Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Katy Sutcliffe

Reviewer’s report:

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

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 …'

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.

Specific / Minor points

- Abstract
  
  o See comments above.

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

- Methods
  
  o P9 - line 55 - what are 'expansive searchers' needs either an explanation or a reference
  
  o 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?
  
  o P11 - Lots of 'error reference source not found' messages - first one at bottom of p11.
  
  o 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 …

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

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

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.

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).

- Findings

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.

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.

P16 - could you explain the relevance of table 4 for this paper? Or consider removing if it is not relevant to the paper?

P17 - table 3 seems to come after table 4? Also typo in description table 3 'table3'

P.26 - line 27 - typo - We identified

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.

- See comments above regarding distillation and presentation of findings.
- I would also suggest better signposting for the sections - and use of different heading levels - it was difficult to follow the structure sometimes.

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

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?**
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

**Quality of written English**
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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