

Qualitative Research Synthesis in the context of Cochrane

Some challenges

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Evidence for health policy & practice: something missing?

- Increasing recognition within the international evidence movements that systematic reviews of effect are not sufficient to inform policy & practice
- Need evidence from qualitative research but about what?
 - Enhancement model: the handmaiden
 - Difference model: the visionary



The enhancement model: Increasingly accepted in Cochrane

- QR can make a methodological contribution and improve effectiveness reviews
 - Help to get the review question 'right' and therefore influence:
 - the way in which effectiveness is defined
 - the data to be extracted
 - Help in interpreting and explaining heterogeneity in RCT results;
- But doesn't necessarily require the synthesis of multiple studies

The Difference model: Evidence of what?

- How is the intervention to be implemented in 'real life' ?
 - Thin description of context for intervention and processes shaping implementation
 - Thick description of levers and obstacles to changes in policy and practice
- Is the intervention 'theory' right?
 - Appropriateness – do available and/or evaluated interventions 'fit' subjective needs?
 - Causal models – are interventions aimed at the 'right' problem?
 - What other types of interventions might be developed?

More problematic for Cochrane?

But how do we produce trustworthy reviews of this evidential base?

The Cochrane Bottom Line

- A **systematic** and **transparent** approach
- **Reproducibility**
- Aim to **reduce bias**
- Ongoing **dialogue with 'consumers'**

Problematic in context of qualitative research?

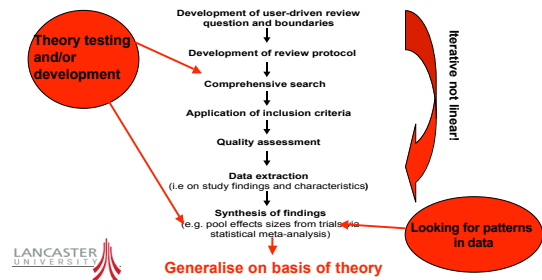
Systematic reviews of QR

- No consensus on how to synthesise QR but process can be systematic, rigorous, explicit
- Has to deal with different study designs, research traditions, theoretical orientations,
- Interpretation not integration

SO

- QR synthesis needs flexibility and iteration not rules and linearity!

Flexibility and iteration not rules and linearity



Summary: key aspects of QR systematic reviews

- *Multi-disciplinary* approach/team needed
- *Iterative process* iterative not staged!
- *Question(s)*: refine as review proceeds
- *Scoping & searching* often intertwined – decisions needed on including rival perspectives
- *Searching* – literature often multi-layered, subject experts & hand searching important
- *Selecting studies for inclusion* – for quality (contentious), relevance, theoretical perspective?
- *Synthesis*: more than thematic analysis
- *Theory* key to review quality and generalisability
- Needs QR expertise

Three specific methodological challenges

- How to identify potentially relevant studies
- How to assess study quality and how to use the results
- How to synthesise 'findings' from included studies

Identifying relevant studies: what approach to take?

- Cochrane: emphasis on exhaustive search for published and unpublished studies to minimise bias
- People are developing search strategies to help with the traditional Cochrane approach
- Is this appropriate for qualitative research or are there more appropriate approaches?
 - Theoretical sampling?
 - Saturation?
 - Other?

Quality Assessment – to do or not to do.....

- It shouldn't be done in qualitative research
- It can be done and the criteria and process are largely the same for all kinds of research
- It can be done but needs to be 'horses for courses' in terms of the appraisal framework used
- If it is done then:
 - Results can be used to make exclusion/inclusion decisions
 - OR
 - Appraisal is a process for assessing the weight of evidence as the synthesis proceeds

If we accept quality appraisal as part of SR of qualitative research

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- Reporting quality often poor –articles lack detail needed for appraisal
- Applying criteria is difficult
- Appraisal frameworks privilege ‘technical’ criteria



Dominant approach: ‘Technical’ Quality Assessment Criteria

- Method appropriate to research question
- An explicit link to theory
- Clearly stated aims and objectives
- A clear description of context
- A clear description of sample
- A clear description of fieldwork methods
- Some validation of data analysis
- Inclusion of sufficient data to support interpretation



Appraising Quality in QR

- Prima facie criteria used to assess ‘quality’ are common to all research
- But beyond or before ‘technical’ criteria does judgement of ‘trustworthiness require criteria tailored to different research ‘paradigms’?



Privileging meaning: a primary quality marker?

- Does the research illuminate subjective meaning, actions and context researched?
- Does it adopt a *verstehen* approach to knowledge – seeking to show how behaviours are viewed from within a culture, society or group?
- Is the point of explanation ‘adequacy at the level of meaning not at the level of cause’. (Max Weber)
- Does study attempt to find ways of according lay knowledge equal worth to other knowledges?



And then there is synthesis.....’

- For some the very idea of qualitative, cross-study ‘synthesis’ is epistemologically impossible
- For others synthesis is only possible with studies using same methods and theoretical assumptions
- Synthesis is essential if research is to be of maximum use for policy/practice, despite the practical difficulties.
 - Most research involves some aggregation, some inductive and deductive reasoning - sufficient epistemological similarity to enable ‘review’.
 - But in practice ‘syntheses’ aiming to produce a third set of data and insights distinct from original data sources may not be possible.



Qualitative Evidence Synthesis Three broad approaches

- *Traditional literature reviews*: lack transparency and problematic trustworthiness
- *Narrative synthesis*: discursive approaches to synthesis involving many different tools and techniques
- *Specialist meta-analysis* e.g.
 - meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare)
 - Critical interpretive synthesis (Dixon Wood et. al.)
 - Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument (QARI) (Joanna Briggs Institute Adelaide)
 - realistic synthesis (Ray Pawson)

My bottom lines....

Qualitative Research synthesis:

- **Should not involve an invariant series of tasks reducing interpretative process to set of hard and fast rules.**
- **Should involve critical thought & explicitness about methods at each stage of the process**
- **Needs to be flexible, iterative and encourage careful judgement at each step of the process.**