Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Petra Verdonk

Reviewer's report:

This is a very beautiful study. The authors have written a comprehensive, very good overview of problems faced by employees in the public sector. It is well-written, interesting, and there are highly innovative elements to this study. It is of importance to the field and without a doubt interesting for publication in BMC Public Health.

I do also have some comments that I would like to see addressed in the article. One major comment is that I miss a gender perspective or at least some explanation for the focus on women. Women’s higher sickness absence in itself is not enough; some elaboration is needed on why women would report sick more often, and also how the reported findings would affect women more than men (if you had interviewed men, what would have been different?). I will point towards a few gender issues that I noticed in the results but these were not analyzed as such. Secondly, I think that some categories are two sides of one coin, which means a higher level of abstraction can be reached.

1. Discretionary Revision
   Abstract
   I would like to see the research question in the abstract as well, and a few words on the content of the themes would be more informative.

2. Major Compulsory Revision
   Introduction: Other than the fact that the authors study women, they do not incorporate a gender perspective. A gender perspective is not a must per se, but for me a bit disappointing, although the authors do (almost) make up for this by all the other good qualities of the paper. Still, if you study women only, and you identify issues as more salient among female employees, it requires at least some elaboration. I will further discuss this later with the results.

3. Minor essential revision: In the paragraph starting with ‘Studies of the effectiveness of organizational changes...’ the authors state that according to these studies published in 1985 and in 1993, new research is urgently needed. A lot has been published in that field since then. Hence, the references or mentioning that new research is needed comes across a bit awkward.

4. Minor essential revision: At the end of the introduction, I would like to see the
Methods: The description of the methods is worth a compliment. The way the data analysis is elaborated is very elaborate and interesting. But they are also rather complicated, and while reading, I was just asking myself whether QCA could also be an obstacle to further theorizing. I will return to this later as well.

Results

5. The results are beautifully described and elaborated. Minor essential revision: the authors use ‘theme’ and ‘category’ interchangeably, and I think the paper would even increase in readability if they would make a choice – use categories for the mid-term results in Box 1 for instance, and then use themes for the final solution – whatever is most convenient.

6. Major compulsory revision: The authors analyzed the interviews in-depth and they embedded their findings in the literature. However, I do think that some themes belong together.

To me, the two themes Unregulated Work and Well Planned Process of Change seem two sides of the coin, and thus, they are actually one theme: but at a higher level of abstraction. Unregulated Work describes how employees live in continuously changing worlds, which is one of the characteristics of modern organizations: they change all the time, and thus, change is a steady feature of working life. Not all employees can successfully cope with that. The results nicely describe the ambiguity of modern working life for many employees. I missed however referencing to what are called post-Fordist organizations, or neoliberalism, which is in particular an issue in the public sector where neoliberal thinking is applied to public service work. It is in particular this structure that intensifies work, puts high demands on employees, and their output is monitored more and more, while at the same time the level of registering and bureaucracy is increasing. Such organizations offer a lot of autonomy and flexibility as well, but in exchange for an increase in productivity – which is hard to define and hard to do in the public sector... Employees are generally well-aware of the fact that their decision latitude comes at a price! The Well Planned Process of Change is the other side of this coin. Work is constantly changing, but in this case there is some structure, some overview that employees can relate to. To my surprise, the authors themselves find these two categories opposites as well. This is one example of how I think that the QCA method might hamper the further analysis of qualitative data, when authors want the data to fit into the established categories. Is that the case?!

7. Major compulsory revision: I found the Multiple Roles category very interesting, and the results are in line with Barnett and Hyde’s expansionist theory (2001). Barnett and Hyde however mention multiple roles in different domains (work and home). To my knowledge, the concept of multiple roles at work is rather new. I find it refreshing and clever. Agent of Change is also very interesting. The authors state that the Agent of Change is usually already positive towards the changes. Possibly, that is why they became an Agent of Change in the first place... But being the Agent of Change actually adds another role to
employees’ existing roles too. Being an Agent of Change is possibly a job for a person who blossoms in Multiple Roles (and thus, is more likely to have multiple roles in the first place). And next, I think that both Multiple Roles and Agent of Change are connected to the Humiliating Position. You may not always get respect everywhere, but getting it nowhere harms health quickly. And people can take some humiliation, but not all the time and in all contexts…Thus: Multiple Roles protect from humiliation. And if you’re an Agent of Change, you can at least have the feeling that you contribute positively, which increases self-respect – even when that causes resistance in others.

I think that the two main themes found are somehow related to structure (its clarity or not) compiled of Unregulated Work and of Well Planned Process of Change and to respect, compiled of Agent of Change, Humiliating Position, and Multiple Roles.

In the discussion, the authors also mention that two key factors of healthy organizational changes are ‘active involvement’ and ‘good structure’. This is worth elaborating in the results section. The authors can use the themes that are described now as subheadings under these larger factors. It would make the paper even stronger, and they would have a very clear model of how these aspects are related to sickness absence.

8. Major compulsory revision: Crosscutting gender issues. Interviewee Inga brings up an issue of importance, when looking from a gender perspective: care work and informal care are not acknowledged in the paper. Being a single parent, at least in the Netherlands where I do my research, is a major risk factor for sickness absence and for stress-related problems, and many more women than men are single parents. Workers do have private lives, and thus, in the changing organization context, this will always create tension with the unfettered needs of the post-Fordist organization. It is just harder to live up to the criteria of a good employee when you’re a single parent; you’re probably not the first person they think of when they seek an Agent of Change who is supposed to put in some extra time… And Inga also takes care of her father.

Furthermore, she brings up gendered health problems Inga: the gallstone problems, the problems with her thyroid. Women suffer more often from diseases with an ambiguous onset, and that are not life-threatening. Hence, the diseases or health problems women face need to be integrated in their working lives. In combination with changing organizations, it may not be so easy to accommodate to varying and unlimited demands or flexible needs of the organization.

Another gender issue is related to the feelings of insufficiency and incompetence, which we have for instance also described in a paper (Verdonk et al., 2008), but the loss of self-esteem or more internalization of problems by women is an important psychological factor that needs further exploration. More often than men, women tend to blame themselves and attribute failure to stable characteristics of their personality. Women’s difficulties with setting limits are for instance also described by Kristina Holmgren in a paper in Disability and Rehabilitation.
9. Minor essential revision: Some quotes may benefit from a little editing, such as the quote from Inga: ‘And during the 90’s I also had a father who was, who started to get sickness absence…’ sounds a bit strange.

Discussion

10. Major compulsory revision: I think that the findings must be placed within the perspective that they were found among women: thus, this knowledge may be true for women in the public sector... and some comments are needed about men. Looking at sex and gender differences in exposure vs vulnerability, are men not exposed to organizational change as much as women? Or do they respond differently to organizational change? Are men just not as often humiliated, or would they be less vulnerable to it? Would they possibly leave – do they have more options than women?! Are men more often Agents of Change, or in Multiple Roles at work?

11. Major compulsory revision: The strengths and weaknesses of the study could be a bit more elaborated. For instance, did QCA contribute to the fact that a lower level of abstraction was presented in the results than in the discussion section of the paper? And what are the authors’ reflections on interviewing men in the public sector; should they have been included in this study as well? Do they think the results differ for the private sector – to what extent?

12. Minor essential revision: Discussion in Relation to other research - Organizational science has developed since Lewin, for instance Gareth Morgan’s work, or Mintzberg. The picture drawn by this reference and the ones in the introduction is that organization science has not been active for decades. I'm sure that is not what the authors mean. But to reference a model from 1947 and then arguing that this is a rather simplistic description as if this is the first time this has been brought up is an oversimplification.

Minor Essential Revision: Is the referencing in the right format for BMC Public Health? I would also recommend the authors to look at the journal Gender, Work and Organization. Maybe I missed it, but I did not see any referencing to the journal. The gender perspective may benefit from some papers in that journal.

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