Exercises

# Chapter 8: Synthesising and analysing qualitative studies

## Exercise 8.1: Navigating around a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES)

### Exercise 8-1: Navigating around a Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES)

Find an example of a qualitative evidence synthesis/qualitative systematic review. Use either the reading guide by Tong et al. (2016) or the SBU. *Tool to assess methodological limitations of qualitative evidence synthesis* (<https://www.sbu.se/contentassets/14570b8112c5464cbb2c256c11674025/methodological_limitations_qualitative_evidence_synthesis.pdf>) to critically read the example you have found. Bearing in mind that, the journey is more important than your destination, answer:

1. Are the methods of your chosen example of a QES well reported?

*Hint (Search): Can you tell which databases were searched, which keywords were used, which limits were applied and which, if any, non-bibliographic search approaches were used?*

*Hint (Appraisal): Can you tell which checklist was used for quality assessment and whether it has been used appropriately?*

*Hint (Synthesis): Can you tell which method of synthesis was used? Did the authors follow all the stages of that synthesis method?*

*Hint (Analysis): Can you tell how the authors generated their analyses and interpretations? Was it a group-based process? Did it follow a formal procedure? Or was it “magicked out of thin air”?*

**2.** **Is this a good example of a published QES?**

*Hint*: Look beyond the individual stages of the review process to the QES as a whole (i.e., how the whole QES “hangs together”).

a. Have the authors looked for the type of studies required to match the review question?

b. Have the authors looked in the appropriate sources to find the right type of studies?

c. Does the checklist for quality assessment match the chosen type of studies?

d. Is the chosen method of synthesis appropriate to the purpose of the review?

e. To what extent does the analysis answer the original review question?

And finally,

f. Is the overall whole QES greater than the sum of its parts? Does it add new knowledge? *(NB. This may not always be possible* *but asking this question helps to distinguish the transformational QES from the mere catalogue of studies).*

**3. What single improvement would you make to the methods of this particular QES?**

Clearly, your suggested improvement will vary according to the example you have chosen. However, you may find it helpful to consider the following hints:

(a) Would this QES have benefited from the inclusion of additional types of literature (e.g., theses, reports etc.)?

(b) Have any potentially important disciplines, countries or regions, or time periods been missed in the list of database/data sources?

(c) Could the authors have chosen a more appropriate checklist/method of quality assessment for the papers they included?

(d) Is the chosen checklist sufficiently well-respected? Has it been used appropriately?

(e) Have the authors missed any potential opportunities to explore patterns across the included studies (e.g., exploring differences in context, intervention type or population)?

(f) Is the level of analysis appropriate to the supporting data? – if the analysis is primarily descriptive would the data have allowed the authors to extend their analysis further? Alternatively, does the data support the interpretation that the authors have provided or have they ‘stretched’ their data too ‘thinly’?

(g) Have the tasks and activities of the QES been carried out by appropriate numbers of review team members, with the right skill sets?