Reviewer’s report

Title: Establishing confidence in the output of qualitative research synthesis: the ConQual approach

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Reviewer: Megan A. Morris

Reviewer’s report:

I would like to thank the editors for the opportunity to review this manuscript. There is an increased recognition of the value of qualitative research in the evolving field of health services research. Unfortunately, as noted by the authors of this manuscript, there is no agreed upon standard for evaluating the quality of synthesized qualitative research studies. For qualitative research to continue to be recognized as a valuable method that yields high value, informative data, standardized criteria are needed. The authors of this paper aim to develop a system for assessing the confidence in synthesized qualitative research findings with a corresponding summary table. While the authors should be admired for such a pursuit, I have concerns that they have not quite achieved this goal. Below are the main concerns that I believe need to be addressed by the authors.

1. The authors outline two main criteria for assessing quality of synthesized qualitative studies: credibility and dependability, which they referenced as from “Lincoln and Guba”. First, I am unsure of the correct citation for this. In the manuscript they cite “Lincoln and Guba”, whereas the reference in the bibliography is a Guba and Lincoln (1982) article. (Additionally, the authors used Dr. Guba’s first name, not his last in the bibliography.) I wonder if the authors do not intend to actually quote the Lincoln and Guba (1985) book “Naturalistic Inquiry”. It is in this book that Lincoln and Guba name four concepts that are needed for verification: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It is unclear why the authors of the current manuscript excluded transferability and confirmability. From my perspective, these two concepts are critical in reviewing the quality of qualitative methods, and therefore should be at least considered in establishing the confidence in synthesized findings. The authors need to make a clear and well outlined argument why they excluded transferability and confirmability and only focused on credibility and dependability.

2. The methods in this article were not thoroughly outlined. It is unclear how the authors came to consensus for the agreed upon results. Information that would be helpful included: the timeframe, how often they met, which criteria they considered, how they came to consensus, etc. Furthermore, it would be necessary to describe more of the authors’ background, including their potential biases. In the article, authors state that qualitative studies should be evaluated on whether the authors made “a statement locating the researcher culturally and theoretically”. It would behoove the current authors to include such information in
their current manuscript to add credibility to their results. I do have concerns that only one voice and perspective was explored in the study. An example of this is the authors state that there are multiple approaches to synthesize findings from qualitative research, yet they only referenced meta-aggregation, a method developed by one of the authors. The authors need to either make a statement for not using or referring to the other methods, or include the other methods which could lead to a broader, and perhaps more thorough evaluation of the methods for synthesizing and evaluating the quality of qualitative research.

3. Critical references seemed to not be included. In particular, the authors did not include a reference to the Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group Supplemental Handbook. http://cqim.cochrane.org/supplemental-handbook-guidance. It would create a stronger case for the authors’ results and add credibility if they included a more thorough literature review. (Furthermore, in Chapter 4 of this handbook the authors note the four criteria for quality, so again I question why the authors of this paper only selected two of these.)

4. Finally, the second aim of the study was to “determine whether a summary of findings is possible for qualitative systematic reviews” and to include a proposed table format. I am unsure that the authors achieved this. The end of page 11 they state that “this system has been trialed with a number of systematic reviews.” This is a vague statement and I do not believe this is sufficient evidence to state that they have achieved aim two. The authors should provide a more thorough explanation of how they developed the table and determined that this was an appropriate and easily implemented table format. Perhaps a companion systematic review in which the authors employed their system would be helpful.

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