Author's response to reviews

Title: Did we describe what you meant? Findings and methodological discussion of an empirical validation study for a systematic review of reasons

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear reviewers,

Dear editors,

we are very thankful for the constructive reviews and tried to address all major and minor revision issues:

**Major compulsory revisions**

**Reviewer #1:** “The discussion of why the response rate was so low is (pp1-14), I think, overly defensive and focuses on the supposition that authors are prejudiced against, and ignorant of, systematic reviews of reasons, without good justification. […]”

**Reviewer #2:** “While I agree that the low response rate is an interesting result and worth discussing, some of the discussion on this is unsupported by the data. […] This discussion seems to rest on an over-emphasis on prejudice/ignorance, and itself ignores the variety of other possible reasons for non-response that are considered elsewhere in the paper.”

**Author’s response:** We changed/toned down this over-emphasis/supposition accordingly (see p. 11-13).

**Reviewer #1:** “In general, I feel it is not clear whether the process of validation by author checking is aimed at checking the ‘reason mentions’ against what the authors actually wrote, what you understand them to have meant, or what they themselves understand themselves to have meant. […] On a related point, I thought that the general problems with any validation methodology based on member checking should be considered, in-particular question of to what extent can the author/participant be considered to have special insight and what extent the researcher can override that insight.”

**Author’s response:** We integrated in the background section following text passage: “With such verification, it is primarily checked if the reviewers understood the author’s reason correctly; so, the understanding of the reviewer of the reason is checked against the understanding of this reason of the author” (p. 4). Also, we repeat this in the discussion section as following: “As the validation process checks the understanding of the reviewer (= coding) against the understanding of the author (= quotation), there are two overriding groups of sources for a coding to be deemed incorrect: methodological or hermeneutical failures/hindrances on behalf of the reviewers, and failures/hindrances on behalf of the author(s)” (p. 11). Finally, we included a new text passage concerning the epistemological implications of this, e.g. concerning the special insight issue, too (p. 12-13).
Minor revisions

Reviewer #2: “[…] It would therefore greatly improve the readability of the paper if there were much clearer demarcation between sections that discuss study findings, and those that discuss study limitations, even if one of those limitations is one of the more interesting results coming from the study.”

Author’s response: We changed the title a bit to indicate that there will be a methodological discussion: “Did we describe what you meant? Findings and methodological discussion of an empirical validation study for a systematic review of reasons”. Also, we changed the last paragraph of the background section as following: “In the following, the method for this survey and its results are presented. With respect to the relatively low response rate and our experiences with several inherent methodological challenges of this first validation study of reason-codings, we added an in-depth discussion on these issues” (p. 5). And we included the following text in the discussion section, after presenting the four questions: “As these are crucial questions for the method used and the interpretation of the results, we want to focus on these aspects in the ensuing subchapters” (p. 11).

Reviewer #2: “[…] It is not immediately obvious that each author was only sent a questionnaire including quotations from their own study – at first it was unclear whether you were checking the coding in the review against that of authors of similar studies generally, rather than of those authors who originally did that coding.”

Author’s response: We included in the method section the sentence “Each author received a separate, customized questionnaire with the quotations from her/his publication” (p. 6) to make this clearer.

Reviewer #1: “[…] It would be very useful to have a clear and strong argument, early on, for why conducting a systematic review of reasons is preferable to not doing one, and how this differs from simply good scholarly practice when examining the literature (which is what ethicists/philosophers are more likely to do).”

Author’s response: We already had a rationale for SRRs included, which we think is sufficient for the paper at hand: “The rationale for using this method is (i) to avoid bias when summarizing reasons that are published in scientific literature, and (ii) to provide completeness of reasons for or against a course of action, especially in contexts of policy writing or guideline development, as a biased or incomplete sample of reasons may lead to ethically problematic recommendations” (p. 3). We added references, though, where more in-depth argumentation can be found.

Reviewer #1: “[…] The whole point of sending it out to expert reviewers is supposed to ensure that positions are correctly presented and no key arguments are missed out. Can you offer some counter to this claim, to explain why peer review is not sufficient to validate the results of a review of reasons (i.e. why go to all this trouble)? […]”
**Author’s response:** We included the following text passage: “One could argue that the main goal of a SRR is reached when completeness of reasons of and minimisation of bias prevail, and that a robust peer review is sufficient to check if this is the case or not. We would argue that even expert reviewers are prone to subjective biases and thus not able to objectively decide about the correctness of the coding for extracted reasons. So, validation of the coding is paramount for an improved methodology of SRRs” (p. 4).

**Reviewer #1:** “It is not entirely clear, to my mind, why some references were rejected for the survey. The table does not really help me to understand. It is not clear what ‘not made into questionnaire’ means, and after reading the explanation I am still not sure why some were explicitly rejected in the pilot study.”

**Author’s response:** We altered table 1 and included a short explication of the reason (now) called “not transformed into questionnaire”.

**Reviewer #1:** “You mention that the pilot and the final questionnaire were not significantly different so that could be analysed together, but so imply that there were differences. Can you let us know what these differences were, or what kind of differences they were (some example perhaps).”

**Author’s response:** We added that the only difference between the questionnaire in pilot testing and in the actual study were layout differences (“the differences were only details in the layout”, p. 7).

**Reviewer #1:** “I suggest you use the terms ‘complete/incomplete’ to refer to questionnaires instead of ‘positive/negative’. This needs changing throughout the paper.“

**Author’s response:** As suggested, “Positive responses” was changed to “completed responses”, “negative responses” to “incompleted responses” throughout the paper.

**Reviewer #1:** “Some examples are given of the neutral author validating claims of incorrectness. Can you indicate whether this exhaustive list, or just selected examples? I assume the latter?”

**Author’s response:** We added a “for example” to indicate that this is not an exhaustive listing (“In another 3 cases he verified claims of incorrectness that dealt with subsuming the reason under the correct reason type (for example, […]; p. 9).

**Reviewer #1:** “I am not convinced that the claim about the questions listed being relevant to overarching questions of quality in bioethics is obviously true. […]“

**Author’s response:** We deleted the assertion that the non-response-reasons have bearing to the relevance for quality of bioethics in general, and are just saying now that they are relevant “for further comparable studies” (p. 10-11).
Reviewer #1: “Can subheadings be used to structure the discussion, rather than ‘Regarding (1)’ etc?”

Author’s response: We inserted subheadings in the discussion section.

Reviewer #1: “You state that you have several good reasons to believe that your methodology was appropriate and can be recommended for future attempts, but you do not expand on this by outlining those reasons – which really needs to be done.”

Author’s response: We included the following text passage giving some reasons: “[..](i) generally, a survey is a “tried and tested” social science research methodology, and “author check” methods are established in qualitative research (even if 2 survey participants stated unfamiliarity with the methodology used); (ii) there seems to be no viable alternative to sending individual questionnaires (to each author or author group of a paper) to validate the coding of a SRR (this cannot be done by one questionnaire for all participants); (iii) as the participants were invited not only to tick a box when they deemed a coding incorrect, but to clarify why the coding was wrong, it was possible for the reviewers to interpret – to a certain degree – the understanding of the reasons by the participants; this made “overriding” participant’s evaluation by reviewer’s understanding feasible, when the interpretation seemed to outlandish to them” (p. 17-18).

Reviewer #1: “Line 91. the phrase ‘with the according different coding’ is unclear. Line 96, the sentence ‘This coding was taken over for the questionnaire’ is unclear’ […] Line 109. The phrase ‘according coding’ is unclear […] Line 200 – 205. This is very long sentence, and consequently very hard to follow. Can it be broken up? […] Line 253-257. This is another very long sentence that needs breaking up.”

Reviewer #2: “Minor spelling/grammar/linguistic issues – line 126: should be excluded from the survey; the sentence at lines 90-91 is unfamiliar English – perhaps a rephrasing of the sentence, with “corresponding” instead of “according” would make it clearer”

Author’s response: We corrected/broke up/rephrased the sentences. The sentence “This coding was taken over for the questionnaire” is changed to “The questionnaire was based on the same coding”.

Author’s remark: Please note that we slightly altered the conclusion section, corresponding to the changes in the other sections.