Letter to the Editor

On methodological fit and interpretive boundaries in qualitative synthesis within the recent article: How do female healthcare staff experience the menopause transition in the workplace? A critical meta-synthesis

Dear Editors,

We read with interest the recent interpretive meta-synthesis by Hughes and Robertson [1] examining workplace experiences in the context of menopause among health professionals. This is an important and under-researched area, and we note that the overarching themes identified are broadly consistent with findings reported in the primary literature, including our own work [2] cited within the review.

We wish to raise several points for consideration. First, there appears to be a descriptive inaccuracy in the reporting of our study [2]. The original research included participants across six countries, including the United States; however, the USA is omitted in the review's description of study characteristics. In a synthesis of this scale, accurate representation of contextual features is important, as these contribute directly to interpretation.

Second, while the use of interpretive meta-synthesis [3] appears methodologically appropriate, there are instances where the representation of data, particularly quotations drawn from our study, seems to extend beyond the original context and meaning conveyed by participants. This suggests a degree of interpretive drift, whereby higher-order constructs move at some distance from the first-order accounts on which they are based.

We suggest that this issue is particularly salient in fields where the evidence base remains limited. In the context of menopause experiences among health professionals, qualitative studies provide rich, contextually embedded accounts of a relatively under-explored phenomenon. As such, the selection of synthesis methods that prioritise fidelity to primary data is of heightened importance. More aggregative or descriptive approaches may, in some instances, better preserve the integrity and nuance of original participant accounts.

In this context, we invite the authors [1] to consider approaches that incorporate explicit modelling to systematically test the relationship between textual data, subthemes, and higher-order constructs, such as Empirical Textual Thematic Analysis (ETTA) [4,5]. ETTA may offer one pathway to strengthen analytic transparency and maintain proximity between primary data and interpretive outcomes.

We offer these reflections in the spirit of strengthening methodological transparency and supporting the development of a robust evidence base in this important area.

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