Reviewer's report

Title: What about N? A methodological study of sample-size reporting in focus group studies

Version: 2 Date: 9 February 2011

Reviewer: Cicely Kerr

Reviewer's report:

The authors are to be congratulated on their thoughtful and positive response to the reviewers’ comments. Overall I think the manuscript is much improved and there are only a few outstanding issues for the authors to address, with no need for further peer-review:

1. Minor Essential Revisions
   a) At the start of the methods section on page 8, “systematic search” should be changed to “structured search” in line with the authors’ move away from claiming this is a systematic review

   b) Also on page 8, the revised paragraph at the start of the eligibility criteria section is now rather clumsy. EMBASE and PsychINFO also offer good coverage of medical journals and a combined search of all three databases would be ideal if this was your main aim, so this doesn’t really add up as a justification to only use PubMed Central and it may not be a great idea to confuse the issue by mentioning the alternative databases. This paragraph would be better structured to start with a clear statement of aim(s) in terms of eligibility, followed by the methods to meet the aim(s), including some of the elements of the aims and methods mentioned in the following paragraph on the same page e.g. “Our aim was to focus on current use of focus group methodology in health science journals to review the state of the art in the field. We searched PubMed Central for primary studies that used focus groups and were published in 2008. We chose PubMed Central because it offers good coverage of medical journals and allowed us to apply a “Free Full Text filter” to limit searches to publications from open-access journals. This approach allowed us to focus on the most widely available publications, gave us easy and immediate access to papers and others to easily access publications cited in this review and check our conclusions. We chose studies published in 2008 as a recent complete year to be able to check expansion in the field from earlier years. Searches were conducted in 2009 and repeated for studies published in 2003 and 1998, i.e. five and ten years earlier.”

   c) On page 11, the first page of the results section, the final 3 lines on page 11 should be a bulleted list (apologies should have mentioned this the first time round).

   d) On Page 15, the new section giving examples of adequate reporting of saturation starts “As indicated above,….” It is not clear where above this is
indicated, so this sentence would be better starting from “We also found some examples of adequate reporting….”

e) On page 17 in the middle of your new section expanding the discussion of impact of difficulties in recruiting participants you find it curious that a study claimed to have reached saturation despite deciding before the start of the study to conduct a limited number of groups. I don’t find this curious at all, it was certainly risky to assume that 5 groups would be enough to reach saturation and have no leeway to conduct more if saturation was not reached by this point, particularly if there was no iterative process of data collection and analysis for discussion in later groups to be targeted towards refining emerging themes from earlier groups. However, it is perfectly possible.

f) At the top of page 21 you still refer to “the practical application of the theory of data saturation” I still don’t agree that saturation is a theory so this should be replaced with “the practical assessment of data saturation” or “the practical application of the concept of data saturation”

g) In the study strengths and limitations section on page 21, while I accept your reasons for limiting searches to open access publications you still need to acknowledge this as a limitation and discuss the likely implications of excluding around 80% of potentially relevant publications for the validity of your conclusions. This is the most significant outstanding issue in the manuscript for me and the editor should check the limitation has been acknowledged and discussed before making any final discussion about publication.

2) Discretionary Revisions

a) In the new background section on page 3, the third sentence starts “In later years, focus groups have become increasingly popular…” this is without a reference point for the timeframe, so makes you think ‘later than what?’ It would probably be better to replace later with recent in this sentence, to start “In recent years, focus groups have become increasingly popular…”

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**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