INTRODUCTION TO META-ETHNOGRAPHY

by Simon Moss

Introduction

Over many decades, researchers have conducted meta-analyses—a technique that is designed to integrate many quantitative studies on the same topic to generate a single result or conclusion. Beginning in the late 1980s, researchers generalized this principle of meta-analyses to qualitative research. For example, in their seminal work, Noblit and Hare (1988) introduced the notion of meta-ethnography, an attempt to integrate and synthesize many qualitative studies into a single paper.

This approach spawned many alternative or overlapping approaches—including qualitative meta-synthesis, critical interpretive synthesis, realistic review, and framework synthesis—each designed to assimilate and to synthesize distinct qualitative studies. This document, however, primarily revolves around the origin of these techniques: meta-ethnography.

**Benefits of meta-ethnography**

Many benefits accrue frommeta-analyses and the synthesis of quantitative studies. For example, in the health sector, meta-analyses can offer insights into the prevalence of some disease as well as the efficacy of interventions. Yet, other benefits accrue from meta-ethnography in particular and the synthesis of qualitative studies in general. To illustrate, in the health sector, meta-ethnography can impart greater insight into

* how people experience some disease, condition, or circumstance
* the extent to which various interventions are feasible, appropriate, and acceptable to clients
* why interventions that are recommended in the literature may not be applied in practice

Meta-ethnography, if applied effectively, does not merely summarize the findings, theories, and insights of existing works. Instead, meta-ethnography can uncover concepts and arguments that transcend the original studies.

**Unique features of meta-ethnography**

Meta-ethnography differs from other approaches that have been developed to synthesize qualitative research. The following table clarifies these differences. The first column briefly outlines a key feature of alternative methodologies. The second column specifies how meta-ethnography diverges from this feature.

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| Alternative methodologies | Feature of meta-ethnography |
| **Thematic analysis or the Joanna Briggs Institute methods**. These approaches summarize the findings or insights of past qualitative research | Meta-ethnography does not merely summarize past findings or insights but is designed to generate conclusions that no individual study had reached. |
| **Critical interpretive synthesis, metanarrative, meta-study, meta-summary, and realist synthesis**. These approaches tend to integrate qualitative and quantitative studies | Meta-ethnography is applied to qualitative studies only |
| **Thematic synthesis and framework synthesis**. These approaches tend to adopt a realistic epistemology—in which they strive to identify the true laws that underpin some phenomenon | Meta-ethnography tends to adopt a constructivist approach that is more interested in the perspectives of individuals—and does not assume that some universal laws underpin some phenomenon |

**Main phases**

Noblit and Hare (1988) suggested that meta-ethnography should entail seven main phases. Nevertheless, authors tend to apply and interpret these phases differently. The following table outlines these seven phases. The first column defines these phases. The second column offers some insights into how researchers complete these phases. In practice, the phases can overlap in time (for more references, see France et al., 2019).

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| Phase | Details and examples |
| **1 Begin**: Clarify the research question | * That is, determine an important question that qualitative research might inform—usually around the experience of individuals in a particular circumstance or the perceptions of people towards some intervention or initiative * For example, the meta-ethnography might revolve around the experiences of research candidates after their supervisors leave the university   Decide whether meta-ethnography is more suitable than other approaches to synthesize and integrate qualitative studies. In particular, meta-ethnography is appropriate when   * you do not want to include quantitative studies in the analysis, because you are only concerned about the experience or perspective of participants rather than objective information about the prevalence of some problem or the utility of some initiative * you want to uncover insights that transcend the findings or conclusions of any particular study   Assess the importance of this research question   * Determine the likely audience—such as whether the meta-ethnography could inform health policy or other stakeholders * Ascertain whether a meta-ethnography has already been conducted on this research question—and, if so, whether this meta-ethnography needs to be updated * This research question might evolve to some extent after the researcher scours the literature |
| **2 Decide which studies are relevant.** | Decide whether the search strategy will be comprehensive or purposive   * Some researchers prefer comprehensive searches—in which they strive to uncover all relevant studies * Some researchers prefer purposive searches—in which they continue to search until they seem to have exhausted the key findings and themes, called theoretical saturation. * Whenever researchers want to generate a theory, they tend to adopt a purposive approach   Clarify which databases and sources to search   * Consider the scholarly databases in your field * Consider broader databases, such as Google scholar * Consider databases of the grey literature, such as OpenGrey or Trove   Identify relevant search terms   * For example, you could search “(PhD or Doctorate or Masters by Research) and (Change of superv\*) and (Qualitative) * Researchers have developed protocols to achieve this goal, such as STARLITE or PRISMA   Extract the studies   * Decide the eligibility criteria—that is, how to decide which studies to include and which studies to exclude. For example, you might include only studies written in English, published in a peer-reviewed journal, that has applied grounded theory. * Decide how you will assess these eligibility criteria. You might, for example, read the title and abstract first. If uncertain the study is suitable, you might then read the entire text * You might also gauge the extent to which the studies utilized audit trails or other measures that enhance credibility—and exclude studies that did not exhibit these hallmarks of quality |
| **3 Read the studies in detail**. Only a detailed reading can generate insights that transcend particular studies. While completing this task, record the key findings, quotes, themes, concepts, metaphors, and context of each study | Extract data—such as key findings, quotes, themes, concepts, and metaphors—from the studies you read   * One study, for example, might correspond to the metaphor of “Feeling abandoned like an ugly duckling” or the theme “Realizing the fragility of support” * You might construct a table or matrix to record this information. Each row might correspond to a separate concept, theme, or metaphor; each column might correspond to a distinct study * In general, read the entire paper, rather than merely the results section, because many of the themes, concepts, or metaphors are scattered throughout papers * You could use software, such as NVivo, to assign codes to the paper—similar to how you might assign codes to research data.   Construct a table, or some other format, to characterize the studies   * To illustrate, for each study, specify the population, sample size, methodology, analysis, funding body, and so forth * In addition, for each study, specify the context—such as the characteristics of participants, the location, the kind of organization or setting, and other similar details.   Inter-rater reliability   * Two researchers might, independently, identify the key findings, themes, concepts, and metaphors that correspond to each study * The extent to which the conclusions of these researchers overlap is then assessed |
| **4 Determine how studies are related to each other** | Utilize tables or other formats to clarify how studies are related to each other. For example   * studies might be similar to each other on some attribute—called a reciprocal relationship * studies might contradict each other on some attribute—called a refutational relationship * or studies might explore distinct facets of an overlapping attribute—facilitating what is called a line-of-argument synthesis in which one study extends the argument posed by another study   To conduct this analysis, researchers might consider a range of attributes, such as   * the research findings, concepts, themes, metaphors, explanations, or narratives * the research design, such as the aims, methodologies, and participant characteristics * contextual characteristics, such as the timeframe or setting   To illustrate, the researchers might   * uncover clusters of studies, in which each study in a cluster generated an overlapping theory or theme * uncover a topic in which studies generated conflicting themes; some studies might show that research candidates felt liberated when their supervisor left whereas other candidates felt distressed, for example. * show whether this conflict is associated with contextual differences across studies; perhaps candidates in Asian nations felt more liberated and candidates in European nations felt more distressed, for example. |
| **5 Translate across studies**. That is, the authors of each study utilize distinct terms to delineate concepts, themes, metaphors, and explanations. Yet, sometimes these concepts, themes, metaphors, and explanations, although purportedly different, may be related to each other or might contradict each other. During this phase, the researcher develops novel interpretations to characterize these similarities and differences. | For example, the researchers could develop a table in which   * each column corresponds to a separate study * each row corresponds to a specific concept, theme, or metaphor—such as the immediate response to the discovery that a supervisor will leave * within each cell, summarize how each study referred to this concept, theme, or metaphor, sometimes with reference to quote * in the final column, however, the researchers propose their own interpretation of each row * this interpretation encompasses all the entries in this row—integrating the similarities and differences across studies.   To illustrate, several studies might discuss the immediate response of research candidates when they discovered their supervisors might leave, such as   * Study 1: feeling abandoned * Study 2: resentment because violated contract * Study 3: nonchalance * Study 4: a sense of liberation   The researcher might then attempt to interpret these variations, with reference to the context of each study. To illustrate   * the interpretation might be that responses vary from resentment and stress to nonchalance or liberation depending on the perceived obligations and level of progress in candidates * the researcher would then apply this procedure to the other rows, each corresponding to a separate topic, theme, concept, or metaphor   When presenting these tables, ensure you differentiate which conclusions were   * derived from participants, such as quotes * derived from the authors of these studies, such as themes these authors delineated * generated by you   These three kinds are called first-order, second-order, and third-order constructs respectively. |
| **6 Synthesize these translations.** This phase entails two distinct activities. First, researchers can attempt to synthesize the translations or interpretations they generated during the previous phase. That is, they can compare and integrate the various translations they assigned to each row.  Second, they can undertake what is called a line of argument synthesis—in which they assimilate a sequence of arguments, derived from separate studies, to generate a cohesive, fresh account or overarching explanation of some topic. | In essence, researchers apply the procedures that utilize to generate translations to synthesize translations. They might, for example,   * sort the translations into clusters, in which each cluster comprises translations that are similar in one sense * they might then develop an interpretation or account that integrates these translations * or they might arrange these translations into a sequence—a sequence that generates a novel insight or argument |
| **7. Express or report this synthesis.** | * To report these results, researchers typically utilize a protocol called eMERGe—especially in the health sector. * For a description of this protocol, see France et al. (2019) |

**Variations**

Over recent years, researchers have proposed and implemented a suite of variation to this protocol. The following table outlines these variations.

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| Variation | Details |
| Meta-ethnography of primary data rather than studies | * Typically, meta-ethnography is conducted to integrate the findings or conclusions of distinct studies * Sometimes, however, meta-ethnography can be applied to integrate the data collected from one study but multiple sites—such as data collected in several nations |

**References**

France et al. (2019). Improving reporting of meta-ethnography: The eMERGe reporting guidance. BMC Medical Research Methodology. doi: 10.1186/s12874-018-0600-0

Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies. California: Sage Publications; 1988

For an informative and comprehensive review of meta-ethnography and another technique, Google “A comparison of methods for the systematic review of qualitative research: Two examples using meta-ethnography and meta-study”