What is a qualitative synthesis?

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If you want to inform your practice with answers to questions such as ‘What is it like for people to suffer chronic pain?’ or ‘What are patients’ understanding and experience of hypertension and taking medication?’ or ‘What are older people’s views about falling and taking part in a falls programme?’ then what might you do? You could read individual research papers, but often there are many papers and they can be difficult to track down and access. A qualitative synthesis (sometimes called a qualitative systematic review) systematically searches for research on a topic, and draws the findings from individual studies together. Although systematic reviews of quantitative data are well established, for qualitative research, this is a fairly new field, and methods are still developing.

There are several different ways of carrying out a qualitative synthesis (for more details, see refs.3–6). Noblit and Hare7 describe two broad types of qualitative syntheses. First, integrated reviews, where data are aggregated or summarised, often using themes. Second, interpretative reviews, which as the name suggests, involve interpreting the data. From this inductive approach, new conceptual understandings can emerge, leading to development of a theory that explains and integrates the concepts. Dixon-Woods et al8 emphasise ‘the concern is with generating concepts that have maximum explanatory value’. p. 37, pointing out that all types of synthesis involve some summary of data and some interpretation.

One type of interpretive qualitative synthesis is meta-ethnography. This was described by Noblit and Hare7 and has recently been identified as the most widely cited method used in qualitative synthesis6. Meta-ethnography can be used with different qualitative methodologies, not just ethnography. The actual themes or concepts or metaphors as described by the authors of the original research become the data for the meta-ethnography. Studies are compared by looking at these concepts or metaphors as described by the authors of the original research and some interpretation.

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None.

References