Reviewer's report

Title: Research across the disciplines: Quality criteria for empirical-ethical studies

Version: 1 Date: 21 May 2013

Reviewer: Jonathan Ives

Reviewer's report:

This is a bold and ambitious paper, which uses a ‘road map’ analogy to offer quality criteria for empirical ethics studies. It is a good idea - there is a need for paper such as this and papers on this topic are likely to garner a good deal of interest and be widely read. I would certainly find this kind of paper very valuable for teaching purposes.

Whilst I think the paper is a very good idea in principle, and I am supportive of this kind of paper, I do not think it is publishable as it stands. I list the reasons why below, and I have included constructive comments where I can. All of these could be considered major compulsory revisions, and are quite broad. As a general comment, I think the paper is trying to do too much. There are potentially at least two papers here – one presenting quality criteria, and one presenting issues around the ethical conduct of EE research.

Major compulsory revisions

1. I do not think the paper is clear about whether it is trying to set out quality criteria for the assessment of research protocols (or funding proposals), the carrying out of EE research, or the writing up of EE research. It appears, at different times, to be doing all three. In a statement on page 2, the use of brackets around ‘the reporting of’ makes the intent even more ambiguous – as though the quality of EE studies is equivalent to the quality of the reporting, which suggests (wrongly) that the focus may be entirely on the reporting of EE studies. This needs to be clarified, and I would suggest that the authors pick one or the other, or make moving between them very clear.

2. On page 5 it is implied that there is some kind of method to the analysis presented in the paper, involving systematic or critical review and synthesis, but it is not clear how this has been carried out. For example, it is not at all clear how the authors derived the ‘special criteria’ for EE from the generic criteria described directly above (on page 7). How were the generic quality criteria identified and selected?

3. The authors are entitled to present their opinion on what should be used as quality criteria, and I personally agree with many of the criteria proposed. However, the paper lacks justification for any for these criteria, and there is very little in the way of critical discussion. The reader is expected to accept the criteria as self-evident and uncontroversial, but I don’t think all the criteria are uncontroversial. For example, the section across pages 11/12/13 about ‘car
sharing’ implies that an interdisciplinary research team is necessary for EE research, but this is debated – in act in a recent publication of my own I challenged this notion and suggested there are benefits to this kind of work being undertaken by a single researcher. I mention this because is it a point I personally disagree with, but there is also a lack of argument to support the many claims I do agree with. Dealing with this would require a more focussed paper, dealing with fewer criteria and critically discussing those in more depth.

4. Connected to point 3 is that where the authors do make claims that are uncontroversial (particularly in the research ethics section) they are uncontroversial because they are pretty standard tenets of good research practice, which are not clearly unique to EE research. The authors claim on page 6 they will focus only on those criteria that are not already established or much discussed and/or which are particular to EE research. The authors have not done enough to show that the quality criteria they discuss fulfil these two criteria. In line with comment 3 above, some of this very uncontroversial material could be removed to focus in more depth on the issues that are unique to EE.

Minor essential changes

5. I think there is a translation problem with the term ‘leading question’. To me this means a question that, when asked, leads the person being questioned towards answering in a particular way. I think the authors mean ‘primary research question’ when they say ‘leading question’.

6. On page 9 the claims made about the kinds of empirical methods that are associated with certain theoretical approaches are generalisations, and ought to be acknowledged as being non-exhaustive.

Discretionary changes:

7. I think it would be very useful to sometimes have more reference and explanation of the tables/figures in the text.

8. I would suggest that the title is changed to bring out the road map analogy that is used throughout the subheadings, and that the paper introduces and explains this analogy at the start.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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