Author's response to reviews

Title: Methods for the synthesis of qualitative research: a critical review

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Response to peer review comments

**MS: 1933772401259986. Methods for the synthesis of qualitative research: a critical review. Elaine Barnett-Page and James Thomas**

We would like to thank the three reviewers for taking the time to read our paper and for their helpful comments. We detail below the changes we have made in response (their comments are in *italics* with our changes in normal text.

**Reviewer: Helen J Smith**

Major compulsory revisions:

1. “**Background:** while it is important for this paper to outline the major types of synthesis available, this section could be more concise. Other papers (Dixon-Woods et al Journal of Health Services Research & Policy Vol 10 No 1, 2005: 45–53; Mays et al Journal of Health Services Research & Policy Vol 10 Suppl 1, 2005: 6–20) have provided in depth summaries of synthesis methods and it may be appropriate to refer to these rather than replicate. The originality and contribution of this manuscript is the comparison of the methods by various dimensions, and in a way the authors could cut to the chase.”

   We have struggled with the opening section too, so understand these comments. The problem we have is that, while some of the methods are in Mary Dixon-Woods’s paper, not all of them are, and the perspective of her paper was methods for combining qualitative and quantitative research, so her emphasis is different. We therefore think that we need to outline the methods in question in order for those readers who have not come across them before to make sense of the analysis in the second part of the paper. To aid readability (and in response to Mark Rogers’s feedback) we have taken out some of the jargon that made the section a little hard to follow and have clarified the structure of the paper in the introduction. This signpost is intended to invite readers who are familiar with the methods in question to move directly to the analysis.

   While we already located this work within that carried out by Dixon-Woods and Mays and Pope, we now also include the further references that the peer reviewer suggests.

2. “**Figure 1:** the first table needs a sub-heading ‘epistemology’ to make it clearer.”

   The heading has been added.

   “**Is there a continuum for the dimension ‘types of question designed to answer’? i.e from theory generating through to policy relevant questions.**”

   No, we do not see this as a continuum in the same way as, for example, we do for epistemology, though the two are related.
“The homogeneity/heterogeneity table needs some more explanation in the text.”

We have added a sentence at the beginning of the section ‘Similarities and differences between primary studies’ explaining what we mean by heterogeneity/homogeneity and have amended the title of the table in Figure 1.

“In fact it would be helpful if figure 1 reflected more closely the text in the discussion - can the discussions around problematizing the literature, going beyond the primary studies and the synthetic product be depicted and summarised in figure 1 somehow? i.e the product appears to have a continuum from practical policy or practice recommendations through to contribution to theory.”

We have tabulated the main points on problematising the literature, going beyond the primary studies and the synthetic product and added this to Figure 1. We do not see a clear continuum in terms of synthetic product - more of a dichotomy - as reflected in the revised table.

3. “In the paragraph on problematizing the literature I do not think the author’s statement that meta-ethnographies tend to include only ethnographies is strictly true. I am inclined to agree with Britten et al that meta-ethnography can be, and is, applied to studies that are not ethnographies and can even deal with diverse types of evidence.”

We take the point that those later incarnations of meta-ethnography (e.g. as applied by Britten et al) do include a more diverse range of study methods. We have amended the text under ‘Problematising the literature’ to say that only earlier meta-ethnographies (ie by Noblit and Hare) included only ethnographies.

4. “It isn’t clear how the authors selected the examples used in figure 1 – for example the second table summarises types of questions each approach tackles – the examples used to populate the table are illustrative not exhaustive, and need to be referenced. There are more examples of meta-ethnographies than those listed, similarly there are other examples of thematic synthesis than the one listed.”

The title of the table in Figure 1 on ‘the question the methods were originally designed to answer’ has been amended to make clear how we selected the questions (they were the questions addressed by the reviews that the methods were originally developed to answer) and stating that they are illustrative not exhaustive. References have been included.

5. “Summary: the statement about selecting a method that produces the kind of conclusions needed doesn’t acknowledge the fact that many systematic reviews are question- and available evidence-driven and that conclusions are
sometimes not apparent a priori. Broad questions posed by policy makers often must be refined into feasible review questions- which then helps identify the type of studies required and subsequently the synthesis method used.”

The summary has been amended so that it is less simplistic and acknowledges this point.

Reviewer: Rosaline Barbour

Discretionary Revisions:

“One minor point was that I was slightly puzzled as to why Ritchie and Spencer’s earlier chapter published in 1994 in Analyzing Qualitative Data (eds.) Alan Bryman & Robert G. Burgess (and the original formulation of ‘framework analysis - admittedly before it became thus labelled) is not included. Another reference which might be helpful in terms of raising some f the issues that surround the identification of qualitative papers for review and synthesis is Barbour, R.S. & Barbour, M. (2003) valuating and synthesizing qualitative research: the need to develop a distinctive aproach, Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice, 9(2): 179-186.”

A reference to Ritchie and Spencer’s chapter in Bryman and Burgess has been inserted in the description of the development of Framework synthesis.

A reference to Barbour and Barbour’s paper has been inserted in the ‘Background’.

Reviewer: Mark Rodgers

“However, the article as a whole would benefit if the preceding section (“Overview of synthesis methods”) was to some extent simplified. Though the article is clearly intended for an audience with some qualitative research/synthesis knowledge, introducing terminology such as “middle-range theories” (p.3), “hypothetico-deductive” approaches (p.3), plus some of the more abstract descriptive sections occasionally made this introductory material a little hard to follow. This is not the always the case though - paragraph 3 under “meta-narrative” provides a fairly concise and readable summary of a complex approach. The section might benefit from simply summarising the authors’ rationale for developing each method (as done for CIS, p.6), followed by a straightforward description of the procedures and processes involved. The more difficult conceptual and epistemological ideas are already largely covered in the analysis section of the article, but this could be expanded if necessary.”

We take the point that this section may be a little difficult to read through and may not have used appropriate language for its intended readership. We have now checked the section to take out any unnecessary jargon and more abstract text, including the examples given. We do feel that a certain level of detail is necessary, however, to give a comprehensive description of each method – and in some cases, how they have continued to develop. (This section has also changed in response to the first reviewer’s comments.)
Minor issues:

“p.3: The heading “Discussion” is used twice, both here and on p.8”

The second ‘Discussion’ has been removed and replaced with a different heading.

“p.3, bottom line: “hypethetico” typo”

‘Hypothetico’ has been removed.

“p8, para 2, 1st line: delete “of””

P8. The misplaced ‘of’ has been deleted.

“p.9, para 3, 1st line: insert “formal” before “grounded theory”?”

‘Formal’ in conjunction with ‘grounded theory’ is a term used exclusively by Kearney and it doesn’t seem to be used by anyone else using this method.

“p10, para 2: “different ways of knowing of different researchers” is ambiguous, perhaps rephrase”

We have rephrased this to read “contrasting epistemologies” instead.