Author's response to reviews

Title: Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews

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Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews: responses to reviewers’ comments

We would like to thank our two reviewers for taking the time to read our paper and for their helpful comments.

**Reviewer: Myfanwy Lloyd Jones**

**Minor Essential Revisions**

1) On page 7, you imply that meta-ethnographies inevitably take the form of a 'line of argument'. Noblit and Hare also recognised that meta-ethnographies could be reciprocal (if the findings of the synthesised studies were similar) or refutational (if they were contradictory); they did not have to be arranged into a line of argument.

The paragraph in question has been changed to read,

> Explanations or theories associated with these concepts are also extracted and a 'line of argument' may be developed, pulling corroborating concepts together and, crucially, going beyond the content of the original studies (though 'refutational' concepts might not be amenable to this process).

**Discretionary Revisions**

1) On page 7: The earliest published work that I am aware of which deals with methods for synthesising qualitative research is Glaser and Strauss's description of 'grounded formal theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967). However, you may have had some reason for excluding this as not being the sort of synthesis you had in mind.

We are familiar with Glaser and Strauss’s earlier work, but feel it discusses the possibility of synthesis, rather than describing methods that one might use ‘out of the book’ for use in a systematic review.

**Reviewer: Mark Rodgers**

1) At several points, the authors mention meta-ethnography and specifically reference Nicky Britten and Rona Campbell’s applications of the method, briefly discussing the process of constructing 2nd and 3rd order interpretations. At least superficially, these “interpretations” appear analogous to the “descriptive” and “analytical” themes presented in the paper, so it may benefit the reader for the distinction between meta-ethnography more broadly and ‘thematic analysis’ as presented here to be made explicit.

The following has been added to the conclusions (where ‘going beyond’ primary studies is discussed):
Conceptually, our analytical themes are similar to the ultimate product of meta-ethnographies: third order interpretations [11], since both are explicit mechanisms for going beyond the content of the primary studies and presenting this in a transparent way. The main difference between them lies in their purposes. Third order interpretations bring together the implications of translating studies into one another in their own terms, whereas analytical themes are the result of interrogating a descriptive synthesis by placing it within an external theoretical framework (our review question and sub-questions). It may be, therefore, that analytical themes are more appropriate when a specific review question is being addressed (as often occurs when informing policy and practice), and third order interpretations should be used when a body of literature is being explored in and of itself, with broader, or emergent, review questions.

2) p.10, end of first paragraph, it says studies were excluded if they had “significant flaws”, whereas p.19, end of 2nd paragraph it says all studies were included “regardless of their quality”. This requires brief clarification.

The paragraph on page 10 has been amended to read:

However, since there is little empirical evidence on which to base decisions for excluding studies based on quality assessment, we took the approach in this review to use ‘sensitivity analyses’ (described below) to assess the possible impact of study quality on the review’s findings.

(In our example review we did not find studies that were so flawed we felt it inappropriate to use them, but that has not always been the case.)

3) p.12, final sentence: This appears to be the only occurrence of the phrase “inductive analysis”, which may be unfamiliar to some readers.

The word ‘inductive’ has been replaced with ‘thematic’.

4) The results section starts with the findings of the review of intervention studies, rather than the thematic analysis. As the authors explain, the two sets of findings were subsequently linked, but the paper would flow more easily it the issues that emerged from the thematic analysis were presented first.

This section has been rearranged so that the sequence follows the suggestion from the reviewer: the results of the thematic synthesis are presented, followed by those of the intervention studies (the effectiveness synthesis) and then the combined findings.

5) p.21, bottom sentence: should read “…it may not be necessary…”

This has been corrected.