Reviewer's report

Title: Using the Framework Method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research

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Reviewer: Gavin Daker-White

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Major Compulsory Revisions

1. My understanding of 'framework' analysis in qualitative research is that it involves using elements of a theory (e.g. Normalization Process Theory) to provide categories for analyzing data. A similar approach has been described in relation to the synthesis of published qualitative studies; known as 'framework synthesis' (Simon Carrol, et al. @ SCHARR, University of Sheffield). The authors need to cite these other 'framework' methods and distinguish them from their own approach.

2. Several aspects of the method of analysis presented in the manuscript seem to borrow from elements of Grounded Theory, although grounded theory is not referenced. On the face of it, it appears as though what the authors have done here is use tables or matrices in order to assist with a thematic (or applied grounded theory?) analysis. There is nothing at all 'wrong' with this approach, but I am not convinced that it constitutes a discrete method of its own. Can the authors distinguish their approach from a standard grounded theory/thematic analysis approach?

3. In relation to point 2, above, I would also note that the term 'thematic analysis' is widely used as a short hand by qualitative researchers using quasi-grounded theory methods, rather than those outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006).

4. References to this method of analysis as being easy, or more suited for researchers or clinicians without experience of undertaking qualitative analysis need to be played down or removed from the manuscript. I believe the 'gold standard' should be that people attend training courses prior to undertaking postgraduate studies for publication in scientific journals.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. There are numerous problems with various terminology as used throughout the manuscript. Most importantly, the term 'qualitative content analysis' is misapplied in this context, as 'content analysis' more usually applies to (a sometimes automated) process whereby the frequency of certain words or their synonyms are counted or presented in frequency tables.

2. Page 2 - "Not all types of qualitative data can be analysed in this way." I doubt
the veracity of this statement.

3. Page 2 - "Its unique feature is the matrix output." Again, I am not sure if that is 'unique' as matrices are used in other 'qualitative methods,' e.g. meta-ethnography and qualitative researchers using other methods might also arrange codes or themes in tables as one way of understanding their data.

4. Page 2 - "This potential to compare data across cases as well as within individual cases is a central principle of the method." Again, I would argue that this is something that most qualitative researchers should be / are doing. This is also a hallmark of constant-comparison in grounded theory.

5. Page 2 - "The Framework Method provides clear steps to follow and produces highly structured outputs of summarized data. It is therefore useful where multiple researchers are working on a project, particularly in a multi-disciplinary research team where not all members have experience of qualitative data analysis, and for managing large data sets where obtaining a holistic overview of the entire data set is desirable." Again, these issues arguably apply across qualitative team work in general and are usually addressed by using the built-in features of computer software, such as Atlas.ti or NVIVO.

6. Page 2 - The statement that the method is 'not easy' seems to conflict with the earlier statement that it is particularly useful for people who have no prior experience of qualitative research.

7. Page 2 - "Importantly, the Framework Method cannot accommodate highly heterogeneous data. This means data must cover similar topics or key issues so that it is possible to categorize into 'themes', even though individual interviewees may have very different views or experiences in relation to the topic (these can then be compared)." The second statement seems to partly conflict with the first.

8. Page 2 - "The Framework Method is most commonly used for the thematic analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts, although it could be adapted for other types of textual data, including documents, such as diaries or meeting minutes, and field notes from observations." There is no evidence provided for this statement. Does it need a reference? Also seems to conflict with point 2, above.

9. The bottom of page 3 appears very simplistic, as most qualitative (applied) health researchers commonly employ a combination of analytic methods, e.g. thematic and narrative.

10. Page 7: "Coding can also be done using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)a." - The information in the footnote is essential and should be incorporated into the main text.

11. More references are needed.

Discretionary Revisions
1. Transcription, p.4. I contest the idea that full verbatim transcriptions are needed. If one is interested only in certain things that will form the 'frame,' then surely it is not necessary to fully transcribe all of the data, including that which is superfluous. Further, in qualitative data analysis, more useful insights can come from coding memos, theoretical notes or research diary reflections. Later, the authors refer to analysing sets of transcripts in different phases (which is good practice). Perhaps earlier interviews should be transcribed in full, whereas later ones don't need to be? These issues are underlined when the authors state that analysts also listened to the interviews. Did they need to transcribe the whole of the interviews? Was it a good use of project resources?

2. Page 5 - "In multi-disciplinary or large research projects, those analyzing the data may be different from those who conducted or transcribed the interviews." This appears as a weakness and points to a hierarchy of collection v. analysis, when in the 'best' studies, the analyst will be intimately familiar with the data collected, i.e. they will have collected it themselves. By extension, a better point to make would be that (in an ideal world) all members of the team should be involved in data collection *and* analysis.

3. Page 5 - "meaningful unit of text" needs further explication

4. pp. 5-6 and reference to figure 2. The text mentions 3 different coders reading the first (?) three transcripts, but the figure only presents one set of coding. Does this mean that each of three coders came up with the same codes, that these were the codes that were agreed after consultation, or are these the codes that were ascribed by one of the individual coders?

5. With further reference to the above passage of text and the the contents of figure 2, are these 'codes' as a result of 'open coding' or do they follow from a later process of further merging, re-labelling or re-organisation, as on the face of it the codes appear somewhat removed from the material presented.

6. Page 6 "4) Developing a working analytical framework." This section seems to draw on the principles of coding in grounded theory, which are not referenced. I would also note that in an ideal world, this process should be instigated whilst data are still being collected.

7. Page 6, bottom. 66 codes does not sound like many? How many codes were there before codes were merged/collapsed or re-named?

8. Only when we reach section 7) (page 8) is reference made to analytic memos. These memos should commence earlier in the research cycle. Also note that "analytic memos" are a hallmark of grounded theory.

**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