Exploring Stress and Coping at Work: Critical Incidents among Women and Men in Equivalent Positions

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The purpose of the study was to explore stress and coping among women and men working in similar positions and with equivalent jobs. Interviews, based on the Critical Incident Technique, were conducted with 40 employees in a Swedish telecom company. The following seven dimensions of stress were found: organizational change and downsizing, leadership, obstacles at work, achieving goals, workload, organizational structure, and work-family/leisure conflict. Organizational change and downsizing were the major sources of stress for both women and men irrespective of the organizational level. Some gender differences were found concerning the other stressors, e.g. female managers more frequently reported heavy workload and work-family/leisure conflict. The participants, both women and men, used a wide range of strategies, e.g. active strategies, seeking instrumental and emotional social support, acceptance, and resignation to cope with the demands at work. Managers mentioned active strategies more often than non-managers, while acceptance and resignation were more prevalent strategies among the non-managers. Men, unlike women, did not report using denial or seeking emotional support as coping strategies. The implications of the findings and their consequences for future studies in organizational contexts are discussed.

Keywords: stress, coping, gender, critical incidents

Current working life is considered to be increasingly stressful, partly due to intensive and rapid changes that require flexibility on the part of the employees (Burke & Cooper, 2000; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Stress can be defined as a dynamic transactional process, where individuals experience stress when they perceive that the demands in the environment exceed their capacity to deal with them (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). A stressful working environment characterized by demands for flexibility and insecurity may result in negative outcomes for the employees, such as decreased job satisfaction, lowered commitment and increased sickness absence (Burke & Cooper, 2000; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Long-term sickness absence has increased continuously in Sweden since 1998. Work-related stress is considered to be one of the underlying causes of this increment (Lidwall & Skogman Thoursie, 2001). It also appears that women show more ill-health than men (Alexandersson & Östlin, 2001).

The role of gender has been pointed out by various studies investigating perceived stress. Women experience more work-related stress than men and are more often employed in jobs that have lower status, have lower pay, require a lower level of qualification, and have limited opportunities for career development (Alexandersson & Östlin, 2001; Lundberg & Gonäs, 1998; Nelson & Burke, 2002). In addition, women are also confronted with additional stressors such as work-family conflict (Burke & Greenglass, 1999) that result in a heavier total workload for women (Lundberg, Mårdberg, & Frankenhaeuser, 1994).

When one is confronted with stressful events, coping is essential for relieving the stress that develops. It also plays a major role in maintaining the individual's health and well-being (Endler & Parker, 1990). There is no consensus about how to define coping (Dewe, 2000), but it is common to view coping as part of a transaction between the person and environment. Coping is seen in this respect as a process concerned both with the appraisal of various demands and with the mobilization of strategies to handle the problems and emotions involved. A distinction can be made between reactive and proactive coping (Kirkcaldy & Furnham, 1999), which implies that coping strategies can be used either in anticipation or in response to a stressful situation. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), coping strategies can be categorized as problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused strategies aim to solve the problem or to change the stressful situation. Emotion-focused coping strategies, on the other hand, do not aim to change the stressful situation, but rather to adjust the emotions that are aroused by it. The use of problem-focused strategies has often been considered more effective since it intends to eliminate the stressor rather than simply modifying the negative effects of stress as in emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1990).

Research investigating gender and coping has suggested that women engage more in emotion-focused coping (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Muhonen & Torkelson, 2001; Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002), whereas men tend to be more problem-oriented in their behavior (Hurst & Hurst, 1997; Stone & Neale, 1984). However, Greenglass (2002) points out that when education, occupation, and position in the organization are controlled for, few gender differences in coping can be found.

Earlier studies concerning workplace stress and coping have often investigated women and men who have been employed in different positions, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the relationship between gender, stress, and coping. Dissimilarities between women and men might be due to the fact that they were working in different types of jobs and at different levels in the organizations. Results of a recent study that included women and men in equivalent jobs and position showed that perceived stress was more related to the organizational level than gender (Torkelson & Muhonen, 2003a).

A majority of the studies in the area of stress and coping have used quantitative methods such as surveys and scales. The strengths of these methods are that they are efficient to administer and that their reliability and validity are often well documented. Their weakness is that they do not capture the unique experiences in a specific situation (Narayanan, Menon & Spector, 1999). There is therefore a need for alternative approaches such as qualitative methods or a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to study stress at work (Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll 2001; Dewe, 2000; Narayanan, Menon & Spector, 1999).

The current study is a qualitative continuation of the quantitative study conducted earlier by the authors within the same organization. By means of interviews based on Critical Incident Technique, the study aimed to explore stress and coping at work among women and men working in similar positions and in the same type of jobs. The research questions focused upon the sources of stress for women and men at work and the strategies they used to cope with the stressors.

Method

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 40 employees working in a Swedish telecom company over a period of two months. The company develops and sells Internet-based services, products and individual solutions to solve communication needs for both small and large private companies and public sector organizations. The studied company, like other telecom companies, has been subjected to organizational changes. These have resulted, amongst other

things, in the reduction of staff. The company is one of the twenty companies in Sweden that have reduced their staff by more than 25% between 1988 and 1995 (Arvedson, 1998). The organizational reconstruction process is still in progress.

The total group of 40 interviewees consisted of both women and men working in similar positions and with same type of jobs at the company's sales office. Consequently, 10 female managers, 10 male managers, 10 female non-managers and 10 male non-managers, all working with sales, participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 41.5 years (SD = 8.7), they had been working in the same company for approximately 15 years, and the majority (60%) did not have a university education. A majority (70%) did not have small children (< 12 years). Those participants who had children reported that either the wife had the main responsibility or the couple shared the responsibility.

Six of the male managers and two of the male non-managers had small children (< 12 years). The men reported that their spouses had the main responsibility for the children and the home. Three of the female managers had small children. Two of them said that they shared the responsibility, and in one case, the husband had the main responsibility for home and children. None of the female non-managers had small children. As can be seen in Table 1, the four groups of participants were similar concerning age, years of employment in the company and years in present position.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the participants

	Female managers		Male managers		Female non-managers		Male non-managers	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age	42.00	8.23	41.70	6.40	42.20	12.66	40.10	7.98
Years in the company	13.95	10.85	15.50	9.45	18.85	14.70	13.35	10.08
Years in present position	2.24	2.48	1.14	0.89	2.29	2.46	2.25	2.96

Material

The interviews were based on the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), originally developed by Flanagan (1954). CIT (Flanagan, 1954) is a qualitative interview method, which has previously been used in stress and coping studies (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1996;

Länsisalmi, Peiró & Kivimäki, 2000). The participants were asked to describe a situation at work with the following instruction: "Could you please describe a situation or an event at work during the past month that made you feel distressed, frustrated, or annoyed?" When the participants had described an incident, they were asked to elaborate upon the reason for the stressful nature of the event. Thereafter the interviewees were requested to describe the coping strategy/ies they used in the situation (e.g. what they did, how they behaved).

After fully describing an incident in this way, the interviewees were asked if they could recall other incidents of a similar nature. Some of the participants could give several examples, whereas others described only one or two.

Procedure

The group of interviewees consists of women and men from both managerial and non-managerial levels who volunteered to participate in the study. Before we started interviewing the participants they were informed about the purpose of the study, that their participation was voluntary, that all the information we collected would be handled confidentially and only the two authors would have access to the interview material. Further, the interviewees were informed that they would receive the results of the study when the analysis was complete. All the interviews, except one, were conducted in a separate room in the company and lasted about 45 minutes in general. One interview was conducted at the Department of Psychology. All informants consented to our request to tape-record the interviews.

Content analysis

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and formed the basis for the content analysis (Patton, 1987). Each author independently analyzed twenty of the transcribed interviews by means of QRSNud•ist, a program for qualitative data analysis. The program facilitates analysis of texts since it can be used to create an elaborate index system. The stressors and coping strategies that the interviewees expressed were coded in exhaustive categories, since the aim was to capture the richness of the data. When all the transcripts were coded, the contents of all the different categories were analyzed and overlapping categories were aggregated. Finally, the categories that were related to each other were integrated into seven main dimensions.

Reliability

A total of 58 initial categories of stressors were identified by means of the content analysis. Since the authors had performed their analyses independently, some categories were

found to overlap. After further analysis and discussion the number of categories was reduced to 32. The authors then exchanged their material and coded half of the interviews anew. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa and yielded a kappa of .79. When it comes to coping, a total of 120 expressions of coping were discovered in the interviews. These 120 expressions were coded independently by the two authors in broader categories using COPE scale (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) as a frame of reference. Inter-rater reliability for this coding was $k = .70$.

Results

Sources of stress

Analysis of the stress-related critical incidents reported by the participants revealed 32 categories that could be grouped into seven main dimensions. These main dimensions included stress incidents related to organizational change and downsizing, leadership, obstacles at work, achieving goals, workload, organizational structure, and work-family/leisure conflict. Table 2 shows the frequencies for these seven main dimensions reported by women and men at the managerial and at the non-managerial level.

Table 2

Frequencies of stress incidents for women and men at the managerial and the non-managerial level

Stress incidents related to:	No. of incidents	Managers		Non-managers	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
1. Organizational change & downsizing	49	11	12	13	13
2. Leadership	18	3	10	4	1
3. Obstacles at work	16	3	4	5	4
4. Achieving goals	14	0	5	4	5
5. Workload	14	7	1	2	4
6. Organizational structure	5	1	1	3	0
7. Work-family/leisure conflict	4	4	0	0	0

It should be noted that the frequencies indicate the number of incidents and not individuals. One person could report several incidents belonging to same dimension, whereas others did not report any. The focus in the results section is on describing the main dimensions, rather than going through each source of stress exhaustively. For a more detailed description of each dimension see Appendix.

Organizational change and downsizing. The most central incidents in the interviews were those connected with the organizational change and downsizing process that had taken place during the previous years. It was evident that these sources of stress were of major importance for both women and men and for both managers and non-managers. The work situation was experienced as turbulent and the interviewees wished for some "peace and quiet" so that they could work. The staff had been under pressure of losing their jobs during a long period of time and the insecurity about their employment situation was a central theme in the interviews. Some of the managers, like Esther below, had been obliged to reapply for their original/new jobs repeatedly.

> I think it is stressful to feel questioned all the time. … I understand that we have to reapply for our jobs, but once every other year should be enough, you don't want to do it two or three times a year as we have done now. It creates feelings of disloyalty—I start feeling disloyal and also my staff gets disloyal towards the company in the end. (Esther, female manager)

The constantly changing organization, bringing new roles, routines, and systems for measuring performance, was expressed as "taking its toll." As the changes had been conducted repeatedly during the past few years, and without any follow-up, the situation was experienced as particularly frustrating. The personal networks for information and/or support had split up as a result of the organizational reconstruction processes. Both the formal and informal networks were disrupted since some of the staff had been relocated to other departments in the organization, some were performing other tasks and yet others had lost their jobs. Building up new networks to replace the previous ones could be time consuming.

> People in the large organizations often build networks in order to handle things and work things out. When the networks are broken down, nothing works for a while, as there are no contacts between people. Then you have to start building them up again. (Harold, male manager)

The organizational changes had led to repeated relocation of managers, who were moved to new positions and new departments. As a result, some of the non-managers reported the frequent changes of managers as stressful. The reduction of the staff had caused an increased workload for the remaining employees. An additional source of stress during organizational change was the lack of information about the changes and the uncertainty about where the new changes would lead. An example of the kind of responses included in this category was:

> It is pretty hard to know how everything is going to work afterwards. I feel that it is harder now than it has been during the previous changes in the organization. Afterwards you don't know what tasks you are going to perform or how everything will look. (Ann, female non-manager)

Leadership. Different aspects of stress that were related to leadership were expressed especially by male managers but even by female managers and by the women and men at the non-managerial level. The non-managers felt that the superiors were being too submissive; they perceived a lack of leadership and feedback from the managers.

> It is no big deal bringing things up with my boss. It is not as if I am afraid to go to him but I do that more and more seldom because nothing ever happens. It is very seldom that you receive any feedback from the boss about things you want to get feedback on. (Bob, male non-manager)

Sometimes the lack of leadership was seen as a result of the constant changes at the managerial level. In addition, the middle managers were affected by the leadership style of their managers. When the senior officers suddenly changed their plans or information, the middle managers' planning was affected as well.

> One thing that really irritates me at work is when decisions that have been agreed upon are changed. Like when the times for meetings that we have decided upon are changed. Then it directly messes up my own agenda. I have made plans for the meetings I will arrange with my staff during the spring and then an e-mail from my boss just pops up saying that the time of the managers' meetings has been changed… Orders come from above that make you change your plans and follow the new directions. (Eve, female manager)

The managers pointed out problems connected to carrying out their role as a leader; they expressed having problems with their staff. Some employees did not accept the changes

and the new routines in the company and the middle manager could become a target for employees' dissatisfaction.

> I am working with a group of people who don't want to accept the new routines in the organization. They don't want to change their routines at all. They want to continue to work in the way they have always done. So I have had a very tough time getting them to accept the new way. The weekly meetings where I present the new ways and things that we have to do have been really demanding and stressful. The employees scream and shout from all parts of the room. I don't have time to answer since other people are shouting at the same time. I find the situation really stressful. (Eileen, female manager)

Some male managers had their staff spread in different districts over the country, a situation that put forward different demands on these managers. They lacked the daily contact with their staff and felt that it was difficult to give equal amount of attention to all the members of the staff. A further demand for these managers was that they had to travel a great deal in order to practice their leadership.

Obstacles at work. Further sources of stress that could be identified were related to different obstacles at work. These were situations that in one or another way interfered with, delayed or obstructed the work that had to be performed. As a salesperson one is also dependent upon other employees' performance. When the suppliers failed to deliver, the work of the sales personnel was delayed and as a result they had to face the complaints of the customer.

Other obstacles mentioned were related to the delays and disagreements about the recruitment of new personnel. Being a newcomer or working with newcomers could be stressful. The newcomer was not familiar with the ways of selling or was not familiar with the products that had to be presented to the customers. This made the work for the other employees harder and made it also more difficult to reach the goals. The newcomer herself might find the situation hard too:

> I find that the most demanding part of my work is when I feel unsure about the things that I am going to talk to the customers about…. When I am going to sell a product that I don't know the facts about. And I am going to sell that product to my customers. Not knowing makes me stressed, of course. So this is demanding. (Annabel, female non-manager)

Some of the obstacles that were mentioned as demanding were related to other employees' poor performance or technical equipment that was out of order and causing stoppages or delays in work.

> The technology we have today… that the technical system is not working can cause a catastrophe. It happens, and then the adrenaline level rises, giving you an attack of migraine. (Benjamin, male non-manager)

> One weekend I had so much work to do. Right then the server broke down. So I had to sit the whole Sunday (she laughs) from nine in the morning until ten o'clock in the evening and really forced myself to finish. You get stressed because the technology is out of order. If the technology had been working it would not have taken such a long time. I experienced this as negative stress. (Amelia, female non-manager)

Achieving goals. For a salesperson it was seen as a natural part of the job that one's achievement was assessed and salary related to results. Yet, both women and men at the non-managerial level could experience the performance-contingent rewards as stressful. To achieve the goals was an important factor not only from the economic point of view but as a personal driving force.

> Reaching your goals is stressful, of course. You fight for the rewards and that is of course a stress factor as well. Otherwise, if it wasn't, you would never have become a salesperson… The main reason for being stressed about reaching your goals is economic. But of course the stress is also related to performance itself. (Barry, male non-manager)

No incidents directly related to achieving the goals could be found among the female managers' interviews. The male managers sometimes perceived the pressure to deliver results as a positive challenge, but also described it as very demanding, especially when the goals had recently been getting tougher and harder to achieve.

> No, no… I don't want to do this any more. [The pressure to deliver results] is taking too hard a toll. It is just too much. I work too many hours a day and the demands to achieve your goals are getting worse and worse, tougher and tougher. I don't think it is possible to continue like this when you have passed fifty. Then you have to do something less demanding. (Harry, male manager)

Workload. A number of incidents reported by the interviewees were related to workload. The work that had to be accomplished, such as producing reports or finding information for decisions, was made with short deadlines and high time pressure. The tempo was perceived as very high, the employees had to continuously solve problems and make decisions at a short notice. Another theme that appeared here was the amount of work that had to be done. Some managers, especially women, complained that numerous meetings every day made it impossible to accomplish other duties, such as talking with the staff. Due to their heavy workload the rate of overtime was increasing; some reported a very high amount of overtime every week.

> There is not enough time to do all the things that you have to do. There are so many meetings and telephone meetings. So much time is spent on things like that. And at the same time you need to get the information. But I think that there are too many meetings. You don't have the time. There are so many other things that you have to do, like motivating the staff. Motivating them in a positive manner is seen as less important. (Elisabeth, female manager)

Organizational structure. Some incidents illustrated different kinds of problems that occur due to the large size of the organization. One example concerned information that was sent to all the other departments, but one small work unit was often forgotten and therefore did not get the information. It could also be difficult to locate the right persons when the employees have questions and needed information. This is illustrated by Alma:

> Now and then I think that the organization is too big (laughing), especially when you are trying to reach the right persons. For instance, the persons may not be doing the same things tomorrow as they are doing today. Sometimes it is difficult to find the right persons. (Alma, female non-manager)

Work-family/leisure conflict. A dimension that was brought up by the female managers was the conflict between work and family/leisure. They described a situation where they struggled to combine the areas of home and work, trying to spend some time every evening with the family and at the same time prepare for their work for the next day. As the workload was perceived as very demanding it could also prevent some women from planning to have children. One of the female managers (see quotation below) thought it would be impossible to combine her current working situation with children. She maintained further that male managers have the possibility of combining career and small children since their wives take the main responsibility for children and home.

Right now I can see this as a special time in my life. I have no children. I would not continue like this if I had children. I am very convinced about that I would not have had my job today if I had children and I am very certain about that. But of course, this makes me worried about the future. I am planning to have a child. I am planning to have a child pretty soon, and that makes me worried. I spend a lot of time thinking about how to combine the two. … And it is annoying that the company policy maintains that it is possible to be a leader and parent of small children at the same time. I can't see that this possibility exists for me at all. Most of the leaders who have small children are men. And I can also see that the wives of these colleagues are really struggling hard, because their husbands are never at home.

(Erica, female manager)

Coping

Description of the coping strategies. The analysis of the different coping strategies was performed using the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989) as a frame of reference. Altogether eleven strategies could be identified: five problem-focused and six emotion-focused strategies. The problem-focused strategies were active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping and seeking instrumental social support. The emotion-focused strategies were seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation and growth, acceptance, focus on and venting of emotions, denial and behavioral disengagement/resignation. Some examples of the different problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies mentioned by the participants are given below.

Problem-focused strategies:

1. *Active coping*: delegating, seeking other jobs, building up new networks, trying to prove that one is right for the job, working faster/harder
2. *Planning:* making plans, planning in advance
3. *Suppression of competing activities*: focusing on the problem and putting other things aside
4. *Restraint coping*: waiting for the right moment to act, trying not to retract delegation of task to subordinate
5. *Seeking instrumental social support*: seeking advice or information from colleagues or supervisor

Emotion-focused strategies:

1. *Seeking emotional social support:* seeking support from: supervisor, colleagues, spouse, friends, family members

2. *Positive reinterpretation*: learning something from the experience, seeing something good in what is happening

3. *Acceptance*: getting used to or accepting the situation, learning to live with it

4. *Venting of emotions*: crying, screaming etc.

5. *Denial*: dissociating oneself, pretending that the problem is not a serious one

6. *Behavioral disengagement/Resignation*: giving up one's efforts to solve the problem

Coping with the main stressor. Table 3 presents frequencies for the different coping strategies that women and men at the managerial and at the non-managerial level used in order to cope with the main stressor—organizational change and downsizing. A detailed description of the different coping strategies concerning the other sources of stress can be found in Appendix.

Table 3

Frequencies of strategies used by women and men at the managerial and at the non-managerial level to cope with organizational change and downsizing (the major stressor).

	Managers		Non-managers	
Coping	Women	Men	Women	Men
Problem-focused strategies:				
Active	3	7	2	3
Instrumental support	4	1	7	2
Planning	0	3	0	0
Suppress competing activities	1	0	0	0
Total	*8*	*11*	*9*	*5*
Emotion-focused strategies:				
Acceptance	3	0	0	4
Denial	1	0	2	0
Emotional support	1	0	3	0
Positive reinterpretation	0	1	0	0
Resignation	1	0	1	4
Venting of emotions	0	0	1	0
Total	*6*	*1*	*7*	*8*

It appears that all the participants used a variety of coping strategies, both problem- and emotion-focused, when trying to cope with the different incidents related to organizational change and downsizing. The male managers seem to differ somewhat from the other groups in their use of more problem-focused but hardly any emotion-focused strategies. In the following section the problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies used are portrayed in more detail.

Of the five problem-focused strategies, active coping and seeking instrumental social support were the ones that were most commonly mentioned. Examples of these most common strategies are given below. All the examples are related to coping with different consequences of organizational change and downsizing.

Active coping is illustrated by three quotations. The first two are related to turbulent work situation and the third one is related to job insecurity.

> One has to give priority to those things that are most important and handle them in the proper order…
> (Howard, male manager)

> Well, I will have to work the whole weekend in order to solve the situation. (Bill, male non-manager)

> I think it [seeking other jobs] is one way of coping with downsizing. Then I know that if I can't keep my job in this company, I will have other opportunities. (Esther, female manager)

Seeking instrumental social support is exemplified by the following two quotations. The first example has to do with coping with lack of information and the second one with turbulent work situation.

> Me and my colleagues discussed with each other and then it turned out that one girl from another department knew what to do and she showed us and so the problem was solved anyhow. (Annalynn, female non-manager)

> We try to check up things often—my superior and the others in the network—so that we are informed about the problems and find solutions, for example, how we should act and so on. It is a kind of dialogue we try to have continuously in order to find out where we stand. (Bill, male non-manager)

The most frequently mentioned emotion-focused strategies were acceptance, resignation and seeking emotional social support. Acceptance (I learn to live with it) and behavioral

disengagement/resignation (I give up my efforts) are strategies that are somewhat intertwined. Examples of these most common strategies are presented below. All these examples are related to coping with different consequences of organizational change and downsizing.

Acceptance is illustrated by one quotation below, which has to do with coping with a turbulent work situation.

> I think people say—here we go again—and that the organization usually lands on its feet despite everything. (Edina, female manager)

Resignation is exemplified by the following example that is related to coping with job insecurity due to frequent organizational changes.

> You simply don't care any more. We have gone through this so many times, had discussions, but it does not help. I think many people feel the same way. (Beryl, male non-manager)

Seeking emotional social support is demonstrated by the following two quotations. Both examples are related to coping with turbulent work situation due to downsizing.

> We support each other, the three of us in my team… At times we talk about how fortunate we are to have each other. (Alice, female non-manager)

> My colleagues and I discuss with each other and we can share our anxiety. We can express how we feel, which is a good thing. (Ann, female non-manager)

Summary of coping strategies and their relation to gender and organizational level. In order to examine whether different patterns of coping appeared for women and men and for managers and non-managers, we summed up all the different coping strategies used concerning the stress incidents on the whole as reported among each group. The overall frequencies for different coping strategies used by the four groups can be seen in Table 4. It should be noted also here that the frequencies refer to the number of reported strategies and not individuals.

It appears in general that the problem-focused strategies, especially active coping and seeking instrumental support, were mentioned nearly twice as frequently as the emotion-focused strategies.

Table 4

Summary of different coping strategies used by women and men at the managerial and at the non-managerial level

		Managers		Non-managers	
Coping	*Total*	*Women*	*Men*	*Women*	*Men*
Problem-focused strategies:					
Active	52	17	16	10	9
Instrumental support	30	6	5	14	5
Planning	5	0	5	0	0
Suppress competing activities	2	2	0	0	0
Restraint coping	1	0	1	1	0
Total	*90*	*25*	*27*	*25*	*14*
Emotion-focused strategies:					
Acceptance	23	3	6	5	9
Denial	3	1	0	2	0
Emotional support	7	4	0	3	0
Positive reinterpretation	1	0	1	0	0
Resignation	9	2	0	1	6
Venting of emotions	3	0	0	2	1
Total	*46*	*10*	*7*	*13*	*16*

Among the emotion-focused strategies acceptance was most prevalent. Managers, both women and men, reported using active strategies to a greater extent than non-managers. The non-managers reported using acceptance and resignation somewhat more than the managers did. Among the female non-managers the strategy of seeking instrumental social support was more frequently mentioned than among the other groups. None of the men, whether managers or non-managers, brought up denial or seeking emotional support as coping strategies.

Discussion

In this study women and men working in similar positions at both managerial and non-managerial level in a Swedish telecom company's sales office were interviewed. The aim of the study was to explore the sources of stress for women and men and how they coped with the stressors. The analysis of the interview data revealed 32 categories of stressors that were grouped into seven main dimensions: organizational change and downsizing, leadership,

obstacles at work, achieving goals, workload, organizational structure, and work-family/leisure conflict.

The major stress incidents were those related to organizational change and downsizing processes. These stressors were conveyed by both women and men working at the managerial and at the non-managerial levels. The participant experienced their work situation as turbulent and insecure. A central theme in the interviews was the insecurity about the employment situation. Several managers had been required to reapply for their jobs repeatedly. Lack of information about the changes and the uncertainty about what the new changes would bring about were pointed out in the interviews. Another problematic aspect was that the informal personal networks for information or help had been split up by the new organizational structures.

Other studies also indicate that the consequences of downsizing can be manifold: some employees lose their jobs, and those who retain their jobs (so-called survivors) are expected to work harder, more efficiently and to cope with uncertainty about their own future employment (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Several studies have shown that downsizing can influence employees' health and well-being in a negative way (Hertting & Theorell, 2002; Isaksson & Johansson, 2000; Torkelson & Muhonen, 2003b).

Stressful incidents related to leadership were reported more frequently among the male managers. This could be due to the fact that several of them had their staff spread in different regions, which put exceeding demands on these managers. Female managers did not specifically mention any stressful incidents concerning achieving goals, unlike the other groups, but on the other hand, stress due to workload was more frequently reported by the female managers. Maybe it is just a matter of different ways of expressing the heavy workload among the managers. While female managers point out different aspects related to workload, male managers express this in terms of achieving goals. As consequence of the heavy workload the female managers worked overtime on a regular basis. That the female managers spent many hours on the job might explain the fact that several of them also brought up work-family/leisure conflict in the interviews. None of the other groups mentioned that combining work and family was stressful for them. Other studies have also shown female managers to be more stressed than male managers by greater responsibilities for home and family (e.g. Frankenhaeuser et al., 1989; Lundberg & Frankenhaeuser, 1999) and by stress caused by the work/family interface (McDonald & Korabik, 1991). This indicates that women managers as a group can be vulnerable to stress-related health problems in the long run.

The results showed that the participants used several strategies in order to cope with the stressful situations at work. Both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies were

reported among the four groups of participants. The problem-focused strategies, above all active coping and seeking instrumental support, were mentioned nearly twice as frequently as the emotion-focused strategies. Acceptance was the most common among the emotion-focused strategies. These results applied for both women and men at the managerial and at the non-managerial level. Some differences were found related to gender and organizational level. Female as well as male managers reported more frequent use of active strategies compared with the non-managers. At the non-managerial level acceptance and resignation were more prevalent strategies. This could reflect the difference in power at the hierarchical organizational levels. In order to use more active strategies one needs to have some control and influence over the working situation. It can be difficult for non-managers to employ active strategies due to lack of influence and therefore they have to subdue their anxiety by using emotion-focused strategies, such as acceptance and resignation. A gender difference was found concerning the use of emotion-focused strategies. The men, managers as well as non-managers, did not mention denial or seeking emotional support as coping strategies. This result is in line with earlier studies, showing that women use emotional support more often than men do (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989; Muhonen & Torkelson, 2001; Tamres, Janicki & Helgeson, 2002).

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed. First of all the generalizability of the results to other organizations may be limited as the present investigation was conducted in one organization only. Even though we believe that the studied telecom company is representative of its own sector, we cannot exclude the possibility that it differs from other telecom companies in some respects. Yet another limitation could be that the information the interviewees report during the interview does not have to be all-inclusive. The fact that a certain incident is described as a stressor is contextual; different individuals come to think about different incidents depending upon their mood, short- and long-term memory effects etc. Even if a certain stressor is only reported by one person it is reasonable to assume that other participants might share the same experience as well, even though the stressor does not manifest itself during the period of the study. Using methods like group interviews or focus group interviews may provide more elaborate information since the participants could probe, make associations with and develop each other's responses during the interview session. Further, the number of incidents does not always reveal the seriousness that the stressor might have for a certain individual. One incident can be a massive stressor for one individual, whereas twenty people might point out a similar stressor but experience less distress with it. The problem-focused strategies were mentioned more frequently than the emotion-focused strategies. This might correctly reflect the way participants act, but on the

other hand it can also be a question of a methodological artifact (O'Driscoll & Cooper, 1996). The interviewees were asked what they did in a stressful situation, which might bring out more problem-focused strategies and decrease the reporting of emotional strategies. In order to address this problem it is essential to pay attention to the instructions given to the interviewees in future studies.

In sum, the results showed that the main sources of stress were those related to organizational change and the downsizing process. These stressors were expressed by both women and men working at managerial and non-managerial levels. Some gender differences were found concerning the other stressors, e.g. female managers more frequently reporting heavy workload and work-family/leisure conflict. When it comes to coping, managers expressed active strategies more often than non-managers, whereas acceptance and resignation were more prevalent strategies at the non-managerial level. Men did not report using denial or seeking emotional support as coping strategies. The results indicate that the recurrent organizational reconstruction processes may lead to negative consequences (cf. Burke & Cooper, 2000). Turbulent work situation, lack of information, networks splitting up and increasing insecurity amongst other things, can result in a weakening of loyalty and commitment, which in turn can jeopardize the organizational efficiency in the long run.

The results of the study pointing out the organizational change and downsizing process as a major source of stress for the studied group as a whole made us aware that stressors and even coping strategies are not a matter of the individual alone, but can also be shared by large groups of employees at similar organizational levels. There is reason to believe that the labor market will continue to be characterized by increasing flexibility and frequent organizational changes (Burke & Cooper, 2000; Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). Additional research is therefore needed to investigate individualistic as well as collective aspects of stress and coping for both women and men at the different organizational levels. In addition, the health effects for the employees, as well as the jeopardizing of organizational efficacy, in the long run need to be investigated in longitudinal studies.

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Appendix. Sources of stress and coping strategies related to specific stressors.

Sources of stress	Coping	
	Problem-focused strategies	*Emotion-focused strategies*
1. Organizational change & downsizing		
• Turbulent work situation (3a, 4b , 6c, 6d)	• **Active**: prioritize, delegate (1b); **Planning**: plan in advance (1b), **Instrumental support**: seek information (1b, 3c, 2d)	• **Resignation**: give up (1a, 1c, 2d), **Denial**: try to deny what's happening (1a, 1c), **Acceptance:** learn to live with the turbulence (1a, 2d), **Emotional support**: support from colleagues (1c), **Positive reinterpretation**: something good will come out of the changes (1b)
• Job insecurity (3a, 4b, 2c, 2d)	• **Active**: seek other jobs (2b), work hard (2a, 1c, 1d); **Planning**: plan ahead of time (2b)	• **Emotional support**: support from colleagues (1a, 2c), **Denial**: try to deny insecurity (1c), **Venting of emotions**: crying (1c), **Acceptance**: learn to live with the situation (1d)
• New routines continuously (2a, 3c)	• **Active**: seek other jobs (1c), **Suppress competing activities**: put other things aside and focus (1a), **Instrumental support**: seek advice from supervisor (1a, 2c)	• *
• Networks split up (2b, 2d)	• **Active**: build up new networks (2b, 2d)	• *
• Lack of follow-up (3d)	• **Active**: require explanation for changes (1b), demonstrate one's competence (1b)	• *
• Frequent change of managers (2b)	• **Instrumental support**: seek help from supervisor (2a)	• **Acceptance**: make the best of the situation (2a)
• Increased workload (2a)	• **Instrumental support**: seek help from colleagues (2c)	• *
• Lack of information (2c)	• *	• **Resignation**: give up (2d), **Acceptance**: accept the fact (1d)
• Lack of new goals (1a)	• **Active**: use the old goals (1a), **Instrumental support**: seek advice from supervisor (1a)	• *
2. Leadership		
• Submissive superior (4c, 1d)	• **Instrumental support**: seek support from next managerial level (2c, 1d)	• **Acceptance**: learn to live with the situation (2c)
• Superior changes planning (1a, 3b)	• **Active**: work fast (1b), say no (1a), change planning (1a, 1b), **Instrumental support**: seek advice (1a, 1b)	• **Acceptance**: learn to live with the fact (1b)
• Problems with the staff (1a, 3b)	• **Active**: quit (1a), pay attention to staff (1b), **Instrumental support**: seek advice from superior (1a, 1b), **Restraint coping:** try not to withdraw delegation too soon (1b)	• **Emotional support**: support from family, colleagues (1a), **Resignation**: has given up (1a)
• Staff spread in different districts (4b)	• **Active**: delegate (1b), **Planning**: plan the trips ahead (1b)	• **Acceptance**: get used to the situation (2b)
• Being a middle manager (1a)	• *	• **Emotional support**: support from husband (1a)

Note. a = female manager/s, b = male manager/s, c = female non-manager/s, d = male non-manager/s. The numbers in front of letters a–d indicate frequencies of stress incidents and coping strategies reported among that specific group of participants. * = no specific strategies belonging to this category were mentioned.

Appendix. Sources of stress and coping strategies related to specific stressors. (*Continued*).

Sources of stress	**Coping**	
	Problem-focused strategies	*Emotion-focused strategies*
3. Obstacles at work		
• Problems with supplier (1c, 2d)	• **Active**: phone supplier, pass complaints to supervisor (1c, 1d), **Instrumental support**: get advice about shortcuts from colleagues (1c, 1d)	• **Venting of emotions**: "unofficial debriefing" (1d)
• Problems with recruitment (1a, 2b)	• **Active**: Explain to the staff (1a), try to find creative solutions (1b) **Instrumental support**: advice from colleagues (1b)	• *
• Newly employed (1a, 1c, 1d)	• **Active**: "Take the bull by the horns" (1a, 1c, 1d)	• *
• Technical problems (1c, 1d)	• **Active**: work overtime (1c,1 d)	• **Resignation**: not bothered, give up and go home (1d)
• Complaints from customers (2b)	• **Active**: professional approach towards customer (2b)	• *
• Disinformation to staff (1a)	• **Active**: check and correct, inform others (1a)	• *
• New incompetent colleague (1c)	• **Restraint coping**: wait for others to act (1c)	• *
• New product (1c)	• **Active**: phone to the first customer, read about the product (1c), **Instrumental support**: learn from colleagues (1c)	• *
4. Achieving goals		
• Performance-contingent rewards (4c, 5d)	• **Active**: work hard (2c), seek new job (1d), **Instrumental support**: influence supervisor to revise pay-system (1c, 1d)	• **Acceptance**: part of the job (1c, 3d)
• Pressure to deliver results (5b)	• **Active**: work hard (2b)	• **Acceptance:** part of the job (3b)
5. Workload		
• Deadlines (4a, 1b)	• **Active**: say no (1a), work overtime (2a), **Suppress competing activities**: ignore other tasks (1a), **Planning**: plan ahead (1b)	• *
• Lack of time/high tempo (2a, 1d)	• **Active**: employ assistant/coach, work overtime (2a)	• **Resignation**: have given up, don't care (1d)
• Work overload (1a, 1d)	• **Active**: prioritize (1a), work overtime (1d),	• **Acceptance**: accept the situation (1d)
• Being interrupted by others (2d)	• **Active**: work in the evenings when others have gone home (1d)	• **Acceptance**: accept the situation (1d)
• Controlled by schedule (2c)	• **Active**: finish the current job and ignore the schedule (2c)	• **Acceptance**: accept the fact (2c)
6. Organizational structure		
• Difficult to find right person (1b, 3c)	• **Instrumental support**: seek advice from colleagues (1b, 2c)	• **Venting of emotions**: shout and scream (1c)
• Lack of information to a small department (1a)	• **Active**: call for supervisors attention (1a)	• *
7. Work-family/leisure conflict		
• Imbalance between work and private life (4a)	• **Active**: work overtime during weekdays, but not on weekends (1a)	• **Emotional support**: support from husband, support from colleagues (3a)

Note. a = female manager/s, b = male manager/s, c = female non-manager/s, d = male non-manager/s. The numbers in front of letters a–d indicate frequencies of stress incidents and coping strategies reported among that specific group of participants. * = no specific strategies belonging to this category were mentioned.