Reviewer’s report

**Title:** What methods do reviews of normative ethics literature use for search, selection, analysis, and synthesis? In-depth results from a systematic review of reviews

**Version:** 0  **Date:** 30 Jul 2017

**Reviewer:** Zack Marshall

**Reviewer's report:**

Abstract, page 2, lines 10-11:

This manuscript builds on an earlier publication. Because readers may not have read the other work, I would recommend a revision to the first sentence of the Methods section to provide additional detail and context.

For example, "Using the search terms _______, _______, and ______ we identified 84 reviews … published between _____ and ______." or "Using a sample from _______, we identified 84 reviews … published between _____ and ______."

You could also remove "and analyzed them" from the end of this sentence as you discuss analysis in the next section.

Background, page 3, line 9:

Suggest replacing "e.g." with "for example"

Background, page 4, line 7:

Should this refer specifically to "ethical analysis and synthesis"?

Background, page 4, line 21:

You use Oxford commas inconsistently. Sometimes you write "search, analyze, and synthesize" and sometimes (as here), "searched for, selected, analysed and synthesized". Please correct for consistency throughout manuscript.

Synthesis, page 7, line 10:
Did you contact authors to confirm any of the data extraction? If not, it would be useful to state this clearly.

Results, page 7, line 20:

You mention quality appraisal here for the first time. Is there a reason this was not mentioned earlier? I see later in one of the figures that quality appraisal is being included under Selection. If this is the case, do you still want it in this heading? It seems to appear suddenly.

Results, page 8, lines 9 and 11:

Verb tense inconsistencies with earlier paragraph.

Results, page 8, lines 16-21:

What is the difference between the group that "explicitly wrote that they disregarded quality appraisal procedures because there are no usable or suitable methods or criteria" (n=5) and the group that "stated without further explanation that they did not employ a quality appraisal" (n=2)? Is it that the first group gave a reason? This is not entirely clear and I am not sure if these different groupings are necessary from the way it is currently written.

Results, page 9, line 19:

For PsycINFO, n=19 not 10.

Results, page 10, line 11:

I believe this should read "define" not "defining".

Results, page 11, line 20:

Would suggest removing the word "only" here and on page 12, line 1. It does not seem necessary.
Results, page 12, line 2:

Typically, I would include narrative or hermeneutic approaches as forms of qualitative analysis. You also refer to them this way on page 15 (or at least as qualitative methods). Despite this, you have separated them here and in Figure 7. I understand that you wanted to separate this information from the other forms of qualitative analysis but I would recommend that you find another way to present this information both in the manuscript and in Figure 7. For example, you could identify these as two different subgroupings of qualitative analysis in the text, and then move this section in Figure 7. Is this not also inductive?

Results, page 13, lines 1-3:

This information seems disconnected from the Results section and I would suggest either elaboration or removal.

Figures:

There are a large number of figures included in this manuscript. I am not as clear on the online formatting of Systematic Reviews but I wonder about including some of the information as supplemental material.

Discussion, page 13, line 15:

Watch use of the terms "just", "only", "actually", and "merely" throughout manuscript. At times they seem extraneous, and in other contexts they seem to communicate a negative tone that may or may not be intended.

Discussion, applied search and selection methods, pages 13-14:

Reading the information about the search results here, the information you present does not seem to substantiate some of your claims. In terms of your results, are you able to provide details (e.g. number of search terms used in each study) that would get at the challenges related to searching? You make claims about difficulty with searches but these are not backed-up with detailed results from this study. Is there a way to speak to the sensitivity or specificity of the searches? For example, are you able to report on number of search results in relation to the number of studies included in the analysis for each study? From your comments, I have the impression that there
was likely not enough detail provided in most of the manuscripts but in the absence of this data, it does not seem feasible to use this to support an argument about the difficulty locating studies.

Discussion, page 14, lines 3-6:

We do not know the actual reasons for the selection of PubMed/MEDLINE. It could also be that these are the most widely cited and searched databases in systematic reviews (or in reviews of ethics to date). We cannot answer the question of whether this is "a relevant and fruitful database" without data on the database sources of papers included in the original reviews included in this study.

Discussion, page 14, line 6:

Should be "seems" not seem ("Another explanation … seems").

Discussion, page 14, line 13-14:

You mention book publications. Did you collect data on peer reviewed publications vs books in relation to the inclusion/exclusion criteria? In the area of normative ethics, this information could be interesting. Perhaps all include books. If so, it may be relevant to mention given that the audience of SR may not be aware of this and it is not mentioned until page 14.

Discussion, page 15, line 2:

You seem to prioritize quantitative analysis. Is the phrase "merely qualitative" needed?

Discussion, page 15, line 4:

Awkward, suggest revising.

Discussion, page 15, lines 5-8:

This relates back to my earlier comment about narrative or hermeneutic approaches. Here you make the statement that qualitative analysis and narrative/hermeneutic approaches are both
qualitative methods, but I am not sure this helps to resolve the tension. Narrative/hermeneutic approaches could also be seen as a form of analysis, no?

Discussion, page 16, line 4:
Suggest change to "on the synthesis's objectives" to "on synthesis objectives".

Discussion, page 17, line 19:
Do you mean a full list of the references included in the review? The use of the term "search results" here is unclear.

Discussion, page 18, line 3:
Suggest methodological "aspects" instead of "parts".

Discussion, page 18, line 5:
Recommend revision such as, "Goals definitely play a role in the way the synthesis is framed for the intended audience (other academics …)".

In general, the recommendations should be more clear and succinct (page 19, lines 1-18).

Conclusions, page 20, line 12:
Should this read, "(systematic) ethics reviews" or "normative and mixed ethics literature"? It seems that ethics should be mentioned here somewhere.

Conclusions, page 20, line 14:
Suggest replacing "other" with "new" or "future".
The second goal is unclear. Do you mean writing a chapter or section on quality criteria in a manual on ethics reviews? It also seems to me that your paper goes beyond quality to the broader topic of ethics review methodology. Is it necessary to frame this solely within the area of quality criteria?

Figure 4:
Scopus and Embase should not be written in all caps.

Figure 7:
You refer to "table 3" in the qualitative analysis box. Is there a table 3? Should be corrected.

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