Reviewer's report

Title: Quality assurance of qualitative research: a review of the discourse

Version: 1 Date: 24 October 2011

Reviewer: Henry Potts

Reviewer's report:

I much enjoyed reading this paper. It does not shy away from a complex method and it concludes with a valuable proposal for how to move the field forward. I only have a couple of “major compulsory revisions” and, despite the length of my comments below, I don’t think they should be difficult to address and don’t expect a revised draft would be radically different to its current state.

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached):

1) The meta-narrative review method is new and still evolving, so my comments here are in that context. They are suggestions for further thought rather than saying the authors did something the “right” way or the “wrong” way. Meta-narrative reviewing is perhaps still too young to have a clear “right” or “wrong” way, although work is afoot on that front, which the authors may find useful (see Greenhalgh T, Wong G et al., “Protocol - realist and meta-narrative evidence synthesis: Evolving Standards (RAMESES)” BMC Medical Research Methodology 2011, 11:115).

Let’s start at the end. On p. 19, paragraph 1, the authors say: “Further consideration should be taken as to how best to encourage wider search parameters, familiarisation with different sources of literature and greater acceptance of ‘non-traditional’ disciplinary perspectives within health and medical literature reviews.” I think the authors, in this regard, may not as fully embraced a meta-narrative approach as they could have. Precisely for these sorts of reasons, the search strategy and inclusion/exclusion criteria of a meta-narrative review should be seen as things that iteratively develop so as to achieve those aims. This might be seen to be in contrast to a ‘traditional’, Cochrane-style systematic review, although some would suggest that similar behaviour occurs there, even if only implicitly.

Authors of a meta-narrative review should not feel constrained by their own earlier decisions, as appears to be the case on p. 17, final para., where the authors seem to lament that their own inclusion criteria led them to miss a substantial anthropological literature. If there was a clear, relevant literature that was being omitted, then the researchers could have (iteratively) adapted their selection criteria. That said, meta-narrative reviewing is a pragmatic approach and all reviews have to make decisions as to where to stop. There is nothing wrong with the review as it is, which acknowledges where a line was drawn and
the implications of that, but I think some more reflection over that choice is possible.

Consider also on p. 5, para. 2, where the authors discuss their search strategy. Generally, given that different research traditions may use different vocabularies and publish in different places, it is even more important in a meta-narrative review than a ‘traditional’ systematic review not to rely on search terms and to take an iterative approach to the literature search, including the use of forwards and backwards citation searching. Thus, I would like to see some expansion of detail around the sentence: “Finally, additional literature such as books or book chapters were identified from the reference lists of relevant papers.” (A good reference here is: Greenhalgh, T, Peacock, R (2005). “Effectiveness and efficiency of search methods in systematic reviews of complex evidence: audit of primary sources.” BMJ vol. 331, (7524) 1064-1065. 10.1136/bmj.38636.593461.68)

So, in retrospect, I think the review could have chosen a different path and brought in the anthropological literature, but I also think that the review as it is, choosing to work within certain criteria, does what it set out to do well. Thus, were the authors to expand on the choices taken – and perhaps see these as choices rather than the inevitable result of pre-set rules – I think such an act of self-reflexivity would be valuable.

2) As I was reading the review, I wondered whether the very language of “quality” and “quality assurance”, driven by positivist EBM, unnecessarily narrowed the scope of the review. That is, I am sure many authors, often outside healthcare and before the earliest paper in this review (1994), had considered the issue of how to do good qualitative research rather than bad qualitative research, but did not use a “quality” or “quality assurance” language/approach. And while Narrative 1 looks like a response to EBM, it seems possible that Narrative 2 reflects prior traditions of what constitutes good qualitative research.

And then the authors, on p. 17, para. 3, said something similar. So, in suggesting above a bit more reflection on the implications of the selection criteria and search strategy for what was included in the review, I think there is also room for an expansion of this point. How does the “quality assurance” literature on qualitative methods relate to an older literature on how to do qualitative research well that does not use terms like “quality assurance” or positivist/EBM language?

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

3) I believe most style guides would favour “among” over “amongst”, and “while” over “whilst”.

4) Purely as a stylistic point, perhaps some of the references to “the authors” and indeed “they” could be replaced with a simpler “we”.

5) p. 6, Review Methodology: “A process of evaluating papers according to predefined categories and frequency of citations, as in systematic reviewing, was
not considered suitable or feasible to achieve the objectives.” The matter is perhaps still up for debate, but we would like to argue that a meta-narrative review is still a type of systematic review. Perhaps the phrase “as in systematic reviewing” could be changed to “as in traditional systematic reviewing”.

6) p. 8, final para.: “For the remainder of the publications, the authors assume that they emerged from a postpositivist approach because of the way they distinguished qualitative research from the positivist epistemology of quantitative research.” Could you expand on this assumption?

7) p. 11, Narrative 2: Assuring quality of process: “The second narrative dentified was less prominent than the first” should, of course, be: “The second narrative identified was less prominent than the first”.

8) p. 14, para. 2: “One paper synthesised other literature and described abstract principles of qualitative research that indicate quality [21]” I’m guessing that citation should be to [26] or [27].

Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

9) p. 12: Narrative 2 critiques Narrative 1. Is there anything in Narrative 1 that might constitute a rebuttal to Narrative 2’s criticisms?

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

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 that I have no competing interests