Reviewer's report

Title: Pregnant women's attitudes towards alcohol consumption: qualitative study

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Reviewer: P Nilsen

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This is a highly relevant and well-written paper that I found very interesting. However, I also see some problems which I think need to be improved upon. Some of the findings would seem fairly obvious, e.g. that women “require clear and consistent advice about safe levels of drinking from health professionals”. Still, it is a worthwhile study.

Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

The aim is basically three aims in one: to explore 1) pregnant women’s attitudes towards drinking alcohol in pregnancy; 2) their awareness of sources of information about drinking in pregnancy; 3) their attitudes towards sources of information about drinking in pregnancy

1. Major Compulsory Revision:

I suggest being more specific about the research questions, so that they only cover things reported on in the study on the basis of the interviews. Considering the title of the paper, with its focus on attitudes, I’d refrain from saying that “exploring” their awareness (or knowledge) of sources of information is an actual aim.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?

The methods are well described and seem appropriate. However, I have a big problem with the attempts to quantify the answers, by saying that “half of the women..”, “some women”, “many women”, “many of the women”… This is a common error of qualitative studies, particularly when undertaken by researchers used to working in a quantitative paradigm, where data are quantified. However, in a qualitative study the aim is not to quantify. Rather, this study should aim at identifying themes (factors, components, elements…) that are relevant regardless of whether one or 20 women express them. This is very important; qualitative studies seek to generalize but in a different manner from quantitative studies. It is not relevant to quantify on the basis of 20 interviews. This is a recurrent problem in this study.
I’d refrain from introducing the themes by saying “Most women described the advice on drinking…” or “Some women suggested that clear advice was particularly important…” Instead, introduce the themes in themselves, e.g. “Clear advice was deemed particularly important for women who were less knowledgeable…” The themes should be at the centre of reporting, not “some women said” or “half of the women said”…

2. Major Compulsory Revision:

The authors need to revise the results to refrain from “quantifying” the results. This is a qualitative study based on interviews with 20 women. The themes are the central element, not whether “half of the women” or “some women” said something or if “only six women reported abstinence”. I get the distinct impression that the study was conducted by researchers schooled in a quantitative paradigm who are not entirely comfortable with qualitative studies. The authors state that future research must involve “a more diverse sample that generalises to the wider population” which reveals a lack of understanding of the aims of qualitative research.

Are the data sound?

The methods section provides sufficient information on how the study was designed and conducted. However, the selection of the themes does not seem to be logical or fully coherent.

Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Yes. However, I’m curious as to the decision to report some findings descriptively, “Advice received about alcohol consumption during pregnancy”. In what ways does this section respond to the aims? It is slightly confusing to report these data in this manner, then report everything else under the different themes and using quotations to illustrate the themes. Participant characteristics provide relevant information on the participants (and is just as much “methods” as it is “results”), but the reporting on the advice received does not seem optimal.

3. Major Compulsory Revision:

The authors cannot report things descriptively which they then ALSO report under the themes, e.g. the statement about women finding the advice inconsistent – that is reported both in the descriptive section and the “themes” section. This is confusing and must be changed. As mentioned above, I am fairly sceptical of this descriptive reporting and would like to see the focus of the article being the “themes”.
4. Major Compulsory Revision:

A major problem I have is the themes, how they are labelled and their “internal” coherence of the identified themes. Theme 1 is called “Evaluation of risks” but seems to deal with “how did the women’s impression of risk influence their drinking”. Theme 2, “Unborn child has precedence” is concerned with “what influenced their drinking during pregnancy?”. Theme 3, “Experience of other pregnancies” deals with “the influence of other pregnant women on their drinking”. Theme 4, “Individual differences” seems a very obvious theme; of course, there are going to be individual differences! Theme 5, “Benefits of drinking”, deals with facilitators to drinking in pregnancy. Theme 6 is “Confusing or unclear advice” which deals with whether shortcomings in the advice influence women’s drinking. This is very similar to theme 7, “Advice lacks reasons, evidence or sufficient detail”. The final theme is “Responsibility for own health”. It is difficult to detect a unifying thread or overall the me to the themes that were identified. Possibly they all deal with factors that influence women’s drinking in pregnancy. If that is the case, it should be made more explicit. Please also seem my suggestion below.

5. Major Compulsory Revision:

The authors should consider if a title like “barriers and facilitators to drinking in pregnancy” more accurately captures what they have attempted to identify and describe. Qualitative studies are well suited for this sort of approach, identifying factors that influence attitudes or behaviour, which then can be investigated in quantitative studies to determine their relative importance.

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

6. Major Compulsory Revision:

The conclusions that are part of the abstract are not satisfactory. First, they must strictly respond to the aims. Second, “At present, many women receive no information about alcohol consumption in pregnancy” is a type of generalization that this study does not allow for (and is not aimed at investigating). I also object to a statement like “Government policy makers and health professionals should be better informed about the importance…” That is an opinion and more of an implication of the study than a conclusion. I would not say that “findings on safe levels of drinking in pregnancy remain inconclusive” is a conclusion based on THIS study. The conclusions need to be re-written so that they respond to the research questions of this study and avoid more subjective opinions or observations that have no basis in the study that was undertaken.
Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

The limitations seem to be written from the viewpoint of quantitative researchers. I think there is less of a problem with data collection than with data analysis, i.e. identification of the specific themes. I am not entirely convinced that different researchers would arrive at the same or similar themes. I would like to see more self-criticism regarding this aspect of the study.

7. Minor Essential Revision:

In what ways is this study a pilot study? Is that because “only” 20 interviews were conducted? This is not evident to the reader.

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

Yes.

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

8. Discretionary Revision:

Not fully. I think a more appropriate title might be “Pregnant women’s attitudes towards drinking in pregnancy”. I don’t see any need to highlight that it is a qualitative study. I’d rather say that it is an interview study, although I’m not sure this type of information is really needed. We don’t see the need to emphasize that studies are quantitative.

Is the writing acceptable?

The language is excellent.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests