Author's response to reviews

Title: Involvement and structure: A qualitative study of organizational change and sickness absence among women in the public sector in Sweden

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Dr. de Rijk,

Thank you for inviting a new version of our manuscript, MS: 1607924379478325, “Involvement and structure: A qualitative study of organizational change and health among women in the public sector in Sweden”.

We wish to thank the reviewers for exceptionally good and constructive comments, and we have now amended the manuscript according to their suggestions. A point-by-point reply to all the issues raised in the reviews can be found below. Hopefully, the manuscript will now be acceptable for publication.

Yours sincerely,

Maria Baltzer
On behalf of all the authors
Reviewer's report
Title: Involvement and structure: A qualitative study of organizational change and health among women in the public sector in Sweden
Version: 2 Date: 4 February 2011
Reviewer: Petra Verdonk

Reviewer's report:
I enjoyed to see that the authors have taken the comments very seriously, and I think they have processed them well. Where they disagreed with my comments, they have stated clearly why, and I am open to accept their reflections. My point on the gender perspective is elaborated upon in the introduction and in the discussion chapter. I do not agree that you cannot do a gender study when you only study one of the genders, but however find their reasons for not doing it completely acceptable. I found it very important that the authors acknowledged that gender might have explanatory power.

*We thank you for your supportive and generous comments and thorough reading.*

Just one minor thing: on page 15, the authors refer to Reich [33] when they mention flexible organizations. On page 18, the same section returns, but a bit more elaborated. I like it better on page 18, but anyhow, one of them should be deleted.

*We agree and have now deleted the comment on page 15.*

Other than that I have nothing to comment on. As far as I'm concerned, this will be a beautiful publication.

*Thank you.*

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests

Reviewer's report
Title: Involvement and structure: A qualitative study of organizational change and health among women in the public sector in Sweden
Version: 2 Date: 5 February 2011
Reviewer: Marianne Upmark

Reviewer's report:
Thank you for your comments to my proposals of change. In general I consider this article of interest because of it’s methodologically explorative character. I think this version has improved and the inserted section on gender aspects seems quite adequate, but maybe a little too strongly pronounced, since this issue is not the main one of your study. 
But still I consider that the Introduction as well as the Method sections must undergo further revisions. If not, the manuscript seems unclear and not so well structured.

We are very grateful for your detailed reading and important comments and have now tried to amend the manuscript according to the comments, as detailed below.

Major compulsory revisions:
1. The structure of the Introduction must be improved and thus made easier for the reader to grasp. In it’s present form passages of methodological character are mixed with passages about organizational changes in general.

We agree and have now tried to structure it in a more logical way where we aimed at separating the methodological passages from the passages concerning organizational change. However, since our line of argument builds on methodological considerations, it was not possible to completely separate methodological passages from those about organizational change. Still, we believe that the structure of the Introduction has now been substantially improved.

2. Material and method
Still the material is unclear. For example it must be unambiguous for the reader whether an employee working in a small private nursery is considered to be exposed to expansion if the owners of the "nursery-chain" has expanded with for example 50% by opening a number of new nurseries. If the authors intend to answer this question by the sentence "If the workplace at which the participant worked in.....that year" I propose the concept "the workplace" to be defined more exactly.

We agree that this is unclear. Unfortunately, there is no unambiguous answer to this question, as explained in the following passage, which we have now added to the paper (page 6):

"These somewhat surprising results are, however, difficult to interpret, as the precise reality behind these expansions is not known. Expansion was defined according to an algorithm which used register data based on reports from the employers. It is possible that other phenomena than expansion, e.g. centralization or opening of new units not coded as new workplaces, as well as inaccurate reports from the employers, could have led to misclassification of a substantial proportion of the observed cases."
In fact, this very uncertainty about the exact nature of the phenomenon (which was labeled ‘expansion’ in the previous study) was a major reason that we wanted to conduct the present study. You may say that the lack of clear understanding of ‘expansion’ was the major weakness, not of the present but of the previous, study, and that is also the reason why we do not consider the present study to be about expansion, but rather about organizational changes, which we have investigated in an open, explorative way.

The opposite of long-term sickness absence must be defined. In the Results the opposite is labelled as "low sickness absence" which is unclear.

We agree and we now write the following (p. 7):

“We defined long-term sickness absence as medically certified absence of 90 days or more during a three-year period. The amount of sickness absence was calculated by adding the statutory number of days paid for by the employer to the number of days registered in the National Insurance database from 1997–99, inclusive. All participants who did not meet these criteria for long-term sickness absence were defined as having low sickness absence.”

In the Discussion under the heading Strengths and weaknesses of the study the effects of the time passage between the exposure of change and the interviews must be commented; the interviews were performed 11 to 16 years after the exposure of change at their workplace.

We agree and how now added the following (p. 35):

“The interviews were performed 11 to 16 years after the exposure to the changes, and also long after the supposed outcomes had occurred, which may have led to recall bias and loss of detail. However, interviewing the informants so long after may also have created a certain distance to the events making it easier for the interviewees to tell their stories in a structured way, and not focus too much on emotions. We believe the stories were told with enough richness in details to be essentially trustworthy.”

Minor essential revisions:
In the Introduction where you the authors refer to a previous study, reference 7, I want the figures of the ORs to be included (I think this is an issue of importance for the study since the excessed risk for both sickness absence and hospital admission was quite weak in the previous study).

We have now described this more detailed in the end of the Introduction (pp. 5-6):

“An earlier longitudinal study of 24,036 employees in Sweden [7] showed that those who had been repeatedly exposed to large expansions (increases in staffing) during 1991-1996 had an excess risk of both long-term sickness absence (odds ratio 1.07 [95% CI 1.01–1.13]) and
hospital admission (1.09 [1.02–1.16]) during 1997-1999. In this context, odds ratio signifies the change in odds for each additional year of exposure, varying from 0 to 6. The strongest association between large expansion and sickness absence was in women in the public sector (1.18 [1.08–1.30]), corresponding to an odds ratio of 2.77 [1.62–4.74] between full exposure (all 6 years) and no exposure. Repeated moderate expansion, on the other hand, appeared to have a protective effect (odds ratio 0.91 [0.84-0.98], p=0.012).”

Please note that the odds ratios appear small because they represent the increased risk from one additional year of exposure. An exposure of expansion all 6 years would in fact be associated with a substantial excess risk in comparison with no exposure at all, and we do not know if additional years of expansion would increase the risk even further.

Under the heading Interviews the interviews are described as semi-structured. Would it not be more honest to describe the interviews as a mixture of a semi-structured interview and an ordinary discussion with some fairly senior comments?

We do not quite agree with this comment and believe that the interviews were of a traditional, semi-structured character since they followed an interview guide but with an open approach during the interviews.

Under the heading Strengths and weaknesses the issue of potential gender effects is a little too long since you already in the Introduction discussed the importance of this issue.

We have now shortened the passage about gender issues as suggested.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.