What is qualitative evidence synthesis (QES)?

The synthesis or amalgamation of individual qualitative research reports that relate to a specific topic or focus in order to arrive at new or enhanced understandings about the phenomenon under study/review.
The purpose of synthesising qualitative research

• To integrate evidence from primary qualitative studies in order to develop **new cumulative knowledge**

• Not simply aggregating studies as has been more traditional in a narrative review of qualitative research
What type of questions can a QES answer?

QES

• How do people experience illness or challenging life circumstances?
• What are the barriers and facilitators to accessing healthcare?
• What impact do specific barriers and facilitators have on people, their experiences and behaviors?

Linked to a review of nursing interventions

• Why does an intervention work (or not), for whom and in what circumstances?
• How is an intervention experienced by all of those involved in developing, delivering or receiving it?
• What aspects of the intervention they value, or not; and why this is so?
• Which factors facilitate or hinder successful implementation of a program, service or treatment?
• How does a particular intervention needs to be adapted for large-scale roll-out (Roen 2006)?
What kind of questions have been addressed?

• What constitutes quality end of life care?
• Patient adherence to tuberculosis treatment
• Adapting to and managing diabetes
• Patients’ help-seeking experiences and delay in cancer presentation
• The experience of physical restraint
• Development of a user-focused stroke service in primary care
What might this have to offer?

• Can identify outcomes that are not seen as important in a single qualitative study

• More powerful explanation than is possible in a single qualitative study

• Can refute or revise current understanding of a particular phenomenon, e.g., leg ulceration, chronic not acute condition
What might this have to offer?

• Can identify gaps in the evidence and reveal future research priorities

• Complement findings of effectiveness reviews

• Help inform complex interventions eg

  • intervention complexity
  • context and failure of implementation
  • health systems issues
  • issues with fidelity, dose, reach, equity, process and outcomes

can all be explored with qualitative evidence to try and ascertain what happened in a positive, negative or neutral way
Methodologies for Qualitative Synthesis

_Umbrella terms_

• Qualitative Systematic Reviews
• Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
• Qualitative Meta-Synthesis
• Qualitative Research Synthesis

Booth, Noyes, Flemming et al (2016) p16
Methods for QES

• Vary depend on the methodology chosen for the review
• Many are developed from methods associated with primary qualitative research eg

  • thematic analysis
  • theme extraction
  • constant comparative method
  • coding

For more detail see: Booth, Noyes, Flemming et al (2016) p16
(Some) Specific methodologies *there are more!*

- Meta-Ethnography (1988)
- Thematic synthesis (2008)
- Framework synthesis (2008)
- Realist Synthesis (2002)
- Meta-Narrative review (2005)
- Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis (2013)

For more detail see: Booth, Noyes, Flemming et al (2016) p16
The procedure

1. A clearly stated set of objectives with pre-defined eligibility criteria for studies (not necessarily fixed throughout the review process).
2. An explicit, transparent methodology (not necessarily linear in nature).
3. A well defined, systematic search that attempts to identifies studies that meet the eligibility criteria (not necessarily exhaustive in nature).
4. An assessment of the methodological quality of the findings of the included studies, or at least a statement on why such a quality assessment has not been conducted or how the author deals with quality issues (not necessarily with a focus on risk of bias).
5. A systematic extraction, synthesis, and presentation of the characteristics and findings of the included studies.
Choice of methods: 
*Decisions, Decisions!*

- **Novice** – Bewildering variety of methods of synthesis – compounded by choice of checklists, conflicting guidance etc.

- **Experienced** - Many authors stick to familiar methods rather than select most appropriate method to address question and type of evidence.

- Much description of methods, little evaluation and critique
- Much hiding behind “labels”, misuse of methods


Available from: http://www.integrate-hta.eu/downloads/
Choice of methods: Different approaches to QES

Three key methods recommended by CQIMG for undertaking a QES with the intention of integrating it with an effect review:

• Thematic synthesis
• Framework synthesis/best fit framework synthesis
• Meta-ethnography

Thematic synthesis

- Thematic synthesis can develop either descriptive or analytic themes
- One of the most accessible forms of synthesis
- Can be used with ‘thin’ data to produce descriptive themes
- Where ‘thicker’ data are available, more in-depth analytic themes can be developed
- Themes can then be integrated within an effectiveness review
- May be limited in interpretative power
- Can provide insight from qualitative to supplement the quantitative
Parents’ and informal caregivers’ views and experiences of communication about routine childhood vaccination: a synthesis of qualitative evidence (Review)

Ames HMR, Glenton C, Lewin S
Framework synthesis and Best-fit framework synthesis

- A good choice of QES method due to the extent of the complexity the method can accommodate
- Framework allows a clear mechanism for integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence in an aggregative way
- Frameworks can derive from a pre-existing review, from a conceptual model, from a policy framework or from a logic model
- Requires identification and justification for the selection of the framework
- Risk of simplistically forcing data into a framework
Meta-ethnography

• An explicitly interpretative approach to synthesis and aims to create new understandings and theories from a body of work

• Leads to the creation of descriptive or high order constructs which can help understanding of the interventions within an effectiveness review, particularly where those interventions are complex

• Takes time and experience and requires data within the primary studies to be ‘thick’ enough
REVIEW PAPER

Smoking in pregnancy: a systematic review of qualitative research of women who commence pregnancy as smokers

Kate Flemming, Hilary Graham, Morag Heirs, Dave Fox & Amanda Sowden

Accepted for publication 17 November 2012
Useful resources


Michael Saini & Aron Shlonsky (2012) *Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Research (Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods)* OUP USA
Key references

CQIMG Guidance Series


RETRAIT