Reviewer’s report

Title: Qualitative data in Mandarin: six principles to ensure rigorous analysis

Version: 1 Date: 5 February 2008

Reviewer: Emma Pitchforth

Reviewer’s report:

I welcomed the opportunity to review this paper. The paper addresses an important issue of working across languages and using translation in qualitative research. The paper draws on the example of Mandarin but has relevance and interest for anyone involved in qualitative research involving translations.

Major compulsory revisions

This paper has potentially important considerations for qualitative research involving translation.

It is always challenging to write this type of paper and, as it is, it does not fit well with the format of a research paper.

The current structure of the paper involves a very brief introduction to the project and paper. The methods section then simply states that “we carefully analysed problems we have encountered”. It is not clear what this means or how problems were identified and analysed. The section after Methods reports on Problems encountered in international collaborative qualitative research. This draws upon existing literature and some specific issues to conducting research in China and working with Mandarin. The paper then moves onto the authors’ proposed principles before the discussion and conclusion sections. Some of the content after the Methods section may be more appropriate for the introduction section. I think one of the problems with the paper is that it is given without example and although paper drawn from study administration of TB drugs there is very little detail provided in the data. I think it may be better to rewrite the paper to include more about the TB study. This could even take the form of a case study. Including details of the study would also make the paper of more interest to the potential readership of BMC Medical Research Methodology. If the paper was based upon the study then the authors could draw on examples to better illustrate the challenges they faced and their principles for practice. On pages 6 to 7 the authors give examples from previous work, for example, around the term “yuan qi” and reasons to avoid caesarean section. These specific examples make the points much more meaningful. It was a shame that the authors did not similarly draw upon specific examples from their TB study.

It is difficult to argue with much that is said in the paper as the authors give a descriptive account of what they did and base recommendations on their practice. There is little reflection in the description of what was done and there
was no sense of whether some things did not work so well or whether any tensions existed in the route they chose. The authors present their recommendations giving the sense that no problems were encountered or that any issues remained unresolved. It would also be useful to know at what stage the analysis of problems encountered in data collection and analysis were considered. Was the analysis done retrospectively or had authors identified challenges from existing literature and explicitly thought about how they would over come them? This paper would be improved by providing a more reflective analytical account rather than a descriptive account of what the authors did. It may also be important to draw a greater distinction between challenges common to qualitative research in general and qualitative research in different languages as the value of this paper is in making recommendations for cross language studies rather than qualitative research more generally.

I feel that this paper tackles an important issue believe it is important to publish methodological papers in area of qualitative research involving translation as there is a lack of literature and guidance for researchers. However, I think the paper would benefit from some rewriting and restructuring. Giving more information about the TB study and drawing on specific examples may be particularly useful. A more critical and reflective account and discussion would also beneficial.

The authors have drawn upon relevant literature and the paper is generally well written. It will easier to comment on individual aspects of the paper and make more detailed comments once the paper has been restructured.

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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