Author's response to reviews

Title: Perceptions on healthy eating, physical activity and lifestyle advice: opportunities for adapting lifestyle interventions to individuals with low socioeconomic status

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear editorial board of BMC Public Health,

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to revise the manuscript. The reviewers’ comments helped us greatly to improve our manuscript. In this letter, we provide a point-by-point response to the reviewers’ concerns.

We hope that the revised manuscript is now suitable for publication in BMC Public Health.

Kind regards,

On behalf of all authors

A.J. Bukman, MSc.

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Reviewer: Emma Everson-Hock

Dear reviewer,

Thank you for your kind words regarding our study aim, study design, interpretation of data and quality of the writing. Your comments helped us to improve the manuscript. Below we respond point-by-point on your suggested revisions.

Minor essential revision
The only thing that would prevent others from replicating the work in another context (which would be helpful future research) is that the authors have not appended their interview guide. Doing so (in an appendix or supplementary file) would enable complete transparency.

We agree that it is useful to add the interview questions. The interview questions are added as an additional file in the revised manuscript.

Minor essential revision
Something I think the authors could do to improve the paper is to more closely align the title and aims with the research questions throughout the manuscript. The title and aims talk about SES and in particular low SES and the importance of examining it, however this is not carried through into the research questions. Throughout the paper the link with SES is more tenuous than explicit (possibly as a result of the research questions). I would ideally like to see SES mentioned in the research questions and then the results presented with this more in mind, as at the moment SES creeps into the results occasionally, rather than being explicitly considered in the way the results are presented (yet this is something that the authors flag up as being important). It would be particularly useful if the findings could be organised by SES.
group, although I appreciate the authors may have in mind a more useful way of presenting the findings according to SES.

SES was indeed mentioned in some parts of the manuscript more tenuously than explicitly. We have made it more explicit in the revised manuscript by mentioning our interest in the perceptions of individuals with low SES in the research questions. We now explain that we studied both the perceptions that exist in general among individuals with different socioeconomic positions and the perceptions that especially exist among individuals with low SES. The interviews with the high SES groups were used as comparison to see what other perceptions were shared by the low SES groups. We adapted the last paragraph of the ‘Background’ section to make our interest in the perceptions of individuals with low SES more clear (lines 138–146).

In line with this interest, we adapted the ‘Results’ section. In the first paragraph of this section and in every first paragraph of the subsections, (low) SES is now mentioned more explicitly, by stating explicitly which perceptions were seen in general (and how these were quite comparable between the SES groups), and which perceptions were mainly shared by the low SES groups. In line with this, in the first paragraph of the ‘Discussion’ section we now state more clearly the distinction between general perceptions and the perceptions of the low SES groups specifically (lines 526–545).

Minor essential revisions
I only have two revisions to suggest regarding the writing:
1. On p.21, line 505, “being physical active” should be changed to “being physically active”
2. In the footnote to Table 1, do the authors mean SES or do they instead mean educational level?

Thank you for these suggestions. SES should indeed be replaced by educational level in the footnote of table 1. In line with your suggestions, we changed line 505 (line 515 in the revised manuscript) and the footnote to Table 1.

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Reviewer: Tilman Brand

Dear reviewer,

Thank you for reviewing our manuscript and for your valuable remarks. The remarks helped us to improve the manuscript. Below we respond on your suggested revisions.

Major Revisions
1) Differences and similarities between the socioeconomic group: In the study, the authors analyse perceptions on healthy lifestyles and lifestyle advice in low and high socioeconomic status (SES) groups to identify specific perceptions among individuals in the low SES group. From the results presented in the paper, it seems to me that there were many similarities and only a few differences in the perceptions among the individuals in the high and the low SES group. If this is the case there should be a clear statement on this issue.

The data indeed indicated that many perceptions were shared by both the low and the high SES groups. We agree that it is good to mention that the perceptions of the low SES participants were in general quite comparable to the perceptions shared by the high SES participants. We added this to the first paragraph of the ‘Results’ section (lines 220–222) and the first paragraph of the ‘Discussion’ section (lines 537–539).

Stressing differences in the health perceptions and habits between SES groups can easily lead to stigmatisation. So, be careful with language (e.g., Background section,
first paragraph „In general, persons with low SES eat less healthy“, rather say “...are less likely to eat healthy“) and consider that the low SES group (and the high SES group of course, too) is a diverse population that cannot be reduced to single lifestyle attributes. The finding that the participants from all groups preferred lifestyle advice tailored to their personal situation may be taken as hint that taking broad SES categories into account is not enough.

With stressing differences, we did not intend to stigmatise. We indeed recognise that there are differences within SES groups. In line with your suggestion, we refined the following lines: 58, 80, 541, 565 and 566.

2) Gender aspects: The focus groups were separated by gender and SES (which is good) but there are no gender specific results reported. We know that participation rates in behaviour-oriented interventions tend to be lower in men than in women. What are the differences and similarities in the perceptions between women and men (within and between SES strata)?

It is indeed interesting to study differences and similarities in the perceptions between women and men. However, this is outside the scope of this study. The reason for separating the focus groups by gender was to create more homogeneous groups, since the flow of an interview is expected to be smoother in more homogenous groups compared to mixed groups (Morgan, 1996). The study was not, however, intended to study gender differences. The number of groups is considered too small to look at the perceptions between women and men within and between SES strata (only two groups per gender-SES combination). Therefore, it is not possible to state something about differences between the perceptions of women and men.

3) Sample selection: nine focus group discussions were conducted. Reasons should be given for this number. Was it merely a convenience sample composition? Or: Did the authors expect to reach some sort of theoretical saturation by this sample size? Of course, qualitative research does not aim to achieve ’representativeness’, but still the authors should state whether they had the impression that all relevant aspects were covered by this sample.

With respect to the number of focus group interviews, in advance it was decided to conduct at least eight focus group interviews, four among low SES groups and four among high SES groups (in each of the two provinces one female group and one male group for each SES level). We expected, following Dickson (2000), to reach saturation with this number of focus group interviews. As a result of the convenience sampling, an additional ninth group volunteered to participate although we had already reached the intended number of interviews. During the last focus group interviews, we did not hear any new information; this indicated that we indeed reached saturation of data with the nine groups. We have added the argumentation for the number of focus group interviews to the section ‘Study design’ in the revised manuscript (lines 154–156).

There are notable differences between the high and low SES groups with regard to age and BMI. The author should critically discuss how this may have compounded the results.

As you noted, there were differences in the average age and BMI between the low and high SES participants. These differences could raise questions among other readers as well and therefore we do think it is good to say something about it. However, in general it is difficult in qualitative research to state how factors like age and BMI may have influenced the participants’ perceptions, unless participants link their perceptions to these factors themselves during the interviews. Therefore, we should be careful with speculating about this.
In relation to our findings, participants’ preference for being physically active with persons of the same age and with similar health complaints might be related to BMI and age. It is possible that older persons and persons with a higher BMI have more problems or expect more problems with keeping up the pace of regular physical activities. As our low SES participants already explained, not keeping up the pace of others could be a reason to prefer to be physically active with people of the same age and with similar health complaints. Thus, the higher age and BMI in our low SES groups could be related to their preference for being physically active with comparable others. However, in this study there were also some high SES participants who were relatively older and overweight, and these participants did not mention the advantages of being physically active with comparable others. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the preference for being physically active with comparable others is explained only by the higher age and BMI. A sentence about the possible influence of age and BMI on the preference for being physically active with comparable others has been added to the ‘Discussion’ section (lines 590–594).

Minor issues
1) Several time term 'social factors' is used (e.g., support for lifestyle change section first paragraph; Making lifestyle changes section first paragraph). I don’t really understand what is meant by this term.

The term 'social factors' is indeed confusing. We mean the participants’ social environment or, more general, significant others. It was intended to state that support for lifestyle change should take into account the perceived advantages of making lifestyle changes together with others. We therefore changed ‘address social factors’ in the whole manuscript by either ‘take into account the advantages of making lifestyle changes together with others’ or ‘profit from involving significant others’.

2) Background section: ‘layperson’ as a term for people (who are indeed experts of their own perceptions and life circumstances) is a bit odd, should be deleted.

The term ‘layperson’ in deleted in the revised manuscript.

References
