Reviewer's report

Title: What's wrong with meta-ethnography reporting? A systematic review of published studies

Version: 2 Date: 18 August 2014

Reviewer: Zachary Munn

Reviewer's report:

General comments:
The author's provide a good introduction to qualitative evidence synthesis, the various methods of synthesis and where meta-ethnography fits within this broader field. The paper is well-written and is an important contribution to the field of qualitative evidence synthesis.

This is a timely paper given the increase in the use of qualitative research/evidence synthesis. As formal guidance now exists for conducting qualitative research synthesis using meta-ethnography, this paper provides a valuable assessment on the current state of the research using this method. Conducting an evaluation of the reporting of a methodology that is ‘still evolving and cannot, at present, be regarded as a standardized approach capable of application in a routinized way’ (Campbell 2011) is a challenging task and the authors have achieved this admirably. I have provided comments below.

1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?
   Yes

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described?
   Some comments are provided

3. Are the data sound?
   Yes

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
   Yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
   Yes

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?
   Yes

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished?
   It appears so.
8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes

9. Is the writing acceptable?
A careful proofread is recommended.

Please make your review as constructive and detailed as possible in your comments so that authors have the opportunity to overcome any serious deficiencies that you find and please also divide your comments into the following categories:

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

In the background, you mention on line 95 that meta-ethnography uses as data the interpretations (themes, concepts or metaphors) in primary qualitative study reports which is in contrast to other methods of QES. From my experience the meta-aggregative approach is not in contrast to this and also considers interpretations as data.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

• Minor copy-editing revisions. I have not provided an extensive list but for example:
  o Line 55: e.g. what?
  o Line 129: ‘to synthesise a very large numbers of studies’
  o Include reference to Campbell et al’s report in last line of background

I am surprised by the author’s limited mentioning of the ENTREQ statement. The authors develop their tool based on ‘meta-ethnography publications providing rich methodological detail’ and their own experience, but also state they drew on other publications as well (Dixon-Woods, Hannes). I understand that the ENTREQ is a generic tool but I do not understand the decision to completely ignore it in the development of the author’s checklist considering their use of other publications (Dixon-Woods, Hannes).

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1. The search limits appear quite constrained, and there is no real justification for only searching during 2013. There should be additional information on why these limits were chosen and why the publication of Campbell’s report was deemed the cut-off point.

2. I question the author’s decision to call this paper a systematic review in the paper title. This review does not aim to summarize or bring the findings of multiple studies together as would be seen in traditional systematic reviews. Although there has been a systematic searching process, it strikes me that a more appropriate classification for this paper would be either a ‘scoping review’
or a ‘methodological systematic review.’ Given the limitations in the searching timeframe and the lack of formal quality assessment, a scoping review may be most appropriate (Grant and Booth 2009). The title of the article should reflect this and be changed appropriately.

3. In general, I would like to see more justification and detail regarding how each of the items to evaluate meta-ethnography reports were decided upon.

4. Campbell’s report states in its conclusion that meta-ethnography is ‘still evolving and cannot, at present, be regarded as a standardized approach capable of application in a routinized way.’ (Campbell 2011). You mention this in your document. As this is the case, is it possible to create a standard set of reporting guidelines for meta-ethnography? Some discussion on this may be useful. Additionally, this work has raised a number of questions regarding the conduct and reporting of meta-ethnography studies. It is clear from this paper that authors of meta-ethnography papers struggle to report accurately the conduct of their research. I would like to see some information regarding what a potential method-specific reporting guideline “could” look like – even if this is only mentioned briefly in the discussion.

Reference:

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I am a senior research fellow within the Joanna Briggs Institute and have been extensively involved in an alternative method of qualitative research synthesis, meta-aggregation, including the development of a tool for establishing confidence in the synthesised findings developed during meta-aggregation (ConQual).