Reviewer’s report

Title: Relational autonomy: what does it mean and how is it used in end-of-life care? A systematic review of argument-based ethics literature

Version: 0 Date: 23 Jul 2019

Reviewer: Rosalind McDougall

Reviewer's report:

This systematic review focuses on an important topic and, as the authors highlight, an area of increasing scholarly interest. The search is rigorously designed, conducted and reported. Tables and figures are clear, concise and well-communicated. The discussion section is insightful and clearly-written.

There are three areas where revisions are necessary, in my view:

1. Explaining the synthesis process

The paragraph on extraction and synthesis (p.8) needs rewriting to better explain the process for readers unfamiliar with the QUAGOL approach. What is meant by a 'conceptual scheme'? Are the 'conceptual-ethical questions' the same as the research questions? What does it mean to produce a 'comprehensive overall structure'? What does the structure aim to describe? What is meant by 'the most relevant' meanings? Was it the most relevant or the most common?

In the paragraph starting 'A fourfold structure emerged…' (p.9), it is not clear if the authors are describing the content of the articles or using the content as a starting point for their own further theorising. For example, when it is stated that 'relational autonomy is theoretically conceptualised using the adjusted understanding from the first two sections', is it the authors doing the conceptualising?

2. Structure/presentation of results, particularly 'individualistic autonomy'

Given the way in which the research questions were framed, I had expected the results to be organised in terms of 'meanings, foundations and uses' of relational autonomy. It was not immediately clear why the authors were starting with 'the origins of an individualistic conception of autonomy', as these seemed far from the key findings in relation to the review's focal concept of relational autonomy. The role of this section in the authors' overall interpretation of this literature became clearer later in the discussion section, but needs to be better explained and
contextualised. Reordering the results and/or renaming this theme/section 'simplified individualistic autonomy' may assist in this.

3. Implications for healthcare decision-making

At times in the paper, the practical implications of the review seem overstated. For example, 'Key findings are highlighted and considered in depth with the aim of reaching a clearer path towards better decision-making in real-world healthcare situations' (p.23) and "Completing this analysis was important, because it illuminates a path forward toward better decision-making in healthcare, in general, and in end-of-life care, in particular" (p.27). While the review provides a useful synthesis of literature, the benefits seem primarily scholarly rather than practical. The claims throughout about practical implications need to be explained and justified, or moderated.

Other issues:

- The use of lettering in both the results and conclusions sections of the abstract was confusing, particularly as the two sets did not align. I suggest removing the lettering from the conclusions.

- In the background section, the conceptual connection between relational autonomy and shared decision-making needs to be explicit, as does the connection between relational autonomy and advance care planning. This would also help to clarify why investigating literature at the intersection of relational autonomy and end of life is important/useful; this is currently unclear in the background section.

- Throughout the paper, the authors use the term 'anthropology' in a different sense to the usage that I am familiar with. It would be helpful to define this term at first usage to alert the reader to the specific sense in which it will be used.

- Inclusion criteria specify "development of a relational approach". Was this applied requiring 'development' specifically, or was 'use of' a relational approach also sufficient to meet this criterion?

- The exclusion of book chapters (p.7) needs some justification.

- The long lists of references in the results section make the text difficult to read meaningfully. Could this information be captured in another format (and included as a supplementary file) and the in-text citations limited to a few examples in each case?

- What is meant by 'constructive analysis' on p.14? I'm not sure that this sentence is necessary.
On p. 14, I found the following sentence confusing: 'We identified some specific ethical publications while doing our analysis'. Do the authors mean ethical approaches/methodologies?

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.
Unable to assess

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

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