

Book Review

Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research

Margarete Sandelowski and Julie Barroso

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Reviewed by Souraya Sidani

This handbook presents guidelines for synthesizing findings of qualitative research. After discussing the importance of such synthesis for building knowledge, in the second chapter the authors introduce definitions of and types of qualitative research synthesis. They view the synthesis as a study comprising a series of steps, starting with the formulation of a problem and a statement of purpose. In chapter 3 the authors focus on the steps of retrieving all research reports and determining their relevance to the study domain. In chapter 4 they describe strategies for appraising individual study reports and for conducting a comparative appraisal. Comparative appraisal consists of displaying key elements of the studies included in the synthesis and comparing them in order to determine whether they confirm, extend, refute, or complement each other. In chapter 5 Sandelowski and Barroso discuss issues encountered in appraising the quality of qualitative studies and present a typology of findings that can be used to classify results. In chapters 6 and 7 they describe the process of implementing the two types of qualitative research synthesis, metasummary and metasynthesis. In chapter 8 the authors review strategies for maintaining validity of qualitative research synthesis and in chapter 9 they review content and format for presenting the results of the synthesis.

Sandelowski and Barroso are to be commended for addressing a controversial topic, and for refining the types of qualitative research findings and procedures for conducting a synthesis of these findings. They clarify the arguments advanced by proponents and opponents of the qualitative research synthesis, thereby facilitating our understanding of the rationale underlying the two types of synthesis. Conceiving the synthesis as a study that is conducted in steps, similar to those entailed in a meta-analysis, helps us to view the process as a systematic one with a well-defined sequence of steps. The book is structured accordingly, starting with the formulation of a researchable problem, moving on to the conduct of an extensive search of the relevant literature, then to an appraisal and synthesis of findings across studies, and ending with

dissemination of the results. This sequence is logical. The information relative to the implementation of each step in the synthesis process is presented briefly, with a focus on issues to consider and tips for undertaking some of the steps. The tips are summarized in point form or in tables, and are illustrated with the authors' work. The directions for comprehensively searching published and grey literature, and the decision tree and audit trail to guide and document decisions regarding the relevance of study reports, will be useful for scholars planning to conduct a qualitative or quantitative research synthesis. The authors provide the reader with an extensive list of additional resources useful for an in-depth understanding of the issues and procedures.

This handbook takes a general, broad approach to the presentation of strategies for conducting a qualitative research synthesis. Sandelowski and Barroso provide the reader with an example to illustrate each strategy they discuss, tabulated information highlighting key points or illustrating application of the strategy, and an exhaustive bibliography. While the book lacks details on the implementation of each step, this is consistent with the authors' approach of offering guidelines rather than using a cookbook means of conducting a synthesis. While this methodological flexibility is consistent with the iterative and interpretive nature of qualitative research and with the diversity with which qualitative research is carried out, it can lead to confusion and variability in the synthesis process. Therefore, it appears that the best means of learning how to conduct a synthesis is by doing it!

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