Reviewer’s report

Title: How Participants Report Their Health Status: Cognitive Interviews of Self-Rated Health Across Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Age, and Educational Attainment

Version: 0 Date: 12 May 2017

Reviewer: Stephen Schensul

Reviewer's report:

The paper, "How Participants Report Their Health Status" examines qualitative interview data collected to explain respondents' ratings on a single, self-rated health (SRH) question.

While this question may be used widely in survey research as the authors indicate, in this reviewer's experience it is rarely used as the only health question exactly because it is so global and open to diverse interpretations. This question in any health or mental health survey would likely be combined with assessing symptoms, diagnosed illnesses, anthropomorphic measures, lifestyle and behaviors and socio-demographic factors. I fail to understand the utility of sorting out the meanings behind such a global question, nor do I understand the transformation of qualitative to quantitative data that permit inter-correlations when it would be much more effective to collect comprehensive quantitative survey data in the first place.

Qualitative data plays an important role in research, specifically because it provides a broader perspective, experiences, detail, a coherent narrative, a way of fitting the focal issue in the context of peoples' lives and as an important complement to quantitative data. This paper shows us that a quantitative global assessment of health is a compilation of many different perspectives; in my view this outcome is not very useful nor informative.

The quota sampling for the qualitative interviews is described as seeking a balance of ethnicity (white, black, Latino and American Indian), gender (male and female), age (older v. younger), and educational attainment (greater v. lesser). By my count that is 4 x 2 x 2 x 2 or 32 cells with 2 in each cell if the authors were actually seeking "equal numbers" or many zero cells if only some dimensions were used as the sampling frame. It is hard to imagine that even the Fisher's Exact test to handle such a sampling frame.

While the authors claim a bottom up approach to coding their focus on "valence," temporality" and "conditionality" seems to emerge as an a priori theoretical perspective. Their use of the terms "unitization," "utterance," "turns-of-talk" and "substring" rather than elucidating, mystifies the management and interpretation of qualitative data. The reading, initial coding, rereading and recoding of qualitative data described by the authors will drive away anyone considering getting involved in qualitative analysis.
The Results section is less about what has been found and more about methodological issues of the coding process including more discussion of the nuances of the coding process and the component parts of SRH. More troubling is when "results" of the small subsamples are explained with stereotypic explanations (embedded in the results section) about men, Latinos, those with higher education and other groups. Such statements as, "Given that men are less likely to seek health care than women…," "…whites are more likely to discuss physical functioning…," "Latinos have a more collectivist orientation…" to explain results in these limited subsamples propel generalizations that are not even delimited to this subsample or to a location in Wisconsin.

The methodological issues presented in the Results and Discussion sections overwhelm the presentation of the results and the utility of this investigation leaving the reader to wonder just what was the outcome of this research. A more straightforward and simplified presentation of methodology, a cleaner presentation of the results and a discussion of the application of the outcomes is need make this paper publishable.

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

No

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

No

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

No

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If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

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