Reviewer’s report

Title: Subjective judgements - no more, no less? A response to Malterud, Bjelland and Elvbakken

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Reviewer: Abby Haynes

Reviewer's report:

I was asked to provide comments that focus on whether there is anything obviously incorrect or libellous, and whether the letter is clear to people who are not already familiar with the original article.

I can't comment authoritatively on legalities but, to me, nothing appears purposefully malicious or misleading. As to accuracy, this debate is, essentially, a paradigm disagreement. Both 'sides' have justifiable arguments and nothing appears incorrect, but I have not checked the claims about methods against the original paper, or read any of the primary sources the authors used in their review. For example, Fretheim makes a firm statement about the conclusion in the original paper, "Their argument is simple: The reports we produce do not provide clear conclusions, and are therefore not useful." If this was not accurate it would be problematic.

As for clarity, the author does a good job of summarising the paper (I assume accurately - he uses fairly extensive quotes from the paper which is helpful) and stating what the key criticisms are that he is addressing. The abstract outlines the letter effectively. Consequently, knowledge of the original paper is not required.

On other matters, he makes a very good point that "demonstrating uncertainty may be useful in itself". It is a shame this is not given more attention as it would appear to challenge one of the original paper's arguments (in my experience it's a myth that policymakers only want definitive answers).

Overall, this letter seems clear and makes a valid argument for transparency in reviewing methods. Of course, such transparency is far harder to provide for the sorts of interpretive processes that Malterud et al used, but that is a challenge they need to address.

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