

Contemporary aspects of health and performance among young adult women and men in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this thesis was to improve our understanding of contemporary aspects of health and performance among young adult women and men in Sweden. Cultural and structural changes in society have resulted in new environmental conditions, which in turn give rise to new potential health hazards. The constituent studies of this thesis examined three such circumstances: a) an increasing number of women studying at university, b) an increasing number of women entering educational fields and occupations traditionally dominated by men, and c) an increased focus on individual performance and the pursuit of self-esteem. Based on these aspects, my intention was to investigate: 1) early differences in health and performance between young women and men in higher education, 2) conditions related to stress and insufficient recovery among highly educated women in non-traditional women's occupations, and 3) whether performance-based self-esteem (PBSE) was a predictor of frequent sickness presenteeism among young adult women and men.

The health and performance of a sample of young adults in higher education were examined using questionnaire data. Conditions related to stress and insufficient recovery were explored qualitatively in a sample of highly educated young women working in occupations traditionally dominated by men. Performance-based self-esteem as a predictor of sickness presenteeism was examined in a population-based sample of young adults engaged in work, study, or vocational practice.

The results indicate that, although the study sample was fairly homogenous in terms of age, occupation, hierarchical level, socio-economic status, and number of children (i.e., very few had children), women had a lower prevalence of maintained health and performance over two years than did men. Despite this finding, no major differences were found in the determinants of this outcome, nor did the explanatory factors explain the observed differences. In the qualitative study, the synergy between extensive individual ambition and a context overflowing with opportunities and demands was qualitatively related to ambiguity overload, which was in turn related to perceived stress. If not handled via individual or contextual boundary setting, the respondents became stuck in a loop of stress and dysfunctional coping behaviour, obstructing the possibility of sufficient recovery. PBSE was a predictor of sickness presenteeism even when adjusting for general health, psychological demands, physical demands, economic problems, and main occupation. A synergy effect was also observed in which the effect of PBSE on sickness presenteeism was greatly increased by environmental and personal factors.

In conclusion, the constituent studies of the thesis contribute to our understanding of some contemporary aspects of health and performance by observing that: a) early differences in health and performance between young women and men existed even in a fairly homogenous study sample, b) the synergy between highly ambitious individuals and an environment overflowing with opportunities and demands was qualitatively related to ambiguity overload followed by stress and insufficient recovery among highly educated young women in non-traditional women's occupations, and c) a personality disposition in which self-esteem is dependent on performance was a predictor of potentially hazardous behaviour in the form of frequent sickness presenteeism.

Key words: young adults, gender, performance, sickness presenteeism, individualization, work ability, well-being, health, grounded theory, stress, modern society, stress, anxiety

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- I. Eriksson J, Dellve L, Eklöf M, Hagberg M**
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- II. Löve J, Dellve L, Eklöf M, Hagberg M**
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