Encouraging Encounters

Experiences of People on Sick Leave in Their Meetings with Professionals

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Abstract

Background: The recent increase in long-term sickness absence both in Sweden and many other countries has been met with various attempts to intensify the use of rehabilitation measures in order to prevent people from remaining long-term sickness absent. Several actors, among them professionals in healthcare, occupational health services, and social insurance are involved in handling issues related to the sick leave of an individual, and in providing measures to promote return to work (RTW). Identification of the factors that are related to RTW of the individual is a multifaceted task; therefore to meet the individual in this process is an essential challenge for many actors involved. Knowledge is needed about factors that might promote RTW in order to facilitate future research aimed at designing effective rehabilitation programs. Such information is of great importance to improve the work situations of the professionals, to decrease the cost for society, and to improve the situations for people on sick leave.

Objectives: The overall aim of the work underlying this thesis was to ascertain whether contacts between professionals and persons on sick leave might be one factor that can promote RTW, and also to identify different aspects of how such encounters are experienced by those who are sick listed.

Material and methods: Five investigations were conducted using different study designs, data, and methods of data analysis. The first two (papers I and II) concerned interviews with people on sick leave about positive experiences of their encounters with professionals. The third study (paper III) was based on four questions about encounters, which were included in a questionnaire that was administrated to people who were on sick leave. The fourth study (paper IV) used a broad questionnaire to examine experiences of positive encounters, and the final study (paper V) proposed a model of possible effects of the contacts on RTW.

Results: The first studies (papers I and II) identified different aspects of positive experiences of encounters. For example, it seemed that important qualities included being treated with respect, feeling supported, establishing a personal relationship, and participating in decisions regarding RTW measures. Several of the interviewees stated that RTW might be promoted by positive encounters. The investigation described in paper III showed that perceptions of interactions varied with the type of professionals, as well as with demographics. The respondents perceived their consultations with professionals within healthcare as most positive, followed by social insurance, and lastly occupational health services. In general, females, people born in Sweden, and those who were older, and had a higher education rated their encounters with professionals as more positive. The main finding reported in paper IV was that the majority of the participants had experienced being positively encountered by professionals. Three aspects of such encounters were stressed, namely being treated with "competence", "personal attention", and "confidence and trust". The results related in paper V indicated that theories about empowerment and social emotions could be successfully applied in this area, after they were specifically adapted to some unique features of the interactions between sick-listed persons and rehabilitation professionals.

Conclusions: This thesis emphasizes that being positively encountered by professionals can have a beneficial impact on RTW after a period of sickness absence. More research is required to elucidate the interaction between sick-listed persons and professionals who are involved in their cases. Further studies should focus on how the professionals can be provided with methods that will help the clients increase their own ability to mobilize and develop their resources. Moreover, additional knowledge is needed to extend professional treatment strategies that enhance self-confidence and empowerment of individuals during sickness absence.