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Job demands, job resources,  
and consequences for managerial  
sustainability in the public sector  
*A contextual approach*

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*To my family*



# ABSTRACT

Title: Job demands, job resources, and consequences for managerial sustainability in the public sector: A contextual approach

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The aims of this thesis were threefold: to explore and increase knowledge of managerial working conditions in Swedish municipalities, to extend the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, and to provide information that public sector decision-makers and human resources departments can use and apply in promoting sustainable managerial working conditions. The argument in this thesis is that a contextual perspective on managerial work is needed, entailing a shift in focus from managers and their individual differences, to the conditions that public sector managers work under.

In order to address these questions, a strategic sample of organizations and managers that allowed for comparison and examined systematic differences and similarities among them was used, accompanied by contextual quantitative and qualitative methods that included both subjective appraisals and more objective assessments and data on several levels.

The main theoretical framework was based on the latest development in the work stress field, where theoretical and empirical insights from several decades have been developed into the JD-R model. The model takes a balanced approach in explaining negative as well as positive aspects of occupational well-being. Unlike previous models, the JD-R model can be adapted and tailored to the specific context and study group.

This thesis comprises four empirical studies with specific aims. In the first study, the main aim was to explore different types of naturally occurring psychosocial work situations for municipal managers, based on the combination of job demands and job resources, by means of cluster analysis. Certain focus was also given to investigating how the work situations could be differentiated regarding sustainability indicators for managerial health, motivation, and performance. In the second study, these psychosocial work situations were followed up 2 years later, and the main aim was to investigate how the situations longitudinally predict managerial turnover using logistic regression and thereby identify groups that are at a high risk or a low risk for turnover, actual as well as

intended. The main aim of the third study was to establish how the span of control – that is, the number of subordinates per manager as one of several possible organizational determinants of psychosocial working conditions – affects operational public sector managers' job demands, using multilevel regression analysis. In the fourth and final study, the main aim was to deepen the understanding of first-line human service managers' work assignment and psychosocial working conditions by qualitatively and externally assessing the job demands and job resources as well as the balance between them, through work content analysis, in order to provide explanations of the current work strain of this group of managers.

The first overall conclusion of this thesis is that public sector managers work in a wide array of diverse situations, including balanced as well as unbalanced psychosocial working conditions in terms of job demands and job resources. An unbalanced work situation, characterized by a lack of correspondence between the job demands posed and the job resources provided, was found to be a reality for a large number of the managers, especially within human services. The psychosocial working conditions were found to be related to consequences for managerial sustainability in terms of health, performance, motivation, and turnover. In addition, the contextual approach applied contributed to identifying organizational and structuring factors – in other words, the type of service the manager works in and the manager's span of control, managerial position, gender, age, and managerial experience – that provide reasons for the variation in psychosocial working conditions and their consequences. Taken together, the results can provide guidance for actions to be taken in order to promote sustainable psychosocial working conditions for public sector managers, thus reducing both significant individual and organizational costs.

# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ABSTRACT .....   | 5  |
| LIST OF FIGURES .....  | 9  |
| LIST OF TABLES .....   | 9  |
| LIST OF PUBLICATIONS .....   | 10 |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....  | 11 |
| TACKORD .....  | 12 |
| INTRODUCTION .....   | 14 |
| Aims of the thesis .....   | 16 |
| Organization of the thesis .....   | 16 |
| THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND .....   | 17 |
| The Organizational Context of Managerial Work .....  | 18 |
| The public sector .....  | 19 |
| Municipal organizations .....  | 21 |
| The Content of Managerial Work .....   | 22 |
| Leadership and management .....  | 22 |
| Managerial work and the managerial behavior approach .....   | 23 |
| The Conditions of Managerial Work .....  | 24 |
| Exploring psychosocial working conditions .....  | 24 |
| Balance models .....   | 25 |
| A new balance model – the job demands-resources (JD-R) model ..  | 28 |
| Using the JD-R model with public sector managers .....   | 30 |
| The Consequences of Managerial Work .....  | 35 |
| Sustainability .....   | 35 |
| A Contextual Approach .....  | 45 |
| Theoretical motives for a contextual approach .....  | 45 |
| Methodological motives for a contextual approach .....   | 46 |
| Applicability motives for a contextual approach .....  | 48 |
| MATERIALS AND METHODS .....  | 49 |
| Materials .....  | 49 |
| Research setting .....   | 49 |
| Research design and sample .....   | 51 |
| Methods .....  | 52 |
| Data sources, data collection, and data dimensions .....   | 52 |
| Data analysis .....  | 66 |
| Ethical approval .....   | 74 |
| Reflections on the empirical process .....   | 74 |
| MAIN FINDINGS .....  | 75 |
| Study I: Typical situations for managers in the Swedish public sector:<br>Cluster analysis of working conditions using the job demands-<br>resources model ..... | 75 |
| Study II: Managers' turnover in the public sector: The role of<br>psychosocial working conditions .....  | 80 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Study III: Span of control and the significance for public sector<br>managers' job demands: A multilevel study .....              | 84  |
| Study IV: Job demands and job resources in human service managerial<br>work: An external assessment through work content analysis | 88  |
| DISCUSSION .....  | 93  |
| Managerial Work in the Public Sector .....  | 93  |
| The psychosocial working conditions of managers .....   | 93  |
| The organizational and structuring factors of managerial work .....   | 95  |
| The consequences of managerial working conditions .....   | 100 |
| A Contextual Approach Extending the JD-R Model .....  | 101 |
| Extending the JD-R model by applying contextual methods .....   | 101 |
| Extending the use of the JD-R model to public sector managers ...   | 103 |
| Applicability Contributions and Implications .....  | 104 |
| Finding target groups for intervention .....  | 104 |
| Accessible and easily communicated knowledge .....  | 105 |
| Suggestions for improvements to managers' working conditions..  | 107 |
| Limitations and Methodological Considerations .....   | 110 |
| CONCLUSIONS .....   | 114 |
| SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING .....   | 116 |
| Syfte och frågeställningar .....  | 116 |
| Empiriska studier .....   | 118 |
| Övergripande slutsatser .....   | 124 |
| REFERENCES .....  | 126 |



## LIST OF FIGURES

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Figure 1. The JD-R model. ....  | 29  |
| Figure 2. Overview of the response patterns of the CHEFiOS manager questionnaire. ....                  | 59  |
| Figure 3. Adaptation of the MOA model as the framework and guiding analysis model for this thesis. .... | 68  |
| Figure 4. The analysis model of Study I. ....   | 76  |
| Figure 5. The analysis model of Study II. ....  | 81  |
| Figure 6. The analysis model of Study III. ....   | 85  |
| Figure 7. The analysis model of Study IV. ....  | 89  |
| Figure 8. Illustration of the psychosocial work situations as presented to practitioners. ....          | 106 |

## LIST OF TABLES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Overview of the materials and methods of the four studies addressed in this thesis. ....            | 50 |
| Table 2. Descriptives of the CHEFiOS sample (2009, N = 555). ....  | 52 |
| Table 3. Overview of the specific research objects, data sources, measurement levels, and informants. ....   | 53 |
| Table 4. Relevant data dimensions from the CHEFiOS manager questionnaire. ....                               | 54 |
| Table 5. Description of the data dimensions included in the ARIA interviews and their related criteria. .... | 61 |
| Table 6. Organizational and demographic data included in the analyses. ....                                  | 66 |
| Table 7. Short description of the main characteristics of the eight clusters. ....                           | 77 |

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

This thesis is based on four studies, referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

Study I Berntson, E., Wallin, L., & Härenstam, A. (2012). Typical situations for managers in the Swedish public sector: Cluster analysis of working conditions using the job demands-resources model. *International Public Management Journal*, 15(1), 100–130.

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Study II Corin, L., Berntson, E., & Härenstam, A. (2016, January 14). Managers' turnover in the public sector – The role of psychosocial working conditions. *International Journal of Public Administration*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/01900692.2015.1035786

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Study III Wallin, L., Pousette, A., & Dellve, L. (2014). Span of control and the significance for public sector managers' job demands: A multilevel study. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 35(3), 455–481.

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Study IV Corin, L., & Björk, L. (2016). *Job demands and job resources in human service managerial work – An external assessment through work content analysis*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| $\alpha$ | Cronbach's alpha  |
| ANOVA    | Analysis of variance  |
| CI       | Confidence interval   |
| e.g.     | For example ( <i>exempli gratia</i> )   |
| EM       | Expectation maximization  |
| ERI      | Effort-reward imbalance model   |
| ESS      | Error sum of squares  |
| GMSI     | Gothenburg Manager Stress Inventory   |
| HR       | Human resources   |
| HRM      | Human resource management   |
| HSO      | Human service organizations   |
| ICC      | Intraclass correlation coefficient  |
| i.e.     | That is ( <i>id est</i> )   |
| IGLS     | Iterative generalized least squares   |
| JDC      | Job demand-control model  |
| JDCS     | Job demand-control-support model  |
| JD-R     | Job demands-resources model   |
| MANOVA   | Multivariate analysis of variance   |
| MANCOVA  | Multivariate analysis of covariance   |
| MDSD     | Most different systems design   |
| MLM      | Multilevel modeling   |
| MOA      | Moderna arbets- och livsvillkor för kvinnor och män [Modern work and living conditions for women and men] |
| MSSD     | Most similar systems design   |
| NPM      | New public management   |
| OLS      | Ordinary least squares  |
| OR       | Odds ratio  |
| PASW     | Predictive Analytics Software (formerly Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, or SPSS)             |
| RIGLS    | Restricted iterative generalized least squares  |
| SOC      | Span of control   |
| TSO      | Technical service organizations   |
| WHO      | World Health Organization   |

## TACKORD

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*Linda Corin*

Onsala, 15 mars

# INTRODUCTION

A well-functioning management is a highly important precondition when it comes to creating healthy and productive public sector organizations. Operational managers hold key positions in the public sector through their responsibility to lead, manage, and develop their welfare organizations. Managerial work in the public sector is challenging, since the levels of complexity, demands, and expectations are generally high. The interests from numerous stakeholders such as politicians, senior management, audit authorities, employees, clients, and their relatives must constantly be balanced. Managerial work in the public sector may also be especially rewarding, with the notion of doing good and making a difference for the public, particularly benefiting the welfare of the whole society, as discussed by public service motivation theorists (e.g., Rainey & Bozeman, 2000).

## *Changed managerial work – Is there a problem?*

Managerial work in the public sector appears to have changed radically during recent decades, pointing toward a troublesome work situation in which organizational changes, economic constraints, and disadvantageous psychosocial working conditions have become a larger part of managerial work (Ball, 2003; Trydegård, 2000). Managers have been shown to be negatively affected by their work situation (Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2011), and maintaining managers' health, as well as attracting and retaining skilled managers, has become an area of great concern for managerial sustainability in the public sector (e.g., Björklund, Lohela-Karlsson, Jensen, & Bergström, 2013; Danielsson et al., 2012; Härenstam & MOA Research Group, 2005; Skagert, Dellve, & Ahlberg Jr, 2012; Vinberg & Landstad, 2013).

## *A knowledge gap*

Despite these findings, research is scarce within this area and few studies have focused on the working conditions and sustainability of public sector managers. Although the studies on this specific group of employees are few, they have signaled problems with job strain, stress, and fatigue (Ahlberg et al., 2006; Björklund et al., 2013), as well as with high levels of sick leave (Lidwall, 2010; Lindholm, Dejin-Karlsson, Westin, Hagström, & Uden, 2004; Westerlund, Ferrie, Jeding, Oxenstierna, & Theorell, 2004). In addition, there is a push to acquire more knowledge, since a high proportion of managers are approaching retirement, in combination with a number of managers wanting to leave their jobs voluntarily. This problem has been highlighted by several public sector representatives, such as unions and employer organizations, and further confirmed by several recent scientific studies (Cregård & Solli, 2012; Skagert et al., 2012).

Thus, the conditions that public sector managers work under might be questioned and their sustainability might be threatened. Managers who are able to, as well as want to, work as managers over the long term are crucial, especially in times characterized by challenging developments in public organizations, the

increased demands of an aging population, increased immigration and urbanization, and financial deficits in many societies. Managerial work in the public sector must be attributed significance in order to promote healthy and attractive jobs and to not jeopardize the future of public sector organizations and thus the welfare society.

### *A contextual approach*

The present thesis applies a contextual approach in order to shed new light on managerial working conditions in the public sector. Within this thesis, a contextual approach means that the focus is turned from managers and their individual differences, to the conditions that public sector managers work under. Furthermore, context is considered a layered concept wherein managers are influenced both by the context immediately proximal to them, i.e., their psychosocial working conditions, and by the larger organizational context. The context and its layers are reflected in theory, design, and method. Managerial working conditions in the public sector are investigated through strategic sampling and methods that take into account the context in which managers work, as well as the variations in that context. The results are directed toward public sector decision-makers and human resources departments, where the knowledge provided and the ways in which it is presented are aimed at helping them to understand the conditions that managers work under. Such knowledge is a valuable basis for planning improvements to unsatisfactory work situations and thereby for promoting the creation of sustainable managerial work. It is also crucial in attracting and retaining skilled managers and securing the future of the public sector.

## **Aims of the thesis**

The aims of this thesis were first, to explore and increase the knowledge of managerial working conditions in Swedish municipalities. Second, the aims included extending and developing the job demands-resources (JD-R) model by applying contextual methods and placing special emphasis on public sector managers. Finally, the aspiration was also to provide information that public sector decision-makers and human resources departments can use and apply in promoting sustainable managerial working conditions. The argument in this thesis is that a contextual perspective on managerial work is needed.

The specific aims of the included studies were as follows:

- To identify and describe different types of managerial work situations, based on the combination of job demands and job resources from several sources, and thereby to detect high-risk and low-risk work situations in terms of managerial sustainability (Study I and II).
- To determine whether organizational characteristics can explain differences in psychosocial working conditions among operational public sector managers (Study III).
- To apply a method for externally assessing job demands and job resources as well as the balance between them in public sector managerial work (Study IV).

## **Organization of the thesis**

The first section of the body of this thesis consists of a theoretical and empirical background. After the Theoretical and Empirical Background section, the research design of the overarching project<sup>1</sup> that this thesis is a part of is presented in the Materials and Methods section, together with the specific methodology and empirical material used in the studies making up this thesis. In the Main Findings section, the results of the four studies are summarized and then the general contributions from them are examined in the Discussion section. The Conclusions section completes the thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> This thesis is part of a large research and development project referred to CHEFIOS (Härenstam & Östebo, 2014a), which is a Swedish acronym for Management, Health, Efficiency, and Prerequisites in the Public Sector.



## THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The understanding of managerial work as a context-bound practice is underestimated in management research and theory (e.g., Dierdorff, Rubin, & Morgeson; 2009; Johns, 2006; Mintzberg, 2006). Individual characteristics have historically been the main attention of the leadership and management research field (Vroom & Jago, 2007), although mainstream research has differed in its focus over time (e.g., Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Northouse, 2007; Yukl, 2010). Initially, the attention was turned to the personality characteristics of the leader (Stogdill, 1948), which later shifted to the skills of the leader and the conviction that leadership could be taught and trained (Katz, 1974; Yukl, 2010). Efficient leadership behaviors in terms of task orientation and relationship orientation were later highlighted (Blake & Mouton, 1964), followed by the notion that efficient leadership may vary between situations. Hence, situational characteristics were then put in the spotlight of the leadership research, mainly through Fiedler's (1967) contingency theory and Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) situational theory. The commonly used situational approach to leadership, which has been used extensively in organizational leadership training and development (Northouse, 2007, p. 91), focuses on situational influences, thus constraining the leader who must then adapt his or her style of leadership to the situation at hand (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). Thereafter, a line of leadership theories with an emphasis on motivating employees and consisting of different leadership styles was introduced by Bass (1985). Leadership style theories are still the most researched today (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009), with the main emphasis on transformational leadership as the supreme leadership style (Yukl, 2010). As a result, the concentration on managers' styles and strategies within the leadership literature has largely come to overshadow the way in which managers are influenced by the situation or context in which they are functioning (Vroom & Jago, 2007), which is the focus of this thesis.

Although an overall definition of context is missing in the literature (Mowday & Sutton, 1993), the organizational context has, for instance, been defined as "situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables" (Johns, 2006 p. 386) and "stimuli and phenomena that surround and thus exist in the environment external to the individual, most often at a different level of analysis" (Mowday & Sutton, 1993 p. 198). These phenomena have for the most part been studied separately from the individual and his or her work (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Cappelli, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993). However, in order to understand how the organizational context shapes individual working conditions and health, both features need to be addressed (Bejerot & Härenstam, 2010; Härenstam, 2008). The resulting gap between perspectives and traditions has further led to less being known about how working conditions in the organization influence managers (Brazier, 2005). Management is part of the organizational

context, made up by the structures and cultures within which individuals work (Fullan, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Nyberg, 2009), but managers are also, like any other employee, affected by the context (Brazier, 2005; Vroom & Jago, 2007; Yammarino & Bass, 1991). The organizational context is a reality that must be taken into account, and it can be considered a helpful counterpoint to the individual-centered theories (Johns, 2001). Although differences between managers are not irrelevant, the effects of the situation or context can dwarf these variations (Vroom, 2000; Vroom & Jago, 2007). Therefore, it is of great importance to incorporate the context into the field of management research (Brazier, 2005).

With this backdrop, the theoretical and empirical background consists of and is organized around four aspects of managerial work in the public sector. In line with the contextual approach of this thesis, knowledge of the setting in which managerial work takes place in the public sector is needed. Hence, the first section of the theoretical and empirical background consists of an introduction to (1) the organizational context of managerial work, providing an introduction to the public sector and the changes it has undergone in general and the organizational context of municipalities in particular. In the two sections that follow, the main focus of the thesis is framed by elaborating on (2) the content of managerial work and (3) the conditions of managerial work. Thereafter, some of (4) the consequences of managerial work in terms of sustainability are summarized. The theoretical and empirical section concludes in a section on the contextual approach that frames the scope of this thesis and the guiding theoretical and analytical model derived from that approach.

## **The Organizational Context of Managerial Work**

Today, most researchers acknowledge that management is an interaction between the manager and the situation in which the manager takes part (Fiedler, 1996; Johns, 2001; Vroom, 2000). Johns (2001) has argued that consideration of context is essential in understanding and developing meso-level connections such as person–situation interactions. The organizational context can provide restrictions on or opportunities for certain behaviors and attitudes, and thus influence its employees in several ways (Härenstam, 2008; Johns, 2001). A favorable context can, for example, assist the individual to find ways to cope with different kinds of work-related challenges (Ekman & Arnetz, 2005). And whereas good organizational structures may help prevent disease or contribute to health, less favorable structures can generate ill health among employees (Thulin Skantze, 2006). Bennis (2007) stressed that “if we have learned anything in the decades psychologists have now devoted to the study of leadership, it is that leaders do not exist in a vacuum” (p. 3). These days, it is more or less taken for granted that the organizational context and conditions matter.

Studies focusing on these organizational factors are less common, however, although such knowledge has strong implications for the prevention of job stress, and very little is thus known about which organizational factors are the most

important (Härenstam, 2008). It has been argued that more research needs to be done on how country-specific institutional characteristics manifest themselves at the level of the individual manager (Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000).

### **The public sector**

Generally, organizations in the public sector have been found to have many similarities with private sector organizations, but they also face special requirements and have some unique prerequisites (Boyne, 2002; Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003; Rainey & Bozeman, 2000). Hence, managers who work in the public sector also face unique prerequisites (Boyne, 2002; Pollitt, 1993; Rainey, 1991; Ranson & Stewart, 1989). It has been argued that public and private management are fundamentally different in the rules that each sector rests on. In the public sector, traditional public sector values, including representativeness, justice, and equality before the law, are intermingled with modern managerial ideals on economy and efficiency (Noordegraaf & Stewart, 2000). Hence, public sector organizations are more multifaceted, with more objectives and stakeholders to consider, thus creating a high level of complexity for those who work there (Hagström, 1990). Organizations in the public sector, for instance, have external actors, such as politicians, with extensive influence over resources and decisions that impact on public organizations and their workforce (Pandey & Wright, 2006; Ranson & Stewart, 1989). Many public sector organizations are also characterized by their special relationships with their recipients or clients (Söderfeldt et al., 1996), and a very large part of the public sector is oriented toward human services, a welfare sector that includes care and education (Hasenfeld, 1983; Thylefors, 2007).

Furthermore, the public sector in Sweden has, like in many other countries, undergone big changes on several levels during recent decades. Cost-effectiveness has been suggested to be the main incentive for the changes in the public sector in general (Bach & Della Rocca, 2000), and Sweden is no exception. Since the 1990s, financial difficulties and fewer resources have increased demands on the public sector in Sweden that it be cost-effective and still be able to offer services of high quality. It has led to aggressive cost-cutting initiatives that in most cases have involved downsizing (Montin, 2004).

New public management (NPM) – in other words, introducing economic and managerial ideas from private companies into public organizations (Hood, 1991) – has often been launched at times of financial crisis accompanied by downsizing (Bach & Della Rocca, 2000). At a higher level, NPM is a general theory and model postulating that the public sector can be improved by imitating and copying managerial methods from the private sector, where management approaches such as scientific management have long traditions (Taylor, 1911). At a more practical level, however, NPM is an array of specific concepts and practices including, for example, a greater emphasis on performance, decentralized and flattened organizations, and market-type mechanisms (Pollitt & Sorin, 2011). NPM