Reviewer’s report

Title: A mixed methods investigation of surrogate end-of-life decisions among older adult partners

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Reviewer: Alexia Torke

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript presents findings from a study of couples making hypothetical surrogate decisions for each other. The use of qualitative and quantitative methods leads to some interesting conclusions about the limitations of taking another's perspective and reasons why people may risk lower quality of life for their next of kin than for themselves.

There are some issues with the writing, particularly with the title, abstract and introduction, that I have commented on below. There is unclear language usage and unclear presentation of some important concepts.

A major conceptual challenge is presentation of the idea of risk: that surrogates are more likely to take certain risks for others than for themselves. In the introduction, the authors discuss this phenomenon but do not always make it clear which risk they are talking about. There are usually two risks involved in the decisions: risk of death and risk of poor quality of life. Why do they think that the risk of low quality of life is more salient to the surrogates? This may be the case, but cannot be assumed.

The thematic map that is presented is a map of ethical concepts, which is fairly cognitive in nature. Yet in the discussion, the authors raise the issue that participants felt they might have made different decisions in real life due to the emotions of a real life situation. I have a couple comments about this. First, you shouldn't raise a finding in the discussion that hasn't been presented in the results. If you discuss the emotional topic, please present supporting results and/or a quote. It is ok, however, to acknowledge that your analysis focused on the ethical framework and not the actual emotional experience. This could be noted in the limitations. Or you could consider how the surrogate's emotions could be addressed in an ethical framework.

Title: even after reading the manuscript, the phrase "is not at odds with" doesn't make sense to me.

ABSTRACT

Methods: in the last line of the methods, "which" should be changed to "that."

Results: "matched up" could be changed to "was consistent"
The sentence "Taking a mixed method approach allowed us to nuance both literatures" does not make good sense and is not actually a conclusion related to the findings of the study. I recommend deleting this sentence.

Page 3 para 3 "remains characteristic of current legislation" does not make sense. Do you mean that this is what most US state legislation advocates?

Page 4 para 3: this is where the concept of risk becomes unclear. If you are referring to risk of low QOL, make that clear. There are several other referencess to the concept of risk, in the rest of the introduction that don't make it clear what risk you are referring to.

Page 5 para 3: not clear what you mean by "required benchmark."

Page 6 paragraph 2

It is not clear what you mean here by "cautious." It would be helpful to be more specific. Which option involves more risk taking, the one that potentially saves the life of the patient, but with possibly more pain and suffering?

The concept of social values theory is not well explained.

Page 7 para 2 Not clear what you mean by "without taking into account the content of the decisions were made." Some other studies have looked at the ethical frameworks used by surrogates, for example Fritsch et al, J Clinical Ethics 2013; Devnani et al JGIM 2017. Or do you mean the specifics of the clinical decision? Please clarify this.

Page 7 When discussing the pragmatist epistemological framework, I do not understand what you mean by …"but sidestep them in order to address a real-world problem"

Page 10 Results

In each pair, did both partners complete the study with respect to decision making for the other? This is implied but never clearly stated.

Page 11 last line Did you mean "accepted treatment more often"?

Figure 3 caption: the word "theme" is used three times here. Please edit.

The results are very clear and well-presented.

Table 2: this gets back to the concern about risk. Make it explicit if you are talking about risk of QOL, versus risk of death.

p. 22 para 2 The use of the word "inevitably" suggests that this was the case for all participants. This seems like an over statement.
Page 24 para 3: "there was a remaining level of uncertainty" makes it sound like everyone felt this way. Please soften this claim.

Page 25: It is concerning that you raise emotional content of decision making for the first time here. This should not appear in the discussion if you don't present this topic in the results.

You do not note any limitations such as the narrow scope of your population. You also do not provide information on race, socioeconomic status or religion, which all affect decision making.

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.

I am able to assess the statistics

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Needs some language corrections before being published

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