
NES 2008

Reykjavik, Iceland

“To me, health is that you feel well, not just that you’re not ill, but that you feel good and are satisfied despite all the poverty and wretchedness that I usually say I live in. So, you might say I’m in good health because I feel well”

(Assistant nurse, working in care of the elderly)



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

Understanding work ability: experiences of female assistant nurses in elderly care

Hélène Sandmark ^{a, b}, Karin Hägglund ^b, Kerstin Nilsson ^c and Anna Hertting ^a

^a School of Health and Medical Sciences, Public Health Science, Örebro University, Sweden

^b Department of Medical Sciences, Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Uppsala University, Sweden

^c Institute of Health and Care Sciences, The Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

Background...



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

High participation rate among Swedish women in the work force

More than 80% of women in the Nordic countries are gainfully employed



Extensive family policies...

In Sweden there are generous subsidies for child care and leave policies



Where are the women?

Of the one million people working in the public sector in Sweden around 80 % are women

Many of these are in jobs such as caring for the elderly



Long- and short-term sickness absence has been frequent among these, and from the end of the 1990's there has been a high and rapid increase



The increase of sickness absence from 1997
in Sweden is still to a great extent
unexplained

Swedish women are twice as frequently
sick-listed as men (~64%)



Why this study?

- Few studies on factors promoting retained work ability
- Lack of indicators
- Assistant nurses belong to an occupational group with the lowest occurrence of long-term health and presence at work in the Swedish working force



Aim

To focus the individual female assistant nurse, in order to highlight different factors and setting-based sources of health, and investigate how function at work and in private life might explain retained work ability



Definition of **Work Ability** in this study:

...is high presence at work; which means not being frequently or long-term on sick leave



Setting

A municipality in mid-Sweden that employs 482 people permanently within municipal elderly care



Study methodology and design

The approach is a qualitative research methodology, as the intention was to gain an understanding of actions and meanings in women's (assistant nurse's) lived experiences



Data collection

Interviews were chosen, as interviews allow the informants to freely express their experiences rather than being guided by the researchers' a priori ideas of relevance



12 interviewees — inclusion criteria:

- Selected from the 117 female assistant nurses (out of 466) who had taken the least amount of sick leave over the past five years (up to 5 days/year and no long term sick leave)
- Permanently employed
- Worked in Swedish elderly care for at least five years
- Different ages (31-56), working day or night shifts and in different departments within the community elderly care



-
- Thematic, open-ended, interviews (~1 hour)
 - The interviews were performed by experienced public health researchers
 - Interview guide, with a life-history approach;
adolescence, schooling, choice of occupation, occupational history and present work, family and social network, health and sickness absence
 - Content analysis



Findings...



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

Themes

Categories

A desirable job, despite low status

- Wanting to work with people
- A rewarding job and work ethic, despite low status, heavy workload and poor wages
- Freedom in the work, despite some monotony

Supportive social networks

- A strong work team
- A few, qualitatively good relationships
- Equal opportunities

Coping ability

- In spite of a difficult childhood ...
- Balance: work – spare time – family
- Demands on one's own children
- Good self-rated health, despite physical or medical dysfunctions
- Lifestyle: everyday “built-in” exercise
- Time of one's own



A desirable job...

There's something in healthcare and something in the job that attracts you

...but the response you get from them is worth so much. You're very much appreciated



Supportive social networks

The way we work means that we don't actually have much to do with the manager. So it's been more important who our colleagues are – that we all get on and so on



Friends...

*That's how it is, you don't need so many, you know,
you can have a few good friends, three or four...*



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

Equal opportunities...

He can dress them how he likes and change nappies and cook whatever food he likes. Yes, he can do it in this way and I don't see it. And so it doesn't matter really if it's, well...



Coping with own children...

There's always something going on, but I like that. I think it's great that they want to be at home with us, and that I know where she is. So she and I have quite a good relationship, although I'm the one who sort of has the authority. We're not like friends...



Time of your own...

Thursday evenings are mine. Yes, that's when I choose what to do. If I want to be at home I stay at home. If I want to do something else, I do



To strengthen work ability among female employees in elderly care, the findings indicate that it is crucial...

- To support mobility in working life in order to find a desirable job
- To promote social support and networks at the workplace and in private life
- To promote a coping-oriented approach to health issues and social life



This paper has been accepted for publication in WORK



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

THANK YOU!



Örebro castle



ÖREBRO UNIVERSITY

helene.sandmark@oru.se