Reviewer’s report

Title: Explaining the social gradient in sickness absence: a study of a general working population in Sweden

Version: 1 Date: 23 January 2013

Reviewer: Karl Bang Christensen

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to read this manuscript. I found the manuscript well-written and the analysis appropriate. I have two major points that I think should be addressed:

1. This is not a study that measures work environment factors and then relate these to sickness absence occurring in a follow-up period. It is a study that takes two samples (sicklisted/non-sicklisted) and then compare how they evaluate their work environment. This should be reflected more clearly in the discussion of results. Even though diagnoses are not discussed it probably safe to assume that many will be sick-listed due to, say, lower back-pain. This in turn will probably lead respondents to report differently on their physical work environment.

2. Why are individual items added together in a sum scale and then divided into categories. This will lead to loss of information. It can be useful to do this if you want to present just a single effect measure of 'symptoms' you would need to reduce 'Physical and mental symptoms' in such a way. However when all you are interested in is adjusting another effect measure I would suggest that you could adjust for individual item responses.

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.