

Integration of qualitative evidence: Towards construction of academic knowledge (0109)

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Approaches to integration of qualitative information have been on the rise over the past few decades, and the reasons for this development are many. Qualitative research is increasingly relied upon as a method of inquiry, as illustrated by the rise in the number of researchers undertaking qualitative studies, leading to a need to manage and make sense of this ever growing body of work. The increasing costs of research in lean financial times have led to the drive to make most efficient use of qualitative research studies, which are by design human resource intensive and costly, thus creating a desire to capitalize on the work. Further, those in practice professions more and more often are being called upon to bring research closer to the practitioners who can best use it to improve practice, and they typically want answers to the kinds of questions that are asked and answered in qualitative studies, but from a broad range of sources rather than a single study. These trends have led to a need for information that has been culled from a wide range of qualitative studies and thus rendered useful to practitioners (Author & Author 2009).

Over the past three decades, researchers have responded with a range of approaches to integrating information from qualitative studies. The number and variety of these approaches, however, has increased to the point that making sense of them has become a challenge. Some scholars have argued that trying to hash out subtle differences among approaches has undermined their value and use and further has had an unfortunate tendency to polarize perspectives of those who use such approaches (see for example Gough & Elbourne, 2002). We are sympathetic to this position and in large part agree with it but ultimately believe, however, that until we find some way to take stock of and understand the range of approaches

that exist, those of us who engage with integration of evidence from qualitative studies cannot advance this field of inquiry. In this paper, then, we intend to:

- Describe the literature base that undertakes integration of qualitative evidence,
- Provide an overview of the various research approaches that have been employed for integrating qualitative research,
- Compare critical elements of various approaches to this increasingly used approach, and
- Argue for the value of viewing synthesis of qualitative evidence as a process of construction.

Background

Over time, researchers have become discouraged with the traditional literature review as a way of making important meaning of existing information. The problems of such reviews have been outlined in a number of works (Author & Author 2010; Sandelowski, Barroso & Voils, 2007; Author & Author, 2007). In large part, criticisms of these traditional reviews highlight that they lack epistemological grounding and methodological rigor. Such reviews have, it is asserted, failed to provide a greater understanding of existing evidence. Many have been dissatisfied with the more refined approach of systematic reviews as well (Bondas & Hall, 2007; Booth, 2006; Author & Author 2010; Author, et al, 2008). Such reviews traditionally have focused on analyzing evidence from one kind of study only and have thus limited the kinds of questions that can be asked. Such approaches have typically relied on meta-analysis as the primary approach to data analysis and thus have privileged a positivist stance as well as approach.

Some researchers have begun to undertake the challenging task of either including qualitative information in their syntheses or treating the integration of qualitative information as a separate endeavor. Recent attention has turned toward an exploration of synthesis of qualitative research, particularly during the past two decades. Evidence of growth in the field of qualitative research synthesis (QRS) is seen in the development of many centers that have striven to find ways to synthesize qualitative information (see for example, The Campbell Collaboration, The EPPI Centre, Joanna Briggs Institute, and The Cochrane Collaboration). The debate has been ongoing as to the best way to undertake the process of integrating qualitative evidence, without undermining the very nature and purpose of qualitative research.

Several recent texts have explained the processes of qualitative synthesis, and most of these focus on use of such approaches in health care. Paterson, Thorne, Canam, and Jillings' (2001) for example, describe their method of meta study for qualitative health research. In addition, Pope, Mays, and Popay's (2007) work on synthesizing qualitative and quantitative health evidence provides information about a range of synthesis approaches. The authors identify three primary methods: quantitative, interpretive, and mixed, and they also provide useful information about the products of synthesis. Two recent works describe approaches that are based upon Noblit and Hare's (1988) conception of using interpretive methods to analyze interpretive studies. Sandelowski and Barroso (2007), from the field of health care, contributed a work on synthesizing qualitative research that provides detailed descriptions about how to conduct a qualitative research synthesis, as well as examples from their own work.

Attempts to describe the various approaches to integration of qualitative information have received some recent attention in articles as well (see for example Dixon-Woods, Booth, &

Sutton, 2007; Finlayson & Dixon, 2008; Author & Author 2010; Suri & Clarke, 2009). All of these works tend to provide over arching descriptions of the processes of synthesis, whether describing multiple approaches or arguing for one specific approach. Those that have made some attempt to categorize various approaches to synthesis of qualitative work have tended to do so by type (review or synthesis), generation (traditional literature reviews or modern critical reviews of literature), or along a continuum (from least to most positivist). Few scholars have undertaken an investigation of the syntheses themselves to understand the critical features of each and to understand how the synthesists are conceptualizing the processes of syntheses. Several important questions remain unanswered:

- 1) Which terms are most frequently used to describe common processes,
- 2) How might these approaches best be categorized,
- 3) What are common features and elements of various approaches, and
- 4) What constitutes methodological rigor, and documentation of such, in this field.

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