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# Bringing Method to the Madness: Sandelowski and Barroso's Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research

Ronald J. Chenail

*Nova Southeastern University*, [ron@nova.edu](mailto:ron@nova.edu)

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## Bringing Method to the Madness: Sandelowski and Barroso's Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research

### **Abstract**

The synthesis of qualitative research has emerged as an important methodology in the contemporary research landscape. In their new book entitled *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research* (2007), Margarete Sandelowski and Juliet Barroso successfully bring method to this potentially maddening process of finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing results from primary qualitative research studies.

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Research Synthesis, Qualitative Metasynthesis, Qualitative Research, Integration

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**Bringing Method to the Madness:  
Sandelowski and Barroso's *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative  
Research***

**Ronald J. Chenail**

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida USA

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*The synthesis of qualitative research has emerged as an important methodology in the contemporary research landscape. In their new book entitled *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research* (2007), Margarete Sandelowski and Juliet Barroso successfully bring method to this potentially maddening process of finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing results from primary qualitative research studies. Key Words: *Qualitative Research Synthesis, Qualitative Metasynthesis, Qualitative Research, and Integration**

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Following on the heels of the growth of qualitative research in many fields and professions and the trend towards systematic reviews and research synthesis in general (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) we have seen the rise in particular of various strategies to aggregate, summarize, and synthesize findings from qualitative research studies (e.g., Kearney, 2001; Noblit & Hare, 1988; Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001). Margarete Sandelowski and Juliet Barroso in their 2007 work, *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research*, make an important contribution to this emerging movement to integrate findings from primary qualitative research publications.

Sandelowski and Barroso's work in the area of qualitative research synthesis methodology development derives from a series of National Institute of Nursing Research/National Institutes of Health funded projects focusing on studies of HIV-positive women. Through the course of their research Sandelowski and Barroso produced a systematic approach to synthesizing qualitative research findings while also contributing significant findings in our understanding of motherhood of HIV-positive women. The *Handbook* brings together the best of their writings into one source and gives us as readers a clear picture of how to conduct these interesting yet challenging studies.

Sandelowski and Barroso begin their depiction of their approach to metasynthesis by situating this "urge to synthesize" (p. 1) within three important trends: the explosion of qualitative research studies, the rise of evidence-based practice, and the perceived under-utilization and under-valuation of the current body of qualitative research results. Because of these circumstances researchers have begun to develop strategies for reviewing and integrating findings from this wealth of qualitative research. For instance Catherine Pope and her colleagues (Pope, Mays, & Popay, 2007) have written on ways to synthesize not only qualitative research results, but also how to integrate these findings into syntheses of quantitative research. The Cochrane Qualitative Research Methods Group (<http://www.joannabriggs.edu.au/cqrmg/about.html>) also advocates this both/and strategy too with the ultimate goal of seeing qualitative research findings being regularly

incorporated in systematic reviews of research evidence. Although Sandelowski and Barroso have written elsewhere about the relationship between qualitative and quantitative results in mixed reviews (see Voils, Sandelowski, Barroso, & Hasselblad, 2008), in the *Handbook*, they focus their attention on synthesizing the results from primary qualitative research studies.

Before moving into the steps for their qualitative research synthesis, Sandelowski and Barroso outline the controversies and issues surrounding the conduct of qualitative metasynthesis. One main criticism of this work is the challenge by some that the results of primary qualitative research studies can not be synthesized due to the assumptions inherent with qualitative research (e.g., the idiographic nature of the results) and the variety of qualitative research (e.g., scientific, artistic, and critical styles of inquiry). They also point out that there is no consensus as to the terminology to describe the process, the match between the synthesizing method and the methods of the primary research articles, retrieval and sampling strategies, and the goals of the synthesis (see also Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, & Sandelowski, 2004). Acknowledging there are controversies and diversity in the process, Sandelowski and Barroso push forward by writing they hold that to them the synthesis of qualitative research findings is both possible and positive and the methods they offered are intended to "...preserve the integrity and enhance the utility of qualitative research..." (pp. 9-10).

Despite the apparent differences between various approaches such as meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988), grounded formal theory (Kearney, 2001), and meta-study (Paterson et al., 2001) among others, there are some similarities to the tasks involved in conducting one of these reviews (Finfgeld, 2003):

1. Conceive the focus of the study
2. Select a research question to guide the study
3. Search for candidate sources
4. Retrieve the sources
5. Review and appraise the sources
6. Analyze the findings found in the sources
7. Present the results of the analytical process

Each of the approaches may vary in how these tasks are conducted, but all of the current approaches to synthesizing the findings from primary qualitative research studies follow these steps in one manner or another.

In the *Handbook*, Sandelowski and Barroso present their model clearly and concisely yet also encourage the reader to consider a menu of choices along the way. They also show that they have used different strategies themselves (i.e., qualitative metasummary and qualitative metasynthesis) to achieve their reviewing goals. Their style of sharing what worked for them and also allowing for variation in making choices in conducting one of these studies is a real strength of the book because it encourages us as readers to consider the particularities of our studies and to select methodologies that support our goals and objectives as compared to making our studies conform to the shape of a methodology.

In their chapters on conception, selection, search, retrieval, review and appraisal Sandelowski and Barroso detail the choices qualitative metasynthesizers must manage

throughout their study in order to make organized progress throughout the inquiry. The size of the preliminary data sets generated in these types of studies via initial search and retrieval efforts can result in thousands of candidate sources. To help researchers choreograph what may turn out to be a large troop of sources, the authors share numerous charts, tables, and other handy tools to bring method to the madness. Although Sandelowski and Barroso's style suggests a "lo-tech" approach, as is the case with primary qualitative research, some investigators may wish to employ a more "hi-tech" approach and use software designed to conduct qualitative research or employ some of the new software packages developed with synthesis in mind. For those interested in learning more about growing array of tools and software packages available today to assist in carrying out these types I studies I suggest visiting the Cochrane Qualitative Research Methods Group excellent resource--Tools to Assist Qualitative Reviewers (<http://www.joannabriggs.edu.au/cqrmg/tools.html>).

As they present their approach to each of the basic tasks of synthesizing qualitative research Sandelowski and Barroso share ample examples from their research on motherhood and mothers who are HIV-positive. This inclusion of exemplary material made the material much easier to understand and helped me to better visualize the outcomes of each of the steps to their methodology. I also thought the detail to which each task was described made the procedures clear without making them overly complex.

Sandelowski and Barroso's *Handbook* also made the connections between conducting a qualitative metasynthesis and performing a primary qualitative research study more transparent for me and in doing so made the procedures they described easier to follow. This connecting of the two types of studies became the clearest in the qualitative metasynthesis chapter as Sandelowski and Barroso covered analytical choices such as taxonomic analysis, constant targeted comparison, event timeline, and in vivo and imported concepts. Most of these techniques would be familiar to qualitative researchers who have employed ethnography and grounded theory in their research or who have used procedures from these two methodologies to conduct generic qualitative analysis. When seen in this light qualitative metasynthesis has much in common with qualitative document analysis when the researcher is using methodologies that are more transformational in nature when it comes to working with data (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). In such cases the researcher goes beyond the separation of data into qualitatively unique categories and themes and strives to integrate these separate distinctions into a synthesis as can be seen when qualitative researchers create grounded theories, essences, or thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

Sandelowski and Barroso conclude their presentation with chapters on quality control and results presentations. In the quality control chapter they present many methods that qualitative researchers will find familiar such as audit trails and expert peer review. They also present some effective ways to use team members in establishing trustworthiness in the undertaking. In the presentation of findings chapter they discuss the challenges of sharing the results from the studies in journal-length forms and some promising alternative configurations. To appreciate the alternative forms they describe in the *Handbook* I suggest readers visit the two complementary web resources Sandelowski and Barroso have posted which extend the material from the book. The first, The Qualitative Metasynthesis Project (<http://www.unc.edu/~msandelo/qmp/>), features a summary of their research and the wealth of bibliography of publications emanating from

the project, and the second, SandBar Qualitative Metasynthesis Digital Library Project (<http://sonweb.unc.edu/sandbar/index.cfm>), allows researchers to search data and findings from the various qualitative metasyntheses conducted by Sandelowski and Barroso and to explore their methods in greater detail.

Besides contributing to our understanding of qualitative metasynthesis and motherhood and HIV, Sandelowski and Barroso (2002a, 2002b, 2003) also generated a series of articles based upon concerns discovered throughout the process of reading and appraising qualitative research publications. This third line of publications focus on ways in which authors of primary qualitative research articles can improve the reporting of their methods and results and the likelihood that their research findings will be included in future systematic reviews. My favorite of this group is their paper entitled, "Finding the Findings in Qualitative Studies" (2002a) where they encourage authors to present their findings in "Findings" sections. This may sound like a silly request, but having read a few qualitative research papers in my lifetime I have to admit I have come to appreciate the irony of not being able to find the findings in the findings section of a research paper!

I predict Sandelowski and Barroso's *Handbook for Synthesising Qualitative Research*, along with other recent important publications (e.g., Dixon-Woods, Booth, & Sutton, 2007), will help to bring qualitative research synthesis into greater prominence on the contemporary research landscape and concurrently aid in demonstrating the importance of qualitative research methodologies and their resultant findings. Although Sandelowski and Barroso's approach is one of many choices from which investigators may select to guide their syntheses, I think it will emerge as one of the most prominent forms in this interesting array of creative alternatives.

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### Author Note

Dr. Ronald J. Chenail is the Co-Editor of *The Qualitative Report* and *The Weekly Qualitative Report* at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). He also serves as the Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Director of NSU's [Graduate Certificate in Qualitative Research](#). He can be contacted at 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314-7796 USA; Telephone: 954.262.5389; Fax: 954.262.3970; E-mail: ron@nova.edu.

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