

## Abstract

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The aim of this thesis is to use a cultural-historical and activity theory approach as a general framework for investigating the work activity system of middle managers in municipal elder care. The influences of organizational environment, cultural and historical factors are addressed along with the way municipal middle managers experience their work environment and the job situation of elder care managers. The methods comprised questionnaires, diaries, interviews and observations. The specific questions concerned:

- The relationship between the type of activity and gender and the experience of psychosocial, physical work environment, psychosomatic reactions and job satisfaction among municipal middle managers
- The actions and significant patterns in work of elder care middle managers
- The quality and quantity of social contacts in work of elder care middle managers
- The conflicts and tensions in work experienced by elder care middle managers in relation to the historical phases of their profession
- The construction of gender as a historical and cultural process

The results indicated that the type of activity was more important than biological sex as a factor in the psychosocial work environment experience of municipal middle managers from different departments. The department affiliation coincides to a large extent with the biological sex. The work of middle managers in elder care was influenced by two distinct patterns: the official line organization and a horizontal network. The networks were not constant – they were rebuilt depending on context. It was indicated that these two structures could affect the use of new technology. Elder care managers spent about 70% of their work time in interaction with other people. The contacts could be related to different components in the work activity system of the managers and the practical implications of this were discussed. The causes of work conflicts expressed by the elder care managers were related to different historical phases of management in elder care. It was found that it was possible to relate some major conflict themes to different phases as sources of tension in the activity system. It was also found that there were three different orientations that expressed the gendering aspects of middle management in elder care. These results are discussed and related to the components in the work activity system.

**Key words:** Activity theory, gender, middle managers, elder care