Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 18 April 2013

Reviewer: Torill Helene Tveito

Reviewer's report:

Major compulsory revision
The authors have done a good job of answering my concerns; inclusion of the new table 3 was a valuable addition to the manuscript.

However, I am still concerned regarding the circularity in using as outcome measure physical exposure when physical exposure is used for splitting the population in 5 socioeconomic groups. I agree that the relation is often more complex than we think, but from table 3 it is very clear that high socioeconomic status implies low prevalence of heavy lifting and awkward working positions and the opposite for low socioeconomic status (in the 2 highest socioeconomic groups approximately 20% report heavy lifting and approximately 30% report awkward working positions, whereas in the 2 lowest socioeconomic groups the rates for both are approximately 80%). There were more employees from the lower socioeconomic groups in the sick-listed group, so they will have more physical exposure at work. It is a little like saying that smokers smoke significantly more cigarettes per day than non-smokers.

Perhaps the authors could include a discussion about this problem? This will alert the readers that there is a potential problem here and can draw their own conclusions.

Level of interest: An article of importance 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.