

I MODERNISERINGENS SKUGGA? OM FÖRÄNDRING OCH IDENTITET I TVÅ ADMINISTRATIVA SERVICEYRKEN

Anette Karlsson

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Abstract

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Author: Anette Karlsson

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The overarching aim of this dissertation is to study what happens with occupational identities in occupations subject to substantial and protracted pressure for change, more specifically in administrative service occupations in Sweden today.

The dissertation centres on two cases within this broader category: medical secretaries and post-office cashiers. Typically for administrative service occupations, both have a large majority of women and their existence has repeatedly been questioned. At the same time, they represent two diverging lines of the differentiation this type of occupations has gone through. While the medical secretaries so far have kept their place in medical/health care, the post-office cashiers have gone from expansion of the work content in the 1980s and 1990s to dequalification, splitting, and finally being abolished.

The study combines interviews as a main source of data with various types of text material. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2004–05 with a total of 39 medical secretaries and post-office cashiers. The theoretical backbone of the dissertation is a pluralistic identity perspective combined with an intersectional analysis that takes into consideration various bases of identity like gender and class but also modernity. Focus is also put on the use of discourses and narratives.

The results support the view that it is meaningful to speak of occupational identity in administrative service occupations and, more generally, that it is neither an obsolete phenomenon nor something reserved for well-defined professional, high-status or craft occupations. Both secretaries and cashiers have occupational identities which are distinct and strong *within certain limits*. There is a distinct core of tasks, competences and ethical norms that stands out as generally considered important. This core is also in many respects the same in both occupations (emphasizing among other things the balanced exertion of carefulness and service), which points toward the plausibility of the concept 'administrative service'. There is furthermore some basis for suggesting that a strong but delimited occupational identity of this type can be evoked by technological and economic changes if these are perceived to collide with human and social concerns, and that it can also - at least under some circumstances - be a resource for resistance and action. Swedish medical secretaries constitute an example of this. In their collective identity work, they walk a fine line between embracing contemporary discourses of modernization, professionalization and change, and holding their ground in spheres of the occupation that easily get dismissed or neglected in these discourses.

Keywords: identity, occupations, administrative service, modernity, gender, intersectionality, change, medical secretaries, post-office cashiers