Reviewer's report

Title: "Taking Your Place at the Table": The Value of Chaplains as Integral Members of Interdisciplinary Research Teams

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Reviewer: Christopher De Bono

Reviewer's report:

General Notes:

In general, I think this is an important paper that begins to address the experience of chaplains in particular research settings. It’s novelty makes it valuable for consideration re publishing, but the paper does require some tightening/rewriting, in my opinion.

Specifically, my primary rewrite recommendation [major compulsory revisions] concerns some methodological issues and writing issues related to the paper’s assumptions about what the discovered data actually says: namely that the authors appear to interpret more generalizable outcomes than the data from one small ethnographic study could suggest, in my opinion. Simply put, the paper overstates some of its conclusions (more details below) but that is correctable.... What is key is to explore the data more critically and closer to the experience –there is lots there… and I think can, taking into account real limitations in any small study, still raise important future questions and point in important and valuable directions.

Thus, greater value will emerge if this paper is better contextualized; that is, that it remains with the actual “research” experience and plumbs it more deeply in that context, namely an experience of the actual chaplains (N=3) in a palliative care spirituality study.

I would also recommend a more robust discussion section: many of the results/tensions in the text about these three chaplains in research are easily found in any lit search on the history of chaplaincy’s varied and at times unclear identity on multidisciplinary teams. This is not new but it is interesting that the same narrative would emerge in this research context. I would recommend that the discussion section (2 mere pages) be developed, and the results section shortened (9 ½ pages). I believe a more robust discussion of the findings would make this paper more interesting.

Finally there are a couple of other key concerns addressed below – (1) auto ethnography is research, and there is no indication this research study got REB approval. I am assuming the lack of documentation is just an oversight. And (2) while the parent study is mentioned, there is no citation that the primary study (spiritual AIMS study) was published (or will be published)… Since this research study figures prominently in the origin of this paper, I think the outcome/findings
of that paper matter. And if the parent study was not publishable, was that on account of any of the tensions described in this second paper?

Again, my recommendations below should not in any way diminish the important area this paper is exploring. I am very pleased to see the authors thinking about this issue. With some re-writing, this paper should find a way to be published.

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When assessing the work, please consider the following points:

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

[Major Compulsory Revisions] The scope of this paper’s question is too broad – the use of auto ethnography, as I understand it in this paper, is really about the experience of three chaplains on a research team with a specific spiritual care intervention in Palliative care as a focus – while it might raise questions (And recommendations) for chaplains being on other research teams and on research teams in general, this data collection seems way too specific (and preliminary) to be generalizable to chaplains on all research teams…. In other words, the data is about 3 chaplains participating in this particular chaplaincy related research issue in palliative care…. SEE:

- Line 8/9 on page one could be rewritten to be more precise: “the experience and impact of chaplains on an interdisciplinary team researching a spiritual care model in PC, as well as tensions… …”
- See also page 5, line 17. (a team which is studying a spiritual care intervention)
- The title of the paper could use some revision (to be more specific) –more details below
- A clearer focus could also better contextualize the “results” and conclusions section.

PT- reducing the analysis to this issue will make for a tighter paper.

Pg, 18, line 17-18 – How does one study with an n=3 suggest that “chaplains have a key role to play on interdisciplinary research teams” ….? Is this only for research pertaining to spirituality in palliative care?

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?

1) The methodology of auto ethnography is only basically described.

2) [Minor essential revisions] It is not clear if this ethnographic study went to an REB? This is a concern generally where I am working (in Toronto, Canada) but I am not sure if this is a requirement of this journal. Did the research team know their comments were being analyzed for this purpose as well as the primary research study?

To put this consent issue another way --- This is a study that emerges as part of
the process of the primary research study on AIM or in the language of the abstract “evolved” (page 3, line 11) from parent study. I am assuming there are two REB requests.

[minor essential revisions] Also to this point … The method given for the primary project (page 7, line 25) Page 5, line 16 --- indicates the data for this paper was sourced in “audio recording of the weekly team meetings” - I am assuming these are not separate from the primary study’s team meetings with the rest of the investigating team? This is not clear – on page 8, line 16, there is reference to the team meetings … where the autoethnographers captured identity insights. (line 22) .. Also when there are citations (such as the one beginning on page 9, line 22) the data is from the larger team meeting… Standard practice would require consent from all the subjects, or at least a justification why one was not sought.

3. Are the data sound?

1) [minor essential revisions] The data in this case are themes and citations from the case reviews and memoing characteristic to autoethnographic process. There is little/inadequate discussion on exactly how the themes were found for this paper. For example: Whether a grounded theory approach was used for theming or some other method? And how exactly, by whom? (see for example Page 3, line 18 … “documents were reviewed for this report” )

2) Prior to the limitations section, there is on page 15, line 22 reference to the chaplain participants were not meeting team expectations – they were too busy etc.... methodologically did anyone consider whether sitting in a room coding altogether (if this is what happened) might affect the findings?

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?

N/A

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

As mentioned already, there is some question as to the applicability of the findings, in terms of generalizable conclusions.

Again, in terms of limitations, the discussion section, page 18, line 17, over sells the KEY role --- in this case…there might be success for these three chaplains on this particular team… for this project, but is this true for chaplains on “interdisciplinary research teams” generally?

This first paragraph (again page 18, line 17FF) reads like conclusions, with very little justification.

The next paragraph, page 19 (line 1ff) is much better…
6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

1) [minor essential revisions] I found the paragraph starting on page 14, line 6 difficult to follow --- how exactly does the model differ from psychosocial tools? And what does the CPE action/reflection tradition add here? It appeared like the authors were applying it to the research process and then in the last line, starting on line 20, there is a comment that the research method “does not seek out to evaluate or improve the work of the chaplain”. This dynamic (at play) probably needs a little more critical analysis…

2) [minor essential revisions] And for the sake of achieving further clarification, did the fact that there was a “new comer” (page 15, line 1) to the AIM model at all compromise the way it was being implemented and studied in the research project? By this I mean, how was the intervention “controlled” to ensure consistency? And if there was significant variation, was this not also something to learn about research methodology?

This newcomer issue emerges again on page 17, line 17FF… how well did the shift from a tendency to engage in supervision move to a focus on research work? IF this was not done, this could confound the research process too. The citation (lines 29-38) does not offer much clarity on this dynamic.

3) [major compulsory revisions] In terms of balance and what the literature is saying…. See page 20, line 1 ff…. one of the contemporary debates is actually whether the work of the chaplain is unique and whether it can’t be done by others (Occupational Therapists, Social workers, Psychologists)? The authors make the point that “pc teams” “should include a chaplain” but what is the justification? And somewhat awkward is the last sentence in that paragraph – (page 20, line 6) what is the research/lit evidence that PC is exploring the unique contributions of each team member? (Some reference is called for here). My key point here is that a big part of the clinical spirituality debate (and the relevancy of having chaplains at all) seems focused on who needs to and who can offer that service? There is some conflicting literature on this question.

4) [major compulsory revisions] Because I think this is an important paper (novelty wise and content wise), it would be my recommendation to be more selective in the results section, and engage in more critical analysis of some of these key issues in the discussion. What, for example, are the implications (page 19, line 8) of better understanding of chaplaincy roles on interdisciplinary teams? The reference to non chaplains not being “proficient” is interesting, but the authors must know this is precisely one of the challenges of contemporary spiritual care? Did this conversation come up? Is it’s inclusion here part of the insecurity of chaplains, or a testimony to specific skills?

Another issue or way to think about this is why does a research approach/interaction open up better or improved interdisciplinary appreciation for “what chaplains do” than in their regular clinical work? The citation on page 10, line 8ff by the PI is telling, but one must wonder how well or not well-integrated
chaplains have historically been on his/her psychiatric teams for every day clinical work. Perhaps, one of the implications is that the research project finally put a light on what chaplains do or do not do…. A more telling possibility is that chaplains have historically failed to offer serious or meaningful clinical interventions on the teams this PI directed?

7. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

[major compulsory revisions] The limitations are cited on page 20, line 21ff. This limitation makes even clearer my primary point of critique/recommendation: the paper’s scope needs to be reduced, in my opinion…. To use the authors’ words: this research structure “limits the generalizability to other research teams and clinical settings.” (line 24/5) That is not the sense one gets from the title or most of the paper.

[Minor essential revisions] In terms of BIAS – line 26(page 20) – there might be value in linking this to the critique and method of ethnography…. This is not a new challenge.

8. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?

[Minor essential revisions] Page 6, line 5 – is this #9 reference in the endnotes to the published data from the primary or parent report? This is not clear in the text? And it is not clear in that cited article either… see also page 3, line 13 where the project title is given… was this published?

9. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

[major compulsory revisions] The title oversells the findings – it is only one experience on one research team – could this better be called a case study? Or make reference to the limited study?

I believe the catchy phrase, with its obvious link to finding oneself at the theological and clinical research table, helpful, but the second part needs adjustment.

Perhaps : An autoethnographic study of three chaplains at research…(?)
OR : A case study of Chaplains doing research (?) on spiritual care in palliative care
OR : A case study of the value of chaplains as part of a research team on Spiritual care in palliative care.
OR- 3 chaplains researching spiritual care methods in PC...

[major compulsory revisions] I think the Abstract also needs to be more specific in the background section about the specific project… this speaks to my overall concern about generalizability. The results section also needs to be more precise – page 3, line 23… “contributions to the research team concerning spiritual care interventions….”
10. Is the writing acceptable?

1) In general, the writing is acceptable in terms of style; but as per my major concern, the text needs to be edited, and better focused on the particular but limited findings, and how these might or might not be generalizable.

Sometimes there are statements that sound like conclusions but the data source is not clear.

For ex: Page 5, line 2…. Will research necessarily advance the profession? Or is this what is hoped by the discipline of spiritual care/chaplaincy? The point is that Research may or may not validate its methods? It can go both ways. And this was an articulated fear of at least one chaplain in the study.

This issue emerges again at the end of the paper… which makes generalized statements (page 21, line 1/2)

The ending, line 13, also sounds a bit too agenda driven… it feels like a call to action.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'.