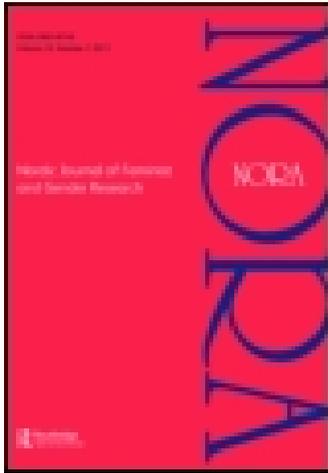


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# Job Rotation Meets Gendered and Routine Work in Swedish Supermarkets

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**ABSTRACT** Swedish food retail trade employers are required to counteract the strain of checkout work through job rotation. As checkout work tends to be seen as a “women’s job”, this makes the industry a potentially interesting site for negotiations within gendered organizations. Based on interviews with nine food retail trade managers, this study investigates how job rotation is incorporated into specific work organization models, focusing on the implications of work requirements, organizational divisions along the lines of gender, and the visibility of gender patterns in the managers’ descriptions. Three different models of job rotation were distinguished analytically: limited, partial, and extended, differentiated by the extent to which job rotation was used. While these different models had specific effects on gender patterns of working within the stores, these effects seemed accidental rather than conscious, which corresponds with the managers’ more general tendency to make gender into an organizational non-issue. Job rotation was also found to be enabled not by training but by the standardization of work tasks, suggesting that job rotation supports rather than challenges the general de-skilling affecting the industry.

## Introduction

Contemporary Swedish supermarket workplaces provide potentially interesting sites for the negotiation within gendered organizations. In tandem with the association between front-line service work and feminine behavioural norms/aesthetics (Hall 1993; Adkins 1995), supermarket checkout work has traditionally been seen as a “women’s job”, and cashiers have almost exclusively been women employed on a part-time basis (Tolich & Briar 1999; Sundin 2001; Kvist 2006). Working on the register is monotonous and repetitive, leading to a high incidence of debilitating occupational physical conditions (Zeytinoglu et al. 2004). Furthermore, work performance can be closely monitored either directly or technologically by both customers and management (Kvist 2006). As knowledge about organizational activities obtained at the checkout is limited and considered peripheral, the gendering

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of checkout work is related to the under-representation of women among managers (Sundin 1998; cf. Broadbridge 2007). Male workers (constituting one-third of the workforce in the Swedish food retail trade (SCB 2012)) have primarily worked the store floor and been employed on full-time contracts. Women too have worked on the store floor, but their roles have reflected specific gendered conceptualizations of the products and customers (cf. McDowell 2002; Pettinger 2005); thus, gendered divisions tend to run between the different segments. While men are more likely to work in departments selling hardware and electronics, women dominate in clothing and kitchenware. Men have also been associated with tasks perceived as requiring more skills, such as butchering (Sundin 2001; Kvist 2006).

In contrast to the traditional organization of work, existing workplace regulations do not allow workers to spend their whole workday behind the till (Sverige. Arbetsmiljöverket 2011). Based on this regulation, the Swedish Labour Inspector filed a financial penalty in 1998 against the supermarket *Prisextra* in Stockholm, demanding that the store implement job rotation in order to counter static checkout work (Yrkesinspektionen 1996). After a series of appeals, the matter was resolved by the Swedish government, which stipulated that checkout work must be limited to two hours at a time and must follow a break of at least 15 minutes or the performance of other work tasks. It was also mandated that employees should not spend more than four-fifths of their working days behind the counter (Regeringsbeslut 2001).

Organizing cashiers to rotate “out of” the checkout simultaneously calls for other workers to rotate “into” the checkout. As such, the requirement to introduce job rotation involves a simultaneous requirement to eliminate the gendered boundary that has separated the checkout and the cashiers from the rest of the store’s activities. Echoing this theoretical potential, policy-makers and some researchers have articulated job rotation as a method for reducing gender segregation and improving gender equality in food retail trade workplaces (Jämo 1993; Christenson 2000; Drejhammar & Karlqvist 2006). Furthermore, job rotation is often included in normative concepts such as “good work” (Johansson et al. 2013) and constitutes a potential break from the processes of standardization, de-skilling, and cost reduction characterizing the food retail trade in Sweden (Sandgren 2009; Boman et al. 2012) and in other Western countries (Broadbridge 2002; Esbjerg et al. 2010; Price 2011).

Contrasting with the rhetorical gloss that seems to dominate much discussion on job rotation in the food retail trade, the limited literature suggests that job rotation is an ambiguous and heterogeneous concept. In the supermarket studied by Kvist (2006), notions of the checkout as “women’s work” meant that male workers managed to evade their assigned hours at the checkout through informal negotiations between peers, despite the use of job rotation. According to these men, they did not have the time to leave what they perceived as their “actual” job, which they took pride in performing, located in “their” segment of the store floor. In Sundin’s (2001) study of nine grocery stores, job rotation was implemented as a method to increase efficiency, but existing gender structures made it difficult to implement. Butchering, associated with men, was ultimately excluded on the basis of being too skilled, whereas checkout work, associated with women, was excluded based on the notion that the store floor workers were reluctant to work there. The expected opposition of

workers (both at the till and on the store floor) has also been used by managers as an argument for why job rotation is impossible in practice (Christenson 2000). As the introduction of job rotation tends to be part of a larger reorganization, the positive effects on the physical environment seem to be mitigated by a general intensification of work and an increase in routine replenishing (Drejhammar & Karlqvist 2006). These studies also indicate that the lack of awareness of how gender-structured organizational activities and a general downplaying of gender as an organizational issue significantly added to the difficulties of implementing change (cf. Coleman & Rippin 2000; Acker 2006).

Drawing on interviews with nine food retail store managers, this study contributes to the limited knowledge of how job rotation is planned, understood, and incorporated into specific work organization models in food retail trade workplaces. The article examines: Which work tasks and positions are part of or excluded from job rotation, and how does this affect the job description of workers in the stores? Is the specific use of job rotation creating gendered divisions of work tasks, positions, and spaces? If so, where are these divisions located? In what ways do the managers make gender visible as an organizational issue, and what implications might that have for the use of job rotation?

### **Organizations as gendered**

This study focuses on a number of demarcated aspects (work requirements, gender divisions, and the visibility of gender) that are part of the on-going everyday activities, practices and processes involving work requirements, job evaluations, wage setting, supervision, recruiting, and the more informal “doing the job” that together constitute a gendered organization (Acker 1990; 2006; see also Korvajärvi 2002; Kvande 2002). According to Acker (2006), these processes create hierarchical “regimes” within particular organizations, which, despite varying in terms of hierarchical steepness, degree of segregation, visibility, legitimacy, and control, all maintain inequalities (Acker 2006). The inequalities generated by organizations are not limited to gender, but also include inequalities based on class, race/ethnicity, age, and sexuality. That we chose to focus this study on gender therefore constitutes another demarcation of the complex processes of organizations.

Our interest in the creation of gender divisions is sensitive to the complexity and ambivalence that constitutes most reorganization processes (cf. Sundin 2001; Kvande 2002; Acker 2006). Rather than being automatically changed by reorganizations, the order that is being challenged can be re-stabilized by “restoring processes” (Abrahamsson 2009). The focus on work requirements is motivated by the loading of work tasks implied by job rotation. Furthermore, the introduction of new modes of organizing work is a gendered process that negotiates not only the distribution but also the content of work tasks and positions (Kvande 2002). Changes that affect the skill requirements of work and/or the social construction of specific skills (cf. Cockburn 1983) tend to have an impact on gender structures and discourses, and vice versa. While work tasks that are made important “suddenly turned male” (Abrahamsson 2003), those that become draining and deskilled have a tendency to be perceived as “women’s work” (cf. Sommestad 1994).

Our interest in the visibility and legitimacy of gendered divisions in these organizations is motivated by Acker's prediction that a high degree of visibility and a low degree of legitimacy in relation to gender enhances the opportunities for change (Acker 2006: 454). More often, though, gender tends to "disappear" from organizations or to be seen as "beside the point" (Acker 2006: 452), despite the existence of gender segregation. The act of distancing gender from an organization often includes emphasizing the asocial, rational logic of the activities and reducing gender to a private matter of individual men and women rather than the outcome of internal organizational processes (Korvajärvi 2002; Grosen et al. 2012).

### **Study design**

This article reports the results of an interview study with nine food retail store managers, conducted in the autumn of 2010, which was designed to identify work organization and gender patterns in large Swedish food retail stores. As the study was part of a larger project on gender and work in food retail organizations, the interviews were also intended to identify one organization for a subsequent in-depth investigation. We chose to interview store managers because their remit of strategic planning and their overall handling of store activities imply that they can be expected to possess the resources to oversee and influence such activities. One effect of this decision was that all of those interviewed were men. In general, female store managers are few in number in the food retail trade, and, in the larger stores, they are almost non-existent. The fact that only men were interviewed is thus a reflection of the gender composition of the trade. During the analytical process, we have tried to reflect upon how this shaped the knowledge created, especially concerning the extent to which issues of gender were visible/invisible in the managers' meaning-making about the organization.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on location, with durations of 35 to 70 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. During the interviews, the managers were asked to describe the employment structures of their stores, the variety of work that their employees perform, and the manner in which work is organized in the store. All managers described their work organization as a "rotation" system and referenced scales of monotony versus variety in work tasks. Nevertheless, it was evident that the specific practices and meanings that the managers associated with rotation varied greatly. To understand this variation, the thematic analyses were guided by the following questions: How are work and workers organized in the store? What work tasks do men and women perform? Is job rotation used? If so, in what manner? Was the rotation a matter of "work task exchange" (rotation between the same work tasks in different segments of an organization), "horizontal work task loading" (rotation between different but comparable work tasks), "vertical work task loading" (rotation between tasks with different skill and qualification levels) (Hudson 2002), "cross-functional rotation" (moving employees across organizational boundaries to different jobs throughout an organization), or "within functional rotation" (when an individual remains within the same organizational function, moving laterally within an extended scope of work) (Casad 2012)? These questions enabled the variations to be analysed according to the

extent to which job rotation was used. As a second step, the models were analysed in relation to work requirements and gender divisions. The empirical description included in each topic was again scrutinized in order to seek both a unifying pattern and contradictions and alternative interpretations. Finally, we analysed the ways in which the managers described (or did not describe) issues of gender and its relation to the stores' activities. To what extent were issues of gender made visible or invisible in the managers' descriptions (cf. Acker 2006)? Were issues of gender considered external and distant or internal and integrated into organizational activities? (cf. Korvajärvi 2002; Abrahamsson 2009)

In line with the qualitative emphasis of our research project, the investigation was limited to nine stores and nine interviews. Our main concern was not with "how many" but rather to investigate how the meaning of job rotation is produced and how it is mediated in the organization of work. Hence, nine stores and nine male managers were included in the interview study. The average number of employees across the nine stores was 52. Taken together, the stores had similar gender patterns to the industry as a whole: 30% of the employees were men, part-time employment contracts were more common than full-time contracts, and 66% of the men and 37% of the women worked full time. All the interviewed store managers were men, and men also predominated among department managers. Six of the nine stores were large supermarkets with a vast selection of stock ranging from food and clothes to houseware and electronics. These six stores each had a small pre-store (in Swedish, "*förbutik*") adjacent to the entrance. A pre-store typically houses the store's customer service department, sells games and/or instant tickets, and functions as a post office representative. The pre-store is not characterized as repetitive work according to health and safety regulations (Sverige. Arbetsmiljöverket 2011). Therefore, whereas existing regulations encourage the inclusion of checkout work in job rotations, there is no equivalent incentive to integrate the pre-store with the store floor. The stores had also installed self-scanning devices, which were used by approximately 30% of their customers. Three of the investigated stores were marketed as discount alternatives, offering low-priced food and food-related products and employing 20 to 30 permanent workers. These stores had not installed portable scanning devices, nor did they have pre-stores.

### **Limited job rotation—female cashiers and male stockers "helping" each other**

Four of the stores (three small discount stores and one larger superstore) used a limited form of job rotation, characterized by the cashiers' limited participation (formal or informal) in stocking. In these stores, the employees were divided into three departments: the checkout area, groceries, and fresh products. The majority of employees worked as cashiers. To counter the monotony and physical strain of work at the checkouts, the cashiers worked for a limited time stocking shelves on the store floor. Limited job rotation was the model that most aptly corresponded with traditional gender segregation: nearly all of the cashiers were women, and all of them were employed part time. Conversely, the male employees worked predominantly on the floor replenishing stock or as managers, primarily with full-time contracts. In these stores, the gender distinction between the checkout counter and the store

floor, which linked women to a monotonous, narrow, and customer-oriented space, was evident.

In one of the smaller stores, limited job rotation meant that the cashiers were scheduled to work on the store floor replenishing stock one day each week. Before the change, the store manager explained, the workers were each “stuck” in one department; today, cross-functional mobility was greater. According to Bengt, manager at one of the other smaller stores, this type of job rotation implied the following:

In the checkout department, they have their time on the register, and they rotate every day. The rotation means that they do something else to counter the static work position. This has to do with the union and with our laws, and it helps them to learn what goes on in the store. [...] Everybody should be able to work everywhere, really, not the more specific [tasks]. You don't require a cashier to go and do the meat orders. That's not what it's about. You should be able to go and replenish charcuterie products. (Bengt, limited job rotation)

It is evident in this interview extract that this rotation only involved a horizontal loading of tasks; it is applicable to routine replenishing but not the skilled tasks that require an investment in training. Noting the static work position of cashiers, as well as their opportunity to obtain organizational knowledge, the manager's description appeared to be based on a perception of limited job rotation as primarily benefiting (female) cashiers rather than the organization or employees as a whole. This notion also limited the informal involvement of (male and female) stockers to temporary, as-needed assistance, as explained by another manager:

Those working on the store floor do some work on the checkouts as well, not a lot, but they fill in during breaks and things like that so that they won't forget how to work on the checkouts. Because when customer flow is high, everybody needs to help out on the checkout. (Anders, limited job rotation)

Anders describes this process as “helping”, further indicating that the rotation has not changed the gendered distribution of work tasks and responsibilities. This distribution of labour is reproduced rather than challenged by the conditional help that stockers provide; therefore, the checkout has remained a “women's job”. As argued in existing research, informal implementation on an ad-hoc basis rather than through formal scheduling can nourish resistance, permitting the stocking workers who do not want to work behind the counter to avoid doing so (cf. Kvist 2006; see also Abrahamsson 2009). The store floor employees' limited and informal participation in checkout work is also consistent with previous gender research, which has stated that women move into masculinized occupations or perform masculinized work more often than men perform work that is associated with women and femininity (cf. Kvande 2002).

In addition to the limited rotation involving checkout work, Lars, the manager of the larger superstore explained that a greater cross-functional mobility now occurred between departments on the store floor. This change, framed as

everybody “helping each other” to a greater extent, was described as a real time-saver.

L: In the previous organization of work, one or two [people] spent all day stocking the freezer; today it is done within an hour or so. It really is efficient. In addition, the dialogue with the cashiers has worked out great; they come out and help as well. It depends on the day and the number of customers, but they should come and help with the stocking.

I: So if their checkout is not needed anymore, they should go and stock?

L: Yes, and it’s the same if the checkout is in need of help, then they [the store floor workers] should return the favour. (Lars, limited job rotation)

When describing the advantages of the new form of organization and the reduction in organizational divisions on the store floor, Lars said that it allows for an on-going redistribution of workers in accordance with the fluctuating activities: “Before, you went home when you had finished your task, [...] today, you should go and help your mate out.” If more work is waiting somewhere else when you are finished with your tasks (or queue of customers), then this requirement to “help each other” implies a reduction in recovery time for both the cashier and the store floor worker. Therefore, the use of job rotation seems to intensify workloads. This result, in combination with the limited extent to which the cashiers worked outside of the checkout section, suggests that limited job rotation may be insufficient to counter the health and safety risks of monotonous and repetitive checkout work.

### **Partial job rotation—men and women rotating between the checkout and segments of gendered goods**

The second model of job rotation described by the managers, labelled “partial job rotation”, was used in three of the larger superstores. In these stores, workers rotated between working with stock in one department on the store floor and working behind the checkout. Each of these stores was divided into four departments: hardware, non-food, food, and diner. Following the reorganization processes that occurred approximately a decade ago in these stores, the checkout no longer constituted a separate department; instead, it was integrated with the store floor, and each department was responsible for staffing a number of checkout counters.

In contrast to limited job rotation, partial job rotation, which involves eliminating both the cashier position and the checkout department, required previously gendered patterns and gendered job requirements to change. Per described how the implementation of job rotation was initially strongly resisted by employees, including both cashiers and store floor workers. However, today:

For the younger workers and new recruits, rotating is natural; they are not accustomed to anything else. And I promise you, if they continue working in

the store, they are the ones who will keep working until they retire. Historically, few workers have retired at the age of 65. They may retire at the age of 62 with a partial disability pension. Historically, you have not continued working longer. So, it [rotating] is the only answer. However, costs partly increase; moving between tasks takes some time, and you become less effective. Nevertheless, I still believe that there is no other way. (Per, partial job rotation)

Previous research has reported how reluctance to change job directions (both actual reluctance expressed by workers and an anticipated reluctance foreseen by managers) tends to be used as an explanation for why job rotation is difficult to implement (cf. Christenson 2000; Sundin 2001). While Per acknowledges that changes might be met with reluctance, he frames this as a generational issue that does not outweigh the advantages of job rotation.

In all three stores, the restricted and controlled front-line service tasks conducted in the pre-store were excluded from the general job rotation. The fact that nearly all of the pre-store employees were women shows that the association between women and customer-orientated labour appears to remain prevalent despite the formal elimination of the cashier position. When asked about the exclusion of the pre-store from the job rotation, Jan explained that, although the pre-store workers also staffed the self-scanning checkouts, creating a within-function rotation, he admitted that they spent most of their time performing front-line service work:

They [the pre-store workers] might have the most “checkout time”; however, their work tasks are so varied, and, above all, 90% of their work tasks are performed standing up. (Jan, partial job rotation)

Hence, Jan justifies the organization of work by referring to the classification of pre-store work as non-repetitive according to the health and safety regulations (Sverige. Arbetsmiljöverket 2011).

In these stores, men predominantly staffed the hardware department, and women handled clothing and footwear. Thus, partial job rotation reproduced the gendered construction of products and customers and echoed the symbolic connections between masculinity and building as well as those between femininity and clothing (cf. Pettinger 2005). Full-time contracts were more common in the department associated with men, especially in the hardware department, in which all but one of the staff were men. “For some reason, they have a tradition of working full time”, Per says. Hence, this gender division between segments of goods also appeared to justify and facilitate the neutralization of gender differences in working conditions, particularly the predominance of men among full-time employees.

Two of the managers stated that a more extended use of job rotation on the store floor would be preferable, as it makes work more efficient. The problem was that it would not contribute to satisfying the store’s quality standards:

We’ve tried that [extended job rotation], but it caused chaos; working, for example, on both fruit and vegetables and kitchenware and then the checkouts made it far too scattered. [...] Of course, it would be preferable if everybody

could do everything [...], but when looking at the store as a whole, total rotation between all segments is very hard to manage; people just wouldn't cope. (Ulf, partial job rotation)

According to Ulf, the range of stock and the knowledge of different products that this required of workers was the reason for not using more extended job rotation: "The larger the supply, the more questions you get, and that makes it difficult to be allocated abruptly to a different segment", Ulf says. Hence, on the one hand, the allocation of workers to different departments created gendered divisions in the organization; on the other hand, it enabled workers to obtain some degree of specific skills.

### **Extended job rotation—women and some male workers rotating between the checkout and routine replenishing on the store floor**

The third model of job rotation was described by the two managers of the mid-sized superstores. Integration of the checkout with the different departments of the store floor characterizes this "extended job rotation" model. In these stores, the majority of workers rotated between working on the checkout and stocking the store floor according to a specific schedule that corresponded with the arrival of goods. This model departed furthest from the traditional gender patterns characterizing food retail trade workplaces, as it involved eliminating the gendered separation between the checkout counters and the store floor, as well as the gendered divisions between departments on the store floor. As in the superstores that used partial job rotation, the pre-stores predominately staffed by women were excluded from the general job rotation, and this was justified with references to the differences in health and safety regulations.

The first step towards this form of work organization was to integrate the checkout with the store floor (which occurred a decade ago in the two stores); hence, extended job rotation constituted a form of remodelling of partial job rotation, motivated by the desire to increase the efficiency of stocking. When describing how stocking is organized in the store, with workers stocking together segment by segment, Stefan said:

It's like flies surrounding a sugar cube; in the blink of an eye, it's completed. Within the hour, eight containers or so have been stocked, and I'm talking about big containers. (Stefan, extended job rotation)

This new organization was enabled by a simultaneous increase in the division between routine work tasks (stocking), performed by the majority of workers, and the more skilled tasks (stock management), which became centralized among a few supervisor positions.

The perks that we see are that you get more efficient replenishing, and you manage to finish most of the time. [...] and there are downsides as well. We have removed some of the responsibilities of the staff. (Stefan, extended job rotation)

Extended job rotation has left the majority of employees with less skilled work tasks than they were responsible for previously. A closer look reveals that it is the spatial allocation of workers across the store floor that has been extended, whereas the content of work tasks has been reduced.

The pursuit of efficient stocking has also meant that working hours have been restructured in the stores so that the bulk of stocking is performed in the early morning, before the store opens for business. This change implies that fewer people are working during times when the customer flow peaks, compared to hours when the customer flow is low. This allocation of working hours also influences the work content, as it decreases workers' involvement in direct service work. Stocking work is also a strenuous task that involves monotonous lifting performed at a rapid pace, suggesting that the increase in routine stocking risks creating new health and safety problems in supermarket workplaces.

Among the nine stores included in the study, these two stores had the lowest percentage of male workers (21%, compared to 30% in the nine stores overall). Neither of these stores, in contrast to the larger superstores using partial job rotation, contained hardware or clothing/shoe departments, which are two categories of goods that can be considered thoroughly culturally gendered. Although in theory this model greatly challenges traditional gender structures, its potential was limited in practice by the actual composition of staff and commodity supply.

### **The unintentional results of gender—making gender an organizational non-issue**

The previous three sections focused on the use of job rotation in the stores and its implications for work requirements and the creation of gendered organizational divisions. It became evident that the different uses of job rotation affect gender patterns in the stores. Nevertheless, how this mattered in each individual store seemed accidental rather than being discussed or explicitly reflected upon within the organization. In order to make explicit connections between the managers' descriptions of job rotation and their more general comments about activities in relation to gender, this section concerns the visibility/invisibility of gender.

Importantly, gender was not mentioned by any of the managers as a motivator for implementing job rotation, and they were generally reluctant to speak about their organization in terms of gender. Gender was thus not visible during the interviews other than as a result of direct questions from the researcher. However, once the managers began to differentiate gender-blind concepts such as “workers”, “supervisors”, and “managers”, in terms of men and women, the existence of gendered organizational divisions suddenly became visible.

How did the managers tackle existing gender patterns? When asked about the high proportion of women working in the stores, many managers referred to traditions concerning women's domestic care obligations and the flexible working arrangements used in retail:

Historically, many [women] have entered retail, I think, because it has been a part-time job. It has been possible to combine paid work with being a housewife, or stay-at-home mum, “the children are small I can work one

evening, or perhaps I can work during the day time, or” and so on. Retailing has had, or does have, lots of part-time positions. In that way, I think, working in retailing might have suited those who are not the main breadwinner. (Per, partial job rotation)

Here, retail work is contrasted with the masculine role of breadwinner and seen as more suitable for (female) employees, who are perceived as putting their family obligations before their working life. Framing the issue as a win–win situation for the perceived logical needs of both retail employers and women workers also helps to overshadow the ways in which these two proclaimed “circumstances” have historically been entwined in the gendered construction of retail work. Despite the fact that the behavioural norms and aesthetics of retail and front-line service positions have been thoroughly associated with women and femininity (Hall 1993; Adkins 1995), the predominance of women workers in the industry is explained, in the interview extracts, in terms of men’s unwillingness to work there rather than women’s superior ability to perform the job. Indeed, it was young men who were singled out as the most “capable workers”, referring to their perceived ability to be fast and industrious stackers.

Everybody has their own role in the workplace; young and old, men and women. You can’t have only young men, even if you think their performances are the best, because then you’ll have a playground. You must have a mum in that gang, and you must have . . . the whole spectrum. (Jan, partial job rotation)

When stressing that young male workers are superior as long as they work alongside and are controlled by older women, Jan is clearly guided by notions of perceived natural gender differences. Even if the manager used the family-based gendered constellation to describe the most preferable workforce (cf. Ollilainen & Calasanti 2007), he also stated that, due to downsizing, the possibilities for new recruitment were limited, and consequently he had not yet been able to achieve such a constellation.

Some managers referred to the composition of goods as grounds for gendered divisions in their organization. The fact that the specific gendered meaning of certain goods can work either to reinforce the feminization of retail work (Pettinger 2005) or, by contrast, to make it “alright for a lad” (McDowell 2002: 51) is emphasized in the literature. One manager links the increase of male workers in his store to their “manlier” store style:

We have more and more male workers. There are more men in the superstores than in food retailing at large. Perhaps it has to do with the fact, looking at traditions and such, that we’ve a manlier supply, so to speak; hardware, non-food, including electronics, sportswear; many areas like that. The work tasks are also heavier in superstores, physically speaking; many segments include very big volumes. It’s not a conscious choice from our side that we want more men; it’s just that more men than women are looking for jobs here. (Ulf, partial job rotation)

Ulf was clearly guided by notions of gender and the perceived abilities, tasks, and goods that by “tradition” are associated with men and masculinity. Emphasizing that the increase in male employees is not a “conscious choice” but rather a matter of the gender composition of the applicants yet again externalizes gender in relation to the organization. Another manager also referred to the different goods to explain the predominance of women in retailing:

One might perceive retailing as having softer values, especially clothing and retailing of that sort. We have our fair share of non-food products, many of them soft; clothing, homeware, toys, and products of that sort. In that department, all but one of the workers are women. In the hardware department, [the employment structure] is the reverse; it is very tradition-bound. (Per, partial job rotation)

Describing specific goods and tasks as being traditionally associated with men or women helps, again, to naturalize the gender divisions in the store as being determined somewhere else.

What these meaning-makings have in common is that they enable the managers to tackle the gender patterns in their organizations as being, on the one hand, based on taken-for-granted characteristics of the activities and on the other hand, “natural” differences in the desires and abilities of male and female workers of particular ages. Taken together, the logical and rational entity of the organization and the essential gender differences brought into it by the workers lead to the gender patterns of the organizations becoming both neutralized and naturalized. Gender is neutralized, as the potential conflict implicit in the existence of gender divisions becomes glossed over and positioned as something outside the jurisdiction of the organizations (cf. Korvajärvi 2002). Gender is also naturalized, as gender-based differences in power, resources, and working conditions are explained as something determined by essential and natural gender differences (cf. Grosen et al. 2012).

### **Concluding remarks**

Drawing on an interview study with nine retail trade managers, this study investigated the ways in which job rotation is understood, planned, and incorporated into specific work organization designs in supermarket workplaces. It focused in particular on the implications for work requirements, gendered organizational divisions, and the visibility of gender patterns in the managers’ descriptions. While all the managers described their organization with reference to “rotation”, the use of job rotation was heterogeneous. Depending on the extent to which job rotation was used, three different models were distinguished analytically: limited, partial, and extended job rotations. The models had different effects on organizational gender patterns. While limited job rotation meant that the checkout remained a job primarily for female cashiers, partial and extended job rotations meant that both male and female workers rotated between the checkout and the store floor. However, in both of these models, the constrained, customer-oriented pre-store—in which only women were working—was excluded from the job rotation. In addition, while partial job rotation

reproduced gendered divisions across different segments of the store floor, extended job rotation challenged these divisions, as workers rotated across the whole store floor in addition to the checkout.

Based on these findings, we can conclude that, while the different uses of job rotation have specific effects on organizational gender patterns in the stores, these effects seemed accidental rather than conscious in managers' descriptions. When the managers were explicitly asked to reflect on their store's gender pattern, their answers show that the matter of gender was neutralized and naturalized. Of course, the fact that gender patterns are rendered seemingly invisible in the eyes of male managers does not mean that gender is not visible from other perspectives within the same organizations. However, the fact that the managers considered gender a non-issue for their organizations meant that job rotation was considered a method for improving the physical environment or increasing efficiency; consequently, only the gendered divisions that relate to these issues are negated and changed. This becomes most evident in the separate organization of the pre-stores, which means that a binary gender pattern prevailed despite the integration of the checkout into the job rotation. Although difficult to determine empirically, the question is whether the separate organization of the pre-store affects the opportunity to integrate the checkout into the job rotation in the supermarket. If so, what becomes vital is not whether the pre-store or the checkout is perceived as "women's work" but rather the maintenance of gender differences through the division of (gendered) spaces.

Regarding the implications for work description, we conclude that, regardless of the model, the practices associated with job rotation were limited to a horizontal loading of work tasks. The use of job rotation was made possible not by increased training but rather by standardization and a reduction in the number of skilled work tasks. In this case, job rotation is part of, and does not challenge, the more general deskilling of retail work (Fuller et al. 2009; Sandgren 2009; Price 2011). While job rotation might result in a reduction of gendered divisions at the level of the workplace, the simultaneous changes in work requirements (an increase in standardized and routine work tasks) constitutes a gendering process that reinforces the low status of retail work and, by doing so, its association with women. This paradox is made very evident by extended job rotation, which poses great challenges to gendered divisions but has left most workers performing only routine stocking and checkout work. The association between deskilled work and women is underpinned by the fact that the two stores using extended job rotation also had a very low percentage of male workers, in relation both to the stores included in this study and the industry as a whole. The few male workers who were present were predominately young men. The finding that young men are less reluctant to partake in work perceived as "women's work" than older men corresponds to previous research showing that young men tend to see themselves as just "passing through" retail (or service work) on their way up the labour market ladder, as opposed to working there in the long term (McDowell 2002). We do not want to downplay the fact that job rotation—in most, but not all stores—has led to a negotiation of the gendered divide between the checkout and the store floor. However, if supermarket workplaces are filled with jobs reserved for women and some young men passing through, the reduction of within-organizational gendered divisions becomes less exigent. Based on

this study, we ask whether the main “restoring processes” (cf. Abrahamsson 2009) taking place in food retail organizations might perhaps not involve the restoration of organizational divisions but rather the exit of male workers from the industry.

In theory, job rotation is infused with the potential to counteract gender segregation and the development of standardization and rationalization characterizing the food retail trade industry. For this theoretical potential to be translated into practice, however, the use of job rotation must be discussed in relation to matters of work content and gender patterns. Based on the managers’ descriptions, we have found no indications of any such discussion taking place in the nine stores. On the contrary, the managers were reluctant to speak about their organizations in terms of gender, despite the evident existence of gendered divisions. Instead of work content, it was efficiency that stood out as the principle against which the use of job rotation was evaluated. Our study suggests that in the context of low-skilled service work (such as food retailing) that is otherwise characterized by gendered and routine work, the practices associated with job rotation are negotiated and altered along the lines of standardization and gendered divisions.

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