Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 21 May 2009

Reviewer: Helen J Smith

Reviewer's report:

General comments
This is an interesting discussion paper that brings some clarity to debate about the comparative merits of the various options available for synthesising qualitative research. It will serve as a good reference point for those navigating the methods for the first time, those embarking on qualitative synthesis wanting guidance on appropriate methods for specific questions and those commissioning reviews.

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.

2. Figure 1: the first table needs a sub-heading 'epistemology' to make it clearer. Is there a continuum for the dimension ‘types of question designed to answer’? I.e from theory generating through to policy relevant questions. The homogeneity/heterogeneity table needs some more explanation in the text.

   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.

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.

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.

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.

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

**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 I have no competing interests