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Review: Pearls of wisdom: using the single case study or ‘gem’ to identify strategies for mediating stress and work-life imbalance in healthcare staff

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I read this paper with interest. It forms part of a larger qualitative study examining work-life balance among NHS staff, examining a single case, ‘Ariel’ using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA. A strength of this paper is that it reads well, offering a detailed exploration of one participant’s experiences of coping with stress, and the work-life balance, as a professional working in today’s task orientated NHS.

It is interesting that, from 29 participants, only one interviewee offered these atypical themes. The reflective element of being a qualitative researcher is treated thoughtfully, with the acknowledgement of the ‘creeping realisation’ that this particular interviewee offers a different viewpoint about their work-life balance, than the researchers supposed. Transparency of approach when interpreting an individual’s lived-world experiences, which is an important skill, is generally handled well and some thoughtful observations offered.

As a researcher, I was however keen to learn more about exactly how the author uncovered these findings and at what stage did they become aware of the need for greater reflexivity, in order to gain deeper understanding of ‘what was going on’ with Ariel. It was helpful to have this explained by reflecting on the role of trust, and the rationale, by selecting IPA, as opposed to adopting another qualitative approach.

Ariel’s four main themes of choice and autonomy, family values, workplace attitudes and expectations, and compromise and reconciliation are interesting and the discussion provides a clear and logical academic argument for each theme. Good examples of excerpts from Ariel’s interview transcript are inserted within the main text for the reader. One of the strengths of this paper is the author’s attempt at considering the alternative view (the ‘gems’) provided by Ariel and the thoughtful discussion for each of the themes.

However, an aspect I consider which might be further expanded is that we are not given much indication as to whether the researcher considered other explanations for their interpretation of the data. For instance, does Ariel relate her self-narrative of being happy, or content, with her values and beliefs, or might this be a form of self-rationalisation, after the event so to speak, to justify decisions she perhaps needed to make within her family? Some of the data suggests she experienced considerable pressure from her family to work part – time. We are not told if this was discussed further during her interview. It might be helpful to the reader if this angle of her narrative ‘gem’ could have been explored just a little more?

In the methodology section we are told that four main themes were identified. However, we are not told about whether the author asked a colleague to check a sample from the data? This approach is often used with IPA and I suggest a little more information about the actual data analysis process would be helpful to strengthen the paper.

Can we identify promising 'strategies of dealing with stress and work-life imbalance' from one case study? I'm not so sure; however, this is my personal view. In summary, this paper is likely to be of interest for other researchers or practitioners who may be less familiar with using IPA: the author's explanation on how their themes were identified is helpful. This is a thoughtful paper, with a good grasp of some of the perspectives at play for professionals working in today's NHS. Some interesting points are raised, including the call for greater emphasis on a compassionate and caring approach among nursing staff.

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