Reviewer’s report

Title: College students’ interpretations of food security questions: Results from cognitive interviews

Version: 0 Date: 01 May 2019

Reviewer: Martin Caraher

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting paper and the findings are certainly interesting but the paper needs some redrafting and explanation before being suitable for publication.

Write for an international audience and explain US terms and institutions eg land-grant university

There remains a question as to why it is important to look at university students, it might be argued that this is a phase and the FI scale is picking up temporary issues about lack of access to food which are not per se FI but about structure and social capital issues? Most university students will go onto earn higher than average incomes and the restrictions on food during university may be about structure and social determinants. Explain land-grant universities and their student make-up are they comparable to other universities in the US, might you expect a higher level of students from FI backgrounds?

To what extent is food provisioning influenced by a lack of skills and knowledge as opposed to structural determinants. I remember one study looking at the lack of food availability on campus? Do deadlines and university requirements push students to being FI?

How much of this is related to the move from home where food would have been provided and in some instances prepared by others, so are we measuring a lack of coping??

The FI scale as originally devised was, as you say, with mothers and for household use here we are taking about an instrument being used for individual responses to FI. In the sample were there any who were responsible or assuming responsibility for households?

We need to know the methods for random selection/how many were planned to be recruited to the interviews. I assume if was 34 from each group, but this is not clear.

How was the judgement reached with respect to data saturation in the FS groups? [see Morse Qualitative Health Research2015, Vol. 25(5) 587-588].

The section on analysis page 9, needs attention why do open coding, what are formal definitions? Open coding means you do not have to agree on categories/themes, I am confused by the approach. What are 'unclear quotes'?
The social demographics of the participants seem untypical, can you comment. In terms of the half living off campus are there any more details on the household type, food storage, cooking facilities etc.

The findings section is strong with many insights but some of the above information requested will help the reader with context.

I am always confused over questions about balanced meals? What does this mean, and it is the respondent's perception or understanding of what is balanced? Can I afford and did I are two different issues? This then follows on to the next question over was it balanced??

The findings might benefit from more direct comparison to the FS group responses.

**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

**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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Needs some language corrections before being published

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