"SICK SOCIETY"

A Study Exploring
The Psychosocial "Work" Environment

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Preface

A research team within the division of Industrial design at the department of Human Work Sciences at the University of Technology in Luleå Sweden requested an examination of a work environment from a psychosocial approach. Sickness absence was to be analysed to identify problems within the psychosocial work environment. What these researchers hoped is that this study would identify any problems within the psychosocial work environment and provide suggestions as to how it can be improved so that sickness absences can be reduced.

It has long been acknowledged that the psychosocial environment influences the identity construction process. Consequently, the psychosocial “work” environment recognises the significance of everything that surrounds the individual as they construct an identity whilst they work. A review of the current sickness absence discourse identifies unconstructive changes in the structure of organisations within the labour market as the origin of deterioration in the psychosocial “work” environment. Changes that many commentators suggest have increased sickness absence.

It is proposed that sickness absence is caused through a combination of three factors within the psychosocial work environment that produce psychological strain and this affects the health and well-being of the individual. Through the expansion of the concept of “work” to include activities that have previously not been considered in this category, this study identifies the psychological work environment and establishes that the influence of it on the individual is more extensive than previously assumed.

The study finds that organisations infiltrate society at every level and through the collective resources that they control they utilise humanities fear of social isolation to attract individuals into their activities. Once included in their social collective, the individual’s fear of exclusion is exploited to reduce individual autonomy as the organisation puts the individual to work. To retain its “workers”, an organisation maintains a stable, secure environment; until the stability it governs no longer serves the organisation’s purpose.
This study’s search for enlightenment confirms the dangers of psychological demand, the importance of decision latitude, and the significance of social support to individual health and well-being. Additionally, it reveals the full extent of the influence that organisational governance has on creating identities. Furthermore, the study also reveals the potential of organisations to destroy identities it creates through demolishing the secure, stable homogenous environment they have created and nurtured.

As is the case with all research, this study is not the result of one individual’s labours. The study would not have been performed if not for the research team at Luleå university and I thank them for the opportunity they provided for me to enter this exciting research area. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to Elisabeth Berg for her diligent supervision. Your valuable advice and guidance made this study more than it could have otherwise become, and your tolerance, patience and integrity saved me from myself. My wife Lena and my children Megan & Tina have suffered during my absence; thank you for your support and understanding. My friends Terry and Lars I also thank for the discussions we had and the listening I imagined you did.

There are many others deserving my thanks, if you feel your name has been omitted in error, please insert name here __________________________.
Abstract

This study started as a request from a research team at the division of Industrial design at the department of Human Work Sciences at the University of Technology in Luleå Sweden. Their request was for an examination of a work environment from a psychosocial approach using sickness absence as a point of analysis.

From the background of structure change in organisations during the 1990’s that worsened the psychosocial work environment and increased the stress of the individual, the relationship between psychological demand, decision latitude, and social support is examined. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore the cause of sickness absence from a psychosocial perspective. This exploration is lead by three questions: what is the psychosocial work environment and how has the implementation of new management reforms changed it? How do psychological demand, decision latitude and social support affect the individual? And; why does this, with increasing frequency, result in sickness absence?

Through the application of Göran Ahrne’s perspective of organisations, this study critically applies the theory of Robert Karasek & Töres Theorell to empirical data collected through quantitative and qualitative methods. This triangulation of information uses sickness absence as the point of analysis to explore how three factors from within the psychosocial “work” environment affect the health and well-being of the individual.

This study is of an organisation dominated by woman, and this type of absences could provide a legitimate break from the governance and demands of the organisation and is therefore important.

The study reveals the full extent of the influence that organisational governance has not only on individual health and well-being but also on creating identities. Furthermore, it demonstrates the potential of organisations to destroy identities it creates through
demolishing the secure, stable homogenous environment they have created and nurtured. To reduce the risk to health and well-being, organisations must provide a clear objective and direct its governance towards creating stability and security for the individual.

Keywords: psychosocial, work environment, sickness absence, management reforms, psychological demand, decision latitude and social support, organisation, governance.
Abstrakt


Studien visar på att den fullständiga graden av påverkan som organisatorisk övervakning inte endast påverkar hälsa och välbefinnande utan också på skapandet av identiteter. Dessutom upptar studien förmågan organisationer har att förstöra de identiteter den skapat när dessa ej längre är användbara för organisationen. För att minska risken till ohälsa samt skapa välbefinnande, är det nödvändigt för organisationer att erbjuda ett klart mål samt använda dess kontrollmöjligheter för att skapa stabilitet och trygghet åt individen.

Nyckelord: psykosocialt, arbetsmiljö, sjukfrånvaro, psykiska krav, inflytande, socialt stöd, organisation.
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Chapter 1

Absence Due to Sickness

A project organised by the division of industrial design at the department of Human Work Sciences at the University of Technology in Luleå Sweden, is currently conducting an examination of work related ill-health and sickness absence. The project examines the many different aspects of work-life. Their intention is to reduce work related sickness absences through locating and improving problems within the work environment*. This study is a response to the request from the projects research team for an examination of a designated work environment from a psychosocial approach. What is hoped for is that the conclusions from this study will identify any problems within the psychosocial work environment that cause sickness absence so that measures that resolve such problems and reduce sickness absences can be implemented.

The General Debate

During the past decade the cost of sickness benefit to Swedish society has been rising. Given the immensity of that task, a comprehensive review of the sickness absence discourse is virtually impossible. What can be said is that explaining why the cost of sickness benefit has risen, how it can be halted, and locating areas of research that may help to unravel these issues are at the centre of the discussion.

This general debate focuses on society’s changing attitude towards claiming benefits; the possibility of a “sick society” and allegations of increasing fraudulent claims. This infers that individuals “play-truant”; that they are not suffering from ill-health at all! Suggesting that individuals are absent from the workplace because they choose not to attend. Do individuals feel compelled to make fraudulent sickness benefit claims because they do not wish to attend their workplace? Because “sickness” provides a legitimate way to “take a break” this assumption is easy to make, yet if this is the case, two questions beg to be asked; what could make an individual not want to attend their workplace? And; why

* Further details of this project can be obtained by contacting Professor Jan Lundberg at the division of industrial design, department of human work sciences at the University of Technology in Luleå, Sweden.
must a person pretend to be “sick” to take a day off? In the absence of empirical data and relevant information it is not possible to objectively answer these questions. However, sickness absence has not escaped scrutiny.

The Swedish “Statistiska centralbyrån” or SCB* implies that the simple explanations of sickness absence are already known; nonetheless they maintain that a compilation of further research is needed to produce a comprehensive understanding of ill-health and sickness absence (SCB, 2004).

Amongst the areas in need of further research suggested by SCB in their 2004 report† is the association between market trade conditions and the selection of the “sick” during periods of economical growth. The statistics of SCB show that the periods of economical growth reflect low levels of unemployment, and periods of economical decline reflect high unemployment. According to SCB (2004), during periods of economical depression the “sick” are forced out of the labour market and have difficulty in finding work. As the economical climate improves, more people are employed. Consequently, during periods of high prosperity the number of “sick” individuals in the labour market increases. Accordingly, during periods of low unemployment- high prosperity- there is an increase in sickness absence (SCB, 2004).

Conversely, in their anthology‡, Staffan Marklund & co-authors (2005) point out that although there is a clear correlation between market trade conditions and sickness absence, it has not been possible to strengthen the hypothesis that the number of individuals with poor health increases during periods of low unemployment. According to Marklund, the correlation between sickness absence and the state of the economic market is more probably a result of the benefit systems changing the status of individuals as a response to pressure on the government to reduce unemployment figures (Marklund, 2005). This is an interpretation that SCB first highlighted as “transference” §,

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* Statistiska centralbyrån or SCB is The Swedish Central Bureau of statistics.
† Sjukfrånvaro och ohälsa i Sverige – en belysning utifrån SCB:s statistik is a report that applies the statistical data collected by SCB to illustrate sickness absence and ill-health in Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2004).
‡ Den höga sjukfrånvaron – problem och lösning (Marklund (editor), 2005) is an anthology compiled by a working group from the Institution of Working Life, The National Institute of Public Health, The Institute of Psychosocial Medicine and The Insurance Office. It provides an inventory of the existing knowledge on the cause of sickness absence and present new research findings and analysis.
§ SCB indicates that individuals that can, according to regulations, receive financial assistance from more than one division of the benefit system are transferred between them (SCB, 2004).
recommending it as one of the main factors causing the increase in the cost of sickness benefits (SCB, 2004).

SCB also recommends that the rise in sickness absences during the 1990’s should be viewed through the background of the structural changes within the labour market that occurred during these years (SCB, 2004). Although three of the four main causes of sickness benefit cost increase identified by Marklund & co-authors (2005) in their study-increased risk of health problems in an aging workforce*, the effects of the policies of “transference” discussed above, and the lack of communication between departments of the social services that lead to the extension of sick-pensions instead of transference to early retirement status- directly or indirectly incriminate changes in institutional policies. The forth and foremost cause of sickness absence highlighted by Marklund is structure change within organisations in the labour market (Marklund, 2005). This makes it clear that such a background is a fruitful foundation from which to examine the rise in sickness absences.

**Structure Change**

Structure change within organisations has caused the deterioration of the psychosocial work environment through increasing the work tempo and weakening the balance between the demands of the work and the degree of autonomy, or self-government, available to the employee (SCB, 2004; Marklund, 2005). In other words, whilst the demands of the job have increased, the possibilities for the individual to control how these demands are met have not followed suit.

Changes in the structure of organisations during the 1990’s correspond with the introduction of managerial reforms that, according to Pollitt (2004) were intended as “a means to multiple ends”. The implementation of management reforms within the Swedish public sector was intended to restore the balance of a budget deficit (Pollitt, 2004). Pollitt explains that the implementation of these reforms was a response to the need to reduced public expenditure, improve the quality of public services, make

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* An aging workforce (especially within the public sector) is suggested as being the result of the high birth rate during the 1940’s. The increase in the population during the 1940’s lead to massive recruitments into the public sector during the 1960’s to reduce the unemployment figures. The rationalisations within the labour market during the 1990’s and the work-rights principle of “last in, first out” combine to ensure that the average age of the employed is rising (Marklund, 2005).
operations more efficient, and increase the effectiveness of newly implemented strategies (Pollitt, 2004).

The introduction of popular private sector management techniques into the public sector during the early 1990’s lead to the decentralisation of personal authority and an increase in regulatory agencies as productivity and efficiency became the focus of attention (Pollitt, 2004). As Elisabeth Berg & co-authors (2004) point out in their article*, the increase in personal authority, continuous evaluation and performance-auditing increase the pressure felt by personnel (Berg, 2004). What Berg & co-authors reveal is that the constant demand for greater effectiveness and the regularity of the performance auditing combine with the increase in personal authority- that burdens the individual with personal responsibility- and produce greater mental strain or stress (Berg, 2004). Ulrich Beck (2002) gives grounds for considering whether the “decentralisation of authority” that increases the personal authority and reasonability to which Berg & co-authors raise concern is exclusively confined to the workplace. Beck’s theory of individualization suggests that individuals in modern society are coerced into taking responsibility for “a life of their own” (Beck, 2002). This demonstrates that the workplace is not the only source of psychological strain. Without enough support from an organisation † or adequate opportunity for recuperation this continuous struggle increases the risk of stress-related health problems and sickness absence (Marklund, 2005).

**Dangerous Ground**

Karasek & Theorell (1990) link physical health problems- especially heart problems- with the psychological discomfort, stress, or mental strain, caused by employment. They explain that psychological strain- psychological discomfort, mental tension, stress- is produced through exposure to a combination of the three psychosocial factors found within the objective reality of the psychosocial work environment; 1) Psychological demand is dependant on the contents of the work. Put simply, psychological demand is produced by the tasks that an individual performs; 2) Decision latitude is linked to the

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† According to Marklund & co-authors, there is a growing tendency to root out those individuals that don’t function at an optimal level. This tendency indicates that the level of support offered by organisations is decreasing.
organisation of the work. It reflects a combination of a) task authority, and b) skill discretion. Put simply, it conceptualises the control an individual has over the activities they perform and the skills they use to accomplish the task; 3) Social support refers to the individuals close relationships with co-workers and supervisors. Put simply, support from co-workers and the organisation provides’ a “buffer” against the psychological demand of the work (Karasek, 1990).

According to Karasek & Theorell, exposure to this objective reality produces a subjective experience that can ultimately engender dangerous psychological strain (Karasek, 1990). The transformation of exposure to these psychosocial factors into psychological strain is a complex blend of the objective reality and the subjective experience of it- examined in detail in chapters 3 & 4-. The transition of psychological strain into health problems however is reasonably straightforward.

Karasek & Theorell convincingly demonstrate that long term exposure to chemicals that are produced as a result of biological changes within the body as a response to stressful experiences- which were originally meant to protect or help the individual in times of danger- can be detrimental to health and well-being (Karasek, 1990). The chemical agents released in such situations are shown to be healthy, yet prolonged exposure to situations that educe such a chemical release is anything but good for the individual. Exposure to elongated periods of mental tension and stress, or psychological strain exaggerates the release of these chemicals and, if liberation or a rest-bite is unavailable, this has catastrophic affects on the individual’s physical and mental health (Karasek, 1990). In short, in extreme cases, long periods of exposure to psychological strain kills.

**Exploring Workplace Absence**

The essence of this study is to explore the cause of workplace absence from a psychosocial perspective.

SCB (2004) and Marklund (2005) advise that a study of organisations from the background of structure change within them will provide insight into the increase in absences from the workplace. Pollitt (2004) demonstrates that managerial reform during the 1990’s lead to changes in the structure of organisations; it is therefore prudent to
establish how this re-organisation changed the psychosocial work environment. This necessitates establishing; 1) what is the psychosocial work environment and how has the implementation of new management reforms changed it?

Since its publication, the work of Karasek & Theorell has dominated research into sickness absence. Through linking high psychological strain with ill-health, worry, and eventual death, they highlight the importance of three psychosocial factors in the life of an individual. The importance placed on these factors demands the question; 2) how do psychological demand, decision latitude and social support affect the individual?

Once an explanation of the changes within the psychosocial work environment has been formed, and the effects of the changes on the actions on the individual are recognised attention can be focused on the central issue of explaining sickness absence by asking; 3) why does this, with increasing frequency, result in sickness absence?

The following chapter provides a description of the study group, the process of data collection and the approach taken in the analysis. In addition, it discusses the studies validity, reliability, the relevant ethical issues, and offers a brief account of the presentation that follows in the remaining chapters.

Chapter 3 identifies the psychosocial work environment through explaining what work is, where it is performed and what the consequences are when others govern this activity. Chapter 4 explores organisations and social relationships at the workplace. The structural aspects of organisations and the affects of them on the individual are discussed before a real workplace experience is presented in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 is a closing discussion of the empirical data and theoretical knowledge presented in the study.
Chapter 2
Gathering Data

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study is conducted as a part of a larger project currently underway at the University of Technology in Luleå, Sweden. As such, some issues were decided prior to its conception, providing both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantages are derived from the fact that the research area has already been selected. The main disadvantages also derive from this fact; the choice of a data collecting method and the study group are inherited and can only be motivated through finding literature that supports the methods being used. This means that rather than first choosing a phenomenon to study, a group to examine, and then studying the relevant literature to locate a method that suites the study, a study that suites the phenomenon, group and favoured data collection method must be imagined; a difficult, yet not impossible task.

The directives for the study dictate that an examination of the work environment is to be performed from a psychosocial perspective. An analysis of sickness absence within an organisation is to be made using a self-report questionnaire and conducting individual interviews; with the intention of suggesting realistic measures to improve the psychosocial work environment.

The pages below explain how this study was created. Starting with the introduction of the study group, this chapter then reveals the method used to collect the data. It also provides a description of the analytical approach before considering ethical matters relevant to study and issues significant to the reliability and validity of this work. The chapter then rounds off by clarifying important aspects of the presentation.

Living Proof

The study group was not selected by the author, but provided by the research team at Luleå University. The original reasoning that lead to the selection of this particular study group has not been explained to the author; whether there is a high frequency of sickness
absence within this group or whether there are problems within the psychosocial work
environment remains to be established.

The organisation being studied provides a combination of services to a university in Sweden. Although it enjoys economical independence from the Swedish state and is open to competition from rival organisations, it is a part of the public sector. Although the services of the organisation can be commissioned for other activities, its main objective is keeping the buildings of a university campus clean.

The organisation boasts twenty-nine employees; one in a managerial context, the remainder actively perform duties directed at reaching the organisation’s objective; cleaning. The employees range from between twenty-two and sixty-two years of age. The length of service of the employees ranges from the novice, with only two months service under their belt, to the experienced with thirty-four years of service behind them. From this group, a sample of twenty individuals voluntarily participated. Although the sample is a large part of the study group, the study group itself is small. Whilst this draws attention to issues concerning the general character of the study, the social environment of any individual is no larger than the social relationships they maintain. Therefore, the study provides a general account of the phenomenon being examined and it is hoped that its findings provide insights for further research in this area.

Somewhat uniquely, the employees are exclusively female; not one male is employed by the organisation. This raises concerns over the lack of an entire gender from the study; no men means that a whole gender is not represented and this severely limits the scope of any findings. However, this concern is rather pessimistic; an alternative view is that the group offers the opportunity to observe women as they interact with one another in an environment without mixed gender issues influencing their behaviour. This study is especially important as the sickness absence statistics in SCB’s press-release (2005) points out that women in every occupation are absent due to sickness more often than men. The study of a working group of women, isolated as it is from men, can provide knowledge that highlights problems faced by women within the psychosocial work environment that might otherwise be overlooked or obscured in mixed gender situations.

The assortment of marital and parental statuses of the group offers a general selection. Some of the group are married, and some have children living at home. Others are single
mothers and some just single. Nine of these employees withdrew their support and did not provide any information to this study; the empirical data is therefore provided by twenty individuals.

**The Quantitative Equipment**

Karasek & Theorell show that the combination of psychological demand, decision latitude, and social support within the work environment produces either damaging or constructive forms of psychological strain (Karasek, 1990). Their demand/control/support model has become the dominate theory within this research area. The work of SCB reflects this dominance as the above mentioned variables provide the base for their work relating to sickness absence (SCB, 2001, 2004, & 2005). In 2001 SCB published a report which focused on the psychosocial risks of the work environment. The self-report questionnaire* used to collect the data for that, and consequent studies by SCB into sickness absence, was obtained and used to collect the data for this study, as was the informational guide on how to interpret the results†. Within this questionnaire are three indexes that measure the individual’s experience of psychological demand, decision latitude, and social support.

Although self-report questionnaires do not provide an objective description of the real situation, they do provide a description of the individual’s subjective experience of these psychosocial factors. According to Nils Eriksson, a psychosocial approach means accepting that the surroundings have a significant effect on how an individual forms their personal identity (Eriksson in Furåker (red), 1991); making the unique subjective individual experiences of the objective psychosocial work environment an important, valid source of information. The questionnaire thus provides a reliable description of how each individual experiences these factors and individualises the cause of psychological strain, thereby facilitating the location of any specific problem(s).

The questionnaires were completed at a meeting with the personnel at their place of work. Although it was hoped that a pre-arranged meeting would lead to all of the twenty-

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* See Statistical Index Questions.
eight cleaning personnel completing a questionnaire, one withdrawal and eight absences at the time of the data collection resulted in nine remaining uncompleted; as a part of the managerial staff, the workplace experienced by the manager is very different and it was decided that there was no relevance to the information she could provide in this part of the examination. Although questionnaires were made available for completion upon their return, these absentees declined participation in the study for reasons that were not disclosed.

The Qualitative Collection

The qualitative data consists of six interviews. Two of the six interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees, one- with the manager- took place in the interviewee’s workplace, and the others were conducted in an office made available to the interviewer at the university. Each interview was on average 45 minutes in length and all but one were recorded, one was not recorded because of technical problems. Fortunately, notes were taken during all of the interviews; the notes taken during the unrecorded interview facilitates the inclusion of that information.

A disadvantage with this process is suggested by Kvale (1997). Kvale argues that the reliability of qualitative data is created by the researcher during its transcription into written word, and no transcription of the same interview by two individuals is the same. Although the interviews were conducted in Swedish, they are presented in English as this allows none-Swedish speakers to follow the text without frequently visiting the notes. During this translation assistance from a native Swedish speaker was attained to eliminate any misunderstandings and translation errors*. The assistance of a second person in the translation of the interviews implies a weakening of the study’s reliability. However, Kvale also draws attention to the importance of the interpretation and analysis of the material in strengthening the reliability and validity of the study (Kvale, 1997). This means that the text must be correctly understood. The assistance received whilst performing the translation adds to the accuracy of the understanding of the text, and thus

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* The text was first transcribed in Swedish. This was then translated into English by the author using the Norstedts Ordbok. ENGELSK- svenska, SVENSK- engelska ORD- bok, Norstedts Ordbok AB, 1994. Once this was completed, the English translation was compared against the original Swedish text by a native Swedish speaker to access the accuracy of the translation. Any discrepancies were re-transcribed, re-translated, and re-inspected.
the analysis of it. Through seeking a correct understanding, greater reliability and validity is gained than is lost through the input of a second person.

Included in all the questionnaire was a request for interviewees that ensured that the interviewees volunteered and were not selected. Although it was hoped that there would be more, six volunteers came forward; of the six that originally volunteered, only five interviews were performed as one individual withdrew. This resulted in a total of six interviews; five with active cleaning personnel and one interview with the manager.

All of the interviews were conducted in the form of a semi-structured discussion resembled a general conversation. The interviews with the five cleaning personnel centred on the individual’s day-to-day experience of the workplace. Beginning with the question “what do you do when you get to work in the morning?” the interviews were structured around the individual’s experience of the work environment and were guided by questions that controlled the subject and clarified the information being given. Each interview provided information concerning three themes: the organisation of work, social relationships within the workplace, and free time activities. Because no set questions existed from the outset, and each interview was unique, there is no interview question list. The interviewees were given the freedom to speak freely about their experience although when needed questions that channelled the conversation into the subjects of interest were posed.

The interview with the manager differed from those with the cleaning personnel only in that the free time theme was exchanged for a focus on a historical overview of the organisation’s development. Together, the interviews provide an account of both the structure changes that the organisation has gone through and the effects of these changes on social relations in, and outside of the workplace.

**Diagnostic Technique**

The empirical data consists of nineteen completed questionnaires and six individual interviews. The questionnaires establish three things: the level of exposure to psychological demand, the perceived extent of decision latitude, and degree of social support experienced by each individual. These factors influence the level of psychological strain that the individual suffers, and this is directly related to health and
well-being (Karasek, 1991). The assumption guiding the analysis of the quantitative data is that the ill-health and worry caused by psychological strain increases the frequency of sickness absence. The greater the psychological strain becomes, then the more frequent sickness absence occurs. This relationship is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Influences on sickness absence.

Although the data provides a description of the current levels of these factors within this psychosocial work environment, it fails to explain how these conditions were produced. The interviews provide an account of the structure changes that the organisation has gone through and the effects of these changes on social relations in, and outside of the workplace. The information is analysed to clarify; what, if any change has been made to the structure of the organisation, how these changes have affected social relationships within and outside of the workplace.

The assumption is that societal developments during the late 1980’s lead to the implementation of new management reforms in the early 1990’s (Pollitt, 2004) and that, as SCB (2004) and Marklund & co-authors (2005) proclaim, the consequent changes in the structure of organisations produced the current psychosocial work environment. And, as Berg (Berg in Dent, 2004) and Marklund (2005) indicate, that psychosocial work environments have become worse since the implementation of the new management reforms; making it the origin of the increase in sickness absence. This process is illustrated in figure 2 below.

An additional aspect of the analysis is directed at identify how sickness absence is related to the aspects sited above.
**Issues of Integrity**

As the subjects of this research are human, attention must be given to ethical issues relating to the way the research is carried out (Fowler, 1988). Although it is especially important for this study to establish a description of the psychosocial work environment, the protection of the individual’s integrity makes confidentiality an important issue. Fowler makes it clear that it is the researcher’s responsibility to protect all participants from any adverse consequences that may arise as a result of the research (Fowler, 1988).

In line with Fowler’s guidance, all the individuals were informed that the study is to examine the psychosocial work environment with the intention of identifying ways in which it could be improved. They were also extended the option of not participating in the study. Indeed, some of the ladies declined and withdrew. Those that did participate were guaranteed that the information they provided would not be used in another context, or be connected to them as individuals in any way.

The confidentiality forwarded the participants resulted in a decision being made to withhold detailed information of the location for the university that the study group
cleans. This decision was based on assumption that the work environment of all universities are conceivably very similar for cleaners; in that mops, brooms, cleaning detergents, classrooms, toilets, lecture theatres, teachers, researchers, visitors and hordes of students are a part of daily life, and that a more detailed presentation of the organisation’s location is unnecessary and inappropriate.

Birgitta Forsman (2002) draws attention to internal and external research ethics. Internal research ethics include issues such as the falsifying or constructing of data and the plagiarism of texts or stealing of data from other colleagues. The falsifying or construction of data is an issue that relies on the integrity of the researcher, likewise the plagiarism of texts or stealing of data. Fortunately, the use of references is a simple measure that can be implemented when the ideas of others are applied. In this study, any ideas other than the authors own, or information that originates from any other source is introduced or followed by a reference to that source. If no reference is given, then it is the authors own work.

The external ethics that Forsman refers to are concerned with outside interests that can influence the research; the organisation or institution that finances the research for example, may not like the results and try to use their influence to steer the outcome to a more- from their point of view- favourable conclusion (Forsman, 2002). Although this study is a part of a project that is dependant upon outside funding, no economical incentive is provided for it, and no contact has been made between the author of this study and the project sponsors. It is therefore impossible for them to influence the outcome, even if they would like to.

Another issue that Forsman (2002) takes up is that the consequences of research conclusions on the surrounding society should be considered. As any conclusions reached by this study may lead to the implementation of measures intended to improve the psychosocial work environment of an organisation, the consequences of the results are an important issue to consider. Nonetheless, the prospect of improving psychosocial work environmental conditions justifies making an attempt. According to Forsman (2002), there are many that scrutinise new research and this reduces the likelihood of implementing potentially harmful amendments to this sensitive milieu.
To assist the quality assessment that research must go through, it is important that all aspects of the study are motivated through detailed descriptions; of the data collection method and the analytical process (Forsman, 2002). Through providing a methodical presentation of these and other processes, the validity and reliability of the research results are strengthened.

One ethical aspect that is difficult to remove involves the subjective thoughts of the researcher as they can influence the study. The catch 22 of performing research is that objectivity must be maintained at the same time as creativity, or subjective thinking is required. As Anthony Giddens (1990) points out; reflectivity allows critical thinking and produces new ideas. This indicates that subjectivity is acceptable within research, yet only if objectivity is strengthened through convincing motivations. The abundance of sources revealed during the presentation of the theoretical discussion helps to establish trust in the research, as does the description of the studies creation as a whole. The detail of the descriptions and the thoroughness of the motivations provided and the clarity of the study’s disposition facilitate a judgement of the study’s objectivity.

**Validity and Reliability**

The validity of research depends largely on the collection of the empirical data. To achieve a high level of validity, the research must measure the things that the study investigates (Rosengren & Arvidson, 2002). Surface validity is obtained through the theoretical concepts that the researcher uses. The way that the concepts are used motivates the decision to measure just what it is that the researcher measures (Rosengren & Arvidson, 2002).

The collection of the empirical data was conducted according to the method preferred by the main project group at Luleå University. To achieve a high level of validity, the questionnaire was selected as it has been constructed and used by SCB especially to measure the variables of psychological demand, decision latitude, and social support that Karasek & Theorell et al. accept as the most significant factors in the production of psychological strain. The qualitative data is presented in the study in such a way as to protect the individuals that supplied it. The triangulation of information that the
qualitative data facilitates is central to the forming of an explanation of the affects that the quantitatively measured variables have on the individual.

The reliability of the study is about its trustworthiness. Rosengren & Arvidson (2002) insist that the study’s trustworthiness is strengthened through the equipment that is used, the person(s) using them, those that provide the data, and the environment in which this is done. This study uses both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods as the study employs a triangulation of information. According to Rosengren & Arvidson (2002), the data collection method is also important to the validity and reliability of the study.

The use SCB:s standard questionnaire in conjunction with the relevant data interpretation guide strengthens the reliability of the study. The openness of the interviews allowed the interviewees to talk freely about their situation, the themes of focus being re-introduced by relevant questions when necessary. This prevents the “goading” of the informant to provide information that may have been required by the researcher. The combination of this extraction process and the assistance of a second person during the transcription and translation of the interviews establishes’ greater reliability.

Presenting the Discussion

Before commencing, three aspects of the presentation must be explained. Firstly, because of the confidentiality extended to these ladies, it is inappropriate to state the years of service that each has given to the organisation or the age of the interviewees. This is because of the size of the organisation; in such a small organisation this information would undoubtedly allow colleagues to identify one another, and place the written text in the mouths of the individuals. Secondly, in the presentation, the quotations are taken from different interviewees and “aliases” are used to differentiate between them. Those quotations that are presented have been chosen because they best define the situation that they are intended to portray. And thirdly, although the theory of Karasek and Theorell provide the hypothesis being tested in this study, the limitations of it are acknowledged.
The critic that this study makes of Karasek & Theorell’s theory has its origin in the observations made by Nils Eriksson (Eriksson in Furåker (red), 1991) that difficulties exist in identifying whether the psychosocial environment inside or outside of the workplace is most influential in the production of psychological strain, and the suggestion made by SCB (2004) that other factors outside of the individual’s occupation need to be considered when examining sickness absence. It is therefore necessary to apply the work of Göran Ahrne* et al. to ascertain a more reliable perspective of this phenomenon.

To reiterate, in the opening chapter of the discussion it is suggested that new management reforms caused structure change within organisations that have worsened the psychosocial work environment, and this has produced an increase in sickness absences. The need to expand on this simple explanation provides the study with its purpose; to explore the cause of sickness absence from a psychosocial perspective. The three questions that the study poses are: what is the psychosocial work environment and how has the implementation of new management reforms changed it? How do psychological demand, decision latitude and social support affect the individual? And; why does this, with increasing frequency, result in sickness absence? The following chapters represent an attempt to answer these questions.

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*“Social Organizations: interaction inside, outside and between organizations” Ahrne, 1994.
Chapter 3
The Psychosocial Work Environment: Exertion & Governance

The study assumes that the increase in sickness absence is a consequence of a process that began with structure change in organisations. These changes altered the psychosocial work environment subsequently producing greater psychological discomfort, mental tension, and stress, in other words; psychological strain. Psychological strain is the product of experiencing three psychosocial factors; 1) psychological demand, 2) decision latitude, and 3) the social support (Karasek et al. 1990). Before the discussion examines the structural aspects of organisations and the concept of social support; this chapter explores the source of psychological demand and the consequences of exertion, and the significance of organisational governance over the nature of these consequences through the restrictions it places on decision latitude.

Psychological Demand

Karasek & Theorell (1990) convincingly link psychological demand with the contents of the work tasks. The greater the quantity of tasks and mental load, the greater the psychological demand becomes. Although they acknowledge that psychological demand is difficult to conceptualise, because of the diversity of its sources, they nevertheless clarify that-

“Examples of the psychological demands of work (“how hard you work”) include deadlines, how many widgets you make per hour, and how many reports are due this week.”

(Karasek, 1990: page 63).

Psychological demand is produced by the mental arousal or stimulation needed to perform the task(s); psychological arousals associated with physical exertion, stressors arising from personal conflict, skill obsolescence, fear of losing a job, and the burdens of coordination whilst working (Karasek, 1990).
Evidently “work”, through the psychological demand that it produces, is the source of psychological strain. Yet as highlighted above, Karasek & Theorell acknowledge that psychological demand is difficult to conceptualise because of the diversity of its sources; the source being “work”. The use of words such as “worker” and “occupation” by Karasek & Theorell (1990) suggests that “work” is a concept that includes only activities performed by employees. However, what of small business owners; are they free from psychological demands? When psychological demand is “how hard you work” then their activities must also be included, even if they are not “employed”. Additionally, the inclusion of unemployed individuals in the analysis of sickness absence (SCB, 2004) proposes that unemployed individuals are also absent from the workplace due to sickness. For many, unemployment personifies not working; should the activities of the unemployed be regarded as “work”? According to Swedish law, yes they should*. This being the case; where is the workplace of the unemployed?

One possible suggestion is that the offices of organisations that aid the unemployed in their search for work, such as the Job Centre, Arbetsförmedlingen† or similar institutions, as their place of work. Yet the search for work is not exclusively confined within the buildings of these organisations. One well established popular practice is to secure employment through the utilisation of social networks (Piippola, 2003). Furthermore, the unemployed must visit prospective employers during the selection process and modern communication technology provides other mediums, such as the internet and newspapers that many, in all probability, utilise in their search for employment vacancies; suggesting that the unemployed also work whilst at home.

The workplace of the unemployed is obviously difficult to pin-point as it can be many different locations; each different location positioning the “worker” in what appears to be very different work environments. This characteristic is also true of other “occupations”. A washing machine repairman, for example, could be in your bathroom, kitchen, utility room, or in a workshop and a lumberjack usually works out in the forest. Although offices and factories are unquestionably workplaces, should your kitchen, garden shed, or

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* According to Lag (1997: 238): 9 §: 4- see text note 1- all unemployed individuals must actively seek employment in order to receive unemployment benefit (Sveriges Rikes Lag, 2001).
† The Job Center is the name of the organisation that aims to unite unemployed individuals with employment vacancies in Great Britain. Arbetsförmedlingen is the Swedish equivalent.
a friend’s garage also be accepted as such? In general, a workplace is understood as a place where work is done. Yet the confusion over what should or should not be considered as work creates uncertainty as to what or where a workplace is. This makes the work environment an ambiguous entity.

The problem of differentiating the workplace from none-workplace, thus identifying the work environment, is the general everyday meaning associated with “work”. Nils Eriksson defines the work environment as; all the factors that surround the individual in their “work” (Eriksson in Furåker (red), 1991), and “work”, through the experience of the environment that it is performed in, is the source of psychological demand thus strain (Karasek, 1990); for these reasons, the concept of “work” must be clarified.

Work

The general understanding of what work is has changed over the course of history (Furåker et al. 1991). According to Bengt Furåker, in modern society, work is associated with two kinds of activities. The first are activities that are rewarded with monetary reimbursements or “gainful employment”; the second, “other work” includes activities that are not (Furåker, 1991).

Furåker explains that “work” is normally understood as gainful employment that provides a financial income that is then used to provide sustenance or otherwise contributes to the maintenance of an individual’s life. “Other work”, continues Furåker, includes activities without monetary rewards; activities carried out within the extended social group of family and friends. Activities that are not economically rewarded, yet are described as work in common language (Furåker (red), 1991). Housework for example, or helping your son-in-law fix his car, organising your children’s Christmas party at their school, planning an outing for the members of your sports club and so forth. Although for many “other work”- unpaid labour- is understood in a different context to gainful employment, Furåker (1991) argues that any and all activities undertaken to sustain or contribute to the individual’s life maintenance must be included in this category*. Consequently, all activities that sustain or contribute in any way to the maintenance of

* Furåker explains that although picking fruit or berries for personal use is not considered by many to be gainful employment, the activity provides sustenance and therefore belongs in this category (Furåker (red), 1991).
your life are “work”. But what about activities that do not help maintain your life? “Other work”; such as weeding your garden, running errands for grandmother, paying your bills, completing your yearly tax declaration and other forms. Should they be considered as work even if they are not contributing to life maintenance? According to Furåker (1991), yes they should.

Furåker argues that work should be understood as a process involving four dimensions: manpower, equipment, the focal subject, or object of the work* and the product or result (Furåker, (red) 1991). This description of work involves the use of manpower and equipment to change a focal subject or object into a desired product or result in accordance with a plan conceived prior to the process being set in motion. Furåker expresses the “work” formula as-

\[
\text{“Work} = \text{manpower} + \text{equipment} + \text{focus (object)} \Rightarrow \text{product (result)}.
\]

(Furåker (red), 1991: page 21).

Muscle power, or physical capacity and strength provide the human with the ability to work. To exploit this ability, energy in the form of swiftness or speed, and perseverance or endurance is needed. Along with these aspects, the individual must also be adequately socially competent; the need to behave or present oneself correctly and the ability to co-operate is an essential part of work in modern society (Furåker (red), 1991). Furåker goes on to explain that the possession of these qualities alone is not enough to produce manpower; motivation is essential if this physical capacity and these abilities are to be put into action. The use of manpower is thus reliant on the individual experiencing a desire or duty to exert their self (Furåker (red), 1991).

This concept of “work” includes any and all activities that the individual is motivated through a feeling of desire or duty to undertake. Consequently, the term “work” maintains the general understanding of the common language through confirming that

* According to Furåker, the equipment that is to be used is selected by its suitability to the work to be performed. It comes in two forms: a material form such as a power tool, and a none-material form such as a mathematical formula. Both forms are used in varying degrees depending on the nature of the change to be made, or the focal subject of the work process. The focal subject or object also takes on material and none-material forms; it can be the tree that is changed into timber or the timber changed into a table. It can also be a student changed into a tutor, or a tutor changed into a professor. Yet, the result, or product, is decided in advance, the work organiser has the plan, and knows what the desired result or product of the action is before the activity is carried out. The “work” is therefore suited to its purpose (Furåker (red), 1991).
† For original Swedish see text note 2.
activities other than those undertaken as gainful employment are also understood to be
work; such as fixing the roof of your house and washing your car. At the same time it
expands the general understanding of the concept through the inclusion of many activities
that are not generally understood to be work; mundane tasks such as feeding your dog,
making coffee, playing a musical instrument, and opening a bottle of wine. Furthermore,
the implication of “social competence” in the equations highlights another aspect of
“work”.

Through the “privatisation of identity” that Zygmunt Bauman (1991) depicts, and the
individualisation of society that Ulrich Beck (2002) illustrates- that bestows the
individual with personal responsibility for creating “a life of one’s own”- “social
competence” is a part of the “identity construction process” that Erich Fromm (1941)
identified. The emphasise that Beck places on the constant reflexive nature- manpower-
of behaviour selection and merit obtainment- equipment- to produce a personal biography
or “life of one’s own”- subject/object- in order to reach and maintain a place on the social
“high wire” (Beck, 2002) makes forming an identity “work”.

It becomes apparent that the category of “work” includes a wide range of activities
from both within and outside of those associated with gainful employment. According to
Karasek & Theorell (1990), these activities create psychological demands thus
psychological strain. Consequently; each time you become mental aroused by, or
concentrate on a work task, each time you exert yourself physically, each time you are in
disagreement with others or are prevented from using your intellect, when you fear losing
something you value, and each time you coordinate your actions to achieve a purpose, the
psychological demand placed upon you, and the subsequent psychological strain you are
exposed to increase.

One method of coping with psychological strain is to ignore it. However, although
Karasek & Theorell acknowledge that metaphysically removing oneself- turning the
minds eye to something different- from stressful situations is fundamental in reducing
harmful psychological strain, they warn that this is not an adequate long-term solution;
simply physically or mentally getting away from stressful situations merely helps to
reduce psychological strain temporarily (Karasek, 1990). Fortunately, albeit a potential
killer, according to Karasek & Theorell-
“[I]t is not the demands of work itself but the organizational structure of work that plays the most consistent role in the development of stress-related illness.”
(Karasek, 1990: page 9).

Karasek & Theorell propose that although psychological demand produces psychological strain, psychological strain need not lead to ill-health and worry; under suitable conditions exertion has a positive quality.

**Decision Latitude**

Karasek & Theorell explain that the organisational structure—discussed in detail in chapter 4—of the work establishes the extent of freedom that the individual has to decide on the work they shall undertake, and to carry it out as they see fit; this they call decision latitude (Karasek, 1990). They describe their concept of decision latitude as—

“[T]he worker’s ability to control his or her own activities and skill usage, not to control others…..”
(Karasek, 1990: page 60).

Decision latitude provides the individual with the power to organise their time and utilise their intellect. Moreover, decision latitude permits the individual to select the “work” that they undertake and the method of completion (Karasek, 1990). Karasek & Theorell believe this aspect to be especially important in reducing the risk from psychological strain. They demonstrate that psychological demand produced by work which is motivated through feeling a desire or wish to undertake it, even when only undertaken in relatively modest amounts, is significant in the reduction of harmful psychological strain (Karasek, 1990).

Decision latitude is increased by escalating task authority and skill discretion. Having absolute task authority allows the individual complete freedom to decide for themselves what work they shall carry out and when that work is done. Absolute skill discretion provides the individual not only with the freedom to learn new things and develop new skills but also with full control over which specific skills are used when they work. According to Karasek & Theorell, any restrictions placed on task authority, or on skill
discretion or on both- decision latitude as a whole- reduce decision latitude and thus, its positive affect on psychological strain (Karasek, 1990).

When the extent of decision latitude is in harmony with the psychological demands of the work, the work is experienced as a challenge; this then produces a healthy form of psychological strain that stimulates learning and motivates the development of new behaviour patterns. Conversely, if the balance of psychological demand and decision latitude is asymmetrical in the favour of psychological demand, the work ceases to be experienced as a challenge and becomes an ordeal; this produces greater psychological strain that subsequently takes on a harmful nature, initially inhibiting learning and personal growth before escalating to eventually devastate the health and/or well-being of the individual* (Karasek, 1990).

Unfortunately, absolute decision latitude promotes the undertaking of only the “work” that you desire or wish to do. And this too, they warn, can also be detrimental to your health and well-being. Karasek & Theorell (1990) explain that exposure to low psychological demand has both a positive and a negative effect; which of these is experienced by the individual depends on the extent of their decision latitude. An individual that enjoys full decision latitude is free to select the work that they do and perform it to the best of their abilities in whatever time it takes. They explain that individuals in this relaxing low-strain situation are-

“[A]ctually made both happier and healthier than average by work”.
(Karasek, 1990; page 36).

However, when the extent of decision latitude is restricted in any way, the same low psychological demand produces its own set of problems. The greater the restrictions on decision latitude are, then the greater the problems become (Karasek, 1990). This, they clarify, is because even though the lack of psychological demand reduces psychological strain, the restrictions placed on decision latitude prevent the individual from testing their own ideas. This un-rewarding situation results in long-term loss of work motivation. Eventually, the need to learn dissolves and individual development stagnates; causing a regression in an individual’s capacity to use any skills that they once held. Eventually the

* For diagram illustrating this process see Karasek & Theorell’s demand/control model text note 4.
individual’s capacity to make decisions reduces to the extent that problems are avoided instead of confronted and solved. Over an extended period, the lack of psychological demand makes the individual less active in all aspects of life. Eventually all activities are experienced as psychologically demanding and even the reduction in psychological strain produced by “work” motivated by desire or wish to do them is lost. In this passive state of affairs, even the simplest of decisions becomes psychological demanding (Karasek, 1990). Ultimately, avoiding “work” that you feel you ought or must do produces as much psychological strain as performing it. As the old wives tail suggests: “a stitch in time saves nine”.

At the opposite end of the scale, when the level of psychological demands is high or excessive, the extent of decision latitude available to the individual is also of the up-most importance. An individual that has full decision latitude experiences high psychological demands as challenges. Karasek & Theorell explain that-

> “Given the freedom to decide what is the most effective course of action in response to a stressor, the individual can test the efficiency of the chosen course of action, reinforcing it if it has worked or modifying it if it has failed”.

(Karasek, 1990: page 36).

Although psychological demand is high, the psychological strain that it produces is of a positive nature and creates energy that promotes learning and individual development; individuals in this active state fill their lives with “work”. The only disadvantage with this arrangement is fatigue; to remain healthy the individual must take sufficient time to recuperate (Karasek, 1990).

In situations when the psychological demand is high and restrictions over the individual’s decision latitude are in place, the dangers of psychological strain are most acute (Karasek, 1990). The difference between this high-strain situation and the active situation is the degree of decision latitude that an individual can exercise. Karasek & Theorell associate the active situation with professionals; sportsmen, physicians, farmers etc. These individuals enjoy both task authority and skill discretion over the majority of the “work” that they undertake. Without task authority, the individual in a high-strain situation has none of these advantages and is at the mercy of the structural organisation of
the work; the “work” tasks just keep coming and each task is performed in accordance with the restrictions placed upon their skill discretion. The resulting psychological strain suffocates individual development through obstructing learning; fatigue, anxiety, depression, and physical illness become problems.

Consequently, whenever your “work” schedule is governed by others, each time you are prevented from learning new skills or you do not use the skills that you already have, whenever you are not fully involved in making decisions that affect you, every time you are coerced into undertaking more work than you expected to do, or work that you do not desire or wish to do, and on every occasion that you are prevented from doing “work” that you do desire or wish to do, the extent of your decision latitude is decreased and you are exposed to psychological strain that is detrimental to your health and well-being.

**Précis**

It is apparent that in modern society the amount of “work” performed by each individual is staggering. SCB (2004) and Marklund (2005) advise that structure change in organisations is responsible for this increase in activity. A phenomenon that Pollitt (2004) proposes produced greater workloads are the managerial reforms during the 1990’s that were intended to improve efficiency and increase effectiveness. Berg & co-authors (Berg, 2004) confirm that the constant demand for greater effectiveness and the regularity of performance auditing has increased individual workloads because they worry about remaining employed.

Psychosocial is a concept that advocates that the individual develops through interplay with their social surroundings. Taking a psychosocial approach means that consideration is given to the significance that the surroundings have on how an individual forms their personal identity (Eriksson, 1991). The work of Beck (2002) proposes that creating a “life of ones own” involves constant “work” both in the reflexive responses made during social interaction and in the struggle to secure merits and other resources that define our identities. The psychosocial work environment surrounds the individual as they “work” and the huge variety of activities included in the concept of “work” reveals the source of the psychological demand. The psychological strain produced by this exertion can be; a) healthy, encouraging learning and individual development, or b) through obstructing this
process, unhealthy. The degree of decision latitude that the structural aspects of the organisation allow the individual is decisive in determining which of these two experiences the individual is exposed to (Karasek, 1990).

Although this offers an explanation of how psychological strain is produced, the different affects of it on learning and individual development, and how these affects are generated, another influence also plays a significant part in this conundrum. According to Karasek & Theorell (1990), the individual’s close relationships with others within the organisation, co-workers and supervisors, is the most important factor in job satisfaction and low psychological strain. Göran Ahrne proposes that the behaviour of the individual is intended to prevent their exclusion from the organisations to which they are affiliated (Ahrne, 1994). Furthermore, Ahrne argues that organisations should be understood as any social unit, from the national state to the family, characterised by four common principle features; affiliation, collective resources, substitutability of individuals, and recorded control (Ahrne, 1994). Along with Karasek & Theorell’s concept of social support, this perception of organisations is explored in detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

The Psychosocial Work Environment: Affiliation & Identities

According to Karasek & Theorell, the structure of an organisation determines; a) “how hard you work”, thus the amount of psychological demand placed on you, and therefore the level of psychological strain you suffer. And b) the extent of your autonomy and self-governance as you exert yourself, and thus the nature of the psychological strain you suffer. Furthermore, the structural aspects of an organisation greatly influence; c) the degree of social support available to you (Karasek, 1990). This chapter examines the concept of social support; the significance of it to both the experience of psychological demand and personal identity. Moreover it explores the structure and authority of organisations and their influence on individual behaviour.

Social Support

Gained through social relations, social support is an important part of the sickness absence puzzle. Social support and decision latitude are shown to be inseparable components in influencing job satisfaction and psychological strain; in conjunction with decision latitude, social support provides a means of regulating the extent to which psychological demand is transformed into psychological strain. Through reducing the impact of psychological demand, social contacts and social structure affect the basic psychological process important to both maintenance of long-term health and acquisition of new knowledge (Karasek, 1990).

Karasek & Theorell (1990) demonstrate that the overall level of helpful social interaction available from both co-workers and supervisors provides’ encouragement and security whilst the individual carries out their “work”. As the extent of the individual’s decision latitude influences the experience of psychological demand, either as challenges
or ordeals, the degree of social support extended to the individual dictates whether these ordeals or challenges are faced alone or as a member of a collective* (Karasek, 1990).

Acting as a “shock absorbing mechanism” between psychological stressors and adverse health outcomes, social support can make active coping patterns possible that not only affect health but also productive behaviour. The development of active behaviour patterns result from the positive sense of identity that is based on the socially confirmed value of the individual’s contribution to the collective’s goals and well-being (Karasek, 1990). Put simply, social support from the organisation, co-workers, supervisors and others within the individual’s collective group, provides both a “buffer” against the psychological demand of the “work” and an identity.

It is clear from the work of Karasek & Theorell that they perceive organisations as entities that employ; they refer to the “jobs” of “workers” within “occupations”, and predict the level of psychological strain within different “occupational dimensions” (Karasek, 1990). However, according to Ahrne (1994), an “organisation” is much more than this limited perception suggests. Applying the work of Erving Goffman† and Michael Hechter‡, Ahrne (1994) increases the concept of organisation to include all social units characterised by four common principle features; affiliation, collective resources, substitutability of individuals, and recorded control. Accordingly, every group of individuals with a common interest(s) that organises itself according to the institutionalised idea of how an organisation should be structured, such as a nation state, staff at a restaurant, a football team, work-groups or departments within larger organisations, and families are organisations (Ahrne, 1994).

**Organisation Affiliation**

The importance and dangers of social integration, belonging to a group, or affiliation to an organisation was first identified by Emile Durkheim (1983) through his work on suicide. Durkheim concluded that, despite the dangers involved, the human is dependant upon belonging. Fromm (1941) identified three responses to the fear of social isolation,

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* For a diagram illustrating Karasek & Theorell’s demand/control/social support model see text note 5 (or page 39).
† *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: Goffman, 1959.
two of which involve the individual seeking membership to a group or rather, an organisation. To Ahrne, belonging to an organisation means-

“[T]o have a place to go, to have certain rights as well as commitments. Affiliation implies a promise or obligation to come back. To be able or allowed to come back, the affiliates of an organization have to be recognized or they have to prove their affiliation. [...] If you are not recognized you will not be let in”.


According to Ahrne (1994), an organisation is an entity that is joined- although some, such as marriages, are created- by the individual to gain access to collective resources. However, an individual is usually affiliated to many organisations.

Collective resources are of interest to the affiliate as a financial interest such as a wage, it can also be the power of the organisation to get things done, or the identity it provides for the individual. The reason an affiliate first seeks to enter and then comes back to the organisation is that they need and want the collective resources (Ahrne, 1994). Yet the organisation is not dependant upon any one individual as individuals are substitutable; i.e. can be replaced. Through recorded control, usually a record of the individual’s actions; their “performance” of “work” and so forth on behalf of the organisation, is an advantage held by the organisation used to intimidate the individual into behaving in line with the demands of the organisation. Failure to comply is subject to sanctions that can include restrictions placed on access to the collective resources or even expulsion from the organisation (Ahrne, 1994).

The point that Ahrne makes is that organisations are both inclusive and exclusive. Although you may want to continue to be, or become an affiliate in an organisation, it is the organisation that accepts you and allows’ your (re)entry; all individuals are excluded until they have successfully applied for affiliation. Without the appropriate credentials required, or behavioural record desired by an organisation you will be refused (re)entry (Ahrne, 1994).

The power of organisations to exclude is also visible in the work of Fromm, he explains that organisations are likely to refuse entry to unsuitable individuals; in order to become part of the group; the individual must abandon their “self” and construct an identity
according to the values of the group they desire to join (Fromm, 1941). Ahrne confirms that an affiliate is given an identity by other affiliates of the organisation, adding-

“[T]hey (other affiliates) begin to recognize you and they care about what you do, when you come and when you leave”.
(Ahrne, 1994; page 5).

The organisation(s) that the individual is affiliated with make demands of them and greatly influences their behaviour. Ahrne (1994) argues that this is essential for an individual’s individuality, explaining that outside of the organisation nobody makes demands from you and you are not recognised, to be an individual you must be recognised. The scramble for credentials and gaining recognition, being an individual and having a “life of ones own” is a fate shared by all (Beck, 2002), affiliation to organisations provides the fragments of an individual’s fractured identity (Bradley, 1996). This being as it is, the dependency of the individual on the organisations is great; leaving it involves losing a piece of your identity. Nonetheless, as Berg & co-authors reveal when the demands made by the organisation overshadow the individual’s need and want of the collective resources and, perhaps most importantly, when they have found another organisation that accepts them as an affiliate, a small peace of their identity is sacrificed and they leave (Berg in Dent, 2004). However, Ahrne (1994) insists that actually leaving an organisation is rare when the investment made by the individual to the organisation’s collective resources is large. Even less probable is that individuals without the appropriate credentials, good education, or are undesirable in other ways- because of age gender perhaps? - leave an organisation. This is because it is difficult for them to find another organisation that is prepared to accept them as affiliates. The less you have to bargain with, then the fewer the organisations with desirable collective resources that are willing to affiliate you (Ahrne, 1994).

Therefore, the organisation is in a position to make demands of the individual (Ahrne, 1994). The fewer the options are for the individual, then the greater the demands can be. The mutual interest of both parties is the continued existence of the organisation; therefore the individual concedes to the demands made of them and allows their actions to be governed by the organisation (Ahrne, 1994). This, Karasek & Theorell (1990) have shown, can be a dangerous combination.
Constructing Identities

The value system, moral rules, or ideology of the organisation provides the blueprint for the behaviour of its affiliates (Durkheim, 1983; Fromm, 1941; Ahrne, 1994). These behavioural expectancies are designed to ensure that the organisations objectives are reached (Ahrne, 1994). According to Bengt Abrahamsson, the organisations executive group- administrators- ensure that the rules and norms of the organisation direct the actions of the affiliates in accordance with the objectives that the organisation was created to reach (Abrahamsson, 1989). However, the executive group, albeit that they have a close relationship with the organisations leaders- founders- have little say in what these rules and norms shall be; according to Robert Michels (through Abrahamsson, 1989), this oligarchy always gets its own way.

Durkheim argues that the strength of the moral value system and the intensity of social integration can cause individuals to take their own lives; too much, or too little of either destroys the individual’s sense of identity (Durkheim, 1983). As has been discussed above, organisational governance over both these factors is more than commonplace; it is the rule.

The organisation has a vested interest in encouraging the centripetal forces that increases the importance of it to the affiliate, to ensure that they come to it again and again, and avoiding centrifugal forces that decrease the importance of the organisation and reduces the affiliate’s desire, or need to return (Ahrne, 1994). Ahrne proposes that large collective resources are a strong centripetal force because the cost of leaving the organisation is high. The status of an organisation and the uniqueness of it are also centripetal forces and reducing the skill of the affiliates is another. He explains that through controlling the skill level of the affiliates and reducing their activities to routine work performed day after day a stable homogeneous environment is produced and works as a strong centripetal force; those affiliates that do not fit in, and obstruct the coordination can disappear from the organisation* (Ahrne, 1994). Ahrne adds that organisations with less abundant collective resources, a heterogeneous culture, defuse

* This applies only to voluntary organisations, compulsory organisations such as the nation state and family, cannot get rid of undesirable affiliates unless they kill them (Ahrne, 1994).
objectives and low control strategies tend to suffer from strong centrifugal forces and dissolve.

Karasek & Theorell (1990) explain that when an organisation limits or strengthens its governance over the actions of the individual, there are health risks. When an organisation restricts or intensifies social interaction the risks to health and well-being are due to the affects this has on the individual’s identity.

An individual with limited or no social support experiences one of two situations depending on the extent of their decision latitude (Karasek, 1990). Karasek & Theorell explain that when the extent of decision latitude is great, then these independent individuals operate in isolation from, more or less in opposition to, the usual social authority in a manner resembling the *cowboy heroes* of the old American wild-west. Conversely, when any aspect(s) of decision latitude is restricted the freedom of the enigmatic cowboy is replaced with restraints and the individual becomes an *isolated prisoner*†. Neither the cowboy hero nor the isolated prisoner has anybody else to turn to for help, encouragement, or support.

However, an increase in the extent of social support changes the nature of the experience dramatically (Karasek, 1990). The inclusion of an individual with good decision latitude into a collective gives them the opportunity to influence the collective’s activities as a *participatory leader*‡. However, once again, any reduction in the extent of decision latitude reverses the situation and instead of influencing the collective, the *obedient comrade*§ simply performs the “work” as they are expected to do (Karasek, 1990). The difference here is that social support provides a collective to turn to for help, encouragement, and support. The effect that each one of these four situations has on the individual is dependant on the combination of psychological demand and decision

---

* According to Karasek & Theorell, occupations normally associated with the cowboy hero are not essential to the continued operation of society; such as architect, lawyer, engineer, artist, professor (Karasek, 1990).
† According to Karasek & Theorell, occupations normally associated with the isolated prisoner are usually within the production industries, such as assembly line workers, machine operatives, and telephone operators (Karasek, 1990).
‡ According to Karasek & Theorell, occupations normally associated with the participatory leader are professions such as scientist, teacher, doctor, and self-employed business men. Although participatory leaders are not necessarily leaders in the traditional meaning, they share power, have influence, and can affect the collective (Karasek, 1990).
§ According to Karasek & Theorell, occupations normally associated with the obedient comrade are low-status services such as dispatchers, postal workers, and delivery personnel (Karasek, 1990).
latitude; as this affects the character of the psychological strain that the individual experiences’, the nature of which has an affect on learning and individual development. This relationship is illustrated in figure 3 below.

The negative affect on learning and knowledge retention- linked with exposure to both low and high psychological demand- has a damaging effect on the development of patterned behaviours that are important to the construction of a positive sense of identity. With limited social support, the lack of a socially confirmed value of the collective’s well-being, or of the individual’s part in reaching the collective’s goals reduces the individual’s social skills and thus their ability to position their selves in a collective, even if a collective exists (Karasek, 1990).

In contrast to this lonely nightmare are the high decision latitude combinations. The nature of the affect they have on the individual is analogous; both these combinations have a positive affect on learning and individual development, and this aids the construction of a positive sense of identity.

When decision latitude is high and social support limited, the well established identity that the individual develops reduces the value of the collective’s well-being; the individual’s own objectives are of greater importance. However, when social support is increased, the individual is an influencing member and the collective’s objective becomes the centre of their activity (Karasek, 1990).

In situations of low psychological demand the nature of behaviour is less intense. The relaxed conditions reduce the active of both the cowboy hero and participatory leaders. With little social support the cowboy hero becomes a solitary figure consumed within
“work”, experiencing it as a challenge that ultimately provides a sense of personal achievement. The same is also true when social support is in abundance, yet in this situation the participatory leader’s attention is focused on a challenge derived from the interest(s) of a collective, that indubitably reflects the individual’s own (Karasek, 1990).

Précis

As Karasek & Theorell (1990) propose, social support from the organisation, co-workers, supervisors and others within the individual’s collective group, provides’ both a “buffer” against the psychological demand of the “work” and an identity. However, the understanding of an organisation as an employing entity restricts the influence of organisations to just one aspect of our lives, applying the work of Ahrne (1994) increase the scope of organisational influence to include every group of individuals with a common interest(s) that organises itself to reach an objective(s); thus including the nation state, football teams, work-groups or departments within larger organisations, and the family.

Ahrne (1994) argues that the vast majority of organisations are entities joined by the individual to gain access to collective resources, and that an individual is affiliated to more than one organisation. Collective resources are of interest to the affiliate as a financial interest such as a wage, it can also be the power of the organisation to get things done, or the identity it provides for the individual. The reason an affiliate first seeks to enter and then comes back to the organisation is that they need and want the collective resources. Because affiliation to organisations provides fragments of an individual’s fractured identity (Bradley, 1996), the dependency of the individual on the organisations is great; leaving it involves losing a piece of your identity.

The symbiosis between the organisation and the individual places the organisation in a position to make demands of the individual (Ahrne, 1994). The fewer the options of other organisations for the individual to join is; then the greater the demands of the organisation can be. The individual concedes to the demands and allows their actions to be governed by the organisation (Ahrne, 1994).

The organisation’s oligarchy provides a value system, moral rules, or ideological blueprint for the behaviour of its affiliates that reflect the objective(s) of the organisation.
This structuring of social integration and moral rules affects the identity of the affiliate (Durkheim, 1983; Karasek, 1990) and produces four categories with their own distinctive experiences; cowboy heroes, isolated prisoners, participatory leaders, or obedient comrades (Karasek, 1990). The effect that each one of these four situations has on the individual’s learning and knowledge retention abilities is dependant on the level of psychological demand experienced and the extent of organisational governance.

**Expectations**

Given that an individual is affiliated to any number of organisations and the activities that they perform, or “work”, is carried out on behalf of them, the discussion expects that the majority of individuals experience a high level of psychological demand. Therefore, it is expected that the majority of individuals experience either the active or high-strain situations in Karasek & Theorell’s demand/control model*. Considering the extent of organisational governance restricting the individual’s decision latitude- such as state laws and marriage vows- it is difficult to imagine that the extent of an individual’s decision latitude is in harmony with the level of psychological demands that they are exposed to. Therefore the discussion expects that the extent of decision latitude held by the majority is low; thus reducing the options of experience within Karasek & Theorell’s demand/control model. The discussion would therefore expect to find that the majority of individuals experience a high-strain situation and all that that entails.

With the expected extent of decision latitude being low, the majority of individuals are either isolated prisoners or obedient comrades; depending on the degree of the social support they receive. An expectation of the degree of social support available to an individual is more difficult to form. The experience of a high-strain existence suggests that the individual spends the majority of their time struggling with the psychological demands that their affiliated organisations place on them. The lack of free time and the effect of high psychological strain on learning and personal development would reduce their opportunities and ability to form new social contacts, limiting their social support to that which already exists. The size and accessibility of which would establish the degree of social support available to them. The discussion therefore assumes that the social

* See text note 4.
support of high-strain individuals is supplied by the affiliates of the organisations that they share and is dependant on the degree of social interaction allowed by the structures of these organisations. Whether the majority of individuals are held as isolated prisoners or perform their function as obedient comrades within their affiliated organisations is an empirical question. However, based on the theoretical knowledge presented above the discussion expects to find that the level of sickness absence of the isolated prisoners is higher than that of the obedient comrades.

The discussion’s expectations are based on the information presented up to this point. In the following chapter, the presentation of the empirical data will ascertain the accuracy of these expectations.
Chapter 5
The Workplace Experience

The previous chapters of this discussion have argued that psychological demand is produced through the exertion of performing “work” tasks, and that exposure to psychological demand produces’ psychological strain in either a negative form that is detrimental to health and well-being, or a positive form that is conducive to learning and individual development. The form that the psychological strain takes is dependant on the extent of decision latitude in combination with the degree of social support, and this has an affect on individual development, i.e. personal identity. Moreover, all of these factors are governed by the structure of the organisation.

The pages below present the empirical data provided by the study group. Within these pages, the level of psychological demand, the extent of decision latitude and the degree of social support that each individual experiences’ are addressed. The discussion expects to find that the organisation’s structure creates a high-strain experience that subdues the majority of these individuals into obedient comrades or condemns them to an existence as isolated prisoners. Up to this point, the decision has been purely theoretical; this chapter presents a real workplace experience.

High Sickness Absence

According a press-release from SCB, 5.3 per cent of privately employed women* were absent because of sickness every working day during 2003. During 2004 this figure decreased to 5 per cent (SCB, 2005). Alternatively, this means that on average every privately employed woman was absent from the workplace because of sickness 5.15 per cent of the four hundred and forty-six working days of 2003 and 2004. Consequently, each privately employed woman was on average absent because of sickness eleven and a

*The ladies in the study group- detailed in chapter 4- are employed within the public sector. However, societal development and the subsequent introduction of managerial reforms during the 1990’s introduced a competitive element and changed the nature of the organisation; subsequently changing it in a way so that it more closely resembles a private sector organisation. Therefore, the group labelled “privately employed women” by SCB (2005) was selected as the occupational category most suitable to obtain a comparative figure of sickness absence for this study.
half of the working days of 2003 and 2004. Therefore, the discussion accepts that any sickness absence of eleven and a half working days or less in any one year by any one person within this organisation is classified as “low sickness absence”. The term “high sickness absence” is therefore used to describe sickness absent of twelve or more working days in any one year. Figure 4 reveals that only four individuals in this group fall into the high sickness absence category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sickness Absence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remaining individuals take less sickness absence per working year than the Swedish national average for this group of employees.

The Organisation’s Structure

Florence holds a managerial position and it is she that provides a historical narration of the organisation’s development from the 1970’s to the present day. In line with social developments, the organisation has gone through many changes; including the extension of working hours during the 1980’s that made it possible for women to work fulltime. However, the structure of the organisation had/has remained basically unchanged for many years. Florence explains that-

“We just now or we have had so for a number of years, we are three working groups. In every work group there is a supervisor that actively participates in the cleaning, they organise and such like. Then in the group there is no set personal cleaning area, you rotate within the group. They change, don’t always work with the same people either but try to move around. And even then change as much as possible in it (the group)”.†

Florence.

It is clear that the organisation that Florence is describing is divided into three distinctly separate groups, each with its leader and personnel. The personnel rotate within the group,

* Full sickness absence frequencies can be seen in statistical table 3.
† For Swedish text see text note 6.
working with one-another. All of the interviewees confirm this division in the organisational structure. Eddie explains that-

“There are three blocks; block A cleans (one area), block B (another area), and block C cleans (a third area)”.

Eddie.

This verifies that the parent organisation is divided into three smaller organisations; each has its own objective and homogeneous affiliates. During the years that these sub-organisations have been in existence, the affiliates developed a set of routines that each of them knows and they work as a team to reach the objective of the “sub-organisation”; that being keeping block A, B, or C clean. The routine has been performed day after day for a number of years in a never-ending circle of offices, rooms, corridors, and toilets. Working in methodical circles, each affiliate performs their duties without guidance, each knowing what they need to do and what their colleagues will do.

This aspect is reflected in the social lives of these individuals. Free time activities that once involved individuals from other organisations have been discontinued. Activities pursued outside of the workplace are performed together with the other affiliates of their sub-organisations or with other close family members such as children. This is captured by the remakes of Joyce as she explains that-

“I used to go swimming and training before I started here. And had friends there…but I haven’t been there for a couple of years, I am too tired at the end of the day and don’t have the energy. (…) Sometimes we (herself and her sub-organisational colleagues) usually take outings together or go out dancing”.

Joyce.

Indeed Florence confirms the importance of affiliation into the sub-organisations explaining that-

“There is a territory mentality and it is very difficult to get over these territories”.

Florence.

* For Swedish text see text note 7.
† For Swedish text see text note 8.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 9.
This evidence suggests that the structure of the organisation provides a secure environment for its affiliates; each sub-organisation provides an environment valued by its affiliates. However, the managerial reforms introduced to improve efficiency and increase effectiveness that Pollitt (2004) writes about and the evaluation and performance-auditing described by Berg (in Dent, 2004) caused changes in many organisations during the 1990’s (Marklund, 2005). Florence explains that during the 1990’s, this organisation was no exception—

“There we have seen that because we have been hit by measures to improve effectiveness, rationalisations, threats from entrepreneurs and the like, we must do something so that we can do this (clean) with fewer personnel and fewer working hours in office cleaning”. Florence.

Florence explains that due to threats from large cleaning companies the organisation was forced to give a financial cost of cleaning the campus. Florence goes on to explain that having supplied this estimate—

“[T]he management said that if we saved 10% on our turnover, plus 0.5%—reduce the prices by 0.5%—and believed that we could pull it off, we could hold on to the contract. And 10% was 1 458 000† (Swedish Crowns) for our side, no small amount. (….) And the big cost is of course the cost of the personnel. (…) So we worked it out and found that this meant that we would have to reduce the personnel by 4.6 positions.(…) But we were able to keep all the permanent staff‡.

Florence.

Reducing the number of personnel was the first step in changing the psychosocial work environment. Although the quantity of work to be performed remains unchanged, the loss of personnel forces those that remain to become more productive; to work at a faster pace than before. Figure 5 below reveals that, as expected, the level of psychological demand experienced by the majority of these individuals is high. Fourteen individuals are exposed to a high level of psychological demand; thus a high-strain, or active experience. Only

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† For Swedish text see text note 10.
‡ Approximately £121500.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 11.
three of the individuals are exposed to a low level of psychological demand; thus a low-strain, or passive experience. Unfortunately, two of the group could not be placed.

![Table: Psychological Demand](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Psychological Demand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 (16%)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (74%)</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>Missing*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Missing answers are due to the respondent’s failure to answer.

Under pressure to meet the demands of a changing marketplace and tough economical conditions, the parent organisation made more changes. Florence goes on to explain that the second stage of re-organisation was not far away-

“From here, it was then that we began with experience exchange, rotations, and helping each other between the blocks and couldn’t have the “territories” any more if we were to meet our figures. (…) But it’s tough! It is really tough and it means getting everyone in on this and understanding***. Florence.

The objective of the parent organisation takes preference over the objectives of the sub-organisations as they are dissolved. New routines and new areas are enforced but “helping each other between the blocks” means that the old affiliates of one sub-organisation become new affiliates in another. Florence continues-

“So then we have put in place a bigger rotation system so that one does… one works over the whole campus here. And the idea is that we shall have one main cleaning centre where all shall go and from there guide the personnel, send the most people to the places that the need is most pressing, this changes depending on which events and which type of… ya.. rooms have been used the most and so on”**.

Florence.

Although the reduction in personnel increased the tempo of the work for the remaining personnel, accepted as a necessary part of reaching the objective of the sub-organisations, these additional changes were met with resistance; the affiliates are equally reluctant to supply help to others as they are to accept it. Tracy explains, it is frustrating when-

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* See statistics table 1: psychological demand index.
† For Swedish text see text note 12.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 13.
“We want to finish our work (the objective of her organisation) but suddenly we must go and do the work of others (the objective of another organisation)”*.

Tracy.

Deborah makes it clear that the new affiliates just don’t fit in; instead they get in the way. She explains that-

“New people don’t know how we (affiliates in the sub-organisation) work; our routines and such. We must help them and that slows us down”†.

Deborah

The implementation of new routines is met with equal distaste. An aspect captured very clearly by Eleanor when she proclaimed that-

“We know what we have to do! We know where to do it! We know when, why and how! We don’t need a supervisor!”‡

Eleanor.

Eleanor’s body language at the time of the interview, and the tone she used to express herself leave little doubt that directives from the parent organisation are experienced as “interference”. The effect of this experience is a reduction in decision latitude. Figure 6 reveals that the evidence supports the expectation of low decision latitude. Over two-thirds of the study group feel that there are restrictions placed on their self-governance. These thirteen individuals feel that their decision latitude is over restricted. That places them within the experience of either a passive or high-strain situation; depending on the level of their exposure to psychological demand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Decision latitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 (32%)</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (68%)</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remaining six individuals share the experience of not having their decision latitude restricted. This places them within the experience of either a low-strain or active situation; depending on their exposure to psychological demand.

* For Swedish text see text note 14.
† For Swedish text see text note 15.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 16.
§ See statistics table 2: decision latitude index.
The attempt to fuse the sub-organisation is experienced as a restriction in decision latitude. However, far from being openly accepted, this attempted re-structuring was not very successful; Florence explains that-

“When we now shall split up these three groups to one group we have begun a little and we have gone back to three groups again, but we all help with all the offices, everyone goes to one block of offices, do all those and then go on to the next and so. Because of demands for effectivity we must get more done”.

Florence.

Attempting to push through the necessary merger, the parent organisation endeavours to unite the affiliates of all three sub-organisations through organised events. Florence feels that this is a good way to bring the groups closer together-

“This thing with experience exchange when we rotated in the groups has caused many discussions. And these are things that we take up frequently. We met in the autumn of last year in (a town nearby) and went on a little outing together, stayed at a hotel and ate tasty food (...). Then we went through and made sort of a plan of action concerning how we should, which goals we had and how we should…. Much was concerned also with how we should act towards each other, ya.”

Florence.

It is clear this type of “collective” social activity is aimed at merging the affiliates of the three sub-organisations into one organisation. However, Tracy makes it obvious that this objective is still to be reached. She explains that-

“We (sub-organisational colleagues) do ask them (the other affiliates) to come with us when we go out- they never come-, but they don’t ask us”.

Tracy.

Along with the effects on health and well-being, Karasek & Theorell propose that the experiences of psychological demand and decision latitude have an affect on the individual’s learning and self-development abilities. The difficulties encountered when attempting to merge the sub-organisations reflects this phenomenon. As do other

* For Swedish text see text note 17.
† For Swedish text see text note 18.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 19.
characteristics of the personnel associated with learning new behaviour patterns within
the group illustrated by Florence as she explains that-

“[W]e are just now testing a, new mops and shafts. We have
tested several times but they (the ladies) go back to the old ones,
but now I have said that somehow we must accept the new”.

Florence.

Through uniting the experienced psychological strain with that of decision latitude,
figure 7 confirms this learning difficulty; revealing that only four of the group experience
a situation best suited to learning and self-development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Level of psychological demand</th>
<th>Degree of decision latitude</th>
<th>Occupational dimension</th>
<th>Affect on learning/self-development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>active job</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high-strain</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>passive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low-strain</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus far the evidence presents an ambiguous description of social relations within the
organisation; on the one hand there is deep animosity between the affiliates of the
organisation; on the other there are three well established socially stable groups of
affiliates working hard to reach the objective(s) of their sub-organisation. The conflict
between the sub-organisational groups is a problem that Florence is well aware of; she
explains that-

“[T]his kind of thing is very difficult, to break a group and then
suddenly instead of 10 we are 28. We have now a common
cafeteria and that alone can cause… ya.. not... maybe not a
problem is wrong to say but there is in any case grouping in this
cafeteria because there is so much territorial thinking. If one is
kind of a little afraid because now we have been a little group
and then suddenly there are many. But.. ya.. it takes time. And it
must be allowed to take time. One cannot whip into somebody
that it shall be like this, it must take time to grow upon
everybody”.

Florence.

* For Swedish text see text note 20.
† See statistics tables; 1: psychological demand index; 2: decision latitude index frequencies.
‡ For Swedish text see text note 21.
Based upon the theoretical discussion, social support is difficult to predict. Figure 8 reveals that the social support of the study group is split into equal proportions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Social support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Missing*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Missing answers are due to the respondent’s failure to answer.

The surprising aspect of this data is that no majority can be identified; nine individuals experience a low and nine a high degree of social support; one individual failed to complete the necessary part of the questionnaire and cannot be placed. Through placing this evidence with the decision latitude measurement, the associated identity of the individuals in relation to their experiences within the psychosocial work environment is revealed. Figure 9 informs the discussion that there are three individuals with participatory leader and cowboy hero identity’s, and six individuals with isolated prisoner and obedient comrade identity’s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>decision latitude index</th>
<th>social support index</th>
<th>Related identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 high</td>
<td>3 high</td>
<td>participatory leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 low</td>
<td>6 low</td>
<td>isolated prisoner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 missing</td>
<td>1 missing</td>
<td>obedient comrade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the theoretical discussion of the previous chapters; the thirteen individuals with low decision latitude are more likely than others to suffer from ill-health and worry. The health of the six isolated prisoners is expected to be especially at risk because of the lack of social support they receive. Therefore it is assumed that these individuals will take more sickness absences than others; is this assumption correct?

* See statistics table 4: social support index frequencies.
† See statistics tables; 2: decision latitude index; 4: social support index frequencies.
**Sickness Absence**

Karasek & Theorell’s theory proposes that those with high sickness absence are more likely to experience a combination of high psychological demand and low decision latitude. However, in figure 10, where the letters A, B, C, and D represent the four individual high sickness takers, it is obviously not the case for the individuals in this study group.

**Figure 10: Psychological demand/decision latitude*/sickness absence.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High sickness absence individuals</th>
<th>Psychological demand index</th>
<th>Decision latitude index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Low sickness absence group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological demand index</th>
<th>Decision latitude index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>missing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>missing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the thirteen individuals that experience restricted decision latitude, only one is a high sickness absence taker. Surprisingly, of the six individuals that report experiencing high decision latitude, three are frequently absent because of sickness. Interestingly, again in contrast to the prediction of Karasek & Theorell, the majority of those experiencing a stimulating environment conducive to learning and self-development are also those in the high sickness absence group. Figure 11 confirms that only one of the four high sickness absenteees experiences a negative psychosocial work environment.

**Figure 11: psychological demand, decision latitude†, occupational experience, effect on learning/self-development and sickness absence.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Level of psychological demand</th>
<th>Degree of decision latitude</th>
<th>Occupational dimension</th>
<th>Affect on learning/self-development</th>
<th>Sickness absence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>active job</td>
<td>positive</td>
<td>3 high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high-strain</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>1 low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>passive</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>1 high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low-strain</td>
<td>negative</td>
<td>9 low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>missing</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See statistics tables; 1: psychological demand index; 2 decision latitude index.
† See statistics tables; 1: psychological demand index; 2: decision latitude index frequencies.
Of the fifteen individuals that experience a negative psychosocial work environment, only one is a high sickness absentee. The contradiction to Karasek & Theorell’s theory continues when the social support measurement is added to that of decision latitude. This combination is shown in figure 12.

**Figure 12: degree of decision latitude, level of social support*, sickness absence and social support dimension.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>high sickness absence individuals</th>
<th>decision latitude index</th>
<th>social support index</th>
<th>social support dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high sickness absence group</td>
<td>A high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>participatory leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B low</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>isolated prisoner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C high</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>participatory leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>cowboy hero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 high</td>
<td>1 missing</td>
<td>1 missing</td>
<td>participatory leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 high</td>
<td>1 high</td>
<td>participatory leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 low</td>
<td>1 low</td>
<td>cowboy hero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 low</td>
<td>6 low</td>
<td>6 low</td>
<td>isolated prisoner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 high</td>
<td>6 high</td>
<td>obedient comrade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This confirms that of the fourteen individuals exposed to high levels of psychological demand, only four experience high decision latitude; three of these four are high sickness absence takers.

Unpredictably, figure 11 reveals that three of the high sickness takers experience conditions that engender positive identities. In figure 12 it is confirmed that two of the high sickness takers have identities synonymous with Karasek & Theorell’s participatory leaders and one individual with the cowboy hero identity. Identities shared by only two of the low sickness group. In contrast to this, the high sickness individual with the isolated prisoner identity shares this experience with six others in the low sickness absence group.

The assumption that the health of isolated prisoners is especially at risk is incorrect. The following chapter discusses the implications of this evidence in the context of the theoretical perspective established in the previous chapters.

* See statistic tables; 3: decision latitude index; 4: social support index frequencies.
Chapter 6
A Simple Explanation?

This study started as a request from a research team at the division of Industrial Design at the Department of Human Work Sciences at the University of Technology in Luleå Sweden. Their request was for an examination of a work environment from a psychosocial approach using sickness absence as a point of analysis.

A review of the current sickness absence discourse identifies structure change in organisations within the labour market as the origin of deterioration in the psychosocial “work” environment. According to SCB et al. these changes cause(d) an increase in work tempo that disturbed the balance between the demands of the work and the degree of the employee’s self-government. Unconstructive changes that many commentators suggest have increased sickness absence.

The need to expand on this simple explanation provides the study with its purpose; to explore the cause of sickness absence from a psychosocial perspective. This attempt at expansion focuses on three questions posed by the study: what is the psychosocial work environment and how has the implementation of new management reforms changed it? How do psychological demand, decision latitude and social support affect the individual? And; why does this, with increasing frequency, result in sickness absence? This final chapter discusses this exploration, presents its findings, imperfections and proposals for future research projects.

The Psychosocial “work” Environment

Psychosocial is a concept that recognises the significance of the individual’s environment, or everything that surrounds the individual, as they construct an identity. Consequently, the psychosocial “work” environment recognises the significance of everything that surrounds the individual as they construct an identity whilst they “work”.

The concept of “work” presented in the discussion reveals the far reaching implications of the psychosocial work environment. In contrast to the traditional perspective of the work environment as the surroundings in which occupational gainful employment is
performed, this discussion expands the concept of “work” to include activities that have previously not been considered in this category. This explanation of “work” recognises many locations as work environments and establishes that the influence of the psychosocial work environment on the individual is more extensive than previously assumed; revealing the full extent of psychological demand placed on an individual.

Although these psychological demands produce psychological strain, ill-health and worry are caused through the restrictions an organisation places on decision latitude, or individual autonomy. The failure of Karasek & Theorell to include all forms of organisation in their examination creates the impression that the autonomy of the individual is restricted only during their hours of gainful employment. The inadequacy of this perception is remedied through applying the perception of organisations provided by Ahrne; comprehending the scope to which organisations infiltrate society exposes the extent of the restrictions that organisations place on individual autonomy.

The psychological demands of “work” produce psychological strain that has either an enhancing or detrimental effect on the individual’s health. Given the huge psychological demand placed on the individual, the assumption that the individual suffers enough psychological strain to kill them is very easy to make. However, psychological strain can enhance the individual’s health and well-being through stimulating learning and self-development; the effect of psychological strain depends on the nature of the beast. Yet taming the beast is more difficult than first impressions suggest. It is not a simple balance in which “less psychological strain improves health and well-being” but a more complicated equilibrium where “the right amount of psychological strain is conducive to good health and well-being”. The individual thus stands on a see-saw* over a pit of health problems, struggling to maintain stability and avoid falling to their death. That humanity continues to flourish despite the massive psychological strain that all the psychological demand of “work” produces is down to the decision latitude, or autonomy, of each individual.

The restrictions that organisations place on autonomy are decisive in determining the level of psychological demand and the nature of the psychological strain experienced. By undertaking “work” that they desire or wish to do, the individual can reduce

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* In Swedish, a see-saw is “en gungbräda”.
psychological strain through controlling the source of psychological demand. An additional reduction in psychological strain is achieved when the individual manages their own activity whilst performing “work” that is not desired or wished for but must nonetheless be carried out. This changes the nature of the “work” in such a way that it becomes a challenge instead of a demand. Nevertheless, caution must be taken as too little psychological strain and/or too many challenges will eventually tip the see-saw and the individual falls into the pit of ill-health and worry.

The precarious position of the individual is a consequence of the autonomy paradox. As described here, autonomy protects the individual from excessive psychological demands and allows them to manage psychological strain. However, as many commentators point out, full autonomy is not desirable because it results in social isolation. Social isolation is feared with an intensity that compels the individual to sacrifice a measure of their autonomy to attain social integration; organisational inclusion.

**Organisational In(ex)clusion**

During the early years of life, the behaviour of the individual is governed almost exclusively by compulsory organisational affiliations within the family and nation state. As the individual increases in age things change; they are endowed with autonomy. Even though autonomy frees the individual from the restraints placed on them during the early years of their compulsory affiliations, it also brings responsibility for providing for life maintenance and hedonic desires as well as for construction of an identity as they form “a life of their own”. It is also accompanied by a fear of social isolation and a need of recognition as an individual.

Inclusion in an organisation provides the individual with access to its collective resources. Access to these collective resources is desirable because they enable the individual to achieve what they could not achieve alone. Over and above providing for life maintenance and hedonic desires, inclusion in an organisation provides a place to go and be recognised as an individual; the individual “wants” to be included in an organisation(s).

Be that as it may, all organisations have an objective or set of objectives and even though autonomy means that the individual is free to select their affiliations for
themselves, all “voluntary” organisations control inclusion; excluding all individuals unless they represent a “resource” that can be applied to reaching its objective(s). The tasks that the individual is expected to perform and the ability of the individual to carry them out form the basis for inclusion. High status organisations include only individuals with specialised credentials or exceptional merits. Low status organisations will include individuals with a basic diploma whereas general qualifications are required for inclusion in others. Accumulating the right credentials to secure inclusion into an organisation is the responsibility of the individual. Individuals that successfully assemble the credentials, merits and social skills desired by organisations are less dependent on those that they are affiliated with. Less successful individuals value their affiliations as organisational inclusion is difficult for them to secure.

Once included, the behaviour of the individual is governed by the organisation. The individual is expected to adopt the organisations objective(s) as their own and act, or “work” in a manner conducive to it/them. The surrendering of at the very least partial-control of thoughts and actions positions the individual in the danger zone; reducing their decision latitude and exposing them to greater psychological demand. The greater the fear of exclusion is, then the greater the sacrifice of autonomy. The more autonomy sacrificed, then the greater organisational governance can be.

In return, the individual gains social integration and support from others that reduces the impact of psychological demand and decreases psychological strain. More importantly, through social integration the individual achieves recognition by other affiliates as an individual and develops the active behaviour patterns of the collective. This provides the individual with the basis for a stable positive sense of identity. The stability of the collective behaviour pattern is of equal importance to the organisation. As a strong centripetal force it increases the importance of the organisation to the affiliates; ensuring that affiliates keep coming back to it. The continued existence of the organisation and the identity of the individual are to a great extent dependant on a stable homogeneous environment.
A Harmonious Existence

The empirical data confirms that the organisation examined by this study is divided into three sub-organisations. Each one has a small social group of affiliates ritually performing monotonous tasks in pursuit of a well-defined objective. Within each of these “territories”, the affiliates rely on one another to perform the tasks, each knowing what needs to be done, how to do it and what their colleagues are doing. This stable homogeneous environment is designed and supported by the parent organisation.

An additional aspect of this stable and secure environment that is important to consider is the extent of organisational governance over the individual’s activities. The expectations formed by the discussion are that the organisation places high psychological demands on the individual and restricts their decision latitude. The resulting high-strain experience produces levels of psychological strain that inhibit learning and self-development as well as ill-health and worry. Comprehension of the significance that social support has in this situation explains the exclusivity of the affiliate’s social integration.

The psychological demands of the “work” are great and cannot be completed by one individual; they produce psychological strain. Although the organisational restrictions over decision latitude are high, they are more complex to understand because decision latitude is comprised of two concepts; task authority and skill discretion. Task authority is very restricted within this organisation, the activities of the affiliates are governed by the organisation’s objective; psychological demands cannot be reduced through the selection of desirable “work”. Conversely, this organisation allows some autonomy over skill discretion. Although performing these monotonous, reoccurring and predictable tasks utilises only specific skills, organising how this “work” is done is entirely at the discretion of the affiliates. Through pursuing the tasks as a collective, a reduction in psychological strain can be achieved. A mutual dependency between the affiliates is developed as they struggle together to reach the sub-organisation’s objective.

Their collective struggle to reach the sub-organisation’s objective exaggerates the importance of it and it becomes their objective. Bonding them into a social group that works and plays together; all social activity with none-affiliates is reduced to a minimum and the bonds within the group grow even stronger. At the centre of their existence is
“their” objective and they become one complete collective entity. In a situation that stifles learning and self-development, the security of the stable homogeneous environment of the sub-organisation maintains the positive, stable identities that the affiliates have constructed through the recognition that they give one another. A harmonious existence; however, neither the sub-organisation nor the individuals would exist without the other.

A Changing World

The adoption of public sector management techniques into the Swedish public sector removed any differences that may have existed between them. Many commentators propose that the increase in personal authority associated with both societal and organisational developments produces greater mental strain or stress. The introduction of managerial reforms lead to the decentralisation of personal authority and an increase in regulatory agencies as productivity and efficiency became the focus of attention. The reforms within the organisation being examined were implemented to save the parent organisation from the threat of extinction that these reforms placed it under.

The highest price for the parent organisation’s survival was paid by the affiliates on the periphery; affiliates that replaced permanent affiliates when they became ill, those that entered the organisation on a part-time basis; the affiliates at the core of the sub-organisations, those that created and maintain it remain.

The expulsion of periphery affiliates left their work uncompleted, yet the continued existence of “their” sub-organisation and thus- dependent as they are on the existence of it- their identities rely on this work being done. The vast majority of those affiliates that remain now work harder than before.

The increased exertion of the affiliates failed to reach the objective of the parent organisation. Under pressure to meet the demands of a changing marketplace and tough economical conditions, the parent organisation was forced to make structural changes to ensure its continued existence. The “territories” of the sub-organisations were merged; the designation of tasks, and affiliates to perform them was centralised. The increased governance by the parent organisation over the affiliates brought an end to the routines that had for so long provided the opportunities to plan and decide for themselves. They
were replaced with an unpredictable schema dependent on the activities of other organisations and the balance between psychological demand and decision latitude is altered.

The extra demands placed on the affiliates were not met by a similar increase, but a decrease in control; thus increasing the psychological strain the affiliates are exposed to. An additional devastating blow is the dissolving of the(ir) sub-organisations which undermined the “buffer” against psychological demand that social support provided; depriving them of their objective and threatening their identities.

**A New Psychosocial “work” Environment**

The empirical data confirms that the reduction in the number of affiliates increased the work tempo of those that remain. As expected, the psychological demand experienced by the majority of individuals within this organisation is high. Additionally, the re-structuring of routines increased organisational governance through revoking the affiliate’s authority over organising their activities. Thus the level of decision latitude of the majority of these individuals also matches the expectations of the discussion and is low; exposing them to a high-strain experience.

At the level of the individual, the data reveals that thirteen affiliates experience a situation that reduces their ability to learn and stifles their self-development. Ten of these individuals experience a high-strain situation that is detrimental to their health and well-being. In a changing environment this is the worst possible experience.

Individuals suffering these effects have difficulty in adjusting to change. The introduction of new routines and the upgrading of equipment meet with resistance. Whereas new equipment is simply dismissed as not as good as the old; a change in behaviour patterns produces complicated problems. The empirical data reveals the difficulties of changing behaviour patterns as affiliates are dispatched to assist sub-organisations that they are not regularly affiliated with. Well established behaviour patterns produced through long-term affiliation, in a social group that resists change, are inflexible. Upon arrival, the “new” affiliate is exposed to the governance of the sub-organisation as attempts are made to adjust their actions so that they best support that sub-organisations objective. The “new” affiliate must accept this governance and adapt to
the established behaviour patterns and integrate themselves into the social group or suffer social isolation. The difficulties in learning and self-development produced by the experience of their situation means that both the old and new affiliates have difficulty in developing and integrating themselves into new social relationships; conflict occurs as accusations of intolerance and incompetence emerge and individuals remain excluded. This whole process produces more damaging psychological strain and escalates the importance of social support from regular sub-organisational affiliates as the individual attempts to manage it.

The next step in the organisations re-structuring threatens to deprive the affiliates of this important support through abandoning the sub-organisations altogether. However, the resistance to this change testifies to the importance of these havens to the affiliates. Although the sub-organisations were dissolved, the essence of them continues to exist. Territories continue to be claimed and the transference of affiliates between them continues to produce conflicts that endure attempts by the parent organisation to resolve them.

The stability of the homogeneous environment that provided them with an identity has been erased and a new “hostile” environment is confronted on a daily basis. The positive, stable identities constructed and maintained through their sub-organisational affiliation is in danger as the source of recognition diversifies. Merging three sub-organisations with equal numbers of affiliates limits the “positive” recognition that the individual receives by two-to-one. This is reflected in the reported level of social support experienced. The empirical data reveals that half of the study group receive little social support despite the social relationships of the- now scatted- old social collective. This indicates that the source of “positive” recognition of their identity is scarce. There is no “buffer” against psychological demands and they suffer the full effects of psychological strain. The extent of the individual’s autonomy capitulation becomes important in accessing the risk to their health and well-being.

Combining the measurements of decision latitude and social support establishes characteristics of an individual’s identity in association to their experience of the psychosocial “work” environment; identifying those most at risk of high psychological strain. The empirical data reveals that of the nine individuals socially integrated into a
collective, three have retained much of their autonomy. Through actively participating in and directing the collective’s activities, these individuals constitute social authority. The other six individuals have little autonomy and form a collective to direct.

The situation of the nine socially isolated individuals highlights the difference that being part of a collective makes; they work alone, outside of the collective: excluded. Once again three of these individuals retain much of their autonomy and perform their tasks as they like. Yet in contrast to those inside a collective, these individuals have their own agenda and typically act in opposition to the usual social authority. Having not retained their autonomy, the remaining six socially isolated individuals have neither their own agenda nor a collective objective. Excluded from the collective they silently, single-handedly, perform the tasks that they are “given”. The experience of social isolation in combination with little autonomy that these six individuals share exposes them to the highest risk of damaging psychological strain, especially when placed under high psychological demand. This group of individuals is therefore expected to be absent through sickness more often than other individuals.

Contrary to Popular Belief

This study group is comprised of nineteen individuals. Of these individuals, four exceed the eleven and one half day national sickness absence average for this occupation category. The empirical data confirms the connection between psychological demand and ill-health; all four of the high sickness absence takers are exposed to excessive psychological demands. However, the connection between restrictions on autonomy and ill-health that Karasek & Theorell et al. support are not strengthened by this data. Of the thirteen individuals with low decision latitude, only one is often absent because of sickness. The presence of three of the six individuals with a high extent of decision latitude in the high sickness group proposes that maintaining autonomy produces greater psychological strain than capitulation. This interpretation is strengthened through examining the nature of psychological strain that the combination of psychological demand and decision latitude engender. Whereas the majority of the group experience negative damaging psychological strain that hinders learning and self-development, only one is often absent. In contrast to conventional thinking, individuals that experience
positive psychological strain that is conducive to learning and self-development are more often absent due to sickness; three of the four that share this experience are often absent due to sickness.

An additional contradiction to expectations is revealed when the extent of social support is added. The evidence informs the discussion that the social support of the high sickness takers is equally represented. Two of these individuals are socially integrated and two not. Although upon a first appraisal this reduces the significance of social support in this conundrum, a second assessment underlines just how significant it is.

As has already been established, the autonomy of one of these individuals is greatly restricted. This individual is also socially isolated and is therefore expected to suffer from ill-health and worry, thus be absent often. However, the other three high sickness takers retain their autonomy and two are socially integrated active members of a collective; their present’s in the high sickness absence group is unexpected. Yet by far the most unforeseen occurrence is that only two of the low absence group share this experience; the other twelve have surrendered their autonomy. Although six of the low sickness absence takers are socially integrated and not expected to be absent often, six are socially isolated and thus expected to be unhealthy.

This evidence implies that the combination of high psychological strain, high decision latitude, and high social support is detrimental to health and well-being. Additionally, the evidence also implies that high psychological demands, low decision latitude, and low social support are not detrimental to health and well-being. These findings are contradictory to the theoretical expectation that individuals experiencing an active job as a participatory leader, exposed as they are to positive psychological strain, is in the best of health. Contrary to popular belief, this means that hardworking individuals that use their initiative within a team in pursuit of a collectively agreed objective are absent from the workplace more often than other individuals; in this case reported sickness.

A Possible Explanation

At the very beginning of this discussion, the need to view this phenomenon through the background of structure change within organisations was established. It has since been documented that organisations actively encouraged stable homogeneous
environments as they provide a centripetal force that prevents the organisations demise. This stability aids individuals to identify their self through the recognition provided by other affiliates. Within the organisation being studied, three independent sub-organisations, founded by affiliates, were created. Undesirables are excluded as identities are created and a social collective formed. Psychological demands are faced as collective challenges, psychological strain is tamed and a status quo that reduces learning and self-development is maintained; harmony for all.

The changes that rocked the established status quo first produced conflicts around the inclusion/exclusion of individuals into these sub-organisations. The subsequent termination of the sub-organisations re-established the parent organisation and its governance. For those without social support, the isolated prisoners and cowboy heroes, the assembly of a new collective that this change produced is as painless as the loss of the three collectives that they have always been excluded from, perhaps even beneficial. Whereas those with little autonomy continue to do as they are instructed, those that had retained it simply continue to do their own thing. Psychological strain continues to be high; decision latitude continues to be low, social support continues to be in short supply and, for all but one, their sickness absence shows no sighing of increasing. For these that retain autonomy yet are/were integrated within one of the three collectives, this process has increased sickness absence; presumable because of an increase in psychological strain.

Assuming then, that the work tempo increased for all of the individuals in the study group, any increase in psychological strain that it caused is not the cause of high sickness absence. If it were then the number of high sickness absence takers would presumably be much high than four. The decrease in decision latitude that the unpredictability of the new routines suggests also affects the entire group and should therefore increase sickness absence. Yet the evidence contradicts this; six individuals have retained their autonomy. What’s more, three of those are high sickness takers. How can this be explained?

The evidence indicates that the changes in the psychosocial work environment are unwelcome by the majority. The social isolated individuals with little influence are relatively unaffected by the changes to the organisations structure. The individuals that most strongly identify themselves through their affiliation to the organisation- or more
likely to the sub-organisation- and have/had greater influence within the collective are those that report most sickness absence; through exploring their possible response options to these changes a potential explanation is formed.

Having worked so hard to create and maintain their now defunct sub-organisation the strong identities that have been constructed still remain. Leaving the organisation involves a loss of a part of that identity. However, with an identity constructed out of recognition from a now diluted collective, based upon an objective that no longer exists in its original form, the individual is in an ambiguous position. They are in danger of becoming socially isolated because they have an identity that no longer receives the “positive” recognition it was constructed around.

Leaving the organisation altogether involves discarding the identity that they have and beginning elsewhere. This option depends on the individual possessing credentials that are attractive to other organisations or the ability to gain them. As the evidence has shown, the nature of their experiences means that learning and self-development is not easy for this group of individuals. If they don’t already possess attractive credentials, leaving this organisation is an unlikely course of action.

Inclusion into the new collective of the larger organisational entity provides social integration. However, incorporating themselves into the new social collective requires the willingness of the other affiliates to accept them and permit their inclusion. Those with little autonomy find it much easier to accept a new objective as changes to their identities are not necessary. The new objective and the new collective are simply accepted. For those who retained greater autonomy, those that actively influenced the old collective, this situation is a living nightmare.

Given that organisations record the actions of its affiliates, they are recognised as the influencing individuals of the old collectives, the inclusion/exclusion conflicts that raged before and during the merging of these three sub-organisational collective groups produce more “negative” recognition than “positive”. Their inclusion into the new organisation is dependant upon the acceptance of them as individuals by its affiliates, thus unlikely. Comprehending that their inclusion into any new collective that is formed is improbable and anticipating social isolation, these individuals create a new objective
for the old collective to pursue; the resurrection of the sub-organisations and the security associated with them.

Maintaining an identity through holding together the old collective would conceivably produce psychological demand. Although the extent of their autonomy allows them to manage these psychological demands as they see fit, the excess “negative” recognition they receive suggests a relative reduction in social support. The new objective of restoring the old collective is conceivably of less importance to affiliates that can simply accept a new collective and its objective. Especially when acceptance of the new produces less psychological demand, less psychological strain, greater social support and no further reduction to their autonomy. As the affiliates of the old collective endeavour to integrate themselves into the new collective, the social support for the individual protecting their identity dwindles, as does their influence within the new collective. Slowly but surely this individual faces these extra psychological demands alone; eventually becoming exhausted and suffering from psychological strain their health and well-being suffer and they take sickness absence.

The absence of the once influential individual will reduce their social support even further as the supporting affiliates of the old collective avoid social isolation through integrating themselves into the new collective. As social isolation looms on the horizon for the individual that no longer enjoys the recognition that they once received from the old collective and are denied social integration in the new, their sickness absence is liable to increase as the organisation “excludes” its undesirables.

The Studies Achievements

It has long been acknowledged that the psychosocial environment influences the identity construction process. This study applies this knowledge to explain how three factors from within the psychosocial “work” environment affect the health and well-being of the individual using sickness absence as the point of analysis. This search for enlightenment reveals the full extent of the influence that organisational governance has on creating identities. Furthermore, the study also reveals the potential of organisations to destroy identities that have outlived their usefulness to the organisation.
This study finds that organisations utilise humanities fear of social isolation to reduce autonomy and produce the behaviour that they desire; they construct socially integrated collectives that diligently strive to meet organisational objectives. To retain autonomy and reduce psychological strain the individual adopts this objective as their own and their identities become dependant on their affiliation as this supports the individual’s “life of their own”. Organisations provide the stability needed by the individual to do this; until the stability it governs no longer serves the organisation’s purpose.

The research team that requested this study hoped to identify any problems in the psychosocial work environment so that measures to improve it could be implemented. The problems of this psychosocial environment are a result of the organisations success in creating a stable homogeneous environment for its affiliates. This secure was maintained through the high extent of autonomy that the affiliates experienced as they pursued a well defined objective. The changes forced upon the organisation redefined the affiliate’s objective(s) without reducing their autonomy. Without a clear objective, insecurity and instability grow and the affiliates search for security, their autonomy allowing them to direct their actions toward restoring the status quo. To improve this environment, and reduce the risk to the health of its affiliates, this organisation must increase its governance and clarify the objective of the affiliates.

**Imperfections & Continuance**

The gathering of the empirical data for this study, and the analytical approach add to the trustworthiness and dependability of its findings. However, the theory of Karasek & Theorell lacked breath and consequently failed to address fundamental aspects of the individual’s experience. The first limitation of their work is created by focusing the examination on the experience of gainful employment within occupational dimensions. Despite emphasising that organisations govern the level of psychological demands, the extent of decision latitude, and the degree of social support that an individual experiences, they ignore the extent of an individual’s organisational affiliations. Secondly, despite the importance that they place on an individual’s decision latitude as a factor controlling psychological demands and managing psychological strain, Karasek & Theorell fail to fully appreciate the importance of autonomy to an individual’s identity. Because of these
limitations, the theoretical framework of this study included the work of Ahrne as this considers the extent and importance of an individual’s organisational affiliations and offers insight into the influence that of restrictions on individual autonomy has on identity construction.

The imperfections of this study originate in the dominance of this research area by Karasek & Theorell’s work. The use of a standard questionnaire with questions based on their theory measures only the social support received from other affiliates within one organisation. Although an individual may be dependant on an organisation’s collective resources to provide for life maintenance and hedonic desires, other affiliations are a prime source of “positive” recognition for their identity. The individual uses more than one organisation to sustain a “life of their own” and this drastically reduces the dependency of the individual on one organisation’s social collective for recognition and social integration. This failure to consider other organisational affiliations has had consequences for this- and presumable other- research as the questionnaire obtained from SCB allows social support available from other sources to remain undetected. Because of this, some important issue remain unaddressed; how is identity affected by the length of affiliation? Does the individual become more or less dependant on the recognition they receive as time go’s by? How does the length of affiliation affect the experience of psychological demand and decision latitude? Do they experience less psychological demand and more decision latitude? And how long does it take to construct a stable, positive identity? The affiliations studied here are within a low stratus occupational organisation that does not demand a high level of education; in what way does this influence the studies results?

Although these limitations threaten to damage the value of the study, its findings are reinforced by the interviews that provide additional empirical data. The discussions with the interviewees did confirm that they had very little social contact outside of affiliates in this organisation. However, affiliation in families was not treated with the importance that it deserves. This reveals an additional limitation; the total lack of a gender perspective in the work of Karasek & Theorell. An example of this is the resistance to new equipment as learning difficulties caused by psychological strain. From a genus perspective it can be that new technology is interpreted as even more mail dominance
over woman; how creates this new equipment? Is its introduction a critic of women’s ability, or is the introduction of “men’s” technological advances purely unwanted?

Considering the findings of the study from a gendered perspective is non-productive as the general belief is that there are no differences between individuals of either gender and their response to influences are identical. Nonetheless, the social history of gender must be given consideration. The psychosocial environment described in this study invites speculation over the effects of gender affiliation on identity, autonomy, and exclusion, thus the psychological strain that these factors produce. SCB indicate that women are absent because of sickness more often than men; do “compulsory” inclusion/exclusions reflect their gender and reduce women’s autonomy yet enhance men’s? Does the construction of an identity based on gendered ideologies or individual desires produce greater psychological demand? What are the consequences of these choices on social integration? Do affiliations traditional associated with women offer opportunities to reduce psychological demand and manage psychological strain or prevent this? Through locating the focus of the analysis on sickness absence other absences such as caring for sick children were ignored. Because this study is of an organisation dominated by woman, this type of absences could provide a legitimate break from the governance and demands of the organisation and is therefore important. As is traditionally gendered housework and responsibility for the home; does this increase psychological demand? And do women and/or men take a place in the labour market to escape the demands of the home? This type of absence represents the application of autonomy and reveals an identity constructed through gender affiliation. Together, these aspects represent an interesting challenge for future research.
**Sjukt Samhälle**

*En undersökning av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön*

Av Allen King

**Abstrakt**


Studien visar på att den fullständiga graden av påverkan som organisatorisk övervakning inte enbart påverkar hälsa och välbefinnande utan också på skapandet av identiteter. Dessutom uppvisar studien hur organisationer förstör de identiteter den skapat när dessa ej längre är användbara för organisationen. För att minska risken till ohälsa samt skapa välbefinnande, är det nödvändigt för organisationer att ha ett klart mål till arbetstagare samt använda kontrollmöjligheter för att skapa stabilitet och trygghet åt individen.

**Nyckelord:** psykosocialt, arbetsmiljö, sjukfrånvaro, psykiska krav, inflytande, socialt stöd, organisation.
**Introduktion**

Under de senaste tio åren har samhällskostnaden av sjukpenning ökat. Kring detta faktum har en utbredd allmän diskussion uppkommit som fokuserar på varför sjukpenningskostnaden ökar, hur denna ökning kan hejdas samt att lokalisera forskningsområden som skulle kunna bidra till förståelsen av fenomenen.

Det finns många uppfattningar som pekar på en ändring i attityder till sjukanmältning som en bidragande faktor medan andra hävdar att vi numera bor i ett ”sjukt samhälle”. En förklaring är att människor inte är sjuka alls men låtsas bli det för att förfalska sina ansökningar till sjukpenning. Detta resonemang utgår från att individen använder sjukfrånvaro för att legitimera arbetsfrånvaron.


Strukturförändring inom organisationer har orsakat en försämring av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön, genom ökningen av arbetstempot samt försvagningen av jämvikten mellan arbetskrav och graden av individens inflytande (SCB, 2004; Marklund, 2005). Detta innebär att medan kravet på individen har ökat, har inte möjligheten för individen att själv bestämma hur kraven bemöts ökat.

Dessa förändringar i strukturen av organisationer har delvis sin grund i reformer av nya ledningssätt inom den offentliga sektorn. Enligt Pollitt, introducerades dessa reformer under 1990-talet för att kämpa mot den ökande samhällsbudgeten (Pollitt, 2004). Dessa reformer implementerades med intentionen att minska offentligt köpande, förbättra tjänster, samt effektivisera verksamheten. Genom att introducera populära ledningssättstekniker i offentliga verksamheter var ansvaret för personlig autonomi placerade hos individen och effektivitet placerades i centrum (Pollitt, 2004). Resultatet av dessa reformer var oavbruten övervakning och utvärderingar med ökade krav för...
effektivitet. Detta kombineras med det personliga ansvaret av autonomi och har ökat stressen hos de anställda (Berg m.fl. i Dent, 2004).


Karasek & Theorell (1990) kopplar fysiska hälso- och sjukhade – särskilt hjärtproblemen – med de psykiska obehagen, stressen eller mentala belastningen orsakad av anställningen. Karasek & Theorell m.fl. hävdar att denna psykiska belastning är producerad genom en kombination av tre faktorer upplevda av individerna i den objektiva verkligheten av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön; 1) psykiska krav relaterade till arbetsinnehållet d.v.s. ”hur hårt du arbetar”; 2) graden av inflytande eller kontroll som individerna har på arbetsuppläggningen. Denna faktor har två delar; a) uppdragauktoriteten, samt b) kompetensurskillnaden. Konceptets grad av inflytande fängar kontrollen individen har över aktiviteter de utför samt kompetensen de använder för att utföra dessa aktiviteter; 3) socialt stöd handlar om individens sociala förhållanden med kollegor samt arbetsledarna och kan också gälla familj och vänner. Denna faktor funkar som en skyddskudde mellan individen och de psykiska kraven av arbetet. Enligt Karasek & Theorell, ger denna objektiva verklighet en subjektiv upplevelse som i slutänden kan tillverka farlig psykisk belastning (Karasek, 1990).

Syftet med studien är därmed att undersöka orsaken till sjukfrånvaro från ett psykosocialt perspektiv. Denna undersökning ställer tre frågor: vad är psykosocial arbetsmiljön och hur har implementeringen av det reformerade ledningssättet förändrat den? Hur påverkar psykiska krav, graden av inflytande samt socialt stöd individen? Samt; varför leder detta till den ökande förekomsten av sjukfrånvaro?
Metod

En studiegrupp av nitton kvinnliga lokalvårdare i en städfirma deltog i studien med totalt tjugonio anställda. Bortfallet är på grund av ovillighet att delta. Under ett särskilt ordnat ”enkät möte” på arbetsplatsen fyllde nitton kvinnor i en enkät som var hämtad ifrån SCB (SCB, 2003). Denna enkät som använts för uppsamlingen av den kvantitativa datan är den standardenkät som SCB använder för att mäta de tre variabler som Karasek & Theorell (1990) förknippar med psykisk belastning; psykiska krav, graden av inflytande, samt socialt stöd*.

En fråga i enkätarna lokaliserade fem av dessa nitton individer som var villiga att bli intervjuade. Samtliga intervjuerna var genomförda individuellt; några ägde rum på deras arbetsplats, andra hemma hos individen. Dessa semistrukturerade intervjuer började med frågan ”vad gör du när du dyker upp på jobbet på morgonen”? Under de ca fyrtiofem minuterna var individen fri att diskutera sin upplevelse av arbetsmiljön under en vanlig arbetsdag. Under intervjuerna ställdes ledande frågor för att klargöra informationen samt att få fram information inom tre teman; arbetsuppläggning, sociala förhållanden, samt fritidsaktiviteter. En sjätte intervju med organisationens chef blev också genomförd. Denna intervju tog också upp arbetsorganisationen samt sociala förhållanden men bytte ut fritidsaktiviteter mot en historisk överblick av organisationens utveckling.

Genom applikationen av Göran Ahrnes perspektiv på organisationer, har studien på ett kritiskt sätt applicerat teorin av Robert Karasek och Töres Theorell till empiriska data som insamlats. Utifrån denna information analyseras sjukfrånvaron för att undersöka påverkan på individens hälsa och välbefinnande av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön

Organisationens Psykosociala Arbetsmiljö

Psykosocial är ett koncept som godkänner signifikansen av individens miljö medan de utformar en identitet (Eriksson i Furåker, 1991). Därför, godkänner den psykosociala ”arbetsmiljön” signifikansen av individens miljö medan de utformar en identitet medan de arbetar.


**In(ex)kludering & Övervakning**

En individ söker medlemskapet eller inkludering i en organisation(er) för att de är rädda för social isolering (Durkheim, 1983; Fromm, 1941; Ahrne, 1994). Ahrne (1994) förklarar att inkludering i en organisation erbjuder individen någonstans att gå och är igenkänd och ger åtkomst till de kollektiva resurserna. De kollektiva resurserna är efterlängtade av individen för att de gör det möjligt för individen att göra vad de annars inte skulle kunna göra. Kollektiva resurser kan vara lön, influensen av organisationens makt för att få saker gjorda, eller bekräftelsen av en identitet (Ahrne, 1994).

Individens är fri att välja vilka organisationer de söker inkludering i, inte är de heller beroende av eller begränsade till en organisation. Emellertid, exkluderar organisationer alla individer tills individen blir godkänd av antagningsenheter. Dessa företrädar för organisationen inkluderar bara individer som representerar en resurs som organisationen kan utnyttja i samband med dess mål. Utan meriter uppskattade av organisationen blir individen exkluderad. För att bli inkluderad och hindra exkludering måste individen underordna sig organisationens värderingar (Fromm 1941). Detta innebär att individen

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‡ Inkludering i nationen staten samt familjen är inte valfri.
överlämna sin autonomi och konstruerar en identitet kring det igenkännande de får från individerna inom organisationen(erna) de är inkluderade i (Ahrne, 1994).

Genom att arkiverar prestationen av inkluderade individer och deras uppförande under företrädandet för organisationen kontrollera organisationen individens aktiviteter. Utbytbarheten av individer som inte anpassar sitt beteende enligt organisationens behov riskerar restriktioner på tillgången till organisationens kollektiva resurser eller exkludering. Hotet av exkludering använder organisationen bl.a. för att uppmuntra individen till arbete riktat mot att uppnå organisationens mål (Ahrne, 1994). De individer som inte har uppskattade meriter eller skulle vilja behålla för mycket av sin autonomi, är exkluderade från många organisationer och har det svårt att bli inkluderade. Individer som har det svårt att bli inkluderad är mer beroende av de organisationer som accepterar dem. Desto mer beroende individen är i sin inkludering i en organisation, desto mera kontroll har organisation över individen. Många kommentatorer påstår att denna organisatoriska kravsättning och övervakning skapar farlig psykisk belastning hos individen.

Änspåk & Inverkan


Enligt Furåker (1991) är ”arbete” inte bara aktiviteter som individen genomför för att försörja sig. Furåker beskriver ”arbete” som ”arbetskraft + arbetsmedel + arbetsföremål (objekt) ⇒ produkt (resultat)” (Furåker (red), 1991: sidan 21). Furåkers definition fångar alla aktiviteter som kräver; arbetsförmåga, redskap, syftemål, produkt, ansträngning samt

* Original text: “how hard you work” (Karasek, 1990).
motivation som önskan och/eller plikt. Denna uppfattning av ”arbete” innebär att avlönade och oavlönade aktiviteter - liksom hushållsarbete, underhåll av bilen, samt planeringen av barnens julfest på daghemmet, påslagning av teven och arbetssökandet - är arbete. Förutom detta, påpekar Furåker (1991) att social kompetens är viktig för att kunna utföra arbete i det moderna samhället.


Psykisk belastning utsätter individen för en av två effekter beroende på deras aktiviteter och de psykiska kraven de utsätts för. En individ som utsätts för mycket psykiskt krav blir drabbade av skadande psykisk belastning som hindrar inlärning samt självutveckling, är hälsoförstörande och kan i slutändan döda individen. En individ som utsätts för lite psykisk krav blir också drabbade av liknade psykisk belastning (Karasek, 1990). Den individen som utsätts för ”lagom” psykiska krav upplever skapande psykisk belastning som stimulerar inlärning samt självutveckling och är hällosamt. Vilka av dessa former psykisk belastningen tar beror på graden av inflytande individen har över de psykiska kraven de utsätts för (Karasek, 1990).

Graden av inflytande beskriver Karasek & Theorell som "arbetarens förmåga att kontrollera hans eller hennes egna aktiviteter samt kompetensnyttjande, inte att kontrollera andra...” (Karasek, 1990: sidan 60). Inflytande över psykiska krav erbjuder

* Original text: “[T]he worker’s ability to control his or her own activities and skill usage, not to control others.....” (Karasek, 1990).

Kombinationen av psykiskt krav och graden av inflytande påverkar naturen av den psykiska belastningen individen upplever. Karasek & Theorell nämner fyra upplevelsevarianter som varierande kombinationer av psykiskt krav samt grad av inflytande tillverkar.

- **En högt belastad** upplevelse är kombinationen av högt psykiskt krav och en låg grad av inflytande. Innebörden av detta är att individen har inget inflytande över det höga psykiska kravet. Upplevelsen av denna kombination hindrar inlärning samt självutvecklandet och den psykiska belastningen är hög. Denna upplevelse är skadlig för hälsan (Karasek, 1990).
- **En aktiv** upplevelse är kombinationen av högt psykiskt krav och en hög grad av inflytande. Innebörden av detta är att individen har högt inflytande över det höga psykiska kravet. Upplevelsen av denna kombination stimulerar inlärning samt självutvecklandet men den psykiska belastningen är hög. Graden av inflytande gör att denna upplevelse för det mesta är hälsosamt men hotet av utmattning finns (Karasek, 1990).
En lägt belastad upplevelse är kombinationen av lägt psykiskt krav och en hög grad av inflytande. Innebörden av detta är att individen har högt inflytande över det låga psykiska kravet. Upplevelsen av denna kombination hindrar inlärning samt självutvecklandet inom nya områden men skapar gynnsammare förutsättningar för utvecklandet av befintlig inriktad kompetens. Denna upplevelse är den mest hälsosamma effekter eftersom den psykiska belastningen är ”lagom” (Karasek, 1990).

Det är klart att i dagens samhälle ser organisationer till att varje individ utför en stor mängd ”arbete”, därför är också det psykiska kravet och därigenom den psykiska belastningen. Den psykiskt kravreducerande samt psykisk belastningsegenskaps bestämmande karaktär av inflytande räddar hälsan samt välbefinnandet hos individen. Överlämnad av autonomi till organisationer tillåter dem att avgöra både det psykiska kravet individen utsätts för samt graden av inflytande individen har över detta krav. Den reduktionen i autonomi gör individen för att få social integration. Enligt många kommentatorer är de sociala förhållandena också övervakade av organisationer.

Sällskap


De nära sociala förhållanden som individen har inom organisationens stabila homogena miljö är den viktigaste faktorn i arbetsnjutning, hälsa samt välbefinnande. Det sociala stöd som individen får från kollegor och arbetsledare samt andra inom individens kollektivgrupp erbjuder både en skyddskudde gentemot de psykiska kraven av arbetet samt en identitet (Karasek, 1990).

Socialt stöd erbjuder individen uppmuntring och trygghet medan de ”arbetar”. Samtidigt som den graden av inflytande individen har fastlägger om ”arbetet” upplevs som ett krav eller en utmaning, det sociala stöd individen får avgör om kraven eller utmaningarna tacklas ensamt eller som en i ett kollektiv. Igenom detta samarbete med inflytande erbjuder socialt stöd individen ett sätt att reglera i vilken grad psykiska krav blir omvandlade till psykisk belastning. Eftersom socialt stöd och sociala kontakter reducerar smällen av psykiskt krav påverkar de den elementära psykiska processen som viktig i upprätthållandet av hälsa och inlärning. Tillsammans med denna fördel, socialt stöd erbjuds individen med aktiva avlastningsmönster som påverkar inte bara hälsan men även skapandebeteende. Utvecklandet av aktivt beteendemönster är resultatet av den positiva uppfattningen av identitet baserad på den socialt bekräftade värderingen av individens insats till kollektivets välbefinnande samt målen (Karasek, 1990).

Kombinationen av socialt stöd och graden av inflytande påverkar upplevelsen av psykiskt krav, intensiteten av den psykiska belastningen samt identiteten av individen. Karasek & Theorell nämner fyra varianter av identitet baserade på upplevelsen av socialt stöd och graden av inflytande.


- En *följeslagare* upplever en kombination av högt socialt stöd och låg grad av inflytande. Innebörden av detta är att individen har svagt inflytande över sin aktivitet och kollektivet ger skydd gentemot det psykiska kravet av arbetet. Upplevelsen av denna kombination hindrar inlärning och självutvecklandet. Den
ger en positiv uppfattning av identitet och den psykiska belastningen är reducerad.
Denna upplevelse är mindre hälsoskadande pga. det sociala stödet (Karasek, 1990).


Socialt stöd inom organisationens stabila homogena miljö erbjuder individen ett sätt att skydda sig från psykiskt krav samt en identitet och är därför en väldigt viktig påverkande faktor av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön. Enligt Karasek & Theorell är förhållandet mellan socialt stöd, psykiskt krav samt individens grad av inflytande som orsakar psykisk belastning som; a) hindrar eller stimulerar inlärning samt självutveckling; b) skadar hälsa samt välbefinnande; och c) i slutändan dödar (Karasek, 1990). Denna diskussion antar att implementeringen av reformer på ledningssättet störde stabiliteten av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön och ökade sjukfrånvaron.
Empiriska Data


”Det finns tre block; A blocken städar (ett område), B blocken (ett annat område), och C blocken (ett tredje område)”.

Individerna har möjligheten att ordna sina kollektiva arbeten hur de vill och alla vet precis vad de och deras kollegor skall göra. Betydandet av de ”barnorganisationerna” för individerna har utbrett sig så att sociala relationerna inom dem blev väldigt starka. Individernas sociala aktiviteter utanför dessa kollektiv upphörde nästan jämt och de isolerade sig. Florence säger att-

”Det finns ett revirtänkande och det är ganska svårt att komma över dom här reviren”.


Även om denna förändring inte ökade mängden av arbetet bland de kvarstående individerna utsattes de för ökat psykiskt krav genom höjning i arbetstempot. Figur 1 upphävs att majoriteten av de nitton individerna upplever högt psykiskt krav.

![Figur 1: nivån av upplevt psykiskt krav*](http://example.com/figur1.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvenser</th>
<th>psykiskt krav</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 (16%)</td>
<td>lägt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (74%)</td>
<td>högt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>saknade*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Saknade beror på att individerna inte svarade.

* Se statistisk tabell 1: psykiskt krav index (psychological demand index).
Under tryck för att bemöta kraven av en förändring marknad och hårdare ekonomiska omständigheter genomförde organisationen flera förändringar. Florence berättar att-

"Å utifrån, det var då vi började med det här erfarenhetsutbytet, rotationen, å vi måste hjälpas åt över blockgränserna å vi kan inte ha de här ”reviren” kvar för att vi skulle kunna det (bemöta våra beräkningar).(…) Men visst är det tufft! Det är jättetufft å det gäller att få alla med sig att förstå det här”.

När huvudorganisationens målsättningar blev dominerande, dem del organisationernas mål blev integrerade med huvudorganisationens mål. Detta förändrade individers rutiner, mål, och sociala kollektivet. Trots att individerna hade accepterat det ökade arbetstempot var motståndet till denna förändring stort. Individerna var ovilliga att hjälpa andra eller bli hjälpt av andra. Frustrationen växte. Nya individer blev ovälkomna för att de inte passade in i kollektivet; det sociala kollektivet fick och har sina egna beteendemönster som de nya inte känner till.

"Vi skulle vilja avsluta vårt arbete men helt plötsligt måste vi gå å göra deras jobb”.

De nya rutinerna och målen som förändringarna skapade ledde till konflikter bland individerna i de olika del organisationerna. Den självständighet som man åtnjöt förut var nu borta med en ökande övervakning som individerna upplever som onödiga.

"Vi vet vad vi ska göra! Vi vet var det ska vara gjort! Vi vet när, varför och hur! Inte behöver vi nå arbetsledare!”

Förändringarna minskade individernas grad av inflytande. Figur 2 nedanför uppvisar att över två tredjedelar av individerna upplever att deras grad av inflytande är lågt.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvenser</th>
<th>grad av inflytande</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 (32%)</td>
<td>hög</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 (68%)</td>
<td>låg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motståndet till avskaffandet av de tre del organisationerna var stort och individerna gick tillbaka till gamla vanor. Konflikterna mellan grupperna fortsätter att prägla organisationen oavsett ansträngningarna av ledningen att få individerna att samsas.

* Se statistisk tabell 2: grad av inflytande index (decision latitude index).
Svårigheten att få individerna att integrera sig och utveckla nya sociala relationer, lära sig nya rutiner och ta till sig de nya redskapen är ett problem. Florence förklarar att-

“Å vi ska just nu då testa ett, nya moppar och nya skaft. Vi har testat flera gånger men man går tillbaka till det gamla men nu har jag sagt på att något sätt måste vi anamma det nya”.

De konflikter som finns inom den stora organisationen tyder på att sociala relationer inne i organisationen är inte stödjande. Men inom ”barnorganisationerna” finns det starka sociala kollektiv som ger stöd. Figur 3 uppvisar att upplevelsen av socialt stöd är blandat.

### Figur 3: upplevt socialt stöd

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvenser</th>
<th>socialt stöd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lågt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>högt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>saknade*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Saknade beror på att individerna inte svarade.

Genom att sätta upplevelser av socialt stöd med den upplevda graden av inflytande synliggörs individernas identitetsdrag i relation till sina upplevelser av den psykosociala arbetsmiljön. Figur 4 uppvisar att tre individer har deltagande ledare identiteter, och tre cowboy hjältar. Av de tolv andra som kan bli placerade är det sex följeslagare och sex isolerade fångar.

### Figur 4: grad av inflytande/socialt stöd/relaterad identitet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvenser</th>
<th>grad av inflytande</th>
<th>socialt stöd</th>
<th>relaterad identitet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>hög</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>högt: deltagande ledare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>lågt: cowboy hjältar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>låg</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>lågt: isolerad fånge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>högt: följeslagare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>saknade: saknade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Utifrån den teoretiska diskussionen är det de tretton individerna som upplever en låg grad av inflytande som upplever hälsoskadande psykisk belastning. Risken för hälsan av de sex isolerade fångarna är högst eftersom de får väldigt lågt socialt stöd.

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*Se statistisk tabell 3: socialt stöd index (social support index).
†Se statistiska tabeller 2: grad av inflytande index (decision latitude index) och 4: socialt stöd index (social support index).
Hög Sjukfrånvaro

Utifrån ett pressmeddelande från SCB (2005) har diskussionen antagit att sjukfrånvaron av en individ inom denna grupp som överstiger det nationella genomsnittet av elva och en halv dag under ett år är högt. Figur 5 uppvisar att sjukfrånvaron av fyra individer i studiegruppen översteg den siffran och klassificeras som högt sjukfrånvarande. Sjukfrånvaron av de övriga ligger under det nationella genomsnittet.

Figur 5: frekvensen av hög sjukfrånvaro*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvensen</th>
<th>sjukfrånvaro</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>hög</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>låg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figur 6 uppvisar att alla dessa fyra individer -markerade A B C D- och upplever högt psykiskt krav men i motsats till förväntningar upplever tre av dem en hög grad av inflytande. Bara en individ har en kombination av högt psykiskt krav/låg grad av inflytande som förväntades av dem med högt sjukfrånvarande individer.

Figur 6: psykiskt krav/grad av inflytande*/sjukfrånvaro.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hög sjukfrånvarande individer</th>
<th>psykiskt krav index</th>
<th>graden av inflytande index</th>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>B</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>högt</td>
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<td>låg sjukfrånvaro grunden</td>
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<td>högt</td>
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Figur 7 uppvisar att majoriteten av de med hög sjukfrånvaro upplever en psykosocial arbetsmiljö som stimulerar inlärning och självutveckling. Av de femton som upplever en psykosocial arbetsmiljö som hindrar inlärning och självutveckling är bara en individ bland de med hög sjukfrånvaro.

* Hela sjukfrånvaro frekvenserna finns i statistisk tabell 3.
† Se statistiska tabeller 1: psykiskt krav index (pyskological demand) och 2: grad av inflytande index (decision latitude index).
Figur 7: psykiskt krav, graden av inflytande*, upplevd arbetsmiljö, effekt på inlärning/självutveckling och sjukfrånvaro.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>frekvensen</th>
<th>upplevt psykiskt krav</th>
<th>grad av inflytande</th>
<th>upplevd arbetsmiljö</th>
<th>effekt på inlärning/självutveckling</th>
<th>sjukfrånvaro</th>
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Figur 8 uppvisar att det finns två högt sjukfrånvarande individer som har deltagande ledare identiteter, en har en cowboy hjältar. Dessa identiteter har bara två andra individer bland de lågt sjukfrånvarande individerna. Av de sju isolerade fångarna är bara en högt sjukfrånvarande. Alla av de övriga sex samt de sex följeslagare tillhör den lågt sjukfrånvarande gruppen.

Den empiriska datan stämmer inte med den teoretiska förväntningen. Att bara en av de tre deltagande ledarna finns i lågt sjukfrånvaron gruppen är överraskande. Men det mest överraskande är att bara en av de sju isolerade fångarna finns i den högt sjukfrånvarande gruppen.

**Avslutande Debatt**

Organisationer är där för att uppnå ett mål. För att uppnå detta behöver individer som vill hjälpa organisationen att uppnå detta mål. Individer ha ”personligt ansvar” för att skapar ”sitt eget liv”. För att uppnå detta mål behöver de resurser. Organisationen skulle vilja att individer kom till den om och om igen. Individen skulle vilja gå tillbaka om och

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* Ibid.
† Se statistiska tabeller 2: grad av inflytande index (decision latitude index) och 4: socialt stöd index (social support index).


Även om inflytandet på kompetensurskillingen är oförändrad ligger numera uppdragsauktoriteten nästan fullständigt med organisationen. Men eftersom majoriteten av den högt sjukfrånvarande gruppen upplever en hög grad av inflytande och majoriteten av den lågt sjukfrånvarande gruppen upplever en låg grad, är det inte denna faktor som direkt orsakar hög sjukfrånvaro.


Det skulle kunna vara så att individer som förlorar mest genom hög integration i det sociala kollektivet är de som har skapat en identitet väl integrerad till organisationen. Det motstånd som finns mot integrationen skulle kunna bli en desperat kamp för identitetsöverlevnad. Om detta är fallet skulle det utsätta individen till ytterligare psykiskt krav och psykisk belastning. Den indirekta minskningen i socialt stöd orsakad av en spridning av individer från ur sprungskollektivet samt integration i ett nytt stort kollektiv minskar ”skyddskudden” gentemot de psykiska kraven och kontrollen över den psykiska belastningen är förlorad.

Studien visar en fullständig grad av påverkan som organisatorisk övervakning har på hälsa, välbefinnande och identitetskapande. Dessutom uppvisar studien organisations förmåga att skada de identiteter den skapat genom att upphäva en stabil homogen miljö den tidigare skapat och utvecklat. För att minska risken av ohälsa samt skapa välbefinnande, är det nödvändigt för organisationer att erbjuda ett klart mål samt använda dess kontrollmöjligheter för att skapa stabilitet och trygghet åt individen.

**Bristfälligheter & Fortsättning**

Bristfälligheterna i denna typ av studie ligger i begränsningen av Karasek & Theorells teori som inte tar upp två väsentliga aspekter av individens upplevelse. Den första bristen är att fastän organisationer lokaliseras som makten som kontrollerar den psykosociala

Den fjärde bristen i Karasek & Theorells teori är att ett genus perspektiv inte finns. Denna studiegrupp totalt domineras av kvinnor, inte en enda man inkluderas i organisationen. Ökar eller minskar ”föreskrivna” genus tillhörighet rörande in/exkluderingar självständigheten hos kvinnor samt män? Hur påverkar den könsfördelning av hushållsarbete och ansvar för hemmet psykiskt krav? SCB:s statistiska data meddelar att kvinnor i alla yrkeskategorier har högre sjukfrånvaro än män. Vad beror detta på? Det är också intressant att fundera på inflytande av genus in/exkludering av identitetsskapandet. Är det identiteter baserade på genusideologier eller alternativa sociala kollektivs integration som producerar mest psykiskt krav och psykisk belastning?
Eftersom studien fokuserade på sjukfrånvaro granskades inte någon annan legitim arbetsfrånvaro som ger individen avbrott från de organisatoriska kraven och övervakning, som t.ex. vård av sjukt barn. Mot bakgrund av att studiegruppen innehöll kvinnor är denna typiskt genus relaterade arbetsfrånvaro viktig att uppmärksamma. På grund av den begränsade fokusen på sjukfrånvaro har frånvaro var detta typ av legitimit frånvaro, som skulle kunna reflektera omständigheterna inom den psykosociala arbetsmiljön, inte granskade. Detta är ett intressant forskningsområde…
Text Notes.


2. ”Arbete = arbetskraft + arbetsmedel + arbetsföremål (objekt) ⇒ produkt (resultat).” (Furåker (red), 1991: page 21).


4. The diagonal arrow marked “A” in figure 3 shows’ that the risk of psychological strain grows with the level of psychological demand and a reduction in decision latitude. The arrow marked “B” in figure 3 shows’ that when high psychological demand is experienced with high decision latitude the combination stimulates learning and motivates the development of new behaviour patterns (Karasek, 1990).

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**Karasek & Theorell’s psychological demand/decision latitude model.**

![Psychological Demands vs Decision Latitude Diagram](attachment:karasek-theorell-diagram.png)

*Source: Karasek and Theorell: Healthy work-Stress, productivity, and the reconstruction of working life, 1990.*
5. The four categories of occupations within the social support dimension correspond with the occupational dimensions generated by psychological demand and decision latitude in the original demand/control model.

![Psychological Demands and Social Support Diagram]

**Source:** Karasek and Theorell: Healthy work-Stress, productivity, and the reconstruction of working life, 1990.

6. Florence- “Vi just nu eller vi har haft så ett antal år är vi tre arbetsgrupper. I varje arbetsgrupp finns en arbetsledare som deltar aktivt i lokalvården, liksom samordna å så där. Sen i den gruppen då så har vi inga fasta egna städområden utan man roterar runt i den gruppen då, man byter, jobbar inte alltid med samma person heller utan man försöker gå runt å det. Å även då byta om så mycket som möjligt i det”.

7. Eddie- “Det finns tre block; A blocken städar (ett område), B blocken (ett annat område), och C blocken (ett tredje område)”.

8. Joyce- ”Förut simmade jag å tränade innan jag började här. Å hade vänner där… men jag har inte varit dit i ett par år, jag är för trött i slutet av dan å åker inte. (…) vi brukar ta utflykt ibland tillsammans eller gå ut å dansa”.

9. Florence- ”Det finns ett revirtänkande och det är ganska svårt att komma över dom här reviren”.
10. Florence- ”Sen har vi insett att eftersom vi har drabbats av effektiviseringsar, nerdragningar, hot om entreprenörer å sånt så måste vi göra någonting för att klara det här också på ett mindre antal människor, å mindre antal timmar i lokalvård.”

11. Florence- ”Sa man från ledningens sida att om vi sparar 10 % på våran omsättning, plus 0,5, sänker priserna med 0,5 %. Och tror att vi ska ro i land det så, så skulle vi behålla egen regi då. Och 10 % det var 1 458 000 för våran verksamhets skull, inget litet belopp.(…) Och den stora kostnaden i den här organisationen det är ju personalkostnaden.(…) Så att vi räknade på det där och det innebar att vi skulle måsta plocka bort 4,6 tjänster. (…) Men vi kunde behålla all tillsvidarepersonal”.

12. Florence- ”Å utifrån, det var då vi började med det här erfahrenhetsutbytet, rotationen, å vi måste hjälpas åt över blockgränserna å vi kan inte ha de här ”reviren” kvar för att vi skulle kunna det (bemöta våra beräkningar).(…) Men visst är det tufft! Det är jättetufft å det gäller att få alla med sig att förstå det här”.

13. Florence- ”Så då har vi infört ett större roterande system så att man kör.. man blandar över hela campus hära. Och tanken är att vi ska ha en gemensam städcentral där alla ska gå utifrån å därför styr man å där behoven är störst dit sätter man flest människor, det kan se lite olika ut beroende också på vilka engagemang å vilka typer av.. ja… lokaler som har nyttjats mest å så vidare”.

14. Tracy- “Vi skulle vilja avsluta vårt arbete men helt plötsligt måste vi gå å göra deras jobb”.

15. Deborah- ”nya människor vet inte hur vi arbetar, våra arbetssätt å sånt. Vi måste hjälpa dom å kan inte jobba lika fort”.

16. Eleanor- “vi vet vad vi ska göra! Vi vet var det ska vara gjort! Vi vet när, varför och hur! Inte behöver vi nå arbetsledare!”
17. Florence- “När vi nu ska splittra upp dom här tre grupperna till en grupp å vi har börjat lite smått å vi har gått tillbaka till tre grupper, men vi hjälps åt med alla kontor, alla går och gör ett block kontoren, gör dom klart och går över till den nästa å så vidare. För att vi ska effektivisera och då kunna hinna mera”.


19. Tracy- ”vi bjuder dom att följa med när vi går ut, de kommer aldrig, men inte bjuder de oss”.

20. Florence- ”Å vi ska just nu då testa ett, nya moppar och nya skaft. Vi har testat flera gånger men man går tillbaka till det gamla men nu har jag sagt på att något sätt måste vi anamma det nya”.

Statistical Index Questions

(Statistiska centralbyrån, 2003)

Psychological Demand Index Questions:
1. (E16) Har du ibland så mycket att göra att du blir tvungen att dra in på luncher, arbeta över eller ta med jobb hem? Translation: How often have you so much to do that you must take shorter lunch breaks, work overtime or take work home?

2. (E45) Har du vissa tider så stressigt att du inte hinner prata om eller ens tänka på något annat än arbetet? Translation: Is it, at times, so stressful at your workplace that you don’t have time to talk, or even think about anything else but your work?

3. (E48) Kräver arbetet hela din uppmärksamhet och koncentration? Translation: How often does your job require all of your concentration?


Decision Latitude Index Questions:
1. (E44) Har du möjlighet att själv bestämma din arbetstakt? Translation: Is it possible for you yourself to decide how fast you work?

2. (E71) Kan du delvis själv bestämma när olika arbetsuppgifter skall göras (t ex genom att välja att jobba lite fortare vissa dagar och ta det lite lugnare andra dagar)? Translation: Is it possible that you yourself can decide when different jobs are done?

3. (E72) Händer det att du är med och beslutar om uppläggningen av ditt arbete (t.ex. vad som skall göras, hur det skall göras eller vilka som skall arbeta tillsammans med dig)? Translation: Is it possible for you to take part in making decisions about what shall be done at work (for example, how it should be done or who you work with)?


Social Support Index Questions:
1. (E52) Har du möjlighet att få stöd och uppmuntran från chefer, när arbetet känns besvärligt? Translation: Is it possible for you to get support and encouragement from your superiors, when the work feels difficult?

2. (E53) Har du möjlighet att få stöd och uppmuntran från arbetskamrater, när arbetet känns besvärligt? Translation: Is it possible for you to get support and encouragement from your workmates, when the work feels difficult?
Table 1: Psychological Demand of sample group measured with questionnaire from SCB used in the work environment examination 1991-1999, and the examination of problems caused by work (SCB, 2001).

Psychological demand index: 2 “high” alternatives indicate that the individual is exposed to high psychological demands by their work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sickness absence</th>
<th>High Demand</th>
<th>Low demand</th>
<th>High demand</th>
<th>Low demand</th>
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<th>Degree of psychological demand for individual</th>
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Degree of psychological demand for group: low, high, high, high, high.
## Table 2: Decision latitude of sample group measured with questionnaire from SCB used in the work environment examination 1991-1999, and the examination of problems caused by work (SCB, 2001).

**Decision latitude index:** 2 “low” alternatives indicate that the individual has little control over their work-life.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sickness absence</th>
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## Table 3: Number of sickness absences during 2003–2004 taken by the study group.

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4. Table 4: Social support of sample group measured with questionnaire from SCB used in the work environment examination 1991-1999, and the examination of problems caused by work (SCB, 2001).

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<th>Social support level for high sickness absence individuals</th>
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References


Rosengren, Karl Erik & Arvidson, Peter: **Sociologisk metodik**: Liber, Malmö, 2002.


Statistiska centralbyrån: **Pressmeddelande från SCB 2005-02-21 10:00 Nr 2205:042; 2005.**