

Workplace health promotion and absence culture are more important than structural factors as determinants of local differences in sickness absence among social care employees in Swedish municipalities

Ingemar Åkerlind, Cecilia Ljungblad, Fredrik Granström

School of Health, Care and Social Welfare, Mälardalen University, Sweden

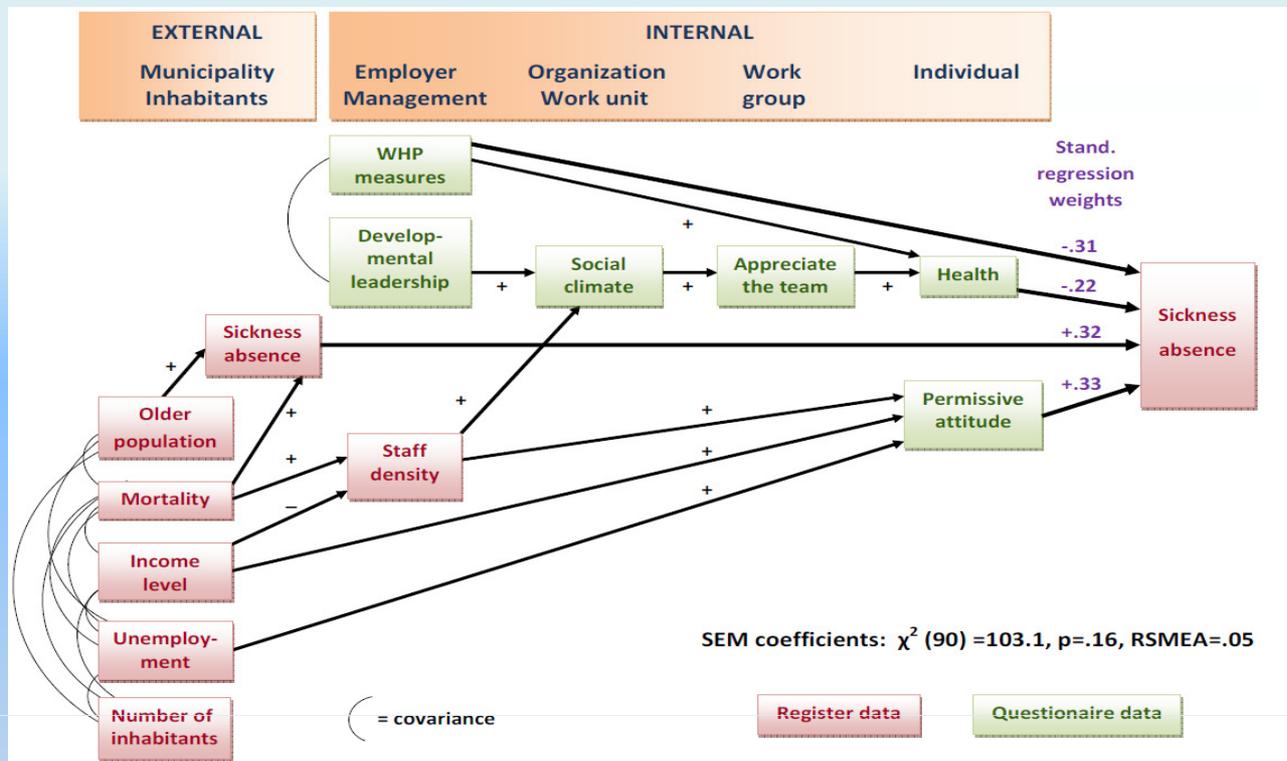
Background

In Sweden there are large unexplained differences in sickness absence between regions as well as between employers within the same trade.

Aim: study sickness absence differences between municipalities in their social care staff in relation to **internal** workplace factors as well as **external** structural factors in the local society.

Method

A questionnaire with focus on perceived organizational climate, health, absence culture and workplace health promotion (WHP) was sent out to 15,871 social care employees in a random sample of 60 out of Sweden's 290 municipalities. The response rate was 58%. A database of the 60 municipalities was constructed with aggregated data from the questionnaire and official registers.



Results

In a **Structural Equation Model** analysis, lower sickness absence level was related to **internal** workplace factors (access to and utilization of a broader repertory of specific **WHP measures**, a more restrictive **absence culture**, and better self-rated **health**) as well as **external** structural factors (lower rates of **sickness absence in the general population**). According to the standardized regression weights, the supply of WHP measures was the most important predictor (total effect = .41) followed by absence culture. Although this attitude was assessed by the questionnaire, it was not related to the other internal variables but rather determined by external structural factors indicating a higher level of prosperity in the local society (lower unemployment as well as higher income level and lower mortality rate mediated by lower staff density in the social care organization). Better self-rated health was determined by a developmental leadership mediated by a better organizational climate at the workplace.

Conclusions

- The staff sickness absence level is related to local structural factors beyond the control of the manager such as absence culture and level of sickness absence in the local general population.
- However, the managers' measures concerning WHP, leadership and organizational climate matter irrespective of these external circumstances.
- **The supply of a broad repertory of WHP measures that are utilized by the employees appears to be the over all most important determinant of the sickness absence level in the organization.**

