, 2015). In contrast, informants living in larger municipalities were far more positive regarding how the PES has helped them. Good opportunities for organising internships and subsidised employment were recurring themes.

In smaller municipalities, the role of the municipality was mostly expressed in a positive way. Most remarkable, perhaps, is how municipalities themselves function as the primary employer. Narratives indicate that the public labour market is, in many cases, experienced as the main alternative route to getting a job. This is one example of what is denoted a buffer labour market, which involves much more insecurity than the regular labour market, which may be a helpful step for individuals in the study, often characterised as having highly limited resources. Although solutions in which the municipality provides public jobs could positively influence integration, the downside in small municipalities is still the restrictions on the local labour market. Previous studies have pointed out that the labour market's potential to absorb additional labour is a major problem (Åslund et al., 2010; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015), particularly in rural societies, where it can be challenging for newcomers with the challenges they already face to also establish social networks (Kristjánsdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2019).

In the two larger municipalities, impressions of the municipality's role were more unclear. They included positive and more negative descriptions. One interesting point that can be drawn from several interviews with informants living in these two municipalities is that notions of the municipality are not always separate from those of other public actors. There are several potential interpretations for this. Those comments could indicate that there is a more seamless cooperation between such actors, for example, through how service offices can be shared by several concerned agencies, which has been noted as an important aspect of achieving a successful integration policy (Konle-Seidl and Bolitis, 2016). A different take, however, is that a multitude of visible actors within the integration nexus are far more present in larger municipalities than in small ones. If more actors are involved, this will create additional challenges for achieving successful coordination (Lidén et al., 2015).

These findings are summarised in Figure 1, where the general tendencies in the material are captured. As indicated in the empirical section and its analysis, deviations from the presented pattern still arise that should be given attention. Experiences described by informants residing in small municipalities depicted the role of the PES as not helpful, whereas the municipality was described in a positive manner. However, informants from large municipalities described the PES as helpful but see the role of the municipality as more ambiguous.

Figure 1 Summary of findings of immigrants' experiences

| | | <i>Involved actors</i> | |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| | | Public Employment Service | Municipality |
| <i>Size</i> | Small municipality | Negative | Positive |
| | Large municipality | Positive | Ambiguous |

6 Conclusions

Based on the analysis above, we want to highlight a number of conclusions. The interpretation of the material implies that integration policies are, in the examined case, experienced differently by immigrants residing in small municipalities compared to those in large ones. Theoretically, this is hardly surprising, as noted in the discussion of policy regime. Discretion at the local level tends to exist (Zapata-Barrero and Barker, 2014), as local contextual factors need to be considered (Jørgensen, 2012; Poppelaars and Scholten, 2008). Even though centralisation of policy has been the ambition (Lidén et al., 2015), these findings show that the Swedish tradition of a strong local policy initiative within this field (Penninx, 2015) has not been overturned but is enduring and vibrant. Although previous research has emphasised the vital role of public officials at the local level (Paquet, 2015), the study goes further by stressing that this is differentiated between small and large municipalities. Thereby, the study emphasises that, from the immigrants' perspective, the examined cases reveal a situation of cross-section incongruence in policy between municipalities, as proposed by Dekker et al. (2015). Whether local integration policies are functioning better in either of these societies is, a question beyond the scope of this study. However, the mere fact that variations in experiences of local integration policy exist raises the idea that differences in how well policies can achieve successful labour market integration also exist and can function as a backdrop for empirical studies that emphasise geographical variations (Vogiazides and Mondani, 2020).

The municipality remains as the most crucial actor in smaller municipalities. If this is due to shortcomings of the PES or a lack of other actors being present are not completely evident. Likewise, the PES is experienced as a positive and helpful actor in larger municipalities. That institutional support for immigrants can vary between communities is not unsurprisingly and could be related to institutional capacity or other locally decisive factors (Campomori and Caponio, 2017; Huang and Liu, 2018; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2015; Polzer, 2011). We sketch how a number of potential mechanisms can explain this pattern and, through this, disentangle actual local policy work from mere contextual impressions that could influence the viewpoints of informants. In small and often rural communities, we propose that the presence of government agencies can be experienced as distant compared to in general urban areas. Although the municipal organisation working with similar responsibilities is not necessarily more extensive, its all-encompassing duties make it more convenient to identify as the first public actor to address when support is needed. This will be particularly valid when bearing in mind that many of those immigrants that have come to Sweden are in need of substantial support due to traumas and limited resources. This group also dominates our material and points

out that individual with refugee background will be of certain need of locally organised help. Municipal capacity was also noted as being different than that of government agencies and of particular impact in smaller societies. One example is how municipalities are often involved in the creation of a ‘buffer’ labour market. This was shown by many informants with the most limited resources who had jobs arranged by the public authorities, mostly municipalities, which were largely temporary and created uncertainty for the individual. Furthermore, due to circumstances related to size, smaller municipalities have been ‘forced’ to develop their policy and working methods with a lack of support from central government agencies. This local activation among smaller municipalities should also be seen in terms of how they are under significant pressure to ensure that received immigrants also remain in the local community due to an otherwise problematic demographic situation (Cvetkovic, 2009; Lidén and Nyhlén, 2022).

Although individual experiences cannot be equated with actual courses of events, the perceptions are of value when trying to understand how policies reach target groups. When immigrants’ narratives of immigrants are analysed, it is clear that local institutions’ contributions to carrying out integration policy differ between types of municipalities. This brings nuance to general understandings of how the public is perceived as overly bureaucratic with the involvement of many actors that are hard to disentangle (Brännström et al., 2018; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). Future research should not be satisfied with the identification of such differences but should also assess the influence of them in relation to how well immigrants are integrated into society.

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Notes

- 1 In one case, the interview was not tape-recorded at the informant's request. However, a summary of the interview was composed by the interviewer, and this was applied as material in the study unless otherwise stated.
- 2 Informants resided in all municipalities in the county except Ånge.

Appendix

Interview guide

The interviews will be conducted as a conversation based on a number of loosely held themes where the intention is that the informants will be free to say what they feel is important to convey. Below is a list of the themes to which the interviews will relate. Sample questions are given for each theme.

| <i>Themes</i> | <i>Sample questions</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|
| About the interviewee | Can you tell us a little about yourself? |
| Living conditions | How do you feel about your current life in general? What is good and what is difficult? Is there anything in particular you would like to change? What? Why/why not? |
| Opportunities | How do you see your future opportunities? Do you feel that you can develop in society? In a way that you want? Do you have the right conditions and support to develop? |
| Obstacles/challenges | Are there circumstances that make it difficult for you to develop? |
| Labour market | Can you tell us what you found most important in getting a job? Have you done anything special that you would like to tell us about that increased your opportunities? Can you tell us what you felt was the biggest obstacle to getting a job? What could be done, in your opinion, by the actors in the labour market to increase the possibilities for people with a foreign background getting a job? |
| Education | Would you like to receive further education? Have you had opportunities for further education? |
| Contact with public authorities | If you have had interventions from a public authority, which intervention/measure has been most useful for you? In what way, in your opinion, could Swedish authorities/municipalities change their way of working in order to increase the possibilities for people with a foreign background getting a job? |
| Place of residence | Can you tell us why you have chosen to settle in Västernorrland/XX municipality? What has been good and what has been bad about living in the municipality? Has it been difficult to find accommodation? What influences whether you will stay or not? Would you like to stay here? |