



Theories and methods in research on

# Gender aspects in sickness absence

Gunnel Hensing and co workers in  
GendiQ



# Participants

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- The Pre-Conference Participants



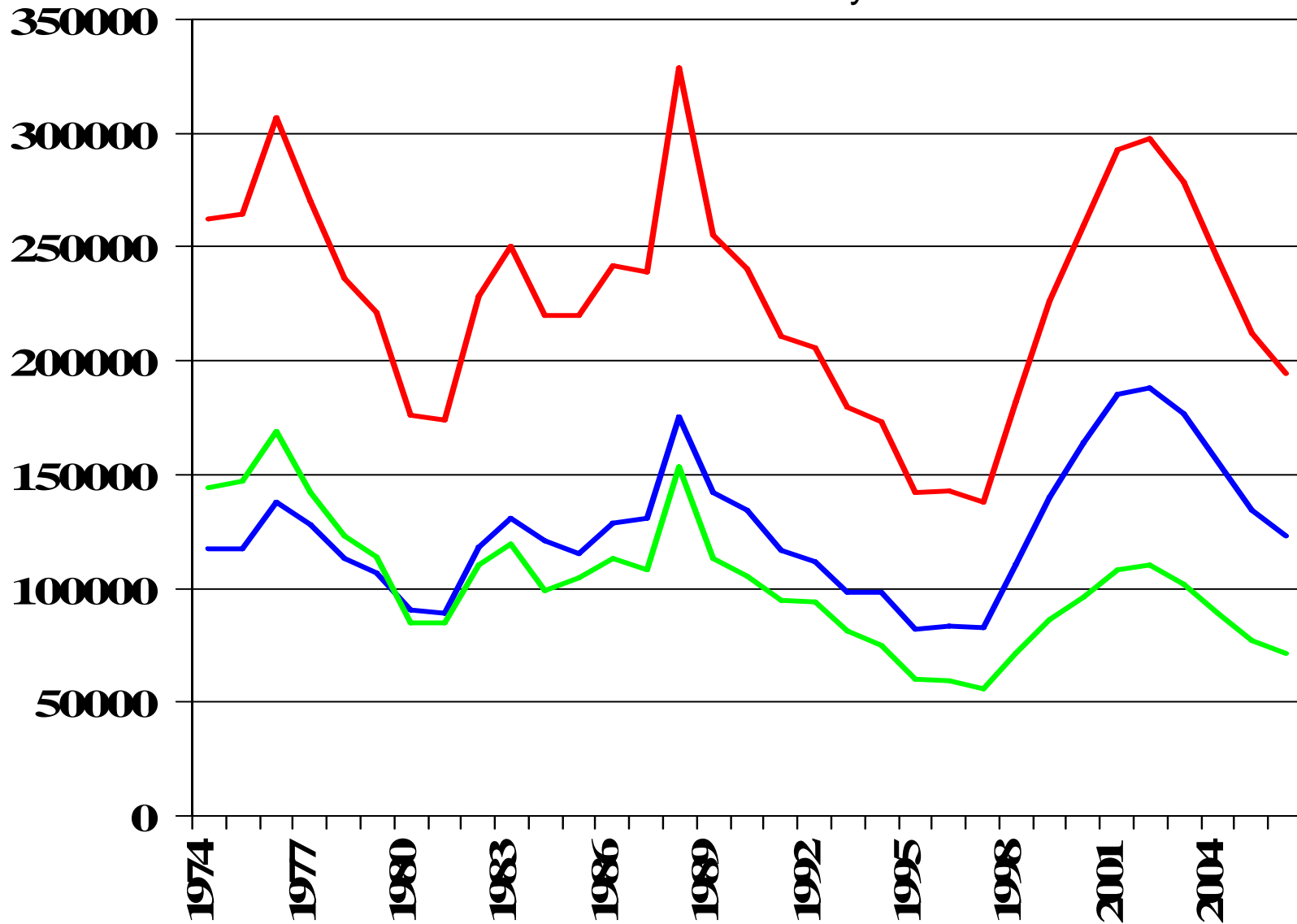
# Why a gender analysis?

- Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed



No. sick-listed at the end of each year





# Why a gender analysis?

## o Sex differences

### • More women than men are sick-listed

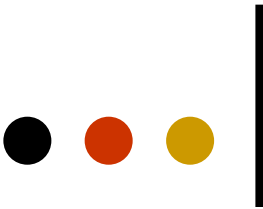
- Women have higher risk for long sick-leave spells and disability pension with back and neck problems
- Women have higher incidence of sickness absence with psychiatric disorders
  - Inconsistent findings regarding length of absence
- Variation over diagnostic groups (injuries), countries (population at risk) and age groups
- Inconsistency regarding length of absence
  - Other determinants influence



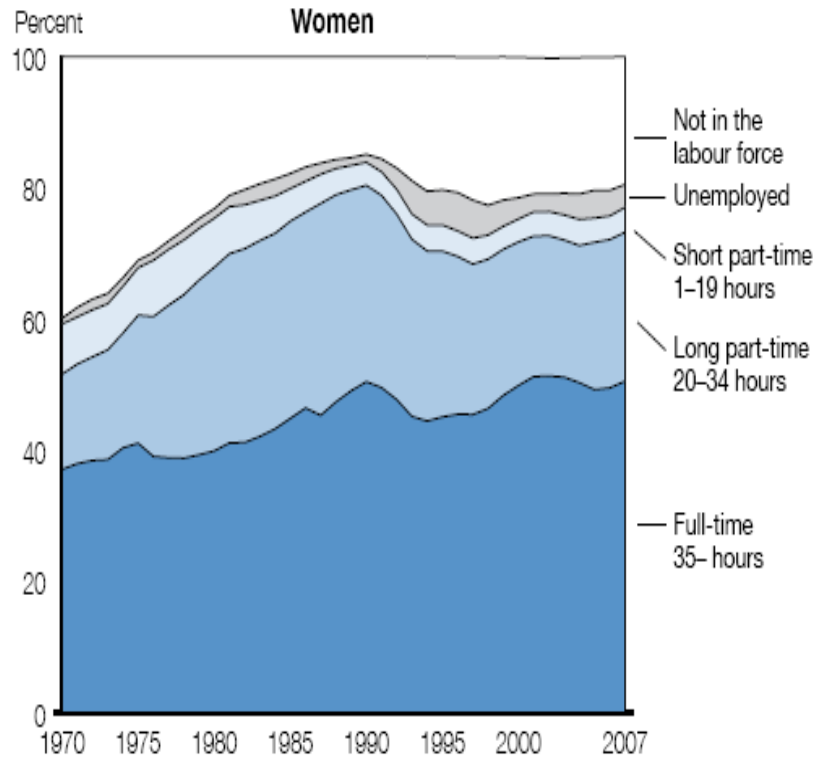
# Why a gender analysis?

## o Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets
  - Labour force participation
    - Proportion and degree

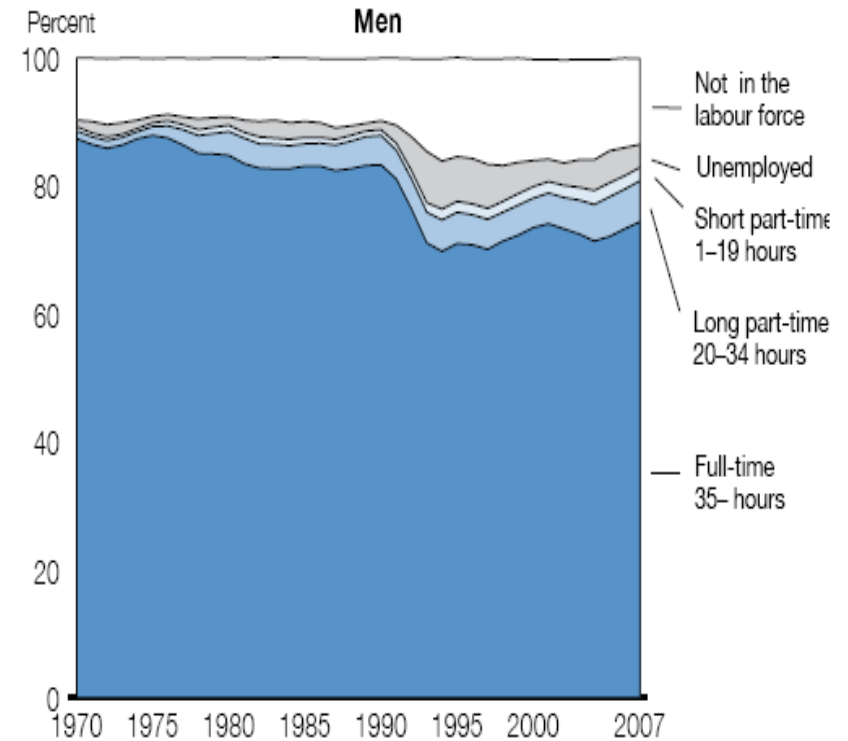


### Women aged 20–64 by activity status and hours normally worked 1970–2007



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Sweden

### Men aged 20–64 by activity status and hours normally worked 1970–2007



Source: Labour Force Surveys, Statistics Sweden

Women 25-44 87%, 45-64 78%

Men 25-44 94%, 45-64 84%



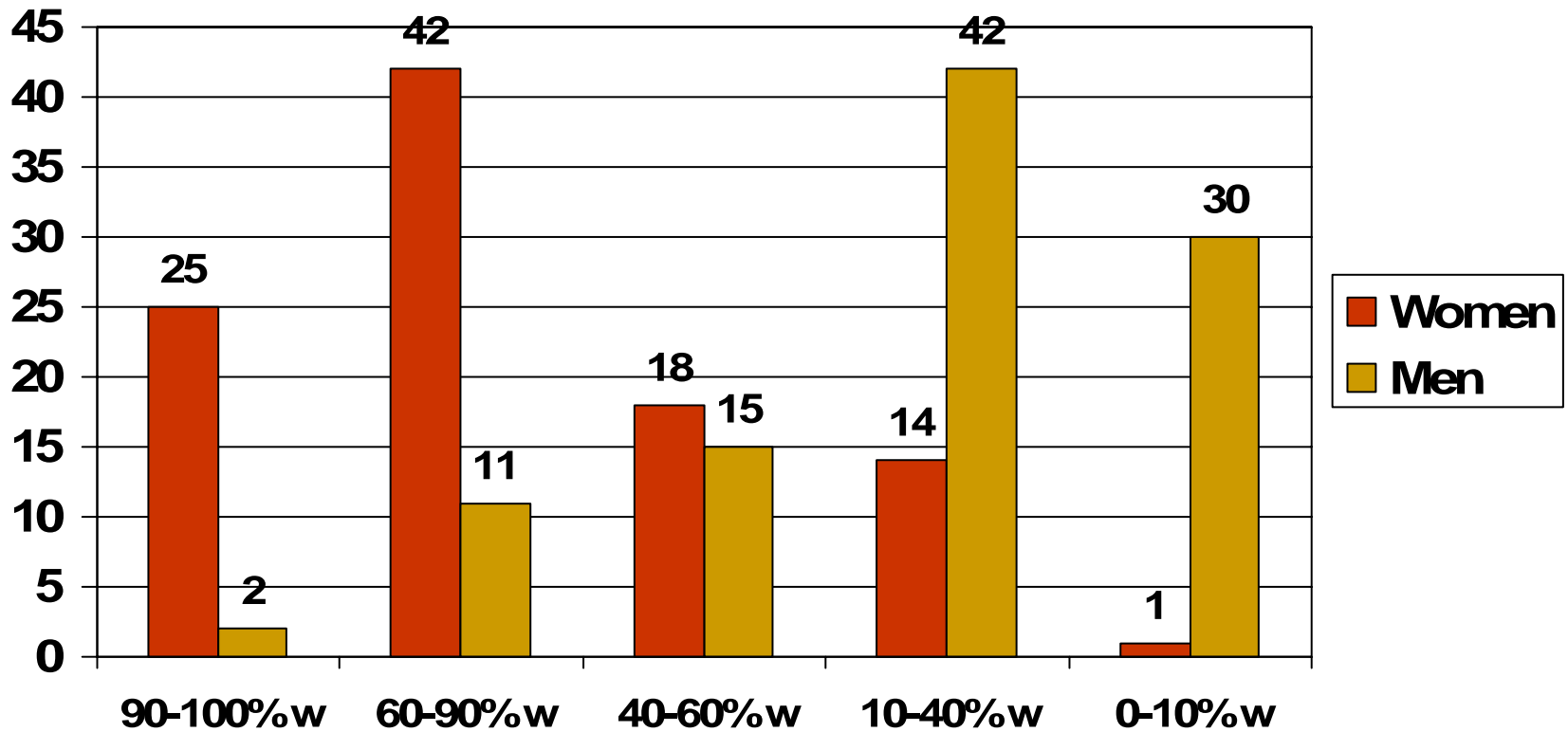
# Why a gender analysis?

## o Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets
  - Labour force participation
  - The horizontal segregation
    - Health, Care, Education, Cleaning
    - Construction, Engineering, Bureacracy, Craftsmen



# The divided labour market, 2007 (%)



Total: 2 038 000 women and 2 260 000 men

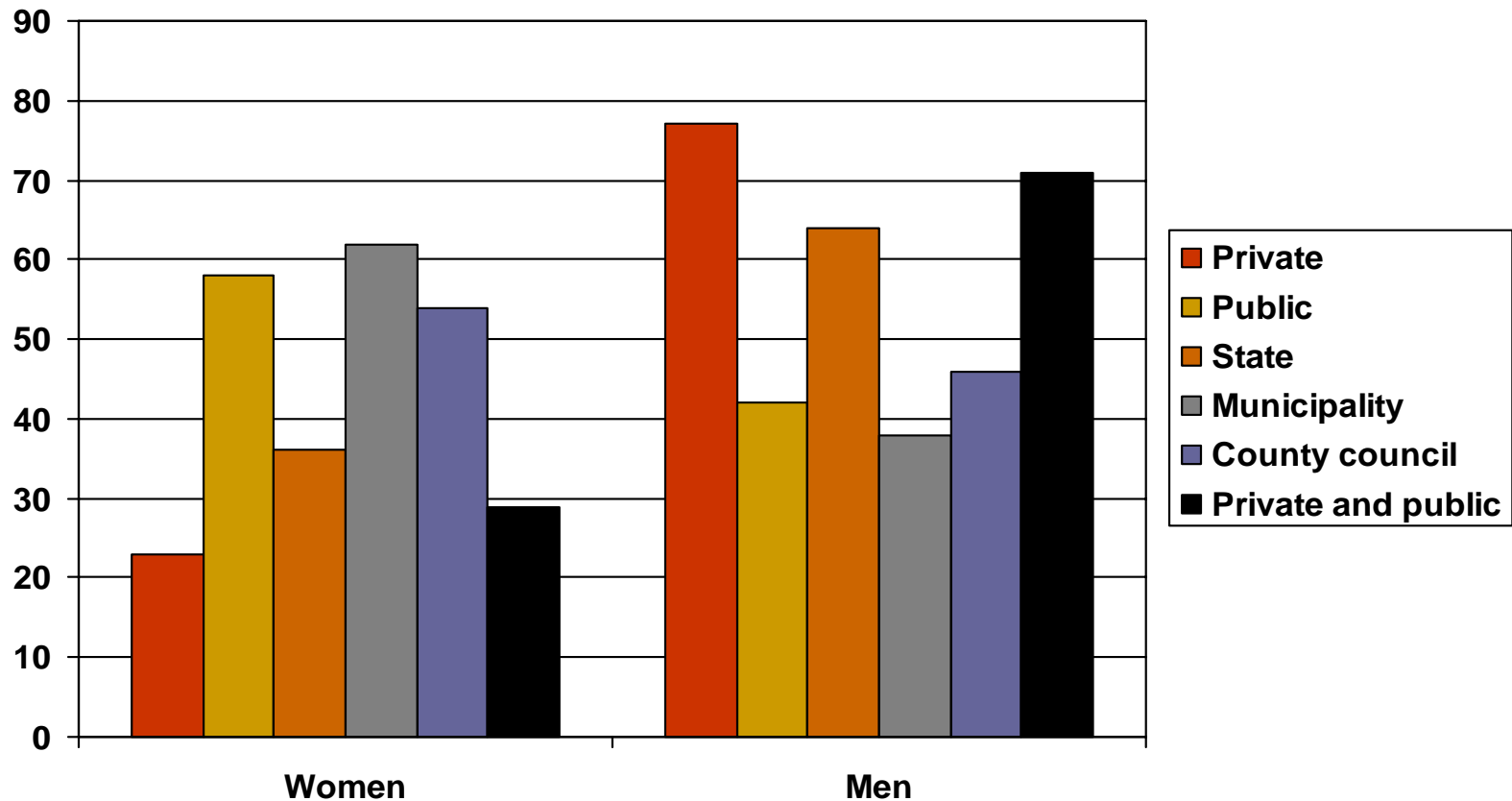


# Why a gender analysis?

## o Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets
  - Labour force participation: paid work
  - The horizontal segregation
  - The vertical segregation
    - "Men at the top"

# Managers in different sectors, 2006





# Why a gender analysis?

## o Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets
  - Labour force participation: paid work
  - The horizontal segregation
  - The vertical segregation
  - Unpaid work
    - Time spent
    - Level of responsibility
    - Type of unpaid work performed



# Why a gender analysis?

- Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets

- Gender constructions and gender relations

- Sickness absence is involved in "doing gender"



# Why a gender analysis?

- Sex differences

- More women than men are sick-listed
- The divisions of the labour markets

- Gender constructions and gender relations

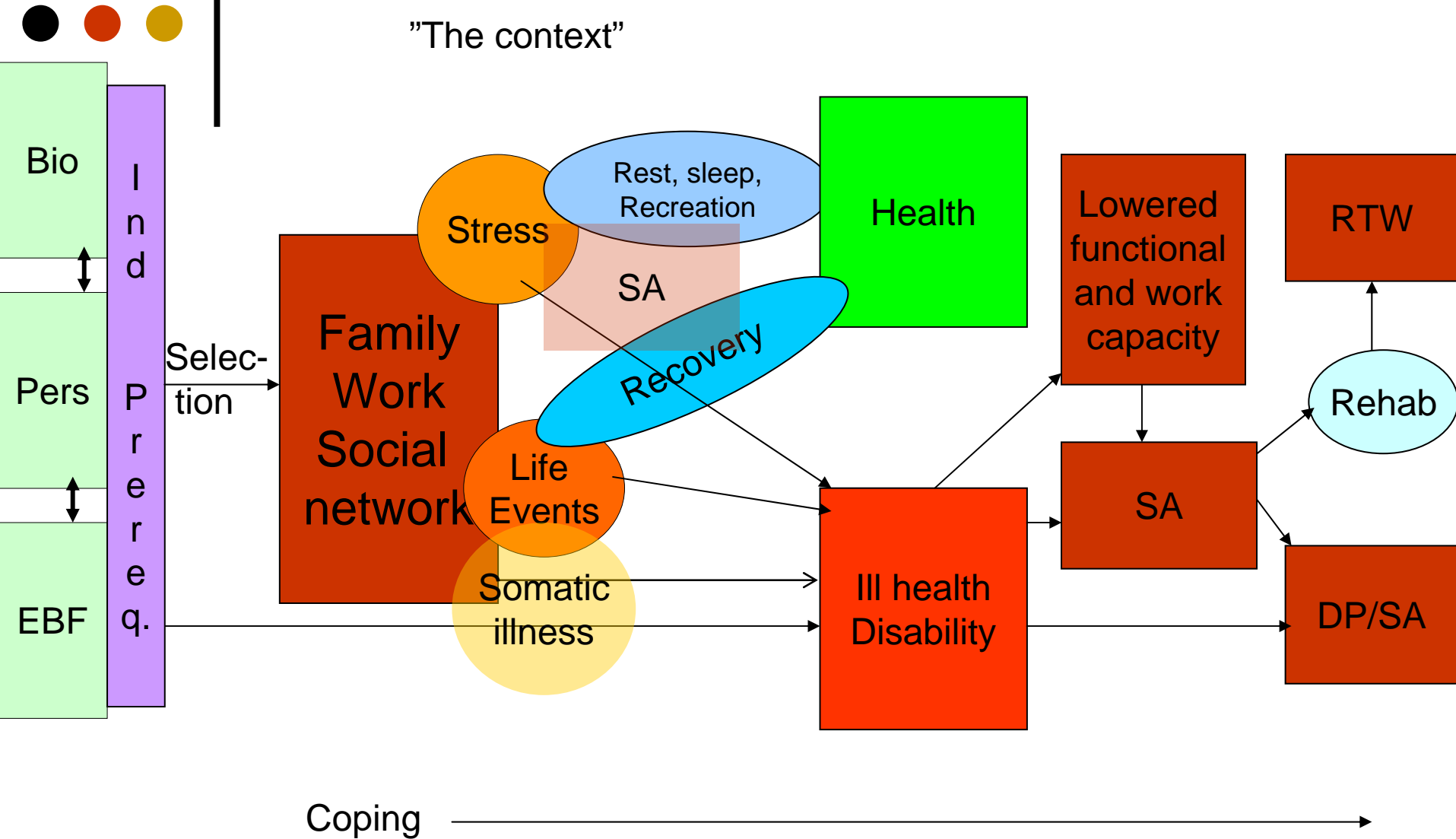
- Sickness absence is involved in "doing gender"

- Men as the norm (andronormativity)?

- diagnostics, treatment, communication, rehabilitation and prevention

A gender perspective can be applied at all stages of the sick-leave process

"The context"



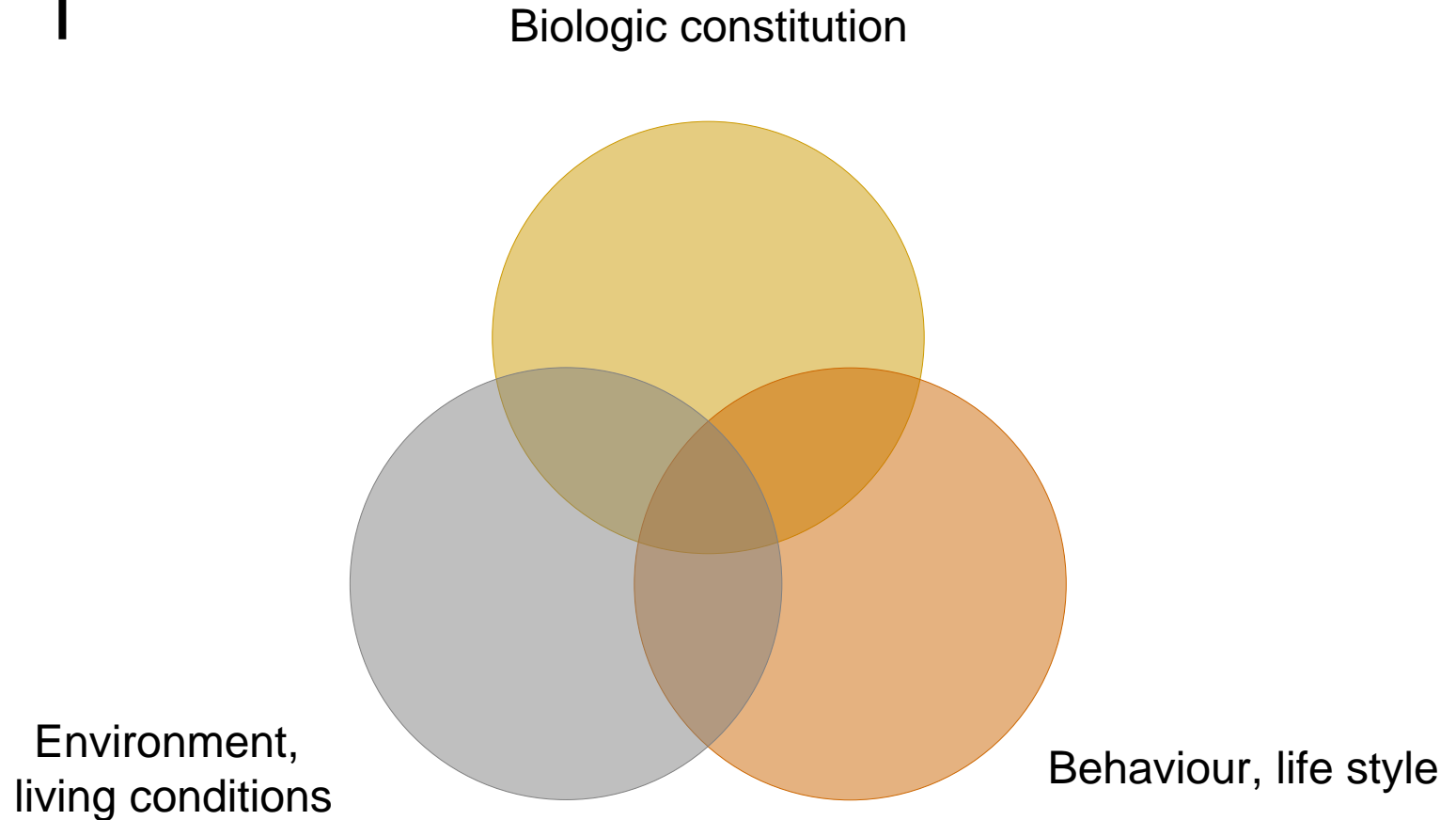


# Today's agenda

- Gender theories and their application in sickness absence research
- Paid work (and combining)
- Unpaid work (and combining)
- Stress in young women
- The overall aim:
  - To understand more and discuss possible ways to move our research area forward



# A comprehensive view of health





Gender theories and models  
relevant for research on sickness  
absence and return to work

- A model of gender dynamics
- Basic concepts
- Possible applications

# Gender theories

- Several
- Different disciplines
- Different basic assumption





Nature

Economy

Identity

Power analysis

Materialist view

- How a society is organised around production influence how individuals behave, think, and make decisions
- Women and men are classified by biological sex which influence opportunities and social organisation

Social construction

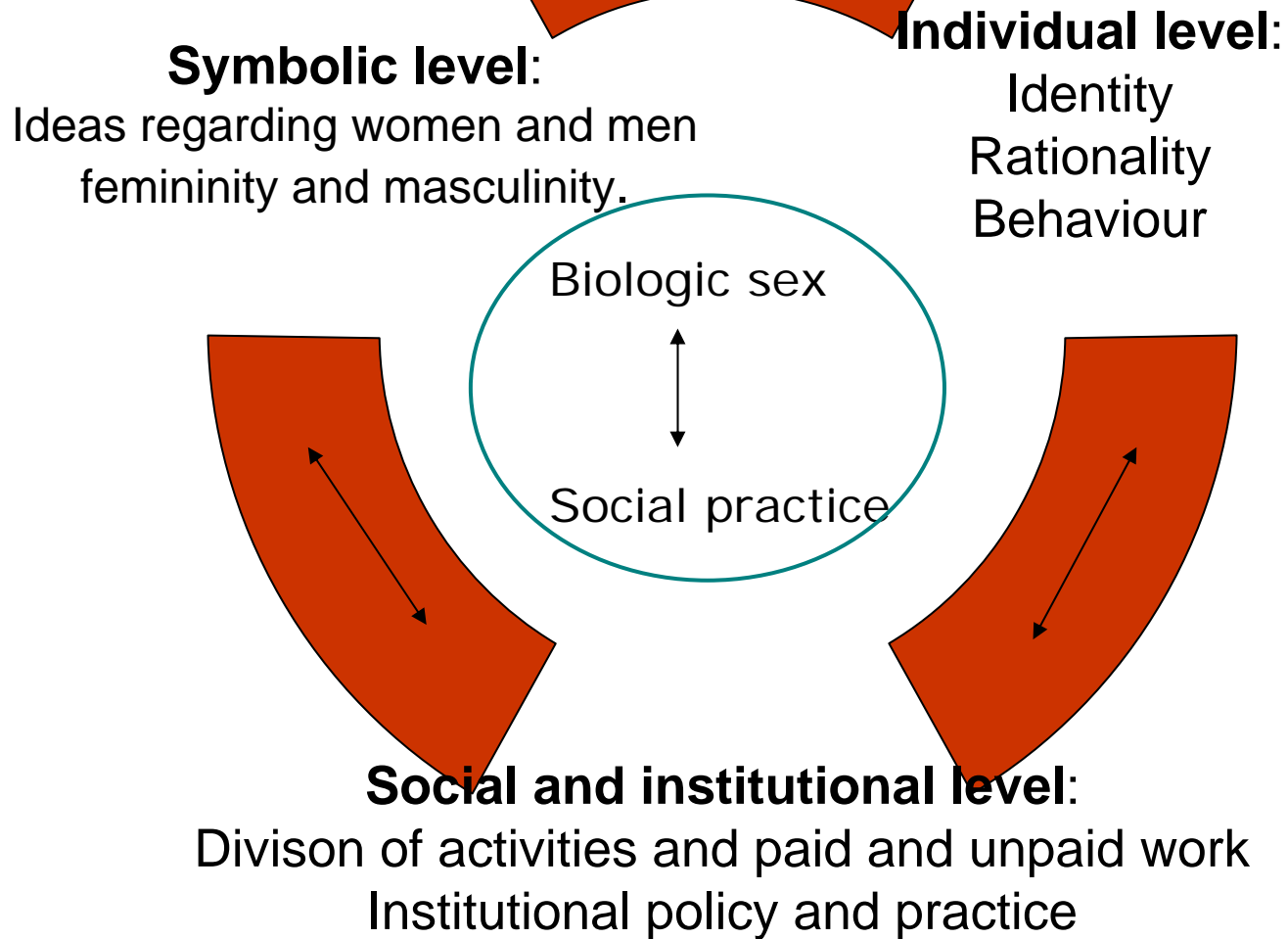
- Important parts of society are socially constructed; products of human interaction and common actions
- Gender is a social construction

Culture

● ● ● | Is this a woman or a man?



Relevant or irrelevant question?



# Gender, difference and bodies



- "...gender.... understood as the cultural difference of women from men, based on the biological division between male and female."

- Connell, 2002, p 8



# Objection to such a definition (Connell, 2002)

- The images might be dichotomous but reality is not
- Gender can only be seen where there is difference
- Differences among men and among women are hidden
- Processes behind personal characteristics are ignored

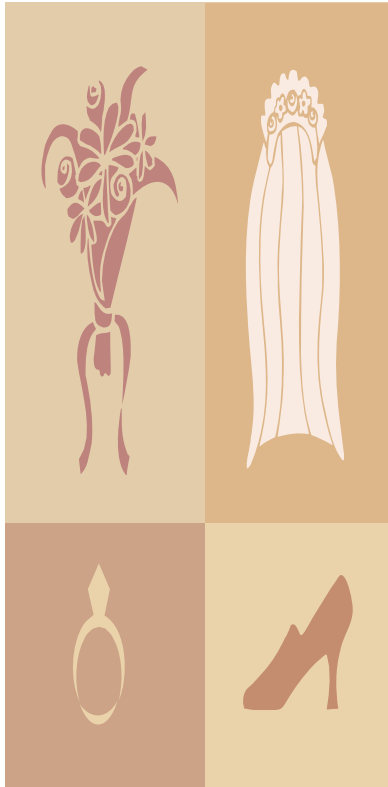


# Gender relations

- "Gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act."
  - Connell, 2002, p 9



# Gender can be defined as

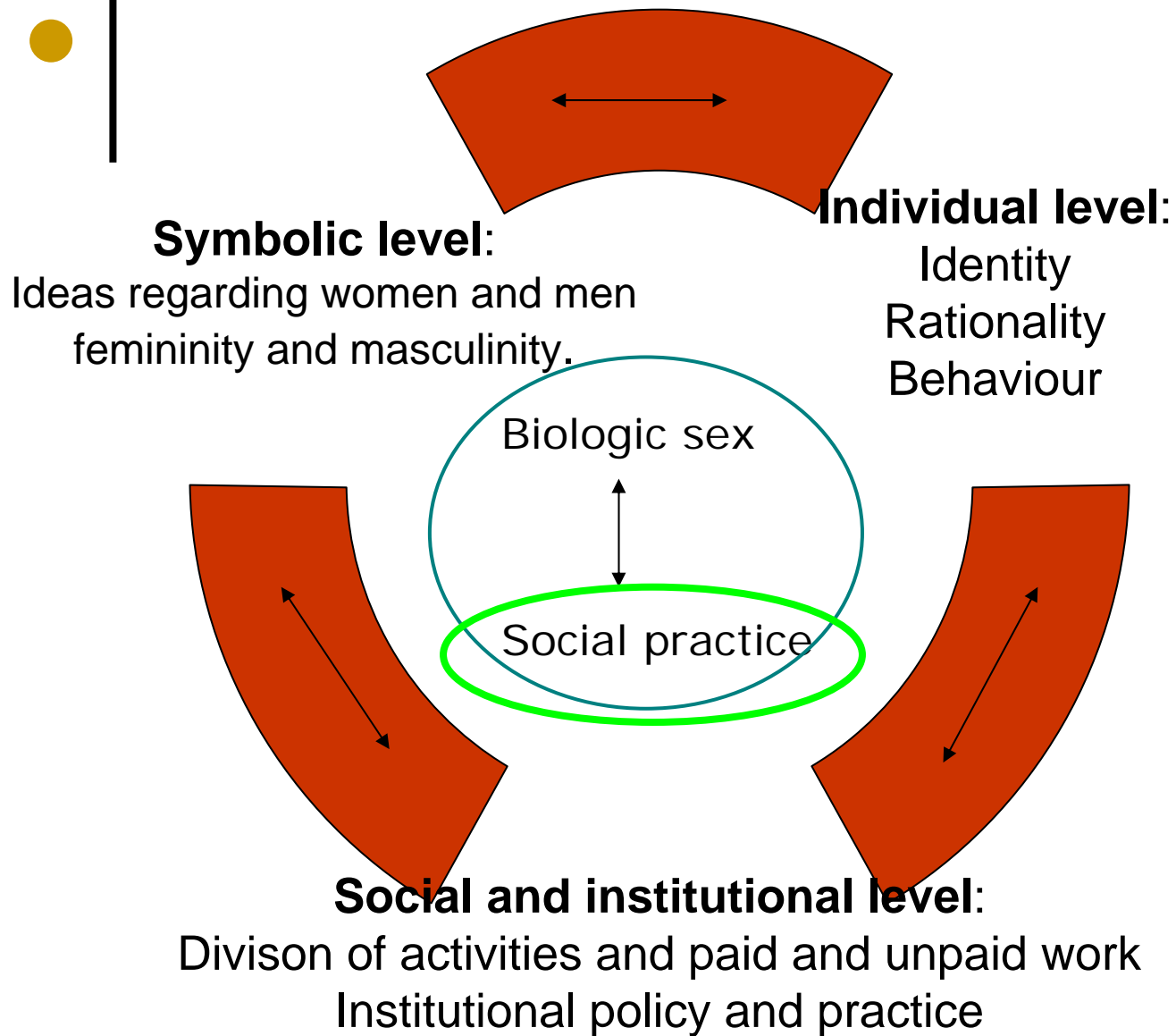


- "...the ways in which the "reproductive arena", which includes "bodily structures and processes of human reproduction", organizes practice at all levels of social organization from identities, to symbolic rituals, to large-scale institutions."
  - Connell, 1995, p71 and Schippers, 2007, p86



# The body is the classifying principle





# Gender constructions: masculinities and femininities





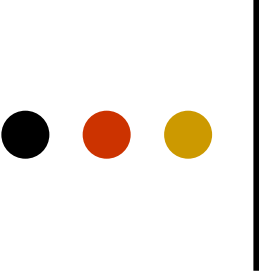
# Different perspectives

- Psychological

- Gender identity
- A set of rather stable characteristics
- Attached to the individual
- Normative

- Sociological

- Gender as discourses and practices
- Changing
- Attached to culture
- Power analysis



# Masculinity (and femininity) have three components (Schippers, 2007)

- A social location
  - women and men can move in and out of this location through practice
- A set of practices and characteristics
  - understood to be masculine
    - Interpretation, Symbolic level
- Widespread cultural and social effects
  - differs by embodiment



# In summary

- Gender is a relation at the individual, social/institutional and symbolic levels
- Social practice of women and men reproduce or change gender
- Masculinities and femininities are social locations that can be entered and left by women and men
- The embodiment of social practice is not indifferent



A photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore. In the foreground, a white starfish lies on the sand. The text "Questions or comments?" is overlaid in the center of the image.

**Questions or comments?**

# Is there a gender order?

## o Order as in

- System or structure
  - Patterns or coherence
  - Order of precedence or hierachy
  - The normal state of things
- } Yes
- } .....?.....



# Hegemonic masculinity

- Based in feminist theory
  - patriarchy
- Critique of sex role concepts and theories
  - Separate behavior and norm
  - Avoid homogenizing and essentialism
  - Account for power
- Take the social nature and changes of masculinity into account



# Hegemonic masculinity...

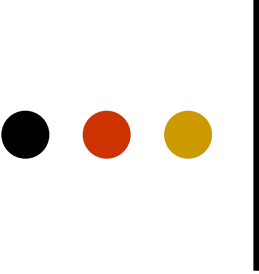


- "...was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e. things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue"
  - Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p832



# Hegemony

- Leadership
- Power
- Consent through cultural values
- Status quo
- The power relations are seen as "natural"



- "Hegemonic ideologies preserve, legitimate and naturalise the interests of the powerful – marginalising and subordinating the claims of other groups. Hegemony is not automatic, however, but involves contest and constant struggle."

- Wetherell M, Edley N, Feminism and Psychology, 1999,p 337



# In summary

- Gender theories focus on
  - Human relations and interaction
  - The importance of labour and how it is organised
  - The construction of masculinities and femininities
  - The distribution of power over women and men, and over identities
  - Embodiment

A photograph of a sandy beach. In the foreground, a white starfish lies on the sand, casting a shadow to its right. The middle ground shows the ocean with gentle waves washing onto the shore, creating white foam. The background features a clear blue sky and the horizon line.

**Questions or comments?**

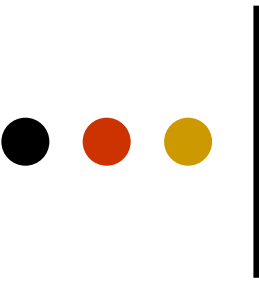




# Sickness absence research

## o Gender

- relation
  - divisions, negotiations
- social location
  - constructions
- system or order
  - subordination
- women and men
  - distribution



# Research related to power issues or the gender order (exposure)

- Women's overall subordination compared to men
  - Access to health care and rehabilitation
  - Quality of care and money spent
  - Relationships, violence
  - Influence at home and at work
  - Ethnicity and Intersectionality
    - Not all women are white, middle class



# Gender order and health (Theory)

- Women's general subordination
  - Poverty
  - Responsibility for children
  - Responsibility for household work
  - Character of and wages in female dominated occupations
  - Violence against women



# Research on differences

- Do we ask the right questions?
  - Aim
    - How do hegemonic masculinity influence health and sickness absence in men and women working in the health care?
  - The design
    - Do we take selection processes into account?
  - The methods
    - Questionnaire/register methods promote simplistic perspectives
  - The interpretation
    - Men and women as complementary and dichotomous categories?



# Another perspective

- The social construction of gender (masculinities and femininities) in the sickness absence and return to work processes



**Symbolic level:**  
Ideas regarding women and men  
femininity and masculinity

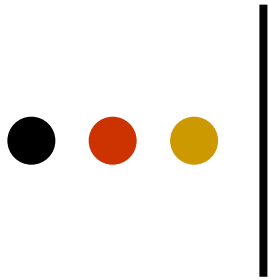
**Individual level:**  
Identity  
Rationality  
Behaviour

Biologic sex  
↕  
Social practice

**Social and institutional level:**  
Division of activities and paid and unpaid work  
Institutional policy and practice



# The construction of femininity in medicine



The hysteric woman.....



# Women and medicine

- Charcot
  - Hysterical women on stage



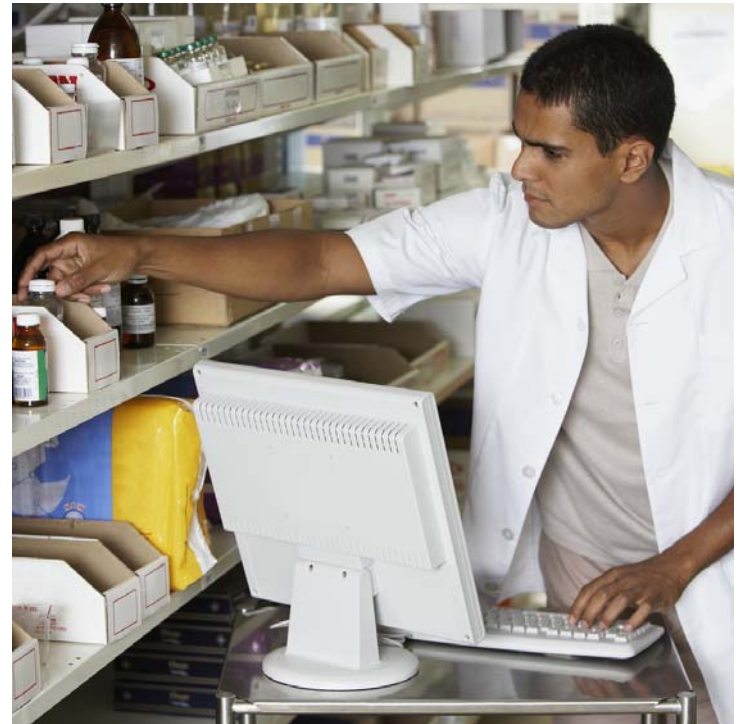
# Women and medicine

- Charcot
  - Hysterical women on stage
- Freud
  - Neurotic women on the couch

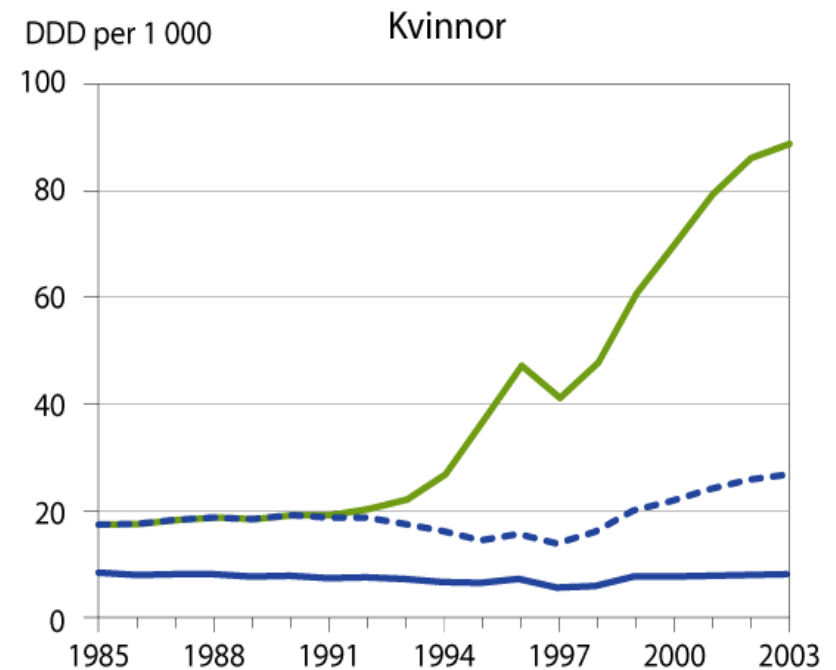
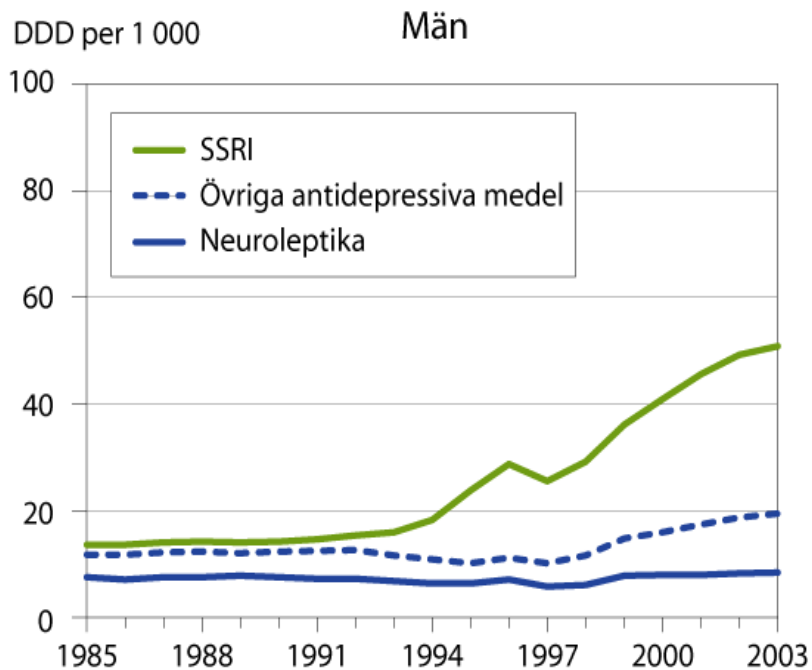


# Women and medicine

- Charcot
  - Hysterical women on stage
- Freud
  - Neurotic women on the couch
- Prozac
  - Depressive women at the counter



# Sales of psychotropic drugs, DDD per 1000 inhabitants per day



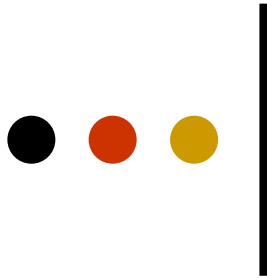
Källa: Läkemedelsregistret, EpC, Socialstyrelsen.

Figur 5: 38

# Women and medicine

- Charcot
  - Hysterical women on stage
- Freud
  - Neurotic women on the couch
- Prozac
  - Depressed women at the counter
- Sickness absence
  - Worn-out women with a sick note





## The hysteric woman.....

### Medicine

- Biological explanations
  - Hormones
  - Mental diseases
  - .....
- Care and cure
  - She has the problem
  - She needs help
- Victimization processes
  - Identity as patient
  - Passive and out of control



### Feminist critique

- Social explanations
  - Living conditions
  - Over commitment
- Take action
  - Change the "exposure"
- Be responsible
  - Avoid victimization
  - Support active processes

# Andronormativity

- "...signifies a state of affairs where male values are regarded as normal to the extent that female values disappear or need to be blatantly highlighted in order to be recognized."



Hölge-Hazelton B, Malterud K, Scand J of Public Health, 2009, p4

Gunnel Hensing, Social Medicine, The  
Sahlgrenska Academy at University of  
Gothenburg, Sweden

2009-12-02



# Challenges to andronormativity in medicine

- Studies on difference between women and men
  - +Questions neutrality, objectivity and fairness of medicine
  - Dichotomous view on gender, sociobiological explanations
- Studies identifying women's subordination and denied access to health care
  - +Identify inequalities
  - Risk to provide images of women as victims
- Studies on the cultural construction of medicine and medical practice
  - +Move the perspective to the system, institution and discourse
  - Narrow cultural explanations not taking power, politics and economy into account

Hölge-Hazelton B, Malterud K, Scand J of Public Health, 2009, p4





# The invisibility of gender

- The everyday accumulation of disadvantage
  - Women and men of the same height?
  - Communication analyses – time used?
    - "The 30% rule"
  - Women and men presenting the same symptoms?
    - Valian V, "Why so slow?", 1998, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press



# In summary

- Research on differences is still needed
  - Identify inequalities and differences in exposure
- New questions need to be put and developed
  - The role of hegemonic masculinity for health in women and men
- The role andronormativity in medicine plays in SAP and RTW
- Femininity needs to be better defined
- The role femininities play in SAP and RTW



**Questions or comments?**



- GROUP DISCUSSIONS
- Sex differences in sickness absence
  - what else do we need to know to move explanations further



# GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- How can gender theories contribute?
  - To your own research area
  - To interventions to reduce sex differences in sickness absence