Reviewer's report

Title: Understanding long-term sick leave in female white-collar workers with burnout and stress-related diagnoses: a qualitative study

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Reviewer: Joost J van der Gulden

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In general
This is a well-written paper on long-term sick leave in female white-collar workers. Although based on interviews with only 16 women, the results presented and discussed are recognizable and the declarations the authors give for sickness absence seem plausible. So, this article is worth to be published after some revision.

I have some questions and remarks:

Results
The informants reported several early signs of illness or burn out (page 15-16). They presented their complaints as a consequence of exposure to stress (or is this the interpretation of the authors?). Why didn’t these intelligent and capable women react effectively? Do they recognize the complaints just afterwards? Or didn’t they dare to see under eyes that they were largely overloaded in the months before sick leave? Why not?

Discussion and conclusion
Is it a specific problem of well-educated female white-collar workers who are very eager to succeed in their career, to ignore health complaints and continue working without complaining? Or are all female workers at risk to ignore their limits even when they had become ill?

If so, would a better work mobility and more social support at work really prevent all further problems?

A second, important recommendation based on the findings of this study might be to find ways to pay more attention to early indicators of exhaustion and burn-out among female managers and staff members in order to prevent long term sick leave.

Methodological issues
How do we know that the 16 informants are representative for all female (Swedish) white-collar workers with comparable work- and health-related problems? What are the consequences for the study results and conclusions if they are not?

The perception of ones work, colleagues, leadership etc. might have changed
when a worker is interviewed during a long period of sick leave, especially when she is (or was) very eager to succeed in working life. It might be better for one's self-image and self-esteem to 'find' the causes for failing to cope the job demands in the work environment than in own behavior or family life. So, the memories regarding the experiences at work might be coloured and distorted to some extend. What can be the effect of this specific form of information bias on the results and conclusions?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.