Reviewer’s report

Title: A mega-ethnography of eleven qualitative evidence syntheses exploring the experience of living with chronic non-malignant pain

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Reviewer: Nicky Britten

Reviewer's report:

This is an ambitious piece of work aiming to raise the practice of meta-ethnography to a higher level, by conducting a synthesis of syntheses, hence the new label of 'mega-ethnography'. I have not seen this term used before. The authors state that they have 2 aims in doing so: firstly to 'pull together the findings' of 11 existing syntheses about the experience of living with chronic pain thereby furthering conceptual understanding of the issues and secondly to see if the methods of meta-ethnography can be used to synthesise qualitative systematic reviews. In other words, one aim is substantive and the other is methodological. This is a very reasonable approach but the first aim suggests that the authors think the existing reviews are in some ways conceptually inadequate: why do they need to be 'pulled together' and what is the gap in the literature that the authors intend to address? The authors do not say very much about this and I think they should.

I have several points to make about this paper in no particular order:

1) In synthesising a number of reviews on the same topic, the authors do not consider the possibility of duplication of included papers or studies. I would have thought it likely that some of these reviews had included the same papers. Presumably the total number of more than 6000 participants (line 14 page 9 - I have had to number the pages myself starting with the journal cover page) involves a certain amount of double counting. I suggest that it would be more accurate if the authors estimated the number of unique participants in their synthesis.

2) In conducting their synthesis, the authors identified 78 'ideas' (page 9) in the 11 reviews although they do not define what they mean by an 'idea' (page 7). I am not clear why they did not begin by identifying the products of the 11 syntheses, and using these synthesis products as the building blocks of their synthesis. I have not had the time to read these 11 syntheses, but as a reader of the mega-ethnography I would like to know if they produced new lines of argument, new concepts or models, or any other kind of synthesis product. On page 8 the authors state that the 'data of mega-ethnography are third order constructs' but they should also include synthesis products as part of their primary data.
3) Having identified the synthesis products, I would want to know, in the same way as Noblit and Hare suggest that primary studies can relate to one another in different ways (reciprocal, refutational or line of argument), how the syntheses relate to one another. In stage 4 on pages 7-8 the authors talk about identifying fourth order constructs but not how the synthesis products are related to one another. For example, can the syntheses (and not just the constructs) be translated into one another or not? By extracting 'ideas' from each synthesis, the authors seem to have treated the syntheses as if they were primary studies, and conducted a thematic analysis of the 'ideas'. If the syntheses they included only produced lists of themes or constructs, one could ask whether they did in fact produce anything new, and if not, whether they should have been excluded from the mega-ethnography.

4) The conceptual categories described in the findings section are all written in the first person. In other words these fourth order constructs (as the authors refer to them on page 15) are all represented as if they were first order constructs. Did the authors of all 11 syntheses present their findings in this way? I find this somewhat misleading as it suggests that the first person statements are direct quotations, when I presume they are not. If they are direct quotations then the sources should be given. Apart from that, I wonder if presenting the fourth order constructs in this way limits their scope by removing the possibility of supra-individual concepts or explanations (for example, different experiences of pain associated with different settings or different health conditions). The presentation of the findings of the mega-ethnography on pages 10-12 as a list of concepts (although at this stage I am not sure if the authors are presenting these as third order or fourth order concepts) adds to the impression that this is the outcome of a thematic analysis rather than a mega-ethnography.

5) Picking up my earlier point about the relationship of the syntheses to one another, there is no consideration of the cumulation of findings over time, how the syntheses do or do not cite or refute each other, or of other authors who have attempted to conduct a synthesis of syntheses (for example Frost, Garside, Cooper and Britten 2016, to give an example from my own work).

6) The synthesis product of the mega-ethnography is an 'explanatory framework' produced by 'pulling together' the conceptual categories presented earlier, presented on page 13 and in figure 3 (but referred to as '7 conceptual categories' rather than an explanatory framework in the abstract). As it is once again written in the first person, I am not sure that it functions as an explanatory framework. What is it explaining? This comes back to my earlier point about the aim of this work: what does this add to the previous 11 syntheses, and in particular what does it add to the previous synthesis products? Personally, I would prefer the authors to adopt a fourth order authorial voice instead of the somewhat misleading first person voice at this stage. This could help to differentiate what is proposed as an explanatory framework from something that reads like a description. If the main conceptual innovation claimed for
the mega-ethnography is the concept of a diagnostic holy grail, this needs much more justification in the Findings section.

I had a number of more minor points:

i) On page 5, I think that Noblit and Hare's (1988, p18) main distinction was between aggregative and interpretive syntheses rather than between descriptive and interpretive syntheses.

ii) On page 6, I wondered if adding the term Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) which is preferred by the Cochrane Qualitative and Implementation Methods group, would have made a difference to the outcome of the searches.

iii) In the tables, first referred to on page 9, I think that Table 1 should also include the nature of the synthesis products (as should Appendix 2). For the sake of completeness, table 2 should include something about confidence in conceptual model produced by the mega-ethnography, although I am not sure if the authors would use the same criteria for the model as for the individual findings.

iv) On page 9 line 42, are the authors using the term 'exemplary' to mean 'worthy of imitation' or do they simply mean that all reviews provided examples to support their concepts? It seems unlikely that all 11 reviews were exemplary in the former sense.

v) On page 14 line 29, do the authors mean 'imply' rather than 'infer'?

vi) In figure 1, it would be helpful to make explicit whose interpretations are being referred to, in other words authors' interpretations in second order constructs, synthesisers' interpretations in third order constructs, and the interpretations of synthesisers of syntheses in fourth order constructs.

Reference


Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No
Does the work include the necessary controls?
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Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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No

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