Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 28 April 2014

Reviewer: Camille Brisset

Reviewer's report:

I acknowledge the authors' tremendous work of conducting 1) a meta-ethnography (ME) and 2) on such an important number of studies. This paper gives interesting insights but considering the current state of knowledge (Atkins et al., 2008), in its present state it does not quite provide much newer knowledge about the challenges of conducting ME. A deeper analysis would be very valuable for the scientific community in terms of methodology.

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

1. While I completely agree on the many challenges of conducting ME, I do not believe all are due to the number of included studies. It surely adds difficulty but deciding on what is relevant to include in a ME or what team expertise is needed for example is part of the process independently of that number. I would nuance each steps accordingly...

2. I do not quite grasp the proposed method in itself and I doubt that in its present form, one will be able to use it. For each step/challenges encountered, the paper would gain in relevance by indicating clearly what was done/chosen in the end. Was an exhaustive literature search conducted? Were papers excluded based on their “poor” quality? Etc. In the same vein, I do not quite understand how the authors interpreted second order constructs and translated studies into each other. Did they “just” all worked separately then talked about it in group? There has to be a starting point or an “index” paper somewhere, somehow. I also believe that Appendix 1 and 2 should not be treated as appendices as they provide details on the proposed method.

3. The authors mentioned in the Abstract and in the Background that researches have used different rigorous methods to produce syntheses. What are they? And what are the other ways of approaching ME? Other MEs with a large number of papers have been conducted. I have personally used the Matrix method (Garrad, 1999, 2011) on 61 qualitative articles to organise the data. I surely do not imply that it is the only way to go about it but the reader needs to know what are the advantages and limits of the proposed method. As for now, this is not clear to me.

4. Some concepts need to be (more) defined, such as “translation” and “line of argument”. What we understand of these concepts and how we apply them is
part of the challenges of conducting a ME.

5. In the Discussion, do the authors imply that social science researches are not scientific? I would choose more carefully the words here as it is a very delicate debate, just like the one between quantitative and qualitative researches.

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

6. The aim of the paper is stated 3 times in the Abstract. We aimed to build on [...] (background) / This paper describes our method [...] (methods) / [...] to produce a large ME synthesis [...] (results). I am also not quite sure about the relevance of stating that Other researches have used different rigorous methods to produce synthesizes, often including a smaller of studies in the results section of the abstract.

7. Appendix 2 is very technical and makes it difficult to follow what was done. Was each article treated as a sub-code within the coding tree? Is a node a code? Please consider using more generic qualitative terminology. Also, can other qualitative software, like QDA-Miner, be used?

8. I would provide more than a reference to figure 1 to describe Noblit and Hare stages. Or at least, clearly indicate that headings 1. to 7. refer to them (in the heading itself for example). I believe it will be easier to follow with a reminder of what the steps are.

9. Check for typos throughout the manuscript (please see the “Minor issues not for publication” section below).

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

10. Please consider synthetizing the 2nd and 3rd sentence in the background section.

MINOR ISSUES NOT FOR PUBLICATION

There are many typos thought out the text that need to be corrected for publication. References, names, etc… should be systematically reported in the same way. To list a few:

11. Noblit & Hare versus Noblit and Hare.

12. NVivo versus Nvivo.

13. Brackets versus parentheses for citing references in the text (e.g., [44]).

14. Pages in a reference for a citation. The information is often missing (e.g., in “What experience does the team need?”, paragraph starting with Collaboration ‘requires that [...]’ for reference N°9; or in “Do I need to do an exhaustive literature search”, 2nd paragraph, reference N°3). Sometime it is written “page” followed by the number (“6. Synthesising translations”, 1st paragraph, last
reference), or a p letter followed a space and the page number (“1. Getting Started”, 1st paragraph, reference N°6), a p letter followed by the page number without the space (“3. Reading the studies”, reference N°6). A “:” was also used (“4. Determining how studies are related to each other”, reference N°29).

15. Citations. They are reported both in italic and in normal text (“What experience does the team need?, paragraph starting with Collaboration ‘requires that […]’ versus “Do I need to do an exhaustive literature search”, 2nd paragraph for Consider […]that ‘omission of some papers is unlikely to have a dramatic effect on the results’).

16. Please check for the “ENREF 54 ENREF 55” in “Quality appraisal”.

17. Please check for the missing spaces (e.g., “Do I need to do an exhaustive literature search”, 1st paragraph, only2-6studies(6)) and the double spaces.

18. Please check for punctuation typos (e.g., “3. Reading the studies”, […] the data for the analysis. (28).” / There are two endpoints).

19. Please check for typos in the reference list (e.g., references 13, 33 and 36).

20. Please check for the tenses, past versus present.

21. Please consider presenting internet links as a reference in the reference list at the end of the manuscript.

22. The statement “reflexive statement” is missing from the second citation in the “Do I need to do an exhaustive literature search?”

23. The Figure legends section does not quite follow the guidelines. What is the title of each figure?

24. There is a spelling error in Figure 1 in the “step 5” box. There is an extra “i” in “studies”.

25. What do the ABCD / BCDB /ABCC / DABD codes refer to in Figure 2?

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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 declare that I have no competing interests