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FEATURE

Practical Strategies in Conducting a Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

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Abstract. *As qualitative research production continues to increase worldwide, it is important to synthesize it. Although there have been some attempts to structure the best ways to synthesize qualitative research, steps provided so far in the literature may not be user-friendly for novice qualitative researchers. This paper defines meta-synthesis, the qualitative research design used to systematically synthesize an existing body of research. The paper provides different orientations of meta-synthesis, as well as a step-by-step guide in conducting a meta-synthesis. This paper is meant to generate more interest and discussion on this less-used and yet much needed qualitative research design. The discussion generated should help improve the practice of meta-synthesis in general. With this knowledge, more qualitative research may be systematically synthesized to help orient new directions of inconclusive research. Expertise in meta-synthesis can also help generate more informed practical guidelines needed by different policymakers and practitioners in their respective fields. Such a contribution would take the relevance of qualitative research one step higher. Last, more systematic synthesis of primary qualitative research studies can help generate new theories or strengthen existing ones.*

Keywords: qualitative research, meta-synthesis, meta-narrative, research synthesis

Introduction

Although still relatively new in some parts of the world, qualitative research is growing exponentially. More and more countries are experiencing a growing interest in qualitative research. More and more universities are promoting the inclusion of qualitative research in the coursework, faculty research production,

and dissemination, as well as theses and dissertations. Research funding organizations that used to be strongly based on quantitative research have begun promoting alternative research methods. More and more scholarly conferences and seminars are opening up for qualitative research papers and presentations. People who used to grapple with quantitative research are finally finding their voice and discovering their formerly-unexplored skills. As a result, there is a growing wealth of qualitative research.

Unfortunately, synthesizing qualitative research is still an uncommon practice. It is not yet common to find many meta-syntheses in various fields in general. There is more need to systematically synthesize the qualitative research studies that have recently been produced. One of the ways to do so is by conducting a meta-synthesis, also known as meta-narrative (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). Although this qualitative research design is not necessarily new, it is still not frequently used to help synthesize existing qualitative research studies. This is because, either most qualitative researchers do not know how to use it since they are still fairly new to the field, or because it is a challenging undertaking. Unlike meta-analysis, its counterpart, which has a clear process in place, meta-synthesis still needs to be clearer and more practically introduced to qualitative researchers in many parts of the world.

Meta-synthesis has been used in different fields. For instance, it is seen in the medical field (Blaschke, 2017), psychology (Corcoran, Schildt, Hochbrueckner, & Abell, 2017), social sciences (Morais-da-Silva, Takahashi, & Segatto, 2016), mental healthcare (Stomski & Morrison, 2017), and women's health (Vanstone, Kandasamy, Giacomini, & DeJean, 2017). This list is not exhaustive. Any field where qualitative research is published is a candidate for meta-synthesis.

Defining Meta-Synthesis

Meta-synthesis can be defined as “an explanatory, inductive research design to synthesize primary qualitative [research] for the purpose of making contributions beyond those achieved in the original studies” (Hoon, 2013, p. 523). According to Hoon (2013), the researchers using meta-synthesis extract, re-analyze, and synthesize the accumulated evidence from previous qualitative research studies. Erwin, Brotherson, and Summers (2011) define meta-synthesis as “an intentional and coherent approach to analyzing data across qualitative studies” (p. 186). These primary qualitative research studies must be somehow connected thematically. Meta-synthesis is a design focused on “aggregating and synthesizing qualitative data” (Mohammed, Moles, & Chen, 2016, p. 695). Accumulating knowledge and evidence from primary qualitative research studies is a major part of a meta-synthesis. It is also called narrative synthesis, qualitative synthesis, thematic synthesis, meta-ethnography, and sometimes qualitative meta-analysis (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009; Thorne, 2014, 2017; Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004).

Importance of Meta-Synthesis

The importance of meta-synthesis can be viewed from four different perspectives. First, a meta-synthesis is primarily used to accumulate primary qualitative research (Beck, 2002; Walsh & Downe, 2005). Such an accumulation of evidence is needed when enough qualitative research has been conducted on an important topic which sometimes, may have different ramifications or conflicting findings. Second, conducting meta-synthesis is about *consolidating* insights from different primary independent studies (Yin, 2009). In this case, meta-synthesis is important because primary qualitative research studies may take many different directions on the same topic.

Third, unless one is using grounded theory as the main research design, theories developed from qualitative research may be weak. To make the new theories more robust and maybe to scale theories up to formal theories, as preferred by a number of grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a meta-synthesis may be needed. Last, a meta-synthesis helps enable “researchers to identify a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine qualitative evidence to address the research question” (Erwin et al., 2011, p. 186). Just as it is with quantitative meta-analysis, primary qualitative research studies take the place of the research participants.

Thorne (2014) believes that there are four situations under which meta-synthesis needs to be used. First, it should be used for a large pool of primary qualitative research studies. Second, it is suitable when there are plenty of qualitative research studies that need synthesizing. Third, meta-synthesis fits well when many primary qualitative research studies are inconclusive or lead to conflicting findings. Last, meta-synthesis is used when the findings of the primary qualitative research studies are under-utilized.

Types of Meta-Synthesis

Different experts classify meta-syntheses differently. For the purposes of this paper, three typologies are considered. These typologies include those by Barnett-Page and Thomas (2009), Finfgeld (2003), and Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden (1997). Though not exhaustive, these typologies represent quite well different types of meta-syntheses.

For Barnett-Page and Thomas (2009), there are four types of meta-synthesis. First, there is the reciprocal *translational* analysis, which is a meta-synthesis focused on the solidification of the meaning of concepts. Then, there is a *refutational* synthesis, which deals with the exploration and explanation of contradictions between individual primary qualitative research studies. Then, there is *lines-of-argument* analysis, which is concerned with building up a picture of the whole from the primary qualitative research studies. Last, there are others known

as *thematic synthesis*, *textual narrative synthesis*, *meta-narrative*, and *framework synthesis*.

Finfgeld (2003) classifies meta-synthesis into three types: *theory building*, *theory explication*, and *descriptive meta-synthesis*. Theory building meta-synthesis deals with theorizing beyond the level of one primary qualitative research study. Theory explication helps the researcher to re-conceptualize abstract phenomena. Descriptive meta-synthesis provides a comprehensive analysis of a phenomenon from primary qualitative research studies.

Sandelowski et al. (1997) also classify meta-synthesis into three. They believe that some meta-syntheses are primarily focused on synthesizing individual studies from the same author. Others deal with synthesizing individual studies from different authors. Still, others are based on a quantitative synthesis of individual qualitative research studies.

Depending on the need of the researchers, they can choose the type that works best for them. Most likely, none of the types is superior to the other. They simply have different purposes and address different types of questions. Each type follows a different perspective.

Practical Steps in Conducting a Meta-Synthesis

Different experts use different steps. However, different classifications have some overlap. In this paper, I argue that steps followed in meta-synthesis should be fairly aligned with how research is conducted in general. The proposed model presented here is built on existing models, actual meta-syntheses, a reflection of research in general, and practicality. Below is the list of the 15 practical steps that can help a qualitative researcher in conducting a meta-synthesis.

1. *Identify the topic or the problem based on an overview of the existing literature.* To be able to identify a research topic, problem, or gap, it is important to read the existing literature (Creswell, 2012). Without a thorough review of the literature, the researcher may undertake a trivial topic or a topic that has been well addressed in the past (Wa-Mbaleka, 2017, 2018). So, the researcher needs to spend some time to identify the gap in the existing body of knowledge on the target theme.
2. *State the clear purpose of the meta-synthesis, as aligned with the selected meta-synthesis type.* Research should never be undertaken without a clear purpose. Given the hard work involved in undertaking a meta-synthesis, researchers should have a clear purpose for it before starting a meta-synthesis. Again, the different types of meta-syntheses have different orientations and purposes, as discussed above. Basically, once again, it is important to select the type of meta-synthesis to be used once the research problem has been identified. The purpose statement must be directly aligned with the problem stated in the previous step.

3. *Present the theoretical framework.* It is true that “atheoretical research is impossible” (Merriam, 2009, p. 66). Even in grounded theory, the newly built theory is verified using older ones. So, for the meta-synthesis, the researcher needs to identify the theory or set of theories that are the basis of the study.
4. *State the research questions.* It is important to state clearly the research questions that cover the whole research problem. The research questions help to orient the meta-synthesis. The research questions, when put together, must be enough to address the research problem. They must also be well aligned with the purpose of the study.
5. *Explain and defend the selected type of meta-synthesis.* As presented above, there are different types of meta-synthesis. An informed qualitative researcher undertaking a meta-synthesis is expected to choose one of the types and explain why that type is the most appropriate for the study. It is important to cite the proponent of that specific type in the explanation.
6. *Set inclusion and exclusion criteria.* To be able to include or exclude studies from the pool of the meta-synthesis, the researcher needs to set clear inclusion and exclusion criteria. Not all qualitative research studies collected from the search of the literature are fit for the meta-synthesis. Only those that meet the selection criteria should be included in the final collection. It is important to remember that a quick browse through the existing literature can help fine-tune the list of inclusion and exclusion criteria.
7. *Collect the primary studies.* The researcher must use a systematic way of collecting the existing qualitative research on the target topic. Online databases such as EBSCOhost, Academic Search Premier, ProQuest, JSTOR, as well as open-access journal databases, should be used and documented for verification purposes. Using different strategies to locate existing qualitative research studies increases the likelihood of obtaining enough, and many good studies fit for inclusion in the meta-synthesis.
8. *Classify studies into “included” and “excluded.”* Once the collection of primary qualitative research studies is over, the researcher reads and evaluates each one of them. Then the researcher assigns them to the two categories of studies, depending on how closely each study is to inclusion or exclusion. According to Atkins et al. (2008) and Newton (n.d.), the following are some of the potential inclusion criteria: central phenomenon, time period, research design, data collection methods, level of trustworthiness, research setting, participants, provision of primary data. According to Newton (n.d.), some of the data that can be extracted from primary studies and included in the meta-synthesis include interpreted data, unanalyzed direct quotes, field notes, documents, and others.
9. *Develop the coding scheme.* Just like it is seen in most qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), developing a coding scheme, or list of

codes, must take place in the preliminary stages of thorough data analysis. As you code about three to five studies, you continuously fine-tune the list of codes until all the codes are well established and distinctively differentiated. Part of developing the coding scheme also includes removing codes that have overlapping meaning, deleting codes that may prove not so significant for the study, and renaming those that were not exactly well labeled.

10. *Code all the data.* After a final coding scheme is established, the coding scheme may be stable enough to code the rest of the primary research studies. Each individual research study acts as a qualitative research participant at this point. Each study is coded thoroughly before the next one is coded.
11. *Present the methodological synthesis of the included studies.* The researchers need to consider using a table for a clearer presentation. At the beginning of the presentation of the results, the researcher needs to synthesize the methodological results found in primary qualitative research studies. Sometimes, such a methodological synthesis can help understand any possible methodological flaws that may be contributing to the inconclusive findings on the selected topic.
12. *Analyze all the data.* Data analysis in a meta-synthesis can take different paths, just like any qualitative research study. Based on the research problem, purpose, and questions, the researcher must decide the best way to proceed with the analysis of the data. The type of meta-synthesis chosen for the study can also significantly affect the choice of data analysis to be used.
13. *Synthesize the findings.* At this stage, the researcher must summarize the most important findings, address the research questions, and the overall research problem. Additionally, the researcher needs to discuss the findings in light of the existing literature.
14. *Develop and present the new theory or model, if that is the goal of the meta-synthesis* (optional). As seen in some of the typologies of meta-synthesis above, some types are mainly focused on generating or fine-tuning a theory from the primary qualitative research studies. Researchers interested in theory improvement or theory-building need to present their new or improved theory at this stage.
15. *Draw the conclusion.* Once everything is done, it is time to draw the conclusion. The researcher highlights the lessons learned, the recommendations for theory and practice, and future research. Although not always common, this might be an opportunity for the researcher to acknowledge some limitations of his or her meta-synthesis.

Some Possible Challenges

Conducting a meta-synthesis comes with some challenges. Some of the commonly raised issues are synthesized in Mohammed et al. (2016). First, there is a challenge of searching for relevant primary qualitative research studies. Sometimes, researchers may need the help of a librarian to be able to find hard-to-find research articles. Second, it is not easy to assess the quality of the collected primary qualitative research. Checking the trustworthiness of a published qualitative research report is not always easy for many people. Additionally, just like the case of quantitative meta-analysis, no one seems to know whether or not unpublished reports should be included.

The third challenge is to decide on the synthesis aspects. Each primary qualitative research comes in a different shape. It requires some serious thinking process on the part of the researcher to decide which aspects to be considered for inclusion and in the data analysis. Last, there are no clear guidelines yet on how to report meta-synthesis results and findings. This might be either because qualitative research, in general, shares the same issue or because meta-synthesis is still fairly new. No matter what the reason may be, guidelines for reporting meta-synthesis results must be developed.

Another challenge that is worth indicating here is the need to know how to deal with bias. Trying to do a member check with the authors of the primary qualitative research studies seems an impossible task. Peer review from some colleagues may be a good approach. Additionally, including qualitative research studies from different designs may bring different perspectives that may be difficult to merge, according to Newton (n.d.). According to the same author, no one seems to know exactly what counts in qualitative research. Setting clear inclusion and exclusion criteria before data analysis begins can help face this challenge.

Challenges are real in meta-synthesis. Actually, many of the challenges reported here are common to all types of research synthesis, including the quantitative meta-analysis. Researchers are therefore encouraged to be well prepared before undertaking a meta-synthesis. What matters the most is to be organized in planning and carrying out the study efficiently and effectively.

Conclusion

From existing literature on meta-synthesis, it is clear that meta-synthesis continues to grow, to be conceptualized better. Therefore, “researchers who engage in this method [need] to share openly with their colleagues their insights about meta-synthesis research to further develop the approach” (Paterson et al., 2009, p. 32). By sharing new and improved insights on meta-synthesis, we can continually improve the way meta-synthesis is conducted. The proposed model here is just one way of going about meta-synthesis. It will not be surprising to see better ones

coming up as we continue to conceptualize the best way to synthesize systematically the large body of qualitative research.

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