Reviewer's report

Title: Illness perceptions in the context of differing work participation outcomes: exploring the influence of significant others in persistent back pain

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Reviewer: Kees Boersma

Reviewer's report:

Although I am not working in the field of health and care research, I can say that this is an interesting and valuable contribution to the literature on persistent back pain. I have a position at the department of Organization Sciences at a Faculty of Social Science. As such, I am interested in research about work and organizations, and the relation between well-being and work. Moreover I have a background in qualitative research methods.

I hope the remarks below will be useful for the authors to improve their manuscript.

1) I am curious to hear more about the theory behind the research. At page 6 it is stated that there 5 core dimensions of illness. However, at page 9 the authors decided to select 3 other dimensions. Only one, consequences of illness of the selected dimensions is in line with the theory. What about the other dimensions? And how is, for example, illness identity (as part of the theory) related to patient identity? How strong is the theory used by the authors if they can replace core dimensions for other dimensions? Must this be seen as an extension of the same theory? Please explain.

2) To include the significant other in the research on persistent back pain is important. What is already know about the influence of the significant other? This article might be helpful: Joan M. Romano, Mark P. Jensen, Karen B. Schmaling, Hyman Hops and Dedra S. Buchwald (2009). Illness behaviors in patients with unexplained chronic fatigue are associated with significant other responses, J Behav Med 32(6): 558-69. (DOI 10.1007/s10865-009-9234-3).

3) I welcome qualitative methods to the field of health and care research. It might be good if the authors give more details about the use of the template analysis. What steps have been taken to come to the analysis? How does the coding scheme look like?

4) The authors give a clear overview of the results. My question would be about the relative importance of the dimensions. For example, can the authors say that the influence of the significant other on the consequence of illness is more/less important than the influence on the patient identity? etc. They will help the reader a lot if they provide a table with the most important outcomes. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core dimension</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Examp. working sample</th>
<th>Examp. non-working sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Core dimension | Content | Examp. working sample | Examp. non-working sample |
Consequence of illness
Nature of work
Patient identity

5) The authors rightly stress the importance of a supportive Human Resource department at work. One recommendation for them to make would be to use the literature on organization culture and HR to better understand the characteristics of work environments.

6) Although it was not part of their sample, can the authors say anything about patients who don’t have a significant other, i.e. those who are living alone?

**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.