



# Municipal middle managers: psychosocial work environment in a gender-based division of labor

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## Abstract

The purpose of the reported study was to explore how 245 municipal middle managers perceived their psychosocial and physical work environments, and to examine psychosomatic reactions and job satisfaction in departments engaged in different types of activity, also to compare male and female managers in these respects. The way in which psychosomatic reactions and job satisfaction were related to the psychosocial and physical work environments was also investigated. The results indicated a difference between departments depending on the type of activity. Departments concerned with care and education, i.e. care of the elderly, child care and schools showed a tendency to lower values for psychosocial work environment factors and more psychosomatic reactions than the departments geared more towards maintenance and production, i.e. street maintenance, the power plant department and the recreation office. In the departments concerned with children, female managers were in a majority. In the street maintenance department, the recreation office and the power plant department, male managers predominated. Compared to the men, the women had a higher level of education, lower salaries, more reactions of a psychosomatic nature, lower job satisfaction and a less satisfying psychosocial work environment. The only department with an equal number of male and female managers was the schools department. Here there were no differences between men and women in the factors studied. Two partial correlations were computed in order to separate the importance of *type of activity* and *sex* to the work environment factors and outcome variables. This indicated that the type of activity was more important than biological sex. The gendering of work activities is therefore also discussed and further investigations are suggested. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Middle managers; Gender; Type of activity; Psychosocial work environment; Psychosomatic reactions; Job satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

In a time of organizational change and reduced budgets in the Swedish public sector, it is relevant to ask what the psychosocial work environment is like in municipal organizations. In spite of ideas about the “flat” organization, the municipal organization is generally characterized by several decision levels with varying authority and powers. An important function is performed by the middle managers. They are the people who pass on information, both upwards and downwards, and who supposedly promote changes and development. However, organizational changes and the general reconstruction of work roles have also affected the function of the middle managers, and certain tasks have been removed from the middle managers to the workers and/or to specialists. These changes have several causes, such as the improvement of more democratic organizations and on increase in the independence and co-determination of the workers. But there were economic reasons as well, such as slimming the organizations in order to cut down expenses and, it is hoped, to become more effective. Nonetheless the middle managers still hold an important position in the municipal service organization as managers, communication mediators and change agents.

The middle manager’s position is at the crossroads between politicians and top managers, subordinates, and the public. A number of studies have been conducted to describe the psychosocial work climate of the middle manager in the public sector to identify certain features of this function. Some authors (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Boalt Boethius, 1991) have stressed the position of being in the “middle” as a cause of conflict. The middle manager is trapped between the demands of clients, superiors and subordinates, often without possessing the necessary authority or powers to handle the situation. Kahn (1973) has suggested the concepts of the *role conflict*, which refers to different, and sometimes incompatible demands or expectations from others; *role overload*, referring to a conflict in which expectations are not incompatible but there are simply too many of them, and *role ambiguity*, which could be described as a lack of individual control and skill discretion. These concepts are often used to describe the specific dilemmas of the middle manager’s position, and they are associated with job-related stress as well.

On the other hand, if compared with their subordinates, the middle managers do have more control over their work, and do experience a higher degree of job satisfaction (Rubenowitz, 1991). In a study of Swedish and British municipal middle managers in schools and eldercare, Schartau (1993) emphasizes the freedom in this position, the tendency to bend the rules and to exploit the system, as against the classical problems of role conflict, role overload and role ambiguity suggested in middle management theory.

Greenglass and Marshall (1993) emphasize the lack of gender perspective in mainstream psychology research on management. However, there are a number of comparative studies of male and female managers in terms of health and stress (see, for instance, the work of Davidson & Cooper, 1992). Frankenhaeuser (1991) refers to several studies which show that differences in stress responses between men and women are diminishing as employment conditions become more similar, but that

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