Author’s response to reviews

Title: A methodological systematic review of meta-ethnography conduct to articulate the complex analytical phases

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Author’s response to reviews:

We would like to thank the reviewers for their thorough, helpful and positive reviews. Below we have described how we have responded to the issues they raised.

Reviewer reports:

Peggy A Shannon-Baker (Reviewer 1): Overall this is an interesting article that provides some important findings on the application of meta-ethnography. Most of the feedback I have relates to how the authors present their study and findings which at times made it difficult to follow and assess the goal of the article.

1. The flow of topics in the background do not follow a sequence that I am familiar with reading. Here is a reverse outline of the topics by paragraph I see when reading the background: increase in use of meta-ethnography (ME) in health sciences research, original purpose for ME, phases of ME, importance of translation to ME, how ME generates theory, historical development to contemporary use of ME, problems with the increased/recent use of ME, stages of the study, and aim of the article. Since the focus of the article is on phases 4-6, these phases deserve more
introduction. To make space for this addition, I recommend limiting the discussion on the increase in use of ME in health sciences to a single paragraph, and minimize historical discussions (except for points that relate directly to issues you now see).

Our response: we have revised the background and hopefully it flows better for the reader. It now focuses less on qualitative evidence synthesis more generally and more on meta-ethnography specifically, we have combined and condensed the material on the increase in use of meta-ethnography in health sciences and we only raise historical points which are relevant to the purpose of our article. We have moved descriptions of phases 4 to 6 from the findings to the background in order to give greater detail on these phases at the outset.

2. I recommend including information on the total number of publications found before identifying if they meet inclusion/exclusion criteria. This will help to interpret how the authors then analyzed 57. (This information is mentioned in the Findings section, but I would argue that the findings should focus on the 57 reviewed, not the total population of publications retrieved. There is also a figure that seems to correspond to this but this is not mentioned until the findings section.)

Our response: Thank you for this suggestion, however we are reporting the results of the search and screening within the Findings section, in accordance with PRISMA checklist for reporting systematic reviews (PRISMA item 17).

To improve readability however, we have created a separate headings within the findings section to distinguish the ‘literature search results’ from the ‘characteristics of included studies’. See pages 11 and 12. We also we agree with the reviewer’s comment that some of the text previously reported in the findings also included description of screening methods (e.g. number of reviewers involved in screening stage). Therefore, we have moved this back to the methods.

3. More information and consistent information on the coding procedures would be helpful. Why were only 13 publications checked by the second reviewer (cf. data coding section)? How were these selected? What were the procedures for addressing inter-coder reliability? The study characteristics section states that some articles were only screened by one person but a second person was added during the analysis phase (for some or all)? How much detail is "a detailed account with in-depth explanation and rationale"? Some examples of such detail presented in a table would be helpful.

Our response: we have provided additional information to explain selection of the 13 publications that were checked by a 2nd reviewer -these were rich and/or seminal texts. As this was a qualitative review in which transparency of approach and completeness of coding are the key principles rather than inter-coder reliability which is more suited to quantitative coding we did not adopt inter-rater coding statistics, instead we used the common coding guidance and the checking of how this was applied in 13 publications.
Screening of retrieved references and coding/analysis of included publications are separate activities. We have added further detail on the screening procedures on page 12.

We have created an additional file containing a table (table 5) which gives some examples of ‘rich’ and ‘not rich’ data from review publications. The richest examples tended to contain very large amounts of material not all of which can be reproduced in at table.

4. How is the data coding section different from the data analysis? These seem like they should be the same section to me.

Our response: we have now combined these two sections into a single section as the activities are related.

5. The data analysis section provides further information on the inclusion criteria that seems like it would be relevant earlier when inclusion criteria for the study were initially introduced.

Our response: further classification of the publications that were included in the review came after screening and was part of analysis – the list of classifications was not used as inclusion/exclusion criteria per se.

6. There were a lot of external inputs/feedback collected on the study. This is a great component. I am very curious to know what if any changes, questions, and/or unique findings came from this input. This could either be summarized when the external reviews are introduced or mentioned with the relevant finding later.

Our response: Where there was a clear link or influence between our collaborative discussions with stakeholders this is no indicated in the findings. The discussions did not always have a direct or discernible impact on our findings e.g. on pages 19, 20 and 31.

7. Since the goal of the article is to discuss phases 4-6 of meta-ethnographies, it seems that the findings presented should only focus on these phases. Instead the authors present findings relevant/related to all phases. Focus only on the findings relevant to the goal of this article.

Our response: we have now removed the findings related to phases 1 to 3.

8. What does a "worked example" mean?

Our response: This is first defined on page 14 – ‘A meta-ethnography with methodological detail on the application of methods (referred to as ‘worked examples’)’
9. It would be helpful to see some examples of descriptive writing versus "rich descriptions," especially if the authors can share examples of these from the 57 they reviewed. Since this was part of the analysis process, providing such examples would help add to the credibility of their claims that they did not find many rich description examples.

Our response: we have created an additional supplementary table (new table 4) with examples. The rich publications have too much material to put all of it in a table so only brief excerpts could be shared. In addition, in the manuscript we describe our judgements of why/how publications were not rich on page 17 e.g. ‘Those not contributing rich data usually provided only a sentence or two on conduct of Phases 4 to 6, often citing or paraphrasing Noblit and Hare (9) (e.g. (38-43), gave a brief one to two paragraph summary of conduct (e.g. (44)) and/or they focused more on reporting of meta-ethnography (e.g. (20, 45))’.

10. I recommend adding a summative discussion of the case examples presented. What similarities, differences, and inferences do the authors draw from presenting these specific case studies?

Our response: we have made some edits throughout the case studies to draw out the differences between them more clearly and included a short summative discussion on page 43-44.

11. The discussion section reads more like a conclusion section in that it summarizes the analytical findings presented in the previous major section. A discussion section is where authors should draw implications for their findings, not restate the inferences identified. This could also be where authors provide guidance for practice in future studies. Revising the framing of the paragraphs and points in the discussion section could help make this distinction.

Our response: As is fairly common practice in discussion, we restated our key findings at the start of the introduction and then tried to compare to the existing literature. Because this is new ground, there was not much in the way of literature we could situate our findings against that wasn’t already in the review.

The findings section was a mix of findings and discussion as is common in qualitative research. This was an non-standard format being a methodological paper. We have cut out some repetition of findings and tried to make implications of our findings clearer and give additional further research suggestions.

12. A smaller issue: the methods identify that articles were selected with publications dates up to March 2016 but the abstract identifies the cutoff as both 2015 and 2016.

Our response: Both the abstract and search methods now clarify that the cut-off point for inclusion into the review was March 2016 (page 3 & 11). The methods section now clarifies that the bibliographic database searches were performed up to August 2015, and the expansive searches to capture any new studies were performed up to March 2016.
Katy Sutcliffe, PhD (Reviewer 2): Overview / strengths This work appears to have been a huge undertaking and is most certainly an important endeavour that will take the field of meta-ethnography forward. By and large the paper is clearly written and well presented. However, I think that some work to refine and make clear the focus of this paper as well as to distil and communicate key findings would be of huge value.

Key suggestions for revision

13. I found the abstract confusing in terms of what the aims and purposes of this paper are. In the abstract you report the aim as 'to provide up-to-date, in-depth guidance on conducting the analytic synthesis phases 4 to 6 of meta-ethnography', in the methods you describe a systematic review to inform the development of 'reporting guidance' and in the findings/conclusion you describe what others have done e.g. 'articulate and differentiate the methodological variations and their application for different purposes'. So I was left unclear about whether this paper is about providing guidance for conduct, providing guidance for reporting, or describing methodological variation in existing meta-ethnographies? I think the confusion comes from the fact that this paper is drawn from a much larger project - however I think the detail of the larger project would be better left until the main body of the article where you can explain it properly.

The aim specified in the background is clearer to me in that it explains that you will provide guidance that is based on a review of existing approaches. 'The aim of this article is to give guidance on the conduct of the complex analytical stages of meta-ethnography through analysis of the latest methodological evidence identified from publications included in our Stage 1 systematic review.'

I would suggest that the abstract is edited to add the more comprehensive account of aims as stated above (although removing reference to stage 1) - and to remove the first sentence in the methods section 'We report findings from a methodological systematic review conducted to inform development of the first meta-ethnography reporting guidance' - thus beginning the methods with 'Fifteen databases …'

Our response: we have edited the abstract as suggested and also amended minor errors. We have removed some details of the wider project to avoid confusion.

14. A firmer conception of what this paper is intending to do would help with presentation of the findings. The significant work of assembling details on the variation in understanding and application of meta-ethnography across numerous guidance documents is really valuable, however I found it slightly challenging to determine what your key findings were. The key thing that would lift this paper is to distil some of your learning more. I think a much more distilled account of the differences between approaches, perhaps some kind of table or diagram, and a summary or list of guidance based on your insights would be of huge value to researchers trying to understand or use the approach.
Our response: We intended to describe the range of approaches used as well as to compare them. We have edited the findings to include an orientation of key findings at the start of the analysis section (page 18), have cut out some of the non-essential points, We have more clearly indicated where the approaches we’ve presented depart from Noblit and Hare’s 1988 methodology.

Specific / Minor points

15. P5 - line 44 - 'Geertz's concept of 'thick description'' and Turner's theory of sociological understanding as 'translation' both need references

Our response: amended to include references (page 5).

16. P5 - line 51 - 'It has seven iterative and overlapping phases.' - need to cite Noblit and Hare here - it's not clear that the 7 phases come from their work

Our response: amended to cite Noblit & Hare 1988 (page 5).

17. P7 - line ADD - 'Recent health-related meta-ethnographies tend to have applied a positivist quantitative systematic review approach …' I'm not sure 'positivist quantitative' is relevant/accurate/necessary to say - perhaps take this phrase out and leave it at 'a systematic review approach'. Comprehensive searching is less important for systematic reviews that do not focus on effectiveness - but it can still be helpful.

Our response: 'positivist quantitative' removed.

Methods

18. P9 - line 55 - what are 'expansive searchers' needs either an explanation or a reference

Our response: We’ve amended the searching methods text, so that our database searches are described first, followed by the expansive techniques. This has enabled us to list the techniques involved next to our ‘expansive searching’ phrase by way of explanation (page 11).

19. P11 - this doesn't quite make sense - 'Seven reviewers screened retrieved publications, using the inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 2. Disagreements were resolved through discussion or by a third reviewer.' Seven reviewers … by a third reviewer? - do you need to say each item was independently screened by two reviewers?

Our response: amended- we’ve revised this section to remove reference to 7 reviewers on page 12.
20. P11 - Lots of 'error reference source not found' messages - first one at bottom of p11.

Our response: This appears to be an artefact of the pdf production process as it does not appear in the Word version.

21. Table 2 - Logic in order of inclusion criteria? May not have been applied in this way for pragmatic reasons - but easier for reader to understand if the key concept is listed first = i.e. it has to be a methods paper on meta-ethnography - which is also has to be …

Our response: amended as suggested.

22. Table 2 - something wrong with numbering re top cell in right hand column.

Our response: amended numbering.

23. Table 2 - There are some superscript characters in the inclusion criteria table - indicating some foot notes - but I can't see the footnotes

Our response- I have changed the superscript characters to be the same as they relate to the same endnote, rather than footnote, which is :

‘Methodological issues’ included all aspects of the meta-ethnography approach including: the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings; research design and the research practices and procedures including conveying findings and developing theory; also included, providing advice on initially choosing meta-ethnography as suitable for one’s research aim, defining the characteristics of a meta-ethnography, comparing qualitative synthesis methodologies including meta-ethnography as one of those compared, and/or describing in detail any other methodological aspect of meta-ethnography.’

24. P14 - lines 51- 53 -I think I understand what you mean but could be clearer. For the first bullet 'Meta-ethnography with methodological detail on the application of methods' adding something like for the whole process' would help make the second bullet clearer. The 'worked example' in brackets is helpful. For the second bullet I don't understand why it says 'other' simply saying 'Methodological text exploring particular aspects of meta-ethnography' still makes sense? An example of a 'particular aspect' in brackets would help.

Our response: We have edited the text to be clearer that the ‘other methodological texts’ were those which were not examples of actual meta-ethnographies (unlike bullet no 1 which refers to actual meta-ethnographies with a focus on the details of the methods used) and to give an example of a particular aspect the other methodological texts looked at.
25. P16 - line 24 - 27 - 'We describe the characteristics of included publications then briefly summarise findings for Phases 1 to 3, before focusing in detail on Phases 4 to 6.' It would be helpful to reiterate the point that stages 4-6 are the most complex aspects of meta-ethnography and that they are often poorly reported. (I'd forgotten your rationale by the time I'd got here).
Our response: amended – see page 16.

Findings

26. P16 - lines 40-42 - '6,271 of them, published from 2006 to 2015, were independently double screened. Due to time and resource restraints, one reviewer screened references published before 2006. References prior to 2006 were known to the project team and its expert advisors, or were identified through expansive searches.' This should be in methods section. And a clearer explanation of why a different approach was used to identify these earlier studies is needed.
Our response: we’ve revised this section to be clearer e.g. ‘Based on our familiarity with the literature, we were confident that references prior to 2006 were known to the project team and its expert advisors already, or they would be identified through expansive searches.’

27. Is the information about numbers reported in the full systematic review report? If so here I think saying the number of title and abstracts screened, the number of full reports screened, and the number of included studies would be sufficient.
Our response: We have followed PRISMA guidance in our reporting.

28. P16 - could you explain the relevance of table 4 for this paper? Or consider removing if it is not relevant to the paper?
Our response: We have removed table 4 of which included texts cite one another since it is not related to a key finding of our analysis.

29. P17 - table 3 seems to come after table 4? Also typo in description table 3 'table3'
Our response: the original table 4 is now removed

30. P.26 - line 27 - typo – We identified
Our response: amended

31. Worked examples - I found these made the paper extremely long - and as they are of worked examples in and of themselves - perhaps just pointing readers to examples of the things that they
do well would suffice? Maybe a table illustrating how these examples varied on different dimensions? However, I would advise against including these long descriptive accounts.

Our response: The recommendation to remove these cases is in contrast to Reviewer 1 who suggested we expand the cases to include a summative comparison. The cases were included to illustrate the relationships between conduct of phases 4 to 6 - since conduct of one phase affects conduct of the next phase - for each case in order to complement the more thematic summary presented in the main findings section. We had included 4 separate figures describing the key processes in each of the case studies - we have now combined these into a single table to help highlight the differences and similarities between the 4 cases.

32. I would also suggest better signposting for the sections - and use of different heading levels - it was difficult to follow the structure sometimes.

Our response: There is no standard structure for presenting the findings of a methodological review such as this. We had initially included many signposting sentences before submitting our prior version but these adversely affected flow and so we removed them. The paper should now be easier to follow now we have reduced its length.

We’ve reformatted the headings to indicate the different levels more clearly – these will be reformatted in BMC house style at proof stage.