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CONTEXTUALIZING MANAGERIAL WORK IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

LISA BJÖRK



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

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ABSTRACT

Title: Contextualizing managerial work in local government organizations.

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This thesis is about managerial work in local government organizations. The purpose is to explain important aspects of managerial work with the help of a contextual perspective. The focus is on managers at the operational level of education, health and social care services, and technical services. Two research questions are raised. The first question considers the relationship between context and managerial work: how does organizational context influence managerial work, and how does managerial work influence organizational context? The second question is about contextual variations within the municipal sector: does the organizational context for lower-level managerial work vary between differently gendered municipal services, and, if so, how can this variation be explained?

In order to answer these questions, I have used a cross-level and comparative research design. The design is cross-level in the sense that I consider how factors at different analytical levels interact. The design is comparative in the sense that the services have been strategically selected to represent differently gendered municipal contexts.

The theoretical framework evolved mainly from management, organization, and gender theory. With the help of Gary Johns' (2006) framework of organizational context, I outlined a model of how to understand the relationship between context at different levels and managerial work practice. Other central concepts in the thesis are Yvonne Hirdman's (1988) idea of an omnipresent gender system and Joan Acker's (1990) notion of gendered organizations.

The empirical work of the thesis consists of three quantitative studies (Study I, II and IV) that are based on a two-wave survey of over 400 operations managers in five different types of services, and one qualitative study (Study III) based on eight interviews with managers, politicians and controllers in two different organizations. In the first study, the impact of organizational traits on the unnecessary and unreasonable tasks in managerial work is investigated, using multilevel regression analysis. The aim of the second study was to provide a measure that can be used in order to evaluate and compare organizational conditions for managers in different types of services. The third study is an investigation into how the generic traits of the New Public Management have been implemented in differently gendered local government organizations. Lastly, the fourth study explores variations in organizational conditions in differently gendered services.

The first overall conclusion of the thesis is that the relationship between managerial work and context is recursive. Organizations are arenas of conflict in which different stakeholders try to turn their ideas into governing formalities. Managerial work practice is to a large extent governed by the formalities that constitute the organizational context, which would in turn cease to exist if not for the daily work practices of managers and other organizational actors. The second conclusion is that there are systematic differences in organizational conditions between differently gendered services, and therefore a structural approach to gender is an important complement to more individualistic views on differences in male and female managerial behaviour.

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