Author's response to reviews

Title: Quality assurance of qualitative research: a review of the discourse

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Author's response to reviews: see over
LETTER TO EDITOR: We are grateful for the comments of both reviewers. We go through each comment below, providing a point-by-point response in italics.

Reviewer 1 comments.

1. Is the question posed original, important and well defined?

Due to the nature of the paper, no research question was posed. This is fine if the purpose of the article is clearly articulated which the authors do. In the last paragraph in the Background that they “examine how quality assurance has been conceptualized and defined within qualitative paradigms”

(a) Major Compulsory Revision:

Criteria for judging qualitative inquiry has been debated since the early 1980s. Qualitative researchers and students have had to follow the debate since this time to defend their research. While the authors’ conclusions are correct: there are two ways to examine quality (posthoc and process), this is not new. For example, an article by Morse et al in 2002 in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), needs to be considered. (an article the authors state they reviewed by going through the journal “by hand”)

We recognise the reviewer’s comments about the long-standing debates over quality in qualitative research and that posthoc and process-based approaches to quality have been identified previously. As detailed in our responses to later comments, we have made more explicit our rationale for this review: that we are responding to a call from global health research to conduct ‘quality assurance’ of qualitative research, and thus we are seeking to explore how this concept has been discussed in qualitative methods literature (see changes to the Abstract, Background and Methods section).

With regards to the paper identified as missing from the review (Morse et al, 2002), we are very grateful for the reviewer highlighting this as it had been overlooked in our literature search process. We retrieved the paper and consider it to be suitable for inclusion in the review, in line with and contributing to the second, process-oriented narrative (see changes to Abstract, Methods, Results and Discussion). The paper also
proved a useful reference for situating our findings within the broader contexts of debates on quality in qualitative research (see para 5 of Discussion, p19).

(b) Discretionary Revision:

Those in the qualitative field know that criteria/quality assurance is either posthoc or process but has it been written down and published? Do we need it to be written down and published or is it just commonsense? I am not sure. Maybe we do need to publish this. Maybe it’s not new as I am a qualitative methodologist and very well aware of this. I defer to the other reviewers to determine if this conclusion is “new”.

We appreciate that the conclusions of our review may be familiar to some qualitative researchers. However we believe that they are most salient for those who are embedded in the world of global public health, to where debates from within the qualitative research arena often do not penetrate. In this paper we aim to speak to qualitative researchers working within such multi-disciplinary environments in the health sciences, in which they may be expected to demonstrate to colleagues/funders situated in a mainstream quantitative research field that quality assurance procedures have been undertaken. In addition, we believe that our findings are somewhat different to previous literature as we have identified core principles of quality in qualitative research, as opposed to constructs of quality (such as ‘validity’ or ‘credibility’) or fixed methods to assure quality. We have sought to make these points clearer to the reader through additions to the Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions sections.

(c) Major Compulsory Revision:

My main concern with the paper is that the authors conclude by calling for a “flexible framework” to define, apply and demonstrate principles of quality in their research. Many researchers will have said they have done this, just like one of the articles that the authors cite (Tracy, Big Tent Criteria). How is what they are calling for different than this paper? This is the crux of my concern for the paper. Researchers have been doing what the authors are calling for as a next step.

We believe the difference between our conclusions and recommendations and previous papers suggesting frameworks for quality is that we recommend a framework that
encapsulates both the principles of qualitative research that should be enacted throughout the research process, and ways in which to demonstrate to external bodies that the research is of good quality. We argue that this framework should be flexible enough to accommodate different methodologies, as well as different demands from external bodies for evidence of quality. This, we believe, differs from previous papers such as Tracy (2010) as we recommend moving away from promoting fixed, stipulated methods to demonstrate quality in line with constructs such as ‘validity’ or ‘credibility’, and toward comprehension and key principles of quality, which may be enacted in a multitude of ways relevant to the research context. We have sought to make this distinction clearer for the reader in our Recommendations section (see para 2, p21).

2. Are the data sound and well controlled?

(a) Major Compulsory Revision:

The authors state a limitation as the low number of papers reviewed. I agree. There are many more articles that should have been reviewed and anchoring the search in “quality” may have been detrimental as we have not talked about “quality assurance” in the field of qualitative research. An example is the Morse one listed above.

We welcome the reviewer’s comments regarding the breadth of literature available on the concept of ‘quality’ within qualitative research as it is an issue that we grappled with ourselves when designing the search strategy and considering the findings from our review. The reason we have focused somewhat narrowly on the concept of ‘quality assurance’ is that we are responding directly to a demand from our own global health research field to find ways in which to demonstrate that quality has been assured in our qualitative research, echoing the structures surrounding quantitative research in clinical trials.

We recognise that the concept of ‘quality assurance’ is thus rooted in the quantitative, clinical trials field, and is not something that has been widely or explicitly discussed in these terms in qualitative research literature from a social science perspective. However, as ‘quality assurance’ is something that qualitative researchers working within multi-
disciplinary global health research teams are likely to encounter, and be asked to carry out, we felt it would be valuable to explore how this concept specifically has been discussed in the literature. We have made changes to the Background and Methods section to make our rational clearer for the reader (see changes to the Background section, and Methods section) and have expanded our discussion of this in the Limitations section. We have also (as detailed above) included the Morse et al (2002) paper in our review as it is a relevant paper that we had unfortunately overlooked (see response 1).

(b) Major Compulsory Revision:

This article is about qualitative research and not global health. If the authors think this is developing the global health field, then the links to this area need to be made. The conclusion is really the only time global health is mentioned. The problem is not about “global health” but about qualitative research.

We agree that our links to global health need to be clearer in the paper. We identified the need to respond to a demand from the global health field to assure the quality of our research in the context of the clinical trials among which we work. We believe our paper is relevant to others working in global health for the same reasons. We have described more explicitly the relevance of this paper to global health research, in terms of the impetus behind this review reflecting a growing demand in global health research for demonstrable ‘quality’ as well as an increased demand for qualitative research (see the changes to the Background section).

3. Is the interpretation (discussion and conclusion) well balanced and supported by the data?

This is well done. The authors certainly worked from their data to develop their results section.

4. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to allow others to evaluate and/or replicate the work?

(a) Discretionary Revision
I am not very familiar with metanarrative approach and would like to see a fuller discussion of this method, especially how they use the terms “narrative” and “discourse”. It would be very instructive to the reader. It obviously has merit as the papers referenced on metanarrative are in exemplary journals but I would like to see a paper/book cited that explains “how to do it”. The underpinnings of it etc. and then this incorporated into the methodology section.

We have expanded the description of the meta-narrative approach in the Methods section, to include brief details about the stages taken in the approach. To our knowledge, there is not a book that describes how to do meta-narrative, perhaps because the field is currently evolving as was noted by Reviewer 2. But the Greenhalgh et al (2005) paper referenced gives a good, detailed description of the methods and we hope this will provide further guidance for readers (see para 1 of ‘Review Methodology, p7).

5. Can the writing, organization, tables and figures be improved?

(a) Minor Essential Revision

There are a few errors here and there, but nothing critical. What I think really needs to be done is a more thoughtful look at what the purpose is and what the authors claim to do and what they conclude. For example, in the methods section, the authors report that “papers were considered within their temporal context, to reflect upon the nature of the debate surrounding qualitative research at that time” but this is not reported including “conflicting findings in terms of differences of paradigmatic approach, and located in the historical timeframe of different debates”.

We have sought to make clearer the rationale and purpose for this review as detailed above (see responses to points 2a and 2b), in order to make more consistent the aims of the review and what we report and conclude. In relation to the reviewer’s comments about not reporting the consideration of papers within their historical timeframe, we agree that this was not explicit in the reported results in this paper. These descriptions reflect the meta-narrative approach taken in the review, and historical context was indeed considered and reflected upon when reviewing the literature (see for example p8, para 2). However, in the interests of brevity and to report the results most relevant to the original aims, we did not expand upon the historical contexts and conflicting paradigmatic approaches in the Results section. Thus, we have removed these
6. Appraisal of Literature

The introduction is well done.

7. Are there any ethical or competing interests issues you would like to raise?

NA

(a) Discretionary Revision

Overall, I appreciate what they authors are trying to do. However, I think their contribution could be reviewing articles that actually try to provide “flexible frameworks” (as stated in the conclusion and often found in Sociology) and critiquing these. If not, the authors should provide a paragraph or two on articles that propose “flexible frameworks” and talk about how what they call for is different than what is already published.

See response to Major compulsory revision 1c.

Reviewer 2 comments

I much enjoyed reading this paper. It does not shy away from a complex method and it concludes with a valuable proposal for how to move the field forward. I only have a couple of “major compulsory revisions” and, despite the length of my comments below, I don’t think they should be difficult to address and don’t expect a revised draft would be radically different to its current state.

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

1. The meta-narrative review method is new and still evolving, so my comments here are in that context. They are suggestions for further thought rather than saying the authors did something the “right” way or the “wrong” way. Meta-narrative reviewing is perhaps still too young to have a clear “right” or “wrong” way, although work is afoot on that front, which the authors may find useful (see Greenhalgh T, Wong G et al., “Protocol - realist and meta-narrative evidence synthesis: Evolving Standards (RAMESES)” BMC Medical Research Methodology 2011, 11:115).
Let’s start at the end. On p. 19, paragraph 1, the authors say: “Further consideration should be taken as to how best to encourage wider search parameters, familiarisation with different sources of literature and greater acceptance of ‘non-traditional’ disciplinary perspectives within health and medical literature reviews.” I think the authors, in this regard, may not as fully embraced a meta-narrative approach as they could have. Precisely for these sorts of reasons, the search strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria of a meta-narrative review should be seen as things that iteratively develop so as to achieve those aims.

This might be seen to be in contrast to a ‘traditional’, Cochrane-style systematic review, although some would suggest that similar behaviour occurs there, even if only implicitly.

Authors of a meta-narrative review should not feel constrained by their own earlier decisions, as appears to be the case on p. 17, final para., where the authors seem to lament that their own inclusion criteria led them to miss a substantial anthropological literature. If there was a clear, relevant literature that was being omitted, then the researchers could have (iteratively) adapted their selection criteria. That said, meta-narrative reviewing is a pragmatic approach and all reviews have to make decisions as to where to stop. There is nothing wrong with the review as it is, which acknowledges where a line was drawn and the implications of that, but I think some more reflection over that choice is possible.

Consider also on p. 5, para. 2, where the authors discuss their search strategy. Generally, given that different research traditions may use different vocabularies and publish in different places, it is even more important in a meta-narrative review than a ‘traditional’ systematic review not to rely on search terms and to take an iterative approach to the literature search, including the use of forwards and backwards citation searching. Thus, I would like to see some expansion of detail around the sentence: “Finally, additional literature such as books or book chapters were identified from the reference lists of relevant papers.” (A good reference here is: Greenhalgh, T, Peacock, R (2005). “Effectiveness and efficiency of search methods in systematic reviews of complex evidence: audit of primary sources.” BMJ vol. 331, (7524) 1064-1065.10.1136/bmj.38636.593461.68)

So, in retrospect, I think the review could have chosen a different path and brought in the anthropological literature, but I also think that the review as it is, choosing to work within certain criteria, does what it set out to do well. Thus, were the authors to expand on the choices taken – and perhaps see these as choices rather than the inevitable result of pre-set rules – I think such an act of self-reflexivity would be valuable.

We appreciate the comments raised by the reviewer with regards to the search strategy for this review, and encouraging further reflection on the choices we made in this regard. We have added more detail about the efforts made to conduct a systematic search (see changes to Search Strategy, pp5-6). We also have reflected
further on the limits of our search strategy particularly in relation to the exclusion of anthropological literature. For practical and time-related reasons, the decision was made not to go back again to our search strategy. This was further justified by our desire to explore and present the literature available on ‘quality assurance’ as commonly understood in quantitative (global) health research, so as to appreciate the types of narratives a researcher may come across if requested to explore mechanisms for assuring quality of qualitative research in this context. We have sought to make our reasoning behind this choice clearer in the paper (see changes to Search Strategy, pp6-7 and Limitations, pp19-20).

2. As I was reading the review, I wondered whether the very language of “quality” and “quality assurance”, driven by positivist EBM, unnecessarily narrowed the scope of the review. That is, I am sure many authors, often outside healthcare and before the earliest paper in this review (1994), had considered the issue of how to do good qualitative research rather than bad qualitative research, but did not use a “quality” or “quality assurance” language/approach. And while Narrative 1 looks like a response to EBM, it seems possible that Narrative 2 reflects prior traditions of what constitutes good qualitative research.

And then the authors, on p. 17, para. 3, said something similar. So, in suggesting above a bit more reflection on the implications of the selection criteria and search strategy for what was included in the review, I think there is also room for an expansion of this point. How does the “quality assurance” literature on qualitative methods relate to an older literature on how to do qualitative research well that does not use terms like “quality assurance” or positivist/EBM language?

We recognize the reviewer’s comments about engaging with other literature exploring how to do ‘good’ qualitative research, beyond the EBM-influenced literature. We have sought to clarify our focus and rationale for reviewing only ‘quality assurance’ throughout the paper (see responses to Reviewer 1’s comments, 1a, b, c and 2a, b). We have also made reference to earlier debates on what constitutes quality in qualitative research which, in some ways, reflect the process-oriented approach (p19, para 1). In addition, we have sought to clarify the ways in which we consider the conclusions and recommendations from this review differ from earlier considerations of quality, in that we recommend focus on key principles of quality, rather than constructs such as ‘validity’ or ‘rigour’ (see changes to Discussion,
p18 para 2). As detailed in the response to Reviewer 1’s comment 1c, we have made more explicit how the framework we recommend differs from those already published (see Recommendations, p21 para 2).

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

3. I believe most style guides would favour “among” over “amongst”, and “while” over “whilst”.

   *Amongst* has been changed to *among* and *whilst* has been changed to *while*.

4. Purely as a stylistic point, perhaps some of the references to “the authors” and indeed “they” could be replaced with a simpler “we”.

   In the absence of clear guidance on style for the journal, we have changed some of “the authors” and “they” to “we” for clearer reading.

5. p. 6, Review Methodology: “A process of evaluating papers according to predefined categories and frequency of citations, as in systematic reviewing, was not considered suitable or feasible to achieve the objectives.” The matter is perhaps still up for debate, but we would like to argue that a meta-narrative review is still a type of systematic review. Perhaps the phrase “as in systematic reviewing” could be changed to “as in traditional systematic reviewing”.

   As recommended, we have clarified the justification for using the meta-narrative approach as opposed to the more traditional systematic review method (see p8, para 1).

6. p. 8, final para.: “For the remainder of the publications, the authors assume that they emerged from a postpositivist approach because of the way they distinguished qualitative research from the positivist epistemology of quantitative research.” Could you expand on this assumption?

   We have added more detail on why some publications were assumed to reflect a postpositivist position, due to the frequent use of the terminology derived from Lincoln & Guba’s criteria for quality (see p10 para 2)

7. p. 11, Narrative 2: Assuring quality of process: “The second narrative identified was less prominent than the first” should, of course, be: “The second narrative identified was less prominent than the first”.
P13, ‘dentified’ has been changed to ‘identified’.

8. p. 14, para. 2: “One paper synthesised other literature and described abstract principles of qualitative research that indicate quality [21]” I’m guessing that citation should be to [26] or [27].

Thanks for pointing out this error. Yes, it should be reference [28] rather than reference [21] – we have amended accordingly (p16).

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

9. p. 12: Narrative 2 critiques Narrative 1. Is there anything in Narrative 1 that might constitute a rebuttal to Narrative 2’s criticisms?

We welcome the reviewer’s comments on this point. We have considered whether this may be the case, but there did not emerge strong indications of arguments that would constitute a defence to narrative 2’s criticism across the literature in narrative 1. In order to retain the focus of the paper, we have not added this observation to the results or discussion.