Invisible impairments in working life – different perspectives on disclosure

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Background: Invisible impairments refer to impairments that are either invisible for others because they can’t be visibly seen on the body or because the person is actively hiding it through various strategies (compare with Matthews & Harrington, 2000). By studying experiences and practices of disclosure earlier studies have illuminated how invisible impairments involves specific dilemmas compared to impairments that are visible (Charmaz, 2010, Davis & Mandelson, 2014, Lingsom, 2008, Santuzzi, Waltz, Finkelstein, Rupp, 2014). The focus of this paper is to present some of the factors that affect if, when, how and to whom persons disclose, or abstain from disclosing, their invisible impairments at work (Norstedt, 2016).

Method: this paper is based on a study with a qualitative approach. 17 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with persons who: a) have invisible impairments and b) who in their professional role handle questions on disability, impairments, sickness and rehabilitation at different workplaces.

Results: Earlier experiences, stigmatizing impairments, colleagues and employers’ treatment, the impairment’s impact on the workability, the employer’s understanding of his/her responsibility for rehabilitation, controlling mechanisms, employment situation and, view on future career are factors that influence decisions on disclosure. Despite reporting positive aspects of disclosure, the interviewees with invisible impairments, expressed an uncertainty whether they would disclose their impairment for a potential future employer.

Conclusions: Even though Sweden’s comparatively strong laws concerning employers’ responsibility and the law against discrimination, persons with invisible impairments experience their situation as precarious and uncertain. This could be understood against their earlier experiences but also against norms on normality and adulthood (Priestley, 2003) and the work strategy (Junestav, 2004).