Reviewer’s report

Title: Factors influencing the choice of transport mode for short distances in older adolescents: a qualitative study

Version: 1 Date: 17 January 2013

Reviewer: Joanna Kesten

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting article.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
Yes, to some extent. The importance of active transportation is clearly outlined and the novelty of short distance travel is of interest.

The importance of research focused on older adolescents could be made clearer. In addition the definition of adolescence used in this research is not clearly defined (e.g. pubertal development, increased independence, age range).

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
The reasons for using qualitative methods and focus groups in particular could be made stronger. The methods employed also need to be explained more thoroughly, in particular the recruitment (e.g. characteristics of the school) and analysis sections. From the authors description it is not clear how the data were analysed and whether this can be referred to as ‘grounded theory’ or thematic analysis. The quantification of the data to outline how many people discussed a factor is interesting but I am concerned that this is not in line with the grounded theory approach the authors say they are following. Indeed, qualitative research is more concerned with the salience of a theme than the number of people who discuss it.

3. Are the data sound?
From what I can tell – yes. See comments below for areas needing further clarification.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
Yes. See comments below for areas needing further clarification.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
More comparisons with previous qualitative studies would be useful. The authors could also make it clearer when they are referring to their study (often at the beginning of paragraphs) in the discussion. In addition there are instances where the discussion appears to not fit the findings. See further comments on this
6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

The authors discuss two limitations of their research. Both of these relate to participant characteristics. There is a need to consider the limitations of qualitative research methods in general.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

The authors predominantly cite quantitative papers in the Background section. Although the authors suggest that little is known about this particular area, there is scope to reference the qualitative literature on travel/physical activity behaviours to put this work in context.

The authors reference a paper published in 2000 detailing a decline in physical activity during adolescence. Firstly, have there been any more recent contributions to the literature supporting this finding and secondly could the authors provide more details about the Sallis paper, e.g. the age at which this decline occurs. For instance if the decline occurs in early adolescence (13 years) through to 18 years could one not argue that focusing on older adolescents may be too late?

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Yes

9. Is the writing acceptable?

In places there are grammatical errors and the authors need to do further copy editing to ensure there are no US spellings. Some of these have been picked up on and have been included in the Minor Essential Revisions below.

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Data Analysis

1. Line 155 – the authors’ state that “Grounded theory is characterized by intensively analyzing data, often sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase” this is not a sufficient description. Grounded theory is a method of analysing qualitative data which is grounded in the data without preconceived theories. Please expand to make it clear exactly how the data were analysed according to grounded theory?

2. Line 156 – the authors’ state that “Through constant comparisons, the analysis derived categories and subcategories from the data.” The method of constant comparison is a process of inductively classifying emergent themes by comparing data coded as a theme to previous data coded at that same theme. Can the authors please expand on what they mean by constant comparison and 'content analysis' which appears on Line 170?

•Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use
of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Background

3. Adolescence

Firstly the authors should define the term adolescence. Secondly, the authors state that a ‘steep decline in activity levels occurs in adolescence’, can the authors give more detail as to when this decline begins? At the moment the case for focusing on older adolescents is not as strong as it could be. Why is it that the focus should be on the end of the adolescent period rather than at the beginning where the decline has just begun or even in late childhood to prevent the decline in the first place? This could be strengthened by emphasising the increased independence adolescents have at this age (e.g. move and expand paragraph 2, line 83 to paragraph 1).

4. Literature

Can the authors’ review any qualitative studies in the background. The Lorenc et al. [43] systematic review referenced in the discussion could be referred to in the Background for example.

5. Context

Were the focus group participants legally allowed to purchase and consume alcohol? Can this information be included in the Background as a potential social influence on travel behaviours? Was this factor found to be influential in travel choices in the focus groups?

6. Methods

Line 108 – Can the authors please clarify what it is about focus groups that mean information about topics that are poorly understood can be produced and provide references to support this statement? I.e. how is this different from other qualitative methods or even quantitative studies? Can the researchers provide an explanation for why focus groups are appropriate with this sample? Did the authors consider the composition of the focus groups, e.g. friendship groups, single sex? The latter considerations will conceivably impact on the data collected.

7. Line 100 – can the authors provide a reference for habit being a strong correlate of transport mode choice.

8. Line 117- Why did the researchers recruit that school in particular? Is it similar in terms of pupil demographics to other schools in the area?

9. Line 118 – can the authors expand on the meaning of “general, technical, occupation and artistic studies” for an audience unfamiliar with the Belgian school system?

10. Line 132- Can the researchers provide a clearer definition of what saturation means and outline how this was reached?

11. Line 157- Can the authors outline what each of the three researchers did in
the analysis?

12. Line 153 - Could the authors state the language in which the interviews were conducted?

13. Line 159 - For the reasons stated earlier I think this article would benefit from the authors reconsidering the quantification of people who talk about certain factors.

14. Line 117 - Can the authors add in the month and years that the data were collected.

Results

15. The quantitative questionnaire data could be incorporated more effectively into the results. For instance, are there any patterns in the qualitative data relating to these different questionnaire responses?

16. Line 249 – replace ‘nearby’ with ‘near to’

17. Line 251 – replace ‘every’ with ‘any’

18. Line 261 – make the ‘b’ in bicycles italic

19. Line 266 – this is confusing – how did the authors determine that the weather was ‘rather’ important from the fact that a lot of people discussed this factor? This is an example of where quantifying qualitative work can be confusing.

20. Line 297 – replace ‘feeling of unsafety’ to ‘feeling of being unsafe’

21. Line 313 – this line appears incomplete.

Discussion

22. Can the authors address the following instances where the results and discussion are not coherent:

- The authors report that safety did not influence the choice of transport mode in older adolescents in the discussion. However in the results the participants are referred to as talking about bikes being stolen in a way which appears to suggest it is an important factor.

The authors suggest that peer pressure to look good may result in adolescents not cycling to avoid sweating however in the results this was highlighted as a less important influence –“few adolescents mentioned they do not like to arrive sweaty and red-faced”.

The cost of driving a motorcycle is presented in the discussion (line 412) but is not included in the results (at least not under the heading ‘financial aspect’).

23. Line 316 – rethink the use of the term ‘correlate’ as this is more commonly used in quantitative studies.

24. Line 352 - be careful here and elsewhere not to overgeneralise the findings.
“Rain, snow or ice make most older adolescents switch to motorized and public transportation” – the participants may suggest this but with qualitative research we cannot make such a strong statement about the actual behaviour of these and other adolescents.

25. Line 410 – can the authors expand on the term ‘emotionally charged preference’ or perhaps consider replacing this with something clearer – such as ‘strong preference’?

26. Line 429 – replace ‘than’ with ‘then’

27. Line 445-446 – the phrase “to go whenever they want to wherever they want” is usually written the other way round “to go wherever they want whenever they want” this is quite informal language so perhaps there is a better way to phrase this?

28. Line 166 and Table 2 – could the authors add information about car driving amongst the sample. This is mentioned later in the results section but as a quantitative finding it would be useful to state this earlier.

29. Limitations

Please also include limitations of qualitative research in general and focus groups in particular (e.g. subject to researchers interpretation of what the sample were willing to say at one point in time, social desirability bias etc) and the limitation of conducting this research in Flanders where there is a ‘cycling mentality’.

• Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

30. Line 175 - Can the author consider a clearer term than ‘ecology’ (e.g. environmentally friendly)?

31. Line 186 – does the author mean ‘feels dependent on it’ rather than feels dependent of it’?

32. Line 200 – can the authors consider a clearer term than ‘subscription’ (e.g. bus pass?)

33. Line 233 - can the authors consider a clearer term than ‘random’ and remove the word ‘for’

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

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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