Self-propelled Employees – Co-workership in Swedish Community Pharmacies[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this article, work in Swedish pharmacies is examined. With the Nordic concept of co-workership as a frame, the aim is to examine how employees in pharmacies view and handle their work situations and the reasons behind them. Data were mainly collected with 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews in five different pharmacies. The data were organized and analyzed by using the content analysis process. In the studied pharmacies, it can be summarized as work was carried out in a self-propelled way. Employees take an overall responsibility for the workplace, have ambition to help others and to be a part of a good team, while most of the work is carried out individually and independently.

KEYWORDS

co-workership / followership / Medarbetarskap / pharmacists / pharmacy

Introduction

The work situation in pharmacies has changed, as a consequence of the deregulation of the pharmacy market in 2009. The change from being a government-owned monopoly to a market where several businesses compete for customers and profit. A common opinion, according to Westerlund and Marklund (2020), is that the community pharmacies in Sweden have 'become too commercialized and have developed into a retail business'. This change influenced the labor market in numerous ways; with new employers, the number of pharmacies has increased by 54% (Tandvårds-och läkemedelsförmånsverket 2020), the opening hours have increased, and there are fewer employees per pharmacy (Sveriges Apoteksförening 2022; Wisell et al. 2015). The same changes have been described in Iceland and Norway because of

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the liberalization of the pharmacy market (Anell 2005). In addition, the Swedish Pharmacists Association reports that the workload for the employees has increased (Sveriges Farmaceuter 2017), which is in line with what has been experienced in other European countries, including Norway, following deregulation (Vogler et al. 2014). A Swedish government report that evaluated the deregulation found that new duties had increased the workload for the employees which created stress (Statskontoret 2013). The job satisfaction of recently graduated pharmacists has also been examined, and it was concluded that it was still high (Mattsson & Gustafsson 2020). To summarize this brief situation overview: the work situation for the employees in community pharmacies has changed regarding several aspects such as new employers in the market, increased focus on retail business, change in work assignments, extended hours, and fewer colleagues at the workplace. There is, however, little knowledge about employees' perception of work in Swedish pharmacies. In this study, we are thus interested in understanding how employees view and handle their work situation in Swedish pharmacies of today. Since pharmacies are a part of the healthcare system and have a primary mission to ensure good and safe use of medicine by distributing, dispensing drugs, and providing advice and information (SFS 2009:366, 2009), they are important to study.

Work is a multifaceted activity that could be studied from a variety of perspectives. The concept of co-workership was selected as the framework for the study, as it encapsulates a broad view of work. Instead of fragmenting a work situation into small pieces, co-workership is concerned about the bigger picture, how the employees manage the work situation. We use the definition of co-workership by Hällsten and Tengblad stating 'how employees handle the relationship to their employer and to their own work' (2006, p. 10). Our understanding of the concept is that employees, based on their perception of their work, develop attitudes and practices to manage the work and the relationships with the manager, colleagues, and the rest of the organization. There is a co-workership whenever there is an employee-employer relationship, but it takes different expressions depending on the context (Andersson et al. 2020). In our view, by using co-workership as the lens through which we view work in pharmacies, we will be able to get a comprehensive view on being an employee at a pharmacy.

In this study, we aim to examine how employees in well-functioning pharmacies view and handle their work situations and the reasons behind. With co-workership as the conceptual framework, our focus will be on how employees manage their work, responsibilities, and engagement, as well as how they relate, trust, and cooperate with others in the workplace.

The research questions (RQs) are:

- How do the employees perceive and manage their work and responsibilities?
- How do the employees view the relationship with:
    o   colleagues?
    o   the store managers?
    o   other parts of the organization?

Pharmacies are an important part of the healthcare system, and this study contributes to the empirical insights about the work in pharmacy outlets that are considered well-functioning. This knowledge could inspire the development of work in other pharmacies

that have the potential to be beneficial to the employees, the employer as well as the patients/customers. In addition, this study also adds to the collected knowledge about co-workership, particularly in a profession-based settings, where there is a leader with authority over the work.

The disposition of the article is as follows: first, a review of the theoretical framework of co-workership is presented. In the next section, the method is described and followed by the result section where the empirical findings from the interviews are presented. Thereafter comes a discussion of the results followed by strengths, limitations, and future direction. The study is finalized with conclusions.

Theoretical framework and earlier research

The use of co-workership can only be found in a Nordic setting, and it was also defined based on circumstances prevailing in this geography, mainly concerning the way work is organized. The reason the Nordic countries differ compared to others is often explained by the coordinated market economy and the way society is organized (Gustavsen 2007). The changes that have occurred in Sweden since around the 1960s have greatly influenced working life, which several authors have addressed (see e.g., Danielsson 2013; Gustavsen 2007; Kilhammar & Ellström 2015; Tengblad & Andersson 2014). New legislation, regulations, and reforms were introduced, which increased financial security, workplace safety, and job security for employees. This strengthens the employees' position in the labor market, which is in line with the intention of The Employment Protection Act (Ferdosi 2020). The law that grants employees the right to be involved in decisions that affect their work and the workplace. A co-worker can thus, in this context, be claimed to be somebody who takes responsibility for the performance, prevents errors from occurring, speaks his/her/their mind, and takes initiative (Danielsson 2013). Overall, Swedish organizations are based on more post-bureaucratic ideas that emphasize dialogue and shared responsibility (Kilhammar & Ellström 2015), and a culture based on post-modern values such as power-sharing, cooperation, and decentralization (Andersson & Tengblad 2007). Andersson et al. (2020) suggest that the special nature of work life in Sweden, together with Norway and Denmark, is the main reason the concept of co-workership is needed.

To operationalize the concept, we begin from the precondition that the concept describes a developed co-workership or constructive co-workership, as Andersson et al. (2021) refer to it when they use it for a similar purpose in their study. Hällsten and Tengblad (2006) describe the prerequisites for a constructive co-workership that their research has identified. Relationships at work should be based on trust and openness to create a constructive co-workership. A community spirit that brings the group closer together and good workplace cooperation is also stated as important. Being engaged in the work, the authors emphasize, to the organization, and having the perception that the work is meaningful, is necessary. Finally, taking both responsibility for the work situation and initiative promotes co-workership in a more developed form. Other research contributes to a validation of the concept and emphasizes similar characteristics (e.g., Larsson et al. 2022). Danielsson (2013) connected taking responsibility, *cooperating* well, being open with experiences, taking initiative, and participating in strengthening the community as characteristics of a co-worker.

Five forms of co-workership have been identified by Tengblad (2003). The differentiation between the forms is based mainly on shared values and attitudes within an organization (Andersson et al. 2020) concerning who assumes responsibility in combination with what level of independence the work is performed. The first form is the traditional co-workership, where the employees to a large extent follow instructions and have a very limited impact on how the work is organized. The second form is organizational-oriented co-workership where the work is guided by routines, procedures, and rules but the employees take responsibility to navigate between them. Group-oriented co-workership is the third form, where the group has an extended responsibility not only for performing the work but also for planning it. The fourth form is individual-oriented co-workership where the responsibility is on an individual level to plan and perform the work. Finally, there is the fifth form, the leaderless co-workership, where the employees take responsibility for almost all decision-making concerning work. The authors do not claim that these theoretical forms exist in a clean-cut way in an organization, but rather in various levels of mixtures (Andersson et al. 2020).

Only a few studies about co-workership have been published in peer-reviewed journals and none of them in the context of pharmacies. Bergman et al. (2017) conducted a study on how employees in healthcare perceived co-workership and concluded that trusting each other's competencies, common goals, and working over professional or organizational boundaries was important. In that study, co-workership was viewed as a collective process formed around the patient. Others have studied the implementation of the idea of co-workership in a county council and a state-owned company, comparing two strategies, by using either a top-down or a more participatory approach (Kilhammar & Ellström 2015). Andersson et al. (2021) studied how a developed co-workership can be retained over time. They identified three strategies to support it: first, secure appropriate staffing level to promote cooperation and community spirit; second, supporting leadership that believes in the idea and act as role model; and finally, institutionalize the values.

Even if co-workership is only used in the Nordic countries, it is not disengaged from other concepts and theories concerning relationships at the workplace or how employees approach their work. Among the concepts related to co-workership are followership, empowerment, and organizational citizen behaviors. The literature regarding followership is extensive, with a primary emphasis on exploring the relationship between followers and leaders, along with the associated behaviors (Carsten et al. 2010), and in the leadership literature, it is mostly described as the object of the leader's attention or part of constructing leadership (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). Some scholars even argue that this concept is outdated, proposing the need for an alternative term that conveys greater involvement in the decision-making process (Rost 2008). Hoption et al. (2012) take it even further when arguing that it is conceivable that when employees identify themselves as 'followers', it can generate more negative feelings toward their work and diminish their inclination to go beyond the formal job requirements. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) suggest that the term 'followership' may inadvertently convey passivity, despite the literature offering a more nuanced perspective of what it encompasses. Danielsson (2013) describes that a member of an organization takes on different roles, and they form their meaning via their relationships with others, not only with the leader. The use of the terms 'follower' and 'followership' in Swedish research is limited, though there are instances of its usage (e.g., Andersson 2018; Blom & Alvesson 2015; Danielsson

2013; Lundqvist 1989). Interestingly, within the Swedish labor market, the term 'följare' (the Swedish translation of 'follower') appears to be almost non-existent in conjunction with discussions of leadership. This does not mean that followership is unimportant, it could be viewed as a part of co-workership but is only one relationship among others that the employee needs to engage in to influence his or her work.

Empowerment is another adjoint concept that has been used in several different capacities. The main idea of empowerment is to distribute decision power in an organization to the employee, and Conger and Kanung (1988) describe empowerment as a construct that is based on power and control. They state that it can be viewed in two ways, by simply delegating, or by enabling employees. Dainty et al. (2002) describe how empowerment has been included in several widely spread management concepts to enable efficiency and effectiveness. Argyris (1998, p. 99) implies that an obstacle for empowerment to flourish is that 'Managers love empowerment in theory, but the command-and-control model is what they trust and know best'. Organizational citizen behavior is another related theory. It aims to understand employees' discretionary behaviors. These behaviors go beyond the demands of what is stated in the job description, and without being 'explicitly recognized by the formal reward system' as Organ (1988, p. 4) described it in his definition, and continuing with that these behaviors could have an important positive impact on how well the organization operates. A developed co-workership could partly be seen as OCB and almost institutionalized empowerment, or as Andersson (2018 p.173) describes Nordic working life where employees "in many organizations take responsibility and initiative almost as if they were managers".

Our understanding of the dynamics between the different concepts is that co-workership primarily focuses on responsibility. Followership and empowerment, on the other hand, seem to emanate more from power and control (e.g., the leader has power to keep or to distribute to subordinates). This is where the tradition of, for example power-sharing, involvement, decentralization, and a strengthened position for the employee in the Swedish labor market, comes into play. Many employees in Sweden are used to being involved, taking responsibility, and being considered, and leaders also expect and enable that to a larger extent. Co-workership is based on cooperation between the employees and between the employees and the leader (or the organization). In organizational citizen behavior, the vantage point is more of altruism, where the employee walk that extra mile, an responsibility that the employee assumes which also may interplay with a degree of more developed co-workership.

Research design and methods

A qualitative case study approach was adopted as a research design to collect the data necessary to get an in-depth, but also holistic insight into the work life of pharmacies. A case study is suitable when less-known phenomena are studied (Gummesson 2003), when the context has a substantial effect on what is studied (Yin 2003), and when a holistic approach is needed (Denscombe 2018). The case could be described as a phenomenon that happens within a framed context (Miles & Huberman 1994). To explore work in well-functioning Swedish pharmacies should fall into this category.

Setting: community pharmacies in Sweden and its people

Community pharmacies are located throughout the country. They are physical pharmacies where individual customers can buy their prescribed medicines and over-the-counter drugs (OTC), that is, medicine that can be purchased without a prescription. The main tasks in a community pharmacy are to ensure the availability of medicine, to dispense it, to ensure the correctness of the prescriptions, give competent advice about the usage and effects of prescription medicine, and to support customers with self-care. In 2019, the sector employed 11,800 people according to the Swedish Pharmacy Association's yearly report (2022), and approximately half of all employees within pharmacies were pharmacists. In addition to pharmacists, the industry also employs pharmacy technicians and assistants. There are two groups of employees that constitute 'pharmacists' in the Swedish setting: pharmacists and prescriptionists, and both are licensed to dispense and give advice about both prescribed and non-prescription medicine. The pharmacist holds a Master's degree in Science in Pharmacy and the prescriptionist a Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy. Henceforth, in this article, the term pharmacist will be used for both groups, due to the similarities in work tasks and responsibilities when working in a Swedish pharmacy. Carlsson et al. (2012) describe the profession of a pharmacist as part of a social contract with society, with expectations and obligations concerning different stakeholders. The pharmacy technicians have post-secondary training and are allowed to advise on OTC. Another group that can be part of the staff at pharmacies are pharmacy assistants, or cashiers as they are sometimes called, and they are not allowed to give any advice on medicines but can help the customers with other products and with payment at the cash register.

The cases

The study was performed at one company operating several hundred pharmacies. The selection of participating pharmacies was made with the main objectives of ensuring size and consistency (Part 1, see Table 1) and meeting the ambition to study workplaces that were considered well-functioning (Part 2, see Table 1). These inclusion criteria, as well as the one that follows, also become a way to put some boundaries around the case, which Yin (2003) argues is important to avoid the study to expand and to secure its feasibility. A clear definition and the setting for the data collection are ways that Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest can be used to bind the case. To reduce the external factors that had the potential to influence the data, a decision was made to select pharmacies that were considered stable and well-functioning. Pharmacies that were newly established, had challenges with profitability, or were facing a temporary external event were excluded due to the suspicion that this could influence the co-workership. If a pharmacy in the organization performed on or above average on selected key performance indicators commonly used in the organization, they were considered well-functioning. Initially, six different pharmacies were selected: three pharmacies from the group of the highest performers and three that performed at the average level in the group of the largest 100 pharmacies in the chain. One pharmacy on the average level opted out due to staffing issues. A decision was made that the inclusion of five pharmacies would provide the necessary data to answer the RQs. The inclusion criteria are described in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion criteria

Part	Inclusion criteria	Rationale
Part 1	Part of the Top 100-group	Larger pharmacies with similar conditions
	Running for 3 years or more	Avoid temporary differences based on new establishment
Part 2	Productivity level among top or average	Stable productivity on a high/average level
	Stable productivity for the last 2 years	Determine that temporary events did not have major influence
	Profit through gross profit	Profitable operations on high or average level
	Customer satisfaction	Customers are satisfied with the pharmacy
	Performance index (Employee survey)	Employees find the prerequisites to perform fulfilled

For the high-performing pharmacies, 'best in class' was selected for applicable criteria. An average for all pharmacies in the Top 100 was calculated, and pharmacies closest to the average were selected. The criteria of the performance index were used to narrow the final number of pharmacies down to three in each category, top and average. Due to the possibility that the development stage of the group at each pharmacy could have an impact on the data, the five pharmacies filled in the Group Development Survey (GDQ) (Wheelan et al. 2003). The GDQ consists of 60 questions, 15 for each of the first four[1] stages in the group development model; Stage 1: Dependency and Inclusion, Stage 2: Counter-dependency and Fight, Stage 3: Trust and Structure, and finally Stage 4: Work and Productivity (Wheelan & Hochberger 1996). The GDQ includes questions about dependency, cooperation, structure, values, leadership, and the group's external relationships. All permanent employees at the participating pharmacies were invited to complete the electronic survey, administrated through using the homepage of GDQ Association. A total of 46 surveys were sent out, and 32 were fully completed. The result, based on the automatically calculated and presented report provided by GDQ Association, showed that four out of five pharmacies were at stage four in group development. This suggests that they were high-performing teams and that they concentrated on work and productivity according to the definition given by Wheelan (2005). The fifth group was at stage two, which Wheelan (2005) describes as a role-seeking stage, where the members feel secure enough to challenge each other and the leader, but at the same time try to resolve their differences.

Data collection

The data collection method was semi-structured interviews with employees and managers at the five participating pharmacies. The research questions were operationalized before the creation of an interview guide to ensure that the RQs could be answered, and the interview guide was divided into four main areas corresponding with the prerequisites for constructive co-workership: trust/openness, community spirit/cooperation, engagement/meaningfulness, and responsibility/initiative. For each area, questions were

formulated that together would give a broad understanding of how the informants perceived and related to the work, the interpersonal relationships, and the organization. The pre-defined questions covered themes like work engagement, the reason for choosing this industry as a place to work, conflicts, cooperation, and climate. The informants were asked about engagement, participation in the development of the workplace, cooperation, and interaction with colleagues, and shared responsibilities. In the interviews, the informants were encouraged to give examples to secure an accurate interpretation and to deepen the understanding of their answers. The same guide was used for all interviews, but for the store managers, some questions were slightly paraphrased to capture some additional information about their role.

At each pharmacy, all interviews were conducted by the first author. Among the 20 interviews, 10 were with pharmacists, five with pharmacy technicians, and five with store managers. Four out of the five managers were also working as pharmacists in addition to their managerial role. The selection of informants within each pharmacy (except for the managers) was made using a random number generator, a function in a spreadsheet program.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and took place at the informants' workplaces. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Quotes used in the results section are translated from Swedish to English and only minimal changes have been made to render them comprehensible when translated and taken out of context. The quotes used in this study are referred to with a number for the informant followed by a letter that indicates the pharmacy. Quotes from the managers are given a number from one to five to indicate the individual.

The Ethical Review Committee stated, after receiving the application, that ethical approval was not needed due to the nature of the data being collected. All participants were informed about the study and signed a consent form.

Analysis

As the guiding principle, the method of qualitative content analysis was used for data analysis in this study. Content analysis is a method to make well-founded inferences about the data (White & Marsh 2006) with the use of a structured approach to order and interpret data to find underlying meaning (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The use of content analysis provides a method to gain a deeper understanding when working with a sizable quantity of text (Kleinheksel et al. 2020).

After having read the transcripts, authors one and three read two of the transcripts more extensively and created the first set of codes. The remaining transcripts were read by the first author, and additional codes were formulated. This was done using inductive content analysis, described by Elo and Kyngnäs (2008) as open coding, creating codes on the go when reading. The transcripts were read several times, and new codes that capture the content were added. The next step was to create categories from the codes that captured the interpreted meaning of the data. In this state, the ambition is to reduce and order the data to be able to learn from it, and to do abstractions (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). The analysis was supported by the software Nvivo, which was used to keep track of the coded data.

Finally, the results of the coding and categorization of the data were discussed with all authors and was combined into the final set of main categories: 1) Holistic responsibility but performing the work individually and independently, 2) The ambition to help others, and 3) Eagerness to be part of a good team with a distance to head office. The categories are explained in more detail in the Results section. The data from the interviews with the managers were included in the main analysis but was also analyzed separately to find common threads within this group. In the Results section, when the views of the managers are described, it is stated that this comes from the informants in the managerial group.

Results

In the data analysis, three main categories were identified, and we will present the analysis in this section. The main categories are used as headers for the presentation of the results.

Holistic responsibility but performing the work individually and independently

Almost all informants expressed being engaged in their work and many expressed a strong emotional connection to their work. The word engagement was used in various ways, but often connecting realizing some discretionary efforts, to do that little extra, to serve the customer in a better way, or help colleagues, or in other ways improve the workplace or the operation. When the informants were asked to describe how a customer in a store can sense if the employees are engaged in their work or not, they described how it could be seen in the way the employees interacted with each other and with the customers.

A strong sense of responsibility when performing the work was prominent in the interviews, for taking care of the customers, the colleagues, and the pharmacy as a whole. The informants expressed great pride in their workplace. One of the managers described this as the team being self-propelled, and that they managed a lot of the tasks without the manager's involvement, like filling in gaps in staffing when somebody was off sick or had unwell children at home:

> I'm convinced that if I had to go and spend an extended period of time at another pharmacy, that this pharmacy would survive. (Manger 2)

To a large extent, the individual pharmacists carried out their work independently, seeking advice from each other when needed. One informant stated that what was important to the employees was not necessarily the same as those things the organization created targets around:

> [I view what is] meaningful in the wrong way, seen from the company's perspective, because what is rewarding for me is not sales, it is helping people. (Employee 1A)

The ambition to help others

When working at the pharmacy, most informants expressed how much they valued the interaction with customers. The interaction was described as important and rewarding. One informant said:

> When you have a lot of interaction with customers, you get almost instant feedback on the need for our work, and we help a lot of our customers. (Employee 2A)

The engagement in the work was described by the informants as deriving from being meaningful, that is, that the work matters to somebody. This was mentioned in nearly all interviews, the job was, and needed to be, meaningful and therefore worthwhile doing. The meaningfulness was directly linked to the customer, if they got what they wanted, or needed, and left the pharmacy satisfied, with a sense of security, or with advice that could improve their life situation, then the work has been proven meaningful. When the customer feels better, it was a sign that the work brings value to someone:

> To help people and see them leave happy, then I think it is very meaningful. (Employee 3E)

Informants expressed the importance of 'working with people' as well as being a part of improving the health of others. The ambition to help people is something that most informants described as the main reason for choosing what to study and why they entered the retail pharmacy industry in the first place. This ambition was described by the informants independent of their role in the pharmacy.

One informant described how she wanted to combine her interest in medicine and service with a decent salary when deciding what to study and where to work. Several informants described how they had the ambition to work in healthcare, but did not like blood and wounds, or as one informant described it:

> Interested in the body, and how it worked… but I have no interest in cutting people. (Employee 2D)

Some informants described how working in the pharmacies could become somewhat tedious. The pharmacists used the words 'push forward' when describing that they progressed the queue by pressing the button in the queue management system to call and serve the next customer. The waiting time was measured and there were targets enforced by upper management on the acceptable length of a customer's waiting time. The term 'push forward' was used in a negative sense, meaning to serve the customer very quickly, and be ready for the next one, as opposed to taking the time to help each customer in the best possible way.

There seemed to be a discrepancy between that individual ambition and the employees' interpretation of the overall business objectives. The informants expressed an understanding of the necessity of selling products to run a business, but the commitment and engagement in different promotional or sales activities was less obvious. This is, as some informants described, a balancing act, where they need to manage the time spent with each customer, both advising them and suggesting additional products:

> If somebody comes in every week to get their methadone, and I tried to push them to buy this week's additional sales product, it would be very weird. So, when the company introduces a rule like that, you must break it, so as not to damage the relationship with the customer. (Employee 1A)

Working in a pharmacy can be summarized as an important job. People visit the pharmacy to get help with their health, and the employees have the ability to do that.

Eagerness to be part of the team with distance to head office

Most informants talked about how important colleagues were for their work. The informants cared about their colleagues, the customers, and their pharmacy. The perception that their colleagues were a very important part of their working environment was often described. When describing their strength as a group, words such as trust, having fun, supporting each other, and respect were commonly used. Some informants talked about their colleagues in the workplace as family or as friends. For the most part, teamwork was described as working well when everybody was doing the best they could according to their abilities.

> We are more than colleagues. We are friends here, that is how I feel. (Employee 1A)

When asked about how conflicts were resolved at the workplace, very few informants could give an example of conflicts in the team. Almost all informants said that there were no conflicts in the group. One informant said:

> I think that it is a little bit strange and unnatural that it has never happened. There are twelve of us working here, it is an interesting question. I will ponder that. (Employee 2E)

When asked how it can be that conflicts do not occur, one informant said:

> Sometimes you can get a little annoyed with somebody, that's for sure, but that [conflicts] does not happen, no. (Employee 1C)

Informants showed the need to be a part of a good team at work. The eagerness to be part of a good team is also apparent in employees' view of the managerial role. The expectation of the manager from the employees was more about ensuring the psychosocial work environment, and less about leading and supporting the employees in their daily work. The manager was expected to concentrate on the needs of the group and to care for the employees.

This also became evident from the interview with the managers. The managers described how to a large extent the employees did their work with little need of guidance in their daily work, and how they as managers work alongside the employees most of the time. One described it as:

> I'm not a boss-boss, I'm a boss-co-worker. (Manager 2)

The importance of sharing information from their private lives was something that almost all informants highlighted. They described how they knew about each other's families, health, and personal challenges. Besides tying the group more closely together, knowing such personal details about each other helped in understanding why some days, colleagues performed at a lower level.

> If you are not performing at your highest level one day because of something in your private life, you can talk about it with your colleagues and get their understanding. (Employee 2A)

Even the managers acknowledged this, one of the managers formulated it as:

> Then you know, she won't be 100%, but at least she's here […]. And that's okay. (Manager 4)

If it is known that someone in a colleague's family is sick or if someone has a death in the family, it will reduce the expectations on performance for the employee involved, and others will step in and to some extent make up for that. Most of the work in the pharmacy was performed in plain sight of the other co-workers and the manager (and in most cases even in front of the customers). If somebody is working more slowly, or spending too much time with one customer, and such like, it can be noticed by the others.

The informants described how the work tasks differed between the different categories of employees, mainly between the pharmacists and pharmacy technicians. Both categories can advise on no-prescription medicine assortment and non-medical products, while only the pharmacist is allowed to give advice on and hand out prescription drugs. Different categories of employees were described as working well together, and there was rarely a problem with cooperation. There was respect for each other's competencies, and they rejected the idea that there was any form of negative hierarchy in terms of the different employee categories. The managers agreed that there were no signs of hierarchy in the workplace, just differences in formal competence influencing the work that employees could do. Despite this, some informants described that there were sometimes discussions about to what extent some employees take responsibility for the tasks that are a collective responsibility for the whole group. Examples of a task with collective responsibility were cleaning the lunchroom, dusting shelves, collecting and preparing recycling of cardboard & plastic, stocking, front-facing the products, and calling the Helpdesk.

Several informants still thought that daily contact with the managers was important and disliked it when managers needed to split their time between several pharmacies. On the other hand, the managers felt that not being around all the time encouraged the group to take responsibility for the business and described that they were seldomly called upon when not present and that the employees sorted out what was needed themselves.

Target setting and follow-up by the managers were also important for the informants. Informants expressed an expectation of clear and distinct leadership, but at the same time, they wanted a lot of involvement in the decision-making, and that the manager did not interfere too much in the daily work of the employees. The managers spent most of their time as a colleague, performing the same tasks as the rest of the team since they were also pharmacists or pharmacy technicians. One manager formulated it as:

But I'm not the one leading this operation, we all are. (Manager 3)

The relationship with the employer beyond the store managers is only mentioned when directly asked. There is an expressed distance with limited contact between the informants and the head office. The head office is present mostly via documents that are sent out about ways of working. When talking about the organization outside their workplace, informants use the word 'them' to describe it, while colleagues and the store managers are included in 'we'. Informants describe a lot of rules and regulations that affect them, but they are mostly described as support. Some informants describe it as being a sign of mistrust and lack of knowledge about how it works on the 'floor'. Examples are given about rules for counting small coins every day after the store closes.

Do they think we steal a one crown coin? Is that how they see us? (Employee 2C)

Informants describe other procedures that are enforced from 'above' that are impossible to comply with. Problems with the IT system and technical support are mentioned as both frustrating and a sign of employees at the pharmacies not being viewed as important by the support functions. There is a lack of communication between the different departments at the head office that sometimes affects the employees, as contradictory priorities, and makes it hard to plan their work, as some informants mention, and was viewed as a lack of respect for the people working in the store.

Discussion

The analysis showed strong engagement in the work and that work was experienced as meaningful by improving peoples' life, which is in line with how Dik and Duffy (2009) describe how the word calling is used in vocational settings. In a pharmacy, the primary way to fulfill the calling is to offer requested medications and provide advice on their proper use. The engagement concerning the customer is not only important for the employees to experience meaningful work, but it can also be assumed very valuable for the healthcare system, where pharmacies are a link. Other studies have shown that communication between pharmacists and patients is crucial for patient adherence to the doctor's orders (Olsson et al. 2014) and it is not too far-fetched to believe that the engagement of the employee is vital to communicate effectively.

The relationship with the customer can be understood as the core of the work in pharmacies and viewed as the main responsibility of the employees. The work itself was performed independently without micromanagement from the immediate supervisor, meaning that they take responsibility for their own tasks, but they also take responsibility for shared tasks, to provide good service to their customers. There are not any signs that the notion of responsibility differs between the different categories of employees. The 'helping' the customer is the focus, not mainly selling products to them.

The sense of ownership over the operation and the workplace is a sign of engagement and could be a foundation for discretionary actions in line with organizational citizen behavior (Organ 1988). It is 'their' pharmacy, and they take responsibility for it, which could be view as discretionary actions. The sense of ownership of the workplace is not only connected with responsibility and performing individual work but also

connected to the relationship with colleagues. The informants expressed the importance of belonging to the team. The psycho-social relationships at the workplace are expressed as a community spirit, which enhances a sense of a safer working environment from a psychological perspective. This togetherness and ability to cooperate is also, together with the engagement and responsibility for work, important for constructive co-workership (Andersson et al. 2021). The analysis shows how employees are invested in the psycho-social aspects at work, for example, being involved in an open dialogue, taking responsibility for common tasks, and deliberately sharing aspects of their private life. By doing so, a part of strengthening the sense of community, the expectations are that other members of the group will become more accepting of a temporary reduction in someone's performance when knowing the reason behind it. This is a way to strengthen the psychologically safe environment (Edmondson 1999; Kahn 1990) and it is another important aspect of constructive co-workership (Andersson et al. 2021). Kahn (1990) describes psychological safety as an environment where one can be oneself without being afraid that it will negatively affect your self-image, your position in the group, or your career, and Edmondson (1999) argues that psychological safety improves collegial learning at the workplace. The sense of community spirit and being part of a team, that the analysis show, is in line with the characteristic of the third and fourth development stages of a team, according to Wheelan (1996), so the analysis support this, since almost all the pharmacies studied are at level four.

The work group at the pharmacies cooperated well, and a lack of tangible hierarchies was described. In the pharmacies, the manager was accepted as a member of the group although the employees still expected managerial responsibility. The different educational levels, as well as roles within the groups, did not seem to influence the relationships in any major way. An earlier Canadian study by Gregory (2017) about conflicts among employees in pharmacies describes them as almost unavoidable. In contrast, in our study, informants expressed that there were hardly any conflicts, and conflicts due to different professions or occupations did not occur at all or were at least not viewed as conflicts. There could be several reasons for this. It could be due to the development stages reached by the groups within the study. Wheelan and Hochberger (1996) state that conflicts within a work group belong to the earlier stages in the group development, while the cases in this study were all at stage three or four where norms and structures are established, and the groups can be more outspoken about issues concerning work without fear of negative consequences and therefore become more effective. In Gregory's study, role misunderstanding and threats to self-identity are described as sources of conflicts (2017). This should be less predominant in a group that has reached higher development stages. The sampling with well-functioning pharmacies could also have influenced the small number of conflicts, that is, a stable operation and both productivity and profitability on an average level or above. That the more democratic Swedish work culture puts less focus on hierarchies and more focus on co-workership (Andersson & Tengblad 2007) may also influence the quality of cooperation within the workplace. Bergman et al. (2017) concludes in their study that a good communication climate appears to be of value for co-workership.

It could be said that there is a twofold relationship with the employer, the relationship with the manager at the pharmacy as a representative of the employer, and the relationship with the head office. There was a clear distinction between the levels, notable in the way the referred to them, 'we and them'; where the 'we' referred to the

pharmacy level, while 'them' represented the rest of the organization. The manager was viewed as part of the team and the 'we'. Even if the managers had to perform tasks as a representative of the employer, the managers were viewed as one of the team. The managers' role was expected, by the employees, to be more of a social lubricant to ensure a conflict-free and safe environment, rather than managing the day-to-day business. Some of the managers were not even present at the pharmacies every day, because they were managing multiple pharmacies and divided their time between them. Even when the managers were at the premises, they often worked alongside the team, sharing the same tasks because they have the same profession as the group and were expected to perform the same work for a substantial part of the week. This expectation was described both by the employees and the managers. The democratic and non-hierarchal working life of Sweden as described by Hällstén and Tengblad (2006) could also add to understanding of the role the manager has in the pharmacies. In addition, it could also be a contributing factor that the workplaces are rather small, and upper management is not in the near vicinity. Even though the manager is seen as a part of the team and the employees take great responsibility for their own and shared tasks, the co-workership at the pharmacies included in the study could not be described a leaderless co-workership as defined by Andersson et al (2020). The employees still value their managers as important facilitators for performing their work. The employees seem to have a distant relationship with the rest of the organization, both physical and emotional, and are described with some mistrust about their objectives as well as knowledge about the actual work performed in the pharmacies. On the other hand, they are expected to support the work when necessary, and their role as, for example, influencing the work by formulating guidelines is not questioned.

The study shows that the relationships at work that the employees must deal with are interconnected; it can be seen as a web. The individual work is not performed in a vacuum, the employees balance it against the needs of the customer, the demands of the employer, their own ambitions, as well as the needs of the group. The relationship with the customer seems to be the core of the employees' work, meaning that work tasks concerning customers are engaging and performed with a strong feeling of responsibility. The shared tasks need to be performed. The different people at the workplace, in their different roles, need to work together to serve the customer well. Our study also shows that employees take a large responsibility for the customer and the tasks related to the customer are experienced as more important than the obligations towards the employer. This study has shown that the ambition to help the customer, and to try to improve their health, while being a good team player and taking responsibility beyond individual tasks, seem to be the core of co-workership within this setting.

Co-workership in the pharmacy setting

The co-workership in the studied pharmacies could be described as a combination of both group- and individual-oriented co-workership, with a strong influence of organizational co-workership when using the terminology described by Tengblad (2003) and Andersson et al. (2020). The work in pharmacies is done to a large extent as individual professionals that take mutual responsibility for the workplace while adhering to the rules and procedures that create the boundaries. According to Andersson et al. (2020),

group-oriented co-workership is common in Scandinavia, where groups take a lot of responsibility for planning and carrying out the work, which supports engagement in work controlled by the group but could have the opposite effect on the responsibility outside the group. Furthermore, the store manager has a limited role in managing the daily operation; instead, the individual employee and the team take a lot of this responsibility.

The importance of the profession stands out as a vital aspect needed to understand co-workership in pharmacies. The results indicate that employees are loyal to the customers and their profession but are more ambivalent towards the overall goals of the organization. They recognize the importance of sales, as an example, but it is not a priority, and they choose not to stress this when they feel their overall ambition to help people are compromised. The employee's identification as healthcare professionals, together with the responsibility assumed for, at least, the local organization, is maybe an important aspect to have a balanced retail pharmacy business? Andersson et al. (2020) suggest that co-workership in profession-oriented organizations can probably best be understood as leaderless co-workership, due to a stronger link between the individual and the profession, which weakens the bond to the employer. Our study has shown that even if there is a weaker commitment to the employer in terms of overall organization (represented by head office and upper management), there is a strong commitment to the organization on the pharmacy workplace level, not only to the profession. This confirms the idea presented by Andersson et al.(2020) regarding employees tending to have a stronger relationship with the profession, and a weaker with the employer, but in this case mainly on the overall level. The store managers are still leading the work, maybe at a more tactical level, and the co-workership in this context should therefore not be understood as leaderless co-workership.

Our findings are in line with literature regarding complex organizations, where it is described, that employees tend to concentrate their ambition at the local operational level, rather than at the strategic level (Cregård et al. 2018). Whether a retail pharmacy organization is a complex organization or not can be discussed, but the focus at the local level is at least shared. Employees at the studied pharmacies seem to have a developed co-workership that combines taking responsibility for the customers, the colleagues, and the operation, and that goes beyond being a professional identifying themselves exclusively with their profession.

To distinguish the form of co-workership we found in the pharmacies, based on profession-oriented work but where the responsibility for the work and the workplace exceeds what traditionally could be expected, we suggest that this may be defined as a profession-oriented co-workership. We suggest that a profession-oriented co-workership that rest firmly on responsibility toward the self-identity arising from one's own profession as well as the responsibility towards customers, colleagues, and the workplace.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

When sampling for the study, well-functioning pharmacies were selected, with the ambition to minimize sources of distortions and uncertainties due to external effects that could influence the data. The advantage of this approach was that all the cases are somewhat similar in the general context and that the data collected provided information to

be able to identify some common threads in co-workership. This study does not, on the other hand, claim to give a full description of co-workership in all pharmacies. It can very well be that in well-functioning organizations, it is easier to distance oneself from head office, prioritize work and goals, and have some leeway when not performing on all targets, due to overall good performance.

The initial plan was to include observations of the everyday work in the pharmacies to grasp other aspects of co-workership that are not easily addressed in interviews, for example, actual behaviors. Because of the pandemic, this was not possible. Observations could have added data and other perspectives that could perhaps have enriched the knowledge contribution.

Work in pharmacies, where both the logics of healthcare and retail interact, could benefit from further studies to ensure that the potential conflict of interests or other obstacles could be described, and even mitigated. We also believe that profession-oriented co-workership can be present in other businesses than pharmacies, but that is something for future research to study.

Conclusion

To conclude, employees at well-functioning Swedish community pharmacies represented by the five cases of this study, show that employees view and handle their work in a self-propelled-way, they take responsibility for their own work, as well as the shared tasks, with limited need for day-to-day guidance from the manager, with a strong orientation to the group. They adhere more strongly to their profession than to the organization's overall business goals. Together with their inner drive, their calling, to do good, they perform their work, individually and as a team. We suggest thus that co-workership in this industry is described as a profession-oriented co-workership.

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Note

[1] There is also a fifth stage, Termination, where the group dissolves.