Author's response to reviews

Title: Worked examples of alternative methods for the synthesis of qualitative and quantitative research in systematic reviews

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Author's response to reviews: see over
December 16th, 2006

Dear Editors,
Thank you for these helpful and positive reviews. The way in which the reviewers make very specific suggestions (all of which they define as minor) has made it easy for us to respond speedily, for which we thank them.

We respond point by point below.

I look forward to hearing from you in due course
Kindest regards
Helen Roberts

Reviewer’s report
Ann Mckibbon Reviewer:
Reviewer’s report:
This article demonstrates two different approaches to qualitatively synthesize data from original studies and reports into a systematic review: textual narrative and thematic synthesis. I suggest that this article be published.

We are grateful to Ann Mckibbon for her review
My comments are minor and I trust the authors to address the issues.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
Nothing here although the first point in the section below needs to be addressed.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
First I would like to see a discussion of the order of the two analyses. Were they done sequentially or in tandem? If sequentially, which one was done first? I would like to see this explained in the methods section

On p.4, we have now inserted: The two reviews ran in tandem, as the thematic review needed time for response and comparison between reviewers.

and also in the discussion section. Is the fact that the reviewers were the same for both analyses a benefit or an impediment?

We now do this just above the discussion section in a new section on strengths and limitations (in response to review Booth) and we have added the passage below:

Strengths and limitations of our study

While the data extraction and thematic synthesis was undertaken by two researchers working independently, only one of these researchers (employed to
work on the qualitative aspect of the review) worked on the narrative synthesis with a second researcher discussing the work as it progressed. Whether the findings might be different with more than one researcher working on both syntheses, or researchers not involved in the data extraction doing the syntheses, or the syntheses being carried out in a different order, are themselves researchable (if rather expensive) questions, as is the issue of whether the immersion of one researcher in the data at every stage a strength (as we believe it to be) or a source of bias.

Second, please be careful with abbreviations. Do you really need to abbreviate SRs? I would suggest not as space is not an issue—your paper is short and is going to be published electronically. In addition, what is EPPI? Do you need to abbreviate CRD? Please also indicate that the NHS is the UK NHS. I know that most people know but any organization that is “national” should have it’s country noted the first time it is mentioned. Similarly, what Department of Health funded the project? Thousands of departments of health exist and I would like to know which one funded the project.

We are grateful for Dr McKibbon’s reminder, and have made the alternations except where NHS is part of a title (as it was for an NHS CRD publication).

Third, the references could do with a bit of a clean up. Please add URLs whenever possible. As this is an electronic document live links are wonderful. For example the first two references should have a URL as well as some of the other non-journal items if at all possible. The BMC article could have a URL also.
Please give full citation for Baird 2005b.
Some journal issues (i.e., number) are missing.
Fisher needs a volume and page number if possible.
Hall, Hewat and several others have a non consistent format for volume and issue.
Please remove the number of references (e.g., May and Rejan).
What are pages “US” for Rand and Reifsnider?
To our immense relief, the references appear to be fine in the Refman file we submitted, so we think the queries below must be due to a transmission error in the files. We have tried changing the format of some records to deal with this, but URLs in particular are not reliably produced in the reference list even when included in the RefMan records. We will confirm with the editors that the files they upload on publication are the correct ones.

Reviewer’s report
Andrew Booth
Reviewer's report:
General
This is a well written and well constructed manuscript on an issue of great topical interest. It has the potential to make a major contribution to the very specific area of systematic review methodology.
We are grateful to Andrew Booth for this and for his review
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
None

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

It would be helpful to briefly define and discuss the two methods of synthesis together with methodological references to each (p.4) before entering the sections that demonstrate their use.

We have added the following on p4:
The first, the textual narrative approach, involves a commentary reporting on study characteristics, context, quality, and findings, using the scope, differences and similarities among studies were used to draw conclusions across the studies, whilst the second, the thematic approach, groups data into the themes.

The reference to the Cochrane Qualitative Review Methods module should be enabled from within the text - it appears in the references only.
We have now done this adding http://www.joannabriggs.edu.au/cqrmg/about.html into the text

It is a Group not a “groups”.
Thanks for spotting this: we have made the correction

Although a few readers will know what is meant by thickness - a reference to Popay’s work I believe – it would be helpful to define and reference this (p.4)
We have added the word ‘richness’ to the first mention of ‘thickness’ and have also added the following:

‘Thickness’ in this context refers to the kind of relatively detailed descriptions and contextual material which help the reader make judgements about the trustworthiness of the data (Arai et al, 2005; Popay et al 1998).

Additional references:

Popay, J. Rogers, A. Williams, G. (1998), Rationale and Standards for the Systematic Review of Qualitative Literature in Health Services Research. Qualitative Health Research, 8,3, 341-351

The discussion should discuss the possible effect of author PL being involved in each method – together with any observations on sequencing and “contamination” issues e.g. was it only possible for PL to do these in one particular order because of contamination. Did this prior knowledge impact on the quality of the second synthesis whichever that may have been.
In response to Ann McKibbon above and to Andrew Booth, we have added the following:

Strengths and limitations of our study

While the data extraction and thematic synthesis was undertaken by two researchers working independently, only one of these researchers (employed to work on the qualitative aspect of the review) worked on the narrative synthesis with a second researcher discussing the work as it progressed. Whether the findings might be different with more than one researcher working on both syntheses, or researchers not involved in the data extraction doing the syntheses, or the syntheses being carried out in a different order, are themselves research-able (if rather expensive) questions, as is the issue of whether the immersion of one researcher in the data at every stage a strength (as we believe it to be) or a source of bias.

References should be supplied for the methodology of both types of synthesis when they are being described to ensure us that the two methods are being demonstrated in their "agreed" form.

In a developing area, as this is, where there is a good deal of testing out of different approaches, we do not feel that there are ‘agreed’ methods, although we do, of course, reference the work of the main protagonists in our background section.

More reference should be made about the controversy regarding critical appraisal - including some available references e.g. Dixon-Woods, Barbour etcetera.

We now add the following on p. 4:

There is vigorous debate on whether qualitative research can be assessed using standard quality criteria, or whether this process is contrary to the nature of qualitative enquiry (Dixon Woods et al, 2006). While the controversy on the use of critical appraisal in systematic reviews including qualitative data lies beyond the scope of this article, with views ranging from those who believe that critical appraisal is core to qualitative synthesis (Attree and Milton 2006) to those who, like Barbour (2006) consider that critical appraisal of qualitative research can be reductionist, it is notable that there is general agreement that a checklist approach to critical appraisal can bring its own problems, particularly in relation to transparency in assessing interpretative work. We took the view that applying quality criteria rigidly would be likely to exclude relevant studies that had failed to comply with a particular reporting regime. Thus, all studies meeting our inclusion criteria listed were included and quality appraisal was used at the data synthesis stage.

and have added the following references:


Basically quality assessment is only required if it is either to include/exclude studies or as in this case to mediate the strength of the findings. As mentioned in comments above re; contamination there should be an extra paragraph headed "Limitations of this study"

We have added a section on strengths and limitations of the study described above (as well as the sections we already have on strengths and limitations of each method of synthesis on p. 9. It reads as follows. (We have used the word bias in preference to contamination)

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Reviewer’s report
Rosaline Barbour Reviewer:
Reviewer’s report:
General
This was a very well-written paper, which makes a significant contribution to an important ongoing debate. The examples used are highly relevant and help to develop the points made. The authors are also to be commended on the attention they have paid to enumerating the limitations of their work and the implications for future debate.

We thank Professor Barbour for her review