

# Shaping Management in Gendered Work – A Comparative Study in the Swedish Public Sector

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## Abstract

By exploring management in a study of different municipal departments, this paper contributes to a theoretical and empirical understanding of how the type of work shapes and reproduces management practices and inequality in working conditions within a horizontally segregated public sector. A structural theoretical model guides the design of the empirical qualitative study within education, elderly care and water supply in several Swedish municipalities. The comparative analysis shows that, while managers within water supply take control over management and are allowed to do so, managers in education and care are instructed to take personal responsibility when handling goal conflicts and lack of resources. Gendered norms and values inscribed in the type of work seem to be fundamentally integral to management practices, which affect the local manager's authority and actions. The results of this study illustrate how management is practiced and reinforces differences in status between different types of work.

## Introduction

Several empirical studies show that women and men, both professionals and managers, in female-gendered reproduction work have lower status, less access to important networks, poorer conditions at work and lower pay, compared with women and men in male-gendered production work (Aronsson et al., 2019; Björk and Härenstam, 2016; Cerdas et al., 2019; Corin et al., 2021; England, 1992; Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014; Kilbourne et al., 1994; Nyberg et al., 2021; Westerberg and Armelius, 2000). Horizontal segregation is prevalent in Nordic labour markets (Charles and Bradley, 2009) and also characterises the public sector which organises the majority of female-dominated reproduction work but also some of the male-dominated production work. Work in the segregated labour market is traditionally linked to activities and work objects with female or male connotations (cf. Sahlin-Andersson, 1994). It is argued that the segregation between male and female gendered work and thus the immanence of differences in organising is a mechanism for the creation of inequality (cf. Tilly, 1999). Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is in the work at the local level where institutional and societal norms such as female and male connotations of types of work are practiced and expressed (cf. Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984; Vabo, 2015).

One explanation for differences in working conditions between female and male gendered work which has been suggested is that male discourse in relation to control and economy may have affected power relations and devalued female-gendered reproduction work (Gonäs and Tyrkkö, 2015). Further, control systems, in line with New Public Management (NPM) principles, have been particularly restraining in reproduction work (e.g. Berg et al., 2012; Davies and Thomas, 2002; Selberg, 2012). In addition, management technologies in accordance with NPM principles may be less compatible with the rationality

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practiced within caring work (e.g. Westerberg, 2006). It has also been suggested that deprofessionalisation and distrust have been consequences of how performance management systems have been implemented in welfare services such as education and elderly care in Sweden (Montin et al., 2017). The extensive focus upon performance results has even been interpreted as a hindrance to tackle the main problem of poor working conditions (Johansson, 2019).

To address some of the problems of NPM, public organisations are seeking to reform management to trust-based management (Dir. 2016:51; Elmersjö and Sundin, 2021) with a focus on increasing trust at the local level. However, when management practices are explored, studies demonstrate that managers' authority and actions may differ depending on more or less invisible norms and values inscribed in the setting (e.g. Aoki, 2015; Andersson and Tengblad, 2009; Dahl, 2009; Levay and Waks, 2009; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Despite the fact that horizontal segregation is described as 'the Achilles heel of Nordic claims to greater gender equality' (Martin 2011 p. 217), how public management is shaped, interpreted and practiced at the local level in different types of gendered work is rarely compared. Thus, to understand what the norms and values in the setting mean for the authority and actions taken by managers, there is a need for comparative studies of how government is interpreted and management is practiced in types of work permeated by *different* values and norms. In this study, the theoretical point of departure is gendered norms and values which, traditionally, are linked to the type of work.

In this study, water supply entails technical work and is considered to be predominately male both with regard to the symbolic meaning of masculine tasks and the bodies of those who do the work (Wajcman, 2011). On the other hand, elderly care is associated with caring and domestic work and is often considered to be predominately female both with regard to the symbolic meaning of feminine tasks and the bodies of those who perform the tasks (Sahlin-Andersson, 1994; Selberg, 2012; Simpson, 2009). However, although gender distribution within an organisation often corresponds to the gendered meaning of the work, it is not self-evident. Instead, it is argued that the individuals who do the work always have the potential to perform differently (Orlikowski, 2016 p. 93). Thus, how gendering is constructed and what it means in terms of inequality must be studied in its specific context (Ashcraft, 2013; Britton, 2000). In order to challenge assumptions regarding the relation between gender distribution and gender practices in different types of work, gender-mixed secondary education has also been selected for the study. Further, in order to reveal variations, in addition to interviewing both men and women as managers in all three types of work, different types of work as well as the same type of work between several municipalities have been compared. The actors studied are managers who are engaged in public management. In their roles they are key actors involved in constructing how management is shaped in the specific part of the organisation they lead (cf. Skagert et al., 2008).

### Aim of the study

By comparing elderly care, education and water supply at the local level in several municipalities, how management is shaped and practiced in work with

different gender connotations is empirically explored. The study aims to explore whether interpreting and practicing management at the local level is a contributing mechanism which may link gendered structures, norms and values in the type of work with how managers' authority and status is expressed in their daily work. The overall aim is to contribute to an understanding of the role of management in how inequality in working conditions and status is created and reproduced.

### Type of work as a gendered frame for interpreting management

A common conceptualisation of a gendered organisation is that gender is embedded in working life and is present in the organisation's processes, practices, ideologies and power relations (Acker, 1992). According to Acker's (1990) definition, the concept of gendered organisation is not only a matter of bodily segregation and numbers in organisations and occupations, it also implies that action and allocation of power, control and status are structured around gender concepts such as male and female, masculine and feminine. A significant body of research in this area discusses the concept *gendered* in relation to how rules, documents and social institutions create hierarchy, segregation and inequality within organisations (e.g. Acker, 2006; 2011; Andersson, 2012; Grosen, et al. 2012; Pullen and Simpson, 2009). In these studies, focus is often on the processes of doing and undoing gender based on cultural pictures of the ideal worker as a man or a woman. Further, current studies emphasise that the way work is organised may also be relevant to understanding gendered practices in work settings (e.g. Johansson, 2016; Storthe cm et al., 2017). However, while earlier research has contributed with important knowledge in this area, studies on the links between gender, the organisational setting by type of work and practices are sparse (Ely and Padavic, 2007; Regnö, 2013). In recent years, though, there has been studies of organisational spaces (e.g. Tyler and Cohen, 2010) and occupations (e.g. Aschcraft, 2007) as a material base for gender identities. In the Nordic setting, studies have analysed the institutional context and impact of public management in elderly care (Meagher et al., 2016; Vabo, 2015) as well as the relation between specific tasks and gendered notions in retail work (Johansson, 2016). Some studies demonstrate that organisational prerequisites and working conditions for managers differ between different types of work within a horizontally segregated public sector (e.g. Björk and Härenstam, 2016; Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014). However, such studies do not fully theorise how gendered work shape and reproduce management practices.

Tilly's (1999) point of entry for analysis how inequality arises, is cemented and transformed helps to understand the problem of gender inequality between different types of work in the sex segregated labour market. Tilly describes the creation of inequalities in society and working life as a process containing certain steps (see Figure 1). The starting point is the historical tendency to categorise workers. The second step is to link tasks and work objects with the category, such as women and men. In the third step, work with female connotations is separated from work with male connotations which is in line with most gender scholars. Tilly suggests that it is the linking of an exterior category, such as gender, with interior categories, such as division of work tasks within the organisation, which contributes to create inequality in working life.

Thus, for Tilly, it is the categorical separation of work and gender which is the key to understanding why the way work is organised in separate spheres may create inequalities in working conditions between men and women. That is, the separation of gendered types of work creates possibilities to govern, allocate resources and control work differently. For example, using the theoretical work of Tilly, Tomaskovic-Devey et al. (2009) note that actors react to this categorical separation by using the status, skill and cultural knowledge related to type of work when making claims on organisational resources (see also Stainback et al., 2010).

In the same theoretical structural tradition, Barley and Tolbert (1997) suggest that type of work is the institutional frame which may shape how actors make claims on organisational resources and further how public management is constituted, interpreted and practiced. In this study this frame is seen as a construction of the historical context, norms and values (ibid) inscribed in both the bodies who have traditionally had responsibility for the tasks (Bradley, 1989; Hearn, 1984) and in the nature of work (Charles and Grusky, 2004; Pettinger, 2005). The nature of work is understood in terms of work tasks, such as operating machines and caring for humans, which have different gendered connotations. Furthermore, the characteristics of the work object, such as material objects and living objects (e.g. Kohn et al., 1983), are a very relevant classification principle to understand gendered work and the gendering implication for management and professional practices (cf. Johansson, 2016; Pettinger, 2005). Thus, it is suggested that the linking of the nature of work in terms of tasks and objects with the practitioners' bodies is the gendered frame for interpreting management.

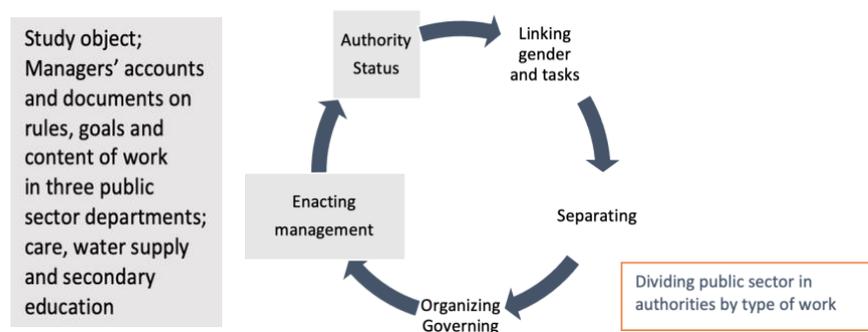
Gender studies demonstrate that the process of linking gender and tasks and separating the spheres follows historical patterns which have led to the devaluation of female gendered work (e.g. England, 1992). For example, the exclusion of women from technology objects and tasks has shaped the gendered connection between technical work and meanings around masculinity such as rationality, skill and expertise (Wajcman, 2011); while female gendered work with living objects and caring tasks has its roots in women's associations within the private realm and in the assumption that the skill needed in care is embodied by women (Simpson, 2009). Other studies discuss rationality in female and male gendered work and how these rationalities organise managers' and professionals' actions differently (e.g. Björk et al., 2011; Waerness, 1984). According to this theory, the lack of clear boundaries in caring and their tacit and under-conceptualised knowledge imply that care work is incompatible with control systems which accentuate specialisation, rules-based decisions and predictable processes in which everyone behaves in the same way (cf Davies, 1995). Further, management principles in line with NPM have been accused of strengthening the tensions between reproductive care work and bureaucratic control systems (Westerberg, 2006).

Gendering mechanisms are said to be immanent and very difficult to empirically demonstrate (e.g. Martin, 2006). For example, we know little about the relationship between the gender of work and management practices (cf. Britton, 2000). However, how management is shaped and interpreted at the local level in organisations is possible to investigate. To be able to empirically explore

the relationship between management and gendered work, this study aims to compare management practices, authority and action in work settings with different gender connotations in several municipalities. Even if this study cannot test causality between gender and management practice, the intention is to contribute with a missing link in knowledge on how generic values and norms on gender are enacted by management in ways that may reproduce or change inequalities between different types of work.

In conclusion, drawing on Tilly's and other structural theories on the importance of studying links between structures and agency in the allocation of resources, power distribution and status (see e.g. Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003), a model for the exploration of the inequality process in the public sector is applied which describes the design of the present study (see Figure 1). The starting point is the second step in the model: the gendered division of the public sector. Another focal interest is organising and governing the studied work setting and particularly phenomenon which might change practices, such as NPM. The focal unit of this study is the fourth step: how management is practiced. Finally, the analysis searches for differences and similarities in authority and action between men and women as managers and particularly between managers in the chosen types of work. The circularity of the theoretical model means that it is hypothesised that changes in management practices might change status and power which in turn either break the link between tasks and gender, or strengthen that link.

Figure 1. A model of how management practices may lead to inequality (grey marked boxes indicate the empirical study)



## Method, Cases and Research Process

In Sweden, hierarchical segregation in municipal organisations has decreased; in 2019, 70 percent of all municipal managers were women (SCB, 2020). However, municipalities are still very segregated by the nature of work and thus organised into different types of departments. Women primarily work with people and are managers in caring and education departments, while men work and are managers in technical departments. Today, departments with female connotations are very dominant in municipal organisations in Sweden, where caring and education constitute the main part of municipal obligations.

Although, caring, education and technical departments are performed in the same municipality they differ in work tasks and work objects, and are thus subject to different national legislation and political boards. This institutional and organisational separation means that, in line with Tilly’s theory on inequality, work can be organised differently. Previous comparative research conducted within the Swedish public sector shows that caring and education operation managers have larger spans of control, less organisational support and less access to hierarchical networks between organisational levels, than managers in technical operations (Björk and Härenstam, 2016). For example, the majority (69%) of managers in technical services, only 20% of managers in caring operations and 26% within secondary education had less than the reasonable number of 16 employees reporting to them.

As gendered work and how it shapes management is being explored, municipal departments which differ both in terms of gender distribution and the nature of work have been chosen. These are units with their own managers who have responsibility for staff, budget and assignments. The focal units for data collection and analysis are thus a local formal division providing caring (elderly care and home care), secondary education or water supply. The departments are all organised hierarchically with managers in different hierarchical positions, even though the units can differ in size. This selection of social settings is used to understand the theoretical focal object of the study, i.e. the type of work and its relation to gender and management practices. In this study, water supply (Water) is an example of a technical and traditionally male-dominated service (see gender distribution of the service in Table 1). In caring service (Care) and in upper secondary education (Education), employees deal with people as their main work objects. Education (upper secondary) was a male-dominated service in the past, but is now identified as gender-mixed. Care is a traditionally female-dominated service. In both Water and Education, a postgraduate education is required for both managers and staff; while in Care, a postgraduate education is required by managers but not required by staff. The three activities are tasks which municipalities are obliged to carry out in accordance with the law; i.e. they are regulated by laws such as the Act on Public Water Services and the Environmental Code (Water), the Social Services Act (Care) and the Education Act (Education).

*Table 1. Percentage of women by employee group in Swedish municipalities in 2019*

	Percentage of women
Care work	89
Upper secondary education	56
Engineering (the category encompasses more than just water engineering)	37

Source: SALAR, 2019

In order to make the variation in the organisation of these three types of services more visible, 28 interviews were held in two municipalities. To gain a broader picture of the material, two interviews were also conducted with managers in two additional municipalities. The two main municipalities were

selected, based on size, to provide variation (one large city and one medium-sized town in West Sweden). The form of local government differed between the two locations: the Social Democrats in the large city and a liberal/right wing in the medium-sized town. In terms of marketisation none of the studied departments are local companies. Further, the large city did not have a system of choice regarding Care and School, while the medium-sized town did so (although there is a monopoly regarding Water).

Respondents included line managers in various hierarchical positions, and the selection was based on type of work. Assisted by contact persons in the municipality, the researchers selected individuals within the departments, and the municipal executive who would most likely be able to provide relevant information on how control was exerted within their type of work and organisation.

The main material consists of 30 interviews with 32 respondents, conducted in 2012, with managers in Water (four men and one woman), Education (seven men and four women), and Care (three men and five women). Within all departments and municipalities, the head of department, head of operation(s) and first line managers have been interviewed. In addition, managers and colleagues at the municipal executive level in the two main municipalities have been interviewed (six interviews with eight respondents). The material also comprises discussions between the researchers and management teams in the three types of department, and in the two municipalities where the majority of the interviews were held. These group discussions occurred both prior to the study and in connection with feedback on the results. In addition, the material includes documents such as government regulation of the three occupations Water, Education and Care and further internal documents such as goals and descriptions of work content of the departments.

In order to capture how management is shaped at the local level, it was important to be attentive to the respondents' perceptions of management. The interviews were therefore loosely structured and lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were recorded and ethical issues, such as information about the aim of the study, the promise of confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the research, were emphasised in the beginning of each interview. Initially, the respondents defined the aspects of control which they viewed as important, described the various forms of control (where control was formulated), and how they responded to it in their work. The interviewer asked respondents how they viewed the dilemma versus possible opportunities for dealing with control. Themes discussed were goal conflicts between different forms of control, and between control and activities in the department, as well as the control of managers' responsibilities. The interviewer explored the respondents' narratives with adaptable follow-up questions, until the respondent's narrative and perspective were well understood. In order to lessen the risk of forming a glossed-over picture of control and its consequences, the interviews focused on descriptions of how control was dealt with in descriptive terms, and the consequences of control in the day-to-day work, rather than on the respondent's, or the organisation's, values or opinions of how control *should* proceed (Repstad, 1993). As has been observed, gender and gender inequality are often created unreflectively in working life (Martin, 2006). Focusing on how control

was dealt with in the day-to-day work yielded narratives about control and its consequences, without the respondents always being aware of the complex picture they were conveying, or how the activities and events they related produced and reproduced the role of gender in the work (Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014). The respondents were also encouraged to analyse the narratives during the interviews, e.g. by being asked to explain how the activities in the narratives should be understood.

The analysis began with multiple readings of the transcribed interview material. After reading and re-reading, coding was begun according to a method inspired by thematic inductive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, the themes of the management practices presented in the result are based on an inductive analysis of the transcribed interview material. With the advent of new public management, control of the organisation has been emphasised through clearer financial control and new reporting and control systems focused on measurable performance and demands for transparency and documentation (e.g. Bejerot and Hasselbladh, 2013). The interviewees can use different terms to describe the practice of these technologies, for instance customers can be named as parents, pupils, family members or service users and auditing can be termed inspecting. However, public sector technologies such as customer and auditing have been chosen to capture the common meaning in the practices described by the interviewees.

A starting point in this study is that comparisons reveal variation in how management as an enactment of gendered work is constituted (cf. Tarrow, 2010). A comparison of different departments reveals the institutionalisation process which links a manager's action to the gendered structure of the work. Further, one benefit of comparing different social settings is that gender structures, which are more or less taken for granted if only one organisation or one type of work is studied, are revealed (Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014). It is an advantage with a comparative study when the chosen settings are similar in some aspects but differ in the aspects which are the focus of the study. In this study, the social settings are all services organised by municipalities and in the studied services the head of the department, head of operations and first line managers have been interviewed. This means that their perception of how they handle control and use management technologies in their daily work as managers and the consequences of their actions, are possible to compare. However, the study's social settings have been strategically selected to represent differently gendered work.

The chosen social settings for study are three departments in both municipalities. However, the number of analytical cases and their limits were not entirely given. The cases have been defined successively during the research process. *In the first step*, each department in each municipality was analysed and coded as a separate case. At this stage there was a focus on similarities and differences between women and men in different management positions within the department. The analysis focused on how management was shaped in the department, and on what the managers were allowed and not allowed to do and obtain (e.g. resources and support) in order to influence, take control over and facilitate the meeting with management technologies (forms of control). *In the second step*, similarities and differences between municipalities and departments were compared. The comparative analysis focused on the respondents' room for

manoeuvre, norms and rules which affected their actions, and how control systems were constructed according to the type of municipality and tasks within the departments. In the comparative analysis, the focus was also on how the gender of the type of work structured the action and the control, and further on how gender attributes were used to force individuals to carry out their work and handle public management in a way which replicated or revised traditional gender structures such as subordination, concealment and depreciation of expertise. Furthermore, formal documents were analysed which focused on the objectives of the work and on how detailed and specific the legislation of the work was described. These documents have been used to gain a broader picture of the respondents' narratives.

To protect interviewees' identities, individuals are referred to in the presentation of the results via three themes of management practice and type of work. This decision is based on the successively and inductively definition of the cases and thus on the understanding that the results primarily differ according to the type of work and not between municipalities, individual's gender or manager's hierarchical position. Moreover, by successively and inductively comparing similarities and differences between the interviewees' experiences of management in and between the different departments, two cases were created: male-gendered Water and female-gendered Care and Education. Therefore, the focus of this study is on gendered type of work, on how management is practiced and on what constrains managers' authority and actions. This means that Water is presented as a male-gender case while Care and Education are presented as female-gender cases. However, in order to facilitate the reader's understanding of the manager's authority and action, type of work and hierarchical position in terms of first line and higher positions managers is noted in the text. Further, when there are differences between municipalities and within a department it is noted in the text.

## Comparing How Management Practices Are Shaped in Differently Gendered Work

This section presents how public management is shaped in the analysed Water, Education and Care administrations in the chosen municipalities.

### Management practices on customer relationships and auditing

In all of the studied municipalities and departments, the respondents describe how regulatory and customer demands for transparency have increased, and how supervision has taken on a stronger auditing role. In all municipalities, however, Water differs from Education and Care with regard to how customer relationships and audits are shaped and influence a manager's authority and action.

Respondents from Water describe how the clear legislation which governs what must be done and how it must be done creates opportunities for the respondents to delimit the assignment vis-à-vis the customer. Through precise legislation, the customer knows what the organisation is expected to deliver and what the assignments will cost. The detailed legislation also creates consensus between the respondents and the supervisory authority concerning what the

assignment entails, what constitutes good performance and what must be documented. However, respondents from Water relate that there are also aspects of the legislation which are open to interpretation. As a result, supervisory authorities may impose unreasonable demands on managers and their departments. It is important, the respondents argue, that shared understanding of how the legislation should be interpreted is created in a collaborative process. For example, there may be copious correspondence between Water managers and the supervisory authority, and the managers hold frequent meetings and dedicate a great deal of energy to the transmission of their knowledge about the work and the requirements they must meet to the supervisory authority.

*... so, actually, you try to teach this person or these people /.../ in the Environmental Administration [the supervisory authority]. [That] is quite a job. (First line manager, Water)*

Within Education and Care, the relationship with customers (parents, pupils, family members, or service users) and supervisory authorities is described as more controlling. Respondents from Education describe how parents have become more aware of their power.

*... this generation of parents is much more aware, of course. /.../ so, I believe there is some anxiety in all schools. After all, no one wants to be reported to the Schools Inspectorate. (First line manager, Education)*

As the respondent describes in the quote above, pupils' parents are aware that they can impose demands on the school. If parents do not feel that their children are being given the desired support, they can always report the matter, take their views to a higher level in the municipal organisation, or move their child to another school. This pattern also applies to Care. As the goals of the work are perceived as being open to interpretation, respondents from both Education and Care say that it is difficult to know where the boundaries of the department's assignment lie when "customers" contact them. Instead of clear boundaries for the objects and the tasks in the operation, the respondents relate that they must take personal responsibility and interpret the boundaries of the assignment. Combined with strict budget frameworks, this lack of clarity makes it difficult for managers to offer customers the services they expect.

*I wish I had that. /.../ [boundaries] in relation to the public and family members, I mean, [so] that [the customers will] have the right expectations [based upon allocated resources] when the person moves in. (Higher position manager, Care)*

Respondents from Education and Care also describe a remote relationship with the supervisory authorities. Within Education, in particular, the respondents relate that control by the supervisory authority has changed from what used to be a collaborative effort, where the supervisory authority provided helpful suggestions for the day-to-day work, to the current situation of auditing and non-conformance reporting.

*Although we are not inspected that often, it is still a present threat. /.../ they [the supervisory authority] have been given more of a policing function. (First line manager, Education)*

As the respondent from Education describes in the quote above, audits by the supervisory authority are seen as a threat rather than part of a collaborative effort, as described by managers within Water. This pattern also applies to Care. Respondents from both Education and Care describe how the supervisory authorities audit and impose demands based on the law and guidelines without considering the resources the department has been allocated by the municipal executive. As individual managers have little opportunity to influence the budget, there is a sense that the managers and their staff are made accountable, regardless of what resources the municipal executive has allocated.

*... their [the supervisory authority's] particular assignment is to ensure that we are complying with the law. They are not always especially pragmatic. /.../ it is not their job to make it happen [the practical aspects of operations], it is their job to make sure we comply [with the law]. So, it is our job to make sure we find a way. (Higher position manager, Care)*

In response to increased demands for transparency, there is a great deal of documentation in all three types of department. Within Education and Care, however, the respondents relate that a great deal of documentation is carried out because the managers are afraid that the supervisory authority will complain of errors and non-conformances, and also due to fear that the department will be reported by “customers” (cf. Johansson 2019).

*... you have to be on top of things and truly write it all down because otherwise you end up in trouble. /.../ [if the supervisory authority] or the mass media or relatives or someone [criticises errors and non-conformances]. (First line manager, Care).*

Water managers are given control over customer demands and the audits of the supervisory authority through clear assignment specifications which encode the tasks in the operation as something which needs skill and expertise; further, these clear specifications set boundaries for the tasks. Water managers are also allowed to use their expertise in the department to influence what should be audited by the supervisory authority. The understanding of Education and Care does not structure such possibilities. As the quote above illustrates, the respondents from Education and Care instead relate how they try to protect themselves and their departments by documenting and creating administrative transparency.

### Management practices regarding financial control

In all studied municipalities and departments, the respondents describe strong financial control. However, in all municipalities, Water differs from Education and Care with regard to how financial control is shaped in practice.

The Water managers' expertise is integrated into financial control in that managerial knowledge of the work is emphasised and sought out in the budget process. The respondents relate that a thorough understanding of the objects and the tasks in the operations is necessary in order to understand the national laws of the sector. This implies that it is the managers, with their knowledge of the operations and legislation, who provide the politicians with input for the financial frameworks.

*... after all, it is the committee [the politicians] who decide the budget, but they assume that we [higher position managers and first line managers] are the ones who have things under control and set the goals based on the demands imposed on our operation. Under the law. (Higher position manager, Water)*

As the respondent describes above, politicians decide on the financial frameworks for the operation but the decision is based on the managers' input. Politicians' trust in managers' expertise and understanding of the objects and tasks in the operations means that managers are involved in financial decision-making. Thus, by using the expert status of the objects and the tasks in the operation, the Water managers are allowed to take control of financial decisions.

When financial control is designed for Education and Care, managerial knowledge of the objects and the tasks in the operation is not sought. Concrete tasks, working methods and levels of ambition are not discussed in relation to financial control in either of these departments. Instead, the respondents say that they are given a set amount of money which they must adapt to and be accountable for, even though they have not been involved in the formulation of either goals or budgets. For example, one manager relates that they are handed a fixed sum, but they are not told how that amount was calculated. Sometimes, the managers say it was erroneously calculated, e.g. there is no money allocated for temporary replacement staff.

*... so, I might feel about the budget: I am given a certain amount of money. That is what I am allowed. And I have to adapt accordingly. I cannot affect the budget. /.../ I have not drawn up a budget. But I have to be accountable for my budget. (First line manager, Care)*

The respondents in both Education and Care say that they must be accountable for a budget which is not consistent with the other goals and needs of the work in the operation. For example, one Education manager describes how a new reform was implemented even though the reform caused goal conflicts between municipal financial control and national governance of the operation. The state and the municipal executive committee presumed that the reform was cost-neutral, but the reform entailed costs for items such as developing and implementing a new grading system and the need for new educational materials.

*And all of a sudden, there are new courses with new textbooks. Of course this is not cost-neutral. But the general claim has been that it is cost-neutral. [There is] a huge risk of exceeding the budget. Or else you stick to the budget, but*

*then the pupils are sitting there without educational materials of their own and this makes learning more complicated for them. (First line manager, Education)*

While the expert status of the Water operation gives managers influence and opportunities to discuss goal conflicts at higher organisational levels and take control over financial decisions, Education and Care managers do not have the opportunity to discuss their work tasks, methods or objectives with the politicians who set their budgets. Rather, it is the Head of Administration and sometimes even the Head of Operations who have meetings with the politicians. However, in these meetings goal conflicts between the budget and work tasks are not discussed (cf Forsberg Kankkunen, 2009; Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014). Instead, as the respondent describes above, for Education and Care this implies that all Care and Education managers must find their own solutions, and they understand that it is their responsibility to shape good public services within the given financial frameworks. They have been informed of the financial constraints and they know there is no point in discussing the budget with the politicians.

*... they [the politicians] expect us to deliver good care based on the money we have. They do not expect me to come back and complain and say this is impossible /.../ they do not want to hear that. (Higher position manager, Care)*

Public management in line with New Public Management implies centralised control of the objectives, at the same time as responsibility is decentralised to local managers (Rasmussen, 2004). However, in practice, Water managers seem to influence and take control over centralised financial decisions, while the assumption that prerequisites for the work are found naturally in the bodies performing typical female jobs seems to encode a silence in Education and Care (cf. Davies, 1995). This silence obscures the needs of Education and Care department managers to take responsibility for the delivery of good services within the given financial frameworks.

### Management practices on setting boundaries of the work assignment

The differences in managerial focus in Water, Education and Care are also affected by how work boundaries are shaped.

Detailed legislation applies to Water, which provides support when managers discuss finances and the conditions for work activities with the politicians in charge. The precise legislation provides clarity as to what must be done and how the tasks must be financed (Swedish Water and Wastewater Association, 2011). For example, there are specific standards related to safety, production and subsequent inspection procedures. Such standards are thought to have increased in scope and are perceived as supportive of managers' work.

*... it is absolutely a source of support, the legislation /.../ you can't just refer back to the rules and try to interpret them. We also have legislation with which we must comply and [that provides] a somewhat different sort of clarity /.../ what we are allowed to do and not allowed to do. (Higher position manager, Water)*

As the respondent describes above, the precise legislation, which clearly lays out which tasks must be performed and how they must be financed, is supportive of a manager's efforts to set boundaries for their department's assignment. When municipal executives want the departments to perform tasks other than those included within the framework of the financing model for the operation, they are either allocated additional resources or the tasks are not performed. Thus, visible and definable tasks within the operation imply that managers within Water are consulted when boundaries are set for the work of the department.

The legislation within Education and Care which clarifies how work tasks must be financed by the municipality is more general than in Water. Within Education, state control of operations has changed from management by rules to management by objectives (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). In the past, both resource allocation and work organisation were more closely regulated, but this was changed in the 1990s through a new curriculum and reforms (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 1995). The new management implied a multitude of targets in auditing schools, and a focus on pupils who must be provided with service according to their individual learning processes (Stenlås, 2009). In the past, there was more focus on knowledge targets alone, and the respondents describe how academic failure used to be blamed on the pupils themselves. Now, the respondents say, there is increasing emphasis on the school's responsibility for the pupils' learning and socialisation. Thus, a female gendering of Education is accentuated by emphasising responsibilities such as socialising children and, further, the changed legislation has made the tasks less visible and definable than before (cf. Ashcraft, 2013). The changes also accentuate the tension between control systems and the operation. For example, it is difficult for managers to identify and make visible which tasks must be financed by the municipality (cf. Westerberg, 2006).

*... there are guidelines and quality standards, but not that you can quantify in that way. (Higher position manager, Education)*

The situation for managers in Education is similar to that for managers in Care who report that the national laws and guidelines which govern operations do not encode clear boundaries for the departments' assignments. These must instead be interpreted by the municipalities. Within Care, there is a feeling that the operations are presented to the general public on the basis of laws, guidelines and levels of quality which creates legitimacy, but this is hard to match in reality. According to the Care managers, politicians do not want to talk about how it can be difficult to deliver a certain level of quality due to financial constraints. The result is a discrepancy between goals and reality which is perceived as dishonest. When cutbacks are made or when managers do not believe it is possible to provide good service within the budget framework, the municipal executive may communicate to the managers that they must lower the quality of the tasks in the operations. What this means in concrete terms is left to the managers to interpret and assume responsibility for.

*... now they just talk about it, and they do that from the top down, from the committee [the politicians] and down the line, that what we do should be good enough to be acceptable.*

*That is the quality we can afford /.../ [But] what is good enough to be acceptable? (Higher position manager, Care)*

One head of administration in Care describes an attempt to break the silence about what is needed to perform the work, and to make the tasks and conditions more visible and definable by clearly spelling out the assignment, and the conditions required to fulfil it. This manager attempted to concretise the assignment by preparing detailed guidelines of the activities in the care work, e.g. what the employee has to do within elderly care. However, this was met with criticism from the supervisory authority.

*... so, we had prepared [detailed] guidelines for Elderly Care and we were severely reprimanded for it. (Higher position manager, Care)*

The background to the criticism is that the Swedish Social Services Act and regulatory supervision are based on the premise that every individual's needs should be met based upon their specific situation. The problem, according to the manager who was interviewed, is not the requirement that everyone's individual needs should be met, but that when the conditions necessary to meet the individual needs do not exist, this is obscured because the operation's assignment is so vaguely formulated.

The more specific legislation and definable tasks within Water emphasise the need for skills and expertise in its assignments, and they further encode the assignments as visible and as something which is possible to relate to when seeking to influence municipal financial management. However, in both Education and Care goal conflicts between financial control and their assignments may be obscured by the vaguer nature of their assignments and tasks. It is not, however, completely self-evident how these operations' assignments can be delimited. There has been a change in the content of the assignment within Education: today, the focus is no longer solely on knowledge targets, but rather there is a broader duty of operation towards pupils, and the work content is not as detailed and regulated as in the past. Further, the gender composition has changed and today more women work in the operation than before. Thus, the female gendering of Education has been accentuated by the changes, and the respondents indicate that a weak position has been created for them, with managers describing how it is difficult to influence municipal objectives. Within Care, the respondents describe how the strict financial control has created a need to reveal and specify the assignment and the tasks. Such attempts to meet the system are stymied, however, with arguments on how the individual need for care being obscured by specifications. Thus, assumptions that the prerequisites for the work are inherent in the individual performing the job in the operation seem to structure the respondents to carry out the work and handle management in a way which reinforces the existing status of the operation.

## Discussion

By drawing on structural theory this study contributes to an empirical understanding of how gendered work shapes management practices at the local

level. The comparative study suggests that, depending upon the type of work, the options for handling management differ. In spite of political majorities in the municipalities, the managers' hierarchical positions and individual gender managers' authority and action followed the traditional gender logic in the type of work. This pattern was confirmed in additional interviews in two further municipalities and similar observations have been made in earlier studies comparing organisational prerequisites and working conditions in the same types of work (Björk and Härenstam 2016; Forsberg Kankkunen, 2014). Thus, according to this study of management practices, gendered norms and values inscribed in the tasks and objects, and linked to the gender of those who have traditionally done the work in these operations, also seem to be fundamentally integral to the practice and performance for those leading the work. The comparative analysis shows several examples of managers' accounts of subordination, concealment of the particular challenges in handling goal and mean conflicts within Care and Education, as well as depreciation of their expertise (cf. Westerberg, 2006). In Water, the managers have an autonomous expert status and take, and are allowed to take, control over the interventions of management. According to this study, gendered norms in the work seem to be transmitted to how managerial work is performed. Thus, the results illustrate that agency in management may serve as a linking mechanism between gender norms and values at a structural level and status of work at the microlevel in line with structural theory (cf. Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003; Tilly, 1999).

The nature of work sheds light on the complex interplay between management and the type of work. The visible and definable tasks in Water imply that it is clear to all actors involved what can be expected and how problems within the operation can be solved. This is combined with influence over the control and budget of the assignment. In contrast, the lack of clear boundaries and the invisible and indefinable character of the work tasks in Education and Care make it difficult to communicate the limits of the assignment. Here, the local managers have little influence over the budget (cf. Johansson, 2019). All these differences may affect the status of the work.

However, management in practice is not solely a matter adapted to the nature of work. Instead, it has been empirically illustrated how Water's power is reproduced by bringing attributes, such as expertise and codifications, to the fore and using them to protect the content of the work (cf. Ashcraft, 2007, 2013; Kirkham and Loft, 1993). Within Education and Care, the type of work structure creates a silence which obscures the expertise, needs and conditions of the work. There seems to be a norm that the prerequisites for the work are found naturally in their staff (cf. Davies, 1995; Fletcher, 1999; Rasmussen, 2004). In both Care and Education, this norm associated with reproduction tasks was transmitted to the managers and used to force them to carry out the work and handle management in a way which reinforces subordination. Respondents within Care also describe how strict financial control brought a need to uncover and specify the assignment and the task. Such attempts to meet the system were, however, stymied. This is an example of concealment of the particular challenges of handling goal and mean conflicts and difficulties to delimit the assignment in this type of work. It seems that management in practice is based on norms

associated with a caring rationality meaning that the caregiver is expected to fulfil the needs of the care receivers, even if resources are limited (Westerberg, 1992).

Ridgeway (2013) notes that status of the work is an essential mechanism involved in the creation of inequality. The results of this study illustrate how management is practiced and reinforces differences in status between different types of work. This study also illustrates that secondary education seems to have changed the gender connotation and status of work in certain respects which in turn has affected manager's authority and space of action. For example, female gendering has been accentuated by a greater emphasis on the duty of socialisation and service brought about by deregulation. Further, today, it is more difficult for the respondents to delimit the tasks and show expertise through codified knowledge. The changes also accentuate the tension between the control systems and the work. In secondary education, it was also noticed that the gender composition of the work is undergoing a change and it is becoming a female-dominated work (cf. Kirkham and Loft, 1993). Thus, by comparing departments with different gender compositions and the type of work in several municipalities, this study provides insight into the ways in which gender norms and values both are inscribed in the work itself and are used to maintain and change the gender connotation, and further what this gendered frame means for management in practice.

### Methodological considerations

The design of the study does not allow the making of causal inferences between gender and manager's authority and action. The present study adds knowledge on one link in the chain from the institutional level to micro level working conditions in how gender differences are created. As Britton (2000) notes, gendering can be constructed at many different levels of society, and a change at one level need not be related to another level. In this study, it is argued that it is within departments at the local municipal level where institutional and societal norms and values are expressed. The analysis indicates systematic differences in how management was shaped between Water departments on the one hand and Care and Education on the other. Managers in work with female connotations in comparison to managers in the Water departments reported less influence, e.g. in how to obtain sufficient resources and support, to delimit the goals and demands on the service and to meet auditing demands in a reasonable way. This implies that it is harder to achieve a balance between demands and resources, not only in their own work situation but also that of their employees. Thus, it can be presumed that staff working conditions can be affected and so contribute to explain worse conditions in female gendered types of work, which is in line with findings in earlier studies (Aronsson et al., 2021; Cerdas et al., 2019, Nyberg et al., 2021).

However, to explore complex processes such as gendering in working life, multi-level and multi-disciplinary studies are needed (Bolin and Olofsdotter, 2019; Härenstam 2009; Härenstam and Nyberg, 2021). Other studies of the institutional frame, such as legislation, financing and auditing systems with a comparative design, are needed to explore possible gendered differences at the institutional level. This study on the change towards increased female gendering

of secondary education indicates that authority, skill discretion and space of actions decreased not only for the employees but also for the managers when the legislation changed towards more targets on socialisation of the pupils in addition to targets on knowledge. In a similar vein, it has been argued that changes to Swedish work environment law have been implemented in a sexist way with decreased support from the inspections implementing the law in reproduction work (Steinberg, 2011). During the 1990s regulation of elderly care decreased (e.g. via more emphasis on the recipients' choices) and in education (e.g. by taking away the maximum number of pupils in a class). At the same time, work environment laws regarding male-dominated types of work have been more regulated, e.g. by formulating when working alone is prohibited or when certification of training for driving trucks is needed (ibid).

According to structure agency theory (e.g. Barley and Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984) actors are not “doomed” to act in accordance with structural constraints. It is a thought-provoking exercise to “change” the type of work in some of the cited examples. Would it be a “possible case” if e.g. managers from Water prepared detailed guidelines for water quality in the municipality and were then reprimanded in the same way as Care managers are? Or if the Care manager tried to teach the supervisory authority about the requirements they must meet in order to fulfil the goals and keep to the law in the same way as managers from Water do? Or, if a Water manager was told to adhere to the stated budget even if water supply pipes were broken during the winter and had to be mended in the same way as Education managers have to implement a politically set school reform without resources? Such questions can be raised in order to hypothetically explore what is hindering giving managers in reproduction work similar authority and space of action as managers in other types of work. There are several research cases showing how a technological-economic rationality has affected budget principles in management which have had negative consequences when implemented in reproduction work (e.g. Westerberg, 2006).

### Implications

Theoretically, the study adds knowledge to the understanding of how management and inequality in working conditions is created and reproduced by gender and type of work. Comparisons of departments have proven fruitful to understand a section of institutional processes which link a manager's action to the gendered structure of the work. The results of this study could be useful in public sector organisations by drawing attention to how management practices in different types of work are shaped. Such a structural strategy could be an additional means to other strategies aimed at increasing gender equality in the public sector. For example, a vast number of performance audit systems are developed for comparisons of municipality services with the same type of work, such as education, without reflecting on whether auditing might have different consequences compared to audit systems for other types of services (Johansson, 2019). Although, based on this study, changes appear to be moving towards increased inequality, it could be hypothesised that if management practices in reproduction work are shaped in ways which instead allow managers to increase their discretion in their actions, status and working conditions of the work might

improve. This might break the link of female gender to the work which is in accordance with Tilly (1999) who argued that breaking the connection between the organisation of work and categorisation by gender, age, class, or ethnicity should reduce overall inequality significantly.

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