

## **Author's response to reviews**

**Title:** Establishing confidence in the output of qualitative research synthesis: the ConQual approach

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**Version:** 2 **Date:** 16 April 2014

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Response to Reviewer's

Thank you to both reviewer's for their comments. We have made substantial changes to the paper based on this feedback which we believe has improved the overall substance of the paper. Generally, we have made it more explicit throughout the article that this approach has been developed and tested with the meta-aggregative approach to qualitative systematic reviews. Following is a point by point response to the reviewer's comments.

Reviewer 1:

1. (a) The authors outline two main criteria for assessing quality of synthesized qualitative studies: credibility and dependability, which they referenced as from "Lincoln and Guba". First, I am unsure of the correct citation for this. In the manuscript they cite "Lincoln and Guba", whereas the reference in the bibliography is a Guba and Lincoln (1982) article. (Additionally, the authors used Dr. Guba's first name, not his last in the bibliography.) I wonder if the authors do not intend to actually quote the Lincoln and Guba (1985) book "Naturalistic Inquiry". It is in this book that Lincoln and Guba name four concepts that are needed for verification: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Thank you for your keen attention to detail. This paper is the one we wanted to reference and we have changed the authors name to ensure the referencing is correct.

1. (b) It is unclear why the authors of the current manuscript excluded transferability and confirmability. From my perspective, these two concepts are critical in reviewing the quality of qualitative methods, and therefore should be at least considered in establishing the confidence in synthesized findings. The authors need to make a clear and well outlined argument why they excluded transferability and confirmability and only focused on credibility and

dependability.

We agree with the reviewer that transferability and confirmability are critical when reviewing the quality of qualitative research methods and feel this needs further discussion. We have included in the paper additional information regarding our choice of the concepts of credibility and dependability, particularly in terms of confidence or truth value of the findings. We have also discussed how confirmability is addressed with this approach.

2. (a) The methods in this article were not thoroughly outlined. It is unclear how the authors came to consensus for the agreed upon results. Information that would be helpful included: the timeframe, how often they met, which criteria they considered, how they came to consensus, etc.

We have added in substantive detail in the methods section regarding meeting frequency, how consensus was achieved in the process and how this has informed the development of the tool to date.

2. (b) Furthermore, it would be necessary to describe more of the authors' background, including their potential biases. In the article, authors state that qualitative studies should be evaluated on whether the authors made "a statement locating the researcher culturally and theoretically". It would behoove the current authors to include such information in their current manuscript to add credibility to their results.

This is a very valid point. We have added that all members of the working party work at the Joanna Briggs Institute, located in Adelaide, Australia, and that they have all conducted meta-aggregative reviews. It has also been added that members have been involved in methodological work for both JBI and the Cochrane Collaboration over many years. Further to this, the participants from around the world also have substantive experience in qualitative methodologies.

2.(c) I do have concerns that only one voice and perspective was explored in the study. An example of this is the authors state that there are multiple approaches to synthesize findings from qualitative research, yet they only referenced meta-aggregation, a method developed by one of the authors. The authors need to either make a statement or not using or referring to the other methods, or include the other methods which could lead to a broader, and perhaps more thorough evaluation of the methods for synthesizing and evaluating the quality of qualitative research.

Thank you for your comment. We have made a number of changes throughout the paper to highlight that this approach was developed with meta-aggregation reviews in mind, and to highlight that testing of the ConQual approach has only been with meta-aggregation reviews so far. We have made mention in the discussion referring to our interest in collaborating on wider testing and evaluation of ConQual approach being used for other methods for qualitative research synthesis.

3. Critical references seemed to not be included. In particular, the authors did not include a reference to the Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods Group Supplemental Handbook.

<http://cqim.cochrane.org/supplemental-handbook-guidance>. It would create a stronger case for the authors' results and add credibility if they included a more thorough literature review. (Furthermore, in Chapter 4 of this handbook the authors note the four criteria for quality, so again I question why the authors of this paper only selected two of these.)

We have included a reference to chapter 20 of the Cochrane handbook, as well as the supplemental online work of the group. One of the authors is a co-author on the Cochrane chapter whilst another is an editor of the supplemental online material.

4. Finally, the second aim of the study was to “determine whether a summary of findings is possible for qualitative systematic reviews” and to include a proposed table format. I am unsure that the authors achieved this. The end of page 11 they state that “this system has been trialed with a number of systematic reviews.” This is a vague statement and I do not believe this is sufficient evidence to state that they have achieved aim two. The authors should provide a more thorough explanation of how they developed the table and determined that this was an appropriate and easily implemented table format. Perhaps a companion systematic review in which the authors employed their system would be helpful.

Thank you for your feedback. There are now reviews that are being conducted using this methodology which we expect to be published shortly. We do believe that this proposed format for a Summary of Findings table does meet our secondary aim to determine whether this was possible for qualitative systematic reviews. We have included more details on the development of the table, specifically how we were guided by the format used in effectiveness reviews.

Reviewer 2:

General comments: The aim of the tool is novel and important, and there is certainly a need for this work which makes it of importance in this field. I do think the tool is under-developed (or at least under-described) for its ambition at the moment though; that the critical issue of “what is confidence” needs to be addressed in this paper; and that the example hinted at in Table 1 needs to be detailed properly in the text.

Thank you for considering the aim of this tool as novel and important. We hope that we have made enough changes to the paper following your feedback to allay any concerns you may have about it being under-developed. Specifically, we have made it explicit that this tool has been designed for meta-aggregative reviews and have illustrated how it is able to be incorporated into this methodology. Within the discussion we have now added in more detail about the limitations of ConQual to this methodology at this point in time. We have carefully proofread the paper and made some grammatical corrections.

Major compulsory revisions

1.(a) ConQual is presented as a tool for expressing confidence in any qualitative synthesis, but it does not appear to have been tested outside a fairly limited

number of meta aggregative reviews; and the range of perspectives which informed its development is similarly narrow.

You are correct in your observations here. We have rephrased sections of the paper to make it explicit that this methodology best applies to meta-aggregative reviews, and that it has not yet been tested with different approaches.

1. (b) The ambition of the tool is significant: to be a GRADE-like tool for any qualitative synthesis, and I do think that its development needs to reflect this scope – with greater engagement with the range of reviews and the community of reviewers for whom the tool is intended for use.

This was an oversight of ours to not include details on the consultation process that followed the development of the tool. As highlighted in the revised document, this tool has been presented to international experts in the field of qualitative research synthesis and particularly meta-aggregation using a Delphi like process.

1. (c) I have had some involvement in the development of the CerQual tool – see below – which, even though it has had far more consultation and testing than ConQual, is not yet considered ready for formal publication.) The two tools are almost identical in their objectives, but have quite different ways of assessing confidence; there is therefore likely to be ‘space’ for both of them, though at the moment I think it would be safer to describe the ConQual tool as being suitable for meta aggregative reviews rather than any qualitative synthesis.

We are aware of the CerQual tool that is in development (please see below for further information regarding the CerQual approach). Although it is difficult to judge from an outsider’s perspective we are of the belief that our tool has undergone testing equivalent to that of CerQual and it is now suitable for publication. We have made sure to identify that this tool is most suited to meta-aggregative reviews where the testing has been focused, and look forward to continuing to discuss the development to date to the international community . There is more work to do, particularly in alternate methods of synthesis, but in terms of meta aggregation, we believe the core of the ConQual approach is ready.

2. In the methods, the question of 'what confidence is in terms of synthesised qualitative research findings' is posed to begin with, but this is not answered explicitly later on. I think this is critical for understanding this paper though: we need a definition of "confidence". Are you saying that greater confidence helps us to know (for example) that the findings are a genuine reflection of the research? Or that they can be transferred between contexts? Or..? It’s hard to think of confidence in an abstract way as it usually refers to your confidence in the ability of something to behave in the expected way.

We have extensively revised how we articulate the concept of ‘confidence’, reframing the term and how it is understood in relation to meta-aggregation as an approach to synthesis, and more particularly, how this perspective on confidence translates in to the ConQual approach.

3. I think the statement that there is no corresponding approach in qualitative

reviews needs some tempering. The CerQual tool has been under development for a while and it has been used in at least one published review. It has also been presented at Colloquia and been the subject of discussion at GRADE meetings. I think it would be worth the authors contacting Simon Lewin and seeing whether he can send through the current draft of the CerQual tool; you could then write a section in the discussion about how the two tools differ.

Thank you for highlighting this – although we were aware of this tool, we did not realise it had been published in a review protocol. We have tempered our statement regarding there being no other corresponding approach in qualitative reviews. There is also a section now detailing the similarities and differences between the tool.

4. Pp7-8: “One way to improve the practicality and usefulness of the findings of a qualitative systematic review is to undertake a process to establish the confidence in these findings.” I didn’t follow the argument here: why should confidence affect practicality or utility?

We have added a qualifier to this statement and changed the wording to better reflect the relationship between promoting clarity about confidence and clarity and transferability of findings.

5. Realist synthesis isn’t explicitly a method for synthesising qualitative research, so I don’t think it really belongs in the list of methods on page 5.

Although many published examples focus only on the qualitative component of realist synthesis, we have removed realist synthesis from the list.

6. Re the sentence pp5-6: “This meta-aggregative method is the only approach to explicitly align itself with the philosophy of pragmatism in order to deliver readily useable synthesised findings to inform decision making at the clinical or policy level...”. Presumably the other methods also aim to do this too; are you saying that meta-aggregation does it better thanks to its use of pragmatism? If so, then we need to know how.

The wording has been softened here regarding this approach. However, this approach is the only one which has been aligned to the philosophy of pragmatism. Further information has been added into the paper discussing this point.

7. P.9: “Therefore, the quality of the included studies directly impacts the quality of the meta-synthesis”. Surely the purpose of the exercise is the opposite? That the critical appraisal process ensures that the syntheses are of a consistently high standard, removing any ‘malign’ influences of poorer quality studies?

We have reworded this section to better reflect the intent as it relates to meta-aggregation – where studies are not included unless they meet explicit quality criteria. This differs significantly from other methods that include papers based on richness of description regardless of methodological quality (meta ethnography for example has many published examples where quality was not

considered a hurdle for inclusion) however, we have not detailed these examples as it would detract from the core purpose of this paper.

8. I think it is worth reflecting on the suitability of an ordinal scale for assessing confidence in qualitative research. Some qualitative researchers would certainly say that this is inappropriate. In particular, what is the justification for having a linear reduction (why should the boundaries be where they are?); does confidence increase and decrease in a linear way?

This is a valid point. Although we are aware that use of an ordinal scale is a potential area of concern, we are of the belief that a ranking system will be of most use to policymakers and healthcare professionals involved in the delivery of care who are considering synthesised qualitative research findings when making decisions.

9. In Table 1, I wasn't sure what the purpose of the 'type of research' column was. If this is for qualitative research, will this column see much variation? In relation to this, I think the worked example needs to be a proper worked example, so we see statements from the research studies etc which led you to downgrade.

We have provided justification when discussing this column within the document. The main reasoning is to highlight to readers that this is coming from qualitative research. We believe a full worked example may be beyond the scope of this paper as it would be difficult to present all individual level findings that contributed to this synthesised finding. The reference for this review is provided.

Minor essential reviews

10. Last sentence of background in the abstract: something isn't quite right with the grammar here. Can it be fixed by deleting the "a" from "... findings and a summary..."?

Thank you, we have revised this sentence

11. Again in the abstract, we first hear about the working group in the 'results' section: should it be described before?

Thank you, we have substantially revised the paper to present the processes used by the working group more transparently and in much greater detail.

Discretionary Revisions

12. Re the statement in the first sentence in the abstract: is this tool only for qualitative syntheses where they are "complementing" an effectiveness review? If not, then the emphasis given here should probably change.

We have included quantitative review here.

P13. 8 "After much debate". Are there any issues that it would be helpful for the reader to know about? In particular I'm interested in why these concepts have been selected above the others the working group discussed. What process led

to their selection?

We have included additional detailed description on development on the tool, particularly in relation to the key concepts and how they were defined by the group through a consensus process.

P.14 CerQual and ConQual are very similar names for two tools with the same objectives. It might be worth exploring whether it would be sensible to differentiate their names more in order to avoid confusion.

They are similar names, with a similar aim, but two very different approaches. We do not consider this as an issue warranting a change at the moment not only due to the difference in terms of approach, but also which approaches to qualitative synthesis they have currently been developed for.