Reviewer’s report

Title: Implementing without guidelines: Learning at the coalface - A case study of health promoters in an era of community health workers in South Africa

Version: 1 Date: 10 Dec 2019

Reviewer: Regine Unkels

Reviewer's report:

Dear Authors,

Thank you for sharing this interesting manuscript on a very important topic and congratulations on conducting the research, this manuscript is based on. Your findings are very important to inform policy also in other settings, so a thick description of your methods is key, to assist readers' decisions on transferability but also to the wide dissemination of your results. I would therefore recommend a revision especially of the methods part along the lines of the COREQ guidelines (Consolidated criteria for reporting of qualitative research) or the SRQR (Standards for reporting qualitative research). Both can be downloaded from the EQUATOR network webpage and are internationally agreed standards that are also required by publishers. I think this will improve your manuscript importantly. I have used the SRQR for my suggestions below.

Since this re-vamp will need additional words, I suggest to shorten the introduction and make it more concise and fitted to your major findings. The description of the history of health promotion for example is very interesting, but clearly not so relevant for your findings. I would also like to suggest to leave out the review of the two policy documents and rather put this in the introduction to construct the rationale for your study and discuss your findings later against these documents, because they clearly show the shortcomings of these documents. In addition, the description of data collection, processing and analysis of these documents is not well elaborated and would need much more writing to help the reader understand what the added value of this methods to your findings is.

Background

The introduction is good, you could provide a bit more information on the study countries you are citing in 98-100.
73: I guess you mean the sustainable development goals.
86: What is the PHC-led UHC package. This was not mentioned before.
87-88: I suggest "Research has a potential role in influencing PHC reform policy…..

The paragraph with the title South Africa is too long and, in its length not so relevant to your main findings. I suggest, to write that the cadre of HPPs existed since the 70ies in RSA, briefly describe their functions today as per guideline, then introduce the PHC revitalization with the introduction of WBOT and CHW. Here you can use the findings from the document review.
Line 144-153 is really good and helps the reader to understand what the urgency of doing the study is.
153-158: Great, that you used a theory to inform your research, not many do this unfortunately. However, it is not clear to me why you chose the theory of Lewis among the many other theories on change. Could you briefly elaborate on this?
The last paragraph should be dedicated to the research question and/or objectives, because this will lead the reader to your methods section.

Methods

Briefly describe the design you used and why. Period of data collection can go under that heading. I suggest to describe the mixed methods study in more detail, because this may have influenced your site or participant selection and the reader needs to know this. Both COREQ and SRQR suggest to add information on the researcher characteristics and how they relate to the context, ie the participants. This is because the researcher is also the research instrument and his/her approach to data analysis may be also influenced by this relationship. E.g. it is a difference if the researcher who collected the data comes from within or from outside the setting, whether these data were collected for a master thesis or not. It is also important to know the background of the researchers. Are they medical personnel or have a background in health promotion etc. This section doesn't need to be long, but it helps to understand what you made out of the data you collected and to understand possible bias.

Study sites

I suggest you add more information on the context of your study provinces and also the sites and why you chose these and not others. Probably this is linked to the mixed methods study, this study was nested in.

Sample

You should elaborate more on the sample and the recruitment strategy. Who recruited the participants and how. Here you should also add the rationale why you did not include CHW and WBOT leads. You do not need to defend this, just explain why. I suggest you also add the reason why you did the group interviews. The number of participants was too small to call this a focus group discussion, but surely you had a reason to interview people together. Adding focus group discussions might have been a good idea, since this method could have revealed norms and how different HPPs have assigned meaning to their work. It would have also been a more effective way to get information. I suggest you explain why you opted for in-depth interviews.

Ethical issues

Should be added here unless stated otherwise by the journal. I suggest you move the consent procedure here, any data security (pass-word secured computer, data transfer/sharing outside the country etc) and protection of confidentiality and privacy.
Data collection

I suggest you add the context, the interviews were conducted in (setting, chosen by whom, privacy) and also something on how you define saturation. To replicate your research in other settings it will also be important to know more about your interview guide: What are the topics you covered, what informed these topics (I would have expected the Lewis theory here for example, our the research team’s personal experiences with the guideline, or the literature). I suggest you also state if the guide was pre-tested, the language of the instrument and whether you have made changes after pre-testing.

Data processing

Data processing is more than transcription. It is important to provide information on who did the transcripts and how data verification was done, e.g. did you go back to the participants and showed them the transcripts to see if that is what they meant. Many times it is impossible to do that, but you can use summaries during the interviews to do that reality check, but you need to sate if you did this. How was data quality analysis done, e.g. another researcher could listen to every fifth interview and check the transcripts. I would also suggest you move the paragraph on how you identified quotations here.

Data analysis

Table 1 seems to be missing and table 2 is incorrectly referenced here as displaying the main categories. A table displaying the codes and themes (audit trail) will be an important tool to increase trustworthiness and transparency of your analysis because the reader could probably re-do your analysis if provided with the table and the data. The basic information would be, how many codes and categories emerged. The role of the Lewis theory during data analysis is not mentioned. I would think you used it for the deductive coding part, but you mention the role of HPPs in rPHC only. I suggest you also state who did the primary coding and who was involved in the review of codes and categories. This also increases trustworthiness.

Results

The quotes are often hidden in the narrative and thus difficult to identify. I suggest, to use either " or italics, not both, and indent all quotes, like you have done for some of them. I would also suggest, to reduce the number of quotes. I have noted that your sub-headings are not equal to the main categories. I think this is a consequence of not using the Lewis theory for analysis. I am not sure why you decided to report your results under different sub-headings. Like this, it is unclear what the role of the categories in your analysis is. Your results should reflect your analysis to make sure that, they are not your interpretations what can be found in the data. I suggest, to review your approach and report using the categories as sub-headings. I would suggest, to use the Lewis theory during the discussion. I
am suggesting this also, because some of the quotes do not match the Lewis headings, e.g. the quote in 404 - 410 rather belongs to stage II as well as the quote from 414 - 421.

I would like to suggest, to state the most important findings in the beginning. You have done this very well in the abstract. Then name the main categories again and elaborate on each category. You have done the latter in detail. I suggest you mention the findings that really inform your main findings and the hypothesis you state later. To me, the main finding is the way HPPs assigned meaning to their new role, despite the lack of guidelines. I think you should elaborate a bit more on that either under the category called purpose of HP practice or under HP roles and type of information used to prioritize HP activities. Pages 19 to 21 elaborate nicely on that with good quotes.

I would suggest, to use a table for the demographic details of the participants and only shortly refer to it for readability and word count issues.

Discussion

Your discussion is nice, there are only some minor editing issues. I would suggest, to use the word "findings" instead of "data", because your data are the transcripts only. But you have analyzed these, and the product of this analysis are your findings or results. I suggest you emphasize more on the challenge of putting evidence into practice. There is a lot of literature on why guidelines are not implemented and you have added a very important part to the puzzle with your research.

529: I suggest, to use fill instead of fulfill.

532-533: The relationship between HP activities and the duties of facility managers and WBOT leaders is not clear. I would suggest, to use another term than "suffer" which is rather colloquial. Instead, I suggest you explain, how HP activities "suffer".

538-541: Why is it relevant under which directorate HP is covered. Please explain, power of practices in implementation sounds really interesting, but you do not give further detail on what this is and how the directorate influences this.

545: I suggest, to replace "although" with "in contrast" for the flow.

546 I suggest "This different interpretation of a vacuum left by national guidelines…”

547-549: I suggest, to move this statement further up in your discussion, since this is relevant for the rationale of your research.

560-561: This phrase is not clear. Who are they and is this at global or RSA level?

Limitations

In general, qualitative research is more about transferability than on generalizability, because the methodology doesn't allow this inference. You have conducted 41 interviews, which is a good number, so I would think, that your findings and conclusions can be transferred to other settings provided you give enough information on how you came to them. One limitation I see however, is that you did not conduct focus group discussions. I think that would have been the most obvious choice of method. I concur with you on the limitations regarding the inclusion of CHWs and WBOT leaders and on the observation, which would also have added triangulation to your findings from the interviews.
These suggestions may look like a lot of work, but if you look at the two EQUATOR documents you will find that it can be done. You have done a very nice research and it is worth to be published in a way that makes it as relevant to the readers that it deserves.

**Level of interest**
Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field

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

Acceptable

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