Reviewer’s report

Title: Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period

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Reviewer: Sara Macdonald

Reviewer's report:

This paper is a welcome addition to the qualitative methodological debate. Sample size, as the authors discuss often appears arbitrary and muddy. The introduction is helpfully laid out and draws on ample relevant literature. The authors clearly discuss he challenges in qualitative methods that flow from the ideological pluralism that they describe. In particular the discussion of ‘saturation’ is especially welcome, though perhaps a more thorough description of the process of theoretical sampling - where samples are built according to emerging theory, would help both to contextualise saturation but importantly emphasise why the overuse of saturation in qualitative papers is problematic. In addition some attention to the interactional nature of interviewing, as respondents provide answers to what are often predefined questions is missing. What is being asked is important and it is easy to imagine how saturation could be reached quickly with homogeneous samples and structured questions. Differential levels of structure within interview types requires acknowledgement.

The objectives are clear and the method is well-described. The inclusion of the BMJ as the 'medical' journal might be questioned given the journal's more recent editorial stance on the publication (or lack thereof) of qualitative research. Indeed the information on the selected journals could be augmented by providing a precis of the 'editorial position' of each. Although the eligibility of studies for inclusion is described the authors do not provide any information on the specific search strategy. How do we know how inclusive the search was? On what basis was 'relevance' decided? The process is appears rigorous and in keeping with systematic review methodology.

The findings are interesting and well laid out - though again jargon heavy and could for readers' ease give a description of 'validity' for example.

Despite offering a really useful discussion of the issue the conclusion is weak. I had hoped that something more definitive around the appropriateness of sample size would have been most welcome. I was left thinking - what is adequate?

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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