Author's response to reviews

Title: Sickness absence in musculoskeletal disorders - patients' experiences of interactions with the Social Insurance Agency and health care. A qualitative study.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editors and Reviewers,

Thank you for taking your time and for your insightful and inspiring comments. We are pleased to send you the revised version of our manuscript. Below you will find a point-by-point response to the reviewer’s reports. The points appear in the order of the comments in the reports.

Point-by-point response

All changes made are highlighted with “tracked changes” in the text and the following changes have been made as a response to the comments from the reviewers:

Reviewer: Kurt Svardsudd

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. There is diversity the manuscript in terms of disability pension. In page 4 and other places it is called “sickness/activity allowance”, a translation of the current Swedish term. However, for an international audience this term is un-interpretable. I suggest that the internationally recognized term “disability pension” be used throughout the manuscript.

Response: The diversity in terms of disability pension is corrected by changing the term “sickness/activity allowance” to “disability pension” throughout the text.
2. In page 4, paragraph 2, second line, it says “… leading to work disability”. I suppose the authors mean “leading to reduced work capacity”, which is the professional term.

Response: “leading to work disability” changed to “leading to reduced work capacity” according to recommendation.

3. Page 4, paragraph 2: What is meant by “The health care system is responsible for the medical rehabilitation for sickness absentees as well as all patient”? Are the patients responsible for medical rehabilitation???

Response: The sentence “The health care system is responsible for the medical rehabilitation for sickness absentees as well as all patients”. By this was meant that the health care system is responsible for the rehabilitation of all patients. As this was not clear we have changed this to “The health care system is responsible for the medical rehabilitation for sickness absentees” and removed “as well as all patients”.

4. Page 4, paragraph 2, second last line: throughout the manuscript the SIA and medical service are called “actors” or “agents”. I prefer “agents” because they are not actors on their own but acting on behalf of an authority (government or county council).

Response: The term “actors” are used throughout the text and we could not find any place were the term “agents” have been used. We would prefer to keep the term actors. We do consider them actors of their own and not merely agents on the behalf of the government. For other research articles who have used the term actors concerning the SIA, the health care and other “rehabilitation actors” see for example Gard G, Soderberg S: How can a work rehabilitation process be improved?--a qualitative study from the perspective of social insurance officers. Disabil Rehabil 2004, 26:299-305, Soderberg E, Alexanderson K: Gatekeepers in sickness insurance: a systematic review of the literature on practices of social insurance officers. Health Soc Care Community 2005, 13:211-223.

5. Page 4, paragraph 2, bottom line: “… as well as in terms of the national economy”. I doubt the agents’ performance may affect the national economy, but it definitely affects the economy of the national social insurance.
Response: “...as well as in terms of the national economy” is changed to “... as well as in terms of the economy of the national social insurance”.

6. Page 4, paragraph 3, first line: the expression “… end of the nineties and the beginning of the 21st century …” is asymmetric since the two centuries have different verbal forms. Such asymmetries tend to hamper reading. I suggest “end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century”.

Response: “end of the nineties” changed to “end of the 20th”.

7. Page 6, first indented section: “Rheumatology Clinic”. Do you mean a clinic which means an out-patient facility (Swedish “mottagning”) or do you mean Department (Swedish “klinik”)?

Response: “Rheumatology Clinic” changed to “Rheumatology Department”.

8. Page 6, first paragraph after the numbered sections, first line: “The fifteen social insurances officers” should be “The fifteen social insurance officers”.

Response: ”social insurances officers” changed to “social insurance officers”.

9. Page 6, first paragraph after the numbered sections, second line: “… were recruited by randomly choosing from a list...”. The authors might consider an alternative, more professional wording, such as “… were randomly sampled from a list …”.

Response: “were recruited by randomly choosing” changed to “were randomly sampled” according to suggested alternative.
10. Page 6, first paragraph after the numbered sections, second last line: “… informants had to have been …” could perhaps be re-phrased as “… informants must have been …”.

Response: “had to have been” changed to “were required to have been”.

11. Page 7, paragraph 2, line 2: “… and obtain a sense of the whole”. The whole of what? A word seems to be missing.

Response: “to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole”. The reviewer considered there to be a word missing here. But “the whole” refers to the “wholeness” of the interview material. The expression “to obtain a sense of the whole” is used in the description of the method used in Content Analysis (see ref. 17. Hsieh H et al “Three approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis”, 2005, page1279paragraph 3, line 5).

12. Page 7, last paragraph, first line: “Several steps had been taken…”. Do you mean “Several steps were taken…”?

Response: “Several steps had been taken …” changed into “Several steps were taken…”

13. Page 7, last paragraph, bottom two lines and other places: what does “… according to common agreement” mean? Some sort of standard, or do you mean consensus between interpreters?

Response: “according to common agreement” refers to agreement between the authors and is changed to “in consensus between the authors” and the last part of the sentence “labels were reformulated according to common agreement” is changed to only “labels were reformulated.”

14. Page 8, Results section, first paragraph, line 5: “There were no answers…”. A better wording might be “There were no responses…”. 
Response: Result section: “There were no answers…” changed into “There were no responses…”

15. Page 9, line 4: “…overview of the background factors…”. A better phrasing might be “…overview of the informant characteristics…”.

Response: “overview of the background factors…” changed to “overview of the informant characteristics…”

16. Page 9, paragraph 3: “…that ran as a thread…” should probably be “…that ran as a common thread…”.

Response: “that ran as a thread…” changed to “that ran as a common thread…”

17. Page 12, paragraph 3: “You have studied…” is very Swenglish and not very easy to understand. Do you mean “You have an education…”?

Response: “You have studied…” changed to “You have an education…”

18. Page 15, second last paragraph: “Depressions were common…” I would have phrased it “Depression was common…”.

Response: “Depressions were common…” changed to “Depression was common…”

19. Page 15, last paragraph: “As soon as anything…” should be “As soon as something…”.

Response: “As soon as anything…” changed to “As soon as something…”

20. Page 16, paragraph 3: “I’d like a…” is not crystal clear. Does it mean “I had like a…” or “I would like a…?”
Response: “I’d like a...” changed to “I would like a...”

21. Page 19, line 6: there is a reference to Figure 1, but in my copy of the manuscript there are no figures at all. Do you mean Table 1?.

Response: The reference to “figure 1” changed to “table 1”.

22. Acknowledgements: the first sentence is incomplete, which may be overcome with the wording “Many thanks are due to all...”.

Response: Acknowledgements: the first sentence is changed to “Many thanks are due to...”

23. The table legends do not follow the author instructions. According to these there should be a headline and a descriptive legend. In Table 1 it might have the form “Table 1 Informant characteristics”, and then on the next line “Socio-economic and sick leave status data” or something similar.

Response: Table legends are changed so that Table 1 has the headline “Table 1 Informant characteristics” and the descriptive legend “Socio-economic and sick leave status data”, and Table 2 have the headline “Table 2, Results” and the descriptive legend “Content areas, subcategories, categories and theme”.

24. As pointed out by the authors, representative sampling is not a big issue in qualitative research, but rather transferability of results. Another interesting issue is saturation, i.e., whether all aspects on the interview material were obtained and taken into account (Swedish mättnad). This circumstance is not mentioned in the manuscript. I think it should. Even better would be to have this issue illustrated in a table, for instance with interviews as lines and aspects as columns, and with each aspect covered in a specific interview marked with a tick.

Response: None of the main articles, upon which we have based our methodological reasoning, and which are articles of importance in the field of content analysis, includes the
term saturation in their reasoning. At the end of the methods section the following explanation is added to the text as a description of how and when data collection stopped:

“With the fifteen included informants the desired variety of characteristics and range of experiences among the informants was achieved.”

25. The vast majority of the points raised above concern language. The manuscript is rather heterogenic regarding this aspect. Parts of the manuscript are written in excellent English, whereas other parts suffer from “Swenglish”, sometimes to a substantial degree. I thing this manuscript deserves to be read with no breaks due to vague or un-interpretable passages. I therefore strongly suggest a professional English language revision.

Response: The article has been sent for a professional English language revision (changes made are highlighted with “tracked changes” in the text).

Discretionary Revisions

26. Page 6, paragraph 2: “Informants were recruited using different gatekeepers …”. I suggest the wording “Informants were recruited using various gatekeepers …”.

Response: “using different gatekeepers” changed to “using various gatekeepers”.

27. Numbered or bullet sections in a text tend to reduce readability. I suggest the authors consider conversion of the two numbered sections into plain text, for instance in the form “Fifteen social … the study. Moreover, advertisements were put … Metro”.

Response: Numbered sections are changed into plain text according to recommendation.

28. It is customary to present citations in italic mode, as the authors do, but also with a left-sided indentation of the text. That would facilitate reading.
Response: Formatting of the citations is changed, and is now presented with a left-sided indentation of the text.

Reviewer: Ole Steen S Mortensen

1. The background for the study is short and clear. The purpose of the study is clear, however, the issue of facilitating and obstructing factors need to be better justified in the background.

Response: In the sentence “Earlier Swedish studies have concluded that the quality of the encounter between professionals in the health care system and the SIA and the person on sick leave is an important factor in the rehabilitation process”… “.. That may facilitate or obstruct return to work” is added to clarify the reasoning behind the issue of facilitating and obstructing factors.

2. The sampling of informants need to be better described and the authors must justify why they do not make a strategic sampling of informants.

Response: In the methods section we have tried to describe the sampling of informants better by adding the following sentences about the process of recruitment and the thoughts behind:

“People with experience of sickness absence due to musculoskeletal disorders represent a heterogeneous group, with variable background factors and characteristics affecting their experiences. The sample recruited for the present study was intended to cover a variety of predefined characteristics with respect to age, sex, residence, civil status, country of birth, sick leave status, employment status and diagnosis for sick leave.

To ensure as broad a range as possible concerning the experiences of contact with the SIA and the health care system, informants were recruited using various gatekeepers and through advertisements”

3. The content of the interview guide must also be presented in the methods section.
Response: The content of the interview guide is added into the methods section:

“The interview guide contained the following questions: 1. How have you experienced your contact with the SIA during your sick leave? 2. How have you experienced your contact with the health care system during your sick leave? 3. How have you experienced the cooperation between the health care system and SIA during your sick leave? 4. Do you have any suggestions as to how to improve the patients’ situation in relation to the contact with the SIA and the health care system during sick leave?”

4. I would also prefer more citations to strengthen the interpretation.

Response: Two more citations are added. Under Content area 1, Interaction with the SIA, Tangled communication:

“And then I asked my social worker, because I risk losing my income. And this keeps going on. One thing after the other is missing. It makes my health worse. So my social worker was kind and rang them up to ask. And then there were loads of questions. ... But I couldn’t handle that part, I really couldn’t. (Inf 4)”

And under Content area 3, Recovery and return to work, A wish for guidance:

“You are like a reed shaken by the wind. There are different forces acting on you. But it is all about having support and help to see the positive things and what is good, and about ending up with people who have the ability to help. Because you can’t expect people on sick leave to be all independent and have access to all their choices. As a person on sick leave you don’t feel that way. You are subordinate and you are dependent and afraid of taking steps outwards, for natural reasons you could say. (Inf 13)”

5. It would be useful to know the authors definition of rehabilitation.
Response: As a response to the request for a definition of the term rehabilitation we have added to the discussion the following section on this issue and provided a definition that agrees with the reasoning of our article.

“Within the field of rehabilitation the approach to patients has similarly moved from a predominantly medical one to one in which psychological and sociocultural aspects are equally important. This development is reflected in the United Nations definition of the term: “The term "rehabilitation" refers to a process aimed at enabling persons with disabilities to reach and maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychiatric and/or social functional levels, thus providing them with the tools to change their lives towards a higher level of independence”.”

6. The discussion and conclusion is well balanced but the authors need to discuss the sampling problems more in depth.

Response: In the result section we have added the following sentence describing how the recruitment process contributed to the desired range of the sampling:

“This versatile ways of recruitment contributed to a sample of informants with desired variety in predetermined characteristics (Table 1).”

And in the discussion section, under methodological considerations, further discussion of the sampling is added:

“Using various gatekeepers and advertisements in the recruitment process enabled us to recruit a sample with a broad range of experiences concerning the contact with the SIA and the health care system.

It can be argued that recruitment through advertisements could lead to an overrepresentation of informants with negative experiences. On the other hand, recruitment through contacts within the SIA and the health care system could lead to an overrepresentation of informants with continuous contacts and positive experiences. By using a combination of the two recruitment processes we hoped to optimize the mix of informants.”
Other corrections:

1. The name of the first author is changed from Jenny Mathiasson to Jenny Hubertsson as she has changed her name since the article was first submitted.

2. References: Reference 14 was incorrect (referred to another article by the same authors). This reference is therefore corrected and now refers to the intended article. Reference 7 was removed as it referred to an exclusively Swedish document and therefore not available to all readers. Some of the other references had incorrect formatting which have been corrected. Two more references (reference 22 and 23) are added as a result of the added definition of the term rehabilitation.

3. Discussion section, result discussion, second last paragraph, last sentence “...professional guidance could have...” is changed to “...professional guidance could consequently have...” to show that this argument is a consequence of the reasoning in the previous sentences.

4. Discussion section, methodological considerations, tird paragraph, third line: “disability pension” is changed to “sick leave status” to clarify that this is what is meant and to be in line with the terms of the reasoning around informants characteristics and table 1.

Yours sincerely,

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