Reviewer’s report

Title: Lessons learned from implementing a responsive quality assessment of clinical ethics support

Version: 0 Date: 16 Jul 2019

Reviewer: Anders Bremer

Reviewer's report:

Dear Authors,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the paper "Lessons learned from implementing a responsive quality assessment focusing on the quality of clinical ethics support". The paper concerns the important and difficult area of how to evaluate the quality of clinical ethics support (CES). As I understand the purpose of this study, it is primarily to evaluate the "responsive quality assessment" (RQA) by interviewing CES practitioners about their experiences of RQA. This study raises questions, for example, about the meaning of "quality" and "efficiency" when it comes to CES. What can be assumed to be central from a quality perspective? What benefit and value can we assign to CES? Are the effects of CES measurable, and if so, in which parts are they measurable? What are the risks that CES will focus only on clinical support (CS) when the evaluation of CES is done without clear quality frameworks or quality indicators based on ethical norms and values?

Having said this, the authors have to address some shortcomings in the paper. This applies in particular to the presentation of the study findings. My comments below are about both major compulsory revisions, minor essential revisions, and discretionary revisions.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. ABSTRACT, p. 2-3, under Results: Instead of using vague and imprecise wording such as "actual issues", "relevance of CES" and "new CES-related activities", I would prefer clearer descriptions. Which were the actual ethical issues? In what way was CES perceived to be relevant? Which were the new CES activities?

2. In page 2, line 54-55, you refer to "some respondents". When using such formulation in a qualitative study, the reader wonder about the other respondents. What did they perceive? (See also my comments regarding the presentation of Findings).
3. **BACKGROUND**, p. 5, line 25-40: The study aims is a bit unclear. Is there any difference between the goal expressed in the first sentence and the second (or third?) aim stated in the third sentence? I believe that clarity would increase if you only stated the aim/s of the data collection and omitted which conclusions can be drawn in the discussion of the results, i.e. if and how RQA can be improved. Also, clarify if "the process" mentioned in line 27-28 is the same as "learning processes" mentioned at page 6, line 7-8.

4. **METHODS**, p. 8, the first sentence under "Data analysis": Please, specify the form (levels) of result presentation, i.e. how the chosen method indicates that the result should be presented (as themes, sub-themes, categories, subcategories etc.). Also, in line with this, clarify if this analysis method is descriptive or interpretative, manifest or latent.

5. Please, clarify what is meant by "categorization of codes into more general themes" (p. 9, line 16-18).

6. Page 9, line 26-29: It is stated that this step resulted in an overview of themes and categories, but why is only the main categories presented in Table 2?

7. Page 9, line 30-31: This step is stated to further specify the emergent themes. What themes? There are no themes listed in Table 2 which becomes confusing compared to what is described in steps 2-4 (p. 9) in terms of categories and themes. Please clarify the text and the table ("Abbreviated coding scheme").

8. On page 9 you refer to Table 2, partly under the Method section and partly under Findings. This is confusing. Do you intend to present the analysis process or the findings with Table 2? The table is problematic regardless of whether it is intended to describe the analysis process or the findings. If the intention is to describe the analysis process then the reader expects to see how codes form categories (subthemes? subcategories?), and how these form themes (main themes? main categories?), i.e. how interview data is analyzed and abstracted into higher levels of analysis and interpretation. This should of course also be reflected in the result presentation, i.e. the different levels of analysis should be reflected in the formulation of themes, sub-themes and analysis text. Quotes should reinforce or validate the analysis text, not be a repetition of analysis text. If the intention is to describe the findings, which is close at hand as the table is placed under Findings, the reader expects to see the results of the analysis, not quotes (raw data) or what the participants were talking about. Please, clarify the methodological aspects mentioned above.

9. **FINDINGS**, p. 9: If Table 2 is intended to describe the findings, it should be refined to contain only abstracted results, for example as themes/subthemes or categories/subcategories (made in accordance with the method chosen). An alternative to the table is a figure that clearly describes the findings. Under the heading Findings and in a table/figure that describes the result, it should be made clear what the headings in Findings stand for in terms of themes, categories or equivalent, not only stated as "main findings" (p. 9, line 44).
10. Page 10, line 13; p. 13, line 36-37 and p. 14, line 23-24: Here the authors use the term "all" respondents, and elsewhere also "some" and "most of" are used. Considering that this is a qualitative study with 10 participants, I wonder if there is any special thought with this quantification? Please, review formulations that risk leading away from the qualitative content. This also applies to the initial summary of results in the discussion section (p. 17, first paragraph).

11. Page 11-16: On seven occasions, two quotes are presented one after the other without intermediate analysis text. This is not optimal. Quotes are meant as "reinforcement" of the analysis or as a way of showing that the analysis is valid. Too many quotes in relation to the analysis text and/or quotes that line up one after the other gives the impression of an unfinished analysis and leaves it to the reader to interpret the raw data itself (quotes). I therefore suggest that you do not use "double" quotes. If the removal of one quote leads you to think that something has been lost, this indicates that the analysis text needs to be developed.

12. DISCUSSION, p. 21, line 17-22 ("Within...//...RQA."): The text is generally related to dialogue, critical attitude and the evaluator's role. However, the connection to your own results is unclear and needs to be clarified and developed.

13. Page 21 (line 25) to p. 22 (line 32): The way to enter reference 48 in relation to the discussion of the result is confusing. Please, clarify what belongs to reference 48.

14. CONCLUSIONS, p. 22-23, the first paragraph: I perceive most of the text in this paragraph as discussion rather than conclusions, which is also reinforced by the fact that references are used. I recommend that the text is moved to the discussion and/or formulated more clearly as conclusions from the current study.

15. Page 23, line 12-14: When it comes to the conclusions, I find it unfortunate to refer to "some respondents perceived" changes. Here, the reader is rather interested in the researchers' conclusions of the study, from a scientific perspective that lifts itself beyond respondents' statements.

Minor Essential Revisions

16. BACKGROUND, p 5, the last paragraph ("This paper...//...of CES."): I suggest removing this paragraph. Consider moving the text about the findings to page 9, under the heading Findings, if these are the themes that constitute the result. It is not clear if these are the themes that make up the result, nor is this clear on page 9 under Findings where it is stated that "main findings" should be presented. When looking at these four themes (?), p. 5, it appears to be domains or research areas for this study and hence "labels" rather than thematic findings.

17. METHODS, p. 7, line 12-13: It is stated that 22 CES practitioners participated. Was it not 20 that participated?
18. Line 49-50: The topic guide consisted of four topics: 1) Motives, goals and expectations; 2) the evaluation process; 3) NEON as a learning community: measuring and being tested; 4) future quality of ethics support. However, the guide contains about 80 specific interview questions for these topics, i.e. not just the topics as a guide for the interviews. This should be stated in the text, not least considering that the stated interview method is semi-structured and not structured.

19. Line 54-55: Since "Appendix A" is not an attachment to the manuscript, the parenthesis can be removed.

20. Page 8, the first sentence ("The topic…): Please, clarify if the topic guide was refined before all 10 interviews. Or was the guide changed during the interviews?

21. FINDINGS, p. 15: The analysis text states that the assessors had an "open, inquiring attitude" (line 24). However, this is followed by a quote where the respondent says that "we also changed some things in the report, at their request" (line 37-39). I find this contradictory. How can this statement be regarded as an "inquiring attitude"? Please, develop and clarify the analysis text.

22. DISCUSSION, p. 16, line 45-47: The aim of the RQA is not the same as stated on page 5, in the first sentence under the heading "The Responsive ...". Please, adjust to eliminate any misinterpretation.

23. Page 16, line 47-57: The text is a repetition from page 5 and is redundant. I therefore suggest deleting the text "In our ... // ... be improved?'".

24. Page 18, line 9-10: Please, clarify what kind of knowledge referred to.

25. Page 19, line 25-38 (Having…//…RQA."): With the reservation that I may have misunderstood the text, I wonder if the authors underestimate this "strategic attitude"? First, it is stated that this "may" have hampered the learning process. Isn't this an overly cautious conclusion? Second, can it also be assumed that this attitude can threaten the very core of CES?

26. Page 20, the first paragraph under the heading: This text would benefit from being reformulated into a statement that the two areas of "responsive evaluation" and "power balance" are important to discuss, followed by arguments why it is important.

27. Page 22, line 1-5 ("Participants…//…reports."). Here I miss a discussion about possible consequences of the critical assessment being eroded, and thus the very idea of developing the quality in CES. Please, consider developing the discussion on this.

28. Line 32: Please, clarify and specify what you mean with "these process elements".

29. REFERENCES: The reference list needs to be reviewed in detail and made consistent. It is also unclear what kind of sources are referred to in references 5, 9, 27 and 28. Please, check and adjust according to the journal's reference system.
Discretionary Revisions

30. TITLE: Consider to delete "focusing on the quality".

31. ABSTRACT, p. 2, line 49-50: Please, review the use of personal pronouns in the script and minimize the usage. Here you can replace "Our" with "The".

32. BACKGROUND, p. 3, line 26: It seems like a word is missing between "key" and "to".

33. Page 3, the numbers for references are incorrectly indicated on lines 30-33 and 53-54. The correct one should be [1-7], [6, 7] and [13, 16-20].

34. Page 5, the first line 39-41: RQA is mentioned at the first time. Hence, here it should be "… a responsive quality assessment (RQA) in…". (Then only "RQA" or "RQAs" should be used in the script, which is not always the case. This should be adjusted).

35. For the two first sentences on page 5, you refer to an unpublished manuscript (reference number 25). This also applies to reference number 29, which is used on page 6, line 50. I recommend that you do not refer to unpublished studies. However, if the editor is of different opinion, I have no objections to this use.

36. METHODS, p. 6, line 12-15: Consider to delete the sentence "Below…".

37. Page 7, line 31-32: Please, clarify how many of the participants attended the meeting.

38. FINDINGS, p. 11, the last line: Consider to delete "in their respective organizations".

39. Page 13, the heading in line 34: Consider to delete "mirrors", and also the quote at the bottom of the page ("Of course…").

40. Page 15, the first line: Change to "…mentioned that…” (delete "s").

41. DISCUSSION, p. 17, the first paragraph: This is a fairly long summary of the results. I recommend that it be shortened if possible.

42. Page 18, the first line: The text "(quality of)" is superfluous and can be removed.

43. The last sentence in the first paragraph can be removed ("We will…").

44. Line 30-37: Please, clarify the boundary between your own results and the referenced study (7).

45. Line 51-52: References "39, 40, 41" should instead be written as "39-41".

46. Page 19, the first line: Delete "of".

47. Line 25: space is missing in "acritical".

48. Page 20, the heading: Use "RQA" instead of "responsive quality assessment".

49. Line 21-23: References "44, 45, 46, 47" should instead be written "44-47".
50. Page 21: In the first sentence, it would be advantageous to indicate that it is the "power balance" that the following discussion is about.

51. CONSENT TO PUBLISH, p. 24: I do not perceive that the last sentence is related to "consent" but rather is a methodological question of validity and therefore proposes that the sentence be deleted.

Best regards,

Anders Bremer, PhD, Ass Prof

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.

Yes

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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