



## **COMMENTARY**

# **Using Meta-synthesis of Qualitative Research Studies as Evidence in Practice and Policy**

**Eman M. Harb, RN, PhD<sup>1\*</sup>; Manar AlAzzam, RN, PhD<sup>2</sup>**

*1,2 Princess Salama Faculty of Nursing, Al al-Bayt University, Al-Mafraq, Jordan. \* Corresponding Author.  
Email: [dr.eman@aabu.edu](mailto:dr.eman@aabu.edu)*

Evidence-based practice is based on the rigorous integration of research evidence through meta-analysis and meta-synthesis. There is a growing recognition of qualitative research's contribution to building the best evidence-based health practice and evidence-based policy (Malterud, 2019; Thorne, 2019). In the healthcare field, evidence-based practice was informed by developing a systematic review tool to develop effective healthcare practices. Evidence-based practice and evidence levels are essential when making patient care decisions. A meta-analysis of randomized clinical trials (RCTs) takes the highest evidence level in the evidence hierarchy. However, the meta-synthesis of qualitative studies occupied the fifth level of the evidence hierarchy. Recently, the recognition of the contribution of qualitative research results to improving the quality of healthcare has increased (Thorne, 2017).

According to Thorne (2019), qualitative research studies allow researchers to understand the human experience across different cultures using different methodologies. Qualitative studies could explain unexpected results from quantitative research and might also explain relationships found in these studies (Malterud, 2019). Furthermore, the meta-synthesis of qualitative studies might have several additional benefits. They might help generate theory, they might improve the scope of evidence reviews towards effective practice and policy (Booth, 2019) or they might provide insights into the evaluation of the healthcare practice and policy (Malterud, 2019).

While combining the results of qualitative studies is acknowledged as a useful review method, there are some methodological issues surrounding meta-synthesis reviews (Thorne, 2019). The typology of qualitative research increases challenges for its appraisal and synthesis (Thorne et al., 2004). Core issues include the diverse philosophical perspectives underpinning qualitative studies (Thorne et al., 2004). Another issue is the lack of contextual meaning when the findings of different studies are combined. Moreover, the critical appraisal of qualitative studies is a challenging process. Some authors argued that various approaches to synthesizing qualitative data have imposed a challenge (Booth, 2019).

Hence, qualitative evidence is an inductive and interpretive method (Malterud, 2019). It is considered valuable and applicable in areas with limited knowledge which need detailed exploration (Thorne, 2019). In quantitative research, there are robust criteria to ensure the evidence's validity. The credibility of qualitative research lies in using data collection strategies that ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative evidence.

The synthesis or "combination" of the results of qualitative studies is debatable. There is no agreement on a unified guidance for the systematic review of qualitative studies for health and social sciences. However, current methodological approaches to qualitative synthesis apply interpretation and aggregation processes (Thorne, 2017). Both approaches have revealed controversial views on appropriate ways

of synthesizing qualitative data. The main characteristic of a meta-aggregative synthesis is that the reviewer avoids the re-interpretation of reviewed studies. In contrast, interpretative synthesis combines the evidence with the intention to elaborate interpretations. According to Booth (2019), methodological research is recommended to identify applications for both synthesis methods. Another recommendation is to constitute practical qualitative research methodological approaches to meet the challenging healthcare issues (Thorne, 2019). Morse (2015) recommends that qualitative researchers use social science terminology, rigor, reliability, validity and generalization to achieve unity among evidences.

Both quantitative and qualitative evidences are needed to join and shape nurses' understanding of healthcare practice (Booth, 2019). However, we think that the focus of the study must be guided by the researcher's perspective, the paradigm that emphasizes the research and the suitable method to address the research question. Thus, qualitative studies in healthcare

policy tend to use methods that reduce the complexity of the healthcare system, with the specific aim of identifying variables that can be manipulated to exert control over policy issues. It aims to improve decision makers' ability to design institutions that correspond to the world's complexity.

In this position, as researchers, we believe that a meta-synthesis of qualitative nursing studies produces generalizable, reliable information to support practice and policy. Synthesized evidence from qualitative studies in the form of meta-synthesis is needed in the nursing discipline and integrating the findings into practice and policy is crucial. Meta-synthesis requires strong research- methodological competence, which is needed in conducting a systematic review. As well, qualitative study reviews provide a patient perspective in evidence-based practice. According to the previous discussion, qualitative meta-synthesis has many contributions to evidence-based practice. It can be used for building models and theories, ensuring empirical research validation and policy development.

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