Reviewer's report

Title: Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews

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Reviewer: Mark Rodgers

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The authors have produced an interesting, knowledgeable and accessible “how to” paper, based on a worked example of their approach to thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. They acknowledge other methodological work conducted this area and succinctly address the most widely cited objections to the secondary synthesis of qualitative research evidence, particularly around the de-contextualisation of primary research findings. They also explicitly tackle principles of transparency and minimisation of subjective bias, which are integral to systematic review methodology – and it is this emphasis that most clearly distinguishes their approach from others presented elsewhere in the literature. The writing is clear and the language used generally accessible to the presumed intended audience of researchers new to the synthesis of primary qualitative research.

The minor comments below are principally points of clarification:

1) At several points, the authors mention meta-ethnography and specifically reference Nicky Britten and Rona Campbell’s applications of the method, briefly discussing the process of constructing 2nd and 3rd order interpretations. At least superficially, these “interpretations” appear analogous to the “descriptive” and “analytical” themes presented in the paper, so it may benefit the reader for the distinction between meta-ethnography more broadly and ‘thematic analysis’ as presented here to be made explicit.

2) p.10, end of first paragraph, it says studies were excluded if they had “significant flaws”, whereas p.19, end of 2nd paragraph it says all studies were included “regardless of their quality”. This requires brief clarification.

3) p.12, final sentence: This appears to be the only occurrence of the phrase “inductive analysis”, which may be unfamiliar to some readers.

4) The results section starts with the findings of the review of intervention studies, rather than the thematic analysis. As the authors explain, the two sets of findings were subsequently linked, but the paper would flow more easily if the issues that emerged from the thematic analysis were presented first.

5) p.21, bottom sentence: should read “…it may not be necessary…”

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.