Reviewer's report

Title: Meta-ethnography 25 years on: challenges and insights for synthesising a large number of qualitative studies

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Reviewer: Monika Kastner

Reviewer's report:

Summary

The current study was aimed at describing an approach to conducting meta-ethnography that is more in line with the evolving use of knowledge syntheses, qualitative research and knowledge translation. Overall, I think this paper is important in the field, as it contributes to what is already known about conducting meta-ethnography – methodologists will find the concepts and the research team’s experience helpful. My major suggestions would be to clarify the purpose of the paper a bit more, and to supplement the sections and discussion with examples from the actual review that was conducted/published to strengthen the applicability of concepts for others conducting such reviews. I included some comments and suggestions below that may be considered to strengthen the manuscript.

Background

# It would be helpful to focus and clarify the objective(s) a bit more in the Background section. Apart from the title, I didn’t really get that you were discussing the challenges of meta-ethnography until I started reading further on

Getting started

Does qualitative synthesis fit the qualitative research ethos?

# What do you mean by “ethos” exactly? Given that meth-ethnography is becoming a knowledge synthesis tool for use across many different fields, it might be helpful to keep the language more ‘neutral’

# How do you make sure that you keep your interpretations firmly grounded in the qualitative studies included?

Is a synthesis of this topic needed?

# You mention that attending a Society meeting informed the need to conduct a qualitative synthesis on chronic musculoskeletal pain – are there other ways that needs for a knowledge synthesis inquiry could be discovered?

What experience doe the team need?

# It might also be worth mentioning that the thoughtful consideration of team experience the way you describe it, is also related to the concept of integrated knowledge translation (i.e., the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the planning and execution of the review will ensure that the knowledge will be
applicable and relevant to them).

What type of qualitative synthesis is appropriate?

# When you describe the various other available methods for synthesizing qualitative research (in the first sentence), it would be helpful to say what these are

# I like that you considered which approach is most suitable to answer your research question – this could be highlighted more as most knowledge syntheses do not consider this step

What resources are available?

# It might be good to also discuss how resources might affect which knowledge synthesis method you might select to answer your question… and who should make these decisions.

Deciding what is relevant

Searching and screening

# You describe a number of qualitative search filters - Have you considered the empirically-tested methodological search filters for qualitative studies developed by McMaster University for Medline (Wong, 2004); CINAHL (Wilczynski 2007); PsycINFO (McKibbon 2006) and EMBASE (Walters 2006)?

Reading the studies

# How was data abstraction done and was it done in duplicate? Did you annotate the PDFs or transfer the data to another database. How did you develop the form?

Determining how studies are related to each other

# It would be great to provide an example of how this “relatedness” analysis is actually done re: creating a list of metaphors, phrases, ideas and concepts

# An example showing the difference between 1st and 2nd order constructs would also be helpful to understand this

# One of the strengths of your review is that you used a collaborative approach to interpreting second order constructs, and I like how each member did their own interpretation first and then came together to interpret the final concept – I would really highlight this in the discussion

# So the untranslatable concepts identified were in fact a kind of exclusion criteria?

Translating studies into each other

# Again an example would be really great in this section also

# Is grounded theory typically the method used to translate studies into each other or can other qualitative methods be used?

Synthesizing translations

# How is the process of developing a “line of argument” different than the using the constant comparative method of grounded theory to translate studies into
each other? – the distinction between these two steps is not clear

Expressing the synthesis

# You may want to discuss integrated knowledge translation here, and how involving relevant stakeholders from the beginning can facilitate the effect translation of knowledge to the right person (and to have the most appropriate messenger for each of these messages)

# You could also distinguish between more passive strategies (publications, presentations) vs. more active strategies such as the short film you developed, or any other subsequent meetings with stakeholders to disseminate the knowledge

Discussion

# I would suggest adding a few more discussion points:

• Are there other examples of studies that include a large number of qualitative studies in a qualitative systematic review? (for example realist review which can include both quantitative and qualitative data; or a Meta-study which also focuses exclusively on the inclusion of qualitative literature)

• How do your findings add to what is already known?

• How might other researchers use your findings to overcome the challenges you experienced?

• What are next steps? How will you build on your findings?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests